

Old Chinese “west”: *sn^ʰər

Masaki Nohara

Seikei University

This article aims to reconstruct the word “west” in Old Chinese phonology. In previous studies, since there was no sufficient evidence besides Chinese dialects, phonetic compounds, and phonetic loans, most scholars reconstructed its onset as *s-. One of the oldest dictionaries, *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字, includes two other written forms of 西 xī “west,” 𠂔 (Gǔwén 古文) and 𠂔 (Zhòuwén 籀文). This paper re-examines the reconstruction of the word 西 xī “west” and investigates the word 訊 xùn “to interrogate” seen in excavated documents. According to the *Shuōwén*, 訊 xùn also had another written form (𠂔 𠂔), which has the old form of 西 xī (𠂔). In other words, 西 xī and 訊 xùn must have had *Xiéshēng* 諧聲關係 connections at the time. Based on the resources from excavated documents such as oracle bone inscriptions and bronze scripts, 訊 xùn credibly has the character 人 rén as the phonetic element. This implies that 訊 xùn should have had the onset *sn- at the time; hence, it is concluded that the word “west” also had the onset *sn^ʰ- in Old Chinese as well.

Keywords: Old Chinese phonology, excavated documents, phonetic loan, preinitial *s-

1. Introduction

Sagart (2004: 69–76) investigated the Chinese words for the four directions, 東 dōng “east,” 南 nán “south,” 西 xī “west,” and 北 běi “north,” and also referred to the etymology of the words 東 dōng “east” and 西 xī “west.” As is well known, the word “west” is one of the most basic words in Old Chinese. We can find it even in oracle bone inscriptions written in the Shang dynasty. However, the reconstruction of the word “west” is still considered a controversial issue. This paper tries to re-examine this reconstruction by focusing on excavated documents.

In traditional studies of Old Chinese phonology, several types of evidence have been commonly used. First, as is well known, the vast majority of Chinese characters are phonetic compounds (Xíng shēng zì 形聲字). These phonetic compounds

consist of at least two parts, a phonetic element and a semantic element. For instance, the character 信 *xìn* “truthful” is composed of the semantic element 言 *yán* “speak, speech” and the phonetic element 人 *rén* “person.” 人 *rén* is thought to have represented the sound of 信 *xìn* at the time when the word 信 *xìn* was written. The phonetic series of 人 *rén* is given in Table 1:

Table 1. The phonetic series of 人 *rén*

	OC		MC		Meanings
人	* <i>nin</i>	>	<i>nyin</i>	>	<i>rén</i> person
信	* <i>snins</i>	>	<i>sinH</i>	>	<i>xìn</i> truthful
千	* <i>sqʰin</i>	>	<i>tshen</i>	>	<i>qiān</i> thousand
年	* <i>nʰin</i>	>	<i>nen</i>	>	<i>nián</i> year
身	* <i>ŋin</i>	>	<i>syin</i>	>	<i>shēn</i> body
仁	* <i>nin</i>	>	<i>nyin</i>	>	<i>rén</i> kind

The phonetic element and phonetic compound were not necessarily homophones (Karlgren 1923/1974: 17), but were homorganic. They share the same roots. For instance, all the words in Table 1 have the nasal onset **n*- (or **ŋ*-), the main vowel **i*-, and the coda **n*.

Second, phonetic loan, which is called Jiǎjiè 假借, has been considered a useful resource in Old Chinese phonology; see (1) and (2):

- (1) 吾何以知其然哉？

(Lǎozǐ《老子》第 57 章)
- (2) 虛(吾)可(何)以智(知)其然也？

(Guōdiàn Chǔjiǎn 郭店楚簡 Lǎozǐ《老子》甲本 30 號)

‘How do I know that it is so?’

Since these sentences correspond to each other, they must have the same (or similar) meanings. In Example (2), the character 虛 was borrowed to represent the word 吾 *wú* “I.” 虛 and 吾 *wú* are considered to have had homorganic sounds at the time.

In the following sections, we discuss the previous studies and summarize Sagart’s perspective (§ 2). Then, we investigate the word 訊 *xùn* “to interrogate” in § 3. 訊 *xùn* is related to 西 *xī* “west” in a phonological sense (see the annotation of *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字). In this paper, the Old Chinese reconstruction and Middle Chinese notation are basically based on Baxter & Sagart (2014).

