ON CERTAIN FUNCTIONS OF ‘A-CHUNG IN EARLY TIBETAN TRANSCRIPTIONAL TEXTS’

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is probably fair to say that there is currently considerable consensus among tibetologists on the graphic functions and even on the original phonetic values of the sounds represented by most of the letters of the Tibetan alphabet. An exception to this is the letter ག མ 'a, now often referred to as ‘a-chung’. And even in the case of this letter there is agreement on many points. For example, in Written Tibetan (WT) the syllables dag ལེག and dga' ལེགཔ are distinguished by placing ‘a-chung in syllable final position after the letter -g-. And in WT transcriptions of Sanskrit, ‘a-chung is subscribed to indicate the presence of a long vowel in the underlying Sanskrit syllable. In both of these cases, ‘a-chung seems to function as an abstract graphic element or diacritic rather than as the bearer of a particular phonological entity. Furthermore, in a small number of words, which in many modern dialects have pure or smooth vocalic ingress rather than an initial consonant, ‘a-chung indicates the absence of any other consonant, including ' (written as མ མ , the so-called 'a-chen). Viewed from a purely graphic standpoint, ‘a-chung in such cases carries the vowel where the system provides no other grapheme for this purpose. Similarly, it bears the second and third vocalic elements in diphthongs and triphthongs (as, for instance, in rте'u “little horse” and me'а'o “cat's mew”).

But beyond these widely recognized functions, ‘a-chung can also occur in pre-consonantal position in WT texts, and on its function and value here there is significant disagreement, involving not only tibetologists but also sinologists, Tibeto-Burmanists, and others who for one reason or another have a stake in its interpretation. The majority of earlier investigators can perhaps be divided into two groups, i.e. those on the one hand who have taken as their starting point the historical-comparative study of modern Tibetan dialects, and those on the other hand who have framed the problem in some other terms, such as paleographic

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origins of the grapheme, Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman linguistic prehistory, and in several cases even the a priori assumption that ‘a-chung in all its environments must have represented a single phonetic entity (i.e. a sort of “Unified Field Theory” of ‘a-chung). Persons of the second, and more diverse, group have variously suggested that pre-consonantal ‘a-chung represented 1) a vowel or essentially vocalic element of some sort, 2) a laryngeal fricative or glide, or 3) a glottal stop pre-initial. Members of the first group, noting that opposite WT ‘a-chung + consonant clusters certain modern dialects possess prenasalized consonants, have posited for the common ancestor of the dialects a set of prenasalized obstruents and then suggested that ‘a-chung in pre-consonantal position was specifically a mark of nasalization or prenasalization. This approach has then been attacked on graphic grounds. For, say its critics, had the script framers intended to represent nasal sounds, they would more probably have chosen the already available nasal letters, m, n, ny, and ng, for this purpose. In comparing these various rather different schools of thought it is worth noting here that they do share common ground in one respect, i.e. they all seek to discover “how ‘a-chung was pronounced.” It is in their answers to this question, rather than in their framing of it, that they part company.

In studying the origins and early history of the Tibetan script and its relationship with the earliest known phonological stages of the language, it is important to take account not only of WT but also of texts of the Royal or Old Tibetan (OT) period. For it is the OT corpus which lies closest in time to the invention of the script, a process which is thought to have occurred over a relatively short span of time during the first half of the seventh century. As regards ‘a-chung in particular, we know that the use of this letter in OT texts was not identical in every respect with its usual applications in WT. For example, we find in OT such non-canonical syllable types as dba’s ཧལེ, dma’ s དམ་ལེ, and mda’d རྫྱད. And we also note that ‘a-chung was not normally or systematically used as a subscript to represent long vowels in transcriptions of Sanskrit (Hackin 1924:88). Perhaps its OT application as a pre-consonantal element might also be examined more closely. The present paper undertakes one aspect of this task, by examining the use of pre-consonantal ‘a-chung in OT transcriptions of Chinese and Sanskrit words. The hope is that this may shed some light on the more general controversy regarding ‘a-chung in Tibetan texts of various periods.

