

**International Conference on the Language(s) of Koguryō and the  
Reconstruction of Old Korean and Neighboring Languages**

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“**T**he International Conference on the Language(s) of Koguryō and the Reconstruction of Old Korean and Neighboring Languages” took place in Hamburg on September 23-24, 2005. The conference was hosted by the Center of Korean Studies at Universität Hamburg and cosponsored by the Koguryo Research Foundation. The one and a half day symposium featured nine presentations by linguists from Europe, the United States and Korea. The seminar room on the second floor of the Asia-Africa Institute held a full house of presenters, moderators, discussants and students with a common interest in the languages once spoken on the Korean peninsula and in the neighboring areas.

Although entitled “International Conference,” the character of the meeting was first described as a workshop. The set-up was less formal and more practical than that of a conference in the sense that speakers who did not feel ready to present a full-fledged paper were encouraged to contribute a summary of what they had in mind as a basis for discussion. Some of the contributions to the conference were skillfully translated by the organizers into English or Korean and all of them were compiled into a volume with proceedings, so that the presentations were easily accessible to the international audience.

In order to ensure fruitful discussions the number of invited speakers was deliberately kept small. The limitation on the number of participants indeed created an open atmosphere, free for anyone to enter the debate and contribute original or daring ideas. But the reverse of the medal was that the

cancellation of a number of guest speakers reduced the core of presenters to a bare minimum. In my opinion, the relatively small number of active participants occasionally deprived the debate of alternative viewpoints and made it more difficult to reach a state of the art. The preliminary conference schedule included promising titles by the professors Lee Sang Oak, Young Kyun Oh, Johannes Reckel, John Whitman and Theresa Case, but, unfortunately, they were not able to attend the meeting. Professor Choi Hee Su from Yanbian University in China contributed a paper called "Investigating Koguryŏ Language through Koguryŏ Culture" to the conference proceedings. Since the speaker was unavoidably detained, the audience was asked to read the paper later.

The primary purpose of the conference was to exchange knowledge and scholarship on the language(s) of Koguryŏ. The topic of the conference extended to the relationship of the Koguryŏ language(s) with Old Korean and with other neighboring languages. The greetings from President Kim Jung Bae of the Koguryo Research Foundation also defined a long-term goal, which is to establish the identity of the Korean nation and to defend the Korean history from distortion. With nationalism on the rise in Asia and elsewhere, it is important to prevent the proliferation of misinformation regarding Koguryŏ, its history, its culture, and its language(s).

We sometimes refer to the language of Koguryŏ as a single one, but the -s between parentheses in the conference title implies that this is not necessarily the case. The plural hints at a variety of Koguryŏ languages, but perhaps its interpretation differed from participant to participant. For some the -s could indicate that a number of place names on the vast Koguryŏ territory reflect not Koguryŏ, but other languages. For some it could refer to the dialectal varieties of Koguryŏ or to the different historical stages, Archaic and Old Koguryŏ. For others the plural could define Koguryŏ as a multilingual and multiethnic state. And still others would stress the parentheses or simply leave the plural out.

The organizers did a great job. Not only in finding a title to this conference that suited all tastes, but also in finding food, beverages and accommodations that satisfied our multi-cultural and multi-culinary expectations. Finding a generally accepted balance between time-management and

table-manners, between formal and informal discussions required watering the wine and making compromises. A consensus on the conference meals was almost as hard to reach as an agreement on the identification and classification of the language(s) under consideration, but Prof. Sasse, Prof. An and their team of colleagues at the Center for Korean Studies kept it all under control.

After the greetings from the President of the Koguryo Research Foundation, followed by some welcoming remarks by our host and head of the Center of Korean Studies in Hamburg, Prof. Sasse, the presentations began. In what follows I intend to report on the character and the content of the papers that were read and on how the presentations related to the opinions of other speakers. This report is based on my own observation and interpretation of what happened. Written by an active participant of the conference, it is subjective by its very nature.

