Some Trends in the History of Western Tibetology

Klaus Karttunen

1. Preface

Long ago, around 1860, a German student decided to take Sanskrit because with Sanskrit he could have a certain and rather good career as a university professor. In our times, no one would select Sanskrit for that reason. Tibetology was never an option in this sense – the great majority of Western Tibetologists have also had to do something else in order to survive. This has been a check to the number of competent Tibetan scholars, but also meant a beneficial difference in viewpoints as Tibet has been studied by Indologists as well as Sinologists, by linguists, historians and Buddhologists. But when we consider the history of Western Tibetology from its beginnings, we also note a geographical factor. It reflects the political interests of world powers in Tibet, but also gives a clue to the different viewpoints of early travellers and scholars. It was not without certain significance, whether information came via India, China, or Russia. In this paper I make an attempt to trace the history and significance of these different trends.[1]

2. The Southern Perspective

The Himalayas are often represented as a barrier, but there are routes over them and many ancient ties connect Tibet and India. High passes lead from Kashmir to Ladakh, from Kathmandu Valley to Central Tibet and from Darjeeling to gTsang po Valley. The most tremendous factor in early Tibetan history was, of course, the arrival of Buddhism from India, but there were also political and commercial contacts. Later on, these routes were also followed by European travellers. The First Phase in their history was the age of the Missionaries.

2.1 The Southern Perspective. First Phase: Missionaries

The first Christian missionaries we know to have visited Tibetan territory,[2] came in 1624, when Antonio d'Andrade (1580–1634) led a group of Portuguese Jesuits to Tsaparang in Western Tibet. The mission there lasted eleven years and was for a while extended to Central Tibet (Shigatse), but was soon forgotten. A rare Portuguese book by Andrade (*Novo descobrimento do Grão Cataio ou des reinos do Tibete.* Lisboa 1626, never seen by me) and a few letters in

[1] I have earlier discussed the history of Tibetology in my Finnish book (Karttunen 1992: 239ff). For a more detailed account see e.g., MacGregor 1970 and Hopkirk 1982. Dr. Marlene Broemer has kindly checked my English.

[2] Some Medieval Christian travellers and missionaries to China and Mongolia had obtained some knowledge of Tibet, but they never visited the country (Laufer 1914).

Jesuit publications were all that remained from it, before modern scholars delved into its history, partly from manuscript sources.

The next Westerners to cross the Himalayas from India to Tibet came more than 70 years later. In 1708 Italian Capuchines established a mission in Lhasa, but had to withdraw after three years. When they returned in 1716 they found a Jesuit already established there. The story and the importance of Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733) is well known. With one companion he crossed the mountains to Ladakh and after much hardship arrived at Lhasa, where he soon started an earnest study of Tibetan language and literature. Tibetology would have started much earlier, had his works been published then, but they remained as manuscripts in Italian libraries and were only published in the 20th century.

The Capuchines, too, contributed to the knowledge of Tibet. They were allowed to work in Lhasa until 1745, and after this, the mission worked in Kathmandu Valley and North India. The most important scholar among them was Cassiano da Macerata (lay Giovanni Beligatti, 1708–1791). It was he who gave to Antonio Agostino Giorgi (1711–1797) the material, which made his *Alphabetum Tibetanum* (1762) useful despite the fruitless speculation of the author. Cassiano also contributed the Devanagari (1771) and Tibetan (1773) volumes to the alphabet series of the Propaganda. The last fruit of the Capuchin scholarship is the so-called Schröter's dictionary,[3] originally compiled by Orazio Della Penna (1680–1745), added to by others, but badly distorted by incompetent editors.

2.2 The Southern Perspective. Second Phase: Travellers

In the second half of the 18th century the British established their colonial power in India and soon also became interested in the country beyond the Himalayas. They were interested in potential commerce and the mineral wealth of Tibet. Thus we find a number of travellers, diplomats and spies visiting, or attempting to visit Tibet. The first were George Bogle (1746–1781) and Samuel Turner (1749–1792), who visited Shigatse in 1774 and 1783 respectively, while Thomas Manning (1772–1840) succeeded in visiting Lhasa in 1803. But after this the border was closed and Tibet became the country of wild rumours and fantasies. Adventurers and missionaries tried to penetrate it, mostly in vain, as we can read from Peter Hopkirk's fascinating book *Trespassers on the Roof of the World*.

