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## The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures

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# Reviews

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## ***The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures***

By Fred R. De Leon

“In archaeology, you uncover the unknown. In diplomacy, you cover the known.”

– Thomas R. Pickering, Eighteenth United States Ambassador to the United Nations.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures*, author Justin M. Jacobs, professor of history at the American University and editor of *The Silk Road* journal, delves into the complexities of several archaeological expeditions in China in the early twentieth century. Jacobs relates to the reader how, for two decades, tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts and works of art were taken from northwestern China and deposited in museums abroad. Denunciations about these expeditions are seen as far back as the 1930s, where scholars at a government-funded research organization accused one prominent archaeologist, Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943), of accomplishing nothing but a “plunder of our cultural artifacts.”<sup>2</sup> These accusations of “theft” continue in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship,” Washington State University, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://distinguishedscholarships.wsu.edu/awards/picke>.

<sup>2</sup> Justin M. Jacobs, *The Compensations of Plunder: How China Lost Its Treasures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 4.

present day through the protests of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, do sources and witnesses of the early twentieth century prove such an unlawful taking of property through coercive or deceptive methods? Using unpublished documents of Western archaeologists and Chinese Confucian-educated officials, Jacobs re-examines many long-held beliefs about the European expeditions in China. He is also able to present many details previously hidden in the unpublished diaries of the participants. The details make for a compelling picture of a nuanced exchange of promises for valuable consideration.

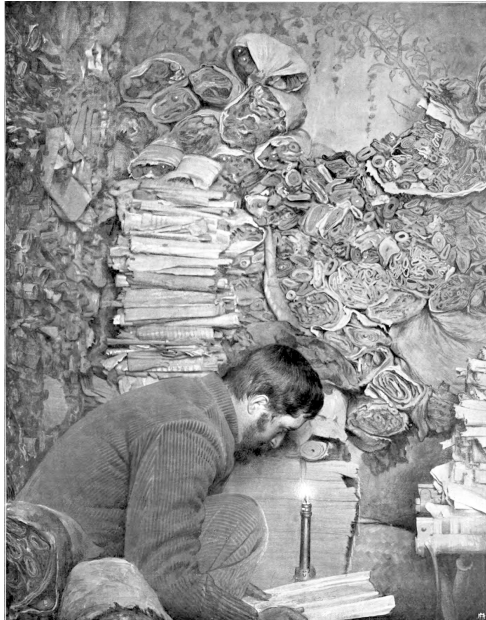


*“The Official Far West China Xinjiang Map.” Courtesy of Far West China: Exploring Xinjiang and the Silk Road.<sup>3</sup>*

As Jacobs asserts, “from 1895 to 1915, a revolving door of Western explorers and archaeologists undertook expeditions to Xinjiang, where the arid climate of the Taklamakan Desert had managed to preserve the ruins of ancient migrants from India,

<sup>3</sup> Permission to reprint with attributions. Image by Far West China, Exploring Xinjiang and the Silk Road, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.farwestchina.com/travel/xinjiang-maps>.

Iran, and Central Asia in conditions unparalleled anywhere else in the world outside of Egypt.”<sup>4</sup> The artifacts and art recovered there are called Gandharan art, the remains of a civilization in Central Asia from the middle of the first millennium BCE to the beginning of the second millennium CE. Gandharan artifacts have Hellenistic influences and contain the “sacred histories of local gods, Buddhist sutras, rules for Manichaeian priests, and Christian scripture.”<sup>5</sup> The provinces of Xinjiang and neighboring Gansu are on China’s western frontier. *Xinjian* literally means “new territory” or “new frontier.”



