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The Laufer Library in New York

Soren Edgren

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The Laufer Library in New York is a small but very interesting collection of older Chinese editions, plus a few of Japanese origin, kept in the Department of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History since 1904. The collection was made by the youthful Berthold Laufer (1874-1934) as something of a working library during the Jacob H. Schiff Expedition to China which he led on behalf of the Museum of Natural History from 1901 to 1904. After Laufer left New York to join the curatorial staff of the Field Museum in Chicago in 1907 the collection was largely forgotten, except for occasional references. In 1931, for example, Wang Chi-chen of Columbia University published an article called "Notes on Chinese Ink" in which he illustrated some pages from the Laufer copy of the rare Ming edition of Cheng shih moyuan. In 1984 I arranged to borrow the same book to include in an exhibition titled "Chinese Rare Books in American Collections" which was held at the China Institute in New York. Perhaps it was this event that finally prompted the library of the Museum of Natural History to make arrangements for the eventual transfer of the collection from the Department of Anthropology; removal to the Rare Book Room of the new library facility is planned to follow the facility's scheduled completion in 1992.

For the past year I have been engaged in preparing a catalog of the books. It is proposed that the catalog be published as a monograph in the series, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, most likely by the end of this year. Besides the bibliographical and historical descriptions of the books, the introduction chronicles Laufer's early collecting activities, especially on the Schiff Expedition.

Berthold Laufer was born in Cologne in 1874. After his initial studies at the University of Berlin, he completed his doctorate at the University of Leipzig in 1897 with a dissertation on a Tibetan text. Laufer possessed wide-reaching linguistic interests and by then he had already studied, *inter alia*, languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, Malay, Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Japanese. Franz Boas, the eminent anthropologist then associated with the American Museum of Natural History, contacted Laufer and invited him to New York and proposed his participation in the famous Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902), already under way. He left at once and spent sixteen months, 1898-99, on the island of Sakhalin and in the Amur River region of eastern Siberia making ethnological collections. Needless to say, he also spent all available time to learn the local languages. This was indeed an initiation for Laufer and the training and experience he gained were to serve him on future expeditions. His terms of employment in the field were $500 per year plus living expenses. Although he endured the hardships of the Siberian winter without complaining, he once grumbled in a letter to Boas that "tradesmen are better remunerated than a learned man who puts his health and life at stake exploring."2 Despite his inexperience the results of his work apparently were well
received for, shortly after his return, he was asked to lead the Schiff Expedition to
China at the tender age of twenty-seven.

By the turn of the century Franz Boas had become increasingly anxious about the lack of Far Eastern collections and research in the United States which he compared unfavorably to that of Europe. In the summer of 1901 he made extended travels there to assess the status of East Asiatic studies and the representation of Asiatic cultures in European universities and museums. Boas concurrently held positions of Curator of Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History and Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University and he was keenly interested in the new Chinese chair to be established at Columbia. He saw opportunities for scholarly cooperation between Columbia and the museum and, in order to promote collecting activities, the East Asiatic Committee was formed under the auspices of the Museum of Natural History early in 1901. The Committee initially comprised less than a dozen prominent New Yorkers interested in Asia; Jacob H. Schiff, the banker, was credited by Boas with its inception. A draft plan stated: "The principal object of the undertaking is to collect specimens and books illustrating the culture of eastern Asia." China was an easy choice for the location of their activities and Berthold Laufer was chosen to implement them. It was Schiff's pledge of $18,000 ($6,000 a year for three years) at the end of December 1900 that accelerated the formation of the Committee and insured the implementation of the plan. For his services Laufer was to receive $3,000 ($1,000 per year) and the remaining $15,000 in the draft budget was to be distributed as follows: "Procuring collections illustrating industrial life, $7,000; bringing together collections illustrating social life, $5,000; books (Chinese literature bearing upon these collections), $2,000; transportation, $1,000."

