

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

The Chin languages have rarely been studied by linguists. As a result the classification and subgrouping of these languages is incomplete. This thesis aims to provide a reconstruction of Proto Chin and to propose a subgrouping of the languages based on this reconstruction.

This chapter presents a brief overview of the Chin people, Chin linguistic classification, the existing literature; the purpose of this thesis; and the sources of linguistic data and the methodology used in it.

In chapter 2, the selection of representative Chin languages is discussed. Chapter 3 provides brief descriptions of the selected languages. The reconstruction is given in chapter 4. A description of Proto Chin, the phonological relationships among Chin languages and a proposed stammbaum of the Chin language family are provided in chapter 5. Chapter 6 is the conclusion.

### 1.1 Background

This section provides brief background information about Chin people in general and particularly in the Chin State of Myanmar<sup>1</sup>. The discussion includes the historical background of Chin people, geographical and demographic information, cultural background, communication, and the nomenclature used for different languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar was formerly called Burma. The SLORC changed the country name to Myanmar in 1989.

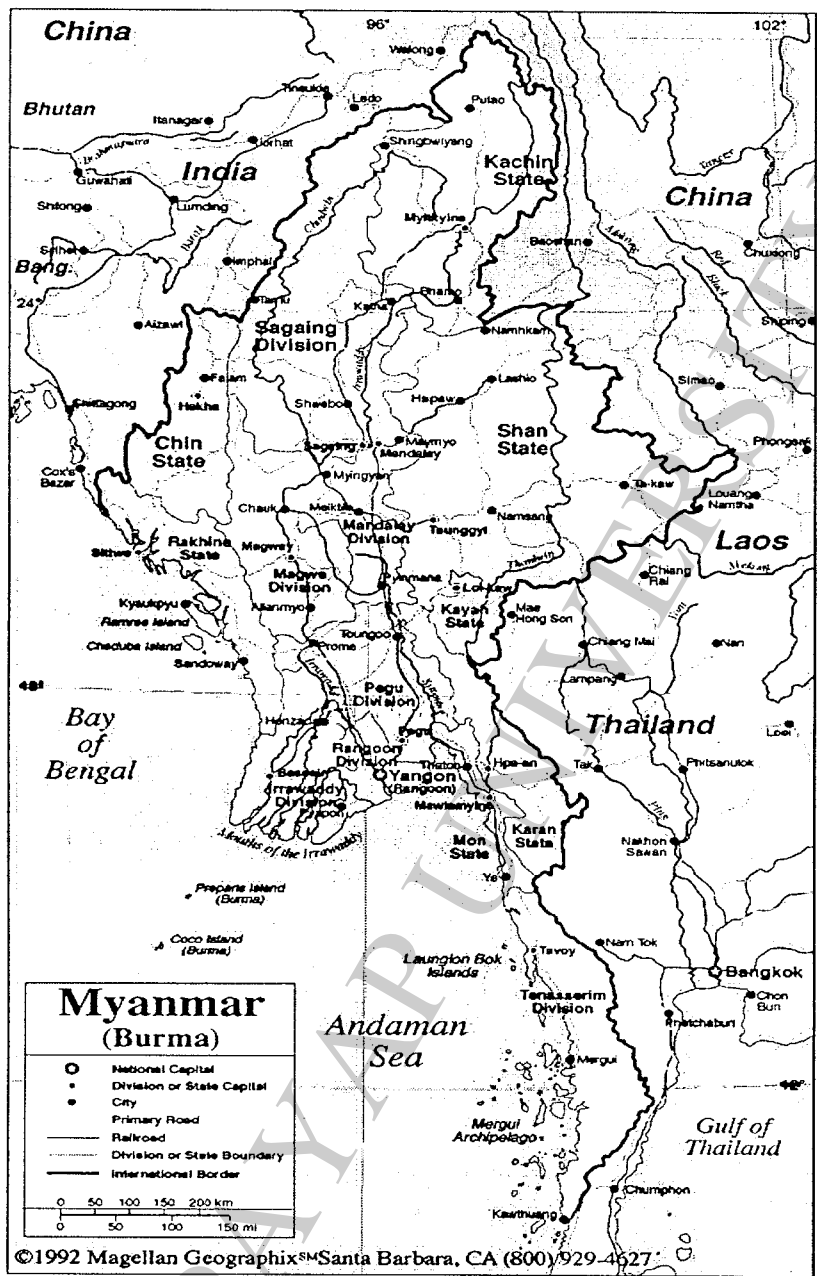


Figure 1. Map of Myanmar

### 1.1.1 Historical background

Chin people have different autonyms as well as exonyms (See section 1.1.6), and live in Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. Their origin was the Yellow or Manchu River valley of Southwest China from where they migrated considerable distances over many centuries (Lehman 1963:11).

Scholars give different dates for their entry into Myanmar. Lehman (1963) claims this entry date to be 750 AD, Khen Za Sian (1999) proposes 800 AD, and Tuan Khaw Kham (1999) claims 850 AD. The earliest historical mention of Chin people in Myanmar comes from inscriptions of the Pagan kingdom from the thirteenth century AD (Lehman 1963:20).

Later, Chin people moved toward the west of mainland Myanmar. Vum Kho Hau (1963) dates this migration as 1374 AD, which is the time when the Kalay (or Kale) Sawbwa (chief) built the Kalay palace and Chin people were put to forced labor. The other proposed dates for the settlement of Chin people to the current region are 1347 AD (Kip Thian Pau 1999), 1400 AD (Khen Za Sian 1999), and 1490-1510 AD (Bawi Hu 1998).