*Photograph of Paul Pelliot inside the Thousand-Buddha Caves, titled “Trois ans dans la haute Asiedated,” dated 1910. Courtesy of Justin Jacobs.*<sup>6</sup>

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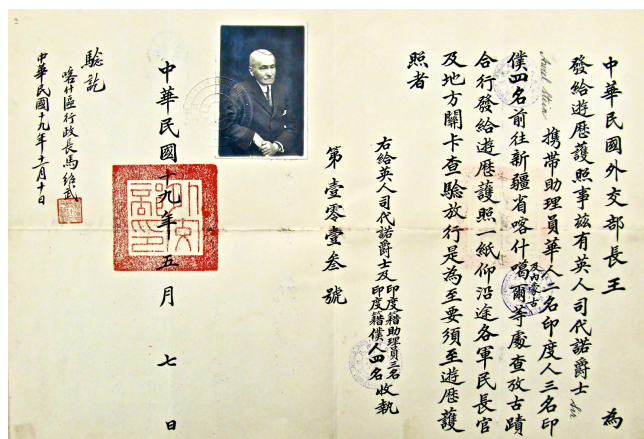
<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted with the kind permission of Justin Jacobs. Photograph of Paul Pelliot inside the Thousand-Buddha Caves, titled “Trois ans dans la haute Asiedated,” *L’Illustration* 135 (January-June 1910): 265.



The populations of these provinces tended to be diverse, including a substantial Muslim population. Besides a diverse local population, the provinces were governed by Confucian-educated Qing officials who had tremendous amounts of autonomy in the early twentieth century due to the declining influence of the imperial government in Beijing. Archaeologists like the British Aurel Stein, the Frenchman Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), the German Albert von Le Coq (1860–1930), and the American Ellsworth Huntington (1876–1947) immersed themselves in this frontier world, completely removed from the nationalist paradigm that shapes our world today.



“Passport for Stein’s Fourth Expedition to Xinjiang,” dated May 1930. Courtesy of the British Academy.<sup>7</sup>

One of the salient characteristics of this frontier territory was the Muslim population’s perception of the Gandharan art as a discontinuity of their current culture. Therefore, the local inhabitants viewed the monuments and writings of the heathen “pagan disbelievers” as having little redemptive value and disposed of them through “passive disposal, aggressive

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted with the kind permission of the British Academy. “Passport for Stein’s Fourth Expedition to Xinjiang,” Stein Papers, May 1930, Bodleian Library, MS 283.

destruction, or pragmatic transformation.”<sup>8</sup> The result was that papers would be thrown away as useless, artifacts would be used as toys for children, and antiquities would become manure for fields or reused as material for building new dwellings. This result, of course, was not the fate of anything made of gold or other precious metals. Items such as these were actively sought by the local inhabitants long before the European archaeologists made their way into northwestern China. One Chinese envoy observed how “every time there is a great wind or rain, the locals go out to search for pieces of gold.”<sup>9</sup> This reality all changed when European archaeologists came into the scene. Quickly the local inhabitants realized that “ancient manuscripts and terra-cotta figures could yield an immediate economic profit.”<sup>10</sup> The local Muslim peasants and shepherds began supplementing their income by selling these items to local middleman merchants who, in turn, would sell them to Westerners.

Archaeologists like Stein realized the economic capital of the exchange and began offering attractive wages for expedition labor with additional monetary incentives for anyone who found the most coveted artifacts.<sup>11</sup> However, these same laborers would later supplement those wages by returning to the original site and removing anything that could be sold that their former employer had failed to take away. There was a tremendous economic incentive to cooperate with these foreign archaeologists. To these local inhabitants, the foreigners were “sahibs,” great men. More than an honorific title, an archaeologist’s designation as a sahib carried with it capital expectations. Sahibs were expected to be generous with their money. He was expected to act like a man of wealth and power, and in such a way, it would provide his laborers the honor, i.e., social and political capital, of being proximate to such power. Archaeologists like Stein understood this and acted

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<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

accordingly by paying wages many times the daily wages usually paid.

The political capital took the form of an arranged audience with Qing officials. For example, Huntington introduced his hired Muslim servant, Da'ud, to the Manchu governor of Xinjiang and even asked the governor to appoint the servant to a minor post.<sup>12</sup> This arrangement was not an isolated request; other archaeologists such as Stein also sought positions for well-liked servants. This sort of career advancement was *priceless* social and political capital that the inhabitants of northwestern China understood the sahibs brought to the area. Considering what the sahibs were taking (worthless antiquities) the inhabitants agreed to what they shrewdly thought was a beneficial contract.

