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What's in a Tibetan Name? Toponymic Opacity along the Bird River in Sanjiangyuan National Park, China

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Abstract

Toponyms of the Tibetan Plateau have been scarcely studied. To help address that need, this study explores cross-cultural toponymy and phonetic opacity. The investigation focuses on toponyms containing the Tibetan word ཙྭ *tza* 'bird' that are used in Yulshul County in the Sanjiangyuan National Park, Qinghai Province. The research is based on personal interviews with 56 respondents and analyzing transliterations of bird-related toponyms for river, valley, and mountain names. Additionally, bird watching was used to gain important environmental insights. Twenty-nine bird-related toponyms were discovered and 59 bird species were recorded in the valley. There was no shared cognitive understanding of the toponyms *Bird River* and *Bird Trace Valley*. It is speculated that this result may be due to the coupling effect of pronunciation nuance in the local Tibetan dialect and misleading transliterations in Chinese. Overall, the findings tentatively suggest the systematic and consistent Chinese transliteration of local Tibetan toponyms related to birds is important for keeping the connotations of these toponyms alive.

Keywords: Tibetan, Chinese, transliteration, bird watching, onomastics, cross-cultural toponymy, Sanjiangyuan

Introduction

Toponyms are much more than labels of identification: they are personal and social depositories of the cultural and historical memory of the landscape (Sabet & Zhang 2020; Dall'Ò 2019; Alasli 2019; Lynch 2016). However, as toponyms become "opaque" and their original meanings begin to fade over time, they can begin to feel like arbitrary sounds, which may be explained in a variety of different ways or not at all (Radding & Western 2010). The same process can take place with transliterated toponyms. The effects of placenames with misunderstood or forgotten meanings is not only linguistic. The cultural and biological elements of the named landscapes may also become invisible to its people. The reason for this loss is clear. Toponyms are not merely labels. They represent knowledge about the referent and its place in the real world (Saeed 2016). In this way, toponyms can transubstantiate the physical and geographical into something of cultural and social experience (Tilley 1994). This paper examines the creative power of toponyms to, as Tuan (1991, 688) said: "call something into being, to render the invisible visible"on the Tibetan Plateau, a largely neglected area of onomastic research.[1] More specifically, the study explored a series of toponyms related to the Tibetan term for "bird" and the linguistic and biological subtleties associated with that word. The research employed a cross-cultural linguistic analysis of bird-related names which combines a naturalistic observation method of bird watching to investigate the significance of the names gathered in recognizing bird species and their habitats.

Ecological and Linguistic Background Information on the Study Site

The study was conducted between August 2020 and August 2022 along the *Tzachu River,* 'bird river', in *Tzashul kog Valley,* 'bird trace valley' of Yulshul County, in the Yulshul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, of China's Qinghai Province. Yulshul is located in the southwestern part of the province (see figure 2). It is the cultural, political, and economic heart of Sanjiangyuan National Park (SNP), one of the first five national parks formally established in China in 2021 (Zang et al. 2022). SNP is the largest national park in China and has the highest park elevation in the world (Zhang et al. 2023). The park stretches across the headwaters of three great rivers: the Yangtze, Lancang, and Yellow — hence the park's name *Sanjiangyuan* 'three river source'.

Flowing through the Tzashul kog Valley is the Tzachu River which originates from Tzala Mountain and flows into the main stem of the Yangtze River, the *Dri chu* in Tibetan or the *Tongtian He* in Chinese. The total length of the Tzachu River is approximately 60 km. Its confluence with the Tongtian He marks the beginning of the Jinshan section of the Yangtze. It is the main source of potable water for the town of Skyedgu mdo, the seat of both Yulshul County and Yulshul Prefecture on its middle reach. On the northern side of Tzala Mountain lies the Rongpo Wetland, which acts as a reservoir for the Tzachu. Rongpo is the second National Nature

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Reserve (NNR) established in Qinghai and the third most important breeding habitat for Black Necked Cranes (Farrington & Zhang 2013). Due to its international importance, this wetland was formally designated a Ramsar site in 2023 (Ramsar 2023).

Bird Mountain Red Mound separates the valley and the wetland (see figures 1 and 2). On the northwestern side of the mountain, in Rongpo, Farrington and Zhang's (2013) highest count of Black-necked Cranes was 216. Farrington et
al. (2013) counted 67 other bird species between October 2010 to July 2012. In 2016, the National Nature Reserve also observed 216 Black-necked Cranes and 84 other bird species (Wei et al. 2021). According to information gathered from the exhibition center of the NNR headquarters, by 2019, the numbers had increased to 300 Black-necked Cranes and 111 other bird species. Among all the species inhabiting the wetland, the Bar-headed Goose [*Anser indicus*] is the most numerous. On May 5, 2011, 8,282 geese were observed. Ruddy Shelducks [*Tadorna ferrginea*] were the second most numerous birds with 1,560 specimens counted (Farrington et al. 2013).

