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***The Historical Phonology of Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese.* By Nathan W. HILL. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv+373.**

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Sino-Tibetan was first recognized as a language family more than one century ago, and great progress in the field has been made in the interim. The reconstruction of Proto-Sino-Tibetan, however, has only seen sporadic attempts—without much consensus—and the phylogenetic relations between different languages within the family remains controversial. Nathan W. Hill’s new book, *The Historical Phonology of Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese* represents a new attempt at exploring early stages of Sino-Tibetan languages, or Trans-Himalayan languages, as it is named in the book, and here, for the sake of consistency.

The book addresses a key area hitherto inadequately researched in the historical phonology of Trans-Himalayan languages, which is the establishment of robust sound laws describing the phonological development of these languages. Establishing sound laws has been crucial to the study of Indo-European languages. The forms of a certain cognates in modern Indo-European languages as diverse as English, French, Persian, and Bengali can each be deduced through the application of a corresponding series of sound laws, applied to their common ancestor, Proto-Indo-European (with other factors such as analogical levelling taken into consideration, in some cases). Moreover, the chronological sequence of sound laws has important implications for establishing the Stammbaum of the language family. Grimm’s Law, for example, which delineates Germanic languages from other Indo-European languages, precedes the High German consonant shift, which affected a subset of dialects observing Grimm’s law, the High German dialects. The numerous exceptions to Grimm’s Law are elegantly accounted for by Verner’s Law, making the sound laws extremely regular.

In contrast, while much progress has been made in the study of Trans-

Himalayan languages using comparative linguistics,<sup>1</sup> this progress has long lacked systematic regularity. A purpose of the book, as Hill sets out in the introduction, is to establish Indo-European style sound laws for Trans-Himalayan and the subsequent sections of the books certainly fulfil this ultimate goal quite well.

Hill focuses on the three most prominent members of the family, namely Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese—also the languages with the longest writing tradition. It is a logical choice, as in such a pioneering study it is prudent to build the scaffold using languages with the most data available. Hill starts from the earliest attested stage of the languages and works back beyond the earliest written stage of each of the three languages, all the way to Trans-Himalayan, the hypothetical ancestor to all members of the family.

To combine evidence from progress made in each of the languages and reach a coherent system is no easy feat, considering that the historical phonology of any of the three languages contain numerous questions remaining to be answered. In addition, the traditional dichotomy between Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman languages and the consequential division between the field of Sinology and Tibeto-Burman studies has presented difficulties. From the perspective of gaining a holistic picture of Trans-Himalayan historical phonology, the opposition between Sinologists and Tibeto-Burmanists has not been conducive to research progress on the family as a whole, especially considering that the primacy of the Sinitic versus Non-Sinitic division within the Trans-Himalayan family is not undisputed.<sup>2</sup>

Taking Chinese historical phonology as an example, while it is certainly true that recent progress in is much indebted to comparison with Tibetan, many studies have resorted to using Written Tibetan as the Tibetan language beyond this remain quite elusive to them.

As Chinese and Tibetan diverged from their common ancestor thousands of years before the first appearance of any material written in the Tibetan language. The sound correspondences between the two languages had become murky. Cognates are often identified on an *ad hoc* basis, and therefore they are

1 Zhengzhang Shangfang 鄭張尚芳, *Shanggu Yinxi* 上古音系 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013).

2 Laurent Sagart, Guillaume Jacques, Yunfan Lai, Robin J. Ryder, Valentin Thouzeau, Simon J. Greenhill, and Johann-Mattis List, “Dated language phylogenies shed light on the ancestry of Sino-Tibetan,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116(21) (2019): 10317–322.