Chinese Low Tones in the 15th century: philological evidence from Korean

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This paper aims to investigate low tones in Early Mandarin Chinese, specifically paying attention to yǐnpíng, a level tone with a voiceless initial, and shǎngshēng, a rising tone with a voiced initial. The two tones are phonologically reconstructed as low tones in Early Mandarin Chinese: yǐnpíng as a low level tone (22 or 33), and shǎngshēng as a falling-rising tone (214) (Geng 2009, Zhang 2010). The reconstruction of yǐnpíng is deviant from its value in Mandarin Chinese, 55, while the reconstruction of shǎngshēng corresponds to its modern value, that is, 214. The discrepancy in the reconstructions of the two tones demands other evidence to support/reject the hypothesis that there are two low tones in Early Mandarin Chinese.

To provide independent evidence, this paper uses Cháoxìānguǎn yìyǔ ‘A Wordlist of Chinese-Korean Phrases’ (CXGYY), a Chinese text recording Korean in the 15th century by means of transcriptions. This text is specifically chosen, as Late Middle Korean is also a tonal language with three tones: low, high and rising. The transcriptions would reveal some insightful details of how Chinese low tones are used to present Korean tones.

This paper builds its foundation on Kang’s (1995) version of CXGYY, and focuses on monosyllabic words and disyllabic phrases. There are 596 entries in CXGYY in total. All the data are sorted, and 69 monosyllabic words and 115 disyllabic phrases are available. Tones of the 184 entries are transcribed and then transformed into high and low tones, in order to correspond to tones in Early Mandarin Chinese.

Similarity ratio is conducted to examine how Chinese tones are used to transcribe Korean tones. The results suggest that in monosyllabic words, only 45% of the transcriptions, but in disyllabic phrases, up to 61% of the transcriptions reflect the similar correspondences. The results in monosyllabic words show a difference in the correspondences from Kwon (1998), in which the Korean low tone corresponds to Chinese shāngshēng, and the Korean high tone corresponds to Chinese shǎngshēng or qūshēng ‘falling tone’. No clear correspondences between the Korean rising tone and Chinese tones are suggested.

Based on the results of similarity ratio, a chi-square test is conducted to examine the correlation between the tones of the first syllable and the second syllable in disyllabic phrases, suggesting that shǎngshēng is more favorable than yǐnpíng in the first syllable, while a high tone is dominant in the second syllable. There is an implication. Shāngshēng in the 15th century is a low tone, and it behaves more like a low tone than yǐnpíng.

References