Adding A Robust Cultural Component in Elementary Tibetan

Introduction

I have been teaching Tibetan language courses at U.C. Berkeley since 2013. I came to this position after a two-year postdoctoral fellowship in Buddhist Studies, also in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures here at Cal. I received my PhD from the University of Virginia in Religious Studies for a dissertation about Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan instruction at Cal is supported by a 2014 Title VI grant to the Institute for East Asian Studies. One of the benefits of this national funding is that it underwrites second-year Tibetan, which had not been offered at Cal regularly in many years, if ever. My Berkeley Language Center 2016 Lecturer’s Fellowship, therefore, was very timely as it gave me the needed time and support to improve the elementary Tibetan course (1A/B) so that there would be sufficient demand for second-year Tibetan to take advantage of the generous funding from Title VI for second-year Tibetan (110A/B). With sufficient enrollments, the Title VI funding will be renewed and I can continue to work at Cal teaching a language that is dear to my heart and my academic research.

As I embark on a career as a Tibetan language instructor I have met several challenges in the classroom. During the Berkeley Language Center Lecturer’s Fellowship, I received invaluable guidance from the directors and faculty members – Mark Kaiser, Rick Kern, and Chika Shibahara – and also from the other fellows. Week after week I learned many important methods and research findings about creating effective language-learning experiences. The bulk of my project, though, was centered on addressing one particular issue that I face in the classroom. The students who enroll in the fall semester of Elementary Tibetan can be easily divided into two different types: those interested in Tibetan culture and politics, and those interested in Tibetan linguistics. The former type of student is hungry for information about many issues in Tibetan studies, running the gamut from traditional culture to sensitive issues in current events. One might think that they would want to enroll in my courses Tibetan Buddhism (C114) and Contemporary Tibet (C115) instead, but they wish to learn about these things via Tibetan language study. The reason for this is partly because they also have plans to visit Tibet. The second type of student might have some interest in Tibet per se, but their intellectual curiosities tend toward the comparative linguistics of Tibetan language. This type of student is multilingual, and takes up a new language every year, it seems. Being “language geeks,” this second type of student tends to have a better aptitude at language learning than the first type. They can learn a list of vocabulary words or a new grammatical construction almost instantly and love to ask questions about the language that do not have any direct practical application. On the other hand, the culture-and-politics oriented students sometimes sidetrack instruction or drills with questions that are tangentially relevant. How can I address the interests and learning styles of both types of student in a way that truly enhances the language instruction of the classes? I dedicated my BLC fellowship to devising lesson plans that are advantageous to all of my students.
In consultation with the BLC faculty directors and other fellows I determined that I can address this challenge through the development of a new and unique series of lessons. Each lesson is dedicated to a particular cultural or social topic and follows a template. The lessons include a short discussion in both Tibetan and English; worksheets on the new vocabulary and grammar; in-class exercises and dialogue drills about the topic; and ‘student-directed learning’ projects conducted outside of class. These lessons will appear after every second lesson in the textbook and will reinforce the vocabulary and grammar that they have already learned from the textbook. This type of lesson will meet the needs of both kinds of students because it allows for extended explorations of culture and linguistics in ways that seem to be the point of the lesson, rather than a distraction or side note. Below I will provide overviews of three different lesson plans, those on kinship and family structure; astrology; and religious practices. I have prepared lessons about Tibetan food, songs, the major cultural regions of Tibet, and farm work.

As a less commonly taught language, Tibetan lacks high-quality textbooks produced in a mature and competitive milieu. There are only two viable textbooks for college-level Tibetan and the most widely-used is called Manual of Standard Tibetan (2003). It is a collaboration between a linguist and a scholar from Tibet University in Lhasa, and was originally composed in French.
Each lesson begins with an idiomatic dialog and these are augmented by a series of online videos filmed in Lhasa in which each dialog is dramatized by native Tibetans. Those dialogs notwithstanding, MST does have serious deficiencies. A recent academic review of Tibetan textbooks had the following to say about our text: “…Tournadre’s and Sangda Dorje’s Manual might be more useful for advanced learners and for learners with a commitment to fine grammatical and linguistic analysis. Moreover, while its theoretical explanations are superb, Tournadre’s and Sangda Dorje’s Manual is sometimes too specialized to be fully understood by nonlinguists. Exercises are also lacking in Tournadre’s and Dorje’s….”¹ I concur and would add that it would benefit from more cultural content. These issues are problematical for both students and instructors.

Below I will give descriptions of three of the lessons plans I developed during the BLC fellowship. They are about kinship, astrology, and religious practices.

