

THE ZHANG-ZHUNG LANGUAGE

A Grammar and Dictionary of the Unexplored Language of the Tibetan Bonpos [A]

The term Zhang-zhung is intimately connected with the history and culture of Tibet. It is the old name of Western Tibet, to the West of the Central Provinces Ü and Tsang, bordering on Nepal, Kumaon and Ladakh in the West. The country was annexed by the old Tibetan kingdom as early as 645 AD. Its most remarkable importance for the studies of Tibet is however connected with the tradition that Zhang-zhung is the sacred country, in the language of which were written those texts which serve as the basis for the religion of Bon. Bon is that organized religion which was shaped when Buddhism in the 5th century AD and later arrived in Tibet. It is still the second religion among the Tibetans next to Buddhism. Tradition tells that Bon were propagated from Zhang-zhung or Ta-zig into Tibet and that the religious texts of the Bon were translated into Tibetan from the Zhang-zhung language. This work of translation was carried out largely at the same time as the Buddhist texts were translated from Indian languages in the 6th to the 9th centuries AD [1].

In spite of this important position in the Tibetan culture our knowledge of the Zhang-zhung language is very deficient. It has been restricted to a few book-titles [2] and a text in the India Office. This text was found in Turkestan by A. Stein and must be dated before the 10th century. It was suggested by F. W. Thomas to have been composed in the Zhang-zhung language [3]. Besides we know two royal

- A. For practical reasons I have followed the American transcription of the Tibetan script in this publication. See T. V. Wylie, "A standard system of Tibetan transcription", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22, 1959, 261-67.
1. See: H. Hoffmann, *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion*, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Socialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, Jhg. 1950, Nr. 4, Wiesbaden 1950; R.-A. Stein, *La civilisation tibétaine*, Collection Sigma 1, Paris 1962, pp. 16, 37-38, 193-210; D. L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, London Oriental Series 18, London 1967, Introduction.
2. B. Laufer, "Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft der Tibeter", *Sitzungsberichte der philol.-philol. hist. Classe der bayerl. Akad. d. Wiss.*, München 1898, 590-591 (*Dal ling a he gu ge bya*); B. Laufer, "Die Bru-ža Sprache und die historische Stellung des Padmasambhava", *T'oung Pao* 1908, p. 3 and 7 (*Kong tse ling tse mer ma rol ma*); F. W. Thomas, "The Zañ zuñ language", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1933, 405-10 (*'U-ya 'ag-tham*).
3. F. W. Thomas, "Two languages from Central Asia", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1926, 505-07; F. W. Thomas "The Zañ zuñ language", *idem* 1933, 405-10; L. de la Vallée Poussin, *Catalogue of the Tibetan manuscripts from Tun-huang in the India Office Library*, London 1962, p. 236 no. 755, Fragment 43. Identified as a medical text. Edited in the transcription of F. W. Thomas by L. Thompson in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1967, vol. 13, pp. 211-17, 4 plates. Here two other manuscripts identified as Zhang-zhung are mentioned: British Museum Or. 8212 [188] and Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Fonds Pelliot tibétain n. 1251.

names from the 6–7th century from the *Tun–huang Chronicle*, *Lig-sna-shur* and *Lig-myi-rhya* [4].

Founded upon a study of the text from Turkestan alleged to be in the Zhang-zhung language, F. W. Thomas placed this language among the pronominalized languages of Western Tibet [5]. This identification was followed by R. Shafer, who even identified it as the old stage of the dialects in the Almora district [6]. But, even including this text from Turkestan, the material for any decisive study has always been too limited.

But recently a “Tibetan Zang Zung Dictionary” was edited by the Bon-po Association in Delhi in 1965 [7]. The print is divided into two parts, pp. 1–22 containing a Zhang-zhung Tibetan word-list together with an introduction on the Zhang-zhung language by Nyi-ma-grags-pa, and pp. 23–64 containing a chronological table of the Bon-po [8] accompanied by a commentary by Nyi-ma-bstan-'dzin dBang-gi-rgyal-po, edited by bsTan-'dzin-rnam-dag. An accompanying introductory note in English supplies the following information on the first part:

The present work is an edition by Nima Grags-pa, of the Shang Shung, of a dictionary of the essence of the Teachings-sutras, praj parameta, tantras and the highly accomplished faultless Jina, the primeval Buddha gShen-rab composed from everything that has been translated from the language of Shang-Shung and collected in the language of Shang-Shung sMar and thence translated into Tibetan. As for those who use it nowadays in this language, they are to be found in Khu-nu Sangs-dKar, Ga-sha, throughout North Tibet, Dang-ra, around the gNam-mTso, in the Highlands of Khyung-lung and in Guge. It is still used in the names of many customs in these regions and mountains.

