

AN ANALYSIS OF MODERN CHINESE COLOPHONS ON THE DUNHUANG MANUSCRIPTS

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For more than a century, the rich artistic and literary treasures of Cave 17 have managed to shed cultural and historical light on the lives of people who lived in, or merely passed through, the desert oasis of Dunhuang and its associated pilgrimage site, the Mogao Grottoes (*Mogao ku* 莫高窟), also known as Thousand-Buddha Caves (*Qianfodong* 千佛洞), during the first millennium CE. Quite often these same materials, dispersed around the world in the first three decades after their initial discovery in 1900, are also used by scholars to address cultural, social, political, and economic gaps in the premodern historical records of neighboring China, Tibet, Mongolia, or Central Asia. There is one topic of scholarly inquiry, however, that has yet to benefit from a close analysis of some of the materials to emerge from Cave 17: modern Chinese history.

This statement may come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the contents of Cave 17 [Fig. 1]. These contents include more than forty thousand objects, among which are religious paintings, Buddhist sutras, ritual tools and manuals, secular texts and letters, and administrative records. All of these objects were created or last modified at some point between the years 405 and 1002 CE. Sometime in the early decades of the eleventh century, Cave 17 was sealed off from the main hallway leading to Cave 16 and then forgotten about for the next nine centuries. How then can any of the objects found in Cave 17 serve as source material for historians of modern Chinese history? For the answer, we must look to the modern colophons added by Chinese scholars and officials to those manuscripts that passed through their hands during the first several decades of the twentieth century.

Many of the Dunhuang manuscripts contain an-

cient colophons that date to the first millennium CE. These are prefaces or postscripts that are contemporary to, or briefly postdate, the creation of the text itself. The modern Chinese colophons are different: they were added to these same Dunhuang manuscripts more than nine hundred years after the original production of the text, and in many cases far longer. More precisely, they were added soon after the initial dispersal of the contents of Cave 17 within China in the years and decades following the opening of the cave by Wang Yuanlu 王圓籙, [Fig. 2], the self-appointed Daoist caretaker of the Mogao Grottoes, in 1900. Of those that still survive, the earliest colophon is dated to 1910, while the latest is dated to 1952.

The colophons added to Dunhuang manuscripts by Chinese elites during the first half of the twentieth century appear only on those scrolls which re-

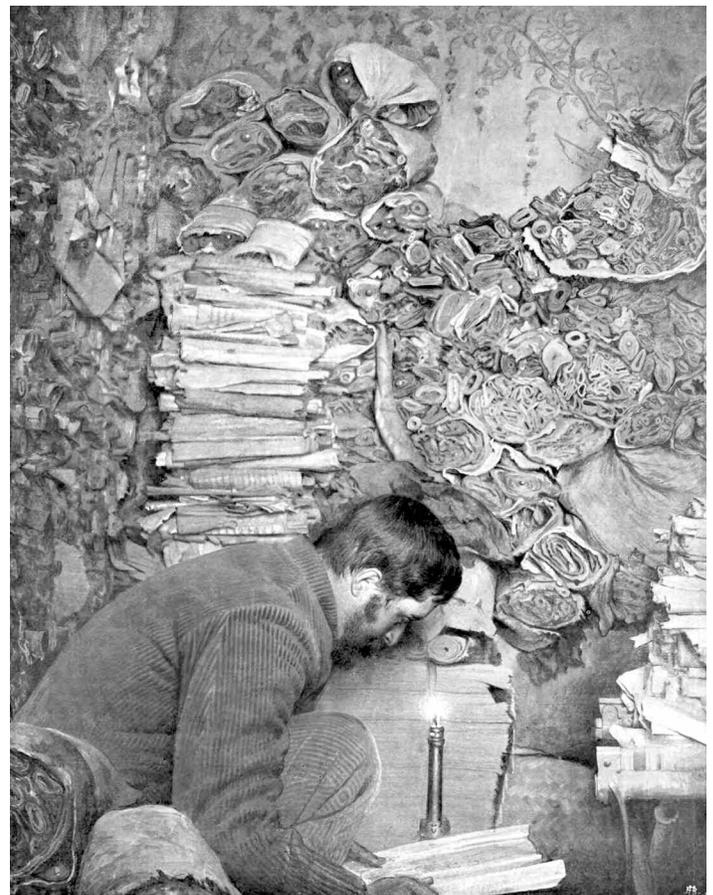


Fig. 1. The secret cave “library,” now known as Cave 17, as it appeared when Paul Pelliot gained access in 1908 (Pelliot 1910: 265).

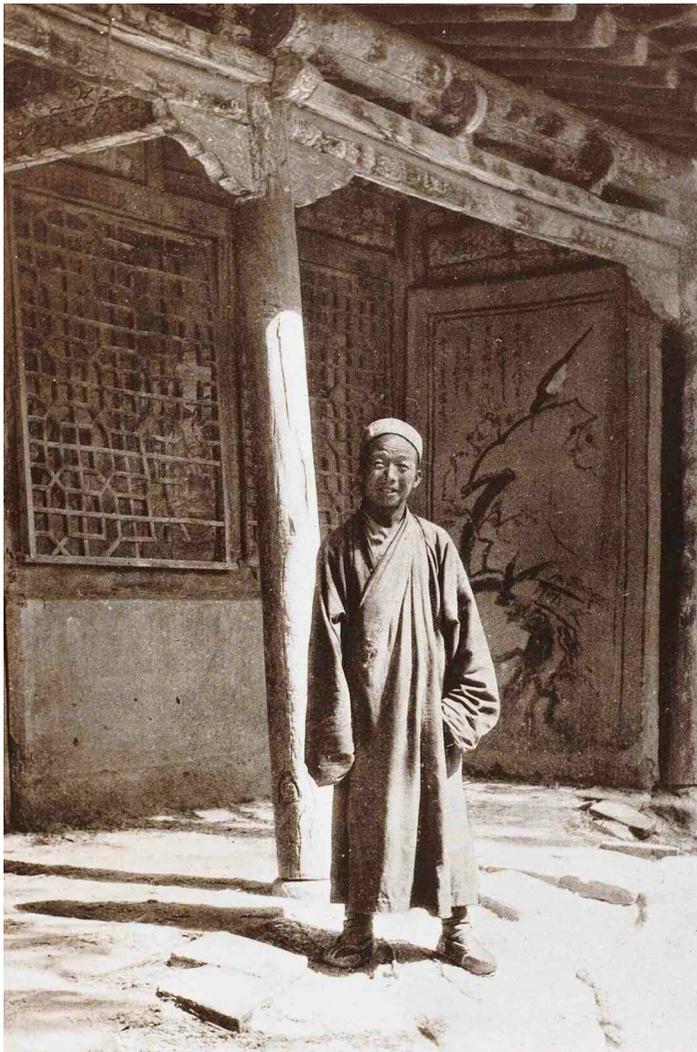


Fig. 2. Wang Yuanlu, the self-appointed Daoist caretaker of the Mogao Grottoes when Stein, Pelliot, and other foreign scholars visited the site in the first three decades of the 20th century (Stein 1912, pl. 187).

mained within the borders of China. In other words, the tens of thousands of Dunhuang manuscripts that were removed from China by foreign scholars and archaeologists and later deposited in various Western and Japanese museums, libraries, and universities do not include such colophons. This, of course, makes perfect sense: once discovered by foreigners, such manuscripts were packed in crates, concealed from view, and quickly transported out of the country. As a result, those scrolls never had a chance to pass through the hands of Chinese scholars or officials and their associated social and political networks. The only modern markings to be found on Dunhuang manuscripts outside of China today are the various catalogue notations indicating their place within the collection to which they belong.

