



## Remembering Paul Pelliot, 1878-1945

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## BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

### *Remembering Paul Pelliot, 1878–1945*

I have recently visited the studies of two Sinologists, one of whom was in his mid-thirties, the other in his mid-forties. Both had on display pictures of Paul Pelliot, who died more than half a century ago, before these scholars were born. It is a fact that Pelliot's many publications are still widely read and that his extraordinary personality still seems to arouse interest and command respect. Indeed, in sheer volume, his posthumous publications exceed those that appeared during his lifetime.

I have three reasons for putting to paper the following reminiscences. I am the only scholar still alive who knew Paul Pelliot well. Secondly, in the whole hagiology dealing with Pelliot, no mention is made of his foibles. Thirdly, and quite rightly, previous writers emphasize mostly his work on the Tun-huang manuscripts and his contribution to Sinology. As it were, they all speak of the young Pelliot. Few remarks have been made on his last years and on his contributions to Altaic studies. It is on this period of his life and on his contribution to this field of study that I shall focus my attention. I venture to present him here from an unusual angle. Of course, reminiscences such as these carry the risk of containing too much that concerns the narrator; I am not sure that I can entirely avoid this pitfall.

My relationship with Pelliot was of short duration, barely six years, from 1939 to his death on 26 October 1945. In more than one way, those were fateful times, very hard on all of us living in German-occupied France. I first met Pelliot in early August 1939 when, with modest support given by the Hungarian Ministry of Education, I arrived in Paris, ostensibly to prepare for my Ph.D. examination but, in fact, to get to know and study with Pelliot. Of my two teachers in Budapest, one, Louis Ligeti, had himself worked for three years with Pelliot; the other, the great Turcologist Gyula Németh, bid me farewell with the parting words that in the person of Pelliot I was going to meet a man "with limitless knowledge." As a matter of fact I had been in touch with Pelliot

at an earlier date. At the age of nineteen I sent him for publication an atrociously bad article, the receipt of which he never acknowledged, but which, for reasons unfathomable, he published in *T'oung Pao*. In later years I never mustered the courage to ask him how this could have happened; I dreaded the thought that he might recognize in me the perpetrator of that sorry effort.<sup>1</sup>

Aged twenty-three, I arrived in Paris and soon after, formally dressed with hat and gloves, I called on Pelliot. The reception I received was, to put it mildly, something of an anticlimax. Wearing pyjamas, he opened the door of his apartment, situated on the Avenue Foch, on the top floor of the Musée Dennerly. He would not let me pass the antechamber and informed me that in October when he was to begin his classes at the Collège de France I could attend those. Not exactly a warm welcome, it compared most unfavorably with those which, in 1937 and 1938, I had experienced in Berlin from, respectively, Erich Haenisch and Otto Franke. In the course of time, this first impression needed no revision. Kindness, friendliness at first sight, were not Pelliot's dominant traits of character.

Pelliot was a solitary man and scholar, he created no school, had no institute of his own, and was not surrounded with an adoring and helpful group of students. Contrary to our current practice, when even junior professors at small colleges rely on the services of research assistants, Pelliot had none, not even a secretary, at least not in France (perhaps he had someone Chinese working for him when he was in Hanoi). He wrote all his works himself, in a small, not very legible hand. It seems he never owned a typewriter. In the last years of his life I was officially his assistant for Altaic Studies at the Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, but this was a courtesy title, given for me to include on my resumé, so to speak. He never once asked me to perform any scholarly task for him. My principal duties, if they may be so called, consisted of providing him with cigarettes, in those war years difficult to come by. He was almost a chain smoker. Shortly before his death—he was already hospitalized—as I was visiting him, I was received by a very agitated Mme. Pelliot clamoring for cigarettes. I

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This is a revised and enlarged version of two papers, read, respectively, on July 7, 1997 at the 35th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, held in Budapest, and on April 6, 1998 at the 208th meeting of the American Oriental Society, held in New Orleans.

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<sup>1</sup> For understandable reasons, I refrain from giving the exact reference for this article.

had none and pointed out that not long ago I had brought enough to last him for a good while. "Je sais, Sinor," came her reply, "mais c'est terrible, je pensais qu'il allait mourir et je les ai toutes fumées moi-même."

