

Fieldwork as Interdisciplinarity:

Case Studies from
Southwest China



Outline

What are the problems?

Why mono-disciplinary methods may be inconclusive?

What are possible interdisciplinary techniques and approaches?

What is my interdisciplinary approach?

What are a few significant outcomes from my interdisciplinary approach?

Discussion

What are the problems?

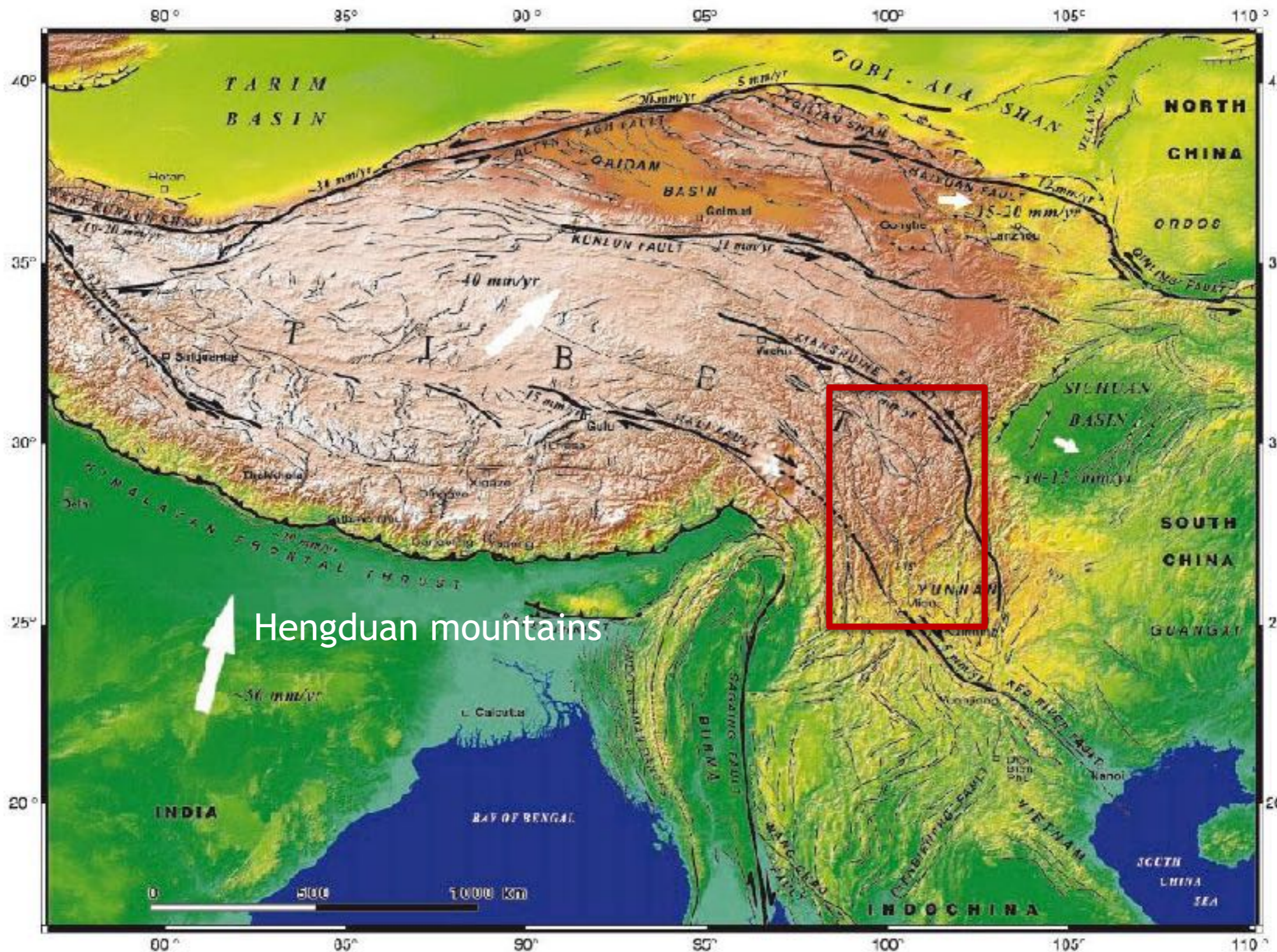
linguistic fieldwork in Southwest China

diversity

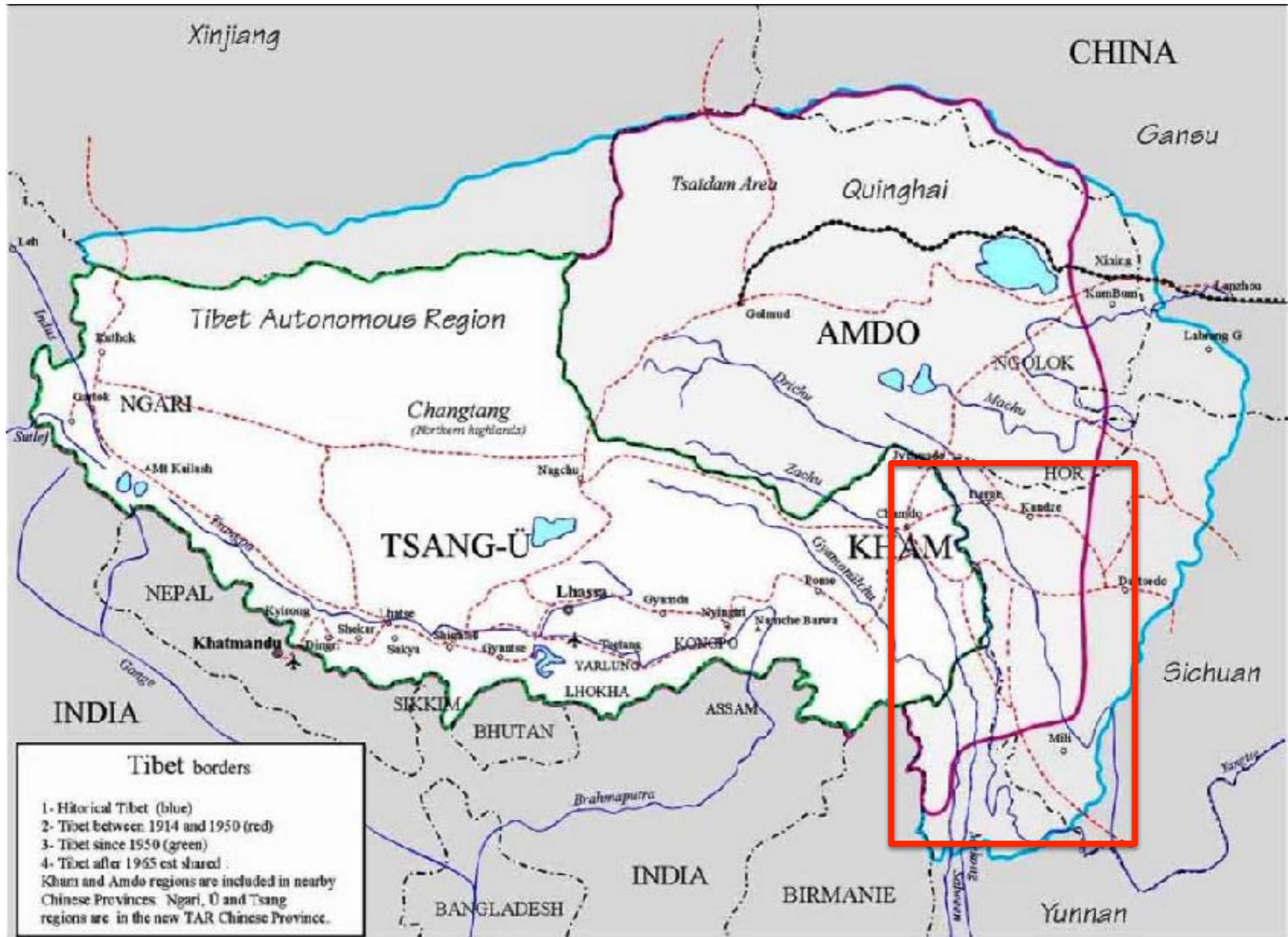
complexity

endangerment

Geography and biology



History and ethnicity



Languages

- typological profile: a residual zone (Nichols 1991:21)

