

Keynote: A Story of Academic and Cultural Curiosity. Leipzig and the Rise of Tibetology in Germany

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends of Tibet. Welcome to Leipzig! It is a basic truism that when major civilizations and cultural traditions meet or reach out to one another, the encounters—be they violent or peaceful, be they unilateral or bilateral like in the case of the Occident and the Orient—are inevitably fraught with cultural repercussions of sorts and with upheavals stemming from the collisions of distinctly different cultural sensibilities and historical make-up of the parties involved.

If we take a look at the enduring influence and inspiration, and not least biased presumptions generated by the myriad encounters of the West with Asia (and we must restrict ourselves in this case to Tibet), post-colonial studies have shown—and that not only since Edward Said’s ground-breaking book *Orientalism* and the heated and prolonged discourse that emerged in its trail—that the narrow perspective or dichotomy West versus East is too simple, further perspectives should be paid heed to. Donald S. Lopez and later Tsering Shakya—the current president of IATS—once suggested that when we talk about Tibet (commonly and euphemistically labelled “the Roof of the World,” the Tibetans not much differently, prefer “the Snow-capped” Land, alluding here to Himalayas, “the Abode of the Snow”), we should take a step further and indeed here see an unique case of apparent exceptionalism: “Tibet has remained outside the scrutiny of postcolonialist discourse,” while in Tibetan studies, “questions drawn from critical studies on the postcolonial discourse have never been properly raised.”¹ By now, things have changed considerably. Still, when we take a look at this purported “exceptionalism” and look further back in search for what initially prompted or generated this unique depiction and perception, one of its more curious and obvious outgrowths points to what later could be labelled as the “esoteric and romantic Shangri-La-mode,” a

¹ Shakya 2001: 183.

Western fabulation and imagination of Tibet, indeed a legacy that has haunted Western authors, artists, travellers and general readers, especially during the last century. It obviously was a sort of fascination, occasionally an idealization that at times also left its imprint among scholars with their academic preoccupation with Tibet. But this burgeoning "exceptionalism" has older roots and goes further back in time. When did the West, in this case the Europeans initially receive more concrete information about this part of Central Asia? In order to understand how Tibetan studies or the systematic scientific study of Tibet, now known as Tibetology, took shape in Germany, we naturally must look longer back in history.

The following small essay in no way attempts to retell the exciting history of how and who were to put Tibet on the map in the Western fantasies and world. But a few well-known points are worth reiterating. The first Western missionaries to arrive in Tibet were from the Society of Jesus. In other words, men of the Christian religion. Between 1624 and 1640, Portuguese Jesuits set up a mission at Tsaparang in Western Tibet, and in 1661 Albert d'Orville and Johann Grueber travelled through Lhasa on a journey from North-West China to India. What a feat! Hardly imaginable to envision a few high lamas from Tibet suddenly turning up in Rome at the same time in their quest for propagating Buddhism in this part of the world? However, the most prominent of all the Jesuits in Tibet was the Italian Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733) who set out from Rome in 1712 and, having travelled via Goa, Delhi, Kashmir and Ladakh, reached Lhasa in early 1716. By the time he left Tibet in 1721, Desideri had acquired sufficient linguistic competence to write five books, and his *Historical Notes on Tibet* is, all considered, a major source for early 18th century Tibetan history. Like his Jesuit predecessors in Japan and China, Desideri well understood the importance of establishing a favourable relationship with local rulers. He offers a positive account of a meeting with the king of the Tibetan Buddhist kingdom of Ladakh. From the very outset, Desideri and his successors faced considerable problems when comparing Buddhist and Christian phrases and concepts, almost insurmountable one would think, so for instance he noted that the Ladakhis used the word *dkon mchog* ('the Precious One') for 'God', and *dkon mchog gsum* for the Holy Trinity. As he afterwards recognized, knowing Buddhism better, he understood *dkon mchog gsum* indeed refers to *triratna* or Buddhism's 'three precious gems': the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. He blamed the mistake in part on his interpreter, a Muslim from Kashmir who knew both Persian and Tibetan.

