

# A Brief History of the Tibetan Alphabetical Order

Élie Roux

(Buddhist Digital Resource Center)

**S**ince the modern Tibetan alphabetical order is the only one encountered in the dictionaries in use today, it can be tempting to consider it to be an original feature of the Tibetan language. In this article,<sup>1</sup> I test that idea by exploring the different structures of Tibetan lexicons<sup>2</sup>, from the imperial period to today's computers. As it turns out, throughout history there have in fact been various types of lexicographical organization, with the alphabetical order starting to be used only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The initial variety of alphabetical orders then settle into the order we use today, which became prevalent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 1. Introduction

The order of Tibetan consonants and vowels seems to have been established from the very early days of the written language: the 7<sup>th</sup> c. grammar *Sum cu pa*<sup>3</sup> contains a presentation of consonants and vowels that is still adhered to today. But Tibetan orthography is quite complex, and a complete alphabetical ordering system must take into account interactions between the prefixes, superscript letters, main letters, etc. For instance sorting འག, རྐ and འཀ requires layers of arbitrary conventions on top of the simple order of consonants. This is what we're going to explore here.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an edited passage of a blog post on the website of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center: <https://www.bdrcenter.org/blog/2021/10/29/sorting-out-tibetan-alphabetical-order/> (accessed November 3rd 2021). We would like to thank Jann Ronis, Luran Hartley and Tenzin Dickie who reviewed the style and content.

<sup>2</sup> See Walter 2006 for an overview.

<sup>3</sup> *Lung du ston pa'i rtsa ba sum cu pa*.

<sup>4</sup> We will solely focus on the general aspects of the alphabetical order (the order of prefix, superscript and main letter) and not on the many details (wasur, long vowels, loan words, etc.) that would make this study more tedious.

## 2. Early lexicons (8-15<sup>th</sup> c.)

In the first centuries of Tibetan literature, lexicons were ordered semantically. An early example is the classic 9<sup>th</sup> century *Mahāvvyutpatti*, created for the purpose of standardizing Tibetan translations from Sanskrit. Its contents are arranged in lists of synonyms, ordered by sanctity, beginning with the epithets of the Buddha and concluding with a list of diseases.

The semantic ordering (e.g. synonymic and thematic) found in early Tibetan lexicons followed the dominant conventions of traditional Indian lexicography.<sup>5</sup> Another example is the Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakośa*, translated twice into Tibetan and highly influential with Tibetan specialists of the literary arts.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the *Amarakośa* and its Indian commentary inspired<sup>7</sup> a genre of synonymic lexicons in Tibet such as the popular *mNgon brjod rna rgyan*<sup>8</sup> in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.

In a different context, the Chinese imperial bureaucracy compiled in the 14-16<sup>th</sup> century a short Tibetan-Chinese lexicon for their diplomats, the *Xifan Yiyu*, also using a semantic order.<sup>9</sup> Two earlier Tibetan-Chinese lexicons were circulating in Dunhuang,<sup>10</sup> one following no discernible order and the other following the order of appearance of words in a particular text.

Another type of lexicographic organization is used in the genre of numerical categories, *chos kyi rnam grangs*.<sup>11</sup> While modern versions present lists ordered by size,<sup>12</sup> early instances of the genre are ordered semantically.<sup>13</sup> This semantic order in lists is also an Indian convention, used for instance in the *Dharmasaṅgraha* attributed to Nāgārjuna, translated into Tibetan very recently.

<sup>5</sup> See Vogel 1979.

<sup>6</sup> See Chandra 1965.

<sup>7</sup> According to Chandra 1965.

<sup>8</sup> *mNgon brjod kyi bstan bcos mkhas pa'i rna rgyan*.

<sup>9</sup> Although different styles of alphabetization were in use in Chinese lexicography, see Xue 1982.

<sup>10</sup> See Apple 2017. The two lexicons are available on the *Gallica* platform of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8307869r>

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b83034694>

<sup>11</sup> Lexicons of that genre enumerate the lists commonly found in Buddhist texts (the two truths, the three worlds, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> For instance Phur bu tshe ring 1994, primarily ordered by size (all the lists of two elements, then all the lists of three elements, etc.), then each section is ordered alphabetically.

<sup>13</sup> For instance sKa ba dpal brtsegs (8th c.) starts by listing the five aggregates in his *chos kyi rnam grangs*.