2. Previous studies

2.1 The Xiéshēng connections of 西 xī “west”

In the *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字, which is one of the oldest dictionaries composed by Xu Shen 許慎 in A.D. 100, the word 西 xī “west” is annotated as follows:

- (3) 𠂔鳥在巢上。象形。日在西方而鳥棲，故因以為東西之西。凡西之屬皆从西。先稽切。棲，西或从木妻。𠂔，古文西。𠂔，籀文西。

‘A bird is on the nest. It is a pictogram. When the sun is setting in the west, birds go to their nests to rest. This is why it represents the word “west.” Every word related to 西 xī “west” has the element 西 xī. 先稽切 Xiān Jī Qiè. 棲 qī is an alternate form of 西 xī “west” and it has 木 mù and 妻 qī as a semantic element. 𠂔 is an old form (Gǔwén 古文) of 西 xī. 𠂔 is Zhòuwén 籀文 of 西 xī.’

The *Shuōwén* annotated that 西 xī has two other written forms in Old Chinese, Gǔwén 古文 “𠂔” and Zhòuwén 籀文 “𠂔”.

Based on the *Shuōwén*, at least five characters are thought to have had 西 xī as the phonetic element. The phonetic series of 西 xī is given in Table 2:

Table 2. The phonetic series of 西 xī

	Meanings	Middle Chinese
栖 (棲)	bird’s nest	<i>sej</i>
洒	wash, sprinkle	<i>sreaX</i>
晒	smile	<i>syinX</i>
茜	madder	<i>tshenH</i>
𨾏 (訊) ¹	interrogate	<i>sinH</i>
迺	then	<i>nojX</i>

As the *Shuōwén* annotated above, 棲 qī is the alternate form of 西 xī. We also can find the word 棲 qī in Old Chinese text such as the *Éryǎ* 爾雅, and it is also written as 栖 qī (xī) in other texts. Therefore, the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén* 經典釋文 *Éryǎyīnyì* 爾雅音義 *Shì gōng* 釋宮 gives an annotation that “栖 qī (xī) should be pronounced like 西 xī. There is an alternate form which is written as 棲 qī.”

It is still controversial whether the characters 西 xī and 迺 nǎi have *Xiéshēng* connections (諧聲關係) or not, since 迺 nǎi and 西 xī have different rhymes respectively, as 西 *-ər and 迺 *-əʔ.

1. 𨾏 is the old form (*Shuōwén* Gǔwén 說文古文) of the word 訊 xùn “to interrogate,” see § 3.

The *Shuōwén* was compiled in the Han dynasty (A.D. 100) and has been mainly used to reconstruct Old Chinese phonology for several decades by most scholars. See the main reconstructed forms:

Table 3. Old Chinese 西 xī “west”: Reconstructions compared

	西 “west”
Karlgren (1954)	*siər
Li (1971)	*siəd
Baxter (1992)	*sij
Zhengzhang (2003)	*suuul

These scholars all reconstructed singleton onset *s- for the word 西 xī, since the analysis of the *Shuōwén* does not always give us further evidence. There is not enough evidence within Chinese dialects either:

Table 4. The word “west” in Chinese dialects

	西 “west”
Běijīng 北京	[çi ⁵⁵]
Xī’ān 西安	[çi ²¹]
Sūzhōu 蘇州	[si ⁴⁴]
Wēnzhōu 溫州	[sei ⁴⁴]
Chángshā 長沙	[çi ³³]
Nánchāng 南昌	[çi ⁴²]
Méixiàn 梅縣	[si ⁴⁴]
Guǎngzhōu 廣州	[ʃei ⁵³]
Yángjiāng 陽江	[ʔvi ³³]
Xiàmén 廈門	[sai ⁵⁵]
Fúzhōu 福州	[se ⁴⁴]
Jiàn’ōu 建甌	[sai ⁵⁴]



(*Hànyǔ fāngyīn zìhuì* 漢語方音字彙 2003)

Based on these resources (including Middle Chinese), it had been appropriate to reconstruct *s-.

