The discovery of sound laws by comparing attested languages is the method which has unlocked the history of European languages stretching back thousands of years before the appearance of written records, e.g. Latin p- corresponds to English f- (pes, foot; primus, first; plenus, full). Although Burmese, Chinese, and Tibetan have long been regarded as related, the systematic exploration of their shared history has never before been attempted. Tracing the history of these three languages using just such sound laws, this book sheds light on the prehistoric language from which they descend. Written for readers with little linguistic knowledge of these languages, but fully explicit and copiously indexed for the specialist, this work will serve as the bedrock for future progress in the study of these languages.

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The Historical Phonology of Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese

Nathan W. Hill
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University of London
To John Okell
Noch ist nicht ein einziges Gesetz, vorab kein Lautentsprechungsgesetz gefunden worden. Und gerade Lautentsprechungsgesetze sind doch die Grundlage jeder Weiterforschung und darum das Ziel, dem vor allen Dingen zuzustreben ist.

(Conrady 1896: viii)
# Contents

*List of Figures*  
Page xi

*Note on Abbreviations and Conventions*  
Page xiii

## Introduction  
Page 1

### 1 Tibetan  
Page 3

1.1 Old Tibetan  
Page 5

1.2 Classical Tibetan  
Page 7

1.3 The Bodish Languages  
Page 7

1.4 Tibetan Diachronic Phonology  
Page 8

1.4.1 From Old Tibetan to Proto-Bodish  
Page 9

1.4.2 Reprise: From Proto-Bodish to Old Tibetan  
Page 21

1.4.3 From Proto-Bodish to Trans-Himalayan  
Page 22

1.4.4 Reprise: From Trans-Himalayan to Proto-Bodish  
Page 44

1.4.5 Diachronic Mysteries  
Page 45

### 2 Burmese  
Page 46

2.1 Old Burmese  
Page 46

2.2 Written Burmese  
Page 51

2.3 The Burmish Languages  
Page 51

2.4 The Loloish Languages  
Page 54

2.5 Burmese Diachronic Phonology  
Page 54

2.5.1 From Burmese to Proto-Burmish  
Page 54

2.5.2 Reprise: Proto-Burmish to Old Burmese  
Page 69

2.5.3 From Proto-Burmish to Trans-Himalayan  
Page 69

2.5.4 Reprise: Trans-Himalayan to Proto-Burmish  
Page 82

2.5.5 Diachronic Mysteries  
Page 82

### 3 Chinese  
Page 84

3.1 Old Chinese  
Page 85

3.1.1 Middle Chinese  
Page 86

3.1.2 Rhymes of the *Shijing*  
Page 102
viii Contents

3.1.3 Structure of Chinese Characters 104
3.1.4 Less Traditional Sources of Data for Reconstructing Old Chinese 107

3.2 Simplex Initials of Old Chinese 113
3.2.1 Internal Reconstruction of Middle Chinese Initials 113
3.2.2 Expanding the Old Chinese Initials Using Xiéshēng Evidence 116

3.3 Old Chinese Pre-initials 122
3.3.1 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials Using Xiéshēng Evidence 126
3.3.2 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials on the Basis of Morphological Speculation 141
3.3.3 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials Using Proto-Mîn 150
3.3.4 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials Using Loans into Vietic 155
3.3.5 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials Using Loans into Hmong-Mien 162
3.3.6 Reconstructing Tight Pre-initials Using Loans into Tai-Kadai 163
3.3.7 Reconstructing Loose Pre-initials 163
3.3.8 Reconstructing Loose Pre-initials Using Proto-Mîn 164
3.3.9 Reconstructing Loose Pre-initials Using Xiéshēng Evidence 166
3.3.10 Reconstructing Loose Pre-initials Using Loans into Non-Sinitic Languages 169
3.3.11 Reconstructing Loose Pre-initials on the Basis of Morphological Speculation 172

