The Buddhist Manuscripts in the Collection of St-Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

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The core of the vast manuscript collection of St-Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, has been formed long before the Academy itself was founded in 1724. Collecting of historical documents, manuscripts and antiquities was popular in Russia since ancient times. Primarily the collected items were stored in churches, monasteries and state treasuries.¹ In XVIII century the importance of private collections had been growing. Besides the objects of historical importance and items of art, the first books in Asian languages were acquired by its owners.

Because of its geographical location and historical destiny, Russia is the state which lies between East and West. The early Russian ethnos was formed under an active contact with Turks. The Golden Horde exerted a great influence on Russian national identity and way of life. Since the beginning of XIV century, while gradually moving eastwards, Russians were creating contact territories, where different cultural, social and religious traditions were coexisting, getting mixed up and integrating. The trade and political bonds between Russia and the peoples of Asia and Northern Africa were set in the ancient times and in the Middle Ages. The gradual accumulation of knowledge about Eastern countries was determined mostly by the current practical claims and also by missionary purposes. The new period in relations between Russia and East begun in the early XVIII century, when academic Asian studies, which later become a field of the fundamental humanities, had developed out of the practical Asian studies based only on the necessity of knowing the languages and customs of Eastern countries. The teaching of Asian languages was primarily introduced in Russia by the orders of Peter the Great in 1700 and 1702. The tradition of collecting of historical and religious objects and books from Asia was developed at the same time.

Peter the Great was himself an active collector, while traveling with “Grand Embassy” through Western Europe in 1697–1699 he purchased a great number of objects, including books on various fields of knowl-
edge. For the storage of Peter’s vast collections the Imperial Library and Kunstkamera were established in 1714. The books and manuscripts brought from the Tsar’s libraries and Aptekarsky Prikaz in Moscow made up the basis for the Imperial Library. When the Academy was founded in 1724, the Library and the Kunstkamera were transferred under its auspices. Afterwards the book funds of RAS were being enriched steadily.

The first manuscripts and books of Buddhist content were received into Russian collections in 1720s. J. Backmeister, who made up the first printed handbook of the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, mentioned Tibetan, or as they were called at the time Tangut, and Mongolian books, collected by G.F. Miller (1705–1783) and P.S. Pallas (1741–1811): “The Library is abundantly supplied with Tangut and Mongolian scriptures written by gold, silver and ink, but as we don’t know these languages, we don’t have any further knowledge about them... A lot of designated scriptures were sent from Siberia in 1720, there they were found in ancient temple Ablainkiid, which was build on the bank of Irtysh by taishi Ablai and which was destroyed by his brother who expelled him away from there with his horde.” The bigger part of the books in Tibetan and Mongolian languages, which were received by the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences from Central Asia were of Buddhist content. This can be explained by the fact that Buddhist literature was the most popular and therefore easy to acquire in the resettlement area of the Mongol tribes.

In 1730 the first books from China were brought to the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences by Lorenz Lange. Later the book collections in the Chinese and Mongolian languages of the Academy were steadily being enriched primarily with the dictionaries, Confucian classics, historical, geographical, etc. books and works written by the Jesuit missionaries. The first information on the Far East Buddhism came to Western science with the works of European priests, who were in need of understanding Buddhist ideology to fulfill their missionary tasks. In Leonid Leontiev’s “Register of Chinese and Manchurian books collected by Alexei Leontiev and stored in the Library of the Academy of Sciences” which dates back to 1766 among 235 books in Chinese and Manchurian there are only two items of Buddhist content mentioned, which were: “N 41. Retaliation for Merits and Lawlessness from Pagan heshangs’ law in Manchurian language (4 volumes)” and “N 130. An Account of a Journey taken by a Pagan monk to accept a Law from his God, which is entitled “Xi yu jii” in Chinese language (2 volumes).”

