

History of Sino-Tibetan

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Abstract

First identified as a linguistic grouping in 1823, Sino-Tibetan remains poorly understood in its internal classification and geographical origins, despite being the world's second-largest language family. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars differed in opinion regarding both the composition of the family as well as its internal makeup. Questions around the internal organisation remain today, with challenges to the traditional binary Sinitic / Tibeto-Burman view in recent studies. Questions also remain around the location of the Sino-Tibetan Urheimat. New documentation efforts along with computational analyses offer important insights, yet fundamental questions about its origins and structure remain unresolved, fuelling ongoing debate in the field of linguistics.

1 Key points

- Despite its size, the internal makeup and origins of Sino-Tibetan still remain as unanswered questions
- The historical context of the family was similarly unclear from the start.
- Modern computational approaches and increased efforts at documenting under-described varieties are providing interesting insights into the family
- While the current situation is one of uncertainty, ongoing efforts suggest a future where the family is much better understood both historically and in terms of its makeup.

2 Introduction

The Sino-Tibetan language family is the second-largest in the world in terms of the number of speakers. Alternatively known as Trans-Himalayan (van Driem 2014) or Tibeto-Burman, it exhibits considerable internal diversity in terms of lexicon, tone systems, phonology, and other important typological features. Glottolog (Hammarström et al. 2024) categorises 514 languages within the family as of version 5.1.¹ The internal diversity of the family has historically complicated efforts to classify its member languages and determine relatedness; internal connections can be easily missed, and regular sound correspondences between smaller varieties difficult to establish.² Unlike other well-studied language families such as Indo-European whose internal structure is relatively well under-

stood, the deeper relationships within Sino-Tibetan remain an open question.

2.1 Uncertainty of the internal structure

While these newer descriptions have provided valuable data that inform our understanding of lower-level subgroups within the family and clarify the positions of under-studied clades, the broader structure of Sino-Tibetan remains uncertain. The relationships between these lower-level groupings, as well as their connections to the family's primary branches, are still the subject of ongoing debate and analysis. Such questions are likely to remain unanswered until more data are made available through additional documentation efforts.

In recent years computational approaches such as the application of Bayesian phylogenetic inference have been utilised for the purposes of understanding Sino-Tibetan classification and history. These preliminary results show some promise, but should not yet be taken as definitive results. That is, while these methods offer insights into potential evolutionary relationships, they have not yet resolved fundamental questions about the family's deeper structure. The successes and limitations of such computational approaches are explored in greater detail in Section 8.

2.2 Ongoing documentation

Over the past few decades, efforts to document many of the smaller languages within the family have increased substantially. This has led to the publication of numerous descriptive grammars and language sketches, improving our overall understanding of the family. What's more, many of these studies focus on languages and regions traditionally underrepresented in Sino-Tibetan research. Such cases include Akter (2024) on Pangkhua, spoken in Bangladesh, and Oko (2019) on Darma, a Tibeto-Burman language of Uttarakhand, among others.

A significant number of descriptions have also come out of Northeast India — a hotspot of linguistic diversity in Eurasia — in recent years, shedding important light on under-described clades. Examples include Konnerth (2014) and Chanu & Singha (2017), among many others. A considerable amount of early-stage documentation has also been done at the masters thesis level by speakers of the languages themselves.³

These descriptions provide important insights into language varieties which may be otherwise inaccessible to non-indigenous scholars due to travel restrictions and the ever-shifting political landscapes. With the increasing availability of data from a wide range of language varieties distributed across the family, along with improved resolution and reliability of descriptive data for already described varieties, the questions of internal relationships may soon have answers.

¹Despite language endangerment being a considerable issue in the family, this number will surely rise in coming versions as ongoing documentation efforts bear fruit.

²Notably, Hruso hrus1242 has been recently de-classified by Glottolog as Sino-Tibetan, despite a general consensus among many scholars of the region of its likely belonging.

³e.g. Hoipo (2021).

3 Names of the family

3.1 Sino-Tibetan

The earliest use of the name “Sino-Tibetan” is attributed to Jean Przyluski in 1924 (Przyluski 1924a). Despite ongoing debates over the precise composition of the family as describe above, the name has remained largely stable until recently, although it was not always the most widely known label.

The term “Sino-Tibetan” was only popularised in Western scholarship during the early 20th century, primarily through the work of scholars such as Shafer (1966) and Benedict (1972). It was intended to emphasise the connection between the Sinitic languages (including Chinese) and the Tibeto-Burman languages, often but not always defined today as Sino-Tibetan minus Sinitic. However, concerns have arisen regarding the suitability and implications of “Sino-Tibetan”.

