Minority, Language and Translation in Tibet

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ABSTRACT

Until relatively recently, research into minority languages and translation has been “largely invisible” in translation studies (Cronin 2003: 153). Of the studies that have been made, emphasis has been mainly on Western and European countries, with very little work done in Asian contexts such as China. And although there are 55 different minority languages in China, studies of translation in minority communities there are thus far non-existent. This paper examines the situation of Tibet, a colony of the People’s Republic of China for more than 50 years. The paper first defines Tibetan as a minor language using a number of critical approaches, then discusses the ways in which the Tibetan language has been altered by the Chinese authorities. The subsequent impoverishment of the language due to its minority status, as well as the fact that many Tibetans are abandoning their mother tongue, are presented. Three areas of translation activity in Tibet – pragmatic translation, literature, and the Internet – are analyzed to determine what is translated, by whom, and in what direction translations are made. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of minority communities and the pressures placed on them to translate for, or be translated by, the dominant power.

1. Introduction

Research into issues related to minority languages and translation first began to receive attention in translation studies in 1995, when a paper on this topic by Michael Cronin appeared in which he introduced a number of key concepts and analytical models that were later developed and expanded upon in a chapter of Translation and Globalization (2003). In 1996, Cronin’s monograph on minority translation in Ireland, which examined the historical development of language and translation within the Anglo-Irish colonial context, was published (Cronin 1996).

The first edited volume devoted to the study of minority was a special issue of The Translator entitled “Translation and Minority” (Venuti 1998), which collected a variety of case studies on minority languages and translation. In the introduction to this volume, Venuti offers a useful, linguistic-based approach to the study of minor literatures. Most recently, the collection of papers published in the volume Less Translated Languages (Branchadell and West 2005) provides a further valuable resource on minority languages and the way in which they have been impacted by the fact of translation, although its focus on European languages somewhat contains its scope.

In both postcolonial and translation studies of minority, translation is often seen to be a positive force that can be used for nation-building and as a tool of resistance against the dominant power. In a postcolonial context, Simon and St-Pierre have pointed to how translations, “though undertaken under the aegis of colonial power, can have unpredictable effects and can become stimulants to the development of national languages” (Simon and St-Pierre 2000: 15). Venuti also writes of the potential for minority languages to “vary” the major language
through translation, and claims that a nation’s standard dialect “occupies the dominant position but is subject to variation from regional or group dialects” (1998: 136).

Branchadell and West argue as well that nation-building is “what unites Western minority languages and larger non-Western languages spoken in former overseas colonies” (2005: 9). They find that Western minority languages have consistently resorted to translation as a means of resistance against the dominant language (ibid.). However, outside of a Western context, little research has been carried out on how language is impacted by its minority status and how translation has been used either to strengthen or diminish its position. As Cronin has noted, minority languages are “still largely invisible” in translation studies, and he urges researchers to address this lack through undertaking “historical research into the past experiences of minority languages” (2003: 153).

This paper attempts to contribute to our understanding of translation in minority communities outside of the West by focusing on Tibet, a region seldom studied in regard to minority issues and translation. The paper’s aims are twofold: firstly, to study the historical experiences of the Tibetan people in terms of how, as a minority, their language has been impacted by the fact of colonization and subsequent assimilation into the People’s Republic of China (PRC); and secondly, to examine the ways in which translation has been practiced in this community, with a view to determining whether or not translation practices have been used for “nation-building” or resistance, and whether they have acted to stimulate or “vary” the major Chinese language.

Interestingly, until very recently Chinese has itself been seen as a minor language in translation studies. However, due to both the internationalization of the translation field and China’s rapidly rising global importance, Chinese is increasingly being viewed as a major language in the global community. 1 Domestically, Chinese is clearly a major language in terms of China’s dominant relationship to the 55 minority languages within its borders, which it manages through a complex system of minority language policies. And while research into Chinese-specific translation issues has proliferated in recent years, studies into China’s power relations with the minor languages under its control have lagged far behind.