However, another impetus for the interest in Tibet was the publication of the *Alphabetum Tibetanum*, by Agostino Antonio Giorgi (1711–1797), a massive, 820-page work written in 1762 in late scholarly Latin. It constitutes the first comprehensive publication of its kind in the Western world: the first large-scale, encyclopaedic attempt to understand Tibetan culture, language and religion from a Western perspective. Although a major section of the work is based on religious polemics, it does retain much historical value as a major link in the earliest chain of Tibetan studies in the West. The current edition, published in Italy, is a facsimile of the original book. The entire work was a result of the Catholic Capuchin missionary work in Lhasa during the early to mid-eighteenth century. The *Alphabetum Tibetanum* obviously was intended to assist missionaries who would be going to Tibet.

ALPHABETUM TIBETANUM

MISSIONUM APOSTOLICARUM
COMMODO EDITUM.

PRÆMISSA EST DISQUISITIO

QUA DE FANEO LITTERARUM AC REGIONIS NOMINE, GENTIS ORIGINE
MORIBUS, SUPERSTITIONE, AC MANICHAËSMO FUSIS DISCRITUR.

BEAUSOBRII CALUMNIE IN SANCTUM AUGUSTINUM,
ALIOSQUE ECCLESIE PATRES REFUTANTUR.

STUDIO ET LABORE

FR. AUGUSTINI ANTONII GEORGII
EREMITÆ AUGUSTINIANI.



ROMÆ MDCCLXII.

TYPIS SACRÆ CONGREGATIONIS DE PROPAGANDA FIDE.

SUPERIORUM FACULTATE.

Figure 1: *Alphabetum Tibetanum*. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Res/4 L.as. 305, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10903885-8

During this period, when the military and cultural presence of the Qing court was increasingly felt in Tibet, the Capuchins had established a mission in Lhasa in 1707 and were studying with Tibetan lamas. When the Catholic missionaries left Tibet in 1745 (following a period during which missionary work was forbidden and no new missionaries were allowed into Tibet), the brief window of Western access to Tibet, and indeed to Lhasa itself, closed, never to be reopened to the present day on a similar scale that they once enjoyed.

The continuous fascination with Tibet remaining unabated, surely also because of its geographical remoteness and inaccessibility, the slow emergence of Tibetology as a scientific discipline was to evolve in the trail of and indeed on a par with Indology but first and foremost with the increasingly appealing interest in Buddhist lore and in Buddhist studies. Its beginning in Europe is well documented and shall not be reiterated here. Naturally, this preoccupation with the land and its unique religious universe now was to sweep throughout Europe, involving a number of French, British even Russian, but predominantly German philologists, philosophers and intellectuals, an added impetus and reason for the later text-based or



Figure 2: Immanuel Kant 1791, portrait by Gottlieb Doebler ©

philological orientation of Tibetan studies, not least in Germany. We are allowed, therefore, to briefly highlight a number of German literati, philosophers, explorers, and scholars who decisively contributed to the scientific interest in Tibet and in Buddhism, some with relation to Leipzig.

As Urs App in an enlightening paper has already highlighted, the gradual emergence of reports on Tibet in the sparse, mainly exploratory literature and in the initial translation of Buddhist texts prompted a row of the most noted thinkers in Europe to consider the place and role of secluded Tibet in their thinking.² From the 1750s onwards, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) among others, already reflected upon the rapidly changing breakdown of the biblical view of history and the philosopher's interest in the history of the earth and of humanity. It was the Age of Enlightenment. He too increasingly questioned the Bible in viewing the cradle of humanity and the seat of mankind's most ancient culture and religion and rejected the view commonly held that Buddhism or the Tibetan religion was a kind of degenerated form of Christianity that was communicated by Andrade, Desideri and other missionaries. Naturally with great interest he had studied the *Alphabetum*