2 OT TRANSCRIPTIONS OF CHINESE

The study of Dunhuang manuscript and inscriptive Tibetan transcriptions of Chinese has a long and illustrious history, culminating most recently in the
comprehensive compendium of Tokio Takata (1988). And over the last half
century it has often been noted that in these transcriptions Tibetan combinations
of ‘a-chung + consonants are used to render Chinese sounds which in Bernhard
Karlgren’s Qieyun 切韻 System (QYS) interpretations are represented as the
nasal initials, n-, m-, and ng-. On independent grounds, these Chinese nasals
are widely thought to have been prenasalized voiced stops during the relevant
period (Maspero 1920:29), or perhaps, as more recently suggested, “post-
stopped nasals” (Chan 1987). This of course accords well with the previously
mentioned theory that similar combinations in native Tibetan texts originally
represented prenasalized initials. Thus, the standard and often repeated
characterization of pre-consonantal ‘a-chung in Tibetan transcriptions of
Chinese is that it “stands for nasality.” This is all very well. But what is
seldom mentioned in the literature is that there are many ‘a-chung + consonant
combinations in these materials which clearly do not function in this way.
The following is a list of such “irregular” cases, arranged by Chinese initial types.
Entries are where possible numbered as in Takata's tables. QYS
interpretations are in Karlgren's system, as emended by F. K. Li. They are
given for reference only; it is not claimed that they are historically correct
representations of the underlying Chinese forms. Dunhuang Tibetan
transcriptional texts and Old Tibetan inscriptive sources are identified using
the following conventional abbreviations:

C = Qianziwen 千字文
DA = Daozan fashi nianfo zan 道安法师念佛赞
FP = Fahuajing pumepin 法華經普門品
K = Jingangjing 金剛經
Kbr = Khotanese Brāhmaṇī; all such forms follow Takata (1988).
NT = Nantianzhu guo putidamo chanshi guanmen 南天竺國菩提達磨禪師觀門
O = Emituojing 阿彌陀經
P = Bore bolomiduo xinjing 般若波羅蜜多心經
Pb = Tibeto-Chinese phrase books; forms from these texts have been assigned
numbers agreeing with the order of Takata's data tables, with lower case
letters added by us.
MT = Multiplication Table
S-T = Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription of 821-822
T = Dasheng zhongzong jianjie 大乘中宗見解
TD = Tiandi bayang shenzhoujing 天地八陽神咒經
Forms directly pertinent to our discussion are highlighted in boldface. For comparison, a selection of other, non-highlighted forms is given where available. In the case of the S-T data, pertinent examples where ‘a-chung’ is subjoined rather than anteposed are also included.

**Labials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>QYS</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>O:</th>
<th>TD:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0073</td>
<td>補</td>
<td>qū</td>
<td>puo:</td>
<td>'phu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0434</td>
<td>胞</td>
<td>qū</td>
<td>phau</td>
<td>'phye'u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0434a</td>
<td>豺</td>
<td>qū-</td>
<td>Ph: 'be'u</td>
<td>“leopard, wildcat”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0481</td>
<td>不</td>
<td>qū, qer, qer-, qer-</td>
<td></td>
<td>K, O, TD, NT, DA, P: pu; TD, DA: 'bu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0737</td>
<td>遍</td>
<td>qien-</td>
<td></td>
<td>O, TD: payan; NT: 'byan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1141</td>
<td>卜</td>
<td>quk</td>
<td>TD: 'bug</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0649</td>
<td>擋</td>
<td>qhwan</td>
<td>NT: 'pwan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0077</td>
<td>勿</td>
<td>quo</td>
<td>K, O, TD, P: bu; O, TD: 'bu; T: phu; NT: 'pl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0078</td>
<td>部</td>
<td>quo</td>
<td>S-T: bo, 'bo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0222</td>
<td>排</td>
<td>qei</td>
<td>NT: 'pyi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0284a</td>
<td>皮</td>
<td>qeq</td>
<td>Pb: *pyi yu T: 'byi pyi tho'u “reins”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0304</td>
<td>比</td>
<td>bi, bi</td>
<td>C: br; O, TD: 'byi; TD: 'byi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0814</td>
<td>貧</td>
<td>qen3</td>
<td>TD: 'bin, byin; DA: byin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1027</td>
<td>白</td>
<td>bo</td>
<td>K: big; TD: beg; NT: 'beg; Kbr: pheh, phieh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1042</td>
<td>平</td>
<td>bjwong</td>
<td>TD: beng; NT: 'byan T: pheng</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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**Labiodentals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>QYS</th>
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<th>TD:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0151</td>
<td>夫</td>
<td>qiu</td>
<td></td>
<td>C, TD, T: phu; TD: 'phu, 'bu; S-T: pu, pu', ē</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0392</td>
<td>非</td>
<td>qju-</td>
<td></td>
<td>K, O, T: phyi; O, TD: 'phyi; K: phyi; Kbr: hvī, hvī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0394</td>
<td>論</td>
<td>qjuwei</td>
<td></td>
<td>TD: 'phyi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0483</td>
<td>富</td>
<td>qju-</td>
<td></td>
<td>C, DA: phu; TD: 'phu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0715</td>
<td>返</td>
<td>qjwao</td>
<td></td>
<td>TD: 'ban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0730</td>
<td>發</td>
<td>qjwot</td>
<td></td>
<td>K: phar, 'phar, 'pher; TD: 'phwad; Kbr: hva:rā, hvārā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0847</td>
<td>分</td>
<td>qjwun</td>
<td></td>
<td>TD: phun; T: phun; NT: 'pun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0853</td>
<td>弗</td>
<td>qjwot</td>
<td></td>
<td>C: phur; O: 'bur, bur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0945</td>
<td>方</td>
<td>qjwang</td>
<td></td>
<td>O: 'bwap; NT: 'pwo; Kbr: hvā:, hvām:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1173</td>
<td>福</td>
<td>qjuk</td>
<td></td>
<td>O: pug; TD: 'bug; Kbr: hvū:hā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On Certain Functions of ‘A-chung

