

# HUANG WENBI: PIONEER OF CHINESE ARCHAEOLOGY IN XINJIANG

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Whenever one thinks of the history of the Silk Road and of the explorers and archaeologists who first unearthed its myriads of ancient treasures, a select group of names readily comes to mind: Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein, Albert von Le Coq, and Paul Pelliot, to name just a few of the most famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective). For those scholars who are somewhat more familiar with the history of the expeditions themselves, other explorers and influential personages are just as well known:



Nikolai Petrovskii, Otani Kozui, Tachibana Zuicho, George Macartney, Clarmont Skrine, Gustav Mannerheim, and perhaps even Ellsworth Huntington. One name that is rarely included within such lists, however, is Huang Wenbi (1893–1966) [Fig. 1], the first Chinese archaeologist to undertake excavations in Xinjiang. An international symposium dedicated entirely to Huang's life and career, held in Urumqi in October 2013 and sponsored by Xinjiang Normal University 新疆师范大学 and the newly established Huang Wenbi Institute 黄文弼中心, constitutes the first significant attempt to reassess his legacy.

The conference, in which scholars from China, Japan, Europe, and America all participated, was held in tandem with the publication of three substantial collections of articles likely to be of interest to anyone who studies some aspect of the history of the Silk Road in northwestern China. For historians and linguists of the pre-modern era, the most useful volume is likely to be *Collected Papers on the Documents Discovered by Huang Wenbi in the Western Regions* 黄文弼所获西域文献论集 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2013), edited by the noted Dunhuang scholar Rong Xinjiang. In his preface, Rong observes that scholars have long referred to repositories of manuscripts and artifacts in London or Paris as "the Stein collection" or "the Pelliot collection," but that no one ever refers to "the Huang Wenbi collection," despite its comparable size. As Rong himself also notes, however, this is a natural result of the historical inaccessibility of the collection, a situation akin to similar collections held in the former Soviet Union. Now that materials from all such previously restricted holdings are rapidly being made available through facsimile reproductions and electronic repositories, Rong hopes that more scholars will be able to

Fig. 1. Huang Wenbi. After: 黄文弼研究论集 2013, frontispiece.

take advantage of the wealth of material that Huang collected during his expeditions to Xinjiang. The articles in this volume, authored by a balanced mix of Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars, represent some of the first systematic attempts to integrate the “the Huang Wenbi collection” into wider fields of comparative scholarship.

Two other volumes offer an eclectic sampling of articles relating mostly to Huang’s life and career in a historical context, though some continue to pursue the above volume’s focus on analyzing the actual archaeological material that Huang brought back from Xinjiang. *Collected Essays on Huang Wenbi* 黄文弼研究论集 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2013), edited by Zhu Yuqi and Wang Xinchun, includes articles of both historical and historiographical import, many of which were first published several decades ago [Fig. 2]. Generally speaking, the later the date of original publication, the higher the quality of scholarship. Though some of the articles included in this volume break new ground in going beyond mere admiration of the man and his work, too many of them simply cover more or less the same standard points of biographical interest, lacking both new sources and new interpretations. Six entire articles, for instance, are authored by Huang’s son, and belong more to the category of studied reminiscences than scholarship. Far more promising is *The International Symposium on Huang Wenbi and the Sino-Swedish Northwest China Scientific Expedition* 黄文弼与中瑞西北科学考察学术研讨会论文集, a collection of papers presented at the international conference in Urumqi in 2013. Here one finds cutting-edge research into Huang’s life and work, put forth by new and promising scholars – mostly from mainland China – for whom the restrictive politics and scholarly taboos of earlier generations exert less influence than they did on their forbears.

The purpose of the present article is to bring much-needed attention to the lively reassessment of Huang Wenbi’s life and work currently underway, and further to contribute to the emerging field of “Huang Wenbi studies.” For the historian of twentieth-century China, the life and times of Huang Wenbi offer original and rare insights into the relationship between foreign scholars and their Chinese counterparts during an era of great upheaval. Huang came of age during a time when the global monopoly of Western and Japanese scholarly institutions was gradually – and reluctantly – giving way to the determined efforts of Chinese scholars to join the ranks of an international scientific elite. Though it was a protracted, painful, and highly illuminating process, it is one that

Fig. 2. The cover of 黄文弼研究论集 with an expedition photo of Huang Wenbi.

has not yet received the serious scholarly treatment it deserves. By means of a careful analysis of the personal diary Huang kept during his first and most famous expedition to Xinjiang (1927–30), it is hoped that more scholars, both within China and abroad, will recognize the enormous potential of a field of study dedicated to the life and times of Huang Wenbi, in much the same way that other fields of study have grown up around the lives of men like Aurel Stein or Sven Hedin.

