
In the past decades, Sino-Tibetan historical linguistics has increasingly become a flourishing field of studies, both in China and elsewhere. Recent trends include growing awareness of the importance of shared common innovations for subgrouping within Sino-Tibetan (Sagart 1995; van Driem 2001, 2006), interest in computational methods derived from evolutionary biology to test hypotheses about the sequence and timing of proposed subgroups (Sagart, Blench and Sanchez-Mazas 2005), and steady advances in Old Chinese reconstructions (Baxter 1992; Baxter and Sagart 1997; Sagart 1999; Zhengzhang 2003). Wang Feng's *Comparison of languages in contact: The distillation method and the case of Bai* (the revised version of his 2004 Ph.D dissertation) marries all these developments, while focusing on a language of considerable importance for a better understanding of Sino-Tibetan: Bai. The genetic affiliation of the Bai language has been disputed due to its prolonged contact history with Chinese. However, despite an overwhelming number of Chinese loanwords, most scholars see Bai as an independent Sino-Tibetan language (*cf.* Lacouperie 1887; Li 1937; Zhao 1982; Dell 1981; Lee and Sagart 1998; Matisoff 2003; van Driem 2001). In *Comparison of languages in contact: The distillation method and the case of Bai*, Wang postulates a set of Sino-Bai related words and on the basis thereof argues that the relationship between Bai and Chinese is due to inheritance from a common ancestor. As is evident from the title, Wang considers the major contribution of his book to be methodological. That is, he advances
a general method, the Distillation Method, for establishing the genetic affiliation of a language whose origins are unknown due to long and intensive contact with one or more other languages. This review accordingly focuses on the methodological aspects of Wang’s study.

The book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the Distillation Method, a new procedure in historical linguistics, designed to “exclude elements from horizontal transmission [i.e. borrowing], consequently obtaining reliable genetic evidence from vertical transmission [i.e. common inheritance] on the basis of language comparisons” (p. 1). The Distillation Method comprises three steps: (i) Intra-comparison; (ii) Inter-comparison; and (iii) Recognition.

Chapter 2 presents the first step. Intra-comparison is defined by Wang as “detection of corresponding lexical items across dialects of a language with which the proto-form of that language may be constructed” (p. 1). In connection to Bai, he uses data from nine Bai dialects to reconstruct their linguistic ancestor. In addition, he performs a subgrouping of these dialects using two phylogenetic algorithms, PAUP and PENNY.

Chapter 3 discusses the second step. Inter-comparison aims at detection of a set of corresponding lexical items across proto-languages with which the core of that language may be identified (cf. pp. 1-2). This procedure, according to Wang, allows him to stratify Sino-Bai related words in order to exclude layers of Chinese borrowings in Proto-Bai.

Chapter 4 deals with the third step, Recognition. In this chapter, Wang attempts to detect cognates and borrowings in the oldest layer of Sino-Bai and to assess their ratio based on the Inexplicability Principle and Chen Baoya’s (1996) Rank Theory. The Inexplicability Principle refers to “the inability to describe a recipient language in terms of the phonological system of the donor language” (p. 2). The “inexplicable elements” are then considered to be inherited from the ancestor language. Chen Baoya’s Rank Theory consists in distinguishing between a 100-word list of more basic and a 100-word list of less basic words. Chen then argues that