

Recenzje / Reviews

Adam Sposato 2021. *A Grammar of Xong*. Mouton Grammar Library 84. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. Pp. xx + 662.

The publication of the grammar bibliographically described above is an important development in linguistics and in more and more precise portraying of the global linguistic situation and deserves special attention not only in the very narrow circle of those investigating the language in question and its cognates and neighbors but also “general” linguists and typologists particularly – and it is the latter audience to which this presentation is addressed in the first place.

What triggered this writer’s attention was the glottonym <Xong> in the title of the book. It does not appear in reference books one would reach for to identify the language behind this label, like Meier & Meier 1979: 540, and even Asher & Mosely 2007: 397. One finds <Xong> in Voegelin & Voegelin 1977: 650 and 239 but only as an orthographic variant of <Chong ~ Shong>, a Mon-Khmer Pearic tongue in use across the Thailand (Trat) and Cambodia (Pursat)¹ border. The glottonym is to be found in the very same role (with addition of the variant <Chawng>)² also in Lewis 2009: 1194, 333 (reference to Pursat, 5000 users), and 529 (Trat, 500 users), and in Kamei et al. 1993: 1031 and (with the addition of <Tshiong>) 1988: 1036. No <Xong> (!) in Asher & Moseley 2007: 397. What, then, is the grammar in question of?

This one learns immediately from the back cover of the volume and, more detailedly, from the very first page (1) of the grammar: “To the best of the author’s knowledge, this work is *the first full-length English-language grammar of any Miao language*, and it is *only the second* such grammar of any Miao-Yao language”.³

¹ Respective province names in parenthesis.

² In Meier & Meier 1979: 540 and 179 the role is played by <Xon>.

³ *Italics* afm. The first Yao grammar referred to by Sposato (*ib.*) was Court 1985. This reviewer would like in this context to draw the attention of the readers of this review to three Japanese Yao language documentations worthy of interest, namely Shintani & Young 1990 and Shintani 2008 and 2011. They are not grammars *sensu stricto* but “classified lexicons” of two separate variants of <Mun> spoken one on the Hainan Island and the



The linguistic picture of China was astonishingly murky until, indeed, a very few recent decades ago – first because of the vastness and the lay of the land, distances, relative closeness of the societies there and language barriers, and more recently, for political reasons. Turmoils of communist liberations, leaps forward and back, hundreds of schools and flowers campaigns, revolutions (proletarian, cultural, and other), etc., apart, the number of <nationalities> (民族) in China (Taiwan included) was officially established at 56 (Han Chinese, 汉族 *Hanzu*, and 55 ethnic minorities, *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), each but one (the Hui, 回族 *huizu*) officially having (or being bound to) its own language (语言 *yuyan*, 语 *yu*⁴), a number of them retaining their own long established writing systems, for a number of traditionally unwritten languages special scripts (based on the, also official, Roman-character *pinyin* transliteration system for Chinese characters) having been developed to create literary standards for education and publishing, while other tongues, ethnolects, dialects remain basically unwritten and, again until quite recently, disregarded by officialdom. The official number of nationalities in China and languages ascribed to them remains unchanged in spite of an enormous progress in the accumulation of our knowledge of the global linguistic situation as well as individual languages and their subclassifications. Decisions were political and influenced by Soviet over-ideologized academia to become axioms ignoring the acquired research data.⁵ Thus, what we officially have are e.g. the “Tajik” nationality with their “Tajik” language while they do speak two different languages⁶ neither being Tajik, “Mongol” nationality with their “Mongol” language (embracing Mongolian, Barga Mongolian, Buryat, Oirat, and even Khatso of Yunnan, being “very unlike Mongolian” and even by the administration considered “a dialect of the standard Ngwi language Nuosu,⁷ even though the two are mutually unintelligible” see Donlay 2020: 1, also 18–25), or, to conclude this list of examples, “Han” nationality with their “Han” language (cf. note 4). In addition, there are officially unrecognized but real nationalities with their officially unrecognized but very

other in Funing County (富宁县), Yunnan, and one of <Mien> in use in Jinping Miao, Yao, and Dai Autonomous County (金平苗族瑶族傣族自治县), also in Yunnan. Both include sections~chapters like “optatives”, “quantity, numbers”, “classifiers”, “connectives”, “particles”, “negation”, “aspects”, “adverbs”, “copula, existential”, “pro-words, indefinite words”, “sample sentence types”, all explained in English and Chinese, and thus can be of interest and use to anyone who has gone through Sposato’s Xong grammar. Similarly designed documentation (but with no introduction in English) of Lobohe~Luobo River Miao is Taguchi 2008. Incidentally, the Hainan Yao Mun speakers have been officially classified as... Miao. Apart from the Chinese glottonym <Miao-Yao>, linguists outside China “fashionably” tend to use terms like Hmong(ic)-Mien(ic) but Sposato decided to stick to Miao-Yao convincingly validating it on p. 20 (note 12).

