Cultural Thieves or Political Liabilities? How Chinese Officials Viewed Foreign Archaeologists in Xinjiang, 1893–1914

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During the twilight years of the Qing 清 empire, negotiations surrounding the arrival, departure, and daily activities of foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang 新疆 were a reflection of the larger asymmetrical geopolitical relations between China and the foreign powers, including Japan. Contrary to popular wisdom, the moral indignation often associated with the spoils of these expeditions is the product of a later generation, one that came of age in the 1920s and 30s. When turn-of-the-century Chinese scholars, officials, and antiquarians showed any interest in the fruits of foreign archaeological labors at all, they invariably looked to those manuscripts and artifacts evincing the Chinese script, wholly ignoring (and occasionally in open contempt) of those written in another language (Jacobs 2009, 2010).

Both the popular wisdom and its recent scholarly corrective, however, assume that the most significant aspect of these expeditions at the time they were undertaken was the transnational debate over culture, history, and language. From the standpoint of those foreign explorers and their domestic disputants who later wrote about these expeditions at length, perhaps that is so. It was decidedly not the case, however, for their Chinese counterparts sweating away on the front lines of the local county *yamen*. The historian's fixation on moral debates and museum controversies in the post-colonial era is anachronistic and not reflective of contemporary perspectives found in the original archival material surrounding these expeditions. When we highlight the rare nugget or two of moral commentary espoused by those Chinese officials whose duty it was to monitor these expeditions, we ignore the much larger geopolitical context against which these impressions were first recorded. This article is an attempt to recover the contemporary geopolitical context surrounding these expeditions, and foreground the preponderant views and concerns of Chinese officialdom. Qing officials in Xinjiang were obsessed not with moral judgments about transnational "theft," but rather with the preservation of their own careers and the threat foreign explorers posed to their future prospects in the Chinese bureaucracy.

Such an agenda will require us to turn our attention to the unwieldy morass of bureaucratic drudgery that flowed through the veins of the Chinese bureaucracy on a daily basis. As we shall see, for Qing officials in Xinjiang, there was nothing abstract or morally controversial about the foreign archaeologists then passing through their province. To these officials, moral indignation, never expressed and seemingly unfelt, was a tactic poorly suited to the challenges at hand. Of far more importance was that they treat these "casual foreign travelers" (*youlizhe* 遊歷者) in a manner that preserved political — not cultural — sovereignty.

Hitched to a sinking ship

"Order your men to transport … [their] crates and luggage to the Liu *yamen* in the Main Hall at Karashahr with great care," wrote Wen Lishan 文立山, the sub-prefect of Turpan, in March 1903, clarifying instructions to his chief of staff. "Then wait for a stamp of receipt and bring it back for our records. The servants assigned to this task must not impede or otherwise obstruct these orders. If they do, the gravest of blame will fall upon them" (Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan et al. [hereafter XJDAG] 2001, p. 158). This brief excerpt from a dull and unremarkable document from the Xinjiang archives opens a window into the unequal relationship that existed between foreign powers and the Chinese state during the final decades of the Qing dynasty. The luggage in question belonged to Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, two prominent German archaeologists whose fame would later derive from their excavations and removal of frescoes on this and future expeditions. For those Chinese officials tasked with keeping tabs on their expedition, however, Grünwedel and Le Coq's scholarly achievements were of little import. To Qing officials, these German explorers were walking diplomatic liabilities, to be handled with kid gloves and promptly sent on their way. If these treaty-protected foreigners lodged the slightest complaint with their powerful ambassadors, it could spell professional disaster for

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the unlucky official in whose jurisdiction the alleged infraction occurred. The frequent transport of luggage is a case in point. Desperate to avoid allegations of neglect, Sub-Prefect Wen took great pains not only to ensure strict compliance down the chain of command, but also to procure a complete trail of bureaucratic paperwork that would absolve him of blame should an incident arise in the future.

