

A note on the history and future of the 'Wylie' system

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The 'Wylie' system of Tibetan transliteration, although it has gained some currency in North America, has achieved nowhere near the universal employment which Wylie had envisioned for it (1959: 263). Many self-ascribed users of the Wylie system do not themselves consistently employ it. Wylie put forward two principles for his system: that it use no diacritics and that it employ no syllable internal capitalization. The second proposal has attracted subsequent practitioners less than the first. Wylie himself makes clear (1959: 267) that this criterion of capitalization is the only difference between his system and that used by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: xv).

A number of logically possible systems could cohere with the principle of no diacritics. The specific decisions of Nebesky-Wojkowitz on several points are unfortunate. His system uses the letter 'h' in three completely different meanings, aspiration (th, ch), palatalization (sh and zh), and the glottal fricative (h). A more consistent system would write either 'nh' for the palatal nasal or 'sy' and 'zy' for the palatal fricatives. The inconsistent choices put forth by Nebesky-Wojkowitz and retained by Wylie show a provincial anglocentrism. A Portuguese reader would not object to 'nh' instead of 'ny'; a French or German would have no special reason to think the choice of 'sh' rather than 'sy' natural.

The capitalization which Wylie prefers is rendered impossible in the case of the 23rd letter of the Tibetan alphabet, by the bizarre practice of rendering this letter with an apostrophe. Perhaps for this reason in China a modified system is used where *v*- represents the 23rd letter and *x*- the final letter of the alphabet, which is left untransliterated in other systems. Wylie erroneously refers to the 23rd letter as 'a-chung'. This practice appears to originate in Das' grammar (1915: 11), where it is however used only for the small letter written below a *ming-gzhi* to indicate a long vowel in Sanskrit.

The major advantage which Wylie himself points to, that diacritics cause needless work and lead to needless mistakes, is in these more technologically advanced times simply no longer the case. Nearly all library catalogs employ the Library of Congress system; this system has the further advantage of being compatible with the traditional transliteration of Sanskrit. Since all students of Tibetan must consult libraries and read Sanskrit, using the Library of Congress system has advantages over the Wylie system.

Although Nebesky-Wojkowitz does not mention any antecedents to his system of transliteration, the responsibility for the diacriticless system of Tibetan transliteration, with anglocentric warts and all, rests not with Nebesky-Wojkowitz but rather Heinrich Laufer. In his 1900 inaugural

dissertation *Beträge zur Kenntnis der Tibetischen Medicin* Laufer employed a system which differs from that of Nebesky-Wojkowitz predictably only in the treatment of the 23rd letter. H. Laufer uses a small circle for Nebesky-Wojkowitz' apostrophe (1900: 6). Heinrich Laufer does not however implement his own system immaculately, for example using -v- rather than -w- for the *wa-zur* on page 54.

His dissertation was Heinrich Laufer's only contribution to Tibetan studies. His better known brother Berthold Laufer is in contrast one of the major figures in the history of our discipline. Berthold Laufer in his own works was content to use a system of Tibetan transcription laden with difficult diacritics. In his life cut short by suicide Berthold Laufer made major contributions to the study of Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian, and anthropology, in a volume and quality that is hard to fathom. It appears that even at his time diacritics were not so cumbersome or time-consuming as Wylie feared.

In the land of its greatest success the Laufer-Nebesky-Wojkowitz-Wylie system is steadily losing ground to systems of transcription which claim to be 'phonetic'. Little notice seems to have been taken of the fact that Khri Srong brtsan is a perfectly accurate way of reflecting the pronunciation of the name of the emperor frequently called Songtsen Gampo, in a manner the emperor himself would have recognized, i.e. Tibetan spelling already reflects Tibetan pronunciation as it once was.

The only transcription system that can legitimately claim to be phonetic is the International Phonetic Alphabet, of which the vast majority of Tibetologists are ignorant. The system which Nicholas Tournadre proposes (Tournadre and Dorje 2003: 475-478) accurately reflects the pronunciation of Modern Standard Tibetan and is quite easy on the American eye. However, for authors such as Tuttle (2005: xvii) and Kapstein (2006: xvii) among others the symbol 'ä', although it represents a sound in Modern Standard Tibetan quite distinct from 'e', is too confusing and ugly (Tournadre and Dorje 2003: 431). Such authors replace 'ä' with 'e', rendering the system no longer phonetically accurate. Inexplicably, the symbols ü and ö, just as familiar from German and just as odd looking in English, these authors embrace.

Despite the North American abhorrence of diacritics, these authors also put an acute accent over a final 'e' in Tibetan transcription, merely to indicate this letter is not silent. North American Tibetologists and their students do not have to spell the name Jacques Bacot, Christina Scherrer-Schaub, and Takeuchi Tsuguhito as Zhak Bako, Kristina Shairer-Shop, or Takéuchi Tsuguhito, in order to more or less pronounce them correctly. How surprising that Tibetan, the one language one would expect everyone interested in Tibet to have familiarity with, causes such consternation. Students of Irish history and literature—even undergraduates—are asked to pronounce an 'm' sometimes as a 'v' without apology.

Works cited

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