THE CHINESE TRANSCRIPTION OF TIBETAN CONSONANT CLUSTERS

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The Chinese writing system is not alphabetic. For this reason it is difficult to represent in Chinese characters a language with marked phonological differences from Chinese. One important difference between Chinese and Tibetan in the seventh to ninth centuries was the presence of initial consonant clusters in Tibetan, which Chinese no longer possessed in that period. It would be interesting to analyze how Chinese managed to transcribe such clusters, to find out if there was any principle of transcription, and to show the difficulties of restoring foreign words from Chinese transcriptions.

The Tibetan transcription of Chinese words, on the other hand, offers very little difficulty, and has been studied by many scholars, especially by Lo Ch'ang-pei (Luo Charng-peir 1933). The Chinese transcription of Tibetan names in the bilingual inscription of 823 has been studied by Laufer (1914), Pelliot (1915), and also by Lo (1933). In this study I will also make use of the material in this important inscription. (My reading of this inscription differs, in some respects, from the texts established by Laufer, Pelliot, and Lo.) Many Tibetan names of this period (7th–9th centuries) can be found in the Tunhuang documents and in the early inscriptions (Bacot 1940–6, Thomas 1935–63, Tucci 1950, Richardson 1952, etc.). A number of names can be matched with their transcriptions in the Chinese records, but many of them have yet to be identified. It is the purpose of this short paper to gather those clearly identifiable names as well as those names in the inscription of 823, to find out if there is

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any principle in the Chinese transcriptions. For my present purpose, I will only take into consideration the initial consonant clusters in Tibetan. The Tibetan forms are transcribed according to the system used in my article in TP 1955; the phonetic transcriptions accompanying the Chinese characters are those of Karlgren's Ancient Chinese (6th century), which I have modified slightly, mainly for typographical reasons (Li, 1971).

There are apparently several ways of transcribing the clusters. They may be classified into the following types.

1. The cluster is represented by one Chinese character, intended to transcribe only the first consonant, and the second consonant is overlooked. The second consonant is in most cases *r*. For example:

khri is transcribed by 棄 *khji*. In *Khri srong brtsan* 棄宗弄贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 7th century,' and in *Khri lde gtsug brtsan* 棄隸蹜贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.'

Also transcribed by 器 *khji*. In *Khri 'dus srong* 器弩悉弄 'name of a Tibetan king in the 7th century.'

Also transcribed by 綺 *khje*. In *Khri sum rje* 綺心兒 'name of a Tibetan minister and general in the 9th century.'

For another way of transcribing this word, see 4a and b below.

lde is transcribed by 獵 *ljäp*. In *Khri srong lde brtsan* 乞黎蘇籠獵贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.' The final -*p* in *ljäp* transcribes the *b*-, the first consonant of the following syllable, see 5 below.

Also transcribed by 隸 *liei*. In *Khri lde gtsug brtsan* 棄隸蹜贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.' This character has another reading *diei*. It is not certain which reading is intended here. If it should be read *diei*, then this transcription belongs to another type, see 3 below.

2. Both consonants of the cluster are transcribed by one character, which has in Chinese either the same cluster as in Tibetan or one similar to it. Instances of this sort are limited in number. In one Chinese has *mj-* for Tibetan *my-*. Similarly, '- (a-chung) before a voiced stop indicates most probably a prenasalized consonant; Chinese uses a nasal to transcribe the complex, for in the northwest dialects of China the nasal initial has become a prenasalized stop when it is not followed by a nasal. We may put here also cases of Tibetan *lh-*, which is normally transcribed by Chinese *th-*. For example:

> *myes* is transcribed by 名 *mjäng*. In *Klu bzang myes rma* 矩立藏名摩 'name of an official in the 9th century.' It may seem strange to use a character with a final nasal to represent *myes*, but this is because the initial nasal not followed by a final nasal is pronounced as a prenasalized stop. Tibetan actually uses *mye* to transcribe 名 *mjäng*, showing that the final nasal is very weak. There are occasional exceptions: see *rma*, *rngegs* in 3 below.

> *myang* is transcribed by 明 *mjvng* 'name of a clan or place.'

