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KAN'ICHI ASAKAWA AND THE YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Hideo Kaneko
University Library

Kan'ichi Asakawa was born in Nihonmatsu, Fukushima Prefecture, in northern Japan in 1873, as the only son of a former samurai previously in the service of Nihonmatsu-han. It was merely five years after the razing of the Nihonmatsu castle by the Imperial Forces spearheaded by men of Satsuma and Choshu in the political turmoil which we know today as the Meiji Restoration. As a deposed samurai, his father found employment as principal of a small village primary school. Soon, Kan'ichi distinguished himself academically in primary and middle schools.

Having moved on to Tokyo for higher education, Asakawa graduated from Tokyo Semmon Gakko, now known as Waseda University, at the top of his class in 1895. With scholarship and financial assistance as well as loans from his friends, he continued his studies in the U.S. Asakawa received his B.A. degree with honors in German, having been elected to Phi Beta Kappa, in 1899 from Dartmouth College; and his Ph.D. in history from Yale University in 1902.

After lecturing on the history and civilization of the Far East at Dartmouth, Asakawa began a long teaching and library career at Yale in 1907. Although he retired as Professor of History Emeritus in 1942, he continued his curatorship of the East Asian Collection until about two months before his death in West Wardsboro, Vermont, where he had been on vacation, in August 1948.

His accomplishments as an institutional historian of Japan and a comparative historian are widely known through such works as The Early Institutional Life of Japan, his revised Ph.D. dissertation published in 1903; The Documents of Iriki, published in 1929 and 1955; and The Land and Society in Medieval Japan, which was posthumously published in 1965. His scholarly contributions also include such articles as "The Origin of the Feudal Land Tenure in Japan" (1914), "Some Aspects of Japanese Feudal Institutions" (1918), "The Life of a Monastic Sho in Medieval Japan" (1919), "The Early Sho and Early Manor" (1929); and "Feudalism: Japanese" in the Encyclopedia of Social Science (1931). Asakawa's achievement as a scholar is summarized by John Whitney Hall in his "Kan'ichi Asakawa: Comparative Historian," an introductory essay to the previously cited The Land and Society in Medieval Japan as follows:

Asakawa had in fact realized his aspiration to become a great and influential scholar. At the time of his death his reputation as an interpreter of Japanese feudal institutions and as a contributor to the general theory of feudalism was secure. In these fields he was a giant, relied on by more widely known historians such as Sansom and E.O. Reischauer, admired by other historical generalists or comparativists such as Bloch and des Longrais, and respected from afar by the new generation of historians just emerging from the postwar graduate mills at Harvard and Columbia.¹

However, outside of the academic community, Asakawa has been almost totally unknown in recent years. This situation was greatly remedied at least in

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Japan in September of 1983, when the Saigo no Nihonjin; Asakawa Kan'ichi no shōgai The Last Japanese; The Life of Kan'ichi Asakawa) by Yoshio Abe was published. In this work, which will no doubt remain as the definitive single-volume biography of Asakawa for sometime to come, Asakawa is richly depicted in his full stature as an internationally attuned man of ideas and wisdom as well as a pioneer comparative historian who cast lasting influence upon the history profession both in the U.S. and Japan.

In addition to Asakawa's activity as a scholar among the top notch scholars of his day, the biography reveals an astonishing volume of correspondence with Japanese public figures: foremost scholars, writers, and men of public affairs. Toward them he played the role of Japanese scholar in exile, constantly commenting on Japan's policies and her behavior in the international arena. At the same time, as a Japanese living in America, he also played the role of sometime spokesman for Japan and outside critic of America. Throughout his life in America he continued to judge the two countries he loved, as he did his own life, from the most idealistic ethical standards of behavior.