Tibet 2 has been a colony of the PRC since the Chinese Communist Party began its takeover of the territory in 1951. 3 Due to Tibet’s extreme geographical

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1 In Translation and Globalization, for example, Cronin lists Chinese as a major language, together with Arabic, Russian and languages of the Indian subcontinent, while adding that, though “major”, these languages are nonetheless still “marginalized in translation studies” (2003: 144).
2 This study focuses on the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)—what most people think of when they hear the word “Tibet”—and does not treat the Tibetan autonomous regions outside of the TAR, where just over half of China’s ethnic Tibetans reside. See footnote 4 for population statistics.
and political isolation for most of its long history, translation activity in the region has remained a largely unexplored—and potentially vast—field of research. The paper begins by defining Tibetan as a minor language using a number of critical approaches, particularly those found in translation studies. The ways in which the Tibetan language has been impacted by colonization is then examined, followed by a study of three main arenas of translation activity in Tibet: pragmatic, literary, and Internet translation.

2. Tibetan as a Minor Language

In the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, regional or minority languages are defined as those that are: a) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; and b) different from the official language(s) of that State” (Branchadell and West 2005: 2). Tibetans are a numeric minority within China, and Chinese is the official language of the PRC, thus Tibetan clearly meets this particular definition of minority.

In translation studies, however, the conception of what constitutes a minority language has evolved beyond questions of national boundaries or numbers of speakers. Venuti defines minority as follows:

I understand ‘minority’ to mean a cultural or political position that is subordinate, whether the social context that so defines it is local, national or global. This position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non-standard and the non-canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture. Yet minorities also include the nations and social groups that are affiliated with these languages and literatures, the politically weak or underrepresented, the colonized and the disenfranchised, the exploited and the stigmatized. (1998: 135)

Venuti sees minority as a relative term, always in dynamic relation with the majority, which invariably changes over time. Due to Tibet’s historical and political situation, Venuti’s definition is applicable in every respect: Tibet’s

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3 Although the PRC does not consider the TAR a colony but an “inalienable” (bu ke fenge) part of the country, most human rights organizations do view it as a colony, as does the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. The independent organization UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization) sent a mission to Tibet in 1997 to determine its status as a colony and concluded that, based on a set of internationally-recognized criteria, “Tibet indeed displays the basic elements of colonialism.” In its report, UNPO called Tibet “the world’s largest remaining colony” and found that the PRC “is today undeniably a colonial power” (UNPO 1997).

4 As of the 2000 census, there were 5,416,021 Tibetans in China, 2,427,168 of whom live in the TAR. The remainder of the ethnically Tibetan population is distributed over 12 Tibetan autonomous areas outside the TAR, in the four provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. In 2000, Tibetans were the ninth largest minority, out of a total of 55 minority groups, in the PRC.
cultural and political position is subordinate within China, where Han Chinese culture and Chinese Communist politics dominate; the language lacks prestige or authority (as discussed below); Tibet is without doubt politically weak, and many would say it is also colonized, exploited and stigmatized. In fact, in the case of Tibet one could say that it was never decolonized; one NGO described it in 1997 as “the world’s largest remaining colony” (UNPO 1997).

Like Venuti, Cronin emphasizes that the concept of minority is always dynamic rather than static, and is always relational. These relations, he writes, can take two forms: the diachronic and the spatial. The diachronic relation is “an historical experience that destabilizes the linguistic relations in one country so that languages find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship” (Cronin 1995: 86). Diachronic relationships involve situations where languages change their status (from minor to major or vice versa) due to political or historical reasons. The spatial relationship refers to language that is placed in a minority position because of the redrawing of national boundaries (ibid: 87).

Although there is a long-standing dispute between the Chinese government’s and the Tibetans’ differing versions of history, there is no doubt that for many centuries Tibet was its own culturally-distinct regional entity, united by a common belief in Buddhism and ruled by a succession of Tibetan kings. Although different regions developed their own spoken dialect, the written script was used and understood by all educated Tibetans. Indeed, for hundreds of years the written Tibetan language was highly regarded and in widespread use across much of Central Asia, having “almost the same significance [there]…as Latin in medieval Europe” (Vostrikov 1994: 9-10). Thus, Tibetan was a major language within its own territorial borders until the Chinese occupation commenced in 1951. This and subsequent events marked a dramatic shift in the status of the language.

In terms of its spatial relationship, when the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was officially established in 1965, the borders imposed by the Chinese government were entirely artificial, roughly cutting out a chunk of what Tibetans had always considered their homeland, naming it the TAR, and then carving up certain other portions of traditional Tibet into 12 “autonomous areas.” While the relationship that many minority languages have with their dominant counterpart may be readily distinguished as either being subject to diachronic or spatial pressures, Tibet’s unique situation meant that it was subjected to both processes within a short span of 14 years.

