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Authoritative and Diachronic Aspects of First-Person Pronouns in Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese

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Abstract

This study investigates the semantics and pragmatics of first-person pronouns in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese from their earliest attestations to the present. The focus is on authoritative uses of first-person forms, which account for patterns of semantic extension or reduction in these languages. The data comprise inscriptions and texts from major historical stages of the three languages, spanning Archaic to Modern Chinese, Old to Modern Thai, and Old to Modern Vietnamese. The study uses qualitative comparative analysis to trace developmental paths across Chinese and neighboring Southeast Asian languages, taking into account genres and sociolinguistic factors such as authors' social backgrounds. The findings show that first-person singular pronouns inherited from Old Chinese, Proto-Tai, and Proto-Vietic have often become specialized or restricted to specific pragmatic uses, while recurrent patterns emerge whereby plural pronouns extend to singular uses and are reanalyzed as unmarked singular forms. Lexical replacement drove these changes and likewise contributed to blurred boundaries between nouns and pronouns, as well as large inventories of pronouns typical of languages in this region. Variation across registers and message receivers further reflects interactions among source, message, channel, and receiver, as perceived through the communication model.

Keywords: first-person pronouns; authority; diachrony; language typology; pragmatics

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1. Introduction

This study examines the uses of first-person pronouns in Chinese and its neighboring Southeast Asian languages, Thai and Vietnamese, from their earliest attestations to present-day usage. This comparison provides implications for the relationship between language use and the sociocultural characteristics of these speech communities (Kashima & Kashima, 1998). The three linguistic populations historically share a considerable body of cultural and linguistic traits (e.g., rice agriculture, Buddhism, cultural vocabularies, toponyms, typological features), resulting from contacts and admixture among Chinese, Indic, and local civilizations within the ecology of the ancient Maritime Silk Road and subsequent trade networks to the present (Yurayong et al., 2026).

Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese are also interesting in terms of person because their inventories are, or historically were, not restricted to a closed set of lexical items, as in many European languages. This follows because common and proper nouns are also used to refer to participant roles in speech. This has been considered a widespread phenomenon in East and Southeast Asian languages (Goddard, 2005, p. 4; Heine & Song, 2010; Djenar, 2023). Furthermore, in all three languages, first-person pronouns are attested as basic linguistic elements in historical records from the earliest stages, providing an empirical basis for diachronic analysis in this study.

The roles of first-person pronouns in expressing the speaker's epistemic authority and managing engagement with addressees and states of affairs have not been fully understood. Despite extensive interest in second-person pronouns in sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, with a focus on European languages (e.g., Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2003), much less is known about first-person pronouns. In this study, we highlight the authoritative uses of first-person pronouns, which largely account for the semantic reduction or extension of various competing forms in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese.

Rooted in the concepts of "power" and "solidarity" in an earlier model (R. Brown & Gilman, 1960), our framework incorporates a typology of linguistic interaction involving central theoretical concepts related to interlocutors' epistemic alignment, egophoricity, and engagement (Bergqvist & Kittilä, 2017; Evans et al., 2018; Grzech et al., 2020). The results illustrate the tendencies of pronouns inherited from the protolanguages and their changing pragmatic profiles. The erstwhile first-person singular pronouns, such as *zhèn* in Chinese, *ku:* in Thai, and *tao* in Vietnamese, became specialized or restricted to specific pragmatic uses, while first-person plural pronouns and nominal expressions with humble meanings were often used as alternative strategies, contributing to their functional extension.

The process of "singularization" (e.g., Y. Chen, 2008), which arises from the conventionalized singular readings of recruited plural pronouns, is another central focus of this study. While the functional extension of first-person plural pronouns in the three languages is clear, evidence for reanalysis varies from suggestive contextual uses to complete lexical replacement. In this study, we adopt a variationist approach (e.g., Kroch, 1989; Pintzuk, 2017) to map the development of respective protolanguages' first-person plural pronouns in Chinese (*wǒ* and *ǎn*), Thai (*rau*), and Vietnamese (*ta*) onto a diachronic path with three stages (Helmbrecht, 2015). We also associate typical contexts of use with four components of communication, including source, message, channel, and receiver (Berlo, 1960), to explain variation due to language register and target audience, among other factors. At a more theoretical and methodological level, this analysis provides a diagnostic framework for future studies of other languages and cross-linguistic comparison.

The remaining parts of this article are structured as follows. Section 2 reviews previous studies on first-person pronouns in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese while connecting their comparable characteristics for further analysis. Section 3 describes the language materials and analytical methods used in this comparative study. The data representing diverse genres are then analyzed individually for Chinese (Section 4), Thai (Section 5), and Vietnamese (Section 6). In Section 7, we discuss the findings from a comparative perspective as well as their contribution to the theoretical discussion of pragmatic and diachronic aspects concerning the use of first-person pronouns across historical periods. Section 8 summarizes the contribution of this study to the language-specific analysis and cross-linguistic comparison at a more general level. Throughout this article, the reconstructions of Old Chinese (OC) forms (Baxter & Sagart, 2014) are provided in brackets where relevant.

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2. First-Person Pronouns in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese

Comparative analyses of first-person pronouns across languages in East Asia exist but are nevertheless not numerous. One common developmental trajectory noted across languages is that inventories of self-referencing indices are decreasing, and the function of appellation is simplifying along with societal changes (Denonpho et al., 2023). Another well-attested pattern among Southeast Asian languages is the functional extension of kinship terms to serve as pronouns, as has been compared among Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese (Cooke, 1965, p. 3). Although decent diachronic descriptions of the uses of first-person pronouns have been previously written for Chinese (e.g., Lee, 1999; Yau, 2004; Djamouri, 2009), Thai (e.g., Palakornkul, 1972; Sangsod, 1989; Uckaradejdumrong, 2016), and Vietnamese (e.g., Luong, 1987; P. P. Nguyễn, 1996), these observations have generally been restricted to individual languages with no attempt to pursue a broader areal comparison, which is a goal of the present study.

In Archaic Chinese, multiple forms were available for self-reference. Noun-based expressions related to social status and gender, such as *chén* (臣) 'male servant' and *qiè* (妾) 'female servant', indicated humility (Yau, 2004). This pattern is likewise observed in Thai *kʰâ:* 'servant' and Vietnamese *tôi* 'servant' and *thiếp* 'female servant'. Attested first-person pronouns primarily include *wú* 吾 (< OC **ŋˤa*), *wǒ* 我 (< OC **ŋˤajʔ*), *yú* 余 (also written as 予 in texts from later periods; < OC **laʔ/laʔ*), and *zhèn* 朕 (< OC **lrəmʔ*). These forms can be grouped into two phonological series: **ŋ*-initial series (**ŋˤa*, **ŋˤajʔ*) and the **l*-initial series (**laʔ/laʔ*, **lrəmʔ*) (Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 76). The **ŋ*-initial forms have cognates among first-person pronouns in many other Sino-Tibetan languages (Matisoff, 2003, pp. 487, 489). These pronouns can overlap in speaker reference but differ in their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions (see Graham, 1973; S. Zhou, 1980; Djamouri, 2009; Sio, 2017; detailed discussions in Sections 4.1 and 4.2). Over time, the first-person plural pronoun *wǒ* evolved into the dominant singular form in Standard Mandarin and many other modern Sinitic varieties, alongside the development of analytic plural marking.

Compared with Chinese, Thai has a richer inventory of self-reference forms, as more than a dozen pronouns and pronominalized nouns or classifiers can be used as referential terms for the first-person singular (see e.g., Wiboolyasarin, 2025). These pronoun inventories alternate according to the relationship between interlocutors' power, distance, and affect (Palakornkul, 1972; Filbeck, 1973; Uckaradejdumrong, 2016). In this study, we focus on the Proto-Tai(-Kadai) first-person singular pronoun **ku:ᴬ* (Luo, 2008, p. 15; Pittayaporn, 2009, p. 358) and other related pronominalized words that provide evidence for explaining its diachrony. Pragmatically, the use of **ku:ᴬ* from Old Thai to Modern Thai has consistently been found in direct speech, occurring in three major contexts: 1) top-down communication by authorities to low-ranking individuals, 2) praying or lamenting to oneself, and 3) swearing or cursing (Sangsod, 1989). Meanwhile, the Proto-Tai plural form **rawᴬ* (Pittayaporn, 2009, p. 358) extended its use to function as a first-person singular pronoun in modern language use. This pragmatic extension is also observed in some other related Tai languages, such as Lao (Southwestern Tai, Laos) *hau*^{2} (Enfield, 2007, p. 77) and Nung (Central Tai, Vietnam) *hau* (Saul & Wilson, 1980, p. 20), similarly to the case of *wǒ* in Chinese discussed above. It replaces **ku:ᴬ*, which has become an impolite and coarse first-person singular pronoun in modern colloquial Thai (Senawong, 2011), or has specialized into specific communication contexts for creating inclusivity, such as in royal speech (Kullavanijaya, 2000) and political debates (Nusartlert, 2015). Unlike Thai and other Southwestern Tai languages with longstanding literary tradition and Buddhist literature practices like Lao and Tai Lue, the pair **ku:ᴬ* and **rawᴬ* still retain their grammatical use for number distinction in many Tai languages spoken in South China and Northeast India, such as Mashan Zhuang (Northern Tai, China) *gou*^{53} [1SG] and *raeu*^{22} [1PL.INCL] (Bodomo,

2007, p. 467), and Tai Phake and Tai Aiton (Southwestern Tai, India) *kau*^{2} [1SG] and *hau*^{2} [1PL] (Morey, 2005, p. 218). This pattern resembles the Chinese-like and Indic-like closed class of pronoun inventories.

Similarly to Thai, Vietnamese also uses a wide range of pronominalized nouns for self-reference, especially kinship terms, titles, and social-role nouns (Luong, 1987). The Vietnamese system must be situated first within Vietic, a branch of Austroasiatic that is often discussed under the older label Mon-Khmer, and then separated from the large Chinese loanword stratum. Historical-comparative reconstruction proposes a small set of Proto-Vietic personal pronouns, including the first-person singular form **so:*, reflected in Modern Vietnamese as the informal first-person pronoun *tao*, and the second-person form **mi:*, reflected in *mày*/*mầy* (Alves, 2020, p. xxix). This inherited core differs from Chinese loans and loan-based forms. For example, *trẫm* is borrowed from the Chinese royal first-person form *zhèn*, while the plural marker *chúng* is borrowed from Chinese 眾 'crowd, group' and occurs in *chúng tôi* [1PL.EXCL] and *chúng ta* [1PL.INCL] (Alves, 2017, pp. 291–294). The commonly used polite and formal first-person form *tôi* is historically linked to a noun meaning 'servant', resembling Archaic Chinese *chén* 'male servant' and *qiè* 'female servant', and illustrates a regional cline from social-role nouns to deferential first-person reference (Alves, 2017, p. 291). The inherited form *tao* did not disappear, but its distribution narrowed toward intimate, asymmetrical, or rude uses. At the same time, *ta* remains number-flexible, being interpreted either as inclusive 'we' (P. P. Nguyễn, 1996) or as 'I' in particular literary and discourse contexts. For the same pragmatic purpose as in Chinese and Thai, number in first-person pronouns helps manage inclusion and deference in communication (see the discussion on authoritative uses in Section 7.1).

Building on these pieces of comparative information, this study examines the usages and token frequencies (where applicable) of these first-person forms across different types of discourse, registers, and genres, highlighting their pragmatic properties, stylistic features, and specific social meanings. This investigation helps account for the extensive repertoires of self-referencing indices in these languages and highlights areal patterns. Moreover, recurrent pathways in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese whereby plural forms acquire singular reference conform to the tendencies discussed in previous theoretical studies (e.g., P. Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 198–199; Siewierska, 2004, p. 219; Helmbrecht, 2015). These patterns draw our attention to the process of "singularization" in the first-person paradigm, both at the empirical and theoretical levels (see the discussion on diachrony in Section 7.2).

3. Materials and Methods

The research materials include inscriptions and texts as communicative channels that represent various periods of the three languages. Table 1 summarizes the data and their chronological classifications, with the periodization of Chinese language history based on Aldridge (2013).

