THE QUEST FOR SHANGRI-LA

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ABSTRACT

The name Shangri-La was coined by the English writer James Hilton in his classic novel "Lost Horizon", first published in 1933. Since then the name has become a synonym for an exotic, paradisical never-never land. The word is clearly derived from the legend of Shambhala. According to this tradition, Shambhala is a hidden center, located somewhere in the mountains of Central Asia, inhabited by a group of highly evolved sages. The legend had an important geopolitical aspect in the context of the struggle between Russia, China and Britain for control of Central Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, the various indigenous peoples of the region were constantly struggling to fight off the great powers. In this struggle, the Shambhala mythology was constantly invoked.

When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia they attempted to exploit the Shambhala mythology as a way of bringing the Mongol-Tibetan region under Russian and communist hegemony. Around the same period a crazed White Russian warlord, Baron Ungern-Sternberg, was recruiting followers in the region by claiming to be acting on behalf of Shambhala. Another figure linked with the Shambhala legend is the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich who in the 1920s and 30s led expeditions through Central Asia and Mongolia, hoping to establish a new country that he envisaged as the earthly manifestation of Shambhala.

The Shangri-La/Shambhala narrative has its counterparts in both the East and West, involving other legends of remote, hallowed places. This paper provides a searching investigation into this narrative, tracing its origins and development and comparing its eastern and western versions. The paper is a revised and expanded version of a lecture delivered at the 2015 conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, on the subject of Western Esotericism and the East, held at the University of Latvia, Riga.

Keywords: Shangri-La, James Hilton, Shambhala, Central Asia, Nicholas Roerich, Monsalvat, Never-Never-Lands

The name Shangri-La will probably be familiar to most readers. It has passed into general usage as a synonym for an exotic, paradisical never-never land, far from the madding realities of the everyday world. The name was first introduced by the English writer James Hilton (1900–1945) in his best-selling novel "Lost Horizon" (first published in 1933). Today Hilton is one of those writers whose books are better known than their author. Apart from "Lost Horizon", many people have heard of his other famous novel, "Goodbye Mr. Chips" (1934), the story of a quirky and endearing schoolmaster in an English upper-class boarding school, but fewer know that these two seemingly very different books are by the same author. Yet the two novels are perhaps not so far apart as they might seem. Both were published in the early 1930s when the distant rumblings of the approaching war could already be heard by someone with their ear to the ground, and both offered a vision of a protected and innocent world where time has stood still: on the one hand the privileged world of the English public school, on the other the world of the remote mountain utopia in Central Asia. By the time the film version was released in 1937, Hilton had moved to California to work in the Hollywood film industry and the rumblings had become louder, which probably accounts for the immense popular success of the film. A 1973 remake as a musical was less successful.

"Lost Horizon" tells the story of an English diplomat, Hugh Conway, who is evacuated by an airplane from a trouble spot in northern India along with three other people – a fellow British diplomat, an American businessman and a British woman missionary. The plane is hijacked and crash-lands in the mountains of Tibet. A party of Tibetans arrives and takes the group to the hidden oasis of Shangri-La, located in the Valley of the Blue Moon, where life is miraculously prolonged, and the inhabitants live an idyllic existence under the benevolent rule of an order of lamas who live in a splendid monastery high above the valley, full of beautiful works of art. The Grand Lama of the monastery is in fact a French priest called Father Perrault who has been living there since the eighteenth century, but is now nearing death. Before he dies he names Conway as his successor and tells him that a great world conflagration is coming, which is going to destroy civilization (Hilton evidently foresaw the Second World War). The purpose of Shangri-La, he tells Conway, is to act as an ark in which wisdom and beauty will be kept alive, ready for the time when the destruction will subside and a new civilization will arise out of the ashes. This is how Perrault puts it to Conway:

> […] I see […] a new world stirring in the ruins, stirring clumsily but in hopefulness, seeking its lost and legendary treasures. And they will all be here, my son, hidden behind the mountains in the valley of the Blue Moon, preserved as by miracle for a new Renaissance […]. (Hilton 1998, 198–199)

Conway accepts the assignment, but he is then persuaded by his fellow diplomat Mallinson to leave Shangri-La. A few weeks or months later he turns up suffering from amnesia in a mission hospital in China, where he is discovered by his old friend Rutherford. He agrees to go back to England with Rutherford, but at Bangkok, he jumps ship and disappears, and the implication is that he has found his way back to Shangri-La.