By contrast, those Dunhuang manuscripts that came into the hands of a Chinese collector often contain contemporary colophons added by that very same collector or his close friends and associates [Fig. 3]. Complete facsimiles of these manuscripts can be found in five major collections

Fig. 3. Example of a modern-day colophon appended to an ancient Buddhist sutra from Cave 17. The first three lines of a modern colophon by Xu Chengyao are visible to the left, while the final portion of a Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Names of the Buddhas (Foshuo foming jing 佛說佛名經) appear on the right (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 199).



published in China over the past thirty years. Beginning in the early 1990s, Shanghai Antique Books Press (Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社) published the first of three multi-volume collections of ancient Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts that were collected and preserved within China during the twentieth century. These include manuscripts that ended up in the Shanghai Museum (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993), Peking University Library (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995), and the Tianjin Municipal Museum of Art (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1996). Over the ensuing decade, two more collections from other publishers then followed: Dunhuang manuscripts held by various collectors and institutions in Gansu Province (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al. 1999) and those that ended up in the China Bookstore conglomerate in Beijing (Zhongguo Shudian cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui 2007).

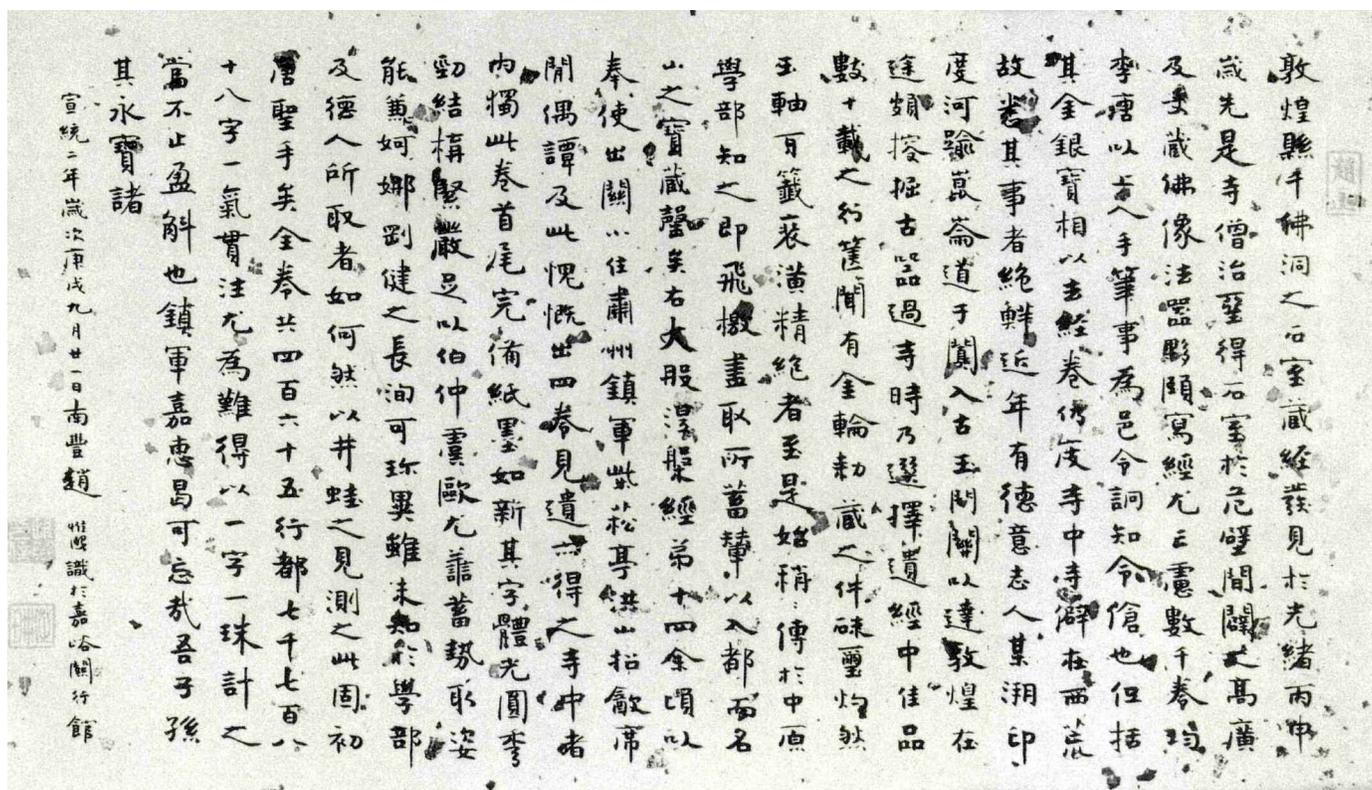
Nearly all of the colophons examined in this study were found in one of these collections. Though the facsimiles are generally of high quality, the colophons themselves, written in a free-flowing cursive script that was never intended for publica-

tion, are extremely difficult to read. The editors of several of these collections have provided helpful transcriptions of the original text for some of them. Most of the colophons, however, must still be digested in their original forms. As the rest of this article will show, the modern colophons attached to Dunhuang manuscripts stored within China open a rare and precious analytical window onto numerous areas of concern to the historian of the early twentieth century. These include: the cultural priorities of Confucian elites during the Republican era (1912–49), early reactions within China to the dispersal of manuscripts from Cave 17, modes of interaction with cultural artifacts in China before the establishment of national museums and libraries, and, perhaps most interestingly, strategies of deception used to increase the market value of forged manuscripts.

Early Modes of Interaction

Of all the facsimiles included in the five collections published since the 1990s, the earliest authentic colophon of any substance can be traced to the Qing official Zhao Weixi 趙惟熙 in 1910 [Fig. 4].¹ This is a relatively late date, a full ten years after

Fig. 4. This lengthy colophon, written by Qing official Zhao Weixi on a Great Nirvana sutra obtained during his travels through Gansu en route to Urumchi in 1910, is the earliest authentic modern Chinese colophon to survive on a Dunhuang manuscript (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 124).



Wang Yuanlu first discovered Cave 17 and started to send choice specimens from his hidden cache to Qing officials stationed in northwestern Gansu. Though we do not know how many manuscripts Wang delivered as gifts to such officials, we do know that word of these gifts circulated rapidly within Qing officialdom. As early as 1903, the prominent Qing official and scholar Ye Changchi 葉昌熾, who had received four copies of a *Great Nirvana* (*Da ban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經) sutra from Cave 17 as a gift from another official the previous year, commented upon these manuscripts in his diary. In two diary entries dated to 1903–4, Ye reveals that an unspecified number of Dunhuang manuscripts from Cave 17 had already come into the possession of Dunhuang county magistrate Wang Zonghan 汪宗翰, local military officers Heng Jiemei 恆介眉 and Zhang Xiaoshan 張篠珊, and Wang Zonghai 王宗海, an assistant instructor in the Confucian school of Dunhuang county. In addition, Yan Dong 延棟, the circuit intendant of Ansu, was also known to have a small collection. Last but not least, in 1907 and 1908, respectively, the British archaeologist Aurel Stein and French sinologist Paul Pelliot both caught glimpses of manuscripts that Wang Yuanlu had delivered as gifts to nearby officials, who then took them as far afield as Urumchi in the northwest and Lanzhou in the southeast (Rong 2013: 85–101).

