

# *China perspectives*

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## The Dynamics of Tibetan- Chinese Bilingualism

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The Current Situation and Future Prospects

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Translated from the French original by Peter Brown

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### TEXTE INTÉGRAL

- 1 The ecolinguistic situation in Tibet is complex and unstable, in a constant state of flux. Not only do two great literary languages, Tibetan <sup>1</sup> and Chinese, find themselves side by side, but there are also numerous Tibetan dialects, as well as around twenty other Tibetan-Burmese and Mongolian languages, spoken on the high plateau. This study will consider only the current situation of Tibetan and Chinese, leaving aside the other languages that play only a minor role today. We will examine the sociolinguistic factors at work as well as linguistic policy, in order to try to gain an understanding of the development of Tibetan and Chinese in the region <sup>2</sup>.
- 2 Before the Chinese Communists took over in 1950, Tibetan was the only official language in the territories under the Lhasa government’s administration. Chinese was completely unknown to the Tibetan population except to a very few Tibetan intellectuals and traders. The linguistic situation was more complex outside the areas controlled by the Lhasa government in so far as Chinese-speaking peoples had already been settled there for a long time, living side by side with the Tibetans, especially in the border regions.

- 3 One of the first tasks of the new Chinese government in the Tibetan areas was to carry out the enormous task of translation into Tibetan of many modern texts, particularly those of a political and technological nature. Through this monumental work stretching over several decades, a great many neologisms were coined to translate the new scientific, technical and political concepts that had been completely unknown in Tibetan up until then. It also led to the publication of bilingual dictionaries. The neologisms were in the main based on calques or expressions drawn from classical Tibetan. The number of literary borrowings from Chinese has remained very low. Tibetan has benefited considerably from the input of Chinese in these areas, exceeding many of the South-East Asian languages in its lexical inventions.
- 4 In spite of these positive factors, we have been witnessing, especially since the early 1990s, a very marked decline of Tibetan in almost every walk of life. The real threat hovering over Tibetan has not gone unnoticed by the Chinese authorities. The government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) recently issued regulations which aim to protect the language entitled Decree on the Study, Use and Development of the Tibetan Language 3. The simple fact that the government is acting to protect Tibetan through the introduction of legislation underscores the gravity of the situation. We will briefly analyse a few articles of these regulations and, in the sections that follow, paint a picture of the ecolinguistic reality of Tibet through some representative examples.

## The first regulations of their kind

- 5 A set of regulations on protecting the Tibetan language was adopted by the National People's Congress (NPC) at the seventh sitting of the fifth session on May 22nd 2002. They were published in a Tibetan translation on the front page of the Tibet Daily (*bod ljongs nyin re'i tshags par*) on June 6th 2002, as well as on the sixth page of the Chinese language version of the same newspaper (*Xizang ribao*) 4. It was also partially reprinted in English on May 24th 2002 by Xinhua. Comprised of 19 articles, these are the first regulations of their kind, aiming to protect the language of a "minority nationality" in the People's Republic of China. It corresponds to the amendment of an earlier draft bill (*tshod lta'i lag bstar gyi khrims*) voted by the NPC at the fourth sitting of the fifth session on September 9th 1987.
- 6 Article one states that "Tibetan is the common language of the Autonomous Region of Tibet" 5.
- 7 "Tibetan and Chinese have equal administrative status in the Autonomous Region of Tibet" (Article 3).
- 8 "The Chinese and those belonging to the other minorities living in the Autonomous Region of Tibet must learn Tibetan" (Article 8).
- 9 "Those bilingual in Chinese and Tibetan will receive priority in recruitment to administrative positions" (Article 10).
- 10 Some articles are striking in their ambiguity and lack of detail and realism. For example, what is the significance of the first article? Is it merely a pious wish or bureaucratic formula, when we know that in Lhasa as in most cities of the Autonomous Region, it is very difficult to catch a taxi, go to the market or to any public office if one speaks only Tibetan.
- 11 Also, what is the meaning of Article 4, which stipulates that for important meetings, both languages, or even just one of them (!) can be used. Yet, as long as it is possible to use only one language, there is scarcely any doubt that Chinese will be the one chosen. Another feature of this regulation is the absence of any coercive measure or meaningful incentive.

