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Sinitic languages of Northwest China: Where did their case marking come from?*

XU DAN

1. Introduction

In the early 1950s, Weinreich (1953) published a monograph on language contact. Although this subject drew the attention of a few scholars, at the time it remained marginal. Over two decades, several scholars including Moravcsik (1978), Thomason and Kaufman (1988), Aikhenvald (2002), Johanson (2002), Heine and Kuteva (2005) and others began to pay more attention to language contact. As Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 23) pointed out, language is a system, or even a system of systems. Perhaps this is why previous studies (Sapir, 1921: 203; Meillet 1921: 87) indicated that grammatical categories are not easily borrowed, since grammar is a system. However as Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 14) said, “This widespread view arose (we suspect) not from the examination of actual language contact data, but from the standard structuralist belief that the most highly structured subsystems are the most stable”. Today’s research reveals that any element can be borrowed; even components of morphology in source languages can be integrated into target languages. My field work confirms that not only whole lexical items but also morphological suffixes in language A can be recruited as postpositions or suffix-like morphemes into language B¹. This phenomenon is far from being rare in the Gansu-Qinghai linguistic area in China, where Mandarin speakers adopted case-marking from non-Han (non-Chinese) languages into their own language. In this area, different ethnic peoples speak different languages, and the Chinese language spoken next to or surrounded by them has undergone dramatic changes.

Thomason and Kaufman (1988) paid special attention to social factors and cultural background in language contact. Actually, Weinreich (1953: 66, 70) had already presented the same point of view. The data collected during my field work over the past five years in this region completely support this opinion that social factors have a significant impact on language contact, and there is little to be said by a study limited only to linguistics. It had long been assumed that the Chinese

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¹ For example the suffix *tal/tel* ‘till’, ‘until’ in Mongolian has already been borrowed in Hezhou (Linxia) dialect (Ringdzin Wangmo 1991: 15), Qinghai dialect (Min Shengzhi 1989: 84) and Tangwang (Xu Dan 2014).

language has exerted influence on non-Han languages, since it is politically and economically stronger. However, recent work shows that in Northwest China, the Chinese language has become unrecognizable due to contact with non-Han languages. The Chinese language and non-Han languages are undergoing profound changes in this region and these changes are bidirectional rather than unidirectional.

This article will first present the case marking found in the linguistic area located within the borders of the two provinces of Gansu and Qinghai in China. In this area, case marking is a notable feature found in non-Han languages such as Santa (Dongxiang), Bao'an, Monguor (Tu), Eastern Yugur languages belonging to the Mongolic group of the Altaic family; Western Yugur, Salar and Kazakh belonging to the Turkic group in the same family; Amdo, a group of dialects (Tournadre 2005:17) being classified within the Tibeto-Burman group in the Sino-Tibetan family and in Sinitic languages or Chinese dialects². The case marking system did not come from Chinese, which does not use morphological means to express grammatical relationships between syntactic elements. Section 2 will focus on case marking in Sinitic languages, its formation and origin. In previous works dealing with case marking in this region, it has been assumed that the case marking system in these Chinese varieties indeed came from non-Han languages, that the ablative and instrumental cases were borrowed from Mongolic languages due to intense contact over centuries. This view seems to be adopted without doubt, but the origin of the accusative marker has not yet been clearly explained. I will propose that the accusative marker originated in and developed from the Chinese language. In section 3, I will analyze the process of case marker formation. We will see that the Chinese language has also contributed directly and indirectly to the formation of a case marking system in Chinese varieties in this region. Section 4 is a summary of the article and proposes further discussion on case marking in this area.

2. Case marking in the Gan-Qing linguistic area

Languages express “case” by different means such as word order, adpositions, etc., but do not necessarily possess a morphological case marking system. An overt case marker is a bound morpheme suffixed to a noun used to relate this noun to

² The choice of this term reflects the author's different approach. Chinese researchers use “dialect” distinguishing these varieties by a common phonetic and phonological evolution based on the same mother language, i.e. the Chinese language, while Western scholars prefer the term “Sinitic” thinking that these “languages” are “distinct, non-mutually intelligible languages” (Enfield, 2005: 184). This term “Sinitic” is often used in a comparative context with other families or macro-language families.

other elements in a sentence (Kahr 1976, Iggesen 2005). Languages use different means to clarify relationships between the arguments (primarily agent and patient) and the verb. In non-Han languages spoken in China, OV order languages mark the agent (ergative marking) or the object (accusative marking). The goal is the same, separating the grammatical agent from the grammatical patient subject from the object, both of which are preverbal, in order to indicate their relationship to the verb. It is often seen that in languages with case marking, the presence of the dative, locative, ablative, and instrumental case markers is obligatory, while subject marking (ergative) and direct object marking (accusative) are not or are optional when possible. The marking of an NP is often determined by the animacy and definiteness of nouns; sometimes the marking shows a pragmatic pattern as does ergative marking in Tibeto-Burman languages (LaPolla 1995, Tournadre 1996, DeLancey 2011).

Over the past few decades, the Gansu-Qinghai area has drawn the attention of many linguists, including Cheng Xianghui (1980), Li C. (1983), Chen Yuanlong (1985), Ma Shujun (1982, 1984), Li Keyu (1987), Chen Naixiong (1989), Ringdzin Wangmo (1991), Zhang Chengcai (2006), Wang Sen (1993), Jia Xiru (1991, 1994), Dwyer (1992), Zhu Yongzhong *et al.* (1997), Dede (2003, 2007), Janhunen (2004), Peyraube (2009), and Xu Dan (2011a, 2011b, 2013) among others. Some books merit mentioning: Slater (2003), who works on Monguor, proposes a “Qinghai-Gansu Sprachbund”³. Janhunen, Peltomaa, Sandman, and Xiawu Dongzhou (2008) published a descriptive grammar of Wutun, a language of Northwest China, considered to be a “mixed language”. Almost all the scholars mentioned have noted that Sinitic languages in this area possess a case marking system, consisting of nominative (zero marking), accusative/dative *-xa* or its allophone *-a*, instrumental/comitative *-la* or its variant form *-lia*, and ablative with different phonetic forms. It is known that in this area, Mongolic languages and Amdo Tibetan have exerted influence upon those Sinitic languages.

In China, languages having VO order do not appeal to overt case markers, while those using OV order require overt case markers. This trend is obvious in languages of China: VO languages use word order or prepositions to distinguish agent from patient, while OV languages (not all of them) rely on case marking. As has been mentioned, the notion of agent and patient is closely linked to the animacy [+A] and definiteness [+Def] of nouns. The stronger a noun or noun phrase’s [+A] and [+Def] features⁴, the more it can be used as a semantic agent in

³ Janhunen (2004) also agrees with this point of view, using the term “Amdo Sprachbund”.