Chinese scripts have not historically been modified: however, it has been said that some glosses on the *Shuōwén* are not necessarily relevant to reconstructing Old Chinese. In the 20th century, however, large numbers of pre-Qin documents were unearthed around the Yangtze valley. These newly revealed documents are considered extremely useful for the study of Old Chinese. In the next section, we shall see the older characters for 西 xī.


2.2 西 xī in the oracle bone inscriptions and bronze scripts

In oracle bone inscriptions, the character 西 xī literally represents the word “west,” see in (4):





- (4) 西 xī in the oracle bone inscriptions
-  (西)土受年。Xī tǔ shòu nián (Jiǎgǔwén héjí 甲骨文合集 9742正)
 -  (西)方受年。Xī fāng shòu nián (Jiǎgǔwén héjí 甲骨文合集 33244)
‘The western land will have harvests.’



The forms of 西 xī in the oracle bone inscriptions look just like a “bird’s nest.” As mentioned above, the *Shuōwén* interpreted the word 西 xī as “A bird is on the nest. It is a pictogram.” Nonetheless, we were unable to find any character representing “A bird is on the nest.”

In the bronze scripts, the character 西 xī represents the direction “west” and the name of a person. We could not find the character 西 xī representing the meaning “A bird is on the nest” in the Bronze scripts either; see (5):

- (5) 西 xī in the bronze scripts
- 以 (西)至于堆莫。(Sǎnshì Pán 散氏盤) ‘go west and come to Gōngmò.’
 -  (Hóumǎ Méngshū 侯馬盟書) ‘The name of a person.’

The following diagram indicates the process of change for the forms of 西 xī:

- (6) The process of change for 西 xī
- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | → |  | → |  | → |  |
| Oracle bone inscriptions | | | | Bronze scripts | | |

Shuōwén Gǔwén 說文古文 “鹵” and *Zhòuwén* 籀文 “鹵” are similar to the forms in the bronze scripts,  and . Thus we can find the word “west” in the oracle bone inscriptions and the bronze scripts, whereas this evidence will not allow us to reconstruct it except for the singleton *s-.

2.3 New reconstruction

Sagart (2004: 72) reconstructed 西 xī as *s-nʰər.² In his paper, there are some notable descriptions. He gave at least four pieces of evidence in his paper; the phonetic series of 西 xī, the word 尼 ní “rest,” etymological evidence, and Sino-Tibetan cognates.

2. Sagart (2004) originally reconstructed it as *^as-níl. This paper is based on Baxter & Sagart (2014). Schuessler (2009: 283) also implied that 西 xī has *sn- onset (Schuessler did not reconstruct the pharyngealized onsets for the Type-A syllables).

First, Sagart followed Unger (1990: 60) and focused on the word 𪚩 (𪚩) *nǎi* “then.”³ 𪚩 *nǎi* is a variety of the word 乃 *nǎi* “then.” Surprisingly, we can find both words (𪚩 *nǎi* and 乃 *nǎi*) in oracle bone inscriptions, and 𪚩 *nǎi* seems to have 西 *xī* as a phonetic element; see (7) and (8):

- (7) 九日𪚩(𪚩)至。 (Jiǎgǔwén héjí 甲骨文合集 19449)
‘In nine days, then [...] will arrive.’
- (8) 𪚩(𪚩)唯是喪或(國)。(Máo gōng dǐng 毛公鼎)
‘Then it could destroy the country.’

The problem is that each rhyme differs respectively, 西 *xī* *-ər and 乃 *nǎi* *-əʔ. This is still an inconclusive problem, but as Baxter & Sagart (2014: 146–147) indicated, “Perhaps the apparent confusion of rhymes results from the occurrence of the adverb ‘then’ in an unstressed position.” In addition, it seems that the elements 西 *xī* in (7) and (8) differ from the original form of 西 *xī*, as in (4a). Although *Shuōwén* annotated that 𪚩 (𪚩) *nǎi* have 西 *xī* as the phonetic element, Dong (2004: 186–187) considered the annotation of the *Shuōwén* to be invalid.