3.4 Old Chinese Medial *-r- 173

3.5 Old Chinese Vowels 173
3.5.1 Asymmetries in Type A Rimes with Velar Codas 174
3.5.2 Origin of Some -w- (合口 Hékŏu) Rimes in Labio-velar Initials 175
3.5.3 The ‘R-Hypothesis’: Origin of the Vowels -ae- and -ea- 175
3.5.4 Asymmetries in Type A Rimes with Dental Codas 176
3.5.5 The ‘Rounded-Vowel’ Hypothesis: Origin of the Remaining -w- (合口 Hékŏu) Rimes 177
3.5.6 W-Neutralization 178
3.5.7 ‘A-Raising’, ‘Acute Fronting’, and ‘I-Raising’ 179
3.5.8 Hi > Mid 180
3.5.9 Asymmetries in Type B Rimes with Dental Codas 181

3.6 Origins of the Tones and Final Clusters 182
3.6.1 Distribution of Middle Chinese Tones in Xiéshēng Series and the Shǐjīng 182
Contents

3.6.2 Origin of the Departing Tone 183
3.6.3 Origin of the Rising Tone 186
3.7 Finals of Old Chinese 186
3.7.1 -*aj Monophthongization 187
3.7.2 Final *-r 187
3.8 How to Reconstruct a Word in Old Chinese 188
3.9 From Old Chinese to Trans-Himalayan 194
3.9.1 Merger of Velars and Dentals after -i- 194
3.9.2 Labial Neutralization 195
3.9.3 Inability to Distinguish *-u- and -ə- before Acutes 195
3.9.4 Inability to Recognize -r- in Certain Circumstances 196
3.9.5 Coblin’s Conjecture: *Tr- < *rT- 197
3.9.6 Pulleyblank’s Conjecture: *Cr- < *RC- 200
3.9.7 Old Chinese *-k < *-k, *-kə 201
3.9.8 Old Chinese *?-<*-?, *-q 202
3.9.9 *-j < *-j, *-l 204
3.9.10 *-r < *-r, *-rl 206
3.9.11 The Correspondence of Chinese *-o- to Tibetan -u- 208
3.10 Reprise: Trans-Himalayan to Old Chinese 210
3.11 Diachronic Mysteries 210
4 Trans-Himalayan 211
4.1 Overview of Trans-Himalayan Phonology 211
4.2 Initials of Trans-Himalayan 212
4.2.1 Simplex Resonants 212
4.2.2 Simplex Obstruents 219
4.3 Vowels of Trans-Himalayan 236
4.3.1 The Vowel *-a 236
4.3.2 The Vowel *-e 236
4.3.3 The Vowel *-i 237
4.3.4 The Vowel *-o 238
4.3.5 The Vowel *-u 239
4.3.6 The Vowel *-ə 241
4.3.7 Unexpected Vowel Correspondences 242
4.4 Finals of Trans-Himalayan 244
4.4.1 Final *?- 244
4.4.2 Final *-q 244
4.4.3 Final *-k 245
4.4.4 Final *-ŋ 246
4.4.5 Final *-p 247
4.4.6 Final *-m 247
4.4.7 Final *-t 248
## Contents

4.4.8 Final *-n 248  
4.4.9 Final *-r 249  
4.4.10 Final *-j 250  
4.4.11 Final *-l 251  
4.4.12 Final *-rl 252  
4.4.13 Irregular Finals 254  
4.5 Reprise of Diachronic Mysteries 257  
4.6 Concluding Remarks 257  

**Appendix: Complete Lists of Examples** 259  
**References** 291  
**Index Verborum** 310  
**Index Rerum et Nomum** 346  
**Index Legum** 370
## Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>The Tibetan alphabet</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Bodish Stammbaum (after Shafer 1966: 113)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Bodish Stammbaum (after Hill 2010b: 111)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Stammbaum of the Bodish family proposed here</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>The Burmese alphabet</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Burmese simplex onsets</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Old Burmese consonant clusters</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>The rimes of Old Burmese</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Written Burmese consonant clusters</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Rimes of Written Burmese</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>The Burmish language family</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1a</td>
<td>Opening of the Qièyùn from a Dùnhuáng fragment</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1b</td>
<td>Transcription and translation of Figure 3.1a</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Two homophone groups from the Känmiù Bāquē Qièyùn of 706 CE</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The fāngqié onset speller chains ē₁ and ē₂, distinguishable in the Qièyùn but not in the rime tables</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>The fāngqié onset speller chains l₁ and l₂, distinguishable in the Qièyùn but not in the rime tables</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>The forty-two initials of the Qièyùn</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Chart 23 from the Yùnjìng</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Chart 23 of the Qīyīnlüè</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Co-occurrence of rimes of the four divisions with various types of Middle Chinese initials</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Co-occurrence of the rimes of type A and B with various types of Middle Chinese initials</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>Proto-Mǐn correspondences to Middle Chinese ㄆ b-</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>Combining the evidence of Kra-Dai, Vietic, and Mǐn</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>Old Chinese initials on the basis of Middle Chinese internal reconstruction</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