The British invaded and annexed the Chin Hills in 1892 and declared the area an integral part of Burma. The British introduced the Chin Hills Regulation in 1896, making the Chin Hills a single administrative area. This regulation was replaced by the Chin Special Division Act of 1948, which was adopted on October 22, 1948, after Myanmar gained independence. Within the Chin Special Division were six subdivisions: from north to south, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Mindat, Paletwa and Kanpetlet.

The Chin Special Division was changed to the Chin State under Section 30 (B) of the Constitution of the Union of Burma adopted on January 3, 1974. The former six

subdivisions were formed into nine townships: Tonzang, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Thantlang, Matupi, Mindat, Paletwa, and Kanpetlet.

The scope of this thesis is confined to the Chin languages spoken in Myanmar, particularly in the Chin State.

### **1.1.2 Geography and demography**

The Chin State lies in the west of Myanmar, between 24 and 21.45 degrees north latitude and between 92 and 94.5 degrees east longitude as shown in Figure 2. The area of Chin State is 13,367 square miles.

The Chin hills are a series of generally north-south oriented mountain ranges, but south of 22 degrees north latitude there is a large region in which this pattern is interrupted by cross-cutting local ridges, valleys, and other irregularities (Lehman 1963). The main mountain ranges vary in height from 5,000 to 9,000 feet. The highest mountain point, Victoria (Khonu), is 10,018 feet above sea level, situated in Mindat Township of Southern Chin State. The main rivers in Chin State are the Manipur, Bawinu, Kaladan and Tio rivers. The climate is chiefly influenced by monsoon winds, but owing to the altitude, the weather is often cold. There are three seasons, hot, wet, and cold.

Up-to-date official demographic information for the Chin State is not available. Referring to the 1931 census of India, Luce (1985) gives the total population of Chin speakers in Burma as nearly 344,000 with 44 different tribes. Today the population in Chin State is about 435,000. The writer of this thesis estimates that native speakers of Chin languages comprise over 95% of this population.

Map of Chin State



Figure 2. Map of Chin State

Map adapted from Rand McNally (1998)

### 1.1.3 Culture

The emblem of the Chin people is the hornbill, associated in Chin legend with faithfulness, fidelity and loyalty. Before they embraced Christianity, Chin people were headhunters and animists. The society is patriarchal and monogamous. In the past, the hair knot position differed from north to south. Grierson (1904:552) says,

... the Siyins, Soktes, Thados, Yos and Whenos wear the hair in a knot on the nape of the neck; the Tashons, Yahaos, Hakas, and the southerners generally tie it up on the top of the head, whence the name Baungshe, because it is usually just over the forehead.

The Masho, who are today known as Khami (Vumson 1988:43) wore their hair knotted at the side of the head.

Little agricultural advancement has taken place in Chin State, so that swidden cultivation is still practiced in some places. Ancient religious beliefs and culture are interwoven such that it is difficult to differentiate the culture from beliefs. In the past, Chin people did not have friendly inter-tribal relationships but fought each other. The practice of revenge is still present among some Southern Chin groups.

Christianity was introduced to the Chin Hills by American Baptist missionaries in 1899. Christianity changed some customs, such as spirit worship, head hunting and discrimination against women. Today the majority of Chin people are Christians.

### 1.1.4 Communication

There is no means of air or sea travel within Chin State. No national highway crosses the Chin State. Due to the geographical terrain, the rivers cannot be used for transportation. There is a road that connects Mindat in the southern part of Chin State<sup>2</sup> with the central part of Myanmar. Communication in the north is better than

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<sup>2</sup> The official usage of North and South Chin State coincides with Lehman's grouping, which is based on social and cultural phenomena.

that in the south. There is no regular inter-state bus service in the Chin State, however there is daily bus service to Hakha (the state capital), Thantlang, Falam, Tedim and Tonzang from Kalaymyo in the Sagaing Division. The roads are generally paved in the north, and dirt in the south. People seldom travel north-south or vice versa, but often travel east-west or vice versa, even up to Mizoram and Manipur States of India.

### 1.1.5 Nomenclature

One of the main complexities among the Chin people is what they call themselves. Chin people are called 'Kuki'<sup>3</sup> in India, and 'Chin'<sup>4</sup> in Myanmar. Matisoff (1995) mentions that 'Chin' is a loose exonymic designation for many 'Northern Kukish' languages and peoples. Chhangte (1993:1) says, "These tribes [Chins], then were what the Bengalis indiscriminately called 'Kukis', and the Burmese 'Chin'". There are at least four different autonyms used in the Chin State: 'Laimi', used in Falam, Hakha and Thantlang townships; 'Zomi', used in Tonzang and Tedim townships; 'Mizo', used in some parts of Tedim and Falam townships; and 'Cho', used in the south.

Grierson's definition of Chin as "the various tribes inhabiting the country to the east of Lushai hills, from Manipur in the north to about the eighteenth degree of the north latitude in the south" (1904:551) will be used in this thesis.

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<sup>3</sup> "Kuki is an Assamese term, applied to various hill tribes, such as the Lusheis, Rangkhols, Thados, etc. It (this name) seems to have been known at a comparatively early period. In the Rai Mala, Siva is stated to have fallen in love with a Kuki woman, and the Kuki are mentioned in connection with the Tipperah Raja Chachag, who flourished about 1512 AD" (Grierson 1904: 509).

