

**CONFRONTING INDIANA JONES
Chinese Nationalism, Historical Imperialism,
and the Criminalization of
Aurel Stein and the Raiders of Dunhuang, 1899–1944**

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On December 27, 1930, the Tianjin press boldly branded one of the world's foremost archaeologists an insatiable "thief" for the first time and demanded his immediate expulsion from the country. Unaware of the public besmirching of his name and newly arrived in the oasis outpost of Keriya nearly half a continent away, Marc Aurel Stein was far more concerned with an alarmingly persistent spew of bloody phlegm than with the vagaries of the Chinese press. The headline in the *L'Impartial* (*Dagongbao*), however, was adamant: "Under Pretense of 'Travel,' Stein Plunders Xinjiang Antiquities; Outrageous Speeches in America Insult Chinese Nation; Immediate Expulsion Requested." According to the report, among Stein's many offenses were his "absurd claims" that the far northwestern province of Xinjiang "does not even count as part of Chinese territory" and that "the Chinese race is on the verge of extinction." By far his most unforgivable crime, however, was the "pilfering and permanent removal of Dunhuang's storehouse of treasures to a foreign land." This act alone constituted an "enormous loss to our country."¹

Though several more months would pass before local obstruction efforts finally succeeded in driving Stein out of Xinjiang for good, the massive smear campaign directed against the diminutive Hungarian-born British citizen had now finally gone public, and the days of unchecked foreign archaeological expeditions in China were just about over. As Stein stubbornly pressed north toward the oases of Korla and Kucha in March 1931, Chen Yuan, a Chinese historian at the Nanjing-based Academia Sinica—the newly emergent vanguard of the professional Chinese intelligentsia—seized the opportunity to put the finishing touches on his monumental *Dunhuang jieyu lu*. Though discreetly translated into English as *An Analytical List of the Tun-huang Manuscripts in the National Library of Peiping*, anyone familiar with the Chinese language could not fail to miss the prominent position of the character for "plunder" (*jie*) smack dab in the middle of the title, and, if asked, could likely provide a more accurate translation: *An Index of the Dunhuang Manuscripts Remaining after the Plunder*.² Warned by friends

and colleagues that the insertion of the character for “plunder” into the title itself was too “provocative” (*ciji*), Chen replied that, “on the contrary, this character is insufficient to express our full anger. I should use an even stronger character!”³

It had not always been like this. Three decades earlier (and in a much less afflicted state) Stein had been in the exact same place, wowing the local Qing officials of Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang) with his erudite scholarship and indefatigable will. In 1899 Stein set out from India for the first of four expeditions to Xinjiang on funds obtained from the British Indian government for the express purpose of confirming “the large place which Indian language and culture must have occupied in the administration and daily life of this region during the early centuries of our era.”⁴ And the local Qing officials were only too glad to wine and dine him. On June 3, 1901, Han Yaoguang, prefect of Keriya county, filed a glowing report after his meeting with Stein. “In my opinion this traveler is quite genial and cultured, polite and refined. In fact, he is an outstanding individual in every respect.” Han’s many conversations with Stein were “exceedingly precious” and made the prefect “beam with joy.”⁵

Yet by October 1930 the British consular officer in charge of securing Stein’s Chinese visa felt compelled to alter both the tone and language of Stein’s application. It had become prudent by this point to advertise Stein as a “truly good friend of the Chinese government” whose “aim in undertaking such archaeological activities within Xinjiang is nothing more than to uncover and extol the prestige of ancient China.”⁶ How did Stein plunge from “outstanding individual” to insatiable “thief” in the course of a single generation? Most Western accounts, parroting the exculpatory accounts of foreign adventurers unfamiliar with either the Chinese language or developments in Chinese intellectual circles, have been content to attribute Stein’s fall to the vague “winds of nationalism” that swept across China during the 1920s. Such a fierce gale of “awakened nationalism,” we are told, spurred “a new generation of indigenous archaeologists ... [to seek] an early end to the days when Westerners, as if by writ, could uproot another nation’s past.”⁷

A fuller picture, however, can be reached through an examination of what Chinese diplomats, scholars, antiquarians, and journalists themselves were saying about Stein and his generation of controversial explorer-cum-archaeologists. The rise of a professional Chinese intelligentsia—a product of the Nanjing decade—in the late 1920s and early 1930s emboldened some Chinese scholars to re-evaluate the activities of the “haughty imperialists.” And yet, at precisely the moment when chastened Western imperialists were fleeing the scene of the crime, the drive to implement what might be characterized as an unacknowledged policy of Chinese historical imperialism on the northwestern Central Asian frontiers reveals a less attractive—and heretofore unacknowledged—side to the effort to reach out to the geographic and cultural margins of the defunct Qing state.

A recent and laudable turn in the field of Chinese history, exemplified by the writings of scholars as diverse as James L. Hevia and Chen Jian,⁸ has placed

great stress on uncovering instances of “Chinese agency” within the context of China’s long historical subjugation at the hands of Euro-American and Japanese imperialism. Yet it is of paramount importance that such scholarship goes one step further and makes at least a minimal effort to show how “Chinese agency” is not simply the benign opposite of passive victimization.⁹ In our belated search for “Chinese agency” (often seen as anticipating or representative of Chinese nationalism), we must also begin to come to terms with the thin line separating nationalism from imperialism.¹⁰ In his examination of the critique of the “barbarous” Western looting expeditions in the wake of the Boxer uprising in 1900–1901, Hevia raised the question of how Westerners, the self-proclaimed victims of Chinese “barbarism,” could continue to “retain the moral high ground if they slavishly copied the behavior of savages?”¹¹ Throughout this chapter, we must ask precisely the same question of the bearers of Chinese agency, who not only “slavishly copied” the imperialist behavior of Western archaeologists,¹² but then almost immediately proceeded to suppress any discussion of their own imperialist actions by cloaking the historical record in an uncompromising discourse of criminalization.

Although the Dunhuang Thousand-Buddha Caves (*qianfodong*) ultimately yielded over 40,000 previously undiscovered ancient manuscripts, paintings, statuary, and ceramics dating from the fourth to eleventh centuries, ownership of the artifacts themselves was hardly all that was at stake. Rather, at issue were the fundamental historical and linguistic parameters within which China’s northwestern frontiers would be framed and interpreted for generations to come. The Sino-Manchu-Mongolian ruling class that had administered local Qing authority in the northwestern frontiers for nearly two centuries prior to the arrival of Western archaeologists did not, for the most part, view the social integration of the peoples of Xinjiang (“New Dominions”) into the greater Qing empire as a desirable end. Two hundred years of hands-off administration in the northwest allowed twentieth-century Western adventurist scholars the opportunity to stake their own unchallenged historical claims to the lands of “Chinese” Central Asia, much to the chagrin of their newly nationalist Chinese-educated counterparts.

As the archaeological heritage of Xinjiang and Dunhuang—and Stein’s prominent lineage among the many raiders of Dunhuang—increasingly became an intellectual battleground for competing historical, linguistic, and ethnic narratives, many Chinese-educated scholars came to echo Qing statesman Duanfang’s view that control over the Dunhuang manuscripts was “a matter of life and death for Chinese scholarship.”¹³ Anticipating the Nanjing decade and continuing throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the imposition of a muscular Han Chinese nationalist rhetoric on the historical margins of the northwestern territories was part and parcel of “largely unacknowledged twentieth-century modes of Chinese imperialist strategies in print and visual media,” strategies that were “boldly and optimistically projected in

anticipation of a time when the state would finally be able to back up such imperialist claims with credible military force.”¹⁴ The censure and ultimate “criminalization” of Western archaeologists spelled the death knell for any historical orientation that did not exalt and naturalize the primacy of the Chinese written word and the role of the Han peoples.

First Contact: Antiquarian Officials React to Stein and Dunhuang, 1900–1910

As word filtered up through the local yamens in Xinjiang in the summer of 1901 that a “casual foreign traveler” (*youlizhe*) had unearthed “wooden tablets, fragments of leather plaitings ... [and] quite a bit of tattered paper with tracings of writing visible,” the Chinese-educated officials serving on the Qing frontier apparently assumed that such writings would be in their own language.¹⁵ How else to account for the naïve bureaucratic request mechanically forwarded to Pan Zhen, district magistrate of Khotan, that he “transcribe” an additional file copy of several 2,000-year-old Sanskrit documents that Stein had produced for his inspection? The awkward position in which Pan found himself as he carefully crafted his May 17, 1901, reply is evident. “Insofar as I cannot make out the style of calligraphy used in this script,” he admitted sheepishly, “any attempt to trace a copy by hand would ultimately prove futile.”

