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The Father of Modern Studies of China in Europe: Étienne Balazs (1905-63) Too Brief a Life Story

It is now more than forty years since the death of the well-known French-Hungarian sinologist, Étienne Balazs (1905-63). Despite the passage of time, this scholar's any-faceted writings still prevail in the academic world of sinology and China study. His major works, including studies of the Sui and Tang dynasties' economies, and (with the late Yves Hervouet) his Song bibliography, remain authoritative sources. As the British China historian Denis Twitchett wrote in 1965 in a preface to the printed version of a series of lectures Balazs had delivered in January 1963 at the University of London,

> Professor Étienne Balazs had a strong claim to be the father of modern studies of China in Europe. Since the war he has exerted a very great influence on his younger colleagues, not only through his published writings, but perhaps even more by his concern--expressed in always trenchant and polemical terms--to focus their attention upon significant aspects of Chinese culture rather than upon subjects of marginal interest, and by his efforts to improve our methodology and to promote close scholarly contact between those engaged in Chinese studies in the various European centres. It is largely due to his personal influence that Chinese studies in Europe have begun to achieve some measure of integration into an academic field with a common sense of purpose and with ever-improving professional standards.

Much has happened since Professor Twitchett wrote these words. One might even propose that China study has so transformed itself into a series of specializations that scholars of Balazs' generation working in the 1950s and 60s would consider our present-day curriculum enigmatic. So, one may well ask: why should we continue to find the accomplishments of Balazs readable and relevant to our understanding of Chinese history?

I believe that the answer to this question lies in the nature of this scholar's *oeuvre*: Balazs tried be a realist and empiricist in his understanding of China. At a time when the annotated translation was the most common expression of historical writing on China, Balazs was asking 'big questions', e.g. what was the cause of China's stability over 2000 years? While he pursued the answers to such queries in accordance with the highest philological

standards, he had little patience with those scholars who were 'over-absorbed' with the Chinese language in their studies of Chinese history. Balazs is well-remembered for his challenge to contemporaries whom he felt incarcerated the study of Chinese civilization. He considered many of their contributions so marginal that the wider public's interest in China could never be aroused. He had certain disdain for those China specialists who engaged in what he called in 1960 the 'stamp collectors' mentality'. From very early on his career, he pursued the idea that Chinese history had relevance to 'larger issues'. And, a glance at the complete bibliography of Balazs' printed works and unpublished papers reveals how this goal penetrated his writing.

Unfortunately, Balazs' life was too short for him to gain the 'glittering prizes' of French sinology -- a professorship at the Collège de France or special honors in particular academies of learning -- nor did he have the chance to found a 'school' associated with his name. As Denis Twitchett has observed, "....he spent many years on the side-lines of sinology....". And yet, within a relatively limited period of time he was extraordinarily productive and made a permanent mark on China study in Europe, the United States, and even in Japan. Although he is probably best remembered for his efforts to launch the 'Song project' in France, less well-known is his struggle to integrate the study of China within Europe, as Professor Twitchett has suggested.

It is important for understanding Balazs' life and work to put him in a wider context of China scholarship. Nowadays, while we may find in any well-stocked bookshop, with ease, the most engaging and stimulating publications about Chinese history, based on thorough empirical research, in Balazs' time such works, with the rare exception, were unavailable. What Balazs would have thought of the success of the many fine volumes authored by Jonathan Spence that have conveyed the richness of Chinese history to a broad-based audience, we may only guess. But certainly during his lifetime Balazs did make known to those around him, students, colleagues and other experts, both within and outside Europe, his frustrations with the China curriculum in the Western academy. Narrating his biography affords us the opportunity to focus on the development and vicissitudes of European sinology. In this man's life story one may trace a number of controversies that still beset the academic study of Chinese history in Europe.

Today, I shall attempt to summarize the important points in Balazs' life in relation to his scholarly production, and, hopefully time allowing, to ask you to consider his achievements in relation to the history of classical China study here in Heidelberg.

