Controversies and Conundrums in the Reconstruction of Proto-Sino-Tibetan

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【Abstract】

This presentation examines the current state of progress in the reconstruction of Proto-Sino-Tibetan, with an emphasis on those aspects that remain the focus of controversy or uncertainty. Sino-Tibetan may be defined as the language family containing Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese and all the languages derived from their most recent common ancestor. The hypothetical ancestor language from which this family descends is termed Proto-Sino-Tibetan. Over the last half of the 20th century and proceeding into the 21st century, a number of scholars (including Paul K. Benedict, James A. Matisoff, and Gong Hwang-cherng) have attempted full or partial reconstructions of this language. Yet today, despite immense progress in fieldwork, data collection and consolidation, and comparative reconstruction, many basic questions remain. I will focus my discussion on the most salient of these questions, including:

• the membership of the family: which languages belong to Sino-Tibetan?
• the broader genetic affiliations of the family: can Sino-Tibetan be shown to be one branch of a larger language family?
• the proto-vowel system: did Proto-Sino-Tibetan have four, five, or six vowels?
• the proto-consonant system: did Proto-Sino-Tibetan have a two-way distinction (e.g. *p- vs. *b-) or a three-way distinction (e.g. *p- vs. *pʰ- vs. *b-)?
• the proto-word structure: were many basic words “sesquisyllabic”, made up of a reduced syllable and a full syllable? If so, were these sesquisyllabic words always morphologically complex?
• the proto-prosodic system: was Proto-Sino-Tibetan tonal? Did it have a syllabic distinction corresponding to the well-known “Type A/B” distinction of Old Chinese?
• the proto-derivational morphology: what derivational affixes existed in Proto-Sino-Tibetan, and to what degree of certainty can their functions be reconstructed?
• the proto-inflectional morphology: was Proto-Sino-Tibetan characterized by simple or complex verbal morphology?

Following discussion of these issues, the direction of future scholarship, and the prospects for future progress, will be examined.