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BERTHOLD LAUFER

1874–1934

BY

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Berthold Laufer (Oct. 11, 1874-Sept. 13, 1934) spent most of the years of his maturity in the United States. He was, however, German-reared and educated and to the end preserved many of the attitudes and habits of the European savant. In him Europe made one of its most distinguished gifts to American scholarship. He was born in Cologne, the son of Max and Eugenie (Schlesinger) Laufer. His parents were wealthy and gave him every advantage of education and culture. A brother, Dr. Heinrich Laufer (died July 10, 1935), was an honored physician and for many years practised his profession in Cairo, Egypt.

As a child Berthold Laufer was much interested in dramatics, especially in marionettes. He and his brothers and sisters presented complete plays, all of them original. He himself wrote a number of them and they were usually given on his father's and mother's birthdays. He once cherished dreams of becoming a dramatist and throughout his life was an ardent admirer of Shakespeare. For years he studied music, especially the piano. He had a passion for the great masters and for the opera. Beethoven, Mozart, and Liszt were his favorites.

His father wished him to become a lawyer or a physician and predicted failure for him in his chosen profession of archeology. However, the senior Laufer became reconciled to his son's decision and assisted him in the prolonged and exacting preparation which the young man deemed necessary.

Life in the schools included a decade (1884-1893) in the Friedrich Wilhelms Gymnasium in Cologne. The years 1893-1895 were spent in the University of Berlin. During part of that time (1894-1895) work was taken in the Seminar for Oriental Languages in that city. The doctorate of philosophy was from the University of Leipzig in 1897. Laufer's doctoral dissertation, a critical analysis of a Tibetan text, was dedicated

"in love and loyalty to my parents on their silver wedding anniversary." Many years later, in 1931, in the city of his adoption, the University of Chicago appropriately added an honorary doctorate of laws.

Laufer decided on Eastern Asia as his special field and took the time to acquire the necessary linguistic and technical tools. He had courses in Persian, Sanskrit, Pâli, Malay, Chinese, Japanese, Manchu, Mongolian, Dravidian, and Tibetan. Among his teachers were some of the greatest scholars of the day. He studied Buddhism under Dr. Franke, Chinese under Professor Wilhelm Grube, Malay under the grammarian Gabelentz, Tibetan under Dr. Huth, and Japanese under Professor Lange.

In 1898, soon after publishing his doctoral dissertation, Laufer came to the United States. The step was taken at the suggestion of Professor F. Boas, himself German-born. Professor Boas obtained for his young fellow-countryman an invitation to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The move so made proved decisive. It was in the United States that Laufer henceforth made his home. Here he did the major part of his scholarly work. Here he married (Bertha Hampton), and here he died. Independent and self-reliant, after he came to the United States he no longer drew support from his parents, but made his own way financially.

Majoring as he did on the Far East, it was important that early in his career he should spend some time in that part of the world. In 1898-1899 he led the Jesup North Pacific Expedition to Saghalin and the Amur region to study the ethnology of the native tribes. The interest so developed and the information obtained are reflected in a number of articles from his pen and, indeed, in his studies throughout the rest of his life. In 1901-1904 he led the Jacob H. Schiff Expedition to China for research and investigation in cultural and historical questions and for the formation of ethnological collections.

Returning to the United States, Laufer became Assistant in Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, a position he held from 1904 to 1906. During part of this time, in 1905, he was lecturer in anthropology at Columbia

University and in 1906-1907 he was lecturer in anthropology and Eastern Asiatic languages in that same institution.

In 1908 Laufer went to the staff of the Field Museum of Natural History and there, in spite of repeated invitations to go elsewhere, sometimes at a marked increase in salary, he remained to the end of his days. Officially the positions held were successively Assistant Curator of the East Asiatic Division, Associate Curator of Asiatic Ethnology, and Curator of Anthropology.

Twice more Laufer made prolonged visits to the Far East, both times for scholarly purposes—in 1908-1910 as leader of the Blackstone Expedition to Tibet and China and in 1923 on the Marshall Field Expedition to China.