0946 妨 QYS phjwang O: 'hwang, phung
0484 覆 QYS phjau- T: phu; O: 'phu
0155 父 QYS bju: TD: 'phu; DA: phu
0485 浮 QYS bjau TD: 'bu
0570 凡 QYS bjwom TD, T: bam; TD: 'bam; Kbr: hvam:mä
0571 梵 QYS bjwom- O, TD: bam; NT: 'pwam, wyam; Kbr: hvam:mä
0716 煩 QYS bjwom C: ban; O: 'ban; T: phan; NT: 'pwan
0849 分 QYS bjwom- C: bun; K, TD: 'bun
0855 佛 QYS bju:t K, FP: bur; O, TD: 'bur; FP, T, DA, P: phur; Kbr: hvi:rä, hvirä, hva:rä, hvarä
0952 縛 QYS bjwak T: 'pwag
1175 復 QYS bjuk K, TD: 'bug; P: phug; Kbr: hvūːhā, hvūːhāː, hvāhā
1193 奉 QYS bjwong: O: 'bung; Kbr: hvūːmːnā

Dentals

0972 等 QYS tæŋ: K, O, TD: ting; O: teng; T, NT: ding; NT: 'ting; Kbr: tımɡä
0003 陀 QYS dā O: da, 'da; TD: da
0004 大 QYS dā- NT: 'da'; TD: ta
0464 調 QYS dieu TD: 'de'u; DA: thye'u
0471 投 QYS dəu TD: de'u, 'de'u
0472 頭 QYS dəu TD: 'de'u; DA: thi'u
0619 達 QYS dāt C, TD, T: dar; O: 'dar

Retroflex Stops

1156 中 QYS tjung K, O, T, P: cung; O, TD: chung; TD: Jung; S-T: cung, c'ung; Kbr: tümːnā, tüm
0140 住 QYS dju- K, NT: ju; NT: 'ju; chu
0342 持 QYS dǐ TD: ji, 'jì, 'jǐ, cì; T: chì; Kbr: kši, kṣi, kṣvyū
0551 深 QYS dām: NT: 'jam, 'jyam
Palatals

0112 諸 QYS tśjwo K, O, DA, TD, P: ci; C, T, NT: cu; O: 'cu; Kbr: cū, cūm
1187 種 QYS tśjwong: TD, NT: cung, jung; T: jung; TD: chung, 'jang; Kbr: tümnā
0912 昌 QYS tšhjang TD: 'chang
0806 神 QYS dzjen TD, T, NT, P: shin; C, TD: šin; NT: 'shin; Kbr: šīmnā; S-T: shin
0995 乘 QYS džjeng- K, T: shing; NT: 'shing; TD: ceng
0678 禪 QYS žjān T: shan; T, NT: zhan; NT: 'zhān
0917 常 QYS žjāng TD: jang, 'jang, jyang, sheng; T: shong, shyong; S-T: shang; Kbr: šā
0357 始 QYS sī: TD: she, šī; NT: 'shi
0502 守 QYS sjəu: C: ši'u; S-T: zhī'u, sh'i'u,
0565 攝 QYS sjāp T: shab; NT: 'shwab
1010 譜 QYS sjāk TD, T, P: shig; TD, T: sheg; TD: shīg; NT: 'shig
1076 聲 QYS sjāŋ O, TD, FP, T: sheng; TD, NT, DA: she; NT: 'she; Kbr: še, šai

