Revisiting the nature of Sino-Korean readings: With some considerations on the role of Sino-Korean readings in the study of Chinese historical phonology

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This paper aims to revisit the nature of Sino-Korean reading system, one of the important materials for the reconstruction of the sounds of Middle Chinese. Much research has been devoted in the literature to identifying the nature of Sino-Korean (e.g. Pak 1971; Kono 1979; Lee 1994; Ito 2007; Eom 2008, 2015; Zhang 2008; Qian 2015; Shin 2015, 2017). Based on a critical review of previous studies, this paper provides a new analysis of some irregular Sino-Korean readings, which may shed light on understanding the role of Sino-Korean readings in the study of Chinese historical phonology.

First, in this study we explain some of irregular Sino-Korean representations as a result of different adaptation strategies. Previous studies of irregular Sino-Korean readings often regard those multiple representations as different historical layers, assuming that the same source form in Chinese must be adapted identically in Korean. This assumption, however, is challenged by modern loanword data, which provide persuasive evidence that the same source form in the source language can be adapted differently in the borrowing language.

Second, in some cases the same rhyme in the source language is represented differently in Sino-Korean according to the place of articulation. For those different representations that are in a complementary distribution, we tend to treat them as reflections of the same layer, rather than different layers.

Thirdly, we argue that some irregular representations in Sino-Korean can be explained as a result of sound change in Korean. Sino-Korean readings are not affected by sound change at the same rate. The readings in Early Middle Sino-Korean include a number of variants that reflect different stages of sound change, and thus some of the irregular readings can be accounted for by lexical diffusion.