

Tibetan : Its Relation With Other Languages

by Dr. R.K. Sprigg

It is generally assumed that the Tibetan language is as close to the Chinese as Tibet itself is to China; and all but a very few members of the English audiences to whom I have given lectures and talks on my brief visit to Tibet, as far as Gyantse, in 1950, a few months before the Chinese occupation, have been astonished to find that the Tibetan books I showed them were not written in Chinese characters. The fact that Tibetan is not written in the same way as Chinese does not, of course, prove anything about the closeness of the relationship of Tibetan to Chinese any more than the fact that Tibetan is, in fact, written in letters derived from an Indian script proves it to be an Indian language; but, even so, it is remarkable how much the attitude of people in this country towards the Tibetan language and the people who speak it is shaped by misconceptions of this sort. Such people seem to find the occupation of Tibet by Chinese easier to understand and accept if the Tibetan language can be thought of as a close relation of the Chinese (though it does not seem to occur to these people that the very same argument could be used to justify the occupation of China by Tibetans).

Amongst specialists in linguistics, on the other hand, it has been accepted for a century or more that, out of the major languages of central and eastern Asia, it is Burmese that Tibetan most closely resembles. The credit for discovering this relationship, as long ago as 1853, must go to J.R. Logan. He is the author of the two terms Tibeto-Burman and Burma-Tibetan in a series of articles in *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* for the year 1853, one of which is entitled 'General characteristics of the Burma-Tibetan, Gangetic and Dravidian languages'.

In an earlier chapter of the same

volume Logan considered the Tibeto-Burman group of languages in relation to the Dravidian, and at first came to the conclusion that 'the non-Asian languages of India, from their Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman members on the North East to the Tamil in the extreme south, have many features in common', but qualified this statement, a little further down the page, with the remark (with which not all of us will agree): 'the phonology of the south is advanced, plastic and energetic, while that of the Tibeto-Burman languages has hardly wakened into life and motion'.

Whatever the relative merits of the Dravidian and the Tibeto-Burman groups of languages may be as regards plasticity and energy, there is no denying that, in associating Tibetan with Burmese, or even, for that matter, in distinguishing them as a group from Tamil and other Dravidian languages, Logan's observations show remarkable insight, especially when one remembers how restricted, in 1853, his opportunities were for studying Tibeto-Burman languages, whether through published material or from observation at first hand. He was writing at the time of the Second Burma War (1852-53); his source material for Burmese was limited to 'the grammars of Judson and Latter' (p. 53); there was still less contact with Tibet and Tibetan-speakers: Darjeeling had, it is true, been 'ceded' to the East India Company eighteen years earlier, but foreigners did not lightly travel in Sikkim, as Sir Joseph Hooker, the botanist, had discovered four years earlier; and another twelve years were to pass before Sir Ashley Eden's escape from Bhutan was to precipitate the Bhutan War. Only through Kashmir, occupied, with British support, by the Dogra, Rajah Gulab Singh, in 1846, was there access, of a sort, to the

Tibetan-speaking populations of Baltistan and Ladakh. Logan tells us (p. 106) that he had to rely, for published material on Tibetan, on Cosma de Koros's Tibetan grammar, of 1834, and Abel Remusat's *Recherches sur les langues tartares*.

It is another twenty-five years before I again find the term Tibeto-Burman in a publication. This next occurrence is in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for the year 1878: and here it is important to remember, in establishing the climate of opinion of the time, that another twenty-six years before Younghusband's troops entered Lhasa, and, three years and twenty-four years respectively, before the publication of Jaschke's and Das's Tibetan dictionaries. E. L. Brandreth writes (p. 8): 'the chief group we then come to is what has been called the Tibeto-Burman from the two principal languages included in it—an immense group—the boundaries of which in the present state of our knowledge are very doubtful'. Later in the same issue of the *Journal* Captain C.J.F.S. Forbes, of the Burmese Civil Commission, writes, somewhat disparagingly: 'the term "Tibeto-Burman" has latterly crept into use as a convenient designation of a very large family of languages which appear more or less to approximate to each other'.