In the strict, traditional sense of the word, Pelliot had few pupils. From among those who persevered in research the names of Louis Ligeti, Francis Woodman Cleaves, Louis Hambis, Rolf Stein, Louis Bazin, and my own come to mind. I regret if, accidentally, I have omitted a name or two, but it was a very small band. Without any doubt, Hambis—whose role almost attained that of a research-assistant—was closest to him; but more will be said about this later.

Soon after our first brief meeting, but not because of it, World War II broke out and, after a period of administrative hesitation, the Collège de France opened its doors for Fall classes. Because of his age, Pelliot could not be mobilized and he found unacceptable such wartime duties as were offered to him. He could not see himself in a hierarchy in which his place was not on the top. So, to my great luck, he resumed his courses. These were of two types: one addressed to humans, i.e., to a wider public, the other intended for his students. In his courses of the latter type he paid no consideration whatsoever to the level of knowledge we may have had. I vividly remember the occasion when, in opening a course, he announced that it would be based on the Kirghiz chapter of the *T'ang shu*. The fact that some of the handful of auditors (including myself) could not read Chinese did not bother him. By the time of the next lesson I had learned, on my own, how to use a Chinese dictionary, and had gained a vague idea of the contents of the first few lines of the text to which he added his superb commentaries, veritable dazzling fireworks. If by any chance an outsider ventured into one of his lectures (the Collège de France lectures were open to everyone, the motto of the institution being *Docet omnia*), he went out of his way to become even more technical. When the unwary human had taken to flight, Pelliot remarked with some satisfaction, "On est de nouveau entre nous."

He was a fascinating speaker, with a pleasant voice and, however technical the matter may have been, the presentation was made in a beautiful, clear French style, with no "ahhs" or "ers." He used notes but no prepared text. He allowed interruptions, questions, and quite often he addressed one of us with the formula, "Monsieur X nous dira sans doute . . ." In answering, one took upon himself a considerable risk. It was not enough to make an intelligent comment or to provide some information Pelliot may not have had, but it also had to be done in faultless French. He had zero tolerance for mistakes in French

grammar and his reactions to linguistic mistakes were quite often plainly rude. In this respect I was lucky, having spent years in a French-speaking Swiss boarding school, so all in all, I could express myself correctly.

Modesty was not Pelliot's strong point: of it he had none. Accordingly, he would not tolerate contradiction and disliked people who, in his view, intruded into what he considered his own territory. He simply had no interest in training young Sinologists. Rolf Stein found asylum with the formidable Marcel Granet. Robert des Rotours, an aristocrat, was autonomous, and with his manners and fortune impressed Pelliot. As for Louis Hambis, he diligently prepared draft translations of scores of Chinese texts of the Yüan period which then served as a basis for Pelliot himself to display, in the commentaries, his own immense learning. As for me, who had no intention of remaining permanently in France, the diagnosis was quite unequivocal. Although it was out of the question to challenge any of Pelliot's views, the solid scholarly education (should I say boot-camp experience?) that I had acquired in Hungary allowed me now and then to cite data mainly in the Turkic and Finno-Ugric field, which, quite surprisingly, were unknown to Pelliot and yet relevant to his interests. Towards me he could therefore be astonishingly generous, to the point of inaccuracy, in his recommendations. In a letter of reference written on 11 July 1942 he wrote that I had arrived in Paris "solidement préparé pour le turc" and in another letter (1 October 1942) he even went further and indulged in gross exaggeration: "M. Sinor, familier des langues finno-ougriennes, connaît également bien le turc dans toutes ses formes et dans tous les temps." It should be noted that such praise, going well beyond the limits of truth and necessity, assigned me a place beyond the borders of Sinology. Pelliot supported only those whose interests lay outside his private hunting ground. I see this much clearer now than then and I am certain that this attitude of his was more instinctive than deliberate. As could be expected, a young student in Sinology could never measure up to Pelliot and, thus, was of no interest to the "Maître."

