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An Investigation on the Nature of Qieyun and Phonology

Qieyun is a masterpiece that organizes and records the phonology of Zhonggu Chinese from the Sui Dynasty. From this book, we can get a whole picture of the Chinese Zhonggu Phonology. However, the discussion and debate over the nature of the phonetic system of Qieyun has never stopped. The establishment of a phonetic system should have a basis, but what was exactly this phonetic basis? The main controversy lies between two views. The two views entail the monophonic system and the comprehensive system. This is the main question we will be exploring today.

I. An Overview of Qieyun

The book Qieyun 《切韻》 is a Chinese language rhyme dictionary compiled by Lu Fayuan during the Sui dynasty. The inspiration of writing such a book came from a discussion with eight of his scholar friends, who are 劉臻、蕭該、顏之推、盧思道、李若、辛德源、薛道衡、魏彥淵. The intended function of this book was to guide proper reading of classical texts of the ZhongGu 中古 period. Prior to the creation of Qieyun, there were similar works in the same field, for example, Li Deng's Shenglei 《聲類》 from Wei of the Three Kingdoms Period, LuJing's 呂靜 Yunji 《韻集》 of Western Jin Dynasty, and many more. Although these books had great reference values, but the scholars saw a lack of well-defined standard in them. So on the basis of the previous works, they constructed a relatively comprehensive phonetic system.

The phonetic system of Qieyun is a set of phonetic notation that uses the method of

Fanqie 反切 to mark the pronunciation of Chinese characters. The Fanqie phonetic notation is the most essential and basic material for studying the phonetic system of the Zhonggu 中古 period ; it is understood to be the foundation of Chinese phonology.

The formation of Fanqie is closely linked to Buddhism. Buddhism was introduced in China during the reign of Emperor Ming of Han, in the process of translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit, the concept of the spellings of consonants and vowels was discovered. This inspired the idea of Fanqie and hence developed the Fanqie phonetic notation. In simple terms, Fanqie displays the pronunciation of a character by using two other characters, the first character with the same initial consonant (声母) and the second character with the same rest of the syllable, called the final (韵母). For example, the Fanqie for the Character 欣 is 許斤切. Fanqie was created to remediate the deficiency of the phonetic methods of 讀若 and 直音. As we know, 讀若 and 直音 always use a character with the same pronunciation as the phonetic character, accurate pronunciation can be delivered after reading the phonetic character. For example, the character 苳, 讀若急¹ ; 急 : 及聲² (has the sound of ji). However, this method of phonetic notation has a great disadvantage. It would be difficult to find a character with the same pronunciation when encountering a rare or uncommon character; on the other hand, if a simple character is annotated by a rare character, it would be rather hard to know the pronunciation of the original simple character. In addition, the phonetic method of 直音 cannot describe the tone and the final (韵母) of the character. Therefore, Fanqie was a great development in the

¹ Xushen 許慎, Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Shuowen Jiezi Zhu 說文解字註, (Taipei: Hongye Wenhua press, 2016) p.27

² p.512

phonetic notation of Chinese characters, marking the beginning of the study of Chinese phonology.

As for the book *Qieyun*, not only did it continue and improve the *Fanqie* system, but it also categorized the finals (韻母) of *fanqie* according to the four tones in classical Chinese phonetics, 平上去入. Among them, 54 are the level tone (平), 51 are the falling-rising tone (上), 56 are the falling tone (去), and 32 are the entering tone (入). *Qieyun* well-organised and recorded such information and is a great contribution to the Chinese phonetic system as well as to the phonology of the Zhonggu period. For this reason, people at the time praised that ‘*Qieyun* was a book to be valued by all, it should be followed and regarded as a classic.’ *Qieyun* is perceived as the most detailed and accurate rhyme dictionary since the Sui Dynasty³. Throughout history, we are familiar with the form of writing being unified in the Qin Dynasty, now widely known as the *XiaoZhaun* 小篆; similarly, the emergence of *Qieyun* unified the phonetics of the characters. This is certainly a significant contribution to the field of Chinese phonology.

Unfortunately, the original book has not been completely preserved, fragments of the book can be found in different parts of the world, but this situation does not affect the true value of the book. The *Kanmiu Buque Qieyun* (刊謬補缺切韻) by Wang Renxu (王仁昫) of the Tang dynasty revised *Qieyun* and added some commentaries; he also inserted around 6000 new characters and indicated the difference between *Qieyun* and

³ Pan Wenguo 潘文國, ‘Hanyu yinyuzhong nanyihuibide zhenglun: Zailunn Gaobenhan tixi jixingzhizhuwenti, 漢語音韻中難以迴避的論爭——再論高本漢體系及性質諸問題’ *Guhanyu Yanjiu* 古漢語研究, 57.4(2002), p.1

the previous rhyme dictionaries. The book *Guangyun* by Chen Pennian 陳彭年 of the Song Dynasty was written based on *Qieyun*. Hence, we could still restore the original book of *Qieyun* through these two books and the existing fragments.

Although *Qieyun* had achieved the unification of Chinese phonetics and established a well-defined standard, but later generations had their doubts about which phonetic system was the formation of phonetics based on? There had been active debates in this area.