Figure 1: Bird Mountain Red Mound ཐུ་ལ་དམར་འབུམ། (Photo taken by the author in July 2022)

Linguistically, Tibetan is commonly divided into three major dialects: Amdo, Khams, and Ü-Tsang. According to Konchok (2017), the varieties spoken in the Yushul Prefecture belong to the Northern Khams dialect and are classified as Sga ba, Nangchen, Rdzastod, and Dristod "regiolects". Despite this formal division, their differences are minor enough that most adults can communicate without changing their normal speech. The Yushul Prefecture and the county were established only in the early 1950s and their capital is Skyedgu mdo which has become the destination for many regional immigrants. Historically, the study area belonged to the Nangchen Kingdom where the people mainly spoke the Sga ba regiolect. Today, immigrants and locals speak "standardized" Sga ba (Konchok 2017); and Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) is primarily used at schools, markets, and workplaces. Unlike some other prefectures in the province, Yulshul people predominantly prefer Putonghua over the Qinghai Chinese dialect. Therefore, most of the toponyms in the study area are originally Tibetan, pronounced in Sga ba, and transliterated into Chinese for official use in Putonghua.

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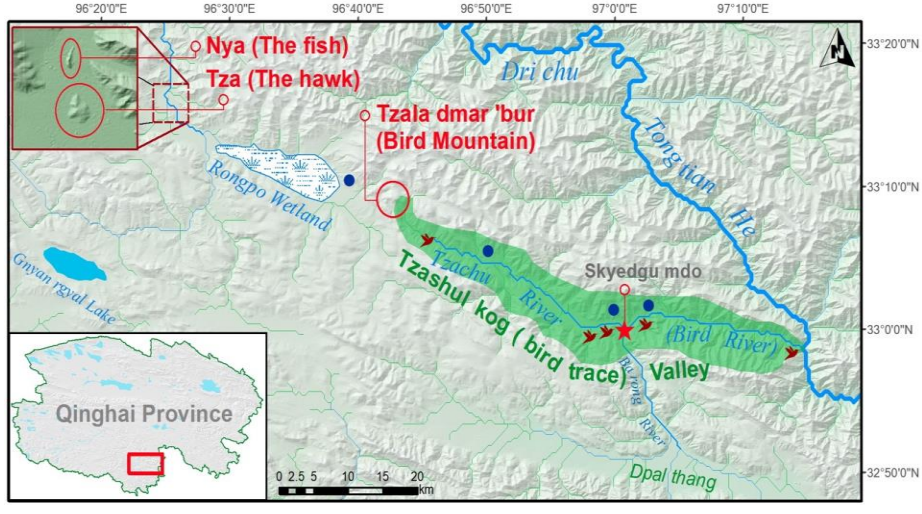

Figure 2: Map of the Study Area and Its Location in Qinghai Province.

Note: The blue dots approximate the locations of the in-person interview sites (i.e., Rongpo Dekyi ling, Karda Village, Skyedgu Upper Village, and Sangze Village). The bird icons from the Northwest to the Southeast of the Bird River designate the bird watching sites (i.e., Tzachu Headwaters, Erji Park, Yiji Park, Cholsang Park, and the Confluence Zone).

Research Methods

This study employed a triangulation approach in which information was gathered from three different sources: 1.) a survey; 2.) bird watching; and 3.) and archival records. In May 2022, 56 interviews were conducted both in person and online. The questionnaire gathered information about local perceptions of the Chinese transliterations of the Tibetan names for the river and the valley, which are 扎曲河 *zha qu hé* and 扎西科 *zhā xī kē*, respectively. In the survey, the question about the river name was intentionally open-ended to allow varying meanings of the Chinese transliteration in the Tibetan language. By comparison, the question about the valley name was multiple choice and provided four alternative answers, including a 'no idea' option. Finally, the survey contained a follow-up question to determine people's knowledge of the mythical origin of the valley name.

To reach more respondents efficiently, the questionnaires were distributed using the snow-ball technique through WeChat, a popular Chinese instant messaging and social media app. As many senior citizens do not have access to mobile phones or the internet, in-person interviews were conducted with older residents in four locations: Rongpo Dekyi ling Village, Karda Village, Skyedgu Upper Village, and Sangze Village. In total, 56 respondents, who ranged from 18 to 82 years of age, participated in this study. The demographics of the participants are summarized in table 1, below.