In the Field Museum Laufer's duties were multifarious. As Curator of Anthropology he had general oversight of new accessions and of the installation, labeling, and cataloging of materials, and upon him fell the direction of his staff. His chief interest, naturally, was in the Chinese exhibits. Most of these were composed of purchases made during his expeditions to the Far East. His especial pride was the jade collection and he preferred always to show it in person to visitors. He considered it and his monograph on jade as among his major contributions. At the time of his death he had just finished a completely new installation of the entire Chinese Collection. As will be seen from a glance through his bibliography, Laufer edited many of the Museum's publications and actually wrote many of them with his own pen. He was a prodigious worker. Famous in the Museum's staff were his two desks, both piled high with accumulated tasks, and with a swivel chair between them so that he could turn from one to the other.

To his heavy burdens on the staff of the Field Museum, Laufer willingly added many others. There was the constant stream of visitors, some of them distinguished scholars, others Chinese students, and still others youthful beginners in Far Eastern subjects. He was enthusiastic in encouraging Chinese students in scholarly investigations of their own culture.

Through his later years he was easily the outstanding American sinologist. To him, then, came for advice and criticism many who aspired to a career in that field. To these embryonic scholars he gave unstintedly of his time. Thoroughly frank in his criticism and in pointing out defects in their work, he was also extraordinarily kind and often went through their manuscripts with minute care, suggesting corrections and additions. He was severe in his condemnation of carelessness, incompetence, or superficiality. Accordingly, his praise, when given—as it often was—became an especially high reward.

Laufer was deeply concerned in promoting an increased interest in the United States in the serious study of Far Eastern cultures. He gathered extensive collections of Chinese books and manuscripts for the Newberry and the John Crerar Libraries in Chicago. One work from the Newberry Library, transferred in 1928 to the Library of Congress, contains the lost Sung (1210 A.D.) *Kêng Chih T'u*, of which no other copy is known. He collaborated with the United States Department of Agriculture in its researches in Far Eastern plants and agricultural methods. When the American Council of Learned Societies formed its Committees on the Promotion of Chinese and Japanese Studies he accepted membership on both. He was the first chairman of the Committee on the Promotion of Chinese Studies and brought to the task creative imagination, and an enthusiasm which led him to devote to it an amazing amount of energy and time. To the leadership which he gave in the initial stages of these Committees must be ascribed much of the remarkable progress which Far Eastern studies have made in the United States in the past decade.

The list of committees and scholarly societies to which Laufer belonged is impressive. He seemed to welcome invitations to help with whatever appeared to him to give promise of promoting scholarship in the fields in which he was interested. It may have been a trace of the vanity which is to be found in most of us—a desire for recognition—or it may have been an urge to accomplish as much as possible, the lure of achievement. Whatever the reason, Laufer was forever taking on new

tasks and lengthening his list of membership in committees and societies. In several of these he took a very active part. He was a member of the Advisory Board of the China Institute of America; of the American Committee of the National Council of the Chinese Cultural and Economic Institute; of the Committee on the Promotion of Friendship between America and the Far East; of the board of the American Institute of Persian Art and Archaeology, a fellow of the Ethnological Society, a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; of the National Research Council; a member (as this biographical sketch attests) of the National Academy of Sciences, a distinguished member and at one time president of the American Oriental Society, honorary vice-president of the New Orient Society of America, a member and successively vice-president and president of the History of Science Society, a member of the American Anthropological Association, of the German Anthropological Society of Tokyo, of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, of the Royal Asiatic Society, of the *Société Asiatique*, of the Hakluyt Society, of the American Folklore Society, of the Linguistic Society of America, of the Illinois Academy, of the *Société de Linguistique*, of the *Société Finno-Ugrienne*, of the Society of Friends of Asiatic Art, of the Society of East Asiatic Art (Berlin), of the Orientals (Chicago), and of the Barth Society (Vienna). He was a corresponding member of the Indian Research Society (Calcutta), an honorary member of the Archeological Society of Finland, and an honorary member and secretary of the American Friends of China (Chicago). He was associate editor of the American Journal of Archeology, a special correspondent of the National Library of Peiping, and a member of the Advisory Council of Yenching University.

