

Two Inseparable Names, Dunhuang and Paul Pelliot

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Paul Pelliot—A Meticulous Philologist and Courageous Explorer

THE name of the great scholar Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) is forever linked to the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang in northwestern China, and, more generally, to Far Eastern Studies. His legacy, consisting of more than eight hundred scholarly articles published in the first half of the 20th century, remains fundamental in many areas for the history of Indochina, Mongolia, China, Central Asia, and Iran.

Pelliot was a meticulous philologist blessed with an infinite curiosity and a prodigious memory. He not only had a perfect knowledge of ancient and modern Chinese, but also mastered Turkish, Uyghur, Mongolian, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and other rare ancient languages. He was as effective at collecting works of art and books as he was at identifying inscriptions and manuscripts that, thanks to his efforts, had been acquired for French cultural institutes.

Far from being a scholar confined to his study, Pelliot was a peerless explorer and a courageous man of action; in 1900, he distinguished himself during the siege of the Foreign Legations by the Boxers in Beijing and was awarded the National Order of the Legion of Honour at the age of twenty-two. He later received the Military Cross at Gallipoli, where he served in 1914.

During his expedition to Central Asia, he did not hesitate at times to leave the convoy to scout along forgotten mountain paths and hunt for epigraphic inscriptions in remote areas. Shortly after his return to France, he was appointed professor at the Collège de France, filling the Chair of “Language, History and Archaeology of Central Asia” created for him in 1911. Only the war and his travels temporarily interrupted a life devoted to teaching and research which he conducted until his death in 1945.

Paul Pelliot graduated from both the National School for Oriental Languages and the School of Political Science. He also held a

Bachelor's degree in English. He was heading for a career in diplomacy when he came to the attention of the most renowned Orientalists of his time, the sinologist Édouard Chavannes and the Indianist Sylvain Lévi, who convinced him to pursue his studies of ancient Asia. He began his career as a teacher in the newly founded French School of the Far East in Hanoi, and, from 1900 onwards, was regularly sent to Beijing by the School to acquire Chinese books and artifacts for its new museum and library.

Like the other major European powers, Germany, England and Russia, the French government launched an expedition to Central Asia, an area which at that time was one of the least known regions on earth. Appointed as the head of this major expedition, Paul Pelliot crossed these vast expanses of land between 1906 and 1908, then continuing his journey on to China where he acquired thousands of Chinese books that enabled French sinologists to have access to the essential tools needed for the study of Chinese culture. While in Beijing, he became acquainted with the community of Chinese scholars and informed them of the exceptional discovery of the thousands of medieval manuscripts from Dunhuang.

Contribution to Study of Chinese Buddhism

Pelliot's invaluable contribution to the study of Chinese Buddhism is rarely acknowledged. He addressed this topic as early as 1903. He was more interested in the historical development of the Buddhist religion than in the doctrine itself and wrote that: "Philosophies and religions are born, evolve and perish in certain conditions of time and environment, and it is these conditions that must be discovered." He strove to determine with the utmost accuracy the paths that allowed Buddhism to penetrate into China and analyse the stories of the monks who moved along the Silk Road.

He likewise explored the relationship between Taoism, an authentically Chinese system of thought, and the early phases of the spread of Buddhism into China. He wrote on the way the two doctrines borrowed concepts and vocabularies from each other. He also studied this syncretism as it appears in a folk tale entitled *Huhujing* (The Conversion of the Barbarians). As the story goes, Laozi, the holy founder of Taoism, disappeared one day in the western borders of the Chinese territory and his doctrine reappeared centuries later precisely from the West to spread to the Chinese empire under the new name of Buddhism.

Pelliot was interested in the linguistic aspects of Indian, Sogdian,

Chinese, and other languages, and produced comparative studies between various forms of Buddhism. More than one hundred articles were devoted to points pertaining to Buddhism. His most striking contribution is however linked to his expedition to Central Asia where he was able to explore unknown Buddhist sites, many in the Kucha region and especially later at Dunhuang.

He spent months in the Chinese oasis of Mogaoku, the “Caves of Unparalleled Height” near the city of Dunhuang on the edge of the Gobi and Taklamakan Desert. There, he explored several hundred decorated caves dating from the second half of the first millennium. In his detailed survey, he recorded their interior decorations and deciphered every inscription. All the major wall paintings and clay sculptures were photographed under his supervision. Back in France, despite a series of setbacks, he managed to publish these unique photographs.

His scientific survey of the Dunhuang caves is the earliest description of the site and stands as a reference for modern historians of Sino-Buddhist art. One of the smallest caves, cave number 17, offered a



Pelliot examining documents in the Library Cave (1908)

literary treasure of over 65,000 manuscripts from the 5th to the early 11th centuries, in Chinese, Tibetan and many extinct languages. In March 1908, Pelliot spent three weeks in a row huddled in this small recess in the cliff unrolling and selecting more than 4,000 Chinese manuscripts, almost as many in Tibetan and a few others in Sogdian, Uyghur, Sanskrit, Kuchean, and Khotanese—he even found a small prayer written in Hebrew. The linguistic diversity found in the cave testifies to Dunhuang having been for centuries a lively Buddhist centre at the crossroads of numerous cultures.

After negotiating with the guardian monk of the site, the documents Pelliot selected reached Paris at the end of 1909. The manuscripts were sent to the National Library while the artifacts and silk paintings went to the Louvre where they were immediately displayed. They were subsequently transferred to the Guimet Museum in Paris. The Buddhist paintings and banners from Dunhuang are the oldest known specimens from China, as no other site has preserved similar documents from that period. The free access by several generations of scholars from all over the world to Pelliot's collection of manuscripts, sutras, various texts and archive documents, has necessarily fostered a better understanding of early Chinese Buddhism.

Author Biography

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