> *phyi* is transcribed by 紕 *phji*. In *Snam phyi pa* 悉南紕波 'title of an official,' and in *Phyi blon* 紕論 'Minister of the Exterior.'

> *lha* is transcribed by 他 *thâ*. In *Klu bzang lha bo brtsan* [矩]樓勃藏他[譜]贊 'name of an official in the 9th century.'

> Also transcribed by 貪 *thậm*. In *Khri bzher lha mthong* 綺立熱貪通 'name of a minister in the 9th century.' The final *-m* in *thậm* transcribes the first consonant of the following syllable, see 5 below.

> Also transcribed by 塔 *thập*. In *Zhang lha bzang* 伷塔藏 'name of a minister and general in the 9th century,' see also 5 below.

> *lho* is transcribed by 土 *thuo*. In *Btsan bzher lho gong* 贊熱土公 'name of an official in the 9th century.'

'bal is transcribed by 末 *muât* 'name of a clan'. Final *-t* regularly transcribes Tibetan *-l* or *-r*.

'dus is transcribed by 弩悉 *nuo-sjet*. In *Rgyal bzang 'dus kong* 頰藏弩悉恭 'name of a minister in the 9th century,' and in *Khri 'dus srong* 器弩悉弄 'name of a Tibetan king in the 7th century.' The transcription of a final *-s* by the syllable *sjet* is rare, and in the second example *sjet* serves to transcribe both the final *-s* and the initial *s-* of the following syllable, see 4b below.

3. The first consonant of the cluster is overlooked, and only the second consonant figures in the transcription. For example:

spu is transcribed by 拂 *phjuət* or 弗 *pjuət*. In *Spu rgyal* 拂夜 or 弗夜 'name of the clan of the Tibetan kings, according to the Chinese sources.' see also 5 below.

blon is transcribed by 論 *luən* 'official'.

btsan is transcribed by 贊 *tsân*. In *Btsan po* 贊普 'title of the Tibetan king.'

bzher is transcribed by 熱 *ńźjät*. In *Btsan bzher lho kong* 贊熱土公 'name of an official in the 9th century.' This word appears often in Tibetan names, see also 5 below.

bka' is transcribed by 伽 *gjâ*. In *Bka' la gtogs pa* 伽羅篤波 'title of an official.'

dpal is transcribed by 鉢 *puât*. In *Dpal chen po* 鉢闡布 or 鉢掣逋 'the monk minister in the 9th century.'

gtsug is transcribed by 踧 or 縮 *ṣjuk*. In *Khri lde gtsug brtsan* 棄隸踧贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.'

gtogs is transcribed by 篤 *tuok*. In *Bka' la gtogs pa* 伽羅篤波 'title of an official.'

rje is transcribed by 支 *tśje*. In *Mang po rje* 莽布支 'an official title.'

Also by 兒 *ńźje*. In *Khri sum rje* 綺心兒 'name of a minister

and general in the 9th century.' There was probably an
earlier person of the same name.

rtsan is transcribed by 贊 *tsân*. In *Stong rtsan* 祿東贊 'a minister
and envoy to China in the 7th century.

rma is transcribed by 摩 *muâ*. In *Klu bzang myes rma* 矩立藏名摩
'name of an official in the 9th century.'

rngegs is transcribed by 額 *ngvk* 'name of a clan.'

rgan is transcribed by 幹 *kân*. In *Stag zigs rgan khol* 悉諾昔幹窟
'name of an official in the 9th century.'

mchims is transcribed by 琛 or 綝 *ṭhjɔm* 'name of a clan.'

mngan is transcribed by 岸 *ngân*. In *Ngan pon* 岸奔 'title of an
official.'

In the case of clusters of three consonants, sometimes the first two
consonants are omitted and only the third consonant figures in the
transcription; sometimes the second and the third consonant are
transcribed by one character as in Tibetan *gy-* by Chinese *ki-* (cf. 2
above). For example:

rgyal is transcribed by 結 *kiet*. In *Rgyal gen legs tsan* 結研歷贊
'name of a judge in the 9th century.'

