
Single Words in Cultural Transfer Processes

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Himalayan Encounters

Philological Practices in Reading Orazio della Penna's (1680–1745)
Tibetan-Italian-Tibetan Dictionary

Abstract: This chapter examines some of the methodological practices employed in the compilation of the Tibetan-Italian-Tibetan dictionary by Francesco Orazio della Penna (1680–1745), an Italian Capuchin friar sent on an apostolic mission to Tibet. It shows how an in-depth examination of the dictionary entries reveals important details about Della Penna's encounter with the Tibetan language. Considered within their historical context, these entries illustrate the author's methods of approaching, deciphering, and translating cultural concepts that were often entirely unfamiliar to him. At the same time, they demonstrate his malleability in repurposing Tibetan Buddhist expressions to render Christian concepts, as well as his efforts to render Buddhist ideas comprehensible to a Western, Catholic audience. In so doing, this chapter shows that a philologically oriented reading of the dictionary allows us to reconstruct how it was created and to document aspects of this early encounter between Tibet and the West.

Keywords: transcultural exchange, translation, conversion (cultural concept), dictionary-writing, interreligious encounters

1 Introduction

After the European exploration and settlement of the Western Hemisphere, the production of bilingual dictionaries of “exotic” extra-European languages became increasingly common. In fact, the need to communicate with newly encountered populations inhabiting the areas explored by Europeans stimulated efforts to create

Note: I would like to thank Mr Elio Marini for providing access to the manuscripts discussed here, and to the nuns of the Augustinian monastery of Sant'Antonio da Padova in Pennabilli (Rimini, Italy), for providing the photo of the portrait of Orazio della Penna shown in Figure 1. I would also like to thank Michael Sweet and Leonard Zwilling for their useful editorial suggestions, as well as the editors of this volume and the organisers of the interdisciplinary conference “Beyond Comparison: Towards a Connected Philology,” for their unparalleled professionalism.

Note: In this chapter Tibetan terms are rendered in English phonetic transcription, followed in parenthesis by transliteration according to the Wylie system. The transliteration is always in italics, unless it renders a proper name; in transliteration proper names capitalise the first letter instead of the root letter.

lexicons and compile grammars of their languages.¹ The resulting vocabularies and grammatical treatises were often written by Catholic missionaries, who had an interest in acquiring the vernacular of a given region rapidly and accurately in order to spread the Gospel among indigenous populations. Missionaries were also uniquely qualified to compile these texts, as they possessed the grammatical knowledge to attempt a structural analysis of these languages, and thus generally included grammatical explanations in their bilingual dictionaries.² Because these early dictionaries can be tentative and inexact, or even reveal their authors' judgmental stance towards the language and culture they were trying to interpret, they have often been considered unreliable and obsolete, so that they have been effectively "associated with the penumbra of libraries" (Bussotti and Lachaud 2023, 11) and overlooked as an object of study.³ On the contrary, missionary dictionaries offer a generally unfiltered illustration of the first encounter between their writer and the language (and culture) the writer was trying to interpret. They contain hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of words that bear witness to the varied environments, circumstances, and people encountered by the writer, including the possible misunderstandings that may have occurred, particularly concerning objects, behaviours, or situations that, because of deep cultural differences, may have struck the writer as peculiar or downright bizarre. It is thus that these missionary dictionaries can be studied not only from a linguistic viewpoint but also as sources with which to reconstruct the cultural encounters that occurred between vastly different societies at the time they came in contact. As a result, these texts have finally started to attract the attention of scholars. At first, interest in the dictionaries and grammars compiled by missionaries was primarily linguistic, and largely devoted to the pre-colonial languages of America (Troiani 1995; Hovdhaugen 1996; Zimmermann 1997). Beginning with the first conference of the Oslo

1 Among the first witnesses of European attempts to communicate with the populations they encountered in their explorations are the *cadernos*, i.e. notebooks in which travellers jotted down vernacular words in indigenous languages and their relative translation (or attempt at translation). These were already being created during the first circumnavigation of the world by Ferdinand Magellan (1480–1521) and have been rightly called "precursors" of the early dictionaries. These were soon flanked by *cartinhas*, or *cartilhas*, syllabaries for teaching Portuguese (and thus facilitate evangelisation). On *cadernos* and *cartinhas*, see Couto (2023, 24–27).

2 Since the missionaries had all been similarly trained in Latin and Greek, in general they used the grammar and syntax of these languages as the standards for deciphering the various idioms they encountered. For discussions on the use of Latin and Greek grammar as a basis for interpreting completely unrelated languages, see e.g. Gray (2000, 932); Klöter (2017, 43); Ostler (2004, 44).

3 Barreto Xavier and Županov (2015) have convincingly argued that many of the cultural categories still associated with Asia today were first understood and systematised by Catholic missionaries. However, their contributions were eventually fully subsumed and overshadowed by the influential work of British Oriental studies, leading to the missionaries' original contribution being either forgotten or, when acknowledged, regarded as suspiciously bigoted and partisan. As we will see below, the same process occurred on a smaller scale for the Tibetan-Italian-Tibetan dictionary written by Father Orazio della Penna.

Project on Missionary Linguistics (Zwartjes and Hovdhaugen 2004), “missionary linguistics” effectively solidified as a recognised and vibrant subfield (Zwartjes 2012, 185), spurring an ongoing series of international conferences on the topic. The initial focus on Mesoamerican languages, however, delayed research into missionary dictionaries of Asian languages. An important study devoted to missionary work in Asia and employing a broader lens than the exclusively linguistic one was published in 2011 (Filliozat et al.), while the first Oslo Project on Missionary Linguistics conference specifically dedicated to Asian languages took place in 2018 (Zwartjes and De Troia 2021). More recently, the excellent work of Bussotti and Lachaud, which emphasises the polyvalent scope of these “word-hoards” (2023, 11), studies a number of early bilingual (and often bidirectional) dictionaries from a multidisciplinary perspective: of Chinese to Spanish, Latin, and Italian; of Japanese to Latin, Portuguese, and Russian; of Cantonese to English; of the Hokkien vernacular of the Philippines to Spanish, and finally of the Konkani language of the area of Goa to Portuguese. Most of the texts discussed were authored by Catholic missionaries,⁴ and the spectrum of Asian and European languages covered is indeed impressive. Only a few Asian regions are absent from the volume,⁵ and among them the editors specifically acknowledge the omission of Tibet (Bussotti and Lachaud 2023, 15 n. 13).

In fairness, the simplest reason why Tibet is missing from such a comprehensive collection is that, until very recently, all the missionary dictionaries of Tibetan ever written were thought to have been lost. In addition, while there are a few “early” (pre-twentieth-century) bilingual dictionaries of Tibetan,⁶ none of them has yet been undertaken as the object of study. This chapter addresses the absence of Tibet from the general panorama of European lexicons of Asian languages by introducing the earliest surviving bilingual dictionary of the Tibetan language into a modern Western language: the Tibetan-Italian and Italian-Tibetan dictionary compiled by the Capuchin

4 Bussotti and Lachaud (2023, 15) state that “missionaries and dictionaries were intimately connected.”

5 The sheer volume of works produced by the missionaries sent to China ensures that dictionaries of Sinitic languages are among the most extensively studied. González Linaje (2023, 179 n. 22) estimates that “from the 16th century to 1799, 1680 titles on China were published in Europe.” Other regions, such as Korea – where the influence of Christianity arrived relatively late compared to India, China, and Japan – have generally received less attention, but see Kiaer and Yu (2022) on a translation of the Bible from English to Korean.

6 These were: Schröter (1826), Csoma de Körös (1834), Jäschke (1998 [1881]), and Das (1991 [1902]). These are scientifically conceived and by and large written according to standard lexicographic usage. As first hypothesised in Jäschke (1998 [1881], v) and shown in Bray (2008 and 2011) and Venturi (2023, 54–56), Schröter’s dictionary is a partial copy, translated into English, of Della Penna’s, although at this stage it is unknown to what extent. The last two dictionaries of the above list, those of Jäschke (1998 [1881]) and Das (1991 [1902]), are still widely used among Tibetologists today. On the Western tradition of Tibetan lexicography, see Goldstein (1991, 2549–2550), though it omits Schröter (1826), as well as the eighteenth-century Capuchin attempts.

Father Francesco Orazio della Penna (1680–1745), which has recently come to light (Venturi 2023). In so doing, it shows that the Tibetan language was also the object of study by Catholic missionaries and highlights the importance of this early dictionary as a tool providing a time snapshot of Tibet in the early eighteenth century, as seen and experienced by Della Penna. Furthermore, this chapter also aims to illustrate the philology-based methodology being employed to study this dictionary, offering a set of questions which, I propose, can also be applied to other early bilingual dictionaries of extra-European languages.

