The རྟེན་འབྲེལ། *Tendrel* of Tibetan Translation

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Abstract: This essay explores ways we can endeavor to center the Tibetan language in the process of translation, articulating this through a three-fold paradigm of attitude, intention, and methodology. Topics covered include virtual learning technology, the importance of translating Tibetan works produced outside of male monastic contexts such as secular works and works by Tibetan women, approaches to collaborative translation, parallel text publication, moving away from Wylie transliteration toward using the Tibetan script in publications, and finally reflections on the act of translation as an intersubjective relation that involves cultivating *tendrel* རྟེན་འབྲེལ། between author and translator.

Keywords: Tibetan translation, virtual learning technology, Tibetan women's writing, collaboration, *tendrel* རྟེན་འབྲེལ།

Translating Tibetan into English without furthering the relative invisibility of Tibetan entails a delicate act of deep listening to what Gayatri Spivak has called "the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text," referring to elements of language such as tropes and figuration that exceed the grammatical logic tying words together on the page (Spivak 2021 [1992]). It requires fidelity to Tibetan idioms and not mixing metaphors, for these map not only ideas but also Tibetan material and environmental worlds. At times it involves pushing anglophone readers to contend with the friction of unfamiliar modes of ex-

pression or untranslated Tibetan words (foreignization), as Lama Jabb (2023) has argued. Done thoughtfully, translation can provide a portal into and not an erasure of the Tibetan language. Achieving this requires a certain *attitude*, *intention*, and *methodology*.

Especially for those of us who translate from the vantage-point of non-native fluency in Tibetan and native fluency in English, centering the Tibetan language requires an *attitude* of humility in which, regardless of one's academic stature, one is perpetually a student of the Tibetan language. Being a Tibetan language student means always seeking out and fostering opportunities to continue Tibetan language learning instead of claiming mastery. On a curricular level, this means supporting not only elementary Tibetan language classes for non-Tibetans but also cultivating and participating in higher-level forums for discussing Tibetan-language works in Tibetan. For example, for two years at Northwestern University, we were fortunate to host a weekly Tibetan literature workshop taught by Tibetan writer Pema Bhum in Tibetan primarily for doctoral students who are native speakers of Amdo-dialect Tibetan. This would not have been possible without funding from the Khyentse Foundation, which supported Northwestern's Tibetan language course offerings for five years.

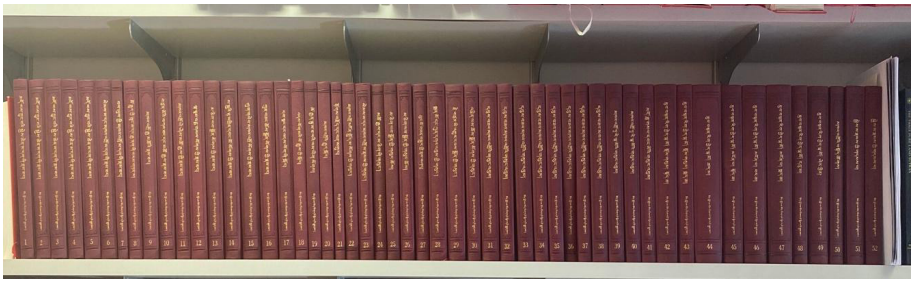
Contributing to the success of this Tibetan workshop is the post-pandemic prevalence of virtual classroom technology, which has allowed Tibetan-speaking students from different universities to come together more easily than they could have before the Zoom era. Tibetan language pedagogy is changing rapidly, by and large for the better, as a result of the expansion of virtual learning spaces. For instance, programs such as Esukhia in Dharamsala, India and Rangjung Yeshe in Kathmandu, Nepal provide Tibetan language teachers and learners with more online teaching and learning opportunities. Another largely positive outcome of the rise of virtual learning environments is the increased possibilities for universities to join together in offering more robust Tibetan language curricula. In the past, low student enrollment numbers have made Tibetan language instruction prohibitively expensive for most colleges and universities, but greater utilization of virtual classroom technology provides new and as yet under utilized potential for pooling resources across institutions to create more shared Tibetan language course offerings.

Particularly for those of us who are not native Tibetan speakers, centering the Tibetan language in our translations calls for an *intention* to transcend preconceived conceptions about the universality of English-language conceptual frameworks. The architecture of the English language shapes our thinking in ways we can't always recognize without immersing ourselves in Tibetan-speaking environments. It is not enough to translate written Tibetan without also learning how to speak it; without this fluency we cannot ask questions of the greatest Tibetan language experts. But this is not the only gain that learning to speak Tibetan brings for those of us who didn't grow up speaking it; building relationships with others in and through the Tibetan language reshapes one's sense of self, time, humor, hospitality, and much more.

As we consider the *intention* to transcend preconceived conceptions, we can extend that gesture toward reconsidering which Tibetan texts qualify as worthy of translation. Given the emphasis to date in Tibetan Studies on translating works authored by male Buddhist elites, it is now time to turn more attention to works authored outside of male monastic domains, for instance secular genres of writing, contemporary Tibetan women's writing, and other works featuring marginalized Tibetan voices. This movement is already underway, with several recent conferences at the University of Virginia, UC Boulder, Northwestern, and INALCO about contemporary and historical Tibetan women's writing.