<sup>4</sup> "Chin is a Burmese word used to denote the various hill tribes living in the country between Burma and the Province of Assam and Bengal. It is written and dialectically pronounced Khyang. The name is not used by the tribes themselves, who use titles such as Zo or Yo and Sho" (Grierson 1904: 510).

### 1.1.6 Chin languages in Chin State

There are different claims about the number of Chin languages spoken in Chin State of Myanmar. Focusing on Chin languages, Bradley (1997:26) says, “names for these [Kuki-Chin] groups are much more numerous than distinct languages”. Referring to the 1931 census of India, Luce (1985:81) mentions that there are 44 different Chin tribes<sup>5</sup>. Grimes (1996) lists 38 Chin languages spoken in Myanmar: Asho, Bawm, Cho, Dai, Fannai, Falam, Gangte, Hakha (Baungshe), Hualngo, Khimi, Khualsim, Khumi, Khyo (Hyo), Laizo, Lente, Lushai, Kaang, Mara (Lakher), Matu, Mizo, Mindat, Mun, Ngawn, Ngente, Paite, Saizang, Senthang, Shongshe, Siyin, Taishon, Tedim, Teizang, Thado, Thawr, Zahau, Zo, Zokhua and Zotung.

In his article entitled “Call us Myanmar”, Myatthu (2000) numbers 135 national peoples living in Myanmar, and 53 in the Chin State: Anan, Anu, Aupu, Asho Chin (plains), Awwakhami, Bamar, Chin, Dai (Yindu), Dim, Ganbe, Gwethe, Hsaihtan, Hsinhtan, Hwalngo, Kalintaw (Lushe), Kawno, Khami, Khuanghsai Chin, Khuangsu, Khunli or Hsim, Khwa-hsinme, Laing, Laizo, Laukhtu, Lemyo, Linte, Lushai (Lushe), Lyintu, Mahu, Makan, Marin, Miae, Miyam (Mara), Meithai (Kathe), Mwine, Naga, Pakim, Panan, Salaing, Tabaung, Taichun, Tandu, Tiddim (Tedam), Tardoe, Taw, Tezon, Yaunghtu, Zataung, Zohtone, Zeinnhyut (Zonniyut), Zope, Zo, and Zun. Among these 53 different languages, Meithai, Naga and Bamar are not in Chin language family.

To summarize the above sources and personal communication with local people<sup>6</sup>: there are 54 Chin languages spoken in respective Townships of the Chin State as

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<sup>5</sup> Tribes and languages are not always identical but generally languages differ according to tribes.

<sup>6</sup> Based on personal communication with Rev. Paul Tu Lung, a Rawngtu speaker on March 29, 2001; Rev. Kaw Kung, a Zotung speaker on March 30, 2001; Rev. Ngai Hung Om, a Cho speaker on April 1, 2001 and Robert Khua Hnin Thang, a Khualsim speaker on June 14, 2001.



shown in Table 1. The first row in the table represents the names of administrative townships.

Tonzang	Tedim	Falam	Hakha	Thantlang	Matupi	Mindat	anpetlet	Paletwa
Thado	Sizang	Falam	Hakha	Thantlang	Matupi	Mindat	Hnoktu	Khami
Tedim		Ngawn	Zokhua	Zophei	Zotung	Muun	Chinpon	
Zo		Laizo	Mie	Daai				
Teizang		Zaniat	Senthang	Lautu		Cho		Khasi
Hualngo (Mizo)			Thawr	Mara		Kaang		Khamui
Dim		Khualsim		Amlai		Rawngtu	Rah	Myo
Khuano		Zahau		Tamang				Laitu
Vangteh		Tapong		Wumtu				Khumi
Guite		Sim						Khuangsu
Val		Bualkhua						
Saizang		Taisun						
Phaileeng		Lente						

Table 1. Chin languages in the Chin State of Myanmar

## 1.2 Literature review

This section is divided into an overview of Chin linguistic classification and previous reconstructions of Chin languages.

### 1.2.1 Overview of Chin linguistic classification

The internal relationship between lower level Tibeto-Burman groups is still unclear. Various linguists classify the Tibeto-Burman language family differently. Shafer (1974) splits Tibeto-Burman into four main parts: Bodic, Baric, Burmic and Karenic. On the other hand, Benedict (1972) identifies seven subgroups: Tibetan-Kanauri, Bahing-Vayu, Abor-Miri-Dafla, Kachin, Burmese-Lolo, Bodo-Garo, and Kuki-Chin. Bradley (1997) summarizes the overall pattern of Tibeto-Burman, using Shafer and Benedict's classifications, as shown in Figure 3.