Table 1. Chronology of Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese literary languages.

Languages	Periods	Dates
Chinese	Pre-Archaic and Archaic Chinese	14th–3rd c. BCE
	Middle Chinese	2nd c. BCE–10th c. CE
	Modern Chinese	11th c. CE–present
Thai	Old Thai	13th–16th c. CE
	Middle Thai	16th–18th c. CE
	Modern Thai	18th c. CE–present

Table 1. *Cont.*

Languages	Periods	Dates
Vietnamese	Old Vietnamese	11th–16th c. CE
	Middle Vietnamese	16th–19th c. CE
	Modern Vietnamese	19th c. CE–present

The Chinese data were retrieved from various sources for different time periods. The analysis of Pre-Archaic Chinese was based on J. Chen's (in press) statistical analysis of Shang divination records (ca. 14th–11th centuries BCE). These divination texts were taken from the most recent collection of oracle bone inscriptions (Guo & Hu, 1978–1982; Huang, 2022). This includes *Jiǎgǔwén móběn dàxì* (甲骨文摹本大系), with information on the text group, the sequence number, and the corresponding sequence number in the earlier collection *Jiǎgǔwén héjí* (甲骨文合集) provided. The Archaic Chinese data were drawn from classical prose, including the historiographical work *Zuǒzhuàn* (左傳) and philosophical works from different schools, such as *Analects* (論語), *Mèngzǐ* (孟子), *Zhuāngzǐ* (莊子), and *Xúnzǐ* (荀子), regarded as representative of Late Archaic Chinese (ca. 5th–3rd centuries BCE). The analysis of Middle Chinese was based on Q. Zhu's (2012) empirical study of Eastern Han (ca. 2nd century CE) texts. The Modern Chinese data were collected from reference grammars and grammatical sketches.

The Thai data were selected from epigraphs on steles or other artifacts that represent the Old Thai language (the Sukhothai era). The dominant genre of these early sources is historical narrative by kings or authorities who announced and recorded their biographies or respectful deeds, such as administrative duties and warfare, or donations and support for the construction of temples or the manufacture of precious artifacts. Literature, meanwhile, provides examples of fictional language use, especially Buddhist and domestic epic stories and poems produced from the Old Thai and Middle Thai (the Ayutthaya era) periods up to the Modern Thai period (the Bangkok era). Legal texts also belong to our source materials, illustrating the use of first-person pronouns in communicative settings with clear differences in social hierarchy and administrative authority. Modern colloquial language use is based on previous studies of first-person pronouns. Interestingly, the authoritative uses of first-person pronouns are also a prominent feature of occult spells, providing examples of a culturally specialized genre in comparison with other discussed domains of more typical language use. A large part of the materials used in this study is digitally archived and managed by local institutions in Thailand, including Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC, 2021) and Vajirayana Digital Library (VDL).

The Vietnamese data in this study were drawn from a small set of representative texts spanning Old Vietnamese to Modern Vietnamese. These language materials were selected to cover multiple genres, including Buddhist scriptures and treatises, courtly Nôm poetry, narrative fiction, missionary writing, and modern prose. The sources are given in Table 2 in chronological order.

Table 2. Source materials for Vietnamese.

Title (source)	Genre	Date
Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu ân trọng kinh (佛說大報父母恩重經) 'The Sutra on the Buddha's Teaching of the Profound Gratitude Owed to Parents' (Hoàng, 1999)	Bilingual (Nôm and literary Sinitic)	13th–15th c. CE
Thiền tông Khóa hư ngữ lục (禪宗課虛語錄) 'Recorded Sayings of the Zen School: The Book of Emptiness' (Trần, 2009)	Bilingual (Nôm and literary Sinitic)	14th c. CE

Table 2. *Cont.*

Title (source)	Genre	Date
Quốc âm thi tập (國音詩集) 'Collection of Poems in the National Language' (T. Nguyễn, 2001)	Nôm	15th c. CE
Tân biên Truyền kỳ mạn lục tăng bổ giải âm tập chú (新編傳奇漫錄增補解音集註) 'Newly Edited Tales of the Marvelous, with Added Explanations and Phonetic Annotations' (Q. H. Nguyễn, 2001)	Bilingual (Nôm and literary Sinitic)	16th–17th c. CE
Phép giảng tám ngày 'The Catechism in Eight Days' (de Rhodes, 1651)	Early Quốc ngữ with Latin paratext	1651 CE
Thiên Nam ngữ lục (天南語錄) 'The Versified Chronicles of the South' (T. L. Nguyễn, 2001)	Nôm	Late-17th c. CE
34 thư từ Công giáo thế kỷ 18 '34 Eighteenth-century Catholic Correspondences' (Đoàn, 2008)	Early Quốc ngữ	18th c. CE
Lục Vân Tiên (蓼雲仙) 'The Tale of Lục Vân Tiên' (Đ. C. Nguyễn, 1982)	Nôm	Mid-19th c. CE
Sống mòn 'Worn Out Life' (Nam Cao, 1944/1956)	Modern Quốc ngữ	20th c. CE

The analysis in this study is primarily qualitative, comparing developmental paths across Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese. Basic quantitative analysis is also included in the study of Chinese, as its literary tradition and historical corpora are sufficiently abundant, whereas early Thai and Vietnamese text corpora are more limited or fragmentary.

The discussion of the languages generally follows chronological order, with diachronic changes in first-person pronouns across periods noted. A typological characteristic enables large inventories of pronouns to coexist in pronominal paradigms (as introduced in Section 2), motivating us to adopt a variationist approach for this study (e.g., Kroch, 1989; Pintzuk, 2017). Moreover, differences in text genres and relevant sociolinguistic factors, such as the social backgrounds of the authors (when available), are considered alongside the semantic and pragmatic categories discussed. As previously demonstrated in a great number of sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, speakers' identities and stances significantly influence the use of first-person forms in utterances (see Du Bois, 2012; De Cock, 2016; Sweetser, 2022). In this study, we associate typical contexts of use with four components of communication in Berlo's (1960) model, including 1) source (authors and authoritative agents), 2) message (content), 3) channel (inscriptions and texts), and 4) receiver (target audience). These extralinguistic aspects enhance our reflection of societal changes in the three speech communities, supplementing the formal and functional linguistic analysis in this study.

To facilitate this integrated approach, our data in Sections 4, 5 and 6 are organized and presented by genre, highlighting variation across diverse domains of language use over time. The data presentation and interpretation center around various genres from different historical periods, emphasizing diachronic change as well as pragmatic variation and shedding light on the relationship between the two.

Since formal analysis and phonological reconstruction are not the focus of the present study, which examines the semantics and pragmatics of the linguistic phenomenon under investigation, written examples from earlier stages of the three languages are ortho-

graphically adapted to modern language readings. Despite not being the best practice, this methodological choice was made to enhance the comprehensibility, uniformity, and diachronic comparability of the data across historical periods. In practice, this means that all Chinese examples are transcribed in *Pinyin*, while Quốc ngữ orthography is adopted for all Vietnamese examples. As for Thai, all examples are phonetically transcribed according to the Modern Central Thai pronunciations using the IPA transcription.

4. Chinese

In this section, the Chinese data on first-person pronouns include divination records on oracle bones for Pre-Archaic Chinese from the 14th–11th centuries BCE (Section 4.1), classical prose for Late Archaic Chinese from the 5th–3rd centuries BCE (Section 4.2), Buddhist texts for Middle Chinese from the 2nd century CE (Section 4.3), and Modern Chinese (Section 4.4).

4.1. Divination Records

Oracle bone inscriptions, known as *Jiǎgǔwén* (甲骨文), are the earliest attested texts in Chinese. The major body of these inscriptions consists of official divination records of the Shang (商) state, dating from the 14th to the 11th centuries BCE. These ritual texts are highly structured, often divided into four sections. Texts typically begin with the preface (前辭), which records the date and the name of the divination agent, either the king or a court diviner. This is followed by the charge (命辭), which often concerns matters such as weather, agriculture, dreams, illness, and affairs including sacrifice, military campaigns, and hunting expeditions. This may be followed by the prognostication (占辭), which gives the king's interpretation of the divinatory results, and finally by the verification (驗辭), which states what happened afterward.

In divination records, hundreds of instances of first-person reference have been observed, with most occurring in the charge section. Three of the four first-person pronouns mentioned in Section 2, *wǒ*, *yú*, and *zhèn*, are attested during this period. M. Chen (1956, p. 96) noted that *yú* and *zhèn* are first-person singular pronouns, whereas *wǒ* is a plural form. A syntactic distinction exists between *yú* and *zhèn*, with *zhèn* restricted to possessive contexts and *yú* occurring complementarily in non-possessive positions. The first-person paradigm of Shang Chinese is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. The first-person paradigm of Shang Chinese (13th–11th centuries BCE).

Function		Form
1SG	possessive	*zhèn*
	non-possessive	*yú*
1PL		*wǒ*

While the syntactic distinction between the two first-person singular pronouns is clear, the semantic distinction between *wǒ* and *yú*/*zhèn* is less evident in the records and requires justification. The use of the first-person pronouns follows a regular usage pattern, in which the singular pronouns occur when the king is the divination agent, but they are rarely attested in those records associated with court diviners. The plural pronoun *wǒ*, by contrast, is not restricted to either type of record. As shown in Figure 1, singular pronouns also occur at low frequencies in the speech of the diviners, but most cases are observed in direct quotations of the king. The data, therefore, suggest that in the speech of diviners, singular pronouns are generally excluded, whereas the king uses both singular and plural pronouns, with the former occurring more frequently in these records. For example, the

contents of the records in (1) and (2) are the same except for the date and the speakers, while different types of pronouns are attested.

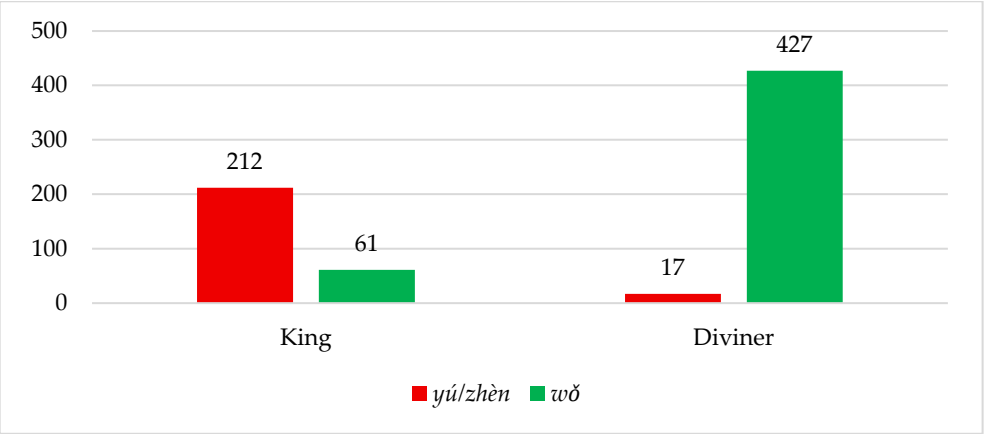

Figure 1. Token frequencies of *yú*/*zhèn* (singular) and *wǒ* (plural) based on the speakers.

(1) 乙丑卜。王貞。**余**伐獯。（6926, 7126, 賓一）
*Yǐchǒu bǔ, wáng zhēn, **yú** fá Yóu (?)*
PN divine king divine **1SG** attack PN
'Divining on the day of Yichou, the king said: I will attack Yóu.'

(2) 丁丑卜。殼貞。**我**伐獯。（6929, 7134-2, 賓一）
*Dīngchǒu bǔ, ké zhēn, **wǒ** fá Yóu (?)*
PN divine PN divine **1PL** attack PN
'Divining on the day of Dingchou, Ké said: We will attack Yóu.'

From a pragmatic perspective, this usage pattern is closely associated with speakers' identities and social status. In the speech of diviners, who speak in their official roles rather than as individuals, first-person singular pronouns are avoided, while the king may alternate between singular and plural pronouns. When the topic concerns the king himself rather than state affairs, such as his own dreams or illness, as in (3) and (4), only singular forms are used. In matters of state, such as agriculture and sacrifice, or collective actions, such as military campaigns and hunting expeditions, the king tends to use plural pronouns, as seen in (5), while singular pronouns can also be used to single out the self as in (1).

