

What were the four divisions of Middle Chinese

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The purpose of this presentation is to find out the stages of the phonetic changes of the rhymes for the period extending from *Old Chinese* (late version of the Odes by the Han times) to *Middle Chinese* (described in the *Qièyùn*). We shall make as if, during this period which spreads out over approximately eight centuries, the Chinese had been the object of periodic descriptions, the last one of which would be the *Qièyùn*.

1. System in two divisions: A (future I/IV and II) and B (future III). This situation is the result of a phenomenon of bipartition of the OC vocalic system, with consequently the formation in MC of two series of rhymes:

rhymes A: tense, clear voice, tendency to vowel lowering.

rhymes B: lax, breathy voice, tendency to vowel raising.

Furthermore, confusions between rhymes occur independently in each series. These phenomena are typical of a voice type register language. Ex:

A (tense) 巔 *diān* < MC ten [ten] < OC *tin [C-tin] « mountain top »

B (lax) 真 *zhēn* < MC tsyin [tɕin] < OC *tjin [tin] « true, real »

The categories A and B indicate a tense-lax contrast.

2. System in three divisions: A (future I/IV), A (future II) and B (future III). This situation results from the velarization of OC medial **-r-** which causes the halving of the paradigms of the former series A into A-I/IV and A-II. Ex:

A-II 艱 *jiān* < MC ken [k^ven] < OC *krin [k-rin] « difficult »

In series B the velarization is absorbed in the breathiness, there is no halving.

B-III 巾 *jīn* < MC kin [kin] < OC *krjin [krin] « scarf »

The expected division *B(II) is thus missing.

3. System in four divisions: conception of a new division (future IV) to place the front diphthong MC **ie** < **e** (< OC **i/e**).

A-IV 年 *nián* < MC nen [nien < nen] < OC *nin [C-nin] « harvest, year »

A-IV 見 *jiàn* < MC kenH [kien^h < ken^h] < OC *kens [C-kens] « to see »

The divisions A-I and A-IV are in complementary distribution. A-IV indicates a tense rhyme with front diphthong. We thus have, A-I, A-II, A-IV and B-III, that is the stage of the *Qièyùn*.

Meaning of the four divisions: I tense rhymes ; IV tense rhymes with the front diphthong ; III lax rhymes with breathy vowels ; II tense rhymes with velarization. The missing division left a trace by the formation of the *chóngniǔ* pairs.

Conclusions: the four divisions system was imagined to define phonetic features which could not be described with the tools of the Indian linguistics. The Chinese linguists who elaborated the *Qièyùn* were the first ones to describe a voice type register language.