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ANDREAS HÖLZL

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Bala (China) – Language Snapshot

Andreas Hölzl
Independent scholar

Ethnic Names:	Bala 巴拉, Balama 巴拉玛 (< Mongolian ‘savage, wild’); Balan (niyama) 巴懒(尼雅玛) ‘Balan (people)’; Banla 半拉 (< Northeastern Mandarin ‘half’); Banai, Bani 巴尼, Tesu ba namo 特苏巴纳莫 ‘local people’
Language Family:	Tungusic > Jurchenic/Manchuric
ISO 639-3 Code:	N.A.
Glottolog Code:	bala1242
Location:	Zhangguangcai mountain range and surrounding areas, Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces, China
Speakers:	unknown, probably extinct
Status:	no official status
Written Form:	no written form, sometimes written with Chinese characters
Vitality Rating:	EGIDS 9 or 10

Summary

Bala is a Tungusic language of the Jurchenic subbranch recorded by Mu Yejun 穆晔骏 (1926–1989) and other researchers. The language was spoken by people living in the Zhangguangcai mountain range (*zhangguangcai ling* 张广才岭) in Northeast China. There do not appear to be any living speakers, but information and materials may still be available from elderly people and in written documents. Data on the language encompasses word lists, grammatical items, a few sentences, and one song written in Chinese characters. The language shows some archaic features of utmost importance for comparative Tungusic linguistics. It is similar to Jurchen (jurc1239), and more distantly related to Manchu (manc1252). Bala exhibits signs of being a

mixed language, evincing a certain number of borrowings from Manchu dialects, Chinese, and perhaps other Tungusic languages. There is sociolectal and dialectal variation that is poorly understood. Today, the Bala probably speak Northeastern Mandarin (nort3283).¹

中文摘要

巴拉语属于满-通古斯语族满语支。穆晔骏（1926-1989）等学者记录了该语言的资料。说巴拉语的巴拉人曾居住在中国东北的张广才岭。虽推测巴拉语现已无人使用，但可能从年长者处及书面资料里尚能找到蛛丝马迹。关于该语言的数据包括词汇表、语法成分、若干句子，以及一段用汉字转录的歌词。巴拉语包含的一些古老的特征对满-通古斯语比较语言学有重要意义。与其有关联性的语言是女真语（jurc1239），其次是满语（manc1252）。作为一种混合语，巴拉语含有一定数量的外来成分，即满语方言、汉语，可能也有其他满-通古斯语的影响。对其地域方言及社会方言学界知之甚少。今天巴拉人使用的应为东北官话（nort3283）。

1. Overview

Bala is a possibly extinct Tungusic language formerly spoken around the Zhangguangcai mountains in Northeast China. The Bala are not officially recognised as a minority separate from the Manchu; a few consider themselves to be Han Chinese. There are very few mentions in the published literature (Ma 1997 [1987]: 142; Wang 1988; Wu 1988: 70-72; Wang 1998; Zhao 2000: 18; Li 2014: 12, 28). The Bala were mountain dwellers said to have fled from Nurhaci (1559-1626), the leader of the Jianzhou Jurchen, the core of the later Manchu, and therefore were not integrated into their socio-military banner system (Mu 1984a). This is comparable to the Chaegasūng 在家僧, descendants of Jurchen who about the same time escaped to mountain ranges in what today is North Korea (Reckel 2002; Kim 2013). The main occupation of the Bala was hunting and fishing. They practised shamanism (Bala *ts'aman* 'shaman'), had horses, and kept many dogs (Mu 1984a). During the 20th century, the Bala left their secluded life and appear to have undergone language shift to Northeastern Mandarin (*dongbei guanhua* 东北官话). One of the last known speakers was Guan Hongchun 关洪纯, already 71 years old in 1964 (Mu 1985: 5). The Bala language is said to have become extinct in 1982, although it cannot be excluded that partial knowledge of the language may have survived beyond that date.

¹ I want to thank Yadi Hölzl, an anonymous reviewer, and Peter Austin for their help.

