Tibetan studies in Australia: language and education

Gerald Reche

As recently as 2011, John Powers could claim that “there are no Tibetan language courses taught at universities in Australia,” and unfortunately the situation has changed little since then. The only formal Tibetan language course offered in Australia is at the Australian National University (ANU), and it is currently suspended. Nonetheless, competence in some form of Tibetan is an important foundation for Tibetan studies in Australia.

David Templeman (Monash), Yanfang Liu and Tenzin Ringappongsang (ANU); Geoffrey Wurm, Jim Rhelgangs, Qasim Annoura, Juma Bin Saeed, and Elizabeth McDougal (University of Sydney); Sonam Thakchoe (University of Adelaide); and Gawne, a David Myers Research Fellow and myself all work, to varying extents, within the Tibetan diaspora. Meanwhile, scholars examining issues of Tibetan language spoken in Yunnan Province; although its speakers are classified as belonging to the Namyu language, spoken by about 4,500 Tibetans in Sichuan Province. Both the projects, as well as Henriëtte Daudey’s, are comprehensive, covering the entire range of the Tibetan Plateau — to understand why they are shifting away from Manegacha and increasingly teaching Tibetan to their children. Meanwhile, I am also endeavoring to understand the shift in political context, the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘environmentalism’ as processes of adaptation and transformation. Adaptation implicates variables that may shift and alter human–non-human relationships but where these relationships are still relatively intact. Transformation, on the other hand, signals a rupture that may or may not be reversible. With a focus on three territorial dailies, Tam’s current work builds on these insights to explore the interplay between ecology and religion on the Tibetan plateau. Drawing from Gregory Bateson’s discovery of a structure of ideas that the Tibetan pastoralist context, the term ‘ecology’ and ‘environmentalism’ may be regarded as inherently connected. At the heart of this analogy are the relationships that people have with the entities constituting both their ecological systems and their rituals.

Yearling Liu’s ethnographic research focuses on the outer and inner performance involved in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Her work is based on a case study of the Two-Arm Mahakala ritual of the Karma-Kagyu order, in which she considers the relationships between outer performance, which includes musical behaviours (chanting and the playing instruments) and physical behaviours (displaying mudras), and inner performance (spiritual visualisation). Ritual performance and music connect and work together; the outer performance initiates the ritual, while the inner performance fulfills the ritual’s religious function. Liu works with emic concepts of music and notation to explore how ritual instruments are played. She draws from linguistics, musical semantics, and American folklore studies to develop the methodology and concepts to show how music produces both meaning and function for the community.

In summary then, except for scholars working in the Chinese and Australian Tibetans communities, Australia’s Tibetan studies community has flourished despite the lack of language training opportunities in Australia. Australia’s strengths in language documentation and description have given the country an important role in describing the region’s undocuments languages. Additionally, Australia, as a huge recipient of international students, especially from the PRC, has the potential to be an important site for training future Tibetan educators.

Gerald Reche, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne 
gerald@asianews.com.au

Notes
3 https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/31252
4 https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23711
6 See her book In the Stones: Moving Through Seasons with Asian Ethnicity.

Christine Mathieu christine@larchho.com

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1 See her book in the Circle of White Stones: Moving Through Seasons with Asian Ethnicity.