

A Brief Survey of Issues Relating to Tibetan Language in the 21st Century

This brief document was prepared by David Germano as informal notes to contribute to a discussion on "Teaching and Learning Tibetan: The Role of the Tibetan Language in Tibet's Future" as part of The Congressional-Executive Commission on China on April 7, 2003. The notes are written for an audience with no prior background on the subject.

The goal of these notes is to summarize issues pertaining to the current situation of Tibetan language in Tibetan culture with a focus on China, the value of Tibetan language in its colloquial and literary forms to Tibetan culture, possible futures negative and positive, and recommendations as to what the American government can do to facilitate the more positive of these possible futures. I have organized the notes into four corresponding sections.

1. The situation of Tibetan Language in Tibetan culture in the 21st century

Firstly, a few background facts are necessary to coherently understand anything about the current situation of Tibetan language, which can be summed up in terms of the dialects of Tibetan and classical literary Tibetan. "Tibetan" is not simply a language along the lines of modern English consisting of a broad range of speakers who easily understand each other in accordance with standard spoken forms enforced by modern media, lexical materials and educational system. Indeed, one could easily speak of the so called "**dialects**" of Tibetan as separate languages, following the old adage that a dialect is a language without an army (and, correspondingly, a language is a dialect with an army). The divergence of dialects is great even in a very small geographical area, and are often mutually incomprehensible to speakers without considerable experience traveling. The lack of a transregional spoken "standard" comprehensible universally leads to Tibetans often falling back on other languages - Chinese, English, Hindi, Nepali - to communicate with each other, a problem especially striking in Tibetan parts of China. In the last several decades, there has emerged a proto-standard spoken form based (but not identical to) Lhasan Tibetan. This language, which some hopefully term "general" or "standard" language (*spyi skad*), is understood widely in the diaspora community, as well as many parts of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. However it remains poorly understood, if at all, by most inhabitants of other areas, including Kham (mostly now administered by the Chinese province of Sichuan) and Amdo (mostly now administered by the Chinese province of Qinghai). The lack of a robust standard Spoken Tibetan thus continues to encourage the reliance on other Chinese as a transregional form of communication among Tibetans from different areas.

Secondly, literary Tibetan has a long and distinguished tradition going back to at least the seventh century, and has produced a massive corpus of diverse literature including biographies, histories, philosophy, technical manuals, census data and so forth. Since the eleventh century this literary tradition - now typically referred to as classical **Tibetan** - has been remarkably consistent in orthography (spelling), lexical items, and grammar, so that a competent reader can range widely from the eleventh century to the present. Particularly notable is the remarkably **conservative orthography**, which means words are typically spelled now as they were in the eleventh century. Unfortunately, most of the dialects are not equally conservative in their pronunciation, such that the spelling of classical Tibetan is in many cases dramatically divergent from the pronunciation of corresponding terms in modern spoken Tibetan. This makes literary Tibetan unnecessarily difficult to learn, and also entails that many colloquial, spoken terms have no standardized spelling.

Classical Tibetan continues to be used, though increasingly confined to monastic arenas, and a handful of elite scholars. A **modern literary Tibetan** has emerged in creative writing, newspapers, academic essays and the like, though the continuities with classical Tibetan remain strong. The most pressing issue in

terms of literary Tibetan relates to overhauls which might make literacy in Tibetan - and especially its day to day use as a means for note taking and communication - more straightforward and compelling to ordinary Tibetans. While certainly there are broader government, education and commercial realities which hinder Tibetan literacy, there are also compelling internal issues. There has been **a partial emergence of vernacular literature**, in which spoken terms and grammatical constructions are increasingly coming to the fore, while orthography often privileges regional spoken pronunciation over classical literary forms. These literary forms can be easier to learn for reading and writing for local Tibetans, given the greater continuity with their own speech, while content can also be more compelling for a broader audience. On the other hand, an increasingly vernacularization of literacy also undermines the impressive preservation of a transregional form of literacy over a huge geographical area for ten centuries, not a small consideration.

In this connection, it should be noted that often Tibetans are completely fluent in spoken Tibetan, but **lack specific colloquial competencies**. In other words, they are unable to have a coherent discussion in Tibetan when it concerns specific professional or intellectual contexts, and especially when tied to bodies of literature. In these contexts they will code-switch to other languages. Part of the problem here is that though an impressive industry has emerged in creating specialized dictionaries providing a swelter of neologisms for new terminology in computer science, mathematics, biology and other specialized subjects, the lack of standardization of such terminology, the failure to implement them in the standard curricular resources, and the general failure to support Tibetan as a medium of learning and exchange in the associated disciplines all has conspired to make such neologisms largely theoretical in import. The key crisis in the education realm is the lack of middle school and onwards curricular materials which are well written, in Tibetan, of compelling content with local significance, and actually use consistently in the educational system.