3.2 Tibeto-Burman

Logan (1852) was the first to use “Tibeto-Burman” for the entirety of the grouping identified by Klaproth (1823) to include Sinitic. Logan was also the first to identify Karenic as belonging to this group. Notably, the position of Karenic was subsequently questioned in large part due to the SVO word order which is otherwise atypical in non-Sinitic members of the family; however the current consensus is that Karenic is properly included (Matisoff 1991b).

3.3 Trans-Himalayan

A major criticism with the term “Sino-Tibetan” is that it gives disproportionate emphasis to Chinese and Tibetan, despite the existence of hundreds of Tibeto-Burman languages that are equally part of the family (van Driem 1997; DeLancey 2013). George van Driem has been a vocal critic of the term, arguing that it reflects a Sinocentric perspective rather than an accurate linguistic classification (van Driem 2001). Instead, he proposed the term “Trans-Himalayan” as an effort at a more inclusive alternative, acknowledging the widespread distribution of these languages across the Himalayan region and beyond. Similar criticisms come from scholars such as Scott DeLancey (2013), who has pointed out that it suggests a direct dichotomy between Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman, when in fact, the relationship is likely much more complex. With the internal structure of the language family remaining uncertain, a single binary division between Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman may be an oversimplification.

Despite the criticisms, many scholars continue to use “Sino-Tibetan” due to its historical precedence and widespread recognition. Others prefer “Tibeto-Burman” when discussing the non-Sinitic branches of the family (Matisoff 2003a). Some researchers, particularly in China, have continued to use “Sino-Tibetan” to emphasise the connection between Chinese and other languages in the family (Sun 1996).. This has been ostensibly supported by computational methods which claim support for this dichotomy (Zhang et al 2019), although methodological complications raise additional questions. These are discussed further in Section 8.

4 The origins of Sino-Tibetan as a clade

The earliest known identification of Sino-Tibetan as a linguistic grouping can be attributed to Julius Heinrich von Klaproth in his

Asia Polyglotta (Klaproth 1823). In this work, Klaproth compared lexical roots across a range of Asian languages and identified clear similarities between Chinese, Burmese, and Tibetan, along with other languages that could be shown to be related to these three. He classified these languages as forming a single monophyletic group within the linguistic landscape of greater Asia.

Klaproth did not include Kra-Dai (Tai-Kadai) or Austroasiatic languages in this grouping (Klaproth 1823: 363365), a distinction that would later be revisited by subsequent scholars who would argue for their inclusion. Following Klaproth, Cust (1883) correctly maintained the exclusion of Tai and Austroasiatic, while also recognising the inclusion of Karenic. This is notable as Karenic is typologically distinct from much of the rest of the family,⁴ and has itself been the focus of genealogical scrutiny.

By the late 19th century, there was little debate over the validity of Tibeto-Burman to the exclusion of Sinitic as a well-supported language family, a position that van Driem later described as the “default hypothesis” (2005a). The debate which followed largely focused on what else should be included.

4.1 Proposed Kra-Dai connections

In spite of this early recognition of a distinction, many other early scholars considered Tai, Austroasiatic, and Vietnamese to be part of the same language family as what we would today call Sino-Tibetan. In the 19th century, Sinologists and early comparative linguists, including Schott (1856) and Schleicher (1861), speculated on the genetic relationship between Chinese, Tai, and Austroasiatic languages. Other scholars grouping these languages into a larger “Indo-Chinese” included Forbes (1878) and Edkins (1867), often basing their views on typological similarities such as early phonetic observations, and common monosyllabic word structures and tonal systems, rather than rigorous comparative analysis. These shared features were later understood to be the result of language contact rather than genetic inheritance (Enfield 2005).

By the early 20th century, Pelliot (1904) and later Przyluski (1924b) took to the question of Kra-Dai as a related language group. They suggested Austroasiatic and Kra-Dai were distinct from Sino-Tibetan, but that the languages had undergone extensive mutual influence.⁵ Their analyses marked a shift toward a more rigorous understanding of language relationships, ultimately leading to the modern separation of these families.

4.2 Indo-Chinese

In many cases where Kra-Dai was included, it was at a higher-level node in the family tree. In some cases, Kra-Dai was grouped with Sinitic at this level, as in the classification of Conrady (1896) who drew connections to Sinitic and Kra-Dai on tonal and morphological grounds, with the same higher-order connection to Tibeto-Burman. Many others followed this view, including Grierson (1909) in his *Linguistic Survey of India*. This model became widely repeated in sources around the end of the 19th century, with Daic surviving in some models even until the 21st century. Shafer’s model had subgroups for Daic, Sinitic, Bodic, Burmish, Baric and Karenic (Shafer 1966). Benedict (1972) removed Daic but other-

⁴Karenic is one of the only branches of Sino-Tibetan aside from Sinitic which shows a default SVO word order (Kato 2021).

