

Cultural aspect of relations between Russia and Tibet in the 19th and early 20th centuries

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In the beginning of the 21st century, on the threshold of the new century's culture, it is quite natural to observe the development of interest towards culture's origins, to the period of the very beginning of interregional and interethnic contacts. The question of interaction between different cultures represents a part of a universal problem of relations between peoples having different views upon the universe, the mankind's place and role, the ways of economic development and State organization.

During the last centuries Russia and Tibet maintained close spiritual and cultural links. Catherine II proclaimed Buddhism (the main religious tradition of Tibet) one of Russia's official religions. Since the 17-th century Buddhism has been professed by the peoples of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva as well as of Chita and Irkutsk regions. The basic values of Buddhism are a part of the indigenous Russian culture and constitute Russia's spiritual heritage side by side with Orthodox Christianity and Islam.

Studies of Tibetan language began in Russia more than 200 years ago, although before the early 18-th century those researches were limited to personal curiosity. A more significant interest to Tibetan writing arose only in the third decade of 18-th century. While evaluating works of Russian scientists in the sphere of Tibet culture in the 18-th century, one should not forget that studies of Tibetan language in Europe only began at that time and knowledge of Tibet by European Orientalists was extremely limited. Under such circumstances it is necessary to mention the merits of the Russian Academy of Sciences which maintained in European science interest to Tibetan language and culture preparing the coming of the period of their intensive studies.

Substantial scientific studies of Tibetan language and culture began in Russia in 1829 when the rivalry between Russia and Britain in Asia started to grow which made Russian politicians turn more frequently their eyes on the East. The oriental policy became strategically important for Russian policy as a whole. This period coincided with the beginning of activities of Jacob Schmidt who enriched science through translation and publication of different Tibetan and Mongol texts and compiled a dictionary and grammar of Tibetan language. At the same time Russian Orientalist Vassiliev, who made an enormous contribution to Russian and world Tibet studies, started his researches. He studied Tibetan language on his own and was sent, as a member of Russian spiritual mission, to Beijing where he spent 10 years collecting data for his researches. In China he started to work on "The Lexicon of Buddhist Terminology" and on articles dedicated to Tibetan Buddhism. Vassiliev wrote multiple books on Tibetan language and history as well as works on Tibetan literature and peoples who influenced history of Tibet.

In that period of time a number of expeditions to Tibet were organized. A primary attention should be paid to the results of the expeditions conducted by Nikolay Przhevalsky, Mikhail Pevtsov, Vsevolod Roborovsky, Piotr Kozlov, Gombozhab Tsibikov, Baradiin. Apart from political goals they pursued studies of geography, ethnography and culture of peoples of Central Asia and Tibet. There was also a significant growth of interest to Tibetan language literature and culture in Russian scientific and political circles, the time for a new group of researchers came. Oldenburg was the initiator and propagandist of Tibet studies.

On Oldenburg's initiative the Academy of Sciences launched in 1897 the publication of "Bibliotheca Buddhica" dedicated to literary monuments of late Buddhism in different languages. This and other works of Oldenburg brought him fame of one of the best specialist in Buddhist culture in general and in culture of Tibetan Buddhism in particular.

Being aware of the important political and scientific consequences of staying in Russia of the Tibetan mission, Oldenburg maintained close contacts with representatives of Dalai Lama and rendered them assistance including efforts aimed at establishing of the Tibetan Mission in Saint Petersburg. Besides, he managed to make a classification of all the books on Tibet studies which had been published before.

In the end of the 19-th century the leader of Tibet Dalai Lama XIV addressed to Russia searching for patronage and protection from Britain's colonial expansion, since China failed to guarantee its territorial inviolability. In 1900 and 1901 its first counselor Buryat lama Agvan Dorzhiev conducted negotiations with the tsarist government which resulted in an open, although short-timed, rapprochement between Russia and Tibet. Russia responded to Dalai Lama's appeal and promised to render him diplomatic support and certain military assistance.

As a response to lord Kerzon's military expedition to Tibet in 1903, Russian military headquarters had plans to organize a Russian military and diplomatic mission to Tibet led by famous traveler Piotr Kozlov.

Right up to the beginning of the World War I Saint Petersburg maintained contacts with Dalai Lama, mainly through efforts of Agvan Dorzhiev who acted as his unofficial representative in Russia and made an important contribution to development of cultural links between the two countries. Dorzhiev was also famous as a serious and profound researcher of religious, historical, national and ethnographic traditions of Tibet and Mongolia.

Cultural contacts achieved their apogee in that period (Tibetan medical treatise "Zhudshi" was translated into Russian, Buryat doctor Badmaev began researches and active practice of Tibetan medicine, a Tibetan Buddhist shrine was opened in Saint Petersburg etc).

Thus, together with Russia's growing political activity in Central Asia and its rivalry with Britain for influence in the region, the 19-th century witnessed the growth of interest to Tibet in Russian scientific and political circles as well as an active penetration of oriental ideas into the Russian society. Though the idea of establishment of a Russian protectorate over Tibet did not meet support, cultural interaction between Russia and Tibet was obvious.