2 The context of the Italian missions to Tibet

First, it is necessary provide some essential context for the topic at hand. The text under discussion is a Tibetan-Italian and Italian-Tibetan dictionary, compiled approximately between 1717 and the late 1730s by Francesco Orazio della Penna (Figure 1), who had been sent to Tibet on an apostolic mission under the auspices of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (hereafter shortened to Propaganda Fide), the office of the Holy See created in 1622 to promote worldwide evangelisation.⁷ Orazio della Penna was not the first Catholic missionary on the Tibetan plateau. He had been preceded, almost a century before his arrival, by two isolated Jesuit attempts: one in the West of the Tibetan plateau⁸ and another in South-Central Tibet.⁹ Although these missions were unsuccessful in terms of evangelisation, they sparked European curiosity about Tibet through the publication of a report titled *Novo descobrimento do gram Cathayo, ou reynos do Tibet*, which was quickly translated into Spanish, French, Italian, and German.¹⁰ By 1703, however, the memory of these earlier efforts by the Society of Jesus had faded, while suspicion of the Jesuit order's methods had grown, so that Pope Clement XI (r. 1700–1721) approved Propaganda Fide's decision to grant the missionary field of Tibet to the Capuchin order, specifically to the Capuchin friars from the Marche province in eastern Central Italy.¹¹

7 On the foundation of the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, see Metzler (1971, vol. 1, 79–111); for context see also Pizzorusso (2022, 1–34).

8 This was Antonio de Andrade's mission to the town of Tsaparang in the region of Guge that lasted from 1624 to 1632. On this mission, see Wessels (1924, 43–119); Sweet and Zwilling (2017); Hosne (2018, 255–260).

9 The mission of Estevão Cacula and João Cabral took place at almost the same time as that of Andrade, and reached the town of Shigatse between 1626 and 1635; see Wessels (1924, 120–163).

10 See Hosne (2018, 256). A scanned copy of the original Portuguese publication of Andrade's report can be found here: <https://china-bibliographie.univie.ac.at/2011/01/18/andrade-novo-descobrimiento-do-gram-catayo-ou-reynos-de-tibet/> (25 April 2023).

11 A combination of factors led to the selection of the Capuchin order, particularly the Marche province, for this task. Chief among them was the role of Father François Marie de Tours (d. 1709), who, after an extended stay in India, lobbied for the opening of a mission to Tibet in hopes that the French



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Figure 1: Giovanni Bistolli, Portrait of Fr. Francesco Orazio della Penna de' Billi (oil on canvas, 1736). Monastero Agostiniano Sant'Antonio da Padova, Pennabilli (Rimini, Italy).

The first group of Capuchin missionaries arrived in Lhasa in 1709¹² and began compiling a Latin-Tibetan dictionary. Their mission concluded in 1711 due to a severe lack of funds.¹³ But while records show that the manuscript of this bilingual dictionary was brought back to Rome, it has never been found, and is now presumed lost. Fortunately, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris preserves a forty-one-folio extract of it.¹⁴ However, it is considered “a very rough work [. . .] with several mistakes

Capuchins would receive the assignment. Instead, Propaganda Fide entrusted the task to the friars of the Marche province, a region that was part of the Papal state, thus ensuring the loyalty of its friars to Propaganda Fide, whereas the French missionaries’ allegiance might have been compromised by interference from the French crown. On the decision to assign the mission of Tibet to the Capuchins, see Sweet and Zwilling (2010, 18–24), Gren-Eklund (2022, 86–88); on François Marie de Tours, see Kaschewsky (2020), Gren-Eklund (2022), Wessler (2022); on the conflict between Propaganda Fide and the French crown on questions of authority on the missions, see Pizzorusso (2022, 231–246).

12 The group included François-Marie de Tours, Giuseppe da Ascoli (1673–1710), and Domenico da Fano (1674–1728).

13 Because of the enormous distance and the many currency exchanges required to convert Roman money into coinage accepted in Tibet, the annual funds that were supposed to be transmitted from Rome either failed to arrive in Lhasa or arrived very late and significantly reduced in value. The letters of the Capuchin missionaries testify to the resulting issues with starvation and indebtedness. See e.g. Petech (1952–1956 (hereafter *MITN*), vol. 1, xci).

14 *Départements des Manuscrits, Tibétain 542*

(<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b541005425/f11.item>, 25 April 2023). It comprises four folios of explanation of the alphabet and thirty-six folios with the Latin-Tibetan entries. Its title reads: *Vocabulario Thibettiano scritto con caratteri propri ed esplicato con lettere latine, e modo di pronunciarlo; estratto dal Padre Domenico da Fano Capucino dal Dizionario, ch’egli haveva fatto e portato in Europa, quando venne l’anno 1714. Per informare la Sacra Congregazione de propaganda fide dello stato di quella Novella Missione per trattarne in Roma lo stabilimento di essa Missione* [Tibetan Vocabulary written with its own characters and explicated with Latin letters, and the way to pronounce it; excerpted by Father Domenico da Fano from the Dictionary which he had made and brought to Europe, in the year 1714, to inform the Sacred Congregation for the propagation of the faith of the state of the New Mission [and] to discuss in Rome the establishment of this Mission]; all translations are my own.

The intriguing story of this extract has been reconstructed in Zaytsev (2021) and should be summarised here. When Domenico da Fano left Tibet in 1711, he made his way to Rome, bringing the dictionary with him. While passing through Paris, he received the request by Nicolas Fréret for a copy of the dictionary, which Da Fano made in Rome, but copying only the entries of which he was confident (f. 4v; see n. 17 below). On his return journey to Tibet, he delivered the extract to Fréret when he passed through Paris again in December 1714 or January 1715. Incidentally, Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749) was a pioneering scholar of Chinese, who had studied this language under the tutelage of Arcadio Huang (Ch.: 黄嘉略, Huang Jialüe, 1679–1716), a Christian convert from Fujian who had been brought to study in Paris by the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris.

Fréret found a use for the Da Fano dictionary when, around 1722, an unexpected text made its way into his hands: a portion of a Tibetan manuscript found in an abandoned monastery near Semipalatinsk (now Semey, in Kazakhstan). This text had been presented to Peter the Great (1672–1725), the Emperor of Russia, who was looking for specialists able to decipher its language. Fréret recognised the script as the same used in Da Fano’s dictionary and consulted with the Fourmont brothers, Étienne (1683–1745) and Michel (1690–1746), in order to translate it using the Da Fano dictionary itself. During

and misunderstandings,”¹⁵ and the only known translation of a Tibetan text made using this dictionary is riddled with mistakes.¹⁶ Furthermore, a late eighteenth-century copy of this extract, with the order of the entries changed to a Tibetan-Latin format, is preserved at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.¹⁷

It seems that although Della Penna had only arrived in Lhasa on 1 October 1716, by mid-February 1717, he was already working with Domenico da Fano “to prepare a very copious dictionary, all drawn from their [the Tibetans’] books.”¹⁸ From another letter, we learn that by 1721 the manuscript was advanced enough that a copy was sent to Rome with Father Domenico da Fano (1674–1728), who, however, died in Bengal and never reached Italy.¹⁹ By 1738, Orazio della Penna himself estimated that his dictionary comprised about 35,000 words, including both the Tibetan-Italian and the Italian-Tibetan sections.²⁰

However, because Della Penna died in Nepal, the fruits of his labour never arrived in Italy. After his death and the termination of the Capuchin missions in Tibet and Nepal,²¹ the dictionary manuscripts endured a complicated series of handovers,

this process, the Fourmont brothers made a copy of the extract by Da Fano, which is also kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Département des Manuscrits, Tibétain 486). However, the copy is very roughly done, especially since it is evident that the scribe did not have any training in writing the Tibetan script, and consequently this is either entirely absent or very poorly formed.

15 Translated from the original Italian in *MITN* (vol. 1, xcii). Still, Domenico da Fano, the author of the extract, stated that he only copied the words about which he was certain from the dictionary: “Quello che sta notato nel vocabulario l’hò estratto dal Dizzionario che co gli altri missionarii feci prima di partire per Roma, di cui hò scelte quelle cose, delle quali ho stimato esserne più certo del loro significato . . .” (f. 4v) [What is written in the vocabulary I have excerpted from the Dictionary that I did together with the other missionaries before leaving for Rome; from this I have chosen those items of which I thought I was more certain of their meaning]; also transcribed in *MITN* (vol. 1, xci).

16 See Sizova (2021); Zaytsev (2021). This is not surprising, as Petech had already described the extract by Da Fano as quite problematic in 1952 (*MITN* vol.1, xcii).

