

NOTES ON AMERICAN TIBETOLOGIST BERTHOLD LAUFER'S TIBET EXPEDITION¹

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Berthold Laufer (1874-1934) was born in Germany and lived in America for more than 30 years until death. He made a great contribution to American Sinology and thus was honored as the greatest Sinology master after Friedrich Hirth (1845-1927) in the United States. Moreover, he had an important influence on American Tibetology. Before arriving in America, Laufer's research focused on Tibetan literature conserved in German libraries, especially the bon text *Klu bum bsdu pa'i sñin po*. Since he worked in America in the 1900s, Laufer had directed two China expeditions and collected plenty of Tibetan objects and literature. By using these materials, he published many excellent works, such as "Origin of our dances of death" (1908), "Die Kanjur-Ausgabe des Kaisers K'ang-hsi"(1909), "Notes on Turquois in the East"(1913), and "Use of human skulls and bones in Tibet"(1923). Laufer's first journey was conducted in 1901 and was discussed in detail in "The First China Exploration of the American Sinologist Berthold Laufer" (2020). The second was taken in 1908 when Laufer was employed by the Field Museum of Natural History and was appointed to conduct an expedition to collect Tibetan examples for the museum. This journey lasted for two years nearly from 1908 to 1910, and its process and acquisition would be investigated in this paper.

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The Field Museum of Natural History was founded in 1893 with Marshall Field's financial support. It was originally called the "Columbian Museum of Chicago" and had been renamed several times from 1894 to 1966, namely the "Field Columbian Museum" (1894-1905), the "Field Museum of Natural History" (1905-1943), the "Chicago Natural History Museum" (1943-1966). In 1966, it reverted back to "Field Museum of Natural History" as its official name, also well-known as the "Field Museum". Initially, the Museum's focus was Latin America, then turned to South Asian and Southeast Asian culture since the beginning of the 20th century. However, it was Laufer who gathered a world-class collection of Asian material culture samples for the Museum and made it one of the greatest institutions of Asian collections in America.

Before joining the Field Museum, Laufer held positions at the American Museum of Natural History and the Department of East Asian Languages at Columbia University successively. In the summer of 1907 when Laufer was in New York, he met with G. Dorsey who worked at the Field Museum as the curator of the Department of Anthropology. Laufer advised Dorsey to pay attention to Tibet, and to establish a special room for the Tibetan collection in the Field Museum. What Laufer said fascinated Dorsey. As "the greatest museum builder of the period" (Cole 1952:163) and "the principal architect of Field Museum Anthropology collections" (Welsch 1999:450),² Dorsey applied himself to enrich collections of the Department of Anthropology as much as possible. Thus he invited Laufer to join him and employ Laufer as assistant curator of Asiatic Ethnology. When Laufer accepted the offer, Dorsey commanded him to organize a scientific expedition to Tibet with an endowment liberally provided by Mrs. T. B. Blackstone for the Museum. The story started from Darjeeling where Laufer reached on April 2, 1908.³

² Warren Haskin, Stephen E. Nash and Sarah Coleman, "A Chronicle of Field Museum Anthropology", *Fieldiana. Anthropology*, 36, 2003, p.67.

³ According to the correspond between Mr. F.J.V.Skiff and Laufer, Laufer landed at Colombo on March 13 firstly and then arrived at Calcutta on March 24. After some days, he reached Darjeeling. See Hartmut Walravens, *Kleinere Schriften von Berthold Laufer*, Teil 3, Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, Wiesbaden, 1985, p.430: BL/F.J.V.S., 1908/6/28.

1. Tibet Expedition from 1908 to 1910

When he was at Darjeeling, Laufer lived in a native Pandit's house who was fluent in Tibetan and ever went into Tibet personally. It was a good chance for Laufer to improve his Tibetan pronunciation and obtain information about Tibet. During this time, Laufer had made a journey along the Sikkim-Nepalese frontier and in the interior of Sikkim to investigate whether his plan of reaching Tibet by way of Darjeeling and Sikkim was realizable. As India and Sikkim were under the control of the British Government at that time, the British Government prohibited any other non-British from entering Tibet or Bhutan by way of India or Sikkim without their permission. Laufer's plan was thwarted as envisioned. The Anglo-Indian Government refused to offer him a passport for a visit to Tibet and laid a prohibition against cutting across the boundaries between Sikkim and Tibet, or across from Sikkim to Bhutan. Thus he modified his plan and applied for a passport with which he could move freely in Sikkim to the Anglo-Indian Government through the U.S. Consul-General of Calcutta. Ten days later, on April 30, 1908, the Deputy Secretary of the Government of India in the Foreign Department replied as follow:

“Dated Simla, 30, April, 1908

I am directed to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated the 20th April 1908, requesting that permission may be granted to Mr. B. Laufer, to visit Sikkim and Bhutan for a period of six months for the purpose of ethnological study.

