

James Evert Bosson (1933-2016), in Memoriam

“Arseniev was Boodberg’s biology teacher.”

– note in margin of last page of my notes from Elementary Manchu, UC Berkeley, 1985-86

The thing I remember most clearly about studying with Jim was how much he knew, and the way in which he conveyed what he knew as if he thought you must have known it, too, but had simply forgotten. All these connections, all that knowledge of the pedigree of the field, all those *words*. I don’t think he forgot very much at all. For me, he was a link between a mythical past – a past that included not just 20th-century people like Peter Boodberg and Nicholas Poppe (who also remembered everything, including the price of milk at school in pre-Revolutionary Russia when he was five years old), but 19th-century names like Vladimir Arseniev and Ivan Zakharov – and the much more mundane present. Sometimes I think he would have preferred to have been born fifty years or even a century earlier and to have had the chance to be part of one of those years-long expeditions into the vast spaces of Inner Asia, traipsing about Siberia collecting obscure languages.

His office in Durant Hall – then the home of what was unapologetically called the “Department of Oriental Languages” – was amazing. It had a view onto one of the main thoroughfares on campus, just slightly elevated above ground level, and he could watch the world go by every day from that discreet perch. Isolated from the main hallway, you had to go through a little vestibule to get access; it was if you were walking back a few decades in time. On the wall were the photos of all the scholars who had made a difference to him, his academic ancestry there displayed, a black-and-white portfolio featuring people whose faces were at first unknown to me, but whom I later came to recognize: his teacher, Poppe; his close friend Gombojab Hangin; the “saintly Vera Ivanovna,” his affectionate form of reference to Vera Tsintsius, the unexcelled lexicographer of Tungusic languages. This was the world he inhabited, naturally and effortlessly, a grand philological tradition that he shared with his senior colleague, the legendary Peter Boodberg, of whom he always spoke with reverence, and with his predecessor, Ferdinand Lessing, who introduced Mongolian language instruction at Berkeley in 1935, a tradition Jim proudly upheld for over thirty years. While he taught Manchu and Tibetan, too, Mongolian was his first love.

Reading texts with Jim was like taking a walk in a lexical forest – at any given moment he would stop, reflect on a word, and then talk for five or ten minutes

on its etymology, the nuances of its usage, and its connections to other words. The reading-walk would then continue until the next break in the trees, when again he would pause to comment on some interesting lexical detail, a clever calque, or a false cognate. His desk was always strewn with dictionaries, and the shelves behind him were filled with them, most of them filled with annotations of all sorts.

Jim seemed puzzled when presented with evidence that others were not as linguistically gifted as he was. This was totally out of modesty: he did not seem to regard himself as having any kind of unusual ability. This could sometimes be amusing. I remember one conversation with him about Manchu poetry:

“Is there such a thing?” I asked.

“Of course. I think there’s an Italian scholar who has written about it.”

He thought for a second.

“Yes, that’s right. Giovanni Stary. At Venice. I think I have an offprint here.”

He searched for a few minutes in his files and then pulled out what he was looking for.

“You can take this and make a photocopy.”

I took a look at what he gave me: *Nuovi spunti per un’analisi*

“But it’s in Italian. I don’t know Italian.”

“Well, you have the weekend, right?”

No irony at all. Not to disappoint him, I went and got an Italian dictionary and did what I could. That I can actually read Italian today owes largely to his inspiration.

From the time I first began to study with him in 1985, my relationship with Jim spanned over thirty years, more than half of my life. He introduced me to a field that was then on the wane and inspired me to plunge on ahead. He introduced me to his former University of Washington classmate, Okada Hidehiro, and made sure I got to Tokyo and received the training I needed there, and which indeed turned out to be instrumental in the development of my career. He and Ann-Britt welcomed me whenever I came back to Berkeley. Even after I finished my degree, he continued to mentor me, visiting me in my new position to make sure I was settled in, getting me chances to present at conferences and inviting me to join him, Jerry Norman (his first PhD student), and Steve Wadley to launch a journal of Manchu studies, *Saksaba*, which continues today, edited by my students.

Learning Manchu with Jim was a major turning point in my life, and pretty much everything I have done since then has been shaped by it. I have tried to

repay the time and faith he invested in me by ensuring that Manchu studies would not end with his generation. In the early 2000s we found ourselves both at Harvard, where we overlapped for a few years. We shared students, co-wrote an article, and together explored the marvelous holdings of Manchu and Mongolian materials in the Harvard-Yenching Library. It was a wonderful reunion, and brought us both tremendous satisfaction. Surely this is every student's dream, to be able to return to one's teacher's side as a colleague, continue the learning process, and lay down more memories.

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