high genetic diversity

no clear center of innovation

until recently, no lingua franca for the whole area

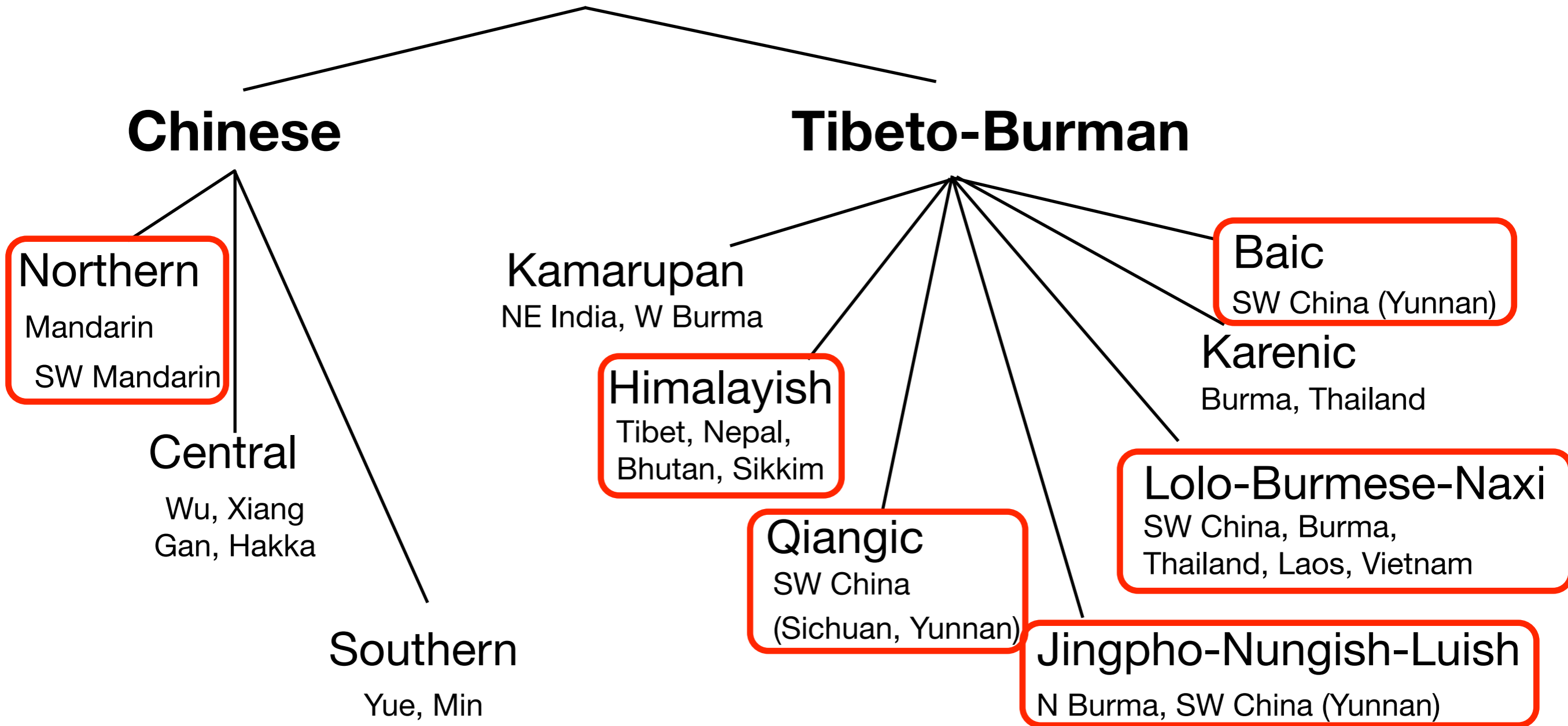
some unique, cross-linguistically infrequent features (such as topography-based spatial deixis)

some clear areal features (such as multiple existential verbs)