⁴ Respective glottonyms have been created by suffixing 语 to the official ethnonym like e.g. 苗语 *miaoyu* Miao, 瑶语 *yaoyu* ‘Yao’, 藏语 *zangyu* ‘Tibetan’, 塔吉克语, *tajikeyu* ‘Tajik’, 彝语 *yiyu* ‘Yi’, 高山语 *gaoshanyu* ‘Taiwan Highlanders’ languages’, etc., also, of course, 汉语 *hanyu* ‘Chinese’, regardless often of what ethnolect or ethnolects the speakers actually speak.

⁵ Hence, no wonder that Sposato quotes... Stalin’s 1913 *Марксизм и национальный вопрос* (p. 30, footnote 23).

⁶ Wakhi and Sarikoli

⁷ One of six mutually unintelligible languages officially ascribed to the Yi nationality who use also numerous other lects. It does not seem that Gerner 2013 even mentions Khatso.

real means of verbal communication like Tuvans, Chams, Be, Khmu, and many others, including Chinese... Russians).

This picture, characterized above as “murky”, started clearing up with the appearance of linguistic atlases of China (like Liu & Wen 1987, Hao 2002, Cao 2008, Zhang 2012), dictionaries of Chinese dialects (esp. a series of 42 dialectological dictionaries of individual localities under the editorship of Li Rong published between 1992–2003⁸), studies like e.g. Kurpaska 2010, Joniak-Lüthi 2015, Künstler 2019 (2000), an entire “collection of studies on newly discovered languages in China” (*Zhongguo Xinfaxian Yuyan Yanjiu Congshu*) and a series of monographs with the caption “collection of studies on dialects of China’s minority languages” (*Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Yuyan Fangyan Yanjiu Congshu*),⁹ and more recently, e.g. De Gruyter Mouton series labeled <Sinitic Languages of China> in its entirety, but also individual volumes of <Mouton Grammar Library> in which the book under concern here has been released. Gradually, it became obvious that China’s language diversity goes far beyond the “magic” official number 55.¹⁰ For non-specialists the revelation perhaps first appeared in form of Svantesson 1991, and the number of independent (“stand-alone”) languages in China quoted in various sources keeps growing – to 107 (Grimes 1978: 248), 149 (Svantesson 1991: 82–85¹¹), “about 160–250”, 293 (Lewis 2009: 293), 302, or simply “hundreds”. Gerner and Bisang 2010: 620 express the opinion that “[...] taking intelligibility alone as the criterion [they] would estimate that there are perhaps 100 Miao languages in southwestern China” only and Sposato supports it: the “figure of one-hundred-plus mutually unintelligible Miao-Yao languages is likely the most accurate one” (p. 20).

Aware of the fact that Sposato’s <Xong> is a Miao language, this author returns to the reference books mentioned above to find items that evidently can be either identified or strongly related to the *lect* described in the grammar under concern. Thus, in the blink of his eye <Ost-Miao> with 650000 users is spotted in Meier & Meier (p. 141) among nine named languages under the caption “Miao-Gruppe (vorläufige Klassifikation)”.¹² In

⁸ For their list see Kurpaska 2010: 129–131; the material collected was later presented as monumental Li 2002.

⁹ Respectively 中国新发现语言研究丛书 (at least 43 volumes on this author’s shelves, the initial 25 titles listed in Majewicz 2005: 117–119) and 中国少数民族语言方言研究丛书.

¹⁰ Persons who stood behind these splendid Chinese publications when directly asked about the “necessity” or “possibility” of correction of this number categorically excluded it, at the same time insisting on the official consent to, and support for, such research.

¹¹ In “Appendix 3. Genetic classification of the languages of China” (p. 87) he provides seven Hmongic (= Miao) glottonyms (*i.a.* <Qo Xiong>, cf. below in this text), and six Mienic (= Yao) glottonyms.

