

古物保管委員會
National Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities
Peiping, China

Statement Regarding Sir Aurel Stein's Archaeological Expedition in Chinese Turkestan

Sir Aurel Stein, the well known explorer, came to China this spring and obtained a passport from the Chinese Government to enter Chinese Turkestan from India. In issuing the passport, the Chinese Government was assured by Sir Aurel Stein that the object of his journey was merely to investigate the ancient route of Hsüan-tsang. But recently we have obtained reliable information that Sir Aurel Stein's real object is to undertake large scale archaeological excavations and is supplied with very large funds from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Trustees of the British Museum. From the nature of the agreement made between Sir Aurel Stein's financial supporters which authorizes him among other things to determine from his collections what are to be considered duplicates, it is evident that he intends, not only to excavate in Chinese Turkestan, but also to export archaeological objects and works of art from this country. Being members of the National Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, we consider it our duty to place our views before the institutions mentioned above which may not be aware of the question[ab]le nature of the undertaking or the great resentment roused in this country, and ask them to consider whether in the interest of science and international good feeling they should continue their support promised to Sir Aurel Stein.

(1) We want to point out that to carry out such extensive archaeological work in a country like China, where the people take such a vital interest in their own history, under the false pretence of investigating trade routes is altogether inconsistent with personal honour usually expected from a representative of well known scientific institutions. We would hardly have believed it possible had not Sir Aurel Stein's past conduct proved to us beyond doubt that he never allowed any such scruple to trouble his conscience. To investigate the ancient route of Hsüan-tsang is in fact a favourite untruth told again and again by Sir Aurel Stein in his former travels. He says himself: —

“The true historical sense innate in educated Chinese, and their legendary remembrance of Hsüan-tsang, the great ‘monk of the T'ang period’ whom I claimed as my guide, proved helpful in explaining the objects of my explorations” — ANCIENT KHOTAN, Introduction, vii

“There was another source of aid to fall back upon – the memory of Hsüan-tsang, an appeal to which never failed to secure me a sympathetic hearing alike among the learned and the simple” — SERINDIA, Vol. 2, p. 805

There can be no doubt, therefore, of his true intentions this time when he uses once more his favourite excuse. Do the scientific institutions that support him endorse his method of obtaining [a] passport under false pretence?

(2) The export of archaeological objects from their country of origin can only be justified when (a) the objects are obtained legally from their rightful owners, (b) the taking away of any part of a collection will not damage the collection as a whole, or (c) there is no one in the country of their origin sufficiently competent or interested in studying or safe-keeping them. Otherwise it is no longer scientific archaeology, but commercial vandalism. Sir Aurel Stein's conduct during his previous journeys in Chinese Turkestan verges dangerously on the latter. An example will make this clear. There was a sealed library in a cave near Tun-Huang containing a priceless collection of early Chinese manuscripts. Sir Aurel Stein, taking advantage of the ignorance and cupidity of the priest in charge, persuaded the latter to sell to him at a pittance what he considered the pick of the collection which, needless to say, did not in any way belong to the seller. It would be the same if some Chinese traveller pretending to be merely a student of religious history goes to Canterbury and buys up the valuable relics from the cathedral care-taker. It throws a flood of light on Sir Aurel Stein's character when he gleefully related the whole incident without the least shame in his book "Ruins of Desert Cathay", Vol. 2, pp. 159–219. The Tun-Huang collection of early Chinese manuscripts formed a unit by itself. But Sir Aurel Stein, not knowing a word of Chinese, took away what he considered most valuable, separating many manuscripts which really belonged together, thus destroying the value of the manuscripts themselves. Soon afterwards French and Japanese travellers followed his trail with the result that the unique collection is now divided up and scattered in London, Paris and Tokyo. In the first two cities at least, the manuscripts lie un-studied for the last twenty years, and their rightful owners, the Chinese, who are the most competent scholars for their study, are deprived of their opportunity as well as their ownership. Do the scientific institutions financing the new expedition realize what they are doing and desire with their eyes open, that Sir Aurel Stein as their representative should repeat his dishonourable act?

(3) It is just to prevent such acts of vandalism that all countries have enacted laws prohibiting unauthorized excavations and the export of archaeological treasures. Italy even forbids the selling of old pictures to foreign countries. When H. Pumpelly went in 1903 to excavate in Russian Turkestan he had to return his entire collection to the Russian museum. Even semi-independent Egypt has enforced laws against illegal excavators. On June 2, 1930, the Chinese Government promulgated the Laws of Antiquities, making such work as contemplated by Sir Aurel Stein illegal. Do his financial supporters representing the best known scientific institutions desire him to carry out his work in secret in direct violation of Chinese law and then smuggle the objects obtained out of the country?

(4) We desire to say that Chinese scholars and scientists do not want in the least to prevent foreign scholars from making their contributions to Chinese archaeology. On the contrary, during the last decade several foreigners have co-operated with us on terms satisfactory to both parties. While we welcome foreign participation in Chinese archaeological studies, we will use every mean to resist any attempt on the part of foreigners like Sir Aurel Stein to carry out excavations under false pretence and to smuggle secretly historical and archaeological objects out of the country. We believe that

in so doing we have on our side the sympathy of all true students of scientific archaeology all over the world, and that when the scientific institutions that have promised Sir Aurel Stein their financial support have been informed of the questionable methods used by him and the disastrous results expected, will withdraw their support in the interest of true science and good international relations.

Signed: CHANG CH'I

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