

Professor Nishida Tatsuo and the Study of Tibeto-Burman Languages

YABU Shirō

September 26, 2012 marked the passing of Nishida Tatsuo, linguist and Professor Emeritus at Kyoto University. He was 83 years old. Professor Nishida, who was born in the city of Osaka on 26 November 1928, began his formal academic training in the China Studies Department at the Osaka College of Foreign Affairs (renamed from Osaka School of Foreign Languages, before being reorganized as Osaka University of Foreign Studies afterwards, and unified as School of Foreign Studies, Osaka University at present); and after graduation went on to the Kyoto University Faculty of Letters, majoring in linguistics and graduating in March 1951. From there he continued his studies as a research fellow upon receiving a scholarship to study in the University's graduate school (old system) and after completion of his course studies was hired as a part-time lecturer in the Faculty of Letters, then appointed as assistant professor of linguistics in July 1958 and promoted to professor in February 1972. During the 34 years until his retirement in 1992, his pedagogical duties as a member of the University faculty involved conducting its course in linguistics. His extracurricular research activities were marked by the publication of a large body of scientific findings mainly in the journals of such learned societies as the Linguistic Society of Japan, Toho Gakkai (The Institute of Eastern Culture), and the Japanese Association for Tibetan Studies. He also contributed to these three societies by serving in various executive positions, including the president of the Linguistic Society of Japan between 1979 and 1981. He was also active in the research activities of the Toyo Bunko, serving as a director and a member of the Oriental Studies Advisory Council.

In 1959 he was awarded the Japan Academy Prize for his linguistic contribution to the interdisciplinary joint research project on the Juyong Barrier Tower on China's Great Wall, received his doctoral degree (D. Litt.) from Kyoto University in 1962 for his analysis of Hsi-hsia (Xixia) or Tangut script and a study of Hsi-hsia grammar, was awarded another

Japan Academy Prize and the Academy's Imperial Prize in 1968 for his two-volume work entitled *A study of the Hsi-hsia language: Reconstruction of the Hsi-hsia language and decipherment of the Hsi-hsia script*, and was finally made a member of the Academy in 1999. In 2008 he was given the honor of Person of Cultural Merit for his contribution to the historical and comparative study of Tibeto-Burman languages including the Hsi-hsia/Xixia or Tangut (hereafter Xixia) language.

Nishida Tatsuo's academic research of languages may be roughly divided among studies of the Xixia language, Sino-Tibetan languages, in particular Tibeto-Burman languages, Sino-Barbarian (non-Sinitic) vocabularies (*huayi yiyu* 華夷譯語), and the scripts and writing systems of East Asian languages, all of which could be summed up within the bailiwick of "Tibeto-Burman linguistics." However, we must not ignore that Professor Nishida's work included attempts to better understand language structure based on the methods of structural linguistic analysis, as well as language change and linguistic genealogy based on the methods of historical and comparative linguistics. One more approach, which has been called "philological linguistics," (文獻言語學, coined by Shōgaito Masahiro, one of his most excellent students) is a unique approach involving reading texts based on linguistic methodology and analyzing their content in linguistic terms. This approach is clearly reflected in all of Professor Nishida's works on the Xixia language and Sino-Barbarian vocabularies.

For over 60 years, from his student days at Osaka College of Foreign Affairs and then at Kyoto University under the tutelage of Ishihama Juntarō and influence of his lectures on oriental linguistics, Professor Nishida devoted himself especially to the study of the Tibeto-Burman languages of Sino-Tibetan language family; that is, Tibeto-Burman comparative linguistics. Furthermore, it was Izui Hisanosuke and the Kyoto University's oriental studies tradition that seems to have greatly influenced his approach to the philological study of written sources.