¹² Among them, <Hainan-Miao> with the hint that it “hat sehr enge verwandtschaftliche Beziehungen zu Guangxi-Dialekten des Yao und wird vielleicht nur ein miaoisiertes Yao sein” (*ib.*), <Việt-Mèo (auch Hmông)> of northern Vietnam (six groups there, five of them distinguished by “color ethnonym” into Blue, Red, Flowered, Black and White Hmong, one known as Na Miêu; script partly based on Vietnamese orthography with final tone consonant letters, cf. e.g. Dang et al. 1984, Savina 1917, Nguyễn 1974), <Gua-Mba-Meo> from Thailand (*phaasāa mēw* ภาษาเมว, Green~Blue and White Hmong; a dictionary of a Thailand variety of Green~Blue Hmong (Lyman 1974) was released from Mouton and one of White Hmong (Heimbach 1979) from Cornell University), and Lao Meo (Lao Sang, *phaasāa mòng* ภาษาเมง, Green~Blue and White Hmong; a longer poetic text in Green Hmong ~

Lewis 2009: 349, 959 and 972 we find among nine alternative names for Eastern Xiangxi Miao two variants of interest for the present text, namely <Eastern Ghao-Xong> and <Ghao-Xong> with 80000 (*sic!*) speakers. In Voegelin and Voegelin 1977: 227 and 473 it is hidden behind <Hsiung>,¹³ a Wade-Giles equivalent of *pinyin* <Xiong>. In Asher & Moresby 2007: 184, in turn, Xong could be detected in <Qoxiong> classified under <Miao> (in turn under “Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) Group”) with the number of speakers 800,000, together with <Hmo>, (1,500,000), and <Hmau/Hmong> (3,000,000). The same source informs (p. 183) that “Miao, with over 5.3 million speakers, is divided into at least twelve languages in three main groups”.¹⁴ In the monumental Kamei (1992: 337), we find “コシユン(/qo35 ɕjõ35/)語, または, 湘西苗語”, evidently our Qoxiong ~ Xiangxi Miao, along with フム語 Hmu ~ 黔東苗語 Qiangdong Miao, and フモン語 Hmong ~ 川黔滇苗語 Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan Miao with seven subclassifications (~ Miao lects).

All these facts quoted in the preceding paragraph have been provided to confront them with what one reads in Sposato 2021: 17–18: on “other terms [...] used to refer to Xong in the literature. The most frequent [...] probably” being “‘Qo-Xong’, along with variants like ‘Qo-Xiong’, ‘Qoxung’, ‘Ghaob-Xong’, and ‘Ghaob-Xiong’”. The author points to the source of these glottonyms, namely *ghaob-Xonb* (in which *ghaob-* is “the most frequent nominal prefix” described on pp. 185–191 of the *Grammar*, and *Xonb* means ‘Miao’) and maintains that “the term can only be used to refer to native speakers of a Miao language [...] or to the Miao ethnicity as a whole. It is never used to refer to the Xong language [...] simply called *Xonb*” (p. 17). And further one learns that “Even more inappropriate is the term “Red Miao” [...]. Most of the author’s own Xong-speaking consultants have reacted with nothing but puzzlement when presented with” the color terms cited above “and the few who were familiar with them have given conflicting responses” (18).

Sposato (pp. 12–14) shows also the terminological confusion with glottonyms including components <Western>, <Eastern>, <Northern> used in Chinese- and English-language literature (e.g. West Hunan Miao or Northern Miao to denote what the Chinese label ‘Eastern Xiangxi Miao’ or ‘Xiangxi Miao’, *Xiangxi* meaning ‘West Hunan’ ~ ‘Hunan territory west of the River Xiang River (湘江)’ and also, as abbreviation, standing for ‘Hunan’ and for ‘Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture’ (湘西土家族苗族自治州 *Xiangxi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou*) situated in Northwestern Hunan). The Wikipedia article “Xong language” (“last edited” Oct. 15, 2021) provided the following glottonyms apart the one used in its title: “*Xiangxi Miaoyu* (湘西苗語), Western Hunan Miao, in Chinese. In Western sources, [...] Eastern Miao, Meo, Red Miao and North Hmongic”,

Mong Njua recorded in Laos, together with an English translation can be found in White 1983). An elegant and richly illustrated introduction to the Hmong of Thailand could be Lewis & Lewis 1984.

¹³ Among six alternate (synonymous) glottonyms, the others being Miao, Hmong, Hmung, Hmo, and Hunan Miao. Among “dialects” under <Miao>, Black, Flowery, Green/Blue, Red, and White Miao have been listed.