⁵For example, Tai languages borrowed heavily from Sinitic for the numeral systems.

wise held on to the Indo-Chinese model, resulting in a tree with Sinitic on one side and all other the Sino-Tibetan languages on the other. Notably Avery (1886) had previously come up with this same view without the inclusion of Kra-Dai. This model has largely remained as the accepted standard until recently.

Van Driem (2005) points out that the “Indo-Chinese” label persisted well after scholars had determined that Kra-Dai and Austroasiatic were not part of Tibeto-Burman. In particular, the popularity of the term in non-specialist circles resulted in later scholars taking it at face value that this constituted a language family. It is easy to find today sources from the not-too-distant past which still support this analysis.

Efforts to place the languages in a single family were not historically straightforward. By the late 19th century, scholars such as Houghton (1896) already acknowledged the difficulties in linking the languages within the family posed by what he termed “phonetic decay”, the considerable degree between varieties where sound changes render cognate identification difficult, although Houghton still considered the languages to be related.

5 Kra-Dai & Austroasiatic connections

Today, Kra-Dai (Tai-Kadai) and Austroasiatic are recognised as separate families, although they have had deep historical interactions with Sino-Tibetan languages. The early misclassification highlights the evolving nature of linguistic research and the importance of distinguishing between genetic and areal linguistic relationships.

Benedict (1942) later formulated the “Sino-Tibetan-Austro-Tai” hypothesis, grouping Sino-Tibetan with Tai-Kadai and Austroasiatic. This was partly influenced by shared morphological traits and apparent lexical correspondences. Vietnamese, historically classified as part of Austroasiatic, was included due to its extensive contact with Chinese and structural similarities (Haudricourt 1954). However, many of these similarities were later attributed to areal influence rather than genetic inheritance.

By the mid-20th century, most linguists rejected the inclusion of Tai and Austroasiatic in Sino-Tibetan, recognising them as distinct language families (Bodman 1973). Advances in comparative linguistics demonstrated that shared features were the result of language contact rather than a common origin (Matisoff 1991a).

Sagart proposes additional higher-order links between Sino-Tibetan and Austronesian (2005), and more recently to Hmong-Mien (2019), although these are still debated today.

6 The placement of Sinitic

Tied to all discussions around the name, Urheimat and internal structure more generally is the question of Sinitic and its primacy in the tree model. The relationship between Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman languages today is largely without controversy, while the placement of the Sinitic branch remains a point of contention. Traditionally, Sinitic has been treated as one of the two primary branches alongside Tibeto-Burman, forming a binary division (Benedict 1972). However, alternative models suggest that Sinitic may be deeply embedded within Tibeto-Burman rather than standing as a coordinate branch.

Benedict (1972) proposed a clear dichotomy between Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman, emphasising fundamental phonological and morphological differences. He argued that Sinitic diverged early, largely due to its isolating morphology and lexical differentiation. This view was widely accepted, influencing later research and shaping the Sino-Tibetan classification model.

Van Driem (2001) argues against this binary division, proposing that Sinitic is a sub-branch of Tibeto-Burman rather than a primary branch. He points to shared morphological and lexical features between Chinese and certain Tibeto-Burman languages, suggesting that the Sinitic languages emerged from within an earlier Tibeto-Burman continuum.

DeLancey (2013) supports a gradual divergence model, wherein Sinitic languages underwent extensive areal influences that contributed to their unique typological features. Rather than an early split, Sinitic is proposed to have evolved through a long period of interaction with neighbouring languages, particularly in the Yellow River Basin, where it absorbed features distinct from its Tibeto-Burman relatives.

This has led some scholars to propose that Sinitic represents a highly innovated branch of Tibeto-Burman, diverging through extensive contact with non-Sino-Tibetan languages (Matisoff 2003a).

While the traditional Sinitic / Tibeto-Burman dichotomy remains dominant, alternative models continue to gain traction, driven by interdisciplinary research. The classification of Sinitic within Sino-Tibetan is likely to remain unresolved until a more comprehensive historical reconstruction is achieved.

7 Locating the Sino-Tibetan Urheimat

The location of the Sino-Tibetan Urheimat remains a topic of considerable debate among linguists, archaeologists, and geneticists. Several competing hypotheses propose different regions as the original homeland of proto-Sino-Tibetan, each supported by various strands of linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence.