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Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Survey Respondents

Demographic Feature		Freq.	Percentage
Sex	F	30	53.57
	M	26	46.43
Age Range	18–20	2	3.57
	20–30	17	30.36
	30–40	17	30.36
	40–50	11	19.64
	50–60	0	0.00
	60–70	3	5.36
	>70	6	10.71
Profession	Teacher	15	26.79
	Civil Servant	10	17.86
	Farmer	6	10.71
	Doctor	5	8.93
	Retiree	3	5.36
	Police Officer	3	5.36
	Student	3	5.36
	Nurse	2	3.57
	Business person	2	3.57
	Conservationist	2	3.57
	Lawyer	1	1.79
	Free Lancer	1	1.79
	Nomad	1	1.79
	Media	1	1.79
	Photographer	1	1.79
Education Level	Bachelor	29	51.79
	Associate Degree	9	16.07
	Master	9	16.07
	No Formal Education	6	10.71
	High School	2	3.57
	Primary School	1	1.79

For the birding portion of the methodology, Nikon Monarch M5 8x42 binoculars and *The Field Guide to Birds of China* (Mackinnon 2006) were used to identify and record different bird species. The observations were made during birding walks in three main sites: 1.) Choslung Park at the start of the lower reach of the Tzachu; 2.) Yiji Park; and 3.) Erji Park at the end of the upper reach of the Tzachu. These sites were chosen because they are readily accessible. Each route is approximately 3 km long and takes around an hour. Every work day, the researcher visited one main site, from August to December 2020, and March to November 2021. From March to August 2022, the birding walks were reduced to once a week but four trips were made to the confluence of the Tzachu and the Tongtian He. In addition, an eight-day birding trip to the headwaters of Bird River was made. In total, 260 birding walks in the valley were conducted.

Finally, for the archival segment of the research method, the focus was on categorizing the bird-related place names from the book *Cultural Explanations of Toponyms of Villages and Townships in Yulshul County* (Tsering 2019). This work was supplemented by studying other unpublished manuscripts, where other bird-related toponyms not mentioned in Tsering's book were discovered and recorded.[2]

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Results

Making and Remaking of the River, the Valley, and the Mountain

According to Tsering (2019), the original Tibetan name for the river is བྱ་ཆུ *Byachu* in Wylie transliteration. Today, it is commonly known as 扎曲河 *zha qu hé* in Chinese. In the Sga ba dialect, *bya* is pronounced as *tza*. Therefore, the river is phonetically pronounced as *Tzachu*. In other major dialects, *bya* can also be pronounced as *sha*, *cha,* or *ya*. *Tza*-related place names in the text are in the Sga ba regiolect. The other Tibetan words are spelled with the Tibetan and Himalayan Library simplified Wylie romanization system, which emphasizes the accuracy of the script over phonetics. In the tables of this article, the *tza*-related place names are presented using Wylie transliteration. The character *qu* phonetically stands for *chu*, which means 'river' in Tibetan. At the same time, *hé,* too, means 'river' in Chinese (Sun & Jiang 2023). For Tibetan placenames, it is not uncommon for cross-linguistic combinations to be used. For example, the toponym '*Qu hé*' exemplifies a common Chinese transcription of a Tibetan toponym. The analytical question for this investigation, however, centerd on the dialectal pronunciation, transliteration, and connotation of the Tibetan word ཙ "tza". According to the Tibetan dictionary *Dagyig Gsarsgron* (2010), *tza* has several meanings: as a verb, it is the future tense of 'do'; when it is affixed with the particle "wa", it means 'work'; however, as a noun, it popularly means 'bird'. Of those meanings, 'bird' is of particular interest in the toponymic context.

For transliteration, some locals in the region studied use 杂"zá" instead of 扎"zhā", "zhá", or "zā".[3] The pronunciation of "zá" is closer presumably to the original Tibetan pronunciation of the word "tza". The complexity presented by"zha" and "zá" can be seen in the following example. The two different characters are used for the county *Rzastod* and the township *Rzastod*. The two Tibetan place names are written in the same way but are transliterated differently as 杂多县 *zá duō xiàn* and 扎朵镇 *zhā duǒ zhèn,* respectively. Despite their similarities in spelling, these two place names refer to two different river systems. While the Lancang River is referred to as *zá duō*, the toponym *zhā duǒ* refers to the Yalong River, a major tributary of the Yangtze River. Lancang River itself is commonly written as རྩ་ཆུ *Rzachu*, but some believe it is called ཟླ་ཆུ *Zlachu*, 'the Moon River'. The people of Rzastod County pronounce *zla* 'moon' as *za*, similar to the way they pronounce *rza* 'rocky'. In the lower reaches of Langcang in the Chamdo Region, people pronounce *zla,* the word for 'moon,' as *la*. *Among these speakers,* the term གཙང་ *gtsang* is used to refer to river instead of *chu* 'water or river'. Consequently, the Chinese name for the Mekong River, *Lancang*, is a transcription of *Zlagtsang*.