Retroflex Fricatives

0124 初 QYS tshjwo T: chu; NT: 'chu; HS: che
0930 莊 QYS tšjāng K, O: tsang, 'tshang Pb: *莊 田 人 T: cang ten zhin “farmer”
0127 所 QYS šjwo K, O: shi; O, TD: she; P: zhi; K: se'i, se; K, O, T: shu; NT: 'zho; Kbr: šū, šū

Sibilants

0794 進 QYS tsjēn- O: tsin; T, NT: dzin; T: tshin; NT: 'jyin
0270 此 QYS tshjē: K, O, TD, T: tshi; TD: tshī, tshe; NT: 'tshi; Kbr: tciysi, tciysä, siyä
0821 七 QYS tshjet O, TD, NT, MT: tshir; TD: tshīr; NT: 'tshir; MT: tshi
0880 憔 QYS tshāk NT: 'shig

It seems possible that 錯 here has been misread as 昔 (QYS sjāk) or some such word.

0039 坐 QYS dzuā: NT: 'dzwa
0348 字 QYS dzī- TD: dži, 'dzi
0494 就 QYS dzjəu- K, DA: dži'u; O, TD: 'dzi'u
On Certain Functions of ‘A-chung

0797  QYS  dzjen:  TD, FP, P: dzin;  TD: 'dzin, 'dzin, dzin;  Kbr: tsǐmñä
1123  QYS  dziek  C, NT: dzi:g;  NT: 'dzig, jig;  T: tshig
0255  QYS  siei  C, O: sye;  TD: se;  NT: 'she;  Kbr: si
0350  QYS  sí  S-T: s'i
0823  QYS  sjet  K, TD: sir;  NT: 'shir;  Kbr: sīrā
0906  QYS  sjang-  K, O, TD, T: syang;  T: syong;  NT: zho, 'zho;  P: ;

Velars and Laryngeals

0223a  QYS  kwái-  Pb: *怪  T: 'gwa'e  “to blame”
0561  QYS  kjäm:  S-T: kem, k'em
0878  QYS  kāk  O: kag, 'kag
0961  QYS  käng-  S-T: k'ang
0994  QYS  khuo:  TD, T: kho;  DA, P: khu;  NT: 'khu;  Kbr: khū
0519  QYS  kjhau  TD: khe'u;  O: 'khe'u;  Kbr: khyûvā, kyū
0377  QYS  gjū  DA: 'gye
0520  QYS  gjou  C: gi'u;  TD: 'gi'u;  Kbr: khyûvä
0262  QYS  ywei-  TD, NT: hywe;  NT: 'hywe, 'hye
0429  QYS  yâu  TD: 'he'u
0552a  QYS  yâm:  DA: h'am
0754  QYS  yien-  O, TD: hyen;  T: hyan;  DA: 'hyen
0896  QYS  ywâng  T: hwong;  NT: 'ho;  Kbr: hvā:
0962  QYS  yâng  K: 'heng;  Kbr: haṃ:ñā, ðhaām:ñā, haṃñā
0969  QYS  yâk  NT: 'hég, 'hog
0978  QYS  yâng  C, O: heng;  K, O: hing;  TD: 'hing
1024  QYS  yong  TD: 'heng;  T: heng;  O, TD: 'he;  NT: 'he'u;
          DA, P: he'i;  Kbr: ūe:
0104  QYS  xuo  TD: 'ho
0139  QYS  xjwo  K: he'i;  NT: 'hye;  DA: hyi;  P: hi;  T: hu;  NT: 'hyu;
          Kbr: hyû, hyû
0882  QYS  ñâk  K, TD, T: ñag;  O, TD: 'ñag

