

Ōtani Expeditions into Central Asia (1902–1914)

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Abstract

The three Ōtani Expeditions (1902–1914) constitute the first non-Western attempt to carry out systematic research in Central Asia. The mastermind behind these Japanese enterprises was Ōtani Kōzui, the 22nd lord-abbot of the Western Honganji temple in Kyoto and the patriarch of the Honpa Honganji denomination of the Jōdo Shinshū sect, which was and remains the largest Buddhist community in Japan. Kōzui's position as a monk during the period the expeditions were carried out reveals his religious motivation as the planner and sponsor of these research trips. Inspired by the 7th century traveler-monk Xuanzang, the main purpose of the Ōtani Expeditions was therefore to find the routes through which Buddhism had passed before reaching Japan. This is what makes them unique when compared with other exploration missions.

Keywords

Ōtani Kozui, Shin-Buddhism, expedition, Silk Road, Honganji

Count Ōtani Kōzui (1876–1948) was born as the first son of Ōtani Kōson, also known as Myōnyo (1850–1903), the 21st lord-abbot (門主 *monshu*) of Nishi Honganji temple in Kyoto¹. It was his destiny to become the next leader of the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan, the Jōdō Shinshū sect. His father was keen on providing him with an educational environment in accordance with the requirements of such a prestigious post. During his own term of office, Myōnyo had experienced harsh times in relation to the Meiji restoration. Nishi Honganji was a loyal supporter of the imperial cause against the shogunate: surprisingly, though, the revolution had turned its back on Buddhism, and the Buddhist sects were persecuted by the Shintoist supporters of the emperor through the *haibutsu kishaku* (廃仏毀釈, “Abolish Buddhism and demolish Buddhas”) movement (Ketelaar 1990: 9). Jōdō Shinshū of Myōnyo was no exception. However, following the initial blows to his faith, Myōnyo had managed to guide his sect safely through this period of turmoil. At the end of the 19th century, the political situation in the country had finally started to settle down,

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and a virtually unstoppable Japanese interest for Western culture and technology was underway. Kōzui was born in an era in which Japan was increasingly evolving from a pre-modern traditional feudal state into a Western-style empire. As opposed to the chained-country policies of isolation of the previous Tokugawa period, now the country's gates were wide open to the rest of the world. Japanese elites were flowing to the Western countries in order to learn the mechanisms behind their progress. Thus, Myōnyo decided to send his son to London to study the language and the culture of the mighty British Empire.

Already during his childhood, Kōzui had proved that he was not fit for the popular system of education. He had difficulties adapting himself into the traditional institutions of education. He quitted the schools he attended both in Kyoto and Tokyo, and was educated by private tutors².

Following his arrival in London, in March 1900, the problem of adaptation was soon to show itself. London at the turn of the century was a lively center for international intellectual exchange. The age of expeditions and discoveries was underway, and numerous scientists and adventurers were flocking into the city with marvelous information they had gathered from all around the world. Exposed to the flow of information especially from the travels of Ármín Vámbéry (1832–1913), Nikolay Mikhaylovich Przhevalsky (1839–1888), Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), Sven Hedin (1865–1952), Sir Francis Younghusband (1863–1942), Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) and many others into Central Asia, Kōzui was soon to discover that instead of remaining comfortably in London to study, as was planned for him by his father, he wanted to organize an expedition by himself.³ He was knowledgeable on and inspired by the travel accounts of the 7th century Chinese Buddhist traveler-monk Xuanzang (c. 602–64), the “Records of the Western Regions” (西遊記 *saiiki-ki*).⁴

The First Ōtani Expedition (1902–1903)

Kōzui spent the following year travelling around Europe (Paris, Marseilles, Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul), meeting with people who had been to Central Asia, and making plans and necessary arrangements for an expedition which later was to be called “The first Ōtani expedition”. On 3 May, 1902, he paid a visit to John Milne, a personal acquaintance who had close ties with the official and academic circles in England, at his Earthquake Observation Center in the Isle of Wight, where they discussed the final details of his plan (Nagasawa 1991). Confident of the feasibility of his enterprise, he decided to launch the expedition, which was set out on 6 August, 1902, from London.⁵ As a devout Buddhist, he was determined to discover the traces of Buddhism in Central Asia. Studying the history of Buddhism, he no doubt had a vague idea of the roots of Mahayana Buddhism which had originated in India, flourished in Afghanistan, and entered China via Central Asia. The initial findings of Western travelers were more than promising. Thus, unlike its Western precursors, the Japanese expedition was assuming a religious character, in addition to its scholarly one.