Beginnings

Étienne Balazs (né Balázs István) was born on January 24, 1905 in Budapest, Hungary. His life history in a certain sense

parallels the dramatic trajectory of the first half of the twentieth century. As his country of birth entered a downturn phase after World War I, Balazs began the first of several journeys that would distance him forever from his natal roots. At the age of eighteen, after having completed his secondary school studies (baccaluréat), he set off for Berlin where he enrolled in China studies under the tutelage of Otto Franke (1863-1946), who had become Professor of sinology at the University there in 1923.

Given the tremendous impact of this German scholar on Balazs' intellectual life, it may be worthwhile to say something about this important figure in the history of European China studies. Franke himself was a member of that first generation of European sinologists who had had the opportunity to study in China and make acquaintance with China's educated elite, access Chinese libraries and bookshops, and directly observe the changing intellectual milieu of late Qing China. Previous to his extensive travels in China and other regions in East and Central Asia during the last decade of the nineteenth century, Franke had studied European history and law (besides Chinese) all of which stimulated him to value the learning of Chinese history as essential for the comprehension of contemporary events.

Prior to his Berlin appointment Franke had gained a reputation as a 'publicist' for China, someone with a knowledge of all things Chinese, and for this reason Balazs may have chosen Berlin as the site for his higher education. When he met Franke he made known to his teacher that his first attraction toward China was thought and philosophy: his interest in Daoism and Buddhism may have been, as his nécrologist Paul Démieville points out, a reaction to the temper of the times. Like those who engaged in 'nihilistic revolt or mystical escapism' at the end of the Han dynasty, or sought clarity at a time of intellectual diffusion, Balazs may have likened his own experience of Hungary's *fin-de-siècle* with that of China during the third century. The country's belle époque had come to a close during the first decade of the twentieth century and was finally shattered as the Austrio-Hungarian empire lost the War.

But Balazs' mentor redirected his student's scholarly talents away from ideas and 'thought history' toward another course altogether. Franke saw in this young man, "his best pupil," someone with strength of mind and intensity who might pursue many of the insights unleashed in the then recently published work of Max Weber (1864-1920). Among the many important essays that had appeared in the three volume collection Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie [Collected Writings on the Sociology of Religion] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1920-21) was "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: 1.Konfuzianismus und Taoismus" ("The Economic Ethics of World Religions: Confucianism and Taoism") in which Weber examined the "rational, ascetic, scientific and cultural elements" of Chinese civilization. Max Weber's writing on Confucianism had a colossal influence on Balazs' understanding of Chinese history. Suffice to say at this point in our discussion here, for Balazs, many of Weber's themes became part of his own lifelong intellectual quest to comprehend China's

'failure to rise like the West', ideas he expressed in the essay 'Significant Aspects of Chinese Society', which we will discuss later today.

> In the first paragraph of his Ph.D. dissertation, "Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte der T'ang Zeit (618-906)" ("Contributions to the Economic History of the Tang Period"), Balazs cited Max Weber's publication in order to substantiate his own interest in Chinese economic history and noted that:
> Looking at questions of Chinese economic history needs today no special justification. On the one hand, this knowledge of economic forces is unavoidable for understanding the contradictory development of East Asia. On the other hand, the special nature of the [Chinese] economic system that crystallized over the centuries also deserves our special attention.

He saw his own analysis of the Tang economy based on the shihuozhi (monographs on financial administration) of both the Jiu Tangshu and the Xin Tangshu as lending perspective to an as yet unworked, universal history and theory of economic development, as well as a 'block of information' contributing toward better understanding of modern Asia. He chose the Tang period as the central focus for his thesis because it "represented the mid-point between the end of feudalism [around the time of Qin Shi Huangdi (sic)] and the beginning of modern capitalism in the West."

To study Tang economic history at that time was entirely unconventional: 'mainline' sinology in Germany during the 1920s was still directed toward philological and linguistic matters, and to a certain extent philosophy and religion. And outside sinological circles, among European historians for example, even the notion of China possessing a history was in itself a relatively new phenomenon. Balazs' first contribution to the world of China learning was not only a work of distinction for its scholarship, but also for its originality.