- 12 The previous bill voted in 1989 was more coercive. In particular, it required Tibetan children to learn Tibetan. According to the new regulations, the choice is left up to the family, and young Tibetan children may choose to enrol in Chinese classes 6(6) and sit their examinations only in Chinese. If they enrol in Tibetan classes 7(7), the Tibetan language becomes compulsory, but in Lhasa, the curriculum is completely in Chinese (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). In the county capitals, up to senior secondary level (ninth class out of the twelve years of the curriculum), the textbooks for scientific subjects have been fully translated, but only a number of teachers use them 8.
- 13 The entrance exam to university in no way encourages students to choose Tibetan, as they must also take a Chinese exam and are given a single overall mark equivalent to the mark they get for Chinese.
- 14 The 2002 regulations are admittedly a positive step forward, but one can have doubts about its implementation, as they are accompanied by no coercive measures or strong incentives to implement them. Moreover, they operate on a purely theoretical level, with no pragmatic dimension. No mention is made of the problem of dialects, nor of the standardising of the spoken language. The regulations, similarly, remain silent on diglossia (literary and spoken Tibetan), which does constitute an enormous barrier to the learning and spread of Tibetan language.
- 15 Since being passed, these regulations have gone largely unnoticed, even within the Tibetan population, and it has had no noticeable impact. Official meetings and documents are still in Chinese... which remains the language of the education system and of public administration. 9

## The “devaluation” of Tibetan

- 16 In China, the period of the Cultural Revolution turned out to be one of terrible regression in all fields of cultural endeavour, but in certain regions of Tibet this regression also affected the written language of Tibetan which was quite simply outlawed for several years. After this dark period, Tibetan was able to take off again in the 1980s. A number of literary journals sprang up and many popularising works appeared. Pilot schools in which scientific subjects (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) were taught in Tibetan were set up in various regions in Lhasa, Zhikatse (Chinese Rigaze) and in Lhokha (Chinese Shannan). In 1991, official Chinese statistics clearly showed that Tibetan high school students were obtaining better results in scientific subjects when they were taught in their mother tongue. These results were even announced on television in both Tibetan and Chinese.
- 17 However, since the mid-1990s, there has been a steady decline in the use of Tibetan and, conversely, a bolstering of Chinese which is becoming dominant. This new trend can in part be explained by a series of measures which were taken particularly in the field of education. These include an increase in the amount of time for Chinese in the curriculum, and its introduction at an earlier and earlier age (at the present time, it is taught right from the first class of primary school in the main cities). Young Tibetans are confronted with numerous cultural challenges: From the earliest age, for instance, they have to learn three writing systems. Tibetan (which offers few professional openings in present-day society), Chinese (which is the most difficult system in the world), and the Latin alphabet (which is used to learn Chinese phonetic transcription as well as English). That is not the end of the challenge since young Tibetans have recently had, in addition, to learn to count in Chinese, a language that they know only imperfectly and which they do not in general speak at home.
- 18 At university, all the scientific subjects and most of the social sciences are taught in Chinese. On the whole, in offices and institutions, only the texts written in Chinese are officially recognised,

although theoretically Tibetan also has an official status. More serious still is the fact that all office meetings take place in Chinese and not in Tibetan; even when those taking part are all Tibetan themselves.

- 19 The lack of interest in Tibetan can be observed through several external signs. Thus, although there is a law requiring bilingual street signs and notice-boards, this regulation is not always respected in certain regions. In Lhasa, the regulation is applied, but the billboards in Tibetan are very often written in characters that are much smaller than their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, the signage is often spelled with mistakes in Tibetan, whereas this is rarely the case in the Chinese. One incident was reported concerning a large street sign in Lhasa that in Chinese said *chuanzang gonglu*—"Sichuan-Tibet Road"—and in Tibetan (on account of poor calligraphy) *khron-bong gzhung lam*—"the Sichuan donkey road".
- 20 We could multiply such examples which suggest a decline in the importance of Tibetan. The lack of interest that Tibetans show in their own language is apparent both in their attitude and speech, as we shall see in the following section. They justify this lack of interest by saying that Tibetan does not allow them "to fill their stomachs". It is indisputable that Tibetan is of practically no professional value.
- 21 There is, however, one area that brings some qualification to what has just been said: the media and, in particular, television. Over the past five years, Tibetan television has put considerable effort into developing programmes and films, and represents one of the rare fields in which Tibetan is promoted. Nevertheless, Tibetan-language television lags far behind the many Chinese channels that offer programmes that are much more varied and attractive.