In examining these data, we note immediately that the largest class of examples comprises Chinese syllables which are generally thought to have had labiodental initials in the underlying forms of Chinese.  The Tibetans tended to represent these sounds as 'p(w), 'ph(w), 'b(w), or 'hw.  And it is important to note in this connection that OT had no labiodental series.  In these cases the transcribers were struggling to apply their script to sounds they did not possess in their own language.  Almost as numerous in number as these labiodental transcriptions are those directed at the Chinese velar/laryngeal series.  And it seems particularly pertinent that the majority of these cases involve the QYS initials y- and x-.  Where these have escaped palatalization in the modern
northwest Chinese dialects, they are invariably realized as velar (rather than laryngeal) fricatives. It seems not unlikely that they were phonetically velar in earlier times. On the other hand, WT h most often corresponds to laryngeal fricatives in the modern Tibetan dialects, and it is probable that the OT value was laryngeal rather than velar. Thus, the combination ‘h- which we encounter so often in these transcriptions may well represent an effort by the Tibetans to signal an unfamiliar phonetic feature in the Chinese target forms. Another Chinese initial class which is well represented in our examples is the palatals. Here we may wonder if our Tibetan spellings such as 'c, 'ch, and 'j are intended to signal a difference between palatals or pre-palatals on the one hand and alveopalatals on the other. To cite a modern parallel, the palatal series in the modern Lhasa dialect strikes me as rather similar to the English alveopalatals and as noticeably different from the modern standard Mandarin palatals. Similar possibilities suggest themselves for the sibilants and retroflexes. Yet another striking feature of the data as a whole is the rather large number of Chinese syllables with voiced or murmured (i.e. zhuo 濁) initials. We must wonder if the phonetic quality of “voicing” in OT on the one hand and in the underlying Chinese dialects on the other was not rather different.

In summary, the function of ‘a-chung in these forms would seem to have been to alert readers to the fact that the Tibetan consonant letters to which ‘a-chung was attached were not to be pronounced in their “normal” way. There is no evidence here that ‘a-chung represents either “nasalization” or, for that matter, any other common phonetic feature. And the particular idea that ‘a-chung was somehow inherently nasal encounters further and even more vexing obstacles in examples such as the following:

0172 乃 QYS nāi: K: ‘ne’i; TD: ‘de; DA, P: ‘de’i; Kbr: dayi
0608 難 QYS năn O: ‘dan; T: ‘nan
1151 農 QYS nuong C: ‘nong; ZC: ‘dong
0815 懇 QYS mjên:³ TD: ‘myin
1064 名 QYS mjjang⁴ O, TD: meng; K, O, TD, T: myi; K, TD, NT: mye; K: myî; NT: ‘mye; T: me; Kbr: mye

Here we have cases where Chinese nasals are rendered as OT ‘n- and ‘m-. Are we really to suppose that these combinations are intended to represent “nasalized nasals” or “prenasalized nasals”? That the underlying Chinese consonants had what struck the Tibetans as special features of some sort seems
very likely, but we can hardly imagine that nasalization is the feature indicated by 'a-chung here.

But what of the numerous and often cited cases, alluded to above, where 'a-chung + consonant combinations probably really do stand for prenasalized consonants in Chinese? Can we not, for sentimental reasons, retain the hitherto popular theory that 'a-chung represents the nasal feature here? This is of course a possibility; but is it not simpler and more consistent to assume that the underlying Chinese sounds here required special graphic representation, just as those in the examples cited above must have done? Why need we set up a special class of "transcribed nasals" in these and only these particular cases?

3 OT TRANSCRIPTIONS OF SANSKRIT

WT conventions for transcribing Sanskrit are fully codified and have frequently been cited by those who have hitherto discussed the nature of 'a-chung. OT transcriptions of Sanskrit, which often differ markedly from their WT counterparts, are not so well known. Our information on them comes in small part from occasional, isolated examples in early texts and in greater part from a Dunhuang manuscript now held by the Bibliothèque Nationale and catalogued as Pelliot tibétain 849. This text has been studied in detail by Hackin (1924). Facsimiles are available as plates 233-239 in Spanien and Imaeda (1978-79, vol. 1). The manuscript contains a rather large number of sample transcriptions of Sanskrit and is also supplied with a set of directions outlining recommended transcriptional renderings of individual Sanskrit sounds (i.e. lines 94-98). The following are those recommended forms which contain the letter 'a-chung as a pre-consonantal (or, in one case, subscribed) element. Each item is accompanied by a selection of illustrative examples from the text as a whole. In several cases, no actual applications of the recommended rendering appear in the text material. 'a-cheng is not separately transcribed in these examples.

