

# Paul Pelliot, Aurel Stein and Chinese Opposition to the Royal Academy's International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935–36

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The failure of Stein's Fourth Expedition to Central Asia of 1930–1 has been shown to have resulted from opposition led by the historian and bibliographer William Hung of Harvard and Yenching, but a similar attempt at opposition by young Chinese intellectuals to the Royal Academy's International Exhibition of Chinese Art, and Paul Pelliot's part in it, is less well known. In their opposition to the proposed loan to London of China's major art treasures, a group of intellectuals, this time from Tsing Hua not Yenching University, linked the names of Pelliot and Stein for their previous removal of art treasures from China.<sup>1</sup>

The International Exhibition of Chinese Art, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in Burlington House from November 1935 to March 1936, was a massive undertaking, planned and executed within a very short space of time and generally acknowledged in Europe to be a great success.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Royal Academy archives include three newspaper clippings that indicate considerable opposition to the exhibition from an impressive group of Chinese intellectuals based in Tsing Hua University.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Chinese national treasures selected from the imperial collections of the Palace Museum were not to be insured was one aspect that provoked their anger. The first article from the *Peiping Chronicle* clipped and pasted into the archive is dated January 22, 1935 and headed 'Chinese here oppose plans for exhibition. Object to arrangements for sending art treasures to London. Tsing Hua group objects to British experts being sent to make selection.' The article refers to a 'long manifesto issued by a number of local Chinese professors and intellectuals' including the Dean of the College of Public Affairs at Tsing Hua University, the playwright Hsiung Fu-hsi,<sup>4</sup> Mr Liang Ssu-cheng (son of the late Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and research fellow of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture),<sup>5</sup> Mrs Liang (née Lin),<sup>6</sup> Dr. Chin Yueh-lin<sup>7</sup> and Dr Chou Pai-yuan<sup>8</sup> (all of Tsing Hua)'. The group opposed the proposal that the works of art be sent uninsured and 'pointed out that once an object of art is acquired by the British Museum it will never be allowed to leave its portals whatever may be its value.'

'[T]he manifesto also raises concern about the report that one of the British experts to be sent out to China to collect art treasures is Dr Pelliot, the French Sinologue... It is said that Dr Pelliot was associated with Sir Aurel Stein in the excavations at Tun-huang in Kansu over 20 years ago when they carried away many valuable Buddhist classics to France and England. It is recalled that when Sir Aurel Stein tried to enter Sinkiang about four years ago, he was denied entry. For China to welcome Dr Pelliot now whilst forbidding his colleague to enter Sinkiang four years ago constitutes such a startling reversal of attitude as is likely to lower her prestige.'

The manifesto appears to be faintly confused: Pelliot was not, after all, a 'British expert' and mention of the British Museum seems to hint at inalienable acquisition (despite the fact that the exhibition was to be held in the Royal Academy, not the British Museum). Stein and Pelliot were rivals rather than associates. However, Stein and Pelliot had carried material away from Dunhuang and were thus both to be feared in the context of Chinese art treasures. Stein was not denied entry to Xinjiang (he was in Xinjiang for several months), but his Fourth Expedition to Central Asia had,

indeed, ended in failure as a result of pressure from ‘Young China’ and William Hung of Yenching University in particular.<sup>9</sup> This time, the intellectuals were associated, not with Yenching but with nearby Tsing Hua University.

