

A Historical Study
of
rGyarong Initials and Prefixes

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0. Introduction

This paper is designed to discuss the possibility of reconstructing the Proto-rGyarong initials and prefixes and to examine their relationship with Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB).

The rGyarong language has attracted the attention of many scholars for a long time, and it is generally thought that the language would be a sort of link between Tibetan and Burmese. In fact, Wolfenden pointed this out as early as the 1930's (see Wolfenden 1936), adding that Ao also had a system of prefixes comparable with Written Tibetan (WT), Written Burmese (WB), and Kachin (Jingpaw).

Since then, we have had several monographs dealing with rGyarong. Unfortunately, however, in spite of some sincere scholarly efforts the comparative studies do not seem to have been very fruitful.

I think that it is rGyarong's striking similarity to WT forms that has charmed students; indeed, the language has many forms identical to those in WT. But, at the same time, in a sense that similarity has misled them. Disappointingly, almost all of them merely picked those rGyarong words which supported their hypothesis and they compared rGyarong directly with WT. My purpose in writing this paper is to counteract this tendency.

I should like to repeat that, above all, it is preferable to reconstruct Proto-rGyarong before comparing modern rGyarong forms with WT directly, because, first, they are at quite a distance from each other chronologically [1] and, second, there are many problems both on the Tibetan side and on the rGyarong side which must be solved before the two branches can be compared. This is the only sound methodology for studying rGyarong [2].

Also, from the actual history of the rGyarong area, we know that there were several fairly large waves of immigration from Central Tibet to the rGyarong area. These occurred at least twice before the 15-16th centuries [3]. We have documents describing these historical events. In my opinion rGyarong borrowed many words from Central Tibetan due to these immigrations and as a consequence it is to be expected that rGyarong should have a striking similarity to WT. It is because of this that almost identical words should be disregarded and not taken into consideration when we do comparative work.

So my basic idea is that we must now collect as many dialects of rGyarong as possible, reconstruct Proto-rGyarong and, after that, compare our reconstruction with the appropriate subgroups---Ch'iang, for example [4]. It is true that field work there would be extremely difficult, but it is still possible to do it in Nepal, India, and Canada. I spent several months in India collecting some Tibetan dialectal data, and I found three rGyarong informants [5] in Sera Monastery which was originally in Lhasa but has been re-established by Tibetan refugees in South India, where they have fortunately preserved a tradition of speaking Central Tibetan as the standard language and talking in their own dialects in their dormitories, which are set up on the basis of where they came from.

This is a preliminary step towards reconstructing the Proto-rGyarong initials and prefixes and examining their relationship with WT and then with Proto-Tibeto-Burman.

0.1 General remarks about the rGyarong area

The rGyarong area is within Sichuan Province of China, on the east side of Kangze Tibetan Autonomous Region and to the north-west of Cheng-tu. The approximate number of rGyarong speakers is around seventy thousand [6]. According to the informants, the Chos-kia and lCog-rtse areas are the most densely populated, and these two dialects are frequently used for trade. A peripheral area overlaps with Amdo Tibetan in the north, with Ch'iang in the east, with Khams Tibetan in the west, and with Chinese in the south.

According to both the oral tradition and certain documents, there are eighteen dialects in that area [7], but we do not have sufficient data on some of them.

Some scholars refer to rGyarong as 'Jyarong', but this name seems to be based on the Amdo pronunciation of rGyarong. Their own name both for the region and for the language as well as for the people is rGyarong [gja ron].

MAP OF THE rGYARONG AREA



O.2 Abbreviations and Sources

- CK Chos kia Edgar, J.H.: An English-Giarung vocabulary, Journal of West China Border Research Society 5 suppl.(1932)
- CT lCog rtse Nagano, Y.
- HN Hanniu Rosthorn, A. von: Vakabularfragmente ost-tibetischer Dialekte, Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 51(1897)
- KT Kham to Wolfenden, S.N.: Notes on the Jyarong dialect of Eastern Tibet, T'oung Pao 32(1936)
- PT Pati Rosthorn, A. von: ibid.
- SM Suo mo Chin, P'eng, et al.: Chia-jung-yü Suo-mo-hua de Yü-yin ho Hsing-t'ai, Yüyen Yenchiu 2 & 3(1957-8)
- TK Tsa ku nao Chin, P'eng: Etude sur le Jyarung, Han Huiue 3(1949)
- TR Trung Lo, Ch'ang-p'ei: A preliminary study on the Trung language of Kun-shan, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 8(1945)
- TS bTsan lha Nagano, Y.
- TZ Tzu ta Chang, Kun: The phonology of a Gyarong dialect, Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica 38(1968)
- WS Wassu Rosthorn, A. von: ibid.

O.3 References

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