Tib. 'g = Skt. gh (vs. Tib. g = Skt. g), no examples

Tib. 'dz' = Skt. jh (vs. Tib. dz = Skt. j), no examples

Tib. 'd = Skt. ķ (vs. Tib. d = Skt. dh)
pu'-da-ri-ka Skt. puṣṭarīka-
pyin'-da sid-ti Skt. piṇḍasiddhi
Tib. n' (' is subscribed) = Skt. ṇ (vs. Tib. n = Skt. n), no examples

Tib. 'd = Skt. ð (Skt. dh to be rendered by Tib. th)
'
'de-ba no-pyi-ka
'dag-khyi-na 'dzam-bu-ti-pa
pur-ba-'di-pa ar-rda-tsan-tra
'di-ba tsag-kra
'de-ba-lo-ka
pur-ba 'du'i-sha-ta ba-ri-sha a-'i-ba
'di-ba
'da'-sa-ku-sa-la
'das-sa-a-rta a-rtu

Skt. devanopika
Skt. daksinajambudvipa
Skt. purvadvipardhacandra
Skt. dvipacakra
Skt. devaloka
Skt. purvadvisatavarsayul
Skt. deva
Skt. dasakuksaka-
Skt. dasarthartho

Tib. 'b = Skt. b (vs. Tib. b = Skt. bh)

na-mo-'bu-tha-yā
'bu-tha-sa-yam-'bu-tha
'bri-ya-spa-tī
tsa-tur-'bar-ma-by-a-ha-ri
'ba-le-ra-dza
'byin-ba'i-sa-ga-ra-dza

Skt. namobuddhāya
Skt. buddhasvayambhūta
Skt. bṛhaspatī
Skt. caturbrāhmanavihāra
Skt. bāliraja
Skt. bimbacakrāja

Tib. 'zh = Skt. y (Tib. zh not to be otherwise used in the system), no examples

Tib. 'b' (the second ' is subscribed) = Skt. v, no examples

In addition to the recommended transcriptional usages, there are many "irregular" forms in the manuscript. Those involving pre-consonantal 'a-chung are tabulated below, with illustrative examples for each:

Tib. 'dz = Skt. j

tan-tra ma-ya 'dza-la
'dag-khyi-na 'dzam-bu-ti-pa
'dzam-bu-tri-pa tri-ko-na
na-ga-ra-'dza
a-na-'dia-ta-ka
a-sīd-tī-byen-'dza-na lang-kri-dā'

Skt. tantramāyajāla
Skt. daksinajambudvīpa
Skt. jambudvīpatrikoṇa
Skt. nāgarāja
Skt. āṇḍajātaka
Skt. aṣītivyañjanālaṁkṛtaḥ

Tib. 'ty = Skt. dh

'tya-na-sīd-ti

Skt. dhyānasiddhi

Tib. 'th = Skt. dh

ka-ma-tha-du

Skt. kāmadhatu
ru-pa-'tha-du  Skt. rūpadhātu  
a-ru-pa-'tha-du  Skt. arūpadhātu

Tib. 'd = Skt. ḍh  
ba-dzra-ra 'da-ro-hang  Skt. vajradharo'ham

Tib. 'g = Skt. g  
'gu-ya-ti-la-ka  Skt. guhyatilaka  
'gu-dzya sa-ma-dza mu-la tan-tra  Skt. guhyasamājāmūlatantra  
'gu-ya-kar-rba-tan-tra  Skt. guhyagarbhatantra  
a-pa-ra-'go-da-a-ba-rī  Skt. aparagodāvari  
mang-'ga-la  Skt. maṅgala  
'de-ba 'ga-ti  Skt. devagati

Tib. 'g y = Skt. jñā  
'gya-na-sūd-ti  Skt. jñānasiddhi  
'gya-ni-e-ka-tsa-  Skt. jñāniekākṣa-

Tib. 'bri = Skt. mṛ  
ba-dzre-am-'bri-ta tan-tra  Skt. vajrāmṛtatantra

Tib. 'z = Skt. y  
'zo-go-'o-tro-tan-tra  Skt. yogottaratantra  
(cf. zo-gi-ni tan-tra  Skt. yoginītantra)

Tib. 'dz = Skt. y  
'dza-ma ra dza'  Skt. yamarāja  
'-dzo-gi-  Skt. -yogi-

Tib. 'g = Skt. k  
u-tra-ra-ang'-gu-ra  Skt. uttarakuru

Tib. 'b = Skt. v  
'byi-ro-ta-ka-ya  Skt. virūḍhaka  
'byi-snyu  Skt. viṣṇu  
'ba-yo  Skt. vāyu  
'bying-srag a-no-sta-na  Skt. -vimśakānusṭhāna  
'da-sa pa-lo-'byi-phu  Skt. daśabalovibhū  
'da-'ba-tīng-sad-  Skt. dvatīṃśat-  
'brī-ta-da-ra-ka- sid-ti  Skt. vrddhadārakasiddhi