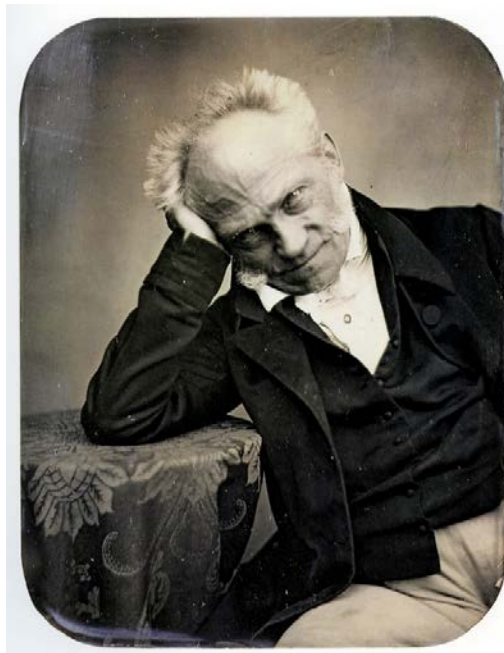


Figure 2: Arthur Schopenhauer, daguerreotype by Jacob Seib c.1852

² See App 2008.

Tibetanum by his contemporary Antonio Giorgio. G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) too, another prominent philosopher, altogether on a more sound footing, also speculated about the origin of Buddhism, still adopted an Asian origin of history and a gradual evolution from a primitive state to perfection.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), still another influential philosopher, showed a pronounced philosophical interest in Asia too like an increasing number of contemporaries. His fascination with Buddhism reached another level. He is the first European philosopher to be influenced by Asian philosophy and religion at an early stage in his career. He became convinced that the Kanjur was the oldest and most complete repository of Buddhist texts and admired early translations of some of its texts. In 1850, Schopenhauer became the first Westerner to refer to himself as a Buddhist. Already in around 1830, he was of the opinion that Tibet was the land where original Buddhism had survived and was thriving. Schopenhauer, more than anyone else, was to rely on one person in this connection namely on a Moravian missionary called Isaak Jacob Schmidt.

What had happened? At the turn of the 19th century knowledge of Buddhism and of Tibet slowly matured and a more serious interest can be observed. Much of this foray into foreign territory were made by the Germans who were employed by the Russian Czar but who mainly wrote and communicated in German. Well-known too is the vital interest entertained by the British in Tibet, with their long-term rule in India (we only need to refer to diplomats like George Bogle, Warren Hastings and Samuel Turner and the latter's visit to Tibet in 1784). Of particular interest for the topic Tibetology in Germany addressed here is the circumstance often ignored by the historians who have studied the Western discovery of Buddhism. We refer here to the interest in Tibet that came via Mongolia or the contact with the people of Mongolia not seldom entertained by Germans in the service of the Russian Czar and the Russian Academy. The reports on the Kalmyks and the Mongols left behind by the natural scientist Peter S. Pallas (1741–1811) in around 1769 among others and later Isaak Jacob Schmidt were conducive to furthering this development. Turning to Tibetology proper, it is worth remembering that when we look for the father or pioneer of Western Tibetology as we know it today, we might come up with two candidates:

The most obvious and generally acclaimed pioneer candidate was Csoma de Kőrös (Sándor Kőrösi Csoma 1784–1842), originally known as the „foreign monk“ (later also called the Hungarian Bodhisattva), as a philologist and Orientalist he was the author of the first attempt to write a Tibetan English dictionary and grammar book, both works

appropriately considered early milestones of Tibetan Studies. Eager to seek the homeland of the Hungarians believed to be in Tibet and Central Asia, he in fact never should set foot on the plateau itself or reach inner Asia; when meeting Tibetans in India, circumstances forced him to remain there, following lengthy stays in different places in India, not least in Ladakh and Zanskar. He was one of the first Europeans to master the Tibetan language and to read parts of the two canonical collections of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature, the Kanjur and the Tenjur. He is universally acclaimed as the pioneer of Tibetology and a national hero in Hungary.



