The Gift

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The Tarim Basin was a cradle of ancient civilisations. Kingdoms were established around key trading routes, allowing communities such as the Khotanese, Tangut, Uyghur, and Loulan peoples to flourish. Trekking through vast, sweeping terrain, this discussion explores: what does it mean to be custodians of these cultural artefacts, how should the stories of these cultures be told, and how might we rethink the reanimation of these voices today?

For our conversation today, I thought we could start by remembering a few of the predecessors who travelled on the Silk Road, both physically and mentally, before us.

The historian Arnold Toynbee recounted the Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda’s account when asked which historical period he would choose to be born into. His answer to this was that he would have liked to be born in Western China right at the beginning of the Common Era. This would refer to the area of Xinjiang, which at the time was a melting pot of Buddhist, Indian, Greek, Iranian and Chinese cultures.

This rich history has inspired many others, including the Hungarian-born, British archaeologist Aurel Stein, who we will be discussing. Stein saw himself as following the footsteps of Xuan Zang. The Swedish geographer Sven Hedin also described Asia as his bride, so I suppose this fascination is something that we all share in our work. At the same time, these archaeological and geographical expeditions are also implicated in imperial expansionist ambitions as we know it today.

As the title of the show suggests, we’ll look at the different facets of the exhibition in our conversation today. We’re interested in reading visual documentations of these expeditions through the lens of the gift championed in the context of classical anthropology. The gift binds the giver and the recipient in such a way that the recipient is compelled to return a counter-gift. This compels us to consider the history of this discipline in a critical manner. Dan Hicks remarks that there is a force, like the force of the gift, that demands us to return to the disciplinary past to destabilise the present. Foregrounding this moment in archaeology is the political discussion of restitution. In a way, restitution is about the politics of giving, of giving back, and the time that has lapsed...
1902–1910: Japanese expedition to Central Asia by Count Ōtani Kōzu

1902–1914: German expeditions to Turfan, initiated by Albert Grünwedel and organised by Albert von Le Coq

This idea of the gift as parting with something and passing it on to another group is an intriguing frame of view, especially in terms of art history, religious history, geography or cartography. Most of the early expeditions that we now know of—whether done by Stein, Hedin, Count Ōtani Kōzu or others—probably did not start as something concrete. They might not have been actively thinking about how the things they found would bring one part of the world to another. The notion of “uncovering” and the word “discovery” are used quite often in the context of looking at or understanding another civilisation, and what’s now cemented in the work of contemporary scholars is the exercise of filling in the blanks: although we understand most parts of the world, there is this vast region between India, China, Russia and Turkestan. How do you fill that wide space? What was there before and how can we find out?

I think that’s very interesting, and I also like the idea of the gift. As you said, it’s about exchange. It has an effect on both the giver and recipient, and that’s very true of this period of archaeology: it’s a two-way interaction. It also exemplifies the broad history of the Silk Road, which centres around interaction between cultures from places both near and far.

The archaeologists and others who travelled to the region during the early 20th century were imbued with a 19th century framework of viewing things—the ethnographic gaze that we see from many photographs in library and museum archives. They would take photographs of peoples in situ and position them in relation to their own points of view, but I also think that they were open to
Photographs from personal trip to Taklamakan Desert (Yotkan and Rawak) by Puay-peng Ho.

VOICES FROM THE DESERT SANDS
influence from their experiences. As Puay-peng said, this area is a blank for most people. The explorers didn’t head to the region with set expectations, and this is especially evident when you compare this to expeditions to Egypt, for example. They went without premeditation and for various personal reasons. Stein went because he was interested in Indian, Iranian and Greek influences and how these influences might play out in this part of the world. Otani went because he wanted to learn more about Indian and Buddhist influences, which he thought were the roots of classical Japanese civilisation. During their journeys, they were all gifted with knowledge—as well as objects—and a deeper understanding about the region.

Toynbee’s comment is interesting. The Tarim Basin area of Eastern Central Asia is unique: a very rich cultural area with much to gift back to the travellers of the time, but is often presented as a blank in the modern era. This is an interesting way to look at it, and one I hadn’t really thought about before, so I appreciate this opportunity to explore that.

The sense is that the givers are those in history and the receivers are those around the world. Their cities may have been buried, their monasteries covered and their tombs forgotten. The explorers who went on those expeditions could be thought of as intermediaries. That would be quite an interesting twist.

I think that that’s a very interesting perspective. When we raised the idea of the gift, it brings to mind what Dan Hicks writes about with regard to restitution, the British Museum, and the Benin Bronzes. The Tarim Basin is very different because, as you say, the givers are people whose civilisations mostly no longer exist—the exception is, of course, the Uyghurs. We no longer have the Tangut or Khotanese communities. They speak through their objects which were buried for a long period. It was through early 20th century archaeologists that their voices emerged again.

