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The Montgomery Collection at Columbia University: Late Qing and Republican Period Chinese Language Accounting Records

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While one would certainly be hard put to come up with an historical or contemporary Chinese equivalent for capitalist maxims such as "the business of China is business," scholarly interests in China's business history has grown over the past several years. At the Association for Asian Studies' 1991 Conference, for instance, a half-dozen economic historians participated in a well-attended roundtable on "Prospects for Research in Chinese Business History." The distinguished American business historian, Alfred Chandler, served as keynote speaker. Discussants averred that, compared with counterparts in Western and Japanese business history, scholarship in this nascent field has been stronger in treating issues involving the "external relations" of Chinese business than in dealing with its "internal relations." External relations refers to broader themes such as entrepreneurship, or the relationship between Chinese business interests and the late imperial and modern Chinese state. Internal relations designates the in-house operations of Chinese commercial and industrial firms, involving business management, labor relations, accounting methods, and the like.¹

As one of the central aspects of these internal relations, accounting is rightfully regarded as the lingua franca of business past and present, east and west. Accounting has been epitomized as the systematic enumeration, ordering, and reporting of business transactions to facilitate effective economic activity.² From Max Weber and Werner Sombart down to the present, western scholars have tended to assume—largely on the basis of preconceptions and slender evidence—that accounting techniques such as double-entry bookkeeping were the unique, incomparable products of post-medieval western civilization. Asian civilizations, in particular China and India, allegedly lacked such basic rational prerequisites of commercial and industrial capitalism.³ As sociologist Gary Hamilton remarks in a critique of these assessments, "uniqueness is a comparative claim, as well as a presumption underlying much historical research."⁴ Valid historical comparisons of "the West" and "non-West" should be predicated upon the well-documented historical experience of both domains.

¹Presented at the panel, "Rare and Unique Archival and Library Resources on China and Korea in the New York Metropolitan Area," of the Mid-Atlantic Region/Association for Asian Studies twentieth annual meeting at Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, PA on November 2, 1991.
In the Chinese case, that experience is now coming to be perceived as both complex and richly attested to by primary source materials located in archives in China, Japan, and the West. Guo Daoyang, the leading scholar of Chinese accounting history in the People's Republic, has recently delineated the entire field in a magisterial study entitled Zhongguo kuaiji shigang (A Draft History of Chinese Accounting). In two volumes and over a thousand pages, Guo analyzes and documents the development of both state and private sector accounting from the pre-imperial era to the 1940s. Guo's work will be the starting point and guide for serious research for year to come. Among other things, it establishes that fully indigenous double-entry bookkeeping systems analogous to those in the early modern west had developed in China by the mid-Qing era.\(^5\)

In contrast to the largely secondhand opinions of foreign or even indigenous external commentators, accounting records such as journals and ledgers represent an "insider's" view of how the world of Chinese commerce actually functioned over the late imperial and Republican periods.\(^6\) The day-to-day operations of native banks and commercial firms, not to speak of urban and rural Chinese households as well as the activities of the imperial state itself, can be traced in these documents. Although far from abundant, locating such materials has actually proven to be less of a problem than making the effort to decode and analyze them (for one thing, commercial bookkeeping records often make use of special numerals and esoteric terminology, varying with the business in question).

The richest depositories of Chinese-language accounting records remain in East Asia. In Nagasaki, to cite one example, the municipal museum holds over eleven hundred account books of various types and ten thousand business letters dating from 1901 to 1934. These records were generated by the Tai-Yi Hao, a modest-sized family firm, staffed by two dozen Hokkien (South Fujian) natives, which dealt with the wholesale export of marine products to China and Southeast Asia. Exemplifying a native double-entry accounting system in long-term operation, these documents have now been extensively studied by Hsu Tzu-fen of Koshien University, Osaka.\(^7\) While no comparable depositories exist at present in the United States, scholars wishing to gain greater familiarity with Chinese accounts as primary sources need travel no farther than metropolitan New York.

