The Cultural Politics of Language: Japanese as a Common Language in Manchukuo

Hiromi MITANI

Introduction

The commonly-accepted notion of language policy is that it results from conscious efforts to control the structure or function of language varieties. These efforts may include fixation of orthography, standardization and modernization of grammar, or elevation of the status of particular language varieties as "official" or "common" languages in multilingual societies.

Also, it is usually acknowledged that language policy is derived from language planning by governments. However, the uncritical assumption of the dichotomy—governmental or non-governmental—makes it difficult to see the conscious and unconscious participation of various social groups—such as businessmen, journalists, scholars and other ordinary people—in creating, sustaining or resisting a particular language policy.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the process in which sets of meanings, such as imperialism and racial hierarchy, were created within the discourse on colonial language policy in modern Japan. The word, "discourse," here must be understood in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1970; 1972), since Foucault's concept of discourse is more suitable than concept of ideology for the consideration of such notions as multivocality, possibility for resistance and unintentional collaboration in analyzing a particular policy-making process.[1]

Before entering the discussion of a national or imperial language policy, we have a point to be made clear, that is, the very status of the

[1] For more discussion on Foucault's notion of discourse and language, see Pennycook (1994, 1995).

notion of *a* language. Although deconstructing the notion of language as a whole is beyond the scope of a brief article, it must be noted that the concept of a whole, homogeneous language is merely a fiction and a historical construct. It is important to acknowledge that such a notion of *a* language was intimately tied to the growth of the nation state as it grew up in Europe and the United States (e.g., Yasuda 1997: 27; Pennycook 1994: 26–30).

Therefore, as Pennycook points out in his historical analysis of English as an International Language, the fundamental issue worth considering in the analysis of language policy is not an objective, top-down definition of a language, but a way in which meanings are created and reproduced in the discourse concerning language and language policy (1994: 28–29).

Based on those assumptions, the next section of this essay will provide a sociohistorical framework for analyzing Japanese imperial language policy. This will be followed by a close examination of Manchukuo's language policy as a case study of Japanese policy making. Later, we will explore the characteristic nature of Japanese language policy. The key concepts for the analysis in this essay are language myths and rhetoric of superiority.

There is one thing to be noted before moving on to the main task. This essay focuses on the policy-making process and pays little attention to the influence of the policy on the colonized people and their society. They surely have their own versions of the history, but they are not discussed in this essay; the subject here is the impact of the presence of the colonized people on Japanese language policy, not vice versa.

The Western Influence on Japanese Language Policy

Until recently, quite a few people in Japan assumed the myth of Japan as a racially and linguistically homogeneous nation that could trace its origin back to the ancient past (Miller 1982). In this belief, the purity of the Japanese as a race is assumed to be reflected in Japanese as a language; therefore, it is supposedly unable to be learned easily or ought not to be mastered properly by non-native speakers (Miller 1982: 154).

This kind of myth, however, is not particularly Japanese. As Schiffman points out in his attempt of typologizing language policy in the world, "many linguistic cultures have myths about language and these beliefs are often strongly cherished by members of the linguistic culture" (1996: 67). These language myths, as we shall see later, are promoted and sophisticated particularly in the process of making language policies for non-native speakers.

In the introduction to the recently published English translation of his book, Calvet writes that his description of the French language in the colonial context is not specifically French (1998). He suggests that a similar description of English practices can be found in Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992). Then Calvet concludes that "linguistic cannibalism" is "a process inherent in any colonial dominance, and can be read at different levels" (Calvet 1998: iv).

Although there is room for argument on the use of the term, "cannibalism," it seems reasonable to suppose that colonial language policies have something in common in their theories and practices. It is on such grounds that I would claim that a contrastive perspective offers a useful framework for the better understanding of the nature of Japanese colonial language policy.

The aim of this essay, however, is not to generalize colonial language policies. There are two major reasons to refer to the Western powers and their language policies for the analysis of Japanese colonial language policy. First, the very concepts of "nation" and "national language" in modern Japan had their origin in European social and linguistic theories in the nineteenth century. Ueda Kazutoshi, "the founder of Japanese modern linguistics," and his successors had studied in Germany, France and other European countries and imported the latest linguistic theories such as those of Brugmann, Osthoff, Paul, Saussure and Whitney back to Japan (Lee 1996: 96–117; Yasuda: 1997: 38–48).

