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## **Russian Japanologist Serge Elisséeff at Harvard in 1932–1957**

This article deals with the life and scholarly and pedagogical activities of the Japanologist Serge Elisséeff in the USA where he was the first Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and a Chairman and Professor of the Department of Far Eastern Languages at Harvard University for 23 years. The author bases his work on the documents found by him in the archives and libraries of Harvard University and the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Published and unpublished letters of S.G. Elisséeff to his Russian colleagues are also used. Serge Elisséeff's activities as an organizer of science and of teaching Eastern disciplines is also examined.

*Key words:* Serge Elisséeff, archives, Japanology, Harvard University, the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Oriental studies in the USA.

In autumn 1932, Serge Elisséeff, the well-known Paris-based Japanologist, was invited to deliver lectures on Japanese history and the Chinese language at Harvard University in the USA during the 1932–1933 school year. On September 18, 1932, he arrived in the USA and started working. Elisséeff delivered a series of lectures on the history of Japan and was also engaged in the study of historical Chinese texts and modern Japanese texts with students. His teaching load was six hours a week. He also gave eight lectures on Japanese painting at the Lowell Institute in Boston. His lectures were very successful as the scholar told his listeners about things not written about in the books (Diakonova, 2000, p. 159).

When his official mission at Harvard was over, Elisséeff returned to France via Japan and then China. He visited Shanghai, Nanking and Peking where he got acquainted with many Chinese scholars. In 1933–1934, he continued to teach in Paris. As Professor of the Practical School of the Higher Studies he read a series of lectures on Buddhist iconography and delivered lectures on Chinese painting at the School of Louvre (Op. cit., 161–162).

At the next meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Harvard-Yenching Institute in November 1933, Serge Elisséeff was recommended for the appointment as Professor of Far Eastern Languages at Harvard University Arts and Sciences Faculty and as Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute simultaneously from September 1, 1934. His salary was \$10,000 per year. He was accountable to the Board of Trustees and to the Educational Committee of Harvard University. "It should be made clear to Professor Elisséeff that his professorial appointment is without limit of time and is practically for life, with the qualification that the University's rules are explicit that a man may be retired after the expiration of his sixty-fifth year and should normally retire at seventy" (H-YI archives. МТр, November 13, 1933).

The Harvard-Yenching Institute was established at Harvard University in 1928 to administer a trust under the will of the late Charles M. Hall, of Niagara Falls, New York. The purpose of it was to organize and supervise the higher education in Christian universities

and colleges in China. These educational institutions were founded by Protestant missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in order to teach the Chinese language, history, literature and other subjects contributing to the maintaining of Chinese traditional culture, as well as subjects relating to the culture of the West. Another task was inseparably linked with this—to organize the teaching of the Chinese and Japanese languages at Harvard University, first of all for those young people (the Americans and the Chinese) who were going to teach in China.

Christian educational institutions were ruled and subsidized by the United Board of Christian Colleges in China based in New York. Private donations were also accepted. After the Harvard-Yenching Institute was established, this Institute also provided substantial financial help for them. The Institute was supervised by the Board of Trustees, one third of which were professors from Harvard, one third missionaries, and one third businessmen. Representatives of the University intended to organize academic activities at the Institute, that was why they had to make a scholar, preferably a Sinologist, its first director. Paul Pelliot was chosen for this purpose but he rejected the post and suggested Serge Elisséeff instead.

While Serge Elisséeff was teaching at Harvard, his candidacy was studied with great attention at the meeting of the Board of Trustees. He made a uniformly good impression as a man who knew his subject thoroughly and had a good critical mind besides a tremendous amount of energy and interest in his subject. But there were arguments against him. The most important of those was his academic training in Japan, at Tokyo University, for which reason he could not be accepted by a number of Chinese scholars. He had a good practice of reading and writing in Chinese but his spoken language was rather poor. Some thought that it was dangerous to rely on a person specializing in Japan rather than in China. However, having visited China in the summer of 1933, Elisséeff enlisted the support of Chinese scholars and it was not difficult for him to improve his spoken Chinese spending some time in China. The Trustees were also satisfied with the programs of Chinese and Japanese teaching courses proposed by Elisséeff.

