Online Confucius Institute Public Talk Series

Dr Frances Wood: *Seventeen Thousand Chinese Manuscripts and a Dozen Printed Books – the Dunhuang Collection in London*

6 June 2025

[Edited transcript]

KAN, Qian

Welcome everyone to today's talk: *Seventeen Thousand Chinese Manuscripts and a Dozen Printed Books - the Dunhuang collection in London.* I am just going to do a very quick introduction.

I'm KAN Qian, Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University, and Senior Lecturer in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. I'm just going to do this first bit and then at the very end I'll come back here to announce some forthcoming events.

Today we are delighted and it's also my pleasure to welcome Doctor Frances Wood. Her Chinese name is Wu Fangshi (吴芳思). To be our guest speaker. Frances worked as a library assistant in the Chinese section of SOAS from 1972 to 1977. In 1977, she moved to the British Library and then worked there looking after the Chinese section until her retirement. That was for 36 years wasn't it, Frances? And then she retired. During all those years in the British Library, most of the activity was devoted to raising money for the conservation and cataloguing of some seven thousand Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang, and also to support the Chinese conservators and the scholars who carried out the work. She has also written a number of books on Chinese cultural history, including *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* and also with Mark Barnard, she wrote *The Diamond Sutra.: The Story of the World's Earliest Dated Printed Book*. Today we have the pleasure to hear Frances lecture on the topic, and then after that, I'm equally delighted to welcome Doctor Lars Peter Laaman, who will be chairing the questions and answer session. Lars is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His research interests include popular religion, including Christianity during the Qing period and the Republic of China, the history of medicine and drugs in modern China, and also the language, culture and history of the Manchus in Qing China. Now, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Frances.

Frances Wood

Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure for me always to talk about the Dunhuang collection because I was privileged to work with it for so long and it's the most fascinating group of manuscripts you could possibly imagine, and the whole story of Dunhuang, Stein, and the manuscripts, I think, includes endless possibilities for research.

Now it starts with Aurel Stein, who was born in Hungary, he was educated mainly in Germany but also in England. He was a Sanskritist, so a specialist in Indian languages and he went to work for the British government in India in the Education Department. But his main interest really was the pursuit of ancient manuscripts, and he launched two major expeditions to China - many other expeditions to other parts of the world - when he collected an extraordinary number of materials in China. His expeditions to China in 1906 to 1908 and 1913 to 1916, which included trips to Dunhuang, were financed by the British Museum and the Government of India and all the finds of manuscripts and objects that he brought back, came all the way back to London before being redivided between the British Museum and the Government of India. So, a large number of artefacts he found are actually in India, but the majority are still in London.

There were further subdivisions of what happened to manuscripts. Tibetan manuscripts, for example, went to the India Office, but when the India Office Library was disbanded, that all came into the British Library. So, you have a vast repository of nearly 30 000 items brought back by Stein on his two expeditions. You can see him here in the photographs; he was an indefatigable explorer and one of the most important things, I think, if you look at the picture at the bottom, when he was doing his military service in Hungary, he learnt photography and map-making and he is still today - in China he is not regarded very favourably because of his removal of so many objects from China - he is nevertheless regarded very favourably for his photographs and his maps, which still chart parts of the Central Asian deserts. And if you see him in the photograph on the bottom right, where he's surrounded by Indians, you can see with turbans, he took with him map-makers from the Survey of India and he always took a dog - as you can see the dog between his knees - and on the other side of him is a Chinese gentleman in a pointed hat who was his Chinese secretary, who we will come back to.

In 1907, his most important move was to Dunhuang is on the edge of the great deserts of Central Asia at a point where the two main Silk Roads divide with a northern route and a southern route, and Dunhuang is just at the point really where the routes divide and Dunhuang was a massive Buddhist centre in traditional China, a place where thousands of caves were carved out of a rock face on the edge of the desert and a flourishing Buddhist community existed for several hundred years. By the time Stein gets there in 1900, it had been largely abandoned for possibly really, since the Song Dynasty, but the caves themselves remain, as you can see in the bottom picture, with wonderful paintings and on the side of one Cave, *Cave 16*, you can just see a little door rather like a window on the right hand side and that led into what is now named *Cave 17*, which was completely stuffed with manuscripts and paintings. As you can see, the photograph I'm very fond of shows a gentleman bending over a candle with all the manuscripts behind him. This is Stein's great rival, Paul Pelliot, a Frenchman, an extraordinary intellect, a man who knew many of the languages of Asia and who followed Stein into the Cave. Stein was there in 1907, Pelliot was there a year later, and he was able to work in the Cave because of all the manuscripts Stein had taken out. You can see them behind him bundled up higgledy-piggledy and Pelliot is working through the manuscripts, making selections for the collection in Paris.