Here is another phonetic compound that Sagart (2004: 72) observed. 哂 *shěn* “smile” has 西 *xī* as its phonetic element, and it has initial *sy-* in Middle Chinese. Based on the preceding studies, Middle Chinese *sy-* was derived only from Old Chinese initials *st-, *ʃ-, *ŋ-, *r-, *ŋ̊-, and *q^h-.⁴ That is why we are unable to reconstruct singleton initial *s- for 西 *xī*. Baxter & Sagart (2014: 147) pointed out that “Reconstructing *s-n̥- in 西 *xī* ‘west’ also accounts for how 西 *xī* can be phonetic in 哂 *shěn* < *synX* < ‘smile’; MC *sy-* cannot represent simply *s-, but can regularly reflect *ŋ̊-.”⁵

Here is another phonetic series the same as 西 *xī*, which is 信 *xìn* “truthful.” Although 信 *xìn* has been considered a semantic compound (Hùi yì 會意), 信 *xìn* is actually a phonetic compound and is often written as 𠂔 and 𠂔 in the unearthed texts such as bamboo slips in the Warring States Period. As you can see, 人 *rén*, 千 *qiān*, and 身 *shēn* are phonetics in them. 身 has initial *sy-* in Middle Chinese like 哂 *shěn*. 千 *qiān* and 身 *shēn* can also represent the word 仁 *rén* “kind.” The character 𠂔, which has 人 *rén* as the phonetic element, also represents the word 仁 *rén* “kind.” Therefore, we supposed that 人 *rén*, 千 *qiān*, 身 *shēn*, and 仁 *rén* have homorganic initials and rhymes in Old Chinese; see the reconstructed forms in Table 1.

3. Unger (1990: 60) reconstructed the consonant cluster for 西 *xī* based on the character 𪚩 (𪚩) *nǎi*.

4. See Bai Yiping [William H. Baxter] (2010: 161–178).

5. The problem is that 哂 *shěn* might not be old enough to reconstruct Old Chinese.

Second, Baxter & Sagart (2014: 147) noted that morphological evidence, “In terms of morphology, 西 *xī* < *s-n̥ər can be connected to the words meaning ‘stop’ or ‘rest’; *s- is the prefix forming oblique nominal from verb roots”; see (9):⁶

- (9) 尼 *n̥ər? > *nejX* > ní ‘to stop’ (intransitive?)
 尼 *n̥ər?-s > *nejH* > ní ‘to stop’ (transitive?); cf.
 柅 *n<r>[ə]r? > *nrijX* > nǐ ‘a stopper for carriages’
 西 *s-n̥ər > *s̥ər > *sej* > xī ‘(place for stopping:) west’
 棲 *s-n̥ər > *sej* > qī ‘bird’s nest’ (Mandarin qī is irregular)
 (Baxter & Sagart 2014: 147)

Sagart (2004: 72) also gives further comments seen in some late archaic or Middle Chinese dictionaries:

- (10) 尼，息也。(*Wūyīn jíyùn* 五音集韻) “rest, to rest”
 尼，安也。(*Guāngyǎ shìgǔ yī* 廣雅釋詁一) “peace, peaceful”
 尼，和也。(*Guāngyùn* 廣韻) “harmony, harmonious”
 尼者，止也。止亦定。(*Ēryǎ* commented by Guo Pu 爾雅郭璞注) “to stop”

Although 尼 ní seems to be related to words meaning “to rest, to stop,” the problem is that these notifications seen in (10) might not be old enough to reconstruct Old Chinese.

Third, what interests us is that Sagart (2004: 73) intriguingly noted the relationship between 西 *xī* and 東 *dōng* “east”. He said that “The meaning ‘rest, stop,’ which can be assigned to root *n̥l, is a good counterpart to the meaning ‘start moving,’ which the *Shuōwén* tells us underlies 東 *dōng* ‘east.’” The *Shuōwén* analyzes 東 *dōng* “east” as follows:

- (11) 東，動也。(*Shuōwén jiězi* 說文解字) ‘moving’

The following is a table comparing the words 東 *dōng* “east” and 西 *xī* “west.” It is considered that these two directions “east” and “west” relate to the idea of sunrise and sunset in Chinese languages as well.⁷