Prof. Toh Soo-Hee from Ch'unghnam University in Korea set the ball rolling with a Korean presentation translated as "About Early Paekche Language mistaken as being Koguryō Language." He argued that *Chiri* 4, the record of the *Samguk sagi* that traditionally is believed to reflect Koguryō toponyms, in reality reflects Early Paekche language. He started from the geopolitical observation that the west-central part of the Korean Peninsula was Paekche territory until Koguryō forced the Paekche kingdom to shift southward in the fifth century. Stressing the strong evidential power of place names, he located the toponyms recorded in *Chiri* 4 on the map and based his conclusions on their distributional patterns. He found that the toponyms from *Chiri* 4 that can be situated in the west-central part of the Peninsula must reflect Early Paekche language, while those situated along the north and central east coast are Ye-Maek language and those distributed in the south-east reflect Silla language.

In his paper "Location and Linguistic Identification of the Koguryō Language" Prof. Christopher Beckwith from Indiana University in the US discussed the Koguryō language in space and time. He divided the Koguryō corpus into two historical stages, Archaic Koguryō and Old Koguryō and discussed the geographical distribution of the Koguryō toponyms. He agreed

with the first speaker that the toponyms in the west-central part of the Peninsula could reflect the language of the early Paekche kingdom. However, he was unwilling to treat Early Paekche as a separate language that is significantly different from the Koguryŏ language. According to Beckwith the language of the early Paekche kingdom is Puyŏ-Paekche, a dialect of Koguryŏ, along with some other regional varieties such as the Ye-Maek and the Okchŏ dialects. After its southward shift, two different languages were spoken in the Paekche society, Puyŏ- and Han-Paekche. As far as the linguistic classification of the Koguryŏ language is concerned, Beckwith thought that it is certainly related to Japanese. He rejected the idea that Koguryŏ is related to Korean or to any other Altaic language and, finally, he rejected the para-Japonic theory that the language of the toponyms reflects not Koguryŏ, but a sister language of Japanese-Ryukyu once spoken in southern Korea.

In his talk "Koguryŏ and Paekche: Different Languages or Dialects of Old Korean? The evidence from texts and neighbors," Prof. Alexander Vovin from the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the USA questioned Beckwith's viewpoints on the Japanese-Koguryŏic language family and on the bilingualism in the kingdom of Paekche. Skeptical about the reliability of toponyms as linguistic evidence, Vovin chose a different perspective than the previous speakers, namely textual evidence and loanwords. Presuming that Koguryŏ was spoken in Parhae after the fall of Koguryŏ, he expected to find Koguryŏ loanwords in Jurchen and Manchu. The Korean-looking words and grammatical morphemes in Jurchen and Manchu suggested to Vovin that the Koguryŏ language is some form of Old Korean and that the linguistic situation during the three Kingdoms period was more homogeneous than it is usually thought. Vovin further argued against Paekche bilingualism because the handful of preserved doublets for titles does not necessarily indicate the simultaneous existence of two different languages in one society. He concluded that Koguryŏ and Paekche are nothing but dialects of Old Korean.

Exploring the interface between ethnology and linguistics, Prof. Juha Janhunen from the University of Helsinki in Finland contributed a presentation titled "The Lost Languages of Koguryŏ." He proposed a number of premises concerning the linguistic and ethnic identity of Koguryŏ as a basis

for further developing our ideas. The premises pictured Koguryō as a multi-ethnic and multilingual state that used Chinese as a prestige language but had a dominant and dynastic language of its own. Janhunen found historical and geographical indications to identify the dominant language as Proto-Tungusic. He also connected Proto-Amuric, the ancestor of Ghilyak (Nivkh), with an old stratum of political and cultural dominance in the region of the former Koguryō territory. Janhunen was in agreement with Prof. Toh that the language of the Old Koguryō corpus of toponyms recorded from the central-west part of the Peninsula is not Koguryō, but Paekche. He classified this language as the peninsular sister language of Japonic, collaterally related to the lineage of Japanese-Ryukyū. He concluded with a rather pessimistic note that the chances of identifying the lost languages of Koguryō in a more detailed way are relatively low.