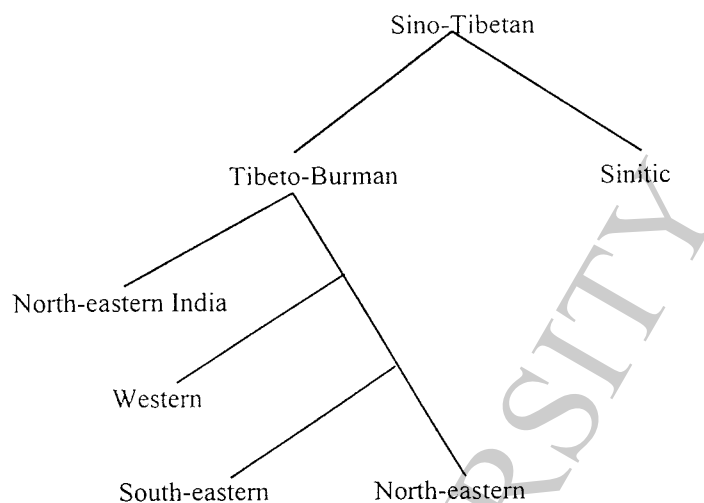


Figure 3. The Tibeto-Burman linguistic family (Bradley 1997:2)

Bradley (1997) classifies the Chin languages as part of the ‘Kuki-Chin-Naga’ language group, which he places in a ‘North-eastern India’ group of Tibeto-Burman.

Although Bradley (1997) classifies Kuki-Chin-Naga under the Northeastern India group<sup>7</sup> based on substantial lexical and morphosyntactic similarities, he marks the relationship by a dotted line (as shown in Figure 4) because Shafer classifies it as a part of Burmic and Benedict links it to Burmese-Lolo. Within the Kuki-Chin-Naga group, Bradley proposes Southern Naga, Old Kuki, Meithei, Chin and Other Chin groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Burling (1983) terms this group of languages the ‘Sal’ group, based on their distinctive word for ‘sun’.

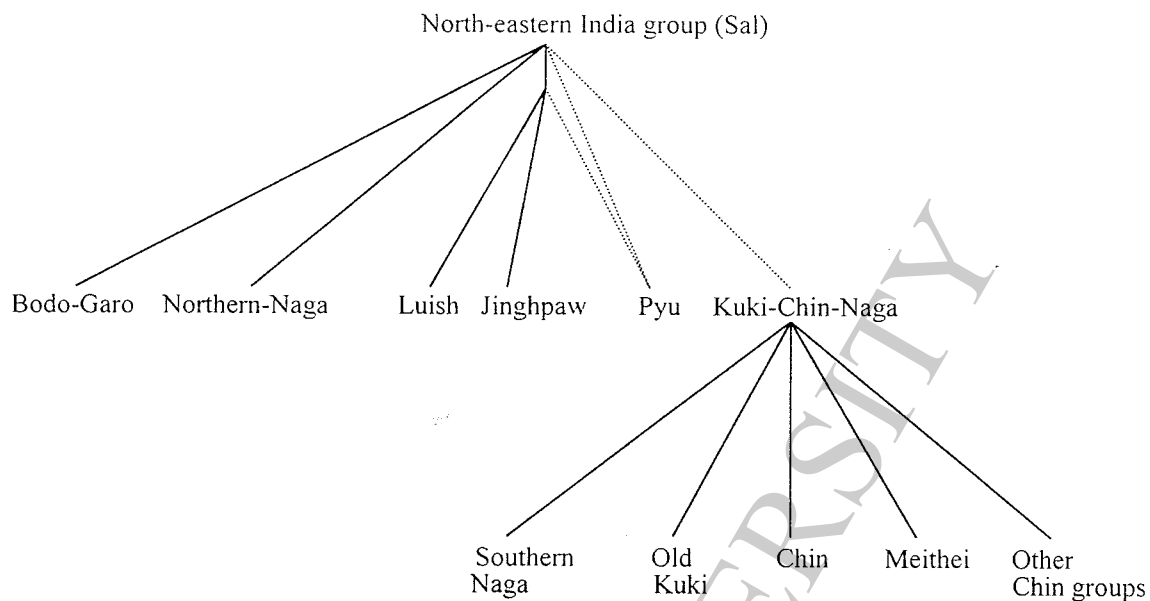


Figure 4. Kuki-Chin-Naga of North-eastern India group (Bradley 1997)

Bradley (1997), further classifies the Chin position of Kuki-Chin-Naga as Northern Chin, Central Chin and Southern Chin. The Chin language family mainly covers the languages spoken in Myanmar. Southern Chin language groups are divided into three geographical subgroups: Northern, Central and Southern.

Thus, Bradley (1997) classifies Kuki-Chin-Naga as shown in Figure 5.

