

2014

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Recommended Citation

Peters, Simon (2014) "Gyalthang Southern Khams Tibetan: A Case Study of Language Attitudes and Shift in Shangri-La," *Anthós*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/anthos.2014.111>

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Gyalthang¹ Southern Khams Tibetan: A Case Study of Language Attitudes and Shift in Shangri-La

Simon Peters

*Every valley has its own dialect
and every lama has his own sect.*
-Tibetan Proverb

This opening proverb speaks directly to the great linguistic diversity of the Tibetan Plateau. Not only have Tibet's historical religious leaders founded numerous distinct sects of Tibetan Buddhism, but when Tibetan people from different places encounter one another, the divergence between their speech varieties may inhibit communication. These forms of diversity are understood facts of history and life for Tibetans. The quote above also points to the natural features of the land as the source of linguistic variation, just as the lama provides spiritual wisdom. It was not until relatively recently that the scientific community embraced the correlation between ecological and ethnolinguistic diversity, using Luisa Maffi's term, "biocultural diversity" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 6). Inherent in this relationship is the co-occurrence of biological diversity and a wealth

¹ The field site was officially renamed in 2002 to Shangri-La, deliberately drawing on the imaginings of a timeless paradise in James Hilton's 1933 book *Lost Horizon*, as part of the city's growing tourism industry. In Chinese, the name is transliterated as Xianggelila (香格里拉). Its former Chinese name was Zhongdian (中甸). I will use the Tibetan name, Gyalthang, in acknowledgement of my informants. Because this city lies in a county known by the same name, I will use 'Xianggelila' in reference to the county and 'Shangri-La' to draw attention to the romanticization of tourist Gyalthang.

of human cultural and linguistic variation. The reverse is also true: as the planet's environmental quality degrades, endangering many plant and animal species, the linguistic and cultural vitality of the people living alongside them also weaken. Environmental destruction, urbanization, and globalization are interrelated processes that reinforce one another. This vicious cycle threatens the ethnolinguistic identities of those unable to secure a sustainable living with their traditional practices. These are the people most likely to lose their languages in the mass linguistic extinction predicted for the near future.



Figure 1. The maps show the relative locations of Diqing Prefecture within Yunnan Province, and Yunnan within China. The three numbered counties within Diqing are Xianggelila County (1), Deqin County (2), and Weixi County (3). Gyalthang City is approximately located where the numeral (1) is situated on the map.

Accessed from:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shangri-La_County

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Diqing_mcp.png

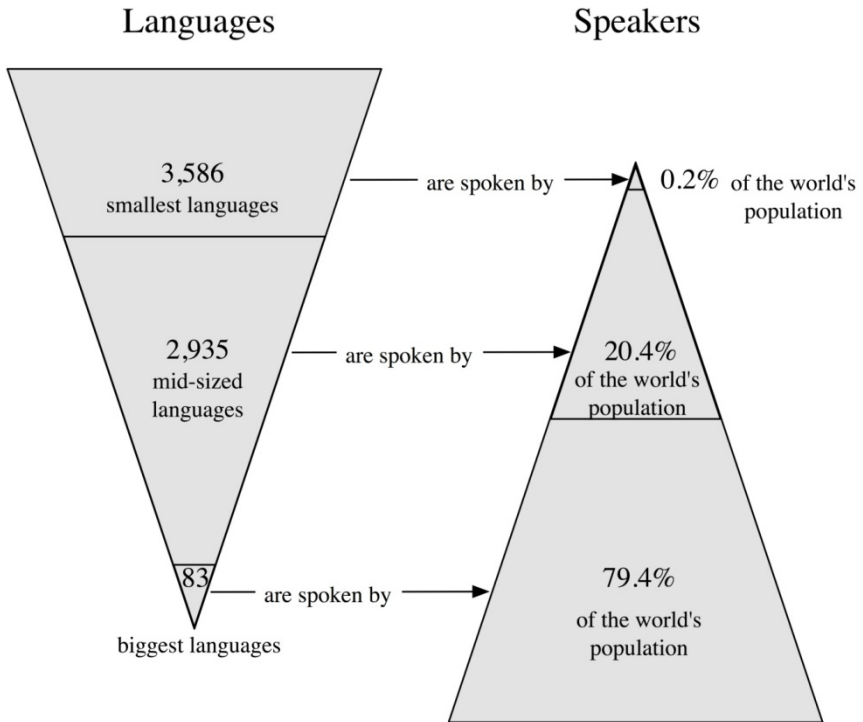


Figure 2. Anderson, G. & Harrison, K. D. (2007). *Living Tongues* Institute for Endangered Languages.

