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*Nancy Norton Tomasko, "I. V. Gillis and His Biographer, Bruce Swanson", *The East Asian Library Journal* 13, no. 2 (2009): 1-16, accessed January 14, 2017,
https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/tomasko_nancy_norton.EALJ.v13.n02.p001.pdf*

I. V. Gillis and His Biographer, Bruce Swanson

NANCY NORTON TOMASKO

In August 2004 Bruce Swanson, the author of the next article in this number of the *East Asian Library Journal*, wrote requesting an article on Irvin Van Gorder Gillis and the Spencer Collection at the New York Public Library, which had appeared in a previous issue of the *Gest Library Journal*.¹ I filled his order and wrote him a note asking about his interest in I. V. Gillis. He replied, “My principal interest is Mr. Gillis whose early career in China as U.S. naval attaché I have traced through official navy files of the period 1909–1918. This [rare-book-related] part of his life, involved as he was in scholarly research, was unknown to me.” Startled, I replied something to the effect that here at Princeton University we were certainly aware of Gillis as the person through whom Guion M. Gest in the 1920s had accumulated a collection of old and rare Chinese books that eventually became the core of the collection of East Asian language materials at Princeton, but we knew very little about Gillis’s naval career or about his family background.

Thus began our exchange of sources, information, ideas, photographs, interesting leads, and newspaper articles as Bruce extended his research on I. V. Gillis’s life and work. Bruce, himself a career navy man, had first encountered I. V. Gillis during research for his monograph, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China’s Quest for Seapower*.² Fascinated

with Gillis's inventiveness and his distinctive outspokenness, Bruce had begun, in long-hand on yellow, legal-pad paper, to spin a novel based on the intrigue that he found in many navy-related documents. However, he decided to set this "fiction" aside to pursue first the real-life story of Gillis and began to write, again in long-hand on yellow, legal-pad paper, a biography of I.V. Gillis. We finally met when Bruce and his wife, RoseAnn, came to Princeton in the spring of 2005 for several days so that Bruce could read through Gest Library archival records. Bruce also traveled several times from his home in Atlanta to the Washington, DC area to locate documents in various U.S. Navy and government archives, mined on-line sources, and eventually located Bonnie Gillis Waters, a distant cousin of I.V. Gillis, who lives on Gillis-family property in upstate New York and who is the Gillis-family's genealogist.

In the autumn of 2007 Bruce, an avid hunter, went with his son and several friends on a hunting trip in the upper Midwest. Toward the end of the trip Bruce inexplicably fell ill. Back in Atlanta, his physicians' diagnosis of leukemia intensified Bruce's efforts in his remaining weeks to continue writing his text on Gillis and to move the project forward. He telephoned Vance H. Morrison, Captain, U.S. Navy (Retired), a navy colleague and close family friend, to explain the challenges he was facing and to ask this friend if he were willing to carry the Gillis manuscript to completion. Vance willingly agreed and immediately asked another friend and navy colleague of Bruce's, Don H. McDowell, Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired) to work with him.

Bruce left a study full of stacks of his manuscript pages, organized generally by the chapters of his outline of Gillis's life. Vance Morrison and Don McDowell, with the encouragement of Bruce's widow, RoseAnn Swanson, have for the past year and a half been cooperating to organize Bruce's manuscript and to fill in documentation. This has involved no small effort on their parts, but it is clear that both men have caught a good measure of Bruce's determined curiosity about I.V. Gillis. Perhaps this can be credited partially to parallels that exist between Gillis's navy and post-navy careers and their own careers that give them an insider's understanding of the implications of Gillis's work.

I spoke with RoseAnn Swanson about the possibility of publishing the first chapter of Bruce's manuscript in the *East Asian Library Journal*.