An alternative conception of minority and language is that of “less translated” languages, which grew out of the concept of “lesser used languages” and has been defined as “all those languages that are less often the source of translation in the international exchange of linguistic goods,” regardless of the

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5 The Tibetan written language was developed in the 7th century and was based on a script used in the northern Indian state of Kashmir.
number of people using them (Branchadell and West 2005: 1). This definition sidesteps issues of power, hegemony and politics by focusing on a language’s scope for translation within the global market. This perspective is also useful in discussing the situation in Tibet, because the total number of Tibetan speakers is hardly small. Despite this fact, Tibetan is seldom the source or the target of global translation activity except in the area of Buddhism, which has been exported to the West since the 1960s through a dual process of transmission and translation.

Thus, whether one defines minority in terms of national boundaries, historical shifts of power, population figures, political position, or amount of translation activity, Tibet satisfies each definition of what constitutes a minority culture, making it a prime locus of study for minority translation issues.

3. Ideology, Language and Diglossia

In the 1950s when the Chinese Communist Party was beginning to consolidate its rule in Tibet, one of the first challenges it faced was the inability to communicate its political concepts to the Tibetans. Not only was the Communist ideology “totally alien” to the vast majority of Tibetans, but there were also “no linguistic means” of conveying these concepts (Shakya 1994: 157), since Tibetan literacy was traditionally centered around Buddhist philosophy. Thus, the focus during the initial years of colonization was on how to modernize the “old-fashioned” Tibetan language and adapt it to the new modern socialist context.

In order to accomplish this, an entirely new lexicon was developed in the 1950s and early 1960s concerned solely with Marxist ideology. New words such as “bourgeois” and “class struggle” were introduced and translated into Tibetan. In addition, because the Tibetan language was considered elitist and unpatriotic, “a new grammar and literary style that more closely reflected colloquial Tibetan, as well as a simplified orthographic system” were imposed (Maconi 2008: 174). As a result, this new style of writing soon became “the standard measure for correct usage” (Shakya 1994: 159).

During the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), further changes were made to the Tibetan language and for several years during this period it was even forbidden to use Tibetan (Maconi 2008: 174). When the Cultural Revolution was over, the government instituted policies to protect Tibetan culture, but language and educational policy in Tibet—as in all minority areas—has been consistently aimed at implementing the use of Chinese in all spheres of public life. From the 1980s onward, the authorities in the TAR no longer actively worked to alter the Tibetan language to make it conform to Communist ideology, but as the process of assimilating Tibet into the PRC continued, Tibetan also continued to suffer further changes due to its increasingly weakened status as a minor language.
Cronin has observed that “minority languages that are under pressure from powerful major languages can succumb at lexical and syntactic levels so that over time they become mirror-images of the dominant language” (2003: 141). While this may be more commonly true of languages that belong to the same linguistic family, due to the sharing of similar grammatical and lexical features, Tibetan is also being altered in ways that are forcing it to become, if not a mirror-image, then at least a partial imitation of, the dominant language. In the 1990s, for example, the Chinese authorities began an odd campaign to make the Tibetan language artificially imitate the four tones of standard spoken Chinese (Mandarin), described by Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu:

All radio broadcasters and TV announcers in Tibet have been trained to sound tonally Chinese; more precisely—to enunciate Tibetan tones in such a way that it resembles Chinese, thus violating the phonological rules of Tibetan….Mandarin has no tone or vowel harmony—i.e. the previous (or following) vowel tone cannot affect adjacent vowel tones. This gives it a staccato sound peculiar to Chinese. Tibetan has both tone and vowel harmony. By altering the tone of Tibetan to make it sound like Mandarin, the Chinese are in effect making it incomprehensible. (2004: 82)

Thus, despite the fact that Chinese and Tibetan are linguistically dissimilar, the PRC government has still attempted to alter the Tibetan language to conform to its own standards, and Tibetans themselves have had no alternative but to accept these “linguistic perversions” (ibid). As Maconi notes:

The coexistence of the Chinese and the Tibetan languages in present-day Tibet does not presuppose an equal footing. Tibetan has an inferior sociopolitical and cultural status. Consequently, diglossia rather than bilingualism is a better term for current Tibetan linguistic practice in the PRC (2008: 175).