Also by 頰 *kiep*. In *Rgyal bzang 'dus kong* 頰藏弩悉恭 'name
of a minister in the 9th century,' see also 5 below.

brtan is transcribed by 旦 *tân*. In *Brtan bzher stag cab* 旦熱悉諾
帀 'name of an official in the 9th century.'

brtsan is transcribed by 贊 *tsân*. In names of many Tibetan kings,
such as *Khri srong brtsan* 棄宗弄贊 (7th century), the first
Tibetan king known to the Chinese. This word also spelled
rtsan in some manuscripts.

4. The Tibetan cluster is represented by two Chinese characters, some-
what in the fashion of the fan-ch'ieh system. The first character
represents only the first consonant, and the second character the

second consonant as well as the following vowel or vowel plus a final consonant. There are two sub-types:

a) The first sub-type uses a character having the same or nearly the same vowel as the second character. For example:

klu is transcribed by 矩立 *kju-ljəp*. In *Klu bzang myes rma* 矩立藏名摩 'name of an official in the 9th century.' The Chinese vowel *ə* in the second syllable, especially when followed by a labial consonant, is often used to transcribe Tibetan *u*, cf. 心 *sjəm* for Tibetan *sum*.

Also by [矩]樓 *kju-ləu*. In *Klu bzang lha bo brtsan* [矩]樓勃藏他[譜]贊 'name of an official in the 9th century.' The first Chinese character cannot be read clearly from the inscription, and is emended according to the example above.

srong is transcribed by 蘇籠 *suo-lung*. In *Khri srong lde brtsan* 乞黎蘇籠獵贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.'

khri is transcribed by 綺立 *khje-ljəp*. In *Khri bzher lha mthong* 綺立熱貪通 'name of a Tibetan minister in the 9th century.'

Exceptionally, the vowel in the first character may be very different from the second character, as

khri gtsug are transcribed by 可黎可足 *khâ-liei khâ-tsjwok*. In *Khri gtsug lde brtsan* 可黎可足 'name of a Tibetan King in the 9th century.' The last two syllables are not transcribed in the Chinese records.

lde is transcribed by 盧提 *luo-diei*. In *'o lde* 戶盧提 'name of an ancestor of the Tibetan kings.' Perhaps the vowel in *luo* is due to the influence of the preceding syllable rather than the following syllable.

Rarely, the first syllable is almost in rime with the second syllable, as

srong is transcribed by 宗弄 *tsuong-lung*. In *Khri srong brtsan* 棄宗弄贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 7th century.' The

character 宗 has another reading 宋 *suong* which would seem better phonetically.

spu is transcribed by 窣勃 *suət-buət*. In *Spu rgyal* 窣勃野 'clan name of the Tibetan kings.' This example can also be listed under the following 4b type.

b) The second sub-type uses a ju-sheng word for the first consonant, particularly words ending in *-t*. The ju-sheng word is, as a short syllable, perhaps the closest thing to a Tibetan consonant without a vowel. For example:

snya is transcribed by 悉若 *sjet-ńźja*. In *Btsan snya* 贊悉若 'a minister in the 7th century, son of *Stong rtsan*.'

srong is transcribed by 悉籠 *sjet-lung*. In *Sras srong lde brtsan* 娑悉籠獵(誤作臘)贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.' The Tibetan form is restored from the Chinese transcription and is doubtful.

stag is transcribed by 悉諾 *sjet-nâk*. This word appears in many names, such as *Brtan bzher stag cab* 旦熱悉諾币, *Stag bzher hab ken* 悉諾熱合乾, *Stag zigs rgan khol* 悉諾昔幹窟, etc., all names of officials in the 9th century. In the northwest dialects of China the nasal initial, not followed by another nasal, became a stop, perhaps a pre-nasalized stop, often transcribed in Tibetan as *'b, 'd*, etc. This makes possible the use of *nâk* to transcribe *tag*.

stang is transcribed by 悉當 *sjet-tâng*. In *[Khri brtsan] khod ne stang* 綺立藏窟寧悉當 'name of a minister in the 9th century.'

snam is transcribed by 悉南 *sjet-nậm*. In *Snam phyi pa* 悉南紕波 'an official title.'

khri is transcribed by 乞力 *khjət-ljək*. In *Khri gzu* 乞力徐 'a general and minister in the 8th century.'

