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Nancy Lee Swann and the Gest Chinese Research Library

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The Gest Chinese Research Library was the precursor of what today is Princeton University's Gest Oriental Library and East Asian Collections. It started its existence about sixty years ago at McGill University, and it was there in Montreal that Nancy Lee Swann spent half of her career as curator. From the 1920s until 1948 the library was inextricably tied to Guion M. Gest, the founder of the library, and his bibliographic agent, I. V. Gillis, as well as Swann. The three of them formed a triumvirate of pioneers who worked together for the good of the library and Chinese studies as well. Thus, though this paper concentrates on Nancy Lee Swann, it will perforce also address the contributions of Gest and Gillis.

In doing research on Nancy Lee Swann, I used regularly available materials—books and articles she wrote, the library's annual reports and correspondence. In Gest Library the amount of correspondence was prodigious, thanks to the unique tripartite arrangement for buying and administering the library; and it proved a very rich source of materials on all three of the pioneers who developed Gest Library. The set-up was such that Mr. Gest, who bought the books and paid at least in part the operating expenses of the library, lived in New York and carried on his correspondence through the secretary for his engineering company. Dr. Swann, who was curator of the library, was of course present at the site of the collection, first in Montreal, Canada, and later in Princeton, New Jersey. Commander Gillis, who sought the books and cataloged them once they were purchased, was a resident of Peking. Thus, three services which are usually executed under one roof were spread over three countries, with letters and telegrams the links among them.

The three corresponded at least once a week and in some periods for Swann and Gest on a daily basis. Telephone communication between Canada and the United States was not common then; and the mails, which were very rapid in those days, allowed for missives to speed back and forth with great regularity. Whenever one of the trio wrote to another, he usually sent an additional copy to the third, so they were all equally well-informed about purchasing, cataloging, and all other aspects of the library. Although Gest was kept busy at the headquarters of his engineering firm in New York's Woolworth Building, he was interested to know who visited the library, what books were used, what special projects the library could support, what sort of typewriter Swann's secretary needed—in other words, every facet of the library's operations. This renders the Gest files very comprehensive and complete; thus the main source of primary materials on Gest Library is one tightly-packed five-drawer file cabinet containing the Gest correspondence of the 1920s through 1940s.

Looking at Nancy Lee Swann's background, one would not have predicted that she would become a scholar of Han dynasty China and curator of a Chinese library. She was a Texan by birth, who even later as a curator who had not lived in Texas for decades, still sometimes wrote the Southern "you all" instead of "you" in her official correspondence. She was born on February 9, 1881, in Tyler, Texas, a town of about 15,000 among the coal and oil mines of east Texas. Tyler was known as the center of the Rose Garden of the World, or that part of the United
States which supports the nurseries that grow about one-third of the roses in this country and where the Texas Rose Festival is held each year.\footnote{1}

As a young woman Swann showed an interest in education and attended the Sam Houston State Teachers College in Huntsville, Texas, in 1898-99, then taught school for four years. She decided to return to university, this time to get a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas in Austin in 1906. There she earned a Phi Beta Kappa key which was a treasured possession; she wore it in official portraits and requested in her last will and testament that it be buried along with her ashes in the family cemetery plot.\footnote{2} For the next several years she devoted herself to Y.W.C.A. work, first in Texas and then as a teacher in China for seven years. In 1919 she returned to the University of Texas for a master's degree, then went to China again in 1920-23. In 1924-25 she was in the doctoral program in the Department of Chinese at Columbia University where she worked with Thomas F. Carter, then head of the department and author of The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward (New York: Ronald Press, 1925). She returned to China for a third stay, this time on fellowship to the North China Union Language School in Peking. In these years she lived in a Chinese home and did her first work in a library at the Language School's library. In 1927 she returned to the States where she completed her doctoral thesis and soon after was hired at the Gest Chinese Research Library.

Swann's thesis was appropriately on a woman academic, the Han dynasty figure, Pan Chao; the thesis is entitled Pan Chao, Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A.D.: Background, Ancestry, Life and Writings of the Most Celebrated Chinese Woman of Letters. With its publication in 1930 (New York: Century Company) Swann established herself also as a woman scholar of Chinese. When Arthur Hummel of the Library of Congress reviewed the book in the American Historical Review in 1933, he called it a "definitive study of a gifted Chinese woman of antiquity, and at the same time a vivid portrayal of the social and intellectual background of the age in which she lived."\footnote{3} Swann may have been the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in Chinese history in this country; if not the first, she was at the very least one of the first prominent ones.