### A Life of Obscurity

Up until very recently, the name Huang Wenbi has been relatively unknown outside of China. Even within China, he enjoys nowhere near the prestige and recognition of other contemporaries in related fields. Why? Two explanatory frameworks may go some way in helping to understand his neglect: language and politics. The first explanation is largely responsible for his obscurity outside of China and Japan. Huang was educated entirely within China, obtaining all of his degrees from Peking University in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and never traveled abroad. Though it seems he could read publications in major European languages pertaining to his field, and was able to carry on basic conversations with his foreign colleagues – apparently in English or German – his own work



was published exclusively in Chinese, and remains so to this day. This stands in stark contrast to some of his more well-known contemporaries — such as the archaeologist Li Ji or anthropologist Fei Xiaotong — who were educated abroad and saw to it that their works appeared in both English and Chinese. That Huang did not survive the Cultural Revolution, succumbing to his persecutors on a snowy winter day in 1966, similarly deprived him of the opportunity to oversee a revival of his scholarship during the reform era.

Another inhibiting factor related to language is the fact that many of Huang's discoveries contained ancient Central Asian scripts and languages. Indeed, as will become evident in the analysis to follow, this is one of the more important and compelling aspects of Huang's legacy, and one that carries profound implications for the political and cultural debates attendant on any "frontier expedition." In the context of his time, however, the unfortunate result was that few scholars within China had the linguistic expertise which might have allowed them to study Huang's collection with profit, even if it had been accessible to them. As Wang Guowei observed in the 1920s, "none of our countrymen have yet studied these sorts of ancient languages." As a result, those who wanted to unlock the secrets of non-Chinese documents and artifacts discovered in Xinjiang "have no choice but to look toward England, France, and Germany" (Wang 1999, p. 52). (Even today, roughly half of the articles contained in *Collected Papers on the Documents Discovered by Huang Wenbi in the Western Regions* [2013] have been penned by Western or Japanese scholars). And yet scholars from these latter countries could not obtain access to the collection during the tumultuous decades subsequent to Huang's return to Beijing in 1930. Furthermore, the fact that Huang was not chiefly engaged in the recovery of classically oriented sources, filled with symbolic nationalist potential — such as the Shang oracle bones unearthed by Li Ji at the government-funded Anyang site in Henan — could only further undermine his prospects for scholarly celebrity.

Matters of linguistic import notwithstanding, the chief reason Huang has fared so poorly in the historical imagination is due to politics. More specifically, it is due to the politically charged tensions Huang maintained with both Chinese and foreign members of the famous and much touted Sino-Swedish Northwest Scientific Expedition to Xinjiang (1927–33). Billed both then and today as the first scientific expedition to Xinjiang in which Chinese and foreign specialists participated on equal footing and on terms respectful to Chinese political and cultural sovereignty, the Sino-Swedish expedition has long occupied a hallowed and sacrosanct position within China as a mod-

el to which all foreign scholars are expected to adhere should they desire to do work in China. For Xu Bingxu, the professor of philosophy at Peking University who was selected as Co-Director of the expedition alongside Sven Hedin, the venture was regarded as a politically successful enterprise that paid professional dividends for the rest of his life. Xu's diary of his experiences, first published in 1930, has long attracted scholarly attention and is frequently reprinted.

In stark contrast, Huang's diary, amounting to 565 typeset pages, was never even prepared for publication during his lifetime. (It is a wonder at all that the original handwritten manuscript managed to survive Huang's persecution during the Cultural Revolution). Only through the unstinting efforts of Huang's son, Huang Lie, was the manuscript rescued and edited during the reform era, finally seeing the light of day in 1990. What can account for such a delay? Articles by Li Xun and Håkan Wahlquist, appearing in two of the three volumes published on the occasion of the 2013 conference, both give prominence to a series of remarkable entries in the second and third volumes of Hedin's massive *History of the Expedition in Asia, 1927–1935*, long the chief narrative of the expedition with which most people outside of China are familiar. As Wahlquist notes, it is in these portions of the narrative, particularly the one detailing Hedin's return to Beijing in 1934, that Hedin takes the unprecedented and — for him — highly unusual step of vilifying one of his adversaries in print. That adversary is Huang Wenbi, whom Hedin repeatedly disparages as an unscrupulous rumor-monger and relentless saboteur of Hedin's most recent collaboration with the Nationalist government in Nanjing: a motor expedition across Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang intended to produce blueprints for future road construction.