4. Impoverishment and Abandonment

It has been frequently observed that in situations of diglossia, speakers favor using the language of power and abandon their own less-valued language. As this process continues and socio-economic or political forces exert further pressure on speakers of minor languages to use the major language, the minority language often begins a process of linguistic deterioration. In his study of minority languages in Africa, Herman Batibo coined the term “marked bilingualism.”

Cronin elaborates:

Marked bilingualism is characterized by the presence of two languages which have unequal power and prestige. Speakers tend to gravitate
towards the more powerful and prestigious (major) language and abandon the language of lower social value (minority language). As the minority language is spoken less often, its domains of use become more restricted and the language’s lexicon and linguistic structures suffer continuous impoverishment. (2003: 165-66)

In the TAR, linguistic impoverishment is already well underway, with the Tibetan language being corrupted by the mixing of Chinese words into everyday vocabulary, a phenomenon known as “Chibetan” (Free 2008: 8). Loan words are being increasingly used, and many people now use Chinese words even when there is a Tibetan equivalent. Tibetans refer to this as “speaking half-goat, half-sheep” (ra-ma-lug skad) (Tournadre 2003: 4). Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech is so common that “many young people in the urban areas are incapable of forming a sentence in Tibetan without using Chinese words” (ibid: 4-5).

A report by the Free Tibet Campaign revealed that in schools the Tibetan spoken by students is deteriorating, and “there are now about three Chinese words in every five Tibetan sentences” (Free 2008: 8). The Tibetan government-in-exile also reports that “people everywhere in our cities and villages today are not able to articulate themselves in proper Tibetan and their language is becoming a hybrid mix” of Tibetan and Chinese (Central 2009: 30). Even university students are not able to read Tibetan, “let alone write it” (ibid.) Besides the use of loan words and mixed language, code-switching is also a frequent occurrence, which Tournadre considers to be related to the sociolinguistic pressures existing in Tibet to speak in the language of power (2003: 6).

Both code-switching and the use of loan words are not merely an attempt by Tibetans to survive in their socio-economic and political environment; they also reflect a sense of insecurity on the part of Tibetans regarding their culture, language and identity. Living in a diglossic society as a minority community, the extensive linguistic and cultural assimilation that Tibetans have experienced has caused great concern for the survival of their language and identity. A Free Tibet Campaign report states:

Tibetans fear their mother tongue will become extinct if the current situation continues. Consequently, Tibetan culture and identity will be endangered and Tibetans will be assimilated into the Han Chinese. Most Tibetan intellectuals believe Han Chinese government officials in Tibet want the Tibetan language to disappear forever. (2009: 1)

Such fears are not entirely unfounded. Studies have shown that many ethnic Tibetans, particularly those living outside of the TAR where they are a statistical minority, have already abandoned their mother tongue in favor of Chinese, with tens of thousands of Tibetans exclusively using Chinese to communicate (Zhou 2004: 225). Within the TAR as well, where Tibetans make up more than 90 percent of the population, there is a strong sense that the language is under threat.
Many Tibetan educators and scholars have expressed their concern over the possibility that the language may, indeed, become extinct. They contend that Tibetan has become a “useless” language, with knowledge of Tibetan becoming unnecessary in everyday life (Kolas and Thowsen 2005: 140).

Apart from undergoing a process of impoverishment and abandonment, the domains of use of the Tibetan language have also been restricted to the home and other private settings, as Chinese is the official language used in all spheres of public life. In education as well, Tibetans have no choice as to which language they learn in, as Chinese has increasingly been used as the medium of instruction in all but the earliest years of primary school.

5. Translation in Tibet: A One-way Street

In minority cultures, the direction of translation is most commonly from the major language into the minor language, due to the major language’s position of authority and power. Cronin divides the function of translation in minority cultures into the pragmatic and aesthetic, with the pragmatic function relating to “those aspects of translation that pertain to the routine, practical needs of the minority language” and its most notable feature being that it is “overwhelmingly unidirectional” (2003: 147).