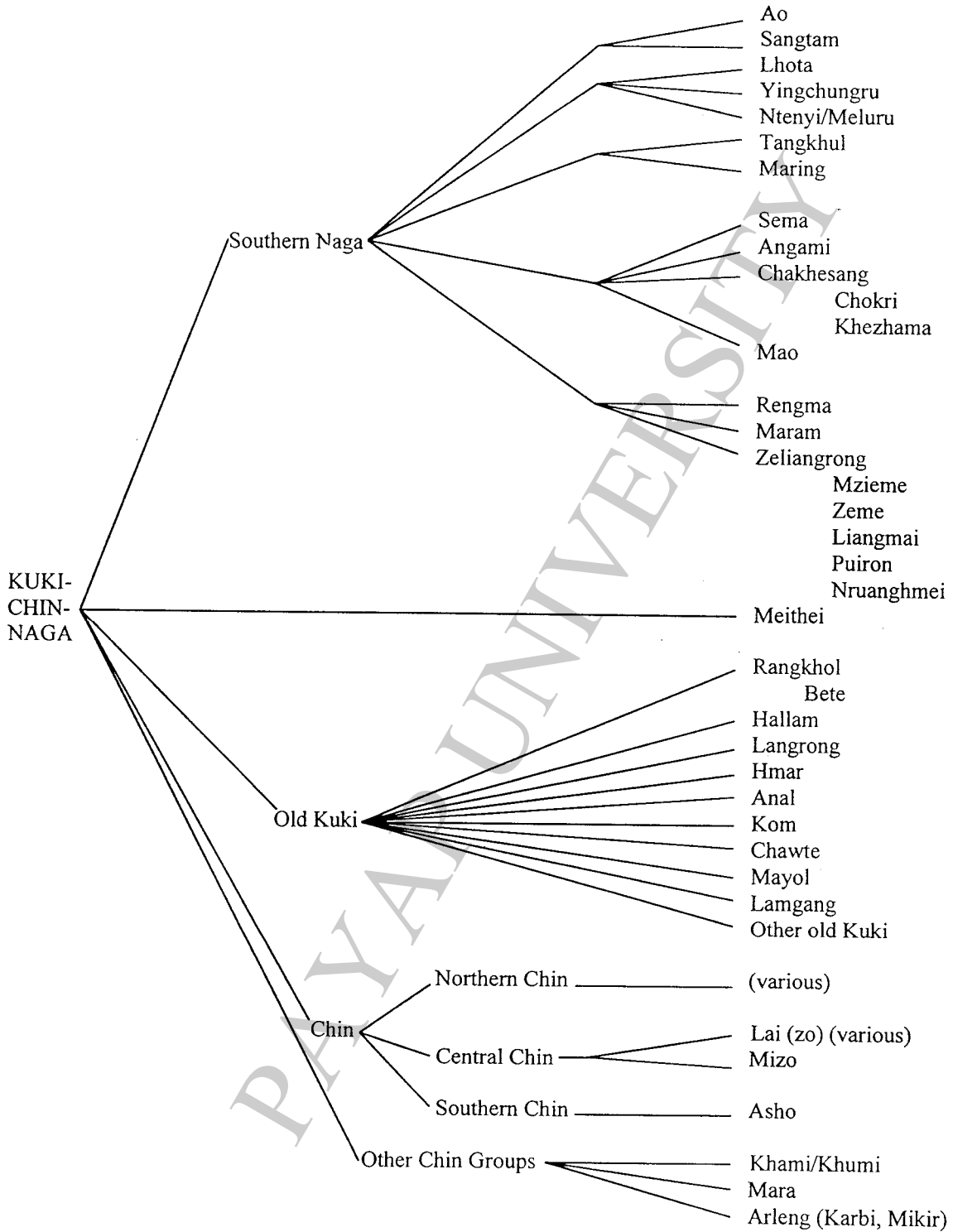


Figure 5. Kuki-Chin-Naga (Bradley 1997)

Bradley (1997:29-30) gives a more detailed picture of Chin languages at a lower level as shown in Figure 6.

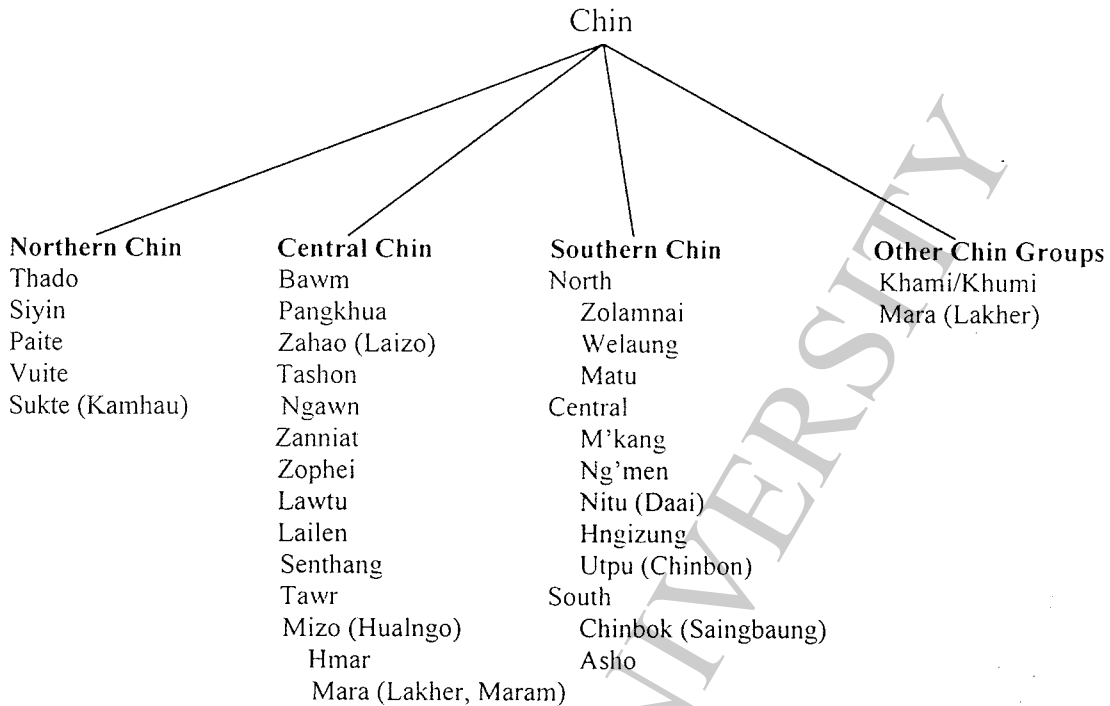


Figure 6. Chin subgroups (Bradley 1997)

Grierson (1904) in contrast, proposed four main groups: Northern Chin, Central Chin, Southern Chin and Old Kuki, as shown in Figure 7.