In light of the frequency with which new colophons were added to those Dunhuang manuscripts in the possession of Chinese collectors in later decades, it seems curious that our earliest surviving colophon dates only to 1910—a full decade after Wang started giving them away as gifts in hopes of securing a donation for the restoration of the Mogao Grottoes. What happened to these manuscripts? In his overview of the history of the dispersal of the contents of Cave 17, Rong Xinjiang (2013: 85–101) observes that very few of the earliest dispersals have managed to survive down to the present day. Evidence culled from those Chinese colophons that did survive may provide a clue as to why. In short, the Confucian scholars and officials of the late Qing and early Republican eras did not yet view the Dunhuang

manuscripts in the same way as Western archaeologists such as Stein and Pelliot did: that is, as artifacts that belonged in a national museum, library, or research institution. Instead, they viewed them as precious objects that were capable of serving a variety of social, political, and economic agendas within the collector's own private networks.

Let us begin with the social agenda. Whenever a Qing official came into possession of an ancient scroll from Dunhuang, one of the first things he did with it was to display it at a social gathering. In the 1910 colophon appended to a *Great Nirvana* sutra by Zhao Weixi (see Fig. 4), we learn that this sutra had been given to him “during a banquet convened by Garrison Commander Chai Hongshan 柴洪山” (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 124). In 1911, the anonymous author of a colophon appended to another *Great Nirvana* sutra noted that his host “took out all the Dunhuang stone cavern manuscript rolls that he has collected from the second year of the Jiande reign period of the Northern Zhou. The paper used for this scroll is 1,340 years old.” The venerable age of the manuscript did not deter further additions, however, for this notation is followed by a list of the names of twelve people who looked at this scroll while it was on display. Over the next seventeen years, this sutra would amass six additional colophons [Fig. 5], the last in 1928 by Ma Xulun 馬叙倫, a prominent politician and scholar who ex-

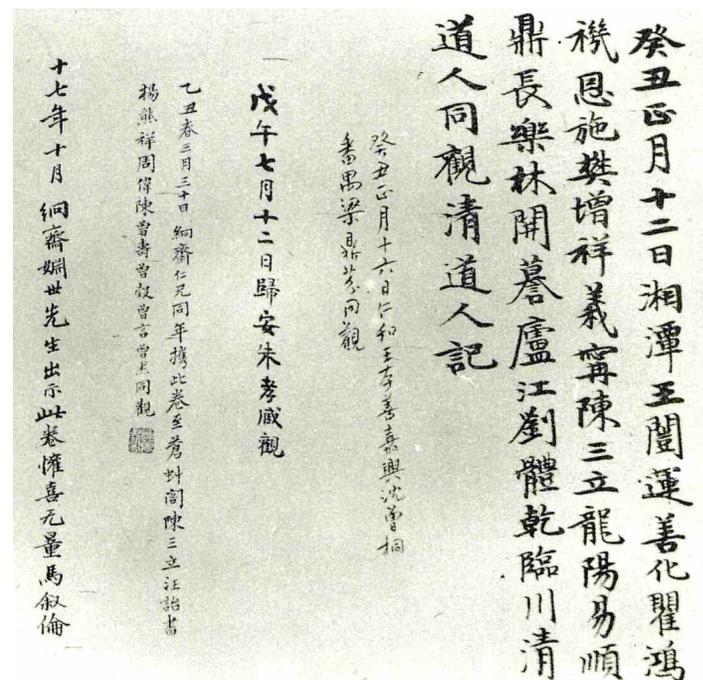


Fig. 5. A succession of colophons appended to a *Great Nirvana* sutra (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 93).

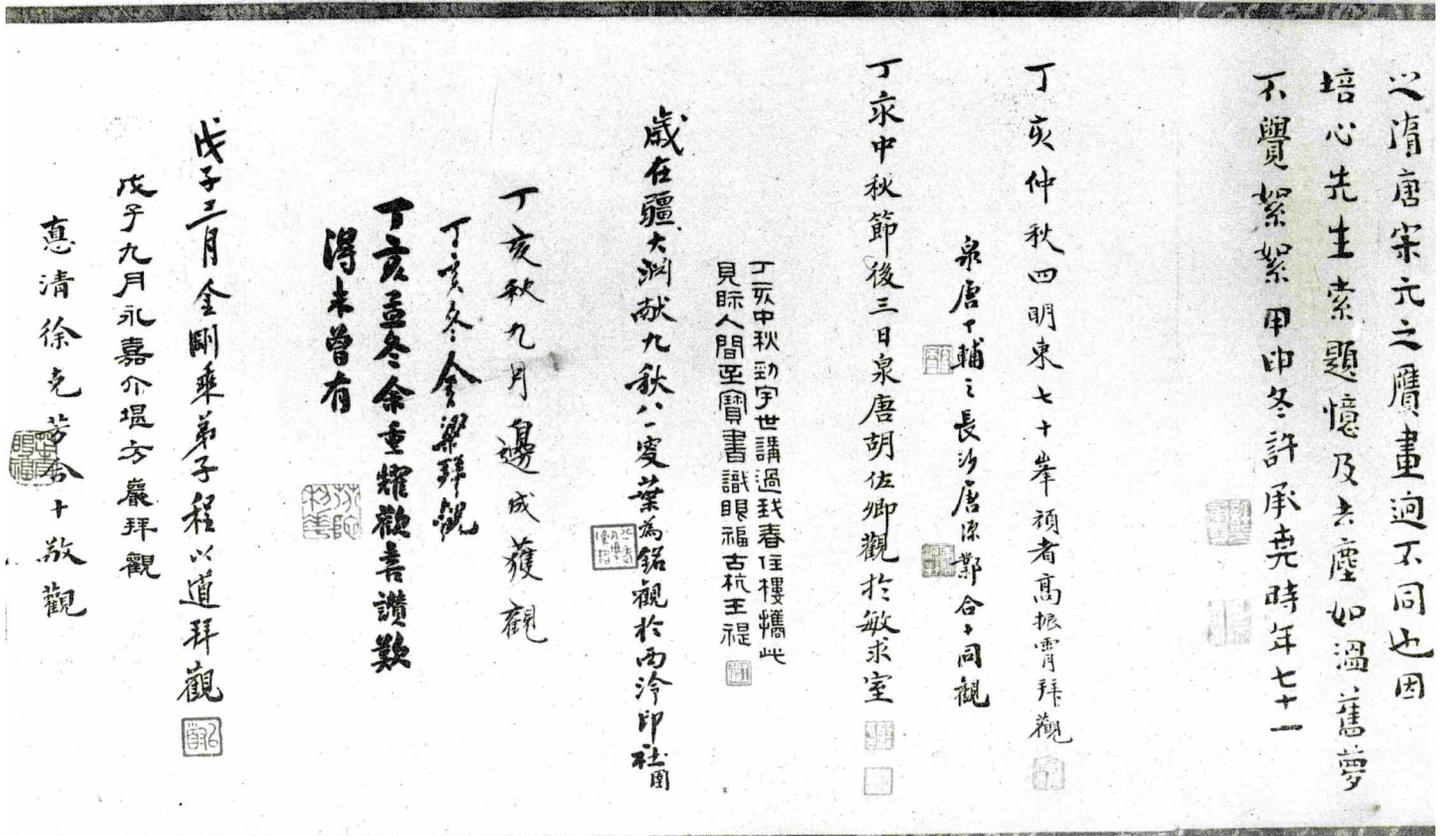


Fig. 6. By 1947–48, this Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Names of the Buddhas had accumulated more than thirteen signatures from distinguished guests of its various owners (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 200).

pressed his great pleasure at perusing the scroll (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 92–93).