The county seat, ཡུལ་ཕུག་ཐང *Tzapug Tang* 'bird cave flatland' is transcribed as 萨呼腾 *sà hū téng*. In this instance, the term "tza" is transcribed as *sà* to distinguish it from "rza" meaning *Lancang* or 'rocky' (see table 2). Phonetically, however, "sà" is closer to the Tibetan word in Rzastod regiolect. What makes the situation even more complex is the fact that people in Yulshul may also use the transliteration of "zha" and "zá" interchangeably for other Tibetan words such as རྩ *rza* 'rocky', བྲག *brag* 'cliff', and བཀྲ *bkra* 'auspicious' (see table 2). Across the geographic plateau, the word "bkra" is rendered as "zhā". This convention cam be seen in the popular greeting "bkrashis bdelegs" is nationally accepted as 扎西德勒 zhā xī dé lè which means 'Good Luck and Good Health" in English. It is against this maze of transliteration that this study collected place names featuing ཙ *tza* 'bird'. The results of that search are presented in table 2.

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Table 2: Translational Misdirects of *bya* (*tza* in Sga ba dialect) from "zha" and "zā" in other Toponyms in Yulshul.

Tibetan Toponyms	In Wylie	Chinese Translation	In Pinyin	English Translation
ཇ་ཆུ།	Bya chu	扎曲河	zhā/zhá/ zā	Bird River
ཇ་ཉ་རྫེ་ཐ།	Bya nya Village	杂娘村	zá	Bird Fish Village
ཇ་ཤུལ་ཁོག	Bya shul kog	扎西科	zhā xī	Bird Trace Valley
ཇ་ཕུག་ཐང་།	Bya pug Thang	萨呼腾	sà	Bird Cave Flatland
ཇ་སྟོད།	Bya stod	扎/杂多/朵	zha/za	Upper Bird
རྫ་སྟོད་རྫོང་།	Rzastod County	杂多县	zá	Upper Langcang County
རྫ་སྟོད་ཞང་།	Rzastod Township	扎朵镇	zhā/zhá/ zā	Upper Yalong River Township
རྫ་རྩེན་ཞང་།	Rzachen County	扎青乡	zhā/zhá/ zā	Big Rocky Mountain Township
རྫ་མཆོག་སྤྱང་ཚོ།	Rzachok Village	扎秋村	zhā/zhá/ zā	Good Rocky Village
རྫ་ཁྲི་རྫེ།	Rzakhri Village	杂扯社	zá	Ten Thousand Rockies Village
བག་དཀར་སྒང་རྫེ།	Bragdkargang Village	扎尕岗	zhā/zhá/ zā	White Cliff Hill Village
བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཕོ་བྲང་།	Bkrashis pobrang	扎西颇章	zhā xī	Auspicious Palace
བཀྲ་ཤིས་དར་ཐང་།	Bkrashis Dartang	扎西达通	zhā xī	Auspicious Flourishing Flatland

Note: In the Pinyin Column, only the first character is in Pinyin. The only excpetion is *zhā xī*.

As can be seen in Table 2 above, the terms "stod" and "smed" are often used in Tibetan toponyms gathered to indicate the upper and lower reaches of rivers and valleys. For instance, at the core headwaters of Sanjiangyuan, there are three critical counties: *Rza**stod*** 'Upper Lancang', *Dri**stod*** 'Upper Yangtze', and *Rma**stod*** 'Upper Yellow'. These two toponymic terms were also found to be used in formations with "tza". For example, the toponyms *Tza**stod*** 'Upper Bird'and *Tza**smed*** 'Lower Bird' were used by elder respondents to refer to the upper and lower reaches of the Bird River. The pronunciation of *Tzastod* could be easily confused with *Rzastod* meaning 'Upper Lancang' or 'Upper Yalong').

