

Vasilii Mikhailovich Alekseev and Russian Sinology

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Vasilii Mikhailovich Alekseev¹ (1881-1951) is best known to readers of French and English through his by now curiously outdated but refreshingly thoughtful discussion of the underlying principles of Chinese literature, *La littérature chinoise: six conférences au Collège de France et au Musée Guimet*.² The first few dozen pages of that book are among the weakest that I have seen from Alekseev's pen. Its merits lie in the persistence with which he asks fundamental questions such as what exactly should count as Chinese literature and why its global status is what it is and should be what it should be. He asks squarely why Chinese poetry, rich and abundant as it was, has never had much formative impact on the West. But in this context he does not mention what he could not know: that apparently more than a million copies of his own

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¹ The Library of Congress transliteration system for Russian is used throughout. There is a disorientating number of transliterations of his surname, including "Alexejeff," "Alekseev," "Alekseev," "Aleksejev," and "Alexeief." He referred to himself in English as Basil M. Alexeiev. His original Chinese name was 阿翰林, his Chinese colleagues tended to call him 阿力克, but the most current Chinese version is 阿列克謝耶夫.

² Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1937, 252 pages; reviewed by Henri Maspero in *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939): 313-16.

translations from the *Liáozhāi zhìyì* 聊齋誌異 (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio) have been sold in Russia alone. His extraordinary collection of New Year's pictures was enthusiastically reviewed by Derk Bodde.³ Finally, there is in English his charming study on the Gods of Wealth which was reprinted many years after its original publication in 1926.⁴

One vividly understands how, in Russia, there has developed something of a scholarly personality cult around Alekseev, enthusiastically continued by many who never met the man himself. Alekseev was a unique master of Russian scholarly prose. Even as a foreign reader one senses the extraordinary vivacity and verve of his diction even in the most prosaic contexts. He was in fact so much of a scholarly artist that one is tempted to forgive him where one feels he is excessive or goes wrong. I count forty-three Russian articles on Alekseev's work cited in M.V. Alekseev, *Trudy po kitaiskoi literature*.⁵ Even in China he has aroused considerable interest. *Trudy po kitaiskoi literature* lists twenty Chinese articles on his work, mainly from the 1990s onwards.⁶ Notably, Lǐ Míngbīn 李明濱 has written a series of eleven articles on Alekseev's contributions to Chinese studies, and in 1981 Gē Bǎoquán 戈寶權 published *Liáozhāi zhìyì zài Sūlián* 聊齋誌異在蘇聯.⁷

Alekseev was a passionate phonetician and linguist by training. His model was Henry Sweet and his *Practical Study of Languages: Guide for Teachers and Learners*, and his colleague in the study of Chinese linguistics in 1905-6 was a young student of Slavonic linguistics,

³) V.M. Alekseev, *Kitaiskaia narodnaia kartina: Dukhovnaia zhizn' starogo Kitaia v narodnykh izobrazheniakh*, ed. L.Z. Eidlin, compilation of materials by M.V. Bankovskaia, foreword by B.L. Riftin and M.L. Rudova, commentary and bibliography by B.L. Riftin (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 260 pp., 105 illustrations (including 8 plates in color). See Bodde's review in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 27.2 (Feb. 1968): 339-47. Compare also the English version of this: Maria Rudova, ed., *Chinese Popular Prints* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1988), unpaginated, 178 illustrations; and also the even richer selection in *Redkie kitaiskie narodnye kartiny iz sovetskikh sobranii* (Leningrad: Aurora Publishers, 1991), unpaginated, 206 annotated illustrations, all different from those in *Chinese Popular Prints*.

⁴) Basil M. Alexeiev, *Chinese Gods of Wealth: A Lecture Delivered at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, on 26th March, 1926* (London, 1928, 44 pp.; rpt. Singapore: Cybille Orient Gallery, 1983).

⁵) Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003, vol. 2, 458-61.

⁶) Vol. 2, 460-61.

⁷) In *Wen shi zhishi* 1981.4: 115-19.

Bernhard Karlgren, who was then beginning to take a serious interest in matters Chinese. Alekseev always retained a deep admiration for the young Swede.

Characteristically, Alekseev was not always polite, and he did not mince words when it came to the description of his scholarly mission. In his *Rabochaia bibliografiia kitaista. Kniga rukovodstvo dlia izuchaiushchikh iazyk i kul'turu Kitaia* [A Working Bibliography for the Sinologist: A Guide for Students of Chinese Language and Culture],⁸ he refers to it (p. 7) as the *likvidatsiia kitaevetskoi bezgramatnosti*, i.e., “the liquidation of sinological illiteracy,” and goes on to stress the crucial importance of a *teoriia sinologicheskogo slovaria* (“theory of a sinological dictionary”). In fact, the details of the project are not complete in the book, but an appendix (pp. 459-543) provides a detailed survey of his dictionary plans. He focuses on the importance of a system of “synonym associations”: “We wish to append a list of synonym associations as, for example, in Roget’s *Thesaurus*.”

Keenly aware of the challenges such maximalism poses, he hastens to add, “But this needs many years of work, and especially the specialized work of a collective.” Then he comes to his crucial point: “It is clear to us that only this system is the true system of the language, and that the alphabetic dictionary is no more than, as it were, an index to it.”⁹ My own *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*¹⁰ is based on precisely this point of view and might properly have been dedicated to the memory of Alekseev had I known about this programmatic appendix thirty years ago.

As Riftin points out, the lofty ideals proposed and instantiated in Alekseev’s program were never realized in the famous Russian dictionaries compiled by V.M. Oshanin in Moscow. It is sobering to recall that Oshanin’s four-volume *Bol’shoi kitaisko-russkii slovar’* (Large Chinese-Russian Dictionary)¹¹ has not the remotest rival in a Chinese-English or Chinese-German dictionary to this day and is surpassed in Western Europe only by the six-volume French *Le Grand Dictionnaire*

⁸) St. Petersburg: Biblioteka Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, 2010. 70 copies printed.

⁹) *Nam iasno, chto tol’ko eta sistema i est’ nastoiashchaia sistema iazyka, a alfavitnyi slovar’ lish’ kak by ukazatel’ k nei* (pp. 482f).

¹⁰) <http://tls.uni-hd.de>.

¹¹) Moscow: Nauka, 1983.

Ricci de la langue chinoise.¹² Also for classical Chinese there is nothing in German or English that can compare with Séraphin Couvreur's *Dictionnaire classique de la langue chinoise*.¹³ Thus in lexicography at least French philology continues to play its (alas) sadly neglected traditional leading role in the West.

Alekseev makes it amply clear that he was not alone in his project. His colleague and friend Paul Pelliot, with whom he exchanged letters from 1911 onwards, included it in his "Les tâches urgentes de la sinologie."¹⁴ It remains relevant to ask how well Sinology has done in the pursuit of these "urgent tasks."

One may disagree with him on occasion, but Alekseev was certainly a man who had the courage of his scholarly convictions. He was a true man of letters, one of the great intellectuals among Sinologists of the last century. His highly personal aphorisms, to which I return below, record the intellectual experience of being a Sinologist *and* a lively intellectual.

