

ON FREEDOM AND IMPRISONMENT IN INNER ASIA

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This project aimed to research the history and traces of two travelers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Inner Asia and China: Hans Leder (1843–1921) and Erwin Lang (1885-1962). Both men came to the Asian peripheries of the Russian Empire, Siberia, the Far East or Mongolia, time-shifted and under very different circumstances reasons and destinies: Hans Leder voluntary as a free and mostly independent researcher, mainly entomologist and the artist Erwin Lang involuntary, forced as a prisoner of the First World War. In this pilot-project in cooperation with Mongolian and Buryat-Russian scientists we analysed traces of their travels and stays in Transbaikalia in their legacies and researched if they – on the other hand – left traces of their stays there. A first field research aimed at re-traveling parts of their routes made more respectively about hundred years ago. We compared and documented crucial places such as the border town Kiakhta (also known as Troitskosavsk), Ulan-Ude (former Verkhneudinsk) and Chita in their present state with the historic descriptions of both travelers. We visited local museums and local archives to look for traces of both men there, i.e. collectibles of Hans Leder in Kiakhta and art works such as paintings by Erwin Lang in Chita. The project started to fill missing links in the research on the Austrian research traveler Hans Leder and will enter new terrain concerning the documentation of the yet not at all or only little researched legacy of the Viennese painter Erwin Lang who belonged to the circle of artists of the Secession and Hagenbund in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century.

The main activities of the project On Freedom and Imprisonment in Inner Asia were:

1. Field research in Siberia and Mongolia together with Mongolian and Siberian cooperation partners
2. Archival research in Ulan Ude State Archive and Weltmuseum Wien
3. Museum research in Ulan Ude, Chita and Kiakhta

During the field research, we retraced places visited by Hans Leder and Erwin Lang. The travels of Hans Leder in Mongolia have been analysed in previous projects, but his travels in Siberia and from Siberia to Mongolia had not been researched so far and represent a missing link. Leder stayed more than two years in Buryatia and Irkutsk, Verkhneudinsk (today Ulan-Ude) and Kiakhta became important places for his research activities. We started to investigate on collectibles left by Leder in Kiakhta Museum of Local Lore of Academician V.A. Obruchev, one of the oldest museums of Siberia and the Far East. We met the entomologist Larisa Khobraokova at the Institute of General and Experimental Biology of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Ulan Ude.

Dr. Khobraokova is one of the few Russian scientists who did research on Hans Leder and his entomological findings in Siberia and Mongolia. Future cooperation in this field was discussed and we got access to relevant Russian literature.

Team members re-travelled parts of Erwin Lang's journey as war prisoner from Ulan Ude to Chita by Siberian Railway. Due to catastrophic rain falls it was not possible to reach the village of Alexandrovsk, where Lang had stayed at a farmer family but through the support of the local scientists Alexander I. Chaschin and Vladimir I. Kosikh from Chita University we were able to get access to relevant literature and photographs. The Russian scientists became interested to follow further research in the archives of Chita on the topic. In the Kuznetsov Museum we met museum director Kolosov who stated his interest to do further cooperative research on E. Lang and his artistic works possibly left in Chita.

Archival research was pursued in the pre-revolutionary collection and photo collections at Ulan Ude State Archive. We discovered interesting materials on the political and trade relations in Inner Asia that directly or indirectly connect to our topic. Through the contacts established during research, we discussed to further follow archival research.

Results and Tentative follow-up proposals

This pilot project was very fruitful in regard of strengthening already existing and establishing new contacts with Mongolian and Buryat/Siberian researchers and institutions (such as the Institute of Mongolian Studies, Buddhism and Tibetology and the Institute of General and Experimental Biology of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Ulan Ude and Ulan Ude State Archive). Unfortunately drastic weather conditions made some plans impossible to be realised and they remain for future research. The interest in our topic, the history and legacies of "Austrian travelers" in Inner Asia arose great interest and the will to continue future cooperation in this field. Follow up projects and publications were discussed with various partners and scientists in Mongolia and Russia and are planned for the future.