⁴ It is to be noted that the second feature [+Def] is pertinent neither in Linxia dialect (see Li Wei’s sentences 1993: 435), Qinghai dialect (see Ren Bisheng’s examples 2004: 343) nor in Tangwang (Xu Dan 2013). An indefinite object can be marked by accusative [xa].

unmarked sentences. In the opposite situation, the noun must be marked by different means to avoid confusion. This has been already indicated by Greenberg (1963: 75): “If in a language the verb follows both the nominal subject and nominal object as the dominant order, the language almost always has a case system.” In OV languages, one of the two preverbal noun phrase (subject or object) tends to be marked. However, marking strategies can be very different. In the Gan-Qing linguistic area, Mongolic languages and Amdo Tibetan both have OV orders, but they use opposite means: Mongolic languages employ accusative case, meaning that the patient/object is marked; while Amdo Tibetan (like Standard Tibetan) uses ergative case, implying that the agent/subject is marked. Whatever the choice of terminology, the fact remains that the agent-patient relationship must be explicitly expressed in one way or another. Let us compare some examples from this region:

Amdo:

- (1) nga-s du po ‘then na
1SG-ERG smoke draw PRES
‘I smoke.’

Santa (or Dongxiang)

- (2) tʂu mini ʂu-ni udzə (Liu 1981: 37)
2SG my book-ACC read
‘Read my book!’

Bao’an (or Baonan):

- (3) gagə-lə-nə urdzi rə (Buhe and Liu 1982: 31)
brother-PL-ACC call come
‘Call the brothers.’

Monguor (or Tu)

- (4) aaba-nə malga-nə ndəree gee (Zhaonasitu 1981: 19)
dad-GEN hat-ACC here put
‘Put Dad’s hat here.’

Linxia (*Linxia Fangyan*, 1996: 201)

- (5) wo ga wa ha xiang le⁵ (*Linxia Fangyan*, 1996: 201)
1SG little child ACC think PRF
‘I miss my child.’

Qinghai

- (6) maozi a na lai
hat ACC take come
‘Bring the hat.’ (Li 1987: 28)

⁵ Examples of Linxia and Qinghai are transcribed in pinyin here as the authors only present them in Chinese characters. In examples from Janhunen *et al.* (2008), the glosses are the authors’.

Tangwang

- (7) nə ʃu xa khě liə (Xu 2013)
 3SG book ACC read PRF
 ‘He has read the book.’

Wutun

- (8) gek shai-**ha** nio-se-lio ze-li (Janhunen *et al.* 2008: 63)
 dog snake-FOC bite-die-PRF EXEC-OBJ⁶
 ‘The dog bit the snake to death.’

In the examples above, it is clear that Amdo Tibetan and other languages use different approaches in order to express agent-patient relationships. In Amdo, the agent is always marked by an ergative marker, while in Standard Tibetan, it is not obligatory if the action is not completed. In Mongolic languages the accusative marker is a homophone of the genitive marker while in Tibetan, the ergative marker is also a homophone of the genitive marker⁷. In Sinitic languages, the accusative/dative marker *xa* (or its allophone *a*) is used in Gansu as well as in Qinghai. In Tangwang and Wutun, the marker *xa* (noted *ha* in pinyin) plays a similar role as in other languages in this area.

In fact, at least two types of borrowings must be distinguished. The first one is vocabulary borrowing which can be phonetically identical, partially identical, or only a recreated form based on borrowings⁸. The second type is grammatical borrowing. As mentioned in the introduction, many linguists in the previous century thought that grammar was the most stable and least prone to being borrowed between languages. Xu Dan (2011b) studied the borrowing of a plural marker from non-Han languages into Chinese varieties, showing that the phonetic form of a plural marker is not necessarily identical to the source language. Again, the accusative/dative marker *xa* in this area also presents a good example: phonetically, it has nothing to do with accusative markers attested in non-Han languages. I will develop an analysis of the origin of *xa* in the next section. Before comparing them with non-Han languages, let us examine more examples on the Tangwang⁹ language ((9)-(15)), collected in field work by the author of the present article. They concern dative, ablative and instrumental cases. Some

⁶ These terms are given by the authors of *Wutun*. EXEC: executive, OBJ: objective.

⁷ The morpheme for the accusative marker in Sinitic languages is different from that of Mongolian.

⁸ Johanson (2002: 11-19) distinguishes “global copies” from “selective copies” or “mixed copies” while Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 74, 83) have established “borrowing scale” differentiating lexical borrowing from structural borrowing, moderate from heavy structural borrowing. The terms used by different authors do not necessarily refer to the same concepts but reflect that no single pattern in borrowing exists.

⁹ Tangwang is located in Dongxiang (Santa) Autonomous County, Gansu Province.

components of morphology borrowed from non-Han languages into the Tangwang language will also be presented:

- (9) *nə ləŋɿ xa və liɔ ke vət̪hi*
 3SG teacher DAT ask PRF CLF question
 ‘He/She asked the teacher a question.’
- (10) *və t̪ei ɕyɕiɔ li ɕiɛ lɛ liɛ*
 1SG just school POST ABL come PF
 ‘I have just come back from school.’
- (11) *və t̪ɔt̪ɿ la t̪hiɛ z̪əu liɛ*
 1SG knife INST cut meat PF
 ‘I cut the meat with a knife.’
- (12) *və nə t̪ei ʂu ŋi khẽ liɔ*
 1SG 3SG GEN book 3POSS read PRF
 ‘I have read his book.’
- (13) *ama ŋi nə xa tsu xa t̪ei f̪ẽ ɕiã : t̪ei x̃*
 mom 3POSS 3SG DAT do RES GEN meal delicious DEGR-PART very
 ‘The meal his/her mom has made for him/her is delicious.’
- (14) *ŋi tsɔʂã ɕiɛ t̪ɿ xui thala tsu ma t̪ɕe*
 2SG morning ABL this moment UNTIL do what Q+DUR
 ‘From the morning until now, what have you done?’
- (15) *tsu t̪ɕə t̪ɿɿ thala xɛ pu z̪u mɛ t̪ɕə t̪ɿɿ tsəu*
 do DUR eat COMP else NEG like buy DUR eat go
 ‘It’s better to buy it (to eat) than to make it yourself.’