### 3. Orthographic lexicons (15-17<sup>th</sup> c.)

Another category of texts relevant for research is *dag yig*, a label that covers different genres of lexicons or didactic verses on orthography. Around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, many *dag yig* texts began to utilize alphabetical ordering to arrange their contents. Due to the orthographic complexity of Tibetan, different alphabetical orders are possible, and these texts evince a variety of them with no obvious popular standard.

The *dag yig*-s are usually versified and intended to be memorized in full, not used as reference dictionaries; for this reason they don't need to adhere to a very strict order and can be difficult to follow for unfamiliar readers. Three famous early examples (15-16<sup>th</sup> c.):

- the *Dag yig bdud rtsi'i chu rgyun* uses the order ཀ དྲལ བྲལ རྩ བརྩ རྩ རྩ བརྩ
- the *Dag yig ngag sgron* by dPal khang lo tsA ba uses what became the prevailing modern order ཀ དྲལ བྲལ རྩ རྩ བརྩ བརྩ<sup>14</sup>
- the *Dag yig za ma tog* has ཀ ལ ལ ... བཅའ བཅའ ... བཅའ བཅའ བཅའ

The genre continues to use a variety of alphabetical orders, for instance the famous 20<sup>th</sup> c. grammarian Tseten Shabdrung uses the order ཀ རྩ རྩ རྩ དྲལ བྲལ བརྩ བརྩ in his *Dag yig thon mi'i dgongs rgyan*.

A note must be made on an important 15-16<sup>th</sup> c. lexicon of archaic terms, the *Dag yig li shi'i gur khang*, in which we were not able to find an order; this is also the case for earlier instances of *dag yig*-s such as the one by bLo ldan Shes rab<sup>15</sup>.

### 4. Early bilingual dictionaries (18<sup>th</sup> century)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the compilation and publication of several bilingual lexicons that were nearly unprecedented for using a thoroughly alphabetical order. These were commonly meant to be used as reference dictionaries and not learned by heart. The advent of this genre can be ascribed to three factors:

<sup>14</sup> The order is oddly not recognized in Goldstein 1991, which cites Palkhang as an example of lexicon with no alphabetical order.

<sup>15</sup> rNog blo ldan shes rab (1059-1109). The *Dag yig nyer mkho bsdus pa* is one of the first (if not the first) instance of *dag yig*, focusing on the distinction of homophones.

- a renewed interest in Sanskrit from Tibetan scholars<sup>16</sup>, and a desire to produce Sanskrit renderings of Tibetan proper names and text titles;<sup>17</sup>
- a change in the way the Qing dynasty considered non-Chinese languages, leading to the compilation of the Pentaglot Dictionary; the translation of many Tibetan texts into Mongolian, etc.<sup>18</sup>
- Christian missionary work in Tibet.<sup>19</sup>

The lexicons of this era again use a variety of alphabetical orders, for instance:

- *Bod rgya shan sbyar ngo mtshar nor bu'i do shal*, a popular Tibetan-Sanskrit lexicon, uses the order ཀ དཀའ བཀའ རྩ བརྩ ལྩ སྩ བསྩ;
- the first original Tibetan-Mongolian lexicon<sup>20</sup>, a part of the *Ming gi rgya mtsho*,<sup>21</sup> has an order that is difficult to follow, but goes something like ཀ དཀའ བཀའ རྩ བརྩ ལྩ སྩ བསྩ;
- *Rang blo gsal ba'i me long las mngon brjod kyi bstan bcos bsam 'phel nor bu*, a Tibetan-Sanskrit lexicon from Bhutan, and the *Bod kyi brda yig rtogs par sla ba*, a Tibetan-Mongolian lexicon of 1737<sup>22</sup> use what became the prevailing modern order;
- the Tibetan-Italian dictionary of 1732<sup>23</sup> sorts according to the first letter.<sup>24</sup>

A noteworthy exception is the 1742 lexicon devised by lCang skya rol pa'i rdo rje to translate the Tengyur into Mongolian,<sup>25</sup> which uses a semantic order.

<sup>16</sup> Situ Panchen (1700-1774) is a prominent figure of the movement.

<sup>17</sup> See Ruegg 1998.

<sup>18</sup> See Maurer 2018.

<sup>19</sup> See Bray 2008.

<sup>20</sup> See Burnee 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Dag yig chung ngu gdul bya'i snying mun sel byed nyi ma stong gi 'od zer*. This is the *nyis 'od* section of the *Ming gi rgya mtsho / Nere yin dalai*. See Yakhontova 2005 about the *Ming gi rgya mtsho*.

