

THE AMDO DIALECT OF LABRANG

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INTRODUCTION

While the description of Tibetan dialects in Western languages has proceeded apace for the last century, for various reasons there are few accurate, useful descriptions of any particular dialect presently available. Due to political and geographic constraints, Tibetan dialectology in the West is still in its infancy (Beyer 1992:20). In particular, the study of Tibetan dialects in the ethnically diverse regions of what has been called the “frontier zone” of China¹ has seen little progress in recent decades.

Before the Communists won the civil war against the Republicans (KMT) in 1949, the rugged conditions of these regions and their susceptibility to frequent warfare limited foreign researchers’ access to them. Since 1949 and until very recently, the upheavals of successive “revolutionary” campaigns and xenophobia in China had effectively closed to foreigners such sensitive border regions, where most of the country’s “minorities” (*shǎoshù mínzú*) live.

However, since the advent of Deng Xiaoping’s “open door” policies in the early eighties, there has been an increase in opportunities for foreign researchers to undertake long-term fieldwork among local communities in these regions. Moreover, Chinese and Tibetan linguists have been increasingly able to publish for wider audiences the results of decades of research on vernaculars spoken among ethnic groups of this “frontier zone.” Unfortunately, much of the

¹ The “frontier zone” in China is the rugged stretch of mountainous and desert land from modern Yunnan province in the south to modern Gansu province and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the north, which for centuries formed a shifting zone of frontier politics and trade. This “zone” marked the outer limits of Chinese state power and cultural influence over, among others, Tibetan, Tangut, and Mongolian steppe polities all the way up to 1949 (Alonso 1979; Aris 1992; Ekval 1929; Rock 1956; Sperling 1990, 1993; Stoddard 1985; Sutton 1974).

corpus of material on Tibetan dialects recently published in China is unavailable in Western languages and therefore difficult for foreign linguists and language learners to access.

This article and other work to follow may be viewed as the outcome of the present historical moment. In collaboration with two distinguished Chinese linguists, both of whom have conducted linguistic research among speakers of Amdo dialects in Qinghai and Gansu provinces for over thirty years, and drawing on our own fieldwork conducted among Tibetans in Amdo regions in 1995-1996, we present a detailed description of the sound system of the Tibetan dialect of Labrang² as a representative of the Amdo Tibetan dialect group. This phonology of the Labrang Amdo dialect will form Part One of our planned three-part series on the dialect, Parts Two and Three of which will be a grammar and a lexicon. The present article provides a useful system for transcribing the language, which will be employed in the grammar and lexicon as well. While we are not producing teaching materials *per se*, we do hope that the series will be useful for the growing numbers of foreign researchers planning to work in the area.

Since we are presenting this description of the Labrang dialect as an introduction to Amdo Tibetan dialects in general, we provide a context for this particular regional variety in the following paragraphs. We first give a brief introduction to the complicated political geography of the region, as this has affected the ways in which linguists have construed "Amdo dialects" in relation to other groups of Tibetan speakers. We then describe certain materials previously published on Amdo dialects and discuss some of their methodological problems and basic assumptions. We conclude by discussing Labrang and our treatment of its dialect. An appendix with references and further reading on Amdo Tibetan dialects is also provided.

AMDO AND AMDO DIALECTS

For centuries, the terms "Tibet" and "Tibetans" have evoked a sense of mysterious uniqueness for foreign travelers and scholars. To the wider public, they have designated a particular people and culture isolated on "the roof of the world" and linked by, it was assumed, a common devotion to Buddhism and a common language. In recent years, however, Tibetanists have begun to focus on the remarkable sociopolitical and linguistic variety of Tibetan-speaking populations over time (Samuel 1993), as well as the geopolitical complexities

² In Tibetan, "Labrang" refers both to a monastery and to the surrounding villages formerly subject to it, both of which are located in southwestern Gansu, near the Qinghai border. In Chinese, the monastery and the town attached to it are known as *Lābuléng*, and the town is the seat of the county known as *Xiàhé*.

that have generated much ambiguity around the identification and classification of such populations (Stoddard 1985). These complexities are nowhere better expressed than in the plethora of ethnonyms and sociopolitical classificatory schemes applied to Tibetan-speaking populations by Tibetan and Chinese historians. These taxonomies reflect a long history of contesting claims to control over regions far from centers of power, as well as the migrations of soldier and refugee populations from various military campaigns as early as the 7th century.