Kōzui, accompanied by young members of Jōdō Shinshū, headed towards Baku. On September 4, the group reached the eastern end of the Turkestan railroad, Osh. From there on, they travelled on horseback. Having crossed the 3.800 m. Derek Pass on 21 September, 1902, they managed to arrive at Kashgar, the westernmost point of the western regions of China (Toei 2001: 6–13). They stayed overnight in the house of the Russian consul; the following day, after meeting Colonel Miles, the British Consul stationed at Kashgar, they moved to his residence. Colonel Miles warned them about the climate: they were made aware that the postal road to Srinagar via Gilgit would soon be closed due to heavy snowfalls. Therefore, out of necessity, Kōzui decided to split the group into two separate teams: one to head towards India and the other to the regions around Taklamakan (Katayama 2001a). On September 27, the group left Kashgar. Passing through the southern route of Eastern Turkestan, they reached Yarkand and continued to Tashkurgan. There, on October 14,

the group split in two.⁶ Kōzui headed south to India with one of his companions while the others went northward. The India team went through Mintaka Pass, Gilgit, into Kashmir, and arrived at Srinagar on 9 November, 1902. The Eastern Turkestan team went north to Yarkand and followed the southern route (south of the Taklamakan desert) to the east to reach Khotan. Staying for forty days in Khotan, they did their research in the nearby areas. This team left Khotan at the beginning of the new year (January 2) and started travelling through the desert road into the northern parts of Taklamakan. After travelling extensively in Aksu, Ush, and Turfan, they returned to Kashgar. Their next route was Maralbexi – Tumxuk – Aksu – Bay – Kucha, reaching Kizil on 10 April, 1903. They stayed in this region for over four months, which indicates that important relics were found during their excavations. They concentrated their research activity on Doldol Akul⁷, the Kizil Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and the Kumtura Thousand Buddhas Caves. After leaving the area on 11 August, 1903, mainly due to the eruption of the Russo-Japanese war in February 1904, this team was forced to return to Japan in mid-1904 via Urumqi, Hami, and the Chinese inland (Katayama 2001a)⁸.

As for the India team, their voyage had come to an abrupt halt by the news that Myōnyo, the father of Kōzui, had died (18 January, 1903). In order to be declared the new lord-abbot, Kōzui had to return to Kyoto as soon as possible. He reached Nagasaki on March 12 and delivered his first address as the new patriarch of western denomination of Jōdō Shinshū on March 25⁹. At the age of 28, Kōzui took on the heavy responsibilities coming with the patriarchy, leading millions of followers throughout Japan. However, his love of research in Central Asia would never cease. As a matter of fact, it would later on cost him his position in the sect.

The Second Ōtani Expedition (1908–1909)

Following the end of the Russo-Japanese War (September 5, 1905), Kōzui announced that he would travel to Eastern Russia. This trip took place between July 29 and August 25, 1906. The following year, the construction of his educational complex, named “Nirakusō” (二樂荘, Villa of Two Joys), in Ashiya, Kobe, was completed (Ashiya City Museum 1999: 55). The complex, in addition to a private villa, had a school, playgrounds, both outer and inner gardens, greenhouses, printing facilities, a large library, and archives in which manuscripts and other artifacts from the expeditions were to be kept. Kōzui had personally designed the architecture in an eclectic fashion, fusing Western and Eastern styles. Its style was praised by the prominent architect Itō Chūta, who saluted Kōzui’s design as a pioneering monument conception in Japan.

Although he could not personally take part in it, Kōzui sent a second expedition into Central Asia in 1908. This expedition was led by Zuichō Tachibana and Nomura Eizaburō. Between June 1908 and October 1909, the Japanese team followed a route touching Beijing – Uliyasutai – Khovd – Urumqi – Turfan – Karashar – Kurla – Lop Nur – Hotan – Yarkand – Kucha – Kashgar, reaching India on its way back to Japan (Katayama 2001a). Once again, they had returned with many Buddhist relics which were to be stored in Nirakusō.