(3) 丙辰卜。王貞。**余**有夢。…（17440, 5472-1, 師賓）
*Bǐngchén bǔ, wáng zhēn, **yú** yǒu mèng, …*
PN divine king divine **1SG** have dream
'Divining on the day of Bingchen, the king said: I had a dream…'

(4) 庚辰[卜]。王。弗疾**朕**天。（20975, 209-1, 師肥）
*Gēngchén [bǔ], wáng, fú jí **zhèn** tiān.*
PN divine king NEG hurt **1SG.POSS** head
'Divining on the day of Gengchen, the king (said): Do not make my head hurt.'

(5) 壬辰卜。王。**我**獲鹿。允獲。（10951-1, 3665, 師賓）
*Rénchén bǔ, wáng **wǒ** huò lù, yǔn huò.*
PN divine king **1PL** capture deer indeed capture
'Divining on the day of Renchen, the king said: We will capture the deer. (We) indeed captured.'

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As a general observation, the singular pronouns *yú* and *zhèn* are mostly restricted to the king (Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 76). Note that they are not specialized royal 'I' forms, such as *zhèn* in later Chinese (Yau, 2004) and its borrowed form *trẫm* in Vietnamese (see Section 6.1). However, these uses imply potential authoritative meanings associated with the first-person singular pronouns, which account for their semantic reduction and contextual specialization over time (see the discussion in Section 7.1).

4.2. Classical Prose

Four first-person pronouns are attested in Chinese classical prose written from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BCE, although their token frequencies vary significantly (Djamouri, 2009), as shown in Table 4. On the one hand, the singular pronouns *yú* and *zhèn* declined in frequency. Their syntactic distinction was neutralized, and their uses became restricted (Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 76). On the other hand, the newly emerging pronoun *wú* increased in frequency, while *wǒ* remained in active use. Therefore, *wú* and *wǒ* became the dominant first-person pronouns during this period. As the inherited pronoun *wǒ* gradually extended to singular uses, both *wú* and *wǒ* were used for self-reference.

Table 4. Frequencies of the first-person pronouns in four classical prose texts (based on Djamouri, 2009).

Form	Frequency	Subject	Object	Possessive
yú	233 (11.26%)	58%	30%	12%
zhèn	2 (0.10%)	0	0	100%
wú	918 (44.35%)	65%	2%	33%
wǒ	917 (44.30%)	39%	39%	22%

Previous studies have identified various synchronic distinctions between *wú* and *wǒ*, including syntactic distribution (non-accusative vs. full distribution; e.g., Karlgren, 1920), alignment patterns (A vs. S/P; see Sugita, 1993; Tong & Lu, 2025), subjectivity (subjective vs. objective; see Yamazaki, 1991; Djamouri, 2009; Dong, 2014; Ichihara, 2018), information structure (non-contrastive vs. contrastive; see F. Zhou, 1959/1990, pp. 58–59; Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 77; Pan, 2001; H. Zhu, 2010; Shi & Liu, 2023) and prosody (light vs. heavy; see Yu, 1949/1999, p. 173; Kennedy, 1957; Zhao, 2018; Feng, 2023). These studies highlight different profiles of the two first-person pronouns at the grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and prosodic levels.

From a diachronic and variationist perspective, different usage patterns between *wú* and *wǒ* reflect unstable competition due to their partial overlap in paradigmatic roles. Competition between two forms is likewise observed among second-person pronouns in the history of European languages (see, e.g., Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2003). In Section 4.4, similar patterns recur in some Modern Chinese varieties, providing further evidence to support a diachronic account.

Plural readings of *wǒ* remain and vary across texts. In historiographical prose such as *Zuǒzhuàn*, plural *wǒ* often refers to the social group to which the speaker belongs, typically a clan, country, or military unit, depending on the context. In Confucian works, *wǒ* is often interpreted as generic 'we' (Harbsmeier, 1997) rather than as referring to specific social groups, as illustrated in (6).

(6) **我**不欲人之加諸我也，吾亦欲無加諸人。（論語·公冶長）
wǒ *bù* *yù* *rén* *zhī* *jiā* *zhū* ***wǒ*** *yě*, …
1PL NEG want people POSS impose DEM **1PL** DECL
wú *yì* *yù* *wú* *jiā* *zhū* *rén*.
1SG also want NEG impose DEM people
'We do not like others' imposing them (their ideas) upon us, so I do not want to impose them upon others.' (Analects, Gōngyě Cháng)

The two first-person pronouns *wú* and *wǒ* in classical prose reflect the paradigm summarized in Table 5. The overlap in their paradigmatic roles leads to competition in singular uses. The remaining plural uses also suggest that the "singularization" process is not complete. In Late Archaic Chinese, *wǒ* is typically attested as a "number-flexible" first-person pronoun, like *ǎn* in modern Mandarin varieties (see Section 4.4) and *ta* in Vietnamese (see Section 6.1). The functional extension of *wǒ* is likely a trigger behind the increasing use of different plural markers in Early Middle Chinese, evolving from common nouns meaning 'group' or 'peer', such as *shǔ* (屬), *cáo* (曹), and *bèi* (輩). These "secondary" plural markers, less grammaticalized forms with recognizable lexical meanings, can mitigate the number ambiguity of *wǒ* (see similar examples in Section 4.4, Section 5.4, and Section 6.4).

Table 5. The first-person paradigm of Late Archaic Chinese (5th–3rd centuries BCE).

Function	Form
1SG	*wú*, *wǒ*
1PL	*wǒ*

4.3. Buddhist Texts

The unstable competition reflected in classical prose came to an end after the 1st century CE. As the use of *wú* declined, *wǒ* became the dominant first-person singular form. However, this tendency is not reflected across all types of texts. In traditional prose, the frequencies of *wú* and *wǒ* remained balanced. By contrast, in Buddhist texts from the Late Han period onward, *wú* almost disappeared from use. Based on examples from 44 traditional prose texts and 39 Buddhist texts (Figure 2), Q. Zhu (2012) provides an empirical study of this cross-genre variation. As seen in these figures, the frequency of *wú* remained high in traditional prose, with the singular pronouns *yú* and *zhèn* also occasionally attested. In Buddhist texts, by contrast, the frequency of *wú* significantly decreased. Meanwhile, in line with the tendency observed in earlier texts (see Table 4 in Section 4.2), *yú* is rare in these Buddhist texts, and the royal 'I' *zhèn* is not attested at all because of its specialized role-marking meaning.

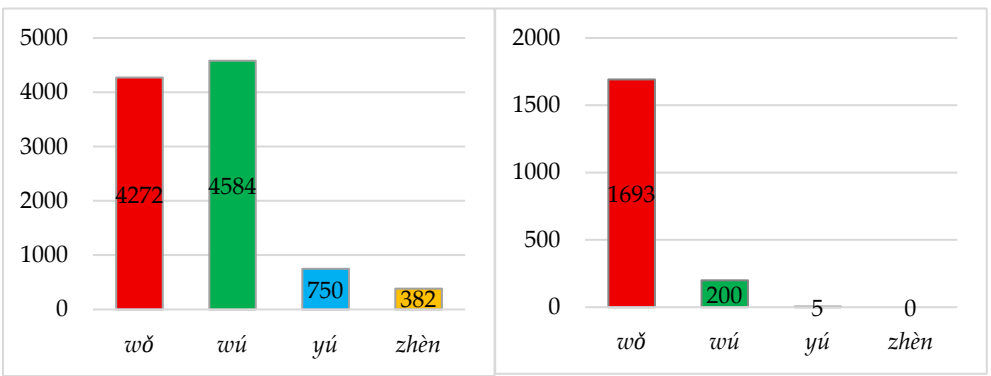

Figure 2. (**Left**). Different first-person pronouns in traditional prose. (**Right**). Different first-person pronouns in Buddhist texts (based on Q. Zhu, 2012).

Compared with traditional prose written by highly educated scholars and strongly influenced by Confucianism, Chinese Buddhist texts translated from Indian scriptures appear to be more vernacular in general, showing a different profile in many respects (Zürcher, 1977). One striking feature is the decreasing use of *wú*. The contrast suggests a genre-based preference for *wú* in written language, which may obscure ongoing change in colloquial language. Nevertheless, the development of the first-person paradigm can still be observed through the competition between vernacular and literary varieties. Based on the evidence from Buddhist texts, by the 2nd century CE at the latest, *wǒ* had become the dominant first-person singular form.

Beyond this ongoing change, the data suggest another tendency for various first-person singular pronouns attested from Pre-Archaic and Archaic Chinese to become highly restricted in speech, although they never disappeared from language use. Instead, these singular pronouns developed specific social meanings and stylistic features. For example, *zhèn* was reserved for emperors. At the same time, the two pronouns *wú* and *yú* were typically attested in literary language, where their token frequencies could be even higher than that of *wǒ* (see Figure 2). In conservative writing practices, these old-fashioned forms were often preferred.

4.4. Modern Chinese

Unlike in previous historical stages of Chinese, *wǒ* is today the only singular form in Standard Mandarin, while plurality is now expressed by the newly developed plural clitic *=men* (們). The plural reading of *wǒ* has thus disappeared from present-day use. Furthermore, Chinese person paradigms have become more analytic through the development of plural marking, as suppletive stems for plural forms have been replaced by a unified marking pattern across the three grammatical persons, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The person paradigm of Standard Mandarin.

Number	1st person	2nd person	3rd person
Singular	*wǒ* (我)	*nǐ* (你)	*tā* (他)
Plural	*wǒmen* (我們)	*nǐmen* (你們)	*tāmen* (他們)

With regard to number, a development path from plural to singular use, similarly to the shift in *wǒ* in Archaic Chinese (Section 4.2), recurs in modern varieties. For example, the pronoun *ǎn* (俺), resulting from the fusion of the first-person plural form *wǒmen*, is widely attested in northern Mandarin varieties in Henan, Hebei, and Shandong (Li, 2008). This plural pronoun has also developed a singular use. These two pronouns *wǒ* and *ǎn* in Mandarin varieties partially overlap in their singular uses (see Table 7). The form *ǎn* is "number-flexible", and it may become dominant through competition with *wǒ*, resulting in complete syncretism in the paradigm, as illustrated by the Weifang pattern. The singularization of first-person plural pronouns is also attested in non-Mandarin varieties, such as Jin and Wu (e.g., Sheng, 2019).

Table 7. The first-person paradigms in three Mandarin varieties in Shandong (based on Li, 2008).

Function	Linqing	Weifang	Zichuan
1SG	*wǒ* (我), *ǎn* (俺)	*ǎn* (俺)	*wǒ* (我), *ǎn* (俺)
1PL	*ǎn* (俺)	*ǎn* (俺)	*ǎn* (俺) [EXCL], *zán* (咱) [INCL]

The recurring pattern observed from these examples is that, when a plural form is reanalyzed as singular, an additional plural marker is attached to reinforce the plural reading. In many northern Mandarin varieties, for example, the plural form *ǎnmen* is common,

even in those varieties where *ǎn* retains its plural use (see similar examples in Thai and Vietnamese in Sections 5.4 and 6.4).

From an interactional perspective, first-person plural forms are attested as a politeness strategy in Modern Chinese. For example, Lee (1999) discusses the use of *wǒmen* in the 18th-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), where the plural pronoun is often used as a modest 'we' for self-reference in the speech of women, children, and family servants of low social status. This sociolinguistic note is also supported by Lü's (1941/1984, p. 16) observation that the pronoun *ǎn* in northern Mandarin varieties is more frequently used by women than by men and by younger speakers than by older speakers. As the singular reading of the first-person plural pronoun *ǎn* becomes conventionalized, pragmatic meanings associated with politeness become obscured (Y. Chen, 2008).

5. Thai

In this section, we investigate the development of referential words that can be used as first-person singular pronouns throughout the attested history of the Thai language. Our data represent diverse genres, including ancient epigraphs (Section 5.1), literature and books (Section 5.2), occult spells (Section 5.3), and modern language use (Section 5.4). The examples and analysis presented in this section also largely align with observations from the pronominal system of Lao, a closely related language of Thai (see Enfield, 2007, pp. 77–84).

