

# Translating Academic Research Methods and Writing into Tibetan

དབུ་ཤུལ་ཚེ་དཔག་སྐྱབས། *Tsehuahab Washul*

**Abstract:** Western formal academic research guides in Tibetan are scarce for Tibetan academics. Tibetan scholars who went through graduate programs in *minzu* (minority nationality) universities in the PRC generally agree that research practices and writing in Tibetan language could be enriched by learning from Western academic research standards. Today, there is a new cohort of Tibetan graduate students and scholars who have been trained in Western institutions in various disciplines. These scholars can work with both English and Tibetan, and thus collaborate in translation work with non-native Tibetan speaking scholars. Tibet has a very rich and long tradition of translating from other languages; there are myriad precedents that we can learn from. Although translation is not a straightforward task, and it is challenging to reach agreement among scholars, at least we can start with standardizing basic lexicons of terminologies, such as common concepts, names of people and places, and eventually create a research guide in Tibetan language. Technologies such as Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tools can make collaboration across time and space seemingly effortless. Translated work can be disseminated through conferences in the Tibetan Studies field. Finally, this article shares some initial reflection on translating ethnographic research methods into Tibetan as an example.

**Keywords:** Tibetan language, Translation, Academic writing, Research methods.

In this essay, in the same vein as the Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who urges his fellow writers to write in African languages to enrich their own

languages and build confidence in their own cultures and forms of expression, I call for Tibetan translations of academic research methods from European languages (primarily English) into Tibetan in order to add vitality to Tibetan language scholarship. Today, there is a new cohort of a Tibetan graduate students and scholars who have been trained in Western institutions in various disciplines. In 2021, a small group of these Tibetan PhD students and scholars studying in North America and Europe started an informal discussion group called Bumtsok. The organization, facilitated by The Latse Project, arranges talk series, offers new book introductions, and has plans to eventually produce a handbook for research methodologies in Tibetan language.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking on research ethics at a Bumtsok talk series, Gen Lama Jabb asserted that Tibet has its own rigorous research traditions, from which we can utilize many research tools. He stated that, as researchers, we should strive to use indigenous Tibetan academic terms when possible. Thus, translating research methods also involves an important task of recognizing and identifying Tibetan forms of intellectual traditions and using the existing terms whenever possible. This demands deep knowledge of both source and target languages.

In general, academic research published in Tibetan is considered to be inferior in terms of scholarly quality to those in other, dominant languages such as English and Chinese. Tibetan journals, for example, are mostly considered to be of a lower grade in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Western formal academic research guides in Tibetan are not widely available for Tibetan graduate students (to my knowledge, one book was published recently).<sup>2</sup> Tibetan scholars who went through graduate programs in *minzu* universities in the PRC generally agree that Tibetan language academic publications could benefit from Western academic research standards. Therefore, there is a need for translating academic research methods and writings from English into Tibetan.

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1 The name “bumtsok” (འབུམ་སྐྱེས་པ་) is the abbreviation of “a gathering of PhDs” in Tibetan (འབུམ་རམས་པའི་ཚོགས་པ།). The group aims to explore ways they can share their experiences of studying abroad in Tibetan-studies-related fields with counterparts and other interested persons back home in Tibet.

2 ལུན་གྲུབ་དོ་རྗེ། 2020 རིག་གཞུང་དཔྱད་ཚོམ་འཛི་ཚུལ་གྱི་རྣམ་གཞག་མེད་བརྩམས་པའི་དོལ་གཏམ་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྟུན་ཁང་།

Tibet has a very long tradition of translating from other languages. The ninth century *drajor bampo nyipa* (སྐྱུང་བམ་པོ་གཉིས་པ།) is known as one of the first national translation guides that standardized terms and practices. The twelfth century luminary Sakya Pandita's *Gateway to Learning* (མཁས་པ་རྣམས་འཇུག་པའི་སྒྲོ།) discussed principles of translations. There were countless translators known as *lotsawas* (ལོ་རྩ་བ།) who translated different fields of knowledge from Indic and other languages throughout Tibet's intellectual history. As monastic training is heavily oral based, there are not many Tibetan language guides available on writing. However, Ngawang Tendar's guide, *The Sunlight of Eloquent Explanation: A Presentation of Exposition, Debate, and Composition* (འཆད་ཚོད་ཚོམ་གསུམ་གྱི་རྣམ་གཞག་ལེགས་བཤད་ཉིན་བྱེད་སྣང་བ།), written in the 18th century discusses the process of composing treatises, is such an example of a precedent that we can learn from.