Some Biographical Studies and Balazs' Exile to France

In the period immediately following the completion of his thesis, Balazs began to study the ideas of three Chinese thinkers: the anti-Buddhist Fan Zhen (450?-515?), the Song reformer Li Gou (1009-59), and the poet-warlord Cao Cao (155-220). With perspective, one may speculate that Balazs utilized the genre of biography as a way of understanding intellectual choice at a time of change or crisis. And also, from an historiographical view, these essays mark his first efforts to proceed beyond the 'commentarial tradition', and to investigate problems within Chinese history, i.e. to ask questions that bear importance on the evolution of Chinese society and culture.

The first individual, Fan Zhen, a minor literatus who was a member of the ardent Buddhist Prince Xiao Ziliang's (460-494) charmed circle of "Eight Friends," became a polemicist against Buddhist doctrines. Fan, assigned the appellation 'China's first

materialist' by Balazs, was the author of a tract Shenmie lun ("Essay on the Extinction of the Soul"; written in 490), essentially an attack on Buddhism. In his study, Balazs provides the background to Fan's argument with a summary of his biography in the Liang dynastic history, and a discussion of the amiable debates between the good-natured Prince and Fan.

The key to Balazs' interest in Fan Zhen's role in Chinese history may be found in the first paragraph of his article: he regards the acceptance of Buddhism in China as a "struggle." To broaden his understanding of the confrontation between Chinese Confucianism and Taoism with Indian Buddhism, he writes in this first paragraph that he wants to pursue the "history" of this encounter, and by that he "[did] not mean a mere history of names, bibliographies, translations, and commentaries" (255).

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The subject of the second biographical study "A Forerunner of Wang An-shih," Li Gou (1009-59), became a vehicle for Balazs to express to an even greater extent his interest in the connection between history and philosophy. Like the reformer Wang Anshi (1021-86), Li Gou attempted to incorporate basic Confucian principles into a renewal program for the Song state. Although never a degree- or office-holder, Li established a reputation among contemporaries as an excellent writer and teacher, and in two important essays tackled a number of practical problems arising in the eleventh century as a result of China's military tribute policy. These two works are the Fuguo jiangbing anmin sanshi ce (Thirty Plans for Enriching the Country, Strengthening Military Power, and Satisfying the Needs of the People; 1039), and Zhouli zhi taiping lun (The Zhouli Leads to General Well-being; 1043). Referring to the modern scholar Hu Shi's study of Li Gou, Balazs repeats Hu's identification of Li Gou "as the founder of Song philosophy" (287). Balazs also focuses on Li's preoccupation with Song Confucianism's failure to satisfy religious and metaphysical needs. For Li, Confucianism should be "man-centered" and a force for "unfolding men's natural endowments" (287).

Unlike his study of Fan Zhen, Balazs utilizes here for the first time the studies of modern Chinese scholars; not only Hu Shi, but also Liang Qichao's study of Wang Anshi, are part of his scholarly sources for this investigation. He also uses information from two publications by Otto Franke, and not surprisingly, he supports Franke's own viewpoint of Confucian officialdom. Officials, Franke writes, "for the most part effete, and trained solely in the literary arts, were 'indifferent, and chiefly concerned with lining their own pockets. Confucian pacifism, which tried to make up in cultural self-conceit what it lacked in practical ability and a sense of responsibility, had largely crippled the national will'" (278). Also, "the weight of tradition, and the vested interest of those concerned in maintaining the existing state of affairs, were far too strong to be overcome in so short a time" (278), and consequently, inhibited reform.

Thus, what we witness here in Balazs' writing by 1933 is a

methodology that incorporates translation and textual analysis with the views of contemporaries into historical commentary. His tone is both sophisticated and cynical. He generalizes about the "sickness of the state" for which "doctors" or reformers like Li Gou or Wang Anshi can hardly save the situation without "deep surgery" (277). And given the timing of this essay (1933), one wonders how much he identified with his subject.

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The last sinological work Balazs completed in Berlin was his translation and study of inscriptions, mainly Buddhist, from the collection of Baron van der Heydt. In 1935 he emigrated to France for political reasons. In Paris where he found refuge among other anti-Nazi sympathizers, he hardly had time to continue his sinological work. Only a few book reviews and his relatively short examination of two poems by Cao Cao saw publication during this period, before he went into hiding in 1940.

