

Tibetan studies in Australia: language and education

Gerald Roche

As recently as 2011, John Powers could claim that “there are no Tibetan language courses taught at universities in Australia,”¹ and, unfortunately, the situation has changed little since then. The only formal Tibetan language course offered in Australia is at the Australian National University (ANU), and it is currently suspended.² Nonetheless, competence in some form of Tibetan is an important foundation for Tibetan studies in Australia.

David Templeman (Monash), Yanfang Liou and Tenzin Ringpapontsang (ANU); Geoffrey Samuels, Jim Rheingans, Catherine Scheutze, and Elizabeth McDougal (University of Sydney); Sonam Thakchoe (University of Tasmania); John Powers and Gillian Tan (Deakin); Ruth Gamble (La Trobe University); and myself all work, to varying extents, with varieties of spoken and written Tibetan. With the lack of Tibetan language training in Australia, all of these scholars have learnt their Tibetan overseas, in a variety of formal and informal programs. In addition to Tibetan, scholars working on the sacred textual traditions of Tibet also work with Sanskrit (John Powers, Sonam Thakchoe and Jim Rheingans).

Chinese, English, and Hindi are also used as research languages in Tibetan studies in Australia. Political scientists such as Ben Hillman (ANU) and James Leibold (LTU) work in Chinese, as does anthropologist Christine Mathieu (Monash), who conducts research on the Naxi and Mosuo people on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. In terms of language teaching in Australia, Chinese is now widely taught in Australian universities, as well as some primary and high schools. Meanwhile, scholars examining issues to do with the diaspora community, such as Julie Fletcher (Victoria University), Jennifer Rowe (University of Queensland), and Julie Blythe (LTU), use English in conducting research. Georgina Drew (University of Adelaide), who works on a variety of issues related to religion and resource management in the Himalayas, uses Hindi as a research language, as does Ruth Gamble in her work in India. Jane Dyson (University of Melbourne), who works in the Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand with communities that once had

trading relations with Tibetans north of the Himalayas, works in both Hindi and Garhwali.

Other lines of research in Australia that intersect with Tibetan studies have opened up new linguistic horizons beyond Tibetan, Chinese, English, and Hindi. As a country with a large number of endangered and ‘sleeping’ languages, Australia has internationally been at the forefront of language description, documentation and revitalization research, and this expertise contributes to Tibetan studies. Two PhD studies describing languages spoken by Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China have been completed in recent years. One, on the Ersu language spoken by Tibetans in Sichuan Province, was written by Zhang Sihong at James Cook University.³ Another, completed by Henriëtte Daudey at LTU in 2014, provided a grammatical description of the Pumi language spoken in Yunnan Province;⁴ although its speakers are classified as belonging to the Pumi ethnic group, just across the border in Sichuan Province, speakers of the same language are classified as Tibetans.

Two other PhD projects are currently nearing completion at LTU, both being undertaken by Tibetans from the PRC, both native speakers of the languages they are describing. One project, by Sonam Lhundrop, will produce a description of the rTta’u language, spoken by about 4,500 Tibetans in Sichuan Province. Another, by Libu Lakhi, will describe the Namuyi language, spoken by about 10,000 Tibetans, also in Sichuan Province. Both of the projects, as well as Henriëtte Daudey’s, are testimony to the heritage of Tibeto-Burman linguistics at LTU and the work of Emeritus Professor David Bradley and Randy LaPolla (now at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), and now continued by Lauren Gawne, a David Myers Research Fellow and author of *A Sketch Grammar of Lamjung Yolmo*.⁵ Lauren’s work, in particular, intersects with that of other linguists in Australia who work on Tibeto-Burman languages outside of Tibet, in Nepal and Bhutan—Gwen Hyslop (University of Sydney), Mark Donohue (ANU), and Barbara Ward (University of Melbourne). It is also worth noting the important linguistics work being done in the surrounding Himalayan regions in northeast India, bordering the Tibetan world, by Stephen Morey (LTU) and Mark Post (University of Sydney).