In 1928 Guion Gest hired Nancy Lee Swann to work at his library, and she moved to Montreal where she stayed for the next eight years. At that time there was another person holding the position of curator, a Robert de Resillac-Roese, who had no training in Chinese. When in 1931 he resigned, Swann became acting curator for two years until she was appointed curator in 1933. In these years Mr. Gest was showing a keen intellectual and financial interest in the library, before his business suffered the irreversible dire consequences of the Great Depression.

The Gest Engineering Company in its heyday had offices in New York, Montreal, and San Francisco; and it did business all over the world, most notably in electric trains and other modes of transportation. Gest had a special personal interest in Buddhism, as attested to in a report on "Buddhist Collections in the Gest Chinese Research Library" which Swann wrote in 1933. She notes that the first book in the collection, bought in the late 1890s, was a Buddhist manuscript scroll from Japan dated A.D. 740.\footnote{4} Next Gest requested that Ch'en Pao-chen, the late Ch'ing scholar who had been tutor to Hsüan-t'ung, the last Chinese emperor, purchase some books for his collection.\footnote{5} Ch'en amassed over 8,000 volumes which made up a small library of standard works for a Chinese library. With this corpus, the Gest Library opened officially on Chinese New Year's Day of 1926; that was February 13 of that year.
Why Gest established a Chinese library and why he housed it at McGill are worth investigating. The words of Berthold Laufer who wrote up a description of the library after a visit there in 1929 explain Gest's interest:

Mr. Guion M. Gest was actuated by two principal motives: (1) to promote through the study of Chinese literature a better understanding of China and a closer relationship and amity between China and the western world (it being Mr. Gest's conviction that an entente cordiale between nations can be far better accomplished by education, i.e., through a knowledge of Chinese literature and civilization, of which comparatively little is known and translated, than by any other means), and (2) as implied by its name, the object of the Gest Library is to place its books at the disposal of scholars for research work, especially in cooperation with the faculties of McGill and other universities, as well as with sinologists in the United States, Europe, China and Japan. Research work of this character has already been done in medicine, pharmacology, astronomy, etc. A plan is on foot to found a chair of Chinese language and literature at McGill, which was chosen by Mr. Guion M. Gest because of the excellent and profound research work accomplished in the different faculties and departments of this university.

In 1932 Gest wrote the following in "A Statement from the Founder."

There has been no attempt at any time to buy in volume for quantity's sake alone, but the one object has been to obtain the best of the old works that could be secured and perpetuate them in a home where a full realization could be made by the Western World of the culture of China. With this object in mind the Library has reached its commanding position at this time, and it will be extended and its usefulness broadened during the lifetime of its founder.

Gest quite successfully fulfilled his desire, his library being preeminent among Chinese collections in North American universities and second in holdings only to the Library of Congress. Ever the promoter of his library, Gest wrote in 1933 to Jerome Greene, professor of international politics, to apprise him of the wealth of material in the Gest Library. Greene replied: "Of course I have heard a great deal about your wonderful Chinese collection. I regard it as perhaps the most important contribution that has been made toward making up for the deplorable lack of attention to Far Eastern civilization in American universities."

Indeed, Gest had a healthy interest in international relations, though his library holdings may not have reflected this directly. He attended conferences on international politics as well as the annual conference on Far Eastern Studies and the American Oriental Society where Swann presented papers such as one entitled "An Account of Certain Eunuchs in the Palace Favorled by Rulers in China." In addition Gest and Swann encouraged the use of Gest Library for research projects.

For example in 1933 Gest took steps to initiate a project for doctors at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research to do research at Gest in the use of acupuncture to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system. There was also application made to the American Council of Learned Societies to locate a project to translate the dynastic histories at Gest Library. This was the same time
that the Library of Congress was looking to begin the biography project which resulted in the publication of *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943-44) to which Swann made contributions; the Gest project was probably the main rival of the LC for ACLS funds. But the bottom was to fall out of Chinese studies at McGill and also out of the Gest Library, thus assuring LC's dominance in research for a period of perhaps ten years.