In 1974, Hartmut Walravens devoted one of his invaluable bibliographic essays to Alekseev.¹⁵ The complete bibliography of Alekseev's writings by itself makes up a precious volume of its own.¹⁶ Without any doubt, Alekseev's chef-d'oeuvre was his magisterial doctoral thesis on Sīkōng Tú's 司空圖 *Èrshísì shī pǐn* 二十四詩品, published in 1916.¹⁷ This book surely deserves to be added to the extensive bibliography on the *Èrshísì shī pǐn* in Stephen Owen's useful *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*.¹⁸ Alekseev's thesis was celebrated by L.Z. Eidlin, as translated by Francis Woodman Cleaves, in "The Academician V.M. Alexeev as a Historian of Chinese Literature."¹⁹ Eidlin may have been

¹² Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001.

¹³ Ho-kien-fou: Imprimerie de la Mission catholique, 1904, 1080 pp.

¹⁴ *Actes du XVIII Congrès International des Orientalistes, 7-12 Sept, 1931* (Leiden: Brill, 1932), 134-35.

¹⁵ "V.M. Alexeev—Leben und Werk: Eine Bibliographie," *Oriens Extremus* 21.1 (1974): 67-95. As will be seen, there have been significant additions to the publications by and on Alekseev since then.

¹⁶ I.G. Bebikh and O.E. Sakoian, *Vasilii Mikhailovich Alekseev* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 95 pp.

¹⁷ *Kitaiskaia poema o poete, Stansy Si Kong-tu*, Petrograd 1916, 706 pages; re-edited with admirable care by B.L. Riftin (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2008), 699 large pages.

¹⁸ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Council on East Asian Studies, 1992, 299-358.

¹⁹ *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 10.1 (1947): 48-59.

excessive in praise of his own master, but it is difficult indeed to avoid excessive praise when it comes to his work. It is as if, fifty years before William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words*,²⁰ Alekseev had desperately tried to do for classical Chinese what Empson does so inimitably well, for example, in the chapter entitled "Statements in Words": namely, to tease out the subtle statements that are so crucial in poetic diction, be it in poetry or prose—or even conversation.²¹ Alekseev writes: *slovo nalivaetsia krov'iu dukhovnoi i zhivet kak propovednik*, which I must quote in the Russian because I have no way of conveying in English the keyword *dukhovnyi*, in which there is much more soul than meets the eye in its German near-equivalent *geistig*: "The word is filled with spiritual blood and lives like a preacher."²² One often feels that Alekseev's Russian deserves to be read with the kind of care he devoted to Chinese.

Alekseev cultivated a general interest in classical Chinese prose, as is evidenced in his two-volume anthology of translations from masterpieces of Chinese prose and by three thick volumes of studies.²³ It is worth remembering that during the years 1941-44 much of this hard work was done in exile under extremely difficult conditions in Borovoi (northern Kazakhstan).

Alekseev also has a brief related work on calligraphy, *Artist-kalligraf i poet o tainakh v iskusstve pis'ma*, which was reviewed by J.J.L. Duyvendak.²⁴ His more general papers on sinological subjects are collected in a very substantial separate volume, which occupies a unique place in the history of Sinology because of its fascinating autobiographical section.²⁵ Since then, a considerable number of Alekseev's books have been published in Russian. Many of these are based on the extensive

²⁰ 1951; rpt. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989.

²¹ The singular importance of Empson for any serious student of Chinese literature was brought home to me by David Hawkes.

²² V.M. Alekseev, *V starom Kitae* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 1958), 199.

²³ V.M. Alekseev, *Shedevry kitaiskoi klassicheskoi prozy v perevodakh akademika V.M. Alekseeva* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2006), 470 + 502 pp.; V.M. Alekseev, *Trudy po kitaiskoi literature*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2002), 572 + 512 pp.; and V.M. Alekseev, *Kitaiskaia literatura* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), 595 pp.

²⁴ *T'oung Pao* 2nd ser. 38 (1948): 301-7.

²⁵ V.M. Alekseev, *Nauka o vostokey* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), 535 pp. The sinological autobiographical notes with the crucial personal aphorisms are found on pp. 266-346.

archives he left behind. I limit my comments to the volumes in my own collection.

One of Alekseev's great passions turns out to have been for the Qing dynasty writer Pǔ Sōnglíng 蒲松齡: he studied and taught the *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* throughout his life and produced a splendid annotated translation of a rich selection of them.²⁶ Riftin has given us a detailed analysis of Alekseev's approach to the problems of translation in his paper "Novelly Pu Songlinga (Liaozhaiia) v perevodakh akademika V.M. Alekseeva."²⁷ Alekseev's fascination for this important collection of tales comes out nicely when he tells us in his travelogue: "... and then comes Liaozhai and starts to tell us about the most intimate and simple things in a language that would do honor to the most distinguished writer of literary-caste Chinese literature (*kastovoi kitaiskoi literatury*)."²⁸

Alekseev died almost sixty years ago, but his translations and studies continue to be published and republished in Russia, most importantly through the relentless efforts of Boris Riftin, Academician and Sinologist extraordinary from Moscow. The latest publication from the extensive manuscript archives of Alekseev is his *Working Bibliography for the Sinologist: A Guide for Students of Chinese Language and Culture*, which I review in more detail below. This readable pedagogical work provides a narrative and delightfully subjective, comprehensive survey of the sinological literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For once, we can look over the shoulders of a great Sinologist surveying the literature on his subject. Herbert Franke's much shorter and much less personal survey *Sinologie*²⁹ gives us another fascinating vision of the field that may be usefully compared with Alekseev's, of which Franke would not have known at the time he wrote his important work; however, Franke was highly aware of the productivity and importance of Russian Sinology. There is no comparable survey of the field in English.

²⁶ *Strannye istorii. Rasskazy o ljudjakh neobychnykh* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2007), 399 pp.

²⁷ *Vostochnaja klassika v russkikh perevodakh* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2008), 113-206.

²⁸ V.M. Alekseev, *V starom Kitae* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 1958), 300.

²⁹ Bern: A. Franke A.G. Verlag, 1953.

Alekseev's travelogue of his expedition to China in the company of Édouard Chavannes³⁰ is of unique personal as well as scholarly interest. He emerges as the open-minded ethnographer with a keen eye for all manner of things, like New Year's pictures and the paired inscriptions known as *duilián* 對聯 on shops as well as in more dignified places. His candid and highly personal sinological aphorisms are without parallel in the history of Sinology. The catholic range of his learned interests is evident everywhere in this manuscript, but what makes him unique is the persistent urbane thoughtfulness, the magisterial and at the same time intensely engaging intellectual style that permeates his writings.