Many other manuscripts evince a similar life history. No matter how delicately they were handled, it is clear that they were constantly rolled and unrolled over a period of many decades. Cheng Zongyi 程宗伊, a former magistrate of Jiuquan, recalled in his colophon how “Mr. Bingran took out this manuscript for our perusal” (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al. 1999/3: 152). Xu Yili 許以栗 expressed his gratitude to Yuan Wenbai 袁文百, who “once served in Yumen County, only 100 *li* from Dunhuang. Often he would take out his collection of manuscripts for our perusal” (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al. 1999/5: 308). Each new perusal added yet another imperceptible layer of wear and tear to manuscripts that were already more than a thousand years old. The most obvious example comes in the form of the colophons themselves, which could tally up to several hundred characters each. On a *Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Names of the Buddhas* (*Foshuo foming jing* 佛說佛名經), Xu Chengyao 許承堯 makes note of a request from his host to add a

colophon (*suoti* 索題) to his manuscript. As a result, Xu writes at the end of his lengthy colophon [Fig. 6], “I have unconsciously jabbered on for too long” (*bujue xuxu* 不覺絮絮). Xu, however, did not jabber on for so long that future guests could not find space to record their own names. The last colophon, dated to 1947–48, includes the signatures of thirteen more men who were invited to view the sutra (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 199–200).

While viewing these manuscripts, the collector and his guests would compete to demonstrate their intellectual sophistication and cultural refinement. The best way to do this was to comment upon the historical origin and aesthetic qualities of the calligraphy left by ancient scribes. In the third colophon appended to his *Great Nirvana* sutra [Fig. 7], Zhao Weixi declares that “the ancients believed that the critical evaluation of calligraphy was a sacred task.” Thus he, too, was obliged to follow suit. In his first and lengthiest colophon (see Fig. 4), Zhao described the Chinese characters on his manuscript as “vibrant and smooth, tender yet muscular, and tight in structure” (*ziti guangyuan*

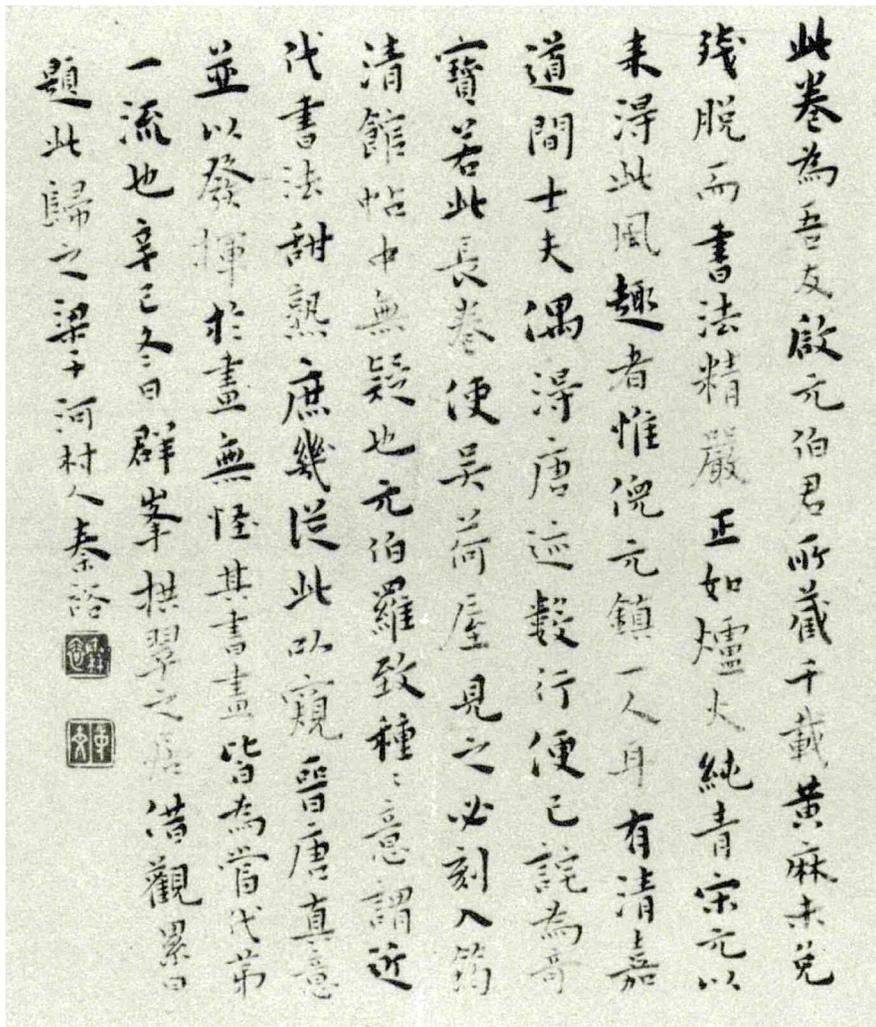


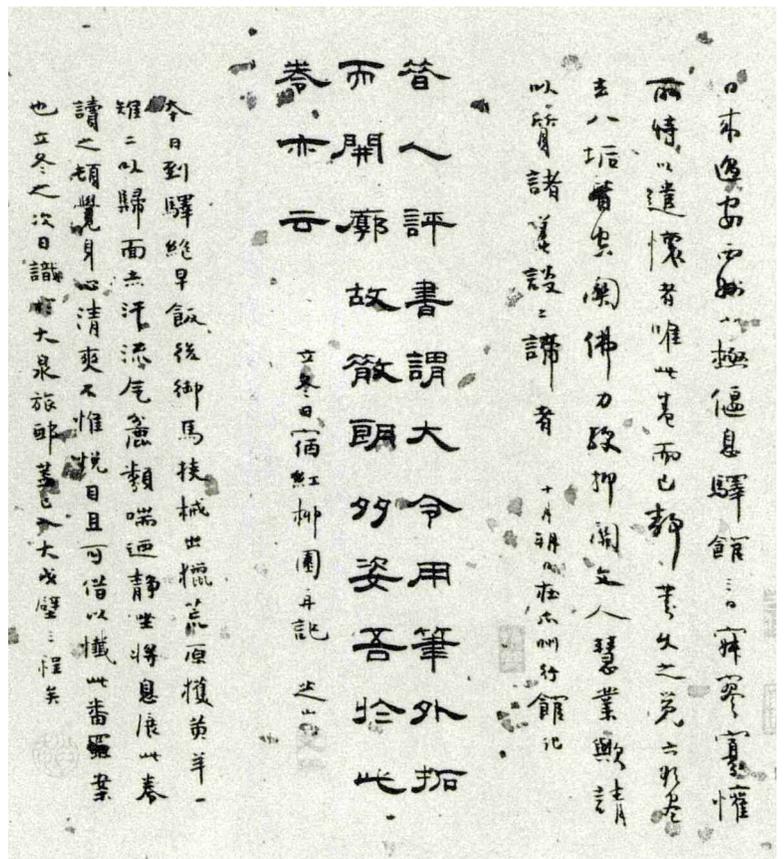
Fig. 9. Calligraphic commentary appended to a Diamond Sutra (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 66–67).

sion. While suffering from extreme loneliness, Zhao wrote in his second colophon [Fig. 10], he discovered that the Dunhuang manuscript in his possession was capable of driving his fears and anxieties away. “After reading this sutra all of my evil defilements have been flushed out and eliminated. [Within this manuscript] lies not only the power of the Buddha but also a noble task for learned scholars.” The next day, Zhao rode out to do some hunting and succeeded in shooting “one yellow goat and two wild turkeys.” Later that evening, he “took out this manuscript and began to read. Immediately my body and mind were purified. Not only is this sutra pleasing to the eye; it can also help me atone and repent for this afternoon’s activities” (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 125). Ye Changchi also believed that the power

compared the characters to a rainbow (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 66–67). Song Xiaolian 宋小濂, who was invited to view the massive collection of former Xinjiang treasury official Liang Suwen 梁素文 in Beijing, described his experience in mystical terms. “It was like entering a treasure cave, with all five senses mesmerized,” he gushed in 1913. “Or like traveling through the Buddhist heaven, with all thoughts obliterated. So beautiful! So extravagant! I could only sigh while viewing them all.” (Yang 1995: 43).