Example (9) uses the dative case *xa*, which is a homophone of the accusative *xa*. In the Tangwang language, as in other Sinitic languages in this area, the dative case is obligatory. When a direct object and an indirect object co-occur, the dative case must be used while the accusative case is optional. The same phenomenon is attested in Wutun in Qinghai (C. Li 1983: 34), Xining (capital of Qinghai, Ren 2004: 341), Linxia in Gansu (*Linxia Fangyan* 1996, see examples at page 200)¹⁰, Xiahe in Gansu (Nakajima 1992, see examples at page 488), Tangwang (Xu Dan 2011a: 147). In (10), the ablative case marker in Tangwang is *ɕiɛ*. As has been mentioned, the ablative case markers in this region phonetically appear the most variant (see Table 1).

¹⁰ Wang Sen (1993: 192) however insists that when the construction with double object is used, both of these objects (direct or indirect) must be marked by [xa].

It is clear that their respective phonological forms are copied from neighboring languages. The instrumental (when the NP is [-Animate]) / comitative (when the NP is [+Animate]) *la* has an allophone *lia* in Tangwang and in Linxia dialect (see example 11). The morpheme *ni* is a suffix indicating the third person possessive¹¹ in (12). Either its phonetic or its grammatical function evokes Mongolic languages. Finally, the suffix *-thala* which varies according to vowel harmony is also integrated into the Tangwang language to express ‘until’ (14) or ‘rather than’ (15)¹². Min (1989) and Ringdzin Wangmo (1991) separately suggested that in dialects in Qinghai and Gansu, the suffix *-thala* was influenced by Amdo Tibetan. Apparently, this suffix is almost identical to Mongolic languages¹³ at both the phonetic and functional levels, and is quite different from Amdo¹⁴ with different morphemes identified by these authors.

Now, let us compare Sinitic languages in this area with non-Han languages to better understand the case marking system in Sinitic languages. In table 1, the source for the Mongolic language is from Daobu (2007), Linxia is from *Linxia Fangyan* (1996), Qinghai dialect is from Li Keyu (1987), and Amdo is from Janhunen *et al.* (2008). Data for Tangwang is based on Xu Dan’s field work. Several additional notes must be given here.

Amdo Tibetan and Mongolic languages share some similar characteristics. Both of them have a case marking system. It is to be noted that the locative case marker is the same as the dative marker in Mongolic languages while the allative and dative markers are identical in Amdo Tibetan. This is attested in many languages (see Fu Jingqi and Xu Lin 2008). Their fundamental difference is that they have chosen different marking strategies, either predominant ergative alignment or accusative alignment.

In the Mongolic languages presented in Table 1, accusative and genitive markers are the same (except in Chakhar Mongolian which is considered to be Standard Mongolian in Inner Mongolia), while in Amdo Tibetan, ergative and instrumental markers are identical.

¹¹ When this suffix is used, the accusative marker [xa] is omitted.

¹² For more details and examples, see Xu Dan to appear.

¹³ For example:

(i) Түүн-ийг яв-тал хүлээгээ-ч (Tserenpil and Kullmann 2008)
 him-ACC go-UNTIL wait-IMP
 ‘Wait until his departure.’

¹⁴ The two authors have given two postpositions in Amdo meaning ‘until’: *reg ga* and *thək she (la)*. It is clear that only the function is similar not the phonetic.

	Middle Mongol	Standard Mongol	East Yugur	Mongtor (Tu)	Santa (Dongxian)	Bao'an	Linxia	Qinghai	Tangwang	Wutun	Amdo
Nominative											-ø
Ergative	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-ø	-kə
Locative	-da -du -ta -tu	-d -t	-də	-də	-də	-də	-ø	-ø	-ø	<i>li</i>	- ka ¹⁵
Dative											
Accusative	-ji -i	-iig -g	-n	-nə	-ni	-nə	-xa /a	-xa/a	-xa/a	<i>ha</i>	-ø
Genitive	-jin -un -u	-iin -εε	-in -ə	-nə	-ni	-nə	-ø	-ø	-ø ¹⁶	<i>de</i>	-kə
Ablative	- atʃa	-aas	-sa	-sa	-sə	-sə	-ta	-sa	-εiε	<i>la/ra</i>	-ni
Instrumental/ Comitative	-‘ar -bar -ijar	-aar	- aar	-la	-gala	- gala	-la	- la/lia	-la/lia	<i>liangge</i>	-kə

Table 1. Case marking systems in the Gan-Qing area

Some explanation is also required for Table 1:

- (a) Case markers in Mongolic languages are regular and similar. They are clearly connected to Middle Mongol even though some sounds have changed. Chakhar Mongolian preserves Middle Mongol's difference between accusative and genitive markers, while other Mongolic languages which formed around the 14th century AD simplified and unified the two markers. Undoubtedly sound changes have taken place, and the tendency is towards sound simplification.
- (b) Case markers in the Sinitic languages of Linxia and Qinghai as presented in

¹⁵ The locative system in Amdo includes two types: locative implying movement [ka] with numerous allomorphs and locative indicating in situ [na] for present and [ni] for other cases.

¹⁶ In Sinitic languages, [ti] or [tə] is attested as a structural particle between possessor and possessee. Janhunen et al. (2008), authors of Wutun, take *li* (a Mandarin postposition) as a locative case marker and *de* as a genitive case marker. The cited markers in the above table are from these authors.

the table are similar and linked, even though the source of the ablative case marker must be different. Apparently they are similar to the case marking systems of Tangwang and Wutun, two Chinese varieties¹⁷. Amdo Tibetan presents different case markers, which are shown to be phonetically unrelated to case markers in the other languages. Wutun, a “mixed” language of Chinese and Amdo Tibetan¹⁸, illustrates less Amdo influence in case marking and behaves in a similar way to other Sinitic languages, which have case marking systems which are *a priori* more closely related to Mongolic languages than to Amdo.

- (c) The ablative case marker in Wutun is singular: it is phonetically similar to the locative/dative case marker in Lhasa Tibetan, and is quite different from either Amdo or Mongolic languages.

As has been shown, the case markers are quite similar in Sinitic languages, even though Li Keyu (1987) did not present them as case markers but as “adpositions”. In the article by C. Li (1983: 34-35), the author clearly indicates that Wutun has *ha* as dative/accusative¹⁹. Moreover, he shows that in Linxia dialect, the dative/accusative case marker also exists, in variant phonetic forms. It is amazing that these Sinitic languages and varieties show a similar pattern to Mongolic languages in choosing an accusative marker rather than an ergative marker. Actually, it is not typologically unusual to find an accusative alignment pattern rather than an ergative alignment. Even in Wutun, which is often considered to be a “mixed language” of Chinese and Amdo Tibetan, it seems that the Tibetan pattern of marking the agent with an ergative marker has not been adopted. As for ablative and instrumental case markers, East Yugur seems to show a closer affinity to Chakhar Mongolian, which is genetically (in a linguistic sense) closer to Middle Mongol, while other Mongolic languages form another group along with Sinitic languages and varieties; a mirror phenomenon is attested. As a synchronic phonetic form, the ablative marker opposes *-aas* to *-sa* and the instrumental marker *-aar* to *-la*²⁰.