Members of the Board of Trustees came to the conclusion that the Americans lacked a specialist of Elisséeff's level with a tremendous knowledge, a good basic training and great abilities. Along with this the Trustees planned to transfer the burden of the Institute's supervision to some of the Americans so that S. Elisséeff might concentrate on science entirely as it was his greatest inclination.

The outstanding organizational abilities of the scholar became evident only later. "Professor Elisséeff made a uniformly good impression as a man who knew his subject thoroughly and had a good critical mind besides a tremendous amount of energy and interest in his subject. He knows much more Chinese than many people who are known as Chinese students. Professor Elisséeff's access to the Japanese school on Chinese subjects is important and not to be overlooked. Mr. Green added that he does not think there were any Americans who have the knowledge, background and ability that Professor Elisséeff has shown. Mr. Green queried whether it might not be advantageous to have an understanding with him that the professorship was a full appointment, but that it might be desirable from his point of view and from the point of view of the Trustees to relieve him of administrative duties after the organization was started; that it could be out to him so that it would be regarded as a favor instead of a lack of confidence, since he could not conceive of Professor Elisséeff's desiring to carry a full burden of administrative duties. It might well be that after a time there would be some American to whom the Trustees would like to entrust those responsibilities and leave Professor Elisséeff to the productive scholarship for which he is qualified" (H-YI archives. MТр, November 13, 1933).

The USA did not have Oriental studies as a branch of knowledge, as an academic discipline at that time. Different studies were scattered. The Council of Learned Societies was organized in 1919 so as to “unite scholarly work in America where there is no Academy of Sciences and where every university or learned society is isolated from any other” (Diakonova, 2000, p. 188). The Council had different commissions as well as the Committee for Chinese and Japanese studies. Elisséeff was a member of it. Sometimes people who did not know Oriental languages were engaged in Oriental studies. As Elisséeff noted, works on Japanese history were based on old works of Japanese authors, on outdated documents. Primary sources were not used and the knowledge of languages was not obligatory.

S. Elisséeff underlined that it was impossible to study the history of Japan without a knowledge of the language (Diakonova, 2000, p. 158). There were no Japanese and Korean scholars of their own either at Harvard or in the US in general.

Beginning from 1931, a Japanese man called Kishimoto taught the Japanese language, but he had no scientific methodology. Chinese studies were a little better. The Chinese language was taught by the Sinologist Professor J. Ware but the history of China was read by M. Gardner who did not know the language.

So in September 1934, S. Elisséeff and his spouse arrived in Cambridge (Massachusetts) where Harvard University was located, and the scholar assumed his new duties. He had to accept this position so he could have a financial opportunity to give a higher education to his children. The children stayed in France with their relatives but soon started living in Elisséeff's old apartment on Boulevard Pereire, 75, on their own. Nikita became a student of the Sorbonne and Vadim was about to graduate from his school.

In Cambridge, the Elisséeffs settled in Memorial Drive, 989, the street that goes along the Charles River dividing Cambridge from Boston. Kishimoto has left Harvard University by this time, and Elisséeff alone had to read eleven lectures on Japanology and one lecture on the Chinese language. These courses included the history of Japan, art where architecture played a great role, reading medieval Japanese texts. There were also six hours of the Japanese language remaining from the previous lecturer. Beginning from 1938, Elisséeff's pupil Edwin O. Reischauer conducted the Japanese courses along with his teacher. In 1961–1966, E.O. Reischauer was the US ambassador to Japan.