Below we shall examine three main areas of translation activity in Tibet: pragmatic translation, aesthetic translation (literature), and the Internet. How these are carried out—what is translated, by whom, and in what direction translations are made—provide critical information for the understanding of minority communities and the pressures placed on them to translate for, or be translated by, the dominant power.

5.1 Pragmatic translation

Unidirectional translation, from Chinese into Tibetan, has been the case in Tibet starting from the earliest years of colonization, when large quantities of Chinese Communist propaganda materials and government documents had to be translated for the purposes of governance. Essays and speeches by Mao Zedong, treatises on Marxist-Leninist thought, and documents related to the rule of Tibet were among the first works to be translated from Chinese into Tibetan (Shakya 1994: 162). Translations into Tibetan increased in number after the period of liberalization began in the late 1970s, with publications appearing in a variety of fields (Stoddard 1994: 134).

One of the main bodies responsible for translation work in Tibet is not located in Tibet but in the Chinese capital of Beijing. China’s Ethnic Languages Translation Bureau (under the State Ethnic Affairs Commission) is responsible for
translation work into seven of the main minority languages, including Tibetan. Originally tasked with translating works by Lenin, Marx and Mao Zedong, it now translates other important leaders’ written works, national-level government documents, speeches, laws and regulations into minority languages, as well as providing interpreters, training translators, and publishing translations of works on minorities.

Within the TAR, all official translation work is undertaken by state-run translation committees and translation bureaus, which are located at every administrative level (village, town, prefecture, county and city). These bodies are responsible for translating local government documents, laws and regulations, providing bilingual signs, standardizing terminology, and providing interpreters (Chinese into Tibetan) during meetings (Kolas and Thowsen 2005: 142). Almost all news is translated from Chinese into Tibetan, including print and broadcast media. Although there are both Chinese and Tibetan-language newspapers, Tibetan-language newspaper content is generally translated from Chinese sources. Most educational and scientific materials are also translated from Chinese (ibid.: 137).

According to government media reports that have been widely quoted and circulated on the web, Tibet currently has some 1,000 people working as professional Chinese-Tibetan translators who translate around 50 million words per year (China 2008). The purpose of the work of these translators is “to enable the Tibetan people to learn the related policies and regulations promptly” (China 2009). Based on this information, one may conclude that all of Tibet’s translators work in government bodies and translate only legal and political documents from Chinese into Tibetan. However, other statistics released by the government indicate that this is not the case.

For example, the China Translation Yearbook 2005-06 shows that in 2006 there were 497 translators working in state-owned companies in Tibet (Translators 2007: 638). Such companies operate in a variety of fields, such as agriculture, mining, metallurgy, manufacturing and tourism. Information on the direction and content of such translation work is not made publicly available, but based on the technical nature of most of the state-run enterprises that operate in the TAR, one may conjecture that translating technical specifications, user guides, and product packaging forms the bulk of these translators’ work. Since the officially-sanctioned language in state-owned enterprises is Chinese, regardless of their location, it is likely that most of the documents requiring translation are written first in Chinese and then translated into Tibetan and/or English.

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6 It is unclear whether these translators are counted within the 1,000 figure or not. The yearbook does not include statistics on translators working in private companies.

7 Statistics in the China Translation Yearbook show that more than 90% of all translators in state-owned companies in Tibet are Tibetans. This is indicative of the fact that few Chinese in the PRC, even those living in the TAR, learn Tibetan to a level sufficient to work as translators.
This brief overview reveals that pragmatic translation in Tibet in all of its forms—news, both print and broadcast; government documents; laws and regulations at all levels; technical and manufacturing-related documents; as well as public signs, notices and other informative writing—is carried out under government auspices from Chinese into Tibetan. The identity of individual translators is always invisible, with the bulk of the work performed by committees, work teams or government employees within particular agencies or state-owned enterprises.

5.2 Literature

Prior to the 1950s, translation activity in Tibet was primarily focused on transmitting the vast corpus of Buddhist literature which was brought from India and translated over a span of hundreds of years beginning in the 8th century. Non-religious materials from India were also translated in large numbers, such as treatises on grammar, astrology, poetics and composition. After the great task of translating the Indian Buddhist corpus was completed and Tibetans had developed the indigenous form of Buddhism now known as Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetans began creating their own religious literary tradition in the Tibetan language, after which there was little translation activity for hundreds of years.