¹⁷ Janhunen *et al.* (2008:11) think that “Wutun may be defined as a variety of Chinese”. I agree with them. Tangwang may also have this status. With a loose definition, Tangwang and Wutun may be included in the “Sinitic languages”. See also Peyraube (this volume).

¹⁸ This point of view is popular among Chinese linguists. See Sun, Hu and Huang (eds.) 2007.

¹⁹ Janhunen *et al.* (2008) did not take *ha* as an accusative/dative marker but as a “focus marker”. Peyraube (2009; this volume) disagrees with him considering that *ha* in Wutun should be a case marker like other *xa* or *a* attested in this area. The authors of *Wutun* (2008: 62) recognize that “Wutun does, however, have an element that in some of its functions comes close to an accusative marker”. In particular, these authors (2008: 64) indicate that “the focus marker could be characterized as a kind of proto-case marker, which could easily develop into an actual accusative or dative-accusative case marker with a broad range of functions”.

²⁰ Discussion of the diachronic formation of these ablative and instrumental cases is beyond the

3. Origin of the accusative/dative case marker *xa*

The origin of the accusative/dative case marker *xa* is puzzling: most of the scholars agree that the case marking is a result of language contact, but when and how? The accusative/dative marker *xa* in Chinese varieties presents a phonetic form very different from either Amdo or other Mongolic languages. Some tentative propositions can also be found. Li Keyu (1987: 28) thinks that *xa* may have come from the accusative marker *xa* in Kazakh and *a* in Chuvash, two Turkic languages²¹. This explanation can link *xa* and *a* phonetically, but seems forced without further arguments. Du Xingzhou (2005: 127) suggests that *xa* might come from *xan*, as attested in the *Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty*. (Yuan Dynasty: 1271-1368). According to this author, *xan* was a purely grammatical morpheme and would have been atonal. With the loss of the nasal, it changed into *xa*. In the *Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty*, *xan* is a multifunctional word. It acts as a verb meaning ‘to move’ and is frequently found as a grammatical word expressing locative and dative functions. As Yu Zhihong (1992) indicates, *xan* can mark locative, dative, and even ablative and genitive cases. In summary, *xan* has different functions in documents from the Yuan Dynasty. In different versions of *Lao Qida* (a Chinese textbook for Koreans between 14th and 18th centuries, see Li Taizhu 2003), *xan* [+postposition]²² is attested but the number of occurrences is quite small. The oldest version (from around the 14th century) gives four examples with postpositional use, and always in the same context: *xan* is attested after the word *shifu* ‘teacher’, and the three later versions make the meaning explicit with different words such as ‘in front of the teacher’, ‘for the teacher/towards the teacher’. None of them is clearly linked to accusative marking. These scholars (Li 2003 and Du 2005) have tried to find traces of sound change in the accusative/dative marker in contemporary Chinese in the Gan-Qing zone. Apparently, Amdo has not played a definite role in forming the accusative/dative marker in this area (see table 1).

Janhunen *et al.* (2008: 62) tend to identify the origin of *ha* through its functions. They indicate that “the element *-ha* does not fully qualify as a syntactically motivated accusative case marker. Rather, it is probably best identified as a discourse-oriented, pragmatically motivated focus marker.”

If we observe Chinese varieties and dialects in this area, we are inclined to say

discussion of this paper.

²¹ Salar, another Turkic language, has a dative marker which is phonetically similar to *xa* in Sinitic languages. The dative marker in Salar is *ɬə/ɣə* and its variant forms such as *ɬə/gə*, *e/ə*, *nə*, conditioned by the preceding syllable’s vowel or consonant (see Lin Lianyun, 1985).

²² Most occurrences of *xan* are used as a verb having the meaning ‘to go’, ‘to move’.

that in Wutun as in other languages, *ha* is becoming an accusative marker, just like in Tangwang and other Chinese varieties. C. Li (1983) has already considered *ha* to be a dative/accusative marker in Wutun. As has been said in the last section, a parallel evolution can be found in other Chinese varieties such as Linxia, Tangwang, Xiahe (in Gansu), Gangou and Xining (in Qinghai), etc. In Tangwang, *xa* is an accusative/dative marker, moreover, it is a homophone with at least three functions²³: accusative/dative case marker, topic marker and final modal particle²⁴.

The notion of topic is summarized by (Lambrecht 1994: 127) as follows: “A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if IN A GIVEN DISCOURSE the proposition is construed as being ABOUT this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is RELEVANT TO and which increases the addressee’s KNOWLEDGE OF this referent”. Generally a topic is located at the beginning of a sentence while focus has freer position. Given that a topic deals with shared information, it is not stressed, while a focus emphasizes new information and can be recognized prosodically or syntactically²⁵.

It can easily be seen in Table 1 that in the Sinitic languages of the the Gan-Qing linguistic area, accusative and dative take an identical form *xa* no matter which non-Han language influenced them. In other words, under the linguistic influence of Amdo in Wutun, Xiahe and Qinghai, Santa (Dongxiang) in Tangwang, Monguor (Tu) in Gangou, Mongolic languages and Amdo in Linxia, the result remains the same: *xa* or its allophone is both the accusative and dative marker.

The approach of finding a phonetic origin for this accusative/dative marker in non-Han languages fails to explain why it is so different from any of them. However, it is not unreasonable to imagine that this widespread phenomenon might have been influenced by Chinese in this linguistic area. It is difficult to prove or verify how the accusative marker *xa* in Kazakh, *a* in Chuvash and the dative marker [ʁə/ʁə] in Salar, all belonging to the Turkic group, were borrowed into Sinitic languages which formed in this area around 14th century (see Xu Dan 2014). Historically, Han and non-Han (Turkic, Uyghur, etc.) ethnic populations had successive battles and wars over land and political power in this region. Tibetans in the 8th century and Mongolians in the 13th and 14th centuries had a dominant position in this area. Recall that the people who speak Chinese varieties in Wutun, Tangwang, Gangou, Linxia, Xining, etc. are often bilinguals and a large portion of them are offspring of ethnic Han.

²³ In addition to these three functions, the homophone *xa* can also work as a verb ‘descend’ and a resultative.

²⁴ In Chinese, modal particles generally are at the end of a sentence like *a*, *ma*, *ya*, *ba*, *xa* and so on. See Hu Mingyang (1987).

²⁵ In Chinese, the structures such as *lian...ye/dou* ‘even’, *shi...de* ‘it is...that’, etc. are focus structures.