At one of the first meetings of the Trustees, Elisséeff stated that it was necessary to organize a magazine where articles devoted to the problems of East Asia could be published. That magazine was given priority by the scholar even over advancing the Chinese-Japanese library. The first issue of the magazine, which was entitled *The Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, was published in April 1936. It was dedicated to the memory of Professor of Philosophy J. Woods, who established Oriental studies at Harvard. The second issue was published in July and the third, double one (Nos. 3 and 4), in November. The publication of the magazine became regular. It exists to this day. Later Serge Elisséeff involved the best scholars of the West and the USSR to work in this magazine—his colleagues P. Pelliot, A. Maspero, V.M. Alexeiev, U.K. Schutzkiy, et al.

Composing the Chinese-English dictionary was another of Elisséeff's important undertakings. For reasons of economy, work on the dictionary was undertaken in Peking, where nearly 5 million cards with characters were prepared. The work in China was concluded in 1938 and the cards were sent to the Harvard-Yenching Institute where, under the guidance of Serge Elisséeff, all the characters were translated into English with exact references and quotations.

In the second term of the 1936–1937 school year, S. Elisséeff again visited Japan and China where he inspected Christian universities and a number of colleges. After this visit, Elisséeff, as Director of the Institute, became much more sure that the Institute must sup-

port the Chinese in the study of their own history and archeology. "Elisséeff thought the Harvard-Yenching Institute should continue to subsidize pure studies in Chinese civilization and not branch out into other activities, especially since the Rockefeller Foundation is interested in sociology and anthropology. The Director remarked that he felt even more strongly, after his visit to China, that the Institute should support the Chinese in the study of their own history and archaeology. He added that the item 'Chinese linguistics and Chinese archaeology' mentioned in Professor Wu's plan as subjects to be supported by the Institute is already supported by it in the Chinese Department at Yenching University and should not be subsidized twice" (H-YI archives. МТр, November 8, 1937, l. 24).

The Chinese-Japanese library of the Harvard-Yenching Institute was situated, like the Institute itself, in the rooms of Boylston Hall at Harvard Yard. It comprised books not only in the Chinese and Japanese languages but also in Manchurian, Mongolian and Tibetan. There was also a big collection of Western books dedicated to East Asian problems. In the 1940s, Serge Elisséeff called this library the best library of such a kind in the Western world. Its quality was beyond doubt, and it was inferior to the Congress Library alone as regards the quantity of titles.

In February 1939, there were 130,000 Chinese and 30,000 Japanese books in the library, and, as of July 1, 1956, there were 299,841 volumes in the languages of East Asia, 231,189 of them in Chinese and 56,381 in Japanese (HU archives. UA III 50.8.11.3).

The library was growing so fast that the question about new areas was argued several times. The Board of Trustees was looking for financial opportunities to make a new building for the Harvard-Yenching Institute and its library. However, leaving Harvard in 1957 Serge Elisséeff have not seen the new building. Now, it takes a ten-minute walk to get to this building from Boylston Hall.

The Chinese-Japanese Library exchanged books with the Institute for Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Library of the USSR Academy of Sciences. First of all, this applies to the Sinological Index Series of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and Supplements of the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series published in China, and to volumes of the "Mélanges Asiatiques" series published by the USSR Academy of Sciences and sent to Harvard as well as the "Notes (*Zapiski*) of the group of Orientalists of the Asian Museum" and several issues of the "Bibliography of the Orient" (Diakonova, 2000, p. 186).

The teaching of the Oriental languages at the Arts and Sciences Faculty was structuralized in 1938–1939. This structural unit was called the Department of Far Eastern Languages, and Serge Elisséeff was appointed as its chairman. "On February 9, 1937, George Henry Chase, Ph. D., L.H.D., John E. Hudson, Professor of Archaeology and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, moved that the Faculty of Arts and Sciences establish a Division of Far Eastern Languages beginning in 1938–1939. The motion was carried. The Division of Far Eastern Languages became the Department of Far Eastern Languages in 1939–1940" (Reischauer Institute 1996, p. 6–8, 58–59).