17 This copy was made by Michel-Ange-André Le Roux Deshauterayes (1724–1795), a nephew of the Fourmont brothers and professor of Arabic at the Collège Royale (now Collège de France).

The manuscript is now held by the Staatsbibliothek in Munich (BSB Cod.tibet.10, <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0009/bsb00094600/images/index.html?id=00094600&groesser=&fip=193.174.98.30&no=&seite=7>, 26 April 2023).

18 “Noi fra tanto ci prepariamo con fare un copioso dizionario tutto cavato da’ loro libri” [In the meantime we are preparing to make a large dictionary, all derived from their books], excerpt from a letter (CL. 33) written by Domenico da Fano in Lhasa on 15 February 1717 (*MITN* vol. 1, 83–86, quotation at 84–85). This letter shows that, at least at this point, the two were collaborating.

19 Letter written by Fr. Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia (1684–1764); see Venturi (2023, 51–53). He was in Lhasa between 1721 and 1733 and from January to October 1741 (*MITN* vol. 1, cxv).

20 See *MITN* (vol. 3, 88 and 154). Also consider that Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia estimated the number of the dictionary’s entries at “over 30,000” (*MITN* vol. 3, 212).

21 The mission to Tibet proper, which included Lhasa and a smaller residence in Dakpo (Dwags po) – established primarily to grow grapes to make wine for the Mass – was definitively closed in 1745 with the departure of Orazio della Penna. The missions in Nepal were closed in 1769 but were sporadically reopened several times until 1810. However, the lower calibre of the missionaries, the changing politi-

losses, accidental recoveries, and further losses in the north of the Indian subcontinent,²² until they were eventually forgotten. By a stroke of luck, they were rediscovered in India at the beginning of this century by a non-professional historian with an interest in the life and works of Della Penna, and it is only recently that an agreement has been reached to allow these manuscripts to be utilised for research purposes.²³

3 Della Penna's Tibetan-Italian and Italian-Tibetan Dictionary

3.1 General description

The texts that have survived comprise three manuscripts: two are autographs by Della Penna, one Tibetan-Italian and the other Italian-Tibetan, both written on Tibetan paper. The Tibetan-Italian manuscript consists of 193 unnumbered folios and it has lost some of the initial and final pages, which contained part of the first (*ka*), and the last two letters (*ha*, *a*) of the Tibetan alphabet. The Italian-Tibetan manuscript, containing 218 unnumbered folios, spans from approximately the middle of letter *N* to *Z*. The third manuscript is a copy of the Italian-Tibetan dictionary, written by several different hands on European paper. This copy was likely made at one of the Capuchin missions in northern India, probably at the end of the eighteenth century, when there was still hope of reopening a mission in Lhasa. Fortunately, this copy supplements the missing parts of the autograph Italian-Tibetan manuscript, as its 427 folios include the letters from *A* to *S*. The following is a preliminary report of some of the more salient features of these manuscripts; a complete study of these texts is planned and will appear in the future.

Judging from the organisation and the appearance of the manuscript, the Tibetan-Italian autograph dictionary appears to be a first draft. The Tibetan entries are grouped together roughly in alphabetical order, with individual groups of thematically related words often separated by a horizontal line. This line is normally followed by a section of blank space, evidently to allow for the possibility of adding more en-

cal circumstances, and the persistent difficulties in receiving financial support from Rome contributed to the general decline of the enterprise. Despite this, the name “mission of Tibet” continued to be used in official papers of Propaganda Fide well into the nineteenth century, even though the only stable missions in the area were those of Chandernagor (near Calcutta, in Bengal), Patna and Bettiah (both in Bihar).

²² The history of the surviving manuscripts of Della Penna's dictionary is recounted in Venturi (2023).

²³ The story of Della Penna's dictionary exemplifies the statement by Bussotti and Lachaud that “the afterlives of these pioneering works show that most of the time they were consigned to the artificial slumber of libraries until their rediscovery by modern scholars” (2023, 15).

tries.²⁴ The handwriting overall appears slipshod, as if done in rushed note-taking, possibly on uneven surfaces or in an uncomfortable position. Frequent abbreviation marks are used in the Italian cursive (Figure 2).²⁵ The Tibetan script may also have been written by Della Penna – a hypothesis that arises from a comparison of the Tibetan portion of the two sections. The Tibetan calligraphy of the Italian-Tibetan manuscript is elegant and precise, suggesting it was the work of an amanuensis specifically hired for the task (Figure 3).²⁶

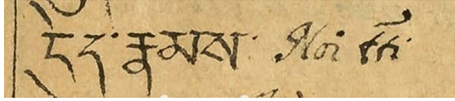


Figure 2: Example of abbreviation for the word “tutti” in Italian; in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano], private collection, unnumbered folio.

Concerning the content, the most noteworthy aspect of both dictionaries is that rather than being mere wordlists, they contain sentences that open a window to the activities of Della Penna and the other Capuchin missionaries in Lhasa, thus reflecting the local vernacular and offering glimpses into the environment, nature, and society in which the Italian missionaries were immersed. In particular, several²⁷ of the longer sentences appear to be quotes extracted from Buddhist sources that Della Penna was reading under the tutelage of a Tibetan master and, for a period, alongside his “colleague” and rival, Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733) of the Society of Jesus.

3.2 Learning Tibetan: Orazio della Penna and Ippolito Desideri

At this point, a brief parenthesis on Desideri is warranted, as he is the best-known and most famous of the Italian Catholic missionaries to Tibet.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, the Jesuits made the first attempts at evangelisation in Tibet in the seventeenth cen-

²⁴ This practice is common to many early bilingual dictionaries; as Couto (2023, 38) has observed, these texts were “conceived to be able to evolve.”

²⁵ This was a common practice at the time, particularly of missionaries who were trying to save paper.

²⁶ Missionary documents occasionally refer to the expenses sustained to hire Tibetan scribes; see e.g. *MITN* (vol. 1, 50).

²⁷ The total number of pages of all three texts amounts to 1670, with about thirty-five to forty entries per page in the Tibetan-Italian section, around thirty entries per page in the autograph Italian-Tibetan section, and circa twenty entries per page in the copy of the Italian-Tibetan. Since this research is still in its early stages, I cannot yet provide complete data or statistics but can only offer a preliminary assessment.

²⁸ The details of Desideri’s experience in Tibet are fairly well known and will not be repeated here; his original travel account, in Italian, has been reconstructed from the surviving manuscripts, transcribed and fully annotated in entirety in *MITN* (vol. 5, 122–219; vol. 6; vol. 7, 3–193). For a full English edition and translation supplemented by an exhaustive introduction and footnotes, see Desideri (2010,

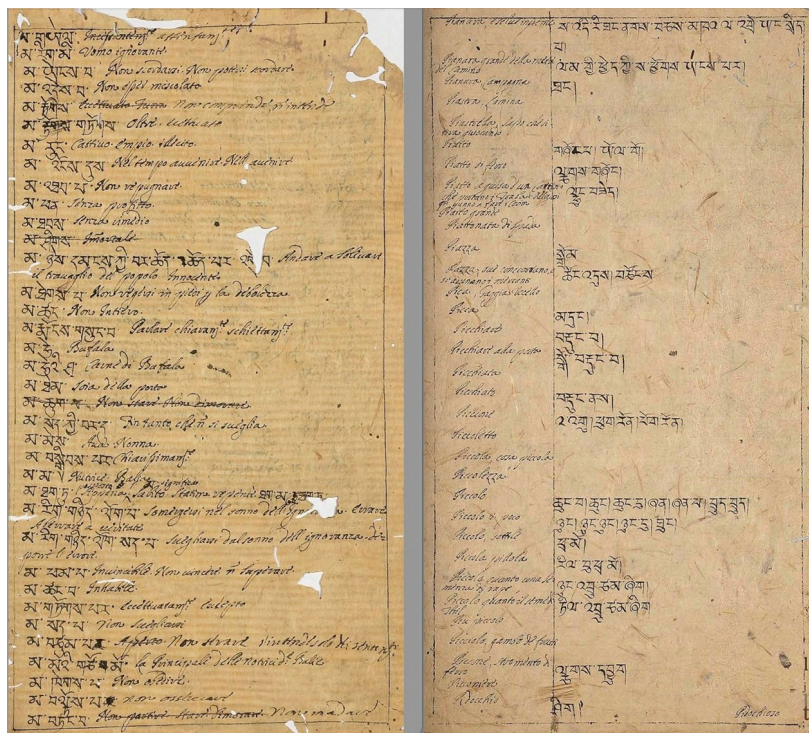


Figure 3: A page of the Tibetan-Italian dictionary (left) and of the Italian-Tibetan dictionary (right); in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano] and [Dizionario Italiano-Tibetano], private collection, unnumbered folios.

ture. However, in 1703, Pope Clement XI both condemned the Society of Jesus for its tolerance of local cultural traditions in Malabar and China²⁹ and assigned the missionary field of Tibet to the Capuchin order. The latter directive may have spurred the Society of Jesus to attempt to reassert its claim on the region, although by this time the location of the *reynos do Tibet* discussed by de Andrade was quite uncertain.