Outside of China, these provocative entries have most likely escaped previous scrutiny simply because Huang was such an unknown and shadowy figure within the standard histories of the Silk Road and its latter-day expeditions. Within China, the reason no one has highlighted these entries prior to Li Xun's article in 2012 can only be due to the fact they touch upon extremely sensitive issues located at the heart of nationalist narratives of scholarly collaboration with foreign explorers. In short, as a result of his unprecedented willingness to re-organize his Swedish and German expedition as a joint Sino-Swedish venture, Sven Hedin has long occupied a cherished position atop the pantheon of enlightened and progressive foreign scholars sympathetic to, and respectful of, Chinese concerns. That Huang Wenbi, a relatively low-ranking member of this expedition, would later incur Hedin's very public wrath for suggesting that Hedin had been less than honest in adhering to the

stipulation of the Nationalist government that he not engage in archaeological excavations during the 1934 motor expedition — Huang even alleges that Hedin conspired to smuggle his finds out of China altogether — thus presents a very serious problem.

Li's and Wahlquist's findings naturally lead to even more questions. If, for instance, Huang's relationship with Hedin could end with such public acrimony in the mid-1930s—and still bother Hedin enough to consider the episode worthy of inclusion in his official narrative of the expedition a full decade later — could there also be signs of discord during the original Sino-Swedish expedition in 1927–30? If so, then the outlines of Huang's historiographical ostracization might finally be within our reach. In other words, was Huang's feud with Hedin one of the chief reasons why Huang's diary was deemed unfit for publication during the entirety of Huang's natural life? And, by extension, could this be responsible for his marginalization both from scholarly and from popular narratives of archaeological expeditions to Xinjiang? This theory appears even more promising when we consider the diary of Chinese Co-Director Xu Bingxu — Huang's colleague and superior — who was able to publish his narrative of the expedition almost immediately upon the return of most of its members to Beijing in 1930. For instance, while Xu was only too willing to print his criticisms of some of the rank-and-file foreign members of the expedition, he always portrays Hedin himself as beyond reproach.

Huang, however, does not. Thus it is with the above backdrop in mind that we now turn to a close reading of Huang's diary itself, in order to paint a fuller picture of the many tensions attendant upon a scholarly venture between Chinese and foreigners during a key transitional period in modern Chinese history. Huang's diary will also prove instructive in challenging some of the conventional wisdom regarding the attitude of Chinese scholars in the eastern metropole toward the linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity of the distant non-Han borderlands. Ultimately, the following analysis will show that the career of Huang Wenbi, the first professional Chinese archaeologist to conduct fieldwork in Xinjiang, bears a striking resemblance to that of Aurel Stein, toward whom Huang harbored equal parts admiration and jealousy.

### Huang and the Teutons

The opening lines of *The Diary of Huang Wenbi during an Expedition to Mongolia and Xinjiang* (*Huang Wenbi Meng Xin kaocha riji* 黄文弼蒙新考察日记), make it clear how Huang regarded the nature of his mission to Xinjiang:

My colleagues and I have been deputed by the Chinese Association of Academic Organizations to serve as members of the Northwest Scientific Expedition, entrusted with the task of excavating antiquities and other assignments. Originally Hedin, a Swede, had planned to organize a large-scale expedition to northwestern China to excavate antiquities and study the geology, climate, etc. Chinese scholars expressed their opposition. After negotiations, China sent five scholars and five students to accompany the survey. I was one of the scholars. As a result, our task was twofold. On the one hand, we were to supervise the foreigners, and on the other hand we were to carry out scientific investigations. [Huang 1990, p. 1]

Xu Bingxu, the professor of philosophy at Peking University who was chosen as the Chinese Co-Director of the expedition, expressed similar sentiments in the preface to his published diary. Noting the unprecedented nature of the Sino-Swedish collaboration, Xu let it be known that all future proposals for foreign expeditions in China would have to follow this new model. "As for our posture toward foreigners," Xu wrote, "we will embrace them with friendship and welcome those who are willing to cooperate with us. But for those who pursue an agenda of cultural aggression (*wenhua qinlue* 文化侵略), hoping to pillage and carry off our precious resources, we will find a way to resist them and prevent their return to our land" (Xu 2000, p. 2).

Although both men professed similarly lofty goals, there was a key occupational difference between them, and it was one destined to give rise to tensions in the field. In short, Xu's appointment to the expedition was based upon political considerations, whereas Huang was attached to its roster on the strength of his scientific qualifications. In other words, Xu was not trained to undertake excavations in the field, nor did he. He was appointed to the expedition solely for the prestige of his name and willingness to endure hardship. As a result, it is clear that Xu had a greater stake in adhering to a politically correct narrative of the expedition than did Huang, who was more likely to see himself in direct methodological competition with the Swedish and German members of the expedition. And the politically correct line of the day, one that has continued down almost to the present, was that Sven Hedin was an enlightened foreigner whose actions on this expedition stood as sufficient atonement for his past "imperialist" activities in China.