If we observe the Chinese language data, we will see that *xa* did not come directly from non-Han languages. Instead it came from a pause marker often identified as final particle or topic marker *xa/a* in Chinese. With numerous examples in contemporary Chinese and in Yuan (1271-1368) Chinese, we will see that the Chinese language also contributed to the formation of case marking in this area. This explanation seems more natural and simpler than the mentioned suggestions. This hypothesis is based on two facts: (1) contemporary Chinese as well as Yuan Dynasty Chinese have a pause marker *xa/a* which is a potential candidate to be reused in the case-marking system. (2) The on-going change of *xa* in Tangwang's pronoun system allows us to visualize the pause/topic > accusative evolution. That means that the Sinitic languages acquired a new grammatical category either by copying grammatical elements from neighboring languages or from their own native morphemes (see Heine and Kuteva 2005).

The main word order in Chinese was and is still VO (Xu Dan 2006), and typologically speaking, Chinese is a topic-prominent language (see Li and Thompson 1976). Mandarin spoken in the Northwest resorts to two means when the object is preverbal. Either the preposition *ba* should be used ((S+) *ba*+O+verb) in a marked sentence or a phonetic signal (which can be *xa*, *a* or other variant forms) including a pause after the preverbal object ((S+)O(+*xa*), verb) could be found in an (un)marked sentence. Here *xa* is taken as a BASIC FORM to facilitate discussion, but in real conversations, other variant forms (including a pause or a short silence) can be perceived. For this reason, Xu and Liu (2007: 77) labelled it as a *dun ci* 'pause marker'. It is important to know that in Chinese, this famous *xa* has a free syntactic position and no element in European languages can behave like it does. The pause marker in Chinese can mark any element in a sentence. The following examples²⁶ are drawn from the website < http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/> (a database by Peking University) based on ancient and contemporary Chinese. They are selected from conversations in spoken Mandarin in Beijing²⁷:

- (16) 你不能呵²⁸, 爸!
nǐ bù néng a bà
 2SG NEG can FP dad
 'Dad, you can't do it!'

²⁶ Here the pause/topic markers are limited to [ha]/[a], other variant forms are not given here.

²⁷ The examples below are transcribed in *pinyin*, an alphabetic system used in China. Other examples in Chinese dialects will be treated in the same way to facilitate reading; note however that the pronunciations are different from standard Chinese.

²⁸ The pronunciation varies for this character. It can be [xa, xə, a].

- (17) 先頭兒北京啊, 北京人很少
xiāntóuēr Běijīng a, Běijīng rén hěn shǎo
 before Beijing TOP, Beijing people very few
 ‘Before in Beijing, there weren’t very many people who lived there.’
- (18) 這種樂呵, 滿世界沒場尋呢
zhè zhǒng lè ha/a, mǎn shìjiè méi chǎng xún ne
 this CLF happiness TOP full world NEG place find FP
 ‘This kind of happiness can’t be found anywhere else.’
- (19) 穿那個鞋啊, 都是那麼高的跟兒的
chuān nà ge xié a, dōu shì nàme gāo de gēnr de
 put.on that CLF shoe TOP all be as high of heel FP
 ‘The shoes they wear, the heels are always that high.’
- (20) 所以呵, 脫掉人間煙火難哪
suǒyǐ a/ha tuō diào rénjiān yānhuǒ nán na
 so TOP get.off RES world life difficult FP
 ‘So, it is difficult to get away from life among men.’
- (21) 這現在啊, 我年老了, 幹不了了
zhè xiànzài a, wǒ nián lǎo le, gān bù liǎo le
 this now TOP 1SG age old PRF do NEG RES FP
 ‘So now, I’m getting old and can’t do it anymore.’

The syntactic position of *ha/a* is very free. In (16) it is a final particle. It can follow a noun to mark a topic (17) or object (18). It can also follow a VP (19) or even a conjunction (20) or adverb (21) to mark a pause or to highlight the following discourse. It can topicalize a subject or object or other elements in a sentence. The topic markers in Chinese have different sources depending on the dialect²⁹. In the above sentences, it has been seen that *ha/a* is closely linked to a final particle (16) or pause particle (in the rest of the cases). These particles do not play any role at the syntactic level. If they are omitted, the meaning of the sentences is not changed but the tone is less smooth. This phenomenon is also attested in Qinghai dialect. Jia Xiru (1991: 9) indicates that *xa* can be added to almost any element without changing its sound: it is seen after direct objects, indirect objects, nouns expressing a location, and after the standard in comparative sentences (Jia 1994: 59)³⁰. His information is quite similar to what

²⁹ Fang Mei (1994: 137) thinks that topic markers in Beijing Mandarin come from final particles while Xu Liejiong and Liu Danqing (2007: 89) propose various sources including final particles in Shanghai dialect.

³⁰ Du Xingzhou (2005: 127) supposes that [xa] might have come from [xan] after losing the nasal.

we have seen in contemporary Chinese.

Actually this kind of pause marker *xa/a* has already been found in theater texts from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) during which Mongolic rulers governed the Chinese population. The examples below come from the *Lao Qida*, a Chinese textbook for Koreans from the 15th century. Let us compare some examples³¹ with those in contemporary Chinese:

- (22) 鈔呵，擇鈔，爛鈔都不要。(98/36b1-2)
chāo (h)a zé chāo làn chāo dōu bú yào
 money TOP choose money worn-out money all NEG take
 ‘As for paper money, you have to choose it, don’t take worn-out bills.’
- (23) 穿衣服呵，按四時穿衣服。(91/33a7-8)
chuān yīfu (h)a àn sìshí chuān yīfu
 put-on cloth TOP according four-season put-on cloth
 ‘As for clothes, you should wear different ones depending on the season.’
- (24) 官分呵沒，宜做買賣，出入通達。(105/39b2)
guān fèn (h)a méi yí zuò mǎimai chūrù tōngdá
 official destiny TOP NEG suitable do business situation easy
 ‘If one does not have the chance to become an official, it is better to do business in order to have an easy life.’
- (25) 有些病疾呵，休回避，與請大醫下藥看治者。(89/32b2-3)
yǒuxiē bìngjí (h)a xiū huìbì yǔ qǐng tàiyī xià yào kànzhì zhě
 some illness TOP stop avoid help invite doctor prescribe treat FP
 ‘As for illness, don’t avoid dealing with it, help him to find a doctor to treat it.’