However, there are written records that show *Tzachu* being used by local speakers to mean 'bird river', *Tzala* 'bird mountain' or 'bird pass', and *Tzashul kog* 'bird trace valley' (Tsering 2019). Along with these bird toponyms, in and around the Bird Trace Valley, 29 more place names associated with 'bird' were identified. The toponyms are listed in table 3. Most of these names are sorted from Tsering's Book (2019). *Bya*, in the Wylie, is pronounced as *tza* and *byi'u* or *bye'u* as *tzee* in Sga ba. In the column labelled "Chinese Translation", the content in the brackets is used interchangeably with the non-Bracketed. The abbreviation NIA stands for "no information available".

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Table 3: Toponyms along Bird River Related to 'bird'.

Toponyms (Tib)	In Wylie	Chinese Translation	Meaning
ཇ་ཆུ།	Bya chu	扎曲	Bird River
ཇ་ཤུལ་ཁོག	Bya shul kog	扎西科	Bird Trace Valley
ཇ་ལ་དམར་འབུར།	Bya la dmar 'bur	红土山	Bird Mountain Red Mound
ཇ་ལག་ཆུ	Bya lag chu	杂郎曲	Bird Leg River
ཇ་ཤུལ་ཐང་།	Bya shul thang	扎西唐	Bird Trace Plain (Flat)
ཇ་ཉ།	Bya nya	杂娘村	Bird and Fish
ཇ་ལག་ལུང་པ།	Bya lag lung ba	杂郎沟	Bird Leg Valley
ཇ་ཚང་ཁུག	Bya tshang kug	扎仓科 （杂从库）	Bird Nest Nook
ཇ་ལྷོ་ཁུལ་ཆུང	Bya lho kul chuang	扎南小区	South Bird Quarter
ཇ་ཚང་ཐོ་ཡུ།	Bya tshang tho yu	杂仓桃于/扎村托弋	Bird Nest Hill
ཇ་ཚང་ཐོ་ཡུ་ལྟག་མ།	Bya tshang tho yu ltag ma	杂仓桃于当玛	Upper Brid Nest
ཇ་ཚང་ཐོ་ཡུ་བར་མ།	Bya tshang tho yu bar ma	杂仓桃于巴玛	Middle Bird Nest
ཇ་ཚང་ཐོ་ཡུ་ཞབས་མ།	Bya tshang tho yu zhabs ma	杂仓桃于夏玛	Lower Bird Nest
ཇ་ཚང་ཐང་།	Bya tshang thang	杂仓唐	Bird Nest Plain (Flat)
ཇ་ཚང་སྒེའུ།	Bya tshang sge'u	杂仓格	Bird Nest Mound
ཇ་སྟོད།	Bya stod	NIA	Upper Bird
ཇ་སྨད།	Bya smed	NIA	Lower Bird
ཨྱི་ཆུ།	Byi'u chu	子琼	Little Bird River
ཨྱི་ཆུ་ནང་།	Byi'u chu nang	子琼沟	Little Bird River Valley
ཨྱི་ཆུང་སྒེའུ།	Byi'u chu sge'u	曾琼格	Little Bird Mound
ཨྱི་ཆུང་ནང་།	Byi'u chung nang	籽琼囊/贼羌囊	Little Bird Enclave
ཨྱི་ཆུང་མགོ་མ།	Byi'u chung mgo	曾琼果嘛	Little Bird Head
རྒོད་ཚང་མ་མོ།	Rgod tshang ma mo	NIA	Vulture Nest Ewe
ཨུག་ཚང་བན་རྒན།	'Ug tshang ban rgan	NIA	Owl Nest Old Monk
ཨུག་ཚང་བྲག(བག) སྙ།	'Ug tshang bragsna	NIA	Owl Nest Cliff
ཁྲ་འགུ (མཚོན་གུ)	Khra 'gu	禅古	Falcon Head
ཕོ་རོག་ཚང་ཁ	Pho rog tshang kha	NIA	Raven Nest
རྒོད་མགོ	Rgod mgo	NIA	Vulture Head
གོ་ཝ	Gowo	羔喔	Bearded Vulture