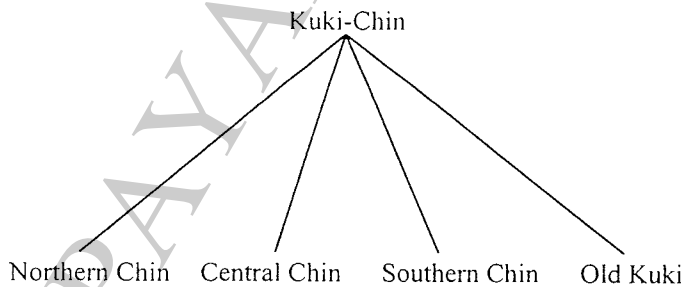


Figure 7. The Kuki-Chin language family (Grierson 1904)

The Old Kuki varieties are mainly spoken in India. Lushei (Ngente) is the archaic name of Mizo, and the speakers live both in Myanmar and India. Figure 8 illustrates Grierson's (1904) classification of Chin languages<sup>8</sup>.

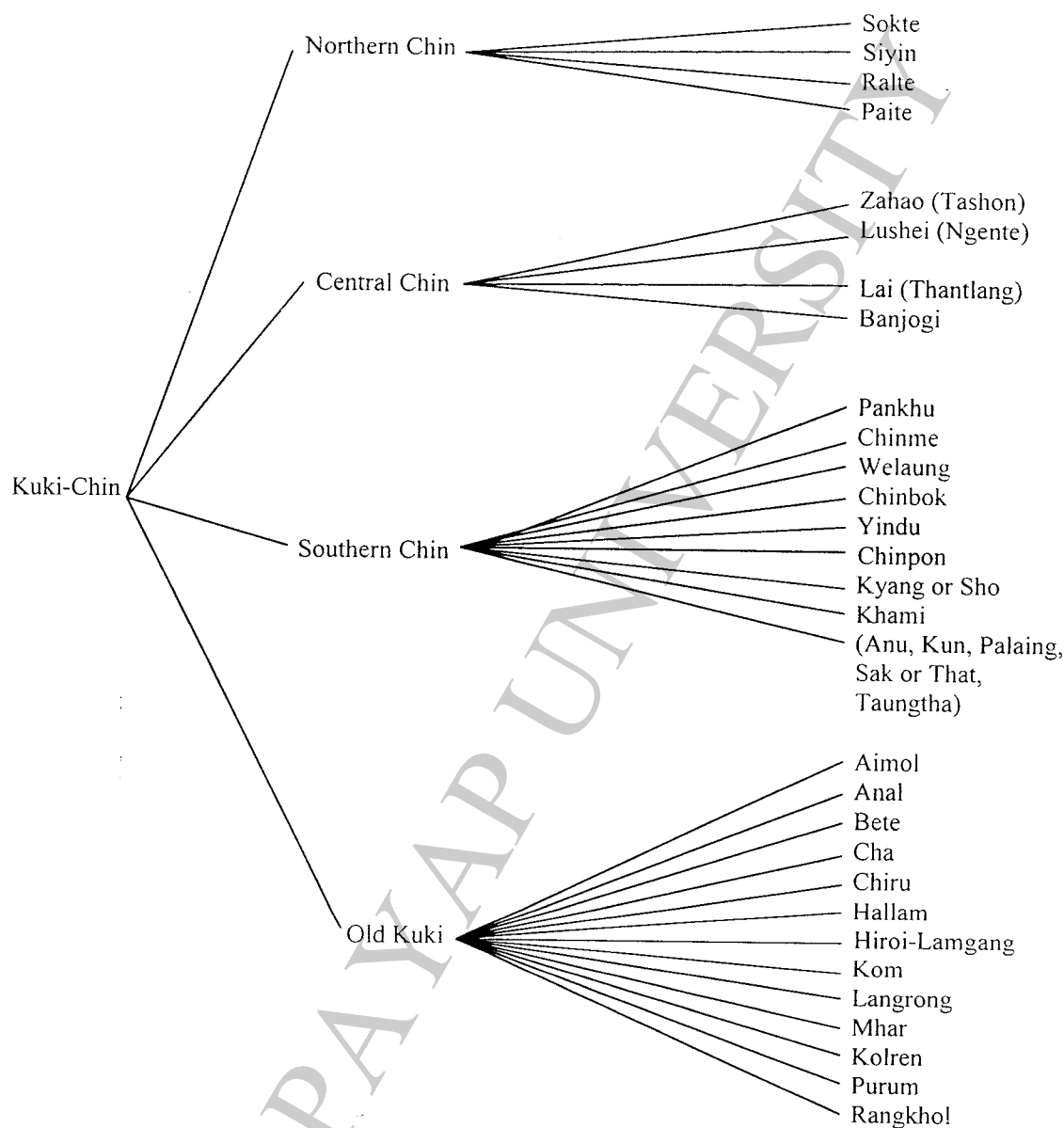


Figure 8. Grierson's classification of Chin languages

<sup>8</sup> Chin people (of India and Myanmar today) were under British rule when Grierson conducted his Linguistic Survey of India.

Peiros (1998:180) says that Kuki-Chin languages may fall into two subgroups: Luhupa (including Tankhur and other languages) and Chin, which includes at least four subbranches: Southern, Lakher, Old Kuki and Lushei as shown in Figure 9.