Understanding her husband's passionate interest in seeing his entire manuscript pulled together for eventual publication, RoseAnn agreed to the preliminary publication of the material on Gillis's family background and early years in the navy. Bruce's eldest daughter, Meghan Snyder, sent me the computer file for the first chapter of that manuscript, and RoseAnn later located a partial list of the documentation for this section. This first chapter, to which necessary documentation has been added, is what we are publishing in the current number of the *East Asian Library Journal*.

When completed, Vance Morrison and Don McDowell's edited version of Bruce Swanson's complete manuscript will present a larger narrative of I. V. Gillis's career. The article that follows begins with I. V. Gillis's family background and follows his navy career to the beginnings of his involvement with East Asia. To give the readers of the *East Asian Library Journal* a context for Bruce's narrative, here I offer a very brief sketch of Gillis's life, starting with his first contact with Asia.

Toward the end of 1899 Gillis was given new orders to the gun boat *Annapolis* for extended deployment in the Far East and in 1901 went to Asia for the first time as chief navigator and chief engineer of the *Annapolis*. Enroute to China, passing the Philippine Islands, Gillis was, in his own words, "nearly stung to death by wasps on Guimaras Island."³ (See figure 1.) He served on two other ships in Asian waters before receiving appointment as naval attaché in Tokyo from 1904 to 1905 and then in Beijing from 1907 to 1908. He participated in one overland reconnaissance mission with journalist Willard Straight into Manchuria to the Amur River. His unusually well-practiced talents with engineering and communications led him to positions of high responsibility at each stage of his naval service in East Asia. Along the way he accrued unusual honors for outstanding work, among them a medal of the Order of the Rising Sun bestowed by the Japanese government in 1909 after a tour as an observer aboard a Japanese ship that went to Korea to survey the Russo-Japanese War theater. Between 1911 and 1914 Gillis held the title of Assistant Naval Attaché to Peking and Tokyo and by special arrangement also began representing the Bethlehem Steel Corporation in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in its pursuit of contracts with the Chinese government to provide steel and ships for a navy that the Chinese government hoped

GILLIS, Irvin V.

(Pa - N.Y.)

2137

(Son of 252)

Proposed engineering competition in the Navy.
Suggested separation of duties of Fleet Engineer and Chief Engineer of the flag-ship.
Submitted basic idea of Director Firing (before Admiral Percy Scott) but letter was pigeon-holed by Captain Perry, of KENTUCKY.
Evolved what is now known as Rude's "Star Finding Diagrams" several years before Rude and submitted it to Hydrographic Office where it was duly pigeon-holed.
Suggested necessity for knowledge of psychology by naval officers and proposed the study of the subject at the Naval Academy, but the idea was ridiculed by the Commander-in-Chief Rear Admiral Schroeder.
Proposed basic idea of present system for procurement and record of ship's stores afloat, but Paymast General and Bureau Chiefs opposed the idea as impracticable and nothing came of it.

GILLIS, Irvin V.

(Pa - N.Y.)

2137

(Son of 252)

Nearly stung to death by wasps on Guimaras Island (P I) in 1901.
Wrote book on origin and meaning of the Chinese characters "ch'ao" and "hsi" in connection with the tides.
After retirement acted as adviser to the Chinese Cabinet Office, Ministry of the Navy, Ministry of Communications, and the Coast Guard Administration at various times.
Presided over American symbolic Masonry in all China as the District Grand Master for China - Massachusetts Constitution for 13 years (1923 to 1936) and as such was the Senior Ranking Mason of all nationalities in China.

1. U.S. Naval Academy Records Cards for Irvin Van Gorder Gillis. Courtesy of the U.S. Naval Academy Special Collections and Archives, Nimitz Library, Annapolis, MD.

to build. Gillis, thus, was in China associated with the U.S. Legation in Beijing at China's transition from empire to republic.

