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Luce Foundation Partners With Linguists To Save Endangered Languages

Submitted by [University of Hawai'i Foundation](#)
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UH Mānoa linguistics student John Van Way with speakers of Xiangxi Miao, a minority language of Hunan Province, China.

THE WORLD - The world is experiencing an alarmingly accelerated rate of language extinction. It is predicted that *at least* fifty percent of languages will not survive this century. Every time a language disappears without documentation, we experience a monumental loss of scientific and human information.

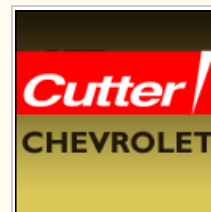
In order to help stem this linguistic and cultural crisis, the Henry Luce Foundation has awarded \$160,000 to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Department of Linguistics in the College of Arts and Sciences for research on endangered languages in China and mainland Southeast Asia for the *Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat)*.

"To have such a major grant awarded to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Department of Linguistics is a true testament to the value of the international significance of the ELCat project's work and its critical role in fostering language preservation and revitalization," said UH Mānoa Chancellor Tom Apple.

The ELCat project is a joint undertaking by UH Mānoa and the LINGUIST List at Eastern Michigan University. It has received financial support from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and in-kind support from Google. The primary goal of ELCat is to produce a comprehensive, reliable, up-to-date source of information about the world's endangered languages. The ELCat project began in the fall of 2011 and the findings of the first phase are available at the [Endangered Languages Project website](#).

"The Henry Luce Foundation's award will greatly help us document the particularly complex linguistic picture in China and mainland Southeast Asia," said Professor of Linguistics at UH Mānoa Lyle Campbell, director of the ELCat project. He continued, "China has both a large number of Chinese languages (often inaccurately called 'dialects' of Chinese) and minority languages which are very different from the Chinese languages. The exact number of languages in China is simply unknown,

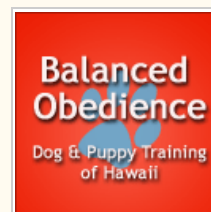
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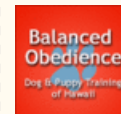
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though many of them are endangered. In China alone (not including Taiwan), 85 languages are considered endangered, but we do not know the real number.”

ELCat will be critical in our understanding of which languages are in most imminent danger of extinction and will help direct future scholarly work, resource investment, and conservation efforts. There is no other such resource that exists today.

Thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation, NSF and Google, the ELCat project will:

- Develop a definitive catalogue of endangered languages, with extensive new knowledge about the situation in East and Southeast Asia.
- Provide hands-on research experience and training for a number of graduate students, the future specialists in these regions.
- Serve as a resource for communities whose languages are endangered, providing them with information to help their efforts at language preservation and revitalization.
- Raise public awareness, foster increased research on endangered languages of these regions, and increase documentation of these little-known languages.

“The project fits well with the Luce Foundation’s goal to strengthen scholarly and public resources on East and Southeast Asia,” said Helena Kolenda, who directs the foundation’s Asia Program. “We are grateful to UH Mānoa and to Professor Campbell for their leadership in this important effort to document linguistic and cultural diversity.”

Both John Van Way and Katie Butler have been or are graduate assistants on the ELCat project.

To learn how you can support the Department of Linguistics in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, please contact Kristi Bates at (808) 956-0843 or Kristi.Bates@uhfoundation.org

You can also make a secure gift online at www.uhfoundation.org/GiveToLLL

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The Henry Luce Foundation (www.hluce.org) was established in 1936 by the late Henry R. Luce, co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., to honor his parents who were missionary educators in China. The Foundation seeks to bring important ideas to the center of American life, strengthen international understanding, and foster innovation and leadership in academic, policy, religious and art communities. The Luce Foundation pursues its mission today through the following grant-making programs: American Art; East Asia; Luce Scholars; Theology; Higher Education and the Henry R. Luce Professorships; the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs; Public Policy and the Environment; and the Clare Boothe Luce Program for women in science, mathematics and engineering.



The Endangered Languages Project website developed in partnership with Google will be continuously updated.

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Katie Butler working with two Michay aunties to record and document their language in Yunnan, China. Michay is an endangered Tibeto-Burman language with a declining speaker population of fewer than 10,000.

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