During the over seven years Professor Nishida spent as a graduate student and part-time lecturer at Kyoto University, he published a total of seven different articles, two dealing with Burmese, two with Tai (Daic), two with Xixia, and one with a comparative study between Tibetan and Burmese, all of which clearly indicate the direction in which his research was headed. For example, looking at his early works on Burmese, in "A structural analysis of the phonemic system in the Burmese language" (1953), his first attempt at publication, "Studies in the ancient Burmese language through the Myazedi Inscriptions" (1955-56), and "Tibetan and

Burmese: Some problems concerning the comparison of their vocabularies" (1957), we detect attempts to deal with the subject both in synchronic and diachronic perspective, intending to follow in the steps of historical and comparative linguistics. (His articles on Tai linguistics were pursued along similar methodological lines.) Also during his early studies we can detect the concepts of "link language" (1957 treatise) and "*sonus grammæ*" (1955 treatise) that were, as we shall see later, so important in Professor Nishida's research in comparative Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

While enrolled as a graduate student at Kyoto University, Professor Nishida also studied Burmese and Tai as an auditor at Osaka University of Foreign Studies, demonstrating that he understood well the indispensability of the study of modern languages to historical and comparative research and the observation of their minute phonetical phenomena.

No doubt the greatest contribution made by Professor Nishida to the field of Tibeto-Burman linguistics was his deciphering of Xixia, achieved through the methodology known as "philological linguistics," which advanced by leaps and bounds the study of Xixia writing system and language, subjects taken up by only a few scholars in Western Europe, Russia, or even China. Attempting to read and interpret sources written in an unknown language with an unknown writing is indeed one of the most difficult tasks; however, with the help of a Xixia rhyme book, entitled *Tongyin*, which he found in a used book store in Kyoto, and his comprehensive knowledge of Chinese phonology, Professor Nishida was successful in both deciphering Xixia writing system and reconstructing the Xixia language. While honing his Xixia linguistic studies by tracking down an enormous body of written sources, his research interests expanded into all phases of Xixia historical and cultural studies, shifting the focus of the field from complete dependence on Chinese historiography to the primary Xixia sources, marking a new epoch in Oriental studies.

The language of the Xixia people, which in the Russian scholarly tradition has come to be called Tangut, was current from the 11th through the 13th century among the peoples inhabiting the northwestern part of the Chinese continent (present day Gansu Province, the western part of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, and the northern part of Shanxi Province, centering upon the Ningxia Muslim Autonomous Region) and is thought to have then gradually died out, falling into linguistic extinction after the late 14th century. Xixia was the national language of the kingdom of Xixia, which ruled the region between 1038 and 1227, being the written language thought to reflect the spoken language of Xixia's

ruling aristocracy. A large number of documents were written in a script resembling Chinese characters in form and function, that is to say quasi-Chinese script, issued by Li Yuanhao, the founder of the Xixia kingdom, in 1036, two years prior to Xixia's proclamation of statehood to the Song Dynasty, which have been preserved to the present day. Then after the fall of the kingdom of Xixia, the Xixia language appeared in the inscriptions dated 1345 on Juyong Barrier Tower on the Great Wall of China and remnants of the Xixia script were in use, dated 1502, as late as the mid-Ming Period. However, because no source materials well-recording spoken Xixia have come down to us, with the exception of a limited number of word forms, there are almost no clues enabling us to discover how Xixians conversed with one another. This is why in practice "Xixia" refers merely to the language transmitted to us through sources written in Xixia script.

Nishida's profound powers of observation regarding the complex writing system of Xixia script, combined with his broad knowledge of Chinese phonology and deep understanding of the Tibeto-Burman languages, all enabled him to bring back to life the Xixia language that had been dead for centuries. The early findings in his Xixia linguistic research are contained in the work *A Study of the Hsi-hsia Language*, for which he was awarded the above-mentioned honors by the Japanese Academy. This work was followed by the three-volume *The Hsi-Hsia Avatamsaka sūtra* (1975-77), the three-part "A study of the Hsihsia rhyme tables 'Wǔ yīn qiè yùn'" (1981-83), "A study of the Hsihsia poem 'Yuè yuè lè shī'" (1986), *The language and culture of the Kingdom of Xixia* (1997), *Xixia language studies and the Lotus Sutra*, 4 vols. under one cover (2007), and *New studies of the Xixia languages* (2012), to mention just a few of the most notable of his many contributions to the field, such problems as the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Xixia, the Xixia phonological reconstruction by using Xixia rhyme tables, plain and elevated strata in Xixia vocabulary, the findings of Xixia twin characters, the formation of the Xixia written languages, and so on.

