

Massive new Tibetan dictionary will help protect against Chinese encroachment

by [Chakmo Tso](#)

December 20, 2024



US Rep. Jim McGovern (right) looks on as Geshe Lobsang Monlam (second from right), and Sikyong Penpa Tsering (left) attend a ceremony for the presentation of the Tibetan Grand Monlam Dictionary to the Library of Congress on December 12. (Palden Gyal/Radio Free Asia)

A new 223-volume Tibetan dictionary containing definitions of over 300,000 words presented to the Library of Congress last week will play a key role in preserving the Tibetan language amid China's assimilation policies in the region, US lawmakers and advocates said.

The Monlam Grand Tibetan Dictionary project, which began in 2012 under the advice and guidance of the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual leader, took 150 people working over nine years to complete. It is one of the largest dictionaries in the world.

The project was overseen by the Monlam Tibetan IT Research Centre in Dharamsala, India. The education software development firm founded in 2012 is funded by the Dalai Lama Trust, the Tibet Fund and the United States Agency for International Development.

The dictionary is written entirely in the Tibetan script.

All 223 volumes in hardback format were presented to the Library of Congress in Washington DC, on December 12 as a “gift to the US government and the American people.”

A free digital version of the dictionary is available on various iOS and Android apps.

US Congressman Jim McGovern, a Massachusetts Democrat who was at the ceremony, called it “an incredible resource that will help preserve the Tibetan language for future generations” while highlighting China’s attempts to phase out Tibetan, such as forcing Tibetan children to attend Mandarin-only boarding schools.

Geshe Lobsang Monlam, founder and chief executive officer of Monlam Tibetan IT Research Centre, said the project was a “true community effort.”

It “involved the participation of many editors, scholars and heads of different Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions, which is why I take great pride in saying that this dictionary is truly representative of Tibetan culture,” Monlam said at the event.

“It will benefit not just the Tibetan people in our preservation of our language but also others, including in the US and China, in imparting our ancient knowledge and culture,” he said.

The dictionary was given to the Library of Congress because “Tibetans have shared a long friendship and shared values with the American people,” he said. “We have also enjoyed the support of the US government in the preservation of our culture, language, and religious traditions.”

“This dictionary serves as proof of the fruits of that relationship and support,” he said.

Other speakers and guests at the event included Tibetan government-in-exile leader Sikyong Penpa Tsering, International Campaign for Tibet President Tencho Gyatso, and representative Namgyal Choedup of the Office of Tibet in North America.

The dictionary project began as an effort to bridge the gap between the modern and ancient by developing the vocabulary and terminologies necessary in the Tibetan language to keep pace with the changing world and technological advancements, Monlam said.

The dictionary preserves the unique lexicographical system in Tibetan while incorporating the standard principles and the practices of modern dictionaries from other countries, said Monlam, a Buddhist monk, scholar, and IT innovator.

The Monlam Tibetan IT Research Centre has been on the cutting edge of preserving the language. In 2023, it created software that uses AI [to translate written and spoken Tibetan into English, Chinese, and other languages](#) faster and more accurately than any existing translation software. Work on the dictionary is expected to continue for the next decade as the team continues to update it.

The Library of Congress's Tibetan Collection, established in 1901, is one of the largest in the West, including the entire corpus of Tibetan literature from the 8th century to the present. These include Buddhist and Bon-po philosophical texts and their commentaries, historical biographies, musical notations, the collected works of over 200 major Tibetan authors, bibliographies, and texts on linguistics, modern science, the social sciences, and modern literature.

The library's Tibetan Collection currently holds 17,000 treatises, 3,600 rare volumes, 57 different periodicals and over 15,000 photographic prints. —RFA Tibetan

Additional reporting by Palden Gyal and Yeshe Tashi.

Copyright © 1998-2023, RFA. Used with the permission of Radio Free Asia, 2025 M St. NW, Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036. <https://www.rfa.org>.