Accessed from:

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/langhotspots/globaltrends.html>

Bernard (1996, p. 142) succinctly states that, “97% of the world’s people speak about 4% of the world’s languages; and conversely, about 96% of the world’s *languages* are spoken by about 3% of the world’s *people*” (cited in UNESCO, 2003, p. 2, emphasis in original). Estimates of the number of languages currently spoken on earth range from six- to seven-thousand (Brenzinger & de Graaf, 2006, p. 1; Lewis & Simons, 2009, p. 4). Figure 2 shows a breakdown of small, mid-sized, and large speaker populations across these languages. An overwhelming 79.4% of the world’s population speaks merely 83 out

of the 6,604 languages Anderson and Harrison identify. In contrast, only 20.4% of the population represents 2,935 languages and a miniscule 0.2% speaks the remaining 3,586 languages (Anderson & Harrison, 2007). These disparities across speaker populations indicate an impending wide-scale loss of human languages as speakers of those less widely spoken shift to languages of regional and global importance. Currently, 50% of all languages are not being transmitted to children and are losing speakers (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). In light of these statistics, experts predict a 90% reduction in the number of languages spoken by the end of this century, leaving 700 languages at most (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2).

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), an ethnolinguistically diverse and rapidly developing nation, language loss is expected to be particularly widespread. According to the *Ethnologue*, the numerous regional dialects of Chinese and the country's ethnic minority languages total 298 (Lewis *et al.*, 2014). Here, "ethnic minority" or "minority nationality" (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) refers to the PRC's 55 recognized cultural groups distinct from the majority Han Chinese. These recognized minorities account for 8.47% of the country's total population while the Han represent a 91.51% majority (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). The minority languages, spanning four different language families², face a significant threat from China's unprecedented urbanization. In 1980, the country's rural population was still about 80%. Economic opening, modernization, and industrialization steadily drew people into the cities to join the factory labor force. The implementation of drastic agricultural reforms accelerated the rate of urbanization as the rural peasantry could no longer sell their crops for a sustainable income and moved to urban centers in search of better wages. In the decade from 1999 to 2009, the urban population increased from 34.78% to 46.59%. Today, the urban and rural populations of China are almost

² Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austro-Asiatic, and Indo-European.

equal (All China Data Center, 2010). Recognized as one of the most transformative forces shaping contemporary China, urbanization is also a significant influence in the shift away from minority languages in the PRC.

Figure 2 above illustrates the unlikelihood that these minority languages will still be in use in the near future. If the global population is 7 billion, the average number of speakers for the ‘biggest’ languages is roughly 67 million. The average speaker population sizes for the ‘mid-sized’ and ‘smallest’ languages are 487,000 and 3,900 thousand respectively. Comparing these numbers with the *Ethnologue* figures reveals that among even those 14 ‘institutional’ languages the *Ethnologue* deems China’s most vital, only the state language (listed as Mandarin Chinese) constitutes one of the ‘biggest’. The only other languages that could be included in this category are two Chinese dialects: Cantonese (Yue Chinese) with a count of about 62 million speakers in all countries and Wu Chinese, spoken predominantly in Shanghai, with 77 million. In fact, the largest languages in China are all regional varieties of Chinese, or Chinese “regionolects”. No ethnic minority language surpasses 10 million speakers.

Many of these small and mid-sized minority languages are spoken in a province known for its biocultural diversity: Yunnan Province. Accounting for only 4% of China’s landmass, Yunnan holds 50% of the entire country’s plant and animal species and is home to 26 of China’s 56 recognized nationalities, including the Han (Pei, 2012; Mullaney, 2011, p.35-6). This paper examines the language shift of one threatened minority language of Yunnan in particular: a variety of Tibetan local to Shangri-La County of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The context for this shift is Gyalthang, the urbanizing capital city of both the county and prefecture, where I conducted field research between April 26 and May 17, 2013.