There was one special case with enormous importance for the development of Tibetology. Of course, I mean that of the Hungarian traveller Alexander or Szandor Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), who was actually looking for the roots of Hungarians, when he arrived in Ladakh in 1823 and started the study of Tibetan. In 1831 he came to Kolkata and was granted a modest scholarship

[3] *A Dictionary of the Bhotanta or Boutan language*. Serampore 1826. On this and other dictionaries, see Simon 1964.

(then called pension) for preparing Tibetological books. For a while his grammar and dictionary and other works were the only reliable guides to Tibetan literature. He planned to visit Tibet proper and Lhasa before returning to Hungary, but died on the way in Darjeeling.[4]

Some information was also contributed by Csoma's younger contemporary Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–1894), who was for many years the British resident in Kathmandu (1820–1843, first as a secretary) and used his free time for many kinds of scholarly pursuits. He collected manuscripts, vocabularies and ethnographic notes, observations about and specimens of plants and animals, etc., which gave him a lasting reputation in almost every aspect of Himalayan studies.

As Tibet was closed to Europeans, the British decided to use Indian spies, who were not so easily detected, to get at least some information about the country. From the 1860s on these "Pundits" travelled in Tibet in the disguise of Buddhist pilgrims, secretly measuring distances and making notes. One of these spies, Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917), later became a scholar and left his name in the annals of Tibetology.

Three German brothers, Hermann, Adolf and Robert Schlagintwait, entered British service in 1854. They were employed in the magnetic survey of the Himalayas and Kashmir, during which they also visited Ladakh and Chinese Central Asia. Adolf (1829–1857) was killed in Kashgar, but Hermann (1826–1882) and Robert (1833–1885) returned and Hermann was later ennobled as "von Schlagintwait-Sakünlüski". The fourth brother, Emil Schlagintwait (1835–1904), was too young to follow and remained at home, but soon took up Tibetology as a life-long interest, although he never left Europe. His pioneering monograph on Lamaism is still well known, but many other studies written in German lie dormant among the publications of the Bavarian Academy and are rarely consulted by Tibetologists who may not even know what they might contain.

Much information about Tibetan culture and literature was obtained from Ladakh, which had become a part of British India.[5] Particularly important was the Moravian mission working in Ladakh. Important among the early missionaries for Tibetan studies was the lexicographer Heinrich August Jäschke (1817–1883), whose Tibetan dictionary is still much used. Later on Karl Marx (1857–1891) started Tibetan epigraphy and his student August Hermann Francke (1870–1930) became one of the most famous Tibetologists of the early 20th century.

Among the ill-fated attempts to penetrate Tibet, I must at least mention the Dutreuil de Rhins expedition in 1891–94 to Central Asia, with several unsuccessful attempts to penetrate Tibet. Finally, in June 1894 in the village Tong-

[4] There is no end to writings about Csoma. See e.g., Le Calloch 1984.
[5] More exactly, part of the protectorate principality of Jammu and Kashmir.

mbon-ndo (Marouis 1970) near the sources of Yangtze, Tibetan villagers attacked the French travellers killing Dutreuil de Rhins (1846–94) and robbing and capturing F. Grenard, who was later sent home by Chinese officers.

The inaccessible integrity of Lhasa was broken by the Younghusband expedition in 1903. Its political significance does not concern us here, but the expedition also included scholars such as Lawrence Austin Waddell (1854–1938)[6] and E. H. C. Walsh (1865–1952). After this, there were British residents in Lhasa, among them Charles A. Bell (1870–1945) and Hugh Edward Richardson (1905–2000) were also noted as scholars.