The Third Ōtani Expedition

At the end of May 1907, a spectacular discovery was made by Sir Aurel Stein in a grotto in the remote area of Dunhuang of Western China. He had managed to take over 14,000 scrolls and fragments back to England (Wang and Perkins 2008: 3). Within a year, in March 1909, having heard about the discovery in Dunhuang but without knowing the details, a rival of Stein’s, Frenchman Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) arrived at the site. Unlike Stein, Pelliot was able to read the ancient Chinese manuscripts. After a tireless examination of the texts, which lasted for several days and nights,

he persuaded the Taoist monk who was guarding the library cave to let him take with him a pile of those invaluable manuscripts. It was only natural for Kōzui to send a new team to Dunhuang after learning the news about the Stein's discoveries. Thus, third to visit the site was the Japanese team led by Zuicho Tachibana and Yoshikawa Koichiro.¹⁰ In November 1908, Kōzui invited Sven Hedin to Japan and met him in his residence in Kyoto (Shirasu 2002: 26). Based on the information he received from Hedin, he started to plan a new expedition to find more manuscripts of Buddhist content. Therefore, he decided to travel to India and to London in order to gather more firsthand information. On 24 September, 1909, he departed Kobe for India. In Srinagar he met Francis Younghusband (October 30), then, accompanied by Zuichō Tachibana, he headed to England. In August, 1910, he met both Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin in London. Probably thinking that he should act swiftly before others would reach Dunhuang, he ordered Zuichō Tachibana to leave London and travel to Dunhuang as soon as possible. On this journey, he was accompanied by a young Englishman, A.O. Hobbs (Galambos 2008). Hobbs was to die at Kucha shortly after contracting smallpox while Tachibana was surveying in and around the Taklamakan. After having participated in his fellow companion's funeral at Kashgar, on 21 March, 1911, Tachibana seems to have interrupted all communication for a while. Almost a year later, he finally met Yoshikawa Koichiro (26 January, 1912), who was sent to join him in Dunhuang. The two managed to acquire some 400 scrolls of Buddhist sutras written in Chinese, Uygur, Tibetan, and other languages. They returned with these manuscripts together with thousands of Buddhist artifacts they collected from the area. Facing monetary difficulties due to Kōzui's tumbling position within the sect's administration, the third expedition had to stop abruptly. In July 1914, Yoshikawa reached Japan.

The Legacy

As the third expedition came to an end, preparations for an initial publication to introduce a selection of the artifacts brought from the region started (Kagawa 1915). Kōzui's enthusiasm and dedication was not welcomed heartily by all the adherents of Nishi Honganji. Some within the administration were increasingly raising their voices against the enterprises of their patriarch. Their criticism was focused on the large sum of money which they claimed was used by Kōzui to sustain the expeditions. Under heavy criticism, Kōzui resorted to an unpredictable decision: on 12 May, 1914, he resigned from the post of lord-abbot and left Japan for Shanghai. He would spend the rest of his life mainly in China, not as a religion leader, but as a leader of public opinion. He continued to travel extensively around the world. The Ōtani collection was unfortunately split over the course of years. Parts of it are distributed among Ryukoku University, Ōtani University, the Tokyo National Museum, the Lu Shun Museum, the Seoul Museum, and some private collections; parts of it went lost. Scholars continue to work on the legacy of the Ōtani Expeditions, revealing new information on Buddhist and Central Asian history.¹¹

Notes

1. See 鏡如上人年譜 [*Nenpu*], published by Kyōnyo Shōnin 7 kainen Hoyō Jimusho in 1954 (p. 1).
2. See 鏡如上人年譜 [*Nenpu*], p. 6.
3. Katayama (2003) contains a detailed account of Kōzui's activities in Europe before his departure. Already in the summer of 1900, he had endeavored to reach the North Pole. For the details of his expedition to the Arctic Circle, see Katayama (1998).
4. The travel accounts of the three Ōtani expeditions were to be published in 1937 with the title "The New Records of the Western Regions", see Uehara 1937.
5. Akio Katayama (2001a) has provided a detailed account of Ōtani's expedition to Central Asia. A column published in *The Times* on 11 September, 1902, featuring the departure of the Japanese team, is included in this article.

6. The India team included Ōtani Kōzui, Honda Eryu, and Inoue Kōen. The Taklamakan team was formed by Watanabe Tesshin and Hori Kenyū.
7. Doldol Akul (ドルドル アクル), an ancient temple area in the vicinity of Kumtura and Kizil. Mentioned in the travelogue of Xuan Zang (602–664) as 阿奢理忒 (Asharini or Ais/carya / A^hs/alini in Sanskrit) in his *Records of the Western Regions*.
8. See also the considerable amount of additional documentation included in Katayama (2001b).
9. See 鏡如上人年譜 [*Nenpu*], p. 27.
10. In addition to (Katayama 2001a), see Anonym (1910: 448–9).
11. A detailed study of Japanese scholarship on Ōtani Expeditions can be seen in Katayama 2013.

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