

A CHINESE ADVENTURE

A Swiss Family in Pursuit of Success in the Celestial Empire

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1. A Chinese Adventure

A Swiss family in pursuit of success in the Celestial Empire

Long stored away at the bottom of a trunk, a bundle of letters describes the fortunes, trade and spirits of a family who left the Swiss Canton of Neuchâtel in the 19th century to sell watches to the Chinese. Albums with photographs of these pioneers were miraculously found in an antique shop in the same region. These invaluable records, at last reunited, allow us to piece together the history of the Loup family in China and their travels of over nearly a century around the Celestial Empire at a time when Swiss citizens were themselves migrants.

The primary reason that the Baur Foundation has taken an interest in the story of this family is because they are representative of a category of Swiss who left their homeland in the hope of improving their lives, one of whom was Alfred Baur (1865–1951) himself. This chapter of Swiss history, which remains little researched, is part of our common heritage. It is a reminder that Switzerland was not always the small economic wonder that we know today, and that it has above all been built on the adventurous and selfless spirit of our forebears.

The second reason that the biography of this family finds a place in the Baur Museum is because it chronicles the history of some of the objects in its collections. The origin of certain works in porcelain, jade and semi-precious stone, or cloisonnés, textiles, snuff bottles and other items, is suddenly revealed. Acquired at the turn of the 20th century through one of the family members, Gustave Loup (1876–1961), these antiques had lived through the slow decline and sudden collapse of an empire nearly two thousand years old, before enduring the shock encounter of two radically different cultures. They were hunted out in China, then sent by boat to Europe where they finally arrived in Switzerland, and entered the possession of one of the period's greatest collectors of Far Eastern art. Thus, this remarkable account is quite simply part of our shared, thrilling history.

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2. The Loups, a history of pioneers

The story begins with a certain Eugène Borel (1838–1887), who followed a commercial apprenticeship at the clock- and watchmakers Vaucher Frères de Fleurier (Canton of Neuchâtel), a company that already had a branch in China. Eugène left Switzerland in 1857 and travelled “by the Indian Mail” to the Middle Kingdom to enter the company’s service there. At just nineteen years of age, wide-eyed with astonishment, he discovered the cities of Hong Kong, Macao and Canton. Two years later, a fellow Swiss named Pierre-Frédéric Loup (1840–1899), from Môtiers in the Val-de-Travers, also arrived in the port city to work as Borel’s assistant. The pair, who now tackled the everyday difficulties of living in a foreign land together, struck up a strong friendship, and ten years later became brothers-in-law.

The remainder of this story is closely bound up with historical upheavals. Following in the wake of military advances, the two merchants opened new branches, first settling in Shanghai, then Tianjin and Peking. After the first company for which they worked went bankrupt in 1868, they each went into business on their own account. Eugène attempted to export various goods, including silkworm cocoons, before returning to Switzerland for good. In 1881 Pierre bought up the Chinese branch of the clock- and watchmakers’ L. Vrand & Co. of Tianjin and Peking, which he succeeded in developing into a prosperous business, later left to his three sons, Bernard, Gustave and Albert. The boys were all born in the French concession in Tianjin and each was to follow his own path. Gustave, the eldest, who trained in clock- and watchmaking, progressively turned to selling Chinese antiques to Switzerland where Alfred Baur would become one of his clients. Albert became an architect: his buildings – private houses, as well as cultural, public and commercial buildings – still stand in Tianjin and, in particular, Switzerland. The youngest son, Bernard, remained in the family business.

Of the three Loups born in China, only Bernard would continue the family line. In charge of the company and its properties, it behove him to protect the family interests. Having to endure the fall of the empire, the Depression, the invasion and then occupation by the Japanese, the civil war, the slow dismantling of the concessions, then the taking of power by the Communists, Bernard was the last member of the family to return to Switzerland. He finally did so in 1954, long after packing his wife and children off to safety. He held out until the pressure exerted by the new government on business owners became too great and he was obliged to sign over all the family’s possessions in China. This brought the history of the Loups in China to an end after three generations and almost a century of adventure.