As a student of linguistics I too am obliged to recognize that there are linguistic grounds for dissatisfaction with the term Tibeto-Burman. This is because the reasons for adopting it were not so linguistic as politico-cultural: Burmese and Tibetan were the two national languages of the group, with great literary prestige. From a linguistic point of view it would have been better to name the group from the languages at its extremes, from its two most diverse members, if, of course, it had been possible to establish which those

languages were. This was not, however, even attempted; for Logan himself writes: 'Tibetan, in many respects, takes a place between the Burman and the more advanced postpositional languages'.

Despite Forbes's strictures the term Tibeto-Burman was sufficiently well established by 1909 to give its name to Part III of the *Linguistic Survey of India*.

The sources that Logan used in arriving at his discovery were Cosma de Koros's *Grammar of the Tibetan language* (Calcutta, 1834) and Adoniram Judson's *A dictionary, Burmese and English* (Maulmain, 1852, containing, as an appendix, Latter's *A grammar of the language of Burmah*, Calcutta and London, 1845). Logan does not list the Burmese and Tibetan words that he had compared in order to arrive at this conclusion; but his article does contain such Tibetan words as *lag* ('-pa 'hand') (Burmese *lak*), *mig* 'eye' (Burmese *myak*), *phag* 'pig' (Burmese *wak*), *nyis* 'two' (Burmese *nhac*), *ngā* 'I' (Burmese *ngā*), *rna-ba* 'ear' (Burmese *nā*), *sna* 'nose' (Burmese *nhā*), and *stong* 'thousand' (Burmese *a-thong*); so it is likely that these words were among those which encouraged him to look for a systematic relationship between the two languages. Even so, words such as these, with a similar meaning and a matching similarity in spelling, are quite rare; so he probably realized that the relationship of Tibetan to Burmese was by no means close.

The relationship between Tibetan and Chinese, on the other hand, is still more distant; so it is remarkable that Logan should have guessed at this relationship too.

The degree of relationship between these two languages, Tibetan and Chinese, has been the subject of much discussion recently; this is largely due to the publication, three or four years ago, of P.K. Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan: a conspectus* (O.U.P., 1972). Benedict had at first come to the conclusion, in 1942-43, that 'Tibeto-Burman and Karen are regarded as constituting a superfamily (Tibeto-Karen) standing in opposition to Chinese. The relationship between Tibeto-Karen and Chinese is a distant one, comparable with that between Semitic and Hamitic, or between Altaic and Uralic' (p. 2), and, further: 'the relationship between Tibeto-Burman and Chinese is a remote one'; but by 1972 he

had revised his earlier opinion, and criticizes it in these terms: 'this is hardly an accurate statement: the term 'remote' should be applied to the state of our knowledge at that time (early 1940s) rather than to the relationship between TB [Tibeto-Burman] and Chinese. It is now quite clear that the great bulk of the core ST [Sino-Tibetan] vocabulary is shared by these two language groups, e.g. whereas in his earlier study (Benedict, 1941), the writer was hard put to find more than one basic kinship term—shared by the two groups, he now recognizes a relationship for over half these basic terms' (p. 154, footnote).

Within the Tibeto-Burman group Benedict associates Tibetan particularly closely with Kanauri, in a Tibetan-Kanauri division, with 'perhaps also Dzongai, Lepcha, and Magari' (p. 5); Burmese, correspondingly, he associates with Lolo, in a Burmese-Lolo division. The remaining five divisions within Tibeto-Burman he associates particularly with (i) the Kirantis, (ii) the Miris and Daffas, (iii) the Kachins, (iv) the Bodos and Garos, and (v) the Nagas.