An interesting point of comparison to this is how the recent move of a few Egyptian mummies to a new museum turned into a procession through the streets. It was as if the Egyptians were trying draw a connection between themselves and the ancient Egyptian civilisation. I’ve always felt that there’s a big divide between ancient and modern-day Egypt, and this parade was an effort to bring the two together. We should explore what you said about the givers in the context of the Tarim Basin as belonging to civilisations that largely no longer exist.

It’s interesting that you mention the Egyptians trying to trace that single, homogeneous history—a timeline that extends all the way back to ancient Egypt. Chinese civilisation is also traced in a similar way, often to 5,000 years ago. Whereas it was, in reality, a great diversity of different civilisations.

We can hear the voices of people who lived in the Tarim Basin through their objects and other archaeological finds. Today the
Speaking up for these people also depends on what has been discovered. I have always believed in historical chances and opportunities. 100 years ago, however, so many things would have been a matter of chance: the climate, guide or availability of water. These turns of events made the explorers’ stories intriguing. Given such contexts, how can the artifacts they uncovered and brought to the West, Japan or Korea be representative? There was a lot of looting happening at the same time too. Gravediggers would operate actively in those areas. As a result of that, what we see today might just be a very small fragment of what was there before.

Yes, it is a random selection and what’s left is, as you say, found by serendipity. Although random, I also think that there was a lot of systematic archaeology done across the Tarim Basin in the early 20th century. What do we mean when we say that the artefacts are representative of an area? I don’t think there’s a lost civilisation waiting to be found. What the area didn’t throw up, of course, were glittering gold objects like those found in Tutankhamun’s tomb. The Tarim Basin has perhaps received less of a voice in history for this reason. We must push for its voice to be heard. It was only later with excavation of places such as Tillya Tepe to its west that there was the discovery of gold items and other such visually spectacular finds. Some wonderful, important objects have been found in the Tarim Basin, but they don’t have the “bling” or wow-factor that would help make this place interesting to the rest of the world. We’ve found very important textiles, for example, but mostly they don’t look very exciting, even if they tell fascinating stories.

It’s also interesting that these archaeologists weren’t interested in bling. They took fascination in the Buddhism people practiced, their daily lives, and small remains. They were also doing archaeology at the cusp of when it was starting to become a discipline, with Flinders Petrie writing about the importance of recording everything and noting where everything was found so that objects could be dated and assembled. In comparison, other archaeologists of the time were known to seek the gold pot rather than the potsherd. This is very interesting from an academic and archaeological perspective. The Tarim Basin has given us a complex gift; a gift that needs to be researched and read to be understood.

entire area is under a different regime and the political element cannot be ignored. This is different from the Benin Bronzes, for example. The people of Benin today can be said to have a continuity with the bronzes that were stolen from the country. Of course, the Uyghurs today have a continuity with earlier Uyghur kingdoms in the Tarim Basin, but their culture too is now under threat and the many other once-thriving cultures have long disappeared. Archaeologists and scholars, wherever they may be, need to speak up for these many forgotten kingdoms, cultures and peoples.
I’m writing a history of Khotan right now. It’s a kingdom that ruled for over a thousand years, had its own language, culture and art, yet there isn’t a single, comprehensive book on its history. There are a few Chinese books, but these take the form of annals or records. I think the fact that there hasn’t been a scholarly publication on such an important kingdom really sums it up. A century has passed since explorers ventured into the region and we still don’t have that scholarly voice, let alone a broader voice for these peoples. We’ve a long way to go.

There is Loulan to the East, and Kizil and Kucha to the North. Those are major kingdoms as well. Would you also say that this is an everyday archaeology that speaks for the common people? There are legal documents, transactions, and records of arguments between people. It’s not just an archaeology of the great and mighty, but also an archaeology of the people. These objects are not Instagrammable but they tell us very interesting things. Past historiographies have been too focused on dynasties, emperors and those in power. We seldom look at the common people. In this case, I think their voices have been given to us.

I was just reading an article about the lacquered leather scales from armour found at Miran. These little fragmentary pieces might seem like insignificant objects. In fact, Stein noted that he must have discarded many of them on his first expedition. It was only during the second expedition that he came to realise their importance. But now they are seen as important evidence for the sort of armour that ordinary foot soldiers wore on their campaigns. The nature of these finds has given a voice to different groups of people.