Such, then, was the range and productivity of the man whose scholarly autobiography we now have in the form of a systematic report and subjective appreciation of everything he read on matters Chinese—his *Working Bibliography for the Sinologist*. From end to end, the book is a sheer delight for those Sinologists who retain an interest in the history not only of China, but also of the decipherment of the main features of traditional Chinese culture. There will be those who find the book outdated, since Alekseev does not go beyond the 1930s in his treatment of the literature. It is a pleasure to report that on pp. 278-420, Riftin, the indefatigable grand old man of Russian Sinology, shares his perceptions on the most important sinological literature the beginning student needs to be aware of when entering this inexhaustible field of study. As the editor of the *Working Bibliography*, he added precious supplementary notes as well as a detailed bibliographic chapter summarizing recent developments. This survey does not compete in comprehensiveness with Endymion Wilkinson's unsurpassed and constantly revised magisterial editions of *Chinese History: A Manual*, of which a mammoth digitized successor is rumored to be in the works. Rather, and very much in the tradition of Alekseev, it presents an intelligent, openly selective, and subjective assessment by a seasoned philologist of the relative usefulness of the handbook literature sur-

³⁰ See V.M. Alekseev, *V starom Kitae*, translated by Boris Riftin as *China im Jahre 1907: Ein Reisetagebuch* (Leipzig und Weimar: Gustav Kiepenhauer Verlag, 1989), 431 pp. His letters to Chavannes and Paul Pelliot have been published as V.M. Alekseev, *Pis'ma k Eduardu Shavannu i Poliu Pellio* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 1998), 230 pp., with a fine selection of photographs.

veyed. Even within the areas focused on in Wilkinson, Riftin is naturally both able and willing to add a number of useful Russian handbooks overlooked by Wilkinson so far, and yet Riftin's account of handbooks in Russian is far from complete. For example, he fails to mention Boris Stepanovich Isaenko's pathbreaking concise *Kratkii kitaisko-russkii slovar'*³¹ which pioneers systematic attention to stress in an alphabetic dictionary of Chinese.³² Riftin quotes (p. 283) some disheartening statistics of the publication progress of handbooks in Chinese that go a long way to explain the necessity of subjective selectiveness: 1900-1949: 320 handbooks; 1949-1979: 890 handbooks; 1979-1989: 3080 handbooks.

Contrast this with the over twenty thousand handbooks, including those published in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, listed in Zhōngguó gǔjīn gōngjùshū dà cídiǎn 中國古今工具書大辭典.³³ There is indeed a superabundant, inflationary yearly increase in accessible information about every aspect of Chinese culture, and yet there does not seem to be any corresponding increase in the philosophical depth and aesthetic subtlety of our understanding of Chinese culture and indeed of Chinese texts.

It is for the neophyte, the diffident outsider who is hoping to become a sensitive and subtle, aesthetically-minded interpreter of Chinese culture, that Alekseev wrote his book. The first question he raises is that of the perceived difficulty of the language. In his personal style that makes one feel everywhere that one is literally "hearing the Master's voice" he writes: "I have often had to point out, and I have to point out now to make it clear to my listeners (who to a greater or lesser extent take an interest in my autobiography as a Sinologist) that if I had employed as much time on the study of all the European languages as I have on the study of Chinese in my life, then in each of these European languages and in their entirety I would certainly have obtained greater results than those I have achieved in the course of time with the Chinese language" (p. 96, n. 5). Alekseev speaks from

³¹) Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo innostrannykh i natsional'nykh slovarei, 1957.

³²) See also Aleksandr Varlamovich Kotov and Boris Stepanovich Isaenko, *Russko-kitaiskii slovar'* 26000 slov. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo innostrannykh i natsional'nykh slovarei, 1953).

³³) Ed. Shèng Guǎngzhì 盛廣智 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1990).

the heart when he reports how studying a Chinese text one spends most of one's time *not* finding characters in *non*-alphabetic dictionaries. He diagnoses the frustrations of how "ignorance [...] never reaches knowledge but only mechanically transcribes vocabulary from the systematic list in the dictionary into an anarchic notebook" (p. 96, n. 3). To read Alekseev's texts is to meet the man. And little could he have imagined how the contemporary student, having acquired the computer program *Wenlin* 文林, would hold a cursor over any character in his digitized texts to see instantaneously more than he ever wanted to know about any character or expression. For Alekseev, the very difficulties of the language should inspire the improvement of learning methods as well as *nauchnaia organisatsiia truda*,³⁴ "the scientific organization of work" or study methods. He writes (p. 16): "It is to this task of the scientific organization of the work of the Sinologist that the present volume is dedicated, and I intend to summarize my nearly forty years of experience as a Sinologist, giving direction to the neophyte ..." It is the intellectual discipline and systematic nature of the sinological exercise, the *sistema truda* or "system of work" that is Alekseev's chief concern.

A preliminary difficulty, which Alekseev faces squarely, is the justified student complaint that if one wants to study China one also needs to study at least three European languages: French, English, and German, in that order.³⁵ Alekseev does point out that Russian itself is a language like "Norwegian, Danish, Polish, Spanish, Greek, Italian, etc." (p. 38) which one may leave aside. But owing primarily indeed to Alekseev himself and the remarkable linguist A.A. Dragunov, as well as their many students, a case may be made for saying that in the twenty-first century one disregards Chinese studies written in Russian at one's own peril. A detailed study of the early history of Chinese studies in Russia was compiled by P.E. Skachkov, who died in the

³⁴ He nowhere seems to specify that this is what he refers to by his abbreviation "NOT."

³⁵ Alekseev came to learn German relatively late. He felt "humiliated, incompetent, and hopeless" (B48) because of his failure to understand German sufficiently well; see the biography of Alekseev written by his daughter, N.V. Bon'kovskaia, largely based on his diaries, and discussed in the second section of the present article: *Alekseev i Kitai* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura RAN, 2010), 487 pp. (Here and in the following, I designate references to this book in the format "Bnn," hence "B48.")

mid-sixties, and was published posthumously in revised form in 1977.³⁶ This important work, of which a Chinese translation is about to appear, deserves a substantial English-language supplement to bring the story of Russian Sinology up to date. The task of compiling such a supplement would be immense, but it is essential if Sinologists at large are to be made aware of what they miss when they fail to take account of Russian scholarship on Chinese culture. Chinese interest in Russian Sinology is manifest in the 700-page tome, *Éguó Hànxuéshǐ* 俄國漢學史, edited by Yán Guódòng 閻國棟, which provides access to a Chinese perspective on the sources of pre-1917 Russian Sinology.³⁷

In blatant contravention of all current sinological “political correctness,” Alekseev insists on a positively loaded definition of the term “Sinologist” in the first place. He finds, of course, specialists: historians (Chavannes, Pelliot, Maspero, Hirth), then what he calls *drugie filologi* or “other philologists” (Demiéville, von Zach, Haenisch), as well as sociologists (Granet), and linguists (Karlgrén). But what makes them Sinologists is their concern with Chinese primary sources as evidence, and when dealing with such sources they all converge on one discipline: philology. They “are turned into philologists” (*prevrashchaiutsia v filologov*, p. 22). It was obvious in Alekseev’s unimaginably distant times that one cannot imagine such scholars *bez tochnogo grammaticheskogo analiza*, “without a precise grasp of grammatical analysis” (p. 22). Philological competence was, for Alekseev, a *conditio sine qua non* of Sinology, and he routinely complained of regarding the technical terminology of grammar “toward which our grammar books relate with such nonchalance” (*khalotno*).³⁸ The semantic shift in the word “philologist” from this place of honor into an almost actionable professional insult deserves a close study and certainly sums up important developments in Chinese studies of the late twentieth century. The demise of the term “Sinology” also deserves close historical attention. Alekseev insists that for all specialists, basic philological training is not only necessary but *vo mnogikh punktakh odinakova*, “the same on many points.”