Hilton's story exploits the nimbus of mystery, danger and adventure that clung to Central Asia, where geopolitics mingled with legend and mysticism in a heady mixture. Public fascination with the region was fed by works such as Rudyard Kipling's novel "Kim" (1901), in which the eponymous boy hero plays a plucky role in the Great Game, the struggle between Britain and Russia for control of the Eurasian territory. Equally evocative is Kipling's story "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888) about two rascally Freemasons, Dravot and Carnahan, and their ill-fated venture into the mountains of Kafiristan to establish a kingdom. The story was made into a memorable film, directed by John Huston and released in 1975, starring Sean Connery, Christopher Plummer and Michael Cane. Another work that contributed to the mystique of the region was the German writer Karl May's late novel "Ardistan und Dzhinnistan" (1907–1909).[1] There were also real-life events that further added to the mystique, like Francis Younghusband's punitive invasion of Tibet in 1903–1904, which turned him into a mystic and a passionate advocate of inter-religious understanding.

And there were the explorers – men like Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein and the Austro-American explorer and botanist Joseph Rock. It was Rock who is thought to have provided one of Hilton's sources in the form of a series of articles on remote parts of China and Tibet, written for the "National Geographic Magazine" in the 1920s and early 30s.[2] Another – and well-attested – source was a book entitled "A Journey in Tartary, Tibet and China During the Years 1844–5–6" by the French missionary and priest the Abbé Evariste-Regis Huc,

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[1] See critical editions edited by Hans Wollschläger (2005 and 2007).

[2] See Gordon (2006).

first published in 1852 and republished in English in 1928. This book is also reputed to have provided Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical movement, with much of the information on Tibet that she included in her work "Isis Unveiled" (Partridge 2015, 616).

Theosophy pervades the works of the British-American writer Talbot Mundy, whose novel "Om, the Secret of Abhor Valley" (1923) was probably also one of the inspirations for "Lost Horizon". Mundy lived for a time in Katherine Tingely's Theosophical community at Point Loma, San Diego, California, whose exotic domed buildings and idyllic, palm-shaded grounds, overlooking the Pacific coast, could almost be a film set for Mundy's Himalayan sanctuary. The Abhor Valley in Mundy's novel has certain similarities to Shangri-La. The hero of the story, who has the improbable name of Cotswold Ommony, is led to the valley via hidden mountain passes, over rickety bridges, along impossibly narrow cliffside ledges and through bat-infested caves. At last, he is rewarded by a breathtaking view:

> The track passed between two monolithic columns more enormous than the grandest ones at Thebes, and emerged on the rim of a natural amphitheater, whose terraced sides descended for about two thousand feet to where a torrent of green and white water rushed from a cave mouth and plunged into a fissure in the limestone opposite. The air was full of the noise of water and the song of birds, intoxicating with the scent of flowers and vivid with their color […] Above the topmost terrace, occupying about a third of the circumference, were buildings in the Chinese style; the roofs were carved with dragons and the rear walls appeared to be built into the cliff, which rose for a thousand feet to a sheer wall of crags, whose jagged edges pierced the sky. (Mundy 1924)

The narrative goes on to describe his meeting with a venerable lama, whom he takes to be one of Blavatsky's "Masters". "He knew that Pythagoras, for instance, and Apollonius, and scores of others had gone to India for their teaching. For twenty years he had kept ears and eyes alert for a clue that might lead him to one of the preservers of the ancient wisdom, who are said to mingle with the crowd unrecognized and to choose to whom they will impart their secrets." However, the lama tells him: "The Masters are only discoverable to those, who in former lives have earned the right to discover them" (Ibid.).