Also by 乞黎 *khjət-liei*. In *Khri srong lde brtsan* 乞黎蘇籠臘 (當作獵)贊 'name of a Tibetan king in the 8th century.'

bran is transcribed by 勃闌 *buət-lân.* In *Bran ka* 勃闌伽 'a clan name.'

bzang is transcribed by 勃藏 *buət-dzâng.* In *Klu bzang lha bo brtsan* [矩]樓勃藏他[譜]贊 'name of an official in the 9th century.'

'bro is transcribed by 沒盧 *muət-luo* 'a clan name.'

dgu is transcribed by 突瞿 *duət-gju.* In *Zhang blon chen* (or *ched*) *po dgu* 尚論掣逋突瞿 'all (nine) great Zhangs and Blons.' This Tibetan phrase was restored from the Chinese transcription by Laufer.

5. The first consonant of the cluster is transcribed by the final consonant of the preceding character which transcribes the preceding syllable when it is either an open syllable or ends in *-l.*

bzher is transcribed by (立)熱 *(ljə)p-ńźjät.* In *Khri bzher lha mthong* 綺立熱貪通 'name of a minister in the 9th century.'

Also by (答)熱 *(tậ)p-ńźjät.* In *Stag bzher* 悉塔熱 'Secretary General in the 9th century.' This is a rare case where the final *-g* of *stag* is not transcribed, and where the *b-* of the following syllable takes its place; of course the *-g* may have assimilated to the following *b-*. This name is also transcribed in the inscription as 悉諾熱 *sjet-nâk ńźjät.*

Also by (頗)熱 *(kie)p-ńźjät.* In *Rgyal bzher khod ne brtsan* 頗熱窟寧贊 'name of an official in the 9th century.'

bzang is transcribed by (頗)藏 *(kie)p-dzâng.* In *Rgyal bzang 'dus kong* 頗藏弩悉恭 'name of a minister in the 9th century.

Also by (立)藏 *(ljə)p-dzâng.* In *Klu bzang myes rma* 矩立藏名摩 'name of a minister in the 9th century.'

bla is transcribed by (劫)羅 *(kjä)p-lâ.* In *Mnganpon khab so 'o chog gi bla* 岸奔樿蘇戶屬劫羅 'a title.'

gzu is transcribed by (力)徐 *(ljə)k-zjwo.* In *Khri gzu* 乞力徐 'name of a minister in the 8th century.'

'bring is transcribed by (欽)陵 (*khjə*)*m-ljəng*. In *Khri 'bring* 欽陵 'a minister and general in the 7–8th century, son of *Stong rtsan*.'

mthong is transcribed by (貪)通 (*thậ*)*m-thung*. In *Khri bzher lha mthong* 綺立熱貪通 'name of a minister in the 9th century.'

lde is transcribed by (鶻)提 (*ɣuə*)*t-diei*. In *'O lde spu rgyal* 鶻提勃窣(當作窣勃)野 'an ancestor of the Tibetan kings.'

rgyal is transcribed by (拂)夜 (*phjuə*)*t-jia*, or (弗)夜 (*pjuə*)*t-jia*, or (勃)夜 (*buə*)*t-jia*. In *Spu rgyal* 'clan name of the Tibetan kings.'

Also by (達)焉 or 延 (*dâ*)*t-jän* or *-jiän*. In *Bon* (*'bon*) *da rgyal* 坌達焉 or 延 'title of an official.' In all the above transcriptions of *rgyal*, the consonant *g* is not transcribed.

It is evident from the preceding examples that a Tibetan word may be transcribed in different ways, sometimes according to the phonetic environment and sometimes by free choice. For this reason it is not always easy to restore Tibetan words from the Chinese transcriptions. This is further complicated by corruptions of the texts. Sometimes a person is well known in the Chinese documents and in the Tibetan texts, but the transcription in Chinese characters presents certain difficulties. For example, the name 祿東贊 *Luk tung tsân* undoubtedly refers to the famous minister who, in the 7th century, was sent as envoy to the Chinese court to receive the Chinese princess Wen-ch'eng as wife of the Tibetan ruler. His name in Tibetan is *Stong rtsan*, which we would expect to be transcribed as 悉東贊 *sjet tung tsân*. The transcription *luk tung tsân* would transcribe better the name *Ltong (or ldong) rtsan*, but this name is not attested in the Tibetan documents.

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