When I speak of the European influence, I do not wish to imply that the Japanese language policy was a mere copy of European social theories at the time. In the modernizing process of the state, the Japanese policy-makers and opinion leaders not only imported social, cultural and institutional structures from the Western powers, but also "assimilated and transformed" them in response to the local circumstances (Duus 1995: 11).

Another reason to consider the influence of the Western powers is that Japanese policymakers and opinion leaders were from the start highly sensitive to the attitudes of the Western powers. Being a latecomer among the imperialist states, Japan, like Germany, was obsessively concerned with its own international standing (Young 1996: 77; Oguma 1997, 1998; Gann 1996: 336–341).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Japan was the only non-Western imperial state, that is, what Oguma calls "the colored empire" (1998: 661). For this reason, he argues, the Japanese people had both a sense of their country's "backwardness" to the Western powers and a sense of superiority over other Asian people at the same time, and those mixed feelings strongly affected their policy-making (661).

Apparently, it would be hard to prove the validity of such a generalization statistically, especially at a time when the methods of public opinion polls had not as yet been well developed. The thoughts and ideas of policymakers and opinion leaders, however, can be assessed with some objectivity, and their opinions could affect ordinary people's thinking.

For the two reasons mentioned above, it would be possible to say that to examine the international political and ideological context is informative for the analysis of the policy-making process in modern Japan. As Schiffman acutely points out, language policies "do not evolve *ex nihilo*" (1996: 74), and the Western influence was one of the major factors that constituted the particular context in which Japanese language policy was formed; besides, too much focus solely on Japanese language policy might make it difficult to define what aspects of the

Japanese language policy was particularly Japanese and can eventually cause reinforcement of the old myth of Japanese uniqueness.

Language Policy in Manchukuo

"Between 1876 and 1915," notes Hobsbawm, "about one quarter of the globe's land surface was distributed or redistributed as colonies among a half-dozen states" (1987: 59). In the late nineteenth century, when Japan launched its project of transforming itself into a "civilized" nation-state, great nations were "global conquerors" (Anderson 1991: 98). To be accepted as "great", therefore, Japan had to begin overseas expansion "even if she was late to the game and had a lot of catching up to do" (98).

After the military takeover in Manchuria between 1931–1932, however, the Japanese leadership faced a new problem, that is, how to justify imperialist expansion in the world where colonialism was no longer considered legitimate. By the end of the World War I, the colonialism had come under attack not only by indigenous nationalist movements but the leaders of the imperialist states themselves; the right of national self-determination had become a new principal in the post-Versailles world order (Duus 1996: xix-xx).

To avoid the diplomatic and political constraints, Japan decided to transform the three northeastern Chinese provinces into a new "independent" state of Manchukuo. The appearance of independence was maintained by signing formal treaties and assigning of indigenous leaders in the highest positions of formal authority. However, in terms of the quality and degree of control exercised by Japan, the system established in the occupied area was equivalent to colonial rule.

Because of the artificial nature of the "independent" state, it was all the more necessary for Japan to create myths and rhetoric for the legitimization of the state. The Japanese leadership employed such rhetoric as "racial equality," "ethnic harmony," and "people's state" as official slogans of Manchukuo.

The concern about anti-colonial world opinion was also reflected in the state's language policy. In Manchukuo, it was decided to have more than one national language; not only Japanese, but also Chinese and Mongolian were defined as the languages of the state. This "multilingual" policy was quite different from those in Taiwan and Korea, where Japanese was defined exclusively as the only national language (Chou 1996).

Since Manchukuo never had a law to define clearly its national language(s), there was confusion among the Japanese scholars and officials in the understanding of Manchukuo's national language(s). Morita Takashi, one of the Japanese bureaucrats in charge of Manchukuo's educational administration, for example, wrote clearly that Manchukuo's national languages were Japanese and Chinese, while Maruyama Rimpei declared that Mongolian was also a national language (Morita 1942: 80; Maruyama 1942). In any case, Manchukuo was, in appearances, a "multilingual" state.