¹⁴ The remaining languages classified in the “Group” are: She, Yao, Bunu (here four subclassifications: Bunu, Baonao, Numao, Dongmeng), Baheng (~Pathen), Ngnai, Younuo, and Jiongnai (*ib.*, 184). No subclassifications named for <Yao> (*ib.*) in spite of the information that “Yao includes at least seven languages” (*ib.*, 183).

and endoglottonyms *Xonb* and *Meo*. The author of the *Grammar* decided to use the glottonym *Xong* as “synonymous” with ‘Western Xiangxi Miao’ (Chinese *Xiangxi Miaoyu Xibu Cifangyan* 湘西苗语西部次方言, used “in Yang’s 2004 survey of Xiangxi Miao”, p. 13 in Sposato 2021).

<Xong> (pronounced [ɕʰɔ̃] with mid high to low falling tone (1), cf. *ib.*, 98, and below) described in the *Grammar* is treated as one language consisting of its mostly mutually intelligible local varieties, “concentrat[ing] on several fully mutually intelligible varieties spoken in Fenghuang County, located in the far west of Hunan Province” (p. 1), the author admitting that “it may well contain several mutually unintelligible (or at best marginally mutually intelligible) speech varieties” under the influence of what he had heard from his own “consultants and other Xong-speaking contacts” (p. 13).

The language (third largest among Miao-Yao) is said to be spoken by “approximately 900,000 people, [...] vast majority of [them] living in mountainous parts of western Hunan [...] and eastern Guizhou Province[s]” (p. 1, more precisely on pp. 14–15) and does not seem to be endangered (cf. pp. 56–58).

<Xiangxi Miao> for Sposato is „a larger set of Miao varieties, some of them [...] completely mutually unintelligible” which includes Xong “along with three other Miao varieties” Suang, Seu, and San, collectively treated as Eastern Xiangxi Miao (p. 13ff.). All four enjoy writing standards, for Xong it is one based on the ethnolect of Jiwei Township (吉卫乡), a variety described by Xiang 1999. In this context, Sposato’s following constatation can be of interest: “[...] popular awareness of Jiwei Xong’s status as the “standard” variety of Xiangxi Miao seems to be largely restricted to Jiwei itself and areas immediately nearby. None of [his] Xong-speaking consultants in Fenghuang County or Suang-speaking consultants in Luxi County have even been aware that Xiangxi Miao has a “standard” variety, much less which variety that might be”¹⁵ (p. 31).

Meillet & Cohen 1924 “Languages of the World”, for decades one of the titles considered “the most authoritative” on the subject, seems to even do not mention either *Miao-yao* collectively or any of the group member separately even though it was the French and French missionaries who were among the most influential in Indochina and southern regions of China, while its “New Edition” of 1952 includes a three-page section “3. *Le Miao-tseu*” (pp. 563–566) in the sub-chapter “Les langues bordières” of the chapter “Les langues tibéto-birmanes” (signed by Henri Maspero) with five Miao glottonyms specified (*miao-blanc*, *miao-bleu*, *miao-noir*, *houa-miao*, *miao-tseu*), and Yao indicated as “populations apparentées” and admitting that “les dialectes *miao-tseu* [...] sont mal connus” (564) and the “tribus” speaking them “très morcelés” (563). The “Bibliographie” for the chapter lists four sources related to Miao, one of them being Savina 1917. Kun Chang’s “Bibliography” for “The Miao Language” section of his contribution “National Languages” to Sebeok 1967 provides (pp. 162–163) but a list of 12 journal articles

¹⁵ The entire subchapter 2.4 on “Xong’s status within China” (pp. 27–31), footnotes included, is here to be particularly recommended.