Figure 3: Csoma de Kőrös lithography by Ágost Schöff, 1846

The other candidate, far less known to win the prize of being the pioneer in advancing Tibetan studies in Europe, and in particular in Germany is Isaac Jacob Schmidt (1779–1847).



Figure 4: Isaac Jacob Schmidt ©

Schmidt was an Orientalist who ultimately specialized himself in Mongolian and Tibetan. Schmidt was a Moravian missionary to the Kalmyks and devoted much of his labours to Biblical translations. He published the first grammar and dictionary of Mongolian, as well as a grammar and dictionary of Tibetan. His works are regarded as ground-breaking for the establishment of Mongolian and Tibetan studies. He was born into a protestant family (i.e. the Moravian Church or *Unitas Fratrum*) and he was to live most of his life in St. Petersburg as member of the Russian Academy of Sciences; he even adopted the Russian citizenship. A major work of his was his Tibetan grammar published in 1839 barely following in the trail of Csoma de Kőrös's grammar. It was followed closely by Schmidt's Tibetan-German Dictionary in 1841, printed in Leipzig. It had about 5000 more entries than Csoma's dictionary. When we consider his subsequent publications, such as a German translation of *mDzangs blun*, the "*Wise and the Fool*," his role as a pioneer becomes evident. Schmidt had lived among the Kalmyks between 1802-06 and his *History of the East Mongols (Geschichte der Ost Mongolen und ihres Fürstenhauses*, St. Petersburg/Leipzig 1829) was a translation of an original 17th century Mongolian source, namely Sagang Sechen's celebrated *Erdeni-yin tobči* (of 1662), a source now commonly called the *History of the Eastern Mongols*, yet essentially was drawing much of its historical information from a row of Tibetan medieval sources,

not least the Tibetan master narrative *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* among others. Once Mongolia had been converted to Buddhism, in fact Tibetan Buddhism, and not least the Tibetan language became the lingua franca of large segments of the religious establishment.

Schmidt was to be followed in St. Petersburg by Anton Schiefner (1817–1879). He is in particular known for a number of translations from the Kanjur and not least *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India* (1868, still a readable translation). During the same period French scholars - like Phillipe-Edouard Foucaux (1811–1894) as mentioned above – indeed proved to be prolific translators of Tibetan canonical sources too. Foucaux, who was inspired by Csoma de Kőrös's pioneering works written in the 1830's, already in 1842 was to champion the first proper chair of Tibetan studies in Europe.

In Germany, Buddhist studies, which here in the first place meant the philological foray into the niceties of the key Buddhist languages, followed by the translation of a steadily growing amount of important texts, now gained momentum. The mastery of the classical Tibetan medium and its well-established and reliable Buddhist vocabulary saw the language as a totally indispensable tool for Sanskritists enabling them to restore often lost or fragmented Sanskrit original retained in the Tibetan canon. Scholars often were equally well versed in both Sanskrit and Tibetan. At this point those involved in Buddhist studies by now are already too numerous to be listed here. Relevant to Leipzig, one of the pioneer institutions for the promotion of Oriental languages, we should mention Heinrich Wenzel (1855–93), who like most of his contemporary scholars studied a number of Oriental Languages, and as *Privatdozent* (Private Lecturer), taught Tibetan in Leipzig from 1886 on a regular basis.

In our deliberately incomplete prosopography of German scholars who conducted research on Tibet, we must also mention the brothers Schlaginweit (Hermann, Adolph and Robert and not least Emil), mostly known as eminent travellers in Central Asia. Based upon the findings of his brothers, it should be the youngest of the Schlaginweits, Emil (1835–1904) who should concentrate on Tibetan, and as the first German write works on Tibetan history, foremost his *Die Könige von Tibet* (i.e. *The Kings of Tibet*), actually the work was based upon the *La doags rgyal rabs*, but he also conducted studies of Tibetan chronology and the life of Guru Rinpoche, a German translation of *Padma bka' thang*, albeit in was only a section of this large work.