Indeed, before 1951, virtually no Western or Chinese literature had ever been translated into Tibetan (Shakya 2008: 71). One exception was the New Testament, which was first translated in the 1860s by a Moravian missionary (Bray 1991: 29). However, Shakya notes that, “as Christianity did not have any impact upon Tibetan society, the Tibetan Bible still remains an atypical and idiosyncratic form of Tibetan literature” (1994: 164).

Traditionally in Tibet, there was, in fact, almost no “literature” in the Western sense of creative or imaginative writing that did not serve an informative or educative purpose (Cabezon and Jackson 1996: 17). It was not until after the Cultural Revolution was over and the “new era” (from 1979 on) of relatively more liberal policies began that a modern Tibetan literature was born, modeled at first after the social-realist literature then prevalent in China, and later influenced by the introduction of a small number of foreign works.

The first Tibetan publications of the new era were literary magazines that were begun with the hope of reviving the Tibetan written language. In 1980, the TAR Writers’ Association published the first journal devoted to modern literature by Tibetans, Tibetan Literature and Art (Xizang Wenyi). However, the inaugural issue of this journal was a collection of stories that had been first written in Chinese (by Tibetans), published in Chinese journals, then selected and translated into Tibetan. As Shakya notes, “the translation of these stories from Chinese into Tibetan suggests that there were no Tibetans writing in their own language at this time” (2008: 66).
Since the 1980s, literary magazines and journals have been the main outlet for Tibetans writing in either Chinese or Tibetan. Because some writers have grown up speaking only Chinese and are not able to write in Tibetan, two parallel literary worlds have developed: one Sinophone and one Tibetophone. However, the two groups are not equal in terms of access or patronage. Tibetophone writers, thanks to their “necessary bilingualism,” are able to read Chinese and thus have access to both literary worlds; Sinophone writers (and audiences) have little access to Tibetan works, since very few literary texts are translated into Chinese (except in the area of Buddhism) (Maconi 2008: 182). Further, Sinophone Tibetan literature gets much more official support than Tibetophone literature (ibid.).

Due to the existence of these two parallel worlds, a fierce debate over what constitutes Tibetan literature (whether it should be based on language of production, ethnicity of the author, or content) has arisen. One writer named Sonam refuses to call Sinophone literature written by Tibetans “Tibetan literature” and openly criticizes the use of Tibetan-Chinese code-switching in writing, arguing that:

The linguistic solutions adopted by some Tibetan Sinophone writers in an attempt to ‘translate’ their intimate Tibetan self into the Chinese language (translation, transliteration, compound solutions, loan words, etc.) are examples of ‘anti-literature’ because they are unintelligible to both the Tibetophone and Sinophone reader. (Maconi 2008: 195)

During the relatively freer literary climate of the 1980s, the idea of borrowing and learning from other literatures was perceived by Tibetans “as an important strategy for cultivating a new literature and critical space” (ibid.: 189). There was a call by Tibetans for more translations of Western and foreign literature, but such translations are, to date, still “quantitatively feeble, and undertaken on the basis of previously-made Chinese translations” (ibid.). Maconi’s study found that translations of literary works from Chinese into Tibetan are “far more numerous” than translations from Tibetan into Chinese (ibid.: 181).

One of the few literary works from traditional Tibet that has been translated into Chinese (and other major languages) is an ancient orally-transmitted tale known as the Gesar of Ling Epic. Since 1979, the PRC government has placed tremendous resources into studying, collecting, editing and translating this work, which it states is “the longest epic in the world” and totals some 10 million words

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8 Maconi uses the terms Tibetophone and Sinophone to indicate the language of literary production, not the spoken language of the individual writer.
9 Apart from Tibetan Buddhist texts, which have been translated into Chinese at various times in history, other examples of Tibetan-Chinese translated literature include the Gesar of Ling Epic, folk tales, biographies of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas, and the *The Tibetan Medical Atlas* (Stoddard 1994: 147).
The government has, in fact, used this work to counter a criticism made by Hegel some 150 years ago that China has no epic literature. Through studying and translating this Tibetan tale, the government has effectively co-opted a piece of ethnic literature and brought it into the corpus of what is officially considered China’s (if not a Chinese) literary system.