I am to say in reply that there is no objection to the proposed visit to Sikkim, and the Political Officer will be directed to give Mr. Laufer every assistance in prosecuting his studies. The Government of India, however, regret, that permission to visit Bhutan cannot be accorded, and the permission to visit Sikkim is given only on the understanding that Mr. Laufer will make no attempt to enter either Tibet or Bhutan.”⁴

⁴ This reply was included in the correspondence between Laufer and Frederick J.V. Skiff in 1908/6/28. See the letter in Hartmut Walravens (1985, 431).

As soon as he received this reply, Laufer returned Darjeeling on the 1st of May where he stayed for one and a half month to make a Tibetan collection, take photographs, and record Tibetan songs. On June 30, Laufer sailed from Darjeeling for China. He had reported to Mr. Frederick J.V. Skiff, the Director of Field Museum, that he intended to enter Tibet through the interior of China.⁵

On arriving in Beijing, Laufer contacted everyone who would assist him to carry out the Tibet expedition successfully. However, things didn't go well. The Qing Government-issued edicts made it clear that the foreigners who intend to enter into Tibet were unwelcome and would be rejected by the natives. A notification issued by the Sichuan Bureau of Foreign Affairs recorded in Laufer's letter to Skiff confirmed it:

**A Notification
Issued by the Szechuen Bureau of Foreign Affairs**

In response to the application of the Bureau of Foreign Affairs that the Board of Foreign Affairs be requested to prohibit foreigners from entering the territory of barbarous tribes, His Excellency Chao, the Viceroy of Szechuan, has replied as follows:

“For foreigners who come to China to enter the territories of barbarous tribes is contrary to the provisions of the Treaties. If foreigners make a practice of running into danger regardless of the advice given them, it is very inconvenient for the local authorities to send guards for their protection. Unusual dangers are hard to guard against. In regard to requesting the Board of Foreign Affairs to notify the different Ministers that a strict prohibition may be issued, the idea is a good one and will be acted upon. At present the Bureau of Foreign Affairs should communicate with the Consuls explaining the situation, and should also issue instructions that efficient protection be given (to travelers) so that trouble may be avoided. The suggestion that protection be withheld from travelers can't be acted upon, but all the local authorities must be instructed to await the reply of the Board of Foreign Affairs, on receipt of which further instructions will be issued.”

⁵ See Hartmut Walravens (1985, 432).

Having received this reply, the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, are circulating the fully acted upon. If foreigners are observed to be entering the territories of the barbarous tribes' guards must be provided to give them efficient protection so that trouble may be avoided. On receipt of a reply from the Board of Foreign Affairs, further instructions will be issued.

To be strictly obeyed

A copy of the report to the Viceroy enclosed.

Addressed to the Grain Intendant of Chamdo.

Kuanghsü 34th year, 8th month, 29th day (Sept. 24, 1908)⁶

Laufer had anticipated the obstacle when he was designated for this expedition. In his letter to F. Boas, Laufer had ever referred that he didn't know that Britain and Russia had made an agreement with the Qing Government on the foreigner's visiting to Tibet before his appointment. Once he read this news, Laufer inferred that this expedition to Tibet through Darjeeling or Sikkim would be in failure potentially for the unfavorable political situation. He reported to Dorsey and suggested Dorsey cancel this expedition, but Dorsey had convinced the Field Museum and the sponsor Mrs. Blackstone to endorse Laufer's Tibet expedition. Moreover, Dorsey had promised Laufer if this expedition was dissatisfied and came to nothing due to the external circumstances, Laufer didn't take the blame.⁷ Everything was prepared, Laufer had no choice but to do it. If not, he would be regarded as a man without a sense of responsibility. His ability would be queried and his reputation would also be at stake.⁸

Thus, Laufer struggled to manage to enter Tibet. When arrived in China, Laufer watched for an opportunity to visit the 13th Dalai Lama in Beijing⁹ and expected to establish friendship with the Tibetan nobility which would facilitate

⁶ The original Chinese hasn't been found. This translation was recorded in Lafuer's letter to Frederick J.V. Skiff in 1910/2/6. See the letter in Hartmut Walravens (1985, 433).

⁷ See the letter of Laufer to F. Boaz which written in 1908/4/13 in Hartmut Walravens (1979, 169-171).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This meeting was recorded in *Neiting Zhencha Dalai Baogao* (Investigation of the Dalai Lama by Inner Office) which was conserved at the library of Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia. This report had been included in *Qingmo Shisanshi Dalailama Dangan Shiliao Xuanbian* as an appendix. See Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'anguan and Zhongguo Zangxue Yanjiu Zhongxin (2002, 322).