

Paper X

The Silk Road And The Korean Language

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1. I suppose that some of you might be surprised to hear that the term "Silk Road" is not unrelated to the Korean language. However, this is an indisputable fact. In entries on 'silk' in the English dictionaries at hand around me, its etymology has been given as follows. First, I will refer to "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1969)."

“Middle English silk, selk, Old English sioloc, seoluc, probably from Old Slavic selku, akin to Greek Seres, the Chinese (probably originally meaning 'the silk people'), Mongolian sirkek, silk, Korean sil, all ultimately from Chinese ssu, silk."

Next, "The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology," ed. by C.T. Onions (1966):

"OE. sioloc, seol(e)c, for *siluc , corr. to ON, silki pp., and OSI. solku (Russi shelk), Lith. silkai, Opruss. (genitive) silkas- L. *sericum, for sericum, n. of sericus, f. seres -- Gr. Seres, oriental people from whom silk was first obtained and passed through Slavonic countries into the Baltic trade."

The immediate supplying source for 'silk' of English and 'selku' of Old Slavic seems to have been Mongolian. Nevertheless, the accounts in the above-listed dictionaries raise some questions. To begin with, the following two points will be mentioned.

First, the way of thinking centering around China has to be questioned. That 'sirkek' of Mongolian or 'sil' of Korean came from 'ssu' ("thread") of Chinese is less convincing. 'Ssu' is reconstituted as '*siag' of archaic Chinese pronunciation. (Karlgren 1964, Tung Tung-ho 1948) This reconstructed form makes it quite unlikely that 'shil' of Korean or 'sirkek' of Mongolian came from Chinese. On the other hand, I would like to ask how specialists in this field can attribute 'Seres' of Greek to China. While the first dictionary I cited made this attribution, the second one was vaguer - 'Oriental people'.

Second, there is a need to analyze the Mongolian word 'sirkek' further. Let us, handily, are a look at F.D. Lessing's Mongolian-English Dictionary (1973).

- a) Fibre, filament, thread; texture; grain(as of stone)
- b) Piece(a numerative used in counting grains of cereals, threads, pieces of paper)

The 'Hong-o Yu-hai' (Vol.I i of the two, 19), a glossary of Korean and Mongolian words, compiled toward the end of the 18th century, listed 'Sirkeg' of Mongolian as 'oe-ol-sil' (one-strand thread) of Korean. However, there is a word 'utasu (n)' in written Mongolian, meaning the thread. This word shows up in Middle Mongolian ('Hua-i I-yu' – a Chinese book) as 'hudasan.' (In an archaic form, it is reconstructed as *pudasun.) The two facts revealed in the foregoing, namely, 'sirkeg' having a meaning as a numerative and Mongolian having another historically-meaningful word indicating 'thread,' suggests that 'sirkeg' might somehow have been extraneous.

Hereupon, we feel a need to turn to Tungus languages . Here, there are words meaning 'thread': 'tomko' of Evenki, 'tomko' of Negidal, 'tompo' of Orochi, 'tokpo-topko' of Orocco, 'tompo' of Nanaic, and 'tongo' of Manchu. And in Tungus languages there are also some other words: 'siren' (thread made of horse-hair), 'sirekte' (thread made of sinews) in Evenki; 'siren' (hair, thread in arbelast) in Lamut; 'siren' (strained thread), 'sivxe' (cord, string) in Nanai; 'siren' (string, thread), 'sirge-sirhe' (silk thread, silk floss from a cocoon, string of a musical instrument) in Manchu. We can now understand that 'bomko' and the likes refer to thread following the rise of spinning while 'siren' and the likes correspond to primitive thread prior to that period.

This, we can easily know that 'sil' in Korean is a word corresponding to 'siren' and the like in Tungus languages. Yet, we have to note that 'sil' in Korean, unlike 'siren' in Tungus languages, means a product following the rise of spinning. This word listed in bibliographical sources of the middle age as 'sil' (the royal text for Korean alphabet – 'Hungmin Jongum') and there is proof that the word was also in the tongue of Shilla. To wit, 'Samguk Yusa' (Vol. 3) carries a footnote on 'Sapo' of Shilla, saying that "Ulju of today used to be called Kokpo." This illustrates that during the period of Shilla 'Ssu' used to be interpreted as 'sil' since an old interpretation of 'kok' was also 'sil'. This fact is affirmed by the fact that the author of one of the 'hyang-ga' songs entitled, "Thinking of a Flower Boy named Chukchirang" (Vol.2 on Chukchirang during the reign of King Hyoso) was listed as 'duk o sil' and 'duk o kok.' (Kwon Tok-kyu, 1929; Lee Ki-moon, 1987)

Thus seen, while there is a possibility that the immediate source of 'silk' in English could have come from Mongolian, there still is room for us to surmise that its original source might have come from Ancient Korean.

2. Now we feel a need to survey the thread spinning technique of ancient Korea. Since I am not a specialist in this field, I ask for your tolerance if I make some mistakes.