by Chinese authors (and only six items for sec. “The Languages of the Yao People” (164–165); Miao is seen as one language with “three major groups of dialects” while “the Yao people speak three languages: Punu [= Bunu], Mien, and Laka”; Kun Chang (Zhang Kun 張琨) was considered expert on Miao-Yao languages). In the “Preface” to a collection of 11 translations into English of Chinese scholars’ articles published in Chinese (Purnell 1972: vi–vii), its editor wrote: “In recent years, the Miao and Yao languages have been of growing interest to a small group of western scholars [...] mainly in the field of historical linguistics [...] and attempts have been made to link Miao-Yao with the Sino-Tibetan family [...] and the Austroasiatic family [...]. Synchronic studies [...] have lagged far behind except in [...] phonology. Several dictionaries have been produced [...] some [being] rather inaccessible. Information on syntax is difficult to find, and the material of semantics, discourse structure, dialectology, language contact, [...] is virtually nonexistent”. Hence, perhaps, we had results as presented in Voegelin & Voegelin, Meier & Meier, or Asher & Moseley mentioned above, and in Yartseva 1982, usually helpful in identifying lesser known languages, under «Языки мяо-яо» (classified as Sino-Tibetan) one finds only... “мяо-яо” with not a single lect named (p. 24). Purnell 1972 includes “Brief Descriptions” of both Miao and Yao, written by respective Miao (pp. 1–25) and Yao (239–255) “Language Teams”, originally published in 1962 in the journal 中国语文 *Zhongguo Yuwen* 1(111) and 3(113), respectively. In Olney 1983, however, as many as about 100 items directly concerning Hmong/Miao/Meo, in their majority of use to speakers of Western languages, have been listed.

This is more or less “the prism” through which we should look at Sposato’s *Xong Grammar* which in the author’s own words “is primarily a phonological and grammatical description of certain Xong varieties spoken in Fenghuang County”, with “the phonological and phonetic characteristics of the [...] variety spoken in Yankan Village [near] La’ershan Town” described “in particular” (pp. 58–59). Methodologically, it is to be “essentially a typologically informed, non-Eurocentric version of traditional Western grammar” (48). Primary linguistic data are the author’s “own elicited Xong texts and example sentences [...] collected [for their major part] in the Xong-speaking town of La’ershan, [...] Fenghuang County in the far west of [...] Hunan Province” (8). The corpus embraces 12 recorded texts, two of them being the main source of “example sentences” in the *Grammar* and appended at the end of the book (587–628 and 629–649, preceding only the list of “References” (651–658) and the “Index” (659–662)), and the remaining ten, also providing examples used in the book, have only been listed with short explanations on their nature and contents on pp. 8–10. Fieldwork and informants described on pp. 49ff. The area of research (52ff.) characterized as trilingual (Xong as the main tongue, Fenghuang Chinese suggested to be Gan heavily influenced by Southwestern Mandarin, and Standard Mandarin), with mono-, bi-, and trilingual speakers with varying fluency in each of the tongues, each of them playing a different (situational context-dependending) role (pp. 56ff.).

Sposato modestly evaluates his *Grammar* as “still far from complete” despite the fact that “this description contains as much phonological and grammatical analysis of Xong as

the author was able to perform in the time available to him” and points to three acres for further investigation (tonal phonetic variation and intonation, phonetic and phonological variation among mutually intelligible varieties of individual Miao-Yao languages of China including Xong, and multiverbal constructions), pp. 10–11.

Numerous volumes recently published in series like e.g. Pacific Linguistics, MGL, Cambridge Reference Grammars, or Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library, etc., are grammars or dictionaries of languages previously undescribed and every such work should be welcomed. The very glottonym <Xong> may look and sound¹⁶ obscure but it does not mean that the language remained undescribed prior to Sposato 2015, the harbinger of the *Grammar* in focus of attention here. On the contrary, Sposato mentions “a vast body of linguistic literature on Xong, nearly all [...] in Chinese” (31) and elsewhere specifies that “Xong is one of the most thoroughly described members of Miao-Yao family, with many dozens of articles, several book-length studies, and even a handful of text collections [...] on the language” (8). A special section “Previous descriptions of Xong” (31–48) in the *Grammar* constitutes a critical survey of ten studies, starting with Yu Jinzhi’s 520 pp. thick reference grammar of Aizhai Miao of 2011¹⁷ (“by far the most comprehensive description of any Xong variety to precede [Sposato’s] grammar”, 33) and the 1999 Jiwei “standard” mentioned above (“certainly the most complete grammatical description available for the Jiwei variety of [...] interest to all scholars for the extensive glossed texts it contains. But [...] – there’ll always be <but>s, p. 39], to conclude with two MA theses and “at least three short articles” on Xong. Actually, the survey ends with a section on “Publications on Xong in languages other than Chinese” revealing the author’s “aware[ness] of only a single [such] publication [– his own] 2012 paper on Xong relative clauses” (47).¹⁸ Sposato admits the existence of “a number of publications in English [and] at least one in French [...] that present some Xong data [...] nearly in all cases known to the author [...] taken from previously published Chinese-language studies” (*ib.*). As an update contribution this writer would point to Xong examples appearing in David Strecker’s “Typological profile of Hmong-Mien languages” (Sidwell & Jenny 2021: 278–283, 290–296) with examples (e.g. both on p. 281) also from Sposato (2015: 188–189).