This sojourn to France, which was to become permanent, was not Balazs' first experience in this country. He had already spent academic year 1925-26 in Paris for research on his doctoral dissertation, and it was during this first stay that he became acquainted with his 'second intellectual father', i.e. 'l'homme de la Chine antique', Henri Maspero. At the time of Balazs' first stay, the first edition of Maspero's La Chine antique had just seen publication. Maspero's path-breaking book focusing on every aspect of early China, including Buddhism, Daoism, popular religions, linguistics, literature, law, anthropology, economics, philosophy, and popular religions, and the reconstruction of the earliest stages of Chinese language grammar and phonology, must have been awe inspiring for Balazs. I believe the Frenchman's broad insights set the standard for Balazs' own approach to China study, which would only see fruition directly after the War.

The War Years and Aftermath: The Beginning of Balazs' Paris Career

Balazs' flight from Paris in 1940 ended in Meauzac, a small village in the 'département' of Tarn-et-Garonne where he and his family lived "underground"; they were one of five refugee families which the villagers took pride in aiding and concealing. He subsisted by cultivating a small patch of land and raising geese while his wife Hildegard engaged in all kinds of needlework. According to one source, during this difficult time Balazs did try to pursue some writing related to earlier research. But only after the war ended, and then three years in Montauban, where he taught the equivalent of high school German and English at a number of 'collèges', did he return to Paris, and sinology as a full-time occupation.

His first formal appointment, announced on December 14, 1949, was 'maitre de conférences' with the Centre national de la Recherche scientifique (CNRS) where he was assigned to the group for 'law'. His research plan with the Centre was to translate the economic and law monographs from the Suishu. During 1948, his first full year back in Paris, and prior to his CNRS nomination, Balazs began retrieving his academic momentum. He concentrated on two major projects: editing, revising, and preparing Maspero's

papers for printing in the posthumous volume to follow La Chine antique, and completing for publication his own two studies concerning the fall of the Han and its repercussions for Chinese society and intellectual history. Both these articles "Nihilistic Revolt or Mystical Escapism: Currents of Thought in China during the Third Century A.D.," and "Political Philosophy and Social Crisis at the End of the Han Dynasty" were first delivered as lectures to the Institut des Hautes Études chinoises in March 1948.

Once instated as a full-time CNRS researcher, Balazs had the time and motivation to pursue a number of tasks that were to insure his permanent fame. These included the completion of the first two of three projected volumes for his project Études sur la société et l'économie de la Chine médiévale, part I: Le Traité économique du 'Souei-chou', finalized in 1953, and awarded the coveted 'Stanislas Julien' Prize by the 'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in 1954, and part II: Le Traité juridique du 'Souei-chou', published in 1954. Although the principal function of a CNRS appointment is research, Balazs did do some teaching. From May to March 1950, he gave fourteen classes at the Institut des Hautes Études chinoises -- one set of these sessions took up section 23 of the Xunzi, and the other 'economic treatise' of the Suishu.

A relative sense of financial security allowed him to acquire an appartment in Paris (Avenue de la République, arrondisement XI^{e}) and to rent with friends "a wreck of a shack" in the mountains near Menton (Alpes-Maritimes). At this point in the early 1950s, Balazs also began to travel often, attending conferences, giving learned papers, and not least, communicating his own vision of China study with others. In a paper "The Stages of Sinology," delivered to the Third Conference of Junior Sinologists in London in June 1950, Balazs offered a broad history of sinological studies and a sharp critique of its past and present formation.

This conference paper is very valuable for our understanding of how Balazs viewed the work of others, including Chinese and Japanese specialists of Chinese history, and of how he characterized past and contemporary developments of China study by European scholars. In the paper he divided sinology study into four stages. The first began with the arrival of the Jesuits in China.

The second stage, occurring in the nineteenth century, he considers a phase of "gropings," a time when European "scholars were concerned primarily with the relations between the Chinese and the foreigners, the principal relation being that of religious beliefs and philosophical opinions" (1). Balazs' main objection to the achievements of those sinologists in stage two was their lack of attention to the institutions and customs of contemporary Chinese life. In contrast, to the few good nineteenth century scholars (he names Alexander Wylie, Eduard Biot, and Stanislaus Julien), the majority limited themselves to what he considered 'tangential' study in the wider sweep of knowledge of China's history.