As to the old record concerning production of thread and textile by the Korean nation, our attention is drawn to the section on Chason (Korea) in the 'Book of Han' (Hanshu), "The Road of Yin (Un in Korean) declined and Kija went over to Chosen and taught its people courtesy , farming, sericulture and weaving." This record and the fact that the center of sericulture in China existed in the Shantung

region, allows us to presume that ancient Koreans were deeply connected to the origin of sericulture. Records such as the one in the Section on Ye, Tung-I Chuan ('history of eastern barbarians') of Hou Han Shu ('Book of the Latter Han'), "People of Mahan were versed in sericulture, making cotton cloth," can be found also in Sam-kuo-chi ("Accounts on Three Lordships"), and Wei-chi ('Accounts on Wei') and in Tung-i Chuan, consequently reinforcing this supposition. As to 'cotton cloth' in Hou-han-shu, one can refer to Han Chi-yun who gave an account in 'Haedong Yoksa' (Vol. 26, On Products 1) ("paraphrased history of the east of the sea"), "Generally, cotton is silk wool and cloth is woven hemp."

In Korean there is a word 'kib' meaning silk cloth. This word was given as 'kib' in bibliographical sources of the middle age. (In accounts on translation of combined characters in 'Hunmin Chongum,' it was said "kib is the 'design on cloth' and in Chi-lin-lei-shih it was said," wi (silk) is called 'chi' ('kub' in Korean.) This word seems to have been innate in Korean. The existence of such an innate word seems to suggest that there must have been an innate, indicative object corresponding to the word.

Another important fact here is that there is a word, kib (silk, in Mongolian. It is given as kib -- kiib in written Mongolian and kib (cured silk) appears in Middle Mongolian ('Hua- i I -u' -- "Chinese borrowings from barbarians' words"). As has been pointed out by N. Poppe (1950), this word seems, no doubt, to have been an ancient borrowing from Korean 'kib.' In particular, the strange spelling of 'kiib' in written Mongolian strongly suggests this probability. Lexical borrowing is an outcome of language contact accompanied in introduction of civilization. 'Kib' in Mongolian seems to bear witness to the influx of Korean silk products into Mongolia since olden times.

Ancient Korea seems to have been famed for its textiles. An outstanding example could be 'moshi'(hemp cloth). Nowadays, 'moshi' from Hansan is famous and this 'moshi' had gained international fame early on in ancient times. It was called 'kara-musi' in Old Japanese. This word, first appearing in old archives of 102, is found in many books. It is well known that 'kara' means Korea. 'Moshi' also found entry into China. The word 'moshipo' ('moshi' cloth) appears in "Pak-t 'ong-sa," a book of Chinese conversation compiled in the period of Koryo. Ch'oe Se-jin gave a very interesting exposition, in his 'Chib-ram' ("collection of guiding information") (Vol.I o f II, 13) that this is the Korean word , 'moshi,' imported to China and that the Chinese also write this word 'moksapo' or 'molsapo.' A Chinese scholar Yang Lian-sheng (1957) has also acknowledged this borrowing. In a Chinese book, "Chi-lin Lei-shih" ("miscellaneous things about Kyerim (Shilla)"), one finds "cho means moshi" and "cho cloth is 'moshi' bai." The two characters picked up in this book, "mo shi" draw our attention in that they correspond to those in "Pak-t'ong-sa." This seems to indicate that the word must have been written in those characters in China at that time. (12th century)

3. The linguistic elements, imprinted in the Korean language via the Silk Road from the far West, seem not to have been considerable. The influence, of course, came in through China or Mongolia.

Some instances of influence via China are found in the names of musical instruments. For instance, ‘p’ iri’ (flute). In ‘Hunmong Jahwae’ (Vol. II of three, 32) ("exposition of Chinese characters") we find 箏 means ‘p’ri,’ pronounces ‘p’il” and 篳 means ‘p’iri,’ pronounces ‘ryul’ " and earlier on than this, ‘Tushi Onhae’. ("translation in Korean alphabet of Tu Fu' s poems") translated 箏 in the original text as ‘p’ iri.’ This ‘p’iri’ came from 箏 (pronounces ‘p’ il-ryul). It is pronounced in Korean ‘p’ il-ryul’ but in modern Chinese pronunciation ‘pi-li.’ ‘Piri’ in Korean reflected this modern pronunciation. In ‘Munhon Bigo’ (A Chinese book on bibliography) we find in this section on music an account that the original name of ‘p’il-ryul’ was ‘bi-ryul’, a musical instrument from the region of Kuja. This musical instrument is also written ‘篳篥’. In the Book of Sui and in its section on music, we find ‘小篳篥 桃支篳篥’, in the listing of Koguryo's musical instruments.

Next gems. For instance, 玻璃 This is also written “玻璃”. A Chinese book, ‘Panch’ o Kangmok’ ("study on nature"), gave an account, “玻璃 a gem from the West.” This characters are pronounced in Old Chinese ‘pua-liei,’ in Modern Chinese ‘po-li.’ This word appears in Modern Korean of the 18th century as ‘Peori.’ (‘Tongmun Ryuhae’ (“glossary of Mongolian words”) , Vol. II of 2, 30). In this vein , Chong Yak-yang pointed out a very interesting fact in his ‘A-on Kakbi’ ("study of Korean colloquialism") that 玻璃 of China (Chinese pronunciation ‘pori’) has the same pronunciation in Korean of ‘pori’ ("barley") and that 玻璃眼鏡 came to be called ‘maek-kyong’ (麥鏡).