Sposato’s *Grammar* in its entirety shows that some satisfactory clarification of, and our wising up to the notional complex <Miao-Yao> ~ <Hmong-Mien> is a matter of the... 21st-century years (the author, however, mentions “the first linguistic publication on Xong [...with a 52 pp. chapter on the language] completed in 1937 but not published until 1947 (and reprinted in 2003)” (32, cf. also 45f.).

Sposato starts (p. 1) from characterizing his object of research as “a fairly typical member of the Miao-Yao family” but what is “naturally” perceived as “typical” by specialists in Miao-Yao or, more broadly, MSEA¹⁹ linguistics, for linguistic typologists and

¹⁶ Nobody asked could read it aloud, everybody asked how to read it.

¹⁷ 余金枝著 戴庆厦审订2011。湘西矮寨苗语参考语法 [Xiangxi Aizhai Miaoyu Cankao Yufa]。北京：中国社会科学出版社。

¹⁸ Precisely the same formulation appeared in Sposato 2015: 45.

¹⁹ Mainland Southeast Asia; for explanation and justification see Sidwell & Jenny 2021: 1.

theoreticians it often is a marvel, a stroke of luck. Xong is “highly isolating, highly tonal”, monosyllabic with a very simple syllable structure (C)V^T (= optional consonant initial and obligatory vowel and tone) and rich phonemic inventory (80 or 81²⁰ segmental phonemes: “arguably 65” consonants, 15 (7 oral monophthongal + 8 diphthongal and/or nasal) vowels, and 8 tones), strict word order (SVO, SV, VO), serial verbs, “zero derivation”, “non-tonal suprasegmental phenomena” with phrase-level intonation superimposed upon the tone system (this always fascinated linguists unfamiliar with tonal tongues) and toneless elements (individual particles and interjections, cf. 116–117).

“Tone is primarily a syllable level phenomenon” and is its distinctive feature. Tones in Xong serve for lexical contrasts: “the author has not yet encountered tone being used for any grammatical purposes, such as distinguishing case, number, tense or modality”. They “are not simply specified pitch heights or contours; rather, they are each a complex “bundle” consisting of a specified pitch height, a specified pitch contour, and a specified phonation type (i.e. modal, breathy, or creaky)”. Sposato exemplifies it with a “minimal” triad <daox> : <daot> : <daok> phonemically realized as /tã2/ : /tã5/ : /tã7/ meaning respectively ‘to precipitate’, ‘to kill’, and ‘maternal grandmother’; digits stand for tones *mid-high to high to mid high peak* (2), *low to mid-high rise* (5), and *mid-low level* (7), and word-final letters in the orthography serve as tone marks or indicators (<-x> = tone 2, <-t> = tone 5, and <-k> = tone 7). Tones numbered 1–8 are otherwise transcribed also with digits and final consonant tone symbols: 41 modal²¹ (= 1, *mid-high to low fall* <-b>); 454 modal (= 2); 43 modal (= 3, *mid-high to mid fall* <-d>); 43 breathy (= 4, *mid-high to mid fall* <-l>); 14 modal (= 5); 22 breathy (= 6, *mid low level* <-s>); 22 modal (= 7); 21 breathy (= 8, *mid-low to low fall* <-f>). Another example is a hardcore “minimal octuplet”: <doub>, <doux>, <doud>, <doul>, <dout>, <dous>, <douk>, <douf>, with a graphic presentation of differences in their pronunciation (pp. 93–99).

Since the Xong consonant inventory is so rich, there is no wonder that it includes quite a number of consonant phonemes and their phonetic realizations which rarely appear in “Western” (and by far not only “Western”) languages and have unique, sometimes unexpected or surprising sets of distinctive features (like e.g. breathy nasals and laterals [m^h], [n^h], [l^h], [lj^h] or prenasalized aspirated stops [n^ph] [n^kh] [n^qh], with descriptions of their articulation) – and linguists greedy for such exotic *rarae aves* will not be disappointed reaching for Sposato’s *Grammar*. The phonological component of Xong is so different from what Western neophilologists are accustomed to that the “Phonology” chapter (60–122) is, in comparison with many other grammars, quite extensive.