3. The journey to China

Leaving for China in the 19th century was not a simple matter! And when the departure was from Switzerland, the difficulties were multiplied. Only certain stretches of the railway lines had been completed and their construction was a slow affair, held up by the need to dig tunnels through mountains and build bridges over valleys. Consequently it was often necessary also to use coaches to reach certain seaports.

Early on, the passage to China left from England and rounded the Cape of Good Hope, but this route was replaced by departure from Marseilles and the crossing of the Egyptian desert, before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated the transit to the Indian Ocean.

The very idea of going to China from Switzerland must have seemed madness. Travellers left without knowing if they would ever arrive, let alone return!

The account made by an early watch- and clockmaker, August Jeanneret-Oehl (1815–1891), who left Neuchâtel for Canton in 1838, informs us that the passage lasted more than 5 months, as the ship on which he travelled still had to round the Cape. The young man was one of four passengers on a merchant ship. His three fellow-travellers were all representatives of British tea companies.

Twenty years later, Eugène Borel (1838–1887) left Neuchâtel for Hong Kong but the route had changed. It was now customary to pass through the Mediterranean and halt at Alexandria. Passengers and baggage were then transhipped overland to Aden where the voyage continued via Pointe de Galle, Madras, Calcutta, Penang, Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong and Shanghai. This route took just a little over two months.

Just two years after Borel, Pierre Loup (1840–1899) left the Val-de-Travers. He went from Geneva to Marseilles by train on a railway line that had just been opened (1858). Like Eugène, he travelled on a steamship that specialised in transporting passengers and their baggage but also carried freight. On his return to China in 1872, following a trip to Switzerland, he passed through the Suez Canal for the first time, and the photos celebrating this extraordinary event still remain in the family archives.

During the second half of the 19th century, Japan also opened its doors to foreigners. Long closed to the outside world, the Land of the Rising Sun now attracted Westerners. Curious to explore this unknown country and enthusiastic to develop a new market, many Europeans crossed the East China Sea to explore the archipelago.

4. Opium and old lace

Despite their expansionist desires, the nations of Europe had to remain discreet and for the time being obey the wishes of the Chinese authorities by remaining outside the empire's borders. Having become completely dependent on products like silk, porcelain, lacquer and, above all, tea, to which the Netherlands and the British court had become addicted, it was impossible to risk halting supplies. This obsession is perfectly illustrated by the mission of Robert Fortune (1812–1880), a Scottish botanist who was sent in secret to the Middle Kingdom by the British government to steal tea plants that would then be sent to India for cultivation, and to gain as much information as possible on the breeding of silkworms.

At the time, China was quite willing to sell its products for export but it was reluctant to import foreign goods. This of course raised the ire of the Western merchants in the country, who consequently took up the lucrative business of dealing in opium. The growing dependence of the Chinese on this drug upset the country's trade balance with the West, and the Chinese authorities responded by increasing the prohibitions on its use and by seizing illicit merchandise. China was weakened by drug smuggling, and the two Opium Wars that followed – 1839-42, and 1856-60 – were won by the European nations. This initiated an era of imperialism.

European troops were garrisoned in the few new ports authorised to them but then brazenly advanced inland. They were followed by adventurers avid for novelty and above all personal fortune, by engineers tasked with planning and constructing facilities for the circulation and transportation of goods (and armed troops), and finally settlers, among whom many merchants searching for a new Eldorado. In addition to potential business, which motivated a great many, the discovery of a new country was just as exciting.

The Westerners quickly organized their concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin and their legations in Peking. When it came to commerce, the European dealers were immensely imaginative: in addition to clocks and watches, which rapidly gained a foothold among the Chinese public, the trading posts offered a wide variety of other articles in an attempt to establish the loyalty of this demanding new clientele. Fortunes were made by those able to ferret out the best products and beguile their public with them.

Alongside the business their husbands oversaw, Mrs Laure Borel in Neuchâtel and Adèle Loup in Tianjin took up dealing in textiles, silks and furs. To do so they made use of every available nook and cranny in the clock cases. It seems that their products delighted the ladies of Neuchâtel as much as the Chinese!