In his diary, Xu always refers to Hedin as "Mr. Hedin" or "Dr. Hedin." Huang, however, never refers to Hedin by anything other than his unadorned surname, reserving such titles of respect only for "Mr. Xu" and

the other Chinese members of his party. On several occasions, Xu records his admiration for the spirit of scientific discovery and unflagging persistence of Hedin, as was the case when the latter muddied himself in the water in order to measure the velocity of a river current. "We Chinese may laugh at them now," Xu observed, "but it is only later that we will come to realize that the levels of judgment and tolerance exhibited by foreigners are very difficult to reach" (p. 94). By contrast, Huang demonstrated little interest in holding up his foreign colleagues as a model for his countrymen to emulate. What he wanted more than anything else was to become that model himself. When Huang learned early on that the Swedish archaeologist Folke Bergman had already uncovered a large number of artifacts, and that Hedin was promising a reward of up to 5,000 dollars to anyone who discovered "the next Loulan," Huang let his competitive spirit be known:

Mr. Xu laughed and said that no one should tell Mr. Huang about this, or he will certainly go looking for two ancient cities, and we shall have to give him 10,000 dollars. Hedin agreed, saying we absolutely cannot let Mr. Huang know about this. But Mr. Xu then turned his head around and told me. I laughed, and said that the discovery of one ancient city is nothing, for when I get to Xinjiang I expect to discover an entire kingdom. [Huang 1990, p. 112]

Whereas Xu was eager to participate in a Chinese and German language exchange arrangement with Hedin, Huang kept his distance, despite his linguistic deficiencies. And though both Xu and Huang record criticisms of their foreign colleagues, Huang's are far more scathing and indiscriminate. Xu, however, took great care to insulate Hedin from censure. The best illustration of this comes from the arrival of the expedition in Hami, its first major stop within the borders of Xinjiang. Faced with orders from the governor that every member's baggage must be opened and inspected, some of the European members dug in for a fight. Calling their intransigence "very immature" and "unreasonable," Xu wrote that he could not "countenance any foreigner enjoying special privileges within my country." After several of the foreigners decided to eat separately from the Chinese, Xu proceeded to disparage them in his diary. "Faced with such nonsense and their childish temper, I could only let them go." Several days later, however, Hedin, sidelined during the dispute with a fever, returned and "asked about the course of the luggage inspection and why we were eating separately. He then roundly castigated Massenbach and the others" (Xu 2000, pp. 164, 166).

If we only had Xu's version of events to go by, then it would seem like Hedin really was the foreign saint that seven decades of glowing Chinese historiography

have made him out to be. But Huang's diary provides a very different perspective, including several key episodes that Xu chose either to omit or severely circumscribe in his narrative. Here we will limit our analysis to four of the most telling: the filming of a traveling theater troupe, a proposal to survey the ruins of the Great Wall, the camel thief episode, and access to strategic military sites.

On June 26, 1927, a traveling contingent of the Flower and Drum Opera Troupe passed by the expedition's encampment in a part of what is now Inner Mongolia. Huang thought "their performance and lyrics were very crass and depraved," and took solace in the fact the new Nationalist government in the south had already issued a ban on its performance, so as to "improve the customs and habits of the people." Much to Huang's chagrin, however, "the foreigners decided to take a motion picture of it, with the intent of showing it to audiences overseas and exposing the backwardness of the Chinese race. How very humiliating!" Worst of all, Huang continued, was that Co-Director Xu Bingxu refused to stand up for what Huang thought was right. "I made strenuous attempts to suggest that they not do this, but Mr. Xu did not approve. What a shame" (Huang 1990, p. 24). When Huang again broached the fate of this film with one of his Chinese colleagues, he concluded that Xu's "excessive weakness and pliability (*guoyu ruanruo* 过于软弱)" were a "cause for concern" (p. 34).