Gillis officially retired from the navy on 1 July 1914 and returned briefly to the United States before reappearing in Beijing in September of 1914 as representative in China of the Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut, and, as well, of Bethlehem Steel. In fact, from this position as industry representative, Gillis managed a clandestine, civilian information operation and recruited numerous eminent foreign scholars, researchers, educators, anthropologists, archaeologists, businessmen, and missionaries, developing a wide net of intelligence informants.⁴ In mid-1917 in response to disintegrating world cohesion, Gillis returned to rank in the navy, and for two and a half years he filled the post of naval attaché in the U.S. Legation in Beijing.

By 1914 Gillis had already established a home in Beijing and was very active socially in the foreign diplomatic and business circles in China. (See figures 2 and 3.) Thus, when he fully retired from the navy late in 1919, perhaps it was an obvious choice for Gillis to forego returning to his homes in Pennsylvania and up-state New York. He continued his career in China and never again, so far as can be learned, left that country even for a short period. In 1922 Gillis listed himself professionally as I Li Shou, "representing American shipbuilders & manufacturers" and gave business addresses at "Ma I Pa Hsieh Chieh, outside Hou Men" and at Kwai Pang Hutung.⁵ In 1925 he was associated with the Peking Mongolor Mining Co. as a manufacturer's and shipbuilder's representative.⁶ Gillis reported that at various times also acted as adviser to many entities of the Chinese government: Chinese Cabinet Office, Ministry of the Navy, Ministry of Communications, and Coast Guard Administration.⁷ Socially he was vice president of the American Chamber of Commerce, a director (along with S. C. Thomas Sze and others) of the Association of Chinese and American Engineers, and president of the Peking Club.⁸ He was particularly active in the Masons, presiding over all Masonic activities in China for thirteen years (1923 to 1936.)⁹ (See figure 4 for an undated photograph, probably taken in the 1920s.)

With his feet planted solidly (and yet very fluidly) in Chinese and Western military, governmental, engineering, business consulting,



2. I.V. Gillis standing beside a fireplace. Probably taken in Beijing. Undated. In the collection of The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection, Princeton University.



3. Garden of I. V. Gillis's residence in Beijing. Photograph by John Van Antwerp MacMurray, secretary to the U.S. Legation, Beijing, May 1915. John van Antwerp MacMurray Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

and social domains, it is not surprising that Irvin Van Gorder Gillis at some point in the nineteen-tens or early twenties met Guion Moore Gest, whose own electrical engineering company did a large business in many international venues, when Gest came to China seeking contracts for production and sale of electric cable. The story of Gest's medical problems with his eyes and Gillis's suggestion that he give Chinese medicine a try has been frequently cited as the precursor to Gest's interest in accumulating old books on Chinese medicine with Gillis acting as his book agent and to Gillis's advising him to expand the range of his collecting interests to include antiquarian books in all categories.¹⁰

In 1927 Gillis moved to a new residence, perhaps not far from his earlier residence outside of Di'anmen (Houmen) in the area just north of the Forbidden City. This move may have corresponded to his marriage to Zhao Yubin (Chao Yü-pin), a woman eighteen years his junior, who has been identified, by some reports, as a Manchu and a member of the former imperial clan. (See figure 5 for an undated photograph of Gillis



4. Commander Irvin V. Gillis, USN (retired), in dress clothing, white shirt, tie, overcoat, standing in front of doors. Undated. NH661150. In the collection of the Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, DC.



5. I.V. Gillis with his wife, Zhao Yubin, possibly a wedding photograph. Probably taken in Beijing. Undated. In the collection of The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection, Princeton University.

and his wife.) It was from this residence that he ran his business as a book buyer, primarily for Gest, but for others (among them the North China Language School in Beijing and major library collections in North America) as well. In 1926 the huge collection of books acquired for Gest was shipped to its first home, McGill University, Montreal. In 1933 and 1934 (and probably earlier and continuing for some additional years), Gillis listed himself solely as representing the Gest Chinese Research Library, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.¹¹

