

The Tibetan transcriptions of Tangut (Hsi-hsia) ideograms¹

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§1. *The Tibetan transcriptions as a source for the reconstruction of Tangut phonology*

The importance of reconstructing the phonology of the Tangut language is beyond question. Not only is a sound reconstruction of Tangut phonology vital to the solution of practical problems in Tangut studies, but it is also of major interest for the historical-comparative study of Tibeto-Burman. Various sources exist for the reconstruction of Tangut phonology, both external and internal. The external sources comprise the Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit transcriptions of Tangut ideograms (Sofronov 1968:1, 69-70).

The significance of the internal sources for the reconstruction of Tangut phonology is evident, since they enable scholars to establish the system of Tangut initials and rimes. The limitations of the internal sources, however, lie in the fact that the abstract system thus obtained lacks phonetic substance; i.e. by relying on the internal sources only, it is impossible to determine the actual *pronunciation* of these initials and rimes.

As for the external sources, we have chosen to work with the Tibetan transcriptions, which, in our view, are of crucial importance to the reconstruction of Tangut phonology because they constitute an attempt to represent Tangut speech sounds by means of an alphabetic script. Each

¹ This article is an English version, translated by one of the authors, of «Тибетские транскрипции тангутских иероглифов» (Юрий Юрьевич ван Дрием и Ксения Борисовна Кепинг), which will be published simultaneously in Russia in *Письменные Памятники и Проблемы Истории Культуры Народов Востока*, выпуск XXV, Москва: Издательство «Наука».

element of the Tibetan script in these transcriptions denotes a concrete phonetic feature of the Tangut syllable as it was perceived by those who transcribed the Tangut text. Herein lies the superiority of an alphabetic script, and therefore of the Tibetan transcriptions, to the syllabic logographic script of the Chinese transcriptions. The Chinese could only compare the pronunciation of an entire syllable in their own language with the pronunciation of a syllable in another language, but were unable to compare the pronunciation of individual speech sounds, which is why any Chinese ideogram used in transcribing Tangut can only approximately reflect the pronunciation of a Tangut syllable. It must also be kept in mind that various reconstructions have recently begun to appear of Chinese dialects of that period, none of which can with any degree of certainty be connected with the northwestern dialect apparently used in the transcriptions or with the XIIIth century. As a result, we have no way of ascertaining the exact pronunciation of a particular Chinese character used to transcribe a given Tangut ideogram. We have left the Sanskrit transcriptions out of consideration, first of all because of their small number and, secondly, because the Tangut ideograms which they transcribe were especially created for the sole purpose of rendering Sanskrit terms directly into Tangut.

A number of phonetic reconstructions of Tangut are currently available (Nishida 1966, Sofronov 1968, Li 1986), but these reconstructions do not concur. For example, the absolutive/possessive postposition 𐞰𐞱 is read as ?yeñ according to Nishida's reconstruction, as ?in¹ according to Sofronov's reconstruction and as jě according to Li's reconstruction. In the Tibetan transcriptions, this ideogram is transcribed sixty-three times as ཡེ ye, five times as གཡེ gye, twice as ཡི yl and once as གཡིཌ gyeñ.

In this article, we shall examine one of the external sources for the reconstruction of Tangut phonology, viz. the Tibetan transcriptions of Tangut ideograms. We have studied twenty-four fragments of Tangut text with Tibetan transcriptions, from which we have compiled an exhaustive catalogue of all extant Tibetan transcriptions. These fragments constitute

portions of Buddhist writings in Tangut translation where the Tangut ideograms, which are arranged in vertical columns, are accompanied by their transcriptions in Tibetan cursive script on their right, with the single exception of Text 20, where the transcriptions are to the left of the ideogram they transcribe. It seems reasonable to assume that these Tibetan transcriptions were added, perhaps for didactic purposes, by Tibetan lamas who did not know Tangut script.

§2. *The Material*

The twenty-four fragments we have used consist of: (1) nineteen photographic plates in negative image kept in the Nevskij Archive of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, where they are catalogued as фонд 69, опись 1, №181; these constitute texts 1 to 19; (2) a fragment of a wood-block print kept in the Manuscript Department of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Leningrad; this wood-block print constitutes text 20; (3) a photograph and three photocopies of four manuscript fragments kept in the Aurel Stein collection of the British Museum in London; these constitute texts 21 to 24.

(1) *Texts 1 to 19:* Nineteen photographs in negative image, 19 x 24 cm in size, of manuscript fragments of Buddhist works in Tangut translation. Some of the photographs include several fragments. The photographs are numbered on the back in pencil from 1 to 19. On a number of photographs, the manuscript fragments themselves are numbered. The fact that these fragments are labelled with three-digit numbers is a source of some amazement. It is unclear whether these numbers indicate that there were more than one hundred such fragments or whether they have some other significance.

Table I shows the correspondence between the numbers of the photographic plates and the numbered manuscript fragments. As can be seen from Table I, not all fragments on the photographic plates are numbered.

The manuscript fragments on plates 10, 12-17 and 19 are unnumbered. Moreover, not all fragments are numbered on the remaining plates. For example, only two of the three fragments on plate 8 are numbered. Furthermore, one and the same fragment may occur on more than one photograph. For example, fragments 101n and 102 on plate 5 are repeated on photographs 7 and 8 respectively.

Text 1: six lines of 10 to 24 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 2: six lines of 7 to 23 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 3: six lines of 7 to 23 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 4: six lines of 19 to 24 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 5: Fragment 101n contains fifteen lines of 8 to 14 ideograms, with gaps. Fragment 102 contains six lines of 5 to 14 ideograms.

Text 6: Fragment 104 contains nine lines of 23 ideograms each. Fragment 105 contains two lines of 2 and of 3 ideograms.

Text 7: fifteen lines of 18 to 24 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 8: Fragment 102 is the same fragment as that which appears in Text 5. The unnumbered fragment on this plate consists of six lines of 9 to 14 ideograms. Fragment 109 consists of nineteen lines of 3 to 8 ideograms.

Text 9 (= Fragment 112): One fragment consists of five lines of 14 ideograms each. Another fragment consists of six lines of 2 to 6 ideograms. Yet another fragment consists of two lines of 3 and of 4 ideograms.

Text 10: five lines of 23 ideograms each.

Text 11: the same as Text 2.

Text 12: six lines of 21 to 24 ideograms.

Text 13: six lines of 23 ideograms each.

Text 14: eight lines of 12 to 23 ideograms.

Text 15: ten lines of 23 ideograms each, with gaps.

Text 16: nine lines of 3 to 23 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 17: ten lines of 15 to 23 ideograms, with gaps.

Text 18: nine lines of 23 ideograms.

Text 19: One fragment is the same as the fragment in Text 1. Another fragment contains six lines of 6 to 23 ideograms.