One week later, Huang proposed a side trip to investigate rumors that a ruined portion of the Qin "Great Wall" was nearby. "I decided to head out and investigate it," Huang wrote on July 1, "but was prevented from doing so by the foreigners. This made me extremely angry and sad" (p. 26). Four days later, Co-Director Xu took up the proposal with Hedin, and Huang recorded them "talking endlessly" in his diary. According to Huang, Hedin initially demurred on the pretext that there were not enough camels to permit their departure from the party. When faced with Xu's lobbying on Huang's behalf, however, Hedin changed tack, telling Xu "that this part of the wall had already been noted on European maps." Hedin's ever-changing excuses did not sit well with Huang. "I suspect that Hedin is simply trying to frustrate us. Originally when we broached this matter with Hedin, he didn't know anything about it. Now that we've told him it might be the Qin wall, he says that it has already been discovered. Could it be that he doesn't want the Chinese to be the first to discover it?" (p. 27)

Several months later, one of the expedition's Han porters attempted to abscond in the night with two camels. Though both Huang and Xu recorded this event, their responses could not be more different.

Huang wrote that he was “greatly ashamed of this Chinese man, who has no self-respect and whose actions have led to a loss of face for all of us.” Wishing to “prevent the foreigners from applying their own form of private punishment,” Huang and the rest of his Chinese colleagues decided to deliver the thief to the local officials. Soon, however, Huang’s indignation turned to pity:

This man is already more than fifty years old and he has great difficulty walking. Thus he stole two camels, one to carry his possessions and the other for himself to ride. Other than his clothes and some other sundry possessions such as a few pieces of bread, he didn’t touch any other important items. So to label him a thief rests upon a single moment of muddleheaded action; he is certainly not a seasoned criminal. But the foreigners have already tied him up in chains, verbally abused him, and even taken pictures of him. How many more such insults can our country bear? [p. 68]

Most distressing to Huang, however, was what happened two weeks later, when “the foreigners tied up the camel thief and filmed him on camera.” For Huang, this was further evidence that “foreigners all adopt an insulting attitude toward China, imposing a deep affront to our honor” (p. 86). On the contrary, Xu, in his published account of the camel thief affair, sides entirely with Hedin and the foreigners. In stark contrast to Huang, Xu describes the thief as a “seasoned criminal,” and approves of the shackles used to immobilize him, confident that “there was no intent to abuse him” (Xu 2000, p. 64).

The final source of tension between Huang and the foreigners — and between Huang and Xu — was a result of the strategic aims of Hedin’s original German financiers. In short, Hedin’s purpose in attempting to organize an expedition to Xinjiang had originally been to undertake geological, meteorological, and cartographic surveys in support of German aeronautic expansion throughout Central Asia. Huang’s understanding of these aims comes through clearly in an account of an extended discussion he had with another Chinese member of the expedition, in which Huang learns that “their goal for this expedition is entirely related to airplanes”; hence, the cover pretext of “implementing aerial archaeology.” After summarizing the geopolitical goals of interwar Germany vis-à-vis the Soviet and British presence in Xinjiang, Huang expresses his adamant opposition:

I am of the opinion that such a project as this absolutely cannot be countenanced, as the rights for aerial routes concern national security. If we permit airline routes, then Germany can simply fly

straight into the heartland of China via Central Asia and the Pamir plateau, without having to travel around the ocean. China has already lost its riverine shipping routes to foreigners, and this is cause for regret to this day. [Huang 1990, p. 33]

Huang concluded the matter by expressing his resolve to “restrict them from any and all strategic military regions” (p. 34). Later developments show that he stayed true to his word. When the Swedish geologist Erik Norin proposed a survey of the strategic Juyanhai region, Xu expressed his disapproval. Huang went on to note in his diary that “Hedin suspects that I am the true cause of obstruction,” a suspicion Huang makes no attempt to dispel. From that point on, tensions mounted. “Originally Norin wanted to map a lake,” Huang wrote, “and planned to take a southern road to get there, but I expressed my disagreement. Then he decided to take the northern road, and stopped for three days. We started off after them.” What their ultimate intentions were, Huang was uncertain, “but whenever they see me they stop their secret discussions, and we simply have to act like we don’t understand what they are saying” (p. 112).

In the end, Huang rejoiced when he heard that the governor of Xinjiang had refused to yield an inch to Hedin’s proposal that his German sponsors be allowed to establish aerial routes through Chinese territory. Again, however, the differing accounts of Xu and Huang are instructive. Whereas Xu dispassionately describes Hedin’s meeting with the provincial Minister of Foreign Affairs, refraining from adding any commentary of his own, Huang indulges in scarcely concealed *Schadenfreude*. “Hedin then mentioned that [warlord] Yang Yuting had already issued his approval [in Beijing], hoping to use this as an intimidation tactic against [the governor]. This is truly laughable.” Several weeks later, the matter was closed for good. “They were refused,” Huang noted. “I am thrilled. For many days now the air has been filled with the shrill voices of the Germans saying they will return home, but this is not enough to intimidate my countrymen” (p. 178).