In addition to his book Benedict has put forward his views on the relationship of Tibetan to Burmese and to Chinese at the yearly Conferences on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, the eight meetings of which have so far all been held at universities in the United States; and some of the papers read by him and others at the Conferences have been published in a new journal, *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, published from Berkeley, California.

Detailed studies of a number of the various Lolo languages, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and others, especially by J.A. Matisoff, contributing editor of *Sino-Tibetan: a conspectus*, have recently made it easier to see to what degree these languages, spoken in Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam as well as in the Yunnan and Szechuan provinces of China, are related to each other and to Burmese within the Burmese-Lolo division, and therefore ultimately to Tibetan within the Tibeto-Burman group as a whole.

My own studies are for the most part limited to the Tibetan language, and concentrated on the more conservative dialects of Tibetan, those of Baltistan, to the west of Ladakh,

and of the Goloks, from the north-east of the Tibetan-speaking area, around Amne Machen. The latter dialect I have studied, and tape-recorded, with the help of Dodrupchen Rimpoche, of the Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok. The interest of these dialects from the remoter parts of the Tibetan-speaking area lies, for me, in their pronunciation, which corresponds much more directly to the spelling system of Classical Tibetan, and makes it possible to guess what the structure of the Tibetan language might have been like in the time of Thonmi Sambhota, or the time when the Kangyur was first written, and what its pronunciation might have sounded like at that time. It is exciting for me, for example, to hear a dialect of Tibetan spoken in which the word written *leags* ('iron') is pronounced with the sounds '—ks' at the end of it corresponding to the letters —gs, as is the case in the Balti Tibetan word 'hl-chaks' (—i) 'of iron', or the sounds '—khs' corresponding to the letters —gs at the end of *lugs*, as in the Balti word 'lukhs' (ingnu) 'concerning'. Only a very few of the very many Tibetan dialects have kept pronunciations such as these unchanged over the centuries; but these examples of mine make it clear that the dialect of Baltistan, in what is now Pakistan, is one of them. Other dialects, those of Lhasa and of Kham, for example, have developed a different kind of pronunciation, one that seems to have moved away from the ancient spelling.

Indeed the so-called *da-drag* spellings to be found in the Kangyur and in the most ancient of the Tibetan inscriptions, in the syllable-final letters *-ld*, *-rd*, and *-nd*, for which Sarat Chandra Das's *Tibetan-English Dictionary* gives *kund* and 'byord' ('the modern *kun* and 'byor') as examples, suggest that in the ancient Tibetan of those times there were words ending in the sounds '—it', '—rt', and '—nt', or '—ld', '—rd', and '—nd'. I should be even more excited if I could find a Tibetan dialect in which those syllable-final sounds still existed; but the words in which they occurred are now spelt with *-l*, *-r*, and *-n*, of course, and the pronunciation peculiar to the *da-drag* spellings is now no different from that appropriate to the *-l*, *-r*, and *-n* spellings. What a pity that the ancient pronunciations symbolized in the *da-drag* spellings have not

managed to survive to the present time'. Even in the Balti and Golok dialects there is no hint of a distinction in pronunciation corresponding to them.

From the Tibetan words containing the *da-drag* spellings it is clear that the pronunciation of the various Tibetan dialects, Lhasa, Sherpa, Sikkimese, etc., have changed considerably over the centuries since the time of Thonmi Sambhota and Songtsen Gampo; but the speed of the change seems to have been less in Tibetan than in the many and varied dialects of Chinese; and it is in trying to guess what those different forms of Chinese might have sounded like in about the year 600 A.D., the time of Songtsen Gampo, and many centuries earlier, that scholars specializing in the history of Chinese have turned to Tibetan for help. While it is true that the most important source of clues for guessing at the pronunciation, or the different forms of pronunciation, of Chinese in those times is to be found within Chinese itself, through examining the lists of words to be found in the rhyme books written for the guidance of Chinese poets, important clues are also to be found in the way occasional Chinese words occurring in Tibetan documents are spelt in the Tibetan script. A further, and important, source of clues to the ancient pronunciation of Chinese comes from comparing the reconstructed pronunciation of Chinese words, reconstructed, that is, according to the indications of pronunciation to be found in the ancient rhyme books or from other clues, with the spelling of the corresponding Tibetan words (including the *da-drag* spellings). This is done on the assumption that the further one goes back in time the more two related languages, like Tibetan and Chinese, or Tibetan and Burmese, are likely to resemble each other, with the more conservative language shedding light on earlier stages of the less conservative language.

