

Manual of Standard Tibetan

Language and Civilization

**Introduction to Standard Tibet (Spoken and Written)
Followed by an Appendix on Classical Literary Tibetan**

by

Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje

Translated by Charles Ramble

Foreword by Matthew Kapstein

**Snow Lion Publications
Ithaca, New York
Boulder, Colorado**

LEARNING TIBETAN

When I began to study the Tibetan language, during a visit to Nepal in 1970, suitable texts for beginners were few and far between. At first I located a tattered copy of the Rev. Bruce Hannah's ancient Tibetan grammar in a used book stand, and found to my dismay that the good pastor's illustrations of the language were entirely drawn from missionary translations of Bible stories. Not exactly the thing for a late-sixties dharma-bum! A local shopkeeper, no doubt very much amused by my efforts to communicate on this basis, took pity and provided me with a small textbook published in the Panjab, that taught me how to order tea using a level of speech suitable only for small children, household domestics, and Khampa hillbillies. This proved to be quite adequate for the *chang*-stalls of Bodh Nath, but little more. Finally, I had the good fortune to borrow a copy of George Roerich's *Textbook of Colloquial Tibetan* and, given the general absence of technology in Kathmandu at the time, eagerly set about transcribing the entire book by hand. Though by no means ideal, the exercise proved to be a useful apprenticeship. It was only after I returned to the United States the following year that I was able to avail myself of the texts by Chang and Shefts, and by Goldstein and Nornang, works that marked the first efforts to adapt modern methods of language pedagogy to the requirements of Tibetan language instruction.

In the three decades that have passed since, a substantial number of contributions both to Tibetan linguistics and to Tibetan language teaching have thoroughly transformed the lay of the land, and the would-be learner of Tibetan, far from having to struggle to gain access to the merest crumb, is now more likely to suffer from an embarrassment of riches. For those who are finding it difficult to make up their minds about which course to follow, I do not hesitate to recommend Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje's excellent *Manual of Standard Tibetan*. Their collaboration represents the confluence of linguistic analysis of the first order with the stylistic sensibilities of a leading contemporary master of Tibetan composition. Both share a keen appreciation of an approach in which the learning of language and of culture must inform one another, with the result that this is one of those rare language textbooks that is a pleasure to read.

A Manual of Standard Tibetan emphasizes modern colloquial Tibetan as spoken in and around Lhasa, but adhering to a register that is widely used and understood. The student who masters it should have little difficulty communicating in most communities where Tibetan is spoken. The rudiments of the literary language are also thoroughly introduced, making it possible to make rapid progress in either Classical Tibetan or Modern Literary Tibetan during the second year of study. The cultural background incorporated in the entertaining dialogues and texts given throughout the book will prove invaluable to all who wish to enter the rich and endlessly fascinating sphere of Tibetan civilization, whether they do so as scholars, casual visitors, or in connection with work in development or in commerce.

It is often said that learning a language begins one's exploration of an entire new world. Rare, however, is the language course that succeeds in conveying the sense of excitement and discovery thus promised. In *A Manual of Standard Tibetan* you will find yourself transported to monastery courtyards and to nomad camps; and, though Tibetan remains always a challenging language requiring discipline and effort to learn, the rough journey in this case turns out to be a genuine delight.

Matthew T. Kapstein
The University of Chicago
June 2002