**Kinship Lesson:**

One of the first cultural lessons I will present to the class is about Tibetan family structures. There are a variety of Tibetan family structures and a survey of Tibetan household organization raises many geographic, economic, and cultural issues. Several Tibetan family structures differ greatly from the modern nuclear family, for instance. Knowledge of the differences imbues the basic kinship vocabulary with denotations that are not reducible to the meaning of their English “equivalents” and for this reason the lesson on kinship is also a substantial lesson in the linguistics of Tibetan language. The textbook introduces kinship vocabulary in Lesson Six, “Family Photo,” and this cultural lesson will accompany this lesson.

Below is the section on kinship terms from Lesson Six of the Manual of Standard Tibetan:

---

A beginner will recognize all of the standard kinship terms from their native English, Chinese, Hindi, and so on. This list contains parents, grandparents, siblings, aunt, uncle, and so on, just as the students expect. There are also noticeable differences (at least for English speakers). Tibetan differentiates junior and senior, and maternal and paternal at the level of the terms themselves. In other words, these factors are not signified by adjectives but are signaled by the term itself. Many of the kinship terms in this list have both informal and polite (or honorific) forms, in distinction to English and modern Mandarin Chinese. The broad principles of honorifics will have already been introduced by this point in the semester. Nevertheless, beyond these points regarding the intrinsic hierarchal nature of the kinship vocabulary is the very important and interesting anthropology of Tibetan families, which is the main topic of this lesson.
There are two main sectors to Tibetan society, the agriculturalists (farmers) and the pastoralists (often called nomads). The agriculturalists live in villages and live off of the grain that they grow. The pastoralists live in tents and live by animal husbandry. They lead their livestock on a migratory pattern that follows available grass and water through the seasons of the year.

![Figure 2 Tibetan farmer ploughing](image)

![Figure 3 Tibetan nomad herding livestock](image)

A lecture on the range of family types in Tibetan must begin with the fact that in Tibetan society the perpetuation of the household is the core concern. The term household pertains to both agriculturalist and pastoralist societies and essentially refers to the domicile and the chief source of livelihood (be it the farm or the herd of livestock). Varied environmental and social conditions have given rise to a number of different family structures all aimed at maintaining the household across generations. As a side note, the centrality of the household can be contrasted with, for instance, the central place of the patriline in other societies. In China, for instance, the central organizing principle of a family, and by extension household, is the continuity of the patriline. In Tibetan society, the biological patriline is not the chief concern of families.
As this is just an introduction to the lecture to be given to the students I will be brief. There are four major forms of Tibetan family structure: monogamy, polygyny, polyandry, polyandrygyny. Polygyny is a family in which a single man marries multiple women. Polyandrygyny, likewise, is rare and refers to a family in which multiple men – a father and son, or brothers – marry more than one woman. One reason that both of these family structures are rare in Tibet is that they do not necessary promote the continuity of the household owing to the fact that they will result in numerous children. Too many children can be a problem in Tibet because it is difficult to bring new land under cultivation. One wants to have enough for the family’s main plot or livestock support as many people as possible.

The two most common types of family organization are monogamy and polyandry. Students have no difficulty understanding the fact of monogamous relationships. In Tibet, they are found most commonly among the pastoralists. The reason for this is because nomads do not live off an indivisible field; the land available to them for grazing is virtually limitless. And it is easy to start a new household. All that is needed is a starter herd of cattle and sheep, and a pair of spouses. The nomad way of life has been refined over the centuries so that all the duties can be performed by a mother, father, and their children. Once the children come of age they start new households of their own (if they are male) or marry into new households (if they are female). Laborers and servants who have no land of their own also practice monogamy.

Polyandry is also very common in Tibet, and found mainly amongst the agriculturalists. It is documented across the plateau and continues today in Tibet. Polyandry typically involves two or more brothers marrying one woman. Students are usually unfamiliar with this type of family arrangement, and indeed it is not common worldwide. In a farming context, its logic and utility are readily comprehensible. As most Tibetan settlements have very little land that can be newly cultivated, it is a common practice for two or three brothers to marry the same woman, who moves in to the home in which the brothers all grew up and in which their family has lived for generations. This will limit the number of mouths to feed in each generation and keep the household unified; without dividing up the family land amongst the heirs or forcing some of the males to move away to establish an entirely new household and productive farm. The senior male has special authority in the relationship and is considered the father of all of the woman’s children, though all of the brothers have sexual access to their common wife. These sorts of details fascinate the students. Another strategy for limiting the number of children born is to send one son from each generation to the local monastery, where his vow of celibacy will prevent him from starting a family.

The preceding explains how the males in each generation are organized and deployed in the service of the household. If there are far more married men than married women, what
happens to the women who do not marry for lack of eligible households? In the agricultural communities of Tibet most parents keep one daughter at home to live unmarried and as a fulltime caregiver to her parents. These unmarried women play an important – if unsung – role in their families as long as their parents are alive but once their parents pass it is not guaranteed that a family member will be assigned to care for them in their old age.