S. Elisséeff expected that he would stay at Harvard for five years only. For some time he did not even retire from the position of Professor of the Practical School of the Higher Studies. However, the war began in Europe in 1939. So the scholar stayed in the US. Later, when the war was over, he had to stay until American retirement as he could not retire in France.

In the 1942–1943 school year, S. Elisséeff got an Honorary Master degree, most probably, because he was not a student of an American university. In 1946, the scholar was appointed Director of the American Institute for Asiatic Studies in Peking that was previously called the Sino-Indian Institute established by A. Staël-Holstein (H-YI archives. МТр, November 14, 1946, l. 269).

In September 1948, Elisséeff was elected an honorary member of the French School of the Far East in Indochina (HU archives. UA V 382.95.1).

He was a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Literature, the Chinese-Japanese Society of the USA and a chairman of the American Oriental Society in 1954–1955.

During the War, the Institute and the Harvard University took an active part in the US military programs. S. Elisséeff and E.O. Reischauer conducted intensive Japanese courses to prepare linguists for the US Navy. Besides, beginning from 1943, S. Elisséeff taught five days a week from 8 to 9 under the Army School Training Program and went to Washington every Saturday as a consultant to the Office of Strategic Services. In September, 1944, the Army asked the University to organize a special course for the Civil Army Training School, which, although called Far Eastern, in reality dealt only with Japan. The teaching material furnished by the Army was found entirely unsatisfactory and it was necessary to prepare new material. Because of this new program, the Director resigned from his consultation work in Washington (H-YI archives. MТр, November 13, 1944, l. 195–196).

The ordinary program of teaching during the war also changed. As to the urgent necessity of preparing an adequate number of specialists in the Japanese language as quickly as possible, a summer term was added to the school year that lasted 12 weeks beginning from the middle of June up to middle of September. Courses were more intensive and additional lectures and seminars were included. “Summer term, although of 12 weeks, shall constitute a regular term with the same quality and amount of work each course has in fall or spring term” (HU archives. UA V 344). Later the University reverted to the normal two-terms schedule.

Beginning from the 1890s up to 1930–1931, there were only 61 students of the Japanese disciplines; during five years in 1931–1935 there were 36 students already; in 1936–1940, there were 132 people; in 1941–1945, 237 students; in 1946–1950, 442 people; in 1951–1955, 401 students; and in 1956–1960, 627 students (Reischauer Institute, 1996, p. 24).

During his work at Harvard, S. Elisséeff prepared a series of Japanese textbooks and collections of Japanese texts for students of different levels. His pupil E.O. Reischauer often was his coauthor. The Japanese textbook for the beginners was published in 1941 and then it was reprinted numerously.<sup>1</sup>

The reader in literature and history was prepared for those studying the Japanese language.<sup>2</sup>

The annotated bibliography on Japanology in main Western languages made by Elisséeff with two pupils must also be noted.<sup>3</sup>

In 1947, Serge Elisséeff, together with the Professors E.O. Reischauer and F.W. Cleaves, prepared a memorandum titled *The Asian Studies at Harvard* where he showed his own attention to this problem. This document, sent to the Dean of the Arts and Science Faculty P. Buck, demonstrated Serge Elisséeff's talent as an administrator and an organizer of science and teaching process.

Elisséeff wrote that, after the war, the interest in the Asian countries became much greater, so new priorities had to be set. He considered the confrontation between the USA

<sup>1</sup> *Elementary Japanese for University Students, Vocabularies, Grammar and Notes*. Compiled by S. Elisséeff, E.O. Reischauer. Cambridge (Mass.), 1941. Reprinted in two parts in 1942 and in three parts in 1944: *Elementary Japanese for College Students* (together with Takehiko Yoshihashi).

<sup>2</sup> *Selected Japanese Texts for University Students*. Vol. I, II. Compiled by Elisséeff S., Reischauer E.O. Cambridge (Mass.), 1942. Reprinted in 1947–1948 in three parts.