<sup>22</sup> It cites *Dag yig ngag sgron* as one of the main source of inspiration (see Burnee 2021) and we hypothesize that it is the inspiration for its alphabetical order.

<sup>23</sup> Della Penna 1732, 386 pages. Made while he was staying at Sera Monastery; based on an analysis of the Padma Thang yig. Only one known copy held in a private collection, described in Lo Bue 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Irrespective of the function of the first letter in the syllable (prefix, superscript or root letter). Therefore the word བཀའ, whose root letter is ཀ, is placed in the བ section because the character that first appears is བ, in that case a prefix. If sorted by root letter it would be in the ཀ section.

<sup>25</sup> *Dag yig mkhas pa'i 'byung gnas*.

5. *Convergence towards a common order (19-20<sup>th</sup> c.)*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of alphabetical orders in lexicons and dictionaries became increasingly systematic, and their orders started converging towards ཀ དཀར བཀའ རྒྱ རྒྱ བཀྱ བཀྱ.

Some examples for Tibetan-Mongolian lexicons are *brDa yig ming don gsal bar byed pa'i zla ba'i 'od snang* (1830), sorted ཀ དཀར བཀའ རྒྱ བཀྱ རྒྱ བཀྱ and *brDa yig ming don gsal ba'i sgron me*,<sup>26</sup> sorted according to the prevailing modern order.

The early Tibetan-English dictionaries Csoma 1834 and Schröeter 1826 follow della Penna 1732 and sort by first letter.<sup>27</sup> Schmidt 1841 was the first Western dictionary to use what became the prevailing modern order. It was based on previous Western dictionaries and two Tibetan-Mongolian lexicons including the *Bod kyi brda yig rtogs par sla ba*, which we hypothesize was the source of inspiration for the alphabetical order.<sup>28</sup> The order in Schmidt has had a lasting legacy as it was subsequently used in Jäschke 1881, followed by the very influential dictionary by Chandra Das in 1902, and seemingly all later Tibetan-English dictionaries.<sup>29</sup>

Between Tibet and China, several Tibetan-Chinese lexicons were compiled in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> The *gSar bsgrigs rgya bod ming gi rgya mtsho* of 1932<sup>31</sup> surprisingly cites Das 1902 as one of its main sources,<sup>32</sup> and it is

<sup>26</sup> *Terminus post quem* 1742 since it cites the *Dag yig mkhas pa'i 'byung gnas* in its colophon. It also cites the *Bod kyi brda yig rtogs par sla ba* which is probably the source of the alphabetical order.

<sup>27</sup> In the case of Csoma it is possible to hypothesize an influence of the Ladakhi pronunciation of his collaborators (See Maurer 2018 for this hypothesis, see Terjek 1976 and Viehbeck 2016 about his collaborators). But in our opinion the most simple explanation remains an imitation of his predecessors and of the Western alphabetical order, sorting by characters from left to right.

<sup>28</sup> The other one is the *Ming gi rgya mtsho* which uses very different alphabetical orders.

<sup>29</sup> For instance Goldstein 1984.

<sup>30</sup> See Tuttle 2007 and Tuttle 2009 for the context.

<sup>31</sup> This dictionary seems undocumented in previous scholarship in English. It was created by the Research Society for Tibetan Texts in Xining (青海藏文研究社), that also published a Tibetan-Chinese version of the *Mahāvayutpatti* in the same year, the *sGra bye brag rtogs chen mo'i rgya gar gyi skad dor nas bod yig dang rgya nag gi yi ge gnyis gsar bskrun pa*. The first page of the BDRC scans has a handwritten note "Presented to Ven. Chi by V. G. & Ruth L. Plymire, Dec. 5, 1933, Huangyuan, Jinghai". Victor and Ruth Plymire were American missionaries based in Dankar (sTong 'kor). See Horlemann (forthcoming) for more about this dictionary.