³⁶ *Ocherki istorii russkogo kitaavedeniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 505 pp. It deals with Russian Sinology up to the Revolution.

³⁷ Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2007.

³⁸ See N.V. Bon'kovskaia, *Alekseev i Kitai* B49.

Unfashionably to our modern specialist and professionalist ears, Alekseev also insists that this philological commonality means that specialists in Chinese sociology, linguistics, history, economics, literature, and so on should “have much more in common with each other than a Greek historian has with an Indian historian, a philologist of Arabic, or a sociologist of Japan.” Note that Alekseev assumed that it was quite impossible to be a specialist in all the sub-disciplines of Sinology—and difficult enough to be a specialist in any of them. His thought was that there was an important common philological and cultural core that ought to bring scholars of matters Chinese together, and that made them into Sinologists. He recognized degrees, though, of being a Sinologist. He imagined a sliding scale in which the geologist was at the bottom while the specialist in Chinese cultural history was at the top. In the tradition of Henri Maspero, Alekseev feels very strongly that Japanese, German, English, French, and Russian Sinology are but one subject, and that all Sinologists must obviously be familiar with the Chinese language. Sinological research must be solidly based on what has been achieved by Russian, French, German, and Japanese scholars. He acknowledges that one cannot demand of Sinologists everywhere a reading ability of, say, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, or even Latin, although he himself found the knowledge of Latin crucial for his purposes (p. 23).

Next, Alekseev takes up the question of the intended readership of ancient Chinese literature, and finds that this readership is very much like that of the Jews, the Arabs, the Greeks, the Indians, and the Romans: it is a readership of the highly educated (often in preparation for public service) and of those who not only consume literature but are typically ready to produce it. One is acculturated into this community through the crucial feature of *podrazhanie* or “imitation.” In a footnote, Alekseev goes quite far in his characterization of ancient literary culture: “From ancient times, imitation lies at the root of all Chinese culture, and if in this world there is history of literature defined by the misanthropic theoreticians as a history of imitation, then it is indeed Chinese literary history” (p. 102, n. 35). Alekseev points out the highly limited circle of competent readership of classical Chinese texts in China and the extraordinary number of manifest and undeniable mistakes in the translations of the great masters of Sinology like

Alfred Forke, Georg von der Gabelentz, Herbert Giles, Otto Franke, Gustave Schlegel, V.P. Vasil'ev, Bernhard Karlgren's teacher of Chinese A.I. Ivanov, and notably V.M. Alekseev himself (p. 33).³⁹ In a singularly useful footnote he lists some of the more remarkable critical articles by the remarkable and indomitable Erwin von Zach which spelled out in almost obsessive detail the mistakes of academically more successful contemporaries (p. 108, n. 80).⁴⁰ An instructive modern illustration of this is one of the great Chinese philologists of the twentieth century, D.C. Lau, whose translation of the *Mencius* was so pervasively and convincingly corrected by David Nivison that Lau published a second edition taking full account of the serious mistakes pointed out to him. The instructive message of this episode is that a striking number of things that Lau got substantially and even grammatically wrong had been much more adequately rendered a century ago by James Legge.⁴¹

It would be easy but tedious to illustrate the decline in the quality of translation from the time of Legge and Couvreur until today. Whatever the truth may be, the cantankerous, myopic pedantry of such detailed criticisms of translations, irritating as it often is, is also healthy and instructive, especially when the criticism is directed against oneself and toward those in scholarly authority (p. 108, n. 81). Alekseev was theoretically and practically obsessed with the theory of translation and the problems of translatability. He was not merely a true master

³⁹ See also p. 146 where Alekseev obliquely refers to criticisms of his doctoral thesis, and especially n. 41 on that page. The re-edition of his thesis in 2007 conveniently incorporates these corrections. Absent in the list of those who fall prey to mistakes, interestingly, are the philological Pelliot (1878-1945) and Henri Maspero (1882-1945), the linguist and historian of China, son of Egyptologist Gaston Maspero (1846-1916), murdered by the Nazis at Buchenwald.

⁴⁰ See also the highly instructive re-editions edited by Hartmut Walravens: Erwin Ritter von Zach (1872-1942)—*Gesammelte Rezensionen. Chinesische Geschichte, Religion und Philosophie in der Kritik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), and Erwin Ritter von Zach (1872-1942), *Gesammelte Rezensionen. Chinesische Sprache und Literatur in der Kritik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006). Of special interest is Martin Gimm, "Eine Nachlese kritisch-polemischer Beiträge und Briefe von Erwin Ritter von Zach," *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 130 (1981): 16-61, as well as the instructive chapter on von Zach in Bernhard Führer, *Vergessen und verloren: Die Geschichte der österreichischen Chinastudien* (Bochum: Projekt Verlag, 2001).

⁴¹ Who is known to have been careful in listening to advice from the learned Wang Tao. See David Nivison, "On Translating *Mencius*," *Philosophy East and West* 30 (1980): 93-122, and D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, vol.1 (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 1984), 1.

of the practice of Russian prose translation. Interpretive and hermeneutic precision was in his view at the very heart of any understanding in any area of Chinese culture. His 1916 doctoral dissertation on the *Èrshìsì shī pǐn*, mentioned above, was one gigantic exercise in this area, and he recognized (p. 34) Pelliot's profusely annotated translation of the *Lǐ huò lùn* 理惑論 as a model of the precision he had been aiming at.⁴² One may deplore the obsessively myopic philological *xùngù* 訓詁 perspective that Alekseev commends, but there can be no doubt that basing his work on such philological pedantry, Alekseev pursued extremely ambitious comparatist, literary, philosophical, and artistic ends. In the end he was more of a philosopher and a "culturologist" than a mere Sinologist. His pioneering comparative study of Horace's *Ars poetica*⁴³ and Lù Jí's 陸機 *Wénfù* 文賦⁴⁴ stands unsurpassed. In his seriousness and rare honesty, even in matters embarrassing and humiliating for his trade of Chinese philology, Alekseev was a true intellectual, not a mere professional.

Alekseev concludes his methodological introduction with a devastatingly relevant but intemperate remark directed towards those happy students of Chinese culture for whom the Chinese are primarily informants, sources of information, and who are interested only in those Chinese *po svoemu razvitiuu ne vyshe*, i.e., "who in their development have reached no higher" than the researchers themselves. For them, Alekseev suggests, there is indeed no need for philology or for books like the one he is writing. In philology, they have use for *nikakikh knig krome uchebnikov tipa Berlitz'a*, "no books other than Berlitz-style textbooks." Today what Alekseev called "the Berlitz style" has basically become the immensely popular, predominant mode of instruction on the Chinese language throughout Western universities. Sinology may be falling into disrepute in many quarters, but the conditions for the serious humanistic research that Alekseev was advocating have certainly never been remotely as good as they are today. It seems to me that from 1906 onwards Basil M. Alexeiev has shown us a Way.

⁴² See Pelliot, "Meou-tseu ou les doutes levés," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd ser. 19 (1920): 355-433.

⁴³ *Ad Pisones*.

