

A LITERARY SOURCE FOR LATE 18TH-CENTURY SPOKEN TIBETAN (AMDOWA)

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Recently I have stumbled upon a piece of material valuable for the history of modern Tibetan dialects in a literary area where I suspect that the linguist would hardly look for it. And the purpose of my note on this material is only to call the linguist's attention to it.

Historical material for an observation of the development of Spoken Tibetan is scarce. In the case of the Amdo-group of dialects so far only a Chinese transcription of 15th century Amdowa is known through Nishida's article from 1963.¹ Roy Andrew Miller while surveying the history of the Tibetan language in a footnote to his review of Róna-Tas' *Tibeto-Mongolica*² refers to a period of «NEW TIBETAN (17th—19th century)» with the «literary standard known from several Ch'ing dynasty polyglot texts and lexica» and notes that «In addition to this literary corpus, the sources of the period provide a considerable amount of information about several spoken languages, most of which still awaits philological exploration. When available these might be categorized as NEW SPOKEN TIBETAN plus distinguishing geographical indications.»³ It seems that he was primarily thinking of the curio-type material scattered among the lexicographical and grammatical literature of the period. This material has been picked up by the later Tibetan scholars who were increasingly uneasy about the great amount of difficult words that have gathered within the bulk of the literary heritage over so many centuries and who desperately probed the store of their spoken tongue in order to get some clue as to the meaning of obsolete words and phrases — a natural enterprise which can be observed even now every-day while working with Tibetan scholars. Nobody probably would have expected, however, that we should find more material for this period of the Tibetan dialects than mere «information», and yet we have.

¹ Nishida Tatsuo, *Jūroku seiki ni okeru Seikōshō Chibettogo Tenzen kōgen ni tsuite — Kango-Chibettogo tangushū iwayuru Heishūbon 'Saibankan yakugo' no kenkyū: Kyōto Daigaku Bungakubu Kenkyū Kiyō* 7 (1963), 85—174.

² *Language* 44,1 (1968), note 1.

³ *Loc. cit.*, 148.

The Geshe Dr. Lobsang Dargyay and myself have been working together for some time on a translation and interpretation of a philosophical essay on the *rnam thar sgo gsum*, the three doors towards liberation, written by Guñ than 'Jam pa'i dbyaṅs, also known as Guñ than dKon mchog bsTan pa'i sgron me. This dGe lugs pa-scholar lived from 1762—1823.⁴ He was born in mDzod dge smad,⁵ South-East mDo smad, Amdo. He was admitted to the mDzod dge dgon named bKra śis chos gliṅ⁶ at the age of five, to bKra śis 'khyil (= Bla braṅ, Labrang)⁷ at the age of seven and went to Central Tibet at the age of seventeen in 1778. There he studied in the sGo maṅ grva tshaṅ of 'Bras spuṅs and was then installed in 1792 as the 21st in the *gdan rabs* of Bla braṅ, bKra śis 'khyil.

When Lobsang Dargyay was preparing the notes for Guñ than's biography and a systematical survey of his works he pointed out to me a text in order to show what playful ideas our most serious scholar was capable of having. This text caught my attention at once: it had evidently been written in colloquial language.⁸

It is included as Nr. XVI of the tenth volume (*ñā smad cha*) of the *Collected Works* which were reproduced by Ngawang Gelek Demo (New Delhi 1972 ff.).

It bears the marginal title *Phal skad zab chos* (The profound teaching in colloquial language) and has a verse in the place of a formal title which I would translate as: «The profound teaching which is granted in the form of colloquial language for an adequate understanding by all people of simple mind in the presence of the reverend bsTan pa'i sgron me, the lord rDo rje 'chaṅ,⁹ the father who rejoices over the dance(?) of men, is contained (herein).»¹⁰

The text consists of eleven folio-pages and is evidently incomplete. It was probably composed after Guñ than's return to bKra śis 'khyil, i.e.

⁴ The following notes on the circumstances of Guñ than's life are mainly based on a short biography prepared by Lobsang Dargyay («*Guñ than dKon mchog bsTan pa'i sgron me'i rnam thar mdor bsdus*») which will be published 1981 in the *Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*.