5.1. Ancient Epigraphs

Tracing back to the first attestation of the Thai language in 1292 CE, the first-person singular pronoun *ku:* (กู < Proto-Tai **ku:^{A}*) appears repeatedly in the Ramkhamhaeng inscription. This inherited pronoun functions as a self-reference to King Ramkhamhaeng, who reigned over the Sukhothai Kingdom from 1279 to 1298. For example, at the beginning of the inscription, King Ramkhamhaeng introduces his family using *ku:* as the possessive pronoun 'my' in (7). Likewise, in other contemporary Sukhothai-era inscriptions, *ku:* may refer to the authorities who ordered the inscriptions in many parts of the Sri Chum inscription (the 13th–14th centuries CE), as in (8).

(7) พ่อ**กู**ชื่อศรีอินทราทิตย์ แม่**กู**ชื่อนางเสือง พี่**กู**ชื่อบานเมือง
pʰɔ̂: ***ku:*** *cʰû:* *Sǐ:ʔintʰra:tʰít* *mêː* ***ku:*** *cʰû:* *na:ŋ* *Sŭəŋ*
[father **1SG**] name PN [mother **1SG**] name lady PN
pʰîː ***ku:*** *cʰû:* *Ba:nmɯəŋ*
[brother **1SG**] name PN
'My father was named Śrī Indrāditya, my mother was named Lady Sueang, and my elder brother was named Ban Mueang.' (Ramkhamhaeng inscription, 1292 CE, SAC)

(8) **กู**แลยังจักได้ตรัสแก่สรรเพญุเดญาณ เป็นพระพุทธจริงว่าไซร้ จงให้พบปูน
ครั้น**กู**อธิษฐานบัดแมงแห่งหั้นดายกลายพบโป่งปูน
ku: *lɛ:* *jaŋ* *càk* *dâi* *tràt* *kɛ̀:* *Sǎnpʰe:júʔdeːja:n*
1SG then still FUT get speak to PN
pen *pʰráʔ pʰút* *ciŋ* *wâ:* *sái* *coŋ* *hâi* *pʰóp* *puːn*
become Buddha true QUOT PTCL let give find lime
kʰrán ***ku:*** *ʔàʔtʰíttʰă:n* *bàt* *mɛːŋ* *hɛ̀ːŋ* *hân* *daːj* *klaːj* *pʰóp* *pòːŋ* *puːn*
when **1SG** aspiration for_a_brief_moment become discover spring lime
'If I shall attain Enlightenment as a Buddha, may I find lime mortar. Having made the aspiration for a brief moment, a vast deposit of lime material was discovered in that location.' (Sri Chum inscription, lines 25–28, the 13th–14th centuries CE, SAC)

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Besides its basic form, *ku:* is also used in several ancient Thai inscriptions in a compound with another first-person pronominal element *kʰâ:* (ข้า), derived from the word 'servant' (similarly to Chinese *chén* 'male servant' and *qiè* 'female servant', and Vietnamese *tôi* 'servant' and *thiếp* 'female servant', as introduced in Section 2). This compound has been attested since the 14th century CE, such as in the Bang Sanuk inscription found in Phrae Province (9) and on a tin plate found at Wat Mahathat temple in Ayutthaya Province (10).

(9) **กูข้า**ยอมือนบพระศรีรัตนตรัย อันดีพิเศษกว่าอินทพรหม
ku: kʰâ: *jɔ:* *mɯ:* *nóp* *pʰráʔ sǐ:ráttanáʔtrai*
1SG raise hand respect Triple_Gem
ʔan *di:* *pʰíʔsè:t* *kwà:* *ʔintʰáʔ* *pʰrom*
REL good supreme COMP Indra Brahman
'I raise my hands in veneration to the Triple Gem, which is supreme and excels even Indra and Brahman.' (Bang Sanuk inscription, 1339 CE, SAC)

(10) ด้วยกุศลผล**กูข้า**หล่อพระพุทธพิมพ์ ถ้วนวันเกิดทำบูชาพระศรีรัตนตรัย ฟังพระสัตปกรณาภิธรรม์
สรรพบริบูรณ์กัลปนาอานิสงส์นี้ไปทั่วไตรภพสบสัตว์นิกรบิดรญาติสาธุชน
ส่วนตน**กูข้า**ขอไปเกิดเอากำเนิดในดุสิตคัลบพิตรพระไมตรี
dûaj *kùʔsoǒn* *pʰoǒn* ***ku: kʰâ:*** *lɔ̀:* *pʰráʔ* *pʰúttʰáʔpʰim* *tʰuân* *wan* *kɤ̀:t*
by merit result **1SG** cast Buddha_image numbering birthday
tʰam *bu:cʰa:* *pʰráʔ sǐ:ráttanáʔtrai* *faŋ* *pʰráʔ sàtpakɔrana:pʰíʔtʰan*
make homage Triple_Gem listen Seven_Books_of_Abhidhamma
sǎnpʰáʔbɔribu:nkalapana: *ʔa:níʔsǒŋ* *ní:* *pai* *tʰûə* *traipʰóp* *sòp*
all_sentient_beings merit this go all_over three_realms meet
sàtníʔkɔ:n *bìdɔ:n* *jâ:t* *sǎ:tʰúʔcʰon* *sùən* *ton* ***ku: kʰâ:***
worldly_being father kinsman righteous as_for self **1SG**
kʰɔ̌: *pai* *kɤ̀:t* *ʔau* *kamnɤ̀:t* *nai* *dùʔsìʔtàʔkʰalabɔpʰít* *pʰráʔ* *maitri:*
beg go be_born take birth in Tuṣita_heaven Maitreya
'By virtue of the merit derived from casting Buddha images (votive tablets) numbering equal to the count of the days of my age, performing homage to the Holy Triple Gem, and having fully heard the Seven Books of the Abhidhamma, I dedicate this merit unto all sentient beings within the three realms (*Trailokya*), unto worldly beings, parents, kinsmen, and all the righteous. As for myself, may I attain rebirth in the Tuṣita heaven and enter the presence of the Lord Maitreya.' (Wat Mahathat temple tin inscription, lines 1–9, 1374 CE, SAC)

Our interpretation suggests that the difference between the two forms likely relates to expressions of authority. While the basic form *ku:* is situated in communication from an authoritative source (e.g., the king or the chief) to a receiver of lower social status, the compound form *ku: kʰâ:* often occurs in contexts in which the inscription's author or authority belittles themselves while paying homage to the Buddha or the Triple Gem. This pattern finds a parallel in the use of the equivalent humble first-person pronoun form *ʔankʰajom* (อัญขยม) borrowed from Khmer អញ្ជុំ *ʔaŋkʰɲom*, as illustrated in the sacrificial chanting verse addressed to the celestial beings in (11).

(11) **อัญขยม**บังคมบรมภูวสวะ มนตรชากรุงชนะ นิตยเทวดาผอง
ʔankʰajom *baŋkʰom* *bɔromáʔpʰu:váʔsavàʔ* *montràʔcʰa:* *kruŋ* *cʰanáʔ*
1SG bow Supreme_Sovereign_of_earth
níttajáʔ *tʰe:wada:* *pʰɔ̌:ŋ*
Supreme_Sovereign_of_celestial_being all
'I bow in deep reverence unto the Supreme Sovereign of the Earth, the Supreme Sovereign of all celestial beings.' (Khamchan Dutsadi Sangwoei [The Chant for

reading or chanting during royal ceremonies involving auspicious elephants], Verse 1, the 16th century CE, VDL)

We also find another attested parallel form *câu ku:* (เจ้ากู) or *cû: ku:* (จู้กู) in the *Customs of Chenla/Cambodia* (真臘風土記 *Zhenlafengtu Ji*) by the Yuan Dynasty Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan (1270–? CE), who traveled to Cambodia in 1296–1297 CE. The first component, reconstructed as **ɕʏwᶜ* in Proto-Tai, is a Chinese borrowing from 主 'owner, master', from Middle Chinese *tśjuᴮ* or Late Han Chinese *tśjoᴮ* (Pittayaporn, 2009, p. 369), which extends from its original meaning to the religious meaning 'god' in the Thai context. In his records, Zhou Daguan describes the titles of religious practitioners with the following Sanskrit and Thai-Chinese terms: *paṇḍita* 'learner', *câu ku:* 'ordained *bhikṣu*', and *tapasvī* 'monk' (Yongboonkerd, 2000, p. 9). The form *câu ku:* is clearly not a native Khmer word but a borrowing from the Thai language, along with the transmission of Buddhism from Sri Lanka through Sukhothai into Cambodia. A corresponding form in Khmer is *kamrateŋ aɲ* [lord + 1SG] (កម្រតែងអញ), used as a pronoun to address respected or high-level authorities, such as noblemen and Brahmans.

The authoritative uses of *ku:* in ancient Thai inscriptions discussed above generally correspond to top-down communication by authorities (see Sangsod, 1989, discussed in Section 2). This usage can be readily explained by the prominent function of inscriptions as a major channel for written communication in ancient history, similarly to the Chinese case discussed in Section 4.1.

5.2. Literature and Books

In fictional literature, the pronoun *ku:* is often used in direct speech by protagonists. This is a common strategy observed throughout the history of the Thai language, from the 13th century CE to the present. The following examples illustrate such usage in various literary sources and communicative contexts across time: *Trayabhumikatha*, composed by King Maha Thammaracha I (also known as King Li Thai), who reigned over the Sukhothai Kingdom from 1347 to 1368 CE, as in (12); *Mahachat Khamluang*, the Thai epic narrative of the Great Birth (*Mahājāti*) of Vessantara Bodhisattva, composed in 1492 CE, as in (13); and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the Thai epic poem composed during the 17th–18th centuries, as in (14).

(12) ผิว่า**กู**ให้ยาคนกินและให้ลูกคนตกไซร้ ให้**กู**เป็นเปรตมีเนื้อตัวอันเหม็น
และมีแมลงวันอยู่เจาะตอม**กู**กินทุกเมื่อแล ให้**กู**คลอดลูก**กู**เมื่อ ๗ คน และให้กินเนื้อลูก**กู**เองทุกวัน
pʰìʔ wâː ***kuː*** *hâi jaː kʰon kin léʔ hâi lûːk kʰon tòk sái*
if **1SG** give drug person eat and give child person fall PTCL
hâi ***kuː*** *pen prèːt miː nuáə tuə ʔan mĕn*
give **1SG** become Preta have flesh body REL stinky
léʔ miː malɛːŋwan jùː cɔʔ tɔːm ***kuː*** *kin tʰúk mûə leː*
and have fly stay pierce swarm **1SG** eat every moment PTCL
hâi ***kuː*** *kʰlɔ̂ːt lûːk* ***kuː*** *mûə cèt kʰon*
give **1SG** become child **1SG** moment seven CLF:person
léʔ hâi kin nuáə lûːk ***kuː*** *ʔeːŋ tʰúk wan*
and give eat flesh child **1SG** self every day

'If I gave medicine unto a person to induce the miscarriage of her child, may I be reborn as a *Preta* (hungry ghost) with a putrid flesh, incessantly infested and eaten by flies; let me deliver seven children, and let me eat the flesh of my own offspring daily.' (Trayabhumikatha, Palm leaf bunch 2, 1345 CE, VDL)

(13) อาบัดนี้**กู**จะได้ลูกท้าวมาเปนข้าเมีย**กู**

*ʔa:bàt ní: **ku:** càʔ dâi lû:k tʰá:ɯ ma: pen kʰâ: miə **ku:***
moment this **1SG** FUT get child king come become wife **1SG**
'Right now, I will have the king's daughter as my wife.' (Mahachat Khamluang, 1492 CE, VDL)

(14) มึงอย่าร้อนใจฟัง**กู**ว่า ลุกขึ้นหลกผ้าอยู่โล้งโต้ง
ศรีประจันเจ็บท้องร้องโก้งโค้ง หมอตำแยเข้าโขย่งแล้วข่มมา
เข้าล้อมซ้อมข่มอยู่พัลวัน ถึงยามนั้นฤกษ์ปลอดคลอดแล้วหวา
นอนหงายตะกายร้องวาวา เป็นหญิงโสภาน่าเอ็นดู