Contemporary lexicons of Western terminologies were introduced in Tibetan en masse since the 1950s mostly from Chinese translations, which are themselves mostly rooted in Japanese translations from Western languages. Many of the currently established academic terms in Tibetan are translated by non-experts who often did literal translations of these academic fields based on the Chinese terms (such as through textbooks). For instance, the term *mi ser pel yüil ring luk* (མི་མེད་སྤེལ་ཡུལ་རིང་ལུགས།) for “colonialism” mimics the Chinese term *zhiminzhuyi* (殖民主义), which was itself derived from Japanese. Some people use the term *mi gyü rik pa* (མི་རྒྱུད་རིག་པ།) for “anthropology,” which is the direct translation of the Chinese term *zhongzuxue* (种族学 the literal transition is “the study of race”), which was used prior to the 1980s. Due to a lack of timely translation, there is also a tendency for Tibetan scholars to use outdated theories and many Tibetan scholars do not trust new terms that official bodies standardize and disseminate. The relatively scarce and lower quality of Tibetan translations of academic research methods is another factor that reinforces the perception that Tibetan language is a language of the past and not useful for dealing with contemporary knowledge.

Nowadays, a new cohort of Tibetan graduate students and scholars trained in Western institutions can work with both English and Tibetan, and thus collaborate in translation work with non-native Tibetan speaking scholars. This affords opportunities for scholars to translate research methods from their

respective fields or disciplines into Tibetan. Such translation projects would involve long-term, collaborative work.

As part of Bumtsok's inaugural online event in 2021, we discussed starting with a specific discipline and an end goal of producing a basic glossary of research method terminologies in Tibetan. A few of us began to translate basic citation practices into Tibetan. As an experiment, I attempted translating some aspects of ethnography into Tibetan and gave a small online workshop with a group of college students in Tibetan. My experience is very limited, but I want to share a couple of reflections from this case.

I realized that translation work helps one dig into the deeper history behind academic fields through a careful consideration of the etymology of the words. For example, take the very basis of the anthropological method, the term *ethno* in ethnography: Some render it in Tibetan as *mi rik nam shé* (མི་རིགས་རྣམ་བཤད།) or *mi rik lo gyü* (མི་རིགས་ལོ་རྒྱུ།). As many are well aware, *mi rik* (མི་རིགས), equivalent to “ethnicity/nationality” (Ch. *minzu*), has a specific political and social meaning in Tibetan in the PRC context, where the state officially recognizes fifty-six *mi rik*, that might be more misleading.

Furthermore, translation work is also an opportunity to imagine a new possibility for such words instead of direct translations of original concepts of the words. In this case, I settled with *rik né jö pa* (རིག་གནས་བརྗོད་པ།) (roughly translated as “narration of culture”) for ethnography just for the purpose of the workshop, deliberately choosing a vague combination of words to illustrate my point of possible new directions. Furthermore, I am inspired to search for ethnographic descriptions in traditional Tibetan scholarship as a comparison. A more recent example is Gendun Chopel's South Asia travelogue, *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler* (རྒྱལ་ཁབ་མ་རིག་པས་བསྐོར་བའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་གསེར་གྱི་ཐང་མ།). Lastly, this work challenges us to consider what aspects of research methods should be prioritized when being used primarily by native scholars, in this case, Tibetan researchers researching their own cultures.

Although translation is not a straightforward task, and it is challenging to reach agreement among scholars, at least we can start with standardizing

basic lexicons of terminologies, such as names of different disciplines and key terms, and even basic things like terms for the structure of an academic article, citation practices, common concepts, and of course, names of important people and places. This will enable academic circles to use Tibetan language to talk about how to undertake research and academic writing more efficiently. Next steps might include tackling research methods, and eventually we might be able to produce a comprehensive Western style guide to research and academic writing in written Tibetan language. Such resources will greatly enrich the Tibetan language in the current context and empower Tibetan speaking scholars to produce higher quality academic writings in Tibetan. This endeavor might be something academics can contribute to support the vitality and perseverance of Tibetan language, as well as to enhance scholarship in general.

## Works Cited

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