At the beginning (p. 1) the Dictionary is supplied with a reproduction of the Large Type Zhang-zhung Characters, *Zhang-zhung sMar yig che-ba'i ka-dpe*. The characters are placed according to the Tibetan syllabary of 30 characters, but their individual form is different from the corresponding Tibetan character. In general, the Zhang-zhung characters of this list are modelled on the basic design of the Bon swastika.

Then follows an introduction (pp. 2–6) which examines the languages of Jam-budvipa or this world in general and the language(s) of Zhang-zhung in particular. It states the different kinds of origin and relationship of the languages, explaining the origin of each group of languages as descending from different groups of gods.

4. J. Bacot, F. W. Thomas (et) Ch. Toussaint, Documents de Touen-houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet, Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque d'études, 51, Paris 1940–46, p. 13 and 155.
5. F. W. Thomas, “The Zañ zuñ language”, JRAS 1933, 408.
6. Bibliography of Sino-Tibetan languages I, edited by R. Shafer, Wiesbaden 1957, s. v.
7. Tibetan Zang Zung Dictionary, Lahore Press, Jama Masjid, Delhi –6, (1965). Mimeographed in Tibetan with an added printed introductory note in English; 64 pp. and 2 maps.
8. This table is being published shortly in an English translation by Per Kværne in Acta Orientalia, Copenhagen.

The Tibetan classification of the Zhang-zhung languages

Regarding the areas connected with the origin of Bon, (s)Ta(g)-(g)zig(s) [9] and Zhang-zhung, it is stated that the languages of these two both descend from the language of the Gods of Primary Existence, *Ye-srid-lha*. The Zhang-zhung language is divided into four main groups or dialects called *Phug-pa*, *Bar-pa*, *sGo-pa* and *Phal-pa* or the *Interior One*, the *Intermediate One*, the *Door(-keeper)* and the *Colloquial One*.

Phug-pa descends from the language of the Ka-pi-ta sub-group of gods. In the accompanying map on p. 65 it is geographically placed to the West of Western Tibet, together with 'Ol-mo-lung-ring, in the country *Zhang-zhung Phug-pa rTag-gzigs*. It is thus connected with the very origin country of the Bon religion.

Bar-pa is related to Sanskrit and is geographically placed to the North or rather North-West of Western Tibet.

sGo-pa is explained as *Zhang-zhung sMar*, the sMar dialect of the Zhang-zhung language and descends from the Ye-srid-lha. The district of sMar is generally identified with the upper valleys of the Indus River basin, between Leh and Gartok, but according to the map p. 65 it comprises, linguistically at least, a much greater part of Tibet. It comprises the whole of Western Tibet, with frontiers towards Ladakh, Zangskar, Spiti and Kunu, Kumaon, Nepal and the Tsang Province, furthermore the region of lakes which lies to the North of the Transhimalayan Range as far as Nagchuka and the country to the North of the Kongpo Province, i. e. the area outside the administrative boundaries of Central Tibet. This area, identified as Zhang-zhung sMar, corresponds to the area described in the accompanying English note quoted above.

Phal-pa is divided into five dialects, called *Dal-ma*, *Dir-ma*, *Dar-ma-dir*, *Gu-ge* and *Phal-po-gLang*. Among these Gu-ge is immediately identified as the present day district of Guge in the upper valleys of the River Sutlej, to the West of Lake Manasarowar. Possibly the other four are to be placed in the same region.

This geographical and linguistic representation seems to indicate that *sGo-pa* was the language of the wide area where the Zhang-zhung language had its largest distribution before it was gradually absorbed into the other (Central) Tibetan dialects. Traces of the Zhang-zhung vocabulary are presumably still present in the dialects of this region. *Phal-pa* seems to indicate those districts where the Zhang-zhung language is still, or was still in rather recent times, the colloquial idiom.

9. Ta-zig, which is found in different spellings, is the later, generalized concept of the region to the West of Pamir, primarily identified with Persia. Considered a part of Zhang-zhung it is intimately connected with the origin of the Bon religion. See the works of Hoffmann and Snellgrove quoted in note 1.

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