Some sutras were cherished for their perceived religious powers. In his 1910 colophons, Zhao Weixi described the genuine spiritual attraction of his *Great Nirvana* sutra in his posses-

Fig. 10. In the two colophons on left and right—bracketing his assertion of the importance of scholarly critique of ancient calligraphy (see Fig. 7)—Zhao Weixi discusses the perceived spiritual powers of his Dunhuang manuscript (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 125).



of the Buddha still lay hidden within a painting of Guanyin that had come into his possession from Dunhuang. “The frame was merely made from thin paper, and yet it did not wear away in over a thousand years,” Ye wrote in his diary in September 1904. “Was it not protected by the power of the Buddha?” (Rong 2013: 90).

Despite these repeated lofty appraisals of the aesthetic, literary, and spiritual qualities of the Dunhuang manuscripts—former Gansu governor Chen Jikan 陳季侃 once referred to them in a colophon as “the foremost treasures [of all that is] between Heaven and earth [*tianrang jian huanbao* 天壤間環寶]” (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 60)—their earliest Chinese owners were more than willing to give them away as gifts to colleagues or friends whose favor they wished to obtain.

Sometimes, in order to squeeze as much social and political goodwill out of a single manuscript as possible, they would even cut it up into several pieces, so as to curry favor with multiple friends and patrons. The indelicate fate of one ever-shrinking *Great Nirvana* sutra was documented over the course of multiple colophons, some undated. According to Xu Yili, the author of the first colophon in 1930 [Fig. 11], his *Great Nirvana* sutra began to shrink the moment he left his government post at Yumen in Gansu and returned to the eastern seaboard. It was at that point that “all my friends competed with one another to cut off their own piece [*zhengxiang gelie* 爭相割裂].” Later, a subsequent colophon describes how the author “managed to obtain a portion” from the original

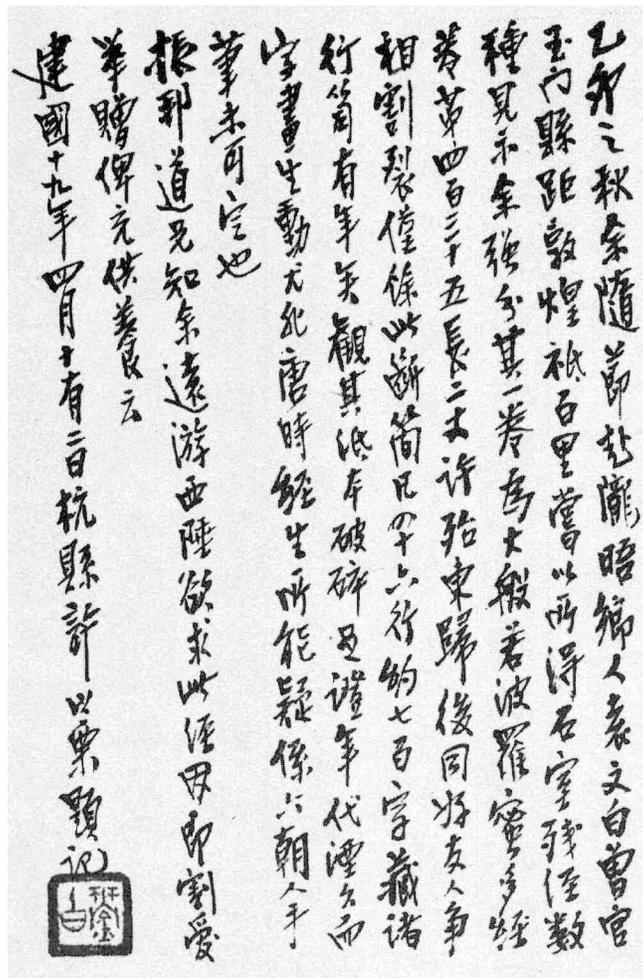


Fig. 11. In this colophon appended to a *Great Nirvana* sutra from Dunhuang in 1930, Xu Yili observes (in the fourth and fifth lines from the right) that upon his return to the interior from Gansu, his friends “competed with one another to cut off their own piece” (*zhengxiang gelie*) of this manuscript, to the point where “all that remains is this small fragment” (*jin yu ci duanjian*) (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al. 1999/5: 308).

most care each and every time their owner took them out for display. Nevertheless, the fact remains that several decades of reverent handling and penning of colophons, along with the constant packing and unpacking that must have accompanied a lengthy and peripatetic official career, inevitably took its toll on the condition of these manuscripts.

And in the end, when circumstances became desperate enough, these same manuscripts would be sold off for economic capital, regardless of how many times previous owners of the scroll had warned their descendants not to do so. Zhao Weixi left just such a warning in the final lines of his 1910 colophon (see Fig. 4). “How can I ever forget the generous favor bestowed upon me by the Garrison

scroll. In the end, Xu Yili wrote, “all that remains is this small fragment [*jin yu ci duanjian* 僅餘此斷簡]” consisting of about seven hundred characters. The sutra’s turbulent journey, however, was still not complete: this final fragment was later given to one Feng Sizhi 馮司直, who in turn gave it to one Zhang Ziyang (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al. 1999/5: 308).

It is thus little wonder that so few of the earliest Dunhuang manuscripts collected by Chinese scholars and officials within China have survived down to the present day. As the colophons excerpted above demonstrate, each scroll or painting, already bearing the weight of more than a millennium of use and storage, was further pressed into service for a variety of social and political ends. No doubt they were handled with the ut-

Commander?" he wrote. "My children shall cherish this for eternity" (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 124). Unfortunately for Zhao, they did not. As subsequent colophons make clear, Zhao's *Great Nirvana* sutra passed through the hands of at least two more owners, before eventually ending up at the Haiwangcun bookshop in Beijing.

In 1944, Xu Chengyao, a former circuit intendant in northwestern Gansu who obtained more than two hundred manuscripts from Dunhuang during his tenure, added a colophon to a *Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Names of the Buddhas* manuscript owned by his friend. In it, he reflected on the tragic fate of the scrolls that once filled his collection. "They have been scattered about and are now mostly lost," he wrote, "while those that have survived by chance are not many" (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 199). On another colophon the previous year [Fig. 12], Chen Jikan lamented the scarcity of those manuscripts he had once handled so frequently. "Those manuscripts that my

Fig. 12. In spring 1943, Chen Jikan lamented the dispersal of the Dunhuang manuscripts at the end of this *Great Nirvana* sutra (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 61).

流沙堆積如阜高燥逾恆為
石室永閔即再經手在猶當
完好一入人手則百十年內可
論夷以盡證之今日藏經已
希如星鳳其後可知訪問在
隴時朋輩與余競購者所得
多已散止余上何能永保但眾

friends and I competed for so intensely back in our days in Gansu are now dispersed all over the world" (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 61).