Much to Pan’s surprise, however, the foreign traveler “does appear to be able to make sense of the majority of the writings in this script, and reports that they are letters and correspondences between local chiefs and princes from the kingdoms of this region in earlier times and the Indians who ran errands back and forth among them.”¹⁶ Two weeks later Keriya prefect Han Yaoguang also had to rely upon Stein’s linguistic skills in order to report that “these are all ancient Indian characters, not of the sort still in use today. They are perhaps 2,800 years old, a date [Stein] verified by reference to an annotated English version of Xuanzang’s account of his trip to the Western Regions.”¹⁷

Stein’s well-known penchant for casting himself in the role of a modern-day Xuanzang—the celebrated Chinese-educated monk who traveled to India during the seventh century and brought back thousands of Buddhist Sanskrit scriptures for translation into Chinese—resonated repeatedly with literate officials and religious monks stationed in Xinjiang who were familiar with the many tales that had grown up around this venerated historical figure. Frequently invoking Xuanzang’s perilous journey in search of original Sanskrit versions of “lost” Buddhist sutras in northern India, Stein cloaked his efforts as those of one who is “performing a pious act in rescuing for Western scholarship all those relics of ancient Buddhist literature and art which were otherwise bound to get lost earlier or later through local indifference.”¹⁸

In fact, Chinese-educated officials did not fret over the loss of manuscripts not in Chinese. Ye Changchi, the provincial education commissioner for Gansu province from 1902 to 1906, maintained copious diary entries regarding the specific contents of Chinese-language documents and steles that had begun to trickle out of Dunhuang's Thousand-Buddha Caves during his tenure in Gansu. In his entry for September 28, 1904, however, Ye made only a terse remark regarding the receipt of a gift of "31 leaves of a manuscript sutra ... all in Sanskrit," whose strange script he derisively characterized as a "flurry of raindrops in a windy storm, with letters puny as flies." In December 1909, however, three years after retiring to his home in Zhejiang province, Ye deeply mourned reports that the French sinologist Paul Pelliot had carted off a great many Chinese "Tang-Song manuscripts and paintings" from the Dunhuang cave library.¹⁹

The linguistic preferences of Western and Chinese scholars were also evident within the northwestern manuscript forgery business, whose proprietors staked their very livelihood on the profitable exploitation of wealthy scholars. From 1895 to 1901 Islam Akhun and his band of Khotanese accomplices ran a highly lucrative business forging manuscripts in "unknown languages" and selling them to European "sahibs" in Kashgar. According to Stein, "a certain Ibrahim Mulla ... made it his special business to cultivate the Russian demand for 'old books,' while Islam Akhun attended chiefly to the requirements of British officers and other collectors." The scam was so successful that by 1896 the forgers no longer copied everything by hand but rather started to produce fake books by means of "repeated impressions from a series of wooden blocks."²⁰

What sort of person would prove most likely to exchange large sums of silver for a short length of Chinese-scripted hemp, silk, or paper? Zhao Weixi, a Qing official traveling through Gansu and Xinjiang during 1910–1911, provides a classic character profile of an interested buyer of Chinese-language Dunhuang manuscripts. Zhao's sojourn through the northwest on his way to Dihua, the provincial capital of Xinjiang, occurred at precisely the same time that Luo Zhenyu had begun to agitate (successfully) for the Ministry of Education to begin the excruciating process of shipping to Beijing the remaining 9,000 or so Dunhuang manuscripts not taken by Stein or Pelliot.

When on October 23, 1910, Zhao decided to rest his weary limbs at a wayside inn near Gansu province's Jiayu Pass, perched on the northwestern precipice of what could only tenuously be referred to as "China proper," he prepared himself for his imminent entry into Chinese Turkestan by penning a lengthy colophon on the backside of a *Mahā-parinirvāna* sutra from Dunhuang (given to him the previous year by one-time Gansu garrison commander Chai Hongshan). "The paper and ink appear to be brand new, while the characters are vibrant and smooth, tender yet muscular," Zhao observed. "The structure is tight and orderly. Bursting with latent vitality, in form and appearance the characters succeed in harmonizing elegance and grace with a firm, robust bearing." Such a feat, Zhao believed, "can only flow from the brush of an early Tang genius."

After tabulating each and every one of the sutra's 7,788 characters individually, Zhao triumphantly declared that "every character is worth a pearl, and if placed in a *hu*-vessel these pearls would burst out over the side."²¹ Zhao's passion for the abstruse minutiae of the Chinese calligraphic art—more than one-third of the entire colophon is taken up with such purple prose—was not atypical. When the famous calligrapher Wang Shubo gazed for the first time upon the mesmerizing strokes of the *lishu* script on a manuscript brought from Turpan in 1914, he dreamily described the sight as "an elegant flow interspersed with rich splashes of recklessly bold ink dashes that achieve intensity through a refined grace. The entire page," Wang continued breathlessly, "is overcome with a mesmerizing beauty. No one has seen such a thing for over a thousand years." This time mere pearls were insufficient to gauge the worth of each character, for these exquisite specimens were deemed worthy of "a thousand pieces of gold each, enough to cure one's hunger."²²

Antiquarian officials and calligraphers such as Zhao Weixi and Wang Shubo tended to divide their colophon commentaries between two subjects: aesthetic particularities of the Chinese calligraphic craft as evinced on the manuscript in their possession, followed by a brief speculation on the implications of Stein's and Pelliot's removal of the greater portion of manuscripts from the Thousand-Buddha Caves. But in contrast to the uncompromising polemics hurled at these foreign explorers in later decades, these initial reactions were mild, often even approving. Much like the friendly cooperation evident in the establishment of the Sino-Russian joint mining operations (see Kinzley, Chapter 2) in Tacheng in 1899—the same year that Stein began his first expedition—Chinese-educated scholar-officials in the first decade of the twentieth century encouraged, approved, and even collaborated with Stein's archaeological endeavors.

On October 30, 1908, Zhu Ruichi, prefect of Pishan county in Xinjiang, wrote a personal letter to Stein in which he expressed concern at the latter's encounter with "snowcapped mountain peaks and winter gales so fierce that they pierce the human body and severely chap the hands and feet." When Zhu heard of Stein's plight in the fearsome outdoors, he immediately "mourned" for the archaeologist's welfare. After further consideration, however, the prefect's mourning turned to admiration. "What I mourn," Zhu clarified, "is the thought of you scaling mountain cliffs, fording bodies of water, and enduring all sorts of strenuous obstacles. What I admire is your stern fortitude and stoutness of heart." For Zhu and other antiquarian officials unaccustomed to ever leaving the comfort of their study, Stein's activities on the frontier "confer glory upon the desert sands of the Gobi and add luster to the mountain peaks of the Kunlun."²³

In stark contrast to the creative tongue-lashings that later generations of nationalist Chinese scholars would broadcast, in this early period Stein's and Pelliot's relocation of archaeological artifacts to Europe was consistently mediated via decidedly neutral verbs such as "obtained" (*huoqu*), "transported" (*yunsong*),

“carried away” (*xiedai*), and “sent back” (*jihui*).²⁴ As late as 1925, Cai Yuanpei, president of Beijing University, maintained a nonaccusatory tone while stating matter-of-factly that “ever since the discovery of Dunhuang’s stone caverns, the majority of important materials has been shipped (*yunwang*) to Europe by the English scholar Stein and the French scholar Pelliot.” Though it was certainly a “pity” that “scholars wishing to read such manuscripts have no choice but to travel to Europe,” no erudite Chinese-educated scholar or high official in these early decades thought that Stein and his ilk were “criminals” for taking Chinese manuscripts to libraries and museums across Europe.²⁵

Even when Zhao Weixi called the removal to Paris of ten thousand of the most exquisite manuscripts “a deep humiliation for our people,” he did not condemn the remover. And while Luo Zhenyu confessed to a “troubled state of mind” and yearned to “accompany Dr. Pelliot on his journey back to the West,” he also immediately stated his “appreciation for Dr. Pelliot’s generosity and warm-heartedness,” calling him a “dear friend of high moral integrity.”²⁶ On the contrary, these antiquarians consistently blamed Abbot Wang—the hapless Daoist guardian of the Dunhuang caves who repeatedly sold manuscripts and relics to raise money for temple repairs—and the many local officials who pecked away like scavengers at the poorly secured stash of Dunhuang manuscripts that were transported to Beijing in 1910.