Most of the manuscripts were Buddhist texts, which is appropriate since it was a great Buddhist site and you can see the wonderful yellow paper one is an Imperially commissioned manuscript with marvellous calligraphy, beautiful paper, beautifully produced. But then there are other simpler ones, the one with the multiple Buddha figures is a Buddhanāma, a non-canonical Buddhist text, a very popular text which involves little stamped Buddha images, then coloured in and calligraphy and then to the to the side of that is a little printed prayer sheet. But above is the frontispiece of the *Diamond Sutra*, which is the world's earliest securely dated printed book, produced in 868 and unsurpassed in its extraordinary beauty, which I'll come back to.

There were many other texts and I suppose after the discovery of the Dunhuang corpus really, in particularly into the 20th century, the main interest was focused on the non-Buddhist material, which is a very small percentage, maybe possibly 10% of the total, but there are texts which include as you can see here: the Laozi, there's a Qieyin dictionary you can see with a larger characters and then the smaller characters in glosses, there's a copy of the Lunyu, and there are an enormous number of economic text, contracts and so on. My professor in in Cambridge, Professor Twitchett, wrote his first and his major book called *Financial Administration Under The T'ang Dynasty*, almost entirely based on finds at Dunhuang. There are samples of tax collection, of censuses, there are also many, many contracts made between private people, which were all piled into this little cave.

Stein took away many thousands of manuscripts and paintings from The Cave. He paid for them. He bought them from the little gentleman you can see Wang Daoshi (王道士[1]) who was a Buddhist, a

[1] His real name is Wang Yuanlu (王圓箓)

Daoist from central China who had made his way up to Dunhuang, finding the caves largely deserted and falling into disrepair, he made it his life's work to try and do up the caves, to repair them, to restore them, to get the statues repainted and so on, and so he as willing to accepted money from Stein towards this, as it were, this reconstruction process. Now, the questions of acquisition are complex and will no doubt that come up in the questions. The point is really that Wang Daoshi had really no right to sell the material, he'd found it there, nobody else was paying any attention, and he was doing it for what he thought was a good aim and Stein was always fairly punctilious in his approach to the collection of material. Not only did he pay for what he collected, but he also maintained very good contact with all the local officials in the area so that they had a rough idea of what he was doing. They had no detailed idea, and they had really no sense of the significance of what he was doing, but he made it his business always to call upon the local officials and to have tea with them and to be friendly with them so in Stein's view, everything he was doing was above board.

Now, as we've said, I said, before, Stein was a Sanskrit scholar, he didn't know Chinese at all, and so he had really no sense of what he was collecting. He made use of his Chinese secretary.
Jiang Shiye (蒋师爷[2]) who was found for him by the by George MacCartney, who was the British Consul in Kashgar and Jiang Shiye, was a lowly official, so he was very versed, he was very literate, but he was literate in different things. He was literate in probably Confucianism in the in in daily use of language and so on, and probably economic and government vocabulary. But he didn't know Buddhism at all, and there are some quite amusing accounts in Stein's diary of a point when they were camped nearby at Anxi and Jiang Shiye started looking through the material and looking through it with Stein and he couldn't make head or tail of it because he was not a Buddhist and Stein could only now and then pick up the transliterated sounds of Buddhism when he could hear the names of Sanskrit terms which had been transliterated into Chinese. But basically, Stein really had no idea of what he had collected and what its significance was.

Stein sent all his manuscripts and collections back to London, as I said before, through Kashgar, through the British Consul in Kashgar, who you can see here, Macartney of Kashgar, standing to one side with his what looks like a camera in his hand. And here he is entertaining the Pelliot expedition. Now the Macartneys in Kashgar - I mean, it's a very much an outpost of the British Empire, miles from anywhere, but they saw many, many archaeological teams coming through.
They were very generous with their hospitality, they looked after everybody, and right into the middle of the 20th century, the British Consulate in Kashgar was a favoured spot for all travellers to pass through. So here we see Pelliot - he is in the centre at the back, in a dark suit - and he too is being entertained by George Macartney, who is interesting in that, as I say, he was very open to entertaining Germans, French, Russians, any archaeological expedition that came through. But he obviously did have a slight soft spot for Stein, who was very fond of the family, he used to send presents for the children. And there are letters we can find where Macartney has posted on letters from Pelliot. MacCartney doesn't really spy on Pelliot, but he takes an interest in his activity, and he simply forwards his letters on. There's a very important letter from Pelliot writing to Macartney saying, *I don't think I'll go to Dunhuang yet, I'm going to do the northern Silk Road. I'm going to look up at sites there* and Macartney posts this on to Stein, who is already *en route* for Dunhuang, hoping that no one else will get there first. There's a rumour of manuscripts to be seen there, of wonders to be seen there, and Stein wants to be first, and Macartney reassures him by passing on Pelliot's note saying, *oh, I'm going off on the northern Silk route*.

