

Agriculture and Language Family Distribution in Northeast Asia

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As a linguistic area, Northeast Asia is made up of 10 language families (Janhunen 1998): Ainuic, Amuric (Nivkh/Gilyak), Japonic, Kamchukotic, Koreanic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Turkic, Yeniseic, and Yukaghiric. The third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth of these are sometimes related by various versions of the Altaic hypothesis, but scholarly consensus about this is still lacking. Food production ranges from wet rice cultivation, to steppe pastoralism in Mongolic and Turkic language areas, to reindeer pastoralism among speakers of Kamchukotic, Yeniseic, Yukaghiric and Tungusic, to hunting and fishing among these groups and Ainuic. I focus here on the two regions where language dispersion relates to the spread of wet rice agriculture: the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago.

Miyamoto (2009) identifies three distinct spreads of farming technology from Shandong to the Liaodong peninsula to the Korean peninsula. The first, involving the millets *Setaria italica* and *Panicum miliaceum*, spread around the Bohai littoral in the second half of the 4th millennium BCE, reaching the Korean peninsula and the Russian maritime provinces, but not Japan. The second, in the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE, involved rice in addition to millet, but without systematic paddy cultivation. This also reached the Korean peninsula but not Japan. The third, toward the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, involved highly organized paddy cultivation and was centered on rice. It is associated with the Mumun pottery culture in Korea and the Yayoi culture in Japan. Mumun irrigated rice farming appears in the mid-first millennium BCE (Ahn 2010), essentially at the same period as in Japan, where recently recalibrated dates for the beginning of Yayoi paddy agriculture in northwest Kyushu point to a starting date between 1000 (Harunari 2006) and 800 (Miyamoto 2009) BCE.

Archaeologists in Korea and Japan have tended to view Mumun and Yayoi rice farming as two distinct national narratives, with longstanding debates over degree of interaction and the size of population movement. I argue that the wet rice farming stage of Mumun and the Yayoi arrival and dispersal in the Japanese archipelago are the same event, and that the language associated with this dispersal was Japonic. Evidence for this view is the relative shallowness of Japonic (Japanese-Ryukyuan) as a language family and onomastic and historical evidence that Japonic was originally spoken throughout the southern half of the Korean peninsula. Ahn (2010) reports that agricultural settlements associated with paddy agriculture disappear from the agricultural record on the Korean peninsula between the 3rd century BCE and the first century CE., “when the Late Mumun culture, with a nomadic lifestyle, spread from the Liaoning region of northeast China“ (2010: 91). This event corresponds to the arrival of Koreanic speakers. Descriptions of the small polities in southern Korea in the *Hou Han shu* (1st c.) and the *Wei zhi* (3rd c.) show farming communities of mixed ethnicity and language. The fact that Koreanic is an even shallower language family than Japonic supports a later arrival for Koreanic speakers. The absence of Korean loans in Japanese referring to rice agriculture is explained by the fact that Japonic was already spreading in the archipelago by the time

Koreanic and Japonic speakers came into contact in the southern peninsula. On the other hand, the existence of cognate vocabulary for dry field agriculture points to an earlier period of contact – or diversification – prior to the advent of wet rice cultivation.

Partial references:

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