

五十九

We came to some walls
in the midst of the sand
doors lead into caves
remarkably grand
where they preserved
statues, sutras and art
the oldest, the Diamond
the deepest, the Heart

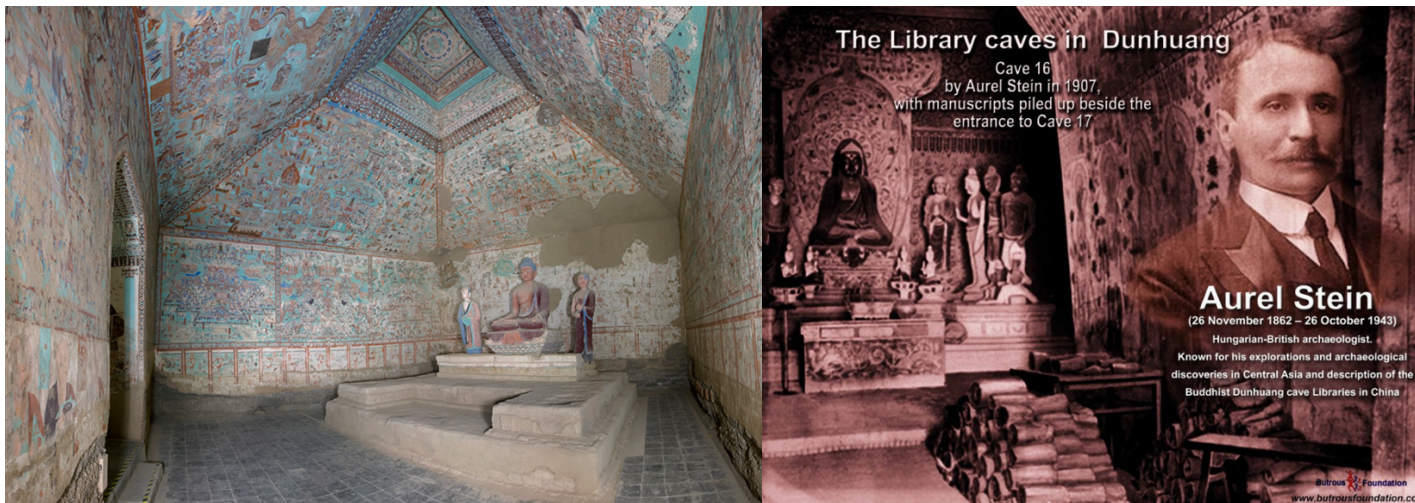


Chapter 59 – Dunhuang – a Diamond in the Rough

Located in western China, 200 miles west of Jiayuguan in the province of Gansu, Dunhuang was a nexus where merchants and traders from China and the west interacted with Buddhist pilgrims. Jiayu pass, near Jiayuguan was the first frontier fortress at the west end of the Ming dynasty Great Wall and was the western end of the Gobi Desert and the eastern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. About 25 km southeast of Dunhuang lies an area known as the “Caves of a Thousand Buddhas” (千佛洞 Qiānfó Dòng). It is also called the “Mogao Grottos” (莫高窟 Mògāo Kū). They are, in fact, a one-mile stretch of nearly 500 caves which were burrowed into sandstone by 366 monks in the middle of nowhere about 1000 years ago.

In 1900, a Daoist monk by the name of 王圓籙 Wáng Yuánlù, discovered a hidden door in one of those caves (cave #17 aka the Library Cave) while doing some painting restoration work. Behind the mysterious door, Wang discovered nearly 50,000 ancient manuscripts, rare textiles, silk embroideries, and other artefacts dating back more than a millennium.

In 1907, Hungarian born British archaeologist Aurel Stein first arrived at the Mogao Grottos. A year later, Paul Pelliot, the French Sinologist and Orientalist followed. Between the two of them, they “purchased” thousands of manuscripts, paintings, embroideries, and other artefacts from Wang Yuan Lu which they sent back to museums in London and Paris. Russian and Japanese explorers and collectors followed close behind.



Stein and Pelliot were also followed by the likes of Langdon Warner of the Fogg Museum in Boston who (according to Dong Linfu) cut out pieces from twelve frescoes because he wanted to preserve Chinese culture and thought that the Chinese were “subhuman, uncivilized, and unable to appreciate their past culture.” Alan Priest followed Warner carving out fourteen pieces of a stone frieze and carrying away six heads of Buddhist statues bound for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (from Dong, Linfu. *Cross Culture and Faith: the Life and Work of James Mellon Menzies*. University of Toronto Press, 2005.

In 2020, George Dillard wrote an interesting article in the Medium Daily Digest called “Was This Real-Life Indiana Jones a Savior or a Thief?” in which he calls Sir Marc Aurel Stein’s actions in Dunhuang into question. Was it “... Europeans humiliating and subjugating a civilization that had once been the most sophisticated in the world?” or did he rescue treasures from the Red Guards when they were directed to destroy monuments and historical sites which only served as remnants of “the 4 olds”? Contemporary Chinese artist and dissident, Ai Weiwei (艾未未 Ài Wèiwèi) would probably agree with the latter. In 2010, Ai recreated the 12 bronze Chinese zodiac animal heads looted from the Old Summer Palace by Anglo-French troops in 1860 when Lord Elgin ordered it burned to the ground. Ai created these partially in response to Christie’s auction house withdrawing two of the original looted bronzes from its sale of Yves Saint Laurent’s vast collection in 2009 in which they had hoped to sell for over \$10M each. Ai said “ “I don’t think that it’s a national treasure. It has nothing to do with national treasure. It was designed by an Italian and made by a Frenchman for a Qing dynasty emperor, which actually is somebody who invaded China. So if we talk about ‘national treasure,’ which nation do we talk about?”

According to Dillard, Aurel Stein “... both enlightened the world about a little-understood part of the world and its history and took hundreds of priceless artifacts from China to India, many of which have yet to be returned to their rightful owners.” Dillard goes on to say, “What Stein discovered in Central Asia was staggering, and it redefined the way we think about Asian history. He found that the age in which he was living — a period in which globe-spanning empires traded over tens of thousands of miles — was not the first era of globalization. When conditions had been right, the great civilizations of Eurasia had actually interacted quite a bit.”

When challenged and questioned as to whether the over 14,000 documents were legitimately procured, Stein believed that, “the preservation of fragile artifacts trumped any consideration of the rights of China to its own historical artifacts.”