To these many activities Laufer added an astonishing amount of writing. His hours were long, from nine to five in his office and evenings in writing or study at home. In one letter he speaks of his sixteen hour day. In his zest for work and with his high standards of accomplishment, often he assumed more than he could do. Partially finished manu-

scripts lay in his files for years, uncompleted. Highly sensitive and chronically overworked, at times, especially in his later years, he was unwell and subject to moods of depression. At times, too, ill-health and overwrought nerves made him irritable and extravagant in his censure of fellow scholars. Those who saw below the surface, however, readily forgave these idiosyncrasies, for they knew him to be the soul of loyalty and, when his feelings were touched, prodigal of his time and money. During the War of 1914-1918, for instance, though of German parentage, he gave generous financial assistance to the family of a French sinologist who had lost his life in the struggle.

From his labors Laufer found relief in his home life, in music, and especially in motoring. He was an excellent *raconteur*. His stories were usually drawn from Chinese sources and were always to the point. With his musical and artistic temperament, and with his mastery of Chinese, it was not strange that he found diversion in the rich stores of Chinese poetry. He enjoyed Chinese riddles and had an enormous collection of them which he hoped sometime to publish.

Scholar that he was, Laufer took great interest and pride in his personal library. On it he spent much of his salary. At his death it went, by letter of gift, to the Field Museum.

In the midst of his busy life, as we have said, Laufer took time to do an amazing volume of writing. As will be seen from the appended bibliography, his published works were over two hundred in number and ranged all the way from book reviews and articles of two or three pages to substantial monographs. Geographically these covered all of what used to be known as the Chinese Empire—China proper, Manchuria, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, and Tibet. They touched as well on Indian subjects, on Eastern Siberia, on Japan, Sakhalin, the Philippines, and the islands of the Pacific.

Yet within this wide geographical area Laufer's interests were fairly well defined. He did not attempt the impossible task of making himself an expert in all phases of Far Eastern life and culture. The record which we have summarized, the list of his society memberships, and his bibliography indicate

the range of his specialization. It was partly linguistic, partly artistic, to a less extent religious, but chiefly anthropological, and in the influence of one culture upon another. Laufer had little or no time for political history. Nor did he evince much concern over current political developments in the Far East, or spend many hours in studying the vast transformation wrought in our own day in the cultures of China and Japan. His interests were centered chiefly on these peoples as they were before the destructive irruption of the Occident. It was the understanding of the older phases of their culture which he sought to promote. After all, it was to archeology that he had early given his affections and it was the ancient life of mankind in the East of Asia which captured his imagination.

Languages were of interest to him mainly as tools. He knew and used an appalling number of them, some well and some only slightly. With the facility of one reared and educated on the Continent of Europe, he wrote in English, French, and German. He knew Chinese and Tibetan, and had some familiarity with Japanese and with several of the languages of India and of Central Asia. Much of his linguistic equipment was in fields in which not many other scholars, and especially American scholars, are proficient. Few, therefore, are competent to judge the entire range of his work.

While languages were to him chiefly means to an end, with his inquiring mind he could not fail to be fascinated by them for their own sakes. Among his writings, for instance, are a study of the genitive in the Altaic tongue, a long article on the prefix *a-* in Indo-Chinese languages, a small, privately printed brochure on the language of the Yüe-chi or Indo-Scythians, and what is really a major monograph on loan-words in Tibetan. He discussed, too, the origins of the Chinese and the Tibetan languages. He had brief notes on the derivation of our word "booze" and on Jurchi and Mongol numerals.

In the light of his love of music, it is not surprising that Laufer was deeply interested in Chinese art. Since so much of his study of the interchange of products, to be noted in a moment, had to do with examining the legends concerning the

results of the western journeys of Chang Ch'ien of the Han dynasty, it is not strange that the art of that period attracted him. One of his most important monographs was on the pottery of the Han dynasty. He had a shorter monograph on Chinese grave sculptures of the Han. He prepared a brochure on archaic Chinese bronzes of Shang, Chou, and Han times. He wrote a brief article on some newly discovered bas-reliefs of the Han.