During the last 10 years of his twilight era in the 2000s, Professor Nishida devoted himself exclusively to the task of collecting all of his research, mostly Xixia studies, into a compendium of complete works. As he himself was fond of saying, around the middle of the 1990s his Xixia linguistic research experienced a significant development, compelling him to hold his modestest and deepest respect for the fact that such a magnificent written language as Xixia had been perfected within the pro-

cess of the Xixia people creating a unique writing system and utilizing it on an everyday basis (*Xixia language studies and the Lotus Sutra*, 2007; “Dr. Nishida Tatsuo reminisces on his life dedicated to the study of Hsi-hsia language and Sino-Tibetan languages,” 2010).

Professor Nishida’s Xixia linguistic research first began to reconstruct the Xixia phonological system by inferring the sounds of each individual Xixia script character, based mainly on *Wuyin Qieyun*, re-established and supplemented by many fragmentary rhyme reference works in the tradition of Chinese phonology, such as *Wenhai*, *Wenhai Zalei*, and *Tongyin*. From there, he embarked on a search for a pair of what he called “twin characters,” by attempting to identify the structure and function of the Xixia script, which is a kind of quasi-Chinese script, but had been organized semantically in a different and more complex manner. He found in 1986 that these “twin characters” were a pair of characters which stand for interrelated linguistic forms in terms of both semantics and grammar. Moreover, he showed that Xixia possesses two vocabulary strata. Looking at the vocabulary groups in a Xixia original literary work titled *Yue yue le shi*, he noticed that there were two kinds of vocabulary strata: one composed of elevated and refined words, the other of everyday plain words. The latter are cognate largely with Tibeto-Burman and were used colloquially among the common people. The former were presumed to be of foreign Altaic Xianbei origin, current among the aristocrats ruling the kingdom of Tuyuhun. He, nevertheless, suggested that the hypothesis was also in doubt. Accepting the fact that Xixia had two vocabulary strata raised very difficult issues in terms of how Xixia was to be defined linguistically.

Besides Xixia studies, Professor Nishida also conducted a series of research on Sino-Barbarian vocabularies based on the methodology of philological linguistics. The Sino-Barbarian vocabularies, many different manuscripts of which exist today, were compiled at the Siyiguan 四夷館 (Imperial Institute of Surrounding Barbarian Languages) which was set up during the fifth year of the Ming Dynasty’s Yongle Era (1407) and then at the Qing Dynasty’s Siyiguan 四譯館 (Imperial Institute of Surrounding Barbarian Language Translation) as classified vocabularies of the languages spoken by the peoples living on China’s borders, containing not only word equivalents, but also literary examples of usage in the case of what is called the “B sort” of manuscripts (乙種本).

There is also Professor Nishida’s body of research on Sino-Barbarian vocabularies, including Pai-i/Baiyi of the Tai languages (1961), the Tibet-

an dialect of Tianquan (1963), followed by books entitled *A Study of the Tibetan-Chinese Vocabulary Hsi-Fan-Kuan i-yu* (1970), *A Study of the Burmese-Chinese Vocabulary Mien-tien-kuan i-yu* (1972), *A Study of the Tosu-Chinese Vocabulary Tosu i-yu* (1973), *A Study of the Lolo-Chinese Vocabulary Lolo i-yu* (1979), and *A Study of the Baima-Chinese Vocabulary Baima i-yu* (with Sun Hongkai, 1990). Through his reconstruction of the Tibeto-Burman languages of the time based on the source materials in the above Sino-Barbarian vocabulary series, Professor Nishida was able to develop a better understanding of some part of the linguistic history of each respective language and comparative study of Tibeto-Burman languages. What interested him in Tosu, a language virtually unknown up to that time, was that the similarities between Tosu and Xixia had, in his way of thinking, well preserved in some way the features of the proto-Lolo-Burmese language (PLB).

