
Questions about Baxter & Sagart's Old Chinese

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This article raises some questions about the methodology of Old Chinese reconstruction in general and Baxter and Sagart 2014 in particular. Issues are discussed using examples from Baxter and Sagart.

Keywords: Old Chinese reconstruction, Comparative method, Hypothetic-deductive method, Baxter and Sagart, Etymology, *Xiéshēng* series

List of Abbreviations:

B&S	Baxter and Sagart <i>Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction</i> , 2014 ¹
IE	Indo-European
MC	Middle Chinese
MY	Miao-Yao 苗瑤 languages
NOC	Old Chinese, new reconstruction by Baxter and Sagart's 2014 book ²
OB	Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions
OC	Old Chinese
OCM	Minimal Old Chinese (Schuessler 2009) ³
QYS	<i>Qieyun</i> system (traditionally 'Middle Chinese')
ST	Sino-Tibetan
TB	Tibeto-Burman
WT	Written Tibetan

1. Introduction

No one knows what Old Chinese (OC) was like, none of us was there. We can only interpret sparse data, and these interpretations are more subjective than we might wish. Every one who tries to reconstruct OC on the basis of, more or less, the same material (Middle Chinese=MC, *xiéshēng* 諧聲 series, *Shījīng* 詩經 rhymes) arrives at a different OC language. Perhaps OC was as proposed by Baxter & Sagart (B&S), or by Baxter⁴, or by Wáng Lì 王力, or Li Fang-kuei 李方桂, Pān Wùyún 潘悟雲, etc., or something entirely different. Or OC simply cannot be reconstructed with any degree of plausibility.

Note the OC phonological interpretations of the copula *wéi* (MC *jiwi*) 隹維惟 'to be, it is/was' > 'only' 唯 (隹 has also the reading MC *tswi* < **tui*):

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- 1 William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 - 2 Ibid.
 - 3 Axel Schuessler, *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2009).
 - 4 William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).