I begin by offering some highlighting certain aspects of Tibetan language variation with particular attention to the local Gyalthang variety. In the following section I introduce Gyalthang's touristic Old Town and the language situation there, exploring how the highly divergent nature and mutual unintelligibility of Tibetan language varieties inform stakeholder language attitudes. I place Gyalthang Tibetan into the UNESCO framework for assessing language vitality to explore the interactions of these attitudes and the implications they have for the maintenance of the local Tibetan variety. I conclude with a discussion of what language shift in Gyalthang reveals about language shift in general. The example of Gyalthang's Old Town complicates the notion of language shift in which one group succumbs to a single dominant homogenous force. What this case illustrates instead is a multilingual situation fraught with issues of socioeconomic and prestige inequalities against a backdrop of urbanization and globalization.

Research Methodology

My methodologies for this research project were ethnographic in nature. Because I do not speak any Tibetan, I relied heavily on the information people gave me. To offer balance to my informants' subjective statements, I also reflected upon my own subjective impressions of various observed social interactions. I made the majority of these observations conveniently within a small cultural education environment where I boarded. Here, Tibetan youth received room and board while studying a traditional painting style with religious significance to Tibetan Buddhists. Those I most frequently observed were five males between the ages of 14 and 21. Occasionally there were additional males present; they included a preteen monk in training, another student in his mid-twenties, a monk in his late twenties, an instructor in his thirties, and an elderly man.

With the exception of the instructor, who is an Amdo³ speaker from Qinghai, they all came from areas within the broad Khams dialect region. The instructor's wife was an Old Town local who prepared meals for the boarders. I spoke with her often and spent some time at her family's home across the street, where I interviewed one member of the grandparent generation and several in the parent generation. Here, I was also able to observe intergenerational familial interactions among toddler-aged children, parents, and a grandparent.

Another significant site where I conducted observations was a boarding school outside of urban Gyalthang, which students from villages across the prefecture attended. I interacted with two groups of students, each in a different grade within a three-year vocational program to become Tibetan teachers. One class had 27 students, nine girls and eighteen boys, between the ages of 17 and 20. With the exception of one girl whose official nationality was Naxi (though her father was Tibetan), all the others were Tibetan. The other class was composed of 30 students, sixteen girls and fourteen boys, between the ages of 19 and 21. Aside from one Yi girl with no other connection to Tibetan communities or culture, the rest were all Tibetan. Their instructor was a Tibetan academic with relatives from various dialect areas.

Other informants included three elderly Old Town Tibetan women in the grandparent generation and a family in a village outside of Gyalthang that included members of the parent and grandparent generations. I also interviewed numerous Tibetan individuals in their twenties and thirties from Old Town, other provinces in China, and Tibetan enclaves in India. One of these, a female raised elsewhere in Diqing who spent considerable time in an Amdo-speaking area, introduced me to her family members from Old Town. I was able to observe intergenerational family interactions among members of the

³ Tibetan is subcategorized into three dialect groups: Amdo, Khams, and Central or Ü-Tsang.

grandparent, parent, and child generations. This particular informant was extremely influential in my research. She facilitated a meeting with one of her aunts from Old Town and her aunt's close friends, as well as introduced me to several Tibetan academics in their forties, fifties, and older.

Of the time allotted for this Independent Study Project, I spent three weeks at the field site and one week working on the initial write up. The majority of my time was dedicated to establishing social networks and making sense of the dense social complexity shaping Old Town. Certainly more preparation time and more time in the field would have enabled me to systematically conduct standardized interviews and collect survey data, greatly benefitting this study. However, I did attempt to gather thick qualitative information from individuals representing a wide range of demographics. The UNESCO framework provides an accessible organizational method for presenting the information I collected and assessing Gyalthang Tibetan's language vitality. In addition to an overview of the circumstances surrounding Old Town's shift from the local Tibetan variety, it offers a glimpse into the complex social, linguistic, and economic realities emerging in China's urbanizing ethnic minority regions.

Tibetan Languages

Tibetan is a Central Bodish language of the Tibeto-Burman family that can be broken down into three commonly recognized dialect groups, Amdo, Central (also called Ü-Tsang in the literature), and Khams. While the borders demarcating Tibetan autonomous regions, prefectures, and counties do not perfectly conform to the boundaries of dialect regions, Tibetan people use these borders to explain the different ways of speaking. As such, Amdo areas include Gansu and Qinghai, although there are also speakers in Sichuan. The

Central variety is traditionally confined to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), but has spread with many exile communities. Khams contains the most speech variation and covers the Tibetan areas of Yunnan, much of Tibetan Sichuan, and a large portion of the TAR.