Still, in 1712, Ippolito Desideri was sent to re-establish a Jesuit presence in “Tibet.”³⁰ However, mistaken geographical notions and a series of circumstantial rea-

ed. Zwilling, tr. Sweet). Two important studies on Desideri’s work are Pomplun (2010) and Lopez and Jinpa (2017).

²⁹ The literature on the controversies about the Chinese and Malabaric rites is vast; for a recently edited volume that considers aspects of both, see Županov and Fabre (2018).

³⁰ Before arriving in Lhasa, Desideri had only heard of two regions of Tibet: “Little Tibet” (corresponding to Baltistan) and “Great Tibet” (i.e. Western Tibet, including Ladakh), but did not know about the “third Tibet,” i.e. Central Tibet. See Desideri’s letter transcribed in *MITN* (vol. 5, 22–32, quotation at 23).

sons led him to arrive in Lhasa four years later, on 18 March 1716.³¹ One can imagine his astonishment when, only six and a half months later, on 1 October, a small group of Capuchin friars arrived in the same city. The initial joy at meeting compatriots soon gave way to discomfort over not knowing which of the two religious orders had jurisdiction in Tibet. While letters were immediately sent to Rome to seek clarification, Ippolito Desideri and Orazio della Penna both moved into the monastery of Zhidé (Bzhi sde) at the suggestion of the then lay ruler of Tibet,³² before later relocating to the large monastic university of Sera.³³ There they took lessons in Tibetan from a Buddhist lama to learn the language from an authoritative source. Their lessons included reading Buddhist texts held in the monastery's library, a task essential for becoming acquainted with the vast scholarship (commentaries, exegesis, etc.) underpinning this religion.

Eventually, news arrived from the authorities in Rome that the mission to Tibet had been assigned to the Capuchin order³⁴ and on 28 April 1721, Desideri left Lhasa for the last time. Still, his five-year sojourn in Central Tibet yielded a complete and informative account of his travels and experiences in Tibet, as well as five treatises written in Tibetan in which he explains the essential doctrines of Christianity and refutes what he considered to be the fallacies of Tibetan Buddhism.³⁵

Although both Della Penna and Desideri studied with the same master, only Della Penna provides the name of their Tibetan teacher. Unfortunately, this is almost all we know about him. His title, “rabjampa” (*rab 'jams pa*), indicates that he was a highly educated member of the Buddhist clergy, having obtained the highest degree in a monastic university, akin to a “doctor of divinity.” However, his name, Yonten Ngawang Pelzang (Yon tan ngag dbang dpal bzang), is far too common to give us any precise indication about him. The only additional biographical detail

31 Desideri travelled with a senior companion, the Portuguese Fr. Manoel Freyre (b. 1679), who was in fact secretly on a mission to gather intelligence about the Capuchin activities in Tibet. Upon reaching Ladakh, Freyre heard of the presence of Europeans in “a third Tibet larger than the other two” (Sweet 2006, 17) and decided they should make their way there. The rumour heard by Freyre evidently referred to the earlier Capuchin expedition to Tibet, which had left Lhasa in 1711. Consequently, when Freyre and Desideri arrived in Lhasa in 1716, they found no Capuchin friars. Desideri, truly devoted to the idea of spreading the Gospel among the locals, decided to remain, while Freyre, having completed his task and exhausted by the difficult and dangerous travels, made his way back to India. A fuller account is given in Sweet (2006, esp. 1–12).

32 At that time, this was Lhazang Khan (Lha bzang khan, d. 1717), who belonged to the Khoshut tribe of the western Mongols or Oirats.

33 Desideri provides a description of Sera at the time when he and Della Penna were studying there. See *MITN* (vol. 6, 29–30).

34 The letter announcing the decision of Propaganda Fide reached him on 13 August 1719; see Pomplun (2011, 411).

35 Four of these have been translated in Italian by Giuseppe Toscano, SJ (1981–1989); a partial English translation of the fifth, which is of monumental length, is included in Lopez and Jinpa (2017). On the Tibetan texts read by Desideri to compose these treatises, see Pomplun (2011).

we can add is that he was a caretaker (*dkon gnyer*) of the Ramoche temple at Zhidé in Lhasa. While Desideri studied with him from 1717 to 1721, Della Penna worked under his guidance for at least fourteen years, as evidenced from a letter written in 1731.³⁶

Studying with a Buddhist master helped Desideri refine his critique of the Buddhist religion and enabled Della Penna to compile his dictionary.³⁷ Indeed, Della Penna may have been as proficient as Desideri in understanding both the Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy, as we know that he completed five translations of important Christian texts into Tibetan, including a catechism and a book on the life of Jesus, as well as seven translations of Buddhist works into Italian.³⁸ Unfortunately, none of these have survived. However, an analysis of the dictionary entries can help us reconstruct the method Della Penna used to gather a vast set of terms and expressions useful for translating the precepts of the Christian doctrine, while also decoding the principles of Buddhist philosophy for a Catholic audience.

³⁶ See the letter written by Gioacchino da Sant'Anatolia in 1731 (*MITN* vol. 1, 167); his name also appears in the explanation of the prayer “Om maṇi padme hūṃ” as the person who had expounded its meaning (*MITN* vol. 4, 172). Additionally, he is mentioned in Agostino Giorgi’s *Alphabetum Tibetanum*, published in 1762 and partially based on Orazio Della Penna’s accounts (Giorgi 1762, 680, corrected in the corrigenda table at 765). Notably, according to Gioacchino da Sant'Anatolia, Yonten Ngawang Pelzang appreciated Catholicism: “Perché il maestro che sono 14 anni che sta con il P. Prefetto con tutti senza timore confessa che la nostra legge è miglior della loro” (*MITN* vol. 1, 167) [Because the teacher, who has been with the Fr. Prefect for 14 years, proclaims to all without fear that our law is better than theirs].

³⁷ Pomplun (2011, 388 n. 10) strongly suggests that Desideri and the Capuchins (particularly Orazio della Penna and Domenico da Fano) collaborated in writing the various treatises composed during their mission in Lhasa. In particular, he proposes that the work that Desideri presented to Lhazang Khan (possibly the one entitled *Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda* and translated as *L'Aurora* by Toscano 1981) may have been facilitated by a defence of the Catholic faith completed by Domenico da Fano in 1716. He also posits that “the Jesuit had a large hand in preparing many of the works usually attributed to the Capuchins, such as the dictionary and Italian translation of the *Lam rim chen mo*.” At this point in the research on Della Penna’s dictionary, it is not possible to confirm this, but in the future, it will be necessary not only to carefully examine the handwriting, but also to compare the translation of Buddhist terms in Italian and of Christian terms in Tibetan, as indicated in Della Penna’s dictionary and as used in Desideri’s works.

³⁸ These were listed by Gioacchino da Sant'Anatolia in a letter written in 1733. The passage is translated in Venturi (2023, 52) but mistakenly omits the very first item of the list, a translation of “the Lam-rim-cenbò, which is the conclusion of all the Tibetan laws and of all their Bible, which comprises 108 large books in folio.” See the transcription of the original letter in *MITN* (vol. 1, 171).

3.3 The making of the Tibetan-Italian and Italian-Tibetan Dictionaries, as reconstructed through an analysis of their entries

The long-term aim of Della Penna's effort, and of missionary dictionaries (and grammars) in general, was to create language-learning tools that could be used by prospective missionaries destined for a mission's territory, so that they could begin to study the language before their departure. As the office established by the Holy See to oversee Catholic missionary activities spread around the globe, Propaganda Fide was well organised for the production and dissemination of these didactic materials: in 1626, only four years after it was founded, it had created the Tipografia poliglotta, an institution tasked with printing books useful for evangelisation.³⁹ Its publications included dictionaries and grammars of the various languages encountered in mission territories, as well as translations of holy books, catechisms, and other doctrinal and liturgical works in the many languages spoken where the Catholic Church had missions. Thus, while Della Penna may have begun to write his dictionary as a personal mnemonic tool for Tibetan words and expressions, in the hopes that it would help him and his fellow missionaries to perform everyday tasks, and eventually also to discuss, baptise, confess, and perform Catholic rituals in Tibetan, he also realised the importance of his pioneering work for future generations of missionaries. Because of this, it was imperative that his translations, if they were to be sent to the printing press,⁴⁰ were as correct and trustworthy as possible, from Italian to Tibetan and vice versa.