Chinese Reactions to Stein and Pelliot

The colophons also contain a good deal of commentary on the fate of those Dunhuang manuscripts that Chinese scholars and officials did not get their hands on. Such commentary is of two sorts: descriptions of Stein's and Pelliot's visits to Cave 17 in 1907–8 and the removal of some eight thousand manuscripts to Beijing in 1909.

In the earliest surviving colophon, Zhao Weixi provides a lengthy account [Fig. 13; see also Fig. 4] of how he believed the contents of Cave 17 first came to be discovered and how so many of them managed to end up in foreign hands:

The manuscripts stored in the stone cavern of the Thousand-Buddha Caves in the district of

Fig. 13. Zhao Weixi's account of the removal of the Dunhuang manuscripts by foreign scholars (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 124).

敦煌縣千佛洞之石室藏經發見於光緒丙申
歲先是寺僧治聖得石室於危壁間闢之萬廣
及委藏佛像法器彫闕寫經尤三憲數千卷均
李唐以去入手筆事為邑令詞知令信也但括
其金銀寶相以去經卷傳度寺中寺僻在西北
故考其事者絕鮮近年有德意志人某溯印
度河驗其益道于闐入古玉門關以達敦煌在
逢頗撻極古器過寺時乃選擇遺經中佳品
數十載之行篋間有金輪劫藏之件味靈灼然

Dunhuang were discovered in the *bingshen* year of Guangxu [i.e., 1896]. It was a monk from the temple who, while applying plaster, discovered a crack in the wall that threatened to topple the partition... [On the other side] was piled high images of the Buddha and other items of religious rituals, along with many thousands of manuscripts, all written by men of the Tang dynasty or after. This discovery was reported to the local official of the district, but he issued muddled orders and merely pocketed the silver and treasures for himself. The manuscripts remained holed up in the temple, and since the temple was located far out in the desert wastes of the far west, very few people were aware of it. Then a German followed the Indus River, crossed over the Kunlun Mountains, and entered Keriya, from whence he traveled to the old Jade Gate Pass and thus reached Dunhuang. En route he excavated a great number of antiquities. When he passed by the temple he selected the best of the manuscripts, packing them away in numerous large cases. (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 124)

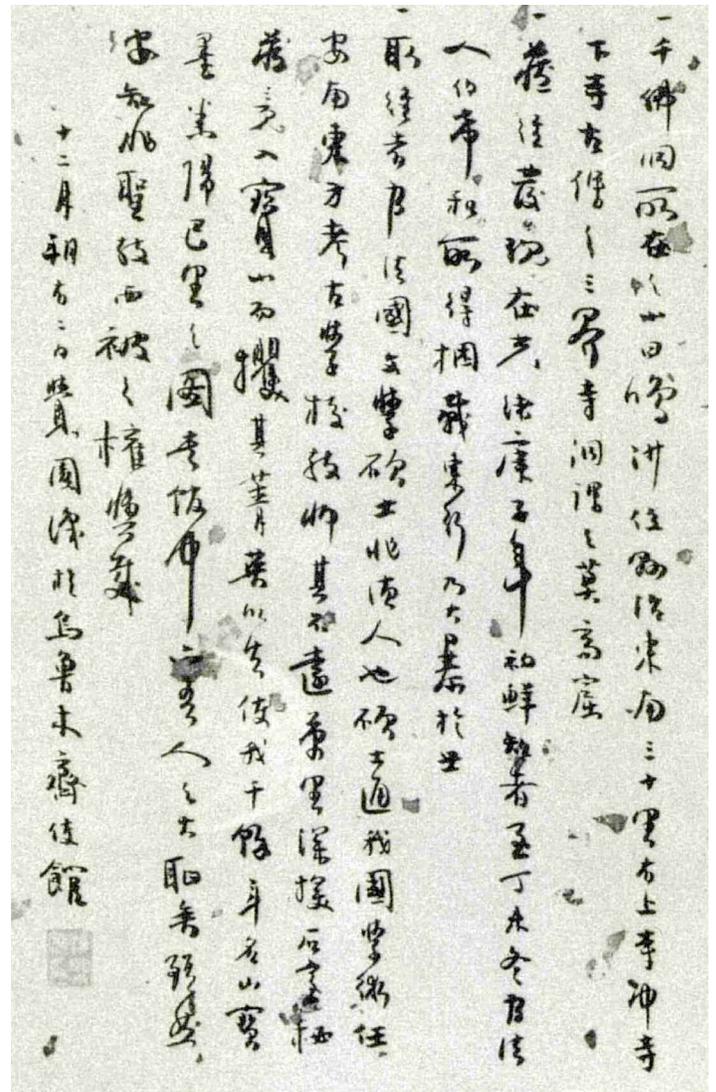
Here we see several of the features of such commentary that will appear repeatedly over the course of subsequent colophons: the belief that Stein, whom Zhao does not name, was a German; chronological errors regarding the year in which Cave 17 was discovered; a surprising lack of moral judgment concerning the actions of foreign archaeologists; and a vocal condemnation of local Qing officials, who, along with Wang Yuanlu, will bear the brunt of blame for the loss of so many cultural treasures from Cave 17.

The authors of these colophons never identify Stein by name. They do, however, discuss the actions of Pelliot at length, often conflating his and Stein's visits to the cave. This is likely due to the fact that, unlike Stein, Pelliot spoke Chinese and maintained a Chinese-language correspondence with numerous Qing scholars and officials (Wang 2008). In January 1911, as part of his fifth colophon

Fig. 14. In one of the many colophons appended to his *Great Nirvana sutra*, Zhao Weixi laments how “Pelliot seized and took away the cream of the crop” (*jue qi jingying* 攫其菁英, fourth line from the left) and describes the removal of all these manuscripts to France as “a deep humiliation for our people” (*wuren zhi dachi* 吾人之大恥, third line from left) (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 125).

to the *Great Nirvana sutra* in his possession [Fig. 14], Zhao Weixi noted that “Pelliot seized and took away the cream of the crop” (*jue qi jingying* 攫其菁英). He then described the removal of all these manuscripts to France as “a deep humiliation for our people” (*wuren zhi dachi* 吾人之大恥) (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 125). That same year, Wang Renjun 王仁俊 wrote on a *Great Nirvana sutra* that three years prior “the Frenchmen Dr. Pelliot brought copies of five manuscripts from Dunhuang” for his perusal (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 92).

It is worth noting, however, that while the loss of so many manuscripts may have stung, the men who took them were not singled out for blame. In 1944, Xu Chengyao described these painful foreign acquisitions in matter-of-fact, non-judgmental terms: “British and French travelers were the first to bundle them up and take them away” (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 199). In 1943, at the



吾國官民不知愛惜丁未歲
法國伯希和博士闖之自新
疆馳詣石室賄守藏道士
檢支精品數巨篋英人日人
繼之咸大獲而歸余度隴之

Fig. 15. In a 1943 colophon appended to a Great Nirvana sutra, Chen Jikan criticizes the officials stationed in Dunhuang nearly three decades earlier and describes the visits of Pelliot and other foreign scholars to the caves (Shanghai guji chubanshe 1993/1: 61).

end of yet another Great Nirvana sutra [Fig. 15], Chen Jikan deplored the fact that Qing officials and commoners some thirty years earlier “didn’t know that they should have cherished these manuscripts” (*wuguo guanmin buzhi aixi* 吾國官民不知愛惜). He then conflated Stein’s and Pelliot’s visits to Dunhuang into a single visit by Pelliot. “In the *dingwei* year [i.e., 1907], the Frenchman Dr. Pelliot heard about the cache and hurriedly rode through Xinjiang on his way to the grottoes,” Wang wrote. “After bribing the guardian

monk who had hid the manuscripts, Pelliot proceeded to select the cream of the collection, loading them into large boxes. Englishman and Japanese followed quickly on his heels, each obtaining a large stash and sending it back to their countries” (Shanghai guji chubanshe 1993/1: 61).