After the Asiatic Museum was established in 1818, the Academy of
Sciences transferred all books in Asian languages there, and afterwards started sending to the Museum all the books from Asia. Unfortunately, these additions were rarely registered properly, most of the books do not have stamps of their previous owners and collectors, so it is impossible to trace out the provenance of every book. According to some remaining written information and evidence one can conclude that in XVIII—early XIX centuries, the primary attention was devoted to the collecting of dictionaries, grammar essays, works on history, geography and ideology, which could give some common knowledge about Asian countries. The Asiatic Museum began to select written monuments as the objects for research, acquiring the collections of scholars who were purposefully engaged in collecting.

Books and manuscripts of Buddhist content in Sanskrit, Chinese, Mongolian and Tibetan came to the Asiatic Museum as a part of two big collections of Pavel Lvovich Schilling von Canstadt (1786–1837). The importance of these acquisitions was noted by the Russian researchers immediately. It was mentioned in the Report of Marii Ivanovich Brosset (1802–1880), who inventoried the Chinese part of the Asiatic Museum collection in 1841: “Until now the Chinese collection of the Asiatic Museum did not have anything particularly remarkable, at least nothing that could outstrip the private facilities and could correspond the needs of academic community, which has the best conditions to increase its richness endlessly. But in 1836 and 1838 it was somehow magically lifted on a grade of an unbelievable benefit. So except for the Paris Royal Library now immensely increased by books belonging to its new curator Stanislav Julien our Library undoubtedly leaves behind all others of this kind.”

Some fragmental descriptions of P.L. Schilling’s first collection are preserved among his papers in the Orientalists Archive in St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies. They were made up mostly by his correspondents who were acquiring books in China. Several notes written by P.L. Schilling and other persons show that his collection was well arranged and systematized. It numbered totally at more then 2000 volumes, 286 items of books in Asian languages and included unique copies, which none of other European libraries possessed.

The acquisition of books for P.L. Schilling’s collection was executed mainly through the mediation of the members of the Russian Orthodox mission in Beijing, P.I. Kamensky, N.I. Voznesensky, Z.F. Leontievsky, D.S. Chestnoi, M.D. Sipakov and others who were specially fulfilling P.L. Schilling’s orders. The collection of P.L. Schilling also had Chinese, Manchurian, Tibetan and Mongolian dictionaries; encyclopedias;
Classics; historical, geographical, philosophical, mathematical, astronomical, medical etc works; maps; Catholic missionaries theological writings.

P.L. Schilling sold the first part of his collection to the state in 1830, when the claim of foundation of the Department of Oriental studies came up in the Saint-Petersburg University. For a number of reasons the books were not housed in the library of the University and in 1836 according to the order of the Emperor Nicolas I, they were handed down to the Asiatic Museum. P.L. Schilling decided to sell his collection just before his expedition to Siberia in 1831–1832. Probably he intended to get some money for a purchase of his other collection. His second collection was also later handed down to the Asiatic Museum. The quantity of books of this collection left the first far behind, it numbered more than 4800 items. An inventory on it was written by Y.I. Schmidt and N.Y. Bichurin. The first of them described Tibetan and Mongolian books, the second worked with Chinese, Manchurian, Japanese and Korean books.

In 1835 the collection of the Asiatic Museum was enriched by 95 Indian manuscripts bought by D. Stewart in London. In the collection different Sanskrit literature genres were represented, all of the records well accomplished and adjusted, and written in different areas of Northern India in the second half of XVIII century. V.P. Vasiliev (1818–1900) in 1840s handed over to the Museum several manuscripts and block-prints in Chinese, Mongolian and Tibetan, mainly of Buddhist content collected by him in Beijing. Among them there was an exemplar of “Lotus Sutra” rewritten in XIX century by an archaic Nepal handwriting of XI–XII centuries.