It was a tragedy that Asakawa's career coincided with the first half of the twentieth century, in which Japan went through her most recent turbulent international involvement that ended in the crushing defeat of Japan in 1945. In his 1904 publication, Russo-Japanese Conflict: Its Causes and Issues, and articles as well as in speaking engagements in New York City and throughout New England around that time, Asakawa was able to speak in the most optimistic terms about Japan and her future. Certainly, the American public opinion was on his side. However, with the Portsmouth Treaty, American opinion became suspicious of Japan, and soon Asakawa himself was forced to witness Japan's continued expansion into her neighboring countries. Eventually, Asakawa ceased to write or speak in public on Japan's international behavior; however, he never ceased to write about it to his friends in Japan and the U.S. A good example is the letter of advice he wrote in 1915 to Prime Minister Shigenobu Okuma over the "Twenty-One Demands." Asakawa had known him since his Waseda days and renewed his acquaintance when he returned to Japan in 1906. Other politicians Asakawa frequently corresponded with include Kentarō Kaneko, Nobuaki Makino, and Ichirō Hatoyama. Among his scholar friends were such notables as Shōyō Tsubouchi, Masaharu Anesaki, Sanji Mikami, Katsumi Kuroita and Hiroyuki Miura. Asakawa also corresponded with such people as Eiichi Shibusawa, a prominent industrialist, and Sohō Tokutomi, a well-known journalist and publisher. Asakawa in his letters continued to criticize Japan's drift towards militarism. But, to his great disillusionment and sorrow, history unfolded as it did in the 1930s, 1941 and 1945.

Less known is Asakawa's efforts to build the Japanese and Chinese collections at Yale and elsewhere as an important prerequisite to the promotion of East Asian studies in the U.S. The only published account so far in English of this aspect of Asakawa's life is found in Andrew Y. Kuroda's article, "A History of the Japanese Collection in the Library of Congress, 1874-1941," which was published in the Senda Masao Kyōju koki kinen toshokan shiryō ronshū in 1970. The article describes acquisitions of Japanese materials Asakawa made in behalf of LC while on a trip to Japan from 1906 to 1907. Most of these materials were works in traditional format, and they were rebound into
9,072 volumes in western style binding before shipment to the U.S. It is estimated that in their original format they probably were 3,160 titles in 45,000 volumes. This collection became, in Kuroda's 1970 assessment, "a foundation on which the present Japanese Collection of the Library of Congress has grown into the largest outside of Japan and the tenth largest Japanese library in the world." 3

The 1906/1907 trip also marked the beginning of Asakawa's forty-two year professional service to Yale University Library and the first systematic acquisition for its East Asian Collection. In January of 1906, Asakawa was appointed Instructor of History of Japanese Civilization and Curator of the Japanese and Chinese Collections at Yale University, with a salary of $1,200, beginning with the academic year 1907-08. Earlier, he had been commissioned to select and acquire Japanese books during his stay in Japan in 1906-1907, as he had been for LC. It might be added here that Asakawa had previously cataloged all the Chinese and Japanese books at Yale as a volunteer while studying in the Library. However, since the hours required more than anticipated, the Library offered to pay for his work at the end of summer of 1903, and he accepted.4

In 1906, Yale had 4,000 to 5,000 volumes of East Asian language materials. As is well known, the first major gift of Chinese books to Yale was made in 1878, when Yung Wing, the first Chinese subject ever to graduate from an American college, presented his alma mater with forty Chinese works in 1,237 volumes. As for Japanese works, a sizable number of good early Edo editions at Yale are graced with bookplates bearing the name of O.C. Marsh and the year of donation, 1873. O.C. Marsh was Yale Professor of Paleontology and a connoisseur of Oriental artifacts. More precisely speaking, in 1906 Yale had 717 Japanese titles in 1,351 rebound volumes,5 which Asakawa estimated to be more than 4,000 fascicles in the original format and probably the best Japanese collection in the country.6 However, according to Asakawa, it had not been systematically collected and it was entirely inadequate for an exhaustive study in any branch of knowledge.7

In the fall of 1905, when Asakawa found it necessary for personal reasons to make a trip to Japan the next year, he began writing letters to a number of people about the existing crucial needs to build a strong East Asian library collection as the prerequisite for the enhancement of East Asian studies in the country and offered his services for the acquisition of Japanese materials while in Japan. Today there remain his eloquent letters to such people as D.C. Gilman, President of the American Oriental Society and President Emeritus of Johns Hopkins University, Franz Boas, Secretary of the East Asiatic Committee, Columbia University, and J.C. Schwab, Professor and University Librarian at Yale University. The result was the double commission from Yale and LC.