In the first several years after the foundation of Manchukuo, no definitive master plan for Japanese language teaching was announced. It was during 1936–1938 that the Manchukuo government began to work on language planning in earnest (Shi 1993: 60; Yasuda 1997: 216–248). According to Morita, with the abolition of extraterritoriality in 1937, Japanese language officially became a national language in addition to "Manchurian," that is, Chinese (1942: 80).[2]

In 1936, the Manchukuo government institutionalized language examinations. The subjects were not only Japanese, but also Manchurian and Mongolian. Later Russian was added. Thereafter, however, it became necessary for non-native speakers of Japanese to pass the Japanese language examination for employment and promotion at government offices (Toyoda 1964: 325–327; Morita 1942: 81–83). The Japanese language here functioned as a "gatekeeper" to determine which individ-

[2] The Japanese leadership preferred to use the term, "Manchurian" (*Mango*), to call the Chinese language spoken by the majority of people in Manchukuo. This reflected their strong political intention to separate Manchuria from China.

uals or groups should have access to political power and economic resources (Tollefson 1991).

Also, in the "New School System" (*Shin gakusei*) proclaimed in 1937, Japanese became a compulsory subject for all children in Manchukuo, no matter what ethnic group they belonged to, while the other national languages were not required for non-native speakers. In principal, for example, Chinese native speakers learned Japanese and Chinese and did not have to learn Mongolian, while Mongolian native speakers studied only Japanese and Mongolian. For this reason, it can be said that Manchukuo was a bilingual state, rather than a multilingual state.

With those changes in the legal and educational system, Japanese became in fact the primary language and was assigned to special status as a "common language" in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the inhabitants in Manchukuo were native speakers of Chinese (Morita 1942). In the following section, the notion of Japanese as a "common language" will be examined more closely.

Japanese as a Common Language

In Manchukuo, the vast majority of the inhabitants spoke only Chinese, and Japanese language teachers and teaching materials were chronically in short supply (Yasuda 1997). Under such circumstances, Japanese policy makers and opinion leaders were well aware of the difficulty in applying the old notion of "national language" which for the most part was consistent with "mother tongue" for the language policy of Manchukuo. Japan needed to keep up the appearance that Manchukuo was an "independent," multiethnic nation-state, and at the same time, the position of Japanese as the primary language had to be secured; it is that Japan needed to invent a new comprehensive definition of Japanese applicable to its ever-expanding sphere of influence in Asia.

To justify the discrepancy between the ideology of multilingualism (or bilingualism) and the reality of the precedence of Japanese, the Japanese leadership employed the concept of Japanese as a "common language" not only in Manchukuo but also in the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (*Daitoa kyoeiken*). This new strategy was not merely the outcome of a top-down decision by the state; the idea of Japanese as a common language in East Asia attracted a substantial number of collaborators. Their opinions varied in methods and theories, but they shared the same assumption that the Japanese language should be propagated for the sake of the enlightenment of Asian people. For the moment, we shall look carefully into the logic and rhetoric that appeared in writings by linguists and educators on the teaching of Japanese in Manchukuo and other areas in the Co-Prosperity Sphere.

According to Yasuda, the notion of Japanese as a common language in East Asia can be traced back to Ueda's writing in 1895 (1997: 63–4). One of the notable features of Ueda's writings is his zeal for the establishment of simplified, unified, standard Japanese. Some scholars like him and his "successor," Hoshina Koichi attached great political and cultural importance in the establishment of standard Japanese based on the spoken language for the national and imperial unity. Also, those who had experience in teaching Japanese in the colonies advocated the establishment of simplified, unified Japanese (e.g., Oide 1942; Sakuma 1940).

Simplified Japanese, however, provoked repercussions from those who considered that the "Japanese spirit" resided in the Japanese language (e.g., Yamada 1941, 1942). For them, criticism against the Japanese language was an impiety to the Japanese polity. Any proposal for modification of the Japanese language was therefore considered an insult to the traditional Japanese culture and spirit. For this group of people, the primary goal was not the spread of the Japanese language but the spread of the Japanese culture and spirit through the Japanese language; Japanese was indispensable for making people in Manchukuo understand the culture and spirit of their mentor, namely, the Japanese.

Althongh there were disagreements among scholars and educators on methods and theories, they generally agreed on which language should be the common language in East Asia. The dominant discourse in the late 1930s and early 1940s reveals two ideological characteristics: Japan's responsibility to guide and enlighten other Asian people, and the propagation of the "Japanese spirit" through the Japanese language.

In his article on Japanese language teachers, for example, Shiraki Kyoichi noted that Japan, the "mainstream" state, was responsible for guiding such "branch" states as Manchukuo and China, and Japanese language teachers should become aware of their own role as vanguards in propagating the Japanese culture (1941: 11).