39 On the Tipografia poliglotta, see Pizzorusso (2004 esp. 484–495), in which this institution is discussed alongside the other major 'cultural satellite' of Propaganda Fide, the Collegio Urbano, a seminary specifically created to instruct the secular clergy originating from the mission territories.

40 It seems likely that as the size of the dictionary increased to thousands of entries, Della Penna began to think of it as a text that could be printed. In fact, in 1732, when he decided to leave Tibet to return to Rome and secure stronger financial support from Propaganda Fide, he was successful not only in obtaining a generous donation from Cardinal Luis Antonio Belluga y Moncada (1662–1743) but also in arranging for Tipografia poliglotta to carve two sets of Tibetan punches for the printing press. One set remained in Rome for the Tipografia poliglotta's use, while the second was brought to Tibet by Della Penna himself when he returned there in 1741, together with a printing press and a lay print-maker, Paolo da Firenze. When the mission was abandoned in 1745, the punches that had been brought to Tibet were left in Lhasa (see *MITN*, vol. 2, 185) and it is likely that they were eventually melted.

Conversely, the set of punches kept in Rome at the Tipografia poliglotta was used to print the *Alphabetum Tibetanum* (first ed. 1759; second, enlarged ed. 1762) by Agostino Antonio Giorgi (1711–1797), which was drawn from Orazio della Penna's accounts and became the main reference on Tibetan culture and mores up to the nineteenth century. However, the punches were eventually brought to Paris, together with many other typographic matrices and materials removed from Propaganda Fide in the period between 1792 and 1815, and they are now held at the Atelier du Livre d'Art et de l'Estampe of the French Imprimerie Nationale. On Tibetan typefaces, see de Baerdemaeker (2020); for a reconstruc-

To perform this bidirectional work of interpretation, Della Penna extracted from the Buddhist texts he was reading at the monastery of Sera a number of sentences that could be useful either to render comprehensible Buddhist ideas in Italian or to translate Christian concepts in Tibetan. To begin with, having spent in total twenty years in Tibet (1716–1732 and 1741–1745), Della Penna had become well-attuned to the central ideas of Buddhism. This is evident in the detailed entries, often spanning multiple pages, which he devotes to them, in an effort both to understand them for himself and to explain to the co-religionists that would have followed him the subtleties of different concepts. For example, in the Italian-Tibetan dictionary, Della Penna dedicates four pages of entries to the important term “activity” (Tib. *las*, Skt. *karma*),⁴¹ while in the draft Tibetan-Italian version, he collected seven pages of notes on the very term for “(Buddhist) religion” (Tib. *chos*, Skt. *dharmā*).⁴² His entries here include quotes from foundational works, such as the life of the Tibetan saint Padmasambhava,⁴³ and various phrases that would have been useful to engage in dialogue with Tibetan monks, such as “to speak about things related to the Law” (*chos ni so sor gsungs pa*).⁴⁴

At the same time, some more complex philosophical terms are jotted down without an equivalent translation, particularly in the Tibetan-Italian section, which, as mentioned, appears to be a first draft. For instance, crucial Buddhist terms like *chökhör* (Tib. *chos 'khor*, Skt. *dharmacakra*),⁴⁵ meaning “the wheel of Law,” and *chöying* (Tib. *chos dbyings*, Skt. *dharmadhātu*), referring to a complex idea that can be translated as

tion of the history of the transfer of the punches and matrices of Tipografia poliglotta to France, see Simon (2024).

⁴¹ The entries can be found on pp. 16–19 of the Italian-Tibetan autograph manuscript, where, in general, the Tibetan *las* is translated into the Italian as *opere*. As the manuscripts are not numbered, the page numbers given here have been added by this author to facilitate research on the dictionary.

⁴² Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 116.

⁴³ Padmasambhava is a pre-eminent, universally venerated figure in Tibetan Buddhism, though accounts of his life and supernatural activities abound with legendary elements that obscure whatever historical figure is at the origin of his *mythos*. He appears to have been an eighth-century tantric master from the Swat region (present-day Pakistan), who greatly contributed to the transmission of Buddhism in Tibet by subduing local chthonic spirits. He also supported the establishment of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. His legends are narrated in a number of “revealed treasures” (*gter ma*) – texts containing accounts of his life and teachings that were purportedly hidden by Padmasambhava himself and successively rediscovered through a vision, dream, or other miraculous sign by a “treasure revealer” (*gter ston*) at an appropriate time. Seminal among these treasures is the *Pema katang* (*Pad ma bka' thang*), revealed in the fourteenth century by Orgyen Lingpa (O rgyan gling pa, b. 1323). Jäschke (1998) [1881] had already recognised the influence of Padmasambhava’s hagiography on the dictionary that served as the basis of Schröter (1826). Pomplun (2011, 387 n. 7) hypothesised that Desideri read this same text, and this would not be surprising, considering that the two missionaries studied together; see also n. 37 above.

⁴⁴ Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 110.

“sphere of reality,” are left without equivalent (Figure 4).⁴⁶ Moreover, the examples involving *chöying* seem to be taken from a passage that Della Penna could not quite decipher. I should add that at this stage, I have not yet found whether translations for *chö-khor* or *chöying* appear in the more complete Italian-Tibetan section, as the transcription of the entire dictionary is at its early stages. At this point, it cannot yet be determined what terms or periphrases he would have chosen to translate these terms.

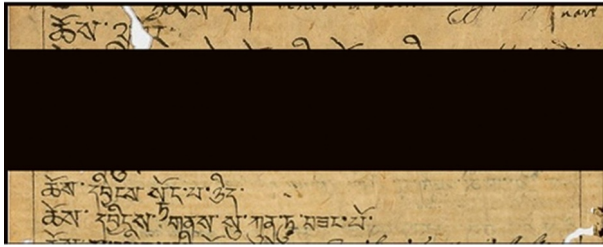


Figure 4: Entries for “chos ’khor” and “chos dbyings” in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano], private collection, unnumbered folio.

While these are examples of the difficulties Della Penna may have faced, at other times he could see enough superficial commonalities between Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism that his translations effortlessly provide the corresponding equivalent to a Tibetan term in Latin or Italian canonic vocabulary. To name one example, the central concept of *chögyel* (Tib. *chos rgyal*, Skt. *dharmarāja*), which denotes a king who sets in motion the wheel of Dharma by protecting and fostering Buddhism, is rendered confidently as “Rex in spiritualibus.”⁴⁷ Similarly, a hearer of the Buddhist law (*chos la nyan mkhan*) is easily recognised as a “catechumen,” while the notion of “abandoning the doctrine” (*chos spong*) is unhesitatingly translated as “apostate.”⁴⁸

These examples show that the strong religious sentiment permeating both Tibetan society at large and Italian Catholic culture in the eighteenth century served as a crucial point of encounter between the two cultures. Although the respective religious traditions pointed in different directions and towards different spiritual goals, the shared centrality of faith for both the Capuchins and the Tibetans contributed to creating a number of elements of mutual understanding. This significantly facilitated their relationships, and I would suggest that Della Penna and his companions were culturally closer to the Tibetans than we can imagine from our largely secular, twenty-first-century viewpoint.

Moreover, another unexpected element that aided Della Penna’s understanding of Tibetan culture came from the fact that familiarity with Greek and Latin mythology was

⁴⁶ Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 112.

⁴⁷ Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Both expressions can be found in the Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 112.

still quite common in eighteenth-century Italy. For instance, in translating the expression *ngan 'gror myong bas las* (Figure 5) as “activities leading to perdition and to receive transmigration in Hell, in the Animals, and in the *Ità*, which are like Tantalì,”⁴⁹ Della Penna effectively translated *yidak*, a Tibetan term often rendered as “hungry ghosts” (Tib. *yi dwags*, Skt. *preta*: see Rotman 2021), in terms readily understandable by his contemporaries. These spirits inhabit one of the six realms of beings in which it is possible to be born. They are depicted in Tibetan texts and represented in Tibetan art as vile beings with huge stomachs and extremely small throats, and are therefore always suffering the torture of hunger. Thus, Della Penna saw a similarity with the Greek mythological figure of Tantalus, whose punishment for his misdeeds condemned him to eternal hunger and thirst, although he was surrounded by water and fresh fruit. Similarly, the *yidak* atone for their accumulated negative karma by enduring constant hunger.