While Hilton's "Lost Horizon" lacks any overt Theosophical message, it has certain similarities with Mundy's novel. Here, for

example, is the passage describing Conway's arrival at Shangri-La after a difficult journey over the mountains:

> To Conway, seeing it first, it might have been a vision fluttering out of that solitary rhythm in which lack of oxygen had encompassed all his faculties. It was, indeed, a strange and half-incredible sight. A group of colored pavilions clung to the mountainside with none of the grim deliberation of a Rhineland castle, but rather with the chance delicacy of flower-petals impaled upon a crag. It was superb and exquisite. (Hilton 1998, 66)

As for the name Shangri-La, it is obviously derived from Shambhala, which, in Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist tradition, is a hidden utopian territory, located somewhere in the mountains of Central Asia, inhabited by a group of highly evolved sages. Sometimes Shambhala is described as a place that exists in physical reality, sometimes as existing in some dimension beyond the physical world but capable of manifesting itself to those who are sufficiently receptive.[3]

A similar legend is that of Agartha or Agharti, which appears to be of more recent origin. Agartha, like Shambhala, is a hidden, mystical center where there resides a group of spiritually advanced beings. The first European to write about it was the French nineteenth-century Indologist Louis Jacolliot (Godwin 1993, 81) and it was further popularized by Jacolliot's contemporary Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, who claimed he had visited it in his astral body. He described it as a vast subterranean kingdom, which – like Shambhala – sometimes sends emissaries out into the everyday world (Ibid., 83–85).

These traditions of Shambhala and Agartha overlap with an ancient Chinese tradition concerning a "Land of the Immortals", that is a group of highly enlightened people who have found the secret of eternal life. Sometimes this place was described as being high up in the mountains, as in "Lost Horizon", sometimes in a vast underground world with its own sun and moon, sometimes on some mysterious islands in the Pacific, which always melted away in the mist when they approached. Again and again with this group of legends we find the same ideas recurring: the remote never-never land where peace and harmony reign, the superior beings who inhabit it, the idea of immortality or longevity, certain features such

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[3] See also Birgit Menzel's paper from this volume.

as a sacred mountain like the one that rises behind Shangri-La in "Lost Horizon", and the idea that one day the invisible center will make itself visible and a great avatar will emerge to rule the world and bring about a new era for humanity.

What has always fascinated me as a historian is the interface between history and mythology – the way in which history turns into myth and myth often drives historical events. And this group of myths is a classic example. It has inspired spiritual movements, expeditions, revolutions, books, and films. And it has exerted a powerful fascination in both East and West. Why? What is it about this group of myths that is so compelling?

Looking first at the West, there is a long tradition of the notion of hidden centers of wisdom in the East, going back to the eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth and twentieth. And within this mystique of the orient, there is a particular mystique that focuses on Tibet and the Himalayas, fed by the works of writers such as Blavatsky with her notion of the Mahatmas, the wise ascended masters in their Himalayan abode. Shambhala is briefly mentioned by her, but she locates it in the Gobi Desert and calls it the "White Island" (Ibid., 97–98). The break-away Theosophist Alice Bailey also located Shambhala in the Gobi Desert and said that it existed in etheric matter, but would become visible when human beings had developed etheric vision (Ibid., 98).

In the 1920s a colorful Polish scientist and explorer called Ferdinand Ossendowski, in a sensational book called "Beasts, Men and Gods" (published in 1922), described a journey to Mongolia in which he was told about an underground kingdom called Agarthi (with an "i"), which corresponded almost exactly to Saint-Yves' description, although Ossendowski claimed never even to have heard of Saint-Yves at the time he wrote the book. He records how a Mongol prince described Agarthi as follows:

> It extends throughout all the subterranean passages of the whole world. I heard a learned Lama of China relating to Bogdo Khan that all the subterranean caves of America are inhabited by the ancient people who have disappeared underground. Traces of them are still found on the surface of the land. These subterranean peoples and spaces are governed by rulers owing allegiance to the King of the World […] You know that in the two greatest oceans of the East and the West there were formerly two continents. They disappeared under the water but their people went into the subterranean kingdom. In underground caves there exists a peculiar light which affords growth to the