**The Montgomery Collection at Columbia University**

The Rare and Manuscript Library in the Butler Library of Columbia University possesses the largest single collection of records in the United States which illustrate and document the history of western accounting and business procedures. Robert H. Montgomery, a professor of accounting at the Columbia School of Business, donated his personal collection on accounting history to the university between 1924 and 1928, and it has been augmented ever since. A total of 1,867 printed volumes and 500 manuscript account books and business documents in several European languages (i.e., Dutch, French, Italian, English, German) dating between 1300 and 1941 constitute the Montgomery Collection. Two checklists are available for the collection as a whole and two exhibition catalogs document items of particular rarity and interest within it. The most recent exhibition catalog, of 1987 vintage...
and entitled *The Origins of a Great Profession*, is of particular value. It offers detailed
descriptions and numerous illustrations of thirty-five items in the collection that comprise
an episodic survey of accounting history in the west. Two shelflists are available to assist
researchers; one lists all holdings in chronological order and the other replicates the listing
in alphabetical order.

In the midst of this ocean of western account books, bookkeeping manuals, and state and
private records is a small archipelago—an interesting collection of twenty-five Chinese-
language manuscripts dating from 1842 to 1925 (for a full listing of each document, consult
the Appendix). Twenty-four of these (designated Ms. 531 in the collection) appear to stem
from Beijing, while the remaining item (designated Ms. 730) is the record of an overseas
Chinese shop in the Netherlands. The items in Ms. 531 were donations to Columbia
University by an otherwise anonymous former Columbia student and Beijing resident,
Franklin C. H. Lee.

A variety of small urban enterprises and household records are represented in the Ms. 531
collection, including a native bank, a wholesale butcher shop, contractors, grainshops,
restaurants, general stores, and "oil stores." Several of the items evidently came from the
same firms (see the items numbered 7, 8, and 22; 12 and 13; and 14, 15, and 16). The
manuscripts are equally apportioned between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a
dozen dating from 1842-1898 and a like number covering 1908-1925. Several types of
materials appear in the collection, including daybooks, general account books, general
ledgers, wage books, expense and purchasing accounts, and sales books. The legibility and
quality of the manuscripts vary, but they do comprise a locationally specific random
sampling of China's late Qing and early Republican commercial milieu.

The Rare Book and Manuscript Library is located on the sixth floor of the Butler Library
at Columbia University in New York City. It is open during weekdays from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M.
during the academic year, with access to materials governed by the following guidelines:

The Collections are available for the use of Columbia University faculty and
students, those in affiliated institutions, and researchers not affiliated with
Columbia who are engaged in scholarly or publication projects.

Aside from the required provisions of suitable identification and registration at the desk,
access to materials in the Montgomery Collection appears unimpeded, except for the usual
precautions governing the handling of noncirculating, rare, and sometimes fragile documents.
Both photocopying and microfilming services are available, while information on publication
permissions can be obtained by contacting Mr. Kenneth Lohf, Librarian for Rare Books and
Manuscripts (212-854-2231) or the Assistant Librarian for Rare Books (212-854-8480).
Inquiries may also be addressed to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library,
Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.
NOTES

1. For a fuller report of the session, see the forthcoming issue of Chinese Business History 2, no. 1 (November 1991).


APPENDIX

Chinese Account Books in the Montgomery Collection,
Columbia University

Ms. 531 Series

1. Riyong zhang 日用賬: "Daybook" dated in 1920s; entries cover periods of about a month with very simple recordings (business undetermined).

2. Churu yinzong zhang 出入銀総賬: "General Account Book" dated 1842-44; is the record of a Shanxi-style native bank, with upper columns for money deposited and lower columns for withdrawals, and monthly and annual subtotals (rarely more than thousand taels were left at the end of the month). The writer is grateful to Professor Takeshi Hamashita for correctly identifying this item.
3. Zhishi laozhang "Wage Book" dated 1861; it lists amount of wages and itemized advances for twenty-eight workers (business undetermined).

4. Zhishi laozhang: "Expense Account" dated 1861; it is probably that of a contractor's shop, listing dealing with three firms or individuals.

