

1-1-1996

The Classical Tibetan Language, by S.V. Beyer

Ronald M. Davidson
Fairfield University, rdavidson@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>
© 1996 by University of Hawaii Press.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Davidson, Ronald M., "The Classical Tibetan Language, by S.V. Beyer" (1996). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 47.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/47>

Published Citation

Davidson, Ronald M. "The Classical Tibetan Language, by S.V. Beyer." *Philosophy East & West* 46.1 (1996): 119-122.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

the existence of common forms of rationality and logic, there are some basic problems with their approach. To begin with, the texts cited are not really representative of the full spectrum of Chinese thought. That is, the arguments made for the existence of universal forms of rationality and logic take into account only those Chinese texts in which knowledge is problematized as it is in the Western tradition. Admittedly, it is not terribly difficult to find in the later Mohist cannon, the "Ch'i Wu Lun" chapter of the *Chuang Tzu*, and even the *Hsün Tzu*, forms of logic and conceptions of knowing similar to our own. The question we must ask, however, is how important these specific ideas and ways of thinking are within the Chinese tradition. While the logic and forms of rationality found in these texts are not insignificant, they nevertheless have not had a great deal of influence on Chinese thought and culture.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, a one-sided search for universals, though a useful and often insightful approach to comparative philosophy, can lead to what Eliot Deutsch has rightly described as the replacement of one tradition by another (*Philosophy East and West* 44 [3][1994]: 578). To get a better understanding of China, we must become aware of our own preconceptions of what it means to know a world. Then, rather than imposing these preconceptions on the Chinese tradition, we ought to ask in what sense their conceptions of knowing might be different. In short, rather than look for Western epistemological issues in classical Chinese thought, as Roetz, Harbsmeier, and Paul do, we need to begin at a more fundamental level by asking what is it to "know" a world in the Chinese tradition.

In addition to these essays, *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy* contains papers by A. C. Graham, A. S. Cua, Peter J. Opitz, and Hubert Schleichert. Though these essays do not focus on the problematic discussed above, they are worth reading in their own light, and are among the better essays in the book.

The Classical Tibetan Language. By Stephan V. Beyer. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Pp. xxiv, 503. Hardcover \$57.50. Paper \$18.95.

Tibetan studies has been blessed recently with a dramatic increase in grammars and grammatical studies, a circumstance quite different from its earlier paucity of materials. The beginning or intermediate student of the language can now use studies on ancient Tibetan, on classical Tibetan, on modern literary Tibetan, on translation Tibetan, or on colloquial Tibetan, in addition to the specific studies of philosophical vocabulary, dialects, medical language, ritual terminology, and so forth. Yet some of these works, particularly those describing the grammatical structure of

Reviewed by
Ronald M. Davidson
Fairfield University

© 1996
by University of
Hawai'i Press

the language, rely on the indigenous efforts to fit Tibetan into a “Tower of Babel” linguistic system. According to this model, all languages either derive ultimately directly from Sanskrit or must be described according to Sanskrit grammatical categories to gain a degree of authenticity, since, after all, Sanskrit is the language of the gods. Beyer’s grammar is perhaps the first attempt to present a descriptive grammar of the classical language that makes use of modern linguistic taxonomies and terminology.

It was with a sense of *déjà vu* that I opened Beyer’s *The Classical Tibetan Language*. Beyer had developed the grammar as a “nice portable project” while he was a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1975–1976 academic year. I was a student at Berkeley at the time and had the opportunity to see this work go through various stages of development; indeed, at least one of its earlier stages resides in photocopy form on my shelf. Beyer’s generation of his explanatory technique was very much a product of his attempt to explain the Tibetan language in an intelligent manner to the students both at Berkeley and at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. *The Classical Tibetan Language* provides, in many ways, a model of procedure to unpack many of the most difficult varieties of the language, and Beyer specifically maintains that “It is intended to describe the READING of classical Tibetan.” Yet the work has some serious flaws that dramatically reduce its usefulness to the student of that language.

The Classical Tibetan Language is really two books in one—a linguistic essay and a descriptive grammar. Beyer begins the text with a very long discourse on the historical linguistics and morphology of the Tibetan words, in particular the noun (pp. 1–190; §§ 1–8). Most of this section deals with linguistic formulation, and far less of it treats what might be properly be expected of a “grammar” of the language. The balance of the text (pp. 191–423) offers us an extended treatment of § 9 Phrases, § 10 Simple Propositions, § 11 Complex Propositions, § 12 Sentences, and § 13 Beyond the Sentence. Pages 424–498 consist of a very large annotated and well-structured bibliography.¹

Beyer’s problematic decisions in the text demand immediate attention once the student opens the pages of the grammar. First and foremost is his selection of a highly idiosyncratic romanization system at the expense either of a normative system or of the simple employment of Tibetan script. Increasingly, Tibetologists have been adopting some modified form of the “Wylie System,” which is actually a form of romanization suggested first by David Snellgrove, in his *Buddhist Himālaya* (Oxford: Cassier, 1957), and adopted by Turrell Wylie, in “A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription” (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1959, pp. 261–267). French authors, to be sure, predominantly continue to use a different system, but the difference between it and English and

American transcription systems is slight and primarily concerns nasals and affricatives. Beyer has elected to introduce his own romanization, which he does not discuss in the context of current scholarship. Equally, the lack of almost any Tibetan script throughout hinders the immediate use of the text as a learning device. Students must have early and frequent exposure to the script to assimilate pronunciation and develop an easy familiarity with the problems of reading. Students learning the language through romanized texts almost always have their pronunciation seriously flawed, an obstacle to their eventual work with Tibetan scholars.