Some of these people might have had no voices at all in their own lifetimes, so this makes it even more important.

We could also speak about living traditions. As you’ve both mentioned, there may not much left to recover from those various sites, but with a bit of imagination we can also find things like the famous theatre scene from Kizil. The scene depicts a form of performative art, where one would show, tell and perform at the same time. That’s something that we can easily recreate, but I’m not sure many people have investigated such a performative form. Other than reconstructing the lives of these people, what can we enliven, enact or re-enact from these cultures? As art historians or contemporary art practitioners, is there more than we can do?

Exchanges are important. They help us to see a connection between people, between states or between monasteries. Those kinds of exchanges could be uncovered from all these remains and ideas. It’s about finding a relational type of existence between entities.

I agree. We’ve barely scratched the surface and much is left to be explored. How many people are writing seriously on this area.
Photograph from personal trip to Taklamakan Desert (Yotkan and Rawak) by Puay-peng Ho.

VOICES FROM THE DESERT SANDS
Photograph from personal trip to Taklamakan Desert (Yotkan and Rawak) by Puay-peng Ho.

THE GIFT
or studying the wealth of material available? Very few, although there’s material for hundreds of scholars. Again, politics hasn’t been kind to us. There was a long period of time during the middle of the 20th century where there wasn’t much archaeology. Archaeology began to pick up when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established, but today the region is in turmoil and its culture under great threat. This is a place that was very connected to Gandhara, what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet how many Indian, Pakistani and Afghan scholars are working on these areas? For scholars in this specialisation, how many have visited these regions? I can probably name them with the fingers on one hand. To understand the connections of the past, we need modern day connections to be there. Who feels ‘ownership’ of Khotanese culture, for example? I was in the Swat Valley, Pakistan a couple of years ago, and there were many connections to be made between that area and the Tarim Basin. Someone who would have known about these connections would have been Xuan Zang. We need to get those connections back to exploit, from a scholarly point of view, this trove of material.

PP I agree completely. Very few people are working on this trove of treasures. It’s also important that we connect this conversation to what’s been found during recent archaeological expeditions. How are they connected to what was discovered over a century ago, and how might they give us a fuller picture of what’s out there?

S Yes, these scholarly projects today can help in connecting things to create a fuller picture. This refers to finds from the early 20th century expeditions, recent archaeological expeditions, aerial scans and more. For example, the Central Asian Archaeological Landscapes (CAAL) project by the UCL Institute of Archaeology aims to assemble archaeological work from the Tarim Basin and beyond—including work from all the Central Asian republics—on one database. Initiatives such as these will further scholarship and encourage students in this area.

PP Susan, what you’ve started with the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) is also another way of connecting different collections together. It is much like what UCL is doing now, but on different fronts.

S That’s what we hope to do, but modern politics plays a big part in this. The archaeologists in the early 20th century were lucky as they had that little window after the resolution of the Great Game to carry out archaeological studies in the area. After that, archaeological discoveries in the area stopped for a long time. It picked up again later for relatively brief period, but in the interim, many things have been lost.

PP There was that ten to 15-year period from Hedin’s first visit in 1895 to Stein’s visits in approximately 1900 to 1914. That’s a very narrow window for the visits, which were carried out in treacherous winter conditions. The severe cold and lack of water made
the window for exploration even smaller. They would have spent three days at each site, or a week if they were lucky.

**S**

We’ve had a couple of systematic surveys of a couple of the sites. There was the Sino-Japanese work at Niya and the Sino-French work at Keriya. However, these are the only two major systematic digs over a whole area since early 20th century archaeology. Whilst doing fieldwork in the area, I passed by lots of interesting sites such as walled cities, but there isn’t the time or resources to look at them all. They’re disappearing. We’re losing things.

**PP**

I’m also intrigued by the fact that these explorers were friends and rivals at the same time; they might have criticised each other’s methodologies or choice of artefacts. As you said, it marked the beginning of modern-day archaeology yet none of them had any formal archaeological training.

**S**

That was because there was no archaeological training! I’ve always felt very privileged to work with Stein’s material because Stein was one to pick up on the importance of documentation, labelling and taking notes. With all his finds, you know exactly where they came from down to the square foot. This is in comparison to objects in German collections with vague designations like “found in the mountains East of Turfan.” There are many archaeological sites that we know of in the mountains East of Turfan, so that description isn’t very helpful. But such labelling conventions were conventional for the time.