It is clear that in the four examples above, 呵 *ha/a* is used as a topic marker. Like in contemporary Chinese, *ha/a* can follow an element (NP or VP) to mark a topic (22 and 23). The same element *ha/a* can be interpreted as a topic marker OR a marker making the object preverbal (24 and 25). This undoubtedly opens the way for later reanalyzing *ha/a* as an accusative marker. The phonetic reconstruction of 呵 *ha/a* in Late Middle Chinese was *xa*, and *xə* in the Yuan

[*xan*] can mark locative, dative, and even ablative and genitive cases in the *Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty* (13th century) according to Yu Zhihong (1992). As has been seen, in later documents such as *Lao Qida* (a Chinese textbook for Koreans from between 14th and 18th centuries) these uses disappeared.

³¹ See Li Taizhu 2003. All the examples from the *Lao Qida* in this article are drawn from the oldest version dating to the 14th century.

period, according to Pulleyblank's (1991) reconstruction. The basic form *xa* was easily introduced into the Gansu-Qinghai area and later reanalyzed as an accusative/dative marker. This hypothesis is backed up by what we can observe in the speech of Linxia, Tangwang, Xining, Gangou and Wutun. Chinese speakers have lived together with other peoples, especially over the past seven or eight hundred years in Northwest China. The languages which have surrounded Chinese all have OV order, and the Chinese language has been strongly influenced by them. It must be remembered that in this region, the Han people were not initially in a dominant position (in the 14th-15th centuries), neither in number nor in religion. The Han people were a minority. It is also useful to know that a large portion of the speakers of these Chinese varieties (Tangwang and Wutun) are descendants of Han people.

We can imagine a plausible scenario: to better understand each other, Han and non-Han people had to learn each other's basic expressions in order to communicate. This could be described as "negotiation" (Thomason 2001: 142) of which speakers are not conscious and it is one mechanism of language change. "The 'negotiation' mechanism is at work when speakers change their language (A) to approximate what they believe to be the patterns of another language or dialect (B)." The pause/topic marker *xa*, *a* in Chinese might be the best candidate to mark a preverbal object, so that it can be brought to attention at the beginning of sentences, since the word order of neighboring languages is OV.

The hypothesis that a pause/topic marker used after a preverbal object triggered the reinterpretation of *xa/a* as an accusative or a dative case marker can also be found in different dialects in this area. The close link between a model particle and a pause/topic marker are attested in Wutun, Tangwang, Xining, Qinghai dialect, Linxia, and even in Lhasa Tibetan:

- (26) gu **ha** e di li (Wutun (Janhunen et al. 2008: 63))
 3SG FOC hungry PROGR OBJ
 'S/he is hungry.'
- (27) gek shai-**ha** nio-se-lio ze-li (Wutun (Janhunen et al. 2008: 63))
 dog snake-FOC bite-die-PRF EXEC-OBJ
 'The dog bit the snake to death.'
- (28) jǎ **xa** tʂh̥ tʂɛ (Tangwang)
 sheep TOP eat DUR
 'Sheep are grazing on the grass.'
- (29) nə ʂu **xa** khe xa liə (Tangwang)
 3SG book ACC read RES PRF
 'He has read the book.'

- (30) tu ʃɿ ʒi tɕia z̃ɕ xa (Tangwang)
 all be one family man FP
 ‘All of us belong to one family.’

In the above examples, *xa* or *ha* has two functions in Wutun: topic marker (26), and accusative case marker (27); and three functions in Tangwang: topic marker (28), accusative case marker (29) and final particle (30). In Xining dialect, the data collected by Ren Bisheng (2004: 340-341) reveals that the accusative marker³² and a final particle are homophones *a*. In Qinghai dialect Wang Peiji and Wu Xinhua (1981: 51) who did not agree with Cheng Xianghui (1980) about the status of *ha* have noted that *ha* must be treated as a modal particle instead of as a grammatical marker. These authors were right to indicate that *ha* could be a modal particle (see Hu Mingyang 1987). As the present article has shown, a modal particle can evolve into a grammatical word. These are some sentences from Xining and Qinghai dialect:

- (31) 飯吃啊! (Xining (Ren 2004: 340))
fan chi a
 meal eat FP
 ‘Eat!’
- (32) 校長一個學生啊罵壞了。(Xining (Ren 2004: 341))
xiaozhang yi ge xuesheng a ma huai liao
 president one CLF student ACC schold very PRF
 ‘The president of the school scolded a student very harshly.’
- (33) 你哈包去說 (Qinghai (Wang and Wu 1981: 51))
ni ha bao qu shuo
 2SG TOP NEG go say
 ‘Don’t go there, he said’
- (34) 家山哈爬了? (Qinghai (Wang and Wu, 1981: 51))
jia shan ha pa le
 3SG mountain ACC climb Q
 ‘Did he climb the mountain?’

Again, *ha* acts as a final particle in (31), a topic marker in (33), and an accusative marker in (32) and (34). Other examples in Qinghai dialect are given by Jia Xiru (1991: 9, 59). Now observe some examples in Linxia dialect. In (35), *ha* plays the role of a topic while in (36), it marks a preverbal object as accusative marker:

³² Ren (2004: 343) takes [a] to be a preverbal NP marker.

- (35) 這個慫哈壞得很 (Linxia Li Wei 1993: 437)
zhe ge song ha huai de hen
 this CLF coward TOP bad DEGR-PART very
 ‘This guy is terrible.’
- (36) 你飯哈吃 (Linxia Li Wei 1993: 435)
ni fan ha chi
 2SG meal ACC eat
 ‘Eat the meal.’

This phenomenon is also seen in Lhasa Tibetan. The same morpheme *ni* (ཉི) is interpreted by Hu Tan *et al.* (1999: 42-44) as a model particle (37), and these authors translated it into Chinese as a model particle, while Tournadre and Dorje (2002: 245) call it a ‘*thématiser*’ (‘topicalizer’) (38): “When topicalization of an object occurs, the marker *-ni* can be translated into French by an object movement to initial position... or translated by the expression ‘as for’; but more often, this particle is not translated at all.”³³

- (37) rgyalsa ni pe cin red (Hu *et al.* 1999: 42)
 capital TOP Beijing be
 ‘As for the capital, it is Beijing.’
- (38) pang gdan ni skyed dman tshang ma-s gon gyi red
 apron TOP woman all-ERG put PRS
 ‘Aprons are worn by all women.’ (Tournadre and Dorje 2002: 245)

It is clear that the topic marker function in Lhasa Tibetan came from a reanalysis of the model particle ཉི *-ni*. The situation is similar in the Gan-Qing linguistic area in which the Chinese particle *xa/a* is reinterpreted as an accusative and a dative marker forming the case marker system with ablative and instrumental case markers, borrowed from non-Han languages.