Certainly the purported desire of eccentric antiquarian official Duanfang to “buy back” (*gouhui*) a portion of those Dunhuang manuscripts in Pelliot’s possession indicates some sense of entitlement to the Chinese-language documents. Yet Pelliot—who refused Duanfang’s request—continued to stay in the good graces of Chinese scholars, largely because he cooperated with them and read classical Chinese fluently. The facilitation of Pelliot’s considerable contributions toward the field of classical Chinese learning were deemed to be of far greater priority than petty—and decidedly ungentlemanly—quibblings over who got there first.²⁷ Indeed, to the first dirt-encrusted man of learning to arrive on the scene went the spoils, and not a single scholar writing in Chinese would ever dispute this tacit agreement during the early decades.

Buttressing the Classics: Luo Zhenyu and the Antiquarian Scholars, 1911–1924

The first serious Chinese scholar to arrive on the scene of Dunhuang studies was the antiquarian Luo Zhenyu. In stark contrast to such Holy Grail-seeking antiquarian officials as Zhao Weixi and Duanfang, Luo and his young protégé Wang Guowei did more during the sixteen years from 1909 to 1925 than anyone else to collect, copy, publish, analyze, and propagate knowledge of the Chinese-language archaeological finds that had begun to emerge in increasing numbers

from Xinjiang and Gansu. Luo and Wang's painstaking efforts to search out and translate speeches given by Stein and Pelliot and printed in such forums as the London-based *Geographical Journal* finally alerted the broader Chinese scholarly community on the eastern seaboard to the activities of foreign explorers along the northwestern frontier.

A mere two years following Stein's first visit to Dunhuang in May 1907, Luo published a collection of speeches by English, French, German, and Japanese explorers in which the latest finds and archaeological discoveries were elaborated upon in detail. Translated into respectable classical Chinese by even more respectable scholars such as Wang Guowei and Fan Bingqing, *Visiting the Ancients among the Shifting Sands* (*Liusha fanggu ji*) served as a crash-course introduction to the considerable head start foreign archaeologists had attained over their Chinese counterparts in the excavation—and reclamation—of the history of a land still caught between the competing toponyms of “Eastern” and “Chinese” Turkestan. To borrow Stein's characterization, antiquarian scholars cast in the mould of Luo and Wang were notoriously uninterested in the politics of “new China's” struggle to claim historical and political sovereignty over the northwestern frontiers. Wang's translation of Stein's March 8, 1909, speech before the Royal Geographical Society, in which Stein first disclosed the details of the “discovery” of Dunhuang's Thousand-Buddha Caves, freely interchanges the toponyms “Turkestan,” “Xinjiang,” “Eastern Turkestan,” and “Chinese Turkestan,” on one occasion even omitting the “Chinese” half of the original document's “Chinese Turkestan.”²⁸

Antiquarians like Luo and Wang used Chinese-language materials from Dunhuang and Xinjiang mainly to confirm the activities of the same Chinese social and political elite groups “that are also documented in the textual sources.” As Lothar von Falkenhausen has observed, because Chinese researchers “have been led to believe that they already knew what happened ... the goal of archaeology was merely to demonstrate the correctness of an already-accepted view.” This outlook reduced archaeological finds to “useful supplier[s] of evidence” for the venerated Confucian classics, and subjected historical materials to become the “virtual handmaiden of antiquarianist historiography.” Studies of Chinese-language antiquities unearthed from the desert sands throughout Stein's lifetime are without exception prefaced with determinist introductory phrases in the mould of “According to the History of the Han Dynasty ...” Wang Guowei's most celebrated scholarly achievement was a “path-breaking reconstruction of Shang royal genealogy, which, gratifying to those who believed in the accuracy of the transmitted texts, demonstrated the essential correctness of the genealogy presented by Sima Qian” nearly two millennia prior.²⁹

Despite the self-imposed straitjacket of a determinist agenda based largely on the Chinese classics, however, the date of February 16, 1925, ushered in a new era in Dunhuang studies. For on that day, Luo Zhenyu was one of several prominent intellectuals who gathered to see 33-year-old Chen Wanli off at the Beijing train

station. Chen's final destination was Dunhuang. And though this marked the first time ever that a Chinese scholar had made the arduous journey to the distant Thousand-Buddha Caves since its "opening" nearly three decades earlier, what Chen encountered along the way would shake the very foundations of the Chinese scholarly community.

Chen Wanli and the Criminalization of Langdon Warner, 1925–1926

Chen Wanli was a doctor by training whose experiences on the Langdon Warner expedition would inspire him to become one of China's foremost historians of ceramics. His fascinating account of American art historian Langdon Warner's ill-fated Harvard-sponsored expedition to Dunhuang in early 1925 is a surprisingly sympathetic eyewitness record of the shock and frustration experienced by all members of the party—both American and Chinese—upon encountering xenophobic, poverty-stricken peasants who had finally learned how to turn crumbling bodhisattva debris into ready cash. The real Chen Wanli was neither the heroic anti-imperialist Chinese scholars have come to venerate nor the saboteur extraordinaire of Western lore. In fact, he seems to have had little inkling of the powerful forces plotting around him.

According to William Hung (Hong Ye), newly appointed dean of Yanjing University in Beijing, the Chinese interpreter from Langdon Warner's first expedition in 1923–1924 came to him one night in early 1925 and confessed with tears and on bended knee that he had witnessed Warner removing several frescoes from the walls of the Thousand-Buddha Caves the previous year yet had never reported the matter. Because word was now circulating that the same Americans had returned to China with an even larger quantity of fresco-loosening glycerin and cheesecloth in preparation for a second expedition, Hung made up his mind to notify Vice Minister of Education Qin Fen, who in turn "instructed local authorities to provide these friends with ample protection and courteous treatment, but on no account allow them to touch any historical relics."³⁰

The ensuing course of events is significant precisely because it showcases the highly sympathetic outlook—indeed, outright mimicry—of the professional Chinese intelligentsia toward the sort of invasive archaeological reconnaissance procedures that had characterized nearly every foreign expedition prior to 1925. Chen must have known that the expedition would encounter polite resistance from local yamens and a few staged protests from the local people—that was all an expected part of William Hung's original plan. Never in their wildest dreams, however, did Chen's Beijing sponsors imagine that Chen himself—an official Chinese representative of Beijing University who was merely intent on replicating what foreigners had already been doing for decades—would be hounded like a

criminal and subjected to a humiliating inquisition backed up by the threat of violence. After more than three decades of idly standing by while cartloads of irreplaceable artifacts had poured out of the country, the Chinese scholarly community—as represented by Chen—was now finally able to carry out its own on-site archaeological research missions. Yet the unwelcome realization that Gansu peasants saw no difference between the “looting” of foreign Americans and the “excavations” of Chinese scholars would lead directly to the criminalization of the foreigners.

On March 24, 1925, little more than a month after setting out from Beijing and still eight weeks shy of Dunhuang, approximately twenty local peasants from a tiny village known as Jingchuan cornered Chen along with several members of the American expedition outside of the Luohan Caves in southeastern Gansu. Amidst a flurry of accusations the villagers “grabbed the reins of the horses firmly and would not let us leave.” Soon more villagers arrived, “making a big ruckus,” and “accused Jayne [one of the Americans] of breaking some Buddhist statues.” According to Chen’s diary, one villager “grabbed onto Jayne’s sleeve and told him that ... if they did not make arrangements for the compensation of the Buddhist statues they would not release him.” In the end an unruly throng composed of residents from six neighboring villages succeeded in detaining the expedition’s members (both Chen and the Americans) for more than two hours before a cash settlement was reached—two dollars apiece for eighteen small statues and thirty dollars for one large statue.³¹

Not long after the agreed sum had been handed over, however, the local magistrate arrived on the scene, followed soon after by his security guard, who returned the money and reported that the “representative for the villagers had been intimidated and threatened, and that he was no longer willing to accept the payment.” (One does not have to read too much between the lines here to understand that the intervention of the local official was almost certainly the catalyst for the return of the money.) During his negotiations with the villagers, Chen had placated them with repeated promises of how he would hold off “bothering the government officials” as long as they could reach a peaceful settlement among themselves. Circumventing the often corrupt local officials, Chen believed, “would ensure the welfare of the villagers,” who in the eyes of the magistrate had clearly gone too far on their own initiative in confronting the formidably connected foreign and Beijing scholars.³²

If Chen’s goal had been to tarnish the image of the Americans, he could have simply framed this dispute as justified peasant wrath toward the haughty incursions of foreign “archaeologists,” and omitted his own role in the fiasco. Yet Chen’s own avowed marching orders—that he advance the nascent discipline of Chinese archaeology—dictated that he himself also enthusiastically participate in the Americans’ “plunder.” Recalling his discovery the previous day of a broken-off portion of an inscribed stele, Chen lambasted the Jingchuan villagers

for “not understanding that they are supposed to cherish things like this.” Even more difficult to stomach, however, was the realization that when the local officials “moved the [main base of the] stele to Wen Temple, they too neglected to move this portion along with it.” Why had the stele been haphazardly broken in two and moved about recklessly? The banal, decidedly unscholarly catalyst of “a dispute concerning the temple’s foundations” clearly exasperated Chen. “In light of this I resolved to transport the remaining portion to Beijing so that the university’s archaeology department could study it. Otherwise, how could the fate of this stele remnant be anything other than eventual destruction?”³³ Much like Stein’s earlier invocation of the preservationist mission of the monk Xuanzang, here the wholesale internalization and imitation by Chinese scholars of the Western methodological and moral approach to archaeology is nowhere more evident.