Yet his interest in art ranged over other periods as well. Buddhist and Christian art in China won his attention. He had a long study of a landscape of Wang Wei, and he wrote on T'ang, Sung, and Yüan paintings. More than one art collector called on him to study his Chinese objects. As late as 1932 he identified in one collection four lost albums of pictures on the themes which were painted for K'ang Hsi in 1696 and then persuaded a patron of Chinese art to present them to the Library of Congress.

He had an interest in philosophy and religion. It is perhaps symptomatic of his emotional temperament that in later years he regretted having devoted so large a proportion of his time to the study of the rationalistic, coldly ethical, and politically and socially minded Confucianism at the expense of the more mystical *Tao Tê Ching* and Chuang Tzu. Not many of his writings dealt primarily with religion. On the great organized Chinese faiths he said little. Incidentally, however, he dealt extensively with Chinese popular religion, especially in some of its earlier forms and as it expressed itself in folklore and magic. So his studies in jade had a good deal to say of the use of that semi-precious stone in magic and religion. He wrote on the development of ancestral images in China and on totemic traces among the Indo-Chinese.

As a scholar, as we have suggested, Laufer was very much the anthropologist. It was in this field that a large proportion of his writing was done. He delighted in taking up specific human tools and practices and putting together all that could be discovered about them. Often the subjects studied were amusing, incidental, and curious rather than of very great promi-

inence. He seems here to have found a kind of diversion. Such were the tree-climbing fish, the domestication of the cormorant in China and Japan, the early history of polo, multiple births among the Chinese, finger-prints, the use of human skulls and bones in Tibet, what he called the pre-history of aviation and of television, certain recondite phases of sex, bird divination among the Tibetans, geophagy, the history of felt, coca and betel chewing, and insect musicians and cricket champions. Others had to do with objects or institutions of more obvious importance—such as the monograph on Chinese clay figures, which he called prolegomena on Chinese defensive armor. Such, too, were his studies of the reindeer and its domestication, and of ivory in China.

Probably Laufer's most important group of contributions lay within the realm of the influence of one culture upon another and of the migration of domesticated plants, of mechanical appliances, and of ideas from people to people. Especially did he devote himself to the interpenetration of cultures in Central and Far Eastern Asia. For this kind of study he was exceptionally well equipped. His knowledge of most of the more widely used languages of the area opened to him the literatures and the inscriptions of many of the peoples involved. His archeological and anthropological interest and training gave zest and background. His phenomenal memory made possible comparisons and put at his disposal a wide range of facts, many of them at first sight seemingly incidental.

In this field were written what some scholars consider his most important single monograph, *Sino-Iranica*. Here he described the migration of various specific cultivated plants. In most instances he traced the introduction of these to China and attempted to determine whether they came from Iran or from some other land. He also included some minerals, metals, drugs, textiles, and precious stones. For some he traced not only the migration to China but also contributions of China to Iran. In appendices he discussed Iranian elements in Mongol, Chinese elements in Turki, and Indian elements in Persian. In this single monograph he used various languages of the Far

East and of Central Asia, employed Arabic sources, and evinced a knowledge of the pertinent literature in several languages of western Europe.

Again and again in articles and monographs Laufer dealt with phases of this major theme. His great work on jade included not only China but references to the use of the semi-precious stone in other lands. He was interested in the possible spread of culture features and artifacts from the Amur region into other parts of the Far East and to the Americas. He wrote on the wide extension of amber, on the bird-chariot in China and Europe, on the introduction of maize into Eastern Asia, on the Jonah legend in India, on the cycle of the twelve animals (so familiar in the Far East), on an ancient Turkish rug, on Christian art in China, on the coming of vaccination to the Far East, on Chinese pottery in the Philippines, on Arabic and Chinese trade in walrus and narwhal ivory, on the story of the pinna and the Syrian lamb, on burning-lenses in China and India, on asbestos, salamander, and the diamond, on Chinese and Hellenistic folklore, on the coming of tobacco to Asia, Europe, and Africa, and its use there, on the history of ink in China, Japan, Central Asia, India, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Italy, on the migration of American plants, and on the lemon in China and elsewhere. It was characteristic of him that one of his longest and most careful reviews was of T. F. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China*, in which was discussed the migration of paper from China to Europe and the possible debt of Europe to China for the art of printing.