From these few examples, it is clear that the animosity between Huang and Hedin destined to surface publicly in the mid-1930s traces its roots back to the earliest days of the Sino-Swedish expedition. At the crux of the matter lay the understandable tensions between foreign explorers long accustomed to getting their way in China, and a new generation of professional Chinese scientists eager to displace them. The irony of the situation, of course, is that in choosing Xu and Hedin as model examples of the new spirit of international scientific cooperation in China, those responsible for the suppression of Huang’s no-holds-barred

account inadvertently consigned him to the margins of historiography on the archaeology of the Silk Road. For it is clear that Huang's diary, with its frank and none too flattering appraisals of Hedin and its raw expose of jealous competitions on all sides, could not be reconciled with the politically correct narratives put forth by Xu and Hedin, both of whom were far more renowned than Huang.

And yet it is clear that Huang deserves his due, perhaps now more than ever. Toward this end, the remainder of this article will analyze the substantive work that Huang undertook in Xinjiang following his departure from the main body of the caravan. As we shall see, there is much more to learn from Huang's career than that made relevant by his principled opposition to the foreign presence in China. Evaluated on the merits of the work he performed rather than the political battles he lost, it is difficult to see Huang as anything other than the Chinese embodiment of Aurel Stein.

### A Chinese Stein?

The similarities between Huang Wenbi and Aurel Stein are many. Both undertook four expeditions to Xinjiang during their lifetimes. Each was the first of his countrymen to complete a successful crossing through the heart of the Taklamakan Desert (Stein did it both from north to south and in reverse, while Huang did it from north to south). Both men were indefatigable in the field, yet neither was eager to dramatize their accomplishments back home or bask in the limelight. Both men were fiercely independent and shunned the company of colleagues: Stein went to great lengths to avoid the sort of burdensome partnerships that he saw in his German and French competitors, while Huang and Xu nearly had a falling out over Huang's insistence that he be allowed to split from the party and conduct his own excavations without a Chinese colleague by his side. Furthermore, both men evinced a strong archaeological "conscience," evident in Stein's criticisms of German excavation methods and the care with which he reburied those murals he could not take with him, and in Huang's repeated determination to lock horns with both Hedin and Xu, despite the detrimental effect such a principled stance had upon his career and legacy.

One other point of comparison, however, carries far greater import vis-à-vis the Chinese scholarly community than it does for its Western counterpart. This is the realization that Huang Wenbi took just as much care to unearth and preserve Central Asian artifacts and manuscripts as he did Chinese. Why is this so important? For two reasons. First, it carries profound implications for political claims to the region by an array

of policymakers, scholars, and dissidents around the world — but especially within China — who may wish to advance their own agendas regarding the future of Xinjiang today. Second, from a historical perspective, it is clear that many influential scholars on the eastern seaboard demonstrated a strident bias against the recovery of that which Huang had devoted himself to collecting. Chen Yuan, president of the Catholic University of Peking, expressed precisely this sentiment in the preface to his *Index to the Dunhuang Manuscripts Remaining after the Plunder* (*Dunhuang jiejyu lu* 敦煌劫餘錄), completed soon after Huang's return to Beijing. "Manuscripts written not in Chinese but rather in one of the ancient Central Asian languages are not worth much (*bu guizhe* 不貴者)," he wrote. "What the Chinese people value (*guoren suo guizhe* 國人所貴者) are ancient manuscripts written in Chinese" (Chen 1931). Much like Stein, who often lamented the lack of institutional and financial support for any archaeologist who chose to lead an expedition outside of the "Bible lands," Huang faced an uphill battle to procure funding and support for archaeological labors deemed unlikely to shed light on the classical forbears of Chinese civilization.

Nonetheless, this is precisely the task to which Huang set himself, despite the wholesale lack of interest among many of his colleagues back home and despite the fact that few if any of them were equipped to conduct research on what he had uncovered. His unorthodox interest in such remains was kindled almost immediately after the expedition's departure from Beijing, during a cursory survey of the environs of Bailingmiao in today's Inner Mongolia. Huang's first big find was a Chinese-language stele "capable of yielding an investigation into the history of the Mongol kings, which we can then use to supplement in many places the official history of the Yuan." Noting that there were very few rubbings of Mongol steles then in circulation, Huang noted his "great luck" in stumbling upon this one. In addition to the Chinese-language stele, Huang also made two additional rubbings of Mongol-language steles, sending at least one of these back to his sponsors in Beijing (Huang 1990, pp. 16–17, 19, 22). Three months later, on the fringe of the Gobi Desert, Huang notes that he "took some workers to Sa-la-zai Temple to examine the Tibetan inscriptions. I made two copies of rubbings" (p. 60).