The third stage includes the "great names" of European sinology: "Giles, Chavannes, De Groot, Laufer, Pelliot, Franke, Maspéro, Granet, and others" (1). Recognizing that this generation "supplied the foundations for a science of linguistics, of ethnology, of history and even of modern sociology" (1), Balazs also casts a critical eye toward the general results of this generation's endeavours, and concludes they were more a "scattering of efforts" rather than a systematic groundwork. He is specific what he means by this:

> I confess, for example, to be unable to see the usefulness of the exact restoration, by means of a thousand phonetic artifices and substitutions, of the original name of an obscure monk if the person in question is totally unknown. Nor can I see the utility of restoring the old pronunciation of a Chinese word by transcribing it by means of so many complicated signs that a simple mortal, even an ancient Chinese, who uses his language to make himself understood, would be physically incapable of articulating it (2).

Balazs accuses this generation of failing to provide synthesis; whatever their achievements in comparative philology, phonetics, etc., more often than not they presented the results of their research in a way that was "singular, exceptional, detached from the totality of the development" (2). The result was that too often their work ended in 'disorientating' investigations of "petty issues, laboriously constructed fantasies and absurd theories" (2).

Balazs regards himself a member of the fourth stage of sinology. While he credits sinology study of his day for advancing to the point where disciplines, e.g. comparative study of religions, may incorporate the results of research related to China, these studies may "remain sterile if they proliferate at the expense of a general historical view which might coordinate them...." (2).

Balazs' critique of contemporary sinology was not limited to Western scholarship. He also delivers a scathing attack on young Chinese scholars trained in the Western academy. He writes:

> Often, these students, fresh from an American college or a continental university, possessing only a veneer of culture, on returning to their own country indulge in a frenzied activity directed towards the writing of 'histories of the evolution of civilisation', histories of the evolution of this or the development of that. They indulge in orgies of systematization, combining in a curious fashion the purely formalistic aspects of scientific methodology with the predilection of the Chinese mind for categories and the hierarchy of divisions and subdivisions. Thus, under the majestic folds of an ostentatious costume one often finds a puny body. (3)

And as for Japanese sinologists:

> They never cease telling us in a thousand ways what they have just said, what they are going to say, and how and why they will say it - without saying anything. (3)

On the same page, however, Balazs takes care to express his appreciation of the works of Wang Guowei, Hu Shi, Guo Moro, Tang Yongtung. He closes his discussion of 'Oriental sinology' with a reference to what was happening "in the China of Mao Tse-tung," where, he implies, that there may be a problem "with liberty in scientific research." Finally, he ends this part of his paper with a statement summarizing the situation of China study in the West, and in the East: "Let us state clearly that a science without direction is futile but a science without liberty is dead" (4).

The rest of this paper focuses on Balazs' suggestions for "advancing our science," which includes the idea of scholars jointly creating "dynastic manuals, that is to say, compiling materials in easily accessible form and in alphabetical order, of all the institutional, biographical, bibliographical, and historical information relating to a period limited by the reign of a great dynasty" (6).

Balazs in Section VI of the EPHE and the Launch of the Song Project

In 1954 Balazs was named 'Chargé de conférences' at the then recently formed Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (later to become the EHESS), and in the following year promoted to the position of 'directeur' at the same institution. His new boss was Fernand Braudel, and it was with Braudel's support that Balazs' career would really begin to flourish. Although Braudel and the majority of the Sixth Section members were Europe specialists, the great historian saw the need to extend the geographical boundaries of this institution. Familiar with the American model of area studies, Braudel invited Balazs to create a program for China (and Daniel Thorner for India) in compliance with the Section's broader goals involving "disciplinary and interdisciplinary research." Balazs now had the patronage of France's most powerful academicians, and thus access to financial resources to develop the Song project.

