Exercises on sharp and round sounds

Development of initials from Old Mandarin to Modern Standard Mandarin

In the phonological system of Old Mandarin, there were no such initials as j, q, x in Modern Mandarin Chinese. These palatal sounds were later developments in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Study the following two sets of data[[1]](#footnote-1).

Data set 1: “round sounds”

Traditionally, sounds like j/q/x are called “round sounds” because of their auditory perception of smoothness. The following characters are all “round sounds” in Beijing, but not necessarily so in other dialects. Please answer the following questions.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Beijing** | **Chengdu** | **Suzhou** | **Xiamen** |
| 京capital | tɕiŋ | tɕin | tɕin | kiŋ |
| 劍sword | tɕiɛn | tɕiɛn | tɕiɪ | kiam |
| 羣crowd | tɕhyn | tɕhyn | dʑyn | kun |
| 今today | tɕin | tɕin | tɕin | kim |

Questions:

1. List all the correspondences (focus on the initial first)
2. What are the reconstruction possibilities?
3. Choose one according to naturalness.
4. What is the condition of this sound change?

Data set 2: “sharp sounds”

The following characters are pronounced with j/q/x in Beijing. But they are actually different from data set 1. Please answer the following questions.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Character** | **Beijing** | **Chengdu** | **Suzhou** | **Xiamen** |
| 尖sharp | tɕiɛn | tɕiɛn | tsiɪ | tsiam |
| 箭arrow | tɕiɛn | tɕiɛn | tɕiɪ | tsiɛn |
| 酒alcohol | tɕiou | tɕiou | tsY | tsiu |
| 俊handsome | tɕyn / tsuən | tɕyn | tsin | tsun |

Questions:

1. List all the correspondences (focus on the initial first)
2. What are the reconstruction possibilities?
3. Choose one according to naturalness.
4. What is the condition of this sound change?
5. Why are these characters traditionally called “sharp sounds”

Questions on Data set 1 and Data set 2

1. What are the sources of j/q/x in Beijing?
2. What is the condition for these sound changes?
3. Based on the distinction between the round sounds and the sharp sounds, can you determine which one of the two sound change processes took place first?
4. Actually there is an alternative pronunciation of 俊tɕyn in Beijing, and it is [tsuən]. What does this show?

1. All pronunciations are taken from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University (北京大学中国语言文学系语言学教研室编) eds. 1962. 《汉语方音字汇》, 北京: 文字改革出版社. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)