Stein may not have known what he was collecting, but he did know, realise, when he got back the significance and he was very keen actually to get Pelliot to catalogue the manuscripts and there's a whole collection of correspondence with Paleo and in in 1911 he sent out two wooden boxes containing some two hundred manuscripts to Pelliot in Paris asking him to catalogue them. In 1913, He asked for them back, but they actually didn't return from Paris until after the end of the First

[2] His real name was Jiang Xiaowan (蒋孝玩)

World War, so not until 1919 do they get back to London, and it's quite clear from Pelliot's notes in the Bibliothèque Nationale, in the Guimet Museum in Paris that Pelliot had no interest in making a catalogue, he was simply interested in seeing what Stein had found and adding the knowledge of it to his own collection.

Stein was better off with the finds from his second expedition, which were catalogued by Henri Maspero, a very significant French Sinologist who died unfortunately during the Second World War in a concentration camp and Maspero produced a catalogue of Stein's finds from his second expedition, which are mostly Han Dynasty and not Tang.

When Stein found - the slide - I mean, you saw the picture of Pelliot with all these bundles behind him, stacked rather haphazardly, but in fact, the paper is so wonderful that almost all of the manuscripts that hadn't been touched really were in in very good . There is the whole question about why they were placed in the cave, and it was usually because there was something wrong with them. You find very fine sets of marvellous sutras, but they're missing one or two rolls, so they're no longer any practical use, so they were put into the cave simply for long-term storage. It's often called a *library* cave. This is wrong. It was simply a repository in which things that were no longer of use were placed and when they came to London, if they were in reasonable condition, they weren't touched and that was fine. The paper, as I say, is marvellous. It may be a thousand years old, but it's still absolutely wonderful. An interesting thing about stacking them, the manuscripts in this cave cupboard, if you like, is that many of them have their rollers removed. You see in the central side there's a roller at the end of the scroll and all scrolls would have had rollers originally, but there at the bottom you can see one where the roller has been removed and I find this very interesting. It's I think partly that the rollers were removed for reuse. The manuscripts with writing on were sort of sacred in China. It was traditional that you couldn't really destroy paper with writing on; it was sacred because of the writing, but the little wooden roller had no writing on it at all, and was not sacred and so it was taken away for reuse.

Now looking at photographs that were taken in 1910 when things arrived in London, you can see that for example in this old photograph at the top, there's a manuscript which is in very good condition. It still has its roller. It still has a silk tie. And then in the middle there are some other ones. But at the bottom you can see the *Diamond Sutra*. As I say, the world's earliest dated printed book, and you can see really why that was finally discarded. It has an enormous number of patches that you can see on the back of the scroll, it was wearing out through use, and also it had a terrible stain - just probably from water damage - all the way across the front of the frontispiece. And this stain has been removed carefully just through washing, and so you can now see, we can now see, the frontispiece quite clearly. But this is why the material was placed in the cave and to some extent, it was really better if it had stayed that way, if the British Museum hadn't touched it at all because in the West, people didn't understand Chinese scrolls and they didn't understand Chinese paper. They didn't know anything about this, it is all fantastically new material, and there was unfortunately rather a tendency to feel that even Chinese things would be better off if they were kind of bound in Western style. They're treated with a hydraulic press and so on. And all the Tibetan texts which were sent to the India Office were bound, as you can see, as kind of volumes, which is crazy because you had to turn them on their side and they're no longer looseleaf pieces, but they're held in this rather ridiculous Western binding.

And in the question of the Chinese scrolls, in the 1920s the main influence on the British Museum was from Japan. There were Japanese visitors, and they felt that scrolls, even if they're documents, even if they're Buddhist texts, they should be mounted as if they're scrolled, as if they're paintings. As you can see here, these are little Japanese Buddhist texts, which have all been mounted in the scroll, which is inappropriate, but it was the view in Japan, and it was the best that the British Museum had in the 1920s.