> grains and vegetables and long life without disease to the people. (Ossendowski 1923)

Ossendowski's account was enthusiastically taken up by René Guénon, the founder of the traditionalist movement, who further propagated the notion of Agartha in his book "Le Roi du Monde" (The King of the World, a title that he possibly took from Ossendowski's book), published in English as "The Lord of the World". The whole Agartha story is tied in with Guénon's idea that there is a primal source of all true spiritual wisdom, which has become lost for the modern world. Guénon even suggests a connection between Agartha and the Rosicrucians:

> It is a remarkable fact that several writers have agreed that the true Rosicrucians left Europe shortly after the Thirty Years War to retire into Asia: it may be recalled that the Rosicrucian adepts numbered twelve like the members of *Agarttha*'s inner circle, both, therefore, complied with the constitution common to so many other spiritual centers formed in the image of the supreme center. (Guénon 1927, 48)

One is also reminded of Gurdjieff's account of the Sarmoung Brotherhood, described in his book "Meetings with Remarkable Men" (Gurdjieff 2011), which operated from a hidden monastery somewhere in the mountains of Central Asia (Gurdjieff worked on the book from 1927, but it was not published in English until 1963). Whether such a monastery existed is a matter of debate. James Moore, in his biography of Gurdjieff, writes:

> The allegorists […] construe Gurdjieff's entire monastery symbolically, beginning with a wayside episode involving a dangerous rope bridge across a deep gorge. The hero on the 'perilous bridge' is noted as the very stuff of myth and folklore: in the West we have Lancelot's sword-bridge, and Bifrost the Scandinavian rainbow bridge; in the East there is Sirat, the Muslims' bridge over hell, and the awesome Chinvat bridge of the Zoroastrian last judgement. As to the remote and secret spiritual center ringed by mountains, it is a glyph which, as 'Shambhala', pervades Tibetan and Mongolian culture; and in the West has touched minds as diverse as Helena Blavatsky, René Daumal, Alexandra David-Neel, Mircea Eliade, René Guénon, James Hilton, Ferdinand Ossendowski, Nicholas Roerich, Giuseppe Tucci and Emmanuel Swedenborg. (Moore 1991, 31–32)

The Russians also have their version of the myth in what they call Belovodye (meaning "White Waters"). The popular utopian belief was shared by peasants, especially the Old Believers as a refuge from the persecution inflicted on them by the Tsar and the mainstream of the Orthodox Church. Many groups of peasants moved East in search for Belovodye to flee from serfdom since the eighteenth century, even equipped with secret maps. The myth survived the coming of communism, and in 1923 one of the last expeditions set off in search of Belovodye but, like most of the previous ones, vanished somewhere en route. Originally said to be located somewhere in the Altai region in the borderland between Kazakhstan, Siberia, Mongolia and China, it was later thought to lie somewhere in or near Tibet (Ashe 1977, 157–158).[4]

I would argue that what we are dealing with here is what the Jungians would call an archetype – the archetype of the shining citadel, remote, difficult to find and aloof from the world – but not totally aloof because occasionally there are intimations of its existence, perhaps in the form of emissaries or reports from the rare travelers who have managed to go there.

One obvious example of this motif is the Grail castle, Monsalvat, in the Arthurian legends, home of an order of knights who go out incognito into the world to do good deeds. It is interesting that there was a renewed romantic interest in the Arthurian mythology just at the time when the Agartha and Shambhala legends were catching on. The painters of that era were fond of depicting idealized visions of the Arthurian world. Typical is a painting by the German artist Hans Thoma, painted in 1899, entitled "Gralsburg" (Grail Castle), showing a shining citadel on a hilltop, bathed in an atmosphere of sacredness, and a group of knights – emissaries of the Grail King – processing back to the castle, probably having completed some mission in the everyday world.

