

# Le vocalisme du tangoute du point de vue des langues rGyalrongiques modernes

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Tangut (Mi-nyag in Tibetan) is a dead Tibeto-Burman language whose texts range for the eleventh to the fourteenth century. It was spoken in northern China, in what is now Ningxia and northern Gansu. Its writing system is of daunting complexity, and we may even assert with confidence that it is the most complex in the whole history of writing : there are nearly 6000 characters, and only 10 percent include a phonetic clue to their pronunciation, unlike Chinese where this figure reaches 90 percent. Since Tangut was not written in an alphabetic writing system, its pronunciation is known indirectly, thank to the riming dictionaries created by Tangut scholars on the model of the Chinese Guangyun. They represented the pronunciation each character by two other characters : the first indicating the class of the initial, and the second that of the rime. This system had the advantage of being more precise than an alphabetic system : several rimes stand in complementary distribution, which proves that Tangut scholars encoded subphonemic distinctions in their dictionaries. However, just like in reconstructing Middle Chinese, knowing the phonological system, however precise it might be, is not sufficient : we need to flesh out these categories with actual phonetic values. Two bodies of data are used in this respect : the Chinese transcription of Tangut, especially in the Fanhan heshi zhangzhongzhu, a bilingual language manual, and the Tibetan transcriptions. However, these data are often contradictory one to another, and besides some rimes are left with too few transcriptions to propose any reliable reconstruction. Yet, another body of data can help us in reconstructing Tangut.

Tangut seems more closely related to the Qiangic languages, that supposedly include rGyalrong, Qiang, Prinmi and others. Therefore, a systematic comparison between these languages may help to understand Tangut phonology better. Investigations of this kinds are very few : the only one with serious implications for Tangut phonology is a study by Gong Huangcheng who demonstrated that so called tense vowels correspond mostly to etyma that have preinitial s- in other languages.

Unlike Gong's paper, who used all the data available on Qiangic languages to conduct his research, I shall concentrate on rGyalrongic languages, using my original fieldwork data together with some published data as a basis for comparison. Some have proposed that the closest relative of Tangut be modern Minyag (Muya in Chinese), although this language, though it seems to belong to the Qiangic branch, seems to bear no exceptionally close relationship to Tangut except for its name. Besides, I have no access to fully reliable data on this language so I could not include it in my study. rGyalrongic languages are spoken in Eastern Tibet, in rGyal-mo tsha-ba rong-pa where Vairocana was exiled in the eighth century, that is now a part of Sichuan, rNga-ba bod-rigs cha'ang-rigs

rang-skyong-khul (Aba Zhou in Chinese). rGyalrongic languages are divided into three branches: Eastern (spoken in the biggest city 'Bar-khams), Stod-pa and Ja-phug. My fieldwork was conducted on two Ja-phug dialects (gDong-brgyad and gSar-rdzong), and I have access to published data on the Eastern lCog-rtse dialect. Using the rimes of the gDong-brgyad dialect that I know best as a starting point, I systematically compare the correspondences with Eastern rGyalrongic and with Tangut. Given the fact that Tangut is not a daughter language to rGyalrong, only a sister language, finding cognates often proves difficult and some of the comparison proposed in my paper may eventually be demonstrated to be incorrect. Since the focus of this paper is on the rime system, no attempt will be made for the time being to establish correspondences between the initials of rGyalrong and Tangut.

This research will not directly help us to ameliorate the existing reconstructions of Tangut. This window in the prehistory of the language can then be used as a tool to reconstruct the system of historical Tangut, because this stage of language evolution must be derived from that of proto-Tangut by a set of systematic phonological rules that must obey typological constraints. The correspondences prove that Tangut underwent important vocalic changes in regard to the more conservative rGyalrongic languages, and comparison between Tangut and rGyalrong gives us a clue not on the pronunciation of twelfth century Tangut, but on the rime system of proto-Tangut. One of such rule of correspondence is rGyalrong a :: Tangut jij; this vowel corresponds to a in Tibetan also, so Tangut i must be an innovation and we can hypothesize a change \*a -> -jij. Finally, comparison can help us understanding the origin of the Tangut verbal ablaut and the Tangut verbal morphology in general.