Tib. 'b = Skt. bh  
pan-tsa ma-ha-'bu-ta  Skt. pañcamahābhūta  
sa-ya-'bu-'dza-ta-ka  Skt. svayambhūjātaka
Tib. 'tr = Skt. dr
pan-cin-'tri-yā

Skt. pañcendriya

What is immediately noticeable in this material is that it all involves Sanskrit voiced sounds of some sort. Though OT had voiced consonants, the Tibetans felt that in many cases the pertinent letters should be accompanied by 'a-chung. This difficulty with foreign voiced consonants seems to mirror the situation found in the Chinese data. I believe the same principle is to be seen in the rather large number of forms in the text where 'a-chung occurs in syllable final position. Compare the following examples:

pan-tsi-'bu-tha'
'bu-da'
shi-da'

Skt. pañcibuddha
Skt. siddha
Skt. buddha
Skt. āṣṭavyākaraṇa

ar-rta-byā-ka-ra'-na

pan-tsa skan-da'-byi-tsa-ra-na
tsa-kra man-da'-la

Skt. pañcaskandha-vivaraṇatantra
Skt. -cakrānandala
Skt. aparagodāpañcaśāta-
Skt. aparagodāvarīrāja

a-pa-ra-ko-da' pan-ja-sa-ta
a-pa-ra ko-da'-a-ba-ri ra-dza
'dza-ma ra dza'
tre-zā'

Skt. yamarāja
Skt. tejāh
Skt. maṇḍala
Skt. jarajātaka
Skt. daśakuśaka-

Here we must recall that, in the actual Tibetan forms, 'a-chung is written directly to the right of the initial consonant letters. What we see here may be nothing more than a variation on the types of renderings exemplified in our pre-consonantal 'a-chung data, with 'a-chung here placed after the affected consonant rather than before it. There are of course many other interesting points in the material. The Sanskrit labiodental v is singled out for special treatment, as Tib. 'b' in the recommended spellings and as 'b- or 'by- in the actual text examples. As noted by Hackin (1924:102), Skt. y seems to have had a strongly consonantal or fricated realization in the underlying pronunciation of the text, and the Tibetans responded to this with '- + z or 'z- + zh. Skt. n, a sound quite foreign to the Tibetan sound system, is supposed to be transcribed with subscribed 'a-chung, etc., etc.

In the end, what is of primary concern to us here is that it is well nigh impossible to assign 'a-chung a phonetic value in all this material. It seems more likely that it is functioning as an abstract graphic marker for things the Tibetans found foreign or unusual. As for the possibility that 'a may have
been a nasal of some sort, I find four examples in the data which might support such an assumption:

pu-'da-ri-ka  Skt.  puṇḍarīka-
sa-ya-'bu-'dza-ta-ka  Skt.  svayambhūjātaka
a-'dza-na-sid-ti  Skt.  añjanasiddhi
a-sid-ti-byi-'dza-na  Skt.  aśītvyañjana

But these pale before the massive body of examples, cited only in part above, where no such explanation is possible. And they disappear entirely when we realize that each of them is explainable as an example of the familiar marking of voiced consonants noted earlier.

4 CONCLUSION

Let us now summarize our findings. It seems clear that, when we view the Chinese and Sanskrit transcriptional corpora as a whole, the letter ‘a-chung cannot be convincingly explained as representing a particular sound. Neither “nasalization” nor anything else can explain all the varied foreign elements represented in our data by ‘a-chung plus following consonants. The only possible and reasonable conclusion would seem to be that ‘a-chung functioned as an abstract marker which modified basic Tibetan consonant letters, alerting the reader that the usual or “normal” readings of these letters would be inappropriate. In other words, ‘a-chung in the transcriptions was a diacritic. The implications of this conclusion now lead us back to the problems mentioned in our introduction.