According to his necrologist Paul Demiéville, Balazs' interest in the Song era might have already been sparked around 1933 with his research for the article on Wang Anshi's precursor Li Gou, but certainly by 1947 he already had this project in mind. When he applied to the CNRS in that year, he expressed his interest in "une grande enquête sur l'histoire économique et sociale des Song." He gave two major reasons that the Song period was well-suited for such an investigation: the association of the Song dynasty with the 'beginning of modern times in China', and second, a relatively fecund source of primary documentation, rich both in terms of quality and quantity. In his presentation "Projet Provisoire d'un Manuel de l'Histoire des Song," to the Seventh Conference of Junior Sinologues in Durham, England during late summer 1954, he added to these two reasons for focusing on the Song, the distinct developments occurring then in printing, navigation, technology, science, literature, philosophy, and

native archaeology.

His plan for the project consisted of three main parts: (1) 'Introduction and General Aspects' featuring tables of main events, and central and provincial administration, imperial genealogies, and maps comparing the Song with modern equivalents, as well as historical maps for different eras within the Song; (2) 'Biographical Dictionary', to resemble in format and organization, Hummel's Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period; (3) Bibliography of literature originating in the Song, and of Song authors. He considered this undertaking as an international project which should attract many contributors; he would assume the role of 'coordinator' but the spirit of the work was to be based on open communication and international cooperation.

In accordance with the regulations of his new position, Balazs was obligated at the end of each academic year to report his activities to the EPHE; these summaries, under their general title "Les Institutions de la Chine Imperiale," were later published in the l'Annuaire of that institution. Balazs' synopses are fascinating because they indicate his changing priorities, and of course, the progress of the Song project.

Reviewing the eight reports together, covering the years from 1958 to 1963, we may trace how Balazs' intentions and preferences evolved. During the first two years of his EPHE appointment, he saw the need to give both a general introductory seminar, probably suitable for non-specialists of China, on the Chinese bourgeoisie and the failure of commercial capitalism to evolve in the imperial era, and a more specialized seminar focusing on the translation of portions of Song texts related to the behavior of merchants. These included documents on commercial taxes found in the Songshi, the Song huiyao, and the Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian. From this information, Balazs and his colleagues were able to prepare a map indicating urban commercial centers in 1077, which was published in Braudel's journal Annales in 1957.

Thereafter, the seminar began to consider agrarian history, and the role of landholding in its juridical, economic, and social manifestations during the Song. A number of visitors from abroad also attended the seminar. The German scholar Herbert Franke, who gave a paper at the seminar in spring 1958 on the late Song official Jia Sidao, inspired a follow-up for the fall term semester; it focused on the agrarian reform of 1263, initiated by Jia Sidao. By the end of the 1950s Balazs and the seminar participants were beginning to show an interest in the empirical research manifested in the two volume collection, Zhongguo zibenzhuyi mengya taolun ji (Essays on the debate on the sprouts of capitalism in China; 1957). From then, until the end of his life, Balazs extended his interest in the Song to the late imperial age. The Chinese mining industry durng the Ming-Qing era, late Ming peasant revolts, and administrative guides, e.g. Xueshi yishuo (1793) were the foci of the later seminars.

Some Concluding Observations

One may well ask what was Balazs' legacy for the study of China in Europe? We must admit that Balazs had many admirers, both during his lifetime and thereafter, but he had no direct successors. Although a publication series Études Song: In Memoriam Étienne Balazs in which leading Song scholars from all over the world presented original essays concerning some aspect of development during that dynasty, for example Ho Ping-ti on demography was issued in 1970, by the 1980s the EHESS cancelled the publication. The major impediment to its continuation was not lack of interest in Balazs'work, but the changing priorities of China scholarship. By then, the study of Chinese history had become disaggregated: scholars realized the advantages of breaking down the country 'horizontally' into regions, provinces, prefectures, counties and cities for closer examination, and of finely dissecting the 'vertical' levels of society, demarcating elite and popular communities, and their particular interests and priorities.

But we may value Balazs as a genuine innovator: he was the first European scholar to see the value of studying Chinese history as an integral part of global history. As he wrote in 1952, 'the fate of China is now indissolubly linked with the fate of the whole of modern society, which is everywhere undergoing the same levelling process and becoming more and more uniform'. How true these words sound, then as now!