[ANNEX F]

SUGGESTIONS FOR A SURVEY OF FOLK-LORE AND VITAL STATISTICS OF CHINA

By Berthold Laufer

In view of the present disintegration of culture and the collapse of ancient traditions in China it is imperative to rescue from oblivion at the earliest opportunity all traditions and lore still lingering in the minds of the people. This task is more urgent than archaeological work, since the treasures slumbering in the soil will continue to exist for a long time, while the memories of men are fast fading and the older generation is rapidly dying out. In this respect it is five minutes to twelve in China, no less than in most other culture groups of the globe. True it is that several collections of Chinese folk-lore have been made and published, but aside from their limited scope these contributions are sadly deficient and almost useless for scientific purposes. The stories are not accurately recorded, but are merely digested or retold in a pleasant literary style to be gathered under the smiling covers of a book. What we understand by folk-lore are not merely collections of fairy-tales, stories, anecdotes, jests, nursery-rhymes, songs, proverbs, riddles, etc., although, of course, the importance of these subjects is not denied or under-rated; but what we aim at is to collect objective data and materials to enable us to comprehend the workings and functions of the popular and social mind in all its ramifications and manifestations.

Sinologues have naturally paid more attention to the official and ruling class, while a study of the middle and lower strata, the rural and laboring section of the population, the simple hard-working folks, has been unduly neglected. At this point the folk-lore investigation proposes to set in. The farmers are the backbone of Chinese society and belong to the best people of the world who command our respect and have our unstinted sympathies. We are keenly interested in all of the farmer's doings,
thoughts, and ceremonies throughout the year and need records
as exact and detailed as possible of all farming operations during
the calendar year from the beginning of the spring till the end of
the winter. In view of the fact that there is a great deal of local
variation in this as well as in most other activities of life, it is
necessary to reach farmers by the hundreds in all parts of the
country. The problem of variability is uppermost in the minds
of ethnologists and folklorists; and only through careful study
and mapping of regional and local differentiations of all phenomena
may we hope to reach accurate conclusions and to stem the flood
of preposterous generalizations from which China, more than any
other nation, has suffered in our literature.

The cycle of life of the average individual, especially of the folks
in the humbler walks of life, is an important subject of which
we know but little as far as China is concerned. This inquiry
offers two aspects. In the first place, it is calculated to embrace
the whole chain of customs connected with the individual from
the day of conception and pregnancy through birth and childhood
up to the age of education, puberty, betrothal, marriage, family-
life, and death. Second, it is of primary importance to have at
our disposition life documents of as many individuals as possible
representative of all classes of society, even including beggars,
vagabonds, bandits, and pirates, who are very interesting and
picturesque characters worthy of the attention of the scientist.
The best method of attaining this end is through the medium of
autobiographies, i.e. to request people to tell the story of their own
lives and to record them in their own words as exactly as possible
or to engage a Chinese teacher for the purpose of recording the
story. There is no doubt that missionaries and Chinese students
in China would prove of invaluable assistance in the pursuance of
this task. In this country the method of autobiography has been
successfully applied by our ethnologists to the American Indian.
The book of the Lapp Johan Turi recorded by Mme. Emilie
Demant (Frankfort, 1912) is a classical example and one of the
finest documents we have for the study of the mind of primitive
man. In Chinese literature there is a remarkable document in
the memoirs of Chen Ting in which he recites the adventure of
his marriage with a woman of an aboriginal tribe of Yün-nan and
which has been translated into French by Tang Tsai-fu (T'oung-
pao, 1905).

Marriage and funeral customs also exhibit a wide latitude of
variation in diverse parts of China and require minute study,
likewise observances at holidays and festivals. W. Grube's "Zur
Pekinger Volkskunde" is a model investigation. If a similar
collection of materials were available for each province of China,
an excellent foundation for serious research would be provided.

The individual scholar who visits China temporarily can
accomplish very little in this field which is almost as vast as an
ocean; and solely concerted action and sympathetic cooperation
of a host of resident workers can bring about results worth while.
While in China I made a collection of some 3,000 riddles (but
desire to have at least as many more), also numerous folk-songs
with phonographic records and notes on customs, usages, games,
and pastimes. I also had occasion to train several Chinese
students in our methods of collecting folk-lore.

Considering the whole situation, it is herewith proposed and
recommended that a systematic survey of Chinese folk-lore be
inaugurated by enlisting the active collaboration of all intelligent
persons living in China and interested in the subject, particularly
Chinese students, missionaries, and teachers. For this
purpose I have in mind to prepare a little guidebook that will give
the necessary directions and instructions as to what and how to
collect, how to do it intelligently and efficiently, and that will
call attention to the most essential subjects to be covered. This
booklet may be printed in a plain and unpretentious style, perhaps
in an edition of 2,000 copies. The only expense involved in this
undertaking would be the printing of the guide, and the addressing
and mailing of copies. It is estimated that a sum of
$1,000 would be adequate to cover these expenses. Use of Chi-
nese type is required.

In this connection it seems desirable to me to obtain also a
certain amount of information bearing upon vital statistics, a
subject of fundamental significance and great general interest
which is almost a blank as far as China is concerned. Primarily
it should be the business of the Chinese Government to establish a Bureau or Department of Vital Statistics; and the bigger issues such as growth of population, birth and mortality rates, emigration, effects of epidemics and social diseases, and other problems could be studied only on the basis of comprehensive statistical data furnished by governmental agencies. However, there are minor problems in which the associates in the folklorist inquiry could without difficulty cooperate and furnish a great deal of useful information that would be welcome to science. Such data, for instance, are: number of children in a family, proportion of male and female children, twins and multiple births, mortality, age at time of marriage, old age and longevity, average duration of a generation, hereditary traits, hereditary genius, etc. The Chinese will yield an exceedingly fruitful material for all problems of heredity and eugenics. Genealogical research also might be carried on in China with very promising results. Data like these can be gathered by means of a questionnaire listing the relevant questions and leaving space for filling in the answers. I have prepared such blanks for the use of our investigators among primitive tribes, and this form might easily be modified and adapted to the specific requirements in China.

On reading the foregoing statement, Dr. Walter T. Swingle offered the following suggestion:

"I would advise a special research unit (of, say, 2 Western scholars and three Chinese associates) to be organized to study Folk-lore and Vital Statistics in China, to work out there the technique of such research and to enlist the help of both Chinese and Western people in this work."