As a result of this sort of comparison of Chinese with Tibetan N.C. Bodman, of Cornell University, has recently published an article in which he suggests that in early times some dialects of Old Chinese had syllable-final sounds similar to those which are symbolized in traditional Tibetan spelling by *-gs* and *-bs*. Influenced by the *-bs* of the Tibetan

spelling of *rlabs* 'wave', for example, he has proposed a syllable-final *-ps* for the corresponding Old Chinese word for 'wave', which he symbolizes as *laps*; and the Tibetan spelling '*gogs*' prevent, avert, with its final *-gs*, leads him to reconstruct an Old Chinese form *gwaks*, ending in *-ks*, for the word meaning 'guard, protect'. This is pioneer work on Bodman's part, and still subject to discussion and controversy; but at least it serves to give some idea of the degree to which Tibetan and Chinese might be related, and of the service that the conservative spellings of Classical Tibetan words are rendering to scholars in the history of the Chinese language.

The relationship between Tibetan and Chinese, then, may not be quite as 'remote', perhaps, as Benedict first thought it was when he first used this word to describe that relationship in the early 1940s; but it is certainly not close, and Burmese is still generally agreed to have a closer relationship to Tibetan than Chinese has, though, compared with the close relationship to Tibetan of languages such as Tamang, Gurung, and Thakali, even Burmese is bound to seem remote.

RECENT VISITORS TO TIBET

A prewar radiogram with a pile of 78 rpm records of Tibetan

music is among the personal possessions of the Dalai Lama still preserved in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

Recently, for the first time since the Cultural Revolution a few foreign visitors were taken to Tibet. The visitors were astounded by the beauty and magnificence of the Potala or former monastic palace. They said that the efforts made to preserve old master pieces of Tibetan art were incredible although the Buddhist faith was discouraged and only three monasteries, inhabited by old people were said to be still functioning.

The visitors were told that the present population of Tibet was about 1,600,000 compared with 1,280,000 in 1961. Of these, the overwhelming majority were Tibetans with only a score or so of thousands of Chinese. Chinese students volunteer to work in Tibet for periods of a year or more but only with the consent of their parents.

It is likely that Lhasa will for the foreseeable future be open only to visitors who are known to be favourably inclined to the Chinese position there. However, visitors, emphasized the cultural identity and pride which the Tibetans seemed to have so far succeeded in maintaining. During a hospital visit all the male patients sat up in bed wearing their hats in the Tibetan fashion.

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DOCUMENTATION

Teng H'siao-ping Blamed for Tibetan Revolt

Teng Hsiao-ping, who was recently dismissed from all Party and State posts after being attacked severely as the chief opponent of Mao Tse-tung, was blamed as the chief culprit responsible for the 1959 Tibetan Revolt. The following is the text of a charge sheet prepared by a group of Red Guards and it strongly suggests that Teng as lieutenant of the late Chou En lai was the architect of China's pre-1959 Tibet policy. Indeed the policy of that period has the stamps of a pragmatic and almost un-Communist man whose philosophy was: "It does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice."

On March 19, 1959, in Tibet, the south western frontier post of the motherland, the Dalai reactionary clique went against the will of the Tibetan people, betrayed the motherland, conspired with imperialism, and gathered together a large number of traitorous bandits to start a full-scale armed rebellion which endangered the motherland and shocked the world. Its serious impact is still felt even to this day, and the several hundred million people of our country have never forgotten that grave incident of national betrayal and shown serious concern for it. Today, at a time when the unprecedented cultural revolution is raging, this major national incident has been finally brought up once again. After all, how did this rebellion occur? Who was the chief culprit? This question is one of concern to us all.