To bring this back to the topic of language instruction, polyandrous families complicate the meaning of the Tibetan word for father. The vocabulary in the textbook only offers one word for father (in its informal and honorific forms). The intricacies of the notion of father will be impressed upon the students when I show them pictures of families that are polyandrous but which they wouldn’t know to be such.

The dialogue exercises will build upon the associated lesson in the *Manual of Standard Tibetan*. The opening dialogue in the textbook involves one person quizzing another about the people in a family photograph, but it is very brief. Ideally the body of the lesson would follow up on this with additional material offering authentic conversation regarding the discussion of family members, but with this text’s emphasis on grammatical explanations it does not. The dialogue exercises I created for this cultural lesson require the students to bring in several family photographs, preferably photographs with multiple family members. The students will first engage in simple exchanges along the lines of “Who is this?” Then the cultural component will come to the fore as they will be led through Q and A sequences that require them to properly use the terminology involving maternal/paternal, junior/senior distinctions. This segment includes questions such as, “Is this your maternal aunt or paternal aunt?” and “Is this your father’s younger brother or older brother?” While I’m not expecting any of the students to come from polyandrous families, there is one distinctively Tibetan kinship term that we can utilize in our dialogues: *phaci maci* “brother/sister (same parents).” This is relevant when the children in a given Tibetan household come from different marriages altogether but are now living together. It is relevant when speaking of half- and step-siblings.
The inquiry based learning component to this lesson involves dictionary work involving vocabulary related to agricultural and pastoral culture. The students will use a digital English-Tibetan dictionary to discover the Tibetan terms for a dozen or so terms such as nomad, tent, livestock, harvest, and so forth, and so forth. Once they have these words they will then consult a Tibetan-Tibetan dictionary and copy down the definitions, and highlight the vocabulary in the definitions that they recognize from this and previous lessons.
While predominantly focused on presenting grammar, the *Manual of Standard Tibetan* does include cultural modules called “civilization” at the end of about one quarter of the lessons. There are five such modules through lesson fourteen in the textbook (which is the natural breaking point for the fall semester), though few contain a vocabulary component and none contain any material that can be immediately used for conversation practice. Lesson Fourteen is entitled “The Banagzhöl Area” — Banagzhöl is a neighborhood in Lhasa — and has a civilization module on “Tibetan astrology and the lunar calendar.” I have greatly expanded this for an engaging cultural lesson involving new vocabulary and idioms and also fascinating ethnographic data about a central aspect of traditional Tibetan life.

Tibetan astrological science is a complex tradition with both a highly technical body of texts and also a more practical and oral aspect that is accessible to the untutored. Tibetan astrology is a hybrid tradition comprised of a Chinese foundation and a later overlay of Indian concepts and
calculations. Tibetan horoscopes are drawn up with the birth of each child and projections about the his or her personality type and overall life trajectory are considered to be largely valid, though mutable. In addition to the knowledge found in personal birth charts, Tibetan astrology also involves a complicated calendrical system in which there are certain days and months that are fortuitous and some that are unlucky. These are determined by astrologers and codified in almanacs, which are widely distributed amongst Tibetan villagers and even those who live in the urbanized areas of the Tibetan plateau. There is a rich body of ethnographic documentation on the role of astrology in the lives of ordinary Tibetans.

The aspect of Tibetan astrology covered in the textbook and that I build upon in this lesson is the cycle of twelve years each with the name of a different animal. This tradition was adopted from Chinese astrology and matches what one used to find on the paper place mats at Chinese restaurants in America. The animal year into which one is born is one’s natal sign and Tibetans generally know their natal sign and place great stock in its implications. Decisions about marriage, careers, and entry into the monastery are based in part on natal signs.

In this cultural lesson, I utilize the language surrounding the natal signs to introduce the students to the rich vocabulary and classifications surrounding personality types and other related issues.

The vocabulary and idioms portion of this lesson is comprised of brief descriptions of the personality traits of people born under each of the twelve years of the zodiac. Up until this point in the textbook the students will have learned very few adjectives for describing personalities, either of themselves or others. The text I have chosen for this lesson is a profile of the twelve natal signs composed recently and posted online. It conforms to the traditional characterizations of each sign but also includes some modern vocabulary such as “innovative” and “tour guide.” Each profile includes a description of the person, a list two or three signs with whom this sign would be compatible, and a list of suggested occupations. As an example, here is the profile for the people born during the Year of the Tiger:
The civilization module in the textbook does offer a single sentence for students to use in conversations about astrology and the lunar calendar: “What is your (animal) birth sign?” This will be the starting point for the dialogue exercises. I will build upon this with conversation drills based around evaluative questions such as, “What is his/her personality like?”; “What are the signs of your best friends?”; “Are your sign and theirs compatible?”; “Are you actually ____ , ____ , and ____ , as it says in your birth chart?”; and so forth. Students will be very intrigued by the conversational possibilities opened up by this vocabulary and the conversations will doubtlessly be self-starting and effortless.