When the quarrel with the Jingchuan villagers broke out Chen fretted over his possession of the stele. “If the villagers stopped me then they would have wanted to unwrap it and take a look, and the dispute would have escalated quickly.” When Chen first spotted the stele in the eastern grotto ten villagers had already been stationed in the cave to supervise his movements, continually pestering Chen with such inquiries as, “Are you going to leave this piece here? What about that one, are you taking it?” Rather than informing Chen that ancient relics of the village’s local and religious heritage were not to be tampered with, these hard-luck peasants seemed to be far more concerned with determining the proper price to be paid for their ancestors’ wares—all of which were clearly for sale. In cloaking their desire for hard cash within a discourse of “plunder,” the villagers made no distinction between Americans from Cambridge and Chinese from Beijing. In the eyes of the peasants, both were outsiders and both would have to pay. Fortunately for Chen’s pocketbook, the “ten workers who had been supervising my work in the grotto never appeared during the debate. How fortunate was I!”³⁴

Chen’s barely concealed disdain for (in the words of recent Chinese scholarship) these peasant “organic protectors of China’s national heritage” ultimately got the better of him, and he initially made no attempt to hide his complicity with his American “friends.” “Though our removal of Buddhist statues ... was Alan [Priest]’s idea, I wholeheartedly believe that it was the correct thing to do for the sake of research, and I assisted in the process.” Because this was Chen’s “first time traveling in the northwest ... I was not able to anticipate such problems. For burdening my friends with several hours of terror,” Chen expressed “deep remorse.”³⁵

Yet this account is not the widely accepted version of the expedition’s troubles as currently told among Chinese and Western historians. The current consensus completely omits the incident at Jingchuan, and instead inexplicably jumps ahead to the expedition’s arrival in Dunhuang nearly two months later,

where “an angry mob forced the Americans to retreat without photographs and frescoes.”³⁶ Recent Chinese historians, aware of William Hung’s backstage machinations yet still attracted to the tantalizing possibility that proto-nationalist peasants were the first to stand up and confront the heinous deeds of foreign “archaeologists,” have taken this miscalculation even further. “The common Chinese peasant masses were the chief reason why Warner’s expedition packed up and fled without any success,” maintains one recent mainstream account. “These Chinese peasants, in obstructing the route of would-be thieves of our cultural artifacts, became the organic protectors of China’s ancient heritage.”³⁷

The sudden emergence of officially orchestrated “anti-foreign” mobs that the party encountered at Dunhuang—the second public disturbance of the expedition—has been explained away by suggesting that the “May 30 incident,” the day on which British-employed Sikh and Chinese policemen fired on Chinese labor protesters in Shanghai and ignited a wave of antiforeign sentiment in several urban centers, was largely responsible for “harassment at every step by the local authorities, as well as by a hostile populace.”³⁸ Such an explanation, however, flies in the face of logic: Not only were the Americans confined to a three-day visit to Dunhuang a full week before the events of May 30 unfolded over a thousand miles away, but there is no evidence that the post-May 30 industrial worker protest movement (largely confined to the major urban centers of the eastern seaboard) ever reached the isolated rural villages that Warner’s expedition visited in northwestern Gansu.³⁹ A crucial distinction needs to be made here. The staged mobs of Dunhuang were part of a pre-May 30 plot orchestrated by an elite Chinese nationalist (William Hung) based in Beijing. By contrast, the reason that Chen was so unnerved by the brouhaha at Jingchuan was precisely due to the fact that it was a local, unscripted “organic” peasant protest that opportunistically exploited for financial gain not only the the “imperialist” greed of the Americans, but also the “nationalist” greed of their Chinese understudy.

A year after the expedition’s demise, Beijing University published Chen’s original manuscript as *A Diary of Westward Travels (Xixing riji)*. Following the lead of Warner himself, who was unable to read Chinese, Western scholarship has dismissively described this work as a “slandorous book” in which Chen supposedly claimed “that he had joined the Americans for the express purpose of keeping track of their actions and preventing them from marauding.”⁴⁰ This is only partially true. As he clearly indicates throughout his diary, Chen himself was highly sympathetic to the archaeological mission of his American colleagues, and nowhere in his original notes does he reveal any insider knowledge of Hung’s plans.⁴¹ It was Chen’s superiors back in Beijing, attuned to the rising nationalistic public outcry over the May 30 incident in Shanghai, who seized upon Chen’s diary as a golden opportunity to “criminalize” the foreigners and marginalize Chen’s sympathetic complicity. “Criminalization” emerged as the only plausible

face-saving measure for those Chinese scholars who had absolutely no intention of relinquishing their newfound academic territory, regardless of how many extortionary roadblocks the “ignorant peasant masses” might erect.

Thus it passed that Chen’s *A Diary of Westward Travels* underwent the interpretive prism of a whopping three prefaces authored by some of the biggest names in Chinese academia. Ma Heng and Shen Jianshi, prominent members of the university’s Archaeological Society, fully subscribed to historian Gu Jiegang’s carefully selective sentiment that “the malice (*e’gan*) of the locals toward Westerners” was an “enormous cause for regret” inasmuch as it prevented Chen from dallying longer at many of the sites. In order to extricate Chen from the “crimes” of the foreigners, Gu determined that the ignorant peasants of Jingchuan had “misconstrued” Chen’s actions at the Luohan Caves, mistaking “preservation” for “destruction,” or even “as theft for our own monetary gain!” On the contrary, Gu pointed out significantly, the illiterate Abbot Wang—who “unlawfully profited from the sale of Dunhuang’s ancient relics” to foreigners for over a decade—was a prime example of a real “thief.”⁴²

The *coup de grâce* against the Americans was delivered in a tardily appended supplement to the diary, written *after* Chen had already returned to Beijing and was apparently debriefed regarding the delicacies of the new political line. In a striking shift in tone from the body of the original diary, Chen suddenly and suspiciously laid the blame squarely on the foreign presence. This post-expedition supplement marks the only place throughout the entire published diary where Langdon Warner is blamed for the expedition’s ignominious departure from Dunhuang (despite the fact that Warner was detained long before he could reach the caves). Chen then goes even further by embellishing Warner’s moral culpability, ignoring his earlier admission of “friendship” with the Americans, and portraying Warner’s peeling of the Dunhuang frescoes in 1924 as every bit as odious as the mass vandalism carried out by hundreds of White Russians who had sought refuge in the caves for nine months during 1920–1921.⁴³

The published diary of Chen Wanli encouraged the dispatch of a series of “scholar-spies” who “fatally compromised” Sven Hedin’s Sino-Swedish expedition of 1927–1930 and capably undermined Aurel Stein’s fourth and last expedition to Chinese Turkestan in 1930. The much publicized fiasco that was Stein’s final expedition signaled the triumphant arrival of a nationalist, professional Chinese intelligentsia financed by government support, united in aims, and eager to pick up where the criminalized imperialists had left off: staking a claim on the marginal lands beyond the pass.