*mɯŋ jà: rɔ́:n cai faŋ **ku:** wâ: lúk kʰûn lòk pʰâ: jù: lô:ŋtô:ŋ*
2SG PROH hot heart listen **1SG** QUOT stand_up strip garment stay naked
sǐ:pràʔcan cèp tʰɔ́:ŋ rɔ́:ŋ kô:ŋkʰó:ŋ mɔ̌:tamjɛ: kʰâu kʰajò:ŋ lɛ́:ɯ kʰòm ma:
PN hurt stomach cry stoop midwife enter tiptoe then hold come
kʰâu lɔ́:m sɔ́:m kʰòm jù pʰalawan tʰŭŋ ja:m nán rɤ̂:k plɔ̀:t kʰlɔ̂:t lɛ́:ɯ wǎ:
circle beat hold stay haphazard until time that occasion safe deliver then PTCL
nɔ:n ŋǎ:j tàʔka:j rɔ́:ŋ wa:ɯa: pen jǐŋ sǒ:pʰa: nâ: ʔendu:
lie_on_back flail_arms cry lustily become female pretty lovely
'Do not be anxious just yet; listen to me first. Saying so, she arose and stripped off Nang Si Prachan's garments until she was entirely naked. Nang Si Prachan cried out in labor, doubled over in agony. The traditional midwife moved in to hold down her hands and feet, while several others lent their assistance. When the auspicious and blessed hour arrived, she gave birth to a lovely baby girl, who cried lustily, lying on her back and flailing her arms to-and-fro.' (Khun Chang Khun Phaen, the 17th–18th centuries CE, VDL)

The use of the first-person pronoun *ku:* in nonfictional books is well represented by the Three Seals Law, compiled in 1805 CE on the orders of King Rama I, the first king of the Bangkok era. Its general function is to situate the judge or prosecutor in relation to the defendants, as illustrated in (15).

(15) มันว่าต่อหน้าตระลาการว่า ถ้ามิรับสมอ้าง**กู**ไซ้ **กู**จะให้ต้องริบราชบาต **กู**จะหาความพญาณให้ต้องปรับไหม

*man wâ: tɔ̀: nâ: tràʔla:ka:n wâ: tʰâ: míʔ ráp sǒmʔâ:ŋ **ku:** sái*
he say in_front judge QUOT if NEG concede allegation **1SG** PTCL
***ku:** càʔ hâi tô:ŋ ríp râ:tcʰáʔbà:t*
1SG FUT give must confiscate state_property
***ku:** càʔ hă: kʰwa:m pʰaja:n hâi tô:ŋ pràp mǎi*
1SG FUT find NMLZ testimony give must impose fine
'He made threats in the presence of the judge, stating: Unless you concede to my allegations, I shall have your property confiscated by the state and procure witness testimony to incriminate you, thereby subjecting you to punitive fines.' (Three Seals Law, Book 2, Page 91, 1805 CE, SAC)

Regarding evidence from literature and books, we have observed that the use of *ku:* in direct speech is consistent throughout historical periods. This prominent usage corresponds to two of the three major functions of *ku:* defined by Sangsod (1989; see Section 2), namely praying or lamenting, on the one hand, and swearing, on the other. The latter function may partially provide a motivating context for its impolite use in modern Thai (see more examples in Section 5.4).

5.3. Occult Spells

In the local Thai tradition, spells accompanying talismans or sacred objects are mostly written in Khmer script and the Pāli language. However, in addition to using full or abbreviated Pāli incantations, these texts often contain a label *ʔo:ŋka:n* (โองการ) that incorporates

the language used by the manufacturers of these objects, such as Thai, Lao, and Khmer. A previous study of spells or occult incantations in ancient documents written in local languages has found that the inherited first-person pronoun *kuː* often appears and is a preferred first-person pronoun (Khatshima, 2025). Three major functions of *kuː* are observed in this genre: 1) referring to the spellcasters themselves, 2) referring to the deity or sacred entity invoked to reside within the spellcaster, and 3) asserting the authority of the sacred entity, which self-refers with *kuː*, to perform the act.

In the first self-reference context, spellcasters use *kuː* repetitively, possibly to reinforce their confidence and the success of the spell acts, as shown in Figure 3 and analyzed in (16). This strategy psychologically enhances the belief in an internal locus of control of reinforcement (Rotter, 1966).



Figure 3. Superstition book at Wat Mai Nakhonban, Ratchaburi province (SAC).

(16) **กู**จะลองลูกช้าง ๆ ก็อ่อนป่า **กู**จะลองปูปลาก็อ่อนเงี่ยง **กู**จะเสน่หาสาวน้อยเนื้อเกลี้ยงก็อ่อนใจ
คนเป็นที่รักน้ำตาตก นกเห็นน้ำตาไหล เห็นหน้า**กู**อยู่มิได้ ร้องไห้มาหา**กู**
kuː *càʔ lɔ:ŋ lû:k cʰá:ŋ cʰá:ŋ kɔ̂: ʔɔ̀:n pàː*
1SG FUT try child elephant elephant then weak forest
kuː *càʔ lɔ:ŋ puː plaː kɔ̂: ʔɔ̀:n ŋîəŋ*
1SG FUT try crab fish then weak barb
kuː *càʔ sanè:hă: să:wnɔ́:j nɯ́ə klîəŋ kɔ̂: ʔɔ̀:n cai*
1SG FUT adore maiden flesh fair then weak heart
kʰon pen tʰî:rák nám taː tòk nók hěn nám taː lăi
person become beloved water eye drop bird see water eye flow
hěn nâː ***kuː*** *jùː míʔ dâi rɔ́:ŋhâi maː hăː* ***kuː***
see face **1SG** stay NEG get cry come find **1SG**
‘Should I cast this spell upon a young elephant, the elephant forgets the forest; should I cast this spell upon crabs and fish, they forget their sharp barbs. Should I cast this love charm upon a fair-skinned maiden, she shall become enamored; when my beloved beholds me, tears shall flow; when the birds behold me, they too shall shed tears. Upon beholding my countenance, they cannot remain still, weeping as they hasten toward me.’ (Superstition book at Wat Mai Nakhonban, lower fold, SAC)

The second other-referring use invokes the deity or sacred entity to reside within the spellcasters’ bodies. This is a strategy that instates authority in the spellcasters to act as

if they are divine when they are uncertain whether their power can compete against opposing forces. For example, the spellcaster in Figure 4, as analyzed in (17), invites the spirit of Hanuman to enable him to perform many miraculous acts that he lacks confidence in performing.

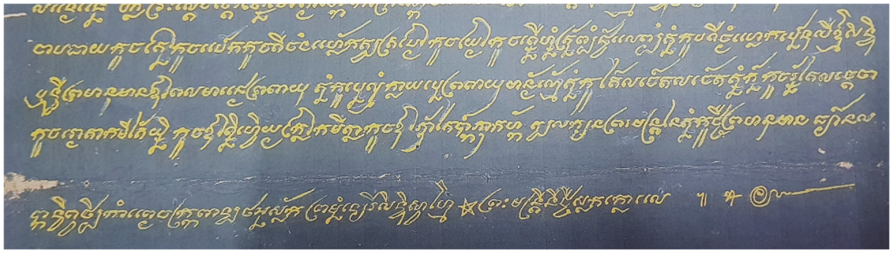

Figure 4. Phra Tamra**:** Thongchai Krabi Yut (Private collection).

(17) จาปธาย **กู**จะโค่น **กู**จะแบก **กู**จะตี จงแหลกด้วยตะบอง **กู**จะย่อง **กู**จะเดินหน ครั้นพบผู้และพบคน **กู**จะตีแหลกเป็นธุลี โอม สิทธิ ฤทธี พระหนุมาน เอาพลมาแฝงพระพายุ

caːpàʔtʰaːj ***kuː*** *càʔ kʰôːn* ***kuː*** *càʔ bɛ̀ːk* ***kuː*** *càʔ tiː*
effort **1SG** FUT fell **1SG** FUT bear **1SG** FUT strike
coŋ lɛ̀ːk dûaj tàʔbɔːŋ ***kuː*** *càʔ jɔ̂ːŋ* ***kuː*** *càʔ dɤn hŏn*
let smashed by club **1SG** FUT creep **1SG** FUT walk invisible
kʰrán pʰóp pʰûː lɛ́ʔ pʰóp kʰon ***kuː*** *càʔ tiː lɛ̀ːk pen tʰúʔliː*
when meet man and meet person **1SG** FUT strike smashed become dust
ʔoːm sìttʰíʔ rítthiː pʰráʔ hàʔnúʔmaːn ʔau pʰon maː fɛ̌ːŋ pʰráʔ pʰaːjúʔ
Om Siddhi potency Hanumān take strength come conceal gale

'I shall fell; I shall bear; I shall strike; may it be smashed to pieces by the club. I shall creep; I shall soar; upon encountering ghosts, spirits, and mortals, I shall beat them until they are pulverized to dust. Om, by virtue of miraculous *Siddhi* and potency, Lord Hanumān infuses his strength into the gale.' (Phra Tamra: Thongchai Krabi Yut, private collection)

The third transformational use asserts the authority of the sacred entity in spellcasters to perform the act. This differs from the first and second uses in that spellcasters neither refer to themselves nor act as divine beings but acquire the power and authority to perform miraculous acts. An example from a spell book in Figure 5 is analyzed in (18).

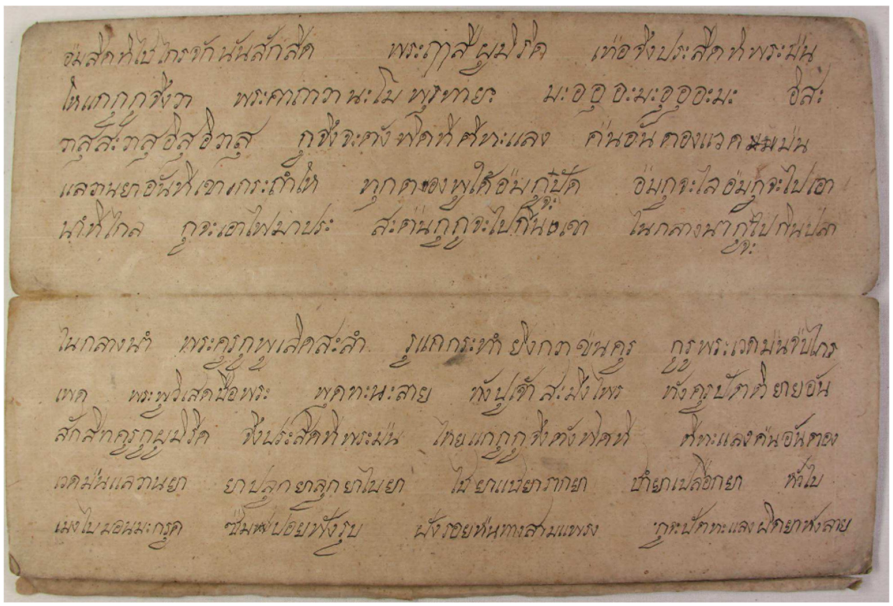

Figure 5. Heart spell book, Lamphaya Floating Market Museum, Nakhon Pathom Province (SAC).