In XIX century the Asiatic Museum received a number of rare Chinese books and manuscripts of Buddhist content. About 1920, V.M. Alexeev wrote: “The Buddhist literature of the book collection being described [Chinese collection] has not escaped the common destiny of all other collections. The old collection, possessing some of exquisite parts of Ming canon, didn’t have the whole of it. That is in the latest years only when the Museum got a splendid Japanese edition of the canon with an enormous supplement for it. The popular Buddhism is represented by the editions of the monastery shops located in the island of Avalokiteshvara (Putuo Shan) and also by books, leaflets, paintings bought from the street merchants.”

“A splendid Kyoto edition of Tripitaka” mentioned by V.M. Alexeev was bought for the Museum in 1910s in Japan by O.O. Rosenberg along with some other Buddhist dictionaries and books.
According to the catalogue of Dorzhi Banzarov, in 1848 in the holdings of the Asiatic Museum, there were 83 Manchurian books with 10 Buddhist books among them: “VII. Buddhist religion. 1. Manchurian translations of various Buddhist books, on oblong sheets, 1 bunch which includes: a. Vatsir-yi lashalaru sure-yi chardzi dalin-de akunahad nomon.

Within XIX—early XX centuries the collections of the Academy of Sciences were being enriched by the purchases made by the Academy itself, by the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the unsolicited gifts given by the individuals and by the heirs of the deceased Orientalists. Exchange of doublets was rather active. The French sinologist Stanislas Julien (Correspondent Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences since 1845) who continually used the library of the Asiatic Museum, enriched it by the exchange of doublets. He delivered an incomplete exemplar of the manuscript “The Biographies of the Buddhist Patriarchs since the Birth of Shakymuni up to 1383” (仏祖略目). Later, in XX century this tradition of book exchange was continued by another great French scholar Paul Pelliot (1878–1945).

About 1855–1857 the Asiatic Museum received the collection of the Kazan Mission, which mainly included Buddhist writings. In 1864 a large collection was received from the Asian Department of the Ministry
of Foreign Affairs.

Since late 80s of the XIX century the Asiatic Museum started receiving materials from the nowadays Chinese Xinjiang. These were collections of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Uigur, Sakha. Tokharian and Tibetan languages of the 1 millennium A.D., bagged by the Russian researchers and diplomats N.F. Petrovsky, N.N. Krotkov, A.A. Dyakov, V.I. Roborovsky, I.P. Lavrov. These manuscripts were mainly fragments of sutras. They were included into the Central-Asian collection of the Asiatic Museum.

In 1902 the Asiatic Museum got the precious collection of Tibetan books (333 volumes) which earlier belonged to G.T. Tsybikov, who collected them during his stay in the monasteries of Ambo and Central Tibet: Kumbum, Kundeling, Ganden etc. Soon the Museum got a valuable collection of B. Baradiin, which was bagged in Kumbum and Labrang. In 1907 the Museum was enriched by the collection of P.A. Dmitrievsky with Buddhist works in Japanese language, such as “The Story about the Departure to the Southern Sea and Coming Back [to the Native Land]” (南煥寄歸傳). Together with the collection of A. Goshkevich in 1910 there were received such books as “The Enlarged and Revised Corpus of Buddha Images of all Schools” (增補諸宗佛像圖彙) and “The Illustrated Martyrology of Jodo School with Japanese Transcriptions” (浄土宗回向文和訓圖會). Along with the collection of N.P. Zabugin in 1911 the Asiatic Museum got the manuscript entitled as “The Biography of 6 Shoho Mountain Patriarchs” (正法由六祖傳).

A new stage in the collecting material by the Academy of Sciences was connected with a dynamic expedition activities of the Russian scientists in China and Central Asia in the late XIX—early XX centuries. The expedition of V.I. Roborovsky and P.K. Kozlov to Turfan in 1893–1895 acquired some objects of antiquity and some fragments of manuscripts in Uigur and Syriac, which were sent for the research to A.O. Ivanovsky and S.F. Oldenburg (1863–1934). The findings have been handed over to the Asiatic Museum.

