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Why Are Some Korean Words Similar to Japanese and Old Chinese?

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Although their genetic relations are still hotly contested, Japanese is, without question, the closest language to Korean. These two languages are tremendously similar in many aspects. Some Korean linguists seek genetic relations between Korean and Altaic languages. Except for a small number of foreign loan words, most of which originated from the western languages in recent centuries, the majority of the Korean lexicon consists of indigenous Korean and Sino-Korean words. Sino-Korean words, which constitute over half of the entire lexicon, are of Chinese origin, although some of these words were actually coined by the Japanese or the Koreans. What is interesting is that some seemingly native Korean words are claimed to be closely related with Old Chinese because they are identical or similar. The following are some indigenous Korean words that Zheng-Zhang (2003:133) identifies as similar to Old Chinese:

- (1) a. kuruus 器, param 风, kəri 街, kurəng 巷, kara 骑
 b. mar 马, kar 葭, khar 枷, sar 梳齿, sarp 雷锤, mir 麦
 c. kor 谷, phar 膊, par 箔, sar 腊肉, sir 丝, sur 酒

Additional examples can also be found in Eom (1988:217-240). Native Korean words, spelled using Chinese characters, are similar to Old Chinese:

- (2) a. 尔 nə < *ɲiei d. 日 nal < nat < *ɲiet
 b. 汝 nə < *ɲia e. 人 njən (nom) < *ɲien
 c. 而 nə < *ɲia f. 刃 (khal) nal < *ɲien

By the same token, as are cited in Eom (2008:240-260), some characters with Old Chinese velar nasal initial are surprisingly similar with their equivalents in native Korean:

- (3) a. 吾 *ɲa > na d. 牙 *ɲea > (n)i
 b. 我 *ɲa > na e. 顔 *ɲean > nat
 c. 眼 *ɲeən > nun

Why are some indigenous Korean words similar to Old Chinese? There may be two possible reasons: they are either cognates or the result of language contact. Oh (2005) and Pan (2006) claim that both of them originated from the same source. That means Chinese and Korean are genetically related such that similar words in these two languages are cognates, or *Han-Han*



tongyuanci 韓漢同源詞 in Chinese. These scholars even propose that Tungusic languages share the same origin with the Sinitic languages. On the other hand, Hou (2006, 2009) regards them as loan words. To her, they are *Han-Han duiyingci* 韓漢對應詞 or *jieci* 借詞. This paper examines these two possibilities closely and concludes that they are not cognates but loan words. In addition, the paper also addresses the question of why Korean is similar to Japanese and to some Altaic languages.

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