

Beyond the mainstream: The contribution of Chinese to language evolution research

Elizabeth Qing Zhang*¹ Edward Ruoyang Shi ² Tao Gong³

*zqelizabeth@gmail.com, ¹Center for Language Evolution Studies, University Centre of Excellence IMSert, Nicolaus Copernicus University, ²Department of Catalan Philology and General Linguistics, University of Barcelona, ³Google

Language evolution research has been mainly focused on Indo-European Languages especially English, but other language families like Sino-Tibetan is also insightful. We will review the *Conference of International Evolutionary Linguistics (CIEL)* based in China and organized by Chinese scholars, and highlight the key contributions of studying Chinese to language evolution research.

The importance of Chinese in language evolution research

- As a member of the Sino-Tibetan family, Chinese could have gone through a distinct evolutionary trajectory from those from the Indo-European language family;
- As a typical tonal language, Chinese could shed light on the interface between the domain-general mechanism of sound processing and speech in evolution;
- The grammar of Chinese is fundamentally different from those of the Indo-European languages, which could reveal the evolution of grammaticalization from a different perspective;
- China has numerous dialects spoken at different part of the country which could be insightful for rudimentary evidence for different stages of language change;
- Language contact is so common in China that we can use empirical examples or computational simulation to account for the mechanisms of language change.

A review of CIEL

- Methods
 - a. We refer to journal paper about CIEL review published to gather detailed information (table 1)
 - b. Presentations fall in the five points mentioned above were summarized

CIEL	year	venue	working language	themes	inclusion in the review	reference
CIEL-1	2009	Guangzhou	Chinese	strongly focused on phonetics	yes	Wong, 2009
CIEL-2	2010	Tianjin	Chinese	strongly focused on phonetics	yes	Zhang, Mai & Wong, 2010
CIEL-3	2011	Shanghai	Chinese & English		no	
CIEL-4	2012	Beijing	Chinese & English	language and the brain, language as complex system, language and population evolution in China, vertical and horizontal transmission of language	yes	Wang, 2013
CIEL-5	2013	Hong Kong	Chinese & English	language and population evolution, language as a complex adaptive system, language and the brain, diachronic and synchronic study of language	yes	Li & Xia, 2014
CIEL-6	2014	Xiamen	Chinese & English	language as a complex adaptive system, language and the brain, vertical and horizontal transmission of language, language and population evolution in China, the ancestry of the Chinese language	yes	Gao & Jiang, 2015
CIEL-7	2015	Tianjin	Chinese & English	language evolution at the macro-, meso- and microscopic scales, genetic and archaeological evidence for language evolution, language and brain, diachronic and synchronic study of language, the origin of Chinese	yes	Chen & Peng, 2016
CIEL-8	2016	Bloomington	Chinese & English	particular cases of language change, neurolinguistics, theoretical models of language evolution, the evolution of human tool technology, modeling of the Han dian corpus of ancient Chinese documents	yes	Schoenemann, Peng & Port, 2017
CIEL-9	2017	Kunming	Chinese & English	the development of language, cognition and the brain, language contact and evolution, the origins of Chinese, diachronic and synchronic study of language, other language evolution related research	yes	Peng & Feng, 2018
CIEL-10	2018	Nanjing	Chinese & English		no	
CIEL-11	2019	Shanghai	Chinese & English		no	
CIEL-12	2021	Lanzhou (online)	Chinese & English	language and the brain, language contact, language development, diachronic and synchronic study of language	yes (personal participation)	
CIEL-13	2022	Jinan (online)	Chinese & English	diachronic and synchronic study of language, language contact, language and cognition, language and the brain, language development, aphasia, grammaticalization	yes (personal participation)	

Table 1: information about CIEL



Fei, C., & Gang, P. (2016). Report of the 7th International Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 44(1), 253–264.
Gang, P., & Yan, F. (2018). The 9th International Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 46(2), 443–453.
Li, G. & Xia, Q. (2014). REPORT OF THE 5 TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN EVOLUTIONARY LINGUISTICS. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 237–247.
Wang, F. (2013). Report of Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics (2012). *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 41(1), 246–253.
Schoenemann, P. T., Gang, P., & Port, R. (2017). The 8th International Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics: August 8–10, 2016, Bloomington, Indiana (USA). *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 45(1), 238–247.
Tianjun, G., & Juan, J. (2015). Report of the 6th International Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 43(1), 256–264.
Wang, S-Y. (1978) "The Three Scales of Diachrony," in *Linguistics in the Seventies: Directions and Prospects*, ed. B.B. Kachru (Urbana, Ill.: Dept. of Linguistics, University of Illinois, 63–75).
Wong, Y. W. (2009). Report: Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics I. Guangzhou, 2009. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 386–396.
Zhang, C., Mai, G., & Wong, Y. W. (2010). Report: The ninth Phonetic Conference of China (PCC 2010) And Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics II (CIEL-II), Tianjin, 2010. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 38(2), 418–439.

➤ Key points

- “Three time-scales of language evolution”—macrohistory, mesohistory and microhistory (Wang, 1978)
- The reconstruction of Sino-Tibetan family
- Migration and language contact in different cultural and social settings (e.g. Kra)
- The evolution of (Chinese) tones
- The origin/ancestry of Chinese language
- The formation of Chinese dialects
- The grammaticalization of Chinese structures

Conclusions

- Language evolution is interdisciplinary.
- Methods like theoretical argumentation, experimentation, and simulation are all necessary for better understanding how language evolved.
- Research on languages other than western mainstream is necessary.
- Research on Chinese provides much insights for language evolution.

Acknowledgement

We thank Li Lei for his insightful contributions to the discussions of ideas in this presentation.