## The sociolinguistic context and Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech

- 22 In the cities, over the past decade, the mixture of Tibetan and Chinese has become considerably more pronounced. In Tibet, this phenomenon is referred to by the term "speaking half-goat half-sheep" (*ra-ma-lug skad*). This Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech is so widespread that many young people in the urban areas are incapable of forming a sentence in Tibetan without using Chinese words, despite the fact that most of the time the Tibetan equivalents exist. Borrowings from Chinese concern more particularly certain linguistic categories (essentially substantives and more infrequently verbs and adjectives, etc.) and lexical fields. We will give a representative (but non-exhaustive) list of these fields.

### • The days of the week

- 23 In speech, Tibetans almost always use the Chinese terms *xingqi yi*, "Monday", *xingqi er*, "Tuesday", etc., instead of the traditional terms *gza' zla-ba*, "Monday", *gza' mig dmar*, "Tuesday", etc. For the time being, most people nonetheless understand the Tibetan terms.

### • Numbers

- 24 Numbers, and particularly telephone numbers, are almost always given in Chinese. When someone gives their phone number in Tibetan, apart from the surprise element, it seems that Tibetans often experience difficulties as they translate the Tibetan numbers back into Chinese. Dates are also often given in Chinese, especially when they correspond to the international calendar. On the other hand, when dealing with the Tibetan lunar calendar, the dates are given in

Tibetan.

## • Place names

- 25 The majority of names of streets, cities, villages and regions are provided in Chinese, even when these names are clearly present in the Tibetan tradition. For example, people will say *Shannan* instead of *Lhokha* (a region in southern Tibet), *Qinghai* instead of *mtsho-sngon* "Kokonor", *Kangding* instead of *dar-btsen-mdo* (Dhartsendo, a city in Kham province), *sela lu* instead of *sera lam*, "Sera Road" (an important thoroughfare in Lhasa leading to the monastery by the same name), etc.

## • The names of official institutions

- 26 Institutions and offices are generally referred to by their Chinese name. That is the case even for the most important institutions related to Tibetan culture. For instance, if you speak to a Tibetan taxi driver in Lhasa by referring to addresses like: *bod-ljongs slob grwa chen-mo*, "University of Tibet" or *spyi-tshogs tshan-rig khang*, "Academy of Social Sciences", there is a good chance that he will not understand unless you opt for the Chinese terms, respectively *Xizang daxue* and *Shehui kexueyuan*. Even the Post Office is generally designated by its Chinese name *yudianju* and not by its Tibetan names *sbrag-khang* or *yig-zam*.

## • The majority of technical terms

- 27 Although many terms have been formed as indicated above, they are hardly used except by a minority of educated Tibetans. For example, television is more often called *dianshi* than *brnyan 'phrin*, a refrigerator *bingxiang* rather than *'khyag-sgam* or a computer *diannao* rather than *glog-klad 'phrul-'khor*, which is however a calque on the excellent Chinese made-up expression "electric brain" to which Tibetans have added the word "machine" (*'phrul-'khor*). In some areas like that of motor parts, the technical terms are sometimes non-existent and in any case it is their Chinese equivalents that are always used.
- 28 The list is not, of course, exhaustive and has tended to get bigger over the past few years. Indeed, among some speakers we can observe massive borrowings of Chinese terms, while their grammar remains Tibetan. It is important to stress here that the problem is not only the high number of borrowings from Chinese but the constant switching, which is more or less conscious, between Tibetan and Chinese within the one conversation, or even the one sentence. This is perfectly comparable to the situation of certain North African immigrants in France, who are forever mixing French and (dialectal) Arabic in their conversation.
- 29 It is worth noting that many speakers in Tibet know both languages well enough to be able to express themselves in one or the other without mixing them up. It therefore seems that the practice of "speaking mixed Tibetan-Chinese" (*ra-ma-lug skad*) as well as code-switching are essentially related to sociolinguistic factors. Indeed, as has been observed for other languages (Anglo-American and Spanish, Russian and languages of the ex-Soviet Union, etc.), moving from one language to the other or the mixing of both languages corresponds to particular situations and environments. The choice of switching or speaking "pure" Chinese or "pure" Tibetan is most often significant and corresponds to definite social behaviour patterns. Let's take as an example illustrating both mixed speech and code switching. The following dialogue was related to me by a Tibetan teacher who went to see the (Tibetan) accountant of his work unit (*danwei*) about getting a bonus. The Chinese expression is given in bold and the Tibetan in italics.