One thing they did with fragments was simply to paste them onto thick craft paper, which is not ideal because anything on the verso can't be seen, and it stiffens the original. There was a wonderful man who worked in the Indian Office Library and in the 1970s and he made of scroll fragments, he turned them into these little sort of tightly rolled cigar shapes, which again they're too tightly rolled. It's not a particularly practical way of looking after them.

This is slightly out of place in a way, but it's how they were looked after. With the Second World War, all of the Stein collection was evacuated to the National Library of Wales - you can see here - because London was bombed and the British Museum did have several direct strikes, losing a lot of quite important printed material. But the manuscripts had all been moved away. My father worked on the move. He had joined the British Museum in the library, the library of the British Museum before the war, and spent a lot of time just putting things into crates, and they were all moved off to the National Library of Wales, which was supposed to be a safe place. It always looks to me like a bit of an obvious target. They were worried about German bombers, and apparently German bombers did use the National Library of Wales as a kind of sighting spot. They would come up the coast, see the National Library of Wales and then head inland to Birmingham and bomb Birmingham. But they didn't bomb the National Library of Wales.

Eventually, I suppose it was really in the 1970s particularly, there was a strong consciousness that the Stein collection really needed dealing with. Very little of it had been catalogued and very little of it had been conserved. And so, in the mid 1970s, the British Museum began to send people to China to try and understand more about how to conserve items. This is Professor Roderick Whitfield travelling to China in '75-'76. And there again Roderick Whitfield, and beside him, Peter Lawson, who was the conservator from the British Library. He was a very, very important figure in the conservation of the Stein collection.

Howard Nelson, who was my boss when I first went to the library, who visited China in 1976 with the head of the, then the head of the British Library, who had it drummed into him in the National Library of China, that this was a vitally important collection, that it must be made available. And when they came back, the Head of the library ordered special newly constructed cabinets, which were made specifically for the Stein collection, and I spent my first summer in 1977 putting. seven thousand manuscripts into the cupboards.

One of the great problems was what to do with fragments and in the early 1970s they were back to scrolls in the Japanese style, placed side-by-side like this, which again is not ideal because if there's anything on the back, you can't see, you can't judge the paper quality because it's been backed.

But in the 1990s we started gathering together finance so that we could work on what was called the at that time, the 'Stein debris'. You can see these really crumpled, dirty brown pieces of paper. When Stein brought the material back to the British Museum in 1910, there were seven thousand fairly complete scrolls where it was possible to see them as a scroll, see what the beginning was, see what the end was and catalogue them. Then there was what was called the 'Stein debris'. It was elevated to 'Stein fragments' later on, but as you can see, it was crumpled, little crumpled pieces of paper all of which had to be opened out. We invited Chinese conservators. You can see there Du Weisheng (杜卫生) who was a major conservator in the National Library of China and Xiao Zhou (小周) with him, who came from the museum in Changsha (长沙). Both of them spent a year, then we had another couple of conservators for a year working on the fragments, and the reason we did this was partly we wanted Chinese expertise and also because for them it was absolutely fascinating. Our British Conservators could easily have done the work, but they open up a little crumpled fragment of Chinese writing on paper, they don't know which way up it goes, they don't what it means. Whereas, for people like Du Weisheng (杜卫生), you open it up and you say, *my goodness, this is pre-Tang, this is probably very early*, *the style of calligraphy* and so on, or *this is an important fragment*. It was for them, a great voyage of discovery.

It was very much under the auspices of Peter Lawson that that all of this happened. He again, was someone who had come into conservation through an apprenticeship to a bookbinder. He had left school really quite young, had none of what all our conservators now want: university degrees, and so on. But he was an absolutely brilliant craftsman and also had an amazing understanding of what was the best thing to do. So, there we all are: Peter and Joe and Du in the conservation studio where they put up with an awful lot of Chinese visitors who were, I think, equally delighted to do the work. And the work that they did was to encapsulate seven thousand fragments, so seven thousand further manuscripts were, as it were, added to the Stein collection through their work. Encapsulation in a very stable plastic was considered to be the best way forward for the fragments because: it holds them in place, they're relatively stable; you can see the verso; you can hold them up to the light; you can see the quality of the paper and so on. So they worked on these and they encapsulated in a plastic that had at least fifty years of use so we knew that it was chemically extremely stable, it had never produced any problems. The Geniza Fragments in Cambridge and other places had been treated in this way. If you sew them into melinex, you hold them in place, but if there's any problem, you can always cut them out. It's not like backing where you've got to remove them from the backing and so on; they can just simply be cut out very easily.

