

International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022
Series Lectures (16): “Asian Community: The Construction and
Transformation of East Asiaology”
Topic: Exploration of Japanese Language –From East Asia to Eurasia–

For the 16th lecture of the Eurasia Foundation International Lecture 2022 of Chinese Culture University, Professor Chen Shunyi, the Chair of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature of our university, was invited to give a speech entitled “Exploration of Japanese Language –From East Asia to Eurasia–.” Where did the nation of Japan and the language of Japanese come from? There is no conclusion yet. In particular, which language family does Japanese belong to? It has always been the focus of discussion among linguists.

Japanese is composed of “Wago (和語)” from native Japanese, “Kango (漢語)” from China, and loanwords from other languages in the world. Professor Chen’s speech first analyzed the pronunciation of “Kango” in Japanese, and the second half focused on the comparison between “Wago” in Japanese and Hebrew to explore the relationship between the two languages.

Pronunciation Features of “Wago” and “Kango”

Professor Chen pointed out that depending the time entering Japan, the pronunciation of Chinese characters in “Kango” in Japanese are different, and there are “Go-on (吳音),” “Kan-on (漢音),” “Tō-on (唐音),” and other types. “Kan-on” refer to the sounds near Chang'an in the Tang Dynasty, which were introduced into Japan in large numbers by envoys sent to the Sui Dynasty and Tang Dynasty. “Go-on” is the sound of Wu State in southern China, and it was introduced to Japan via the Korean Peninsula in the 5th and 6th centuries. “Tō-on” also known as “Sō-on,” was introduced to Japan after the Song Dynasty, and most of them are Buddhist terms. For example, the word “hsing (行)” can be read as “Gyou (ぎょう)” in “Go-on” (such as: administration (行政ぎょうせい)), “Kou (こう)” in “Kan-on” (such as: Ginkou (銀行ぎんこう)) and “An (あん)” in “Tō-on” (such as Angya 行脚あんぎゃ)

In addition, Professor Chen pointed out that since the pronunciation of Chinese characters was introduced from China, it must be regulated by the pronunciation of Chinese characters. From the sounds of Chinese characters in Taiwanese and Chinese, the sounds of Chinese characters in Japanese can be roughly deduced. In principle, the Chinese pronunciation is the same, the Taiwanese pronunciation is also the same, and

accordingly the Japanese pronunciation is also the same.

Then, Professor Chen explained the pronunciation rules of Japanese special sounds, “sokuon (促音)” and “Hatsuon (はつおん 撥音).” Sokuon (促音) is a special sound that come from the integration of the “checked tone” in Chinese (pronunciations of “P,” “T,” “K”), such as Natto (納豆なっとう), Happan (八本はっぼん), Gakko (学校がっこう), etc. The pronunciation rule of the Hatsuon is the Chinese pronunciation of “ㄛ (an),ㄣ (en),” and Hatsuon refer to pronunciation “ん” in Japanese in principle, such as Ann (安あん) and Chin (陳ちん). In addition to the above-mentioned special beats and monophonic sounds, the sounds of Chinese character in Japanese with monosyllabic 2-syllable are either pronounced い (i) or う (U).

Similarities Between Japanese and Hebrew

There are uncanny similarities between the two languages, Japanese and Hebrew. Some scholars have discovered that Japan has many customs and cultures that are similar to ancient Sumerian culture and Judaism, so there is a so-called “Japanese-Jewish common ancestor theory” hypothesis. The “Japanese-Jewish Common Ancestry Theory” is a set of theories summed up by the Scottish missionary Norman McLeod, for the convenience of his missionary work. He proposed the concept that the Japanese are the “lost ten tribes” of the Jewish people. However, the current identification results have found that the genes of the Japanese and the Jews do not have the same markers, and historians also hold a cautious attitude toward the theory or consider it draw wrong conclusions by false analogy.

Professor Chen is also skeptical about this theory, but from the perspective of linguistics, it is really inconceivable why two languages that are 9,000 kilometers apart have such accidental commonalities. For example: the relationship between the Japanese Emperor (Imperial chrysanthemum emblem 菊の御环) and ancient Eurasian civilization (Herod’s Gate north of Jerusalem); Hebrew can read the meaning symbolized by the name of the first Emperor Jinmu; Japan’s Tengu is the same as Israel items that people wear when they pray. Kawamorita Eiji (川守田英二) put forward many examples in his research *Japanese Speech Archeology* (日本言語考古学) and other works, including

similarities in words, similar pronunciation, the translation of the Japanese national anthem in Hebrew, and the meaning of the lyrics of some local folk songs, etc. These demonstrate that Japanese is quite similar to Hebrew in many ways.

Professor Chen's conclusion is that from a linguistic point of view, the "Kango" in Japanese is undoubtedly transmitted from China, so the pronunciation of Chinese characters in Japanese can be inferred from Chinese and Taiwanese to some extent. However, "Wago" in Japanese and Hebrew, which is thousands of miles away, have so many inconceivable commonalities, which seems to violate the principle of language arbitrariness. As for whether Japanese and ancient Hebrew were directly related, more objective research is still needed to confirm.

(Web link: <https://eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/index.php>)

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