Prof. James Unger from the Ohio State University in the USA addressed the question “When was Korean First Spoken in Southeastern Korea?” On the basis of archaeological, anthropological and linguistic considerations, he rejected the idea that a form of Korean was spoken there before the fourth century. The Yayoi migration theory of Japanese linguistic origins suggested to Unger that a sister language of Japanese-Ryukyū was spoken in the outh-eastern area. The speakers of this para-Japonic language shifted to an early form of Old Korean around the third century. The *Samguk sagi* toponyms were taken as evidence that Japanese-like words were once used on the peninsula, but they were not interpreted as manifestations of Koguryō language. Unger agreed with Vovin that the languages of Koguryō, Paekche and Silla were dialects of Old Korean. As far as the classification of Koguryō as a form of Old Korean is concerned, among other possibilities, he did not exclude the possibility of a remote genetic relationship between Korean and Japanese or between Korean and Tungusic.

Dr. Stephan Georg contributed a presentation titled “Chips from an anti-Altaic workshop: Turkic \*z (r2) and Korean \*r in the newest version of the Altaic hypothesis.” He started by apologizing that this is a topic which only marginally touches upon the theme of the symposium. He did not add in what marginal way the languages of Koguryō were touched and did not mention whether a reflex of Korean \*r can be found in Koguryō. He did not explain in

what way Koguryō could stand in a relationship to Old Korean or to the neighboring languages which he refers to as Altaic. In fact, his paper did not mention the word “Koguryō” once. Instead he proclaimed how he wears the title “Anti-Altaicist” with pride and how he keeps up the opposition for those who believe that Japonic, Korean, Tungusic, Mongolic and Turkic are not genetically related. Although certainly relevant on an Altaic forum, I fail to see how this paper has contributed to the goal of the present conference, which is to join our forces in order to find out more about the languages of Koguryō and their relationship to Old Korean and the neighboring languages.

Feeling encouraged by the unexpected opportunity that I was given as a guest speaker, I presented my “comments on Japanese-Koguryōic comparative historical linguistics” that I initially submitted as a basis for discussion. Challenged by Prof. Beckwith’s recent book *Koguryō, the Language of Japan’s Continental Relatives*, I pointed out some difficulties that confront us when attempting to relate Koguryō to Japanese. When sifting the Japanese-Koguryō etymologies along the same criteria as I applied on the Japanese-Korean evidence in earlier work, I found that Japanese and Korean are relatively better relatable within the limits of the comparative method than are Japanese and Koguryō. This is not a matter of the time depth that separates them; it is a matter of the accessibility of the Koguryō data. If we are willing to accept Beckwith’s stance that the linguistic evidence is strong enough to relate Japanese and Koguryō, we must *a fortiori* agree with studies such as Samuel Martin’s *Lexical Evidence Relating Korean to Japanese* (1966) and John Whitman’s *The Phonological Basis for the Comparison of Japanese and Korean* (1985).

Prof. Song Ki Chung from Seoul National University in Korea contributed “Some Observations on the Chinese Characters Used to Write Korean Words during the Three Kingdoms Period.” He reviewed the ways in which Chinese writing can be used to represent a foreign language in general and to transcribe Korean in particular. Prof. Song took an agnostic stance as to whether the languages of the three kingdoms were different languages or different dialects of a single language. However, the title of his presentation suggests that he regards the languages of Silla, Paekche and Koguryō as linguistic varieties of a common Korean source. He concluded

his presentation with a statistical analysis of the number of words in the Old Korean record and he calculated character frequencies. He provided an appendix of Koguryō vocabulary in which the Chinese characters used to write the Koguryō words are read with the modern Sino-Korean readings.