<sup>3</sup> *A Selected List of Books and Articles on Japan in English, French and German*. Compiled by Borton H., Elisséeff S., Reischauer E.O. Washington, 1940.

and the USSR to be the main one. The US saw only the European part of the USSR and did not consider the industrialized Siberia. In Asia, they were also interested only in China and Japan not paying attention to the other countries that stretched, via Central Asia, from Korea to Turkey. “We tend to see the Soviet Union only as a European power, not as a growing Asiatic power with an industrialized Siberia as its focal point. We see Asia as a series of separated lands beyond great distances of ocean from the United States, not as a single Soviet borderland, far larger and far more populous than the other borderland, in Europe. This great Asiatic borderland consists of a lightly populated zone of immediate contact, beyond which lie the great Asiatic centers of population and culture. In the center of the contact zone lives a large block of Turkish-speaking Moslems in Russian and Chinese Turkestan, flanked on the west by the Iranians of Afghanistan and Persia and the Turks of the Turkey, and on the east by the Mongols of Inner and Outer Mongolia, the Chinese of Manchuria, and the Koreans. The great lands which lie beyond are China, Japan, a newly independent India, and the Arabic world of the Near East. A central factor in the future of the Asiatic half of the world is the relationship between these lands and the Soviet Union” (HU archives. UA III 50.8.11.3. L. 3).

S. Elisséeff proposed to make a teaching program for the Mongolian, Turkish, Persian, Arabic languages which could be taught at the Department of Far Eastern Languages, as there were young scholars at Harvard who specialized in languages and cultures of many Asian countries. He also considered it necessary to concentrate not only on the languages, history and culture—as was traditional—but also on the economy and politics of the studied countries.

The scholar noted three drawbacks in Asian studies at Harvard. First was the absence of a general course of Chinese literature. “One unfortunate gap in our Chinese studies is the lack of a general course in Chinese literature, which is made all the worse by a similar lack in most other American institutions offering instruction in the Chinese field. One of the present members of the Department of Far Eastern Languages might be able to offer a course in Chinese literature, but not without a lightening of the teaching load, which under present conditions is impossible. It would, therefore, be advisable, in selecting a part time replacement for Professor Cleaves in the Chinese field, to choose a person who would be well qualified to offer a basic course in Chinese literature in addition to language instruction” (Op. cit., L. 7).

Second was the absence of a course of Asian philosophy, though philosophy was one of the main disciplines in the study of any civilization. “It would seem highly desirable that a man be added in the Philosophy Department who would be a specialist in Asiatic philosophy, having both a sound philosophic training and a good knowledge of at least one of the major Asiatic languages. In view of our concentration in the Chinese field, it would be desirable that his special field be Chinese philosophy, possibly Confucianism, and that he know Chinese and perhaps Japanese also” (Op. cit., L. 7–8).

A third deficiency in Asiatic studies at Harvard was in the field of Indian studies. Although new relations were established between the USA and the independent India, Indian studies in the USA did not increase. Only ancient philosophy, ancient languages and literature were read. Ancient languages, philosophy and art of India were also taught at Harvard but “if Indian studies are to make their proper contribution to the Asiatic field at Harvard, further personnel should be added to the faculty to teach the modern languages, the history and the political, economic and social structure of India” (Op. cit., L. 8).

This document evidently had a great resonance at Harvard. The Mongolian language was taught in the 1950–1951 school year as well as Chinese and Japanese. The Korean language was added to them in 1954–1955 and Tibetan, in the end of the 1950s.

From the beginning of the 1950s, the Christian colleges had certain difficulties because of the political changes in China. The ideology inevitable under a totalitarian regime started interfering in teaching programs and thus presented a great threat. But the situation has not reached the critical level when academic freedom became restricted. More and more grants to the educational institutions were needed in these circumstances to assure their financial independence (H-YI archives. МТр, April 17, 1950, l. 406–407).

