Preface

In the fifth volume to appear in this new series on Sinitic languages of China, Sing Sing Ngai presents us with the culmination of ten years of research on the Shaowu language, a Sinitic language spoken in the northwest of Fujian province in China, found in proximity to the stunning landscapes of the Wuyi mountain range.

After completing her Honours degree in European Studies at the University of Hong Kong, Sing Sing Ngai went on to obtain her Master of Philosophy degree in Linguistics at the University of Cambridge and subsequently won a PhD scholarship to work on the ERC Sinotype project at the EHESS in Paris from 2009 to 2013. A native speaker of several other Sinitic languages, Sing Sing chose, nonetheless, to carry out work on the Shaowu language, inspired by the studies on Min Chinese by the renowned sinologist, Professor Jerry Norman of the University of Washington. Apart from Professor Norman’s research, as well as several other works on historical phonology and a small collection of 19th century missionary documents, little is known about the grammar of this language, a gap that the present volume ably and substantially fills.

The result is a magnificently comprehensive description of the Shaowu Min language, based on an accumulated year of fieldwork comprising seven research trips to the city of Shaowu, and over 300 hours of recording. In her analysis, Sing Sing Ngai demonstrates that Shaowu is, at its core, a Min language, but one that has become highly divergent within the Min group through contact with adjacent Gan, Hakka and Wu languages. In this, she concurs with the earlier studies by Professor Norman, yet skilfully adds more evidence to reinforce his conclusion, above all from the perspectives of morphosyntax.

Readers are certain to appreciate the finely detailed descriptions of every aspect of the grammar of Shaowu, framed in the perspective of linguistic typology and accompanied by over a thousand examples, a small sample lexicon, and a selection of natural discourse texts.

Sinitic languages of China: Typological descriptions is a new series specialising in the description of the grammar of Sinitic languages, ‘Sinitic’ being the technical term for the Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. As such, it includes well-known examples such as Cantonese 广东话, Hokkien or Southern Min 闽南话, Shanghaiese 上海话 and Hakka 客家话, lesser-known ones such as the Hunanese Xiang languages 湘语, or the Jin languages 晋语 of Shanxi, and, importantly, the national language of China, Pūtōnghuà 普通话, known as Standard Chinese or Mandarin in English. Even Mandarin comes in many non-standardised forms including the Sichuanese variety of Southwestern Mandarin 西南官话 spoken in Chengdu, the Southern Jiang-Huai Mandarin 江淮官话 of Nanjing, the Central Plains Mandarin 中原官话 of Xi’an, not to overlook
the typologically unusual varieties spoken in Gansu and Qinghai in northwestern China, such as Tangwang 唐汪话 and Linxia 临夏话.

The primary goal of this series is to promote scientific knowledge of Sinitic languages and their typological characteristics through the publication of high calibre linguistic research, based on empirical fieldwork, detailed analysis of the data and solid, theoretical interpretations. The grammatical descriptions, written in a functionalist and descriptive framework, are illustrated by linguistic examples presented in a ‘value-added’ four-line glossing-alignment format that includes romanisation, glossing, the idiomatic English translation, and also the Chinese characters, relevant for historical and comparative research, as well as for our sinophone readers.

The specific objective is to reveal the great structural diversity found in Sinitic languages and to dispel many recurrent linguistic myths about Chinese. The authors involved in this series are all highly trained fieldwork linguists with a background in both typology and Chinese linguistics.

The series thus aims to reach an international readership for the first time, given that most literature available on Sinitic languages other than Mandarin, up until now, has been mainly written in the medium of (Standard Written) Chinese.

The large-scale research project, The hybrid syntactic typology of Sinitic languages (Sinotype), provided the initial impetus behind this series. Sinotype benefitted from funding in the form of an Advanced Grant (No. 230388) awarded by the European Research Council (ERC) for the period 2009–2013 which included a generous publication subsidy for this series. The host institute, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), graciously provided managerial support and accounting resources, not to mention spacious premises for the Sinotype research centre in inner-city Paris, located at 2, rue Küss in the 13th arrondissement, for the entire period of the project. We take this opportunity to express our many thanks to both the ERC and the EHESS.

The other volumes planned for this series are:
Volume 2: A grammar of Nanning Pinghua, by Hilário de Sousa
Volume 4: A grammar of Central Plains Mandarin, by Yujie Chen
Volume 7: A grammar of Waxiang, a Sinitic language of northwestern Hunan, by Hilary Chappell

Volume 8: A reference grammar of Caijia, an unclassified language of Guizhou, China

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