The picture is strikingly similar in symbolism and composition with a painting from 1932 by the Russian artist and writer Nicholas Roerich, called "The Path to Kailas" – Kailas being the most sacred mountain in the Himalayas and believed to be the gateway to Shambhala. In both paintings there is a similarly remote mountain environment, a shining citadel and a procession of mounted figures

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[4] See also McCannon (2002). The most reliable sources for the Belovodye myth are Chistov (2003; 1967); German translation, *Der gute Zar und das ferne Land. Russische sozial-utopische Volkslegenden des 17.–19. Jahrhunderts*. Münster, New York, Munich, Berlin: Waxmann, 1998.

approaching it – in the case of the Roerich painting mounted on yaks rather than horses.

Now let me turn to the Shambhala tradition in its oriental homeland. It originally developed between about the tenth and thirteenth centuries as a way of galvanizing Buddhist resistance against Muslim invaders. Shambhala was seen as a stronghold of the Buddhist faith, from which one day a powerful king would go forth at the head of a great army and crush the enemies of Buddhism. Thus, Shambhala had two aspects. There was the militant, liberationist side, and there was the image of Shambhala as a place of peace, spiritual enlightenment and superior wisdom. The latter aspect is reflected in the name Shambhala, which means "quietude".

The legend has to be seen in the geopolitical context of the Mongol-Tibetan region, which was the focus of what has been called the Great Game – namely the struggle between Russia, China and Britain for control of Central Asia, which came to a head in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, the various indigenous peoples of the region were constantly struggling to fight off the great powers and assert their independence. In this struggle, the Shambhala mythology was constantly invoked.

When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, they attempted to exploit the Shambhala myth and link it with communism as a way of bringing the Mongol-Tibetan region under Russian and communist hegemony. Consequently, Bolshevik agents and indigenous fellow-travelers were highly active in the region, often posing as Buddhist pilgrims, stirring up nationalist feelings and exploiting prophetic traditions like that of Shambhala. At the same time, there was a White Russian fraction under a crazed, bloodthirsty character called Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, who for a short period became leader of Mongolia and recruited followers by claiming to be acting on behalf of Shambhala (Sunderland 2014). Much information about this whole period has come to light with the opening up of various archives in Russia since the fall of communism, and these have been used by the Russian-American historian Andrei Znamenski, in his fascinating book "Red Shambhala" (2011). Znamenski weaves an extraordinary narrative, involving characters such as Alexander Barchenko, a writer of popular novels about magic and the paranormal, who was an admirer of the works of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre and believed that among the sages of Agartha/Shambhala a high spiritual knowledge had been preserved that could benefit Bolshevik Russia. As Znamenski writes: "Barchenko began contemplating how to ennoble the Communist project by using the ancient science hidden

in Inner Asia" (Ibid., 54).[5] These ideas attracted the support of Gleb Bokii of the Soviet secret police, and for a time Barchenko's project was officially sanctioned, but eventually he fell victim to factional infighting within the Bolshevik establishment and was executed in 1938.

Now we come back to Nicholas Roerich[6], who is a key figure in this whole story. Nicholas Roerich was born in St. Petersburg in 1874, left Russia on the eve of the Revolution and spent some years in the United States, where he and his wife Helena became closely involved with Theosophy and similar movements and in the early 1920s they moved to northern India. Helena was clairvoyant and channeled a whole series of visionary writings, which she believed to come from the Theosophical Master Morya, who revealed the "Great Plan" that the Roerichs were to carry out. This was nothing less than the establishment of a vast new country in Central Asia, which they envisaged as the earthly manifestation of Shambhala, a country of peace and beauty, which would send its message out to the rest of the world.[7] Roerich himself was to be cast in the role of the great avatar, the King of Shambhala. This plan included bringing to humanity the doctrine of Agni Yoga, the yoga of fire – by fire the Roerichs meant universal energy similar to *ch'i* or *prana*, which they believed was going to transform the world.

In order to prepare the way for this great plan, in the years from 1925 to 1928 Roerich, his wife and son George made a great expedition through the heart of Asia. On this expedition, Roerich carried with him a banner called the Thangka of Shambhala, depicting Rigden Djienpo, the ruler of Shambhala, defeating his enemies. The expedition was supported partly by American money, but partly also secretly by the Bolsheviks, with whom the Roerichs played ball in order to further their great plan.