5. A difficult co-existence

At the time Eugène Borel was living in Hong Kong and Canton, the Europeans had finally won themselves – by force during the Opium Wars – the right to set up trading posts in various strategic places in the Chinese empire. With great reluctance, China opened its doors and the “foreign devils” progressively settled in treaty ports, in Shanghai, in the concessions in Tianjin and as part of the legations in Peking.

The welcome extended to them by the local population, often exploited and forced to do the Europeans’ dirty work, was cold and even hostile. On several occasions during the decades that followed, this distrust was stirred up and turned to advantage by different government factions with the aim of ousting the undesirable newcomers once and for all.

In 1857 for example, an attempt was made in Hong Kong to poison the Europeans en masse. The Chinese who made the bread the foreigners ate, but who didn’t eat it themselves, had the “brilliant” idea to add a dose of arsenic. In too much of a hurry to plan it properly, they added excessive quantities that didn’t have the expected effect and the foreigners were instead miraculously saved by violent vomiting. This incident opened their eyes to the hate which they aroused. This attempt to get rid of the Westerners through violence was only the first of a long series, of which Eugène Borel and the Loup family were to experience several episodes.

In Tianjin in 1870, the ill-feeling towards Westerners was at its height and resulted in a massacre. A popular uprising of unprecedented violence took the rebellious Chinese into the French concession where any Europeans encountered – men, women, clergy and even children – were slaughtered in the most atrocious manner. This blind fury sowed terror among the foreign residents in China, who long slept with a gun beside the bed at night. Eugène Borel was fortunate enough to escape the massacre when he was hidden by his boy behind the fireback of a corner fireplace for several days.

In June 1900, the Boxers – so named by the Europeans because they belonged to a sect that taught a martial art supposed to give them supernatural powers – rose up against their foreign enemy. The Western powers once again managed to extricate themselves from an appalling situation. The Loups too experienced the horrors of the Boxers. During the summer, the two brothers Gustave and Bernard found themselves caught up in the turmoil in Tianjin. They joined up with the allied forces and were later awarded the “China War Medal” decorated with the clasp “Relief of Peking” for service rendered to the British nation. The life of the pioneers was not a quiet one!

6. Souvenirs and curios

A letter dated 21 June 1880 shows a very excited Adèle Loup, Pierre's wife. China was still a subject of interest to Paris and even more so than before! But not simply the China discussed and displayed in the salons and royal palaces of the 17th and 18th centuries, or more recently in the museums that had amassed objects acquired by travellers following the Sack of the Summer Palace in Peking (1860). Eugène Borel himself had collected and brought back two battered imperial cloisonnés abandoned on the roadway shortly after the pillage. In France, the taste for the Far East was spreading down the social classes. To quote Adèle's letter: "Perhaps you already know that a sales representative from a shop in Paris spent the whole winter in Peking collecting curios for which he paid absurd prices! [...] Since then, the representatives of the 'Bon Marché' have also visited. [...] Another, a Mr Samuel Bing, director of a store and a great art lover, returned after having exhausted the shops in Tianjin and Peking. They all paid [...] three times more than the usual prices. That and all the travel costs and commissions added.... These curios must be selling extremely well to make them worth hunting down like that!"

Dozens of outlets opened in Paris where these curios were all the rage. A little later Switzerland too succumbed to the fascination of China and Japan, and several shops were set up to sell products from the Far East. One was the Maison Barrelet in Vevey, with which Eugène's brother Léopold was once associated before it moved to Geneva; another was the renowned jewellers and antique dealers Tardy in Geneva, where collectors of Chinese art such as Alfred Baur also lived. In 1872 the Chinese businessman Tchintani arrived in Geneva to work with the Sinologist François Turrettini (1845–1908), who set up a Chinese printing press in his house and published a number of books. In 1875 he opened a Chinese tea shop that is still in operation. In the end, Gustave Loup would also go into Chinese markets as a curios and antiques dealer. Although he was a jeweller and clockmaker by profession, it was in Tianjin and Peking that he became an antiques enthusiast. His house, "La Chine antique", in rue Céard in Geneva, enabled him to set up a real business between the two countries in the 1920s.