Existential verbs

- existential verbs or suppletive classificatory verbs: verbs that can categorize the S/O argument in terms of its inherent properties (e.g. animacy, shape, form and consistency) as well as its orientation or stance in space (Aikhenvald 2003: 153)
- Lizu (Qiangic): six existential verbs, dʒô, ħǎ, dʒwǎ, dʒê, ɲǐ, bô

Sino-Tibetan



Based on: Matisoff, James A. 2003. *The Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman: System and Philosophy of Sino-Tibetan Reconstruction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 5.

Tibetic

1. synthetic languages with inflectional and derivational morphology (paradigmatic (ergative) case marking)
2. template word-tone systems
3. no numeral classifiers
4. no multiple existential verbs

Qiangic

1. case marking (semantic/pragmatic constraints)
2. tonal systems with culminativity
3. reduced numeral classifier systems
4. multiple existential verbs
5. directional prefixes

Lolo-Burmese

1. isolating languages with mostly derivational morphology and overt (accusative) case marking only on a subset of objects
2. omnisyllabic tonal systems
3. well-developed systems of numeral classifiers
5. well-developed systems of existential verbs

Endangerment

local languages are

unwritten

little documented

spoken in a multilingual setting

endangered

Challenges

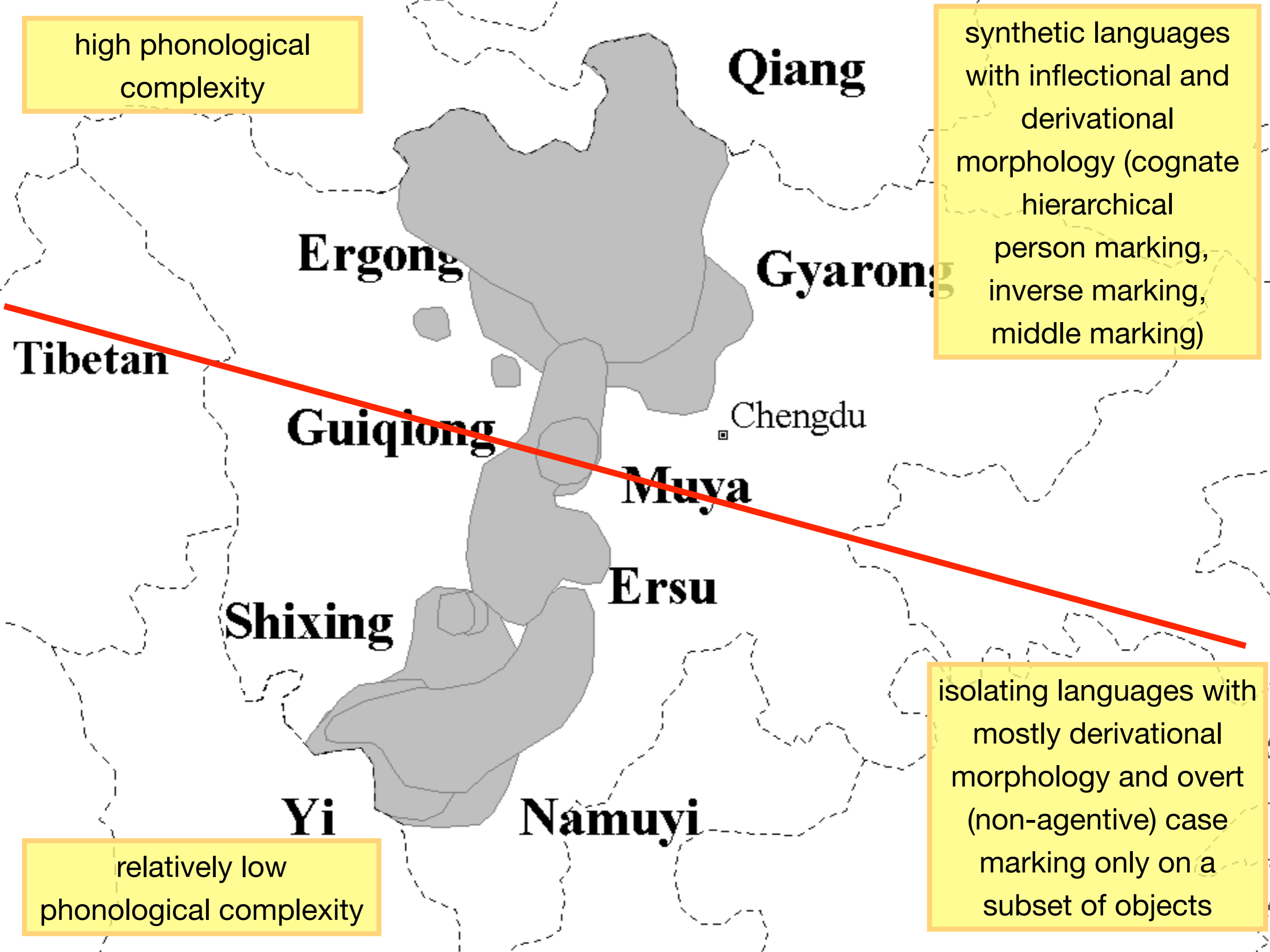
- variation and variability
 - language-internal
 - Ersu: tr , $ɖr$, tr^h , e.g. $/tró/$ ‘gall’, $/ɖrò/$ ‘pot, pan’, $/tr^hò/$ ‘dog’
 - cross-dialectal / among closely related languages (Ersu, Lizu, Duoxu)