Professor Nishida's linguistic fieldwork dates back to his early studies in Japan, when it was so difficult just after World War II to travel abroad. During 1952–53, he made a survey of Burmese in Osaka and in 1954 investigated the Amdo dialect of Tibetan at Tokyo's Tsukiji Honganji temple. Then beginning in 1962, his fieldwork in Japan resumed in joint research program with the Toyo Bunko's Tibet Studies Circle on such subjects as the Lhasa dialects of Tibetan. As for fieldwork conducted abroad, during 1958–59 he was dispatched to Burma for six months by the Institute for Democratic Education (IDE), and during 1964–65 conducted a linguistic survey for another six months in Thailand for the Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, gathering source materials related to Tibeto-Burman languages and others. The linguistic sources he had collected in Burma were Tai (Dehong Tai), published in "A Study of the 16 Century Pai-i=Chinese and Chinese=Pai-i Vocabularies" (1961), and the Tavoyan (Dawe) and Merguiese (Beik) dialects of Burmese, published in *A Study of the Burmese-Chinese Vocabulary Mien-tien-kuan i-yu* (1972), in addition to research on Kachin (1960) and Pao (1967), while the sources collected in Thailand were published in a series of research on Akha (1966), Bisu (1966–67), Lisu (1967–68), and Lahu Shi (1969). Fieldwork on these spoken languages was not merely descriptive in character, but went on to develop into a flourishing comparative study of the language groups to which all of these languages belonged.

The research done by Professor Nishida in the field of Tibeto-Burman linguistics has contributed both to the discovery of new source materials and the comparative approach based on their analysis. In the field of philological linguistics, he struck upon an untitled work among the many

Sino-Barbarian vocabulary manuscripts which had recorded an unknown language belonging to the Lolo-Burmese stock, and named it Tosu. It was the discovery of a language which had no longer been spoken. He then proceeded to reconstruct this language and compare it with Xixia and other Lolo-Burmese languages in researches published in 1972 and 1973. Similarly, in 1966 and 1967 he published a descriptive study of the previously unknown Bisu language discovered during his fieldwork in Thailand and a comparative study between Bisu and other Lolo-Burmese languages.

Professor Nishida's ultimate research aim was to systematically understand the Sino-Tibetan language family, in general, and its Tibeto-Burman sub-group, in particular, and to depict its total picture. As a scholar of Tibeto-Burman comparative linguistics, it goes without saying that he confronted many different languages in that group. When turning to the genealogy of the Tibeto-Burman languages, he developed the concept of "link language" (繫聯言語／媒介言語), that is a language which exists in the context of sharing linguistic characteristics with a number of language clusters and mutually connecting them to one another, arguing the importance of such a concept in furthering the field of comparative linguistics. To begin with, he took up Gyarong of western Sichuan (1957), Kachin of northern Burma and Yunnan (1960), adding later Meitei of India's Manipur, Chiang/Qiang of western Sichuan, Xixia, and Nung of Burma's northern Kachin and Yunnan (1978, 1979), arguing, on the other hand, that it could not be insisted that these languages did not belong to any basic sub-group. He was of the opinion that rather than classifying these languages without proven affiliation in willy-nilly fashion, it was necessary to refrain from classification before attempting to compare several language groups for possible mutually shared links. This is because given the fact that multiple language groups do share linguistic characteristics, in doing comparative research, we view these languages as producing significant clues to identifying affiliation. For example, let us look at his study of Gyarong (1957) and Kachin (1960).

Gyarong

In the comparative study of the Tibetan and Burmese vocabularies, there are words that absolutely do not have any resemblance. The largest part of Gyarong (Gy) vocabulary does have a definite correspondence to written Tibetan (WrT). In addition, several Gyarong words depart completely from Tibetan to resemble in form written Burmese (WrB).