<sup>32</sup> Cited as 達氏英藏字典 ("*Da Shi* Tibetan-English Dictionary") on pages 5, 8 and 12. The text suggests that Das 1902 was given to Li Dan and Yang Zhifu by Ouyang Jingwu (歐陽竟無) in Nanjing in 1927. Other cited sources are *Ye Shi* (Jäschke?) Tibetan-English dictionary, an unnamed Tibetan-Mongolian lexicon and

likely the inspiration for its alphabetical order. Two other lexicons of primary importance are Zhang Yisun 1937 and 1939, which are likely the source of the alphabetical order used in Zhang Yisun 1985 and then in computers. Even if we are not certain about the sources Zhang Yisun used, we hypothesize that he too took inspiration from Das 1902 for the alphabetical order.<sup>33</sup>

In Tibet an important step was the publication of the Tibetan-Tibetan dictionary by dGe bshes Chos grags,<sup>34</sup> a Buryat who became a monk in Lhasa. Its most striking feature is its format: a bound book with a two column layout, likely the first of its kind created in Tibet. These features and the (modern) alphabetical order he used are likely inspired by Dorje Tharchin's dictionary—that dGe bshes Chos grags collaborated on—, itself inspired by Das 1902.<sup>35</sup> A Chinese gloss was added to the dictionary in 1957.<sup>36</sup>

The prevailing modern order was then also used in the still authoritative *Dayig Sardrik* in 1979,<sup>37</sup> and in the famous *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*.<sup>38</sup> The latter is the only dictionary taken as the reference in scholarly literature about alphabetical order in China.<sup>39</sup> Since its system is the same as the one used in Tibetan-English dictionaries

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the 四體合璧文鑑 (a Manchurian-Mongolian-Tibetan-Chinese lexicon). I would like to thank Bianca Horlemann for highlighting this information.

<sup>33</sup> We were not able to find a clear source of inspiration for the alphabetical order in the introduction of these lexicons, nor by looking into Zhang Yisun's collaborators. I would like to thank Fabienne Jagou, Gray Tuttle and Sonam Tsering Ngulphu whose help was crucial in that research. We can nonetheless consider some clues found in biographies available on the Internet. For instance the Baidu Baiké page (<https://baike.baidu.com/item/张怡荪/1180276>, accessed February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022) states that he worked as an English teacher, used Tibetan-English dictionaries and was inspired by Chen Yinke (陈寅恪), who was hired by the University of Oxford. We know that Das 1902 was circulating in China in that period because it inspired the *gSar bsgrigs rgya bod ming gi rgya mtsho* (itself a possible source of inspiration, perhaps through Yang Zhifu?), and we also know that *Bod kyi brda yig rtogs par sla ba* had been printed in Beijing (where Zhang Yisun was based at the time); all using the same alphabetical order. We thus hypothesize that the alphabetical order used by Zhang Yisun was inspired from one of these lexicons, with a strong preference for Das 1902 considering the information given in his biography. More research should be done about Zhang Yisun to confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>34</sup> Chos kyi grags pa 1949.

<sup>35</sup> See Viehbeck 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Tseten Shabdrung's *dag yig* was translated in that same year as well, see Tuttle 2007 about these publications.

<sup>37</sup> Padma rdo rje 1979.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang 1985. Tseten Shabdrung and other Tibetan grammarians were part of the editorial board of this dictionary.

<sup>39</sup> Nyima Tashi 2018, Jiang 2004 and Jiang 2006.

since Schmidt, and is the same used for Dzongkha,<sup>40</sup> it has been used as the model for the alphabetical order used by computers today.<sup>41</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

While the order of letters has been fixed from the very beginning, the alphabetical order was not used in Tibetan lexicography until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This chronology has parallels in the Western context, where alphabetical order was widely adopted only in a surprisingly recent time.<sup>42</sup> Specific to Tibetan, however, is the variety of alphabetical orders used throughout history and their convergence into today's prevailing standard. The reasons behind the adoption of this specific standard as the dominant one remain to be studied, but are probably linked to certain rational advantages.

If the hypotheses we made are correct, we can trace the origin of the order used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to dPal khang lo tsA ba (15-16<sup>th</sup> c., Tibet), through mGon po skyabs (1737, Mongolia & China), Schmidt (1841, Netherlands & Russia), Jäschke (1881, Germany & India), Das (1902, India) and Zhang Yisun (1937, 1985, China). We can see a pattern here that is similar to the one described by Viehbeck 2006, where what could be thought of as local lexicographical features are instead rooted in a multi-cultural network.

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<sup>40</sup> See Geylek.

<sup>41</sup> See the original BDRC blog post about the Tibetan alphabetical order in computers: <https://www.bdrc.io/blog/2021/10/29/sorting-out-tibetan-alphabetical-order/>.

<sup>42</sup> See Flanders 2020.

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