The matter of rivalry is also interesting, isn’t it? The expeditions are often presented as a race. Of course, like any scholar or archaeologist, each wanted to get to important sites before anybody else. But most of them were good friends who had great respect for one another. There was also a lot of discussion, interaction and close collaboration between them when they returned from their expeditions. Archaeological finds were sent throughout Europe from one archaeologist to another to study. Although there were personalities who didn’t get on as much, there were very strong links between them. They were working in this new area and had a great interest and enthusiasm for understanding and promoting it.

**PP**

I’ve read the writings of modern scholars who visited the Tarim Basin in the 1920s and 1930s. Many used the records of Hedin or Stein to look for materials. It was very much in the fashion of travelling in someone’s footsteps.

This reminds me of the 1998 exhibition we did in Hong Kong with the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. It was titled *In the Footsteps of the Buddha*. I gave some tours following the footsteps of Stein, of Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin, and of Charles H. Fairbanks. That way you could travel to the Tarim Basin, with Stein as a “guide.” We didn’t see much because we were hampered by time, but we managed to see the Rawak Stupa and Dandan Oilik. When one visits a hundred years after Stein and
compares what is seen at the sites with his records, there’s a great sense of disappointment because nothing remains.

Stein himself was traveling in the footsteps of Xuan Zang, so there’s this legacy that goes way back. I’ve been on several field trips with local archaeologists, and they used the maps made by Stein because they are so useful. Though many things have been eroded, I’m always surprised how much is still there as well. Rawak Stupa, for example, is still there. The southern Tarim is not a heavily populated or developed area, so many things remain, though by neglect rather than anything else. We don’t know what the next 20 years will bring to the area. So many sites are being destroyed without full archaeological surveys due to inevitable development, and that’s unfortunate because there just isn’t enough manpower to document so much that is left. Eventually, the finds from the early 20th century might be, along with a selection of later findings, our main source of objects for this area. If scholars were to return to the region in 20 years’ time, they might find very little.

You’ve been working with Stein’s collection at the British Library, as well as at the British Museum, and many places elsewhere. How do you see the connection between the objects that reside in Western museums or in the museums of Seoul, Kyoto, or Tokyo, and the site of the Tarim Basin itself? Is there this sense of detachment from that context? With knowledge, you begin to imagine what this context would look like. But how have people pictured some of these finds within the context of Loulan or Rawak?

There are very good photographic records of these places, some of which might be of interest to art historians, but many of them are anthropological and archaeological studies about daily life. Exhibitions tend to select — again — the bling and beautiful objects out of context. The material from the Tarim Basin isn’t that sort of material. It’s everyday material. To set that context and provide that perspective for audiences, you must tie in the material with their lives and make that the focus. These objects — whether a mouse trap, milk churn or a discarded shoe — were used in the everyday lives of these people. I’ve illustrated every exhibition I’ve curated with photographs, site maps and other images of the terrain. Of course, it’s still very difficult for people to connect to them because they’re a long way away in time and space, and there is always a limit to what we can do.

In the past, important artefacts would be shipped off either to Urumqi or to Beijing when they were found, depending on their importance, and local museums were just left with potsherds. I was very cheered over ten years ago when I was travelling in the region to see that many local museums were being built. It was impressive to see that the local museums were displaying local assemblages of material. Of course, it is not clear what the case is today.
Rawak Stupa, Khotan, now surrounded by desert dunes but once part of a network of Buddhist structures radiating from the capital. November 2008. © John Falconer.

THE GIFT
I remember the exhibition you curated at the British Library very fondly. It was very well done and placed all the material within context. That’s not easy to do. This is in comparison to, for example, the National Seoul Museum where the artefacts are put together very nicely, but aren’t accompanied by enough information for one to understand the context surrounding the artefacts.

When I visit Xinjiang or Gansu, I find that the physical landscape really speaks to me. It is important to be able to understand that vastness, that barrenness, how crucial oases are to the area, the people, crops, trees and desert. I wonder how we can replicate that.

All you can do is try to give a sense of it. This comes back to whether we can have different forms of exhibition. Static displays in major museums might not be the best at showing that. Special exhibitions that have been done on this area were able to bring artefacts and their contexts together.

When I lecture about these places, I try to give people an idea of how forbidding the landscape is. It’s very difficult to communicate.

There are other ways of communicating such environments. Media, such as films, music, or other forms of artistic representation, are avenues we could explore. Scientific reconstructions of past landscapes too. There’s the discipline of archaeo-botany that studies the crops, fruits, and vegetables of an area as well. As far as I know, the archaeo-botany of the Tarim Basin is in its infancy, and this is an entire area to be fully explored. Instead of relying on typical static displays, these different forms of media and expression are required to give a sense of context.