One of the more popular proposals suggests that the Yellow River Basin in North China served as the Urheimat, with the descendant languages primarily spreading southward (LaPolla 2001). This hypothesis faces challenges due to the high linguistic diversity of Tibeto-Burman languages in the south based on the origin of diversity hypothesis. However, recent archaeological studies also support this claim, such as Liu et al (2022), posing a challenge to a northward expansion. It is one of the oldest proposals, and remains the dominant view held by many China-focused scholars today.

Another prominent theory suggests that the Himalayan foothills and the upper Salween-Irrawaddy region were the homeland of Sino-Tibetan (Shafer 1966). Matisoff (2003a) further argued that the greatest variety of these languages is found in this region, making it a strong candidate for the proto-Sino-Tibetan homeland.

A more recent hypothesis, proposed by George van Driem (2005b), argues that the Brahmaputra Basin in northeastern India and Myanmar was the origin point of Sino-Tibetan. This model is supported by genetic evidence and the concentration of diverse Tibeto-Burman languages in the region (DeLancey 2010; Post 2015).

While no consensus has been reached, the Sichuan-Yunnan Plateau, the Himalayan region, and Northeast India remain strong contenders. Further interdisciplinary research is needed to reconcile linguistic, genetic, and archaeological findings.

8 Recent computational approaches

In order to address the questions around the origins of Sino-Tibetan, scholars do not rely on linguistics alone (Jacques forthcoming). For decades, links to the archaeological record have been sought (Liu et al 2022), attempts to reconstruct agricultural practices have been made (Bradley 2011), and links to human genetics have been investigated (Barbieri et al 2022). With advancements in computational power, Bayesian phylogenetic inference has been added to this toolkit.

Two significant recent attempts at using these methods for the creation of a Sino-Tibetan phylogeny have been published recently, Sagart et al (2019) and Zhang et al (2019). Sagart et al. (2019) employed Bayesian phylogenetic inference in an attempt at reconstructing the likely divergence times of different branches within the family. Their results suggest that Sino-Tibetan originated around 7,200 years before present. The study supports the hypothesis that proto-Sino-Tibetan speakers were Neolithic millet farmers whose language later diversified into the major branches observed today. This aligns with archaeological evidence of early millet-based agriculture in northern China and reinforces the argument that the spread of Sino-Tibetan languages was linked to agricultural expansion.

Zhang et al. (2019) conducted a separate analysis, using a dataset of lexical items from 109 Sino-Tibetan languages. Their study estimated that the Sino-Tibetan language family began diverging approximately 4,000 to 6,000 years ago. Unlike Sagart et al., who emphasise a northern origin linked to millet farming, Zhang et al. propose that the initial expansion of Sino-Tibetan languages occurred in the Yellow River basin but with later dispersal influenced by complex demographic movements. Their results provide additional support for the “northern-origin hypothesis” but with a later time depth compared to Sagart et al.

In both cases, similar tools were used, but with considerably different initial data upon which the analyses were based. The differences are discussed in some detail in Orlandi (2021), along with methodological criticisms such as the over-reliance by Zhang et al. on older reconstructions and cognate judgements of Matisoff (2003b), many of which have since been revisited in light of the availability of additional linguistic data. The differences between the two phylogenies are largely of differences in data selection, lexical coding, and model assumptions.

An alternative to a tree model model, van Driem’s “fallen leaves” (van Driem 2011), emphasises a non-hierarchical structure for Sino-Tibetan languages. In this model, each of the lower level clades which are demonstrably related with a shallower time depth are considered separately, making no claim to higher-order groupings. This model serves as a useful reminder at the lack of consensus on internal subgrouping.

The complexity within Sino-Tibetan is unlikely to be resolved through a simplified tree model. Instead, to resolve the question of internal relationships, bottom-up analyses and data collection are needed. As the degree and quality of description of Sino-Tibetan languages improves, so too does our ability to answer some of these questions. For now, many of these questions must remain unanswered.

9 Conclusion

As documentation of previously under- and un-described varieties within Sino-Tibetan improves, the overall picture of both the internal structure and the linguistic history of the family is also being brought into light. In spite of being one of the largest attested language families at the present time, there remains considerable debate within the field regarding the exact makeup and origins. Modern computer-assisted approaches to lexicostatistics offer new avenues of research on the interrelatedness, while the shortcomings of such approaches continue to be addressed and refined. Meanwhile, collaboration between linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists are contributing to efforts at locating the Sino-Tibetan urheimat and our understanding of the migration of its speakers from that location to the vast geographic range covered by the family today. Ongoing efforts will likely prove fruitful in the coming years, helping to address the many unanswered questions which remain for such an important and widely-spoken language family.

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