Nowadays in Korea, there is ‘soju’, the most popular distilled liquor. The dialect of ‘soju’ is scattered throughout the country, such as ‘arang-ju’, ‘araegi’. This word was given in a Chinese book (“translated words from Korean”) as ‘arangi’. This word came afar from Arabic via Mongolian. In other words, ‘arang (juice, distilled spirits) in Arabic became aragi(alcoholic liquor made of aerag through distillation; any alcoholic beverage: brandy, wine etc.) of Mongolian via Central Asia and this came into Korea (refer to Okura Shimpei, 1936). The theory that holds that soju came to Korea in the period of Yuan China came from Yi Su-kwang’s ‘Chibong Yusol’ (“quotations from old books on nature such as astronomy, geography and the like”) (19, 37)—“Soju, when it came from Yuan, was used merely as medicine and not for heavy drinking,” and this theory seems to be plausible.

As a matter of reference, there is ‘aragi’ in Japanese but this came from Dutch later on. And, ‘arag’ of Arabic also went into West Europe. ‘Arrack’ of English and ‘arrack’ of French reflect this trace.

By the way of further reference, there are more than 50 Korean borrowings from Mongolian and they all entered in the period of Yuan (mainly the 13th century). They mostly concern the horse, the hawk, foods and military terminology of nomads (Refer to Lee Ki-moon 1964, 1985).

Lastly, I would like to add a comment on 'zh-mun' (thousand) in Middle Korean. This 'zh-mun' is quite similar to the word in Altaic languages meaning 'ten thousand.' In Jurchen, 'ten thousand' was called 'tumen.' In 'Yongbi Och'onga' ("eulogy of the foundation of the Yi Dynasty") (1, 8), there is a footnote that '豆漫' (tumen) of '豆漫江' (the Tuman river of today) came from the Jurchen word meaning 'ten thousand.' In Manchu, '萬' (ten thousand) is also 'tumen'. These are a borrowing from the Mongolian word 'tumen' (ten thousand). 'Tumen' (ten thousand) was also in Old Turkic. This 'tumen' in these Altaic languages is certainly a borrowing from Tocharian (Clauson 1972). In Tocharian A, there is 'tman,' in Tocharian B 'tmane', 'tumane'. 'Zh-mun' in Middle Korean means thousand. Some scholars reason that this 'zh-mun' also might have its etymological origin in 'tumen' (Kim Kan-jin 1965). This reasoning is worth some recognition.

4. Though not indicated directly in the title of my paper, I would like to add some more words on the Korean script, namely, hangul(Korean alphabet). The script is of a phonemic writing system invented in the 28th year of the reign of King Sejong(1446). In the history of characters and scripts, a common practice has been to adopt the writing system of neighboring countries with some modification for its own language. King Sejong, however, did not follow this practice but invented hangul based on new rules. These rules were, in a nutshell, hieroglyphic descriptions of speech organs with some additional strokes. For instance, Niun 'L' (n) was made after the shape of the tongue attached to the upper palate. Some other more aspirated sounds which come from the same position such as 'ㄷ' (t) and 'ㅌ' (t') were made with an addition of one stroke each. Accounts of the rules applied in devising the writing system are found in the book, 'Hunmin Chongum', compiled at the time of the promulgation of hangul. Though Western scholars on characters were not inclined to accept this view advanced by Korean scholars in the past, they have begun to accept this view advances by entirety since the 1960's. (Vos 1964, McCawley 1966, Bollinger 1968, Sampson 1985 and others).

A survey of the history of scripts on the periphery of China reveals certain types. The first is the practice of devising a script similar to Chinese characters as in the case of the Tangut, Ki-tan and Jurchen scripts. The second is the Indian lineage of the Tibetan script. And, the third, the Uighur script which developed from the Sogdian script of Semitic lineage. The Mongolian and Manchu scripts belong here. The fourth - The Old Turkic (Orhon) script is believed to have originated in the West. And, the fifth -The Pags-pa script, made during the period of Yuan Dynasty (1269), was based on the Tibetan script.

When King Sejong undertook the project of inventing a new script for Korean, should he have known only about Chinese characters, unaware of scripts of the alphabetical lineage, he could not have conceived of a phonemic writing system which was entirely different from Chinese characters. Instead of choosing from the scripts he knew however, King Sejong applied an entirely new system of rules in inventing hangul. The system of rules were entirely developed by King Sejong himself drawing on

phonology that came to China from ancient India along with the introduction of Buddhism. Thus seen, hangul was a synthesized outcome in the study of phonology which, under the influence of the flow of alphabetical scripts from the West, came to Korea from India via China and was further evolved in Korea.

5. I do not know for sure to what extent my paper can be related to this meeting the the Silk Road. I have only attempted to cite a few examples which are suggestive of contact with the West in terms of the Korean language and the Korean script. I rest my case for your criticism.

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