Among these toponyms displayed above, 18 out of 28 start with the word "tza" 'bird', 5 with "tzee" 'little bird', and 6 with the names of the following bird species: Vulture, Pigeon, Falcon, Owl, and Bearded Vulture. The terms *tza* (*bya*) and *tzee* (*byi'u*) are frequently used terms for birds. What appears to determines which of these words is applied is the size of the bird. According to *the Stories of Tza and Tzee* (Beri 2013), when the *tzee* birds were called for a meeting to vote for a *tzee* king, the Sparrow said, "Call for all the *tzees* from the biggest Streaked Rosefinch [*Carpodacus rubicilloides*] to the smallest Cricket". After they chose the bat as the king of *tzees*, the bat said, "Among all the participants, the Pigeon [*Columba rupestris*] is the biggest thus to report to the king of *tzas*, the Cuckoo [*Cuculus canorus*]". Thus, birds that are smaller than the Streaked Rosefinch are in the category of *tzee*, and birds that are bigger than the Pigeon are called *tza*. Pigeons themselves are on the boundary line between the two categories. Overall, the study revealed a degree of inconsistency in transliteration of toponyms that featured *tzee*. Out of 5 toponyms, 3 completely different characters are used: 1.)子 *zi;* 2.)籽 *zǐ* ;and 3.)曾 *céng*.

During birding walks along the Bird River in the Bird Trace Valley, 59 bird species were identified. These sightings included the Steppe Eagle [*Aquila nipalensis*], which is endangered according to the Red List of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Category (2022). Among 59 species identified in this study, 22 species are resident, 30 are summer migratory and 7 are wintering birds. In the early summer, the Common Swift [*Apus apus*], Fork Tailed Swift [*Apus pacificus*], Barn Swallow [*Hirundo rustica*] soared in huge numbers over the Choslung Park section of Bird River. The Ibisbill [*Ibidorhynchidae struthersii*] is resident and the most territorial. When the ravens (*Corvus corax*) return to the area in winter, the boulder patches in the river become noisy battlegrounds as they compete against the Ibisbill for territory.

Despite the great number of toponyms containing 'bird' and the large number of bird species in and around the study area, of the 56 survey respondents, 31 (55.36%) answered they had no idea what the toponym *zha qu hé* stands for in the local dialect. Of those who answered, four wrote "Lancang River", which is called *Rzachu* as mentioned previously. Five others (8.93%) said *zha qu hé* means *Rzachu* and indicated the toponym

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got its name from a rocky mountain. Three others (5.36%) wrote *zá qu* to correct the pronunciation from *zha*, but provided no further explanation. In contrast, two respondents (3.57%) mistook *zha* being derived from "zhā xī" which appears in the greeting "**zhā xī** dé lè" or "tashi delek" in Tibetan; these participants asserted that the name *zha qu hé* means 'auspicious river'. Only 11 people (19.64%) answered that *zha qu hé* stands for 'bird river'. Even among this group, there was some uncertainty. For example, one marked his answer with a question mark; and another indicated that he had never heard an explanation for why the toponym was associated with birds.

Regarding the name of the valley, there are three options provided in Tibetan. The first option was *Tzashul kog*, which stands for 'bird trace valley'. The second was *Bkrashis kog*, meaning 'auspicious valley'. The third was *Rzachu kog*, which translates into 'the valley with the river that came from a rocky mountain'. Out of the 56 respondents, 20 people (35.71%) chose option 1; 19 people (33.93%) chose option 2; and 16 people (28.57%) chose option 3. The pronunciation of "rza" (rocky) also seemed to have affected the participants' understanding of the river name as well. This result may be due to their familiarity with the previously mentioned major river systems of the Lancang and Yalong. Interestingly, twenty respondents chose the valley name *Bird Trace*. However, in the following question, where they were asked about the mythological origin of the name, 44 respondents (78.57%) were unaware of the myth. This number included twenty-seven (48.21%) respondents with advanced university degrees. This finding is particularly important as highly educated members of society (e.g., teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers, business leaders, conservationists, civil servants, nature photographers, and lawyers) are often the most influential members of the community. Thus, their accurate use of toponyms for their local environment is important in preventing potentially harmful linguistic substitutions (Bourdieu 1991).

Remarkably, the oldest interviewee in the study, an 82 year old man from the lower reach of the Sangze Village recalled a completely different name for the valley, རྩ་ཆུ་སྐོང་ *Tsachu kog* 'grass water valley'. This was the only time this name was mentioned throughout the study. According to the respondent, the valley was thought to be a fertile pasture, rich in grass and water. For that reason, people called it *Tsachu kog* 'grass water valley'. Given his age and the phonological closeness of *tza* 'bird' and *tsa* 'grass', this name is credible. However, it cannot be easily confirmed as there are no written records found which verified this account.

