Manuscripts of the Silk Road
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Introduction

For more than a thousand years, the paths of the Silk Road joined the distant empires of East Asia and the Mediterranean, forming a complex web of trade, pilgrimage and intellectual exchange between China, Central Asia, Persia, Tibet, India, the Near East and Europe.

Not only precious silks and luxury goods travelled over the mountains and deserts that divided these regions, but also technology, culture, artistic traditions, languages and faiths: papermaking, printing, silk manufacture, gunpowder and porcelain were among the important inventions that travelled along the Silk Road, while Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, Judaism and Islam were just some of the religions that followed the trails left by merchants, monks and soldiers.

At the heart of the Eurasian landmass, Central Asia was the stage for the meeting of the cultures and imperial ambitions of the regions along the Silk Road. Cities such as Samarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, Niya, Loulan and Dunhuang for centuries prospered off Silk Road trade and had a seemingly endless ability to absorb the religions, languages and artistic traditions of the merchants and invaders that passed through. Although certain branches of trade through Central Asia dried up by the 11th century, the fragmentation and end of the Mongol Empire in the 14th century witnessed the true end of a continuous trade route between these once interdependent regions and the demise of the Silk Road. Many of the once flourishing towns were abandoned and left to disappear into the dunes of the Central Asian deserts.

Interest was renewed in the Silk Road in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by explorers, scholar-adventurers and treasure-seekers. In 1907, the Hungarian-born British explorer Sir Aurel Stein made one of the most sensational archaeological finds of all time: behind a walled-up cave near Dunhuang he discovered a repository of thousands of manuscripts ranging from the 5th to 11th centuries in languages diverse as Sanskrit, Chinese, Uighur, Tibetan, and Runic Turkic that had lain dormant for over 1,000 years. He was soon followed by the French sinologist Paul Pelliot, Sergei Oldenberg, and others in the search for manuscripts, paintings and works of art.

The majority of documents, texts, scrolls and manuscripts today are housed in institutions such as the British Museum, London, the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, the National Library of China, Beijing, the National Museum, Delhi, the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, the Tokyo National Library and the Hermitage in St Petersburg.

In keeping with the diversity of the Dunhuang library discoveries, the present catalogue consists of examples of manuscripts in Chinese, Khotanese, Bactrian, Gandhari, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic. Arranged in the manner of a westward journey along the Silk Road from China to Iran, the selection of languages and documents represented in the following pages will hopefully provide a sense of some of the fruitful exchanges as well as the bitter struggles that transpired in these regions over the centuries.

All literate and religious cultures, the peoples along the Silk Road left an abundance of documentary evidence of their ways of life in the form of manuscripts and printed books in many languages. From imperial annals, sacred texts and scientific works to merchant inventories, legal contracts and personal letters, it is possible to piece together an astonishingly diverse period of Asian history.
The Eastern Silk Road: China, Dunhuang and the Oasis-States

Cradle of one of the world’s most ancient and sophisticated civilisations, China was the engine of the Silk Road. Over the course of history, China’s famous silks, as well as other Chinese inventions such as paper, printing, porcelain and gunpowder, drew merchants from all over Central Asia to China’s western borders.

From here, trade routes carried these goods over the world’s most formidable mountain ranges into the Indian subcontinent, around the Taklamakan Desert to the bazaars of Central Asia, or further west still to the shores of the Mediterranean. For most of the period of the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) trade prospered along the Silk Road as China enjoyed internal stability, burgeoning markets, and the presence of merchants from all over Asia.

Along with trade, Buddhism flourished as texts, ideas and artistic styles made their way along the trade routes from India and Central Asia to China. Most of the Chinese works in this exhibition are the fruit of this movement. The last outpost of direct Chinese imperial rule for much of Chinese history, Dunhuang was an extremely important city both in terms of trade and defence. Its importance lay in its strategic location at the western end of the Hexi (or Gansu) Corridor, a 1,000-kilometre passage flanked by deserts and mountains, that served as the chief artery for traffic between China, Inner Asia and beyond. As China’s gateway to the West, Dunhuang not surprisingly played an important role in the transmission of culture, especially Buddhism, between China and the rest of Asia.

The most visually impressive manifestation of this phenomenon are the famous Dunhuang Caves, a series of grottoes decorated with paintings of Buddha and Bodhisattva figures, stupas, paradise scenes and other images from the pantheon of Buddhist iconography.