Pelliot particularly disliked people who appeared to intrude on his Inner Asian territory. Let me cite a few examples. For him, Sven Hedin was a mere ignorant traveler, and he could never muster a kind word for Sir Aurel Stein, who had had the audacity to discover the treasures of Tun-huang before him. He was, however, ready to give Stein credit for having entrusted Chavannes with the task of editing some of the texts that he (Stein) was unable to read. He could never forgive Erich Haenisch for publishing and translating the *Secret History of the Mongols*, tidbits of which text had appeared in Pelliot's papers and

in his courses for many years. Pelliot's partial translation of this important text<sup>2</sup> was published posthumously and, let us face it, all in all it is no better than that of Haenisch. Yet it should be remembered that, probably dissatisfied with his own work, Pelliot himself never published it. In the oeuvre of Otto Franke, Pelliot could detect only the mistakes made in the reconstruction of foreign names and not Franke's merit in writing a large-scale historical synthesis.

His favorite scholars (of course, all dead) were Sir Henry Yule, Joseph Marquart, Berthold Laufer, and Bretschneider. He often referred to the "robuste bon sens" of Yule, with whom he shared a fondness for early travelers. Yule's *Cathay and the Way Thither*, his studies on Marco Polo, and last but not least his *Hobson-Jobson* were constantly cited, and ameliorations, if any, were offered in a tone of respect and affection. As for the intolerable Marquart, Pelliot, like all of us, stood in awe before the breadth of his knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Among the German scholars of the Turfan expeditions, his favorite was Albert von Le Coq (perhaps because of his French ancestry); he respected F. W. K. Müller and he was fond of retelling the adventures of Grünwedel with a high-class prostitute in St. Petersburg. As mentioned above, he ignored Otto Franke but for his mistakes. However, he was objective enough to let Wolfgang Eberhard's pioneering *Kultur and Siedlung der Randvölker Chinas* appear as a supplementary publication of *T'oung Pao*. True, Eberhard was then in voluntary exile in Turkey and the book, like *Hobson-Jobson*, was for Pelliot a rich mine of information. Among his *bêtes noires* the Dutch Sinologist J. J. M. de Groot held pride of place. As far as Hungarian orientalists were concerned, he almost never referred to the formidable Ligeti—I suspect he considered him a clone of himself—but he spoke with deep respect about the lesser-known Nándor Fettich, for the simple but valid reason that Fettich had archaeological data on the Avars formerly unknown to Pelliot. Among contemporary scholars, he often mentioned, always with

respect and affection, the Rev. A. C. Moule, with whom he collaborated on the Marco Polo text, and Cardinal Eugène Tisserand. In later years I was received warmly in Cambridge by the former, in the Vatican by the latter.

In the face of the occupying Germans—we are now in 1940—Pelliot was uncompromising, and I had to take great care not to allow my relative objectivity to appear in our conversations. When the German Islamicist and specialist of Mongol history in Islamic lands, Berthold Spuler, wished to visit him (I heard this story from Spuler himself), Pelliot let him know that he would be willing to meet him "quand nous aurons gagné la guerre," a war which he did not for a moment consider ended with the armistice signed by Pétain. In a letter in my possession, meant to be a sort of certificate, he writes as follows: "Je suis moi-même un résistant de la première heure, et les points de vue de M. Sinor ont toujours concordé avec les miens." I do not know whether Pelliot ever did anything against the Germans but he certainly never hesitated to show his contempt towards the officials of the Vichy Government. There was the much talked-about incident when he refused to shake the extended hand of a minister of that government. More significantly, he would not ask for the permission of the Vichy Government necessary for the Société Asiatique to continue its meetings during the Occupation. Thus all of our meetings were technically illegal, and no member of the society betrayed this activity. Pelliot was once arrested for a short period; but I do not know whether this was by the Vichy police or by the Germans.

