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WALTHER HEISSIG AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONGOLIAN STUDIES IN EUROPE

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Abstract

Walther Heissig (1913–2005) was certainly one of the most influential researchers on Mongolian, well thought of by his fellows and esteemed by his students. This edition of archive materials concerning Heissig's life and work (cited below as WH) is a good opportunity for this author to discuss some aspects of a future, possibly all-embracing biography of Heissig.

Despite what the title may suggest, WH can hardly be considered just a new standard biography of a scholar. It is rather a collection of archive materials, reminiscences, unpublished articles and the like. WH is very useful as a source of raw materials of varying worth for research on both W. Heissig himself and the evolution of Central Asian (pre-eminently, Mongolian and Mongolic) studies, cadre and research organisations in Germany. It is not at all useful, however, as a ready, coherent biographical read on W. Heissig and his role in the development of the Mongolic studies, as it is not arranged according to a deliberate system nor is it equipped with explanatory notes.

WH opens, apart from a list of illustrations and a preface, with a bibliography (pp. 13–99), followed by a list of authors (pp. 101–106)¹ and one of book titles (pp. 107–132). It may seem a bit odd to have an index of authors in a bibliography of a single author.

¹ This register exclusively concerns the names occurring in the bibliography. All other persons are listed in another register, one at the end of this volume (p. 453–460).

However, this bibliography has an unusual structure. It comprises 346 publications of Heissig's (pp. 13–82) and six issues (Nos. 347–352; pp. 83–95) that are actually titles of six series of books, one of them edited and five coedited by Heissig. Under the title of each series, titles and all bibliographical data of all volumes in the series are given; there are, e.g. 148 issues (pp. 84–92) in the case of *Asiatische Forschungen*. One may not completely be sure of some things; for instance, should a volume titled *The Mongolian monuments in ḥP'ags-pa script* by “Nicholas Poppe, translated and edited by John R. Krieger, 1957” actually appear in Walther Heissig's personal bibliography only because it was published as volume 8 of the series *Göttinger Asiatische Forschungen*, edited by “Walther Heissig, Göttingen; Siegfried Lienhard, Göttingen; [and] Omeljan Pritsak, Hamburg” (p. 83)? All these names of translators and co-editors are also listed in the index of authors (also the name of Lienhard who does not appear at any other place in the book). Besides, all the titles of books in all the series are enumerated in the title register (e.g. Poppe's book *The Mongolian monuments...* on p. 119). By these means, the bibliography of Heissig's works and the corresponding indexes became considerably longer and the methodology of reliable bibliographies became seriously compromised.

The next chapter is devoted to reminiscences written by W. Heissig's friends, students and co-operators (pp. 133–200). These are nineteen texts by authors from Germany and a few other countries. It is rather regrettable that the editor of the volume did not supply these memoirs with information on the specific authors and an explanation why some Mongolian authors have one name only, functioning as their both given and family name.² As well, data concerning the affiliation of specific authors are rather chaotically presented, for instance:

“D. Tömörtogoo” (p. 133)

“C. Šagdarsüren (Mongolische Staats-Universität)” (p. 134)

“Cerensodnom” (p. 141)

“E. Pürevžav (Mongolei)” (p. 145)

“Čimeddorži (Universität der Inneren Mongolei)” (p. 151)

“Nima” (p. 155)

“Buyankesig (Huchhot)”³ (p. 158)

“Rinčindorži” (p. 159)

“Charles Bowden” (p. 161)

“Šeyma Soydan, Frankfurt” (p. 184)

² Various Mongolian naming patterns and systems are presented, e.g. in Moses (1988). The fact that Mongols are relatively conservative as far as their naming system is concerned should not come as surprise because names are often associated with the awareness of one's own cultural tradition, cf. the following observation concerning another Altaic nation, the Manchu: “[...] the Manchurian name system was indeed greatly influenced by the traditions of the Chinese people. However, during the process of sinicisation there were many reactions of opposition and efforts to preserve their own cultural identity as is evidenced by their struggle to retain an individual name system, different from that of the Han Chinese.” (Ch'en 1979: 84).

³ The name of the city is usually written *Hohhot* or, in a German transcription of Mongolian, *Chöch-chot*. The present notation looks like a blend of the Chinese and the Mongolian pronunciation.

“Katsuhiko TANAKA [...] Professor Emeritus, Hitotsubashi Universität, Tokyo, Japan” (p. 191)

“NAKAMI Tatsuo” (p. 194),

and so on.

Besides, some of the names are set in greater font size (Čimeddorġi, Nima, Buyan-kesig, Rinčindorġi) and others in smaller size. All in all, a collection of reminiscences certainly is a good idea but the quality of editing leaves much to be desired.