Another article in the same newspaper quotes from the *Ta Kung Pao* of Tientsin, expressing surprise that the Chinese Government had decided not to insure its art treasures: ‘This is really surprising. In spite of the elaborate precautions taken by the Palace Museum, several cases of theft have occurred during the last 10 years.’ The article continues with the stipulation that exhibits should be chosen ‘by China herself’ (something that Sir Percival David was determined would not happen), that ‘China should stick to the principle that important and valuable treasures should not be sent abroad’ and that ‘the treasures must be insured’ (which did not happen as the expense would have been prohibitive – to the organisers).<sup>10</sup>

In what appears to be an editorial from the same issue of the *Peiping Chronicle*, the worries of the manifesto-writers are dismissed:

The idea that Professor Pelliot has anything to do with the exhibition is also a misconception and he is certainly not amongst the group now on its way to China to make, in association with the representatives of the Chinese government, the selection of art objects required...<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Pelliot was closely involved with the selection and with the exhibition. His name first appears in the Chinese exhibition archives in a letter from Sir Percival David in the Dorchester Hotel to W.R.M. Lamb, Secretary to the Royal Academy, dated 8 January 1935, when he asks that all minutes of the [Exhibition’s] Executive Committee ‘from its inception’ (in August 1934) be sent to Pelliot at 59, Avenue Foch, Paris. In another letter to the Academy written in Peking in April 1935, he describes how Pelliot was present for four days when the ‘preliminary exhibition’ of potential exhibits was installed in ‘the old Bank of China’.<sup>12</sup> These potential exhibits had been extracted from the temporary storage of the contents of the Palace Museum, described in an internal memorandum written in late 1934 by the Secretary of the Royal Academy: ‘the Palace treasures are stored at present in a Shanghai warehouse in 21,000 cases... stacked one above the other.’<sup>13</sup> As a final contribution to the preparations for the Exhibition, Major General Neil Malcolm wrote to Bernard Rackham (of the V&A) from the Grand Hotel des Wagons-Lits in Peking on 29 May 1935, ‘Pelliot is leaving here to supervise the loading and shipping in HMS Suffolk’. As part of his campaign to persuade the Chinese Government that insurance was not necessary, Sir Percival David had persuaded the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to allocate space on HMS Suffolk, a war ship, in order to transport safely the 760 art treasures in their 93 cases.<sup>14</sup>

Pelliot’s involvement with the exhibition did not end there. He gave two lectures in Burlington House in January 1935 and six of the exhibits were personal loans. According to the Catalogue of the Exhibition, he lent a bronze belt-hook inlaid with turquoise dated to the Six Dynasties, an early Tang gilt bronze miniature stele supported on a tortoise, a printed Abhidharmavijñānakapada-sastra dated 1099 ‘from the library of the Ku-shan monastery’, a ‘pair of

Nestorian doves’ in bronze and a bronze Nestorian cross, both dated to the fourteenth century and a Tang dynasty ‘woodblock for printing Buddhas on Dharanis’.<sup>15</sup> Most of these must surely have been acquired on Pelliot’s Central Asian exploration of 1906–9.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from his own personal exhibits, loans from the Louvre, the Musée Guimet and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, as well as the fruits of his Central Asian exploration, were all labelled ‘Pelliot Collection’.

Pelliot’s hand can perhaps be seen in the selection of exhibits from Dunhuang that were included in the Exhibition. The printed prayer sheet of Vaisravana is identical with the British Museum’s Stein painting 245;<sup>17</sup> there are several stencils used for creating Buddha images in the British Museum; half of the rubbing of Ouyang Xun’s epitaph is at Or.8210/S.5791 (now in the British Library) and there are several illustrated booklet versions of the *Guanyinjing* in London. Yet in all these cases, instead of choosing the ones that were already in London, items from the ‘Pelliot Collection’, whether in the Louvre, Musée Guimet or Bibliothèque nationale, were selected and transported across the Channel. It is possible that Pelliot chose these items because he was more familiar with them and his access to the Stein Collection items was more restricted, but it seems extraordinary that he chose a small printed booklet of the Diamond sutra (catalogue no. 2990) dated 930 or 949, rather than the splendid Diamond sutra of AD 868 in the Stein Collection, particularly since it was Pelliot himself, rather than Stein, who first realised its significance as the world’s earliest securely dated printed book.<sup>18</sup>