Figure 3. Dialect regions of main Tibetan subgroups imposed on political map of southwestern China.

Accessed from:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetic_languages

Southern Khams Tibetan

All forms of Tibetan spoken throughout Diqing Prefecture are classified as Southern Khams dialects, though they are distinct from one another and not necessarily mutually intelligible. Southern Khams is but one of six Khams sub-classifications⁴. I spent a great deal of my time in the field trying to figure out who was speaking to whom using which location-based variety of Tibetan. My

⁴ Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western Khams, in addition to Cone, and Hgbruchu (LL-Map.org).

observations and statements from informants suggest that the various South Khams varieties of Dqing are not mutually intelligible, but that adequate exposure can facilitate the development of cross-dialectal comprehension.



Figure 4. A map of Dqing on top of which are indicated the boundaries for distinct speech varieties of Tibetan in and around the prefecture according to descriptions from Ellen Barte (personal communication).

Accessed from:

<http://www.swchina.wisc.edu/photo.zh.html>

Learning an unrelated dialect, on the other hand, poses great difficulty. The students studying at the vocational boarding school all told me that studying Tibetan (Literary) was extremely difficult. Peering into their textbooks revealed that many made notes in Chinese characters. This illustrates the linguistic divergence between Dqing varieties of Tibetan and the literary standard. Ellen Barte, local Summer Institute for Linguistics (SIL) researcher working on documenting a number of Dqing Tibetan varieties, likened this situation to having to learn Latin to be considered literate in English.

Unfortunately, the ideology characterizing Gyalthang Tibetan as a vernacular dialect of standard Tibetan make it unfit for education.

Having introduced the relatedness of various Tibetan varieties, in the next section I provide an in-depth description of Gyalthang's Old Town and the language situation there.

Gyalthang

Gyalthang is the economic and administrative center of Xianggelila County and Diqing Prefecture, located centrally within the county. While simultaneously occupying the Southeastern border of the Tibetan cultural area and Yunnan's Northwestern-most corner, Diqing contains two other counties, Deqin and Weixi, which border Xianggelila along the *Jinsha* River (金沙江, the Chinese name for this portion of the Yangtze River). Xianggelila is the largest county and contains 43 % of the prefecture population (Bartee & Hugoniot, unpublished manuscript). The highest percentage of Tibetans, over 80%, resides in Deqin (Bartee & Hugoniot). Weixi, on the other hand, is home to another nationality, the Lisu, and is known by its full name as Weixi Lisu Autonomous County.



Figure 5. Map showing the position of Gyalthang (in red, written Shangri-La) within Shangri-La County and Diqing Prefecture.

Accessed from:

http://www.thebirch-shangrila.com/images/map_attractions_en.jpg

Although the prefecture is significantly less urban than the rest of the country, its urban growth rate measured in the 2010 national census, 13.15%, is nearly on par with the national average, 13.46% (Bartee & Hugoniot). This growth likely has much to do with its burgeoning economy.

Gyalthang's 2002 name change from the Chinese "Zhongdian" to "Shangri-La", the paradise in James Hilton's (1933) novel *Lost Horizon*, marks its arrival onto the domestic and international tourism market. Gyalthang has served as a commercial center since the times

of the Ancient Tea Horse Road when Tibetans on the plateau were purchasing tea to supplement their diets from southern Yunnan in exchange for horses. Although the local Chinese dialect has remained important for interethnic communication among Tibetan, Bai, Naxi, Han, and other inhabitants from that time until the present, the increase in visitors and the dependence upon them for securing an economic livelihood has made knowledge of Chinese, especially standard *Putonghua*, more important than ever before.

Aside from the obvious alterations tourism has had on the physical, economic, and linguistic landscapes of Gyalthang, it has also created a politically 'safe' area where Tibetans can display and celebrate their culture without arousing political suspicion. Possessing and sharing cultural knowledge is encouraged within the new tourist economy as one of the primary drivers of this industry. This has attracted Tibetans from across Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, the TAR, as well as those who had been living in India. These groups all represent regions widely recognized as strongholds of Tibetan culture. On the far southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, the local Tibetan language in Gyalthang is markedly different from these other varieties and holds little prestige. As a result, outsiders assume a position of authority on the culture and religious symbolism that tourists come to see, creating a complex, and at times, contentious social dynamic in Old Town. On one side are outside Tibetans, speaking prestigious varieties and capable of writing Tibetan. Those from India even speak English well and run many of the hostels in Old Town. On the other side are local Gyalthang Tibetans, educated primarily in Chinese with little to no literary knowledge of Tibetan.