As the final line of Chen’s colophon suggests, most of the foreign scholars who secured their own collection of Dunhuang manuscripts were not singled out by name. They simply served as the human backdrop to a cultural tragedy in which anonymous Chinese scapegoats played the starring role. The author of an anonymous and undated colophon [Fig. 16] appended to a Great Nirvana sutra at some point between 1911 and 1914 seems to identify two chief villains: the monks of Dunhuang and Qing officials. “Though [the manuscripts] managed to avoid being burned for ritual sacrifices

Fig. 16. The anonymous author of a colophon appended to a Great Nirvana sutra at some point between 1911 and 1914 describes the fate of the Dunhuang manuscripts (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 126).

or being consigned to the river god,” he wrote, “they were, however, bundled up by foreign merchants [*jiahu* 賈胡] and taken to the West.” He then notes that officials from the Ministry of Education proceeded to round up a few camels of their own to transport the remaining manuscripts to Beijing, but that they used the funds allotted for that purpose to line their own pockets. The final line of this colophon [Fig. 17] draws attention to the actions of an unnamed Wang Yuanlu. “The monk in the hills sold them all to foreigners [*mai yu jiahu qu* 賣與賈胡去]. When will they return? [*he ri gui* 何日歸]” (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 126).

Although most of the authors of these colophons knew that “a monk in the hills” had sold the Dunhuang manuscripts to foreigners, they did not know his name. Neither did they seem to know the

敦煌寫經浩如海數千卷刻數千載
苦人於此留精靈歷劫居然發光采青
牛西去白馬東此寶深埋石室中雖免
紅羊燒牧火不逢綠駟獻河宗賈胡捆
載更西走書未盡落實胡手學官轍取
我駱駝餘者充薪或覆甑 趙侯卓



Fig. 17. The same anonymous author of the colophon in Fig. 16 wonders when the Dunhuang manuscripts will return to China (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 126).

wished that Cave 17 had never been found at all. “If the stone caverns had remained sealed then their contents could have been preserved in pristine condition for another thousand years,” wrote Chen Jikan at the end of a *Great Nirvana sutra* in 1943 (see Fig. 12). “Yet within only a few decades after their discovery, they have all been scattered and lost. Now they are scarce and precious, like a phoenix or a blue moon [*xiru xingfeng* 希如星鳳].” Like every other author of a colophon before him, Chen does not blame Stein or Pelliot for the loss of

Fig. 18. In a 1914 colophon appended to a *Great Nirvana sutra*, the writer Chang Tingjiang describes the corruption that attended the removal of Dunhuang manuscripts to Beijing by the Ministry of Education in 1909 (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 127).

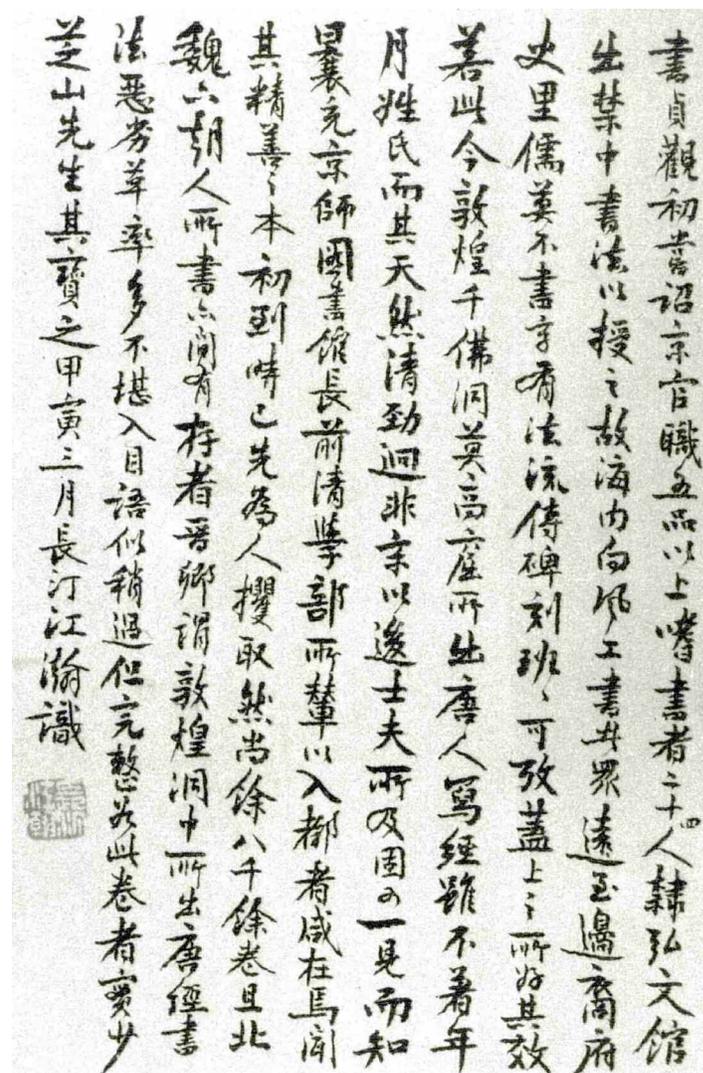
names of those who had overseen the highly disorganized and ill-fated shipment of some eight thousand manuscripts to Beijing in 1909. During the former Qing, wrote the poet and scholar Chang Tingjiang in a 1914 colophon [Fig. 18], those manuscripts that the Ministry of Education managed to bring to Beijing saw the “best of the collection seized and taken away by people the moment the carts arrived in the capital” (Beijing daxue tushuguan et al. 1995/1: 127). In 1944, Xu Chengyao expressed his disappointment that those manuscripts sent to Beijing three decades earlier “were all in fairly poor condition” and contained “very few of high quality” (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 199).

By the 1940s, the last decade of colophon authorship, some Chinese

so many cultural treasures from China, nor does he suggest that anyone had “stolen” the contents of Cave 17. In his eyes, the manuscripts were there for the taking, and the Chinese had simply failed to secure their share. “Those manuscripts that my friends and I competed so intensely for back in our days in Gansu are now dispersed all over the world” (Shanghai guji chubanshe et al. 1993/1: 60–61).

Identifying Forgeries

In attempting to distinguish between a manuscript that indisputably emerged from Cave 17 and one that was later forged so as to fool potential buyers into thinking that it had emerged from Cave 17, scholars face a daunting task. One way to assist in this task is to look to the modern Chinese colophons for additional clues. Such clues can be found in the descriptions of Stein’s and Pelliot’s expeditions to Dunhuang in 1907–8. Simply put, when the author of any given colophon reveals



more detailed information about either one of these expeditions than was yet available in China at the time of composition, then that colophon—and likely the manuscript to which it is appended—is a fake. Thus far I have uncovered two indisputable evidences of such fakery, either of which, if authentic, would have constituted the earliest surviving colophon. Indeed, it is precisely because the dates of these colophons were so early, predating that of Zhao Weixi's 1910 colophon by several years, that I decided to subject them to closer scrutiny.