This local willingness to sell antiquities for financial gain relates to the central theme of Jacobs' book: that there were different types of capital exchanges occurring in northwestern China at the time. Another type of bargained-for exchange that occurred on the Chinese frontier involved "diplomatic capital."<sup>13</sup> Diplomatic capital is the receipt of costly diplomatic or economic favors from powerful Western states in exchange for freely available objects deemed far less valuable to the relative giver.<sup>14</sup> Local Confucian-educated officials knew of these archaeologists' expeditions and what they were returning to their respective museums. Allowing the archaeologists to proceed relatively unimpeded in their search and removal of antiquities provided these imperial officials a considerable amount of diplomatic capital. The receipt of this diplomatic capital was not necessarily announced or published, but it was not hidden either.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



“Pan Zuhuan, the magistrate of Shule County, Xinjiang, and Marc Aurel Stein,” dated 1930. Courtesy of the British Academy.<sup>15</sup>

Qing officials in Xinjiang and Gansu believed, unlike most local inhabitants, that the Chinese art and antiquities being taken from the area were *precious*, but they did not esteem them as *priceless*.<sup>16</sup> Jacobs accurately describes their calculated assessment of the situation. The precious items were tendered in exchange for the valuable social relationship of befriending educated Western scholars who had the ear, and support, of their respective powerful governments. The political and social capital of having Western scholars visit their provincial capital was a valuable enough asset to allay any concerns the Qing officials may have had. Furthermore, Jacobs describes the Qing officials as understanding that these Western archaeologists were “gentlemen of empire,” like themselves.<sup>17</sup> This class connection was not lost on the Western archaeologists who readily made lasting friendships with several

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<sup>15</sup> Reprinted with the kind permission of the British Academy. “Pan Zuhuan, the magistrate of Shule County, Xinjiang, and Marc Aurel Stein,” Stein Papers, 1930, Bodleian Library, MS 21.

<sup>16</sup> Jacobs, 286.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

Qing officials. As “gentlemen of empire,” Qing officials and foreign archaeologists, like Stein, had a firm conviction in their respective empires’ civilizing power.<sup>18</sup>

The Qing officials may not have approved of the idea of acquiring antiquities for the benefit of public institutions, but they very much understood the acquisition of antiquities for “cultural accumulation.”<sup>19</sup> Cultured Confucian elites were expected to amass exquisite private collections and assumed other educated elites would do the same. They also keenly understood the reservoir of diplomatic capital these antiquities represented when they gifted them to other elites to curry favor. Western scholars’ insertion into the exchange stream of capital was a simple process considering Qing officials desired personal relationships with foreign powers’ resourceful and cultured agents.<sup>20</sup> The quintessential anecdote illustrating all these capital exchanges was the discovery and dissemination of the Dunhuang manuscripts in the twentieth century.



*Photograph by M. Aurel Stein titled “Cave library in the Thousand-Buddha Caves near Dunhuang,” dated 1912. Courtesy of Justin M. Jacobs.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, 121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Reprinted with the kind permission of Justin Jacobs. M. Aurel Stein, “Cave library in the Thousand-Buddha Caves near Dunhuang,” 1912, In *Ruins of*

Wang Yuanlu (1849–1931) was an illiterate Daoist caretaker of a derelict temple just opposite the Thousand-Buddha Caves in Dunhuang, in the Gansu Province. He was undertaking restorations of the neglected caves when he noticed a crack in the ceiling of the corridor entranceway of what is now called Cave 16. He broke through the plaster and discovered a hidden “cave library.”<sup>22</sup> Initially, Wang began gifting the manuscripts to local Chinese officials, hoping to build social capital and perhaps receive financial capital in the form of donations. Afterward, Wang began selling caches of manuscripts to archaeologists all the while misrepresenting the number of manuscripts left. Needless to say, he sold each cache at a significant markup. Wang was maximizing the potential financial capital of the manuscripts by creating an artificial scarcity. It took two decades for Wang to shrewdly sell forty thousand manuscripts, paintings, and banners to elite buyers including Stein and Pelliot. None of this happened without the knowledge of Qing officials; in fact, they were the recipients of many of these manuscripts. However, the value of capital is fluid, and in the case of diplomatic capital, the value is greatly affected by political changes. Such a political shift happened in 1911.