Gloss	PTB	Duoxu	Ersu	Lizu Kala	Lizu Ga'er	Lizu Mianning
‘nose’	*s-na	nja ²² (ku ⁵³)	sý(mbý)	tô(mbṽ)	ke ³³ (mɛ ⁴⁴)	ʃti(mbɛ)

- evidentiality systems
- across the Qiangic subgroup

high phonological complexity

synthetic languages with inflectional and derivational morphology (cognate hierarchical person marking, inverse marking, middle marking)



relatively low phonological complexity

isolating languages with mostly derivational morphology and overt (non-agentive) case marking only on a subset of objects

Why mono-disciplinary methods may be inconclusive?

- vertical transmission: linear evolution of languages (the assumption of common ancestry of languages)
 - basic vocabulary
 - sound correspondences
 - (whenever available) grammatical (morphological) evidence
- horizontal transmission: borrowing and contact-induced change as factors affecting the linear evolution of languages

Interdisciplinarity

- interdisciplinarity as closely linked to ideas of problem solving
 - the demands of problem solving are taken to provide ‘axiomatic evidence of the need for multiple perspectives and collaborative work’ (Strathern 2004: 80, 2011)
- interdisciplinarity as linked to the need of endangered language documentation
 - language documentation draws on “concepts and techniques from linguistics, ethnography, psychology, computer science, recording arts and more” (Woodbury 2010)

Language documentation

- “a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties” (Himmelman 2006: v)
- data collected with the aim of documenting (rather than describing) a language requires various kinds of data
- it also requires the collecting of information of potential relevance for other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and the study of oral history
- this presupposes that the data set contains data and information amenable to the research methodologies of these disciplines

Interdisciplinarity in language documentation

- anthropology: expertise on cultural variation
- biology: ethnobiology, phylogenetic methods
- sociology: techniques of conversation analysis
- psychology: questions and methods for studying the biological bases for language capacity
- geography: GIS systems explore environmental ontologies
- non-verbal interaction: gestures and how to study them

Research methods

- interdisciplinarity in data collection
 - testing / survey / experimentation methodology
- interdisciplinarity in data processing
 - statistics: both as a technique and as an accumulated knowledge base
 - multivariate data analysis and mathematical modeling
 - the disembedding of specific empirical concerns from comparative or historical contextual knowledge
 - clarification of causal relationships abstracted from data

