

Money on the Silk Road – twenty years on

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In the early 1990s, there was an evaluation of the relationship between the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and the Dept of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, which indicated that UCL gained substantially more from shared activities, such as teaching and handling sessions, and that the imbalance might be rectified by providing PhD supervision to a member of staff in the department. As one of the youngest members of staff, I was the lucky recipient. At my interview for the job at the museum, I had been asked what I planned to do if I wasn't offered the position. I said I was thinking of doing a PhD on textiles collected by Aurel Stein (a vague notion at the time), and as the job itself was just short of full-time, it was suggested that I do an additional few hours a week on the Stein collection of coins that was housed in the department. That project became the basis of my PhD, supervised by Georgina Herrmann and Richard Reece at the Institute of Archaeology. I had been to the Institute before – as a teenage prospective undergraduate, and I took Ian Glover's course on Prehistoric Archaeology of South and South East Asia as an undergraduate at SOAS (I had wanted to do Chinese archaeology, and that was the nearest thing at the same). As a PhD student, I didn't put in much of an appearance at the Institute ("Does she even exist?" asked the director, Peter Ucko). The collection, books and my closest colleagues in the field – Joe Cribb, Elizabeth Errington and Vesta Curtis – were at the museum, or at SOAS, or at home. At some point, tutorials moved in time and space from Georgina's enormous sunny office opposite the lift or Richard's more monochrome cubbyhole down the corridor to lunch at a nearby restaurant with neon lights. A friendly "We need something written from you" would inevitably be slipped into the conversation. Almost ten years, and two children, later, the PhD was finally completed, and published two years after that. Georgina's no-nonsense advice at the outset had worked: "Think of it as the book you're going to publish, and keep the contents page clear in your mind."

Exactly twenty years after graduating from my formal relationship with Georgina and Richard, I am still in the Department of Coins and Medals, and I still enjoy lunch with Georgina when we randomly spot each other in the BM canteen. I admire her tremendously, and it is an honour to be invited to contribute to this Festschrift on the occasion of her, frankly, unbelievable birthday. As I can contribute nothing of interest in her field, the editors kindly agreed that I might write about mine.

The title of my thesis, and book, was *Money on the Silk Road. The Evidence from Eastern Central Asia to c. AD 800* (Wang 2004). In a nutshell, it brought together the numismatic and contemporary documentary evidence from sites in

Xinjiang, Gansu and Inner Mongolia, collected and published by Stein and other foreigners in the early twentieth century, and since then by Chinese archaeological teams. It showed that coins were not the only form of money on the Silk Road, and that other things, especially textiles, needed to be considered. A summary article can be found in the proceedings of the conference *After Alexander. Central Asia before Islam*, organised and edited by Georgina and Joe (Wang 2007).

I started with the coins. They conveniently fell into three main groups: Chinese tradition, Western tradition and local initiatives combining both. But what could I do with this collection that hadn't been done before? Joe had been there before me (especially on the Sino-Kharoshthi coins), François Thierry, at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, was generously sharing his new work (on Byzantine and Sasanian coins found in China, and local issues of Chinese coins found in Central Asia), and Sascha Neymark was working on the Chinese-style coins of Sogd. The solution was to bring everything I could find together, produce an up-to-date survey, and explore the use of money in contemporary documents. Fortunately, there were important new publications on secular documents, and as I went through the Chinese, Kharoshthi, Khotanese, Tocharian, and Tibetan catalogues, relying on expert transliterations and translations of the often scrappy remains of everyday life, the project moved into a more confident stage, and on to completion.

Just as Georgina and Richard had let me get on with it, so did my colleagues at the museum. In retrospect, I didn't talk about it much, mainly because I needed to find my own way, but also because we were doing other things. At the time, the Department of Coins and Medals was a very dynamic centre of Silk Road research. Under Joe's leadership, Liz, Vesta, Robert Bracey and I were all encouraged to pursue what we thought was important. It was a very supportive and productive environment (Wang et al. in press).

In the early 1990s, after the massive geo-political changes, the world of Eurasia opened up, and "The Silk Road(s)" became a golden term, promising hope and opportunity, its simplicity masking the more complicated history and reality of the world beyond the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. At the museum, we received enquiries about Aurel Stein and his collections: was he a good archaeologist? – a valid question as his name did not appear in standard dictionaries of archaeology, and Chinese references to Stein were consistent in their use of the verb "plunder". And where were his collections? When we realised that the same enquiries were going to several people in different institutions, we formed the Stein Curators' Group – a small group of curators, librarians and archivists who were responsible for collections that included material from Aurel Stein and his expeditions. We met once a year, and in 1999 produced the *Handbook to the Stein Collections in the UK* (Wang 1999). For that volume I compiled a bibliography of Stein's work, and a list of over 100 articles by or about him that had been published in *The Times* newspaper. I was curious to know if those articles would answer the question of whether Stein was a good archaeologist. He typically travelled in small groups, and the only person who published their own account of working with him was the Iranian Bahman Karimi. Perhaps *The Times* might have the answer – what did his contemporaries think of him?