As I am mainly concerned with earlier times, I will cover quickly the last expeditions before the Chinese invasion. Sven Hedin (1865–1952) made several attempts to penetrate Tibet, but was turned back. The Roerich Expeditions in 1924–28[7] conducted archaeological and ethnographical investigations in different parts of the Himalayas, Tibet, Central Asia, China, Siberia and Russia. Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984) visited Tibet no less than eight times between 1929–48 (and Nepal several times later) and became one of the most famous Tibetan scholars. The visits of Rahula Sankrityayana (1893–1963) to Tibet in 1929–30, 1934 and 1936 and the various efforts of Raghu Vira (1902–1963) in the 1940s and 1950s enriched much the knowledge of Buddhist literature. But now it is time to consider the other perspectives.

3. The Eastern Perspective

Another natural way to Tibet comes from the east. From the very beginning of its history Tibet has had close contacts with China and on several occasions it also was under China's political supremacy. This was the case under the Manchu dynasty, when Western Jesuits were active in Beijing.

In the mid-17th century Dutch privateers made the eastern seas dangerous for the Portuguese ships used by Jesuits. Therefore the leader of the Beijing mission, Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666), sent two Jesuits from China to Europe via Lhasa and India in 1661. Thus Johann Grüber (1620–1680) and Albert d'Orville (1621–1662) spent a few weeks at Lhasa in October and later on Grüber described the journey to the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680), who published his story and drawings in his famous *China illustrata* (Amsterdam 1667). This work also contains a drawing of the old Potala palace.

---

[6] All Waddell's important works were written in the early part of his career. In his later years he was ardently trying to prove his fantastic theories about the supposed Mesopotamian origin of Briton civilisation.

[7] The expeditions were led by N. K. Roerich (Nikolaj Konstantinovič Rerih, 1874–1947); among participants was his son Georg N. Roerich (Jurij Nikolaevič Rerih, 1902–1960), then famous as a Tibetologist.

Also in China Jesuits became acquainted with Lamaism, but they promptly interpreted it as corrupted Nestorianism. They were favourable to Confucianism, but Lamaism was supposed to be the work of the Devil and therefore utterly rejected. In Tibet they were not much interested. The numerous millions of Chinese interested them more as the target of missionary work, and they collected and published much information about China, but usually ignored Tibet. Thus the eastern route to Tibet was not used by Europeans before the 19th century as no one save Jesuits was allowed to enter China beyond the port of Canton.

This is the best place to note that information about Tibet was also available in Chinese sources. Although he himself never left France, Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) did some important work on these lines in Paris.

In 1844 two French Lazarist missionaries, Evariste-Régis Huc (1813–1860) and Joseph Gabet (1803–1853) arrived at Lhasa from the North-East and were able to remain there eighteen months, before they were finally expelled. Their travel book long remained an important account of the secret city.

Later on, Roman Catholic missions were established in the eastern borderlands of Tibet, until then almost unknown to Europeans. The Tibetological monument of this mission is the large dictionary (1899) edited by Père Auguste Desgodins (1826–1913). This was also the route used in his explorations in 1907 and 1909 by Jacques Bacot (1877–1965), who then became famous as a Tibetologist.

Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) was a Sinologist by profession, but during his expeditions to Central Asia he also became interested in Tibetan and Central Asian history. Another Sinologist also pursuing Tibetan Studies was Rolf Alfred Stein (1911–1999).

In Russia, some early Sinologists such as Iakinf Bičurin (1777–1853) and Vasilij Pavlovič Vasil'ev (1819–1900) discussed Tibet from a Sinological point of view.

4. The Northern Perspective

Now it is time to consider the Northern Perspective, leading from Tibet to Central Asia and Mongolia and ultimately to Russia. The Russians had penetrated through Siberia to the Pacific in the 17th century and in the 18th they started mapping and studying all these vast areas. An important role in these undertakings belongs to the Imperial Academy of Sciences founded in 1725 by Peter the Great after the model of West European learned societies and academies. He gave his academicians a very ample salary and could thus entice many noted scholars from other European countries.