The Tsing Hua intellectuals were right to suspect Pelliot’s involvement in the International Exhibition of Chinese Art and they might have been angrier had they known that ‘the insurance of all the loans by French museums was arranged in Paris by Professor Paul Pelliot...’.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Shareen Blair Brysac has written several papers on the subject: Shareen Brysac, ‘Sir Aurel Stein’s Fourth “American” Expedition’, in H. Wang (ed.), *Sir Aurel Stein. Proceedings of the British Museum study day*, 23 March 2002, British Museum Research Publication 142, 2004, pp. 17–22, [www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Stein%02Brysac.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Stein%02Brysac.pdf) (seen 3.1.2011); and ‘Last of the Foreign Devils’, *Archaeology*, Nov–Dec 1997, pp. 53–9. For William Hung, see Susan Chan Egan, *The Last Confucian*, Harvard, 1987. Opposition to Stein’s Fourth Expedition was not limited to Hung and Yenching University for the newly formed National Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities included representatives of the Palace Museum, National Library of China, Academic Sinica, the National University, Tsing Hua and Yenching universities (British Library IOL L/PS/10/1218. Despatch no. 94 to FO, 13th January, 1931).
- 2 For a description of the organisation of the exhibition see Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: the field of Chinese ceramics in Britain, 1560–1960*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2007, chapter 3.
- 3 The quotes from the Royal Academy Archives (RAA) are reproduced with the permission of the Royal Academy. I am very grateful to the Archivist, Mark Pomeroy for his warm welcome and access to the archives.
- 4 Xiong Fuxi 1900–65.
- 5 Liang Sicheng 1901–72, architectural historian and designer.
- 6 Lin Huiyin 1904–55, poet, architectural historian and designer.
- 7 Jin Yuelin 1895–1984, philosopher and logician, although internet references in Chinese mainly refer to his lifelong passion for Liang Sicheng’s wife, Lin Huiyin.
- 8 Presumably the theoretical physicist Zhou Peiyuan 1902–1993.

- 9 Shareen Blair Brysac, 'Last of the Foreign Devils', *op. cit.*
- 10 For opposition to the selection of material by Chinese experts see, for example, Lamb's memo to the Chinese Ambassador of November 1934, *Catalogue of the International Exhibition*, *op.cit.*, RAA/SEC/24/25/1 and Percival David's letter to Oscar Raphael of 7 November 1934, in the same volume.
- 11 From the *Peiping Chronicle* articles pasted into the Royal Academy archives RAA/SEC/24/25/1.
- 12 Confidential: Work of the Selection Committee in Shanghai, Percival David, 22 April 1935, RAA/SEC/24/25/1
- 13 Memo from Lamb to the Chinese Ambassador, November 1934, RAA/SEC/24/25/1.
- 14 Malcolm to Rackham, RAA/SEC/24/25/6.
- 15 Royal Academy of Arts, *Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-36* (third edition), London, 1935, p. 55, 255, 258-9.
- 16 The exhibition was something of a showcase for the personal collections of the Organising Committee: Sir Percival David showed 314 items from his own collection on show and the 187 exhibits from the British Museum were all labelled with the name of the previous owner, George Eumorfopoulos; see *Catalogue of the International Exhibition*, *op.cit.*, p. xxvii-xxxv.
- 17 BM registration no. 1919,0101,0.245; Stein no. Ch.xxx.002.
- 18 *Catalogue of the International Exhibition*, *op.cit.*, p. 256. For Pelliot's discovery of the *Diamond sutra's* significance see F. Wood and M. Barnard, *The Diamond Sutra: the story of the world's earliest dated printed book*, British Library, London, 2010, p. 78.
- 19 Lamb to Henri Verne of the Musées nationaux, Palais du Louvre, 27 April 1936. There were some insurance claims including one from Mrs Holmes, who was told, when she complained that her ivory dragon had fallen apart, that 'your butler inspected them', RAA/SEC/24/25/4.