On the other hand, Kugimoto Hisaharu had a somewhat more flexible opinion that Japanese was not necessarily the common language in all the areas of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. He called for the construction of a new unified vocabulary based on Japanese for the modernization of Asia. The establishment of standard academic and technical terms, he declared, was Japan's mission as the leader of Asia (Kugimoto 1944: 28).

Since there was no conflict on the language choice for the common language and vocabulary, the logic and rhetoric for justification of the precedence of Japanese were not fully articulated or sophisticated. Hoshina, for example, assumed that since Japan was the leader of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, nobody in the Sphere would be against enlightenment through the Japanese language (Hoshina 1942: 199). Morita's explanation for Japanese as the common language was not logically clear, either; through the spread of Japanese language education, each ethnic group composing Manchukuo could acquire the sense of belonging to Manchukuo. Then he wrote, "the common language should be Japanese since it represents the culture and spirit of Japan, a fully civilized nation-state (Morita 1942: 81)."

This uncritical assumption of the supremacy of their own language is, however, not specifically Japanese; similar beliefs can be found in the nineteenth-century writings on the languages of the other Western powers (e.g., Pennycook 1994; Schiffman 1996; Calvet 1998). As Pennycook argues, for example, English came to assume mythical superiority as England secured its standing as a prominent industrialized nation in the nineteenth century (1994: 98–99). In this language myth, English was supposed to be "superior to other languages both in terms of its own qualities and of the culture which it represented (99)." Pennycook explains why a very particular orientation towards English language was produced in that period by referring to several key elements: rapid industrialization, massive imperialist expansion, and the emergence of new philosophies such as utilitarianism and social Darwinism combined with racism (109). As for the belief in national and linguistic supremacy that frequently appeared in nineteenth-century writings, Pennycook suggests:

> [The] assumption that the superiority of the language reflected the superiority of the nation could be used in two different ways; on the one hand, the superiority of the British culture and institutions must be reflected in the English language, thus justifying its superiority; on the other, the English language was evidently of such quality that it could only have derived from a superior culture. Thus, some argued that since Britain was the home of liberalism, democracy and freedom, so too was the language. (1994: 100)

The first thing that one notices is that the same rhetoric appeared in the justification of Japanese language teaching in Manchukuo and other areas in the Co-Prosperity Sphere. As we have seen, the discourse of Japanese as a common language rested on the uncritical assumptions that the Japanese were culturally and spiritually superior to others; and only by teaching of the Japanese language, could this superior culture and spirit be spread and understood all over East Asia.

Today we easily notice that multilingualism contradicted the precedence of Japanese in Manchukuo, but it is doubtful if policy-makers and scholars in those days were aware of the inconsistency. For them, who were native speakers of Japanese and members of the politically and economically dominant group, the superiority of the Japanese language did not need to be proved, and it seemed "natural" and "common-sense" to choose Japanese for the common language.

It is useful here to quote from Tollefson for understanding a "common-sense" ideology in the choice of a common language:

> The policy of requiring everyone to learn a single dominant language is widely seen as a common-sense solution to the communication problems of multilingual societies. The appeal of this assumption is such that monolingualism is seen as a solution to linguistic inequality. If linguistic minorities learn the dominant language, so the argument goes, then they will not suffer economic and social inequality. This assumption is an example of an ideology, which refers to normally unconscious assumptions that come to be seen as common sense. (1991: 10)

He goes on to say:

> As ideology builds these (common-sense) assumptions into the institutions of society, it tends to freeze privilege and to grant it legitimacy as a "natural" condition. (11)

Although Japanese was not a language of the majority in Manchukuo, it was in fact the language of the politically and economically dominant group. In Manchukuo, the Japanese leadership never overtly suppressed other languages such as Chinese, Mongolian and Russian, but it did not necessarily mean linguistic equality. For the unity of Manchukuo and the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, people had to have a common language, and the language of the leader of Asia, that is Japanese, was supposed to be the one. Thus, the Japanese language was expected to work as the symbol of unification, and what sustained this logic was *a priori* superiority of Japanese.

Japanese language teaching was, therefore, regarded as a "natural" and benevolent solution to "enlighten" and unite people of various ethnic groups in Manchukuo. This sense of mission to enlighten Asian people through language education attracted a large number of Japanese scholars and educators. In this sense, it may be said that those people contributed, if not consciously, to the reinforcement of Japanese imperial rule.

