'Nephew'='Grandson' and 'Brothers'='Sisters': Unusual kinship terms in two Sino-Tibetan languages

This paper addresses the kinship terms in Southern Min (also known as Hokkian/ Taiwanese) and Prinmi, both Sino-Tibetan languages of China.

Although Sinitic languages have often been assumed of close affinity, kinship terms in Southern Min have unusual features not found in other Chinese languages such as Mandarin and Cantonese.   These include homophones for 'nephew'–'grandson' and the lack of gender distinction in sibling terms.   It is unclear whether the former reflects an original substratum in the kinship system of Southern Min or it has resulted simply from accidental events.   Given the lack of gender distinction, 'son' is also used to refer to 'daughter'.   When 'daughter' is called for, a term morphologically made up of 'girl'+'son' can be used unambiguously.   Likewise, 'granddaughter' can be rendered as 'girl'+'grandson'.

Prinmi is a Tibeto-Burman language unique to China.   The most remarkable feature in its kinship terms is the gender reference made to the speaker for addressing brothers and sisters.   The gender feature is not determined by the biological sex of the brother/sister; instead, it depends on whether the brother/sister has the same biological sex as the speaker.   Thus, a male speaker calls his older brother by the term *bai*, and his younger brother by the term *guen*.   In parallel, a female speaker also calls her older sister by the term *bai*, and her younger sister by the term *guen*.   Other terms are used for calling a brother/sister whose biological sex is different from the speaker.

The paper will present a basic kinship system in both Southern Min and Prinmi, and make comparison to that of other languages in various levels, starting from those in the same genetic groupings to cross linguistic families.   It would be interesting to see to what extent unusual kinship terms in the two languages turn out to be rarissma, and how they may be accounted for.