I was quite amused that in sewing - actually it goes back to the position of women in the British Library and British Museum bindery - there were always women who did some of the sewing work in the bindery as part of a the standard European bookbinding process, but they were kept in a separate room and they were only approached through a sort of hatch: materials were placed backwards and forwards through the hatch. It was an extraordinary Victorian and unemancipated system, but it all changed by the time I was there.

Before working on the *Diamond Sutra* which, if you remember - think back to the photograph with the awful stain - obviously needed conservation, we did an awful lot of work. We were helped by scientists, colleagues - particularly in Belfast - who did PhDs particularly on the colorant, the dye that was used in Buddhist manuscripts. The dye technique known as 'berberine', or *huangbo* in Chinese, was produced from the bark of the Amur cork tree, and it gave the paper a very strong yellow colour, but it's also an insecticidal so it prevented damage by boring insects and so on. Unfortunately, it's very, very fugitive; it instantly dissolves in water, and I'm afraid that the *Diamond Sutra* was probably originally a very strong yellow, but the berberine colour, the *huangbo* colour was washed out during the process that removed the stain from the frontispiece, but it also removed the dye that was originally there and there's very little we could do about that by then unfortunately.

In repairing and working on the Dunhuang scrolls, systems were developed which relied on traditional Chinese and Japanese methods, but also brought in some European methods and what we aim to do with scrolls that - you can see here - had tears in them, had a very ragged edge, and so on, was not to mount them as if they were paintings, not to back them, to put nothing on the back because you wanted to see the verso, you wanted to be aware of the quality of the paper, to be able to hold it up to the light and see how the paper fragments lie. But at the same time, you needed to stabilise it. So, basically what we did was to edge the scrolls, which is a technique which comes in more from the European technique of repairing prints, but we used Chinese paper and ended up with a Chinese scroll form. But the pieces were, as I say, they were stabilised but not backed. And one of the best examples, a good form of practice, was a scroll which is known by its number as 'P9' - 'Printed 9' - which was printed as well, but about a hundred-and-fifty years after the *Diamond Sutra* and it had been backed in the British Museum, but the backing was removed and finally the P9. You can still see the verso, you can see here how the characters bleed through from back to front. Instead of using a very narrow roller to roll it around, a very big thick wooden roller is used so that the paper can remain more relaxed. So, there are slight variations on scroll mounting techniques, but all designed with the comfort and care of the manuscript as the foremost consideration.

Now to come back to the *Diamond Sutra*: it was in a horrible condition by the time that I knew it first in the late ‘70s. It had had seven backings added. Every time people looked at it and thought, *oh gosh, it's looking a bit awful*, they put another backing on it, so it had a very thick backing, which caused these awful creases that you can see. you can imagine mechanically what you do if you stiffen a piece of paper with seven pieces. You're really losing any elasticity in the original paper, and so one of our conservators, Mark Barnard, worked for seven years removing these backings. And you can see here removing a lining, peeling off the paper. He used to work on about 10 centimetres at a time, dampening the whole thing down very, very lightly and then carefully removing the backings because you if you're removing seven backings, the first five are not too bad, but when you're getting close to the original, you really wonder what is it going to be like when you actually get there.

This is the *Diamond Sutra* as it is today. It's particularly interesting that the paper itself is quite difficult to deal with because you can see how the fibres are not very evenly dispersed: there are clumps of fibres, and then there are thinner parts - which you can see. One of the reasons for this is quite interesting and probably has to do with the whole development of printing in China that the *Diamond Sutra* is printed on sheets of paper that are about two foot long, which is a good six to eight inches longer than the average sheet of paper used for manuscripts. It's a particularly quite absorbent paper, which the printer must have thought *well, this will be good for taking the ink*, but this longer sheet of paper was obviously more difficult to control, and its fibres, as I say, are very unevenly dispersed, so that working on it, pulling backings off, you had to be enormously careful that you weren't getting to somewhere that was really too thin to bear it. Mark's work was absolutely extraordinary, and it is interesting that we can now see the paper, see the fibre, and realise that this type of paper, this longer, slightly more absorbent paper, was abandoned. It wasn't used for later printed materials so the *Diamond Sutra* is a stage in the development of the printed book in China, and obviously a slightly experimental stage.

Very, very simple technology was used: just a very, very, very little water was used and working over a light box. You can see how the paper was, the state of the paper and how it had been torn by all this pressure of extra backings over the years. Very simple tools were used. Apparently, some of those ones with the gold-coloured handles are actually dentist tools that Mark had found in a flea market in Moscow that he used. But basically, very little - it's all down to the craft of the conservator.