(18) โอมสิทธิชัยไกรจักรนั้นศักดิ์สิทธิ์ พระฤาษีผู้มีฤทธิ์ เธอจึงประสิทธิพระมนต์ ให้แก่**กู**
กูจึงว่าพระคาถาว่านะโมพุทธายะ มะอะอุ อะมะอุ อุอะมะ อิสวาสุ สวาสุอิ สุอิวาสุ
กูจึงจะตั้งพิธีตีแถลง คนอันต้องเวทมนตร์แลว่านยาอันที่เขากระทำให้ ถูกต้องผู้ใด
โอม**กู**จะปัด โอม**กู**จะไล่ โอม**กู**จะไปเอาน้ำทีใกล **กู**จะเอาไฟมาประสระตน**กู**
กูจะไปกินข้าวในกลางนา **กู**จะไปกินปลาในกลางน้ำ
ʔoːm sìttʰíʔcʰai kraicàk nán sàksìt pʰráʔ rɯːsǐː pʰûː miː rít
Om victory dominion that potent ascetic REL have might
tʰɤː cɯŋ pràʔsìttʰíʔpʰráʔmon hâi kɛ̀ː ***kuː*** ***kuː*** *cɯŋ wâː pʰráʔ kʰaːtʰǎː wâː*
he thus incantation give to **1SG** **1SG** thus say spell QUOT
náʔmoːpʰúttʰaːjáʔ máʔàʔùʔ ʔàʔmáʔùʔ ʔùʔàmáʔ ʔìswaːsùʔ saʔwaːsùʔìʔ sùʔìʔwaːsùʔ
[recitation]
kuː *cɯŋ càʔ tâŋ pʰíʔtʰiː tʰalěːŋ kʰon ʔan tôːŋ wêːtmon leː wâːnjaː*
1SG thus FUT set ritual proclaim person REL touch black_magic and potion
ʔan tʰîː kʰău kràʔtʰam hâi tʰùːk tôːŋ pʰûː dai ʔoːm ***kuː*** *càʔ pàt*
REL he make give touch whoever Om **1SG** FUT sweep
ʔoːm ***kuː*** *càʔ lâi ʔoːm* ***kuː*** *càʔ pai ʔau nám tʰîː klai*
Om **1SG** FUT banish Om **1SG** FUT go take water place far
kuː *càʔ ʔau fai maː pràʔ sàʔ ton* ***kuː***
1SG FUT take fire come bathe self **1SG**
kuː *càʔ pai kin kʰâːw nai klaːŋ naː* ***kuː*** *càʔ pai kin pla: nai klaːŋ nám*
1SG FUT go eat rice in mid paddy_field **1SG** FUT go eat fish in mid water
'*Om*, supreme victory and invincible dominion are most potent; the mighty *ṛṣi* (hermit ascetic) has transmitted the sacred incantations unto me. I therefore recite the spells: *Namo Buddhāya*, *Ma-A-U*, *A-Ma-U*, *U-A-Ma*, *I-Svā-Su*, *Svā-Su-I*, *Su-I-Vā-Su*. I proceed to conduct this ritual and proclaim the sacred decree for those afflictions wrought by others through sorcery, black magic, and herbal potions. Om, I shall sweep it away; Om, I shall banish it. Om, I shall fetch water from afar and bathe my body with fire. I shall consume rice amidst the paddy field; I shall partake of fish amidst the waters.' (SAC)

The authoritative use of ***kuː*** presented in this section represents a unique genre that is specific in its usage but at the same time preserves some pragmatic elements that became obsolete in the modern Thai language. Crucially, the use of the plural form *rau* does not occur in this text type, implying the interactionally exclusive nature of occult spells.

5.4. Modern Colloquial and Literary Thai

The prescriptive account of the pronoun ***kuː*** in Modern Thai treats it as an impolite variant of the first-person pronoun, as appears in reference dictionaries of the Royal Society of Thailand from their first edition (Royal Society of Thailand, 1950, p. 156) to the latest current edition. An identical prescription referring to the pronoun's impoliteness is also given in Thai dialect dictionaries, such as the Northeastern Thai dictionary by Somdet Phra Maha Weerawong (Royal Office, 1998, p. 39).

The impolite use of ***kuː*** is also described in the first foreign-authored description of Thai by the French missionary Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix. The book defines its meaning and usage in the following way: "speaking to inferiors, or equals in joking, in anger or through disdain" (Pallegoix, 1854, p. 365). This suggests that the pragmatic extension toward an impolite use of the inherited Proto-Tai pronoun **kuːᴬ* was already present prior to the mid-19th century. Note, however, that because of its impoliteness, its use can also contribute to intimacy in interaction, as the form is commonly used among close friends in colloquial and informal settings.

Another document consisting of letters exchanged between two members of the royal family, Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, on March 21,

1935, also describes the use of first-person pronouns by members of the royal family in various contexts, as given in translation in (19). Note that the forms เรา *rau* and ตู *tuː* correspond to the distinction between inclusive and exclusive first-person plural forms, respectively, present in some other related Tai languages spoken in China, such as Mashan Zhuang (Bodomo, 2007, p. 467) and Bouyei (Boonsawasd, 2012, p. 104).

(19) 'Regarding the observation on first-person pronominal usage, I myself have long felt perplexed and troubled by this issue. The vexation began when taking notes and composing personal writings, wondering how I ought to address myself. To employ **ข้าพเจ้า *kʰâːpʰáʔcâu*** (derived from ข้า *kʰâː* 'servant' + พ่อ *pʰɔ̂ː* 'father' + เจ้า *câu* 'master') seemed inappropriate, as that term is meant for addressing another person rather than oneself; moreover, it is an excessively self-abasing term. Without even compounding the words, the root **ข้า *kʰâː*** alone already denotes a servant (belonging to the same semantic class as a bondsman or slave). To use the pronoun **เรา *rau***, following the convention of royal pronouncements, also appeared inaccurate, given that เรา *rau* is inherently plural. In searching for a self-referential term when conversing with oneself, I encountered **กู *kuː***, which is nowadays regarded as impolite. Another alternative was **ตู *tuː***, but it has fallen out of contemporary use and employing it would appear decidedly archaic and eccentric.' (VDL)

This description also suggests an alternative neutral form *rau* (เรา), which was originally the Proto-Tai first-person plural form **raw*^{A} but became conventionalized in colloquial Thai as a sort of "number-flexible" pronoun. This development provides a neat parallel to the development of first-person pronominal paradigms in Chinese and Vietnamese (see Sections 4 and 6). This mechanism has also extended to language use by members of the royal family, the so-called "royal we," which is also a widespread phenomenon in European monarchical culture (Pennycook, 1994, p. 177; Íñigo-Mora, 2004). For instance, the first royal commands uttered during coronation ceremonies to the public by Kings Rama VI, VII, IX, and X of the Chakri Dynasty (the Bangkok era) include *rau* as a term referring to the kings themselves (Ministry of Culture, 2018, pp. 132, 134, 138). King Rama X's first royal command from 2019 provides a recent example in which this usage still occurs in the present-day royal context, as shown in (20).

(20) **เรา**จะสืบสาน รักษา และต่อยอด และครองแผ่นดินโดยธรรม เพื่อประโยชน์สุขแห่งอาณาราษฎรตลอดไป

rau	*càʔ*	*sɯ̀ːpsaː̌n*	*ráksaː̌*	*lɛ́ʔ*	*tɔ̀ːjɔ̂ːt*	*lɛ́ʔ*	*kʰrɔːŋ*	*pʰɛ̀ːndin*	*doːj*	*tʰam*
1PL[SG]	FUT	continue	preserve	and	build_upon	and	reign	land	by	Dharma
pʰɯ̂ə	*pràʔjòːt*	*sùk*	*hɛ̀ːŋ*	*ʔaːnaːrâːtsàʔdɔːn*	*talɔ̀ːt*	*pai*				
for	benefit	happiness	place	people	constantly	go				

'We [I] shall continue, preserve and build upon the royal legacy and shall reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the people forever.' (4 May 2019, https://www.royaloffice.th/)

The use of this erstwhile plural form *rau* as a singular pronoun is also observed beyond Central Thai, realized as *hau* in both Northern Thai and Northeastern Thai due to the regular sound change *r* > *h*. Its pragmatically extended singular use in these regional varieties is evidenced by the analogically formed plural form *muː hau* (หมู่เรา), in which the plural reading is re-explicated by the collective index *muː* (หมู่) 'group'. A similar reanalysis pattern is also found in Central Thai with another collective index *pʰûək* (พวก) 'sort', yielding an explicit plural form *pʰûək rau* (พวกเรา). This analogical pluralization mirrors the Chinese and Vietnamese forms with analytic plural markers attached to erstwhile

plural forms. This concerns the marker *=men* in *ăn=men* in northern Mandarin varieties (see Section 4.4) and the marker *chúng* 'group' in *chúng ta* in Vietnamese (see Section 6.4).

Beyond these first-person pronouns inherited from Proto-Tai, numerous words can also be used as self-referencing elements. The most common strategy is to use kinship terms, by which speakers situate themselves in social relation to the addressee according to gender, age, status, and hierarchy, a strategy also found in Vietnamese. For example, a very common age relation between the interlocutors can be expressed by the kinship term *pʰîː* 'elder brother/sister' self-referring to the speaker who is older. In non-intimate contexts, the form กู *kuː*, considered impolite but intimate in Modern Thai, is often replaced by a masculine form (กระ)ผม (*krà?*)*pʰŏm* (etymologically from ผม *pʰŏm* 'hair') and a feminine form ดิฉัน *dìʔcʰăn*, the latter of which was contracted and became a gender-neutral form ฉัน *cʰăn* in modern use.

In Modern Thai, which extensively tolerates code mixing in natural speech, even borrowings from other languages can function as first-person pronouns, such as Teochew *ua* (我) and English *I*. A similar borrowing pattern of first-person forms from Sinitic has also been reported, for instance, for Lungchow (Central Tai, China) in which the Yue forms *ŋo*^{1} [1SG] and *ŋo*^{1} *ti*^{3} [1PL] coexist with the native Tai forms *kau*^{1} [1SG] and *lau*^{3} [1PL] (Massupong, 1982, p. 78). As the current study focuses on items with pronominal and deictic elements, we leave the discussion of other common nouns and borrowings for future studies (see also the historical-comparative investigation of miscellaneous Thai self-referencing terms in Zhang et al., 2026).

6. Vietnamese

The Vietnamese data presented in this section feature Nôm verse historiography (Section 6.1), Buddhist treatises and Sūtra translations (Section 6.2), early Quốc ngữ missionary materials (Section 6.3), and modern literary prose (Section 6.4). Similarly to the Thai case in Section 5, these materials are treated as representative examples rather than as frequency-based corpora with extensive texts spanning different time periods, as in the Chinese case in Section 4. Table 8 summarizes the examples and the functions and forms they represent. The analysis below distinguishes inherited Vietic forms from Chinese borrowings and noun-derived self-reference forms.

Table 8. Vietnamese first-person forms across selected examples.

Contextually Supported Reading	Function	Form (Example)
Singular, role-bound royal	royal	*trẫm* (21)
Inclusive plural in context	plural/hortative	*ta* (22)
Singular poetic construal	rhetorical 1SG in context	*ta* (23)
Literal plural, humble	PL + female humble self-reference	*chúng thiếp* (24)
Singular, humble voice	1SG in context	*ta* (25)
Singular, downward-authority	1SG	*tao* (26)
Inclusive plural or generic	1PL in context	*ta* (27)
Exclusive plural	1PL.EXCL	*chúng tôi* (28)
Singular, humble signature	nominal + 1SG	*con mọn tôi* (29)
Singular, marked stance	1SG	*tao* (30)
Singular, relatively neutral	1SG	*tôi* (31)

6.1. Premodern Historiographical Nôm Text

Premodern courtly and historiographical writing provides evidence for various first-person strategies. A royal speaker may use *trẫm*, borrowed from the Chinese royal 'I' *zhèn* (Alves, 2017, pp. 292–293), as an institutional self-reference in direct discourse, as in (21).

The case is embedded in quoted speech attributed to the king, so *trẫm* functions as a role-marking device rather than a simple lexical alternative to 'I'. The sentence expresses personal affect (*áy náy* 'anxious'), but the royal pronoun maintains the institutional footing of a sovereign speaking about succession and household continuity.

(21) ***trẫm*** *hằng* *áy náy* *hôm* *dao*, …
1SG.ROY always anxious day night
'I (royal) am always anxious day and night.' (Thiên Nam ngữ lục, l. 6409)

The "number-flexible" pronoun *ta* is attested in (22) and (23). In (22), it occurs with the hortative marker *hãy* and is best read as oriented toward collective action. In this immediate context (political uncertainty involving an 'infant crown prince'), *ta* is interpreted as an inclusive plural 'we' (speaker + court actors), contrasting with the singular *trẫm* in (21). Counterevidence against an overall plural reading of *ta* can be found in the diagnostic context in (23), where the numeral *một* 'one' forces a singular construal. This usage appears difficult to reconcile with an analysis of *ta* as strictly plural. It more cautiously suggests number-underspecification and a genre-based use of *ta*. In historiographical discourse, *ta* can rally collective action via hortatives, as in *ta* + *hãy* in (22), whereas in lyric poetry, the same form can be interpreted as a conventional poetic 'I' for self-reflection. Further evidence would be needed to determine whether cases such as (23) represent a fully established diachronic pathway from plural to singular uses (see further discussion in Section 7.2).