Previous to this, Gest Library had grown from 8,000 volumes to close to 130,000 in less than ten years' time. At first Gest wanted to collect only books in Buddhism and medicine. His interest in medicine dated from the trip to China when he first met Commander Gillis and was given some Chinese medicine to cure trouble he had with his eyes. I. V. Gillis had been naval attaché at the American legation in Peking. When he left that post, he stayed in Peking, having married a Chinese woman. He served in many capacities such as representative for the Bethlehem Steel Company; book purchaser for Gest, LC, University of Toronto and other libraries; and even once a year he procured silk pongee to be made up into summer-weight suits for Nancy Lee Swann's brother. It was also said he was head of the American intelligence in Asia, and indeed he did seem to have the soul of an investigator. There is a story that he once verified the date of a purported Sung dynasty book by examining the paper fiber under a microscope; he could then scientifically conclude the book was from the Ming dynasty. His knowledge of the Chinese language and Chinese books was at such a high level that he was able to put together a collection which still stands today as one of the outstanding Chinese rare book libraries in the world. He and his staff of three examined each page of each book and marked missing or damaged pages with signed slips which are in the books even today. He also had many of the books interleaved, rebound, and boxed. It was Gillis who labeled all the books, cataloged them, had catalog cards printed and wrote extensive bibliographic notes for each title; these notes survive in dozens of leatherbound folio-size volumes.

After Mr. Gest's original interests in medicine and Buddhism were ably attended to by Gillis, Gest opened the field for Gillis to buy any interesting Chinese book. And buy he did, especially in palace editions, Ming printings in general, and of course Buddhism and medicine. Gillis also had time to author books and articles. He is best known to students of Japanese through what is commonly called "Gillis and Pai," or *Japanese Personal Names* (I. V. Gillis and Pai Ping-ch'í, [Peking, Hwa Hsing Press, 1940]) and also *Japanese Surnames* (I. V. Gillis and Pai Ping-ch'í, [Peking, Hwa Hsing Press, 1939]). He also wrote philological articles and an index to the rare book catalog, *T'ien lu lin lang shu mu*. This index has just been published in 1983 in Hamburg by C. Bell as part of Hartmut Walravens' series of bibliographies of East Asian research.

The shipments Gillis sent to McGill were housed in the Redpath Library in a special, quite elegant room. It was described in Laufer's report of 1929 as follows:

The stacks are of steel, arranged in two stories, the upper one being entirely devoted to the great cyclopedia *Tu shu tsi ch'eng*. The arrangement of the books is so systematic and splendid that any book can be traced at a moment's notice. The reading room is airy and spacious and well equipped. Excellent photographs taken by Mr. Gest himself in the Orient adorn the walls. The floors are laid with Chinese rugs, and Chinese antiquities in a glass cabinet, as well as a reproduction in stone of the famous Nestorian tablet, lend the room where
at the time of my visit a most interesting exhibit of Japanese color prints and Chinese paintings and manuscripts was shown, including a number of very beautiful Tibet manuscripts in gold and silver writing from Mr. Gest's collection.  

A few years after the library was established there, McGill initiated courses in Chinese studies. The students in these courses, especially those few at the graduate level, were made welcome and helped by Swann, who mentioned them in her annual reports and letters to Gest. The library was also visited or consulted through letter by scholars and luminaries.

For example in 1933, Pearl Buck and her family stopped in at Gest Library while they were passing through Montreal. As mentioned before, Berthold Laufer came to the library as did L. Carrington Goodrich, Ida Pruitt, and many other China specialists. There is evidence of how far and wide the collection was known in a 1934 exchange of correspondence between Swann and H. L. Mencken, who requested information about the intrusion of English words into Chinese as spoken by Canadian- and American-Chinese. All such requests and visits were attended to conscientiously by Dr. Swann who often opened the library on Saturday, Sunday or during the evenings or lunch break in order to accommodate interested parties. She also prepared reports for Mr. Gest and others on such divergent topics as the madder plant and its uses in medicine, walnut oil, and currency; and she sent out exhibits on loan on such topics as Chinese ophthalmology.

Hard times hit Gest Library in the 1930s. First in 1931 a book embargo was instituted in China. Soon thereafter, McGill closed the Chinese studies program and announced that they would no longer support Gest's private collection in their library building. The McGill authorities explained to Swann in 1934 that the allowance for a staff was a luxury and that McGill could not consider purchasing the library either. This happened just as Mr. Gest was losing his eyesight and his business was failing; so he could ill afford the luxury of a library staff or, for that matter, the further purchase of books.

