

**Muji Uncorked:
A first tasting of the dialects, distinctives and distribution**

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Abstract

Among the little-known Phula languages slowly mellowing in the well-stocked wine cellar of China's Yi Nationality thrives a savory series of dialects that affiliate under the label 'Muji.' Though scarcely mentioned beyond local corridors, recent fieldwork in Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan, has made possible a first sampling of the Muji vintage. This paper begins the process of defining Muji linguistically and ethnographically through an analysis of lexical, phonological and sociolinguistic data and a presentation of demographics and maps.

By way of introduction, the paper presents notes on Muji history, demography and general distribution along with a sample phonology sketch of a Muji dialect spoken in Jinping County. Following these sections, Muji is defined linguistically according to phonological, morphological and lexical innovations apparent in affiliated dialects. Notably, such innovations include a correlative redistribution of the *Ngwi tonal split that points back to an intermediate merger, the re-introduction of nasal finals—a rare feature in the syllable templates of modern-day Ngwi groups beyond Southern Ngwi (Hani-Akha)—and a unique diminutive that has evidently grammaticalized along an alternate path of cognitive metaphor from the usual 'MOTHER-SON' cognate pairs found elsewhere in Ngwi. In the closing sections, the paper introduces emerging Muji dialect boundaries along with information regarding language endangerment.

In addition to introducing a long-overlooked language cluster, The paper further undergirds Charles-James N. Bailey's contentions (e.g., Bailey 1996) that adequate dialectology must be both gradient and diachronic.

Keywords: Muji, Phula, Yi, Ngwi, dialectology, phonology, subgrouping, semantic change, endangered languages, language documentation.

Bailey, Charles-James N. 1996. Conceptualizing dialects as implicational constellations rather than as entities bounded by isoglossic bundles. *Essays on time based linguistic analysis*. 118-150. Oxford: Clarendon Press.