6. Sagart (2004: 72–73) also referred to 泥 ní in *Lúnyǔ* 論語. In *Lúnyǔ* 論語 *Zizhāng* 19 子張第十九, the word 泥 ní is used with the meaning “impeded, obstructed 不通也.” Lu Deming 陸德明 comments on this and gives the readings *nejH*. Therefore, Sagart (2004) reconstructed Shàng shēng 上聲 泥 ní as *^an̥l? (*n̥l?) by the *Jíyùn* 集韻 and reconstructed Qù shēng 去聲 泥 ní as *^an̥l?-s by the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén* 經典釋文. As for the word 柅 nǐ, he reconstructed the infix *-r- in noun, which marks double or multiple objects.

7. The *Shuōwén* also interpreted 東 *dōng* as “the sun is within a tree (日在木中),” although this annotation might not be valid. See also Buck (1949: 870–871).

Table 5. The words “east” and “west”

東 <i>dōng</i>	西 <i>xī</i>
*tʰung	*snʰər
east	west
start moving	stop, rest
sunrise	sunset

This paper agrees with the new reconstruction (*s-nʰər) for the word 西 *xī*. However, the evidence provided in previous studies was not strong enough. In the following section, we shall focus on further evidence to support their reconstruction.

3. The reconstruction of 訊 *xùn* “to interrogate”

In the late 20th century, a large number of documents were unearthed around the Yangtze valley and made public. In this section, I provide such further evidence in the reconstruction of the word 西 *xī*.

3.1 The history of the word 訊 *xùn* “to interrogate”

According to the *Shuōwén*, 訊 *xùn* “to interrogate” also has an old form (Gǔwén 古文), and it has 西 *xī* as a phonetic element; see (12):

- (12) 訊，問也。从言卂聲。𠂔 (𠂔)，古文訊从囟。 (*Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字)
 ‘訊 *xùn* means 問 *wèn* “ask.” 訊 *xùn* is composed of semantic element 言 *yán* “speech” and phonetic element 卂 *xùn* “fast”. 𠂔 (𠂔) is an old form (Gǔwén 古文) of 訊 *xùn*. The old form 訊 *xùn* is composed of 囟 *xī* (the old form of 西 *xī*).’

訊 *xùn* “to interrogate” is defined with the word 問 *wèn* “ask.” The *Shuōwén* gives the old form 𠂔 (𠂔); interestingly, it has the old form of 西 *xī* (囟). Therefore, the old form of 西 *xī* (囟) could be the phonetic element in this character 訊 *xùn*. This implies that 西 *xī* and 訊 *xùn* have *Xiéshēng* connections. In the next section, we shall see some examples in the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions.

3.2 訊 xùn in the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions

We can find the word 訊 xùn even in the oracle bone inscriptions as follows:

- (13) 貞: 勿訊。𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 (訊)
‘Tested: we should not interrogate.’
- (14) 庚戌卜: 賓貞: 其訊。𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 (訊)
‘On the Gēngxū day, Bīn tested: we might interrogate.’
- (15) 貞: 訊州妾得。𠄎 𠄎 (訊) 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎
‘Tested: we should interrogate whether we will be able to get slaves.’

Moreover, oracle bone inscriptions contain similar phrases, such as “王訊 The king asks (interrogates)” and “婦好有訊得 Fùhǎo asked (interrogated) whether you will be able to get or not.”

These characters are composed of two parts, 𠄎 kǒu “mouth” and 𠄎 rén “person,”⁸ and the person is bound with his hands behind his back. Therefore, most paleographers suppose that these characters are the original form of 訊 xùn, which means “to interrogate.” Besides these shapes, we can find other examples of 訊 xùn that have 絲 sī “silk” in itself; see (16):

- (16) 𠄎 (Jiǎgǔwénbiān 甲骨文編 279)

Scholars have indicated that this character shows that the person is bound with ropes, and so, 絲 sī “silk” actually means “ropes” here. We can find similar characters in bronze scripts:⁹

- (17) (多友)執訊廿又三人。 (Duōyǒu dǐng 多友鼎) 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎
‘Duōyǒu captured 23 enemies to interrogate.’
- (18) 公車折首百又十又五人，執訊三人。 (Duōyǒu dǐng 多友鼎) 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎
‘Chariot beheaded 115 enemies and captured 3 enemies to interrogate.’