A: **shenfen-zheng** *ga-par yod*

“Where is your identity card?”

B: *'dir yod*

“Here it is”

A: **haoma** *mar bris*

“Write down the number [of the card here]”

B: *ang gi chung drags nas mthong gi mi 'dug*

“The number is [written] too small, I can't read it”.

A: **wo bu shi qu qian de! ni ziji xie!**

“I'm not the one who has come for money! Write it yourself!”

- 30 As can be observed in this short dialogue, the accountant is using two Chinese borrowings **shenfen-zheng** (identity card) and **haoma** (number). The client responds in Tibetan without any borrowing and in particular uses the word *ang-gi* “number”. His interlocutor then goes into Chinese. It seems here that the language-switching is motivated by the irritation of the accountant who does not think it to be part of his job to fill in the document.
- 31 One may without fear of contradiction suggest that the search for a certain complicity or consensus is, in some situations, going to trigger the move to Tibetan, whereas Chinese will, conversely, be associated with “power” and “the norm”. Things are however not quite as straightforward. Generally speaking, code switching and the massive borrowings reflect a linguistic or sociolinguistic insecurity. In fact, many Tibetans are not completely comfortable in either of the two languages.
- 32 The sociological context described above occurs in the cities, but in the countryside we find a very different situation. The majority of peasants and nomadic stock breeders who still make up 80% of the population, generally have a poor knowledge of Chinese and are often illiterate in Tibetan. When they go into town, these peasants and nomads are faced with an “ecolinguistic system” that is foreign to them. In order to function in urban society, one must really be fluent in Tibetan and Chinese as well as Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech. The Tibetan peasants who do not know or know only badly the latter two codes are accordingly marginalised. For example, when dealing with any public institution (hospital, administration, bank, etc.), their poor understanding of Chinese and of *ra-ma-lug skad* is a serious handicap.

## Language levels: another sociolinguistic partition

- 33 In order to complete the sociolinguistic table and present Tibet's ecolinguistic system in all its complexity, we must not forget the question of language levels. Tibetan has in fact one of the world's most complex honorific systems. The existence of language levels is an areal? feature that one finds especially in languages such as Japanese or Korean. The honorific register that is called in Tibetan *zhe-sa* appears in the form of personal pronouns, nouns, verbs, verbal auxiliaries, and even certain adjectives and adverbs. Four types of honorifics are to be distinguished: the ordinary, the higher, the humilific and the double honorific. Honorifics are used in central Tibetan (Ü) as well as in the dialects of the west (Tsang), but they are not very present in the eastern dialects (Amdo and Kham).

- 34 During the Cultural Revolution, the use of honorifics was very much looked down upon, and even considered dangerous, as it marked one's belonging to certain social classes. For more than ten years, the honorific was therefore banned, but it made a comeback in the early 1980s. The ten-year interruption in the use of *zhe-sa*, as well as changes to society and the influence of Chinese have, however, had an impact on the concrete situation of honorifics, with a new type called *zhe-sa rkang-chag* (clumsy honorific) being introduced. For example, the honorific corresponding to the ordinary register expression *chu 'thung* "drink some water" (informal) is *chab mchod* "drink some water" (formal), but at the present time an important part of the population in fact says *chab-chu mchod-gnang*, an "irregular" form from a traditional perspective, as on the one hand, it mixes honorific and crude language and, on the other, through hypercorrection, it adds a superfluous honorific. The correct use of honorifics is considered to be quite prestigious and, conversely, imperfect mastery of them puts the speaker at the bottom of the social scale.

