

UNDERSTANDING THE *QIEYUN* RHYMES

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ABSTRACT

This article shows that the *Qieyun* rhymes are not necessarily different VC units (VC = vowel and ending), as initially defined by Karlgren in his work *Études sur la phonologie chinoise* (1915–1926). Karlgren’s mistake creates a serious problem in the reconstruction of the vowel system of Middle Chinese. In the proposed reconstructions so far, excessive vocalic distinctions are required. This problem is well acknowledged but no explanations and solutions have been convincingly provided. Based on the information from the poetry rhyming before and at the same time of the *Qieyun*, our analyses of the *Qieyun* rhymes with the -ŋ ending indicate that 1) not all the *Qieyun* rhymes are different VCs, and 2) some *Qieyun* rhymes are the preservation of historical categories. With the new understanding of the nature of the *Qieyun* rhymes, the required main vowels of Middle Chinese can be significantly reduced. The twelve *Qieyun* rhymes with -ŋ require only six main vowels. The observation that not all the *Qieyun* rhymes are different VCs can be supported by the recent distribution analyses of the *Qieyun* rhymes. A fundamental viewpoint of this article is that in the study of the phonological history of Chinese, what should be reconstructed is the phonological system of Middle Chinese instead of the so-called “*Qieyun* system”. Because the phonological categories contained in the *Qieyun* are neither synchronically systematic nor phonologically consistent, the *Qieyun* does not represent a single phonological system of any historical period in the phonological history of Chinese.

KEYWORDS

Qieyun rhyme Poetry rhyme Main vowel Rhyme Final

1. INTRODUCTION

In my recent book entitled “A Phonological History of Chinese”, I made the following statement, “Although the *Qièyùn* system has been the focus of Chinese historical phonologists since Karlgren’s study (1915–1926), the nature of this rhyme work itself has since been the center of controversies, concerning fundamental aspects of the *Qièyùn* such as: (1) whether it is a single system or a composite system, whether geographical variants are included and whether historical variants are included; and (2) what the nature of the *yùn* 韵, the basic category of the *Qièyùn*, is.” (Shen 2020, 112) In this article, I will elaborate my thoughts on these two essential aspects.

The rhyme dictionary, *Qieyun* 切韵, has been the research focus of the study of the Chinese historical phonology. Compiled in 601 by Lu Fayuan 陆法言, the *Qieyun* provides the major phonological evidence of Middle Chinese and serves as a comparison base for the phonological systems before and after. Due to the logographic nature of the Chinese writing, the *Qieyun* only provides categorical information. Chinese scholars had no clear understanding of the phonetic values until Karlgren and other scholars’ reconstruction in the early 20th century.¹ However, Karlgren’s reconstruction has many serious problems. As pointed out by Baxter (1992, 27), “Despite its historical importance as the first attempt at detailed phonetic reconstruction of Middle Chinese, Karlgren’s system is both inconvenient and seriously flawed.”

According to our analyses, which will be shown in detail below, Karlgren’s reconstruction has two fundamental issues. First, he views the *Qieyun* as a record of a single dialect of Chang’an, the capital of Sui dynasty. Second, he defines the “rhymes” of the *Qieyun* as different VC (main vowel [nuclear vowel or nucleus] and ending) that is what the practice of poetic rhyming required. The first problem is well realized by the scholars (Chen 1949; Zhou 1963; Pulleyblank 1984; Baxter 1992) but is still not correctly dealt with in various proposals of phonetic reconstruction. The second problem so far is still not well realized.