The Qing Dynasty fell in 1911, and a republic was established the following year. The new republic was the offspring of nationalist sensibilities among a young cadre of elites. New laws were passed, including an order prohibiting the export of antiquities from China.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, there was a reluctance among Xinjiang officials to enforce the new antiquities laws. The hesitancy of frontier officials to enforce the new laws was self-evident during Stein’s third expedition of 1913–1915, where he effortlessly exported sixteen thousand pounds of crates packed with the accumulated antiquities of his travels. The transition had only begun, and many Confucian-educated elites still held to the

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*Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* Volume 2 by M. Aurel Stein, plate 188, London: Macmillan, 1912.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

old mindset. Ultimately, what stopped the exportation of artifacts was the political pressure of a young group of Western-educated Chinese intellectuals.

“Young China” was composed of Westernized Chinese scholars whose education was in European and American universities. With a nationalistic perspective and a Western view of artifacts, they sought to forge a new national identity separate from their imperial predecessors. Nationalism required a forging of a new ideology based on a shared patrimony, and antiquities were vital to provide cohesion to the new “imagined community.”<sup>24</sup> Archaeological artifacts would now “embody the collective cultural heritage of the Chinese people writ large rather than that of an exclusive Confucian elite.”<sup>25</sup> The diplomatic capital value of the artifacts skyrocketed to *priceless*, and when that occurred, there was nothing that Western archaeologists could do to affect an exchange. To eventually force the old guard of Confucian-educated officials to comply, “Young China” created the Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities. The Commission wrote letters to officials and governors demanding oversight of the antiquities law’s expeditions and enforcement. They also used the press to malign Western expeditions and shame provincial officials into action. “Young China” successfully stopped the capital exchange and established a new narrative that accused archaeologists like Stein of “imperialist coercion, personal deceit, and domestic corruption.”<sup>26</sup> This accusation was generally inaccurate since “Western archaeologists did not shoot their way into China, nor did they get shot out...they came to China when the Chinese said ‘yes,’ and they left China when the Chinese said ‘no.’”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the perception and value of diplomatic capital forever changed when the Western idea that art and antiquities

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Jacobs, 154.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

were priceless rather than precious was adopted by “Young China.”

The contemporary debates surrounding Western expeditions to China in the early twentieth century represent an unwillingness by Chinese historians to accept the possibility that local officials and inhabitants of northwestern China had agency and priorities very different from the nationalistic values of today’s PRC. Even today, diplomats and representatives of nations still partake in the formation of bargained-for exchanges involving diplomatic capital. For example, in 2019, Italy returned hundreds of illicitly traded sculptures from the Gansu province back to China.<sup>28</sup> The return was made in conjunction with Italy’s agreement to join the PRC’s “Belt and Road” initiative. The announcement also coincided with President Xi Jinping’s first visit to Italy. Like the Qing officials of imperial China who sought to obtain diplomatic capital from Western empires by allowing the exchange of artifacts, modern officials allow the return of artifacts when the diplomatic and political capital of such an exchange is valued more than the artifacts themselves. These are the “compensations of plunder.”

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Hollingsworth, “Italy to Return Hundreds of Cultural Relics Back to China,” CNN Style, March 26, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/italy-china-cultural-relics-intl/index.html>.



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Fred R. De Leon is a Master of Arts in History candidate at California State University, San Bernardino. His areas of study include archaeology, with a focus on the Roman Republic, and Jewish apocalyptic literature. He is a graduate of California State University, Long Beach and holds a Juris Doctor from Whittier College School of Law. He is involved in his local community where he served a term as a school board member for Val Verde Unified School District from 2008 to 2012. He plans to eventually earn a PhD in history. He extends a special thank you to Dr. Murray for his fearless leadership during these trying times.

