

A personal tribute to G.N. de Roerich

The eager anticipation with which I looked forward to the 24th International Congress of Orientalists, at Moscow, in 1960, was in large measure due to Professor G.N. de Roerich; for I was counting on meeting him again after many years, and expressing my thanks to him for his help with the topic discussed in my contribution to the Congress; but it was not to be. The most that I could do was to introduce my paper, 'Vowel harmony in Lhasa Tibetan', with the words: 'I wish first to mention the great regret with which I heard of the untimely death of Professor George de Roerich, or, as he is, of course, better known here in Moscow, Юрий Николаевич Рерих. It was, indeed, largely because of him that I chose vowel harmony in Lhasa Tibetan as the subject of this paper; for it was a topic that I well remember discussing with him in Kalimpong ten years ago, at the time when it had first occurred to me that the rather puzzling alternation in vowel quality of certain vowels in Lhasa Tibetan was to be ascribed to vowel harmony; and both on that occasion and on numerous others I benefited from his criticisms!' (Труды, XVI, 189-90, 1963).

Possibly the Russian language enabled de Roerich to appreciate the significance of these alternations in Tibetan, because vowel harmony can be heard in the pair of Russian words это and эти, in which the vowel of the first syllable alternates in quality in the same way as in the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan.

My discussions with de Roerich on the subject of vowel harmony and other phonetic and grammatical topics took place in the attractive little house called 'Crookety' that he was then renting in Kalimpong, in the Darjeeling district of India; and they were usually as near to the traditional English tea-time as I could manage to make them; for the old-world charm and courtesy with which he conducted that 'ceremony' was part of the attraction of those visits. I like to think that he learnt this art when he was a student at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London; indeed, he was one of its first students, soon after it was founded, in 1917.

My acquaintance with de Roerich's published work goes back to 1948, when I had just begun the study of Tibetan phonetics and phonology, at that same School; and, systematically searching the shelves of its excellent library, I soon came on two articles of his, 'Modern Tibetan Phonetics' (Journal and proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 27, 1931) and 'The Tibetan dialect of Lahul' (Journal of the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, 3, New York-Naggar, 1933); each of them was a valuable introduction to my chosen subject for study. Authoritative accounts of the pronunciation of Tibetan were indeed rare in those days.

A year later, in 1949, I was able to congratulate myself on my choice of Kalimpong as the most suitable place for carrying out my own research programme; for it gave me the opportunity of meeting de Roerich, and admiring his astonishing command of spoken Tibetan. Indeed, he spoke Tibetan more fluently than any foreigner I have ever met, and would always insist on using Tibetan for his conversations with Tibetan visitors to Kalimpong, and with monks from the nearby monastery of Tharpa Choling. In particular I remember that he was especially skilful in guessing the social status of these Tibetans from phonetic indications in their speech, rather like Prof. Higgins in G.B. Shaw's Pygmalion; and I would derive entertainment and profit from asking him to practise his skill on the voices of Tibetans whose conversations I had recorded with my wire recorder (the tape recorder was not developed until several years later). His command of the Lhasa dialect of spoken Tibetan was later reflected in his Textbook of colloquial Tibetan (dialect of Central Tibet), which he published with the assistance of Tse-trung Lopsang Phuntsok (Government of West Bengal, Education Department, 1957).

As a specialist in phonetics I was interested to note that in this book de Roerich writes of the sound 'g/' that 'in some cases the palatalized velar has become a palatal affricate' (p. 6); accordingly, he pronounced words such as རྩ་ 'hundred' in the same way as རྩ་; and, to my mind, this gave a rather eastern flavour to his pronunciation. Indeed, I used to wonder, at the time, whether he had been influenced, in this respect, by his wide knowledge of the dialects of Kham and Amdo, in eastern Tibet. When, some

years later, he published a detailed account of the Rebkong and other dialects of the Amdo area in his book Le Parler de l'Amdo. Etude d'un dialecte archaïque du Tibet (Rome, 1958), and I was asked to review it for the Royal Asiatic Society, the high degree of competence that I found displayed in this study served to strengthen my view that, consciously or unconsciously, he had admitted one of the characteristics of eastern Tibetan into his speech.

I have made a point of stressing de Roerich's skill in the spoken language in these recollections of mine because he is much better known for his scholarship in literary Tibetan, and especially for his edition of རྩ་མེད་མཛོད་པོ་, The Blue Annals. His work on this 15th-century text was what was chiefly occupying him at the time when I first met him, in 1949; it was not completed until 1953.

Finally, I recall the dignified but moving ceremony in Moscow to which I was invited in 1960, during the International Congress of Orientalists, when the room that housed de Roerich's personal library was dedicated to his memory.

'Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt'

(Virgil, Aeneid, I, 462).

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