Whereas scholars interested in Tibetan women once lamented the dearth of available sources, now this is no longer the case with the proliferation of recent publications of women's writing in Tibet including several collections of contemporary women's poetry and prose as well as the largest-ever anthology of writings by and about Buddhist women compiled by nuns from Larung Gar called the *Khandro Chö dzö Chenmo* (མཁའ་འགྲོའི་ཆོས་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ། *Ḍākinī s' Great Dharma Treasury*), totaling 53 volumes (Padma 'tsho and Jacoby 2020, 2021). These are rich resources for academic research—several dissertations are currently being written on aspects of this material—as well as rich resources for translation projects. At the Lotsawa Workshop "Celebrating Buddhist Women's Voices in the Tibetan Tradition" that I co-hosted at Northwestern University with Holly Gayley, Padma 'tsho, and Dominique Townsend in October 2022,

we initiated a conversation about a large-scale collaborative translation project centered on (parts of) the *Ḍākinīs' Great Dharma Treasury*.[1]



Khandro Chödzö Chenmo (མཁའ་འགྲོ་ཆོས་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ། *Ḍākinīs' Great Dharma Treasury*). Photo by Sarah Jacoby.

These days there are many more organized and funded Tibetan-English translation projects than previously existed, namely those under the auspices of non-profit organizations like 84,000, the Tsadra Foundation, and the Khyentse Foundation. Additionally, pioneering English-Tibetan translation projects are underway, such as 108 Translations associated with The Latse project, which is dedicated to promoting Tibetan language literacy and giving Tibetan readers greater access to world literature. This project has already produced Tibetan-language translations of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, among others. Hopefully translators can draw from this increased professionalization of the field of Tibetan translation to develop new visions of best practices for the future.

Finally, the best *methodology* for creating accurate and beautiful translations that center Tibetan language and Tibetan epistemologies is not solitary armchair reflection but collaboration and co-creation, especially between contributors with native fluency in source and target languages, respectively. This is hardly a novel insight, given the rich imperial Tibetan history of royally patronized translation committees composed of Tibetan and foreign

1 Audio recordings of this event are available here: https://conference.tsadra.org/2022/11/08/the-2022-lotsawa-workshop-audios/

Buddhist experts who, together, translated Buddhist texts into Tibetan. Nowadays, however, it must be emphasized that such source-and-target language collaborations require ethical attribution practices in which the native speaker of an internationally hegemonic language is not always first and/or sole author. Inasmuch as we non-Tibetan scholars speak for, instead of with Tibetan authors and knowledge holders, our translations fall into colonial paradigms. There is no excuse for perpetuating the exploitative practices of earlier generations of Tibetologists. There is also no way not to be already implicated in unequal power relations when translating from a language increasingly exiled from its homeland into a globally dominant language—paying close attention to these dynamics and finding ways to disrupt the well-worn treads of orientalist knowledge extraction is critical.

In addition to clearly attributing credit to all those who collaborate on translation work, there are other ways to address the unequal power relations between Tibetan and English. One is to insist on parallel text publications, with a Tibetan source on the left page next to its English translation on the right.[2] This reinforces the primacy of Tibetan at the same time as it provides the assistance of English translation, although it tends to be unpopular with publishers because it doubles the page length. Another smaller-scale, less resource-intensive practice is to insist on Tibetan script instead of Wylie transliteration of Tibetan words in Tibetan studies publications. If academic journals worldwide can publish Chinese characters, they should also be able to publish Tibetan letters. Since Wylie is difficul to read for many people and the Tibetan language has its own beautiful script, our publications should feature Tibetan script whenever possible. Alongside this, phonetic transcription of Tibetan written in roman letters has value as well to make our work accessible to a wider readership.

Collaboration is not just important because of the pitfalls it helps us avoid. The process of translation is enriched many times over through the critique, corrections, connections, encouragement, and comradery that emerges through

2 Two prominent examples of such parallel text publication series are the Clay Sanskrit Library and the Loeb Classical Library.

the act of reading and translating in partnership with others. Translation is at its heart an intersubjective endeavor, one in which we absorb the words written or spoken by another and transform them into a new form that emerges from us as translators but does not belong to us. For this alchemy to work at its best requires not only linguistic skill but also aesthetic sensibility, ingenuity as well as good judgment about when to step back, concerted effortas well as fortuitous coincidences. To say this in another way, the best translation is vitalized by the *tendrel* (རྟེན་འབྲེལ། auspicious connections, favorable conditions, good omens, interdependent relations) that bring the translator and her source text together, supported by authors, teachers, classmates, co-translators, editors, funders, and friends. When I think about the very long list of people, mostly Tibetans, who have helped me read and translate Sera Khandro over the past twenty-plus years, I realize that I have forged some of the most meaningful friendships of my life, in Tibetan and in English, pouring over Sera Khandro's writing and puzzling through how to render her words in mine. My work translating Sera Khandro would not have been possible without this collaboration, especially with Gyalrong Khenpo Sangyé, Lama Tsondru Sangpo, Tulku Thondup, Lama Jabb, Khenpo Ju Tenkyong, Sogan Pema Lodoe Rinpoche, Somtsobum, and many others. I am overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation for the learning and love that has been and continues to be at the core of my own translation process.

Cultivating this *attitude*, *intention*, and *methodology* runs counter to the values of individual authorship and assumptions of mastery that academia promotes and financially rewards. Centering the richness of the Tibetan language therefore necessitates promoting the importance of learning foreign languages other than languages valued for corporate profit or "national security." It also necessitates a re-evaluation of translation not as a trade skill that can be done just as well by a machine, but as a creative and aesthetic endeavor of parallel and often longer-lasting significance than other forms of scholarship.

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