All negotiations regarding a possible foreign expedition were handled by the central government and foreign embassies in Beijing. Because the Qing court was far too weak to deflect foreign pressure for their entry, Xinjiang's officials had no choice but to fall dutifully in line and unfurl the red carpet. Even when foreigners failed to obtain the necessary paperwork, entry to the province could not be refused, especially since most of them came via railways in Russian Siberia, far from the shrinking radius of Qing power. Furthermore, neither bandit uprisings nor ecological disasters seemed capable of dissuading these archaeologists from their destinations. This vexed local officials to no end, for the simple reason that safe passage and freedom of movement was a treaty right enjoyed by all Western and Japanese travelers in China. As a result, the single most common directive to appear in any document relating to foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang during this time warned Chinese officials to "afford them the necessary protections in accordance with treaty provisions" (*anyue tuowei baohu* 按約妥為保護). Out of the many multitudes of humiliating diplomatic agreements China had signed over the course of the nineteenth century, no specific treaty was ever singled out, for everyone knew what they cumulatively entailed. In short, anytime a foreign citizen hailing from one of the great powers found himself in desperate straits or a diplomatic pickle — often, though not always, of his own making — he could simply call upon his or a friendly nation's diplomatic corps to come to his aid. Aware of how widely the gulf in economic and military disparity stretched between his own nation and that of China, the disgruntled foreigner and his ambassadorial lawyers could then proceed to invoke tortured treaty logic to shift the blame for any quarrel onto Chinese officialdom.

In order to avoid such blame, Chinese officials in Xinjiang treated foreign archaeologists as if they were visiting dignitaries. No detail of their expedition was deemed too petty or mundane to escape scrutiny at the highest levels. The biggest concern was that a predilection for shortcuts and unpatrolled routes would lead to an ambush by bandits, still widespread in the aftermath of major Muslim rebellions in the 1860s and 70s. These fears were realized in the wake of the 1911 revolution, when the Buddhist monk and explorer Count Otani 大谷光瑞 appealed to his nation's diplomatic corps to protest on his behalf. "The Japanese ambassador claims that the Count suffered the pillaging of his silver currency and pack animals by bandits while he was in Khotan county," the Office of Foreign Affairs wrote to Xinjiang's governor in January 1912, "and that local officials were unwilling to protect him. The situation is dire. Find a way to make amends." Left unspoken in such crises was the fact that the foreigner often brought such troubles upon himself. Warned against taking dangerous mountain routes, Count Otani simply brushed his naysayers aside. "He is adamant, and tells us not to worry, since he took this route last year without incident." Still, throwing caution to the winds was not a prudent career move for a Chinese official tasked with Otani's safety. "Should anything happen en route, we will fail to live up to our neighborly responsibilities and problems will arise. We have no choice but to instruct Magistrate Zhang in Yangi Hissar county to gather horses and manservants and prepare for his safe escort" (XJDAG 2001, pp. 232–33).

Whenever foreigners proved less than forthcoming in divulging the details of their daily itinerary (as they often were), Chinese officials turned to their Mongol, Turkic, or Chinese interpreters to get what they needed. "According to our Mongol interpreter," wrote the Turpan sub-prefect, Peng Xuzhan 彭緒瞻, in 1893, "the Russian [i.e., V.I. Roborovskii] spends his time making drawings in the mountains, traveling seven to ten miles per day. Not once has he taken a main road." This unwillingness to stick to the safety of beaten paths worried officials in both Xinjiang and Beijing alike. The central government advised its border officials "not to allow them to proceed to any restricted regions or areas where local sentiment is not conducive to their arrival." Yet as we saw in the case of Count Otani, such restrictions were meaningless in the face of determined resistance by gun-toting foreigners and their powerful consular corps. This led Sub-prefect Peng to try and cover all possible contingencies, imploring his subordinates to "protect this foreigner wherever he goes, without the slightest neglect" (XJDAG 2001, p. 101). In 1906, the American climatologist Ellsworth Huntington made the trip from Karashahr to Toqsun, with an unscheduled stop in Loksin en route. In an effort to stay one step ahead, the magistrate of Toqsun called in his Turkic interpreter, a man by the name of Arin. "He passed through the southern mountains with five attendants, on his way to Loksin," Arin reported. "Then he sent me to accompany the armed escort for his luggage and pack animals to Toqsun." Armed with such intelligence, the magistrate ordered officials in Loksin "to despatch forthwith a servant to protect them in

accordance with treaty regulations, await their arrival, escort them to the county office, and report their entry and exit dates" (XJDAG 2001, p. 251).