Bala is a Tungusic language of the *Jurchenic* or *Manchuric* subbranch that also includes Manchu, however it differs from Manchu in many features, such as not showing palatalization of [t^h] (Bala t'it'igə, Manchu *cecike* 'small bird') and labio-dentalisation of initial [p^h] (Bala p'ədhe, Manchu *fodoho* 'willow', see also Ma & Wulaxichun 1993: 5). Certain borrowings from Manchu dialects can be identified by the presence of these features (e.g., Bala *fut'ə*, Manchu *futa* 'rope', see also Dai 2012: 81, 244f.). Mu (1987) assumes a connection of Bala with the language of the Jurchen who founded the Jin dynasty (1115-1234). He mentions four dialects (referred to as *tuyu* 土语 in Chinese) and several different registers of Bala, some of which are closer to Jurchen (*suyu* 俗语), and some to Manchu (*yayu* 雅语). The Bala appear to have a mixed origin (Mu 1987: 3), which might be reflected in the mixed character of the language. Apart from the different layers of Jurchenic, there are many Chinese loanwords and some elements from other Tungusic languages. Presumably, Bala was influenced by a form of southern Nanaic, such as Kilen (An 1986), e.g. Bala *ənə-rʃən*, Kilen *ənə-rʃən* 'go-NEG' (Manchu *gene-rakū*). Kilen, itself a partly mixed language, could also have transmitted northern Tungusic elements, e.g. Bala *gərbi*, Kilen *gərbi* 'name' (Evenki *gərbi*, cf. Manchu *gebu*). Bala has no written form, although three writing systems do exist for related languages (two for Jurchen and one for Manchu), and Bala was sometimes written with Chinese characters.

According to Mu (1987: 2), after leaving the Zhangguangcai mountains, the Bala were located in Acheng 阿城, Bayan 巴彦, Binxian 宾县, Fangzheng 方正, Hulan 呼兰, Mulan 木兰, Shangzhi 尚志, Shuangcheng 双城, Tonghe 通河, Wuchang 五常, and Yanshou 延寿. Li et al. (2018: 246) encountered Bala in Emu 额穆, Guandi 官地, and Yushu 榆树 and Wang (1998) in Jiaohe 蛟河 (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Location of the Bala²

² Adapted from:
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:China_Jilin_relief_location_map.png (accessed 2020-11-03). Author: Das steinerne Herz. Creative-Commons (BY-SA). Approximate scale and names added (Di 2009).

2. Names

The Bala are known under different names, such as *bala manzhou* 巴拉满洲 ‘Bala Manchu’ (Ma 1997 [1987]: 142). The name *bala* is often said to derive from *balama*, the Manchu word for ‘mad, crazy’ (Norman 2013), which is of Mongolic origin (Doerfer 1985: 19). In Mongolian, *balamad* includes the more fitting meaning of ‘savage, wild’ (Lessing 1960). It could be an exonym used by the Manchu, and later the Chinese. A related designation in Manchu is *balan niyama* 巴懒尼雅玛 (written Manchu *niyalma* ‘person’) (Mu 1987: 3). According to Li (1991b: 294), people on the east of the mountain range call them *bala ren* 巴拉人, those on the west *banla ren* 半拉人 (Mandarin *ren* 人 ‘person’). The latter seems to be the result of a folk etymology based on the similarity to the Northeastern Mandarin dialect word *banla* 半拉 ‘half’.

A self-designation of the Bala seems to be *bani* 巴尼 (Mu 1987), which means ‘local people’. This expression was also recorded in the form *banai* and is reminiscent of the name *Nanai* (literally ‘local people’). The expression *ba: ni:-ni* ‘sky/place/nature person-3sg.poss’ is also attested in Udihe (Nikolaeva & Tolskaya 2001: 629). A song of the Bala (Mu 1984a) contains the self-designation *tesu ba namo* 特苏巴纳莫 ‘local people’ (Manchu *tesu ba i niyalma* ‘local place GEN person’).

Bala could also be a general term for uncivilized people. For instance, forest people clad with fur called *bala* 巴拉 and a language referred to as *woji* 窝集 (literally ‘forest’) also figure in a story of the *donghai woji* 东海窝集 ‘Eastern Sea Woji’ (Fu et al. 1999: 64-69). Another story of the *bala nüzhèn* 巴拉女真 ‘Bala Jurchen’ (also called ‘wild Jurchen’) from Hunchun has also been published by Fu Yingren 傅英仁 (1919-2004) (1985: 39-46). These stories could refer to the Udihe, today located in the nearby Russian Primorsky Krai (see Figure 1). However, Mu (1987: 3) also found references to the ancestors of the Bala that include the *alin (w)udike* 阿林乌底克. This name consists of two words that have the forms *alin* ‘mountain’ and *wejike* ‘forest dweller’ in Manchu. The latter is identical to the name of the *Udihe* (in Bala *udiha*, *udikə*, etc.).