Laufer published so voluminously partly because he relied extensively upon the prodigious Chinese literature and upon what Chinese scholars had written through the ages. Chinese savants had done the spade work and he made their results available to the Occident. This does not mean that he borrowed without giving credit where credit was due. In his scholarly writings where this did not seem pedantry, he was meticulous in his references to his sources. Moreover, of direct, pedestrian, full-length translation he did very little. In his earlier years, when he was trying out his tools, he published

a few translations, perhaps partly as self-imposed literary exercises. Later he did little of this kind of translation. Nor were his writings summaries and popularizations in Western languages of the labors of Far Eastern scholars. He employed treatises in Asiatic languages as he used those of the Occident, critically and as mines of information from which came the many facts which he assembled, especially in his descriptions of objects in the various collections which he gathered or utilized, and in tracing the spread of a given custom, plant, or commodity. In a certain sense his great service was one of synthesis, the comparison and interpretation of existing knowledge. In this he made a distinct contribution to scholarship. Relatively few men, either of the Occident or the Orient, have been equipped in so many of the languages of Central and Eastern Asia. To most Occidental scholars the treasures locked in these languages are as though they were not. His was the function of unsealing them and from the rich stores so disclosed to bring forth and to piece together information in such fashion as to show the interrelation of cultures and the contribution of one to the other.

Of what is usually called generalization Laufer did but little. He wrote few articles attempting to set forth the main outlines of Chinese culture. Once in a long while he attempted it. His brief article on "Some Fundamental Ideas of Chinese Culture" (*Journal of Race Development*, Vol. V, Oct., 1914, pp. 160-174) was one of the few of these efforts. An able younger American sinologist declares that he has found it among the most helpful of Laufer's writings, and states that he is carrying out his own research largely on the basis of the ideas there set forth.

In most of his more serious work Laufer wrote with scholarly objectivity. In it he did not allow his emotions, always strong, or his prejudices, sometimes acute, to enter. Only in infrequent lighter articles did his personal idiosyncracies become obvious. He disciplined himself to observe the same high standards of scientific accuracy by which he measured others.

It would be too much to expect infallibility of Laufer. He

would have been the first to insist that his writings must be judged primarily not by their finality but by their assistance to other scholars in expanding the borders of human knowledge. Honest, able work on which others could build and build so well that they could discover in it the flaws of which he could not be aware was probably what he would most desire.

That some of his publications are being criticized by younger scholars who have found them useful is to be expected. Thus it is said that of the two Chinese works on which he leaned heavily in his important monograph on jade, one is very faulty. In a recent number of the *Zapiski* of the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies, N. N. Poppe, writing on *Problems in Buriat Mongol Literary History*, points out what he believes to be deficiencies in Laufer's *Skizze der mongolischen Literatur* (*Revue orientale*, Vol. VIII, 1907, pp. 165-261). Another Russian has recently endeavored to refute something of what Laufer said about the Giliaks. A younger Chinese scholar has recently asserted that in his discussion of the introduction of spectacles to China, Laufer was misled by mistakes in the Chinese sources upon which he relied. (See Ch'iu K'ai-ming, *The Introduction of Spectacles into China*, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. I, July, 1936, pp. 186-193.) Yet it must be said at once that the work of few if any scholars escape this fate. It must also be added that Laufer was engaged in a revision of his *Jade* which, unhappily, was left unfinished by his untimely death.