Once again his view towards me was overly generous. For a short while, let me shift here the emphasis from Pelliot to Sinor. In June 1940 I was neither surprised nor sentimentally affected by France's collapse. I was and felt Hungarian to the point that in June 1940 I became deputy director of the Institut des Études Hongroises in Paris, the director of which was not ready to remain in a city facing German assault. On 30 August 1940, as a result of the Second Verdict of Vienna, one part of Transylvania was returned by Roumania to Hungary whence it had been detached in 1920 by the Treaty of Trianon. I felt it my duty to celebrate the event with a reception to be hosted by the Institute but I was faced with the delicate question of whether I should invite Germans, notably the Director of the German Institute in Paris. On the one hand, the Verdict, which I welcomed, was passed under German pressure; on the other, I instinctively recoiled at the idea of having victors and vanquished face each other at what was to be a dignified but celebratory occasion. So, no Germans were invited to the reception. My decision, based on tact rather than on political considerations,

<sup>2</sup> *Histoire secrète des Mongols: Restitution du texte mongol et traduction française des chapitres I à VI* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Let me cite what he wrote about him in his "A propos des Comans":

"... au milieu d'hypothèses si aventurées que l'auteur les abandonne lui-même à mi-route, jaillissent les éclairs d'une véritable divination. Mais l'ordre des livres de M. Marquart n'existe que dans la tête encyclopédique de M. Marquart lui-même..." (p. 25)

proved to have lasting consequences. Some fifty to sixty people came to the reception (the first I ever hosted), including my French teachers—Paul Demiéville, René Grousset, the Turcologist Jean Deny and, of course, Pelliot. I was only twenty-four at the time and felt moved and grateful for their presence. The Hungarian Consul General made a short speech, I made a short speech, we sang the gloomy Hungarian national anthem, immediately followed by the stirring sounds of the *Marseillaise* played on a gramophone. The effect was stunning. What for me was a self-evident courtesy towards the host country was for the French there present a defiant assertion of their sovereignty: the playing of the *Marseillaise* had been strictly forbidden by the German occupiers of France. Grousset had tears in his eyes and embraced me, while a very serious Pelliot shook my hand for a long time; he had devoted his life to scholarship but first and foremost he was just French. Without being aware of it, on that afternoon I crossed my Rubicon and entered France.

A good-looking, elegant man with a slightly military comportment, Pelliot was liked by women and he, in turn, appreciated feminine charm. He also valued elegant company and good food—the key to his close relationship with Hambis, a generous though not disinterested host in whose country home in Ligugé I myself spent some happy days. I have no information on Pelliot's family background but he might have come from a modest *petit-bourgeois* family, whence his genius catapulted him into the highest French circles where he moved with ease and not without a sense of enjoyment. I somehow sensed this and in the spring of 1940, with some trepidation, I dared to invite Pelliot for dinner. True, it was not to some obscure student hide-out but to the Chinese Embassy, to which I had access through an attaché of the Chinese mission, who happened to be my girlfriend. At any function given at the embassy, Chinese ladies were supposed to wear national dress but I managed to convince my friend to disregard this rule. In her dress of *haute-couture* she looked quite spectacular, and I must leave it to the judgment of my readers to decide whether it was pure coincidence that soon after that dinner, on May 10, co-sponsored by Pelliot and Grousset, I was elected a member of the Société asiatique.

I remember, some years before his lamented death, the formidable scholar Francis Woodman Cleaves of Harvard telling me that during the years he attended Pelliot's courses he had never had any personal conversation with him. Such was also Ligeti's experience who, as far as I could gather, never had any social contact with Pelliot. Neither of them had social skills and they could not sense

that Pelliot enjoyed the good life, that he was wide open to adventures even of the kind where men's lives were at risk. His courage during the Boxer Rebellion had made him famous and he endorsed with enthusiasm my decision to join the Free French Forces. He also showed considerable interest in my venture into the fur-coat business, an enterprise that sustained me in those difficult years. While I may have been awe-stricken by Pelliot's knowledge, I never suffered from shyness in social intercourse and so was able to see an additional side of him.