One young woman I frequently conversed with was an Amdo speaker who did not grow up in Gyalthang, although she had many relatives there. When inquiring about her relatives' language use habits, she would always insist they were *local*, conveying a degree of assimilation to mainstream Han-dominated Chinese society, and so did not speak Tibetan. Accompanying her on several occasions to

family events, I noted that her local family members were members of the urbanizing, economically mobile sector. They sold their properties in Old Town and were pursuing business ventures. They did not speak any Tibetan, and conversed predominantly in the local Chinese dialect unless speaking with me, in which case they used Standard Mandarin. On one occasion, my informant's aunt was having dinner with two old school friends who were both Tibetan speakers. According to them, they had to speak local Chinese together because the aunt of my friend knew no Tibetan. On another occasion, an Amdo-speaking informant from Qinghai spoke disparagingly about local Gyalthag Tibetans' inability to read the Tibetan script decorating a small temple in Old Town, a major tourist attraction. According to her, the writing was political in nature and contrary to Tibetan values. These two examples illustrate a sentiment among outside Tibetans that locals are not culturally authentic.

Aside from issues of authenticity and assimilation, the great linguistic divide between Tibetan varieties may also be a source for misunderstanding. While many view Gyalthag Tibetan as a substandard vernacular, highly divergent from actual Tibetan, locals in Old Town are proud of the archaic forms present in their variety. For them, these represent a historical claim to authenticity. Other varieties also have literary traditions coming from large local monasteries historically engaged in producing their own religious texts. The link to Tibetan Buddhism lends these speech varieties a certain level of prestige. In Diqing, the variety of Tibetan spoken in Benzilan has achieved recognition in this way. As Gyalthag Tibetan has no tradition of writing, and to this day functional literacy in Tibetan remains uncommon for locals, the transplant community tends to view it as an inferior and incomprehensible pseudo-form of the language, even contesting its legitimacy as a Tibetan language.

The previous sections have introduced the various social and economic factors influencing language ideologies and language shift in Old Town. I now turn to the UNESCO framework for assessing

language vitality to detail the stage of Gyalthang Tibetan's language shift and discuss efforts underway to reverse it.

UNESCO Language Vitality Index

The UNESCO scale uses a dynamic set of 9 factors, which include intergenerational language transmission, the absolute number of speakers, the number of speakers relative to the group's population, trends in existing language domains, the ability of the language to cope with new domains and media, the existence of literature and education materials, official attitudes and policy regarding minority languages in the society, the attitudes that speakers have toward their own language, and the amount and quality of existing documentation. For each factor, the index provides six descriptors that correspond with a grade between 0 and 5, with five being the most conducive to language maintenance and zero indicating the worst condition for language vitality. Some of the grades carry a label. For those that do not carry labels, I have provided my own.

Intergenerational Language Transmission is the natural passing of a language from older speakers to the children in their families. When children no longer learn to speak a language, it is decidedly endangered and will likely become moribund within one or two generations when there are no longer any living speakers or community members who remember it.

In Gyalthang, residents of Old Town I spoke with agreed that children do not speak Tibetan. The teacher at the cultural education center I mentioned above is married to an Old Town woman whose family lives across the street from the center. I often spoke with her when she cooked meals for the boarders at the center. She said she knew Tibetan, but felt it important to speak only Chinese with her young son so that he could excel in school. I once visited her family across the street. Those present included the 57 year-old female of the grandparent generation, several of her children in their 30s and 40s with their spouses, and two small children. The grandmother,

wearing traditional clothing, said they all knew both Chinese and Tibetan. One of her sons told me later that he, in his forties, understands only 40% of it and that his mother realistically understands only 80%.

Another group of three elderly women I spoke with in Old Town told me they speak Tibetan with one another, but local Chinese at home since the children would otherwise not understand them. The importance that parents place on the success of their children in a Chinese language education system and the reported absence of local children who know the language indicate a state of severe endangerment. The index describes this grade as reflective of a language community in which there are speakers only in the grandparent generation, while the parent generation may understand some of it. This corresponds with a 2 on the vitality scale.