With artifacts or manuscripts written in Mongolian or Tibetan, Huang could rest content that someone in Beijing would be able to read them. The further west he traveled, however, the likelihood that anyone in China would be able to decipher the scripts he was collecting decreased significantly. On such occasions,

Huang merely expressed a desire to safeguard the material for consultation by future generations of more linguistically endowed Chinese scholars. Once, when he uncovered a script “that wasn’t Tibetan or Mongolian” but rather Tangut, Huang cursed his own linguistic deficiencies, a refrain often heard from Stein regarding his own sinophilic inadequacies. “It is a shame that I cannot read Tangut,” Huang noted in his diary. “Thus I can only briefly describe it here for future consultation by those who know how to read it” (p. 89). He pursued a similar approach to what he thought would be a bilingual stele in Chinese and Mongolian near Karashahr. After offering a reward of five silver *liang* to whichever of his laborers managed to recover it first, Huang found that he could not identify the script. Nonetheless, “I took three pages of rubbings, to retain for future research” (p. 235).

During his time in Xinjiang, Huang made it a priority to collect manuscripts and artifacts exhibiting non-Chinese scripts. Sometimes they surfaced as a result of his own archaeological labors, but more often than not he acquired them through purchase. In Turfan, Huang records that “some of the locals dug up two pages of a manuscript in Uighur, so I gave them one silver *liang* for it. That is a pretty good deal” (p. 168). Near Kucha, Huang encountered a village headman trying to sell some manuscripts, all written in non-Chinese languages “that were probably from India but with some slight changes.” He paid thirty *liang* for the lot of them, all of which were “complete from front to end, and are probably government documents or letters of some sort.” He then articulated the precise reason why he was paying so much attention to the collection of these sorts of artifacts: “We do not lack for Tang manuscripts on Chinese soil, so I am beginning to pay closer attention to the collection of items in other scripts” (p. 263). On another occasion near Domoko, a Uighur man approached Huang with some manuscripts for sale. “The script resembles that of India but with some differences,” Huang noted. “They are printed documents, but printing developed in the Western Regions relatively early. I gave him twenty *liang* and he left” (p. 426). Huang regarded such finds as “exceedingly precious” (*shen zhengui* 甚珍貴) (p. 207).

In fact, by the time Huang was about to leave the province, word had circulated far and wide through local bazaars that this was a Chinese explorer who would pay good money both for non-Chinese finds and for Chinese manuscripts concerning non-conventional subjects. On his return to Turfan in early 1930, Huang was swarmed by locals trying to sell him various antiquities, few of which seem to have displayed Chinese characters. One such peddler brought him a

Muslim manuscript written in five different languages, none of which was Chinese. “If not consulted for its contents,” Huang wrote, “it can be used as a linguistic reference book.” The same man also brought *The Acts of Mohammed*, while another brought a manuscript about “the conversion of the Mongol kings at Khotan and Kashgar to Islam” (p. 516). In letting it be known that he was interesting in acquiring in such items, Huang was positioning himself against decades of antiquarian transactions in northwestern China, most of which took it as an article of faith that foreigners would pay the highest prices for Central Asian artifacts and manuscripts, while the Chinese would do similarly for the same in Chinese.

In pursuing his interest in procuring Central Asian artifacts and manuscripts for consultation by future generations of Chinese scholars, Huang found himself constantly in the footsteps of Stein and other foreign explorers. Time and time again, he notes in his diary traces of sites where his predecessors had excavated, and what, if anything remained. At one site in Turfan, Huang notes that “foreigners only excavated in this spot for two days, and they did not find much. I doubt that everything inside has already been discovered. If I dig here carefully, I am certain to uncover much” (p. 165). Most of the time, however, Huang realized that the foreigners had done their work only too well, as was the case at Ming-oi:

It is a pity that this site has already been excavated. I see some fragments with the letters ‘mixi’ on them, and other foreign papers, all of which proves beyond a doubt that this was done by foreigners. According to one of the guides, a foreigner came here (probably Stein) with thirty laborers and worked for more than forty days. So there will not be much left to excavate. In matters of archaeology, we have already fallen far behind the foreigners. It is no longer possible to enjoy the ease of discovery which they experienced upon their arrival. [p. 203]

Whenever Huang learned that he was closing in on a site of Stein’s past labors, he usually gave up any and all hope for fresh discoveries. “I excavated here for half a day, but did not see a single thing,” Huang wrote two weeks later. “It is said that twenty or thirty years ago a foreigner dug here for many days, and everything he found was taken away. This must be Stein” (p. 209). Unfortunately for Huang, foreigners — even those working outside the Bible lands — had far more resources to work with than he did. “I inspected the site from north to south,” he wrote in the environs of Kucha, “but most everything has already been excavated by foreigners. It is said about twenty years ago, a foreigner was here. Every day he employed tens of laborers to dig, for twenty or thirty days straight. This

makes it clear on just how grand a scale the foreigners pursued their work" (pp. 313–14).