Translating Stein: Fu Sinian and the Chinese Intelligentsia, 1927–1936

As the criminalization of every non-Chinese person who had ever taken so much as a Buddha's ear out of China gained steam following Warner's departure in late 1925, the formerly unspoken bias toward sinocentric interpretations of history relying solely upon Chinese-language documents now became blatantly overt. The report of the National Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, reprinted in the Chinese press in December 1930, slammed Stein for stealing Chinese manuscripts despite "not knowing a word of Chinese," while a review of Stein's book *On Central-Asian Tracks* criticized him for "not including a single Chinese character" within its pages.⁴⁴ In his 1931 preface to *An Index of the Dunhuang Manuscripts Remaining after the Plunder*, Chen Yuan boldly staked out the rigid linguistic parameters within which Chinese Dunhuang studies would now proceed. "Manuscripts written not in Chinese but rather in one of the ancient Central Asian languages are not worth much to us," Chen bluntly declared. "What the Chinese people value are ancient manuscripts written in Chinese." Chen's index bears out this claim: Of the 8,679 manuscripts that he chose to catalogue, only one is in a language other than Chinese.⁴⁵

The implications of such a bias reach far beyond the Dunhuang manuscripts. When the first generation of homegrown Chinese archaeologists embarked on their maiden voyage to Xinjiang as part of Sven Hedin's joint Sino-Swedish expedition in 1927, the Chinese members of the expedition were incapable of interpreting any inscribed artifact other than those that painted the history of Xinjiang via the Chinese script. When Xu Bingxu discovered a "pile of rocks" displaying various non-Chinese inscriptions, the response among his colleagues was telling. "The pictures look as though they have something to do with measurements of the sun," Xu hypothesized. "The writing contains ten letters, the last four of which are '1700,' but we don't know what language the letters are written in." One person suggested Russian, "but that can't be right." Huang Wenbi declared "somewhat arbitrarily" that it was written in Tibetan, "but we really just don't know, and I harbor my own doubts."⁴⁶

The fact that some of the most preeminent Chinese archaeologists of the twentieth century could not even distinguish—much less read—Russian from Tibetan in a land where so much of the region's history had been recorded in one or the other was apparently troubling even to such old-school antiquarians as Wang Guowei. Shortly before his suicide, and at about the same time that Huang and Xu were struggling to differentiate the Tibetan and Cyrillic scripts, Wang deemed it a "pity that Chinese scholars have not yet conducted any research on

these ancient [non-Chinese] languages.” As a result, Wang lamented, “even if we actually did desire to conduct such research, we would have no choice but to apply for the assistance of English, French, and German scholars.”⁴⁷ The battle for historical sovereignty over the northwestern frontiers was also a battle of linguistic orientations. And nationalist Chinese scholars, who lacked proficiency in all but one of the region’s twenty or so recorded languages, were about to emerge victorious.

In place of the neutral verbs employed by the previous generation of antiquarian scholars and officials, newly nationalist Chinese scholars belonging to the professional intelligentsia in Beijing and Nanjing now proceeded to substitute more damning terminology, words such as “loot” (*dao zou*), “steal” (*qie qu*), “plunder” (*qiang jie*), and “pillage” (*duo qu*). One translator of Stein’s works expressed his “indignation” at Stein’s “wanton bundling” (*dasi sou ku o*) of the Dunhuang manuscripts, while another was repulsed by reports that Stein’s Chinese translator and collaborator at Dunhuang “was actually later awarded a gold medal by the British Indian government!”⁴⁸ As translations of Stein’s works grew more and more popular, however, general audiences unburdened with the nationalist agenda of the Beijing and Nanjing scholarly worlds began to offer unorthodox perspectives. A 1929 article in the *Eastern Miscellany* praised Stein’s “amazing accomplishments” and “historical authority,” with nary a single reference to “theft.”⁴⁹ A prominent book review of Stein’s *On Central-Asian Tracks*, while acknowledging that Stein had indeed “looted” China’s national treasures, nevertheless contended that “all those Chinese antiquities that Stein shipped to London have in fact been preserved in perfect condition.” If not for the measures taken by Stein and Pelliot, these priceless treasures “may very well have been lost forever at the hands of the stupid local peasants, who in their ignorance would have burned the manuscripts and idols in order to cure a disease.”⁵⁰

With such a diversity of popular views and inflammatory labels circulating in the mainstream press, Fu Sinian, director of the Nanjing-based Academia Sinica and one of the most powerful scholars in China, suddenly stepped in and attempted to impose a single orthodox interpretation. According to Fu, the only Western sinologists worthy of praise were those who “acknowledge and propagate the contributions of Chinese scholars.” Such a man Stein certainly was not. Because Stein—unlike Pelliot—had never at any point evinced the slightest interest in sharing his finds with Chinese scholars, instead jealously hoarding up his obscenely large stash of Central Asian antiquities at the British Museum in London, Fu admonished against “recklessly mixing the names of Stein and Pelliot together.” In an influential 1935 article published in the Tianjin *L’Impartial*, Fu insisted on the rehabilitation of Paul Pelliot’s scholarly reputation while at the same time condemning Stein to the purgatory of Chinese public opinion. “In discussing the matter of Pelliot’s connection to the Dunhuang manuscripts,” Fu opined,

“we must carefully examine the course of events at that time as well as issues of morality.” Because Pelliot—who, unlike Stein, evinced a remarkable fluency in spoken, written, and classical Chinese—utilized his cache of manuscripts to “make new contributions to the field of sinology (*hanxue*), he naturally deserves the respect of the people of our great nation.”⁵¹

Stein, on the other hand, once gave a speech at Harvard during which William Hung (the mastermind behind Langdon Warner’s downfall) overheard Stein claiming that the Chinese “lack scholarship.” Supposedly uttered at a 1929 fundraising event designed to raise contributions for his fourth and final expedition to Chinese Central Asia, Stein’s public speeches brazenly encouraged donations on the explicit premise that only he had cultivated the erudition necessary to properly examine and interpret what he was likely to uncover in Xinjiang. Stein, whose callous admission that he “only knew Old China” could not help but ruffle the feathers of the scholars of “New China,” cared little for the present-day political tapestry of East Asia.⁵²

Pelliot was far more sympathetic to the plight of his Chinese scholar friends. When Fu asked him whether he intended to visit friends in Japan during his 1934 East Asian tour, Pelliot vented his “dissatisfaction” with Japan’s recent behavior and said that he had cancelled his planned trip to Japan. Also off-limits was Luo Zhenyu, the disgraced antiquarian scholar of early Dunhuang studies who had recently collaborated with the Japanese in Manchuria. Pelliot again successfully treaded the treacherous political waters, claiming “no desire to meet with him.” And what about Pelliot’s by now undeniable “theft” at the Thousand-Buddha Caves in 1908? In the eyes of an approving Fu, Pelliot had apparently shown considerable progress toward reforming himself, this time around only purchasing “ordinary books along with recently published periodicals ... it is clear [this time] that he has not taken a single rare manuscript out of the country.”⁵³

In laying down the official line of the largest research institute in China, Fu Sinian defined the political positions and cultural sympathies to which all foreigners wishing to gain access to historical materials within China’s borders would have to adhere. A mere three months after Fu’s article, *L’Impartial* published a series of nineteen scholarly reports over a ten-month span that were authored by Beijing-based scholar Wang Chongmin. What Wang chose to publish in Tianjin’s *L’Impartial*, however, effectively essentialized the manuscripts of Dunhuang into a miniscule, highly selective collection of well-known “Confucian classics” that in no way reflected the diversity of peoples, histories, and languages to which the authors of the original manuscripts belonged. On the contrary, a representative selection from the first two months reads like a bestseller’s list of the most venerable and oft-quoted of the Chinese-language classics: the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Book of Rites*, *Analects of Confucius*, and the *Zhuangzi*, to name just a few.⁵⁴

In light of the fact that the Dunhuang manuscripts were composed overwhelmingly of Buddhist monastic literature (approximately 90 percent, less than half of which were written in Chinese), Wang's "representative selection" was actually a narrowly rigid lens focused on less than 5 percent of the entire collection.⁵⁵ Thus at precisely the same time that Fu Sinian and his cadre of nationalist Chinese scholars were attempting to distance themselves from the taint of antiquarianism as typified in "traitors" such as Luo Zhenyu, Wang Chongmin's selective reports from London and Paris revealed the profound debt that the new generation of scholars owed their forbears.

Revitalizing the Han: Dunhuang as a National Resource, 1937–1944

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of twentieth-century Chinese history that the loss of the ancient Chinese heartland to the Japanese in 1937 resulted in the symbolic relocation of China's "national essence" to the decidedly non-Chinese northwestern frontier in Dunhuang. The westward exodus of Chinese scholars to the wartime capital of Chongqing in October 1938 transformed the relationship between Dunhuang and the academic centers of Beijing and Nanjing. Once distant cousins barely on speaking terms, all these focal points of historical scholarship suddenly found themselves intimate neighbors closely connected through blood and kinship ties forged during wartime.

