

**Subject:** Huc and Moorcroft  
**From:** Matthew Kapstein <mkapstei@uchicago.edu>  
**Date:** 4/10/15, 2:09 AM  
**To:** Dan

Dear Dan,

Your inquiry piqued my interest, because I realized that, although I was long skeptical of Huc's report, I hadn't looked into it carefully enough to have a definite opinion about it. So I've gone back over some of the materials at my disposal and now have concluded that Huc indeed invented his story. It includes some altogether implausible elements, and also leaves some clear hints about why Huc thought he needed such a tale in the first place (besides his generalized concerns about the French Lazarist mission, which others who have written about Huc [e.g. Richardson] seem to have recognized too).

Let's start at the end: When Huc and Gabet return to Macao, they find a newspaper article reporting their own deaths. Huc realizes that no one will believe they've been to Lhasa. (As will be seen below, there was Chinese 'proof' available, but as Huc clearly understood, this would not have been accessible to Europeans wishing to verify his tale.) He then reintroduces the story of Moorcroft, but now with an explicit moral to the tale: you see, dear reader, it may well be the case that one is supposed to have died but in fact has just gone to Lhasa. It happened to Moorcroft, and to Gabet and me too.

To go back to the beginning: Huc hears the story of Moorcroft from a well-placed Muslim in Lhasa not long after he gets there. The tale makes clear that Moorcroft, for 12 long years, had disguised his real identity and lived as a Kashmiri Muslim. We later learn that even his Ladakhi servant "Nisan" didn't know who he was in fact. ("Nisan ... croyait lui-meme avoir pour maitre un Kachemirien.") And when he headed back to Ladakh, presumably in 1236 or 7, about a decade prior to Huc's visit, he was killed by bandits and it was then discovered that he had maps.

So where on earth did the name Moorcroft come from? Before dying, did he reveal it to the bandits who then reported it to the Tibetan authorities who captured them, who then reported it to the Muslim, keeping the English pronunciation more or less intact all along the way? Huc tells us that Moorcroft had given Nisan a letter, and that might have provided a source for the name, but Huc then states that Nisan, who could not read the letter himself, destroyed it before showing to anyone. And if, in fact, no one reported the name Moorcroft to Huc, but assuming that there was nevertheless a story about a foreigner of some kind killed in the 1830s and found to possess maps, why would Huc have assumed this to have been Moorcroft at all? What would have led him to identify an Englishman killed in Balkh in 1825 with an unknown killed in Ngari a dozen years later?

The whole thing is too inconsistent, even self-contradictory, to be credible.

The truth, I think, is that Huc is lying when he says that he never heard of Moorcroft before arriving in Lhasa. Moorcroft, in fact, seems to have been fairly well known -- Terjek tells us that when his death

was reported in Hungary, people became worried for Csoma, who was in fact still alive. And if Moorcroft's death aroused enough attention to be reported in Budapest, then certainly Huc, who seems to have read absolutely everything he could lay his hands on that had any bearing on Inner Asian exploration at all, very likely knew of Moorcroft, and his death, in advance.

Finally, the Chinese dossier on Huc and Gabet, some elements of which were first unearthed by Cordier and Pelliot and later studied at length by Cammann in the 1942 article I attach here, has no allusion at all to Moorcroft-- or to a Moorcroft-like figure--despite the clear worries expressed in regard to Western travelers and the English in particular. Had the Chinese been aware of the 1836/7 death of a map-laden Englishman in Tibet, it almost certainly would have been referenced, at least hinted at, here.

The only conclusion of all this in my eyes, is that Huc was confabulating (as he is well known to have done on occasion, despite his considerable genuine knowledge and experience -- Alexandra David-Neel is a later example of a similar phenomenon).

Anyway, it was fun to go back over this stuff, and I thank you for provoking me to do so.

with best regards,  
Matthew

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— Attachments:

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