In August 1934 McGill cut off Swann's salary though they did not force the collection from the premises. Gest paid Swann's salary when he could; but there are agonized letters from this period when Swann has to remind Gest of his promise to pay her a wage, and he asks her to keep her commitment to the library even if he cannot pay her. It is during a two-year period that Swann shows her devotion to the library, working without even her former $2,000 annual salary. Meanwhile she continued her scholarly research. For example, in 1936 her article entitled "Seven Intimate Library Owners" appeared in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies in that journal's first year of publication. A letter she wrote to Bishop White of the Toronto Museum the following year gives some hint of the circumstances in which she wrote that paper:

That article was the most expensive safety-valve by which I ever sought relief in my life. After the close of our library at McGill and I was forced to live in a state of uncertainty as to the future, I went down to New York; got out of my direct field of study in Chinese; and undertook to work with some material about these seven library owners. I put the final copy into shape for publication at very rare moments when back in Montreal last July to supervise the shipment of the Library.
The shipment of the library Swann mentioned in that letter refers to the move that saved Gest Library. In 1934 Mr. Gest began looking for a buyer for his library. The likely buyers were Harvard, Yale and a few other universities. In the end, the Institute for Advanced Study, located in Princeton, New Jersey, but distinct from Princeton University, bought the collection in 1936 with assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation. In the package came the curator, Nancy Lee Swann, who could again open the doors to Gest Library and be employed gainfully.

The reopening of Gest Library was not to be easy. First, when the books were being transported from Montreal, there was a fire in the truck that caused damage primarily to the boxes and covers of the *Ku chin t'u shu chi ch'eng*, an original set of that encyclopedia done in copper movable type in 1726. The vestiges of the fire and water damage can still be seen on the boxes of this work today.

In addition, the Institute for Advanced Study is a research institute, and as such had no mechanism for administering a Chinese library, let alone purchasing books for it. A connection was set up with the Princeton University Library, but until the mid-1940s when Gest Library was moved into Princeton's main library building, Swann had to coordinate with two masters. The only quarters the Institute could provide were in the basement of a large brick commercial building on Nassau Street, the main street in Princeton. Soon after her arrival in Princeton, Swann wrote to her former supervisor at McGill, the Librarian, Gerhard Lomer, saying:

> We are doing very little of things that I had hoped we could do when once we were located here, even in our makeshift quarters, but my personal interest in and dreams for the Library have in no way lessened. We could, however, have been able to carry on just as well, if not better without making the move had McGill undertaken the ownership. Whether or not the move will in time mean a wider use of the Library in the future is of course an unknown quantity at present. The conditions in so far as they are determined both by the owners and the co-operating institution are indeed pleasant; I could ask for nothing more than an increase in the staff of the Gest Library in that respect.

Luckily the unknown quantity she speaks of (whether the move will mean a wider use of the library) worked out to a conclusion that would have gratified both Swann and Gest.

After the commodious and well appointed reading room and stacks in Montreal, the basement accommodations were particularly disheartening. In 1942 Swann wrote to Lawrence Seymour, an alumnus of Princeton's class of 1916 whom she was hoping to interest in improving the plight of the library. Deep in wartime, she wrote:

> Princeton University has not housed it [the library] very satisfactorily, but I rather pride myself upon having made the big, bare basement storeroom attractive with what we had on hand. When the youth of our land should be prepared not only for war in the Far East by having a better understanding of both enemy and ally, but also for the peace which is to come, our Library even now could be used advantageously in these temporary quarters with some adjustment. It is bad to struggle as I do with the constant disagreeable, and at times dangerous, leaks from the sidewalk above, and with a front wall from which plaster and
paint fall because of dampness. As I have been a pioneer all my life, and am of that stock, I do not think that it is yet too late for remedy to be made for the neglect which has kept this collection of Far Eastern books practically unused for the more than four years that it has been housed in Princeton. Come and see the tools which if properly housed, and financed for use, could help shape things as they should be in that reconstruction period which the United Nations face after the war has been won.¹⁹

Swann found it discouraging to be the custodian of a collection which got little use. She wrote Derk Bodde in 1938:

"It is extremely lonely to work in a center without others in the field with whom one may discuss the work. I am exceedingly glad that Dr. David N. Rower and his wife have now arrived in Princeton for Dr. Rowe to pick up as he can from the angle of China the excellent threads that Bob and Jean Reischauer had begun to weave into a pattern for Far Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Research to center in the Gest Library will come more slowly, and I grow very discouraged at the apparent waste of the years for me."²⁰

Swann had earlier described the unsuitability of the Princeton basement and her general dejection in a 1937 letter to Gest:

"I am not very well today. The heat has been terrific and I am nervous. To the worry over my niece and your refusal to help me out financially, the distress at the condition of things in general and the books in particular, I have not slept very well since a terrible storm on the 13th caused this building to leak an innocent amount. Fortunately I was at the office, and got hold of a janitor in spite of the storm to mop the water up on the floor above where the roof leaked. We put down a pail and protection in case of further storm. Then I went through the same thing the next night before the men could get to the roof. After it was supposed to be fixed, I was still afraid. One night I got up and came over here at 1:30 a.m. to be sure of adequate protection. I still watch, because a later storm did bring a leak."²¹

At this point Swann took over most routines of the library formerly handled by Gest and Gillis. The library’s name was changed to the Gest Oriental Library, looking forward to the day when it could house Japanese and perhaps Indian materials in addition to the original Chinese.²² With this change Swann took over responsibilities for selection, such as it was. In those days the Institute did not provide acquisitions funds and the main library was not yet augmenting Gest holdings. In the absence of funding, Swann sought gift books from many sources, including Japanese books from the Japan Institute in New York.