⁴⁴ *Kitaiskaia literatura*, 249-72.

Portrait of the Philologist as a Young Man

We know of Alekseev's youthful diaries chiefly because after his death in 1951 his wife, N.M. Alekseeva, made the crucial contribution of typing out his notes, many of which would have been hard to decipher for anyone else. Alekseev knew he was hyperarticulate in writing, and one of his recurrent Latin phrases was *currente calamo*, "with a racing quill" (B48). He asks himself: "Why is it that I constantly declaim things? Why does it come so naturally to me to make beautiful speeches?" (B58) The diaries are a rich source for the intellectual biography of Alekseev written by his daughter, N.V. Ban'kovskaia, and published in 2010 under the title *Alekseev i Kitai*.⁴⁵ They are a unique contribution to the history of Sinology in the West, equalled in importance only by N.G.D. Malmqvist's *Bernhard Karlgren: ett forskarporträtt*, which is soon to be published in revised form.⁴⁶

Alekseev i Kitai is profusely illustrated with quotations from just those hyperarticulate diaries that Alekseev wrote all his life "*currente calamo*." The first part covers his formative years at St. Petersburg's Kronstadt Gymnasium and in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Berlin, and Peking. I can best pay tribute to this biography by summarizing some of its contents for the benefit of those who do not read Russian; and I must admit that the language of the book is often sophisticated and highly demanding for the likes of me. One perennial problem is connected with the concept of *nauka*, or *Wissenschaft* in German, for which there is no adequate term in English. It is as if a frighteningly inadequate dualism between the humanities and the natural sciences were programmed into the modern English language, where for Alekseev the very essence of the humanities lies in the fact that it must be pursued very much in a "scientific" (*nauchnyi*) spirit, even when, as in mathematics, the concrete "scientific" methods may differ from those current in the natural sciences.

Alekseev was one of eleven children of an unmarried but "stable" couple in St. Petersburg. Only two of these children grew into adulthood. Alekseev's father came to see his main purpose of life in the

⁴⁵ See note 35 above.

⁴⁶ In English, as *Bernhard Karlgren: Portrait of a Scholar* (Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh Univ. Press, 2010).

education of his son, but he died when Vasilii ("Vasia") was only eleven. Vasilii remembered his childhood as full of penury, tears, and regrets. The single joy he recorded was the evenings when he was able to listen to peasants' tales and songs. To the end of his life he envied those who grew up in an intellectually inspiring environment. Such was not his case. He always suffered from a sense of humiliation, self-contempt, and a fear of authorities: "My whole life has taught me only to prick up my ears like a wolf cub in a cage." He claimed, "I am self-educated (*la vospityval sebia sam*)," yet his teachers were many: of Russian, French, English, German, and above all Chinese. His teacher of Greek at the Kronstadt Gymnasium, N.P. Nikol'skii, left an indelible impression on him. A few years later in Paris he summarized his childhood and youth as follows: "I grew out of nothing, out of a chaos of primers. I was carried away by things, like a barbarian, discovering Americas everywhere, and noticing this fact myself, suffering from it" (B62).

At the university, he studied Chinese and Mongolian. But as he wrote in 1946 to his best friend and fellow student Eidlin, he finished his hard work on Chinese with a sense of tragedy. Like many of us today, he complained of "grammar without rules and without clear thoughts, translations in the form of nonsensical curiosities, which plunged one into confused consternation (*izumlenie*)" (B18). Whereas he had greatly enjoyed the company at the Kronstadt Gymnasium, students of Chinese had all come to be seen in his eyes as careerist would-be conquistadores in Manchuria who regarded philology as just a necessary evil on the way to a diploma. But for some reason (*pochemuto*) the young Alekseev felt differently. In times to come, he would rate his students by this "something," which he came to think of as *ser'eznost' nauchnogo entuziazma*, "the seriousness of scientific enthusiasm," and which he thought impossible to fake. What he demanded of any serious student was the obsessive "extreme and at times belligerent perfectionism (*krainii podchas voinstvennyi maksimalizm*)" which his own daughter so vividly ascribes to him (B22), and which was intimately linked with what Alekseev himself diagnosed as an intemperate impatience and an almost morbid dissatisfaction with himself. "Everything in me is incoherent (*neskladno*) ... There is such a complete chaos in me that I do not know how to evaluate such a life ... Life! How much enormity (*skol'ko gromadnosti*) there is in the word!" (B27). "The ques-

tion about life (for me at least) has been posed but not resolved ... To live thinking about life was boring. And so I sought refuge in scientific inquiry. As far as my abilities allowed me, I found refuge there, but, alas, not in my student days, only later ... Successful thirst (*zhadnost'*) for knowledge and enthusiasm—that is the panacea!” he was to tell his students at a later stage (B29). As early as during his Paris days he reflected: “It will be necessary to devise an understanding of cognition (*znanie poznaniia*)” (B62), and by cognition he meant precise, well-defined knowledge grounded in observation. This is what at times he felt he found in Paris: “I am having a wonderful time here in Paris: I work, and I live a spiritual life ... God, how happy I am when I have a good conscience ... I feel full of the meaning of life” (B61). “Let me be unhappy elsewhere but happy in scientific study (*v nauke*)!” was his desperate cry, and yet: “Outside the living air of love (*bez atmosfery ljubvi*) there is no life, only a vegetating existence (*prozhabanie*).”

From his early days onwards, Alekseev remained what one might call a philosopher of life, but very much a philosopher inspired by literary models: “We were all characters out of Chekhov’s stories ... ‘How should one live?’ we asked like Katia in ‘A Boring Story,’ of professors who were unable to give an answer” (B27). In this connection his daughter muses: “Perhaps being an intellectual begins at the moment when in a person the wall that divides reality from literature is broken down” (B28). What Alekseev read entered the flux of his life. The London friend who in 1904 or 1905 called him, unforgettably, “impressionable” (B60), had it right. At times he thought he had an answer: “I want to give myself completely over to my favorite dream—free and strong scientific reflection (*mysl'*).” But one is not surprised to learn from his diaries that at times he found even conversation with his scientific idol, the great Chavannes, distinctly less exciting than a trifling chat (*erundovuiu boltovniu*) with a perky lady (B59).

Alekseev always retained an almost disconcerting passion for ruthless psychological self-analysis, especially an analysis of the contradictions in himself: “Everything in me is incoherent,” he concludes somberly, “aimlessness, ambition, fierce cynicism, and untrammelled (*rasukhabisty*) sentimentalism. Everything in me is in such chaos that I truly do not know how to evaluate my life ... Strange. I begin my personal development with analysis!” (B60). Intellectual work is where

he finds solace: "Leisure is nothing for me, that is clear. I love work; I love to make an effort. It is curious how the absence of leisure time and gloom (*toska*) pleases me!" he notes in his diaries (B33). And this work (*rabota*) has almost sacral dimensions for him: "There is an evil spirit in me which leads me away from work, from the ideal of my soul ... There is a dark force in me which struggles against my bringing out the holiest of holies of my thought (*sviataia sviatykh moei mysl'i*) ... It is fine to jump now from subject to subject without depth of sense! But when life poses for me the demand for serious summaries (*ser'eznye itogi*) of the efforts of my youth—what will I say?" (B63). Those moments of "serious summaries (of results obtained)" were the all-important moments of truth in his life—to the end of his life. Moral and intellectual seriousness is what sums up the core of the man in many ways.