Similarly, also preceding it the chapter curtly titled “Background” (12–59) is relatively long – and, together with the “Introduction” (1–11), both referred to above, it is its very good point of the book worthy of praising. Too often the scarcity of just such detailed “background introduction” is the principal fault of descriptions of, and other data on/from, “lesser known” (*moins répandues*) languages and potential user is forced to waste

²⁰ Depending on the treatment of the single syllabic tone bearing [i].

²¹ Opposition [modal : breathy] implies “phonation (~ voicing) type” (cf. p. 96–97).

much time and patience trying to accumulate some basic but necessary knowledge of the place(s) and people involved, their ethnography, social relations, natural habitat and its surroundings and their influence on the speaking community, language presence in print, broadcasting, schooling, landscape, etc. These parts of Sposato's grammar could be a near model for future such grammars. Of course, e.g. maps like that "of China showing the location of Xiangxi Prefecture" (53) and especially that "of Fenghuang County" (54) could and (therefore) should be much better than in their present form.²²

Sposato admits that "an entire chapter devot[ed to] orthographic issues in a descriptive grammar [...] may seem unusual" (122, slightly rearranged by afm), especially when it is entitled "Orthographies" (plural !; 123–144) and its Yiwei standard has been mentioned (both in the "Background" chapter and above in the present text). But the decision to prepare and include it in the present form has been substantiated and resulted in a thrilling survey of impressively numerous writing systems developed or adopted for recording the language (which actually is concurrently "written" and "unwritten", cf. p. 141). The author decided (again convincingly justifying it, 139–141) to use throughout his *Grammar* the Jiwei standard with necessary modifications (altogether ten; e.g. the introduction of two additional tone symbols <-k> and <-f> as Jiwei Xong has only six tones, and a symbol for tonelessness <-h>, to mention only two modifications easily understandable for linguists from outside the field) and named it "practical academic orthography for Fenghuang Xong" with no expectations that it "will be widely adopted [...] at any point in the near future" (141).²³

The "grammatical" part of the *Grammar* starts with "Nouns", the most extensive chapter in the volume (145–226). "Nouns are a major open lexical category in Fenghuang Xong" (*ib.*) but... instead of rewriting the content of this so important chapter we return for a while to the "Introduction": "it may be that notions like "noun", "verb", and "classifier" can be more meaningfully defined in Xong as sets of syntactic positions that display similar properties than as sets of lexical items that display similar properties" (8); this handy quotation exempts us from relating the contents of a number of chapters that follow – and what follows first is the chapter on "Classifiers and numbers" (227–297), naturally, because their co-occurrence, as a complex, with "nouns" constitutes one (of two) "objective, testable, language-specific properties that define nouns as a lexical category in Xong" (146). Nouns are [- countable], hence they need "measure words" (a different term for "classifiers") for being counted (and not only, cf. 242ff.). Xong, like a number of other languages of varying genetic and typological classifications used by peoples

²² Still, together with the explanations in the text (52) the Fenghuang map is better than those in many other similar grammars. On such maps in such grammars see e.g. the cases of Paluai in *Lingua Posnaniensis* 62/2, esp. pp. 128–129, and Papapana (and Atong dictionary) in the same journal, vol. 63/1, 119–129 (and 113–118).

²³ There may be situations when a/the writing system of a language neglected by its native users is urgently needed under certain circumstances involving foreign interlocutors, as demonstrated by Thavisak 1988 in which Meo-Miao-Hmong text had to be transcribed not only in Roman but, in this case, also in Thai characters (competently: Thavisak authored also a handbook of phonetics in Thai and she used Heimbach 1979); "understandable" tables of notation equivalents on pp. 7–8(–10).

with close cultural and historical ties with China (like Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese), has two different sets of numerals: “native” and “Sini(ti)c” (cf. 285ff.) – and this can also be of special interest for “general” linguists.

Chapter 7, “Deictic forms” (298–346), “covers three small and closed (but very-high frequency) sets of forms”: pronouns (298–323), demonstratives (323–329), and “ignoratives” (329–346). Following it is chapter “8 [on] Complex nominal constructions”, such as “relative clauses” (347–381), “possessive constructions” (382–394), and “nominal conjunction” (395–401). Chapter “9 Clauses” introduces “basic clausal structure” (402–428), “particles [(429–440)], negative markers [(440–443)], and other grammatical forms” (444–451), “special clause types” like “imperative” (451–454), “interrogative” (454–462), “comparative” (462–468), and ““passive” clauses” [with] “a so-called “passive marker”” (468–474).

