Elizabeth Huff and the East Asiatic Library at the University of California, Berkeley

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Elizabeth Huff was trained to be a research scholar, a sinologist, and a teacher—not a librarian. But when she was in the final weeks of completing her doctoral dissertation in Chinese literature in 1947, the most attractive position she was offered came from the Berkeley library, to reorganize and build the East Asian collection. While she lacked any training in librarianship, the qualities of mind and personality which made her a good research scholar, and the training she had received, both in the European sinological tradition and in textual studies in China, prepared her well for many of the tasks that faced her.

After graduating in English from the University of Illinois, she pursued studies in classical art history and then in Chinese art and literature at Harvard, beginning in 1936. On the first Harvard-Yenching fellowship to be awarded to a woman, she went to Kyoto for a year and then, like her fellow students Francis Cleaves and James Robert Hightower, on to Peking. There she studied with a number of textual scholars, notably Achilles Fang. The outbreak of war between the United States and Japan turned the projected two years in Peking into nearly six years, two and a half of which were spent in the Wei-hsien internment camp. Nine months after her return to the United States, she completed her doctoral dissertation on a treatise on poetics (Shih hsüeh) by Huang Chieh. Before she left for Berkeley, Alfred Kaiming Chiu, the head of the East Asian collection at Harvard, gave her a two-week crash course in oriental librarianship.

At thirty-five she had an excellent knowledge of literary Chinese and was broadly trained in Chinese literary scholarship. The exacting standards that had been held up to her in her research, including precision in translation, were undoubtedly congenial to her. She had a precise, retentive mind, and a love for systematic, thorough research. She had a clear notion of what was the proper, responsible way to do things and, being strongly principled, she was decisive about how things should be done in the library. And she stuck to her positions.

We can recapture something of her actions during her first months and years in Berkeley from her annual reports and a few other memoranda to the University Librarian, Donald Coney. Before Elizabeth Huff’s arrival in April of 1947, there was no separate East Asian library, nor a full-time staff member to deal with the East Asian materials. She found that there were over 40,000 Chinese volumes, half of which were in the Department of Oriental Languages reading room and stack. The partial catalog, like the collection, was in disarray. As she said in a report that year: “Because the collection was divided among rooms to which, as to the Oriental stacks, students as well as staff had free access, the collection had fallen into a state of confusion where one could not say which was the most urgent need, searching for the hundreds or thousands of misplaced and lost volumes, restoring on the shelves the order, however incorrect, of the old catalogue, assembling the uncatalogued materials or recataloguing.” In addition there were about 33,000 Japanese volumes which had at least been catalogued, but they were scattered through the nine tiers of the Main Library stacks. In later years she estimated that there were about 75,000 volumes in 1947.2 Such as it was, it was already one of the larger university collections in the country.
Elizabeth Huff at once set about the task of bringing all the materials to one location and establishing the collection as a separate branch, the East Asiatic Library. To create order she resolved to deal at once with the faculty. Two of the senior professors had brought with them from Europe the attitude that since the books had been bought for the faculty, there was no need to sign charge slips when they took volumes to their offices. Nor did they intend ever to return the books to the stacks or reading room since, as one put it, "nobody else is interested in them." Some professors were bewildered by her new procedures, but they meekly surrendered their keys to the stacks. Here her impeccable scholarly credentials stood her in good stead, as did her serious, almost grim, no-nonsense manner. She was always polite and diplomatic, but her well-chosen words came through as moral remonstrances. She said in later years that on an issue with the faculty she always "compromised," but a faculty member was more likely to feel that he had yielded unconditionally.

The respect of the faculty for her scholarship and knowledge was declared at once in an invitation to teach a course on Chinese bibliography under an appointment as Lecturer in Oriental Languages. She enjoyed teaching and offered the course virtually every year until her retirement.4

Upon her arrival in Berkeley, Elizabeth Huff’s first tasks, along with trying to find what books existed and bringing them together, were to hire a staff and to start compiling lists of Chinese books that should be acquired. She recommended to Mr. Coney that the number of Chinese books should be tripled and the Japanese doubled, to form a basic collection of over 200,000 volumes.5 Since the book market in China and Japan had not fully recovered from the disruption of the war years, Huff supplemented her efforts through dealers by asking faculty members going to Asia during the next year, 1948, to carry lists with them and select agents to search for the desired items. Professor Woodbridge Bingham collected 9,000 volumes in China, Ferdinand Lessing bought Tibetan and Mongol books, and Delmer Brown bought 3,400 volumes in Japan. A few months later the library had staff members to send to Asia. Richard Irwin bought 26,000 volumes in China, while Elizabeth McKinnon, who was in Japan adding 19,000 volumes, heard of two important private libraries that might be for sale. She was able to acquire promptly the Murakami library of Meiji belles lettres in 11,000 volumes, one of the finest collections in existence of first and early editions of Meiji and Taisho literature. The other offering was of 100,000 volumes or items, which constituted about one third of the Mitsui Bunko. Although the Berkeley faculty at that time had no tenured teacher of Japanese language and literature, Elizabeth Huff plunged ahead into one and a half years of negotiations to complete the purchase, while raising the additional $60,000 needed from the University and its Regents, who had already invested so much in the East Asiatic Library. During these years the George H. Kerr collection of Japanese materials on Formosa, consisting of 1,920 items;6 and 2,000 Japanese duplicates from the Library of Congress were also added. All of these acquisitions were made in three or four years, carrying the library’s collection to 225,000 volumes.7