My own current research, for my three year Discovery Early Career Research Award from the Australian Research Council, focuses on how the linguistic diversity of the Tibetan world is recognized and managed within the PRC. I am conducting ethnographic research with a specific community—speakers of the Manegacha language on the northeast Tibetan Plateau—to understand why they are shifting away from Manegacha and increasingly teaching Tibetan to their children. Meanwhile, I am also endeavoring to understand the broad political context within which this shift is happening, and how other Tibetan communities in the PRC are responding.⁶

In addition to this research on language, education is now emerging as a field of research by Tibetan graduate research students in Australia. PhD candidate Rigdrol Jikar at the Victoria University is undertaking a project examining the internationalization of higher education in the PRC, and how Tibetan students access and interact with this emerging educational field. Jia Yingzhong, another Tibetan student at Victoria University, graduated with a Masters in Education in 2015, with a thesis examining how culturally-responsive pedagogy for Tibetan students in the PRC improved their English-learning outcomes.⁷ Finally, Lhamotso, a Tibetan from the culturally and linguistically distinct Tibetan region of Rgyalrong, is currently undertaking a PhD in Education at Deakin University. Her research focuses on professional development amongst Tibetan English language teachers in Rgyalrong.

In summary then, except for scholars working in English, Chinese, or Hindi, Australia’s Tibetan studies community has flourished despite the lack of language training opportunities in Australia. Australia’s strengths in language documentation and description have given the country an important role in describing the region’s undocumented languages. Additionally, Australia, as a huge recipient of international students, especially from the PRC, has the potential to be an important site for training future Tibetan educators.

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Notes

- 1 Mackerras, C. 2011. ‘Tibetan Studies in Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore’, *Asian Ethnicity* 12(3):265–283, p.267.
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/studytibetanANU>
- 3 <https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/31252>
- 4 <https://tinyurl.com/wadupumi>
- 5 <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23711>
- 6 See Roche, G. 2017. ‘The Transformation of Tibet’s Language Ecology in the Twenty-first Century’, *The International Journal for the Sociology of Language* 245:1–35; <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2017-0001>
- 7 See Jia Yingzhong. 2015. ‘Exploring the elements of a quality English language program for Tibetan students: A case study of Gang Jong Normal University’, *Global Childhood Studies* 5(4):437–451; <https://tinyurl.com/yinzhong>

Tibetan region of Kham,¹ examining how pastoralists perceived the rapid changes taking place in their traditional pastures under the influence of government policy, international development, and religion. In this work, Tan focused on change as processes of adaptation and transformation. Adaptation implicates variables that may shift and alter human-non-human relationships but where these relationships are still relatively intact. Transformation, on the other hand, signals a rupture that may or may not be reversible. With a focus on territorial deities, Tan’s current work builds on these insights to explore the interplay between ecology and religion on the Tibetan plateau. Drawing from Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, she proposes that in the Tibetan pastoralist context, the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘religion’ inform each other, and may be regarded as inherently connected. At the heart of this analogy are the relationships that people have with the entities constituting both their ecological systems and their religious systems.

Yan Fang Liou’s ethno-musicological research focuses on the outer and inner performances involved in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Her work is based on a case

study of the Two-Arm Mahakala ritual of the Karma-Kagyü order, in which she considers the connections between outer performance, which includes musical behaviours (chanting and the playing instruments) and physical behaviours (displaying mudra), and inner performance (spiritual visualisation). Ritual performance and music connect and work together: the outer performance initiates the ritual, while the inner performance fulfils

the ritual’s religious function. Liou works with emic concepts of music and notation to explore how ritual instruments are played. She draws from linguistics, musical semantics, and American folklore studies to develop the methodology and concepts to show how music produces both meaning and function for the community.

As for my part, following conversations at the IUAES-CASCA conference in Ottawa

this year, I am now planning to revisit my doctoral work in the ethno-history of the South-western Sino-Tibetan borderland (Naxi and Mosuo people) in order to 1) make some of my findings more accessible to anthropologists working in the region, and 2) develop some of the implications of this research for anthropological theory. The structural and historical exploration of mythology, ritual and kinship revealed a web of inter-connections between traditional beliefs, folk behaviours, and politics, and allowed a reconstruction of the shaping of ‘Naxi’ and ‘Mosuo’ polities under Ming indirect rule. I have thus argued that the deliberate adjustment of mythology and ritual by local elites who were well-versed in local lore as well as Chinese and Tibetan civilizational modes, spurred and legitimated the transformation of the societies in this region from tribal to feudal. My analytical method made extensive use of the structuralist theories of Edmund Leach and Claude Lévi-Strauss, confirming these scholars’ enduring genius as well as calling for theoretical fine-tuning.

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- 1 See her book *In the Circle of White Stones: Moving Through Seasons with the Nomads of Eastern Tibet*, <https://tinyurl.com/giltanstones>