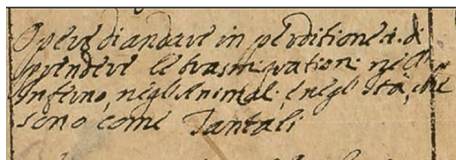


Figure 5: Translation of “*ngan 'gror myong bas las*” in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano], private collection, unnumbered folio.

This set of examples leads us to discuss a second key feature of the way Della Penna was reading Tibetan texts. Of course, the aim of his presence in Lhasa was, above all, to save the souls of as many Tibetans as possible by introducing them to Christianity. In doing so, he was both helped and hampered by the unexpected encounter with the sophisticated religious system of Tibetan Buddhism, which was in many ways ethically, structurally, and scholastically comparable to Catholicism. In fact, Buddhism in general follows a moral code that is compatible with the Christian one, as its basic principles recommend refraining from the non-virtuous activities of harming living creatures, taking what is not given, engaging in sexual misconduct, using intoxicants, and using false or divisive speech.⁵⁰

In addition, Tibetan Buddhism in particular maintained a composite organizational structure that included hundreds of monasteries, internally arranged in a way that would have been instantly recognisable to a Catholic friar, with a hierarchy including the equivalent of an abbot (*mkhan po*), a lead cantor (*dbu mdzad*), and a number of monks (*dge slong*) and novices (*dge tshul*), whose daily life was punctuated by a series of communal ritual services and meals at established hours. Lastly, Tibetan

⁴⁹ “Opere di andare in perdizione e di prendere la trasmutazione nell’Inferno, negli Animali, e negli Ità, che sono come Tantalì”; Italian-Tibetan autograph manuscript, p. 18.

⁵⁰ These are the “five precepts” (Tib.: *bslab pa lnga*; Skt.: *pañcāśīla*) that underpin Buddhist morality; see e.g. Buswell and Lopez (2014, 616).

monasteries, and especially the important monastic universities like Sera, where Della Penna studied, also included rich libraries containing the vast Buddhist canon and a variety of exegetical works, hagiographies, ritual manuals, and so forth. These extensive collections of books could be compared with literary genres with which the Italian Catholic missionaries were familiar.

As a result, Della Penna had access to an enormous literary trove, which he could consult for terms, maxims, and other expressions that aligned with philosophical, ethical, or other aspects of the Catholic religion and could be quickly adapted, or “repurposed,” to serve his effort to proselytise the Tibetans. This was a very different experience than that of other apostolic missions in other parts of the world, as testified by a brief, decidedly simplistic, but very telling quote from one of the Della Penna’s companions, who stated that “Tibet is very different from Congo, and it is necessary to look at many books [. . .].”⁵¹ But it was precisely “looking at many books” that enabled Della Penna to become both sufficiently familiar with Buddhism and collect the vocabulary necessary for the Catholic Church’s proselytising effort in Tibet. After all, it appears that both the Capuchins and several of the Tibetans they encountered were quick to understand that there were elements in common between these religions.⁵²

51 “È molto differente il Thibette dal Congo, convien vedere molti libri [. . .].” Letter written by Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia, Lhasa, 20 November 1724. See *MITN* (vol. 1, 125).

Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia was for many years the only companion of Della Penna in Lhasa; he mostly provided medical services and it appears that he might have spoken enough Tibetan for this task, though his knowledge of literary Tibetan was probably superficial. His letters reveal a genuine, pugnacious, and straightforward personality and he does not mince words. He was very critical of Desideri and protective of Della Penna, especially during the latter’s second stay in Lhasa, since by 1741 Della Penna was already sixty-one years old. During the most arduous parts of their ascent to Tibet, Della Penna travelled on a “*dandī*”, i.e. carried in a sling tied at the ends of a long pole set on the shoulders of two porters; see letter from Costantino da Loro, *MITN* (vol. 2, 46–83, quotation at 55). In the following years, Della Penna’s health began to decline, and he became quite depressed as he grew increasingly frustrated with the inaction and non-cooperation he saw from Rome, especially considering that he risked much to travel there in order to plead for meaningful support (the trip from Tibet to Rome and back took him six years). Despite the initial appearance of success (particularly the donation from Cardinal Belluga), money, letters and general support never materialised, and in the years between 1741 and 1745, his letters to Rome became progressively more laconic, disillusioned, and increasingly infrequent.

52 In many of the letters of the Capuchins it is stated that several Tibetans – both secular officials and religious scholars – expressed admiration for the ideals of Christianity (see e.g. *MITN* vol. 1, 124–125, 130, 133, 138–139, 155, 167). However, these statements must be taken with a grain of salt, as we cannot know whether the Tibetans’ supposed approbation was genuine or merely polite behaviour. Engelhardt (2005) highlights the discrepancy between the openness and tolerance of the Tibetans and the prejudiced view of the Capuchins, who regarded the Tibetans as heretics. Although the Tibetan documents show that the Tibetans were indeed rather open-minded regarding the Italian missionaries, it must be emphasised that all the missionaries, including Desideri, believed they were bringing news of the only true religion, and it is to be expected that they held negative views of the indigenous beliefs they encountered. When contrasting the Tibetans’ “tolerance” with the missionaries’ “intolerance,”

In fact, the main points of discord can be generally reduced to two specific issues: that of the existence of a single creator God, which was a fundamental tenet for the Catholics but a puzzling concept for Buddhists, and the idea of what the missionaries called “transmigration of the souls,” that is, reincarnation, which was as much a central concept for the Tibetans as it was a heresy for the Capuchins.⁵³

This notwithstanding, according to the missionary documents, the Tibetans appreciated and even expressed admiration for the moral code of the Capuchins, who offered medical care *gratis* to everyone,⁵⁴ regardless of social class or standing, and had travelled from far away to spread their faith.⁵⁵ At the same time, it is also evident when examining Della Penna’s dictionary (although less apparent when reading the missionary documents), that by gaining familiarity with Tibetan literature, the missionaries found many religious and cultural similarities, which Della Penna recognised as concepts that could be adapted to Christian beliefs. Thus, in his dictionary we notice many maxims quoted from well-known Tibetan texts, including not only the already mentioned hagiography of Padmasambhava, which at this preliminary stage of research seems to be the most frequently quoted source,⁵⁶ but also the *Life of the Buddha* (*Bcom ldan ’das rgyal ba shākya thub pa’i rnam thar*) by the renowned scholar Tāranātha (1575–1634), and various extracts from the *Kagyur* (*Bka’ ’gyur*), the canonical collection of discourses attributed to the Buddha.⁵⁷ Among the quoted passages, some are generic aphorisms that could be useful in a variety of proselytising settings, such as “to speak about the [heavenly] Law benefits the living as much as the rain benefits the earth”⁵⁸ (*chos kyi char pa sems can kun la ’babs pa*,⁵⁹ from the *Pad ma bka’ thang*). Others ap-

the risk is to remove any nuances, on the one hand disregarding the Tibetans who may have felt hostility or suspicion towards the Capuchins, and on the other neglecting the aspects of Tibetan culture (though probably not Tibetan religion) that the Capuchins appreciated.

53 According to Lopez and Jinpa (2017), Desideri identified two fundamental pillars of Buddhist religion that needed to be dismantled: the notion of emptiness (*stong pa nyid*) and the idea of rebirth, as both stood in the way of the belief in the existence of a creator God.

54 On the Capuchins’ medical work in Lhasa, see Engelhardt (2015).

55 One of the letters even relates that many people, including the Dalai Lama, stated that the Pope was a saint to send religious men in such distant places: “ed io migliaia di volte da Gran Lama, da trabà (cioè religiosi) e da ogni sorte di persone ho inteso con proprie orecchie, – il vostro Grande Lama è un Gran Santo, ha una gran carità in mandare in paesi tanto lontani, con tanta spesa per insegnar la legge, e chi è che abbi tanta carità nel mondo come lui” (*MITN* vol. 1, 169) [and I have heard thousands of times with my own ears the Great Lama, the trabà (that is, the religious men), and all sorts of persons say – your Great Lama is a Great Saint, he has much charity in sending people who teach the law, and that have as much charity towards the world as he does, in such far away countries, with much expense].

56 This was already remarked upon in Jäschke (1998 [1881], v).

57 Della Penna also worked on a translation of Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo*, and therefore it is possible that as research progresses quotes from this important text will come to light.

58 “Il parlare della legge giova ai viventi come la pioggia giova alla terra” [To speak about the law benefits living beings as rain benefits the soil].

