

RETURNING THE HISTORY

(Lost Languages of Ancient Korea)

Why study dead languages? Why study ancient languages, ancient monuments, ancient writing and literature? If we do not know how the ancient people, how our ancestors (predecessors) lived, how they thought, what they dreamed about, then we will not be able to understand the picture of the world that existed among the ancient peoples in those days, we will not be able to understand the cultural heritage they left us. From this point of view, the research and study of languages (and linguistic phenomena) of states that appeared and died out at different stages of the development of Korean civilization is of particular interest.

When talking about the beginning of statehood in Korea, the first thing referred to is the state of Choseon (2333-108 BC), or Ancient Choseon, as it is called today. We do not know who the Choseon people were at the genetic level and what language they spoke. There is little written evidence and the general information that we have regarding the Ancient Choseon is mainly based on myths. The most famous of them is the myth of *Tan Gun*, the divine founder of the state. The first manifestations of the proper Korean tribes date back to the turn of our era. They united into the states of *Buyeo*, *Koguryeo*, *Baekche*, *Silla*. Historically, all the states were focused on the culture (including writing) of China, so they were able to leave samples of their own words on paper, allowing us to understand the nature of their language, ethnic history and origins.

The study of Korean vocabulary generated by people living together in one state – United Silla (668-935), represents the historical and cultural interest of exceptional importance. Hyangga helps to shed light on the mystery of the language of this period. Its detailed de-encryption would make it possible to take a fresh look at the language of the Koryeo era (935-1392), which forms a direct path to the medieval Korean language imprinted in monuments written with the Korean national alphabet.

The first decryption of old Korean records began to take shape in Japan at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The main principle that was applied by the researchers was to compare the Chinese

fragments of the records with the corresponding Korean (Buyeo, Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla) parts. Based on this, they identified a number of ancient Korean words, some of which later turned out to be incorrect. Based on the experience of the Japanese, in the 60-70s of the 20th century decryption work unfolded in Korea. Thanks to the efforts of many scholars, the “Japanese list” of the words was supplemented by newly reconstructed units.

In the early 2000s, in connection with the issue of “History Textbooks for Chinese Schools”, the Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla language heritage caused the emergence of new works on this issue (Toh Soo Hee, Choi Nam Hee, Kim Yeong Hwang, K.I. Beckwith and others). However, the interpretation of Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla lexemes in them, like in all previous studies, were rather weak, incomplete, and contained numerous serious errors. Particularly strange are the reconstructions conducted by K.I. Beckwith, an American linguist. In general, all Proto-Korean lexicographic experiments not only failed to raise the topic of the origins of the Korean language to the desired depth, but also made an understanding of the languages of Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla almost impossible.

There are several reasons for this. First, the writing itself, in which the material that must be reconstructed was recorded. The writing system invented by the Chinese is ideographic, but the most important feature of ideographic writing is that the phonetic organization of the word, hidden behind the hieroglyphic sign, is closely connected with the picture (ideogram). It is sometimes very difficult to determine which side – semantic or phonetic – is borrowed when writing a particular word and this is the main reason for the occurrence of significant differences in their interpretation. The second and very serious problem that attracts attention in historical linguistic studies is that the Chinese hieroglyphic writing does not indicate accurately and clearly the modern pronunciation of hieroglyphs, or those changes that have occurred over the centuries in the sound forms of the words they express. Meanwhile, acknowledgment and consideration of the sound changes that took place at different stages of development, make it possible to identify the real sound of words in the languages

of Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla and make a break-through to their vocabulary. Unfortunately, the rule of historical approach is often neglected by both Korean and foreign researchers, which greatly devalues the results of their work. The final reason being that the reliability of the conclusions should be verified by comparative data (analogies from other languages). But this principle is also not always maintained, which leads to big errors in the proposed etymologies of preserved words and names.

Reading and understanding the oldest Koguryeo, Baekche, Silla records is one of the most important tasks of Korean studies. Deciphering the old Korean scripts is the starting point for a re-evaluation of the Old Korean language. In addition to a purely scientific interest – to reveal new linguistic material to the world, such work would also pursue a practical, down-to-earth goal – to show that the inhabitants of the states of Koguryeo, Baekche and Silla were just the same Koreans as their modern descendants after 1500 years. And the only real criterion to prove this is their language. If in the course of our acquaintance with this language we find indications of its Altaic origin, then Koreans, or rather their ancestors – Koguryeo, Baekche and Silla people will occupy a special position in the Altaic world: they will turn out to be, perhaps, the first group of Altai people who came out of pre-literal darkness.

We note another important fact related to the proposed topic. Since the beginning of the XXI century, which created the prerequisites for the birth of a new, global existence of mankind, new horizons of cooperation between various communities have been opened. The path to them lies both through associations in populous collectives, such as the EU, as well as the integration of individual members of these unions among themselves. Common origin, common history, common genetic memory – this is the knot that can connect and hold together individual nations and countries. It becomes one of the most urgent and important tasks that science, such as ethnogenesis, gives mankind. And one of the sources of ethnogenetic research, of course, is language.