

*Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa.* By AXEL SCHUESSLER. ABC Chinese Dictionary Series. Honolulu: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 2009. Pp. xxvi + 423. \$58.

This superb handbook, described with needless modesty as a companion to Karlgren’s 1957 *Recensa*, is the most useful reference work on Chinese historical phonology to appear in some time. In addition to his highly accessible presentation of phonological detail, Axel Schuessler offers a vision of Chinese historical phonology that is economical and flexible, without losing its philological grounding or its linguistic validity.

The book features reconstructions of three major pre-modern forms of Chinese: medieval (“Middle Chinese”), the “later Hân” that the author has made his special study for two or three decades, and a new “Minimal Old Chinese” that will prove very useful to sinologists. The three forms are easily reviewed by eye because of the neat tabular format used—an improvement over Karlgren. Where appropriate, Schuessler also provides older Mandarin transcriptional records (drawing on the work of W. South Coblin), evidence from major Chinese dialects, and “etymology,” which for early Chinese means likely cognates or comparanda from Tibeto-Burman languages. This last material is judiciously gleaned from the author’s larger 2007 *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press). Homophones are distinguished where possible by terse glosses, and there is an index of the numbering in Karlgren’s 1957 work. Each of the thirty-eight sections is prefaced by a table summarizing the relationships among Old and medieval Chinese phonological categories. There are plenty of useful notes about irregularities and curious words, but not so many as to distract the reader. The book’s focus is trained sharply on phonology, and readers desiring fuller discussion of possible cognate words are referred to the 2007 *Etymological Dictionary*.

The book’s thirty-nine-page introduction is a lucid presentation of the main issues in Old Chinese. Of foremost importance here is section 6, describing the “principles and criteria” for Schuessler’s Minimal Old Chinese. Concisely, this reconstruction is based on William H. Baxter’s 1992 system, simplified in places and without most of the elaborate morphology that Baxter and Laurent Sagart have experimented with since 1992. A few examples suffice to show the variety among recent Western reconstructions, as well as what Schuessler means by “minimal”:

character	Karlgren 1957	LFK 1971	Baxter 1992	Gassmann- Behr 2005	Baxter-Sagart 2009	Schuessler 2009
以	ziəŋ:	ʔrəŋx	ljiʔ	lə-q	ləʔ	ləʔ
舉	kjə:	—	k(r/l)jaʔ	k-la-q	Cə.q(r)aʔ	klaʔ
用	dʒuŋ-	ʔrungh	ljongs	loŋ-s	mə-loŋ-s	loŋh
皇	g’wāng	gwang	wang	—	[g]’wɑŋ	wāŋ
宣	sɿwan	skwjan	swjan	s-hwar	s-q <sup>w</sup> har	swan
犧	χia	—	hng(r)jaj	—	ŋ̊(r)a[j]	hŋai
帝	tiəŋ	tigh	teks	ttek-s	—	têh

LFK 1971 is Li Fang-kuei 李方桂, *Shanggu yin 上古音*, *The Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 清華學報, New Series IX. 1 & 2 (combined): 1–61; Baxter 1992 is William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter); Gassmann-Behr 2005 is Robert H. Gassmann and Wolfgang Behr, *Antikchinesisch – Ein Lehrbuch in drei Teilen*, vol. 1 (Bern: Peter Lang); Baxter-Sagart 2009 is Laurent Sagart and William H. Baxter, *Reconstructing Old Chinese Uvulars in the Baxter-Sagart System* (Version 0.99), *Cahiers de linguistique Asie orientale* 38: 221–44. Note that not all dictionaries contain all characters; few Western reference works of Chinese historical phonology are as complete as Schuessler or Karlgren 1957.

Most of these reconstructions are systematically quite close to each other, despite their superficial disparities. By way of example, for *yǐ* 以 and *jǔ* 舉, Karlgren’s final colon, Li’s -x, and Gassmann-Behr’s -q all represent essentially the same thing as the more familiar final glottal stop found in the other reconstructions. For *xuān* 宣, there is competition between two ideas: whether the medieval initial

*s-* goes back in Old Chinese to a plain *s-* or to a velar/uvular initial with a morphological *s-* prefix. For *xī* 犧, Karlgren uses medieval Chinese initial  $\chi$ - projected directly onto Old Chinese, while Baxter, Baxter-Sagart, and Schuessler use diverse spellings all rendering an identical voiceless  $\eta$ -, to account for graphic contact with the voiced  $\eta$ - of 義. And so forth. Among all these systems it is hard to dispute that Schuessler's retains the most conventional Chinese appearance, which should aid its acceptance among sinologists—few of whom generally keep up with all the arcana of reconstructive thought.