In an article published in 1912,3 immediately after the revolution and declaration of a republic in China, Laufer discussed the significance of the ethnological collections that he had made in China a decade earlier. The collections aim, as he states, "to illustrate the home industries and social life of the common people." He predicted that similar specimens would become harder and, eventually, impossible to acquire. With his book collection he tried to provide textual sources for an understanding and interpretation of the artifacts. Besides translating passages from them in his researches, illustrations from woodcuts in the books are found in some of his early works, notably *Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty* (1909), *Chinese Grave-sculptures of the Han Period* (1911), and *Jade: a Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion* (1912).

The correspondence between Boas and Laufer at the time is preserved to a great extent in the Museum's Department of Anthropology and is essential to an understanding of the formation of the collections, including the books. Laufer's letters are full of lively observations and show his genuine admiration for Chinese culture. Furthermore, he felt that he was breaking new ground with his researches and collections, so much so that he wrote to Boas after two years in China: "On the whole I dare say already today that the principal and most important result of my Chinese campaign will be that I shall place the ethnography and archaeology of this country on an entirely new and solid basis, that I shall conquer China to the anthropologist."4 It seems that his main contribution in this field at the time was, to quote one of his contemporaries, "the application of the principles and methods of ethnology to historic civilizations."5 This is bearing in mind that previous anthropological research had been restricted to so-called simple or primitive societies, often having only oral histories and records. Among Laufer's innovations was the use of a Columbia phonograph recording device with which he recorded various musical and
dramatic performances on wax cylinders which later were transferred to discs and tapes.

As a reflection of his character and the acuity of his initial observations, I quote some passages contained in his first letter from China to Boas, postmarked Shanghai, a mere ten days after his arrival. "There are only a few people here interested about scientific work; what they usually know about Chinese is limited to the boy, cook or groom in their service, connected, of course, with all imaginable silly prejudices. So I do not expect much help from the white residents of this place... I trust that I am not in need of anybody and find already my own way. The deeper the narrow-mindedness of the foreign residents, the higher is the intelligence of the Chinese who show a much better understanding for the character of my work. I was very fortunate in choosing a teacher, who besides the local dialect, talks Mandarin, i.e. the northern dialect as spoken in Peking, and some Cantonese. He is an excellent medium for comparative phonetic studies. You know yourself that there is so much left to do in this line, not a single book being in existence which gives a clear idea about Chinese sounds. I discover more and more new sounds, especially vowels and diphthongs than are supposed to be in the standard books. At the same time I read a classical and a modern writer with my teacher. Collecting of specimens has started, and my catalogue has reached Nr. 160 to-day... At the end of November I expect to go up to Peking. I will write to Mr. [William Woodville] Rockhill, asking him what he thinks about the realisation of my plan to settle in a Buddhistic temple or monastery... There is a very poor museum here consisting of two dirty rooms, belonging to the Royal Asiatic Society, with some birds and other creatures. There is nothing Chinese, however, to speak of... [In closing] I like Shanghai well and enjoy my work very much."

During his three-year sojourn in China, Laufer travelled entirely on his own and carried out his tasks virtually single-handedly; that this was accomplished without hindrances or problems was due, no doubt, to his sympathetic and industrious personality. After approximately five weeks in Shanghai, his itinerary in China began with a five-week tour of southern Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces: Shanghai-Suzhou-Hangzhou-Ningbo-Putuo Shan-Haimen-Ningbo-Shanghai. After three more weeks in Shanghai he departed by boat for Beijing where he was to take up residence from December 1901 until November 1902 before returning again to Shanghai. In December 1902 he began travelling west-northwest with brief sojourns in Nanjing and Hankou before reaching Xi'an in Shaanxi province in July 1903. From early September he travelled by mule cart with his collections, two thousand kilometers by his own reckoning, arriving at Tianjin more than one month later. After spending the next two months in Beijing, Laufer departed on a five-week tour of Shandong province, terminating at Qingdao, from whence he returned to Shanghai. His inland travel for the thirty-eight-day period from Beijing to Qingdao was estimated to have covered a distance of one thousand five hundred kilometers. Finishing the packing and shipping of the remaining collections in Shanghai, he arranged for his own return passage by steamship via Europe.