5. Shouhuo laozhang: "Purchasing Account" dated first month of 1858; apparently stems from a general store having dealings with about three dozen suppliers, including a wine shop, paper supply house, ginger shop, and fruit seller.

6. Waiqian laozhang: "Old Account Book" dated 1873; entries are listed under names of some twenty-five customers for foodstuffs such as black beans, flour, and rice, suggesting a general store.

7. Maiqian laozhang: "Sales Accounts" dated ninth month of 1897 from the Guangju Xinglong store—see items 8 and 22 below.

8. Churu maiqian laozhang: "General Sales Account" dated seventh month of 1898; entries include total daily receipts and itemized disbursements of the Guangju store noted in item 7 above.

9. Riqing gongshi zhang: "Daily Account Book for Employees' Food" dated tenth month of 1908; it consists of itemized but irregular entries, sometimes covering a period of ten days.

10. Riyong liushui zhang: "Daily Current Account Book" dated 1854; it records receipts and disbursements of a food or grain shop over a period of about two months.

11. En Feng zongzhang: "General Ledger of the En Feng Granary" dated 1854-60; the granary was a wholesale supplier of three varieties of so-called "tribute" rice to the Plain Yellow and Bordered Yellow bannermen of Beijing, but transactions with numerous shops and government bureaus are also recorded.

12. Qingdan: "Statement of Account" dated 1909; a statement of total receipts and expenditures of four partners in a contractor's shop, three of whom were evidently kinsmen (see item 13 below).

13. Churu yangyuan zhang: "Account in Foreign Dollars" dated 1908; it records receipts and disbursements of four partners in a contractor's shop in foreign currency.
14. Youzhu huolao zhang 油柜账簿: "Old Accounts of an Oil Shop" dated 1857; old accounts with thirty-seven firms are recorded (see items 15 and 16 below).

15. Youzhu shouhuo zhang 油柜收货账: "Purchasing Account of an Oil Shop" dated in the first month of 1857; it records receipts of goods and current accounts with thirty-three firms or government bureaus.

16. Youzhu liushu laozhang 油柜流水老账: "Current Account Book of an Oil Shop" dated from the seventh month of 1856 to the end of 1860; it is a daybook for oil accounts and foodstuffs, with daily, monthly, and annual summaries of receipts and payments.

17. Xingfan zongzhang 行贩总账: "General Sales Ledger" dated 1919; it records transactions of a wholesale butcher shop which largely supplied mutton and lamb to over two dozen clients, mostly restaurants.

18. Fuji 浮记: "Petty Cash Record Book" dated 1925; it is an account book of a family over a seven month period, listing petty cash purchases of food, cigarettes, etc., and local transportation costs via ricksha and horsecart.

19. Riyong zahang 日用杂项: "Daily Record of Miscellaneous Expenses" dated 1910; it records the petty cash expenditures of a family, including household goods, postal costs, and trips.

20. Churu liushui zhang 出入流水账: "General Current Account Book" dated 1908; it gives the receipts and disbursements of a general store over a period of some five months.

21. Banshi jenzhi qianzhang 办事人支钱账: "Employees’ Wage Account Book" dated 1908; it comprises the wage account of a store, listing the names, initial dates of employment, wage rates and payment of seven employees.

22. Piyou zongzhang 皮油总账: "General Ledger of Hides and Oil" dated 1919-1920; it records deliveries of sheepskins and "oil" (i.e., sheep fat or kerosene) from the Guangju store to numerous firms.

23. Youzhu liushui laozhang 油柜流水老账: "Current Account Book of a Restaurant" dated 1924; despite the Chinese title, this seems to be the record of kitchen accounts for a restaurant (or possibly an extended family household).

24. Churu shouhuo zhang 出入收货账: "General Daybook" dated 1924-25; it may be a restaurant account, since entries include foodstuff purchases and rents.
Ms 730 Series

1. *Deho hao riqingbu* 德和號日清簿: "Daily Account Book of the Deho Shop" dated 1925; it the daybook of an overseas Chinese shop located in the Netherlands recording transactions over an eight month period.