From Central Asia to London: The Stein Collection of Manuscripts

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One of the first questions that I encountered after I began work in the Chinese section of the British Library in the spring of 1978 concerned the whereabouts of the collection of forgeries made by Islam Akhun in Hetian which Stein shipped back to London after his first Central Asian expedition (1900-1901). The question was posed in the middle of the night in Peking airport by Peter Hopkirk of the *Times* who was writing the first of his series of books on Central Asia, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (London, John Murray, 1980). I had been working at the Library for three weeks but had returned to China as a tour guide and Peter Hopkirk had also been visiting Dunhuang with a tour group. In dramatic circumstances the plane which was to take both our groups back to London had to make an emergency return to Peking airport where we were stuck for the next thirty-six hours which gave Mr. Hopkirk plenty of time to grill me on Stein forgeries. I knew nothing of them but promised to enquire.

Back in the Library, it appeared that no one else knew of the whereabouts of the forgeries either and, despite Stein’s account in *Sand-buried Ruins*, the most frequent answer I received was a frosty “We do not have forgeries in the Library”. Some weeks later, a cardboard box was found in the rain in one of the British Museum’s many back alleys containing brownish booklets labelled “Central Asian Documents.” Owing to their newly acquired status as items of interest, the forgeries were carefully dried, numbered, and rehoused beside the more respectable items in the Stein collection. Two have since been exhibited in a major British Museum exhibition of fakes and forgeries (“Fake? : the art of deception,” 1990) so they are earning their keep.

The forgeries had been acquired in the hope that they represented examples of previously unknown languages and scripts from Central Asia, reflecting the late nineteenth-century European passion for linguistic exploration. The broad curiosity of scholars of the period shaped Stein’s own approach but it is unfortunately no longer fashionable with the result that the huge variety of format, material, and languages on the British Library’s Stein collection presents a considerable curatorial problem. Another difficulty in times of recession is the sheer volume of the material. In his pioneering *Descriptive Catalogue of Chinese Manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum* (London, 1957), Lionel Giles described just over 7,000 items; the remaining 7,000 or so were often fragmentary, crumpled, and too fragile to handle and had therefore been effectively untouched since their arrival in London in twenty-four packing cases in 1909. Over the last five years, the preservation of the “fragments” as we call them, though some are several feet long and therefore substantial, has been a major priority. With the help of conservators from China, Du Weisheng of the National Library, Zhou Zhiyuan from Hunan Provincial Museum, Dai
crumpled fragments, some still full of Tang dynasty mouse droppings, have all been cleaned, photographed, lightly sewn into Melinex which leaves them easy to handle, and are currently being microfilmed.

The volumes of material necessitated assistance of extra staff and it is only because of the generosity of the Getty Preservation Trust, the Sino-British Fellowship Trust, the British Council, and Dr. Abraham Lue, all of the manuscripts from Cave 17 are now accessible and have been photographed for publication. Amongst these “fragments” we have identified some pre-Tang documents, dated and written in the marvelous fat-tailed calligraphy of the sixth century: fragments of the *Lun yu*, the usual sheep registers and temple accounts but also a number of the official documents from the Guiyi Army period, marked with very distinctive drawings of birds, a warlord "diary", and a fine Exegetical Edict of 711.

One of our major intentions in conserving these Dunhuang texts was to make photography and publication possible. We wanted the material to be published in China to allow as many Chinese scholars as possible to use the materials without having to travel to London. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), with an editorial team led by Song Jiayu, Zhang Gong, Ning Ke, and Zhou Shaoliang, and Sichuan People’s Publishing House have already published six volumes of a fifteen-part collection of *Dunhuang Manuscripts in British Collections: Chinese Texts Other Than Buddhist Scriptures*. Supported by grants from the Leverhulme Trust and the Universities China Committee, Susan Whitfield is working on an English analytical index which will form part of volume fifteen. In this difficult work, she has been greatly helped by Professor Sha Zhi of Renmin Daxue, whose knowledge (of Tang economic terminology and history) and patience both appear infinite and who stayed in London for nine months thanks to help from the Sino-British Fellowship Trust.