Related difficulties

- true interdisciplinary research, especially in teams carrying out fieldwork in remote locations, is difficult to achieve, both because of theoretically different orientations and practical differences in approach (Austin and Grenoble 2007: 22)
 - conceptual
 - technical
 - logistic
 - financial

Modes of interdisciplinarity

- subordination-service mode
 - one or more disciplines occupy a subordinate or service role in relation to other component disciplines
- integrative-synthesis mode
 - work that integrates knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines

Subordination-service mode

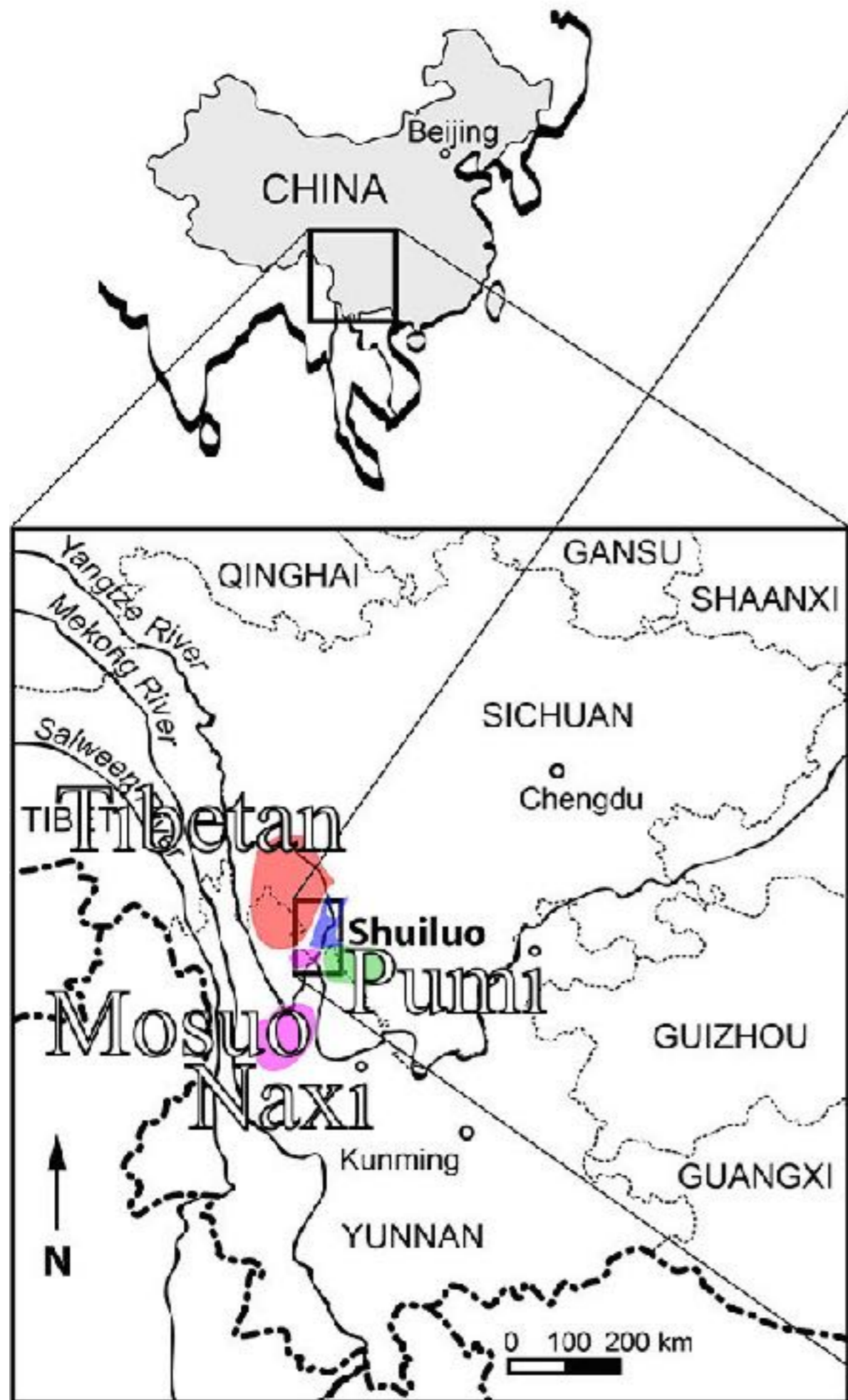
- variation, language change, language contact: phonological convergence
- 2018 (in collaboration with James N. Stanford and Wang Dehe). A long way from New York City: Socially stratified contact-induced phonological convergence in Ganluo Ersu (Sichuan, China). *Language Variation and Change* 30.1: 109-145.