Another important issue to note is **the use of Tibetan script in computer contexts**, as computers and the Internet begin to make deep inroads into Tibetan society. The lack of a standard, international Tibetan character encoding - in other words, a set of fonts that can be used in major operation systems and software while perfectly convertible back and forth - has had a devastating impact upon the use of Tibetan in digital and Web contexts from educational sites to commercial venues to social arenas like chat rooms. This situation has squandered tremendous resources on jury-rigged solutions of limited use, and been another strong factor in frustrating the use of Tibetan language in written contexts.

In summary, in addition to government and educational policies in China - which have been formally supportive of Tibetan but not sufficiently so in practice (an understatement) - there are internal issues: the problem of dialects and a "standard" spoken form, the problem of conservative orthography and literary forms in contrast to vernacular literatures, the lack of digital support and other factors that are unresolved problems contributing to the decline of Tibetan as medium for spoken and written exchange. The overall result of these policies and linguistic realities is that Tibetan has reached a crossroads where its future is in serious doubt.

2. The value of Tibetan language to modern Tibetan culture

So, who cares? Some would consider that what really matters is issues pertaining to Tibetan physical well being (health care, sanitation, etc.), economic well being (new jobs, economic development), and autonomy (especially over issues of immigration and cultural freedom). There are many, however, among Tibetans and non-Tibetans who see the future of Tibetan language as inextricably bound up with Tibetan culture. It is not an issue of whether many need to master Chinese as well - Tibetan language can thrive in a bilingual environment, has been shown in many other socio-linguistic contexts. The issue is the importance and necessity of the continued vitality of spoken Tibetan in its regional forms, the continued

emergence of a standard spoken Tibetan that is transregional in character, the development of new forms of literacy that can be acquired and used by the broad public, and the development of new high quality and compelling materials in the classroom, entertainment and the Web written and spoken in Tibetan.

To put it bluntly, why shouldn't Tibetans simply speak Tibetan at home, but speak Chinese in professional contexts and use Chinese for all written contexts? Or even give up Tibetan all together and simply become Chinese linguistically in all ways? These are complex questions that demand more space than I can provide in this limited context. I would simply like to make several major points. Firstly, all studies within China itself have shown what should be obvious - Tibetans simply don't perform newly as well on educational tests when they are trained and tested in Chinese medium contexts rather than trained and tested in Tibetan medium contexts. Thus bilingualism of the private/professional variety will always leave them at a disadvantage, and doomed to be second class citizens in educational and professional circumstances. Just as importantly, such bilingualism, or a whole scale linguistic conversion, create a dramatic discontinuity with a thirteen hundred year history of their own highly literate culture. These forms of expression, insights, wisdom, and particularities, fashioned over centuries in intimate relationship to their environment and ways of life will be lost forever, except as conveyed back to them in the language and forms of other cultures. A people's sense of identity, place, time is, as has been argued by intellectual after intellectual over the last century, is inextricably bound up with their language. The lexicon, grammatical structures, figures of speech and many other linguistic habits and traditions encode and reinforce a wide variety of forms of knowledge, notions of self, community and world. When the language is lost, so is the specifically Tibetan identity and the Tibetan world; the culture, insights, values and behaviors of numerically dominant cultures will inexorably pervade the vacuum, yet the new world will be on in which Tibetans remain, forever, second class citizens clumsily manipulating tokens of a world where they are always removed may several orders of distance.

3. Possible futures of Tibetan language

To put it simply, Tibetan language is at a crossroads where in a few decades use of Tibetan for reading and writing could become the province of a few isolated monasteries, apart from which it is for all intents and purposes dead. Spoken Tibetan could easily in the same time period become rare among urban Tibetans, and increasingly under pressures even in rural environments. Within two decades this could come to pass.

Yet even while the factors bringing about the deterioration of Tibetan language continue to gain strength, another future continues to remain possible, even if increasingly a fragile possibility. It is possible to envision a future over the next two to three decades where Tibetans develop standard Tibetan into a widely understood vernacular all across the Chinese provinces of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Sichuan and Qinghai; new and exciting products emerge in Tibetan literature forms from the sublime to the trivial, from the curricular to the commercial; and Tibetan language again becomes a densely meaningful site for education and daily communication in spoken and written forms. And all of this could be done while continuing bilingualism with Chinese, especially in urban environments, and without necessarily engendering political conflict with the Chinese state. This is a possible future, but it is one that will only come to pass with incisive action and committed support by forces internal and external to cultural Tibet, leading to the fourth and final section of these notes.

4. Opportunities for American government

I would begin this final section by stating what is obvious to any one conversant with Tibetan language and culture and who has spent extensive amounts of time in ethnically Tibetan areas of China: as committed and expert foreigners, we *can* make a difference in Tibetan society and language. The

possibility is there, it is only a lack of financial resources in the hands of those with the relevant expertise and commitment that hampers rendering these possibilities into vibrant actualities. The position that nothing can be done, that the situation is so corrupt and problematic in "China's Tibet" that any aid is hopeless and even counterproductive, is profoundly mistaken. Individuals - both Tibetan and Chinese - are plentiful with the ability, will power and commitment to make a difference on issues pertaining to Tibetan language. The government's stated policies on the subject are often positive, even if there is little practical support; however various government organizations in China are willing to have others help support these policies if the support is done in responsible and politically viable fashion. Of course easier said than done, but the point is it can be done, and is year after year by people working within the constraints of very limited resources.