In October 1942 when, as a consequence of that playing of the *Marseillaise* two years earlier, I had to leave Paris to escape arrest, I invited Pelliot and the Consul General of Hungary for a farewell dinner (somewhat snobbish, Pelliot enjoyed the company of diplomats). It was a very moving occasion. My wife and I intended to cross illegally into what was called the *zone libre*, i.e., the south of France, not yet occupied by the Germans, with the intention of continuing on to Argentina where my father-in-law lived. It so happened that by the time we arrived in Marseille so had the Germans, who now occupied the whole of France. There was no point in staying there, and by mid-March 1943 I was back in Paris where Pelliot received me with open arms. By that time the war had taken a bad turn for the Germans and one could foresee the final outcome of the conflict. One day, abruptly, Pelliot asked me what I intended to do with my life once the war was over. Quite frankly, preoccupied with the triple task of dodging arrest, finding food, and working on my next article, I had no plans for the more distant future and I told him so. I will never forget that moment. Standing in his study with no trace of any smile or benevolence, he told me peremptorily: "Vous devez rester en France. Je m'occuperai de vous." It was an order and a promise, Pelliot the "grand mandarin," giving orders, making decisions. In a few seconds he changed the course of my life.

It was my good fortune that late in his life, when I knew him, Pelliot was more and more attracted to Inner Asian history and to Altaic studies. In a not very respectful way I would describe his approach as leech-scholarship. He would read a work, attach himself to it, and then produce a masterpiece which usually did little to improve on the essential merit of the original but served as vehicle to carry the reader into uncharted territories. Thus, John F. Baddeley's *Russia, Mongolia and China* (1919) inspired *Notes critiques d'histoire kalmouke*,<sup>4</sup> Spuler's *Die Gold-*

<sup>4</sup> 2 vols., Paris: Maisonneuve, 1960; 235 pp. The text was written in 1920 but Pelliot never put the finishing touches to it.

ene Horde: Die Mongolen in Russland 1223–1502<sup>5</sup> produced *Notes sur l'histoire de la Horde d'Or, suivi de quelques noms turcs d'hommes et de peuples finissant en "ar."*<sup>6</sup> But even many of his articles, such as "A propos des Comans"<sup>7</sup> (already mentioned), "Notes sur le Turkestan de M. W. Barthold,"<sup>8</sup> or "Notes sur la légende d'Uyuz kaghan en écriture ouïgoure,"<sup>9</sup> are but *addenda* or vastly improved versions of works written by others. His chef-d'oeuvre in Altaic linguistics, "Les mots à h-initiale aujourd'hui amuie, dans le mongol des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles,"<sup>10</sup> is, in fact, an elaboration of an idea of G. J. Ramstedt.<sup>11</sup> When he assigned to Louis Hambis the translation of two chapters of the *Yüan-shih* or of the *Sheng-wu ch'in-cheng-lu*,<sup>12</sup> he did so to create a trellis he could then cover with the vine of his own commentaries; it can truly be said that at least three-quarters of the text of these books was the work of Pelliot. On occasion, Pelliot himself admitted that he was guilty of "overkill" in his remarks. On p. 197 (!) of "Le Hoja et le Sayyid Husain de l'Histoire des Ming"<sup>13</sup> he allowed himself to muse, "Le présent mémoire paraîtra bien long pour un sujet assez mince."

Pelliot tended to avoid the constraints faced by the translator of integral texts, who is obliged to deal with all the difficulties presented by a text, choosing instead to pick out those passages he was interested in and ready to solve. He was less secure in Mongol, Turkic, or Latin than in Chinese. As already mentioned, his translation of the *Secret History of the Mongols* remained only a torso and, as far as I can see, the only longer Turkic text he

fully translated was "La version ouïgoure de l'histoire des princes Kalyānaṃkara and Pāpaṃkara."<sup>14</sup>

Rightly distrustful of any theory claiming to explain how the world was working, he could never bring himself to write a synthesis. Pelliot was certainly no historian and lacked the essential virtue necessary for such a vocation: he was unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between the important and the unimportant. Once—and this is really my favorite personal anecdote about Pelliot—I mustered all my courage and confronted him with the question: "Maître" (this was the way we, the chosen few, addressed him), why do you waste your time, and why do you use your fantastic knowledge to clarify matters of no consequence?" I was afraid that the sky would split, lightning would strike me down and I would be cast into eternal darkness, but nothing of the sort happened. Pelliot looked at me and cheerfully answered: "ça m'amuse, Sinor, ça m'amuse"! Here was the key to his manifold activities: he did what he liked.