I agree with Schuessler's decision to give priority to medieval phonology when Old Chinese evidence presents "oddities," to avoid "sweeping addition of phonemes," and above all to distinguish internal reconstruction (in Chinese, based mainly on phonological and graphic evidence) from comparative reconstruction (incorporating etymological and morphological considerations). Schuessler has shown clearly in his 2007 work that there is a place for a comparative-etymological conception of Old Chinese, but it is also important to say that we will have quite a different vision of Old Chinese if we follow conservative internal principles alone.

The introduction includes a statement of principle about one of the most controversial elements of Chinese etymology: how the *xiéshēng* 諧聲 series (the phonological component of the script) should be applied to reconstructed phonology. It is well known that graphic associations between the characters used to write different Chinese words have led many sensible scholars (to say nothing of an army of amateurs) into unsupportable speculation about cognate relationships. Schuessler suggests that "the greater the semantic or mental overlap of a graphic element with the word it writes, the greater the chance that phonological similarity has been compromised" (p. 35). Perhaps this rule of thumb has always been understood by the best philologists of Chinese, but I do not recall having seen it stated before. Overall, Schuessler's agnosticism about some of the controversial issues in the field strikes me as thoughtful and well explained.

The field of Chinese historical phonology as practiced in the West differs quite a bit from its East Asian counterpart. In East Asia, every college Chinese major learns this subject, a recognized component of what is sometimes still called *guóxué* 國學 "the national learning." Every student of traditional poetry is expected to have basic facility in rhyming, prosody, and how to distinguish different words written with the same characters. The names of the various received phonological categories are at least familiar to most serious students of philology, as are the all-important relationships between them. Even many amateurs master them. But in the West, perhaps inspired by the heady, peremptory style of certain major figures in sinology and Western linguistics, individual reconstructions have been the dominant objects of attention. In consequence, few non-specialists in the West seem to realize that reconstruction is no more than a tool for visualizing phonological relationships. The competition between proprietary reconstructions also distracts us from the fact that Chinese historical linguistics is a discipline, and that the basic ideas of that discipline can be uncontroversial even while competing interpretations of them coexist.

For these reasons, it is healthy for us to see more reconstructions of Chinese, varying from one another in many details, so as to replace our current spelling-loyalties with an understanding of phonological relationships. Minimal Old Chinese will contribute admirably to that goal. (One hopes that the Karlgren-Li Fang Kuei reconstruction for medieval Chinese, which Schuessler finds convenient to use as "the most often cited," will soon be given an honorable burial and replaced with something more suited to the abstractness of traditional Chinese notation.)

Now to the naming of a few things that could be improved in the next version. The font used for tone marks sometimes places diacritics off-center over their vowels, and it looks unprofessional. The time has come for all sinologists to adopt Unicode. I grant that Unicode brings its own set of problems, but they can be solved.

The tables should have a statement, prominently placed, about how they are organized and for what purpose they are to be consulted. There is a three-line note about them under the first table, but it is too terse. Better to include those notes in the same place as the list of abbreviations for the whole book. And the list of abbreviations (taken directly from the *ABC Etymological Dictionary* and not thinned for this book) is oddly placed after the preface; it would be more useful between the introduction and the body of the text. As in other works by Schuessler, the reader is confronted with abbreviations almost

on the scale one expects to see in government documents, so it is important for their key to be as accessible as possible.

Words are indexed by Mandarin only. Perhaps that is a result of the strange obsession with romanization that characterizes the whole ABC Chinese Dictionary Series. Whatever the reason, every Chinese reference work should have some sort of index by the shapes or structure of characters, because of the distance between Chinese sound and script. The *xiéshēng*-based order this book follows links character structure and phonology, but there is no good guide to that order in this book, either. Merely putting the words “companion to *Grammata Serica Recensa*” in the subtitle does not excuse the author from making this a free-standing reference work. It appears to me to be a true rethinking of Karlgren’s goals from scratch and destined to become an important resource. It should be equipped with that destiny in mind.

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