Moreover, words with cognate stem forms common in Tibetan and Burmese appear in Gyarong more often with Burmese forms than Tibetan, although, overall, the latter dominates Gyarong vocabulary.

	Gy	WrB	WrT
‘cloud’	ztim	tim	sprin
‘white’	kə-rom	p‘ruu	dkar-po
‘seven’	kəʂnəs	k‘u-hnatš	bdun
‘eye’	mjag~mŋag	myak	mig
‘many’	mjas~mŋas	myaa:	maŋ-po

Kachin

There are cases in which proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) word roots of common Tibetan and Burmese origin can be derived from Kachin (Kc).

‘horse’	Kc (Gauri dialect) kum-râŋ	WrB mraŋ;<*m-raŋ; WrT rta<*r-tha~*m-tha *m-tha>*m-ra>Kc ku-m-râ>Kc (Gauri) ku-m-râ-ŋ (râ is PTB root, the rest are affixes)
‘roots’	Kc a-rû	WrB mrats<*m-rats<*mrtša (methathesis) WrT rtsa<r-tsa PTB *m-r-tsha>*m-ru-tshu>*m-ru>Kc rû (a-rû)

Professor Nishida hypothesized that “link languages” more or less have complex morphosyntactical structure and typify the oldest strata of the Tibeto-Burman language group. Since languages with old written documents are few and far between, the comparative study of Tibeto-Burman, a language group characterized by intense creolization due to actual linguistic contact, should probably be based on working hypotheses. Although P. K. Benedict has gotten on board, calling Kachin a “linguistic crossroad,” thus indicating the importance of that language in the comparative study of the Tibeto-Burman group (*Sino-Tibetan: A conspectus*; 1970), the concept of “link language” has in mind characteristics more in line with a sub-division within the Tibeto-Burman group than a “road map.” Incidentally, it was previously thought that the Sino-Tibetan language family was divided into Sino-Tai and Tibeto-Burman, but during the 1940s, P. K. Benedict proposed an Austro-Tai hypothesis, which attempted to remove Tai languages from the Sino-Tibetan language family and relate them to the Indonesian stock of the Austronesian (Malayo-Po-

linesian) language family. Professor Nishida did not get convinced readily of Benedict's hypothesis, probably due to his understanding of Tai (Daic) languages, to which he had been intimately related since the very beginning of his linguistics career. Along those same lines, in the sense of lending us a bird's eye view of the languages belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family, it is truly unfortunate that his *Studies in East Asian languages*, vol. I: *Prospects for the huge Sino-Tibetan language family* (2000) had to end uncompleted with a single volume. After an initial volume describing the formation of the Sinitic languages, a second volume would certainly have continued on into the subject of the Lolo-Burmese languages.

Professor Nishida's primary motivation behind his philological linguistic approach to such languages as Xixia and the Sino-Barbarian vocabularies was his deep interest in the scripts with which a language is written; that is to say, the writing system of language. In order to decipher accurately languages latent in the script appearing in documents handed down from antiquity, it is essential to correctly understand their writing system. As he had already indicated, the writing system should not be confounded with the system of language itself. This is because while the script of any language is a very useful means of deciphering the language it expresses, it is by no means language per se (1970, 1972).

Whenever dealing with the old written sources, the sound expressed by a written character (*sonus grammæ*, translated by Yabu Shirō from 字音質/示音質) should always be distinguished from the phonemes of speech. *Sonus grammæ* is a sound customarily and universally expressed by both the orthographical prototypes of the earliest stages of any language group and a number of its current written characters of the same origin. The transliteration of written characters is generally done with *sonus grammæ* in mind; and while, in general, each *sonus grammæ* is by no means unrelated to sounds of the language at its earliest stages, or palaeographical value (C. O. Blagden), phonemes which exist as the language's system of sound must be strictly segregated from the discussion ("Studies in the ancient Burmese language through the Myazedi inscriptions," pt. 1, 1955).