Absolute Number of Speakers quantifies the vulnerability of the language to outside forces based on speaker community size. In Gyalthang's Old Town, where diverse Tibetan groups, other ethnic minorities, Han Chinese, and domestic and international tourists converge, the local grandparent-generation speakers are certain to be a minority. In the nearby rural villages, however, are many speakers whose geographic proximity and access to Old Town may reinforce the language habits of Old Town's remaining speakers. Despite this potential, not enough children are learning the language to replace the older generation and the number of speakers is shrinking.

This factor requires more research before a definitive grade can be assigned. An appropriate instrument would be self-assessment language surveys administered to residents of Old Town, as well as nearby Tibetan villages and Tibetan neighborhoods in urban Gyalthang.

Proportion of Speakers to the Total Group Population is difficult to discern. Who to include in the consideration of the group population must first be decided. It is unlikely that speakers in Gyalthang do not interact with others in nearby villages. On the

contrary, it is probable that familial ties and economic expansion in the city put speakers from Old Town, the countryside, and other parts of the city in frequent contact with one another. If this is true, it would warrant the inclusion of wider social networks in consideration of this factor and additional interviews would be necessary to identify the villages with links to the urban center.

Considering the prevalence of local Tibetan I encountered in a nearby village, it is likely that including village networks would increase the potential score for this category.

Trends in Existing Language Domains appear severely restricted in Gyalthang. The language of religious instruction is a literary form and the language of compulsory state education is Standard Mandarin. Based on my observations, local Tibetans above a certain age do not use the language in regular social interactions except for greetings or to earn a better price from local vendors.

One informant told me that she is local and speaks Gyalthang Tibetan. However, even when speaking on the phone to people with whom she claimed to always speak the local variety, she exclusively spoke the local Chinese. She took me to meet the same old local women I mentioned above who spend their afternoons sitting in the sun in Old Town. Along the way, she exchanged greetings with several people. She grew up here and everyone knew her family; she was an insider in this local Old Town Tibetan in-group. With the elderly women we met, she also spoke only local Chinese. I wanted to know why, since they were all local, they insisted on using Chinese together. The grandparent generation women said they are unaccustomed to speaking Chinese with young people, because the children in their families are all monolingual Chinese speakers.

The twenty-seven year-old local accompanying me said that their language was very ‘*tu*’, written with the Chinese graph meaning ‘earth’ (土). This does not communicate a negative attitude toward their language, as I initially thought. Instead, they describe their language as *tu* because it is local (*bendi*, 本地) and using it explicitly

signifies closeness and familiarity with an interlocutor. It is possible that this particular young woman did not need to invoke these speech forms with those we encountered in Old Town because she grew up there and her membership in the in-group is already established.

The majority of speech domains in Gyalthang are dominated by other languages. Those that do exist for the local variety are limited, one occupying a narrow niche in the marketplace and the other used for symbolic purposes. I believe this factor best aligns with a 2 on the index, “limited or formal domains”.

New Domains and Media refers to the language’s usage in newly relevant technological domains often representing modernity and progress. If represented in television programming or news, popular literature, magazines, and newspapers, as well as music that appeal to current trends, a language is relevant in informational and social arenas. New domains are significant because as speakers engage with them, they simultaneously catalogue the language and the culture it expresses. The relevance of these media in the lives of younger generations increasingly makes the language’s application to them essential for its survival.

To date, the Gyalthang variety has not been successfully introduced into new domains and media. This is set to change in the near future with the opening of a comprehensive dictionary website for Southern Khams Tibetan, containing multiple regional variations, alternate lexical entries, and different pronunciations. The local Tibetan television station currently only broadcasts in ‘media Khams,’ which has been greatly influenced by areas such as Derge in Sichuan (Bartee, personal communication). This, too, is scheduled to change in a few months with the introduction of a weekly 15-minute segment in Gyalthang Tibetan. There is only one publication that contains any

local vernacular writing and it is not yet widely known among the population.⁵

The common belief exists that the local language cannot be written down. Even though linguists in the area are actively pursuing orthography development, the majority of locals remain illiterate in Tibetan. Until the newly developed expression of the variety in writing is accepted and implemented in literacy education, there remains no way of fully introducing it into cyber domains and encouraging its use. The publishing of the online dictionary will undoubtedly be a huge step in this direction, but because of current conditions and the inability to know how the forthcoming web and television media will develop, I categorize the degree of coping with new domains as a 1, “minimal”.