As with the earlier parts of his career, Gillis never confined his professional activity to a single domain. The intense interest with systems, procedures, codes, organization, and categorization that he displayed in the constant stream of letters that he wrote to his naval superiors and to the Navy Department enlivened the effectiveness of his engineering consultancy.¹² In Gillis's work as book buyer, these skills translated into an uncanny ability to ferret out old and rare materials, to develop a unique cataloguing system, to work around the increasingly complicated rulings with respect to the sale of Chinese antiquities issued by the wary Nationalist government (about which Gillis made no small number of perhaps fittingly harsh and disdainful comments), and to develop a bookman's scholarly understanding of how to identify and confirm editions of old Chinese books. As stated above, all the while he nosed around for books, I. V. Gillis indeed continued applying his significant store of intelligence-gathering skills in the service of the U.S. government as chief of intelligence in the Far East.

During the Sino-Japanese War the Japanese occupied Beijing and in March 1943 dispatched Americans in that city for transport to an internment camp in Weixian, Shandong. Gillis was among the crowd of Americans walking to the railway station when he fainted, reportedly because of a heart condition. Hospitalized for a period, he was released to spend the balance of the war under house arrest inside the former Beijing British Legation compound, then under the control of the Japanese.¹³ (See figure 6, for a photograph of the Gillises standing inside the British Legation compound.) Officially freed in October 1945, Gillis and his wife did not move back into their home, which for several years had been let out to several Japanese households, until April 1946.¹⁴ Gillis



6. Left to right: Chinese woman holding two dogs, Captain Hines, Zhao Yubin, I. V. Gillis, Chinese man. Caption on the back of the photograph reads, "Taken inside the British Legation Quarters, Peiping, China, October 1945. The Marine officer is Captain Hines." In the collection of The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection, Princeton University.

gradually regained a measure of his health and recovered some of the books and materials scattered during his absence, though much was lost and destroyed. As of 2007 a portion of the last home and garden that the Gillis's owned still stands, again a multifamily dwelling. (See figure 7 for a photograph of Gillis's home as it appears today.) Letters from these post-internment years understandably are at turns sharply cynical, and one mentions the death of his son, the only known reference to any children that I. V. Gillis might have fathered.¹⁵ Gillis died late in 1948 and was probably buried in the Beijing area though the specific location of the gravesite is to date unknown. (See figure 8.)

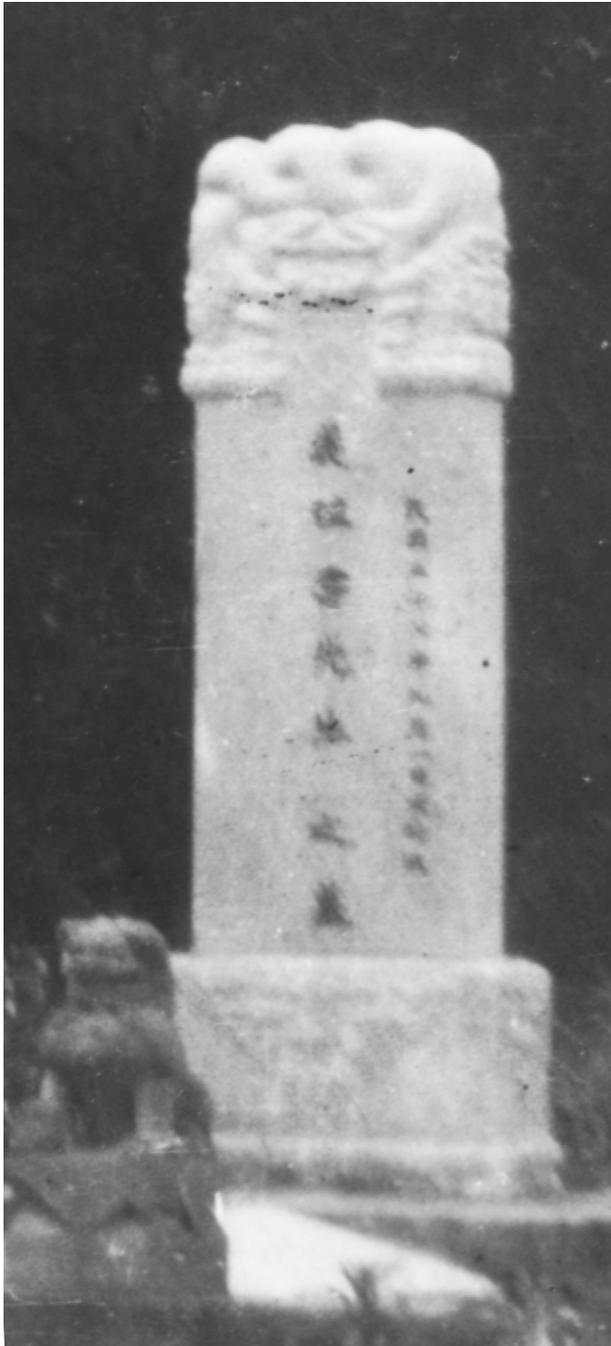
I. V. Gillis's life as an antiquarian bookman in China, which bears considerable significance for the history of the book in East Asia, grew out of and was thoroughly and intriguingly intertwined with his life as a navy man. Bruce Swanson's narrative of the beginnings of I. V. Gillis's navy career sets the groundwork for understanding that career. And we anticipate reading Bruce's narrative in its entirety in Vance Morrison and Don McDowell's edited version when it finally appears as a monograph.