The inquiry-based learning component will begin with some questions for them to pursue in the English and Chinese language literature about Tibetan astrology. Students that are more interested in the history of Tibetan astrology and comparative astrological systems will be directed to the relevant sources. Students more interested in the anthropology of Tibetan astrology will be directed the appropriate sources. This aspect of the inquiry-based learning component will result in a short write-up in Tibetan of what they discovered. I will help them with come up with the right verbs and constructions to express themselves in Tibetan.
Secondarily I will direct them to a description of each of the natal signs that also takes account of not just the animal but also the element. They will then use a dictionary to come up with a rough translation of this more granular astrological description of their natal sign.

**Religion Lesson:**

The third sample lesson is centered on religious customs in Tibet. Both of my groups of students are fascinated by Tibetan Buddhism and this lesson provides a great vehicle for teaching them about the religion’s central practices and images. This lesson will involve more viewing of videos than the preceding lessons because a majority of the content will be found in videos of religious customs taken at temples and monasteries in Tibet.

During the introductory session of this lesson I will lecture briefly about popular or widespread practices and images, rather than history and doctrine. Most of what I will present will be illustrated with excerpts from videos found on YouTube (so that they can be accessed by the students) and photos of religious artwork. The students will see and hear about common practices that occur at temples – such as prostration, circumambulation, performance of rituals, veneration of statues, and the placement of offerings – in a way that combines concise
explanations in English and Tibetan language descriptions that incorporate new vocabulary. Likewise, the same process will be used to learn about various Tibetan gods and their iconographies.

This lesson will build upon prior vocabulary assignments and grammar, but introduce many new nouns and verbs. Many of the new words are compounds that include at least one (semantically significant) syllable that the students will already know. For instance, Tibetan iconography includes a variety of ecclesiastical hats and the names of each hat include the syllable for hat alongside a syllable that describes the hat in question. For instance, the “lotus hat” is shaped like its namesake flower and the Tibetan term for it is pé-sha (lotus+hat). The students will enjoy the easy acquisition of new vocabulary that they can immediately use in trying to identify intriguing details of the Tibetan pantheon. The verbs to be introduced in this lesson will include some that will be etymologically entirely new to the students, and others that are known but now used in a new context. The new verbs will also be rapidly absorbed by the students because they will be learned in terms of the sequence of actions that most Buddhist follow when visiting a temple; and when new terms are introduced as part of a sequence or process they are more easily learned. The visual component will also help.

Grammatically, this lesson will strengthen student understanding of two issues. The first pertains to the modal verbs gö and chok; to need/must and to be permissible, respectively. Prior to this lesson students will know the modal verb gö, which in a conventional context is used for simple statement and requests along the lines of “I would like tea” or “I don’t need that.” In a religious setting this verb has little to do with personal preference is its significance is
one of obligation: “you must take off your shoes before entering the temple.” The modal verb *chok* will be new to the students but will make perfect sense given this lesson. *Chok* is used in conjunction with main verbs to express the idea that the main verb is either permissible or “forbidden.” Sample sentences will express ideas such as, “Women are not allowed to enter this chapel” and “Monks are/are not allowed to do XYZ.” Students will learn these structures quickly because they will be very curious about taboos for monks and societal rules based on gender.

The second grammatical point of this lesson concerns social vector verbs, of which there are many in Tibetan. There are three social vectors: lower to higher, higher to lower, and horizontal. Social vector verbs articulate the unequal ranks between people, such as between parent and child or boss and laborer. Tibetan social hierarchies are never more pronounced than in a religious setting so this lesson will make this feature of Tibetan language and society very obvious for the students. Thus, when a lama gives a rosary to a layperson the verb is very different than that used when a layperson gives the lama a cup of tea, and so on. We will learn the religious usages of verbs for actions such as offer, donate, bestow, request, make a vow (to a religious superior), and so forth. The linguistically-oriented students will enjoy the explanations of these subtle and very characteristic aspects of the Tibetan language. Again, all of these verbs will be illustrated with compelling video footage of all of these customary actions.
Many different classroom activities are possible with this lesson. One of them is to have students give their own narration of a sequence of religious activities found in a YouTube video. They could find a short video – likely something uploaded by a tourist – and describe the actions captured in the video. This would involve almost all of the vocabulary and grammar from this lesson. The Berkeley Art Museum has a permanent, rotating exhibition of Tibetan Buddhist artwork which could become the destination for a fieldtrip. Students could be assigned to go ahead of time to the exhibition and find one Tibetan icon to research, and then during the fieldtrip each one would give a brief explanation in Tibetan of the god’s iconography (outfit, ritual implements, the religious activities portrayed in the narrative scenes around the central deity, etc.).