In the PRC, literary journals, book publishing, and literary translation projects are all overseen by government bodies. There is very little translated material that is not screened and carefully selected for publication, although a loosening of restrictions has been seen in recent years. One does find individual translators occasionally able to select and publish their own works, but this is financially prohibitive for most and still subject to government oversight. Another trend is self-translation, which a small number of bilingual Tibetan writers regularly carry out, thereby maintaining a measure of control over their own literary production.

5.3 The Internet

Use of the internet in Tibet has risen dramatically in recent years, as Chinese authorities have worked to increase the number of telephone lines available in the TAR. Government reports state that in 2002, there were only 4,000 registered dial-up Internet users in all of Tibet (China 2002). In 2010 the number of Internet users is expected to surge to 100,000, with 81 percent of Tibet’s villages having access to telephones (China 2010). Internet cafes are becoming more widespread in Tibet but are mainly located in the capital city of Lhasa.

Although Chinese-language websites have been available since the mid-1990s, the PRC’s first Tibetan-language website was only created in 2002 in Gansu Province. Since then, the development of Tibetan websites has lagged tremendously behind Chinese websites, which are extremely prolific in number.

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10 The Chinese Academy of Social Science’s Institute of Ethnic Literature provides the following information: “Hegel asserted: ‘There is no national epic in China.’ In his great work on aesthetics, when talking about the evolution of the epic, he said, ‘Yet the Chinese did not have a national epic. Their narrative mode was basically prose-like...’ However, as the collection of and research into folk literature developed, people found to their surprise that China not only has an epic, but also has the longest national epic, which still remains alive among the people--it’s name is Gesar.” (Institute 2010).

11 One example is the writer Teling Wangdor (W. Tailing), who has been applauded by the government for his novels and translations, including the translation of a number of works of Shakespeare into Tibetan (Xinhua 2009).

12 Maconi writes that “a few Tibetan-national bilingual writers in the PRC consistently translate their own works,” usually from Tibetan into Chinese, and cites as examples Pema Tseten, who has translated at least ten of his own short stories, and the well-known poet Jangbu (2008: 182-3).

13 According to a government media report (China 2002), www.tonguer.net was not only China’s, but the world’s, first Tibetan-language website. A recent search, however, found that this site no longer exists.
and constantly increasing. Even now within Tibet, many government organizations and private companies do not have websites. No formal studies are available regarding the number of websites that currently exist in Tibet, the language(s) that they use, or how many of them are translated. However, my own study of the websites in Tibet that do exist reveals a startling lack of Tibetan-language versions, particularly considering the fact that their audience is the residents in Tibet, over 90% of whom are ethnically Tibetan.

This study found that, of 36 government bodies in Tibet with websites, only three had content translated into Tibetan; the remaining 33 had Chinese-only versions (Table 1). Even the TAR People’s Government web portal (www.tibet.gov.cn), which is intended to serve all Tibetans, is only available in a Chinese version, as is the Lhasa City People’s Government website (www.lasa.gov.cn). The Tibet Academy of Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Sciences (www.taas.org) only has a Chinese version, but another site for agricultural matters, the Tibet Agricultural and Economic Information Center, is one of the few official websites in Tibet that does provide full content in Tibetan. The reason for this discrepancy may be due to the fact that the former is an educational body and thus there may be an assumption that its users are educated (and can read Chinese), while the latter is aimed at nomads and farmers (who often cannot read Chinese).

The main university in the TAR, Tibet University (www.utibet.edu.cn), has full content only available in Chinese, and although it has buttons to switch to the Tibetan and English languages, the buttons do not function. None of Tibet’s other educational bodies studied provide a Tibetan version on their websites, including one connected to the Tibet Education Department which is aimed specifically at helping university students find employment after graduating (www.xzjyzdzx.gov.cn).

Other government-sponsored websites examined, from the State Tax Bureau (www.xztax.gov.cn) to the TAR Postal Bureau (xz.chinapost.gov.cn), and even

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14 One study found that as of 2008 there were 1,919,000 Chinese-language websites in the PRC (Tang and Gentzler 2008: 174).

15 This internet study was undertaken over a period of several months and was completed in April 2010. All major government departments and bureaus in Tibet with websites in Chinese were first located. Each website was then checked to see if there were Tibetan (or English) versions available, and the functionality of buttons to switch languages was tested. If non-Chinese versions were available, they were examined to determine if the content was fully translated, partially translated, or summarized. The study focused on government websites (including media and education, which are both state-run), rather than private organizations or companies, in order to examine the issue of government will to provide bilingual versions to its minority citizens.