Let us take a few examples from old Burmese found in the Myazedi Inscriptions and others. The close back vowel, /ou/[o], in modern Burmese is written as <ui> in both old Burmese (OB) and written Burmese (WrB), but there is no sound, [ui], pronounced in any dialectal or historical forms of Burmese. In the Myazedi Inscriptions, whenever a consonant (-C) follows after <ui>, we find it to appear as <iC> or <uC>; for example, <nhik~nhuk> 'in, at' (locative particle) which is spelled <nhuik> in other

OB and WrB. The way of writing vowels is probably intended to express either an unrounded back vowel or some kind of central vowel. In addition, <het> in the Myazedi Inscriptions is written in other OB inscriptions in such forms as <yhat, rhat>, etc., but in this case the way of writing is probably intended to express the voiceless palatal fricative [ç] in initial position, not glottal fricative [h]. In any case, *sonus grammæ* of the character must not be confused with the expression of the phonetic value or phoneme.

	Mz (earliest OB)	OB	WrB	ModSpB
'at, in'	<nhik>	<nhuik>	hnuiκ	/hnaɪʔ/
'eight'	<het>	<yhat, rhat>	çät	/hyiʔ~šiʔ/[ɛɪʔ]

(Mz, Myazedi Inscriptions; ModSpB, modern spoken Burmese)

The principles of writing system recognized throughout the several types of script in East Asia, including Chinese script, quasi-Chinese scripts, or scripts like Xixia, Kitai, etc. that resemble Chinese in form and function, and Indic scripts of continental Southeast Asia, not to mention Lolo or Yi script, Moso/Naxi pictographs or Dongba symbols, the Fraser alphabet of Lisu and the Pollard alphabet of Miao, etc. was discussed by Professor Nishida (along with Kōno Rokurō) in *'Script fan': Three conversations on the essence of writing system* (1995) and *Scripts and writing systems of the world* (2001; edited in conjunction with Kōno and Chino Eiichi).

During the late 1970s, Professor Nishida published a body of several works, in which he argued that there was a genealogical relationship between Japanese and the Tibeto-Burman languages. While some attention was directed at his taking up the correspondence between verb conjugations of Japanese and Tibetan, the overall consensus was that his arguments were far-fetched, like the fate of many other attempts to explain the genealogy of the Japanese language. Here let us just note the necessity to draw a line between the Nishida hypothesis and the arguments of prewar and postwar scholars like C. K. Parker and Yasuda Tokutarō. There have been many linguists who have returned to the problem of Japanese in their twilight years, which makes one wonder whether Professor Nishida ever attempted to take a similar path at some time in his career.

Be that as it may, the best linguists are those who have become deeply involved in the empirical study of a specific language, then go on to develop unique approaches to linguistic studies in general. In the case of Nishida Tatsuo, a thorough and clear understanding of such languages as

Han Chinese, Xixia, and Tibetan would only naturally lead to the much broader-based field of comparative linguistics focusing on the various issues regarding the whole Tibeto-Burman languages. For an excellent overview of Professor Nishida's linguistic research in his own words, with some comments of his students, please refer to the panel discussion, entitled "Dr. Nishida Tatsuo reminisces on his life dedicated to the study of Hsi-hsia language and Sino-Tibetan languages," which first appeared in issue no. 119 of *Tohogaku* (2010) and was reprinted in the *New Studies of the Xixia Language* (2012).

During his tenure at Kyoto University, Professor Nishida initiated the small-scale Tibeto-Burman Language Research Group, which in December 2003 was transformed into the Tibeto-Burman Linguistic Circle (TBLC) by the students interested in the field concerned. The latter group has held a meeting three times a year for more than ten years now for the interested scholars from all over Japan and, sometimes, from abroad to meet and present their research findings. During the earlier years, we were privileged to have Professor Nishida present a paper at the meeting, while later on our research findings would be sent to his home.

Let me conclude this memorial by expressing my deepest gratitude for both the profound erudition and outstanding pedagogy of this pioneer in the field of linguistics, with a resolve to further the field that he strove so diligently to develop. May he forever rest in peace.

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