En route to New York in the summer of 1904, Laufer penned a long letter to Boas summing up the results of his nearly three years in China in which he refers to a total of 305 cases that were shipped from China to New York, and in which he says: "From an approximate estimation, the number of specimens (aside from books, rubbing, photos, and phonographic cylinders) will probably amount to about 10,000. They may be classified into two groups, industries and social life,..." He continues in this letter from Cologne, where he was visiting with his family, "Besides the ethnographical specimens, the beginnings of a Chinese library were made for the
Museum, and an extensive collection of rubbings taken from ancient inscriptions, stone-engravings and sculptures. The library comprises more than six hundred different works which were brought together with special point of view of furnishing explanatory material to elucidate the Museum's collections. Nearly all illustrated books relating to archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, religious rites were procured, and a large number of historical topographies of the cities, sacred places, prefectures and provinces of China, Turkestan, Tibet and Mongolia, which abound in material important for anthropological research. Many old, rare and even unique books are included in this collection. I mention only a beautiful manuscript from the Imperial Library which gives an illustrated description of the Imperial Western and Eastern tombs of the present dynasty.  

Laufer's appetite for collecting books was whetted by the experience; after moving to Chicago he took part in the Blackstone Expedition to China, 1908-10, during which he acquired 1,216 titles in 21,403 volumes for the Newberry Library (now in the East Asian Library of the University of Chicago) and 666 titles in 12,819 volumes for the John Crerar Library (now in the Library of Congress). In the same letter from Cologne cited above, Laufer gives an outline description of "the large mass of rubbings numbering several thousands." What he refers to is the group of rubbings acquired of the Schiff Expedition that now forms the nucleus of the outstanding collection of over four thousand sheets at the Field Museum in Chicago, a catalog of which was recently published. After appraising the great research value of rubbings of inscriptions and decorations from Chinese historical monuments and works of art, Laufer wisely decided to take rubbings himself and commission the making of rubbings wherever he travelled in China rather than trying to buy expensive older rubbings of unknown provenance and date. Nearly all the rubbings, therefore, can be dated to the time he was in China. This collection of rubbings, numbering 3,336 sheets (including duplicates) according to Laufer's own accession list, was presented to him by the American Museum of Natural History in 1923. Subsequently it was bequeathed by him to the Field Museum, together with his own personal library, at the time of his death in 1934.

We may now recall Laufer's remark that the "library comprises more than 600 different works." In fact, my initial survey of the books revealed that the apparent serial numbers appearing on the outer wrappers or on the covers of individual volumes, in Laufer's own hand, were not consecutive. After reconstructing the two series numbered A1 to A60 and 1 to 610, the gaps were noted. No accession list for the books could be found in the Department of Anthropology where they originally had been received; however, a preliminary study of Laufer's correspondence indicated that the books probably were numbered separately from the objects and it now seemed safe to assume that these serial numbers were actually his field numbers for the acquisition. In the course of rearranging the books for cataloging, I continued to puzzle over the missing numbers until I was alerted to the fact that a photostat copy of an accession list of the Laufer books existed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. It stated that some of the books acquired by Laufer on the Schiff Expedition had gone to the library of Columbia University. The list was titled "Books/Catalogue B" and the photostat copy probably had been made around 1919. A comparison of titles with my own reconstruction of his acquisition showed beyond a doubt that the "Catalogue B" was his personal list of the books. For many of the individual titles the price paid is indicated in "taels" by Laufer and he also rather consistently noted in the margins which books were intended for Columbia. Thus it has been possible to recreate the complete acquisition of the books made on the Schiff Expedition,
despite the fact that only about two-thirds of the original collection have been kept together in the Department of Anthropology in the Museum. Excluding duplicated field numbers among the two series of 60 plus 610 titles, the approximate distribution of the remaining six hundred fifty works is as follows. Chinese and Manchu titles in the Department of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History comprise 68 percent; Chinese and Manchu language titles in the East Asian Library of Columbia University, 15 percent; and western-language titles in the main research library at the American Museum of Natural History, 17 percent.