Apparently, Beyer felt that the linguistically based romanization system should dominate the descriptive apparatus of the text, a point which might be defensible if the linguistics employed in *The Classical Tibetan Language* were sufficiently rigorous, which it is not. For example, at the beginning of §3, Beyer speculates (p. 7 n. 1) that the “Middle Chinese **bhywan* ‘barbarian’ may in fact be a loan-word from Old Tibetan *bon* ‘shamanic religion’ or a related word in one of the Hsi-fan languages.” For this, he employs Bernhard Karlgren’s *Grammata Serica Recensa* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1964), which recreates this hypothetical pronunciation of the modern Mandarin *fan*. Beyer, however, obscures the process by neither identifying the modern pronunciation nor citing the Chinese character for Karlgren’s reconstruction. In the more recent work of Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle, and Early Mandarin* ([Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991], p. 19), the question is discussed and discarded as a nonissue, particularly since *fan* is used in the ancient *Shi jing*, well predating its earliest Tibetan attestation and affirming its indigenous Chinese origin. Thus the Chinese dynastic authors, rather than using a loan word to describe Tibetans, have employed a homonym already present in the language. Such an explanation is reasonable, since it is the normative means for rendering foreign words in Chinese, including Sanskrit, Gāndhārī, Tangut, and others.² Linguistic errors in the Tibetan materials themselves are fewer, but Beyer’s questionable handling of the materials indicates that this section of the text should have been developed along different lines, especially as it is clearly intended to assist students of Tibetan language, not budding linguists, who will, of course, go elsewhere for their information.

Infinitely better is the heart of the work, the descriptive system of the syntax and grammatical structure of Tibetan. Beyer’s system, with some modifications, shows the future of Tibetan descriptive grammars. His explanation of the relation of transitive and intransitive sentence structures, for example, is excellent, as is his discussion of relative clauses and Tibetan verse forms. Students of the language will pay close attention to

著

詩經

Book Reviews

his analysis of the bKa'-bgyud-pa verse systems here, since this has become widely acknowledged as one of Beyer's strengths.

Yet even here, one lives with structural decisions that extend to the bizarre. *The Classical Tibetan Language*, for example, is numbered in a manner reminiscent of that least useful of structuring systems, the Tibetan index (sa-bcad). Are we to believe, for example, that "§ 11.2.3.2.3.1.3 Type 3 Complement Constructions" is a significant differentiation from "§ 11.2.3.2.3.5.1 Simple Forms," from which it is separated by a few pages? Such clutters of numbers may have their place in the designing of Fortran accounting codes, but it surely is indigestible here in a text designed for language appropriation. I suspect that part of the problem, again, is Beyer's fascination with linguistics. Some years ago, Professor Nagano Yasuhiko, while still a graduate student at Berkeley, showed me just how dependent linguists are on quantitative descriptive methodology. Is Beyer attempting to justify his interest by stacking numbers as quasi-random events, or is this somehow to replace a smoothly structured text?

Exacerbating the problem of use is the extraordinarily weak index, which consists of a total of five pages. The index is arranged according to Beyer's grammatical and linguistic categories, so that the student has little hope of ever looking a phrase or usage up in the body of the text until (s)he has already mastered the body of the text, numbers and all. Franklin Edgerton, in his monumental *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) spoke of his sensitivity toward the weakness of any grammar not employing an index; he justified his own lack based on a highly detailed table of contents, which identified virtually all nominal and verbal forms, and on the presence of a detailed dictionary, which cross-referenced these forms between the dictionary and the grammar. *The Classical Tibetan Language* has neither a glossary nor a detailed table of contents to accompany it, and so it repels the student's best efforts at employing the text. It is unfortunate, indeed, that a text so strong and potentially helpful in grammatical analysis should be so problematic in its actual use.

Notes

- 1 – The greatest curiosity in the bibliography is the lack of mention of the great three-volume Tibetan-Tibetan-Chinese dictionary, *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo—Zang han da ci dian*, ed. Zhang Yi Sun et al. (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984–1985), 3 vols.
- 2 – See the table, for example, in Ernst Waldschmidt, *Bruchstücke Buddhistischer Sūtras aus dem Zentralasiatischen Sanskritkanon, Kleinere Sanskrit-texte, heft 4* (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1932), pp. 431–445.