In May 1951, Tibet was peacefully liberated. From then onward, Tibet, which had suffered so much, returned to the fold of the great motherland. This was a great victory for the thought of Mao Tse-tung.

Faced with the sharp and complex class struggle in liberated Tibet, did we stand on the side of the Tibetan people or on side of imperialism, feudalism, and serfdom? Everyone had to meet this acid test. And this struggle was inevitably reflected strongly within our Party. On this major question, Teng Hsiao-p'ing, the other top Party capitalist roader in authority, consistently filled the role of faithful representative within the Party of the imperialists and their running dogs, the feudal serf-owners.

Naturally, the full-scale armed rebellion in Tibet was a big exposure of the reactionary features of the former Tibet local government headed by the Dalai in opposing communism and the people, betraying the mother country and surren-

dering to imperialism, and history doomed it to failure and extinction. There was nothing strange about this. What was strange was this: Why did Teng Hsiao-p'ing, as the "General Secretary" of the Central Committee, try so hard to please, care for and support the former Tibetan local government headed by the Dalai? And why did he nurse such an extreme hatred for and launch such a frantic attack against our great leader Chairman Mao and the ever brilliant thought of Mao Tse-tung? Is this not thought-provoking?

The Dalai clique was a concentrated representative of the most savage, most barbaric, most reactionary and most backward serf system in Tibet, as well as the faithful running dog of imperialism in Tibet in the recent century. How we should deal with the Dalai reactionary clique was a primary question in the revolution in Tibet after it was peacefully liberated. Let us first of all make clear what stand and attitude Teng Hsiao-p'ing and his like adopted toward this important issue!

Let us lift the inside curtain of the case of Chiang Hua-t'ing, deputy commander of the Dalai traitorous bandit: Chiang Hua-t'ing was originally head of the political department of the artillery regiment of the 18th Army of the Second Field Army (where Teng Hsiao-p'ing was political commissar) of the People's Liberation Army. After he entered Tibet, because of his having an affair with the daughter of an upper-strata aristocrat and because of his other serious errors, he sought refuge in the Dalai's place in 1957. At that time, Fan... deputy secretary of the Tibetan Work Committee, proposed the recall of Chiang to be dealt with severely. However, Teng

Hsiao-p'ing and his like, on the pretext that this might affect the united front relationship with the Dalai, refused to take any action and instead allowed Chiang to sell our intelligence and secrets and collaborate with the Dalai clique in preparing a rebellion. Before the rebellion was initiated, Chiang Kai-shek personally received and bestowed on Chiang (Hua-t'ing) the military title of major-general and gave him an important position. In March 1959, when the Dalai reactionary clique launched the full-scale armed rebellion, Chiang (Hua-t'ing) became the deputy commander of the traitorous bandits. He led a large number of traitorous bandits to ambush our troops and launched a tragic massacre of the innocent serfs.

In 1962, when Chinese troops counter-attacked in self-defence on the Sino-Indian border, this traitor again filled the role of vanguard for the imperialists, Chiang Kai-shek bandit group, the Indian reactionaries and the Dalai reactionary clique in opposing communism and China, and commanded Indian artillery units in a continued stubborn fight against our troops. Teng Hsiao-p'ing, the chief culprit who caused the outbreak of this grave incident, must not escape punishment!

The so-called "People's Council," "People's Leader" and "Official Representative Conference" in Tibet were counter-revolutionary organizations set up by the Dalai reactionary clique for the purpose of opposing the 17-article agreement for peaceful liberation of Tibet and actively planning an armed revolt.

As early as 1952, the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao had clearly stressed that they would firmly suppress and thoroughly eliminate these counter-revolutionary