In 1951, the situation in China became much worse. Essential changes in teaching plans and programs of the subsidized universities were made, the courses on history and literature of China were given from Marxist positions. Nationalization of the educational institutions led in the early 1950s to complete governmental control of their financial and teaching activities.

The United Board of the Christian universities and colleges together with the Board of Trustees of the Harvard-Yenching Institute came to the conclusion that, as the political situation was not going to change in the nearest future, further subsidizing of these educational institutions was undesirable. “Six universities, namely Yenching University, West China Union University, University of Nanking, Fukien Christian University and Shantung Christian University (all of which, although originally separate charitable corporations of New York and Canada, have, since 1945, been consolidated into the United Board) and Lingnan University, a New York corporation, were made as beneficiaries of income charges upon the Restricted Funds of this Institute under the provisions of a decree... Since December, 1950, the corporations have not been able to use any new income from the Restricted Funds for maintenance of their educational programs in China, the primary purpose prescribed by the Institute” (H-YI archives. МТр, November 5, 1951, l. 118, 122–124).

The decision was made to relocate the activities of the Harvard-Yenching Institute to India, Japan and Korea. Serge Elisséeff had to investigate the situation in Japan. He suggested establishing a small teaching centre on the Far East in one of the Christian universities in Japan so as to work with Chinese, Japanese and Korean students.

In 1953, the Americans finally determined whom they would work with in the Asian countries. The educational institutions were as follows: Japan International Christian University (Tokyo), Tokyo Woman’s Christian College, Toyo Bunko (Tokyo), Doshisha University (Kyoto), Research Institute of Humanistic Sciences (Oriental Section) (Kyoto), Hong Kong University (Research Section of the Institute of Oriental Studies), Yunchi (Chosun) Christian university in Korea (H-YI archives. МТр, April 27, 1953, l. 207–208).

In spring 1955, S. Elisséeff stayed in Japan and Korea for two months. The purpose of his trip was to visit educational institutions that received grants from the Institute, to organize the publication of the library catalogues in these institutions, etc. (H-YI archives. МТр, November 8, 1954, l. 359).

In Japan, Serge Elisséeff read lectures and often met with his friend, the Russian Japanologist Orest Pletner (O.V. Pletner’s letter to N.I. Konrad of June 1958).

In 1955, Serge Elisséeff was 66 (the age of retirement in the USA) but his perfect intellectual and physical form and also his great achievements at Harvard let him stay at his job somewhat longer. In August 1956, Elisséeff retired from the post of Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute but stayed to teach at Harvard University until the end of the academic year. After his retirement in June 1957, Elisséeff with his spouse returned to France. They continued to be French citizens till the end of their lives.

The pupils of Serge Elisséeff at Harvard characterized him as a person of wit, mild and delicate, having a good sense of humor and warmth, a man with unflagging energy. His first pupil E.O. Reischauer called his teacher “the father of the American Japanology” and the founder of the American Far Eastern studies in general.

### Abbreviations

HU archives — Harvard University archives  
H-YI archives — the Harvard-Yenching Institute archives  
МТр — Meeting of the Trustees' protocol  
RAS archives — the Russian Academy of Sciences archives

### Sources and Literature

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### Резюме

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#### **Российский японист Сергей Елисеев в Гарварде в 1932–1957 гг.**

Статья посвящена жизни и научно-педагогической деятельности япониста С.Г. Елисеева в США, где в течение 23 лет он был первым директором Института Гарвард-Яньцзинь и профессором отделения дальневосточных языков в Гарвардском университете. Автор основывается на документальных материалах, обнаруженных им в архивах и библиотеках Гарвардского университета и Института Гарвард-Яньцзинь. Также использованы опубликованные и неопубликованные письма С.Г. Елисеева его русским коллегам. Рассмотрена деятельность С.Г. Елисеева как организатора науки и преподавания восточных дисциплин в США.