How they worked was to - you can see in the large slide, in front is a tracing of all the cracks, and then the top up the right you can see little strips have been used to patch. And you can see in the smaller slide where you've got those little tufts sticking up from the paper, that's where all these little repairs have been done. So, each crack is individually repaired, not a backing placed on the whole, but just patched together so that you still retain the original paper. You can see there again the crack and then the mended part. And the fascinating realignment. If you look at the bottom three pictures, you've got a bad misalignment, a worse misalignment. This was done during different back when different backings were applied, probably during the ‘40s, ‘50s, even ‘60s, and then finally where the lines have been correctly realigned. Obviously, the person working on it was trying to align the border lines but got them wrong. But finally, now the *Diamond Sutra* is in very good condition. Everything is beautifully aligned and no further problems.

So now we can see the *Diamond Sutra* is in very good condition. There's a picture of the very famous, the very end of it, where you can see to some extent on the very edge the stronger yellow colour that was once there. And you can see the famous date Xuantong jiunian (宣统 the ninth year of Xuantong) which is 868 AD. Wang Jie (王玠) had it made for universal distribution on behalf of his parents, which is very charming. I don't think he did it himself; he paid to have it made. You've got this very long scroll and faced with this wonderful frontispiece, which can now be properly seen,

carefully aligned and beautifully repaired and restored. I think it's a real tribute to the work of the conservators that you can see everything so beautifully now.

The state of the *Diamond Sutra* at the moment. We've got back to the original paper, we can see what it was like and that allows the possibilities of all sorts of further research into paper and its construction in the Tang dynasty. This is a page from one of our Japanese supporters, Professor [Kazuyuki] Enami, who is an absolute expert on Chinese paper of the Tang dynasty. He'd worked on the Otani Collection, also from Dunhuang. Traditional paper analysis means taking out paper fibres and I've always been rather against that because - well, there are all sorts of reasons. You're damaging the original, you're taking something from one part, but what about the rest of it? And paper is, generally speaking, not a single material. Paper is made often of a mishmash of rags, bits, and pieces, all sorts, and you can see here, in the *Diamond Sutra* they found this tiny fragment of silk, a piece of yellow silk thread. Where that comes from, we don't know, but it comes from the sort of porridge of paper fibres that was used to make the *Diamond Sutra*, and if you use a very, very strong microscope you can work out how the paper was made.

I'll stop there because of time and look forward to any comments and questions you have.

Lars Laamann

Well, I'm going to start off by thanking our speaker, Frances Wood. This was a wonderful presentation which I have heard now for the second time, and it gets better every time. So, this is a very useful introduction to anyone who's interested ot just in the culture of and history of the Silk Route, but also in, I would say, archaeology because the tools that are used in order to preserve these writings. They are almost as important as the as the art of deciphering them and making sense of the contents, because otherwise these objects, these art objects, would be disintegrating and they would be lost in all eternity. So I'm extremely grateful that you made this effort to introduce these invaluable sources to us, and I would encourage anyone who hasn't done so yet to go to the British Library in order to look at the objects in detail. Of course, they are also part of the International Dunhuang Project, so if anybody has questions on that, I would encourage you to ask. I have a few questions, but I think we should give the audience the chance first and then I'll get back to everyone. So is there anyone who would like to speak?

Weiqun Wang

Thank you very much Francesa for your wonderful talk and the introduction. I'm a Mandarin Chinese teacher and I'm always interested in all those projects and also these resources. I'm also a British Museums general member as well. But I was wondering how we can help as Chinese, how can we get access to those, even just for sightseeing, to have a look, and then how can we get involved with this apart from our work, and how can we help? Thank you.

Frances Wood

Thanks. Yes, I mean for me, as soon as I went to work in the library, for me, the most important thing was that the material should be available, especially to Chinese people. It's the Chinese people's heritage. It's not a British heritage if you like, except in the sense of 19th century archaeological exploration. And so and so all of our projects to conserve, first of all, and then to catalogue and then finally to put up on the Web, have all been with the intention of getting more Chinese people to be able to see them. First of all, we published volumes - particularly of the non-Buddhist material - in China with Chinese publishing houses. But I think I would say that, obviously, now the website is the main area, the easiest way for you to see. There are always a couple of Dunhuang manuscripts on display in the gallery in the British Library, always. They're rotated; it's not always the same ones,