Modern China is no exception. The term usually translated as “Tibet” (Ch. *Xīzàng Zìzhìqū* 西藏自治区, the Tibetan Autonomous Region or TAR) refers only to the 2,100,000 Tibetans living in the Lhasa valley and the western half of the Qingzang plateau (Tib. *byang thang*), and does not include the 2,500,000 Tibetan-speaking people in regions now divided among the four separate provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.³ Yet the majority of Tibetan speakers share a state-recognized label as “members of the Tibetan nationality” (*zàngzú*),⁴ and are referred to in the state census as living in one of these five administrative areas.⁵

Such Chinese classifications have been matched and contested by Tibetan counterparts for centuries. It has been fashionable in recent years for Chinese and Tibetan scholars discussing linguistic and cultural variation among Tibetans to rely on a Tibetan convention of dividing Tibetan populations into three “districts”, which do not exactly correspond to the geopolitical lines drawn by the modern Chinese state. The three districts are *dBus gTsang* (Ch. *Wèizàng* 卫藏 often glossed as “Central Tibet”), which roughly corresponds to modern TAR; *Khams* (Ch. *Kāngqū* 康区) the territory to the east and northeast of Central Tibet, roughly corresponding to Changduo in the eastern TAR, southwestern Qinghai, western Sichuan, and northern Yunnan; and *Amdo* (Ch. *Ānduō* 安多), the area northeast of Khams, roughly including most of Qinghai province, a section of southwestern Gansu, and a section of northern Sichuan.

The vast range of territory where Tibetan-speaking populations are found in modern China is what some Tibetan historians refer to as *bod chen* or “Greater Tibet.” The territory represents the extent to which Tibetan power expanded in the heyday of the Tibetan Yarlung kings beginning with Srong btsan sgampo in the 7th century AD and ending with the collapse of the dynasty in the 9th century. Many communities in these eastern “frontier” regions trace their

³ Figures are taken from the 1990 census conducted in the PRC, reported in Zhang 1993:107.

⁴ There are also a number of Hui, Mongols, and Salar who speak Amdo Tibetan dialects.

⁵ Much to the chagrin of many Tibetans, in recent years generations of young Tibetans, particularly those growing up in cities or in regions in which there is much contact with non-Tibetans, are coming of age with local dialects of Chinese as their first language.

ancestry to garrisons set up during military campaigns on what was then the border between the Tibetan empire and the dominions of the Tang (618-907) rulers of China. Elliot Sperling and others argue that the range over which such ethnic Tibetan communities can be found has been shrinking ever since the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty, and this process, due to assimilation and pressure from migrating populations of Han and Muslims, continues to this day (Sperling 1990, 1993).

This tripartite division of Tibetan-speaking populations into Central Tibet, Khams, and Amdo has been very important to modern Tibetan and Chinese scholars as an organizing principle and as a way to make political points. Exiled Tibetan activists use it as a way to portray Tibet as a sovereign centralized state in which a government located in Central Tibet exercised control over its outlying "provinces", Khams and Amdo. The Chinese state found it convenient to argue that Khams and Amdo were not a part of Tibet proper, and consequently carved them up into separate provinces. Chinese and Tibetan linguists in the PRC rely on it as the main way to classify Tibetan-speaking populations. Most introductions to Tibetan dialects in China refer to the "three great dialects" (*sān dà fāngyán*), corresponding to the three regions of Central Tibet, Khams, and Amdo.

Scholars inside and outside of China have recently pointed out that none of these assertions accounts for the actual geopolitical and sociolinguistic complexity of the "frontier" zone. For one thing, the simple classification of Tibetan-speaking peoples into three fixed geographic locations glosses over a long history of disagreement among Tibetan and Chinese historians over ethnonyms and toponyms and their geographic locations in the regions east of the Yarlung valley (Ren Naiqiang and Zewang Duoqi 1989, cf. also Matisoff 1986). Besides, such assertions neglect the actual cultural and linguistic diversity among Tibetan-speaking populations within these areas that are due to differing histories of migration and settlement and varying degrees of contact with non-Tibetan groups.

In the wake of the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty, the rugged topography separating the eastern frontier regions from Central Tibet meant that links between them became ever weaker (Sperling 1993). A number of independent Tibetan polities rose to power in the east, which saw themselves as sandwiched between centers of power in Tibet and China. Centuries of relative separation saw the divergence of local dialects, so that dialects spoken in, e.g., the