Failure to report with swift accuracy the exit and entry dates of foreigners on the move was met with a torrent of abuse. In October 1910, when the names of two Japanese explorers in separate regions of the province were erroneously reported as one, the offending official was swiftly castigated. "The lack of clear reporting does not provide a channel for prudent foreign affairs," observed Rong Pei 榮霈, the *daoyin* of Dihua and Barikol. "In the future, whenever you encounter a foreign traveler, do not submit muddled reports that serve to obstruct our work and lead to further inquiries." In 1909, when officials in southern Xinjiang inexplicably lost track of the Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein for a brief spell, the same *daoyin* ordered them to clean up their act. "Henceforth, whenever foreign travelers enter your district, you absolutely must attach servants to their party and escort them in accordance with treaty regulations. Exit and entry dates must be reported, and you must check their passports to see where they have been and what they have been up to. We do all this in the interests of caution, and no dereliction of duty can be countenanced." Fortunately for Rong *daoyin*, the extensive trail of paperwork he maintained allowed him to identify the precise location of an infraction among his staff. When the Finnish explorer Gustaf Mannerheim managed to escape official oversight for a time in 1907, Rong traced his files back to the source. "When he left for Turpan," Rong discovered, "the local magistrate sent a courier ahead to Fuyuan county. Why did the magistrate of Fuyuan not come out to take charge? … It seems that someone has shirked their responsibility, and gross neglect has occurred as a result. Who shall shoulder the blame for this lapse?" (XJDAG 2001, pp. 225, 112, 288).

As we have seen, most bureaucratic slips and instances of foreign disobedience could be papered over by an interrogation of the native interpreters attached to the expedition, each of whom was legally obliged to answer an official summons. Not surprisingly then, the most troublesome expeditions were those that arranged for their own private translators and porters (such as Stein's Indian servants), who then enjoyed the same foreign protections as their employers. This was the case with the 1908 expedition of Count Otani, whose "specially employed translator started causing trouble, demanding the procurement of wine and food, and the provision of an additional cart." Seeing his demands go unrequited, this translator proceeded to "beat up commoners," and refused to pay for those supplies he did obtain. This was an ominous beginning to the Otani expedition, which everywhere left peeved officials and an acrimonious trail of documents in its wake. At the opposite end of the spectrum was the French sinologist Paul Pelliot, whose fluency in Chinese was a breath of fresh air to his largely monolingual counterparts. "He is of good moral character and disposition, and his elegant speech is pleasing to the ear," wrote one official in 1907. "He lived in Beijing for many years, and is thoroughly conversant in Chinese script and speech. He is an erudite connoisseur of all things ancient, and there is nothing vainglorious about him." Beneath such flowery praise was the pragmatic recognition that Pelliot would not constitute a diplomatic liability for Xinjiang officialdom. In order to find out where he was going, they simply asked him. If there were bandits in the area, they told him to steer clear, and he usually did. That Pelliot evinced a healthy dose of respect for his Chinese counterparts was certainly most welcome. But that was not why they liked him. The reason Pelliot was able to ingratiate himself with Chinese officials was because they were confident no diplomatic incidents would break out on their watch (XJDAG 2001, pp. 200, 204, 262).

Regardless of the diplomatic threat foreign archaeologists posed to Chinese authority in Xinjiang, each expedition — be it well-behaved or decidedly ill-mannered — proved extremely costly to a provincial administration already on financial life support. The only way to maintain a vast Chinese bureaucratic and military establishment in far-off Xinjiang was to provide enormous subsidies from the central government in Beijing. Before the twentieth century, this had been an onerous yet consistently undertaken task. That all changed with the disastrous Boxer debacle in 1900–1, precisely the sort of international brouhaha (foreign missionaries crossing paths with local bandits) that officials strived to prevent with foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang. In retaliation, the foreign powers, after unleashing a deadly punitive expedition on Beijing, levied a crippling indemnity upon the Qing court, one that sent it into a downward fiscal spiral from which it never recovered. Silver subsidies for Xinjiang plummeted, to be severed completely when the last emperor finally abdicated his throne in February 1912 (Millward 2007, pp. 149–50). In light of the fact that the provincial administration gained no tangible benefits from playing host to foreign explorers — they were parasites to be endured, not resources to be exploited —any financial burden incurred by the locality during the course of their travels merely exacerbated the economic crisis already afflicting the province. So rare was the archaeologist who looked after his own debts that Chinese officials encountering such a man felt it worthy of special commendation in their reports. Taking stock of the Huntington expedition in 1905,

one grateful official observed that "this foreigner has offered to pay for all of his provisions and other expenses" (XJDAG 2001, p. 250).