During his eighteen-month stay in Japan from February 1906 to August 1907, Asakawa travelled all over Japan and acquired for Yale 8,120 titles8 in 21,520 volumes, which were rebound in 3,578 volumes, as well as 1,741 maps, 742 photographs and charts, and a number of scrolls. These materials may be divided into two classes, namely, books relating to recent Japan and those bearing on the history of Japanese civilization. In the first group were
1,733 maps and several hundred volumes which were gifts of the Cabinet Bureau and the various ministries of the Japanese government. The larger part of the second group of materials consisted of works relating to various phases of the history of Japanese civilization. The collection of historical sources and literature of all ages, comprising documents, inscriptions of monuments, contemporary records and memoirs, and later compilations, was considered unusually large even in Japan at that time. Literary works, those on local history, and on the history of customs and manners, of commerce, of religion, and other aspects of national life, were also numerous. Particularly strong was the collection of material relating to the institutional development of Japan. A large part of the written work was in manuscript, and many of them were not on the market. They were either secured from owners in different parts of the country, or especially transcribed for the Library from the original or otherwise good copies. The transcribing was done at fifteen different monasteries, libraries and public offices in Tokyo and throughout western Japan, and resulted in about sixty works in 1,000 fascicules, including some outstanding sources and rare materials.

The success of Asakawa's work as a collector was largely due to the cordial support given him by the Japanese government, especially by the Minister of Education, Nobuaki Makino, by local officials, by special scholars in all parts of Japan, by members of different Buddhist institutions, and by authorities of various colleges of the Imperial University of Tokyo, and in particular, by Sanji Mikami, Director of the Historiographic Institute of the University.

Asakawa achieved the Yale acquisition with $3,200 and the generosity of donors, while expending $5,000 and also accepting gifts for LC. Actually, he started out with an estimated acquisitions cost of $5,000 for Yale as well; however, Yale had difficulty in raising the full amount. In fact, after frantic letters from Asakawa, Yale sent the last installment of money in April 1907, which included $1,000 from the salary of Professor F.W. Williams who was expected to go on leave the following year.

For the next forty years, Asakawa continued to build the East Asian Collection and cataloged its materials singlehandedly. Since he was also teaching, he normally spent three half-days a week on library work. As of May 1915, the Collection included 12,272 Japanese titles bound in 8,184 volumes, 622 Chinese works in 4,762 volumes, and 44 Korean works in 70 volumes. In the University Librarian's annual report for 1914-1915, Asakawa observed as follows:

"Although our collection is still numerically the strongest in existence in America, certain other libraries are increasing their collections faster than we are and already excel us in some features. As our collection is widely known among investigators in the country, it is highly desirable, for the prestige of the University, that we should be able to add to the present collection more liberally and systematically than we are enabled to do."