Language Education and Literacy Materials also rely on an acceptable standardization of a written local variety. Although researchers and linguists in the region give this much attention, because the form has yet to be popularized, materials have not been developed on a large scale. While this may change in the near future, for now the orthography is not known to the community. I must assign this factor a 0, “nonexistent”.

Official Attitudes and Dominant/Minority Language Policy of the PRC administer the right of minorities to use and develop their languages. Article 36 of the 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities states that schools with a predominantly minority student body should use the students’ language in the classroom (Yuxiang & Phillion, 2009, p. 3). Like many central directives in the PRC, this does not result in regional, prefecture, county, or local implementation. The realization of this education policy depends entirely on the interest and willingness of local officials. Although Diqing is a Tibetan autonomous prefecture, the

⁵ Brandt, J., & Bartee, E. (n.d.). *A handbook to the birds of Shangrila*. No publisher listed.

schools here always teach and utilize materials in Chinese, relegating Tibetan to an optional subject that is taught one hour per day starting in the second grade. Furthermore, Literary Tibetan, the subject of these classes, does not accurately reflect the speech of the local variety and does not support its maintenance.

Despite a professed commitment to encouraging and supporting minority language development, little is undertaken in Gyalthang to place Tibetan, let along the local variety, in an actual position of institutionalization. Because the local language is not even officially recognized, I index the official attitudes toward the language as a 1, “forced assimilation”.

Community Attitudes determine the fate of their language. A language can be on the verge of extinction, linguists and language planners ready to mobilize, but the only way the for a revitalization effort to be successful is if the community who the language belongs to is supportive. If the community is actively seeking assistance to restore language domains, the project is likely to be successful. If, however, the community has internalized disparaging views of their language or finds it useless, they will not likely be willing to begin learning and speaking it. In a situation like this, the most linguists can do is document the variety as thoroughly as possible so that it can be studied for language research and, perhaps, relearned by a future generation.

Locals in Gyalthang are proud of their Tibetan identities. Instances like the one above, in which my 27 year-old informant said she spoke Gyalthang Tibetan but never demonstrated this skill, suggest that language is an important part of this identity. Even when individuals lack proficiency in the local tongue, they know it belongs to them and have a sense that they should be able to speak it. In spite of this cultural claim to Gyalthang Tibetan language, the people of Old Town are ill equipped to maintain their variety and pass it on to their children. The cultural importance of the language is outweighed by the desire to easily navigate the urbanizing tourism economy and

Chinese language education system. I interpret their attitudes to be “passive”, some support maintenance while others are indifferent or support language loss. This receives a 2 on the vitality index.

Documentation is important to situations of language shift or advancing phases of endangerment because it can live beyond even the last speaker. If documentation is diverse, rich, and thorough, it can be utilized in language planning and maintenance efforts. Documentation is the foundational and most time consuming aspect of revitalization. Its existence prior to the inception of a language planning effort indicates the scope and pace that language development can take.

The number of resources on Diqing varieties of Tibetan is impressive. These have not always focused on the Gyalthang variety and its documentation is less robust. The linguists working in Diqing are engaged in a broad documentation effort of multiple varieties. As part of this, they are providing language documentation training to community members, cooperating with them to document various genres of their own speech varieties. I met one man who was engaged in recording and transcribing his grandfather’s Nakara Tibetan folk sayings for digital publishing. There are several papers on regional varieties, a multi-dialectal dictionary with a digital component, and some texts in development.

A book on the Gyalthang variety is being written by Barteo and Hugoniot. Though not yet published, it indicates a substantial amount of documentation. Furthermore, the infrastructure in place for further documentation is a positive sign of the language’s future development. Still, written texts in the Gyalthang variety are lacking and there are no everyday media available to the speech community. The degree of the documentation is “fragmentary”, a 2 on the index.

The results of the vitality assessment are summarized in Table 1 below. It reveals that Gyalthang Tibetan is currently in a critical level of endangerment, with all grades near the low end of the spectrum. The factors with the lowest grades are new domains & media,

educational materials, and official attitudes & policy. The inability to apply home language knowledge to entertainment, school, or work, arguably the most salient of domains for young people, contributes to an apathetic view of the local language as useless and not worthy of attention. Gyalthag Tibetan’s exclusion from educational and popular media domains, compounded by the lack of official recognition, contributes to passive language attitudes, a shrinking speaker population, the absence of speakers in the child generation, and diminishing speech domains. Although documentation and development efforts are readily underway for Tibetan Gyalthag, they have yet to produce materials accessible to community members that would support their continued use of the language.