59 In the Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 111.

pear to have been transcribed because they would be useful in translating specific episodes, such as “with two large nets they each took fish, or fished,” which, although quoted from Taranatha’s *Life of the Buddha*, could easily serve to translate the parable of the miraculous catch of fish from the Gospel of Luke.⁶⁰

However, the focus on the superficial similarities between Buddhist and Christian values should not distract from the fact that there are indeed a number of substantial differences and even irreconcilable points between these two religions. For this reason, Della Penna had to create neologisms, look for suitable substitutes, and, when necessary, devise periphrases that could come as close as possible to rendering his intended meaning. For example, in the dictionary, the verb “to baptise” is translated with the periphrasis “the cleansing ritual with water descending on the head” (*chu’i dbu’i steng du ’beb[s] cing khrus gsol ba*).⁶¹ In the same section, Della Penna also noted other Tibetan terms and phrases that may have proven useful, such as “sprinkle with water” (*chu brgyab pa*), and “font” or “source” (*chu mig*).⁶²

3.4 The Dictionary as a reflection of missionary activities in Lhasa

Equally intriguing in reading the dictionary is the presence of terms that can be linked to the known activities of the Capuchins in Lhasa. Among them, I would like to discuss three examples in particular: one relating to the Capuchins’ primary mission, that of converting Tibetans to Christianity; another related to their charitable medical work, which provided a means to engage with people of all social classes and introduce a conversation about Christ; and a third illustrating the missionaries’ perhaps unwitting role as importers of Western technology into Tibet.

By 1725, the Capuchin missionaries had been permanently in Lhasa for nine years, and their work was known both among the lower social classes, who mainly utilised their medical services, and the higher echelons of the Buddhist hierarchy and the aristocracy, as the Capuchins frequented the courts of both the secular ruler and of the VII Dalai Lama, Kelzang Gyatso (Bskal bzang rgya mtsho, 1708–1757). It was during this time that they received the concession to build a small hospice and a church

⁶⁰ From the missionary documents, it is evident that an early project to translate the Bible during the first Capuchin mission had been abandoned on account of the expenses it entailed. See letter written by Fr. Domenico da Fano in Lhasa, 25 August 1719: “Noi havevamo intrapresa la traduzione della Sacra Bibbia in lingua e caratteri tibetani; a tale effetto havevo assegnato a questo ospizio a Lassa un straordinario di 150 scudi [. . .] perciò sono stato forzato sospendere per hora tale traduzione” (*MITN* vol. 1, 118) [We had begun the translation of the Holy Bible in Tibetan language and characters; for this purpose, I had assigned to this hospice in Lhasa an extra sum of 150 scudi [. . .] therefore I have been forced to suspend this translation for the moment].

⁶¹ Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 105. The crossed out *i* reflects the fact that this letter was written and then struck out by Della Penna.

⁶² Both expressions are in the Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 104.

in Lhasa from the VII Dalai Lama himself. The church, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, was the first Christian building in Lhasa, and although it eventually fell to ruin after the departure of the last Capuchins, including Della Penna, in 1745, it was apparently equipped, albeit modestly, with all the necessary articles.⁶³

Among these we know that the Capuchins installed a bronze bell with the inscription “Te Deum Laudamus” [We praise thee, God], which survives to the present day, since after the closure of the Capuchin mission in Lhasa it was considered sufficiently interesting to be hung for many years inside the city’s main temple, the Jokhang. It must have been placed in a rather visible location, since it was seen and discussed by many of the travellers to Lhasa in the early twentieth century.⁶⁴ However, by 2004, it had been deposited in a storeroom of the main temple of Lhasa.⁶⁵ What is particularly interesting is that, although there is no mention of this bell in the surviving Capuchin documents, the dictionary contains at least four entries related to it, which testify to the efforts of the Capuchins to communicate about it and its installation.⁶⁶ These are

⁶³ Although according to an early letter by Fr. Felice da Montecchio (February 1712), the “King of Tibet,” i.e. Lhasang Khan, had already assigned a location for the construction of a church and hospice in Lhasa, (*MITN* vol. 1, 48), the permission of the Dalai Lama was not obtained until 1724. The collection of Tibetan documents relating to the construction of the convent and church include: a privilege to build the hospice granted by the Dalai Lama (1724); the deed of sale of the land where the hospice would be built (8 April 1725); the construction permit for the same (21 May 1725); the permit to obtain construction material (1 July 1725) and hire workmen (6 July 1725), as well as a tax exemption for the land and people working at the hospice; see *MITN* (vol. 4, 186–192). Shortly after the completion of the building, a flood of the Lhasa River almost led to the demolition of the church by the inhabitants of Lhasa, who blamed its construction for the calamity. The church was saved by the intervention of the VII Dalai Lama, and, according to missionary records, the Tibetans eventually came to admire its beauty; see for example a letter from Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia written in 1733 where he states: “In Lhasa tutti i grandi e piccoli sono restati for di modo ammirati in aver lasciato il conventino con la sua chiesola, che dicevano *kyepò, kyepò* [skyid po], che al nostro modo di dire sarebbe a dire un paradisetto” [In Lhasa, all, the young and the old ones, were completely astonished in leaving the small convent with its little church, and they were saying *kyepò, kyepò*, which to our way of saying would be a little paradise]. After the closure of the Capuchin mission in 1745, the church was abandoned and eventually torn down, and its precise location is now unknown. It is plausible that the architecture could have resembled the typical Capuchin churches of the Marche region, an appearance that in Tibet would have been a novelty indeed.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Candler (1905, 3); Bell (1931, 152). Richardson (1998 [1977], 247–250) shows a plan of the Jokhang indicating the location of the bell. Note that Richardson calls the bell *Ye shu’i cong chen po* [the large bell of Jesus]; was this the way it was described to him?

⁶⁵ The state and location of the bell today are unknown to me. In 2004, a small group in search of traces of the Capuchin mission in Lhasa found the bell in a storage room of the Jokhang temple. They were able to make a mould, bring it to Italy, and use it to cast a new, identical bell. This replica now hangs in the village of Pennabilli (Marche, Italy), the town of Della Penna’s birth, where the ruins of his family castle are still visible. On the story of the bell, see Marini (2005, 87–95); for a report on the creation of the replica copy, see Proni (2005, 95–102); a photograph of the bell taken in Lhasa can be seen in Engelhardt (2005, 91).

⁶⁶ The four found so far are in the Tibetan-Italian manuscript, p. 99.

(Figure 6): “large bell” (Tib. *cong*; Ital. *campana grossa*), as the typical term for “bell” (*dril bu*) in Tibetan indicates normally a small, hand-held bell used mainly in ritual settings; “to fasten a large bell” (Tib. *cong ’dogs pa*; Ital. *attaccare una campana grossa*), “to make [someone] fasten a large bell” (Tib. *cong ’dogs bcug pa*; Ital. *far attaccare una campana grossa*), using a causative construction; and finally, in the same sequence in the dictionary, “to raise quite high” (Tib. *cung zad bteg*; Ital. *sollevare alquanto in alto*). These entries offer almost a visual painting of what happened on that particular day.

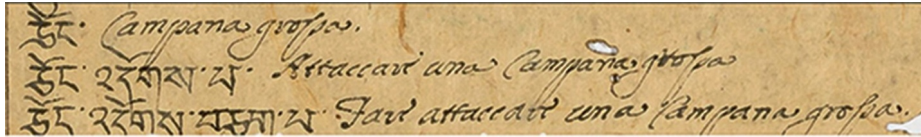


Figure 6: Entries for “large bell,” “to fasten a large bell,” and “to make [someone] fasten a large bell,” in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano], private collection, unnumbered folio.

The second example that should be mentioned is that of medicine. In fact, we have seen above that the Capuchins offered free medical services to anyone who needed them, both as a charitable act and ultimately as a way to approach prospective converts. The letters written by the missionaries and their other records testify to the fact that the Capuchins already travelled with a large quantity of medicines during their first mission.⁶⁷ Their experience in Lhasa confirmed that the practice of medicine was a good way to introduce themselves to the Tibetans. In letters from 1712, containing advice as to the ideal features of future missionaries to Tibet, the importance of training or education in medicine is highlighted.⁶⁸ In addition, they evidently became knowledgeable in the types of medicinal herbs and plants that could be found in Tibet, as the same letter from 1712 mentions that Domenico da Fano bought more than 50 rupees of medicine in a year, on account of the large number of patients he had to attend to (*MITN*, vol. 1, 58). Interestingly, although Da Fano had not actually studied medicine in Europe, his medical services were highly sought after, and he had been so successful in treating one of the Chinese ambassadors in Lhasa that he was nearly forced to accompany their party back to China.⁶⁹ The extent of the medical care provided must have been considerable, since a letter from 1719 specifies that Do-

⁶⁷ See *MITN* (vol. 1, 8–9), where it is described how medicinal pills attracted the attention of the local toll guards, who assigned large monetary value to them and consequently demanded substantial toll payments. Not only were pills brought from Italy, but on occasion the missionaries requested particular remedies in their letters to Italy. See for example a request for “alcarotto” (algarot, an emetic) in a letter by Gioacchino da Sant’Anatolia (*MITN*, vol. 1, 124).