What boils down to is funding. Developmental work benefiting the medical and economic situation of Tibetans is of extreme importance; but it is essential that we do not lose sight of the equal importance of Tibetan language and culture. And the appropriate foreign experts to contribute to aid in these areas are, not surprisingly, those who *know* Tibetan language and culture from a life time of study. Over the last two decades a committed body of scholars have developed with fluency in spoken *and* written Tibetan, extensive professional experience in Tibet itself, and a strong commitment to working within system to support Tibetan language in educational, publishing, computing and other environments. It is remarkable, however, how little support these initiatives have garnered from external sources of funding - most US government support for Tibetan language/literature-related initiatives has been for initiatives based back here benefiting US citizens, or has taken the form of one time student and faculty exchanges. What is necessary is an investment *in Tibet*, working with dedicated professionals to help transform and buttress the local institutional infrastructure of Universities, publishing initiatives and other intellectual-literary forums that are best poised to take leadership roles in addressing the creation of new technologies for using Tibetan in the digital age, new curricular materials for deployment in school systems, new literary and spoken products that are compelling for a young child looking for illustrated stories to a teenager looking for a Web chat room to an adult looking for a good read.

While academics are often justly criticized for their philosophical narcissism and lack of commitment to real world solutions, I believe that in Tibetan Studies we have made great strides over the last decade towards responsible and intelligent partnerships with Tibetan and Chinese institutions and individuals on this front. We are now in a position to help develop new generations of technology that allow Tibetans to use Tibetan almost as fluidly as we use European scripts in digital and Web environments, along with the concomitant revolutions in desktop publishing, dissemination of knowledge, and daily forms of written communication. Tibetans in China have the intelligence, passion and willpower to accomplish these revolutions; they only need help in acquiring the supporting resources and tools. The potential impact is tremendous, with effects rippling out to affect secondary education as well as broader areas of public culture. If, however, we simply rely upon market forces or the luck of the draw, the other future, a future of linguistic collapse and degradation, is all but sure to ensue.

These emerging partnerships offer another vision of a better tomorrow, one in which Tibetan and Chinese languages can co-exist, and Tibetans can remain, well, Tibetan, even if situated within a broader Chinese nation. But they require investment of financial resources; ultimately what is at stake is difference, in this case the value of the preservation of the Tibetan difference, a unique identity shaped over centuries which is now in direct danger of succumbing to the forces of sameness that has consumed so many cultures and languages in the preceding century.

The following are practical proposals that would have tremendous impact on raising the prestige of Tibetan and facilitating its use as a colloquial and literary medium for communication, education and entertainment.

Computing and Web support for Tibetan script:

- Implementation of Tibetan Unicode as global standard for Tibetan script in computing
- Specific support for use of Tibetan Unicode within various programming languages, software and computing tools
- Translation programs from and to Tibetan, including conversion programs to automatically generate roman script phonetic rendering of Tibetan
- Chat room support
- Specific curricular and Web site initiatives in terms of content

Establishing vernacular spoken and literary standards

- Support institutional project to standardize spoken Tibetan and vernacular literary involving an inventory of extant, published materials in proto-standard; proposing; standard principles of establishing orthography; building lexicons by applying principles and making exceptions (all keeping in mind that the situation is too urgent to build consensus slowly, and rather must utilize key figures and institutions to establish a reasonable plan that is then made compelling by virtue of the resources behind implementing it)
- Building dictionary and reference grammar using these standards
- Building digital tools based on these standards
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- Building popular literature and curricular products based on these standards
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- Building curricular materials based on these standards which are of high quality, relevant content, and compelling content
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Literary and intellectual competitions

- Establish competitions with prizes/events in spelling, calligraphy, creative writing, essays and Web sites with Tibetan language content
- Do competitions in specific regional settings involving schools, and inviting visiting expert authors, musicians, etc. to participate as a festival of Tibetan language with poetry readings, etc., and contents for locals judged by visiting experts
- Hold broad, transregional competitions promoted and carried out using radio, TV and Web.
- Link to establishing communal libraries with innovative approaches and resources

Publishing venues

- Support projects to create vernacular literary versions of great classics of Tibetan literature
- Support projects to create vernacular literary versions of great classics of foreign literature
- Disseminate literary products over Web, in print, on Radio, and in audio versions on tapes
- Support comic books, children's picture books, teen novels and other such products in vernacular literary
- Collect unpublished proverbs and tales from rural/nomadic areas and publish
- Document regional musical traditions across Tibet and make available over Web and in tape/CD formats