Her efforts in 1940 to secure a 4,000-volume collection of duplicate titles from the Meiji period held by Tokyo University failed,²³ so the library would wait decades until actively acquiring a Japanese collection. In the meantime, Swann continued with her research, usually working on more than one project simultaneously. Her magnum opus was a study of almost 500 pages entitled Food and Money in Ancient China. The Earliest Economic History of China to A.D. 25 which was sponsored by a grant-in-aid from the Institute for Advanced Study, published by the Princeton University Press (1950) and dedicated to Guion M. Gest.
On the other side of the planet, I. V. Gillis was also turning to other endeavors while Gest Library was in stasis. All along he had been paying the wages of his three assistants from his own pocket, and he himself had not been paid by Gest since 1929. By his own reckoning, he had spent over $10,000 of his own money for the Gest Library. Since 1933 about 27,000 volumes of books he had purchased for the Gest Library had been stored in the Legation Quarter in Peking. Few books had been bought since 1935, and during the Japanese occupation of Peking, when Gillis was put out of his house as a prisoner of war for over three years, the books he had on hand were confiscated, sold, or burned, he suspected.

His shipments during the 1930s were not without intrigue and excitement. In early January 1937, Gillis attempted to ship out twenty-five cases of books through Shanhaikuan to Mukden, then to Dairen and ultimately to New York, the usual ports of passage being blocked. Gillis describes his anxiety about this mission as follows:

...the attempt was so full of difficulties and dangers that for over ten days I was nearly out of my senses, and twice on the verge of a nervous breakdown with the hospital staring me in the face. I have never gone through such a siege of anxiety (for the safety and security of your books, of course) in all my life, and sincerely hope never to do so again.

A somewhat shady shipping agent had been engaged, so Gillis sent two of his own men along to Shanhaikuan to watch the operation. The agent disappeared at Shanhaikuan, leaving the Gillis men with no recourse but to ship the books back over the 250 miles to Peking. Since no railway cars were available in those troubled times, they bribed a railway worker to reload the books under cover of night. The Japanese authorities in control at Shanhaikuan detained Gillis' representatives, suspicious that they were gunrunners. These men were given the third degree, one of them even stripped naked for questioning; but they were finally released and permitted to bring the books back to Peking.

Until 1948 the Gest Library continued in its state of relative unuse. That year both Gest and Gillis died and soon after, Nancy Lee Swann retired, leaving the library in superb condition for the researchers and students she had dreamed of, who were to begin appearing at Princeton during the postwar years.

In 1950 Swann's Food and Money in Ancient China came out, coincidentally with calligraphy on the cover page by Hu Shih, who would follow Swann's twenty years as curator of Gest Library with his own brief two-year stint as honorary curator at Gest. Her book was well received. For the most part, the book is a heavily annotated translation of the very early economics treatise found in the Han shu. Yang Lien-sheng, in an article in Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies inspired by Swann's book, hails it as "a major contribution to the understanding of Chinese economic history...really indispensable to students of Chinese history." J.J.L. Duyvendak in Young Pao of 1950 notes that her work was "the labour of many weariusome years" and says the Gest Library, where she had labored for so long, "found an indefatigable student in its keeper."

In conclusion is a quotation from the review of Swann's book written by C. Martin Wilbur which appeared in the Far Eastern Quarterly: "For those who can read the originals such translations are, of course, an invaluable aid; and they are the
gift of one generation to the next." Besides her scholarship and translations, another gift Nancy Lee Swann made to our generation was the Gest Library which became a world renowned collection under her custodianship. She returned to Texas after her retirement from the library and stayed there until her death in El Paso in 1966 at the age of eighty-five. We can hope that in those years she continued to see herself as the pioneer she mentioned in her letter of 1942, and that we shall continue to appreciate the gifts she, G. M. Gest, and I. V. Gillis left for us.

Notes

4. p. 4.
8. Letter from Jerome D. Greene to Guion M. Gest, June 4, 1933.
22. Letter from Swann to Gest. October 12, 1936.
32. 10:3 (1951). p. 322.