In 1899 the Russian Committee for the Research of the Middle and Eastern Asia was founded under the patronage of the Russian Emperor. The task of the Committee was to arrange and to support Russian and foreign expeditions to the region. W.W. Radlow became the Chairman, S.F. Oldenburg Vice-Chairman of the Committee. The decision to arrange the First Russian Turkistan Expedition was accepted by the Committee when nothing of the materials brought by the European expeditions who earlier visited the region of the nowadays Xinjiang has not been published, so it was difficult to decide in Saint-Petersburg
where exactly the systematic works should be opened. 22 August 1910 the expedition started research in Shikshin near Kharashahr. At first, the ruins of a Buddhist monastery were investigated, further excavations were carried in Turfan and Kucha. About ten above-ground and cave monasteries were investigated there. The findings of the expeditions at first were sent to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), RAS, where they were briefly systematized and inventoried. In 1931–32 they were transferred to the State Hermitage Museum and in 1935 put on an open display. Among the findings there were about 100 manuscripts transmitted to the Asiatic Museum.

In 1910 S.E. Malov discovered in his expedition a unique Uigur manuscript entitled “The Sutra of Golden Light” (Suvarnaprabhasa) and endowed it to the Asiatic Museum. Later it was published and partially translated into German by W.W. Radlow.

In 1911 the Asiatic Museum got the collection of the expedition by P.K. Kozlov (1863–1935). In 1907–1909 he discovered an abandoned Tangut city Khara-Khoto, which lies in the Gobi desert. The expedition findings were represented mainly by the manuscripts in dead Tangut language, and also a numner of writings in Chinese. At present the Tangut collection of St. Petersburg Branch of IOS RAS encounters about 6 thousand manuscripts and block-prints, with a lot of works of Buddhist content. Most of them are translations from the Chinese and Tibetan languages. Original Tangut Buddhist writings imitated Tibetan pattern and by their genre belonged to the preaching of morality based on the facts from Chinese history. Among the Chinese manuscripts from Khara-Khoto there are 283 Buddhist sutras, encapsulating the basic points of the religion in brief and comprehensible way. All other sutras are inconsiderable in number, there are only 31 of them, with 15 exemplars of “The Lotus Sutra.” 9 of them are reprinted from 1146 year edition, 6 of them are fragments of different time manuscripts, the earliest is dating back to the second half of VII century, one was produced in late XI century and two in the middle of XIV century.

The famous Dunhuang collection of manuscripts and fragments of IX–XI centuries, discovered in The Thousand-Buddha Caves was acquired by the Second Russian Turkistan Expedition of S.F. Oldenburg of 1914–1915. The manuscripts collection totally numbers at about 19 thousand pieces including tiny fragments. The more or less full scrolls (about 400) were bought by S.F. Oldenburg from the local people; fragments were discovered inside the caves during archeological excavations. The Dunhuang collection in IOS in St. Petersburg also includes some of the manuscripts from S.E. Malov (1909–1910) Hotan Expedi-
Most of the manuscripts in the Dunhuang collection, which is a part of the Buddhist monastery library, are the Buddhist sutras (under more than 80 titles). The largest part of them exists in a several copies. The collection contains commentaries on sutras, apocrypha, records of oral Buddhist sermons, prayers, ceremonial notes and writings on Buddhist ritual. Primarily, the Dunhuang collection of the Asiatic Museum had some objects of art, but in the early 1970s, 71 items of them painted on silk and paper were moved to the State Hermitage Museum for restoration and display. All the pieces of art brought by the First Russian Turkestan Expedition of S.F. Oldenburg were kept there since 1931–1932. In 1970–80s M.L. Pchelina-Rudova accomplished the study of some difficult ichnographic fragments, which are exposed in the Hermitage nowadays. In 1992–2001 nearly all of the manuscripts of from St. Petersburg Dunhuang collection were published facsimile by Shanghai Classic Publishing House. Totally 17 volumes of “The Dunhuang manuscripts kept in Russia” were published.27