but it is very important to show one or two. For many other things. Then it's best to go to the IDP website which is idp.bl.uk. The British Library ones are being gradually digitised. You can see all of the manuscripts in the French collection also on that same website. The National Library of China is also a partner, and their manuscripts are also being digitised. So, on your computer you can see many. To actually visit - I mean one of the things about digitisation is that it does preserve the originals. We obviously don't want too many people actually handling the originals, because they will wear away; it is only paper. It may be good paper, but it's not going to last that well. I used to try and encourage - if we had visitors, if people made an application to come and see things, one of the things that's best to try and see are some of the fragments. If you check the numbers and see what you want to see. Because the fragments in their plastic holders can be handled, you can hold them up to the light, you can see what the paper is like. It's a very different matter from actually handling a scroll. So, it is possible for Chinese people. I would encourage schoolteachers and teachers at any other level to arrange visits. You can apply to the International Dunhuang Project and ask what is available. Could I bring a class to come and look at something like that? If you want to support financially, people can pay for individual sutras to be digitised. Those that haven't yet been done. There are ways of doing that. From the very beginning, we cooperated very closely with the National Library of China and other holders and Russia as well to try and get everything up. What was once in one cave is now in a dozen different countries, but we can begin to reunite it on the website.

Lars Laamann

Thank you. So, we have two messages. First, by Thomas Purdy, there was another question, so if I take that one first and then yours: *Thank you for this presentation and time. What is the lasting legacy of the Diamond Sutra in terms of its Buddhist teaching?*

Frances Wood

In terms of its Buddhist teaching, well, you can. You can read the *Diamond Sutra*. You can understand it. I mean basically it's very much about the non-existence, as it were, of material things. It's quite a complex one. It consists of a series of questions placed by Subhūti, a disciple to the Buddha, and basically, he's talking about the immateriality of the world. It's very much part of the main Buddhist Canon. It doesn't have any slightly separate messages. I'd say it's right down the middle and therefore it's also one that's not terribly long and it's something that people find easy to memorise and repeat so that it is, in a sense of repeating the Buddhist texts, which brings you merit and can save you from a difficult afterlife, then the *Diamond Sutra* is the one to go for. It's one of the easiest to learn, to repeat, and then to gain merit through the repetition.

Lars Laamann

You can't see this here, but this is this is a Manchu version from the Qing period, which one of my students actually painted, I mean wrote in calligraphy. That's the *Diamond Sutra*. And it was reproduced for the sake of enhancing the spiritual and cultural identity, the quality of the people in China and eastern Asia.b I think it's one of the classics, so if you want to gain an entry point into Buddhism, that's a good way, good thing to choose.

Actually one of my questions was also about the *Diamond Sutra*, but in terms of the knowledge of the - maybe you could just explain - in terms of Pelliot and Stein, their insight into Buddhism was through Indian sources because, of course, they would have studied Sanskrit first. Is that a general trend in the 19th century that people first learn about Indic culture, about the Vedic scriptures and Buddhism, and then go into Central Asia and China? Is that something that you can comment on?

Frances Wood

Yes, and I think that's quite an important question because the whole history of the translation of - well, all the knowledge of Buddhism in Europe does come from India. It starts off with all those rather pioneering people working for the East India Company, men who had seemed to find themselves with an awful lot of time and became interested in Buddhism. Actually, in early 19th century India, Buddhism was very, very low down, was almost non-existent, and it was, in a sense, revived by the interest of East India Company people who looked at inscriptions, who discovered, rediscovered temples. They hacked their way through jungles to uncover temples. There were people like Max Müller doing massive translations, but all - as you say - from Sanskrit and Prakrit into English. China comes as rather a later discovery. And Stein, definitely… [connection breaks off]

Lars Laamann

We have lost Frances. I'm sure she will be coming back. But who is LW?

KAN, Qian

Wang Liang. Is it Wang Liang?

Lars Laamann

Wang Liang. If we take your question first then I will write it down and then later summarise it.

Liang Wang

OK, thank you, Kan Qia, yes, it's me.

Very interesting talk and it's really been glad to see Frances again. is not actually maybe a question and more a comment because locally I've been involved in working with the local Chinese community and also the National Museums of Northern Ireland to have a collection of Chinese lyrics. Of course, it's not as valuable as the Dunghang collections but those items that may be collected by people at the earliest years in China, or maybe donated by Chinese people or Chinese people or immigrants to Northern Ireland societies. Currently we have a number of items, maybe nearly a hundred, that are not totally recognisable in terms of the time and culture, their region or something like that because they were brought to the local society quite a while ago. They have collected these and given us as much information as possible and inviting the society - especially the Chinese communities - to contribute to the knowledge of that, to help to interpret the cultural relics or the artefacts that people brought here locally. And we hope that we will gather good knowledge of that through the massive support from the community.