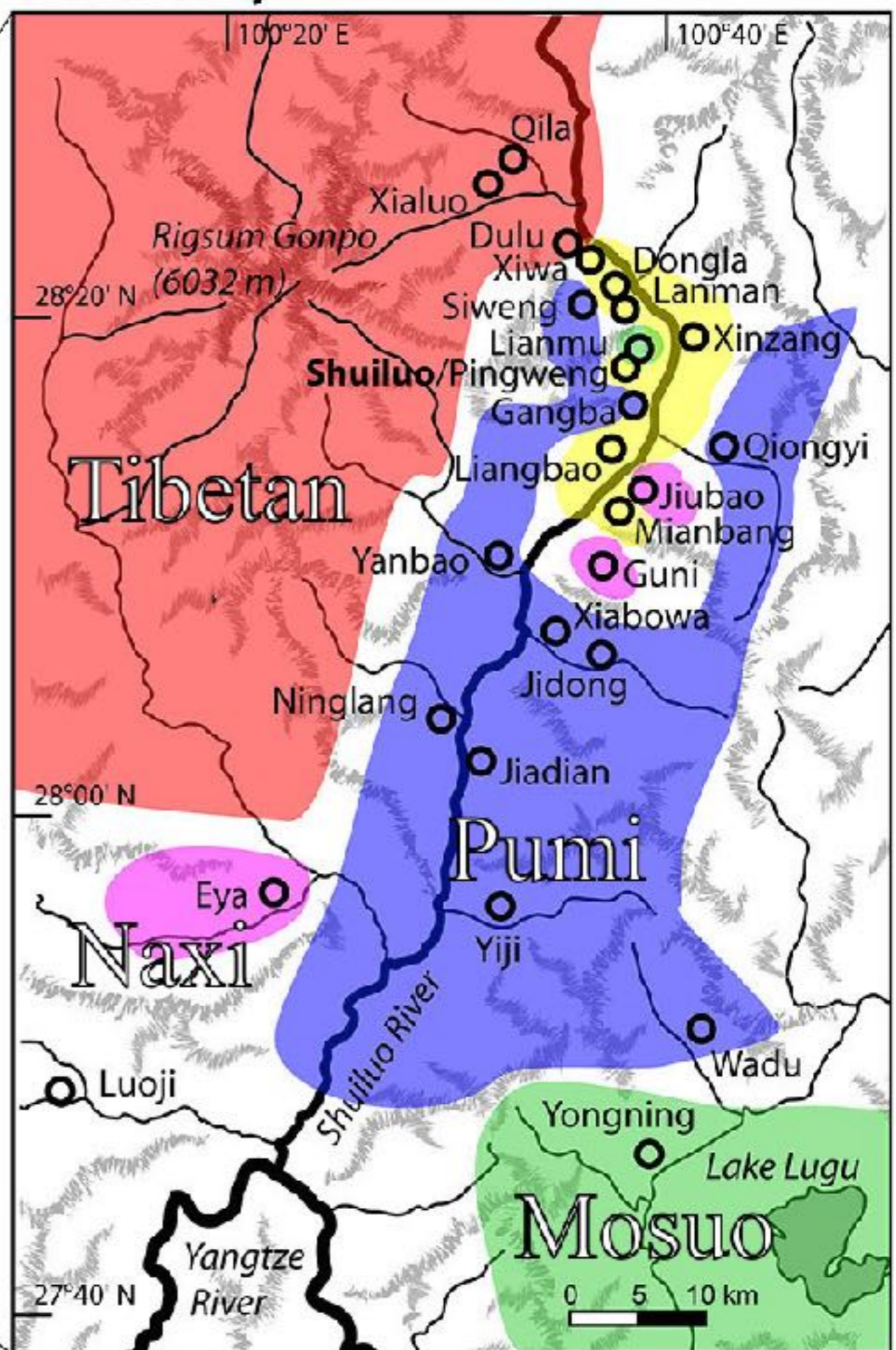
Integrative-synthesis mode

- language change, language contact: lexicon
- 2016 (written in collaboration with Franz K. Huber, Caroline S. Weckerle, Henriette Daudey, Gerong Pincuo). Plant Names as Traces of the Past in Shuiluo Valley, China. *Journal of Ethnobiology* 36.1: 192-214.





Shuiluo Valley



Interest of the study

- plant names may offer valuable information on the degree of relatedness between languages, on past contact between the ethnic groups that speak them, and on their migration history
- plants that are central to the traditional culture of a group, such as crops, tend to have names that are cognate (historically related) in related languages
- plants may also be encountered as novel objects brought in from the outside by trade or by cultural contact
- plants may be encountered as novel objects when ethnic groups move into a new area

Practical implementation

- many difficulties concerning the correct botanical determination of plant material and the problems of scientific definitions of vernacular names
- preparation of specimens in the field as basis for the identification of scientific names for the plants
- deposit of the specimens
- the selection of plant species and plant use categories needs to reflect the local importance of specific species and use categories
 - pile sorting and preference ranking tasks

Interdisciplinary study

- a team of linguists and ethnobotanists; data jointly collected in one fieldtrip (November 2011)
- the plant collection used as basis for interviews consisted of a total of 70 commonly used plant species belonging to 44 families and divided into 10 categories of use
- allowed us to collect a larger number of plant names than traditionally sampled in linguistic fieldwork
- this provided us with an opportunity to approach the linguistic history of the local languages through a comparative analysis of local plant names

Gains