⁵ mDzod dge smad must be the same as mDzo-dge smad-ma which according to T. V. Wylie (*The Geography of Tibet according to the 'Dzam-gling-rgyas-bshad*, Roma 1962, note 710) is the Dzoge area of J. F. Rock's map 3 (*The Amnye Ma-chhen range and adjacent regions. A monographic study*, Roma 1956, cf. G. Roerich, *Le parler de l'Amdo*, Roma 1958, map: Dzoge). It is situated ca. 35° latitude and 103° longitude.

⁶ Unidentified according to Wylie, *loc. cit.*, note 775.

⁷ Cf. Rock, *loc. cit.*, 29—47.

⁸ That Guñ than composed works in colloquial Tibetan has already been noticed by Gene Smith in his *University of Washington — Tibetan Catalogue*, Seattle 1969, §2. 18

⁹ Or: «(which) by the power (dbaṅ [gis?]) of rDo rje 'chaṅ (is granted)».

¹⁰ rDo rje 'chaṅ dbaṅ mi yi gar rol pa'i // yab rje bsTan pa'i sgron me'i žal śā nas // skye bo blo dman kun gyis go bde'i ched // phal skad tshul du gnaṅ ba'i zab chos bzugs so //

between 1792 and his death in 1823. It contains a conversational sermon on the Buddhist principles with questions and answers and is written in prose.

In order to fully evaluate the possible output of a study of this text, it seems appropriate to take a look on some presuppositions that are provided by the person and educational background of the author. Since we know that he was raised in mDzod sge smad we would assume that the dialect he chose to write this piece in was his native dialect, i.e. Dzoge according to Roerich's map.¹¹ Whether the dialect of «Dzoge» belongs to the northern or southern group of Amdowa¹² I cannot say. Considering the fact, that Guñ than not only stayed at Bla brañ during his formative years but once again after about fourteen years abroad, and that he most probably wrote this text while staying at Bla brañ, it is possible that his native «Dzoge» cannot have been much different from the dialect of Bla brañ («Labrang»), which is counted among the northern group by Roerich.¹³

Another important aspect of this material is that its author was not only a scholar of great authority but also an esteemed poet. His ability to present the spoken language in written form, i.e. to chose the appropriate orthographical means, must be considered to have been rather great.¹⁴ Finally: Since our author wrote this text fully conscious that he was writing dialect, we need not fear, that — in spite of the theoretical content of the text — his normal language behaviour as a monk-scholar corrupted too much of the dialect-material in the direction of the literary language of his monastic environment. The parts of the text that are Literary Tibetan are clearly distinguished, and the rest must be representative for the «Dzoge» or/and «Labrang» dialect as spoken by an educated scholar with strong emotional bonds to the language of his people.

To sum up: with this text we have a piece of late 18th century Amdowa-dialect before us which, considering the cultural circumstances, could hardly have been recorded more precisely. After it has been studied, it will not only provide new grammatical and lexicographical material for the history of Amdowa, but also perceptions with regard to its phonetics, and — since the educated orthography used, transgresses the regional limits of Amdo — probably also with regard to Tibetan phonetics of the 18th century in general.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*, 11. Considering his education it would not seem important whether he was a Mongol by birth (Gene Smith, *loc. cit.*, 82) or a Tangut (B. Baradijn, cf. note 14, 211).

¹² Roerich, *loc. cit.*, 7.

¹³ *Loc. cit.*, 7.

¹⁴ Another one of his experiments on languages and orthography, the *Zlos gar gyi bstan bcos*, has been studied by Badsar B. Baradijn, Leningrad 1925 (*Gespräche buddhistischer Mönche*. Aus dem Russischen übersetzt von G. Bufe und W. A. Unkrig — *Zeitschrift für Buddhismuskunde* 8, 1, 1928, 209—242).

In presenting this material it is my hope to find a specialist or a team of specialists who might be interested in studying it. I myself am not capable of doing the linguistic research the text would deserve and shall not deal with it any further. I also hope that other scholars working on the large body of Tibetan literature available nowadays will likewise place similar materials they come across at the linguist's disposal.

N. B. : Prof. Róna-Tas, University of Szeged, has expressed his intention to study the above text.

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