5 PRE-CONSONANTAL ‘A-CHUNG IN NATIVE TIBETAN TEXTS

In writing systems in general the concept of the diacritic is rather abstract. For a diacritic is in essence a purely graphic device, used to modify other graphic elements. It has no phonetic value of its own. On the contrary, by adding it to some other element, we signal that that element does not have the value normally associated with it. The material reviewed above indicates beyond doubt that the early Tibetans were aware of the diacritic as a concept and were able to use ‘a-chung in this way in transcribing other languages. In a sense, this point should not surprise us, because, as indicated above, most tibetologists already believe that, in the spelling system of WT, ‘a-chung functioned diacritically in certain environments. But our observation is necessary, because the majority of these same individuals have not viewed pre-consonantal ‘a-chung as a diacritic in native Tibetan texts.
In recent years there have, however, been two important exceptions to this. In discussing the relationship between WT ‘a-chung’ + consonant complexes and the prenasalized obstruents of the Ndzorge Sæme Xvra Amdo dialect, Sun (1986:113-114) addresses the fundamental question of pre-consonantal ‘a-chung’ in the following passage:

...if the prescript “a-čuñ” really represented prenasalization in CT [= Classical Tibetan], why didn’t the originator(s) of the Tibetan script use a NASAL symbol for its representation? It is to be pointed out, in response, that the nasal phase of a prenasalized consonant BY DEFINITION must be of the same place of articulation as the oral phase of that consonant; in other words, its supraglottal articulation VARIES, depending on what comes after it (e.g. /nb/ = [mb], /ŋ/ = [ŋ], /ndʒ/ = [ŋdʒ], etc.). In fact, speakers of languages with true prenasalized consonants may not even be conscious of them as anything other than inseparable units. It would therefore be somewhat counterintuitive to use, say, the DENTAL nasal symbol to represent this prenasal element in all places. All that was needed was something to mark the prenasalized series of CT onsets as DIFFERENT from their non-prenasalized counterparts. On the condition of making use of symbols already in the alphabet instead of creating special symbols, “a-čuñ” seems to be just about the most befitting indicator of this prenasalization feature. “a-čuñ”, in the first place, never seemed to have any distinct phonetic value. Unlike the other letters in the Tibetan alphabet, its function was NEGATIVE --- the mark for the ABSENCE of the glottal stop... Accordingly, “a-čuñ” came to be used as a sort of “all purpose” orthographic device.

A very similar stance has been adopted by Sprigg (1987:52-53). He remarks:

The ꕰ symbol is underemployed in its syllable-initial use... compared with almost all the other members of the (30) gsal-byed sum-cu set; Jäschke 1881/1934, for example, has only 67 entries for ‘- as against 140 for k-, to which may be added 61 for ky-, kr-, and kl-, and 233 for k- prefixed by d-, b-, r-, and s-, making a total of 434. Only w- has fewer entries than ‘-, with a mere 10. The symbol ‘-, therefore, is well placed to double in some other function, such as homorganic nasality, to which the nasal-consonant symbols ng-, ny-, n-, and m- are ill-suited because each is associated with a single place of articulation, velar, palatal, dental/alveolar, and bilabial. ..the under-used a chung has, in my view, been pressed into service for the additional, and linguistically sophisticated, task of symbolizing homorganic nasality of five different locations [ŋ- ŋ- n- ŋ- m-], not on phonetic grounds but on grounds of economy in symbolization. I see no need to search for a phonetic link between this prefix use of ‘- and its initial and suffix
uses...; the link is orthographic, following the principle of economy in symbolization.

In the principles they espouse, these two passages not only agree with each other in their stance towards WT graphic usage, they also accord completely with our findings on OT transcriptional practice.

Let us review what we have learned here. From Sun in particular we gain the important insight that native speakers of languages possessing prenasalized obstruents do not by any means necessarily view these sounds as combinations of anything. On the contrary, such elements are more probably perceived as unit phonemes, standing in direct contrast with other units in the sound system, and in particular with those non-prenasalized obstruents which happen to share with them other features of manner and point of articulation. Viewed in this light, it would be entirely natural for speakers of a language having, for example, both /d/ and /nd/ to choose from some other writing system a graphic symbol, such as $d$, for the former phoneme and then to create for the latter one a new symbol, 'd (i.e., “modified $d$,” “the other kind of $d$”). The insistence of outsiders, such as foreign tibetologists and linguists, upon analyzing prenasalized consonants into constituent elements of nasality + oral occlusion is in all likelihood a non-native and counterintuitive one.

In summary then, we concur with the views of Sun and Sprigg that ‘a-chung was an “all-purpose orthographic device,” utilized for “economy of symbolization,” whether we speak of WT or OT, of native texts or transcriptional texts. The long quest for the “pronunciation(s) of ‘a-chung” turns out to have been a search for the will-'o-the-wisp. And with Sprigg in particular we must agree that earlier schemes for establishing a phonetic link between all known uses of ‘a-chung have been unnecessary and misdirected.
REFERENCES