(22) ***ta*** *hãy* *cứ* *lời* *hoàng hậu* *dạy* *khuyên*
1PL.INCL IMP keep word empress teach advise
'Let us follow the Empress Dowager's advice.' (Thiên Nam ngữ lục, l. 4688)

(23) *bui* *một* ***ta*** *khen* ***ta*** *hữu* *tình*
EMPH one **1** praise **1** have feeling
'Only I praise myself as sentimental.' (Quốc âm thi tập, Tự thán 13)

First-person plural forms can also be built compositionally with the pluralizer *chúng*, which can attach to pronouns such as *tôi* and *ta* (see Sections 6.3 and 6.4) or to humble self-denoting pronominalized nouns such as *thiếp* (a cognate of Chinese *qiè* 'female servant'; see Section 2), as in (24). In (24), the narration explicitly introduces two girls as the speakers, so the plural reference of *chúng thiếp* is literal. This case shows a productive template [PL + humble self-reference], which is compatible with humility and corporate footing (see further discussion in Section 7.2). In usage, the constructional template with *chúng* fits petitions and institutional genres, in which speakers can present themselves as dependents, a household, an office, or a group.

(24) ***chúng thiếp*** *sự* *xuân* *chửa* *quen*, *lòng* *hoa* *chỉn* *sợ*.
PL **1SG.F.HUM** matter spring NEG:yet be_acquainted heart flower only fear
'We, your humble women, are not yet accustomed to springtime affairs; our hearts are shy as flowers.' (Truyền kì mạn lục giải âm, Tây Viên kì ngộ kí)

The contrast described in this section between the uses of first-person forms in premodern Nôm texts is functional. However, it should not be read as a complete account of the historical origin of these forms. In any case, general tendencies show authoritative footing built by raising the self (royal pronouns) or polite footing by lowering, collectivizing, or stylizing the self (*ta* and humble terms such as *chúng thiếp*). Diachronically, these patterns are consistent with the retention of the Proto-Vietic first-person singular form **so:* as *tao*, with a narrowing of its pragmatic distribution, and with the emergence and later conventionalization of noun-derived pronouns, notably *tôi* from a noun denoting 'servant, subordinate' (see Section 6.4).

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6.2. Buddhist Literature

Buddhist genres show both didactic commentary and hierarchical reported speech. In *Thiền Tông Khóa Hư Lục*, for example, *ta* occurs in doctrinal commentary and can often be read as a singular teaching voice in context. In (25), *ta* appears in expository prose rather than in dialogue. The local context gives it a singular reading, but the form itself should not be treated as inherently singular on this evidence alone. The self-effacing clause ('I am not equal to that') fits Buddhist didactic writing, where the self can be grounded in teaching and humility rather than in personal self-assertion. Since the work is attributed to Emperor Thái Tông, *ta* in (25) expresses a self-lowering stance on the part of a high-status speaker and can be interpreted as a case of authoritative humility.

(25) ***ta*** *nay thực cóc bằng dường ấy*
1 now truly NEG equal PTCL DEM
'Now I truly am not equal to that (yet).' (*Thiền Tông Khóa Hư Lục*, [26b])

In a Vietnamese version of a Buddhist Sūtra, *tao* appears in reported speech in which the Buddha addresses Ānanda. The corresponding Literary Sinitic has 汝 … 吾 … 汝, and the Nôm translation renders this pattern as *mầy* … *tao* … *mầy*. The source writes the second-person singular form as *mầy*. This is the historical spelling used in the quoted text and corresponds to modern Vietnamese *mày*, the ordinary 2SG counterpart of *tao*. The form *tao* is therefore not absent from early Nôm materials, although the present article does not claim that it was frequent across all early Nôm genres.

(26) Literary Sinitic: 汝今諦聽。吾當爲汝分別解説。
Nôm: 邁尼察宜畧侯爲邁{哩+个}{耒+个}注説。
mầy *nay xét nghe* ***tao*** *hầu vì* ***mầy*** *rẽ ròi chú thuyết*
2SG now carefully listen **1SG** FUT for **2SG** clearly explain
'You now listen carefully. I will explain this clearly for you.' (*Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu ân trọng kinh*, 9a1)

Example (26) shows *tao* in an asymmetrical address frame, with *mầy* occurring both before and after it. The Literary Sinitic line aligns 吾 with *tao* and 汝 with *mầy*. The example does not show plural reference. Compared with modern evaluations of *tao* as rude or coarse (see Section 2), the early Buddhist use suggests that *tao* could function as a downward-authority form similarly to the Old Thai case (see Section 5.1), although the example alone does not define its full historical range.

6.3. Missionary Texts

17th and 18th-century Vietnamese missionary materials connect first-person reference with participation frameworks. Catechetical discourse uses *ta* in personal prayer and, elsewhere, in inclusive exhortation, while petitionary writing prefers humble self-reference with *con* 'child' and plural *chúng tôi* to emphasize deference. The use of *ta* in early Quốc ngữ catechetical prose is illustrated in (27). The utterance is framed as personal prayer, so the local reading is singular. The pronoun *ta* can support inclusive exhortation elsewhere in catechetical discourse. Again, we see that the reference of *ta* shifts between singular and plural without introducing additional plural marking.

(27) ***ta*** *cầu cùng Đức Chúa trời giúp sức cho*
1 pray with HON Lord heaven help strength for
ta *biết tỏ tường đạo Chúa là dường nào*
1 know clear religion Lord COP PTCL which
'I pray to God to help me clearly know what the Lord's religion is like.' (de Rhodes, 1651: 5)

In the petitionary genre, first-person reference is constructed through nominal self-abasement. In (28), *các* + *con* 'children' frames the text's authors as dependents, while *chúng* + *tôi* forms an exclusive 'we' that excludes the addressee (the Holy See) from the speaker group. The bodily deference predicate *sấp mình xuống đất* 'prostrate oneself on the ground' reinforces the asymmetrical participation framework. Here, authority belongs to the addressee, and the speakers construct humility rather than self-assertion.

(28) ***các con chúng tôi*** *họp một ý cùng nhau*
PL child PL 1SG gather one mind together RECP
mà sấp mình xuống đất trước một tòa thánh
CONJ prostrate self down ground before one Holy_See
'As your humble children, we unite in one mind and prostrate ourselves on the ground before the Holy See.' (petition letter, 25/5/1760, Đoàn, 2008)

A related strategy at the level of an individual signature is shown in (29), with *con mọn* 'humble child' presenting the writer as socially low, while *tôi* supplies a clear first-person anchor in identification. The co-occurrence of nominal self-reference with *tôi* is consistent with later Vietnamese, where kinship terms, titles, and social-role nouns remain central to relations of respect (as discussed in Section 2).

(29) ***con mọn tôi*** *là Juse Chấn*
child humble 1SG COP Juse Chấn
'I, your humble child, am Juse Chấn.' (missionary document, letter no. 30, Đoàn, 2008)

The Middle Vietnamese missionary documents discussed in this section highlight humility strategies in upward petitions, combining kinship terms with first-person plural pronouns such as *chúng tôi*.

6.4. Modern Colloquial and Literary Vietnamese

Modern Vietnamese preserves *tao* as a strongly stance-marked first-person form, especially in intimate, confrontational, or hierarchical interaction. At the same time, *tôi* is widespread in narration and polite conversation, functioning as a relatively neutral first-person option in many written and formal styles (Alves, 2017, p. 291). The first-person singular forms *tao* and *tôi* can be said to maintain a pragmatic split.

In fictional dialogue, interpersonal stance becomes salient. The *tao* ~ *mày* dyad in (30) uses the modern spelling *mày*, corresponding to *mầy* in the historical example (26). The dyad can signal intimacy, anger, distance, or dominance. Here, it supports an evaluative contrast ('I'm not like you'). Compared with *trẫm* and petitionary *con*, *tao* indexes authority in its pragmatic use in a local interactional sense rather than through institutional rank.

(30) ***tao*** *không như mày.*
1SG NEG like 2SG
'I'm not like you.' (*Sống mòn*, Nam Cao)

In (31), the character Tiên introduces himself with *tôi* when addressing a startled stranger, a context in which polite or decorous self-reference is expected. The line contrasts with *tao* in (30). While *tao* foregrounds confrontation and hierarchy in that example, *tôi* supports credibility and social decorum in narrative self-presentation. The presence of *tôi* in this 19th-century verse narrative is consistent with its later status as a relatively neutral first-person singular pronoun in many written registers.

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(31) *Tiên rằng* ***tôi*** *vốn người ta*
Tiên say **1SG** originally human_being
'Tiên said: I am a human being.' (Lục Vân Tiên, l. 1013)

The template with *chúng* and first-person pronouns attested in premodern Nôm texts is interesting in the sense that a similar combination, *chúng ta*, also exists in Modern Vietnamese. Crucially, the plural reading of *chúng ta* is made more explicit, as *ta* without specification by *chúng* can otherwise allow a singular interpretation, as seen in (23), (25), and (27). This is a case of ambiguity in the number interpretation of "number-flexible" *ta*, whose plural use is made explicit by an analytic plural marker, in a similar way to *ǎn=men* in northern Mandarin varieties (see Section 4.4), as well as *pʰûək rau* in Central Thai and *mu: hau* in Northern and Northeastern Thai (see Section 5.4).

7. Discussion

In this section, we discuss two theoretical aspects that have been observed across the histories of Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese. The discussion is built on a variationist approach that considers coexisting variants and their competition (see Section 3). The first part in Section 7.1 focuses on the pragmatic uses of first-person singular pronouns by considering the aspects of authority, exclusivity, and impoliteness. This understanding of their pragmatic profiles provides contextual evidence within the four-part communication model for discussing in Section 7.2 the categorial extension and shift from plural to singular uses more specifically.

7.1. Pragmatic Uses Related to Authority, Exclusivity and Impoliteness

The authoritative aspects of first-person singular pronouns have been presented in Section 4, 5 and 6. On the one hand, first-person singular pronouns were positively used to explicate the speaker's authority, as in the cases of *yú* and *zhèn* in Pre-Archaic Chinese in (1), (3), and (4); *ku:* in Old Thai in (7); and *trẫm* in Vietnamese in (21). This usage of *ku:* is also typical of legal texts, as in the case of juridical authorities in the first Thai Three Seals Law Book in (15). Occult spells also almost exclusively use *ku:*, as the knowledge is presented as exclusive, creating "epistemic asymmetry" (see Sidnell, 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Grzech et al., 2020) between spellcasters and receivers, as seen in (16), (17), and (18). Such use is also evident in example (26), where *tao* appears in a downward address frame in Buddhist reported speech (see also Bergqvist & Kittilä, 2017; Evans et al., 2018 for egophoric uses of personal pronouns).

On the other hand, speakers may also avoid first-person singular pronouns in their speech. One typical scenario is when the speaker acts in an institutional role rather than as an individual. For example, in Shang divination texts, the singular pronouns *yú* and *zhèn* were rarely attested in the speech of court diviners (see Figure 1), since they always spoke on behalf of the state without singling themselves out. The same can also be said for the Thai royal 'we' *rau*, used in royal commands such as (20), in which the kings addressed the public in their institutional role rather than as individual persons. In these cases, first-person plural pronouns are used as alternative strategies for self-reference. Previous studies have also reported the use of social-role nominals (e.g., 'the President') or proper names (e.g., 'Nixon') in such contexts (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 204; Collins & Postal, 2012, p. 1).

Another motivation for avoidance concerns the face-threatening effects associated with singular pronouns in interpersonal communication (see P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Because of their authoritative implicature and communicative exclusivity, first-person singular pronouns may be considered impolite and thus avoided when politeness is emphasized. For example, in 18th-century Chinese, the plural pronoun *wǒmen* is frequently used

by maids for self-reference (Lee, 1999). In example (25) from Vietnamese Buddhist literature, a high-status speaker uses *ta* in a self-lowering context, contrasting with the royal 'I' *trẫm* in example (21). This pragmatic motivation becomes even more evident in cases where inherited first-person singular pronouns such as Thai *kuː* and Vietnamese *tao* have developed conventional impolite readings (see below).