The character 𠄎 has 𠄎 kǒu “mouth” and a person bound with ropes behind his back (𠄎). Under the person (𠄎), his feet are added.

8. 人 rén “person” is generally written as 人, whereas in these characters, it is written as kneeling on the ground like 𠄎.

9. 訊 xùn is a noun meaning “captive, prisoner” in Examples (17) and (18). In the Western Zhou bronze scripts, 訊 xùn has at least three meanings, “captive, prisoner,” “to interrogate,” and “to ask.” See Wang (2007: 36–38).

The words 執訊 *zhí xùn* seen in (17) and (18) are not only seen in many bronze scripts but also seen in Old Chinese texts like the *Shijing* 詩經.¹⁰ In the next section, we shall see other unearthed examples of the Warring States Period.

3.3 訊 *xùn* in the Warring States Period

As mentioned above, in the late 20th century, a large number of bamboo slips were unearthed around the Yangtze valley, and the older form of 訊 *xùn* was seen in these bamboo slips:

- (19) 競(景)平王就鄭壽, 𠂔之於廟... 鄭壽辭, 不敢答, 王固𠂔之。¹¹
 ‘The king Jǐngpíng came to Zhèng Shòu and asked him at the ancestral shrine. Zhèng Shòu excused himself from answering, but the king stubbornly persisted in asking him.’

𠂔 and 𠂔 actually represent the word 訊 *xùn*. These characters appear to have 言 *yán* “speech” and 係 *xì* “to tie” as the semantic elements.¹² Therefore, some scholars recognized it as 係. However, Su (2007) discerned that it has 人 *rén* “person” as the phonetic element – the same as 信 *xìn* “truthful” does – and he tried to describe the process of its change as follows:

- (20) 𠂔 → 𠂔 → 𠂔 → 𠂔 → 𠂔 → 𠂔 → 訊 Su (2007)

Based on Su’s description, 人 *rén* “person” changed to 千 *qiān* “thousand,” and 千 *qiān* changed to 𠂔 *xùn*. Aside from right or wrong, as described above, the character 訊 *xùn* did not comprise 係 *xì* “to tie” in the oracle bone inscriptions and bronze scripts (see (15) 𠂔 and (17) 𠂔). Hence, 係 *xì* “to tie” was not considered the primitive element for the character 訊 *xùn*. 係 *xì* itself had been used to represent the meaning “to bind someone” in the oracle bone inscriptions. Thus 人 *rén* and 絲 *sī* in the bronze scripts (𠂔) might be replaced by 係 *xì* in the Warring States Period because of their similar meanings:

10. “執訊獲醜” (*Shijing* 詩經 *Lù míng zhī shí* 鹿鳴之什 *Chūchē* 出車).

11. *Shànghǎi museum bamboo slips vol. 6* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書(六), *Píngwáng wèn Zhèngshòu* 平王問鄭壽.

12. Guo (2007).

- (21) 係 xì replaced 人 rén and 絲 sī



口 + 人

Oracle Bone
inscriptions



口 + 人 + 絲

Bronze scripts



言 + 係

Bamboo slips
in Chǔ



訊

Bamboo slips
in Qín

We supposed that 人 rén was the phonetic element until the Qín dynasty. Here is another example showing that 人 rén is the phonetic element in 訊 xùn:

- (22) 禹乃建鼓於廷，以為民之有謁告者𠂔焉。

(*Shànghǎi museum bamboo slips vol. 2 上博簡(二) Róngchéng shì 容成氏 22*)

‘The king Yǔ built the drum at the court so that people who wanted to inform him were able to beat (ask) it.’

