



The epic of a photograph

Pascale Dollfus

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THE EPIC OF A PHOTOGRAPH

PASCALE DOLLFUS

A full page in the French daily *France-Soir* on November 9, 1940 announced the death of Louis Liotard with the words, "Tombé au champ de l'aventure" [lit. : fallen in the field of adventure]. Liotard was a young explorer who had been killed by the bullets of Tibetan bandits, two months earlier. He was killed on a 4950 m high pass, located at 32°21 north and 100°24 east, in the country of the Go-log (*mgo log*), the famous "rebels" living in north-eastern Tibet at the bend of the Yellow River.

The yaks and horses from his expedition also disappeared and with them, their loads –not only the camping equipment, but also the boxes containing the ethnographic collections, notes and numerous photographs taken during the 580 kilometre trip from Tatsienlou (now called Kangting) to the highlands of the Amdo.

André Guibaut, his fellow-traveller, miraculously escaped uninjured. The carefully organised ambush was not a simple robbery, but it involved "supernatural mat-

ters". According to Guibaut, anthropological measurements and photography which had been met with distrust, indeed hostility, since they had been in Go-log country were linked to the attack. They had upset the locals and helped give credence to the rumour that the two scientists were "practising witchcraft". Moreover, the fact that, a few weeks later an important part of the stolen material, particularly the films and photographs, was found undamaged, seems to back him up. Fearing some magic power, none of the attackers had dared to touch them.

Handed over to Father Yang, a Chinese missionary stationed in Tao, then at the Consul of France in Chengdu, the stolen documents, after many adventures which are too lengthy to recount here, reached the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. This photograph showing an old, blind bard with his face lit up and a youth with a wily look was among these documents. Taken the day preceding the attack, its splotchy surface is evidence of the damage done to the negative.

Thus, somewhat ironically, the fear inspired by photography worked in the end in its favour and saved the photos from being destroyed.



Go-log nomads listen to a bard recite the epic of Gesar. Mission Guibaut-Liotard 1940 © Musée de l'Homme.

"Tous deux assis dans l'herbe, le torse nu, un gaou [reliquaire] de cuir sur la poitrine, se passaient un chapeau bizarre, sorte de tiare de feutre avec des oreilles, surmonté de plumes de paon. Celui qui détenait le chapeau le mettait sur sa tête, l'enlevait, le tendait à bout de bras dans des attitudes hiératiques, tout en psalmodiant avec volubilité une sorte de récit interminable que les indigènes écoutaient bouche bée, sans doute quelque chanson de geste, dont le sujet était pris dans l'épopée du héros tibétain Kesar." André Guibaut, 1947, *Ngolo-Setas*, Paris, J. Susse, p. 115.