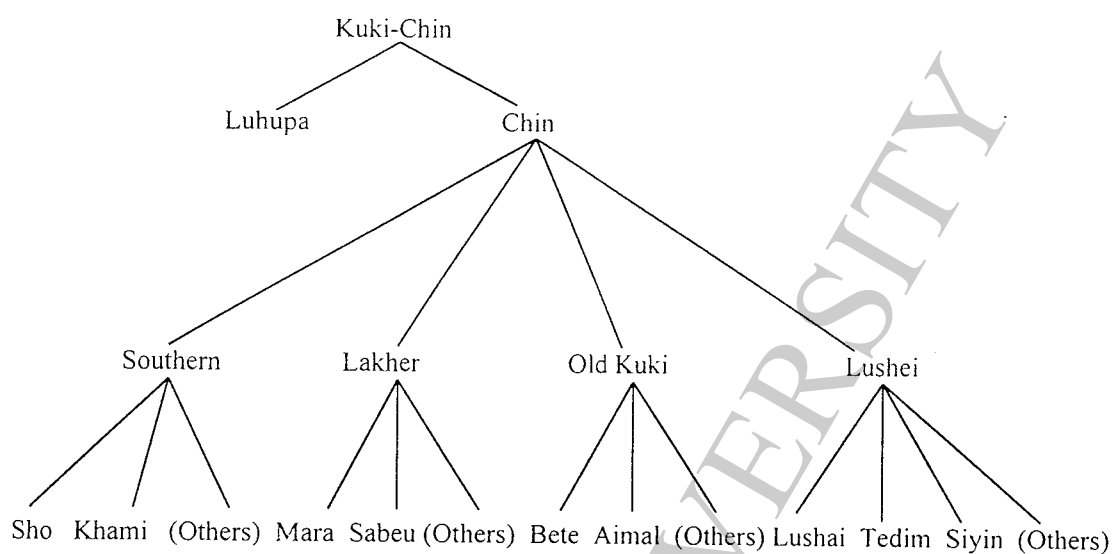


Figure 9. The Kuki-Chin language family (Peiros 1998)

Peterson (2000) proposes that there are two main Chin groups, Central and Peripheral. The Central group includes the traditional Central Chin, and probably also Old Kuki, but possibly not Mara. The Peripheral group includes traditional Southern and Northern Chin, but probably not Khumi, as shown in Figure 10.

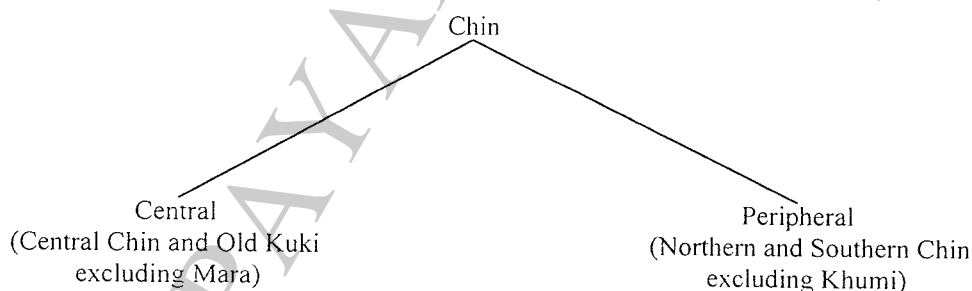


Figure 10. Chin language subgrouping (Peterson 2000)

Lower level classification of some Southern Chin languages has been attempted by So-Hartmann (1988) using a lexicostatistic analysis of the Swadesh 100 wordlist. She subgrouped the languages into two main groups, Khumi and Cho, as shown in Figure 11.

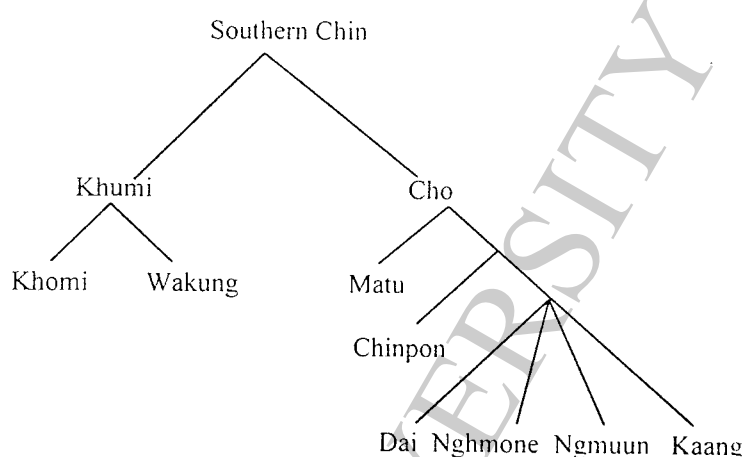


Figure 11. So-Hartmann's (1988) classification of Southern Chin

In summary, the majority of the previous research has the common conclusion that Chin languages are divided as Northern Chin, Central Chin and Southern Chin. To these three main groups, Grierson (1904) adds Old Kuki, and Bradley (1997) adds Old Kuki and Other Chin Groups. Peterson (2000) proposes only two groups, in contrast to the traditional groupings based on phonological and morphological evidence.