The Roerichs' activities aroused the suspicions of the British intelligence service, and there is some evidence that intelligence officers may have consulted the English occultist Aleister Crowley as someone who understood the esoteric world in which the Roerichs moved. At any rate, around the time of the Roerichs' expedition, Crowley painted the picture entitled "Four Red Monks Carrying a Black Goat across the Snow to Nowhere", and Tobias Churton, in

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[5] On Barchenko and Bokii see also Shishkin (2011).

[6] For Roerich's life and work, see Decter (1989); Stasulane (2013); Andreyev (2014); Waldenfels (2011).

[7] See Osterrieder (2012), note 20.

his biography of Crowley, surmises that the painting is a satirical comment on the Roerich plan and the Shambhala legend, the red monks being Bolshevik agents in disguise (Churton 2011, 301–302).

It is significant that Roerich explicitly connected Shambhala with the Grail mythology. Following Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival", he described the Grail as a stone that had fallen from a distant star. The greater part of this stone, according to Roerich, rests in Shambhala, but a part of it has become detached and circulates throughout the world. Roerich possessed a precious stone that he claimed was this very fragment, namely the Chintamani Stone, a wish-fulfilling stone in Tibet Buddhist tradition. The theme of precious stones, linked with the theme of Shambhala, comes across strongly in Roerich's painting "Treasure of the Mountain", showing an underground cavern, studded with huge crystalline stones, while in an inner sanctum in the background a group of robed figures are performing a ceremony, one of them holding up what appears to be a Grail. Roerich was on the lookout for signs and portents from Shambhala, and sometimes he found them. In his diary from the first expedition he recorded the following incident:

> A sunny, unclouded morning – the blue sky is brilliant. Over our camp flied a huge, dark vulture. Our Mongols and we watch it. Suddenly one of the Buriat lamas points into the blue sky. 'What is that? A white balloon? An aeroplane?' – We notice something shiny, flying high from the north-east to the south. We bring three powerful field glasses from the tents and watch the huge spheroid body shining against the sun, clearly visible against the blue sky and moving very fast. Afterwards we see that it sharply changes its direction from south to south-west and disappears behind the snow-peaked Humboldt chain. (Ashe 1977, 187–188)

The lamas who were present and also saw the apparition called it "the sign of Shambhala", and one of them told Roerich: "Ah – you are guarded by Shambhala. The huge black vulture is your enemy, who is eager to destroy your work, but the protecting force from Shambhala follows you in this radiant form of matter" (Ibid., 190).

In 1934 and 1935, the Roerichs made a second expedition – this time through Manchuria and Inner Mongolia – with the support of the American Secretary for Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, who was enthusiastic about Roerich's ideas, as was the President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roerich was able to gain the support of Wallace and Roosevelt for what became known as the Roerich Pact, a sort of Geneva Convention of the arts, with the purpose of safeguarding art

and culture even in times in war. This was signed at the White House in 1935 by the United States and 20 other nations. The symbol of the pact was three discs within a circle, as shown in a painting by Roerich called "The Madonna of the Oriflamme". Later both Wallace and Roosevelt turned against Roerich.[8]

Although Roerich's "Great Plan" never came to fruition, he and Helena Roerich have left behind a considerable achievement – the Agni Yoga movement, the Roerich Pact, the wonderful paintings, the books that both of them wrote, and the enduring legend of Shambhala, which he helped to nourish. Today the Nicholas Roerich Museum at 319 West 107th Street, New York City is a small oasis of beauty and tranquility amid the hustle and bustle of the Upper West Side – a Shangri-La or Shambhala in miniature. The paintings breathe an other-worldly quality: austere lamaseries dreaming amid snow-covered peaks, lone visionaries meditating beneath skies dominated by vast figures of horsemen and angels, Roerich himself as painted by his son Sviatoslav – a white-bearded, black-robed figure with faintly oriental features, who might have stepped out of the pages of "Lost Horizon". A stone's throw away, at 310 Riverside Drive, is an earlier home of the Roerich Museum, an art deco apartment block called the Master Building, completed in 1929, which is probably named after the Master Morya, the Roerichs' superhuman mentor. The largest Russian Roerich Museum, which was opened as a non-governmental museum in 1989/1993 in a grand historical mansion in the centre of Moscow, given to the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR) by Mikhail Gorbachev, was closed by the order of the Russian Ministry of Culture in April 2017. The collection of the museum has now been appropriated by the Russian State, and part of it has been integrated into the State Museum of Oriental Art (State Museum of Oriental Art).