One can easily imagine that memories convey emotions rather than particular facts. What emerges from these texts here is generally an image of a mild man with exceptionally good relations with his students, one having a great deal of prestige in Germany and abroad, and being of outstanding merit in organisational matters. What troubles the reader a little is perhaps the impression of Heissig as an absolutely sinless person. However, some will remember his problems with Americans who arrested him in Shanghai in 1946 on a charge of “military activity against the United States and its allies, to wit, the collection and compilation of military intelligence concerning, inter alia, land, sea and air movements of the United States and its allies and transmission of it and information and advice on political and military conditions and plans in North China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the Bureau Ehrhardt and the Japanese armed forces” (WH: 271). The Bureau Ehrhardt was “an intelligence agency of the German High Command” (ibid.), and the American authorities arrested all its members and collaborators. However, no crime or guilt of Heissig could clearly be demonstrated and he was released from custody in 1950 (WH: 265). Although it can be easily understood why the Americans were severe in their activities against all persons in any way connected with a Nazi intelligence agency in 1946 the assessment of this episode has been highly critical in German circles. H. Walravens speaks of draconian penalties (WH: 264: “die verhängten Strafen [waren] drakonisch”) but no examples are given and one must not forget that the truly draconian penalties imposed by Nazi authorities during World War II were still fresh in the collective memory in 1946. Nicholas Poppe (1897–1991), too, sympathises with his fellow as he writes:

I learned many years later that after Japan’s surrender, the Americans arrested him [= Heissig] as an enemy agent. It was obviously beyond the military men’s comprehension that Heissig could have been a scholar instead of a spy, but thinking is not a virtue of military people. In all the world’s armies the first commandment is «A soldier must not think.» (Poppe 1983: 249 sq.)

This opinion is clearly burdened with emotions that are possibly connected with Poppe’s personal experience: Poppe, descended from a German family in Russia, volunteered, as a Soviet citizen, to act as an interpreter with Nazi troops in the Caucasus in 1942 and left with them for Germany in 1943 where he was employed in a Nazi research institute, the Wannsee-Institut (Poppe 1983: 167; Stachowski 2012: 248). For this reason he has been more than once accused of Nazi sympathies even though no guilt on his part was ever proved. Given this situation, he had

a perfect feel for Heissig's emotions. And these must have been very intensive because Heissig pledged his word to never visit the United States (WH: 265).

Let us return to other reminiscences now. Their panegyric character is rather obvious and one can have doubts whether credit should be given to every tone and shade in these memoirs. Thus, the safest and most valuable information one can find here is that on the atmosphere of those years and on the conditions under which Heissig lived and worked and the "friendly cooperation" of scholars from Germany and the Soviet Union was maintained.

For instance, one finds a rare opportunity here to read a Soviet secret instruction concerning Rinčēn, one of the most respected philologists of Mongolian (WH: 135). Another study should also be mentioned in this context: Unique relations among Oriental philologists in the German Democratic Republic are vividly depicted in Erika Taube's report "Wissenschaft in schwierigen Zeiten" (pp. 176–183). It is true, her paper is in the first place informative for those who need data about the author whereas Heissig's name is mentioned only a few times on the margins. Nevertheless, we can learn here that the East German Orientalists participating in the Second International Congress of Mongolists (1970) in Ulaanbaatar were forbidden from cultivating contacts with their West German colleagues, including Walther Heissig, and ordered to ostentatiously omit a session chaired by Heissig (WH: 178, 179). Their demeanour did not look quite exceptional at the time and, from today's point of view, all such events are nothing but new examples of what is generally known of the Soviet and East German university policies.⁴

More unexpected information concerns a kind of "language rivalry" in Japan in the early 1960s. Tanaka tells us of brilliant Japanese Orientalists like Shichirō Murayama, Takashirō Kobayashi and Kōhei Kamiya who tried to support the knowledge of German in the Japanese Orientalistic milieu while another group, headed by Shirō Hattori, preferred English and connections with the United States (WH: 191). Even though Tanaka was himself a Humboldt scholarship holder and felt connected to Heissig he, nevertheless, rightly remarks, at the beginning of his paper that it is rather hard to imagine today that a Mongolian philologist would have a thorough knowledge of German in those times.⁵

In the following chapter facts and materials concerning W. Heissig's life are presented, while the subsequent one comprises six radio programmes with Heissig. This thread is continued on an enclosed CD of the radio (Deutsche Welle) series "Asien und Europa im Spiegel ihrer Epen" and a 1971 reading (Radio RIAS) by Heissig "Moskau und die Erben Dschingis-Khans (WH: 6).⁶

In the last chapter, Heissig's three archive papers are published. Today they are of no significance other than historical. The first one is of a bibliographical nature and concerns Japanese publications on Mongolian studies in 1939–1945 (pp. 443–445).