One of the last large acquirements of the Institute of Oriental Studies dates back to 1935, when some Chinese manuscripts were sent from the Far East Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Evidently they were brought to Russia from China in the first years of the XX century. At first these manuscripts were kept in the library of the Far Eastern State University, in 1932 they were transferred to the Far East Branch of the Academy of Sciences and after that delivered to Leningrad. The most precious books of the collection are the Chinese voluminous art albums, which are a part of NOVA collection now. Among them there is a colorful album of 5 volumes which dates back to XVIII century and contains stories and pictures on Buddhist canon.28

At present handwritten and printed monuments of Buddhist culture in different languages, which were brought to St. Petersburg from various areas of Asia, are part of a unique collection, which has few analogs in the world. In 1930 the Asiatic Museum with all his staff and collections was integrated into newly-founded Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, one of the basic functions of which is to edit written monuments of the collection of Asian manuscripts.

During the last 50 years the researchers of the Saint-Petersburg (Leningrad) Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, almost finished the cataloguing of the collection. The cataloguing did not lose its actuality during all the history of the Academy of Sciences. For the first time it was evidently mentioned in 1724 in the contract of the unter-librarian I.D. Schumacher (1690–1761), among whose duties were “to manage
over the Library and the Kunstkamera; to keep in order both the Library and the Kunstkamera, and to establish the catalogues.” Since then during XVIII–XIX centuries the inventories for the several parts of the collection were made and some attempts to write full annotated catalogues were undertaken, but the universal pattern to make full written accounts to the collections in different languages has been worked out only by the middle of 1950s. According to this pattern almost all of the catalogues for the collections of the Institute of Oriental Studies were compiled. Now the work on publishing the catalogues is almost finished, which is of great importance for the revelation of printed and handwritten monuments and affords an opportunity of comprehensive investigation of these books and manuscripts.

Notes

2 M.I. Radovsky outlines an interesting evidence of G.F. Miller, which concerns the significance of the Russian Academy’s collections. During his trip to England in 1731, G.F. Miller got acquainted with the collections gathered by G. Sloan, the President of the Royal Society in London, which later made up the basis of the British Museum. Later Miller wrote: “In the early 1753 he [Sloan] passed away being an aged man, after suggesting in his bequeathal to acquire his priceless wealth for an appropriate sum mainly to Russian Empress. This, evidently, has not been considered necessary, because Saint-Petersburg collection of natural and historic objects and pieces of art was so full, that accepting this suggestion was out of requirement.” [Radovsky M.I. Poseschenie peterburgskoi Akademii nauk kitaiskimi gostyami v 1732 godu (Chinese guests visiting Saint-Petersburg Academy of Sciences in 1732) // Iz istorii nauki i tekhniki v stranakh Vostoka (Some historical facts of science and technology in the countries of Orient). II issue. Moscow, 1961. P. 85].
6 The Orientalists Archive of Saint-Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Fund N 152, register N 2, item N 9. P. 1–14v.
7 The Orientalists Archives. Fund N 152, register N 2, item N 9. P.1–14v.

2 The Orientalists Archive. Fund N 56, register N 1, item N 115. P. 1–18, 57–58; Fund N 56, register N 1, item N 131.


4 Catalogue des Livres Chinois, Japonais, Manchous, Mongols, Tibetains, Tonkinois, Sanscrits, etc. de la Collection du Conseiller d’Etat actuel Baron Schilling de Canstadt // The Orientalists Archive. Fund N 152, register N 2, item N 30.


7 Tikhonov D.I. Srovenie vostochnykh rukopisey Instituta, sostavlennyi v Rossiskoi Akademii nauk SSSR. A summary of the manuscripts of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS.


12 Bogoslovsky V.A. Tibetskie rukopisi i ksilografy (Tibetan Manuscripts and Blockprints) // Vostokovednye fondy krupnykh bibliotek Sovetskogo Soyuza (The Asian


26 Menshikov L.N. Opisanie kitaikoi chasti kollektii iz Khara-Khoto (Fond P.K. Kozlova) P. 17.