Most, however, did not. The Japanese were the most notorious offenders, refusing to pay for peddlers and pack animals employed on their journey. In December 1911, when Tachibana Zuicho 橘瑞超, a disciple of Count Otani, insisted on traveling to sensitive oases such as Charchan, located in the impoverished moonscape of southeastern Xinjiang, it was all the local magistrate could do to mitigate the fallout from his arrival. "We are a rustic locale and have no guesthouse for him to stay in," he observed. "So I ordered some Turban residents to vacate their home and let him occupy their quarters." Tachibana's arrival caused such a stir among the local populace that the magistrate had to issue a special order warning the Turkic peasants to "refrain from tracking his movements and thereby instigating an incident." Grünwedel and Le Coq were no saints, either. After arriving at the border town of Tacheng in late 1904, officials all along the route to Dihua received orders to prepare "sheep, firewood, and hay for twelve horses." These were not gifts. "If you can get the traveler to take care of the bill on the spot, that would help us avoid cumbersome paperwork." Le Coq, however, did not take care of his bill, nor was he willing to accept a receipt for his expenses. Following repeated failures to procure payment from the Germans, Chinese officials had no choice but to shoulder the burden themselves, justifying their humiliating capitulation in moral terms. "Seeing as the amount in question is insignificant, the deputy magistrate should just pay for the expenses himself, as a display of magnanimous hospitality" (XJDAG 2001, pp. 233, 228, 162–63, 166, 156).

Unfortunately for Xinjiang's provincial coffers, such displays of "magnanimous hospitality" were becoming distressingly commonplace. Even when foreign archaeologists did not overtly consume provincial resources, Chinese officials were still forced to expend them. The treaties demanded it. "Disseminate an order to all village heads that [the foreigners] are to be afforded protection in accordance with the treaties," wrote Li Fangxue 李方學, magistrate of Ningyuan county, in 1902. "In addition, send them water, vittles, foreign liquor and other necessities, all in fulfillment of our Excellency's policy of treating guests from afar with great generosity" (XJDAG 2001, p. 156). Once again, the moral gloss woven into this statement belies the profoundly unequal nature of the relationship. Grünwedel and Le Coq were scholars without diplomatic credentials, and yet the highest officials in Xinjiang were forced to treat them as if they were foreign dignitaries. Chinese officials assumed the burden of expense for armed escorts, manservants, interpreters, and sometimes even daily provisions. If the foreigners failed to pay their bills, they could not be held accountable. If they ventured off the beaten path, they could not be called back. If they encountered bandits en route, blame fell upon the Chinese officials who did not sufficiently protect their risk-taking endeavors. If they lacked accommodations, locals were kicked out of their homes, then muzzled in their attempts to seek redress.

Last but not least, we must note the stratospheric expense of all the bureaucratic paperwork Xinjiang officials were obliged to maintain regarding these expeditions. As the provincial governor of the early Republic once noted, the quality of paper produced in Xinjiang was "fit only to wrap packages, not to meet the needs of official documents." This meant that all government organs were forced to import, at phenomenal expense, rolls of paper manufactured in inner China and transported to the northwest by camelback (Yang 1921/1965, p. 184). Once in Xinjiang, much of this pricy papyrus was consumed by local officials who had no choice but to document, in mind-numbing detail, their latest adventures in babysitting for tempestuous foreign archaeologists. Over a twelve-month period during 1904–5, Chinese officials throughout Xinjiang had to deal with a constant stream of packages from abroad, all intended for Grünwedel and Le Coq in the field. Since the Germans changed their itinerary constantly, often failing to notify Xinjiang officials in advance, the ordeal of making sure their mail got to them intact became a near comic affair. Provincial couriers and magistrates chased the foreigners to every corner of the province (see, for example, XJDAG 2001, pp. 166, 169, 175, 180, 182). Two decades later such mundane distractions had not diminished. In 1931, no fewer than sixteen documents were circulated by various officials for the express purpose of tracking the development of a painful toothache in P. Vorontnikov, a Russian astronomer attached to Sven Hedin's Sino-Swedish expedition (XJDAG 2006, pp. 138–48). These are merely a few examples of the sorts of daily bureaucratic chores that diverted both the attention and resources of Chinese officials in Xinjiang.

Official forbearance for such tomfoolery declined markedly after the 1911 revolution. Though Xinjiang's new governor, the shrewd and experienced Yang Zengxin 楊增新, quickly neutralized Han revolutionaries in Dihua and Ili, foreign and domestic opportunists took advantage of the chaos to pursue their own agendas. Turkic peasants rose up against the harsh rule of the local Muslim khanate in Hami, unpaid Han soldiers carried out a campaign of terror and assassination throughout the province, and Russian

generals led Mongol cavalry in an invasion of Khobdo. To add insult to injury, nobles in Outer Mongolia leveraged Russian support to declare independence from the new Chinese republic, and Tibet attempted to follow suit. All of these developments had consequences for foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang, by now the last majority non-Han region to remain under Chinese suzerainty. Paranoia was rife throughout the province. Count Otani's men, perennial *personae non gratae* in Xinjiang, were now suspected of meddling in secret society affairs. "This traveler has been in Kucha for three months," an official noted in 1913. "Submit a report for my review regarding whether or not he has been inciting the ignorant commoners; whether he is conducting surveys of the land; where he lodges at night; what activities he engages in; and whether or not the local magistrate has sent someone to protect him" (XJDAG 2001, p. 241).