From July 1917 to September 1919, when Asakawa spent most of his leave from Yale at the University of Tokyo's Historiographic Institute, he renewed acquaintances with old friends and widened his circle of scholar friends in Japan. Also, on this trip he encountered the now famous Iriki documents in Southern Kyushu and acquired 2,637 East Asian works bound in 1,123 volumes for Yale, most of which were in Japanese.
While acquisitions budgets were perennially inadequate, from time to time there were significant gifts from individuals and institutions in Japan, many of which were brought in because of Asakawa's personal relationships with influential people in Japan. A good example is a series of gifts sent by the Yale Association of Japan, which was composed of Japanese Yale alumni in Japan and led by people Asakawa maintained close contact with. In 1921 the Association added to its previous gifts 2,126 works in Chinese in 1,662 fascicles and eight titles in Japanese in twelve volumes, most of which were on Buddhism. In 1925 an additional 285 Chinese works in 781 volumes were sent by the Association. Its most notable gift of some 300 items was given in 1934. This gift, intended for exhibition, comprises objects collected with the special purpose of showing the evolution of Japanese culture largely in its literary aspects, and also of the social life of the people. The collection includes, among other things: original historical documents beginning with the eleventh century; specimens of the writings of famous calligraphers, poetry and fiction; Buddhist texts in manuscript and print, both dating from the eighth century onwards; school textbooks of all sorts; works on customs and manners, as well as on useful arts and occupations; and many examples representing the history of printing in Japan since the eighth century. Of these numerous objects, only a few are copies or reproductions, and all the others are original, including some that are unique and priceless.

The 1934 gift was assembled by Professor Katsumi Kurota of the University of Tokyo with the funds raised by the Yale Association of Japan. Professor Kurota was undoubtedly the best person available for the assignment, for he was then the foremost paleographer of Japan and one of Japan's most distinguished historians. He had continuously served on official commissions to search for the art treasures in Japan to place under the care of the government for preservation. Furthermore, he had an immense circle of former students and friends throughout the country. He knew what items to select, and where and how to acquire them; indeed, some of them could have hardly been obtained but by him. The fund raising campaign was started by Asakawa when he was in Japan in 1917, and he himself donated $250 outright.

The 1934 gift along with some additional items are now housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library as the Yale Association of Japan Collection. Selected items from the collection will be shown as a part of the exhibit, "East Asia; Great Traditions," from December 1984 through February 1985 in the Sterling Memorial Library. Among the items on exhibit will be four Hyakumanto dharani printed in 770 A.D., rare Buddhist sutras in manuscript and printed form, original documents from Todaiji temple dating back to 1055, original records of the cadastral surveys of Nishi Kamo compiled by order of Hideyoshi in 1586 and 1589, Ise monogatari in three copies variously dated from the 15th to 17th centuries, etc. Also, one exhibit case will be devoted to Asakawa memorabilia. Shown in his honor will be Asakawa diaries, letters, research notes, and other related documents.

In addition, two items of excellent calligraphic specimens from the collection will be on display at the Japan House Gallery in New York City from October 4, 1984 to January 6, 1985. On loan to this exhibition of works in Western collections will be Tekagami, a collection of 140 original autographs of famous calligraphers of the eighth to seventeenth centuries, and Shorenin
Soncho Hōshinō gyohitsu tehon, a kana copy book by the hand of the tonsured prince Soncho who died in 1597. The exhibition will then be sent to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (February 15–March 31, 1985) and to the Seattle Art Museum (May 6–July 8, 1985).

In October of 1937 Asakawa made the following report to the Committee on the Far East at Yale:

[There are] approximately 4,000 Chinese works in 9,000 volumes and fascicles; 16,500 Japanese works in 9,500 volumes; and 60 works in 160 volumes on Korea (in Chinese and Japanese).

The Chinese books have not been collected under any plan, excepting those which we suggested to the Yale alumni in Tokyo and got from them as gifts some years ago. A similar list sent to Chinese alumni received no response. Our Chinese Collection is therefore haphazard, and is deficient in every branch.

The bulk of the Japanese collection was made with a systematic and sustained effort pursued in all parts of Japan during eighteen months in 1906–07.