## 1.2. Reconstruction of Chin languages

There have been few comparative reconstructions of Chin languages. Ono (1965) attempts to reconstruct the initial consonants using data from eight Chin languages: Tedim, Ngawn, Lai (Hakha), Laizo (Falam), Anal, Zotung, Khumi and Chinbok. Solnit (1979) attempts to establish phonological relationships between Tedim and Mizo, focusing on developments of a reconstructed \*r. Luce (1985) contains 189 words in 22 Chin dialects, 683 words in 7 (or 8, including Lushai) dialects, and 192



words selected from a 683 word wordlist. He mentions a number of common words and proposes tone patterns. Bhaskararao (1996) also discusses the initial consonants in Mizo (Lushai) and Tedim. A review of previous initial consonant reconstructions is provided in more detail in section 4.2.1.

As regards tone, Henderson (1965) postulated three contrastive tones in Tedim. Weidert (1987) uses Lushai (Mizo), Tedim and Mara among the Chin languages in describing Tibeto-Burman tonology. Paul Thuam Thang (1982) discusses tone patterns in Tedim. Luce (1985) also offers some provisional descriptions of Chin tones, claiming that three tones was once the norm for Chin languages.

Chhange (1985) analyses the acoustic characteristics of Mizo tone and also states (1993) that Mizo is the most phonologically conservative language in the Kuki-Chin group but does not cite any evidence for this claim. Ostapirat (1998) discusses Tedim tones from a historical perspective. Nolan (2000) presents an initial description of Cho (one of the languages spoken in Southern Chin State) tone as having three contrastive tones.

### **1.3 Purpose of thesis**

The purpose of this research is to reconstruct Proto Chin. Previous phonological comparisons of Chin languages mainly focused on initial consonants, and a full phonological reconstruction is yet to be completed. This thesis focuses on all segmental aspects (but not tone) of Chin languages spoken in Myanmar. It is hoped that the result reported here will not only be a contribution to Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics, but will also be of practical use of Chin people in the development of Chin languages.

There are about 54 related Chin languages reported here. Many of them do not have literacy programs, and even the development of an orthography is still a critical issue for some languages. Based on shared phonological innovations, a subgrouping of the

languages is proposed which, it is hoped, will be helpful in decision-making for language development programs among the Chin languages.

#### 1.4 Methodology

Of the 54 reported Chin languages, wordlists for 21 were available to the present author. Previous scholarship (Grierson 1904, Bradley 1997) shows that Chin languages can be divided into three to five subgroups: Northern, Central, Southern, Old Kuki, and Other Chin Groups. The 21 languages available to this study are well distributed according to geographical setting and traditional linguistic subgrouping. It is, however, difficult to apply the comparative method to 21 languages at a time.

Therefore, two main methodologies were applied in the research reported here. The first stage was a lexicostatistic comparison of the 21 languages, resulting in a preliminary subgrouping. Based on these subgroups, representative languages were selected for comparative purposes.

In the second stage, the comparative method was applied to those representative languages, resulting in a reconstructed proto-Chin and a subgrouping of the representative languages based on shared phonological innovations.

The comparative method involves considering corresponding elements in two or more related languages and projecting them backward in time by positing an ancestor whose development can be shown to have resulted in the present form (Arlotto 1972). Sound changes in languages tend to be regular, and these regular sound changes provide a valid criterion to establish language relationships<sup>9</sup>. Phonological rules are thus posited to reconstruct earlier linguistic forms.

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<sup>9</sup> The 'Neogrammarian' school of historical linguists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century proposed that sound change is exceptionless. Although many exceptions were discovered to this proposal, the overwhelming majority of sound changes are regular.

Therefore the comparative method is applied in order to trace the earlier phonological forms of Chin languages by comparing selected Chin languages. The guiding principles throughout the process of applying the comparative method are summarized as follows (Crowley 1992):

1. Any reconstruction should involve sound changes that are plausible.
2. Any reconstruction should involve as few changes as possible between the proto-language and the daughter language.
3. Reconstruction should fill gaps in phonological systems rather than create unbalanced systems [symmetry].
4. A phoneme should not be reconstructed in a proto-language unless it is shown to be absolutely necessary from evidence within the daughter languages.
5. For each these phonetically 'suspicious' pair of sound correspondences, an examination should be conducted to determine whether or not they are in complementary or contrastive distribution.

The comparative method not only provides the proto form of the language, but also provides a method to determine which languages are historically more closely related to other languages in a family (Crowley 1992).

### **1.5 Source of linguistic data**

The main sources of data were unpublished wordlists (SIL Mainland South East Asia wordlist of 443 core words) collected by Kim and Mann<sup>10</sup> in 1999. Both collected a number of Chin languages and out of those, 19 languages were used in this thesis. To supplement this data, the author transcribed Tedim (his native tongue) and collected wordlists on Zo.

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Ajarns Kim and Mann for allowing me to use these valuable data.

In all, 21 Chin languages spoken in Myanmar were analyzed. They are Asho, Bualkhua, Dai, Falam, Hakha, Kaang, Khualsim, Khumi, Lakher, Lautu-Hnaring, Mara, Matu, Mizo, Senthang, Siyin, Taisun, Tedim, Thado (also known as Kuki or Khuangsai), Thangtlang, Zaniat, and Zo. The geographical locations of these languages are shown in Figure 12. Names of languages are in italicized letters whereas the normal letters are location names.

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Figure 12. Geographical centers of language groups

Map adapted from Rand McNally (1998)