Most of the credit for this remarkable development should be assigned to Elizabeth Huff. In the years immediately following the war, Berkeley was one of a number of universities concerned with remedying the neglect of East Asia in the curriculum. The President of the University, Robert Gordon Sproul, was sympathetic to the expansion of the East Asian program.8 The University Librarian backed most of Elizabeth Huff’s proposals. But however favorable these circumstances and however unpredictable the fortune which brought offerings of rare research materials to the attention of Dr. Huff and her staff, she was quick to grasp the value of what was available, and she had the courage to seize the moment and go after funding.
Her greatest coup was the purchase of part of the Mitsui Bunko. The Allied Occupation of Japan had frozen some of the assets of the Mitsui family, the great zaibatsu combine. Some family members decided to make a discreet sale of 100,000 volumes or items, perhaps a third of the joint family library. They retained archives on the history of the Mitsui family and materials on the development of Japanese business and commerce. Items of less direct concern to the family were offered for sale, mostly works of a literary or historical nature—private collections purchased by the Mitsui or assembled by members of the family as an avocation. A third of these volumes offered for sale were in classical Chinese. Most valuable was the Asami Library of Korean books, Yi dynasty imprints—900 titles in 4,130 volumes. (A detailed book catalog of this collection was later compiled by Fang Chao-ying.) Next there was the Imazeki library of classical Chinese, 1,418 titles in 19,838 volumes. There was also an exceptionally fine collection of 1,500 Chinese rubbings. Among the Japanese materials, one of the most unusual parts was a collection of early maps, 700 woodblock printed maps from the Tokugawa period and 1,600 Meiji maps, mostly from the earlier part of the Meiji period. The balance of the offering was made up of four collections of Japanese books, among which were nearly 8,000 manuscripts from Muromachi times down to a 1920s manuscript by Akutagawa. The total number of printed books from the Tokugawa period can no longer be reconstructed, as duplicates were not retained, but over 4,000 titles (roughly 20,000 volumes) that were retained make it perhaps the largest collection of hanpon to leave Japan. In addition there were some tens of thousands of Meiji and Taisho books, among which works of literature were the most numerous.

Clearly the Mitsui materials were not your basic working library. They were Special Collections materials, with a thousand titles that were considered rare at that time, and many more that could be so classified today. Elizabeth Huff delighted in this scholar's library—the Korean and Chinese classical texts, and above all the collection of rubbings. She ordered thousands of cloth wrappers, t’ao or chitsu, custom-made in Japan in silk, linen, and cotton, and oversaw the preparation of labels in an elegant calligraphic hand.

She continued in the following years to add other items that were to her taste: examples of rare Chinese and Japanese printing, the Empress Shotoku’s Hyakumantō darani, 600 additional rubbings, facsimiles of early Japanese manuscripts and printed books, and a large number of facsimiles of Chinese and Japanese handscrolls of painting and calligraphy. Her annual reports point with satisfaction to the acquisition of choice items. As one member of her staff said, if it was "antique, authentic, and attractive," she considered it an appropriate addition.

Such were her personal preferences, but she understood her mission to be the building of a balanced collection to meet the research needs of faculty and students in all fields. Great effort was expended to fill in the early years of journals and to complete runs. She was most responsive to faculty requests for all kinds of materials—except for the occasional item which she dismissed as frivolous. It was a shock to her, therefore, when after ten years of her stewardship, six faculty members in the social sciences addressed a letter to the East Asiatic Library’s faculty advisory committee complaining that because of the personal interests of the librarian, the selection of "scholarly works" in the social science fields was being neglected. Her comment at the time, in her annual report, illustrates her hostility to such interference, and it also provides us with a good example of her mannered prose: "The motive remains dark behind the letter, and its abrupt unpleasantness can be only partly dissolved by an analysis of new titles that showed half of them to be in the subjects in question, by the recollection of the equal claims of a greater number of readers who have not expressed dissatisfaction, and by the abatement of the thrust which is implicit in criticism wordy without pointed examples or precise detail." What she seems to say, among other things, is that she checked the previous
year's purchases and found that half were in the social sciences, and besides, most of the users weren't complaining.

The social scientists also wrote to the University Librarian about this matter. Elizabeth Huff, twenty years later, made the following comment: "(The memo) was three or three-and-a-half pages single-spaced, and I can recall nothing that it said, except that the point of the whole thing was that Mary Wright was a good librarian and I wasn't, because Mary Wright bought for the social sciences and in the modern fields. I thought the letter was extremely indiscreet."12

The year after this incident, in her annual report, she made a point of reporting two important acquisitions in the social sciences: a back file of the newspaper Asahi, and a large set, Mindai Man Mo shiryo, "Historical Materials on Manchuria and Mongolia during the Ming Dynasty."13 To redress the balance, she should be credited with making Berkeley perhaps the most active library in the fifties in arranging exchanges to obtain a large number of Japanese journals in the social sciences, and more remarkable, the physical sciences. Furthermore, the library became the second national depository, after the Library of Congress, of Japanese government documents.

