Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands
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Published by University of Washington Press

Wellens, Koen.
Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China.
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The Premi language today is spoken by approximately sixty thousand people more or less equally divided throughout the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. It is a Tibeto-Burman language and has two distinct dialects. The northern dialect is spoken in Sichuan and in the county of Ninglang in Yunnan. The southern dialect is spoken in the counties of Weixi, Lanping, and Lijiang, all in Yunnan. Because most Premi communities are made up of small, isolated clusters of villages spread over a large area and surrounded by speakers of other languages, local differences in pronunciation and vocabulary within the two main dialects are considerable. For example, in Bustling Township in Muli, the different autonyms “Ch’ruame” and “Premi” were used, both with the identical meaning “White People.”

Premi has no script, and unlike several of the other minority languages in China without a traditional script, no script based on the Latin alphabet has been developed since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Although it has been mentioned that some of the Tibetan texts used by Premi ritualists are in fact Premi texts written in the Tibetan script, the only texts I have encountered containing Premi words are genealogies.

The Premi terms as they appear in this book are rendered in the pronunciation of Bustling Township. Discrepancies in pronunciation or vocabulary between different areas of Bustling Township are mentioned in the text. The table on page xx shows only an approximate rendering of the pronunciation and is not linguistically precise. The Bustling Township pronunciation has both a rising and a falling tone, but because of uncertainty regarding the tone of some of the words and also to simplify
the transliteration, tone-marks are not included. Most letters correspond to their pronunciation in English, with the specifications or exceptions listed in the Pronunciation Guide (below). The glossary contains a list of the Premi words in the text and their meaning in English.

The pronunciation of Tibetan words often seems rather remote from the direct transcription in the Latin alphabet: for example, the word for “incarnate lama” should be properly transcribed sprul-sku, although its pronunciation approximates tulku. In order to increase the readability of the text, Tibetan words are rendered as closely as possible to their pronunciation in English. The glossary provides the proper Tibetan spelling according to the system of romanization developed by Turrel Wylie (1959) for all the Tibetan words in the text.

Chinese terms are romanized in pinyin. All the Chinese terms in the text along with the Chinese characters and English translations or explanations are in the glossary.

**Pronunciation Guide for Premi Words**

n  nasalization of the preceding vowel, like ns in French dans
br bilabial trill
jh  like j in French je
\' after a consonant, denotes a strong aspiration
h  a voiced aspirate
r  a voiced fricative retroflex
rr  like the Spanish r
hl  like ch in German ach, followed by an l.
hs  between English sh and s (like x in Chinese pinyin transcription)
 a  like a in German ja
u  like English o in who
o  like English o in log
ö  like Ö in German Öl
è  like English e in bed
é  like English a in lame
e  like English u in fun
i  like English ea in beat
ü  like ü in German fünf
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