From the summer of the year 1901, in his diaries, "his thoughts begin to be analyzed fearlessly" and he reflects: "Oh, if only I could work on my selected learned cornfield, not worrying about distractions from need and life in a rigid frame, a square and grey frame!" (B27) Sinological work became for him an escape from the square, grey, indigent, narrow social frame into the larger world of international scholarship, and he became a passionate aficionado of the philological work of James Legge.

Alekseev inimitably describes his favorite teacher of Chinese, Peshchurov, as follows: "He was a man of considerable culture, but the Chinese language he separated from this culture."⁴⁷ More precisely, he found that his teacher suffered from *doslovchina chudovishchmaia* or "monstrous literalness." Yet this very Peshchurov it was who a few years later passed all his books on to the young Alekseev—whom, on the other hand, he strongly advised to leave the field of Sinology and aim for a more remunerative bureaucratic career. Even the great V.P. Vasil'ev, whose negativism about China Alekseev was exposed to in his last two years at the Academy, receives a lively description culminating in Vasil'ev's considered opinion that the only thing that was seriously important and worthwhile in Chinese literature were the translations from the Sanskrit of texts that had since been lost in India (B20).

⁴⁷⁾ To him language was rules, experience, and *mot-à-mot* translation.

Alekseev speaks of the “the poisons of supercilious judgment (*otravy vysokomernogo suzhdeniia*)” when one judges the foreign and the strange “from above,” as it were. His mission was to live down this tempting cultural superciliousness by two methods: historical philology on the one hand and contemporary ethnographic curiosity on the other. At times he succumbed to this poisonous temptation in himself too, as he knew all too well, and perhaps we may be excused for thinking it was a usefully poisonous temptation to have to grapple with. At one point he finds himself echoing, in his supremely observant desperation, Vasil'ev's cynical spirit: “The Chinese bearer of a living tradition, in whom the essence of Confucianism is found, does not understand things but regurgitates what he has learnt” (B94). Alekseev never tries to hide the essential contradictions among his perceptions. He was indeed an impressionable soul, as a female friend put it, and on an intellectual level as well.

Alekseev's scholarly father figure, the formidable Buddhologist S.F. Ol'denburg, whose credo was *idti, kuda ne zovut*, “to go where one is not told to go,” went one day to young Alekseev's reading desk and said, “Alekseev, I'd like to see you!” Ol'denburg often saved the young man from intellectual despair by providing “an antidote to the cold stereotype of the Department (*protivoiadiie ot fakul'tetskogo kholodnogo stereotipa*)” and allowing the young philologist to “sob in the sleeve” of the grand old man (B25). There is no question that Alekseev was a difficult and complicated student to teach. He complained bitterly that in the Department *chtenie bylo uchenicheskim, passivnym*, “The reading [offered by his teachers] was student-like, passive” (B23). In any case, looking back on his philological experience, he concluded, “I left the department as an ill-educated person” (B53).

Alekseev felt impelled at every juncture to produce summaries (*itogi*) of what was achieved. Regarding the St. Petersburg school of Sinology: “The leadership of Vasil'ev [and his chrestomathy] and the classical dictionary by Palladii in insipid hands—this is what has ruined Russian Sinology” (B67). The cure for Sinology, to Alekseev's mind, was to “draw it into the scheme of a general global culture (*obshchaia mirovaia kul'tura*)” (B31). But when he visited “Europe” he found, to his surprise, that he himself was regarded very much as an exotic object of study from the Orient. “They look upon me as an interesting wild

creature (*dikovinka*) and do not even hide it ... In the West, Russia is included in Oriental Studies" (B37). This was a real eye-opener for the philologist as a young man.

Nonetheless, in London and Oxford, Alekseev managed to trade lessons in Greek and Latin for lessons in English (B49). He became a truly avid advanced learner of idiomatic English.⁴⁸ Overwhelmed by the wealth of material in the libraries in Britain, he was all the more impressed by the intellectually arid, pedestrian, and lamely practical spirit of sinological enquiry in that country. It was in Oxford that he began to appreciate for the first time the intellectual advantages of the orientalist education he had enjoyed in St. Petersburg. In Cambridge, Herbert Giles appears to have treated Alekseev, like any of his other students, with dismissive lack of interest. He would set aside but a well-defined half-hour for the young Russian. Alekseev notes: "I did, in fact, most of the talking myself" (B37), but Giles did dispense the wisdom of his anti-intellectualism in matters sinological and particularly in matters linguistic ("Disregard grammar!"). Alekseev, in return, noted with pleasure that Giles's history of Chinese literature was not only later but also much inferior to Vasil'ev's, of which Giles had evidently never heard. If Alekseev came away from England impressed by the wealth of orientalist materials collected by the English colonialists and the admirable working conditions in the libraries, he was astonished to register the almost total lack of intellectual excitement left behind by the sinological tradition of the great James Legge. He found the English uncommunicative: "Such is the people: cold like a dog's snout (*kholodny kak sobach'i nos*)" (B36). The difference between Russian and English young ladies gave him food for thought: "English girls are not coquettish ... It is as if they were saying, 'I am only for the one I shall choose. For the others, I am no more than a human being.' I thought a lot about why it is that with us nearly every woman seems to say, 'Try your luck. You can, you know!—Well, or you may not—*da ne sumeesh'*—*poshel proch'*.'" However this may be, looking back at things in 1948, Alekseev drew a gloomy conclusion: "London, Oxford, Cambridge—these were unnecessary places to visit." The most

⁴⁸) As well as a professor of English, as time went by and his merits came to be recognized in St. Petersburg.

useful thing the English did for him was to provide helpful letters of introduction to the great intellectuals in Paris, like the extraordinarily generous Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935) and Édouard Chavannes: these men and many of their colleagues fascinated Alekseev not only with their spirit of intellectual enquiry but also with their intellectual charm. The impish, thoughtful smile of Chavannes remained with him and inspired him for the rest of his life, as in “Chavannes said with that smile: ‘*Ce qui est beau en vous, c’est l’enthousiasme,*’ to which I replied: ‘*C’est idiot, cet enthousiasme!*’” (B47) But with Chavannes everything was put forward with a smile and only to open up broad perspectives for the listeners (B39).

Alekseev’s private teacher of French, Desmaison, was interesting to him for entirely different reasons: “Desmaison is a dirty ragamuffin. He oozes wine. But clever he is! It’s a pleasure talking with him although I still don’t get a lot of what he says” (B50). Clever he certainly was since he prepared Alekseev exceedingly well for attendance at a number of performances at the Comédie Française: “Read *Ruy Blas* with Desmaison the whole night. Ready to hear it tomorrow!” (B51) Desmaison proved excellent company, not least because he showed a serious interest in Russian language and literature. A sound sense for the subtleties of the Chekhov style always remained a gateway to Alekseev’s heart.