The Characteristics of Japanese Language Policy

Now let us go back to the unsettled question of what aspects of the Japanese language policy were characteristically Japanese. As we have seen, the adoption of the rhetoric of superiority for the justification of language policy was not particularly Japanese, but it could be said that the extraordinary emphasis on mythical "spirit" was a characteristic of Japanese language policy.

Some scholars argue that the frequent reference to the "Japanese spirit" was due to the ambiguous position of Japan as a "colored empire" (e.g., Shi 1993; Oguma 1998). They maintain that in the attempt to colonize people who were relatively close to the Japanese in terms of culture, Japan had nothing but the language and the empty notion of "Japanese spirit" to impress other Asian people (e.g., Shi 1993).[3] This view may be correct but seems too simple. Rather, with Japan's rapid imperialist expansion, the discourse of the Japanese language, to use post-structuralist terms, lacked the body of knowledge, in which very particular understandings of Japanese could have been produced to sustain and reinforce its dominance.

In Japan, the process of domestic modernization almost paralleled the process of overseas expansion. Therefore, the attempts of establishing a unified language-of-state for the people in Japan and the necessity to teach non-native speakers in the colonies emerged almost at the same time. That is to say, before it became theorized and unified enough, the Japanese language had to be exported. This could be one of the major reasons why an abstract notion of the "Japanese spirit" was frequently mobilized when the teaching of Japanese to non-native speakers needed to be legitimized.

[3] See also Oguma (1998: 633).

Conclusion

At the defeat of Japan in 1945, Manchukuo was rapidly disintegrated. Although the Japanese zeal for "enlightening" other Asian people through Japanese language education was not rewarded, it could be said that this period was nevertheless crucial for the establishment of the modern Japanese understanding about their own language. Scholars and educators actively participated in the arguments on how to establish a unified language or how to teach Japanese to non-native speakers.

The Japanese construction of language policy in Manchukuo should be understood as the result of multiple processes; they were political, economic, sociocultural and ideological. The political process enabled the expansion of influence and control over Manchukuo, while the sociocultural and ideological process secured and justified the Japanese status in Manchukuo. Those processes were linked, reinforcing each other.

To understand any particular case of colonial policy making, therefore, we must analyze what Duus calls "imperialist coalition" (1995). I have argued that Japanese scholars and educators shared uncritical assumptions on the superiority of the Japanese language and its value as a common language. In other words, linguists and educators contributed, if not consciously, to sustaining Japanese imperial rule over East Asia with their respective knowledge and skills. In this sense, Japanese language policy was not a result of unilateral and unrelenting decision by the government, but a product of a complex coalition of governmental and non-governmental activities.