Among a group of missionaries who provided a major impetus to Tibetan Studies, not least in Germany, one figure in particular holds a prominent position. As indicated above, Tibetan Studies were

actively promoted by a number of missionaries from the Moravian Church (in German commonly known as Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine, the main seat is situated in East Saxony, and the archive there is a real treasure for the study of Tibetan translations of biblical texts and Tibetan philology). The missionaries were particularly active in Ladakh and Lahoul (Kyelang) of present-day India. Among the prominent missionaries who worked there, we find August William Heyde (1825–1907), August Hermann Francke (1870–1930), the latter should later make himself a name with his numerous publications and contributions to Ladakh Studies, in particular to the study of the Bon religion, folk literature and of West-Tibetan versions of the Gesar epic. In fact, unbeknownst to most people, he must indeed be regarded as the first Professor in Tibetan in Germany, since he was appointed in 1925 extraordinary Professor in Berlin.

We now come to the most important missionary whose contribution to the classical Tibetan language and dialectal studies cannot be overrated. Heinrich August Jäschke (1817–1883).



Figure 5: Heinrich August Jäschke, portrait by Hildegard Diel,
© Moravian Archives Herrnhut GS.397

He was born in Herrnhut in the Free State of Saxony. He was a linguistic genius who mastered a number of languages with typical ease, and who spent 12 years in Kyelang, during the time of which he made a number of pioneering works within Tibetology, such as his celebrated Tibetan English Dictionary. As we all know, its wide use of original Tibetan sources has made it one of the best, standard dictionaries available, and this up to this very day. For me at least it has been an indispensable travel companion throughout my entire life.

In this regard Leipzig, the host university of the Fourth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists (2015) located in the Free State of Saxony (Freistaat Sachsen) was to play no small role: It was in Leipzig that the first Buddhist Mission Society or Association was established, in 1903. Furthermore, a number of excellent scholars started their career here, prominently Berthold Laufer (1874–1934).



Figure 6: Berthold Laufer (right) in native dress.
© The Field Museum Image No A98299.

Laufer possibly was one of the most eminent polyglot Orientalists (fluent in a dozen languages like Jäschke, but with relentless curiosity and superb linguistic skills in many more fields) and a pioneer of Asian cultures, a Iranist, aside from a specialist of Mongolian and Tibetan, but also a Sinologist. He was the author of a large number of

ground-breaking articles. His career started in Berlin and continued in Leipzig where he defended his dissertation in 1897. Here he studied under Wilhelm Grube (1855–1908), the first scholar to offer courses in Tibetan, in fact as early as 1882. In Leipzig active was also a number of Sinologists, among others Georg von der Gabelenz (1840–1893), and later the Erich Haenisch, who played a decisive role in translating the „Secret History of the Mongols“ (*Mongyol-un niyuca tobčiyān*, Ch. 元朝秘史 *Yuanchao mishi*).

Today, Germany can indeed pride itself of a relative affluence and density of chairs dedicated to Tibetology and Buddhist studies: Among the five universities in Germany that offer permanent chairs in Tibetology one counts, aside from Leipzig, Hamburg, Bonn, Berlin, now also Munich. In Tübingen, Marburg and in Göttingen, Tibetan is also regularly taught. Still, Leipzig is the university in Germany with the longest continuous involvement in Tibetan studies. Saxony and in particular Leipzig, as the second oldest university in Germany, can pride itself of a most durable and affluent tradition. The University of Leipzig has offered teaching in Asian Studies and languages for close to 170 years and Tibetology alone from the nineteenth century onwards, simultaneously with courses in Mongolian studies. Today, the Institute for Central Asian Studies (Tibetan and Mongolian Studies) in association with Indology since the 1990 can look back on many years of research excellence. Tibetology at Leipzig is highly interdisciplinary. Its cooperation with numerous different disciplines and partner institutions, national as well as international, has resulted in numerous research projects, some of which have been presented at this conference. Indeed, Leipzig can rightly claim to hold a prominent position in the formation and development of Tibetology.

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