

A Sound Change in Progress in Some Fújiàn Mǐnnán Dialects
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The southernmost township in Fújiàn's Lóngyán County is Shìzhōng 福建龙岩适中镇, whose dialect shares some features of the Lóngyán county seat while displaying others associated with nearby Zhāngzhōu County, one of the better known mainstream Mǐnnán varieties.

Shìzhōng's dialects have one highly salient trait, however, which sets them apart from the more representative dialects of both Lóngyán proper and Zhāngzhōu. Many of the Shìzhōng villages use a syllabic lateral, or vowels otherwise highly raised to almost the point of losing vocalic quality, for words where Common Mǐnnán has [i]. Although Mǐnnán as a whole is famous for its small phonological inventory and generally simple vocalism, Shìzhōng seems to have developed its own unusual variation, apparently the result of a local vowel shift in progress. This paper reviews the phonetics of the Shìzhōng lateral and plots its variation in the Township, described on the basis of data collected in between 1994 and 2005, with informants of at least two generations for each site. A comparison with Yǒngdìng County's related Kǒngfū 福建永定孔夫 dialect shows that a number of such phonetic changes are probably related historically.

Viewed areally, it is evident that in the Longyan area, it is the Mǐnnán-speaking cities and lower-lying areas that tend to have the characteristically simple vocalism, while border areas and remote mountain dialects often have highly distinctive phonetics. While such a pattern may be the result of the leveling in population centers and conservatism in the borders and hills, and indeed historical records of the Xiàmén area support such an explanation, the Shìzhōng data suggests that the conservative speech-communities may actually be evolving more distinct accents, perhaps exactly as a way of distinguishing themselves from the population centers.