EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

Sponsored by
The Tang Center for Early China, Columbia University;
Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University;
The Columbia University Seminars

Recent Discoveries on Old Chinese and Pre-Qin Documents

William H. Baxter
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Time and Location:

4:30-6:30pm
November 13th, 2015 (Friday)

403 Kent Hall, Columbia University
1140 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027

Abstract

The recently published *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* (Baxter & Sagart 2014) offers an updated linguistic reconstruction of Old Chinese (approximately, the language of the earliest Chinese classical texts) that takes into account several kinds of evidence that have been given little or no attention in previous reconstructions. Earlier reconstructions largely relied on three kinds of evidence: (1) the Middle Chinese phonological system represented in the *Qièyùn* 切韻 rhyme dictionary of 601 CE (and other contemporary sources), assumed to be descended from Old Chinese; (2) the rhymes of the *Shījīng* 詩經 and other pre-Qín texts, and (3) the phonetic elements of the Chinese script as standardized in the Qín and Hàn dynasties. Because of recent research and discoveries, it is now possible to make greater use of three additional kinds of evidence: (1) pronunciations in modern dialects (especially the Mǐn 閩 dialects) that preserve distinctions lost in the Middle Chinese system; (2) very early Chinese loanwords into neighboring languages (especially of the Vietic, Tai-Kadai = Kra-Dai, and Hmong-Mien = Miáo-Yáo families); and (3) phonetic elements of the pre-Qín script as found in recently discovered pre-Qín documents. An improved reconstruction also makes it possible to get a clearer picture of the morphological processes of Old Chinese, which are more extensive than usually assumed. I will describe the main features of our new reconstruction, and illustrate it with examples. In particular, I will show how the newly discovered texts allow us to improve our reconstruction; and on the other hand, I will argue that our new reconstruction is a sharper tool for analyzing early texts than the traditional frameworks now generally used for this purpose.

Seminar Co-Chairs:
Jue Guo
Barnard College, Columbia University
Roderick Campbell
Institute for the Study of Ancient World, New York University