Prof. An Jung-Hee from Universität Hamburg in Germany delivered an unscheduled but welcome presentation entitled “Revisiting Negation in the Kyunyō-Hyangga and a New Interpretation.” She meticulously examined Chinese characters or character clusters used for negation in the eleven *hyangga*, recorded in the biography of the priest Kyunyō. These verses are written in the early Koryō period, but they are considered to reflect Silla Old Korean. Her contribution was not a phonological, but a syntactical study. Looking into the graphic representation of the texts, she analyzed the negational morphemes according to their distributions, their combinations and the syntactical circumstances in which they occur. On the basis of this philological research, she was able to correct some previous erroneous interpretations of the Silla verses.

As a conclusion, it is clear that the question as to what languages were spoken in Koguryō has no simple answer. The same is true for the question about the relationship of Koguryō to Old Korean and to the neighboring languages. The academic debate was engaging in a way that differences in opinion were expressed freely but respectfully. Our disagreement included various aspects of the problem such as the reliability of toponyms as linguistic evidence (Toh vs. Vovin); the question whether the *Samguk sagi* toponyms reflect Koguryō language (Toh, Janhunen, Unger vs. Beckwith), the interpretation of the Chinese characters underlying the toponyms; the representation of Koguryō as a monolingual or a multilingual state (Vovin vs. Janhunen); the description of Koguryō as a dialectal variety of Old Korean or as an unrelated language (Vovin, Unger, Song vs. Beckwith); the question of bilingualism in Paekche (Vovin vs. Beckwith), the nature of the Koguryō-Japanese relationship (Vovin vs. Beckwith), the former use of para-Japonic in the southeastern part of the peninsula (Beckwith vs. Janhunen, Unger); the overall linguistic classification of the Koguryō languages (Beckwith vs. Robbeets) and the accurate application of the methodology of historical linguistics.

For all the differences, we would probably agree that there was a Koguryŏ kingdom where at least one dominant, now extinct language was used and that we can call that language Koguryŏ. As Koguryŏ spread its influence geographically and culturally, language must have been involved too. The Three Kingdoms Period is marked archaeologically by monumental tomb burials, but, unfortunately the languages of Silla, Paekche and Koguryŏ are not so well preserved. The data that are left to identify Old Korean and Koguryŏ are scarce, fragmentary and speculative, but thanks to careful philological studies such as the ones presented during the conference, it is not impossible to reconstruct some phonological, morphological and syntactic features. As for the relationship of Koguryŏ with neighboring languages, Literary Chinese was imported as a prestige language, but there is no reason to assume that Chinese was spoken by the masses, that it was the actual dynastic language or that it stands in a close genetic relationship to the dominant language of Koguryŏ. The toponyms recorded in the *Samguk sagi* show that Japanese-like words were used on the former territory of Koguryŏ. Whether they are due to borrowing, substratum influence or common ancestorship, we also find similarities between Koguryŏ and the languages of Silla and Paekche, Korean and Tungusic, which are unlikely to be the result of sheer chance.

The presentations offered at the conference represented informed and balanced scholarship. A healthy balance was maintained between attempts to identify the Koguryŏ language as such and studies that compared Koguryŏ to neighboring languages. Careful philological studies of individual words in individual texts of individual languages and broader comparative approaches crossing linguistic boundaries successfully worked in tandem in an attempt to demystify the Koguryŏ language(s). The misinformation regarding Koguryŏ's ancient past threatens our understanding of history and it threatens peaceful coexistence in East Asia. Defending the truth implies researching all the facts that can throw a light on Koguryŏ's past. These facts are spread over multiple disciplines such as history, archaeology and — last but not least — linguistics. What is true for the evidence in any other discipline, also goes for Koguryŏ historical linguistics: “what is not looked for will not be found.”