⁴ Younger readers can find numerous examples of East German academic policy in Connelly (2000).

⁵ "Heute ist es schwer sich vorzustellen, dass in jener Zeit ein Mongolist über gute Kenntnisse des Deutschen verfügte" (WH: 191).

⁶ Incidentally, the Deutsche Welle series is in reality in English on the CD while the RIAS lecture is in German. The title of the RIAS lecture is somewhat different on the CD, viz. *Die Welt seit Marx – Moskau und die Erbens [!] Dschingis-Khans*.

It was probably due to wartime events and Heissig's arrest (1946–1950) that this presentation never appeared in print.

The second text is a short draft of a study on Buryat materials concerning field work conducted by Józef Kowalewski (1801–1878), a Polish Mongolist, the author of a classic Mongolian-Russian-French dictionary and the first holder of a Mongolistic chair (in Kazan) in the history of Mongolian studies in Europe (p. 446 sq.).⁷ It is unknown why Heissig did not write a full version of this study.

The last study here was originally planned as a publication of a Sino-Mongolian document of 1453, preserved in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul (pp. 447–452). It was scheduled for publication in a 1950 issue of *Ungarische Jahrbücher*⁸ which means that Heissig must have prepared it for print in the years preceding 1950, that is, during his arrest (1946–1950). Conjecture that the article might have been ready before the arrest does not hold water because the article opens with information on a short note by W. Eberhard, published in *Monumenta Serica* 11 in 1946, so the paper could not possibly have been written (at least, not in its final form) before 1946. Thus, the article must have come into being exactly at the time of Heissig's arrest. Besides, the transcription of the original document was made according to a copy sent to Heissig by a director of the Topkapı Sarayı⁹ which means that Heissig was allowed to cultivate contacts abroad. Indeed, in that light the American penalties should not be called “draconian”. Purely by chance, another edition of this document, one prepared by the American Sinologist and Mongolist Francis Woodman Cleaves (1911–1995), appeared in the same year (Cleaves 1950) which made publishing Heissig's study redundant. This was probably yet another source of the irritation coming from America.

A comprehensive biography of W. Heissig, presenting him in a well-balanced way and in a broader context of his times still remains to be written. There can be no doubt that WH will be a true treasure for its future author. Apart from the fact that Heissig had an unusual life, rich in events and worthy of an exciting novel, he was first and foremost a scholar and promoter of Mongolian studies. Even now three of his achievements can be recalled that readily suffice to support the view of him as an extraordinary person.

First of all, Heissig developed Mongolian studies into an independent discipline. The British professor of Mongolian Charles Bawden has rightly stressed this aspect in his memoirs:

He took a subject, the culture of the Mongolian people, which had been tinkered with over the years by specialists in other fields of study, principally sinology [!] and was instrumental in establishing it as an independent discipline [...]. He was not alone in this pioneering work, but he was essential to it. (WH: 164)

⁷ For biographical details see Kotwicz (1948).

⁸ The title adduced in WH: 447 is: *Ein mongolisch-chinesisches Dokument von 1453 in Istanbul*. No information is given on whether this was a working title given by Heissig, a final title under which the article was to be published, or both.

⁹ “Seine Umschreibung wurde nach einer Photographie [!] des Dokumentes angefertigt, welche mir Herr Tahsin Öz, Direktor des Topkapu [!] Seray [!] Müzesi, Istanbul, [...] freundlicherweise überlassen hat.” (WH: 448).

Secondly, Heissig edited numerous documents and catalogued various Mongolian manuscripts and xylographs in European collections. Both the editing and cataloguing laid the ground for serious Mongolian and Mongolic research work in Europe.

Finally, Heissig did not avoid popularisation of knowledge of the Mongolian realm. Incidentally, “popular” does not necessarily mean ‘without scholarly value’. One of his most famed works is a popular book on the Mongols *Ein Volk sucht seine Geschichte* which was republished in Germany several times and translated into a few languages. It deeply influenced young readers, one of them being NAKAMI Tatsuo who decided to study Inner Asian culture after having read *Ein Volk...* (WH: 194sq.). Moreover, this book even acted as a scholarly source: it is Heissig’s only work cited in J.-P. Roux’s (1993: 544) classic monograph on the history of the Mongols. It is of course impossible to enumerate all those who were somehow influenced by his popular publications and radio programmes. Nevertheless, the very fact that he did not begrudge sacrificing his time for a high-level popularisation of his discipline deserves to be stressed and appreciated.

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