Our entire Japanese collection is inadequate on the present day conditions. On Old Japan, I cannot speak with accuracy how our collection will compare with those at Columbia, the Library of Congress, and the Harvard-Yenching Institute, as I have been able to give them only cursory examinations. My rough estimation is that on the whole ours is markedly more comprehensive and catholic as to the source material, but in secondary literature we are weaker than others in some fields. An exception must be made of the Japanese collection at the Library of Congress, for its first large set was procured by the same collector as ours and along largely similar lines. This comparison is valid at the present moment, but not for the future, except in some respects only. We are not making any large additions, for lack of funds, while the others are.19

Similarly, Asakawa's frustrations are expressed in his memorandum to the University Librarian, written probably in 1935 or 1936, which has a familiar ring even today. Asakawa pleads:

Mr. Librarian,

I wish to state some of the urgent needs felt in my department. Though it is a fraction of the Library, this department is peculiar in that it duplicates on a small scale several phases of the administration of a complete library. The cataloguing of books, which I regard as the most essential part of my curatorship, is only a part of my work; as a matter of fact, other details often prevent me from cataloguing a single book for weeks at a time. I should be ready to respond to inquiries of books and facts, including matters of no moment. I should keep abreast of recent publications on Oriental subjects that appear in many countries, and be in a position to make useful decisions about purchases and exchanges. I should cultivate the good will of our past and prospective donors, and also to some extent keep in touch with productive scholars.
I should write letters on various business that arises often and in many connections. I should answer the questions and meet the demands that are addressed to me from other parts of the Library concerning matters of remarkable variety; this modest task consumes a large part of my time otherwise limited.

Thus, it would seem that I continue in some sort the capacities of cataloguer, reference librarian, bibliographer, accession officer, business manager and secretary, exhibitor, general utility man, and walking cyclopedia.

This situation may be understood only in conjunction with the following circumstances; - I have no assistant, no typewriter, no telephone, and no more time at my disposal than three or four hours during the week. The result is the most unfortunate arrears in my work in all its aspects.

The most distressing to me is the extreme lowness of the cataloguing. After twenty-eight years of my curatorship, even the Japanese books acquired in 1907 are not yet all finished; and during the last two or three years I have been unable to catalogue a single volume in the remainder of this old collection. As for the Chinese books, I have been able to deal with only a small part of those that continually accumulate in my room. After repeated removals, the uncatalogued Chinese books are, I regret to say, not even all properly classed on the shelf.

The obvious need is assistance. This is all the more urgent, as it would take some time for an assistant to become thoroughly acquainted with the acquirements of this department, so that he should be able to carry on and, I hope, greatly improve its services after my retirement. Aside from this consideration, it is clear that assistance should be provided at the earliest moment, in order to rescue the department from its increasing distress.

Since it would be impracticable to emulate at once the generous provisions of the Library of Congress or Harvard-Yenching Library, one might begin with attacking the most urgent parts of our needs. They are the cataloguing of Chinese books and periodicals and attending to correspondence regarding China. The help should be full time, at the least half time. Unless such helper is already trained in library work, we should allow some time for his indoctrination. I emphasise this point, for my past experience with a Chinese or Japanese student-helper has taught me that his year's term would have elapsed before he had mastered even the elements of the needed accuracy and consistency. This is in great part due to the many points that continually arise to vex the cataloguer in connection with transliteration.

As for the Japanese part of the department, the need of assistance is not so immediate, as the greater part of the collection has been catalogued, and I have a few more years of service before my retirement.20

In conclusion, it must be said that this paper is necessarily an interim report because all the known sources have not been consulted and more sources
may be found in the future. Yale University Library at present has parts of Asakawa's diaries, originals or copies of some 300 letters which were written by Asakawa or addressed to him, drafts of his speeches and writings, and his research notes. His diaries for some important years have not been located; not covered are the years before 1912, 1926-1939, and 1941-44. In Japan, there are about 2,300 letters exchanged by Asakawa with his correspondance, which Yale sent to Asakawa's nephew after his death, as well as other scattered letters penned by Asakawa over the years. Currently, a Japanese and American bi-national committee is preparing some 400 of Asakawa's letters for publication.