Initially, curios were bought like travel souvenirs. They were displayed for sale in tightly-packed rows in which the materials, shapes, subjects, usage and periods of production were mixed willy-nilly. One would have to wait until the late 19th and early 20th century for the first fervent collectors to inspire scientific and museological considerations.

7. Watches for China

Whereas the first horological pieces sent to China – richly ornate clocks, assorted mechanical objects, musical boxes, watches with complications – were the prerogative of the élite, those that followed at a later date became more varied in order to satisfy the requirements of a broader clientele. In particular, a large number of “Chinese” caliber watches, small technological marvels, were exported. These pocket watches, housed in a round case, generally have a burnished and sometimes chased cover. An engraved mechanism becomes visible when the secret cover is activated. The finest examples of this type of watch have a crown and a surround set with small pearls around a painted enamel decoration in the purest Genevese tradition. Originally conceived in London, then developed by the Bovet family in Fleurier and imitated by others, the “Chinese” watch was exported to conquer the market that bore its name.

The windows of the Western-owned shops seem to have been filled with a vast choice of timepieces, ranging from the simplest to the most elaborate in terms of their materials, techniques and ornamentation. A wide variety of decorations was available, most of which were inspired by Europe’s artistic traditions. Occasionally, the compositions included allusions to local life, such as junks on the sea, ports, pagodas, mandarins and elegantly dressed women. Clearly, the Westerners were feeling their way in the marketplace, and, although they wished to offer goods that were designed to appeal to Chinese taste, the encounter between the two cultures was not an easy one and many ideas that attempted to find a balance between them enjoyed varying degrees of success.

Language and script were undoubtedly one of the major hurdles to overcome. One attempt to do so was taken by the manufactory Bovet, which, having probably been advised that Chinese is read in the opposite direction, took the decision to write its name backwards. Thus, for a short period in the early 19th century, some watches were actually marketed under the brand name “Tevob” with the notion that their prospective customers would understand it more easily!

Other experiments were made to appeal to this new market. It was soon discovered in particular that the Chinese did not find it natural to read Roman numerals, so various ways to redesign the dial were explored. One attempt made was to apply the principle of Chinese horometry, which divides the day into twelve sequences represented by two-hourly characters. This idea was short-lived, however, as the Chinese quickly became accustomed to reading timepieces with the Western dial face, which established itself as the norm.

8. The watch and clock business

The Chinese empire aroused the curiosity of the West before arousing its greed. For their part, the Chinese paid little attention to the travellers who arrived from the West, towards whom they were normally respectful but wary.

History recounts that it was a Jesuit who finally found a way to enter the Ming court (1368–1644). After having received refusals to his multiple requests for an audience, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) came upon the idea of offering clocks to the emperor. This astute move opened wide the gates of the Palace to Ricci, as the Son of Heaven, won over by the clocks, was obliged to call on Ricci's services to wind them up as well as to keep them in good order. The eunuchs who were later trained to care for the clocks dreaded a breakdown and so endeavoured to keep the European scholar with them as a form of life insurance. In this way the Jesuits surreptitiously succeeded in getting themselves invited into the apex of the empire.

Although the missionaries had gained entry as a result of their technical and scientific knowledge, this was not the case for other foreigners. The Western rush to China would have to wait a little longer.

During the second half of the 19th century, many Europeans decided to try their luck in the Middle Kingdom, which by this time was attracting speculators of all kinds. The horological market, which represented a significant slice of China's imports from the West, was extremely competitive. Many European manufactories set up a branch in Canton in the hope of making their fortunes. And the Swiss, whose horological industry suffered repeated crises, saw the opening up of the Chinese market as an unexpected opportunity. It was within this context that production of the famous "Chinese" watches appeared and was subsequently developed. Contrary to what the adjective suggests, these watches were not made in China but were manufactured in Switzerland especially for the Chinese market. The production of "Chinese watches" in Geneva and the Val-de-Travers region (Canton of Neuchâtel), in Fleurier especially, stimulated the local economy and encouraged many adventurers to try their luck in China.