His vast knowledge of all subjects oriental (at that time we were not ashamed of using this term; I still am not) made him the ideal president of the Société asiatique. At meetings, no sooner had the presenting of a paper started than Pelliot appeared to fall asleep; no sooner was it over, than he made pertinent remarks on the subject just treated. As a young man I had no problem in having my papers published and never had to send them to any periodical for approval. Not without some apprehension I simply handed them to Pelliot and, a few days later, he informed me of his decision to have them published in *T'oung Pao* or in the *Journal asiatique*. He was quite liberal in his editorial decisions and would accept an article even when he disagreed on some point with the author. In the last footnote of his posthumous *Notes sur l'histoire de la Horde d'Or*, he reproached me for committing "au moins deux erreurs assez graves" of which, so he felt, I had been guilty in an article that he had accepted for publication in the *Journal asiatique*. In accepting my manuscript (which perhaps he did not bother to read?) he had not raised these questions. Stylistic corrections were

<sup>5</sup> Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1943; 556 pp.

<sup>6</sup> Paris: Maisonneuve, 1949; 292 pp.; also published posthumously.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal asiatique* 1921.1: 125–78; a review of sorts of J. Marquart, "Über das Volkstum der Komanen," *Abh. der königl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, n.F., 13 (1912–1914): 25–238.

<sup>8</sup> *T'oung Pao* 27 (1930): 12–36.

<sup>9</sup> *T'oung Pao* 27 (1930): 247–358.

<sup>10</sup> *Journal asiatique* 1925.1: 193–263.

<sup>11</sup> "Zur Geschichte des labialen Spiranten im Mongolischen," in *Festschrift Vilhelm Thomsen zur Vollendung des siebenzigsten Lebensjahres* (Leipzig, 1912), 182–87. Thus Pelliot wrote a seventy-page commentary on a five-page article.

<sup>12</sup> *Le chapitre CVII du Yuan che*, supplement to *T'oung Pao* 38 (1945); *Le chapitre CVIII du Yuan che* (Leiden: Brill, 1954). Paul Pelliot and Louis Hambis, *Histoire des campagnes de Gengis khan: Cheng-wou ts'ing-tcheng lou* (Leiden: Brill, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> *T'oung Pao* 38 (1948): 81–292.

<sup>14</sup> *T'oung Pao* 15 (1914): 225–72. This translation was the product of Pelliot's dissatisfaction with a previous attempt to read and translate the text: M. C. Huart, "Le Conte bouddhique des deux frères, en langue turque et en caractères ouïgours," *Journal asiatique* 1914.1: 1–57. It so happens that Pelliot's reading and translation was not superior on all points to that of Huart, and the text received a new, complete treatment by James Russell Hamilton, *Le Conte bouddhique du bon et du mauvais prince en version ouïgoure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

seldom made by Pelliot but he disliked wishy-washy, “diplomatically” expressed views. One had to state one’s opinion in a straightforward manner. This went so far that he did not tolerate the use of the “majestic plural” *nous*, so commonly used by French scholars, but rather made me write the singular form, *je*. For better or for worse, in works written in French I remained faithful to this practice.

He was a prince, “un grand mandarin,” as we used to call him, and, speaking for myself, I profited greatly from his influence, which reached far beyond the narrow confines of the academic world. When Pelliot spoke, the French academic and political world would listen. In August 1945, when we had “won” “our war” and I was tired of administering a small German town, I wrote to Pelliot asking him to intervene—I did not know how—

to obtain my demobilization. He did, but I was able to thank him only silently when, most anxious concerning my own future, with tears in my eyes, still in uniform, I stood by his coffin on 31 October 1945 and thought of how God could now reveal to this exceptional man and scholar all the unimportant secrets he had been so fond of exploring.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Astonishing though it may seem, there exists no Pelliot bibliography. The daunting task of preparing one has recently been undertaken by Hartmut Walravens and is scheduled to appear in 2000 in the Indiana University Oriental Series.