C. Li (1983: 35-36) reports on the accusative/dative marker *a* in Linxia dialect, saying that “The unusual feature of this case suffix is that its phonetic realization is conditioned by the main vowel of the noun stem. Thus, one can say that this Chinese dialect has a restricted manifestation of vowel harmony.” For example, *a* is used if the noun ends in a back vowel or a nasal, [ɛ] is heard when the noun ends in a front vowel and [ə] if the noun ends in a mid vowel or an apical vowel. The noun syllable is lengthened if the noun syllable ends in a vowel identical to

³³ Translated from French: “*En français, lorsque la thématization porte sur l’objet, la marque ཉི -ni peut être traduite par un déplacement de l’objet en position initiale...ou bien par l’expression ‘quant à’ mais, bien souvent, cette particule n’est pas traduite du tout.*” (Tournadre and Dorje, 2002: 245).

the case suffix vowel³⁴. Even though the authors of *Linxia fangyan* (1996) and other scholars did not mention this phenomenon, it is not surprising when we read the vernacular data in Beijing Mandarin described by Hu Mingyang (1987) on phonetic change of final particles which is conditioned by the vowel or the coda of the preceding syllable of the noun. Xu Dan (2011a: 149) indicates that in Tangwang the accusative/dative marker *xa* has allophones such as [a], [ã] (if the coda of the preceding syllable is a nasal) or lengthened final vowel (+coda) of the preceding syllable. Wang Peiji and Wu Xinhua (1981: 51) also indicate that in Qinhai dialect, *ha* has variant forms such as [a] and [xɔ]³⁵.

I assume that the accusative marker in Sinitic languages of this area came from a pause/topic marker in the Chinese language, which explains why the topic marker *xa* is still a homophone with the accusative marker in these languages. The accusative function is actually reinterpreted from the pause/topic function when the latter marks a preverbal object. Further arguments and examples will be given to prove that accusative markers formed later, and we can “visualize” the ongoing evolution through Tangwang and Wutun. In the articles on case marking in Tangwang (Xu Dan, 2011a), the author shows that the accusative case marker after a pronoun is the coalescence of the pronoun and *xa*. When Chen Yuanlong (1985) published the first article on Tangwang, the morpheme *xa* was already attested regularly after preverbal nouns and pronouns, but the merger of *xa* and pronoun did not take place according to Chen’s description, which did not mention it. He noted that in preverbal position, *vəxa* (1SG+ACC) and *nixa* (2SG+ACC) are used instead of the coalescence *va* (1SG+ACC), *nɪa* (2SG+ACC) attested in the Gan-Qing area (See table 2).

In modern Tangwang, we always hear *va* and *nɪa* when the first or second person is the patient, recipient, beneficiary or receiver. All of these interpretations are actually due to the pause/topic marker *xa*. Since it is used automatically after a preverbal object, the accusative/dative marking function is implied. The third person has still not merged with *xa*, and remains as *nə-xa* (3SG+ACC) in Tangwang. This means that the accusative status of *va* and *nɪa* is due to the sound merger of the first and second person with *xa*, which served to make the preverbal object more salient. When *va* and *nɪa* became accusative/dative marked pronouns, they can even be followed by another *xa* marker, as *vaxa* and *nɪaxa*. This also shows that *xa* has been added to the pronouns, creating a new category: accusative/dative

³⁴ The authors of the *Linxia fangyan* (1996) did not mention this phenomenon.

³⁵ According to Dede’s (2007: 876) investigation, in Qinghai, “The isogloss separating [xa] topic marking areas and [xɔ] topic marking areas runs in the western part of Huangzhong county. The [xa] areas are Huangyuan and the western portion of Huangzhong county, while the [xɔ] areas are southern Huangzhong county, Datong, Ping’an, and Guide counties and urban Xining.”

case. In other Sinitic languages or varieties, the same phenomenon has taken place (see examples reported by Ma Shujun 1982, Li Wei 1993, Ringdzin Wangmo 1991, Wang Sen 1993 among others). What is interesting is that Wutun is undergoing a parallel evolution to that of Tangwang. Let us compare some examples in Wutun noted by these authors.

- (39) *ni jjhakai xxanba-li qhi-li-a* (Janhunnen *et al.* 2008: 69)
 2SG country other-LOC go-OBJ-INTERR
 ‘Have you traveled abroad?’
- (40) *ya ngu nia din-yek* (Janhunnen *et al.* 2008: 64)
 ok 1SG 2SG-OBJ wait-SUBJ
 ‘Ok, I will wait for you.’
- (41) *ngu nia-ha din-di-yek* (Janhunnen *et al.* 2008: 64)
 1SG 2SG-OBL-FOC wait-PROGR-SUBJ
 ‘I am waiting for you.’

It is clear that in the above examples, *ni* expresses a nominative meaning while *nia* expresses accusative. *Nia* actually already includes an accusative case marker; in particular, it may also be a coalescence of *ni* and *xa*, just like what has happened in Tangwang. The double marking *nia-xa* is also similar to Tangwang. Chen Naixiong's (1989) paper on Wutun also gives sentences in which case marking is clear: in subject position, the first and second persons are $\eta\sigma$ and *ni*, while in object position, they become ηa and *nia*, respectively. In the data collected by Janhunnen *et al.* (2008), *ngu* indicates an agent and *nga* (p. 81, p. 85, etc.) or *nga-ha* expresses accusative or dative case (p. 67, p. 94, etc.) Let us compare first and second persons in the Sinitic languages of Linxia and Qinghai, and the Chinese varieties in Tangwang and Wutun³⁶:

	P1 NOM	P1 ACC/DAT	P2 NOM	P2 ACC/DAT	sources
Linxia	$\eta\sigma$	ηa	ηi	ηia	Ma Shujun (1982)
Hanjiaji ³⁷	$\eta\sigma$	ηa	ηi	ηa	Ringdzin W. (1991)
Linxia	$\eta\sigma$	ηa	<i>ni</i>	<i>nia</i>	Li Wei (1993)
Qinghai	<i>wo</i>	<i>wo ha/a</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>ni-ha/a</i>	Ren (2004), Dede (2007)
Wutun	<i>ngu</i>	<i>nga/nga-ha</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>nia/nia-ha</i>	Janhunnen <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Wutun	$\eta\sigma$	$\eta a / \eta aha$	<i>ni</i>	<i>nia/niaha</i>	Chen Naixiong (1989)
Tangwang	$v\sigma$	<i>va/va xa</i>	ηi	$\eta ia/\eta ia xa$	Xu Dan (2011a)

Table 2 Case marking of first and second persons in Northwest China

³⁶ Perhaps the data is limited or I have not fully explored it, but third person *gu* which is also a demonstrative does not seem to be attested in object position.

³⁷ A dialect of Linxia.