II. The Nature of the Formation of Phonetics

The nature of the phonetic system in *Qieyun* has always been controversial and there are divided views. The main controversy lies between two aspects. One of which is the monophonic system, the other one is the comprehensive system. The first believes that *Qieyun* recorded the phonetics at a specific time and in a specific place; while the latter denies the concept of time and space but tends towards more comprehensive phonetics.

Monophonic Phonology

A monophonic system is considered a common language used during a specific period and place. For example, Mandarin is regarded as the common language of all Chinese people worldwide. Since it is based on the Beijing dialect, Beijing dialect serves as the language data of Mandarin. Hence, if we want to study the history of Mandarin or publish a relevant authoritative dictionary of Mandarin, we only need to undertake an in-depth study of Beijing dialect in order to achieve credible conclusion

and results. This is such a succinct and logical system that Mr Gao Benhan has taken it as the main reason for advocating a monophonic system. He believes that Qieyun is a highly unified and prudent system in terms of its content, which is a typical indication of specified description of phonics. He stated that Qieyun was based on the dialect of Changan 長安 (Now Shanxi 陝西 Province), which was proved by the comments of Qieyun's author Yan Zhitui.⁴ Mr. Yan was one of the co-authors of Qieyun and he indicated in chapter Yinci of Yanshi Jiaxun(The Family Instructions of Master Yan) that the dialects of Luoyang and Jinling were the most standard common language.⁵ Consequently, some later generations presumed that Qieyun should be based on dialects around these two places, which shows that Qieyun should be a monophonic system.

Comprehensive phonetics

On the other hand, more people agree that Qieyun adopts a comprehensive phonetic system. For example, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 thinks that Qieyun is inherited from ancient times,⁶ and Wang Li 王力 is also very affirmative of this view. According to the phonetic system of Qieyun, it is possible to infer the ancient phonetic system and to find its link with the modern phonetic system – modern Chinese Mandarin and various local dialects nowadays in China can be explained by the Qieyun system. This is because that the pronunciation of the Zhonggu Chinese was based on the Qieyun system. It does not represent the actual phonetic system of Chang'an – the capital of

⁴ Klas Bernhard Johannes 高本汉 Compendium of phonetics in Ancient and Archaic Chinese 《中国音韵学研究》trans. by Zhao Yuanren 趙元任, Luo Changpei 羅常培, Li Fanggui 李方桂, (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan 商務印書館, 2003) pp.1-15

⁵ Yan zhitui 顏之推, Yanshi jiaxun 顏氏家訓(Beijing:zhonghua shuju,2007),p.297

⁶ Zhang taiyan 章太炎, *Guogu lunheng* 國故論衡 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010), p.23

the Sui Dynasty at the time. It only represents a phonetic system that is considered as a literary language.⁷ Wang Li's opinion is that Qieyun contains the pronunciation of the ancient and the Zhonggu Chinese, and covers various dialects. Although it was written in Chang'an, the capital of the Sui Dynasty, it has nothing to do with the actual pronunciation of Chang'an dialect, and but is equivalent to the rhymed literature of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Such an argument takes the phonological system of Qieyun as a comprehensive body, transcending the concept of time and space.

Personal View

I agree that Qieyun is a comprehensive phonology and but also think that the monophonic phonology is not unreasonable. It is only when these two views overlap can the whole phonological system of Qiyun be embodied as a whole. Lu Fayan, the author of Qieyun, and other scholars did not explain that they considered certain sounds of a specific dialect as the basics for the phonetic system, but their original intention came from observing that the tones in the rhymes from previous works of the predecessors were somewhat different. So they decided to set up a unified phonetic system together. The unity of the phonological system has a certain basis, it is impossible to examine the sound of language without a standard. One of the authors for Qieyun, Yan zhitui(顏之推)said that the phonology of the capital city was used as the standard in Qieyun, also the phonology of different regions was researched and referred to for comparison.⁸ The statement here seems to indicate that the phonology of Qieyun is based on phonology of the capital as the foundations of the phonetic system, but fused with phonology from other areas. That seems to me a strong support

⁷ Wangli 王力, *Hanyu shigao* 漢語史稿(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju,2013),p.49

⁸ Yan zhitui 顏之推, *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓(Beijing:zhonghua shuju,2007),p.297

on the monophonic Phonology, Through further exploration, there is a correlation between monophonic Phonology and comprehensive Phonology. Because Chang an , Luoyang and Jinling were all capitals from the Zhou Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, they had certain commonalities in phonology. therefore this capital phonology no longer represented regional phonetic system of a specific time, and itself has inherited the ancient and modern official phonology. On this basis, Qieyun added and fused part of sounds from other regional phonetic system. It is possible to find an example in Guangyun that the sound of li 穉 was for the phonology of Changsha⁹.

Therefore, in my opinion, the phonetic system of Qieyun is a comprehensive phonology in principle, based on capital official phonology and at the same time it also adopted parts of other regional phonetic sounds.

⁹ Chen pengnian 陳彭年 *Xinjiao Songben Guanyun*, 新校宋本廣韻 (Taipei:Yehong wenhua press,2001),p.46

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