In Buryatia Russians encountered flourishing Lamaism and strong Tibetan influence. The soldiers of Peter the Great found a few leaves of Tibetan text in a Lamaist monastery at the Irtyš and sent them to St. Petersburg. The Emperor sent them to Rome and Paris for interpretation, but the result was meagre. In

Rome the famous Syrologist Giuseppe Simone Assemani (1687–1768) could, as a Semitic scholar, understandably say nothing. In Paris Nicolas Freret (1688–1749) and Étienne Fourmont (1683–1745), as some sort of Sinologists, were better prepared and at least recognised the writing as Tibetan, but their reading was quite fantastic. In St. Petersburg the German academician Theophil Siegfried Bayer (1694–1738), whose interests covered all Asian history, let it be printed.[8]

Besides Russians, many German and some Nordic scholars participated in the exploration of Siberia and Russian Central Asia, usually on behalf of the Imperial Academy. Their studies were mainly concerned with nature and economic opportunities, but some extended their interest to ethnology and history. Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705–1783) in 1733–43 collected more Tibetan texts, but although he could show the worthlessness of the earlier deciphering, his own attempt was not much better. In the 1760s the Finnish-born mineralogist Erik Laxman (1738–1796)[9] observed Lamaism in Buryatia. He is also said to have written down some notes on the Tibetan language, but he never published his observations and the manuscript was lost. It was probably destroyed with his other papers in the fire which destroyed his Irkutsk home in 1812. Thus, his German friend Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811), was more important as he not only collected, but also published some information about Lamaism.

This work was soon superseded by that of the Livonian priest Benjamin Bergmann (1772–1856), who in 1802–03 spent fifteen months among the nomadic Kalmucks in the South Russian steppes. His *Nomadische Streifereien* (1–4, 1804) are one of the earliest detailed and rather reliable sources on Kalmucks and their Lamaism. In 1830–32 Baron Schilling von Canstadt (1786–1837) travelled in Mongolia and on the Chinese northwest border, collected a great number of Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian manuscripts and xylographs and published some of them. Isaac Jakob Schmidt (1779–1847) combined Mongolian information with that culled from Csoma's books. Now he is best remembered for his edition and translation of the *Dsanglun* (*mDzangs blun*). Anton Schiefner (1817–1879) was originally an Indologist, but a great part of his work deals with Tibetan Buddhist literature. Schmidt had been Bergmann's successor as missionary in the Kalmuck area (1807–11), but Schiefner never travelled in Asia.

When Buryatia and Kalmucks became more incorporated in Russia and the connections came better, there were a number of Lamaist people living even as far west as St. Petersburg. In the second half of the 19th century there were also Lamaist priests in the Russian capital and eventually a Lamaist temple was

[8] These attempts of interpretation as well as the original text analysed and translated are found in Csoma de Kőrös 1832.

[9] The most important source on Laxman is still the old, but detailed biography by Lagus (1880).

established. This was still active in the 1920s and thus Russian Buddhologists had a source of information close at hand. More important still were travels in Buryatia and visits to monasteries there. For example, Jevgenij Jevgenevič Obermiller (1901–1935) visited Buryatia every summer, until he succumbed to his fatal illness. Soon afterwards, Stalin's new policy put an abrupt end to this and practically stopped the practice of Buddhism as well as Buddhist and Tibetan studies in the Soviet Union for many years.

5. The Establishment of Academic Tradition

I have spoken of the geographical aspect, but as important is the professional viewpoint of scholars. For missionaries, the main interest was usually the language itself, as a tool of the missionary work. Their most important contribution to scholarship thus consists of grammars and dictionaries (e.g., Jäschke and Desgodins). For others, Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist literature remained the main interest for a long time; only during the 20th century were other aspects of Tibetan civilisation the subject of special studies. A small summary of this is needed to conclude my brief review.

The academic study of Buddhist translations started quite early, especially in Paris. Abel-Rémusat has already been mentioned. Philip-Édouard Foucaux (1811–1894) was an Indologist, who learned the Tibetan language from Csoma's books. His student was Léon Feer (1830–1902). They started the multilingual tradition of French Buddhology, then represented by such scholars as Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935), Paul Demiéville (1894–1979) and the two Belgians, Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938) and Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983).