The Department of Anthropology possesses a card catalog of the collection, compiled in 1918 by a student named K. P. Wang, which gives a rather inflated impression of the books on hand due to numerous cross-reference cards. It was not known, for example, that Laufer had acquired so many western-language titles in China. About 70 percent of them have been traced to the main library of the Museum through its card catalogs, including sixty-nine titles recorded in a handwritten accession catalog of April 1907 which lists them as a gift of the East Asiatic Society [sic]. A few Chinese illustrated books and scrolls have been found among prints and paintings in the collection of objects, apparently separated from the books at an early date. In addition, a small number of missing titles attributed to the estimated American Museum of Natural History holdings has been discovered at the Field Museum. Obviously, some had been borrowed by Laufer as part of ongoing work and not returned and others probably were regarded by him as his own books. Also, it is now understood that some of the rubbings had received individual field numbers that appear on the book list, including fourteen rubbings bound in book form. These, together with other miscellaneous rubbings, were transferred to the Field Museum by the American Museum of Natural History in 1985. Many of the books that went to Columbia University, including a large number of Manchu-language titles, have been identified at the C. V. Starr East Asian Library. For the sake of other researchers the disposition of books no longer kept with the portion of the original collection in the Department of Anthropology will be noted in an appendix to the catalog under preparation.

Berthold Laufer was not a bibliographical expert when he went to China and, indeed, had limited funds available to him for book buying (financial problems and questions of how to get funds to a given location by a certain date form an underlying theme throughout the correspondence), but his vision of what he wanted to accomplish was sound and many important works were acquired. After the passing of nearly a century, quite a few of the books can be regarded as rarities. As with his decision to commission rubbings from stone monuments throughout China, he showed true foresight in choosing to collect geographical and topographical works; about 30 percent of the Chinese books at the Museum fall into these categories. Especially important are works on the border regions, along with difangzhi representing, among others, the provinces of Hebei (formerly Zhili), Shandong, Shaanxi, Zhejiang, and Fujian. There is as well an impressive number of shanzhi and huzhi, those uniquely Chinese records of the history and geography of mountain and lake regions. Three-fourths of the Manchu and Sino-Manchu works (about thirty-two of forty) acquired by Laufer went to Columbia University, which also received from him fifteen works on the Shuowen jiezi. Incidentally, the books that went to Columbia were paid for by the University Library.

Laufer was keenly interested in the history of science and medicine and it is not surprising that he collected a number of herbals and works on Chinese medicine. Traditional Chinese archaeology, that is, works on bronzes, jade, epigraphy, and numismatics, as well as works on fine arts, are all represented. Books on religion,
folklore, and social customs, especially concerning China's minorities, were also gathered by Laufer. The avowed purpose of studying the native industries and social life of the Chinese can be seen as a theme within the collection; that Laufer understood how much useful information was to be found in the difangzhi is certainly to his credit.

In his letter to Boas cited above, Laufer refers to a "beautiful manuscript from the Imperial Library which gives an illustrated description of the Imperial Western and Eastern tombs of the present dynasty." What he appears to refer to is the Changruishan wannian tongzhi 號瑞少萬年統治, an eighteenth-century work on the Manchu Royal Tombs which is rare for having circulated in manuscript only. Laufer was sensitive to the fine printing found in the Qing palace editions, especially the illustrated ones, and he correctly described the woodcuts in the rare Wanshou shengdian chuji 畳壽盛典初集 as "real masterpieces." This work was published to commemorate the Kangxi emperor's sixtieth birthday celebrations. He succeeded in acquiring the two great Ming illustrated works on inksticks and inkmaking: the Fang shih mopu 方氏墨譜 of 1588 and the Cheng shi moyuan 嗣祉事譜 of 1606 mentioned above. The individual rarities notwithstanding, perhaps the greatest significance of the Laufer Library in New York lies in its position as one of the earliest collections of Chinese books in America and, indeed, the first made for an American institution.

END NOTES

1Metropolitan Museum Studies III (1931), 114-133.


4American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), Laufer Papers, Laufer to Boas, 12 August 1903.


6AMNH, Laufer to Boas, 30 August 1901.

7AMNH, Laufer to Boas, 8 July 1904.