3.13 The Middle Chinese complementary distribution of 群 g- and 匪 h-  114
3.14 The development of Old Chinese voiceless resonants in Middle Chinese  118
3.15 The development of Old Chinese simplex uvulars in Middle Chinese  120
3.16 Old Chinese simplex initials  121
3.17 Middle Chinese reflexes of *s-  144
3.18 Middle Chinese division-i/iv syllable types in final -ng  174
3.19 Middle Chinese division-i/iv syllable types in final -ng with the supposition of labio-velar initials  174
3.20 Revised type A syllables with final *-ŋ  176
3.21 Middle Chinese division-i/iv syllable types in final -n  177
3.22 Labio-velar initials (division-i/iv in final -n)  177
3.23 Breaking of rounded vowels (division-i/iv in final -n)  178
3.24 The non-rhyming of 奔 pwon (33–28a) and 門 mwon (33–35a)  179
3.25 W-neutralization (division-i/iv in final -n)  179
3.26 The distribution of Middle Chinese type B rimes before -n  179
3.27 Hi > mid (division-i/iv in final -n)  180
3.28 Six vowels in type B rimes before -n  181
3.29 Six vowels in type A rimes before -n  181
3.30 The Mon–Khmer origins of Vietnamese tones  183
3.31 The 去聲 qūshēng tone transcribing foreign -s  184
3.32 The 去聲 qūshēng tone as Korean -s  185
3.33 Old Chinese origins of Middle Chinese initials  190
4.1 Trans-Himalayan segmental inventory  212
Note on Abbreviations and Conventions

Tibetan is transliterated in the pre-2015 Library of Congress transliteration system with the following changes: ‘ʰ’ rather than apostrophe, ‘ć’ rather than ‘c’, and ‘ǰ’ rather than ‘j’. Burmese also follows the Library of Congress system, with the exception that ‘ʰ’ and ‘ʔ’ are used rather than ‘̂’ and ‘Š’. For Chinese I provide the character followed by Baxter’s Middle Chinese (1992), an Old Chinese reconstruction taken from or compatible with the current version of Baxter and Sagart’s system (2014), and the character number in Schuessler (2009). As in Baxter’s own recent work, for Middle Chinese I use ‘ae’ and ‘ea’ in place of his original ‘æ’ and ‘ɛ’. I do not, however, follow him in changing ‘ɨ’ to ‘+’. When citing sources originally written in the International Phonetic Alphabet I use ‘ś’ instead of ‘ʃ’ and ‘č’ instead of ‘tʃ’. Otherwise, the following symbols and abbreviations are used:

* unattested
√ root
Bur. Burmese
Chi. Chinese
fut. future
Kur. Kurtöp (apud Hyslop 2011)
MChi. Middle Chinese
Mon. Mtsho-sna Monpa, Wenlang dialect (apud Lu 1986)
OBur. Old Burmese
OChi. Old Chinese
pres. present
Rgy. Rgyalrong
Tib. Tibetan
OTib. Old Tibetan
WTib. Written Tibetan
SBur. Spoken Burmese
WBur. Written Burmese
VN Vietnamese (apud Baxter and Sagart 2014)
Note on Abbreviations and Conventions

Atsi (apud Lustig 2010)
Lashi (apud Nishi 1999) I make the following orthographic substitutions when citing tones $33 > \emptyset$, $31 > V$, $55 > H$, $53 > X$

Achang (apud Nishi 1999) I make the following orthographic substitutions when citing tones $55 > \emptyset$, $31 > H$, $35 > X$

Xiandao (apud Nishi 1999) I make the following orthographic substitutions when citing tones $55 > \emptyset$, $31 > H$, $33 > X^1$

$^1$ Xiandao also has a 35 tone, which I leave in numeric notation.