Xiang Da—Stein's Chinese translator—even suggested that Dunhuang could now serve as a hallowed stand-in for the lost homelands of Confucius. "Much like Qufu in Shandong, which is not the private property of the Kong lineage," Xiang wrote from the Thousand-Buddha Caves in 1942, Dunhuang similarly is not the private reserve of the people of Gansu. When Xiang wrote that Dunhuang was a representative of "Chinese culture as a whole" (*Zhongguo zheng ge wenhua*) on par with the ancient sage-king himself, he was applying the same essentialized interpretive framework that Wang Chongmin had foisted upon the threatening mass of unmediated manuscripts in Europe.⁵⁶

Xiang Da was in Dunhuang as part of one of the now frequent delegations of Chinese scholars to the neglected caves, which suddenly seemed much closer to the wartime base of the ultra-nationalist Chinese intelligentsia in Chongqing. Confronted with the grandeur of the caves for the first time in person (incredibly no Chinese scholar had visited the caves in the seventeen years since Chen Wanli had first made the trip in 1925), Xiang struggled to give voice to his innermost feelings. "Thinking back on the spirit of our people, I could not help but shed tears out there," he admitted. Marveling at the "surpassing genius of those early frontier engineers," Xiang deplored the loss of "the spirit of our Han and Tang ancestors."⁵⁷ The Han and Tang dynasties

were often regarded by Chinese scholars as the two most glorious “Han Chinese” dynasties, which succeeded in extending the colonial reach of the Chinese empire farther west than had any other “Han Chinese” dynasty. Thus any concrete souvenir from Han and Tang times—be it wooden tablets from a frontier garrison in Xinjiang or a Tang-era manuscript from Dunhuang—became a potential salve for intellectuals coping with the depressing ebb of wartime China’s international prestige.

Yet even the reclamation of ancient Han-Tang relics was insufficient to satisfy Xiang’s wounded national pride. For too long “we have watched while foreign scholars conduct their archaeological excavations, extolling and lamenting the passing of that remarkable fortitude of our garrison soldiers and the unlimited genius of those architects of the Great Wall.” Instead of building upon Chen Wanli’s maiden voyage to Dunhuang seventeen years prior, “we just stand off to the side and stir up an empty uproar.” In a moment of candid self-criticism for a man who spent the better part of his adult life translating the literary works of a foreigner he believed to be a thief, Xiang suddenly expressed a sense of profound jealousy toward his alter ego. “When we examine the archaeological work that Stein conducted up here and all the maps that he charted, we suddenly realize that what he accomplished is quite simply the dream of every one of us today who merely talks about establishing infrastructure along the Hexi corridor.”⁵⁸

When Xiang Da wrote the foregoing exhortatory words he was lobbying for the Nationalist government in Chongqing to extend official state protection to the Dunhuang grottos. Yet when the world-renowned painter Zhang Daqian made a three-year pilgrimage to the Thousand-Buddha Caves from 1941 to 1943, politics were the last thing on his mind. Zhang took advantage of wartime Chongqing’s proximity to Dunhuang by preparing a series of hand-painted, on-site copies of the Dunhuang frescoes for exhibition in Lanzhou and Chengdu in late 1943 and early 1944. A pamphlet for the Chengdu exhibition characterizes Zhang’s sojourn in Dunhuang as an opportunity “to reminisce on the past so as to shake the present.” According to Zhang, the Dunhuang frescoes “are the forerunners of the six methods of Chinese painting” that dated from a supposed golden age when “the four barbarians all yearned to adopt and imitate Chinese ways.”⁵⁹

By closely scrutinizing the features of the people depicted in the Dunhuang frescoes and other Tang paintings, Zhang was able to conclude triumphantly that “the moustache and hair resemble those of western Europeans.” The implication was that Tang Chinese “clothing and cultural trappings ... had once spread all the way to western Europe,” such was the strength of ancient China back in the day.⁶⁰ Because the Dunhuang murals preserved intact the spirit of those vigorous and admirable Chinese who flourished during the Tang, the fine art connoisseurs who crowded Lanzhou and Chengdu’s exhibition halls during 1943–1944 could gaze upon Zhang’s lifelike copies and silently intuit the long-lost cure—the

cosmopolitan Tang imperial spirit—for China's current malaise.

Wide-eyed pilgrims fleeing the depressing hell of wartime Chongqing had to make room for one last group of unabashed admirers. On September 30, 1943, Joseph Needham, a 42-year-old British biochemist from Cambridge University, arrived on horseback with an eclectic team of Chinese graduate students, reporters, and artists. As the chief representative of the British-financed Sino-British Science Co-operation Office, ostensibly formed “to break the Japanese intellectual and technical blockade round China,” Needham was drawn to Dunhuang as a potential “gold-mine” for his upcoming *Science and Civilisation in China* series.⁶¹ Conceived as a means of proving to the wider world that “the achievements of ancient and mediaeval Chinese science could be shown to be dazzling,” Needham fully subscribed to Fu Sinian's stipulations binding any legitimate foreign research expedition within China: active collaboration with Chinese scholars, overt sympathy for the tragic plight of modern China, and above all, a research agenda that aimed to extol and publicize the timeless genius of the Han Chinese people.⁶²

Armed with the official blessing of Fu and the Academia Sinica, under whose auspices Needham's research was conducted, Needham repaid such privileged access and support by utilizing materials found at Dunhuang to praise what he referred to as the “Chinese race” as possessing “the only other great body of thought of equal complexity and depth to our own,” if not more so.⁶³ “Inventions and technological discoveries were made in China which changed the course of Western civilization, and indeed that of the whole world,” Needham boldly declared in a widely publicized 1947 lecture that all but ensured a lifetime Chinese visa stamp on his passport. In fact, Needham continued reverently, “the more you know about Chinese civilization, the more odd it seems that modern science and technology did not develop there” instead of in the West.⁶⁴ So different from the likes of Stein, Joseph Needham was a sympathetic foreign scholar that Fu Sinian could deal with. And by the time Needham left China in 1947, the strict entrance criteria for foreign scholars hoping to conduct research in China had become clear: The Needhams of the world were embraced as the “good friends of the Chinese people.” By contrast, the Steins—and even the Pelliot—had become “criminals.”

Whose Margin?

In February 1944 the central government in Chongqing finally extended state protection to the Dunhuang caves.⁶⁵ Nearly forty-four years had passed since the unassuming Abbot Wang first discovered Dunhuang's hidden library cave by accident in June 1900, a mere year after the Qing government—in an acknowledgment of the link among territorial sovereignty, mineral resources,

and the role they play in modern states—had established the Tacheng Katu Gold Mining Company in 1899 (see Kinzley, Chapter 2). The tantalizing riches of the Katu mines had once required no less than the “point of a sword” to push wide-eyed “gold digging ‘bandits’” back within the borders of the Qing empire. Yet the early twentieth-century discovery of Chinese-inscribed relics beneath the sands of the northwest prompted Chinese nationalists to invoke the powerful cultural myth of a geographically vast Chinese scriptural imperium of yore as a pretext to “reclaim” Chinese prestige along a borderland increasingly bereft of Chinese authority.

Much like their Egyptian counterparts during the same time period, Republican Chinese scholars also recognized the “vital role archaeology could play in shaping their modern national identity” as well as the role archaeology can play in the construction of a legitimate claim to sovereignty over the lands within the ethnically and linguistically diverse margins of the modern state. Yet whereas Donald Malcolm Reid has presented Egyptian “nationalist challenges ... to Western imperialists’ interpretations of its history” as a liberating phenomena revealing colonial agency, this study suggests that Chinese nationalist challenges to Western imperialist histories can be just as imperialist in nature as the dethroned imperialist himself.⁶⁶ Scant attention has been paid to the many historical and linguistic doors that were slammed shut by the Chinese scholars who followed in Stein’s footsteps—doors shut by the same Chinese scholars and intellectuals who are often singled out in the historical record for their pivotal roles in exhibiting Chinese agency during the “good fight” against Western imperialism.

Yet it is now clear that they also followed a Chinese historical imperialist agenda that denied legitimacy to non-Han residents of the northwestern regions and silenced any scholarly approach that complicated the historical primacy of the Chinese written word and the role of the Han Chinese peoples. The uncovering of extensive Chinese writings in the northwest played into the nationalist desire to naturalize a Chinese-language pedigree for the region. By 1943, Chinese Dunhuang scholars scarcely batted an eye at the prospect of publishing a serious scholarly examination of a bilingual Brahmi-Chinese Dunhuang stele that not only entirely ignored the non-Chinese portion of the stele, but actually went so far as to whitewash into historical oblivion any trace of the rival foreign language on the stele’s surface (see figure, p. 85). Nothing can better illustrate the means by which the putative purveyors of Chinese civilization managed to prosecute the battle with Western scholars for historical and linguistic sovereignty over a region situated on the geographic margins of both European and Asian empires.