By far the biggest concern for the new governor was the extent to which his province was being professionally mapped in preparation for a possible military invasion. Suspicion fell first on the Japanese, but evidence was thin. Not so with Aurel Stein, whose British citizenship suggested that he may be a cartographic vanguard of a much larger expedition from India and Tibet, the latter a suspected British satellite. Officials were suspicious of Indian surveyors that Stein sent out ahead of the main party, and the provincial commissioner for foreign affairs, Zhang Shaobo, wanted to make sure that Stein was aware of their concerns. "You should have a polite conversation with the British consul [in Kashgar]," Zhang wrote to his southwestern officials in November 1913, "and make sure they inform this traveler that he is not allowed to survey important passes for national defense, nor can he draw up any maps. We must do this so that neighborly relations are not hurt when local officials begin to restrict his activities." The next month, when Stein ignored these instructions, officials in Charchan took the unprecedented step of searching the luggage of one of his Indian attendants. "When I entered Narsun's room and examined his luggage," reported the local magistrate, "I saw a device used for surveying and mapping attached to a stand. When I asked him what it was, Narsun said that it was merely photographic equipment. Fortunately, I was able to recognize its true nature on my own, and was not deceived." The conclusion forwarded to Governor Yang was that "both times Stein has come to Charchan, his goal has been to draw maps of our land under the guise of archaeological endeavors" (XJDAG 2001, pp. 113–16, 118).

The governor ordered the equipment in question to be detained, and a forceful note of protest was sent to the British consulate. "Tell Consul Macartney that if Stein draws up any more maps we will deport him." Macartney denied that Stein had anything but scholarly aims. The governor did not believe him. After securing promises from Stein that he would not conduct any more surveys of the land (a promise soon broken), he was permitted to resume his travels. Not only that, but he was also allowed to take out a loan for his journey to the neighboring province of Gansu (XJDAG 2001, pp. 119, 121, 123–24). Thus, despite the newly varnished bluster of the post-Qing administration, the fundamental terms of its relationship with foreign archaeologists had not changed. Though Chinese officials evinced an increasing determination to confront foreigners when they transgressed treaty provisions, when push came to shove, there was still precious little the provincial administration could do about it.

So long as China was weak and prostrate at the feet of foreign nations, any province still committed to a unified Chinese state was destined to adopt a similarly demeaning posture. The red carpet had to be trotted out — the treaties *still* demanded it. After the 1911 revolution, Governor Yang felt bold enough to try and bluff Stein into compliance. When Stein called his bluff, the humiliation was all the more acute. Such capitulation inevitably spawned resentment among a younger generation of Chinese — those who would later interpret the heyday of foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang in moral terms. "Our nation's officials are completely powerless," wrote Xie Bin 謝彬, an intellectual employed in the Beijing government during the 1920s. "They give way in the face of adversity, renounce our handful of rights that actually are written into the treaties … and allow foreigners to twist logic in violation of the regulations" (Xie 1923, p. 372). As we have seen, however, the reality on the ground was quite different. China did not lack for stalwart and conscientious officials eager to safeguard their nation's interests. They simply lacked the resources to enforce their claims of sovereignty on foreigners more powerful than themselves. For these officials, the distractions of the Great War in Europe in 1914 proved a welcome respite from foreign archaeologists. When they returned a decade later, the rules of the game had changed considerably (see Jacobs, forthcoming).

During the end of the Qing and the early years of the Republic, the Chinese empire was united, but it was united in subjugation to Western and Japanese powers. Thus it made little difference whether Grünwedel, Le Coq, Stein, Pelliot, or Count Otani traveled through Xinjiang or strolled through the suburbs of Beijing. Because the distant northwestern borderlands were still tethered tightly to the sinking ship of late imperial China, the burdens conferred upon the Chinese

administration in Xinjiang by foreign archaeologists were virtually synonymous with those imparted by Western missionaries throughout all of inner China. Against such a historical backdrop, the highest aspiration a Chinese official could hope to meet was to keep the financial and political damage accrued by the state to a minimum. And, in the event an "incident" did break out, his highest aspiration was to ensure that he had followed proper bureaucratic procedures to the letter, lest his own head fall on the chopping block. Expressing interest, concern, or indignation over cultural matters was a luxury most Chinese officials did not enjoy.

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