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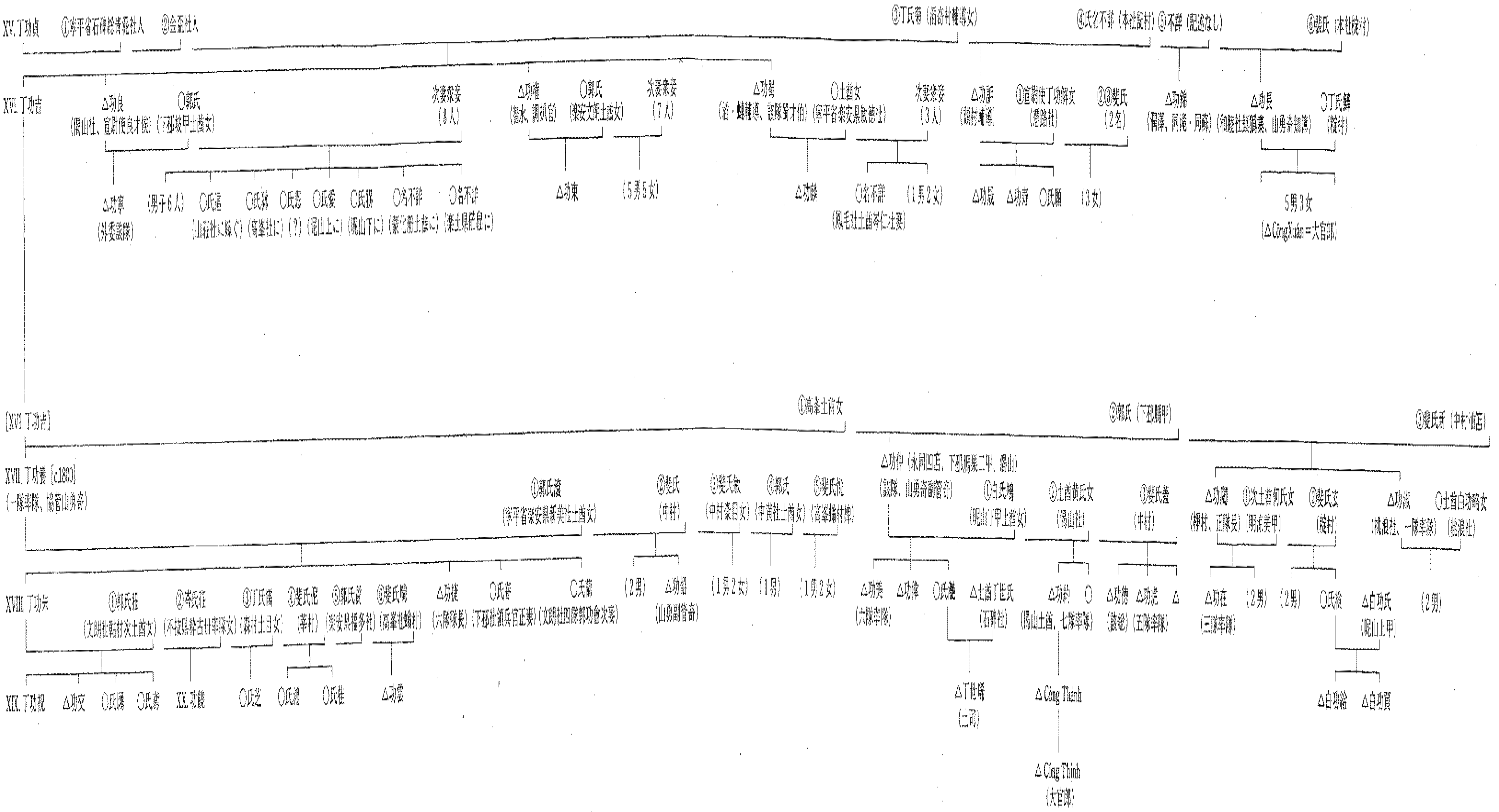
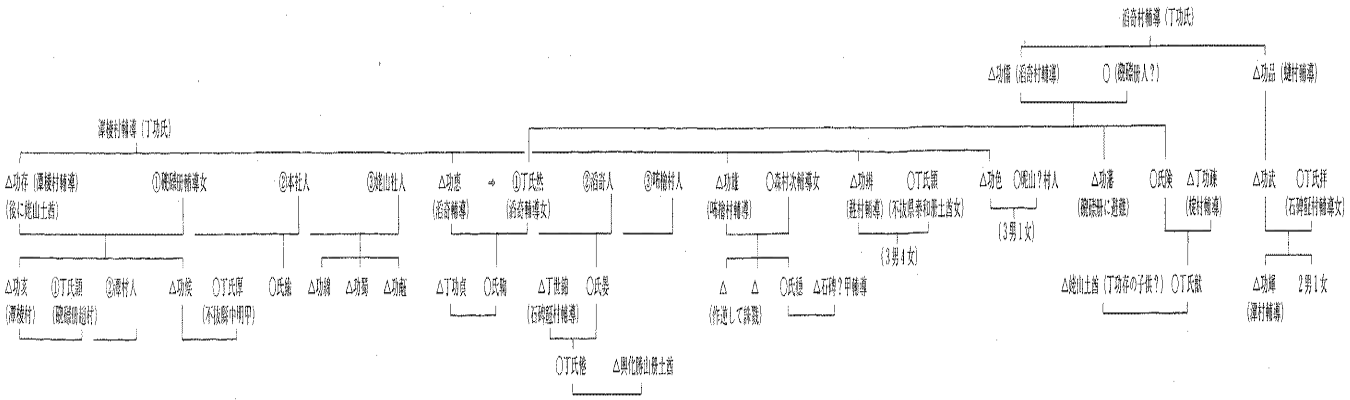
系図1　永岡社丁氏系図（2）



系図2　丁氏菊の実家（滔奇村・譚棱村）の系図



系図1　永岡社丁氏系図（1）