Now I return to the point where we started: "Lost Horizon". At the time that Roerich was gathering support for his pact, James Hilton was busy in north London writing the book. It seems very likely that Hilton knew about Roerich and his activities. Hilton's description of Shangri-La – the sacred place of peace and beauty located in its remote Tibetan valley – is strikingly reminiscent of Roerich's vision. And the idea of Shangri-La as an ark of culture and beauty, as described in "Lost Horizon", is so close to the idea of the Roerich Pact that I feel sure there is a connection. Here is the Grand Lama again, revealing to Conway the *raison d'être* of Shangri-La:

> We have a dream and a vision. It is a vision that first appeared to old Perrault when he lay dying in this room in the year

> 1799. He looked back then on his long life […] and it seemed to him that all the loveliest things were transient and perishable, and that war, lust, and brutality might some day crush them until there were no more left in the world. He remembered sights he had seen with his own eyes, and with his mind he pictured others; he saw the nations strengthening, not in wisdom, but in vulgar passions and the will to destroy […] And he perceived that when they had filled the land and sea with ruin, they would take to the air. (Hilton 1998, 157–158)

When Conway asks him if Shangri-La will escape he replies: "We may expect no mercy, but we may faintly hope for neglect. Here we shall stay with our books and music and our meditations, conserving the frail elegancies of a dying age… We have a heritage to cherish and bequeath" (Ibid.).

As already mentioned, the Roerich pact was activated with the support of the US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and it is probably no coincidence that Roosevelt was an admirer of "Lost Horizon", to the extent that he named the presidential retreat in Maryland "Shangri-La" – later, of course, it was re-named "Camp David".

Today the name Shangri-La crops up ubiquitously, as a search in the Internet will reveal. It is the name of a botanical garden in Texas as well as of numerous businesses all over the world, from restaurants and hotels (especially in China) to beauty salons and travel agencies. Hilton's novel goes on selling, and many people go on believing in the ascended Masters in their secret Central Asian abode.

Tibet has also retained its mystique. Since the Chinese occupation of the country in the early 1950s and the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959, the country has been much talked and written about. Western curiosity about it has been fed by books such as Heinrich Harrer's "Seven Years in Tibet", first published in German in 1952 and subsequently in many other languages. Harrer's book was followed soon afterwards by the publication of "The Third Eye" (1956), the first of a series of books by a man calling himself Lobsang Rampa, describing his life as a high-ranking Tibetan lama. Shortly after publication, it was revealed that the author was in fact an Englishman named Cyril Henry Hoskin. Unabashed, the author stated that he was the spirit of a genuine lama, who had taken over the body of Hoskin with the latter's agreement. If anything, the controversy fueled public interest in Lobsang Rampa's works and helped to keep Tibet in the public consciousness.

Meanwhile, the Chinese, aware of the allure of the Shangri-La story, have officially given the name Shangri-La to a district of Yunnan

province, and one can now even go on "Shangri-La" tours. This is partly to capitalize on the legend as a tourist attraction, but it has also been seen as an attempt to create a sanitized, Disneyland version of Tibetan Buddhism, which can be easily controlled.

I shall end with the last words of Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon". The narrator has been told the whole extraordinary story by Conway's friend Rutherford, and now the narrator continues:

> We sat for a long time in silence, and then talked again of Conway as I remembered him, boyish and gifted and full of charm, and of the War that had altered him, and of so many mysteries of time and age and of the mind […] and of the strange ultimate dream of Blue Moon. 'Do you think he will ever find it?' I asked. (Ibid., 231)

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