Factor	Degree	Grade 0-5
Intergenerational Language Transmission	Severely endangered	2
Number of Speakers	Insufficient data	Additional research required
Speakers : Group	Insufficient Data	Additional research required
Existing Domains	Limited to formal domains	2
New Domains & Media	Minimal	1
Educational Materials	Nonexistent	0
Official Attitudes & Policy	Forced assimilation	1
Community Attitudes	Passive	2
Documentation	Fragmentary	2

Table 1. Compiled grades for the vitality of Gyalthag Tibetan across nine factors of the UNESCO Index.

Conclusion: Urbanizing Language Endangerment

My discussion of the Gyalthag Tibetan speaker population above reveals the need to define the social networks connecting speakers from Old Town, other parts of the city, and nearby villages. Rather than focusing solely on Old Town and urbanizing Gyalthag as an isolated site of language shift, consideration of the countryside as a source of workers and visitors who frequent Gyalthag may provide a more accurate picture of the local language situation.

To explore the impact that a “greater metropolitan area” perspective of the Gyalthang Tibetan speech community might have on my understanding of its language vitality, I have applied the UNESCO framework to Gyalthang Tibetan in a rural context for comparison. I base the grading predominantly on my conversations with the two boys at the cultural education center from nearby villages as well as a family I visited in the rural area.

Factor	Urban	Rural	Rural Description
Intergenerational Language Transmission	2	5	Language used by all ages
Number of Speakers	Insufficient data	Insufficient data	Requires more research
Speakers : Group	Insufficient data	4	Almost all speak the language
Existing Domains	2	4.5	Used in all domains except education
New Domains & Media	1	1	Limited TV broadcasts
Educational Materials	0	0	No orthography available to community
Official Attitudes & Policy	1	1	Not recognized
Community Attitudes	2	4	Most support maintenance
Documentation	2	2	Not comprehensive

Table 2. Comparison of UNESCO language vitality factors for Gyalthang Tibetan in urban and rural contexts.

The comparative assessment suggests differences in language use and attitudes across rural and urban spaces, with rural speech communities significantly more vital, though still in danger of shift. The differences in vitality are especially apparent in the grades for intergenerational language transmission, ratio of speakers to the total group population, existing domains, and community attitudes. If rural and urban speech communities were not assessed as isolated entities, a vitality assessment considering social networks that cross the urban-rural divide would likely result in a vitality rating with potentially moderate increases for the abovementioned factors. Adaptability to new domains and media, educational materials, language policy, and documentation, however, would remain extremely low. Sustained social networks spanning the Gyalthang metropolitan area disrupt the linguistic conservationist qualities generally associated with isolated

rural areas. While such networks may at first appear to provide increased opportunities for urban dwellers to use the local language, they may also be opening rural language havens up to the pressures of language shift. Members of the grandparent and parent generations may be shown to speak Gyalthang Tibetan more frequently in this type of social interaction. Children, however, will still be required to attend school in Standard Mandarin and young adults will spend a great deal of time in economic domains dominated by the local Chinese dialect. Rather than showing an increase in language vitality, further research into the urban-rural networks of greater Gyalthang may demonstrate that the urbanizing pressures associated with language shift are already affecting the outlying rural area.

Future research into the maintenance of Gyalthang Tibetan should address the metropolitan area perspective of the local speech community as well as examine the progress local language advocates have made in documenting the language and securing additional domains for it.

The social and economic situation in Gyalthang's Old Town drastically changed in January of this year when a fire destroyed the majority of Old Town. Fortunately, no one died in this tragic occurrence. Many locals moved to relatives' homes elsewhere in the city and the destabilized economic situation for migrants likely caused many to return to their hometowns. I have been told residents and the city are all eager to rebuild, but that the project is projected to take three years to complete. A revisiting of Gyalthang Tibetan should also examine the impact that the fire had on the social makeup of the city and the language use habits of locals displaced from Old Town.

By pointing out some methodological shortcomings of my research and hypothesizing about the influence of unaccounted for factors, I seek to demonstrate the learning that accompanies independent field research. After reflecting on my data and experiences, I have a better understanding of the preparation, time, and thorough methodologies required to collect the necessary field

data and answer a research question. The experience developing friendships and informant networks in Gyalthang was rewarding beyond measure and I am anxious to return in the future.

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