Chapter 10 – one of the shortest in the book, introduces the lexical category of “Verbs” (475–514, 40 pp. against 81 pp. devoted to “Nouns”; usually, the proportion is just opposite in grammars) extracted on the ground of “two distinguishing properties [...]: the ability to be directly negated and [the] ability to undergo relativization” (476). Discussed are “properties of verbs” (476–482), “verbs and Aktionsart” (482–492), “semantically intransitive verbs with two arguments” (492–500), and “verb morphology” (500–514, here described are cases of affixation and reduplication, with an intriguing “tetrasyllabic construction with an attenuating semantic effect” in which the first component of a confix *lib-daod*, being the categorial exponent of the entire construction and its meaning, is suffixed to the first component of a reduplicated verb and the other one is suffixed to the entire construction (the meaning is ‘a little..., a bit..., a little bit...’ like in e.g. *ndit-lib-ndit-daod* ‘a little bit hot’ > *ndit* ‘hot’; 510–512).

Chapter 11 deals with “Expressive forms” – ideophones (515–536), onomatopoea (537–542), and interjections (542–548).

The last chapter 12 “Multiverbal constructions” (549–586) discusses *i.a.* “verb chains”, idiomatic “tetrasyllabic expressions”, aspectual and modal constructions.

It is excitingly nice for this reviewer to be in the position to highly positively evaluate and praise a publication deserving it – and the present text is exactly such a case. There is, however, an uglier side of his task, namely – that of a nitpicker: to look for (and find) holes even in a spotless product (nothing is ideal even if one strives to achieve perfection). So, let it be: (1) maps have been critically mentioned above; (2) in the list of “References”, a comma has been placed after every family name of the author (or the first author) while its sole function in the said position is to inform about the *inversion of the order* of authors’ name components for the sake of the alphabetical arrangement of consecutive bibliographical descriptions – and it is a very important information when authors’ names with varying (usually, but not always, depending on the language) ordering (family name first or last) on the title pages of works referred to have to be listed (thus, e.g. entry head records like <Dai, Qingxia, Zaibiao Yang, and Jinzhi Yu> and <Dai, Qingxia, Jinzhi Yu, and Zaibiao Yang> on p. 652 are but sequences of fake information: the sources in question are Chinese, so the “reality described” as quoted is

impossible and the only possible records reflecting the respective original title pages can be <Dai Qingxia, Yang Zaibiao, and Yu Jinzhi>, <Dai Qingxia, Yu Jinzhi, and Yang Zaibiao>; similarly, the record <Taguchi, Yoshihisa. 2015> should most probably be <Taguchi Yoshihisa 2015>,²⁴ while the three descriptions (2012a–b and 2013) above it may be correct or not (both <Taguchi, Yoshihisa> and <Taguchi Yoshihisa> are possible but, in the case of conference handouts, impossible to verify without the incriminated handouts in hands); (3) the “Index”, also mentioned above, is much too poor in entries to be of great help in facilitating the potential user’s orientation in the contents of the otherwise bulky linguistic masterpiece and even the very detailed tools in the front matter like the 8-page “Table of contents” (vii–xiv), “List of figures” (xv), “List of tables” (xvii), and “List of glossing abbreviations” (xix–xx, seemingly not complete or not transparent enough but verifying it proved time-consuming and therefore pointless at this point) do not make the volume sufficiently “user-friendly”. After all, it is not a detective story but a reference book to be consulted or checked all of a sudden and this cannot take more than a couple of minutes. Nevertheless, for linguists not being and not intending to be specialists in Miao-Yao linguistics it really is the first Big Book available on matters Miao-Yao, in size comparable perhaps only with the impressive and highly specialist 2012~3 Big Book (912 pp. of print) in Chinese by Qiguang Chen (cf. the proper, at least in the eyes of a former university professor of bibliography, bibliographical description below).

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²⁴ The function of the dot preceding the publication year, except when following possible second name initial, is also very unclear.

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²⁵ Strictly speaking, not a linguistic atlas but very handy and useful for an initial localization of individual official ethnic minorities prior to making use of the other atlases mentioned.

²⁶ The recentmost at the reviewer's hand preparing the present text.

²⁷ The source of the famous map (C-8) of the distribution of Miao-Yao languages, reprinted (in too small size) also in the Sposato's book, p. 22; the *Atlas* listed under Li, Xiong, Zhang 1987 (p. 654). Map C-9 in it shows the distribution of Miao.

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