The photographs in our joint publication have all been captioned but two full catalogs are currently underway. We are fortunate that Dr. Fang Guangchang, former Head of the Rare Book Section of the National Library in Peking (but who has recently returned to a more peaceful life of research in the South Asia section of CASS) and Dr. Rong Xinjiang of Peking University, had early expressed an interest in the material and were able to spend months in London working on the newly-conserved material with support from the K. C. Wong Foundation administered by the British Academy. They originally planned a joint catalog but amicably decided to separate the tasks because Rong Xinjiang’s work on the smaller number of secular fragments will be finished long before Dr. Fang has identified all of the numerous Buddhist fragments.

There are still negotiations underway concerning publication of the rest of the Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang; this would be a truly vast enterprise for a glance at Giles’s catalog demonstrates that a very considerable proportion of the 7,000 manuscripts he cataloged are well over twenty feet long (and reduplicated many time over). Nevertheless, from such diverse sources as Buddhist circles in Hong Kong and Academies of Social Sciences, come such proposals, based on the feeling that the entire corpus deserves dissemination in China.
The feeling in the Library is that, fifty years after Stein's death, it is time to turn our attention to the rest of his collection. Here the problem of variety is even more pressing than that of volume. Sanskrit, medieval Tibetan, Tangut, Kharoshthi, Khotanese, Sogdian, varieties of long gone Indian and Turkic languages and scripts, all these were studied with enthusiasm in the late nineteenth century, when Hoernle's passion for the long-lost languages and scripts of Central Asia blinded him to Islam Akhun's creativity. Many of these have been looked at during the last eighty years: there are lists (just lists of numbers, nothing more) of Khotanese manuscripts made by Sir Harold Bailey long ago, there are partial catalogs such as that of the Sogdian manuscripts made in German in the 1930s. There are also magnificent works which frustrate the modern student such as Boyer, Rapson, and Senart's *Kharoshthi Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1920) which consists entirely of transcriptions of the texts on the small wooden cricket-bats used in Kharoshthi correspondence, reading, for example, "mahanuava maharaya lihati cojhbo-kranaya-sothamgha-lpipeyasa" (p. 123, N. xv. 180). To linguistic experts over sixty years ago, much of the thrill lay in reconstruction rather than translation but it is no longer easy to find late twentieth-century scholars who can make sense of large quantities of Kharoshthi and press on with a descriptive catalog entry, let alone a translation. With the intention of attempting a massive new study of these documents, the Library applied for a grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation last autumn.

We have been given an award which will enable us, over the next three years, to expand the database on which Susan Whitfield is currently working, to enter details of all the Stein materials in the Library, including all the preliminary lists and ancient transcriptions and varying numbers assigned to all the thousands of manuscripts (site numbers, catalog numbers, in the case of forgeries which were shipped from Kashgar, Macartney numbers, shelf-marks, and so on). Then we will be in a better position to contemplate scouring the world for experts who can produce full catalog entries.

One group of Chinese manuscripts in the Stein collection remains uncataloged. These are the wood shavings. Han documents from the Dunhuang limes and Niya, among other sites, were not written on bamboo, a plant which loves water and could not thrive under desert conditions, but on wood. In contrast with the elegant bamboo slips found in southern tombs such as those at Mawangdui or Shuihudi, Central Asian wood slips appear to have started life as chunks the size of chair legs which, as messages were erased by chiselling off the surface of the timber, were gradually whittled away to slender strips. Stein brought back enormous quantities of these shavings, all inscribed in long-tailed Han *lishu* script. It is likely that many will remain unreconstructed but I would like to photograph the shavings (in all their hundreds), send copies to everyone skilled in the reconstruction of administrative documents and letters of the Han. The resulting jigsaws could be compared at a subsequent conference. Though the written style is not as varied as that seen in the Cave 17 paper manuscripts from Dunhuang and it is unlikely that drawings, bird-signatures, or imperial edicts will emerge, it may be that the wood shavings conceal treasures just as Stein's crumpled paper fragments once did.