

A Cutting-Edge Manual for Spoken Tibetan

Review >
Central Asia

In the past few years, spoken Tibetan has become increasingly popular in the Western world. More and more tourists, students, and scholars are travelling across Tibetan cultural areas both in China and in other Tibetan communities living along the Himalayan range and it is not rare to see Western tourists enjoying a walk around the Barkhor market in Lhasa trying to speak or utter some quickly memorized Tibetan words and phrases to smiling shopkeepers and amused pilgrims. A well-written and all-round practical textbook is what we were all waiting for.

By Antonio Terrone

Born from the fortunate collaboration between Nicolas Tournadre (Paris VIII University/CNRS) and Sangda Dorje (Tibet University, Lhasa), the *Manuel de tibétain standard: langue et civilisation* (*Bod kyi spyi skad slob deb*) is an excellent publication, which has both the flavour of a mother-tongue speaker's poetry, and the wit and scientific approach of a Western scholar. This 567-page manual is divided into four main sections: 'Introduction', 'Lessons', 'Grammar', and 'Annexes', including fourteen pages of colour pictures and maps, and two CDs. The *Manuel*, as the title obviously suggests, is addressed to French-speaking readers. For this reason the transcription system chosen, although 'very readable' (p. 8), can on the contrary be quite misleading even for people familiar with French phonetics.

The lengthy introduction (pp. 11–53) provides a comprehensive linguistic description of the Tibetan language focusing on its alphabet, writing system, and pronunciation. Linguist readers will surely find it stimulating and well written. After a brief presentation of the Tibetan language and of other Tibetan dialects, an interesting issue is immediately brought up, namely, the definition of 'Standard Tibetan' (*spyi skad*), which the authors identify as the language spoken in Central Tibet, Lhasa, and in the diaspora (p. 12).

The plurality of Tibetan dialects is well known, and is itself a hindrance to communication not only between Western travellers and Tibetans, but often even among Tibetans from different regions. Religious and historical circumstances have indeed given Lhasa a central position, and its dialect has become a sort of lingua franca for Tibetans transiting through

Central Tibet for business, work, or pilgrimage. However, as far as I know, most Tibetans hardly use this term to refer to any 'common Tibetan language'. *sPyi skad* is one of the many Tibetan neologisms coined from modern Chinese, and it specifically translates the term *pǔtōnghuà*, or common speech (of the Chinese language). While the people of Lhasa, for instance, usually refer to their spoken language as *lhasa'i kha skad*, or Lhasa spoken language (also a neologism borrowed from the Chinese *lāsā kōuyǔ*), most Khampas (northeastern Tibetans) still refer to it as *bod skad*, or Tibetan language.

The second part of the textbook (pp. 55–361) is divided into forty-one lessons reflecting a quadripartite scheme: dialogue, new words, commentary, and exercises. The dialogues have been tailored on a true-to-life situation that I find essential in learning a spoken language. Situational dialogues such as 'coming for dinner', 'on pilgrimage', 'at the football match', 'the Banakshöl', 'bLo bzang's house', and 'in the kitchen', in addition to text readings such as *A khu ston pa'i sgrung* (The Tale of Aku ston pa), lead the reader step-by-step into the world of Tibetan culture and the richness of its language. The authors have included occasional but clever sidebars, called civilization, which give a very concise but practical overview of some features of the Tibetan way of life.

The third section is devoted to the description of the distinctive characteristics of classical Tibetan, and spoken Tibetan. Herein the student will find rubrics dedicated to Tibetan literature (p. 365), the 'song of separation' (pp. 368–9), and grammatical differences between classical and spoken Tibetan (pp. 371–408).

A series of six 'Annexes' (pp. 411–78), giving the work an even more definite linguistic imprint, are consecrated to the

description of Tibetan grammar and phonology. A section is devoted to the use of honorific forms, and the features of formal speech in Tibetan (pp. 439–43). Here Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje introduce us to the complexities of the language, which may require the use of four different honorific forms, especially in Lhasa and in certain circumstances. The last three annexes provide lists of words borrowed from other languages, *mots composés*, and grammar tables.

The already thick book contains two glossaries (pp. 479–549), both of which are short and present everyday terms. The French-Tibetan and Tibetan-French glossaries together contain more than 4,600 entries.

The *Manuel* is also worth praising for its accompanying double CD set, containing readings by three Tibetan speakers including a female reader, which makes for pleasant listening with all of the speech variations. While these readings cover a major portion of the phonology sections, dialogues, and texts from each lesson, it is a shame that the important 'new words' list is not included on the CDs. As a result, students need to read and memorize quite a large number of Tibetan words with nothing to rely on other than the given phonetic transcripts.

Its size and weight hardly make this book a good travel companion or pocket manual for quick reference on Tibetan travels and tours. However, overall, the *Manuel* is a well-written and complete cutting-edge grammar and textbook, making immediate communication in Tibetan accessible for everyone. ◀

– Tournadre, Nicolas, and Sangda Dorje, *Manuel de tibétain standard: langue et civilisation*, Paris: L'Asiathèque (1998), 567 pp. + 2 Compact Discs, ISBN 2-911053-25-7.

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