Full assessment of Asakawa's work as curator must await further research. However, he was no doubt one of the earliest advocates for building strong Japanese and East Asian collections as foundations for East Asian studies in the U.S. He clearly saw the need and importance of comprehensive and systematically acquired collections and did his best in trying to realize his ideals within the confines of his personal and institutional priorities. Asakawa was above all a scholar, a brilliant one at that; but that fact obviously limited the amount of time he himself could spend on library however devoted to building a collection he himself may have been. It was ironical that it took the tragedy of World War II before East Asian Studies in the U.S. really took off. Only in Asakawa's twilight years, there emerged foundation-support research projects and active East Asian studies programs. Even then his institution remained out of the main stream of faculty, program and library expansion while others began to take the lead. At any rate, Asakawa's prophetic vision is clearly stated in the following letter to Franz Boas, one of several letters he wrote in 1905 before the trip which resulted in major acquisitions for Yale and LC:

Since I found it necessary for personal reasons to return to Japan temporarily from next February, I have been wondering whether it would not be possible to take advantage of the trip in order to fill a great need which I have always keenly felt and which will doubtlessly be felt by an increasing number of persons. I refer to the want of a good Japanese library (that is, books on Japan in the Japanese and in the European languages) in this country which can be compared even with the Japanese collection at the British Museum. The want of such a national library is a serious matter against the cause of oriental studies in this country, especially because, of all the branches of oriental studies, East Asiatic studies are still far behind West and South Asiatic studies both in scholarship and in productiveness, and, again, of East Asiatic studies, work about Japan has thus far been even more primitive and less scientific than work about China. This lamentable state of things must in a large measure be due to the want of a library already referred to. Perhaps the best Japanese collection in this country at present is in Yale University Library (containing more than 4,000 fascicles, all of which I had the pleasure of cataloguing), but it has not been systematically collected and is entirely inadequate for an exhaustive study in any branch of the subject. It is high time that an intelligent and systematic collection should be made.
To be sure, my own needs are limited to a few classes of books, but I would like to see a complete Japanese library started in a central position which would meet all the needs of the public and the students in this country. I should be happy to do all in my power to build up such an institution, provided I have a sufficient financial support. If the latter may be secured, I would also interest influential persons in Japan in this enterprise, besides securing every possible assistance from great scholars, so as to insure an exhaustive collection at the start and a continuous growth thereafter.

My original plan covered only the library work already mentioned, but, after seeing Dr. Laufer's splendid Chinese collection, I have been struck with the great usefulness which a similar collection from Japan would have. Although I am not a special student in archeology or ethnography, it may not be entirely beyond my power to follow Dr. Laufer's example in making a model collection of specimens, especially because I shall be able to seek all possible suggestions from trained scholars in this line for making such a collection. If I may be trusted with such a work also, I shall have the satisfaction of rendering a double service, while I shall personally learn immensely from the actual work of collecting specimens.

Of these two collections, namely, the library and the museum collections, I think that it can not be too strongly emphasized that they should be strictly systematic. In addition to this requirement, the library should also be [an] exhaustive stock of books, but it also should have sufficient means to grow continuously and systematically. It seems evident that the library work will always need the service of a trained scholar in Japanese subjects, in order to give it proper order and make it of real value.

These two collections being the sources for all scholarly work about Japan, I consider them as of equal value to, if not more important than, the work of instruction in connection with these collections.21

Asakawa, of course, stayed with the Yale portion of his 1907 acquisitions, which he single handedly catalogued and tried to continue building on. It is regrettable that he did not receive sufficient funds and staff to realize his dream fully. Nonetheless, he constantly toiled for the goal he expressed in his letter to his mentor, President William J. Tucker of Dartmouth College, in 1899:

"To introduce my country in a better light than before to the wide intellectual world to bring closer in understanding and sympathy the East and the West, and to further, however little, the progressive unity of history, is a noble ideal worthy of aspiration."22
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10. Ibid.

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12. Ibid.


15. Yale University, 1919-1920, p. 20.

16. Yale University, 1921-1922, p. 12.

17. Yale University, 1924-25.

18. Diary, 4/23/1948, AP.


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