7. Front door of Gillis's home in Beijing, 2007, with Cao Shuwen, the Chinese book cataloguer in the East Asian Library at Princeton whose research led to locating Gillis's entry in Beiping city household registration records for 1947 and the house as it stands today. Photograph courtesy of Cao Shuwen.



8A. I.V. Gillis grave site, probably in Beijing, specific location unknown.



8B Center text on the stone reads: “Yi Lishou xiansheng zhi mu” (Grave of Mr. Yi Lishou [i.e. Irvin V. Gillis]). The text on the right reads: “Minguo sanshiqinian jiu yue yi?[er?]ri ? ? ?” (Thirty-seventh year of the Republic, ninth month, first [or possibly second] day, [followed by three undeciphered characters]). In the collection of The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection, Princeton University

NOTES

1. See Soren Edgren, "I. V. Gillis and the Spencer Collection," *Gest Library Journal* 6.2 (Winter 1993), pp. 5–29.
2. Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982).
3. Irvin Van Gorder Gillis, ["Alumnus resume summary record card"] 2137, Special Collections and Archives Division, Nimitz Library, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, side 2.
4. The following records, dated from 1913 to 1931, point to Gillis's long-term involvement in intelligence gathering in China. See John A. Logan, "Ta Wha (Big Talk)," typescript given to the Gest Library in 1956 by Mrs. David Murray (i.e. I. V. Gillis's sister, Caroline), in the archives of the East Asian Library, Princeton University. John Logan accompanied the 1931 ethnological expedition to Northern Tibet that Gene Lamb conducted. Logan states that along the way, he did some mapping for naval intelligence to "orient a punitive expedition if it were necessary to send one out by our Marine Guard in Peking." (p. 4) He clandestinely took photographs of sketch maps that he drew and destroyed the sketches. Logan clarifies further, "And upon my return to Peking I redrew them [the maps] in large scale and turned them over to Capt. I. V. Gillis, our former Naval Attaché and who was then head of intelligence in Asia." (p. 5)

See also, "List of Reliable Americans Residing in China," 7 July 1921, Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), 405: 602–200. This document, filed by Gillis's immediate successor to the post of naval attaché at the U.S. Legation in Beijing, in all likelihood was, in Bruce Swanson's evaluation, largely compiled by Gillis himself. The 22-page document lists by city the names of individuals (the first name being that Gillis himself), giving a short biography, noting specific skills, and degree of reliability for each person.