In Germany, Emil Schlagintwait has already been mentioned. Another student of Buddhist texts was Heinrich Wenzel (1855–1893). Georg Huth (1867–1906) worked on Buddhist texts and history and travelled in Central Asia. Friedrich Weller (1889–1980) combined a full competence of Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese in his Buddhist studies. In the first half of the 20th century there arose other schools of Buddhology working on Tibetan material in India and Japan.[10]

Up until the early 20th century, and quite often even later, the main interest had been in Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist texts (with a few exceptions). Only slowly did scholars begin to penetrate to Non-Sanskritic literature as shown in the following examples.

---

[10] In India, e.g., Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya (1879–1959) and Satiscandra Vidyabhushana (d. 1920), in Japan beginning with Buddhist monks studying in Tibet, Ekai Kawaguchi (1866–1945; 1901–02 in Lhasa), Enga Teramoto (1872–1940; 1898–1908 in China and Tibet), Bunkyō Aoki (1886–?; 1912–15 in Lhasa), Tokan Tada (1890–1967; 1913–22 in Tibet), and on a more scholarly level Susumu Yamaguchi (1895–1976).

Bon religion: E. Schlagintwait had written on Bonpos in 1866, but the real pioneers were Berthold Laufer (1874–1934) and A. H. Francke.

Gesar epic cycle: As early as 1836 I. J. Schmidt gave an account of the Mongolian version, but the first serious student of the Tibetan was again A. H. Francke (1900 and later).

The grammar of Thonmi Sambhota was studied in the 1920s by Jacques Bacot and Johannes Schubert (1896–1976). Bacot's other interest was Tibetan theatre.

Annals and historical literature: The first knowledge of historical literature came through Schiefner's edition and German translation of Tāranātha's history (1868–69). Among the early students of annalistic literature were Andrej Ivanovič Vostrikov (1902–1942) and G. N. Roerich.

History and epigraphy: Early pioneers of Tibetan epigraphy were Karl Marx, A. H. Francke and G. Huth. Important were the studies of the members of the Younghusband expedition, esp. Waddell and Walsh (incl. numismatics), also by British residents (Richardson). History was also among the interests of Giuseppe Tucci, followed in this by his pupil Luciano Petech (1914–2010).

Thanks to the Central Asian expeditions of Pelliot and M. A. Stein (1861–1943), an invaluable collection of early Tibetan material became available in the form of the Dunhuang texts. Among early scholars working on them Frederic William Thomas (1867–1956) and Marcelle Lalou (1890–1967) are the most notable.

The creation of Tibetology as an independent discipline was undertaken by these scholars, and many others, including a growing number who had a Tibetan background. The pioneers using my three geographical perspectives belong more to its prehistory, but they were also the first to bring some knowledge of Tibet to the West.

References

Csoma de Kőrös, A. 1832. "Translation of a Tibetan Fragment, by Mr. Csoma de Körös, with remarks by Horace Hayman Wilson", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1:7, 269–276 + 4 pages of Tibetan text.

Giorgi, A. A. 1762. *Alphabetum Tibetanum*. Rome.

Hopkirk, Peter 1982. *Trespassers on the Roof of the World. The Race for Lhasa*. O.U.P.

Karttunen, Klaus 1992. *Itää etsimässä. Eurooppalaisen Aasian-tutkimuksen historia*. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino. ("In Search for the East. A History of European Research on Asia").

Lagus, Wilhelm. 1880. *Erik Laxman, hans lefnad, resor, forskningar och brefvexling*. Bidrag till kännedom af Finlands natur och folk 34. Helsingfors.

Laufer, B. 1914. "Was Odoric of Pordenone ever in Tibet?", *T'oung Pao* 15: 415–418.

Le Calloch, B. 1984. "Les biographes d'Alexandre Csoma de Kőrös", *Journal asiatique* 272: 403–423.

MacGregor, John 1970. Tibet. *A Chronicle of Exploration*. London.

Marouis, F. 1970. “Dutreuil de Rhins”, *Dictionnaire de Biographie française* 12: 936–937.

Simon, Richard 1964. “Tibetan Lexicography and Etymological Research”, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1964: 85–107.