## The causes of decline and marginalisation

- 35 As we have seen above, the sociolinguistic situation in Tibet is a very complex one. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the main factors that have contributed to the creation of the current ecolinguistic system. Undeniably, linguistic and educational policies are playing a considerable role in the way in which Tibetans conceive of their own language. By excluding Tibetan from the administrative spheres and giving Chinese a predominant position at school and university, by offering only a handful of professional openings based on a command of Tibetan, the authorities have contributed to giving Tibetan the image of a "useless" language. The Tibetans, who are very pragmatic and have a great ability to adapt, have quickly turned away from their own language.
- 36 Another important factor is the presence on the High Plateau of numerous dialects that can be classified into three main groups 10: Ü-Tsang, Kham-Hor and Amdo that do not allow proper mutual comprehension. The speakers of Amdo often choose to speak Chinese in order to communicate with people from Central Tibet, although they use the same literary language. For a few decades now, there has been discussion about the need to define a standard Tibetan. In the diaspora, and to a lesser extent in China itself, standard Tibetan (Tibetan: *spyi skad*; Chinese: *gonggongyuan*) based on the language of Lhasa has been developing spontaneously.
- 37 In 1999, a very important book entitled *Bod kyi spyi skad skor gyi ched rtsom phyogs bsgrigs* (A Collection of Articles on Standard Tibetan) 11 was published in Peking with contributions from the leading Chinese experts in Tibetan language and culture, and coming from all the traditional regions of Tibet (Tibet Autonomous Region, and provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan). All the writers (46 in total), with one or two exceptions, called for giving official status to standard Tibetan based on the language of Lhasa. The regional and central authorities have for the time being remained deaf to this call that would however have important consequences for the economic and cultural development of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Autonomous Prefectures.
- 38 Finally, one may also cite among the important factors the extraordinary prestige in Tibet of Chinese, which is rightly seen as a great literary and scientific language. This prestige is also due to the fact that all technological innovations come into Tibet through the Hans.

## The consequences of the present linguistic

# policy

- 39 In April 2001, Jack Lang, the then French Minister of Education, made a speech on regional languages in France which began thus: “For two centuries, the political authorities [in France] have fought against regional languages...”. Through this speech, the French government launched a campaign to rehabilitate and develop regional languages, considering them henceforth as forming part of French cultural heritage. None of the regional languages spoken in France **12** are, however, comparable from a cultural viewpoint to Tibetan, one of the oldest and greatest literary languages of Asia, alongside Chinese, Sanskrit, Japanese and Mongolian. We must remember that, of the five thousand languages spoken in the world, only about thirty have an original writing system. Among the latter, few have been in existence for over a thousand years, as Tibetan has.
- 40 It seems that the education experts in China have not weighed up the heavy sociolinguistic consequences of a linguistic policy that targets only the development of Chinese and neglects Tibetan. In less than fifty years, Tibetan, which is currently part of the cultural heritage of China, has become an endangered language, condemned to an irreversible decline, if not to outright extinction within two generations, if the present linguistic policy is maintained. The responsibility of the regional and central governments in this is obvious. Spoken Tibetan, associated as it is with a major literary language and which benefits from the growing interest of the West, will not of course disappear body and soul, but considerable damage may well be inflicted on it. Moreover, the development of *ra-ma-lug skad* (Tibetan-Chinese mixed speech) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Autonomous Prefectures is detrimental to the learning of Tibetan and Chinese alike.
- 41 In the long term, the sociolinguistic resentments and behaviour patterns of peoples are unpredictable, as is shown by the totally irrational decision of the Republic of Yakutia (Russian Federation) which in 2001 opted for English as its official language to replace Russian. That would not have happened if the Russian authorities had developed a Russian-Yakut (a Turkish language) bilingualism instead of counting on Russian monolingualism (the Russians arrived in Yakouty four hundred years ago).
- 42 IN ORDER to enable proper integration as well as sustainable economic and cultural development in Tibet, it is vital to put in place a truly bilingual Tibetan-Chinese education system which would foster real harmony between the two cultures. In Europe, the cohabitation of different languages within the one state (French, German, Italian in Switzerland or Spanish and Catalan in Spain) could perfectly well serve as a model.
- 43 Over the past few years, Chinese has become crucial to Tibet **13** from both an economic and cultural point of view. However, the fact that the Tibetan language is being neglected may well have disastrous consequences for Tibetan society in the medium to long term. Conversely, developing standard Tibetan and making it official could considerably improve the situation in the field of education, particularly for people on the land and for nomads.
- 44 It is therefore urgent that the Party’s cadres and the education experts in China rethink their linguistic policy in the Tibetan-speaking regions. It is likely that the present regulations on the Tibetan language will have no significant impact and that only a far-reaching reform introducing a real Tibetan-Chinese bilingualism will be capable of changing the ecolinguistic situation. If this does not eventuate, the Chinese government’s responsibility in the predicted disappearance of Tibetan will not be easily brushed aside.