Alekseev was an ambitious and avid learner of languages. He came to know French remarkably well. But as is so characteristic of him, he attacked himself on this account in his diaries when he felt humiliated by a friend’s superior command of the language: “Whence this vanity (*tshcheslavie*)?” (B52) He always remained overambitiously “perfectionist,” maximalist, and knew it. Yet even with Chavannes the smile disappeared when it came to the close philological reading of texts, “which Chavannes never lost a chance to adduce” in support of anything he was saying. By the end of his stay, Alekseev no longer referred to Chavannes by name, but simply as *le maître* (B65). In his later letters he ventures to address the great intellectual as his teacher and friend (*uchitel’ i drug*).

But for all Chavannes’s charm, Alekseev was unable to resist the temptation to study a wide range of subjects with other scholars in Paris. He was attracted by linguists like the comparative philologist

Antoine Meillet. “Spent a wonderful hour with Meillet: he understood that I am committed to the spirit of his thought. I was very glad ... The languages of the East have long been waiting for ... the methodology applied by this outstanding linguist to the languages of the Indo-European family” (B64). He wished he could open up Chinese philology the way Meillet had opened up Latin philology to a well defined and scientifically disciplined comparative perspective.⁴⁹ Alekseev was also fond of the “admirably logical” Victor Henry, who said farewell to him with these words: “You are young, decisive, and full of working energy (*trudoliubivyi*). We shall remain friends. Try to think of me from time to time.” Alekseev was deeply moved: “I am taken with him, the attention he pays to me, and by his warm-heartedness (*serdechnost'*)” (B65). It was in Paris that he made these kinds of friends of the spirit (*dukhovye*).

Even when he did not know the authors, Alekseev was transfixed by books with titles like *Vie des mots*, but he was confirmed in his view that “from general comparative grammar it is impossible to hope for practical usefulness other than that of being enlightening and serving *Allgemeinbildung*” (B44). The function of the academic discipline of Sinology had to become educational, enlightening, aesthetic, and even “spiritual” (*dukhovnyi*), not just cerebrally “scientific” (*nauchnyi*). In short: from an early age, he belonged to a dying breed of old-fashioned humanists. But Alekseev sometimes complained of the disorientating intellectual overstimulation and dissipation in Paris, the absence of systematic and scientific “well-defined and clear perspectives ... What is all this incomprehensible galimatias good for that I’m brooding over?” (B41) Such was the complexity of his life.

The friendship he developed with Chavannes was of a completely different order. He writes in his diary: “My mistake was an eager chasing after things and dissipation of interests.” He should have sat at the feet of Chavannes. He should have tried to become like Chavannes. He should have become a historian. “To the depth of my soul I find Chavannes’ openness of mind sympathetic, one senses a fresh head working consistently ... What would have become of me if I had not

⁴⁹ One finds oneself somberly reflecting that he might find himself still waiting today, considering current methodologies in East Asian historical linguistics.

heard those lectures by Chavannes at the Collège?" (B42) Alekseev became convinced that as a young Sinologist one should not choose a particular subject, but rather go where one can find a guide, a scholarly methodologist with whom to study the right way of doing things: he thought that what he should have done was "to work out in himself the historian, and not the philologist" (B43).

In 1905 he made the passing acquaintance of a certain Paul Pelliot. The early relations between these two scholars deserve close attention:

February 17, 1905: "Met Pelliot at the École. He invited me to take breakfast with him. Tries to practice his Russian on me. Gets on my nerves."

February 21, 1905: "Breakfast with Pelliot. The conversation somehow did not touch on any scientific topics."

March 9, 1905: "Trying to read *Yzhôushû* 逸週書 at the Bibliothèque Nationale. In walks Pelliot. Skipped and skipped and walked off. V. thinks he is one of those *fumistes*."

April 2, 1906: "Pelliot makes himself important with his knowledge, but actually the fellow works [too] fast."

April 21, 1906: "At home with Chavannes. Pelliot, talkative as ever. But what cleverness, in fact! I droop and give up (*niknu i pasuiu*)."

April 25, 1906: "Having read a brochure by Pelliot I was shocked! Here is a product of intellectual breeding! And look at me! Hurried race after worthless crumbs of scholarship (*nichtozhnye krokhi nauki*). I'm ashamed of myself!"

June 1, 1906: "Touch upon Pelliot in conversation with Chavannes. I am aware I'm *sous son coup*. Comforting thought: live up to him ... But actually he is just clever, nothing more. No more than four years difference in age. Let us see what happens."

Pelliot was in fact more than clever: he was fierce and in more ways than one. He once challenged a man to a duel because he had dared criticize the scholarship of Chavannes. The Chavannes personality cult was rife in Parisian sinological circles and has been slow to die out even now. Fortunately, Alekseev never made in Pelliot's presence any of the severely critical remarks about Chavannes that fill his diaries. The intrepid Pelliot frightened even the young Karlgren, a formidable person in his own right, who once commented, "Pelliot was a d'Artagnan!" Whatever the truth of that opinion, Alekseev's letters to Pelliot from 1911 onwards often have something flattering and formal about them, especially at the outset. Alekseev always thought of Pelliot as an

inordinately ambitious and vain man, as well as an enthusiastic socializer whose notorious breakfasts often attracted a disconcertingly large number of visitors.

On his short visit to Berlin, Alekseev found little of that “lively physiognomy” of Paris that he had grown so fond of. The women he found “in good order, but neither elegant nor beautiful, though polite” (B65). What charmed and relieved Alekseev the most in Berlin was the high level of French spoken by everyone. Müller, head of the Ethnographic Museum, lived up to every preconception Alekseev might have harbored about the Germans: “His learning was shocking (*nachitannost' ego puguet*).” The contrast with Herbert Giles in Cambridge could not have been greater: “We talked for three and a half hours. I came away with more profit than half a year of bookish study would have given me” (B66). Professors Forke, Grube, and Sachau all put on a fine show of congenial fluent French at the famous Seminar of Oriental Languages in Berlin. But the student clientele, Alekseev found, was of the same mercantile and desperately uninteresting kind he had seen in England, with only one decisive difference: they did seem to learn Chinese at an extraordinary speed in Berlin, mainly, he thought, because efficient use was made of very well-paid Chinese visiting language teachers.

In Peking Alekseev found little distraction and worked so hard that he did not even find time to write the letters with which he used to entertain his friends from England and France: “Sometimes I regret that I waste my youth in slavery. But then: who does not regret his past?” (B68) Convinced that the spoken language of Peking must be accessible to non-“hieroglyphic” transcription, he produced vast amounts of “fine” phonetic transcriptions of the Peking dialect, much in the spirit of his Paris masters of phonetics. He insisted on investigating in this way what he called “the phonetic laws of the Peking dialect of the northern Chinese language” (B68), and for the methodology of these matters his guide remained his Paris teacher, J.-P. Rousselot.⁵⁰ According to his daughter, Alekseev became the first linguist anywhere in the world to apply strictly experimental methods to the study of Chinese tones (B46). He also became deeply interested in lexicographic

⁵⁰ *Principes de la phonétique expérimentale*, 2 vols. (Paris-Leipzig: Welter: 1897 and 1908).

theory, French literature, general phonology, religious studies, and many other subjects.