The above table shows us that accusative markers have formed and are becoming mature in Sinitic languages, even though the coalescence has not yet occurred in Qinghai dialect or extended to the third person in Tangwang. As I have shown, accusative marking was established reusing the pause/topic marker *xa/a* from Chinese. Even today, the case marker *xa/a* is not always necessary in an OV sentence in Linxia and Qinghai if the context is clear. However it is obligatory for pronouns in Tangwang, but not for nouns. This suggests that case marking may have first formed for pronouns in these languages, then generalized to nouns. The facts provided in this section have shed light on the origin of *xa*, which was a pause marker and final particle and is now a topic marker, and otherwise plays the role of an accusative/dative marker, triggering the case marking category to be established.

4. Formation of case marking in the Gansu-Qinghai area

The case marking system is established in Gan-Qing area with a complete set of accusative/dative, ablative and instrumental markers. As established in the last section, the accusative *xa* comes from a pause/topic marker in Chinese. The path of the formation of this accusative/dative marker could be summarized as follows:

Pause particle <i>xa/a</i>	}	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Topic marker (after a noun at sentence initial position) 2. Accusative/Dative marker (after a preverbal object) 3. Model/Final particle (in sentence-final position)
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This scheme means that a pause particle in Chinese can evolve towards three results: a topic marker, an accusative or a dative marker, or a final particle. In Chinese varieties outside this area, final particles and topic markers are frequently connected due to the pause particle's free syntactic position while in the Gansu-Qinghai area, Chinese varieties underwent two of these changes (topic and accusative/dative markers). As we have established, Chinese varieties do not necessarily undergo all the three changes but at least two of them do occur.

The origin of each marker is different, but the instrumental case marker is a loan morpheme from Mongolic languages, except in Wutun. In table 1, we saw that in East Yugur, synchronically the vowel-consonant sound combination has been reversed into consonant-vowel, keeping the core sound *la* of other Mongolic languages. The instrumental case marker in Sinitic languages apparently came from these languages. In Wutun, however, *liangge* is phonetically identical to Chinese, in which *liangge* can be separated into two elements, *liang* [numeral]+*ge* [classifier]. Even in Wutun, the same phenomenon occurs when *liang ge* is not

used as a case marker³⁸. Semantically, *liang-ge* in Chinese can only be used in noun phrases with the human feature³⁹. But it has completely grammaticalized into a suffix in Wutun, in which *liangge* is not separable (when used as a case marker) and has become one morpheme, and is not sensitive to the semantic features of the noun it marks (see examples given by Janhunen *et al.* 2008: 60-61). It is interesting to note that in Tangwang and other Sinitic languages, *-lia*, an allomorph of *-la*, is also attested. For example, *-lia* is also attested in Qinghai and Tangwang (see table 1). Jia Xiru (1994: 61) indicates that *-lia* is the instrumental marker in Qinghai. Zhu Yongzhong *et al.* (1997: 445) report that Xining uses *-lia* and Gangou takes *-liar* as an instrumental case marker. The medial [j]/[i] in [lia] is perhaps caused by a blind phonetic insertion⁴⁰ or an accommodation between Chinese⁴¹ and Mongolic languages. Again, Amdo does not seem to have contributed much to the instrumental case marker. In the five languages (Sinitic languages and varieties) presented in Table 1, none of the ablative case markers is similar to another, and phonetic differences show that they cannot be linked to each other.

Though the ablative case marker in Qinghai and Tangwang shows some phonetic connections to Mongolic languages, the source of the ablative case marker in Linxia is from Northern Mandarin. In Wutun, the ablative case marker is clearly linked to Standard Tibetan, which has [la] and its allomorph [ra] to mark dative and locative cases. In spite of intense contact between Amdo speakers and Wutun speakers, the ablative and other case markers have paradoxically not been loaned from Amdo. In order to resolve this paradox, linguists must collaborate with anthropologists and historians. Historically, Mongolic rulers and their languages should have exerted a strong influence on speakers in this region. The Amdo language may be a deeper/earlier layer from before Mongolic influence (Cf. also Ringdzin Wangmo 1991). This requires further investigation. Chronologically, Tibetans controlled this area during the 8th century, and the Mongol Empire governed this region during the 13th-14th centuries. Tangwang speakers have been and are still influenced by Santa (Dongxiang) people owing to their common religion, and the case marking in Tangwang reflects this language contact. The evolution and extension of language is perhaps similar to that of genes, which are superimposed one layer after another over time, and today's layer is the result of numerous strata.

³⁸ The following example in Wutun is from C. Li (1985: 331):

Question: *nia nihx dʒɪgə jɣ* /2SG-DAT daughter how-many have/ 'How many daughters do you have?' Answer: *liəŋ-gə* /two CLF/ 'Two.'

³⁹ 我們兩個去 *wōmen liǎng ge qù* 1PL two CLF go, 'Us two will go there.'

⁴⁰ Medial *-j-* insertion is quite common in human languages.

⁴¹ In Chinese, *liá* expresses 'two', being a contraction of numeral and classifier.

Accusative/dative case marking actually helped the case marking system to become established and complete. Concretely, instrumental/comitative and ablative case markers, along with the accusative/dative case marker, form a complete system of case marking. As has been mentioned, we do not take *li* and *de* as locative and genitive case markers. It is clear that they are identical to particles seen in Standard Mandarin and other Sinitic languages. Nobody considers Chinese to possess case marking because of the existence of the postposition *li* and the structural particle *de*. In any language, there are grammatical words marking location or possession, but they are not necessarily case markers. Tangwang and Wutun continue to use these grammatical words inherited from the Chinese language, and there is no reason to think that they have become case markers. The important change in languages of Northwest China is that they have begun to use several postnominal functional morphemes which are completely new and alien to Sinitic languages, but are similar to those of their neighbors.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have shown that Sinitic languages have begun to borrow some suffixes from other languages, but not the whole case marking system. But when these suffixes are absorbed by Sinitic languages, other morphemes, even those which come from Chinese, tend to adjust or accommodate in forming the case marking system. This is the case for xa. The motivation of these constant movements is that the initial VO word order in Sinitic languages in Northwest China has definitely changed into OV word order. In other words, non-Han languages and Chinese have both contributed to shape and create a new category in Sinitic languages: the case marking system.

Case markers formed progressively. But when their quantity reaches a critical degree, the change will become significant and irreversible. At this stage, the whole language system has begun to be affected and a mutation is possible. Languages in Northwest China have influenced each other due to their historical contact in religion, culture, business, and language. The influence is not unidirectional: the dominant position of one language and the dominated position of another can change at any moment in history. The case marking system is the result of numerous layers of borrowings and accommodations between different peoples.

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