In a certain sense Laufer was never completely adjusted to his American environment. In one important respect—in his interest and achievements in anthropology and in the field of culture contacts—he was at home in the atmosphere of American scholarship. Because of the American interest in the social sciences, Laufer could here find congenial spirits who could talk with him as equals and by whom he could be helped. However, in some other ways he remained an alien. In a letter written in his later years he declined to preside at an important meeting on the ground that "a Yank" could do it better. He was, to be sure, loyal to the land of his adoption. However, in East Asiatic studies he stood alone and must often have felt

his isolation. This was partly because, until very recently, the United States has had so few experts in that field. Significantly, however, another element entered. Most Americans who specialize in the Far East do so with the purpose of understanding the current situation in that part of the world. They realize that the United States faces the East of Asia across a rapidly narrowing ocean and must be prepared to deal with its peoples successfully and, if possible, amicably. If they are not to make tragic blunders, Americans, so these scholars hold, must understand these peoples and to do so must know their history and culture. American specialists give themselves to Far Eastern studies, partly because they become interested in them for their own sake, but chiefly from the utilitarian purpose of making their country at home in an age in which it must live on terms of intimacy with Eastern Asia. The Far Eastern scholarship of the United States has tended to devote itself to diplomatic and commercial relations, to economic problems, to contacts between the Far Orient and the Occident, and to current changes in the cultures of the Far East.

The most distinguished European savants who have majored in the Far East, on the other hand, have devoted themselves almost exclusively to the older history and cultures of this region. They have not really understood the current situation. Nor have they cared to do so. That the results of their scholarship should be useful in facilitating the intercourse between the West and the East has seemed to them to threaten its objectivity.

In that European atmosphere Laufer received his training and he could never quite adjust himself to the American outlook nor free himself of a certain impatient disdain for it. This attitude was reënforced by the fact that during most of his life America had no sinologists who could begin to equal him in his acquaintance with the languages and in his prodigious learning in the pre-nineteenth century culture. However, in at least his later years Laufer came to see that in dealing with the Far East the United States must develop its own particular type of scholarship adapted to its interests and needs. He recognized that this might attain as high standards of scientific accuracy as had that of Europe. Indeed, he insisted that Amer-

ica must conform to its own patterns and not to those of Europe. Yet probably he never felt entirely reconciled to this phase of the intellectual climate of his adopted land.

Perhaps in this very maladjustment was Laufer's greatest contribution to American scholarship. By representing in the United States in so eminently worthy a fashion and for a generation this European tradition, he enriched American Far Eastern scholarship as he could not have done had he been completely in accord with it.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The sources for the biographical sketch given above are many—partly the note, based on information given by Dr. Laufer, in *Who's Who in America, 1934-1935* (Vol. 18, p. 1417), partly information kindly provided by Mrs. Laufer and by a former associate and intimate friend, Miss Lucy Driscoll, partly material from Dr. Mortimer Graves of the American Council of Learned Societies, and to a less extent comments by various friends of Dr. Laufer, biographical notices which have appeared since Dr. Laufer's death, and the author's own personal acquaintance, never intimate, but of many years' standing. Among the more important articles on Dr. Laufer are the ones in the *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 101 ff., *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. IV, pp. 265-270, and *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. I, fasc. 2, pp. 487 ff.

The appended bibliography is the most nearly complete and accurate which has been published. It is based largely upon one compiled by Dr. Laufer himself and which appeared in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. LIV, pp. 352-362, but it has been checked with three other bibliographies and, where feasible, from the articles and monographs themselves. At least some of the inaccuracies appearing in other bibliographies have been eliminated and a number of titles have been discovered and added.

The photograph here reproduced comes through the courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History.

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Dr. Laufer was the editor of all anthropological publications, leaflets, guides, and design series issued by the Field Museum from 1915 to his death.

In addition, Dr. Laufer left the following unfinished manuscripts:

- The Buceros and Hornbill carvings.
History of the cultivated plants of America and their distribution over the Old World. 2 vols., ca. 800-900 pp.
Jade, second revised and enlarged edition.
Chinese domestications, pt. 1: Chicken, Cormorant, and Cat. Five Pre-histories.
A History of the Game of Polo.