𠂔 has been thought to have 亘 zhù as a semantic element and 千 qiān as a phonetic one.¹⁴ The question is what this character means exactly. Chen (2003) observed that this character must represent the word 訊 xùn by phonetic loan (Jiǎjiè 假借). We can find a similar structure in the Old Chinese text, as in (23):

- (23) 禹立諫鼓於朝，而備訊唉。 (Guǎnzǐ 《管子》 Huángōng wèn 桓公問)

‘The king Yǔ built the drum, which is called Jiàngǔ, at the court in order to prepare for people’s questions.’¹⁵

Chen (2003) also indicated that the sounds of 訊 xùn and 千 qiān are similar enough to be mutually borrowed. As noted above (Table 1), 千 qiān actually has 人 rén as its phonetic element even in oracle bone inscriptions as follows:

- (24) 𠂔 人 rén “person” (Jiǎgǔwén héjí 甲骨文合集 6177)

*nin > nyin > rén

- (25) 𠂔 千 qiān “thousand” (Jiǎgǔwén héjí 甲骨文合集 7330)

*sn̥ʷin > tshen > qiān

13. *Shuǐhǔdì Qínjiǎn* 睡虎地秦簡. Although we cannot tell whether the character in the *Shuǐhǔdì Qínjiǎn* is derived from the character in the oracle bone inscriptions, bronze scripts, and bamboo slips in Chǔ or not, it is highly probable.

14. The original annotation of *Róngchéng shì* 容成氏 stated that it is composed of 亘 zhù and 支 zhī, but Chen (2003) pointed out that 𠂔 is composed of 千 qiān.

15. 諫鼓 Jiàngǔ was built on the outside of the court for people who wanted to persuade the emperor. They could beat this drum to let the emperor know their will. 唉 ài means “to ask with surprise.”

Hence, most scholars reconstructed 千 qiān as the consonant cluster $*sn^{\text{f}}_1$. Based on these phonetic relationships, we supposed that 千 qiān, which is a part of the character 𠂔, must be the phonetic element instead of 人 rén, and it represents the word 訊 xùn, as Chen (2003) noted.

Thus we can identify 人 rén as the phonetic element for 訊 xùn and reconstruct 訊 xùn as $*snins$. As described above, the *Shuōwén* added the old form 訊 xùn (𠂔), and it had 西 xī as the phonetic element (鹵). Since 訊 xùn is reconstructed as $*snins$, 西 xī must share the same onset $*sn^{(i)}$ - as well; see Table 6:

Table 6. The reconstructions compared: “West” and related words

	OC		MC		Meanings
西	$*sn^{\text{f}}_1\text{ər}$	>	<i>sej</i>	>	xī west
𠂔 (訊)	$*snins$	>	<i>sinH</i>	>	xùn to interrogate
人	$*nin$	>	<i>nyin</i>	>	rén person
千	$*sn^{\text{f}}_1in$	>	<i>tshen</i>	>	qiān thousand

訊 xùn and 西 xī have different rhymes respectively. Perhaps the differences between them are dialectal. In *Lǎozǐ* 老子 and *Chǔcí* 楚辭, $*-in$ ($*-ir$) and $*-ən$ ($*-ər$) often rhyme together. And also, the old form of 訊 xùn (𠂔 = 𠂔) itself represents the word 迅 xùn “fast, strict” in bamboo slips as follows:¹⁶

- (26) 行正(政)𠂔(迅)強。
 (*Shànghǎi museum bamboo slips vol. 5* 上博簡(五) *Gūchéngjiāfù yī* 姑成家父 1)
 ‘(He) governed the country too strict and too hard.’

Lee (2010: 225–234) indicated that the Zhēn 真 and Wén 文 rhyme groups rhyme with each other in the Chǔ Bamboo slips and concluded this phenomenon reflects different layers of Old Chinese. Although it might be concluded that $*-in$ ($*-ir$) and $*-ən$ ($*-ər$) are merged into one in the Chǔ 楚 dialect, we do not have enough evidence to argue the point for now.

The following are the reconstructed forms of the words that have 西 xī as the phonetic element:

16. We also can find the character 𠂔 seen in *Xiāngbāng zhī dào* 相邦之道, slip no. 4 “如𠂔” in *Shànghǎi museum bamboo slips (vol.4)*. Although Meng (2005) indicated that this character represents the word 訊 xùn “to ask” based on the annotation of the *Shuōwén*, it is still considered a controversial issue. Other paleographers suggested that this character could be other words like 思 sī, 晒 shǎi, and 斯 sī. See also Chi (2007: 133–136) for details.