A similar two-page Office of Naval Intelligence document (ONI no. 403-RRQ) dated 21 June 1913, lists persons who "might be of service during approach or out break of war." To this is added a cover page dated 17 July 1913, the first line of which reads, "Lieutenant Commander I. V. Gillis examined this list July 17, 1914 [in error for 1913?], and stated that he considered . . . [person's name] not a desirable person to employ because he talks too much."

Perhaps most explicit of all is an unsigned, personal and confidential letter (ONI no. 20022) from the Office of Naval Intelligence, Washington to Gillis dated 15 November 1915, which states in part, "It is now intended that you should be appointed the Chief Intelligence Officer in China in case of strained relations with a certain power [i.e. Japan]." The document continues, "so, if after conferring with the Naval Attaché at Peking and reading the papers which apply, you decide that you wish to undertake the work, you may consider yourself as the officer designated as Chief Intelligence Officer in China."

Numerous additional declassified documents among those that Bruce Swanson

located in the archives of the Office of Naval Intelligence confirm that Gillis indeed did take up this work in earnest, posting regular reports that reflect his unvarnished candor about how to remedy the deficiencies in the intelligence operations and his evaluation of procedures and events.

5. Alexander Ramsay, comp., *The Peking Who's Who, 1922* (Peking: Alexander Ramsay, 1922), pp. 14 and III. These two street names are attached to intersecting streets or *hutong* just south of the vicinity of Di'anmen and may simply be two names that Gillis used to refer to the place of his business and/or his residence rather than pointing to two different locales.
6. *The North-China Desk Hong List 1925: A General and Business Directory for Shanghai and the Northern and River Ports, Etc.* (Shanghai: North-China Daily News & Herald, 1925), p. 851.
7. Irvin Van Gorder Gillis, ["Alumnus resumé summary card"] 2137, side 2.
8. Ramsay, *The Peking Who's Who, 1922*, pp. 73, 74, and 77.
9. Irvin Van Gorder Gillis, ["Alumnus resumé summary card"] 2137, side 2.
10. For more information, see the following: Hu Shih, "The Gest Oriental Library at Princeton University," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 15 (Spring 1954); Diane Perushek, "The Gest Chinese Research Library," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 43 (Spring 1987); Soren Edgren's article cited in note 1 above; Su Chen and Juming Zhao, "The Gest Chinese Research Library at McGill University, 1926–1936," *East Asian Library Journal* 11.2 (Autumn 2004), pp. 40–99; and Martin Heijdra, "The East Asian Library and The Gest Collection at Princeton," in *Collecting Asia: East Asian Libraries in North America, 1868–2008*, ed. Peter Zhou (Ann Arbor MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2010), forthcoming.
11. See *The North-China Desk Hong List 1933*, p. 620; and *The North-China Desk Hong List 1934*, p. 658.
12. Irvin Van Gorder Gillis, ["Alumnus resumé summary card"] 2137, side 1.
13. Irvin Van Gorder Gillis to Nancy Lee Swann, 28 February 1948, Gest Library Papers, box 238.
14. Gillis to Swann, 17 April 1946, Gest Library Papers, box 238.
15. Ibid.

GLOSSARY

Cao Shuwen 曹淑文	I Li Shou, <i>see</i> Yi Lishou
Chao Yü-pin, <i>see</i> Zhao Yubin	Kwai Pang Hutung, <i>see</i> Guaibang hutong
Dahua 大話	Ma I Pa Hsieh Chieh, <i>see</i> Mayiba xie jie
Di'anmen 地安門	Mayiba xie jie 馬尾巴斜街
Guaibang hutung 拐棒胡同	Minguo sanshiqinian jiuyue yi?[er?]ri ???
Hou Men, <i>see</i> Houmen	民國三十七年九月一?[二?]日□□□
Houmen 後門	Ta Wha, <i>see</i> Dahua

Weixian 濰縣

Yi Lishou 義理壽

Yi Lishou xiansheng zhi mu

義理壽先生之墓

Zhao Yubin 趙玉彬