To mitigate these socially risky singular pronouns, first-person plural pronouns are often recruited, as seen in the Chinese and Vietnamese cases above. One might compare this phenomenon with European T/V systems, in which second-person plural forms referring to a single addressee conventionally elevate the addressee or increase social distance (R. Brown & Gilman, 1960). Nominal expressions with humble meanings, such as Thai *kʰâːˋ* 'servant' in (9) and Vietnamese *thiếp* 'female servant' in (24), are also attested in these contexts. These non-pronominal forms often have the literal meaning 'servant' and conventionally function as substitutes for first-person singular pronouns. The recruitment of such forms has evidently contributed to blurred noun-pronoun boundaries and the large inventories of pronouns typical of languages in this region (see Section 2).

From a pragmatic perspective, our analysis highlights how the use of first-person pronouns involves speakers' management of humility, corporate footing, ritual alignment, or avoidance of an overly blunt singular self-reference. Speakers' choices among various forms change according to different "frames" (Sweetser, 2022). From a diachronic perspective, the pragmatic profiles of first-person singular pronouns, together with their competition with alternative self-referencing strategies, shed further light on their diachronic changes in the three languages.

In Modern Thai and Vietnamese, the singular pronouns *kuː* and *tao* are considered pragmatically inappropriate for formal, upward communication or interactions involving social distance but can be exchanged among highly intimate social equals to show solidarity (see Senawong, 2011, pp. 23–38; Uckaradejdumrong, 2016; Alves, 2017, p. 291). In ancient texts, however, these two pronouns appear relatively neutral in terms of these (im)polite and intimate values. Such readings developed gradually over time (see Section 5.1, Section 5.2, Section 5.3, Section 6.2, and Section 6.4). Impolite implicatures were likely inferred from their meanings associated with authority and exclusivity, as illustrated by examples of "epistemic asymmetry" in (16), (17), and (18), and the Buddhist teacher's downward authority in (26). Once these pronouns became widely perceived as vernacular and coarse, intimate uses may also have emerged (see Section 6.4).

The inherited first-person singular pronoun *zhèn* became specialized and was reserved only for the emperor in Chinese. This form spread to neighboring languages such as Vietnamese (*trẫm*), Japanese (*chin*), and Korean (*chim*) through sociopolitical contact. According to the account in *Shǐjì* (史記), after raising troops and pacifying the empire (221 BCE), Qín Shǐ Huáng (the First Emperor of Qin) introduced a series of language policies to assert his authority, including establishing *zhèn* as a royal 'I'. However, this practice was not entirely arbitrary, since this singular pronoun had already shown pragmatic preferences for authoritative speakers before its institutionalization (see Section 4.1).

At a more general level, our findings suggest that first-person singular pronouns inherited from protolanguages commonly became specialized or restricted to specific pragmatic uses, largely because of their authoritative uses. This change opened gaps for other self-referencing terms to compete with them. For example, the first-person plural pronoun *wǒ*, inherited from Archaic Chinese, has undergone singularization and completely replaced other erstwhile singular pronouns in Standard Mandarin (see Section 7.2). In Thai, meanwhile, numerous semantic groups of common nouns and loanwords coexist with and replace **kuːᴬ* in contexts that may require the specification of social relations and hierarchy between interlocutors (see Zhang et al., 2026). In Vietnamese, in turn, the noun

tôi 'servant' has been pronominalized and used as a neutral form across a broader range of contexts, competing with *tao*.

7.2. Development Pathway from Plural to Singular

The diachronic analysis in Section 4, Section 5, and Section 6 provides empirical evidence that first-person plural pronouns have often extended their functional range to singular uses. In this study, we demonstrate that "singularization" is not restricted to second-person pronouns, as widely attested in European languages (e.g., Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2003), but likewise occurs in first-person paradigms. This observation contributes to a comprehensive diachronic typology of personal pronouns (Heine & Song, 2011; Helmbrecht, 2015).

By the 'singularization' of first-person pronouns, we refer to a systematic change in their number values within the paradigm. In many cases, a first-person plural pronoun can be used to refer to the speaker alone in discourse, and this "non-prototypical use" (Helmbrecht, 2015) is generally motivated by pragmatic factors. This includes institutional 'we' and modest 'we' (as discussed in Section 7.1), or specific registers and genres, such as the editorial 'we' (Siewierska, 2004, p. 218). A systematic plural-to-singular change differs from these contextual uses in that it results in a genuine shift in the pronoun's paradigmatic role. However, as demonstrated in Section 4, 5 and 6, the evidence for "singularization" in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese ranges from suggestive contextual uses (Thai and Vietnamese) to complete lexical replacement (Chinese). To compare the "singularization" processes across the three languages, we adopt a diachronic model featuring three stages (Helmbrecht, 2015), aligning with usage-based and variationist accounts of language change. This analysis emphasizes competition and covariation among multiple linguistic patterns.

The first stage involves **pragmatic extension**, in which the singular use emerges in specific contexts and registers, and the pragmatic motivation for using plural pronouns is clear. Based on the discussion in Section 7.1, we can identify several scenarios in which first-person plural pronouns are recruited for singular uses. For example, the plural pronoun *wǒmen* is frequently attested in self-reference in the speech of low-status speakers, despite its clear plural meaning in Chinese. This is a typical case of managing deference in communication (Siewierska, 2004, pp. 219–220). In Thai, *rau* is used by kings to indicate their public persona (royal 'we'), which can be interpreted as referring either to 'the royal family' (literal plural) or to 'the king' (contextual singular), suggesting a possible bridging context for plural-to-singular reanalysis. In Old and Middle Vietnamese, examples show that *ta* was not always confined to its literal meaning, as seen in examples (23), (25), and (27). Some cases, such as the modest 'we' in (25), were associated with politeness (see Section 7.1), while the pragmatic motivation for other examples, such as (23), is less clear. These cases suggest that the less transparent the pragmatic motivation for singular uses becomes, the more conventionalized the singular readings may be.

The second stage continues with **categorial extension**, in which singular uses become regular and conventional while plural meanings are also frequently attested, resulting in "number-flexible" pronouns in the paradigm. The reanalysis of plural pronouns is indicated by the attachment of explicating but "redundant" plural markers to the original plural pronouns. This recurring pattern is illustrated by examples from Early Middle Chinese (Section 4.2), northern Mandarin varieties (Section 4.4), Thai regional varieties (Section 5.4), and Modern Vietnamese (Section 6.4), as summarized in Table 9. Since the singularized pronoun overlaps functionally with an existing singular pronoun, unstable competition between the two forms may be observed. For example, in Late Archaic Chinese, singular

uses of *wǒ* occur in linguistic contexts in which the "defective" form *wú* (excluded from the object position; see Section 4.2) cannot be used (e.g., Karlgren, 1920).

Table 9. "Redundant" plural markings on first-person plural pronouns.

Number	Middle Chinese	Mandarin	Thai	Vietnamese
Singular/Plural	*wǒ* (我)	*ǎn* (俺)	*rau/hau* (เรา)	*ta*
Plural	*wǒ**bèi**/wǒ**cáo**/wǒ**shǔ*** (我輩/我曹/我屬)	*ǎn**men*** (俺們)	***pʰûək** rau/**muː** hau* (พวกเรา/หมู่เรา)	***chúng** ta*

The third stage eventually yields a **paradigmatic shift**, in which the plural pronoun is no longer used as a plural form in the language. While *ǎn* in northern Mandarin varieties, *rau* in Thai, and *ta* in Vietnamese retain their plural meanings, the erstwhile plural pronoun *wǒ* has shifted completely to singular reference in Modern Chinese. This shift resulted in the lexical replacement of the first-person singular pronoun in Chinese.

Overall, the "singularization" process is best illustrated by Chinese *wǒ*, which has the longest attestation history among the pronouns under investigation. Compared with this complete shift, the plural-to-singular development in Thai and Vietnamese is less straightforward, and the evidence is mixed. We have identified bridging contexts that can be read as environments for reanalysis, but the singular readings can be pragmatically motivated to different degrees and unevenly distributed across contexts and registers. Despite the "redundant" plural-marking patterns, pronouns such as *rau* and *ta* retain their plural meanings in the language. A likely reason is that Thai and Vietnamese preserve more open, noun-like systems of person reference. In Vietnamese, kinship terms, titles, names, humble nouns such as *tôi*, and analytic group expressions such as *chúng ta* and *chúng tôi* coexist with pronominal forms. This wider inventory reduces the pressure for *ta* to lose its plural or collective readings completely. Therefore, the most conservative analysis is to treat the singular readings of these "number-flexible" pronouns as contextual or register-based singular construal. Even the strongest claim supported here does not establish a general plural-to-singular replacement, as seen in Chinese *wǒ*. The comparison between Chinese and the other two Southeast Asian neighboring languages further suggests that "singularization" functions to reshape the Chinese first-person paradigm, whereas noun-based pronominalization plays a more important role in yielding competitive forms in Thai and Vietnamese (as discussed in Section 7.1).

8. Conclusions

In this study, we have examined the uses of first-person pronouns, demonstrating how pragmatic variation related to the communicator's authority and engagement with text and receivers has contributed to the functional reduction or extension of first-person pronouns. The three languages under investigation, Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese, exhibit both similarities and differences in their pronominal paradigms over time, commonly driven by the management of epistemic authority.

From a pragmatic perspective, the use of first-person pronouns transcends several interactional aspects, especially the communicator's authority and engagement. Often, the first-person singular pronouns inherited from protolanguages, including Chinese *zhèn*, Thai *kuː*, and Vietnamese *tao*, have become specialized for specific contexts of use, often related to direct speech and exclusive authority. This is evident in texts produced from agents' speech as individual authoritative sources over the message, especially by kings, judges, and spellcasters in historiographical, legal, and occult genres, respectively. From this authoritative use in hierarchical communication, the inherited singular pronouns may

further develop meanings associated with impoliteness, as seen in *ku:* and *tao*, which can also, conversely, be used to express intimacy with receivers.

From a diachronic viewpoint, self-reference was subject to competition among inherited first-person singular pronouns, plural pronouns, and other (pronominalized) nominal expressions. The degrees to which these protolanguage pronouns have competed, become specialized, or become obsolete also vary across the three languages. While the Archaic Chinese first-person singular forms *wú*, *yú*, and *zhèn* have become obsolete in Modern Chinese, Proto-Tai **ku:*^{A} and Proto-Vietic **so:* have become specialized for informal, impolite, or coarse registers. The Vietnamese evidence is best described as layering rather than complete replacement: inherited **so:* survives as *tao* with a narrowed pragmatic distribution, *tôi* develops from a humble noun into a relatively neutral first-person singular form, and plural meanings remain available in analytic expressions such as *chúng ta* and *chúng tôi*. The Thai and Vietnamese data, therefore, show the retention of plural readings of these pronouns, unlike Chinese, in which lexical replacement has been completed.

As a side remark, our data also suggest potential competition among different language varieties in contact. Although extensive singular uses of plural pronouns exist in regional speech, as illustrated by *ǎn* in northern Mandarin varieties, their functional extension may be constrained by the strong influence of dominant varieties and written traditions. Thus, future research should pay attention to more subtle regional variation, systematically comparing the distribution and frequencies of first-person pronouns across regional varieties. Such an approach can delineate interaction zones among communication cultures in Asia in greater detail, unveiling additional aspects of long-term cultural and linguistic connections beyond the continuum from China to its neighboring speech communities discussed in the current study.

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Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
CLF	classifier
COMP	comparative
CONJ	conjunction
COP	copula
DECL	declarative
DEM	demonstrative
EMPH	emphatic
EXCL	exclusive
F	feminine
FUT	future
HON	honorific
HUM	humble
IMP	imperative
INCL	inclusive
NEG	negative
NMLZ	nominalizer
OC	Old Chinese
PL	plural
PN	proper name
POSS	possessive
PROH	prohibitive
PTCL	particle
QUOT	quotative
RECP	reciprocal
REL	relativizer
ROY	royal
SG	singular

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