



**Review: Christopher I. Beckwith (2004) Koguryo, the
Language of Japan's Continental Relatives: An
Introduction to the Historical-Comparative Study of the
Japanese-Koguryoic Languages with a Preliminary
Description of Archaic Northeastern Middle Chinese**

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Koguryo, the Language of Japan's Continental Relatives: An Introduction to the Historical-Comparative Study of the Japanese-Koguryoic Languages with a Preliminary Description of Archaic Northeastern Middle Chinese. By Christopher I. Beckwith. Brill's Japanese Studies Library, vol. 21. Leiden: Brill, 2004. 274 pages. \$124.00 cloth.

This volume is an attempt to recover the ethnolinguistic history of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo/Koguryō (henceforth Koguryo), recently brought to the attention of the public by a politico-historical controversy. It focuses on the reconstruction of the Koguryo language and its relations to other languages, which will also be the main object of this review, but also encompasses connected subjects such as Chinese historical phonology, the origins of the Japanese language and people, and the Altaic theory and even devotes a whole chapter to various broader linguistic issues.

Beckwith proceeds in this volume to a philological investigation of the “Old Koguryo” (OKog) toponyms recorded in the twelfth-century Korean history *Samguk sagi* and also takes a look at the fragments of the “Archaic Koguryo” language (AKog) found in older Chinese chronicles. Interpreting these transcriptions in Chinese phonograms through his personal version of Chinese historical phonology, Beckwith gives then a reconstruction of the phonological system of his OKog, as well as 139 Koguryo words, out of which he identifies about a hundred cognates with Japanese.

Beckwith concludes that the Koguryo and Japanese languages are genetically related, as already assumed by many scholars, but rejects the Korean and Altaic connections. Actually, Beckwith dismisses the Altaic theory as a whole, even the convergence theory, by denying the very existence of an Altaic typology. For Japanese, he rejects all forms of Altaic, Korean, Austronesian, and, of course, the mixed language theories. In his view, Japanese and Koguryo are in “an exclusive close genetic relationship” (p.183).

Beckwith then tries to back up his theory with historical background and discusses at length the history and the archeology of Northeast Asia. Arguing for lexical and typological similarities with the Sino-Tibetan languages, he hypothesizes about ancient contacts and concludes that the Proto-Japanese-Koguryoic homeland was located in Southern China or Southeastern Asia. The Japanese-Koguryoic speakers would have migrated to the North, some of them remaining on the continent to form the

Puyo-Koguryoic people in Manchuria and Korea, others moving by sea to Southern Korea and to the North of Kyūshū, where they became the ancestors of the Japanese people.

Unfortunately, Beckwith's ambitious work is heavily flawed in many aspects, of which I will provide only a few examples. First, I deplore the general opacity of his methodology, since most of his reconstructions are his own, quite different from the ones adopted in mainstream Chinese (Baxter 1992; Sagart 1999; Starostin 1989, 1998-2003) and Japanese (Martin 1987) historical phonology, and it is unclear how they were arrived at. His comparisons thus use reconstructions that are too often problematic, sometimes simply incorrect, or, worse, just circular.

For instance, the mysterious Proto-Japanese (PJ) *mika < *miak 'eye' (p.157) is simply teleological: the Hateruma form "miŋ" (said ad hoc to go back to *miŋa) quoted as evidence is simply the regular reflex of Proto-Ryukyuan *me, with a lexicalized nasal suffix (Martin 1987:74-75; Oyler 1997). Similarly, the reconstructions of PJ *rmaj > ume 'plum' and *rmey > umi 'sea' (pp.146-47) are completely *ad hoc*. They are supported by neither internal nor comparative method, and such consonant clusters have never been posited for PJ. The Yaeyama form "mi" quoted as evidence (p.147) cannot be found in Hirayama's reference dictionary (1988:139-40; Yaeyama dialects forms are recent loans from mainland dialects since plums don't grow there). Anyway, both words cannot be reconstructed with the same onset since *umi* doesn't exhibit the m-/ø-alternation of *mume/ume* in Japanese, and both words have completely different Ryukyuan reflexes (Shuri ŋmi 'plum' vs. ŋumi 'sea'). Their putative Chinese sources don't exhibit an initial *r- in standard reconstructions either: 'plum' *mī (Baxter), *mā (Starostin); 'sea' *hmi? (Baxter), *smā? (Starostin).

Many words are also cut down into pseudo roots, although there is no internal evidence for a morphological boundary: the only argument for those segmentations seems to be that they make the comparisons look better. For example, the reduction of OJ *naga* 'long' to *na (p.133), *taka* 'high' to *ta (pp.136-137), or *toporu* 'to pass through' to *tō* (p.137, oddly reconstructed as *təwŋ) and their comparison with OKog cannot be accepted without justification.

It seems that all the above "reconstructions" are motivated only by the urge to provide them with an etymology: external comparison is privileged in detriment of

internal evidence. Other quite irregular correspondences and derivations can also be found, with irregular forms too easily dubbed as “dialectal”, and, for some of them, the author even confesses that “these phonological changes are almost completely unexplained” (p.149).

Beckwith’s comparisons also include a significant number of cases with questionable or unrealistic semantics. I am thus not convinced that OKog *tśü ‘to shoot with a bow’ should be compared with OJ *tōbu* (reduced *ad hoc* to *tō) ‘to fly’ despite Beckwith’s claim that simply “arrows fly” (p.140). The most puzzling comparison is found on p.143, where OKog *yatsi ‘mother’ is said to be cognate with OJ *yatukwo* ‘slave’.

I also find unpersuasive the too-easy and too-quick dismissal of the non-Japonic etymologies for Koguryo words (Itabashi [2004] provides a much more thorough list of Altaic, Korean, and even Austronesian etymologies by various authors). Too quick is also the conclusion that the language underlying the toponyms represents the actual language of Koguryo and the rejection of opposite views. The exact nature of the source language of the place names remains problematic in spite of Beckwith’s arguments, and this has led some scholars to label it cautiously “pseudo-Koguryo”.

In addition, many of the phonetic fonts are misprinted, and the mixing of IPA characters and conventional transcriptions can be in some cases confusing.

In conclusion, Beckwith’s book is a valuable attempt to have a new look at the Koguryo fragments, within the broader scale of a global ethnolinguistic study of Ancient Eastern Asia. Nevertheless, its too many methodological shortcomings forbid us to accept Beckwith’s reconstructions and conclusions, although it is quite clear that some of the Koguryo place names indeed represent in all likelihood a language related to Japanese that was once spoken in the center of the Korean peninsula.

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