Table 7. The reconstructions compared: The phonetic series of 西 xī

	OC		MC			Meanings
西	*snʰər	>	<i>sej</i>	>	xī	west
栖 (棲)	*snʰər	>	<i>sej</i>	>	qī (xī)	bird’s nest
迺 (迺)	*nʰəʔ	>	<i>nojX</i>	>	nǎi	then
哂	*ŋənʔ	>	<i>syinX</i>	>	shěn	smile
茜	*snʰins	>	<i>tshenH</i>	>	qiàn	madder
洒 灑	*snrərʔ	>	<i>sreaX</i>	>	sǎ	to wash
訊 (訊)	*snins	>	<i>sinH</i>	>	xùn	to interrogate

As we argued earlier, since Middle Chinese *sy-* comes from Old Chinese *ŋ-, 哂 *shěn* must have had voiceless nasal *ŋ- at the time. Although we can find the character 洒 *sǎ* in the oracle bone inscriptions, they represent the name of a place only. In the *Shuihǔdì Qínjiǎn* 睡虎地秦簡, which was written in the Qín dynasty, we can find the character 洒 *sǎ* meaning “sprinkle”; see (27):

- (27) 洒以沙。 (*Shuihǔdì Qínjiǎn* 睡虎地秦簡 *Rìshū* 日書 *Jiǎzhǒng* 甲種 58b)
‘to sprinkle with sand.’

In the *Mǎwángdūi Bóshū* 馬王堆帛書, the character 西 *xī* represents the word 洒 *sǎ* by phonetic loan:

- (28) 取白茅及黃土而西(洒)之。
(*Mǎwángdūi Bóshū* 馬王堆帛書 *Wǔshíèr Bìngfāng* 五十二病方)
‘pick up the Báimáo and Huángtǔ to sprinkle them.’

As for the character 灑 *sǎ* “to wash, to sprinkle,” there is no character 灑 *sǎ* shown in the excavated documents. What interests us is that the *Shuōwén* annotated that 灑 *sǎ* means 汛 *xùn* “to wash, sprinkle.” Since the character 汛 *xùn* obviously has 汛 *xùn* as its phonetic element, it must be reconstructed as *snins just like the 訊 *xùn* we reconstructed above. It is concluded that both 洒 *sǎ* and 灑 *sǎ* meaning “to sprinkle” could have had the onsets *sn-.¹⁷ We still cannot account for how the words 迺 *nǎi* and 西 *xī* have *Xiéshēng* connections, and so we shall have to leave the question open for now.

17. Baxter & Sagart (2014: 57) pointed out that 洒 *sǎ* and 灑 *sǎ* have morphological relationships with the word 洗 *xǐ* “to wash” and reconstructed it as *[s]ʰərʔ. But I am not certain whether the word 洗 *xǐ* “to wash” and 洒 *sǎ* have morphological relationships.

4. Conclusion

The annotation of the *Shuōwén*, phonetic compounds (Xíng shēng zì 形聲字), and other evidence have been used for reconstructing Old Chinese phonology. However, this evidence might include elements that reflect late Old Chinese or early Middle Chinese. Besides these methods, Baxter & Sagart (2014: 83) also emphasized the importance of using the comparative method for reconstructing Old Chinese phonology. Although I totally agree with their thought, the comparative method is not necessarily useful for reconstructing the word 西 xī.¹⁸ As previously mentioned, a large number of excavated documents has been unearthed and published. These documents must reflect the language at the time. This paper focused on the word 訊 xùn seen in excavated documents, and it was related to the character 人 rén and 西 xī in a phonological sense. Although further studies will be needed to explain the rhymes between *-in (*-ir) and *-ən (*-ər), I can conclude that 西 xī and 訊 xùn must have had connections, both of them had the onset *sn^(ʰ)- in Old Chinese.

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18. The word “west” in Tibetan languages could be useful for reconstructing the word 西 xī in Old Chinese, but at least there is no effective evidence within Chinese dialects. See also Sagart (2004: 73–74).

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Author's address

Masaki Nohara
Faculty of Law
Seikei University
3-3-1 Kichijojikitamachi
Musashino-city, Tokyo 180-8633
Japan
noharam@law.seikei.ac.jp

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