As time passed, the dealers, who constantly evaluated their own efforts, noticed that certain types of goods were more favourably looked on by the locals than others. Watches of lesser quality, the type known as "*à sujet leste*", distinguished by risqué images, were particularly successful with male clients. In addition, the Chinese were very fond of birds of all sorts, and this attachment was used to stimulate their interest in particular pieces, for example, "singsong birds", boxes or cages decorated with automata of singing birds. This fondness quickly inspired Europeans, the Swiss first and foremost, to export cuckoo clocks to China. Soon the European merchants were no longer content to specialise in timepieces, and diversified to offer a broad range of products. It was in these ebullient conditions that the Loup family made its initial foray into China.

9. The Loup heritage at the Baur Foundation

One of the books that belonged to Alfred Baur contains a dedication written in ink. We read, on the flyleaf of *La montre chinoise*: “To Mr A. Baur. With best regards from a colleague. G. Loup. Geneva, December 1919”. This is one of the first mentions of Gustave Loup in the Foundation’s archives. In the yellowed pages of Alfred Baur’s letters, stored in folders methodically filed by dealer and in chronological order, we find a substantial correspondence between the two men. We do not know when or how they met but their first letters date from 1923. A year later, Gustave Loup received the collector and his wife in Peking and he accompanied them as their guide on the only Asian trip they made.

The initial respect between the two Swiss developed into a relationship based on trust, and they discussed many aspects of China, its culture and curios. Baur allowed himself to be tempted: he bought many pieces, at times even complete lots. He later considered with care the objects he had bought, selected the most beautiful and sold the rest. With time, Alfred Baur’s taste and demands became more refined and he set about searching for specific pieces.

Although Gustave Loup never took the place of the Japanese dealer Tomita Kumasaku (1872–1953) in the constitution of the Baur collections, Alfred Baur would always look fondly on him. Was it because they shared the same pioneer spirit, having both set out in search of adventure on the other side of the world? Many of the pieces preserved in the Foundation – most of the snuff bottles, works in cloisonné and jade, and the embroidered imperial robes and textiles, for example – arrived through transactions carried out by the Loups in China. In their own way, they tell us of the meeting between the West and the Far East, and of Europe and China in particular, during the 19th and 20th centuries.

On his side, Gustave Loup kept folders filled with papers of all kinds: scribbled notes, newspaper articles cut out and commented upon, extracts from texts typewritten for future publication, and annotated photographs. We find in his papers jumbled evidence of the daily life and ideas of a man of his time. Often serious, instructive, moving and sometimes amusing, his comments shed new light on the pioneers and their activities.

As his end neared, Gustave wrote about himself and his times. These documents are a valuable source of information, describing the life of a dealer with one foot in China and another in Switzerland, whose antiquities today enrich the collections of the Foundation.

10. USEFUL INFORMATION

A Chinese Adventure

A Swiss family in pursuit of success in the Celestial Empire

Dates	6 April – 2 July 2017
Address	Fondation Baur, Musée des Arts d'Extrême-Orient 8 rue Munier-Romilly 1206 Geneva – Switzerland Tel.: +41 22 704 32 82 Website: www.fondation-baur.ch Email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2pm to 6pm (closed Monday), until 8pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full: CHF 15.- Unemployed, handicapped and students: CHF 10.-
Organizer	Estelle Niklès van Osselt, Curator
Design	Nicole Gérard
Press contact	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts Administration Tel: +41 22 704 32 82 Email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Catalogue	<i>L'Aventure chinoise, Une famille suisse à la conquête du Céleste Empire</i> , par Estelle Niklès van Osselt et Christiane Perregaux-Loup, Fondation Baur, Cinq Continents, Genève, Milan, 2017. (Published only in French)
Cultural mediation	Anne-Sophie Kreis, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits:	Wednesdays, 6.30pm: 12 and 26 April, 10 and 31 May 14 and 28 June 2017
Private guided visits:	Reservation required, please contact the secretariat