Tibetan Linguistics
History, State-of-the-Art, Tasks

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In 1938 Helmut Hoffman read a paper at the meeting of the German orientalists with the title: Probleme und Aufgaben der tibetischen Philologie. This concise and informative summary shows well that Tibetan linguistics has for a long time been considered as a complementary study to textual philology. In the sixties Roy Andrew Miller and Terry Wylie sketched the new trends in Tibetan linguistics. The most recent state-of-the-art report was published in 1982 by Hale who gives a fine overview on Tibeto-Burmese linguistics with a very good bibliography. The weakest part of it is, however, just Tibetan linguistics proper.

In this paper I shall concentrate first on the very beginnings because this is surprisingly unknown.

For the most handbooks and overviews the following statement is typical: "The earliest contribution to the field of Tibetan language studies by a Western scholar appears to be that by Giorgi in 1762: however, the credit for the true beginning of such studies should be given to Alexander Crema de Káros ..." (from a handbook published in 1967 in the US). The great importance of the work of Crema will not be lessened on the contrary we shall see its real significance if we evaluate what had been done before him.

Although the trans-Eurasian travellers of the 13th and 14th centuries as Plano Carpini, Marco Polo, Odoricus de Prodenone all mention Tibet, it is only in the work of Rubrukk that we find a short passage referring to the Tibetan script and language. Rubrukk lived between 1252—1255 in the court of the Mongolian Emperor, there got acquainted with works written in Tibetan about which he gave a very short report. Only the 17th and 18th centuries mark a turning point. In this period we can distinguish between a "southern", a "north-western", a "northern" and an "eastern" approach. I call "southern" the activities of the Catholic missionaries who reached Tibet from the South, "north-western" those which started from the Russian capital. This latter was mainly in direct contact with the Mongols, and the Mongols had their own way of dealing with Tibetan. This do I label as the "northern approach". The "eastern" approach is in this period mainly Chinese scholarship, in Chinese and with the traditional Chinese linguistic methods, but we find also problems of Tibetan reflected in Manchu, the original language of the Ching dynasty.

The works of the Catholic missionaries have been excellently edited by Luciano Petech, the linguistic evaluation of them is yet a work to be done. A rare but valuable exception is the paper of Miller on
the outstanding achievements of Desideri. In the 17th and 18th centuries important contributions were made by French scholars, though they worked from second hand.

In the following I shall restrict any report to the most relevant data of the "southern" and the "northern" approaches:

1627–1632 the first mission of the Capuchian monks to Tibet.
1661 the Jesuits Crusheer and d'Orville cross Tibet on their way home from Peking.
1707 started the second mission of the Capuchian monks and reached Lhasa.
1708 Da Tours and de Ascoli began to compile a Tibetan word-list.
1713 Domenico da Fano completed the above word-list, brought it to Europe and in the winter of 1714/1715 sent a copy of it to the brothers Étienne and Michel Fourmont to Paris.
1716 started the activity of the Jesuit Desideri. He worked five years in Tibet, gave a good linguistic description (discovered only in 1873).
1720–1722 Tabbert, a Swedish officer later known as Strahlenberg collected Tibetan material from Kalmücker monks.
1721 The Russian Tsar Peter the Great sent a Tibetan text to the French Academy for "deciphering". The text was found in the monastery of Albai, W. Siberia. With the study of this text, finally deciphered only by Csoma, Tibetan philology began in Europe.
1722 A specimen of the Albai-text was published in Leipzig.
1723 Abbé Fourmont gave a first "translation" into Latin of the Albai text. This was followed by a vivid discussion in which such famous scholars took part as Bayer, De la Croix, John Chamberlain.
1724 started the Tibetological work of J. G. Mösserschmidt. Though his diary with detailed analysis of the Tibetan language and script remained unpublished until 1962, many scholars of his time had to consult his manuscript. He got in contact with Tibetan speaking Mongolian monks in Siberia.
1730 was published the work of Tabbert–Strahlenberg. In this work we find not only Tibetan texts published in the original script but also for the first time Spoken Tibetan rendered by and printed with Latin letters.
1739–1743 J. E. Fischler took part in the so-called 2nd Kamchatka expedition of the Russian Academy. He brought back rich linguistic material which included also records of Spoken Tibetan. A Central Tibetan and an Eastern Tibetan source can be distinguished.
1744 G. F. Miller published an essay on Tibetan.
1760 In his work Sammlungen Russischer Geschichte G. F. Miller dealt with Tibetan as well.
1762 appeared the Alphabetum Tibetanum under the name of the Auguston monk Georg. It received a severe critique but not because of its linguistic material but because of its speculations on

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9 The last publication on the journey is: A. Pusineri, Mitteilungen des Jesuiten Crusheer über Tibet, in: Contributions on Tibet, 202.
12 There do exist two copies of Fischer's Vocabularium containint trecenta vocabulis triginta quattuor gentium maxima ex parte Siberiana: One copy is in Görlingen (Cod. Mus. philol. Görlingen 261), the other in Lenningrad (B III, 1, No. 135 in the Lenningrad Division of the Archives of the Soviet Academy). The interconnection between the two copies is not quite clear, some claim that one is the draft copy of the other, a detailed comparison is needed. The Görlingen copy is reproduced in G. Doerfler, Ältere westerasiatische Quellen zur kalmerischen Sprachgeschichte, Wiesbaden, 1965, 10–182.
13 He used in Russia his name in the form Miller: De scriptis tanguicis in Siberia repertis, Comentarii Academici Imperialis Scientiarum Petropolitanae X (1744), 420–468.