In one such colophon [Fig. 19], appended to the end of a *Lotus Sutra* (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al., 1999/3: 155–56), the following comments are attributed to Mu Shouqi 慕壽祺, a lifelong Gansu official:

In the twenty-ninth year of Guangxu [i.e., 1903–4], the Hungarian Stein, who was a specialist in Central Asian geography, set out to investigate the geography of Central Asia and its ancient cultures. Traveling as a representative of the British Indian government, he brought with him a translator named Jiang and traveled to the Mogao Grottoes in order to view the cave murals, which are all from the Six Dynasties era. Then he saw an ancient manuscript on the desk of Daoist priest Wang, and proceeded to enter into secret negotiations with him in order to gain entrance into the treasure cave. Once inside, he saw manuscripts, banners, papers, silks, paintings, and other miscellaneous articles piled high from the ground to the

敦煌莫高窟東晉前秦時所
建羅振玉名曰敦煌石室俗稱
為千佛洞者也六朝人藏書於
此唐代所藏以寫經為最多宗
初西夏占有其地為中國之大
圖書館後為沙壓視為荒山清
先緒初莫高窟復發現蓋風吹
沙走而古寺歸然獨存有王道
士者湖北人住持於此中原士
夫從無有至其地者於是世界
可驚人之文藝寶庫歸王道士
一人之手光緒二十九年匈牙利
人斯坦因為中央亞細亞地理專
家為考察中央亞細亞地理與
古文化以英國印度政府辦事

員名義攜翻譯蔣某至莫高窟
觀佛洞中壁畫皆六朝人所繪
並於道士案頭見有古代寫本
與道士秘密交涉入寶庫中參
觀古代所藏卷帙以及紙畫絹
畫等雜件自地上高堆至十英尺
左右其容積約有五百立方英尺
以銀三百兩在王道士手盜去寫本
二十四箱圖畫舖品及他物五大箱
時西歷一千九百零七年五月二十
日也後在倫敦陳列敦煌古圖書
始為世界所喧傳法國遣伯希和
往石室搜求他日滿載而歸中國
政府始電陝甘總督轉飭敦煌將
英法唾棄之殘本掃數解京共
解一萬八千卷其中以唐人寫

經居大多數於是海外士大夫
聲為至寶此卷係玉門縣貢程
君徽五所贈徽五少時與余同
學意氣相投今以唐人寫經寄
余喜其筆帶方形復多近體頗
似六朝人所書非唐人寫經所
能比擬故藏之
宣統元年仲春月鎮原慕壽祺識
於金城寓廬

Fig. 19. This lengthy colophon, attributed to Gansu official Mu Shouqi in 1909, is clearly a forgery (Gansu cang Dunhuang wenxian bianweihui et al., 1999/3: 155–56).

ceiling. It measured about ten English feet high, with a total volume of about five hundred English cubic feet. After giving the Daoist priest Wang three hundred silver taels, [Stein] stole twenty-four boxes of manuscripts, along with five additional boxes of various items such as paintings. This all occurred on May 22, 1907 of the Western calendar.

The colophon is then signed and dated to the second month of spring in the first year of the Xuantong emperor—February 1909. And therein lies proof of the forgery: at this early date, no one in China possessed such precise knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Stein’s acquisitions of the Dunhuang manuscripts. In every other Chinese colophon from these early years, Stein is identified as either German or British; no one seemed to know that he was born in Hungary. Other details—such the cubic dimensions and total volume of the cave library (given in “English feet” no less!), the number of cases of manuscripts and paintings removed, and the exact date of Stein’s transaction at the caves—were not made public until the publication of *Ruins of Desert Cathay* in 1912. Even a preliminary report published by Stein in *The Geographic Journal* did not appear until September 1909, a full seven months after this colophon was supposedly written (Stein 1909: 241–64). When this report was hastily translated into Chinese and included in Luo Zhenyu’s 羅振玉 *Visiting the Ancients among the Shifting Sands* (*Liusha fanggu ji* 流沙訪古記, 1909), the name of Stein’s Chinese secretary, Jiang Xiaowan 蔣孝琬, was rendered not as “Jiang” (as in the colophon) but rather as “Zhang Shuyi” 張叔伊 (Luo 1909: 4)—a strictly phonetic translation of Stein’s original “Chiang-ssu-yieh” (*Jiang shiye* 蔣師爺, or “Secretary Jiang”).

In other words, in order to lend an air of authenticity to what was almost certainly a forged manuscript in hopes of securing a higher price for its sale, some shady Chinese entrepreneur decided to include an implausibly precise summary of Stein’s second expedition. But the details of the summary that he provided could only have been compiled in China at some point after the publication of *Ruins of Desert Cathay* in 1912—provided the person in question could read English, which Mu Shouqi could not. With all evidence pointing in the direction of a scam, the jarring description of Stein hav-

ing “stolen” (*daoqu* 盜取) manuscripts from Dunhuang can be readily explained: the colophon was written not in 1909, when no one in China yet regarded him as a thief, but rather at some point after the adoption of such criminalizing discourse by Westernized Chinese on the eastern seaboard in the 1920s and 30s.

The second fake colophon is attributed to Yang Zengxin 楊增新 and dated to September or October 1908. At the time, Yang was the circuit intendant of Aksu, four years before he would become the governor of Xinjiang. Instead of narrating Stein’s visit to Dunhuang in 1907, however, this colophon treats Pelliot’s expedition of 1908. At the end of a *Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Da zhidu lun* 大智度論) manuscript, the author of this colophon gives a complete account not only of Pelliot’s time at Dunhuang—which had occurred just a few months prior to the date of the colophon and was known only to Wang Yuanlu and the French members of Pelliot’s party—but also his subsequent shipment of ten cases of manuscripts back to Paris; his trip to Shanghai to share news of his discovery with Chinese scholars later that same year; and the Ministry of Education’s order the following year for officials in Gansu to ship the remaining manuscripts to Beijing (Yang 1995: 43–44). But unless Yang had somehow managed to build a time machine and visited the future, he could not possibly have been privy to events that had not yet occurred at the time he was purported to have written this colophon.

Undoubtedly, there are many other fake colophons appended to the Dunhuang manuscripts that have not yet been exposed as forgeries. As we have seen, the modern Dunhuang colophons contain a diverse assortment of evidence that can prove of benefit to scholars in multiple disciplines, especially to scholars of modern Chinese history. As more Dunhuang manuscripts within China come to light and are made available for study, a wealth of additional colophons are likely to emerge. Some of them will be genuine; some will not. Regardless of the authenticity of these manuscripts, scholars whose research brings them into contact with the literary, artistic, and cultural treasures of Cave 17 would do well to include all of these modern Chinese colophons within their analytical purview.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have translated the modern Chinese colophons examined in this paper without the help of numerous Chinese scholars. Foremost among them is Ye Wa, who gave most generously of her time and expertise. I am also grateful to Lilla Russell-Smith, Judit Bagi, Imre Hamar, and Ágnes Kelecsényi for hosting me at the “Dunhuang and Cultural Contact Along the Silk Road” conference at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest in May 2019, where I first presented an earlier version of this article.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The only other modern Dunhuang colophon known to pre-date that of Zhao Weixi comes from the brush of Wang Guan 王瓘, a famous seal-script calligrapher employed by the great Qing official and collector Duanfang 端方. In 1907, he added a colophon to a painting of the bodhisattva Guanyin in which he acknowledges the painting as a gift from Yan Jinqing, a Qing official in Lanzhou (Rong 2013: 96–97).