Three other important names related to birds were uncovered in the investigation. However, none of them contain the words "tza" or "tzee", or name a specific species of bird. The first is *Rongpo*, the name of the Ramsar site. According to one of the respondents, *Rongpo*, initially known as *Rongspo* 'valley migrants,' means 'the land of migrants (birds and gods) from the lower valleys'. Relative to the valley, Rongpo is widely studied given its ecological importance and national and international status. Yet, the toponym itself has not gained the deserved public and academic attention (Ramsar 2023; Wei et al. 2021; Farrington and Zhang 2013). The second name was *Skyedgu*, the name of Yulshul county and prefecture seat. This name literally means 'nine or all biological beings'. It is commonly analyzed within the context of religion and anthropocentrism, but rarely from a biodiversity approach that takes into acount the number of contributing bird species. Lastly, the third name was *Gnyan rgyal* 'the king of the *gnyang* spirits', the name of the lake on the west side of the wetland (see figure 2). On the surface, this name has nothing to do with birds, at least in the Tibetan language. However, one of the Chinese transliterations for the lake is 野鸡 *yě jī*, the colloquial term for the Ring-necked Pheasant [*Phasianus* colchicus].[4]

Discussion and Conclusion: The Transliteration of Tibetan Toponyms

This study has its limitations. First, although it used a triangulation approach, it has a relatively small sample size. To improve validity, it would be important to increase the sample size. Second, it is worth noting that this research predominantly considers the Sga ba dialect in the Yulshul Prefecture. Future investigations could consider other regional and major Tibetan dialects. In addition, including the transliteration practices of other regions of the Tibetan Plateau may enrich our understanding of Tibetan Chinese cross-cultural toponymy and phonetic opacity. Despite these limitations, this study has provided many important insights.

On the basis of this investigation, it appears that the pronunciation nuances in Tibetan dialects and their counterpart transliteration have the potential to obscure and perhaps accelerate the opacity of a toponym's original meaning. This process appears to have taken place for the bird-related toponyms in Yulshul. As shown in this study, many people could not make sense of the name *Bird River* through the single character transliteration, be it *zha* or *zá*. The people investigated tended to make etymological guesses and attempted to infer the original meaning of the Tibetan word based on associations with Chinese characters from other toponyms. As a result, *Bird Trace Valley* was largely misinterpreted as 'auspicious valley'. This mistake is

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believed to have been caused by that fact that the transliteration contains two characters from the popular greeting. As a result, the cultural origin of the valley name is erased along with the crucial biological 'trace' of the original name.

According to Richard Coates (2020), name makers can create touristic expectations of whole communities through packaging and branding for those names that have no "inherent synchronic linguistic meaning" or "sense". He continued to say that because these names are without senses, their connotations are easily manipulatable and therefore useful for tourism and marketing. This may be true for some alphabetical languages, but the statement is fundamentally flawed in the case of Chinese transliterated names. Chinese characters originate from a pictographic system. Whilet in alphabetical languages a word unit can have several syllables; in pictographic languages, one character is a single syllable or a morpheme (Ziyu et al. 1983) which has one of more meaning(s), pronunciation(s), and tone(s). For instance, 鸟 can be read as either "niǎo" for 'bird' or "diǎo" for the 'male genital organ'; the character 鸡 or "jī" evolved from the shape of a rooster and stands for 'chicken'.

Given its pictographic nature of Chinese, many individual or combined characters present their meaning visually rather than accoustically. For example, consider the transliteration of the *Tzanya* 'bird fish' on the northern end of the wetland (figure 1). Its Chinese name is 杂娘 *zá niáng*. At first glance, people may mistake it for 杂粮 which means 'whole grain'. This confusion is understandable as 娘 "niáng" and 粮 "liáng" look very much alike with similar radicals but the two have subtle differences in pronunciation unless they are pronounced in the Sichuan Chinese dialect. Adding to the potential confusion is the fact that the latter is in frequent use. By comparison, the term "niáng" is an older character for 'mother or woman', and "za" means 'miscellaneous, mixed, various or bastard'. As a result, visitors unaware of the original Tibetan name, the geographical features of the landscape (figure 1), and its mythical makings, assume the toponym means 'bastard mother'.

To further explain this point, let us return to *Gynan rgyal Lake*, 野鸡海 *yě jī hǎi*. The base letter of the Tibetan word *gnyan* is 'n'. Let us now substitute 野 "yě" with 鸟 "niǎo", since it starts with the initial consonant "n". Now, the lake's name is 鸟鸡 *niǎo jī* 'bird chicken'. Phonetically, our substitute is much closer to the Tibetan word. Many who are illiterate in Chinese might guess that the name has something to do with birds, especially when they consider the characters' evolutions through different Chinese dynasties up to this simplified version. Let's experiment even further. Let us now substitute 野 "yě" with 年 "nián" 'year'. When this is done, the result is 年鸡 "*nián jī*", the chicken that is traditionally butchered for the Chinese spring festival feast. In sum, 'wild chicken' is not only phonetically inappropriate but semantically misleading.

