

Understanding the *Qieyun* Rhymes

Zhongwei SHEN
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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 vowels 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* is 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