

Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2020 Semester

“The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (12)

Title: Exploring Japanese Language: From East Asia to Eurasia

For the 12th Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, we invite Professor Shun-Yi Chen, from the Center for Japanese Studies at Chinese Culture University, to share his research results on exploring Japanese language. Professor Chen’s speech consist of two parts: the first part explores the pronunciation of Chinese characters in Japanese (Japanese *Kanji*) and its relations with the composition of words and the second part discusses the similarity between Japanese and Hebrew.

Professor Chen indicates that the pronunciation of Japanese *Kanji* is different depending on when they were introduced to Japan. There are different types including *Go-on* (呉音, “sounds from the Wu region”), *Kan-on* (漢音, “Han sound”), and *Tō-on* (唐音, “Tang sound”). *Kan-on* refers to sounds of *Kanji* from Chang’an in Tang dynasty which were introduced with Japanese missions to Tang and Sui China. *Go-on* refers to sounds of *Kanji* from Southern China which were introduced via the Korean Peninsula in the 5th and 6th century. *Tō-on* refers to sounds of *Kanji* introduced after Song dynasty, while *So-on* were introduced in Yuan, Ming Dynasty. Most *Tō-on* and *So-on* were Buddhist terms. Here are some examples of different sounds: 行政 *Gyōsei* (ぎょうせい) is *Go-on*; 銀行 *Ginkō* (ぎんこう) is *Kan-on*.

Professor Chen also points out that since the pronunciation of *Kanji* were introduced from China, they must follow the rule of the pronunciation in Chinese. From the pronunciation of Chinese characters in Taiwanese and Chinese, the pronunciation of Japanese *Kanji* can be roughly inferred. In principle, when Chinese characters have the same pronunciation in Chinese, they might also have the same pronunciation in Taiwanese and Japanese.

Professor Chen explains the rules of *Sokuon* (促音), which is derived from the checked tone in Chinese (like P, T, K). There are three types:

(1) T checked tone (*Chi* ち・*Tsu* ツ): When T meets H, T, K *Gyō* (行, columns), there will be *Sokuon* (H sounds turns to P sounds). For example, 八 (*Hachi*, はち)+本 (*Hon*, ほん) → (*Happon*, はっぽん).

(2) K checked tone (*Ki* キ・*Ku* ク): When K meets K *Gyō*, there will be *Sokuon*. For example, 学(*Gaku*, がく)+校 (*Kō*, こう) → (*Gakkō*, がっこう).

(3) P checked tone: Usually comes with the sound of U. Only few cases, Chinese characters like “十、入、雜、甲、納” in the table of the *Jōyō Kanji* (常用漢字, “regular-use Chinese characters”) left. For example, *Juppon* (十本, じゅっぽん), *Nisshō* (入声, にっしょう).

Regarding the rules of *Hatsu-On* (撥音), the sounds like ㄅ (*An*), ㄆ (*En*) in Chinese pronounce “N (ん)” in Japanese, such as words 安 (*An*, あん), 陳 (*Chin*, ちん). The sounds like ㄅ (*Ang*) and ㄆ (*Eng*) in Chinese pronounce “I (い)” or “U (う),” such as 長 (*Chō*, ちょう)・正 (*Sei* せい, *Shou* しょう).

Except for those special mora (特殊拍, *Tokushuhaku*) and phone (单音, *Tan-on*), the second mora in *Tan-on* of the Japanese *Kanji* usually pronounce “I (い)” or “U (う).”

In the second part, Professor Chen shares the recent scholars’ findings concerning the similarity between Japanese and Hebrew. Scholars have discovered that many Japanese customs and cultures are similar to ancient Sumerians culture and Judaism. Therefore, there is the hypothesis of “the Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theory.” “The Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theory” is a set of theories developed by the Scottish missionary Norman MacLeod for the convenience of mission by putting forward the concept that the Japanese people were the main part of “the Ten Lost Tribes” of Israel. However, the current appraisal results found that the genes of the Japanese are not the same as those of the Jews. This is a strong evidence that denies the theory. Historians often hold a cautious or disapproving view to “the Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theory.”

From a linguistic point of view, however, why two languages that are 9,000 kilometers apart have such accidental similarities. For example: the relationship between the “Kiku no Monsho (菊の御紋, the Chrysanthemum Seal) and the ancient Eurasian civilization (Herod’s Gate in the north of Jerusalem), people can use Hebrew to pronounce “the first Emperor Jimmu,” the Japanese “Tengu” (天狗, Heavenly Dog) is similar to things that the Israelis wear when worshipping. Eiji Kawamorita presented many examples in *Nihon gengo kōkogaku* (日本言語考古学, Japanese Language Archaeology) and *Nihon heburu shiika no kenkyū* (日本ヘブル詩歌の研究, Study of Japanese Hebrew poetry) to prove that Japanese is similar to Hebrew.

Professor Chen concludes that from a linguistic point of view, there is no doubt that the “*Kango* (漢語, the Japanese vocabulary that originated in Chinese)” came from China and therefore, the pronunciation of Japanese *Kanji* pronunciation can be inferred from Chinese and Taiwanese to a certain degree. On the other hand, the incredible similarity between “*Wago* (和語, native Japanese words)” in Japanese and Hebrew, which are thousands of miles apart, that seem to violate the principle of linguistic arbitrariness. However, more objective studies are needed to confirm whether Japanese and ancient Hebrew are directly related.

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