- it offers new data and a new perspective in the research of their linguistic history
- it suggests a number of possible cognates and loanwords among plant names and hence provides new evidence for future, more systematic historical-comparative studies of the three languages based on a larger body of evidence
- it provides independent support for the existing historical and linguistic accounts of the three languages
- it study contributes to the documentation of the underdescribed and endangered languages and to the preservation of the knowledge that these groups have of their natural surroundings

Cultural reconstruction

- Distinct plant vocabularies in five languages
 - Complex migration history: Established names for most plants; most local plants were already known prior to contact
- Some influence of the ethnic groups on each other
 - Direction of borrowing can be identified (few cases): ritual plant names (Tibetan, e.g. *Lithospermum erythrorhizon* <'bri mog>)
Tibetan influence: Ritual activities
 - Direction of borrowing cannot be identified (many cases) (non-Tibetan stocks, e.g. '*Opuncia ficus-indica*' (/õ⁵⁵bu³³ lɛ³³pɛ³¹/))
non-Tibetan linguistic stocks as original in the area
- Common wild plants mostly have descriptive names (e.g. '*Hedera nepalensis* K.Koch (Araliaceae)')
recent colonization of the area

Fieldwork as interdisciplinarity

linguistic fieldwork in Southwest China

diversity, complexity, endangerment

interdisciplinarity is needed

successful research is possible

collaborative work with researchers already in the field

... but also work towards creation of interdisciplinary teams

Fieldwork as interdisciplinarity

train language documenters to think in interdisciplinary rather
than disciplinary terms

ask questions that are informed from an inter- rather than a multi-
or mono-disciplinary perspective

develop methods for addressing the questions holistically

More Information?

visit

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