It was clear from the start that the emphasis of the East Asian collections at Berkeley and at Hoover would be quite different. Elizabeth Huff could count on Mary Wright to concentrate on the Ch'ing and modern periods, leaving classical studies, literature, and art to Berkeley to collect in depth. Since the two libraries were only an hour distant by car, users could easily be directed to the other collection. As early as the early fifties, the two curators decided to save funds on local gazetteers by making some geographic division. Berkeley took responsibility for the southeast provinces--Fukien, Kwangtung, and Kwangsi, chosen because many of the San Francisco Chinese came from those areas, while Hoover favored the central and eastern provinces, important in the early development of the communist movement.14 This understanding between the two libraries was the beginning of more elaborate agreements on collecting responsibility which were later worked out and continue to be in effect between the two institutions.

In 1947 when Elizabeth Huff formally established the East Asiatic Library, there were few knowledgeable and experienced East Asian librarians in the country. She had to learn on the job, as did the staff she hired. Within the first months, with very little experience, she had to make many crucial decisions. She chose the Harvard-Yenching classification, as advised by its creator, Dr. Chiu, but from there she promptly struck out on her own. She decided to intershelve Chinese, Japanese, and Korean books,15 and similarly, to interfile the cards in one catalog, to make the basic catalog radical-stroke rather than four-corner or alphabetical. She started a subject catalog from the beginning and began a depository of LC cards. Charles Hamilton, of the staff, wrote in 1951 a "Draft Code for Descriptive cataloging" of East Asian materials which was circulated to thirty-three libraries, and later fifty-one others in the United States and abroad asked for copies.16 If one had the benefit of retrospective experience, different decisions would have been made, needless to say. But in those days when there was little experience and less guidance, Elizabeth was right to plunge in, intuitively, without further study, and go full speed ahead. The cataloging job in front of the staff was monumental--the 75,000 original volumes had to be recatalogued, along with several times that number that had been acquired.

Remarkable progress was made, in good part thanks to the excellent staff she assembled. Charles Hamilton and Richard Irwin were the stalwarts, and within five years there was a staff of fourteen. She picked many others who later went on to important positions, among them Yukihisa Suzuki who became head at Michigan, Hiroko Ikeda who went on to Hawaii, Fang Chao-ying who took over the Canberra Library, and Emiko Moffitt, now at
Hoover. Many of the student employees and at least one staff member later became faculty members around the country.

Good progress was made also because Elizabeth Huff kept to a steady course, and she did keep a close eye on the entire operation. She was not a librarian in the modern managerial sense, concerned with cost-efficiency and workflow, but rather she might be better described as an enlightened amateur. Had she been a technocrat, it is unlikely that many of those special materials would have been acquired.

She attended CEAL meetings each year, mainly for the opportunity to see those few members she considered well informed, who would have interesting things to say about unusual new acquisitions. But she seems not to have liked most of the sessions. As she said years later: "There was, to my mind, a monstrously vulgar emphasis on the part of the majority of the members upon quantity, accession statistics. That undoubtedly still continues. To my mind it's totally meaningless." 17

Much as she delighted in the fine materials she had collected, she was at heart a scholar, and wanted, at the earliest possible moment, to return to the life of scholarship. And thus, she asked to retire in December of 1967 when she met the requirement--20 years of service or 55 years of age--which, it happened, coincided that year. She was persuaded by the Librarian, Donald Coney, her great ally, to continue for one more year until he too would be retiring. She said that what she needed to do for the library had been done: it was in good shape, much of the collection was catalogued, the uncatalogued books were under control, there was a good staff, and an established routine.18

The progress that had been made is attested by the dispatching to the press of the book catalog of the Asami Library and the photographing by G.K. Hall of the card catalog, which appeared soon after in twenty-three volumes.19 Elizabeth Huff concluded her last annual report with the words: "Rest you merry, books and loyal staff who shaped a treasure-house."20
NOTES

1. The most important of the sources on which this paper is based are the annual reports prepared by Elizabeth Huff between September 1947 and September 1967. Also valuable is an oral history based on interviews conducted by Rosemary Levenson from February to May 1976; the typescript is entitled "Elizabeth Huff: Teacher and Founding Curator of the East Asiatic Library: From Urbana to Berkeley by Way of Peking," 278 pp., China Scholar Series, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1977.

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15. "The main collection...is a unit catalogued and arranged without segregation of languages. Thus Japanese editions and translations of Chinese classics or of the Tripitaka or of poets stand beside their originals, and Korean historical works written in Chinese before the time of the Japan-
ese domination are not separated from those written during the following era in a different tongue." *Far Eastern Quarterly*, p. 44.


17. Oral history, p. 256.