Slightly against the judgement of Andrew Burnett, then head of department, who sensibly questioned whether it would be worth the effort, I set about the

laborious task of winding through *The Times* microfilm at the Guildhall Library, copying shorter entries in pencil, and putting coins in the slot to get print-outs of longer articles, then typing them up, annotating the entries, and eventually publishing *Sir Aurel Stein in The Times* (2002). It was a slow project that fitted in around other things. But it proved that Sir Aurel Stein was indeed a very highly respected archaeologist amongst his contemporaries, and earned the highest honours and medals in the field. An unexpected, and pleasing, result of that book was Peter Ucko's discovery of the Petrie medal for archaeology, which he then researched and sought to revive (Ucko and Quirke 2006).

Over the years, I've worked on a number of projects relating to Sir Aurel Stein, his collections and colleagues, and one project has often led to another. The Stein Handbook led to an invitation from Éva Apor, Head of the Oriental Section of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to co-direct a UK-Hungarian project to catalogue the Stein Collections there. With solid teamwork from John Falconer, Ágnes Kárteszi, Ágnes Kelecsényi, and Lilla Russell-Smith, we produced the *Catalogue of the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences* in 2002, and its *Supplement* (Apor and Wang 2002; 2007). The *Catalogue* and *Sir Aurel Stein in the Times* were both launched at a British Museum study day on Aurel Stein in March 2002, which included a paper by Vesta Curtis and Nasser Pazooki on Bahman Karimi's experiences with Stein, and another by Seth Priestman, comparing the work of Aurel Stein and Andrew Williamson in Iran in the 1930s and 1960s, respectively. The proceedings were published in 2004, and included my catalogue of the Sir Aurel Stein Papers in the British Museum Central Archives (Wang 2004c).

Not long after the publication of *Money on the Silk Road* I received, out of the blue, the kindest message from Valerie Hansen, Professor of History at Yale, whose book *Negotiating Daily Life in Traditional China: How Ordinary People Used Contracts, 600–1400* (Hansen 1995) had been an inspiration to me. In 2006, we met for the first time at the Silk Roads Coins and Culture conference at the Shanghai Museum, where I asked her and Rong Xinjiang, Professor of History at Peking University, if they might be interested in working together on a project looking at textiles as money on the Silk Road. For me, it was an obvious follow-on project, but having spent so long on the thesis, and knowing that textile history is an entirely different specialist field, I was reluctant to head that way alone.

At around the same time, Zhao Feng, Director of the China National Silk Museum and Professor at Donghua University in Shanghai, proposed a project on the Stein textiles in the British Museum, British Library, and V&A collections. My colleague, Carol Michaelson, suggested I take it on. The team comprised Zhao Feng, and his colleagues Wang Le and Xu Zheng on the Chinese side, and myself, Frances Wood (British Library), and Helen Persson (V&A) on the UK side. This was part of a major project to catalogue the silk textiles from the Buddhist caves at Mogaoku, Dunhuang, in collections around the world. *Textiles from Dunhuang in UK Collections* was published simultaneously in Chinese and English editions in 2007, and I remained the English editor for the subsequent volumes: French collections (2011), Russian collections (2014), the Dunhuang Academy (2021) and the Lushun Museum (2021). The UK volume was launched at the three-day "100 years of Dunhuang" conference that Frances and I organised in 2007, with

support from the British Academy, to mark the centenary of Stein's first visit to Dunhuang in 1907. The conference was too diverse for a cohesive volume of proceedings, although some papers were subsequently published in *Sir Aurel Stein. Colleagues and Collections* (Wang 2012).

As Valerie, Rong Xinjiang, Zhao Feng and Wang Le were all planning to attend the "100 Years of Dunhuang" conference in 2007, and their international flights and London expenses were more or less taken care of, I applied for a small workshop grant from the Pasold Foundation, to discuss a potential Textiles as Money on the Silk Road project immediately after the conference. We agreed to work together, with Valerie and I directing, identified the topics we would each pursue, and met again to discuss our draft papers at Yale in 2009, and in Shanghai in 2010, thanks to funding from the Council on East Asian Studies and Donghua University, respectively. Angela Sheng, Xu Chang, Arakawa Masahiro, Wang Binghua, Duan Qing and Eric Trombert joined the project, and our discussions wove in and out of English, Chinese, Japanese and French, with expertise and jetlag steering the way, as we switched language or interpreted almost without realising. In 2013, after translation and editing, we published our papers in a themed issue of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, essentially tracing the use of textiles from local tax payments to consciously modest Buddhist burials (Hansen and Wang 2013).

Since then, I have continued to work on money, textiles and the Silk Road, although on smaller projects. Most recently, these have resulted in papers such as "The Fabric of Banknotes: textiles in and on paper money" looking at textiles as material, security feature and design (the metallic strips as in current banknotes originate from the silk threads embedded in American banknotes as a security feature) – and "Textiles and Money, the Silk Road on Banknotes" at the 5th Symposium of the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles (IASSRT), in November 2021, in which I looked at the design of banknotes issued by the Central Asian republics since the 1990s, including the 2021 Great Silk Road series of Uzbekistan, and followed changes in the designs of the national emblems, including that of Turkmenistan, which has long featured cotton flowers, and in 1992 was redesigned to feature five carpet *gul* (medallions).

Which brings me back to Georgina, her work at Merv in Turkmenistan, and her sunny office opposite the lift, with her big orange and grey rug, and perhaps our favourite shared memory, when I hurried out of the lift, put the baby on the rug, dashed to the bathroom, and came back to find Georgina with a wonderful smile on her face. He was fast asleep.

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