Alekseev's omnivorous work-alcoholism flourished in Peking as never before. "One of his teachers said, 'To work with somebody who works and for somebody who works is pleasant.'" (B69) But Alekseev was found wanting when it came to learning the classics by heart: "Liu tells me that my most serious fault is that I do not remember the classics" (B94). What he worked for was to become a good professor of Chinese, and he came to think that he got it all wrong: "What I should have done was to concentrate on scientific investigation, because one is a scholar first and only then *eo ipso* a professor. But I thought otherwise" (B69).

In 1906 Alekseev immersed himself in a study that would remain one of his preoccupations to the end of his life: new-year's pictures (*niánhua* 年畫), of which he came to make what perhaps is still the most remarkable collection in the world.⁵¹ His was a courageous, revolutionary interest, for even in St. Petersburg his Chinese teacher commented as follows on these pictures: "All this is what uncultured, stupid people indulge in (*sebe pozvoliajut*). I won't even look at them in a university!" (B71) It was a profound pleasure for the young Alekseev to find his learned teachers in Peking also unable to explain these pictures, which he would get semi-literate old men in the neighborhood to expound so beautifully and richly.

Popular art was one thing. Popular tales and hawker's cries were another. Alekseev recorded both on a grand scale. He proudly considered himself a *kitaist-etnograf* (B84). But in spirit he went beyond conventional ethnography. He aspired to become a cultural sleuth, an anthropological Sherlock Holmes deducing the secrets of Chinese culture from seemingly informal and disinterested conversations with a wide range of witnesses for that culture. At one point he says, "Sherlock Holmes would have made an excellent Sinologist" (B86).

All this went very well, but: "I am alone here and lonely with my lively interest for this country. Everything else, everyone else ... Dear me, what a public!" (B73) This changed when Chavannes arrived in Peking, and when, on May 16, 1907, Alekseev was able to join the

⁵¹ Unless the Hanshan bookshop in London is collecting more as I write this.

great scholar at a major exhibition. Chavannes had come to China with a purpose: he was looking for archaeological evidence on the Han dynasty. The young Alekseev was most embarrassed to see how his distinguished teacher failed to make any sense in conversation with his Chinese hosts—until for some reason the subject of Sīmǎ Qiān came up. As a rule, the young Alekseev had to do the talking, and for once his comments were not in his usual self-destructive mode: “He should have understood that without me his listeners would have been bored to tears.” There is, after all, more between Heaven and Earth than Han epigraphy and Sīmǎ Qiān, and the young Alekseev was interested in that other part.

In his diaries of the time he asks a pertinent question: “Will China simply become a part of Europe and America where they just happen to speak and write Chinese, or will the country be able to preserve its personality (*svoe litso*)?” Alekseev gradually came to discuss such questions extensively with the Chinese (B78). He found no sympathy for his occasional displays of national sentimentalism, which he eventually learnt to keep to himself: “I told Chavannes a lot about Russian literature.⁵² Only in Russia can they write like this. I was proud of my wonderful language and happy that in my country something improbably big was growing in the minds of its best sons ... Soon a revaluation of all values would come. The thunder of the storm was audible, the storm of a new life! Chavannes was quite indifferent to such themes: history, in his opinion, is made by extraordinary personalities. With Chavannes one must talk solely about China. There he was simply extraordinary. Our conversations about literally all questions regarding the study of China comprised the charm of this journey. We philosophized gently. In moments like these Chavannes was inimitable (*nezamenim*). I can forgive him everything just for his having given me the chance to spend time in his room” (B79). “The link between a teacher and his disciple can be more lively and more self-sacrificingly deep than that between a father and a son. I forgive Chavannes many things with pleasure, both in relation to myself and also in general—and I am so happy with the triumphant feeling of my own humility” (B80). The recurrent reference to forgiveness makes it plain that Chavannes

⁵² In particular, it seems, about Leonid Andreev.

with his aristocratic ways and “pedantic haste”⁵³ toward his long-dead inscriptions posed something of an emotional challenge to the young Alekseev. Chavannes appreciated the *razgovorchivost'* or “chattiness” of his young disciple all the more because he felt he was naturally incapable of it (B82), and this chattiness it was that ultimately led Alekseev to appreciate Chinese culture and Chinese ways of life so naturally, so deeply, so personally. It was this trait that added a dimension of almost physical responsiveness to his otherwise immoderately ambitious and often very abstract philological pursuits. Like very few others after him he seemed to be indeed “on speaking terms” with traditional China.

By contrast, it would appear that Alekseev was not on speaking terms with Marxists or Marxism: “I’m sorry to say that I am not a Marxist. In the problems that I am concerned with it is difficult (for me, at least) to solve them convincingly in the manner of Marxism” (B14). In 1950 he added: “I’m writing nothing: I’m scared. And thus I spent the entire year.” But in fact at the time there was something else that occupied his mind and what was left of his failing energy: the compilation of what was to become the *Bol’shoi kitaisko-russkii slovar'* (Large Chinese-Russian Dictionary) of 1983, mentioned above. In his introduction to the dictionary, the editor, I.M Oshanin, only barely referred to what in fact was Alekseev’s quite crucial role in the project which preoccupied him for much of his later life. No account of Alekseev would do justice to his methodological approach if it did not focus on the central matter of lexicography which was his abiding preoccupation. It had taken on a life of its own.

Indeed, for all its shortcomings, in the matter of phonetic description which was so close to Alekseev’s heart from his early days in Paris onwards, this dictionary came to go well beyond all dictionaries published in China and all dictionaries published in the West. In fact, it also went beyond Alekseev’s own phonetic transcriptions: *The Large Chinese-Russian Dictionary* indicates the stress contours in Chinese words. N.A. Speshnev,⁵⁴ a student of a student of Alekseev’s, is the hero of the story of the study of Chinese word stress in Russia. In his *Fon-*

⁵³) In the diaries Chavannes is referred to as a *pedantichnyi toropiag*.

⁵⁴) Born in China in 1931.

etika kitaiskogo iazyka,⁵⁵ *Vvedenie v kitaiskii iazyk*,⁵⁶ and in *Kitaiskaia filologiya. Izbrannye stat'i*,⁵⁷ Speshnev lays out some of his principles concerning the phenomenon of word stress in Chinese. In phonetics, Speshnev carried on where Alekseev had left off. Yet closest of all Russian Sinologists to Alekseev, when it comes to developing the line of becoming a *kitaist etnograf*, systematically concerned not with any Mandarin *langue* but with local Northern and Southern Chinese *parole*, is the indefatigable academician and folklorist Boris Riftin.⁵⁸ Riftin was never really taught by Alekseev. It appears he met the man no more than once or twice. Yet it is abundantly clear everywhere in Riftin's vast sinological enterprises that he drew much of his spiritual and scientific nourishment from this extraordinarily inspiring philologist-ethnographer Alekseev.

⁵⁵ Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1980.

⁵⁶ St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo KARO, 2006.

⁵⁷ St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 2006.

⁵⁸ Riftin's Chinese article (under his Chinese name, Lǐ Fúqīng 李福清), "Commemorating the 120th Anniversary of the Birth of the Russian Sinologist Vasilii Alekseev," *Hàn xué yánjiū tōngxùn* 漢學研究通訊 79 (2001): 63-69, has been useful to me in writing the present article.