⁶⁸ See *MITN* (vol. 1, 41, and 57). Engelhardt (2005, 58) has rightly remarked that this advice was not followed.

⁶⁹ See *MITN* (vol. 1, 92): “Il giorno seguente pretendevano | violentarmi andare alla corte di Pechino.”

menico da Fano spent almost 100 scudi in a year to buy medicines.⁷⁰ Another letter from 1724 reports that Fr. Gioacchino da Sant' Anatolia worked hard as a pharmacist, surgeon, and doctor, visiting more than fifty patients daily and gaining access to many important people on account of his medical expertise.⁷¹

While these accounts provide an overview of the situation in Lhasa, they tell us nothing about the specific illnesses encountered by the Capuchin “doctors.” The dictionary may shed light on this, as it contains a number of terms relating to medical conditions, which together may offer a more complete picture of the diseases encountered by the Capuchins during that period. At this preliminary stage, I have noticed language related to dropsy, to various urinary tract conditions, to bone dislocations, eye problems, and more. As part of the work on Della Penna’s dictionary, the medical entries gathered from the dictionary will be compared and collated with the information found in Domenico da Fano’s manual of medicine, that he wrote before 1714 as a practical handbook for future missionaries sent to Tibet.⁷²

Lastly, it is important to mention that the dictionary also provides a window into the importation of Western technology into Tibet, which occurred by way of the presentation of gifts from the Pope and other important members of the Church to the highest Tibetan authorities. The missionaries’ letters reveal that certain gifts were valued more than others; these included – as strange as it may seem to us, given the prominent role of nonviolence, or *ahimsā*, in Buddhism – weapons.⁷³ Western-style firearms were particularly sought after. For instance, when the baggage containing them was delayed en route between India and Tibet, the ruler of Tibet launched a search for the missing cargo. It was eventually discovered that the king of Nepal had kept them in his country, and finally agreed to release them only after a second official request from Tibet.⁷⁴

Similarly, the Capuchin friars also brought with them other products representing the latest European technological advances and novelties to Tibet. The dictionary includes what may be the first Tibetan translations for “microscope” (*me shel*),⁷⁵ using

70 See *MITN* (vol. 1, 115). In another letter, Da Fano reports that he was receiving eighty to ninety patients a day (*MITN* vol. 1, 87).

71 See *MITN* (vol. 1, 129). Initially, the fathers were reluctant to accept any reward for distributing medicines. However, they eventually learned that it was considered impolite not to accept the *khata*, a ceremonial scarf offered to them, so they began to accept these scarves, but continued to provide medicines to everyone without distinction; see *MITN* (vol. 1, 150).

72 *Istruzioni sopra la medicina per li novelli missionarii del Tibet, raccolte e praticate da fr. Domenico da Fano Cappuccino, missionario nel medesimo Regno*; see *MITN* (vol. 1, xcvi–xcvii).

73 On the ways in which the Buddhist administration of the Dalai Lamas confronted the question of state-endorsed violence, and especially warfare, see Travers and Venturi (2018).

74 See *MITN* (vol. 1, 86), a letter where it is stated that the king of Tibet had written to the king of Nepal inquiring for help in finding the baggage lost by the missionaries; and *MITN* (vol. 1, 93) where another letter reports that although the lost baggage had been found in Patna, the king of Nepal was reluctant to release it because he wanted to keep the firearms. The king of Tibet had to write again and insist to have them sent.

75 In the copy of the Italian-Tibetan manuscript, p. 662.

a pre-existing word that literally means “fire-glass.”⁷⁶ In addition, the dictionary lists the words for “to smoke” (*dud sprin 'tshubs pa*),⁷⁷ literally “to swirl, or whirl, smoke clouds,” and for tobacco (*tha ma kha*).⁷⁸ The letters of the missionaries indicate that these gifts were appreciated for their novelty and the prestige they conferred onto the recipient. The Capuchins even received special requests for “tobacco from Brasil to inhale” (*MITN*, vol. 1, 95), and for a water pump, telescopes, and thermometers.⁷⁹

To summarise, the Capuchin missionaries unexpectedly encountered in Tibet a sophisticated religious system with a vast canonical literature and an even greater body of scholarly commentaries and exegesis. By studying in a Tibetan monastery under the guidance of a Tibetan lama, Orazio della Penna became not only familiar with the fundamental literary works of Buddhism but also with the Tibetan philological tradition of reading, correcting, improving, and commenting on texts. This is evident in his dictionary, where he uses the Tibetan system for emendations to correct his orthographic mistakes in the Tibetan language (Figure 7). Although the cultural distance between Tibet and Italy was considerable, the mutual understanding between Della Penna and the Tibetans was perhaps closer than we might expect. This occurred both by virtue of the deeply religious worldview in which both sides were steeped, and because of Della Penna’s familiarity with Greek and Latin mythology, which provided him with an unexpected but very useful interpretive lens.

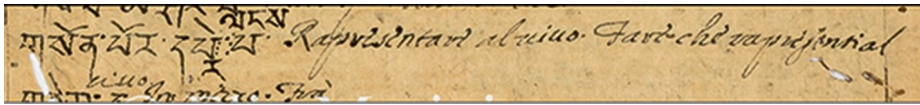


Figure 7: Example of Tibetan emendation (the final letter ra འ is inserted in the rest of the word with a short line of dots), used in Francesco Orazio della Penna, [Dizionario Tibetano-Italiano], private collection, unnumbered folio.

Last but not least, Della Penna’s studies in a Tibetan monastic university exposed him to a vast and nuanced vocabulary reflecting a variety of philosophical and spiritual ideas, some of which he could reapply to Christian concepts, given the necessary pro-

⁷⁶ It is glossed by Das (1991 [1902], 972), as: “1. a kind of crystal cool to the touch but emits fire when exposed to the rays of the sun, 2. the sun.”

⁷⁷ In the copy of the Italian-Tibetan manuscript, p. 462. Today it is commonly *tha mag 'then*.

⁷⁸ In the autograph Italian-Tibetan manuscript, p. 187. On the names of tobacco in Tibet (*tha mag*, *tha ma kha*, *tha mi kha*, *ta ma ka*, *tha ma khi*, etc.), and the different attitudes towards it in Tibetan literature, see Berounsky (2013).

⁷⁹ See *MITN* (vol. 1, 95). However, I have yet to find these terms in the dictionary. Given the sheer number of entries and the odd alphabetical order in both the Tibetan-Italian and, to a lesser extent, in the Italian-Tibetan sections, locating a specific entry is not possible in the same way as with modern dictionaries. A comprehensive list of all the entries will only be available once a full digital transcription of the dictionary is completed.

visos. Thus, Della Penna's dictionary is a unique testament to one of the earliest encounters between Christianity and Buddhism in the Land of Snows. Although the study of a dictionary may appear to be a dry endeavour, it is important to keep in mind that

language manuals and proverbs and individual words tell us a great deal about a culture, and particularly those parts of a culture that are not easily transferable. Cultures and languages are not algebraic equations that can jump across from one side of understanding to another. They are messy, and sticky, and grubby, and anarchic, and full of echoes and gullies and caves. (Titley, 2014/2015, 485)

Della Penna's dictionary exemplifies the above quote because its entries should not be seen as mere words but as windows opening on both Tibetan culture in the first half of the eighteenth century and on the experience of the Capuchin missionaries within Tibetan society. Through a careful analysis of the lemmas it is nearly possible to follow alongside Della Penna: what he saw, the situations he faced, what struck him positively or negatively, what he misunderstood or viewed with suspicion, and perhaps even how the passage of time and his increasing familiarity with Tibetan people refined his thought and his understanding. In this sense, the dictionary is a witness of the attempt to create a transfer between cultures. Although the mission to introduce Christianity in Tibet implied a one-sided transfer, to a certain extent such a transfer – imperfect and marred by prejudices – was reciprocal, as the two sides needed to learn about each other to interact. The dictionary of Della Penna, now retrieved at last, is a direct testimony of the first significant attempt at mutual communication between two vastly different religions. By using philological practices to study it, it is possible to obtain a clearer picture of how it was compiled, thus understanding better the relationship that formed and developed between the missionaries and Tibetan society. In particular, an approach of slow reading⁸⁰ of the dictionary's manuscripts allows us to reconnect their entries to known historical episodes or to information drawn from the missionaries' own letters and accounts.

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⁸⁰ See Pollock (2015, 7); this expression was first coined by Friedrich Nietzsche.

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