3. Available data

If the hypothesis that Bala is closely related to the historical Jurchen language is accurate (Mu 1987), there is a wealth of diachronic data roughly from the 12th century onward (e.g., Kiyose 1977; Franke 2000; Sun 2004; Miyake 2017, and references therein), but a comprehensive comparison remains to be done. There is a gap in attestation approximately from the 17th to the early 20th century when most of the materials are from written Manchu.

Bala data were recorded in the second half of the 20th century by Mu(’ercha) Yejun 穆(尔察)晔骏, also known as Mu(’ercha) Anbulonga 穆尔

察安布隆阿 (1926–1989) (see Mu 1989; Song 1990). Mu Yejun conducted fieldwork from 1964 to 1977 and altogether met 74 Bala people, only 19 of whom knew the language; all were already in their 70s or 80s (Mu 1987: 2, 5). Concerning this topic, Mu Yejun published:

- a paper on the historical and cultural background of the Bala, including a brief word list and a song, both written in Chinese characters (Mu 1984a);
- a brief description of the Zhangguangcai mountain range (Mu 1984b);
- a study of Bala with comparative data from other varieties (Mu 1987); and
- a paper on diachronic changes in Bala phonology (Mu 1988).

Most of the available data can be found in Mu (1987), which includes word lists (about 290 entries) and grammatical information (e.g., nominal and verbal suffixes). Only a few sentences and one short song have been recorded. The song appears to be from a higher register more similar to Manchu, and exhibits signs of mixture, e.g. (*w*)*odi* 窝的 ‘forest’ (Bala *udi*, cf. Manchu *weji*) but *waji*- 瓦集 ‘to finish’ (Manchu *waji*-, cf. Bala *ordi*-). Mu Yejun’s descriptions exhibit some questionable analyses and typographic errors, but the data are generally reliable. Given that the consultants were the last speakers, a certain amount of attrition and variation in the data is to be expected. Mu Yejun’s Bala data were republished in Chaoke & Zhao (2001), and included in several studies (e.g., Ikegami 1999 [1993]: 321-343; Hölzl 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018a, b; Hölzl & Hölzl 2019; Zikmundová to appear), but no comprehensive comparison with other Tungusic languages has been attempted yet.

Additional data have been collected by Li Guojun 李果钧 (born 1933), his daughter Li Keman 李可漫 (born 1968), and his daughter-in-law Dong Yinghua 董英华 (born 1971). Li Guojun conducted fieldwork roughly from the 1960s to the 1980s (e.g., Li 1990, 1991a, b) and around 2004. Li Keman and Dong Yinghua made additional investigations around 2012, with all results eventually published in Li et al. (2018). The data include several stories of the Bala told in Chinese (see also Li 2014) that contain a few words that could be from Bala, although many are close to Manchu, e.g. *ak(e)zhan* 阿克占 ‘thunder’ (Manchu *akjan*, cf. Bala *ak’din*). Some items show archaic features different from the Bala data recorded by Mu Yejun, e.g. *siwen* 司汶 ‘sun’ with two syllables (Jurchen *shouwen* 受温, cf. Bala *šin*, Manchu *šin*). This is a remnant of an old intervocalic -g- that is only fully preserved in languages related to Evenki, e.g. Aoluguya Evenki *šigun* (Chaoke 2017: 21).

The Manchu Zhu Chunyu 朱春雨 (1939-2004), who was exiled to the mountain range during the cultural revolution and later recorded his

experiences in an autobiographical novel (Zhu 1990), described several cultural aspects of the Bala. The reliability of his account is difficult to determine, but he does mention a few names and words that could be from Bala. It cannot be excluded, however, that he took some of the data from published sources, e.g., he mentions the name of a dog called *selmiegu* (Zhu 1990: 43f.). In Bala, *salmiägu* designates a type of arrow (Mu 1987: 28), which he claims to have later learned from Mu Yejun.

It is conceivable that additional material of the language could still be found with elderly people and in written materials, such as genealogical books in Chinese and Manchu (Mu 1987: 2). Another source of data could be personal and place names. For instance, the name *zhangguangcai ling* 张广才岭 could be from Bala or a related variety (*julgen sain alin* ‘the mountain of good fortune’ in Manchu, Mu 1984a: 64). Its name in Bala has been recorded in different forms, such as *zhegen-cai-ling* 遮根采岭. Coincidentally, Chinese *ling* 岭 ‘mountain range’ is a good transcription for the final element *-ling* (Manchu *alin* ‘mountain’).

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