To complicate things further, the prefecture name ཡུལ་ཤུལ *Yulshul* 'residential trace' shares the last word "shul" with *Tza**shul*** 'bird trace' and is transliterated as 玉树 "yushu" 'jade tree'. Formally, *Yulshul* is no longer in use. Instead, a transliteration of the Chinese transliteration, ཡུས་ཧྲུ *Yus hru'u,* is used. However, the two words lack semantic meaning. This practice has the effect of silencing the cultural stories of the landscape (Helander 2009).[5] This issue is not restricted to the Tibetan context but is germane in many other parts of the world.

For example, in New Zealand, the pronunciation of place names has been a major linguistic battleground between the Māori and the Pākehā. For instance, the Māori place name *Towpo* 'The great garment of Tia' is pronounced as "taupo", "tawpo", "tarpo", and "tupo" in English. The "official" English name *Taupo* has now been changed to *Taupō*. The addition of the macron is to assist in the pronunciation and to keep the stories behind the toponym alive. The simple act of adding a diacritic can make a huge difference (RNZ 2019). This is just one of innumerable examples worldwide.

To help preserve these cultural landscapes, there are increasing efforts to systematize the renderings of opaque names in marginalized languages to recognize the culture and history embedded in the toponyms (Kharusi & Salman 2011; Kearns & Berg 2002). However, there is much more work to be done. Currently, given the unequivocal ecological significance of Sanjiangyuan National Park, there is a pressing need to systematically render the original Tibetan toponyms accurately and consistently.[6] The necessity for this action is encapsulated in an old Chinese proverb which says: "If the name is not correct, then the spoken words do not ring true". Although this proverb originally refers to titles, it can be applied more broadly to any name. Accurate names not only make the invisible visible, but also reveal once hidden truths. The importance of accurate toponyms is not limited to humans, however.

As shown in this research, Tibetan toponyms encompass various elements of nature. Through texts and interviews, this investigation found that many bird-related toponyms in the study area etymologically support the significance of birds to the valley, the river, and the mountain. Many months of bird watching also confirmed that these places are significant flyways and habitats for birds. However, many residents are losing the emotional and linguistic connection between the sound "tza" and 'bird'. If more visitors to the areas knew that the original Tibetan names referred to birds, they might become interested in birdwatching and gain more appreciation for these colorful creatures. Seeing raptors hovering in the valley, water birds swimming and diving in the river, Cattle Egrets [*Bubulcus ibis*] standing on the banks, and singing *tzees* chirping in the bush

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might in turn give visitors a mesmerizing and unforgettable experience that would motivate them to protect this precious ecology. The area's abundance of bird-related names highlights the diverse avian population,[7] which makes these places more meaningful to the community, visitors, and others alike. Any displacement and the cultural ignorance of name-making and place-making due to phonetic opacity is a significant loss of Chinese national cultural resources.

Notes

1. Anthropologists, geographers, and ecologists have studied Tibetan traditional ecological knowledge (Mills 1998; Huber & Pedersen 1997). However, their focus has largely been on the concept of sacred sites (Woodhouse et al. 2015; Shen et al. 2012; Salick et al. 2007).
2. For instance, the place name *Raven Nest* was found in the autobiography of Yechen, the former leader of Karda Village (Yechen n.d.).
3. To assist in reader understanding, throughout this article, the Pinyin for Chinese phrases were marked with tones; characters with only one tone were given a single tone mark; and characters with multiple tones were left without marks.
4. In the literal sense, this term means 'wild chicken', and has two other derogatory connotations: a 'streetwalker'; and an 'illegal operation'.
5 However, an alternative cultural explanation of the name is that it stands for the residential trace of the Gaskyalo Clan of the legendary Kingdom, Ling. The Gaskyalo Clan was ruled by the Queen Drumo, who was considered to be the most beautiful and well-mannered woman in the whole kingdom. This alternative explanation casts *Yulshul* as an honorable clan and a place of beauty and situates it among 17 other *shuls* or clans in the pastoral areas of Khams (Konchok 2017).
6 In principle, the systematic transliteration of Tibetan proper names into Chinese might benefit from applying the methodological tradition already developed for rendering English proper names into Chinese to maintain consistency. To be successful, it would be necessary to consider syllabic acceptability of the names in Tibetan (Liang 2019; Wan & Verspoor 1998).
7 In turn, the diversity of the bird species that inhabit an area may be suggestive of the number of avian-related place names.

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