I just wonder if, Frances, the British Museum - is there a network that can help us to identify, to trace the cultural items that we are wondering about: their history, their details; if there's any kind of network, any people that can help us that would be wonderful. And secondly, it's about the impact of the knowledge to the Chinese communities, especially the offspring locally, the second or third generations. We hope to run some kind of workshops to help the kids, as well as other people like the Chinese students, migrant families, to understand the part of culture that have been associated, been related to the local society, of their history and in contemporary societies, and what it means. What kind of impact that will have on our current Chinese community and also other international communities, as well as a model. I'm not sure if, Frances, that you can recommend some effective approaches to help us to run those kinds of workshops because in the process of inviting the volunteers to participate in the potential workshops that we propose, it doesn't seem to have triggered a lot of interest in it. Those local families, their kids, they were brought up here and they'll accept the local culture more than their Chinese heritage culture that they are familiar with. So, they might be less interested in learning about it and it seems that it's in the museums, and it's

only for those people with expert knowledge to study it rather than the common, the average people, who should have awareness of that. I mean ‘should’ from my perspective.

KAN, Qian

Frances is back. Wang Liang, sorry, we're running out of time, so, Frances, I don't know whether you heard the question. Lars can probably summarise it.

Lars Laamann

Yes, so hi, Frances. Maybe you could just conclude the point on Stein. Just what you wanted to say, the last sentence, and then I'll read out my summary of Wang Liang's question.

Frances Wood

Yeah, I'm terribly sorry. Suddenly I got a Chinese newspaper instead of … it just appeared! I don't know. I was disappeared briefly. No, I simply say that Stein definitely came in from the Indian side. And what I think is also very important is that the Dunhang material, the interest in the early stages, has always been on the secular material, but I think interest is now turning to the Buddhist material very much more. You know, in China there are many more Buddhist scholars now than there were there were in the obviously in the 1960s and ‘70s, so it's changing.

I think I heard most of Wang Liang’s question and it's a question about how to engage, how to find out about materials, and how to engage local communities. I would say if there is a lot - I mean it's very bad to be London-centred but but people do move - I would recommend getting in touch with the British Museum, the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum, also, things like the National Maritime Museum. Their education departments almost invariably have - it's usually around Chinese New Year, but also in the summer - they are very, very keen to try and involve their local Chinese community, obviously you can learn from that. And I think, generally speaking, it's very popular, and actually all museums have their duty to engage with younger people and with different communities. We had quite a successful exhibition about the Chinese in Britain in the British Library not long ago. It was very tiny, but it involved a lot of people, and we were very, very concerned. We learnt a lot about things like, *how do you do labels*? We would always put Pinyin, but Pinyin is of no interest whatsoever to most Chinese people. They're not familiar with it, particularly if they don't come from mainland China. So, you learn, you use characters. Well, do you use simplified or long form characters? Etcetera.

Anyway, I would contact the major museums, their education departments and ask them for advice and help, and also ask the departments, if they wouldn't come by and look at your material; they'd be very interested, I think. We're always interested in discovering what is in different museums and contributing then to the history of collecting.

KAN, Qian

I think we have to bring it to end.

Liang Wang

OK. Thank you very much.

KAN, Qian

Thank you so much, Frances, for this fascinating, wonderful talk and also this story about how those manuscripts, with so many stories hidden behind, them coming to London and all the international collaboration in restoration, it's really something which not many people are aware of. So, thank you very much. And thank you Lars for chairing the questions and answers, and thank you the audience for engaging.

I just want to use the last few minutes to quickly say a few words about our existing Chinese module *Beginners Chinese*. If you want to start in October, register using this link. We also have a range of short courses in language and culture, you could have a look at as well.

Upcoming events and talks. On 11th of July we'll have our 10th Modern Chinese Literature Book Club facilitated by Emily Jones and Nicky Harman. They've been facilitating this series for. Nearly a year and a half, I think so. This time we're going to discuss the no- fiction story *The Nursing Home Rightist* (老院的右派) by YUAN Ling (袁）. All the details are on Eventbrite, where you can register.

Then we are having our ten-week beginners Taichi class (Yang style) starting this free online from September 8th. All the details will be on our website. We also host some free online classes; all those details are on our website as well.

So, finally, thank you all very much for coming today, and thanks again Frances and Lars for the wonderful talk. Wonderful session - thank you!

[End of transcript]