Unlike the large-scale protests undertaken in 1947 by Shanghai barbers dissatisfied with their representation in the public sphere (see Iovene, Chapter 12), the long-vanished speakers of Central Asia’s dead languages could scarcely mount an alternative vision to the Chinese interpretation of the history of the region.

Likewise, living twentieth-century descendants of two other amply represented historical languages in the Dunhuang manuscripts—Tibetan and Uyghur, both of which lacked ethnocultural association with an internationally recognized state—were not yet in a position to advocate for the historical importance of their linguistic heritage. In reaching out to the margins of the northwest and painting over its still malleable historical canvas in brilliant Chinese strokes, Chinese scholars of the Republican era ensured that the “northwestern margins” of the East would never again become the “far eastern margins” of the West.

Figure 1. Whitewashed Brahmi-Chinese Dunhuang Stele Fragment



Note: In this 1943 reproduction of a Dunhuang stele for inclusion in an edited volume, the lower half reproduces the Chinese characters as originally inscribed on the stele. The Brahmi script that was originally inscribed on the upper half of the stele has not been reproduced. In its place are four Chinese characters that read: “Brahmi script” (*poluomi wen*).

Source: Dan Tu and Su Yinghui, “Dunhuang shike kao” [Examination of Dunhuang steles], in *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu xubian: Dunhuangxue wenxian juan* [Edited collection of documents pertaining to China’s northwest: Dunhuang studies documents], ed. Feng Zhiwen, vol. 21 (Lanzhou: Gansu wenhua chubanshe, 1999), 297.

Hevia has suggested that the wanton Euro-American and Japanese plundering of Chinese works of art in the immediate aftermath of the Boxer debacle severely challenged the contemporary moral discourse of European civilization at the dawn of the twentieth century: “Could one be civilized, or claim the superiority of European nations, if one looted?”⁶⁷ The unsettling answer, as suggested by the findings of this chapter, is not that transcultural looting expeditions preclude claims to civilizational superiority, but rather that they *enable* such claims, and eventually pave the way for the consolidation of transnational rhetorical hegemony. “When will our countrymen measure up to the Stein and Pelliot spirit,” asked one envious 1930s Chinese pundit writing in a Buddhist venue, “and venture out into the world, unearth and gather up exquisite cultural treasures, and bring them back to our country, all for the greater glory of our nation?”⁶⁸ There is now little doubt that the bearers of “Chinese agency” in early twentieth-century interactions with foreign imperialists traced a familiar historical path, duly cultivating the imperialist ambitions of the nationalism that originally nurtured their anti-imperialist struggle for sovereignty.

NOTES

1. For a day-by-day account of Stein’s location and activities during these months, see Wang Jiqing, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi: Yingguo Niujiu daxue cang Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaocha luxing riji shougao zhengli yanjiu baogao* [Examination of Stein’s diary during his fourth archaeological expedition in China: research compiled on the draft of the diary used on Stein’s fourth archaeological expedition to Central Asia and stored at England’s Oxford University] (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), 330–31. For the Chinese press account of his transgressions, see “Guwu baoguan hui cheng fuyuan qing quzhu Sitanyin chujing, jiaming youli qiequ wo Xinjiang guwu, zai Mei fufa kuanglun wu-ru woguoren” [Under pretense of “travel,” Stein plunders Xinjiang antiquities; outrageous speeches in America insult Chinese nation; Antiquities Preservation Committee requests immediate expulsion of Stein], *Tianjin dagongbao* (December 27–28, 1930).

2. Chen Yuan, *Dunhuang jiejyulu* [An index of the Dunhuang manuscripts remaining after the plunder], *Guoli zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo zhuankan* 4 (March 1931).

3. Liu Naihe, *Liyun shuwu wen xue ji* [Scholarly inquiries from the desk of Liyun] (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian chuban, 1982), 153–54.

4. M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975; originally published in 1907), viii.

5. “Han Yaoguang wei bao Sitanyin ruchu Yutian xian riqi ji suo huo guwu shi gei Li Zisen de shenwen” [Han Yaoguang’s document submitted to Li Zisen about Stein’s entry and exit dates at Yutian county and acquisition of antiques], in *Zhongguo Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu dang’an guan* and *Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou*, eds., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang’an shiliao* [Modern historical material about foreign explorers in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi: Xinjiang meishu sheying chubanshe, 2001), 108–9.

6. “Shilifu wei qingzhun Sitanyin dao shamo kaogu shi gei Jin Shuren de dianwen” [Sheriff’s telegraph sent to Jin Shuren for permitting Stein to make an archaeological tour in the desert], in *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang’an shiliao*, 136.

7. Karl Ernest Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), 383.

8. See, for example, James L. Hevia’s *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 14; also Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

9. John W. Garver has critiqued Chen’s account of Mao’s Cold War foreign policies as emblematic of a recent vein of China-related scholarship that has “forego[ne] critical analysis in favour of understanding how China’s leaders viewed the world.” See Garver, “The Opportunity Costs of Mao’s Foreign Policy Choices,” *China Journal* 49 (January 2003): 127.

10. In his *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), Prasenjit Duara writes that nationalist projects, by their very nature, carry within them the oft realized potential to be “deployed for imperialist ends or with imperialist consequences” (13).

11. James L. Hevia, “Looting and Its Discontents: Moral Discourse and the Plunder of Beijing, 1900–1901,” in Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, eds., *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 102.

12. I do not mean to suggest that these Chinese figures re-enacted the violent slaughter of Western armies who invaded China in 1900. Rather, I use this description in exclusive reference to ethnocultural looting projects enacted by Euro-American, Japanese, and Chinese imperialists during the first half of the twentieth century.

13. Luo Zhenyu, *Liusha fanggu ji* [Visiting the ancients among the shifting sands] (Shangyu: Songfen shi, 1909), 37.

14. Justin Jacobs, “How Chinese Turkestan Became Chinese: Visualizing Zhang Zhizhong’s *Tianshan Pictorial* and Xinjiang Youth Song and Dance Troupe,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67.2 (May 2008): 587.

15. Additional characterizations used for other foreign archaeologists included “traveling official” (*youliguan*), “scholar” (*shiren*), and “explorer” (*youlishi*). See Cordula Gumbrecht, “Chinese Passports for the German Turfan Expedition,” in Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst et al., *Turfan Revisited—The First Century of Research into the Arts and Cultures of the Silk Road* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2004), 114.

16. See “Pan Zhen wei Sitanyin zai Hetian youli, xunwa guji ji ruchu jing riqi shi gei Li Zisen de shenwen” [Pan Zhen’s document submitted to Li Zisen about Stein’s trip in Hotan, excavation of ancient remains and entry as well as exit dates], in *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang’an shiliao*, 107–8.

17. “Han Yaoguang wei bao Sitanyin,” in *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang’an shiliao*, 108.

18. M. Aurel Stein, “Explorations in Central Asia, 1906–8 (Continued),” *Geographical Journal* 34.3 (September 1909): 248.

19. Li Jianhong, “Lun Dunhuang shibao ji Ye Changchi ‘Yuandu Lu riji chao’” [Concerning the loss of Dunhuang’s treasures and Ye Changchi’s “Diary of Mr. Lu Yuandu”], *Dunhuang yanjiu* 64 (2000): 36; and Rong Xinjiang, “Ye Changchi: Pioneer of Dunhuang Studies,” *IDP Newsletter* 7 (Spring 1997).

20. Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, 510–12.
21. “*Da banniepan jingjuan di shisi (tiba 8–1)*” [*Mahā-parinirvāna* sutra no. 14 (colophon 8–1)], in Beijing daxue tushuguan and Shanghai guji chubanshe, eds., *Beijing daxue tushuguan cang Dunhuang wenxian* [Dunhuang manuscripts collected in the Peking University Library] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), v. 1, 124.
22. “*Foshuo shou lengyan sanmei jingjuan xia (tiba)*” [*Foshuo shou lengyan sanmei* sutra (colophon)], in Shanghai guji chubanshe and Shanghai bowuguan, eds., *Shanghai bowuguan cang Dunhuang Tulufan wenxian* [Dunhuang-Turfan manuscripts collected in Shanghai museum] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), v. 1, 113.
23. Wang Jiqing, “Sitanyin di er ci Zhongya kaocha qijian suoqi Zhongguo huzhao jianxi” [Brief analysis of the passport obtained by Stein for his second Central Asian expedition], *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 4 (1998): 74.
24. Other verbal phrases used to describe the activities of foreign archaeologists include “to admire ancient relics” (*zhanwang guji*), “to search for ancient relics” (*kaocha guji*), “to search and dig for ancient relics” (*xunwa guji*), “to inquire about ancient relics” (*chafang guji*), and “to dig for ancient relics on a large scale” (*kaiwa guji*). Gumbrecht, “Chinese Passports for the German Turfan Expedition,” *Turfan Revisited*, 114.
25. Cai Yuanpei, “Dunhuang duosuo xu” [Preface to the Dunhuang manuscripts], in Liu Fu, ed., *Dunhuang duosuo* [Selections from the Dunhuang manuscripts in Paris], *Guoli zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo zhuankan* 2 (October 1925): 1. Though it is certainly possible that some Qing officials felt that China’s numerous unequal treaties with Western powers constrained them to treat representatives of these countries with unusual restraint and obsequious courtesy, just as many politically unencumbered scholars expressed similar sentiments. Stein himself purposely avoided beginning his expeditions on the east coast, preferring to make arrangements through the British consulate at Kashgar and entering Xinjiang through the Central Asian passes. The one time he was forced to go through Chinese officialdom in Nanjing in preparation for his fourth and final dig in 1929, the expedition ended in failure.
26. For Zhao Weixi’s comments, see “*Da banniepan jingjuan di shisi (tiba 8–2)*” [*Mahā-parinirvāna* sutra no. 14 (colophon 8–2)], in *Beijing daxue tushuguan cang Dunhuang wenxian*, 125. For the reaction of Luo Zhenyu, see his “Dunhuang shishi shumu ji fajian zhi yuanshi” [Index of the Dunhuang stone cavern and account of its discovery], *Dongfang zazhi* 6.12 (January 1910): 87.
27. Luo Zhenyu, *Liusha fanggu ji*, 37–38.
28. For the original English version, see Mr. McCartney et al., “Explorations in Central Asia, 1906–8: Discussion,” *Geographical Journal* 34.3 (September 1909): 264. For Wang’s subsequent translation into Chinese, see Luo Zhenyu, *Liusha fanggu ji*, 23.
29. Lothar von Falkenhausen, “On the Historiographical Orientation of Chinese Archaeology,” *Antiquity* 67.257 (December 1993): 839–49.
30. Susan Chan Egan, *A Latterday Confucian: Reminiscences of William Hung (1893–1980)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1987), 114–15.
31. This account is taken from Chen Wanli, *Xixing riji* [A diary of westward travels] (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 43–44.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 44–45.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 44.
36. Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*, 384.

37. Liu Shiping and Meng Xianshi, *Dunhuang bainian: yi ge minzu de xinling licheng* [Dunhuang centennial: the spiritual journey of a nation] (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 119.

38. Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 223–24.

39. See Richard W. Rigby, *The May 30 Movement: Events and Themes* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980); and Nicholas R. Clifford, *Shanghai, 1925: Urban Nationalism and the Defense of Foreign Privilege* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1979).

40. Theodore Bowie, ed., *Langdon Warner through His Letters* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 129.

41. In light of the fact that the diary was published well after the nationalistic fervor of the May 30 incident had spread throughout the country, there was little incentive for Chen to conceal any insider knowledge to which he may have been privy. Quite the contrary, he probably could have benefited immensely from a retroactively jingoistic narrative of the expedition and his supposed role in its sabotage.

42. Chen, *Xixing riji*, 8.

43. See Chen's supplement to the main body of the diary, "Dunhuang Qianfodong san ri jian suo de zhi yinxiang" [Impressions gleaned from a three-day visit to Dunhuang's Thousand-Buddha Caves], *Xixing riji*, 119.

44. See Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*, 374; and "Sitanyin xiyu kaocha ji," *Tianjin dagongbao tushu fukan* 175 (April 1, 1937).

45. See Chen Yuan's preface in the *Dunhuang jieyulu*, 3–4. The lone non-Chinese standout was a Tibetan copy of the "Foshuo wuliang shou" sutra. See *Dunhuang jieyulu*, 9.

46. From a diary entry dated November 16, 1927. See Xu Bingxu, *Xu Xusheng riji* [Diary of Xu Xusheng] (Beiping: Zhongguo xueshu tuanti xiehui xibei kexue kaochatuan lishihui yinxing, 1930), 57.

47. Wang Guowei, "Zuijin er sanshi nian zhong Zhongguo xin faxian zhi xuwen [New discoveries in Chinese scholarship over the past twenty to thirty years]," in Feng Zhiwen and Yang Jiping, eds., *Zhongguo Dunhuangxue bainian wenku: zongshu juan* [One hundred years of documents from Chinese Dunhuang studies: summary documents volume] (Lanzhou: Gansu wenhua chubanshe, 1999), 52. This article was published posthumously three years after Wang's suicide in 1927.

48. See translations by Xiang Da, "Sitanyin Dunhuang huoshu ji" [A record of Stein's acquisition of Dunhuang manuscripts], *Tushuguanxue jikan* 4.3–4 (1930): 429–38; and He Changqun, "Dunhuang qujing ji" [An account of the acquisition of Dunhuang's manuscripts], *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 22.5 (May 1931): 621–41.

49. Zhe Sheng, "Zhong yaxiya kaogu tanxianzhe Sitanyin" [Stein: Central Asia's adventurer archaeologist], *Dongfang zazhi* 26.17 (September 10, 1929).

50. Hua Yi, "Ping Xiang yi Sitanyin Xiyu kaogu ji" [Review of Xiang Da's translation of Aurel Stein's *On Central-Asian Tracks*], *Tianjin yishibao dushu zhoukan* 86 (February 4, 1937).

51. Fu Sinian, "Lun Boxihe jiaoshou" [Concerning Professor Pelliot], *Tianjin dagongbao* (February 21, 1935).

52. See Egan, *A Latterday Confucian*, 122.

53. Fu, "Lun Boxihe jiaoshou."

54. I was able to locate nineteen installments of Wang's intermittent series of reports, all of which were published in *L'Impartial's* weekly literary supplement from May 30, 1935

to March 12, 1936. Other Chinese classics featured by Wang include the *Chuci*, *Wenxuan*, *Shiji*, and *Hanshu*.

55. For specific details concerning the overall composition of the original Dunhuang manuscript collection, see Fujieda Akira, "The Tunhuang Manuscripts: A General Description," *Zinbun* 9 (1966): 1–32 and 10 (1969): 17–39.

56. Xiang Da, "Lun Dunhuang Qianfodong de guanli yanjiu yiji qita liandai de ji ge wenti" [On the management of Dunhuang's Thousand-Buddha Caves and other related matters], *Chongqing dagongbao* (December 27, 28, 30, 1942).

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. "Zhang Daqian suo mo Dunhuang bihua xu" [Preface to the exhibition of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang mural copies] in Lin Sijin, *Qing Jitang ji* [Collected writings of Lin Sijin] (Chengdu: Bashu shudianshe chubans, 1989), 624–25.

60. Ibid.

61. Joseph Needham and Dorothy Needham, eds. *Science Outpost: Papers of the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office (British Council Scientific Office in China): 1942–1946* (London: Pilot Press, 1948), 13.

62. See Joseph Needham's foreword in Pan Jixing, ed., *Li Yuese wenji: Li Yuese boshi youguan Zhongguo kexue jishu shi de lunwen he yanjiang ji (1944–1984)* [Collected writings of Joseph Needham: A collection of Dr. Needham's speeches and essays related to the history of science and technology in China (1944–1984)] (Shenyang: Liaoning kexue jishu chubanshe, 1986), 3.

63. Excerpted from Needham's May 12, 1947 Conway Memorial Lecture in London, later published in book form. See Joseph Needham, *Science and Society in Ancient China* (London: C. A. Watts and Co., 1947), 19.

64. Needham, *Science and Society in Ancient China*, 5.

65. Xiang, "Lun Dunhuang Qianfodong."

66. Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 2.

67. Hevia, "Looting and Its Discontents," 102.

68. Yi Tuo, "Du 'Dunhuang shishi fangshu ji' ji 'Sitanyin qianfodong qujing shimo ji' hou" [After reading "An account of a visit to the library of the stone caverns of Dunhuang" and "A complete account of Stein's acquisition of manuscripts at the Thousand-Buddha Caves"], *Haichao yin* 17, no. 12 (December 1936): 50.