We also have the voices of Xuan Zang and other travellers. Some of them recount their experiences of traversing this forbidding landscape very vividly. There were a few Japanese novels about Dunhuang, but there is not much historical fiction that could help with depicting what this period was like.

Certainly. I think the connection to the contemporary is something we would be interested in seeing represented.

There are possibilities out there, but I’m not sure I’m optimistic about them being pursued. Modern politics in the region is impeding this. This is also material that demands a lot of interpretation and hard scholarship. I’m afraid that isn’t something most students are encouraged to do. Furthermore, to have students, you need to have good professors. How many people are working on this subject who could supervise students? I fear that even though the Silk Road is a growing field of study, this particular region will continue to be neglected and comparatively under-studied.
Your attempt at writing the history of Khotan is very admirable. That would really give voice to that period of history.

I’m doing a history of Khotan as no one has done it yet. Many histories of the region have been centred around the early 20th century explorers, rather than the voice of the people of these places. I think that’s a shame because these explorers were trying to give voices to the people with their findings. Yet so often when we tell the story of the Tarim Basin, we show it through this early 20th century lens. We need to reframe these stories through the eyes of the peoples of Khotan, Kizil, Turfan, Ganzhou, Shanshan/Loulan and so on.

Today, the Chinese still think of these explorers as thieves, robbers and looters that took away these artefacts. However, they’re not looking at the material themselves or giving voices to the people who lived there. A history can be written of these “foreign devils,” but writing the history of the people who lived there would make more sense and be more important.

A lot of this was and remains framed by geopolitics or international politics. Could we consider whether we can reconstruct the intuition of these explorers by taking off our filter of geopolitics in our encounter with these materials? There is a famous instance where Stein traced a connection between an artefact and a story of a Chinese princess who smuggled silkworms out of China. Such an exercise requires a certain level of intuition and imagination. How might we revive this intuition in encountering objects, people, and these sites? I’d also like for us to include something a little more personal here. Have you experienced intuition playing a role in your encounters with the sites, people or objects?

That’s a very good point, and that’s why I think that efforts such as writing fictional accounts of such places can be a good way of bringing things together that ‘dry’ scholarship might not. I use my intuition all the time when I write. I’m trying to tell stories about objects that are much broader than simple descriptions.

As mentioned, I’m writing about Khotan, an area that practised Buddhism very early on, although how early remains uncertain. It’s very difficult to see Khotan as a single sacred landscape today, although a lot has been written about this. There is no high point where one can stand to see how everything fits together. I was in the Swat Valley in Pakistan with the Italian archaeological mission in 2019, and it was evident to see how clearly the sacred landscape laid out through all the stupas, monasteries and shrines in the area: a thought-out vision marked by sacred buildings. I found that experience very helpful in giving me new insights into the geography of Khotan and how it might have been conceived by the people of the time.

Intuition is something you might chance upon, what a researcher would use to ascertain which paths to take to find certain
Abbaseheb China, Swat Valley, one of the many stupas and monastic complexes placed in the valleys radiating from the capital, Bankot, marking the sacred space of this kingdom. September 2019. © John Falconer.
answers. Intuition is always there during research, excavation or archaeological work.

In excavations or archaeological expeditions, everything boils down to chance. At the same time, Stein was very methodological in his work and made very detailed records and documentations.

**S** Stein was very methodological, but he certainly relied on his intuition a lot when he was in an area. It was because of this intuition that he discovered or looked for certain places. He couldn’t explore all the area in the desert. He could then be methodological around a certain area. If you read his writings, you’ll find thoughts such as “I feel there should be something over there,” or “I think something happened here.” All intuition is based upon knowledge and experience, and I think he used it a lot.

**PP** I agree with that. It’s how you find your way around.

What could intuition mean in relation to gifts? These materials came to us as a gift from the people of the time, made possible with the intuition of the explorers. This is how the gift was given to us.

**MY** With all gift exchanges, there’s always something withheld and something preserved. Again, I don’t think there’s another undiscovered civilisation, but I do think that we are all acutely aware of the vastness of what lies beyond our comprehension. In this context, that may make us all a little humbler.

**S** Although I don’t think there’s a new civilisation to be discovered, I believe we have yet to discover the details of these civilisations we’ve already found. Something is still certainly withheld, nurtured by the desert sands for future scholars and archaeologists. Maybe those things won’t present themselves to us until we’ve fulfilled our end of the agreement. By being given this gift, we must return something to it through scholarship: by interpreting this material fully and by giving it its rightful place. We haven’t yet, I think, paid our dues for the gift we have been given.
Antiquarian books that document expeditions to the Tarim Basin between the 19th and early 20th centuries. Collection of Pusy-peng Ho.