16 In the spring of 2010 when this study was carried out, the English button on Tibet University’s website was functioning and brought readers to an English page that provided a small amount of content tailor-made for foreigners who may want to study at the university. However, in December 2010 when the website was visited again to verify information for this paper, the English button no longer functioned. It is unknown if this is because the university has stopped allowing foreigners into its Tibetan-language studies program, or due to technical reasons.
those of remote towns in far-flung regions of Tibet, follow a similar trend: they only provide a Chinese version, and if there is a button to switch to Tibetan, it does not function. Two of the four websites found that do provide full Tibetan translation of their Chinese content are both official media outlets: China Tibet Broadcasting (en.tibetradio.cn), which is responsible for both television and radio services in the TAR, and China’s Tibet Information Center (tb.tibet.cn). These websites are intended for users inside and outside of the PRC and their function is to disseminate news and propaganda on the region; therefore, English and Tibetan versions are both available.

The underlying reasons for the lack of translation on the Internet in Tibet can only be conjectured here. Political, social and economic factors may all play a part, but it is clear that official policy in Tibet is not to prioritize providing web content in the Tibetans’ own language. It should be noted that the cause is not a technical one, since the Tibetan language has been computerized since the early 1990s (Kolas and Thowsen 2005: 140) and inputting systems for Tibetan are widely available.

In any country, political will is certainly a key factor in determining whether or not government bodies provide translations on the Internet for minorities. In the case of Tibet, the policy of officially-sanctioned non-translation has implications for users that go beyond practical, daily needs. It signals to the Tibetan people that the government does not consider their linguistic needs to be of significance. On the Internet in Tibet, as in all spheres of public life, Chinese is the language that minorities should and must adopt.

6. Conclusion

The concept of “linguistic security” as discussed by Branchadell is highly relevant to the situation in Tibet. Branchadell defines linguistic security as “the extent to which individuals can live through their own language without being subject to pressure to use another,” and he identifies two dimensions to the right to use one’s native language in public settings: the active and the passive (2005: 125). The passive dimension implicates a duty on the part of the administration to “respond in the language of the individual”, while the active dimension relates to “the right not to have to translate one’s acts or words” as well as “the right to receive translations into one’s own language” (Branchadell 2005: 125-26).

As seen above, in public settings, including on the Internet, Tibetans are not able to “live through their own language” alone, and often have no choice but to use the Chinese language. The Tibetan people live in a social environment with little linguistic security, and as a result their language is what Branchadell terms a “mandatory translation language” (2005: 126), with translation imposed upon them by a dominant power.
As Cronin writes:

The problem for minority or endangered languages is not so much the fact of contact as the form of contact. Translation as a particular kind of contact is threatening and oppressive if the speakers of minority languages have no control over the translation process and cannot use translation as an enabling force but have to suffer it as a disabling intrusion. (2003: 167)

The issue of control over translation is critical to understanding how minority communities function both in relation to the governing power and in their daily lives. As discussed above, the authorities in Tibet are responsible for selecting and translating all pragmatic materials, both print and digital. In literature as well, the government is largely in charge of selecting what is translated, though it is in this realm that the greatest amount of freedom to translate has been found. Statistics indicate that the majority of translators in Tibet are in fact Tibetans, but their ability to decide for themselves what to translate, when to translate, and the direction of their translations, is subject to strict controls.

This study has shown how Tibetans, living in a situation of diglossia and unequal power relations, have not only had to accept the numerous changes made to their native language, but have also been unable to exert any substantial influence on the way in which translation is carried out in their homeland. Rather than being able to use translation as a source of subversion or nation-building, as has been the case for many Western or European minority language users, the Tibetan people are subjected to the fact of translation as a necessary and, quite possibly, undesirable part of life.

Further, the Tibetans have not been able to, in any discernable way, “vary” the major language through the fact of translation, since such a transfer can only occur in situations in which there is a substantial quantity of translation from the minor into the major language. Since virtually all pragmatic and most literary translations are carried out from Chinese into Tibetan, this has meant that rather than the Chinese language being “varied” by its contact with the minority language, the reverse has been the case.

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