Despite the often melancholy nature of Huang's work, coming as it did a full generation after the "golden age" of foreign expeditions in Xinjiang, Huang reserved very little energy for scolding his predecessors. Mostly he simply aspired to do what they had already done. And in the case of Stein specifically, any antipathy Huang may have felt was balanced by a large dose of quiet admiration. In his diary, we see Huang going to great lengths to procure only those guides once used by Stein, staying in local lodgings once frequented by Stein, noting Stein's campsites, and making liberal use of Stein's maps, which Huang deemed far superior to those produced by his own government. Huang frequently consults Stein's publications, and does not second guess the old Hungarian lightly:

Looking at the shards of pottery and coins, it seems like this region was still inhabited a thousand years ago. Yet Stein, based upon the papers he unearthed here written in ancient Western Regions script, concludes that these all date to after the eighth century. As I do not have any evidence to the contrary, I dare not say otherwise. [p. 425]

Like Stein, Huang makes frequent reference to the travels of Xuanzang. Unlike Stein, however, Huang also had full recourse to the classical canon of Chinese literature and histories at his fingertips.

More than anything else, the reader of Huang's diary gets the sense that what he most fervently wished for was to be regarded as the Chinese successor to Stein. Thus, it should come as no surprise to learn that few things bothered Huang more than attempts to obstruct his progress toward such a goal by local Chinese officials. In December 1928, five months after the assassination of the governor of Xinjiang had given the new governor a pretext to attempt to disband the expedition, Huang wrote a pointed letter to the latter that laid bare a raw sense of injustice. "In the past," Huang observed from Aksu, "scholars from both East and West have come numerous times to conduct excavations, and they have collected untold numbers of crates full of antiquities. In particular, the officials who hosted them were solicitous to the extreme in seeing to their needs. Today, however, when Chinese come, they are not even allowed to obtain a single glance. What will people say about this?" (p. 373). Though one of his Chinese colleagues succeeded in convincing him to remove several provocative phrases from this letter, Huang's most fundamental insecurities remained on full display in his diary.

At the crux of the matter was a simple chronological fact: Huang and his colleagues lagged behind the foreigners by a full generation, more than enough time

for the former to remove the cream of the crop from Xinjiang. Throughout Huang's diary there is a recurrent air of melancholic tardiness, nowhere more evident than when Huang encounters what appears to be several "tourist placards" at sites long since explored and explicated. At one bare site near Aksu, Huang was taken aback by the sight of "a wooden board in the middle [of the site] inscribed with the words: 'The Tang city of Qieshi.' It was erected in 1925 by Magistrate Yang Yingkuan." One week later, he found another. "Halfway up the mountain there was a wooden sign, erected by the magistrate of Bachu County, Duan Quan. On it appeared the words, 'Ancient ruins of the Tang state of Weitou,' followed by several lines of description..." (pp. 478, 484). Few things could be more demoralizing to any explorer, much less the first Chinese archaeologist ever to visit Xinjiang, than to come face to face with the realization that a great number of people before you had already been there and done that.

## Conclusion

The diary of Huang Wenbi contains a virtual treasure trove of data and commentary relevant to scholars in many disciplines. For the archaeologist and historian of ancient China or the Silk Road, it is akin to reading Stein's *Ruins of Desert Cathay* or Le Coq's *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, in that it provides the situational and topographical context indispensable to a comprehensive understanding of the artifacts and manuscripts now contained within "the Huang Wenbi collection." For the historian of modern China or the historian of archaeology, it provides a wealth of documentation regarding Huang's interactions with local Chinese officials in Xinjiang, international scholarly collaboration in China, the daily lives and livelihoods of the southern Uighur oases, the warlord politics of the early Nationalist era, and the amateur excavation activities of Chinese officials themselves. Though Huang's diary has long taken a back seat to the accounts of Sven Hedin and Xu Bingxu, it is arguably the most informative – and certainly the least censored – of the three. That its long delayed publication may very well be a consequence of Huang's falling afoul of the political lines of his day only makes it more valuable as a historical resource for scholars of our own day. As recognition of the value of the Huang Wenbi collection increases in tandem with international accessibility to its contents, there is no doubt that studies of Huang Wenbi will flourish as well.

## About the author

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