## NOTES



1 Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje, *Manuel de tibétain standard*, Asiathèque, 1998, Paris, republished in 2003 (*Manual of Standard Tibetan*, Snow Lion, New York, forthcoming).

2 This text was presented at the Franco-Tibetan Conference on Tibetan Studies held in Peking from October 14th to 16th 2001. Only the part concerning the regulation on Tibetan, which was passed in May 2002, has been subsequently added.

3 In Tibetan the regulations are entitled *bod skad yig slob sbyong dang bed spyod gong 'phel bcas gtong rgyu'i bod rang skyong ljongs kyi gtan 'bebs. bod ljongs nyin re'i tshags par* [Regulations on the Study, Use and Development of Tibetan], *The Tibet Daily*, June 6th 2002. [also published in the Chinese-language version of the same newspaper, *Xizang ribao*, of June 5th 2002, "Xizang ziji qu xuexi, shiyong he fazhan zang yuwen de guiding".].

4 The difference in priority of information between the Tibetan version (front page) and the Chinese one (page 6), as well as the immediate circulation over the internet incline us to think that we are dealing with a public relations ploy.

5 Chinese: *zang yu wen shi ziji qu tongyong de yuyan wen zi*. Tibetan: *bod skad yig ni rang skyong ljongs kyi spyi spyod skad yig yin*. Of course, the regulations apply only to the Tibetan Autonomous Region and not to the Autonomous Prefectures of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan, provinces which cover a territory that is almost the size of the Autonomous Region and whose Tibetan-speaking population is larger than the latter's (2 096 718 for the TAR and 2 478 259 for the Prefectures. Cf. Catriona, *Education in Tibet, Policy and Practice since 1959*, Zed Books in association with TIN, p. 265). However, the linguistic situation in the ten Autonomous Prefectures is quite comparable to that of the Autonomous Region, Chinese being equally dominant in public life there. Of course, there are differences and particularities in the ecolinguistic situation of the Prefectures, but we will not go into these in this article

6 Chinese: *hanzu ban*; Tibetan: *rgya rigs 'dzin grwa*

7 Chinese: *zangzu ban*; Tibetan: *bod rigs 'dzin grwa*.

8 From the beginning of secondary education (the sixth year of twelve in the Chinese curriculum), instruction is given in Chinese in the majority of schools. This is the case in the districts of the Region, as it is in those of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces.

9 Even if Tibetan is occasionally present, its status is *de facto* purely optional.

10 In fact, there are two other major groups: the Ladakhi-Balti and the Dzongkha-Sikkimese, but they are spoken outside of China

11 *Bod kyi spyi skad skor gyi ched rtsom phyogs bsgrigs* (Collection of Articles on Standard Spoken Tibetan), *Bod yig brda tshad ldan du sgyur ba'i las don u yon lhan khang is bsgrigs* (Committee for the Standardisation of the Tibetan Language), *mirigs dpe-skrun-khang*, Peking, 1999.

12 None, apart from Occitan, has an historic literary language

13 Both in the Autonomous Region and the Autonomous Prefectures of the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan.

## **POUR CITER CET ARTICLE**

### **Référence électronique**

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