Though the oldest of these are said to date back to the fourth century CE, cave painting in Dunhuang reached its zenith in the time of the Tang dynasty when the city grew wealthy off the constant stream of merchants and pilgrims.

One of these caves, sealed off in the eleventh century, was also the site of one of the most dramatic Silk Road discoveries: a hoard of about 15,500 manuscripts in a bewildering variety of languages, including Bactrian, Khotanese, Sogdian, Tocharian, Tibetan, Uighur, Sanskrit and Chinese.

No other discovery conveys to the same degree the astounding complexity of cultural and linguistic exchange along the Silk Road as this find. Shortly after their discovery, the majority of the Dunhuang scrolls found their way into major national collections such as the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the National Library of China, and it is an extremely rare occurrence for Dunhuang scrolls like the five in this exhibition to appear on the market.

Almost as spectacular as the Dunhuang discovery were the finds made by Sven Hedin, Albert von Le Coq and Aurel Stein along the Southern Route of the Silk Road that led from China to Khotan. Ancient seats of sedentary civilization, the oasis-states of Loulan, Miran, Charklik and Niya were absorbed in the third century CE into the kingdom of Kroraina, a powerful trading empire that stretched from the western border of China to the Khotan region. Chinese influence also grew in the area with the extension of the Great Wall as far as the salt lake Lop Nor and the establishment of a Chinese garrison in Loulan in the Han period (206 BCE - 220 CE). During the fourth century, however, climatic changes and tribal incursions in the region signalled the end of both Kroraina and the oasis-states. By the seventh century the oases of Niya and Loulan and the Chinese garrison had been abandoned to the shifting dunes of the Taklamakan Desert. The rediscovery of Loulan by Hedin in 1900 and of Niya by Stein in 1901, and subsequent excavations along the Southern Route, brought to light intriguing evidence of close relations between the oasis-states and the Gandhara region in North India. Among Stein’s most important finds in Niya and Loulan were tablets with inscriptions in the Gandhari language written in the North Indian Kharoshthi script. Buddhist sculptures and painting from the cities along the Southern Route of the Silk Road also testify to the commercial, religious and artistic contacts that Buddhist monks and merchants maintained between Central Asia and regions in North India such as Gandhara, Swat and Kashmir.

Photo: View of Loulan ruins,
Sir Aurel Stein
This merchant’s letter is an extremely early example of a paper document and sheds light on society and commercial life along the Silk Road during the period of the late Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). The letter can be linked in date, provenance and content to documents found by Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer and archaeologist who made the dramatic discovery of the Loulan site in 1900. Like this one, many of the letters found by Hedin deal with commerce in Loulan and complain of the difficulties of life in this outpost of Chinese authority. As a group, these letters constitute some of the earliest examples of documents written on paper. For Hedin’s collection of letters from Loulan, see Jacques Giès and Monique Cohen, Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha, Paris, 1995, pp. 96-8.

Although a close reading of the document is slightly hampered by lacunae in the text, the letter relates the difficulties encountered by a merchant called Yinliang in procuring iron supplies due to the Han dynasty’s monopoly on iron production. The letter states that Yinliang charged a group of people, including a certain Zhang Nan, with approaching government officials in charge of iron production. The group, however, seems to have been hindered by delays and embroiled in complicated negotiations involving a cast of other characters including someone called Wang Yi and a Mrs. Chang.

The letter is accompanied by a bronze effigy of a pen and a seal in a silk bag, which may indicate that the letter was placed in a tomb. The practice of placing business contracts and other commercial documents in tombs reflected the ancient Chinese belief that payment affected one’s destiny both before and after death. The seal, inscribed on both sides, reads: yin liang yin xin, ‘Seal of Yinliang’.

Test R 28674 by Rafter Radiocarbon Laboratory is consistent with the dating of this item.
The highly distinctive format of this remarkable document - a double-wedge wooden tablet with seal impressions in clay on the upper surface - immediately identifies it as coming from the so-called 'Southern Route' of the Silk Road that passed through the cities of Khotan, Miran and Niya on the way to China. Along the Southern Route official and administrative documents were frequently written on wood and then sealed with clay and string to enable soldiers, merchants or officials to transport the document safely and without being read. As can be seen here, the name of the recipient was written on the outside of the document.

This document provides valuable insight into the history of Niya, one of the independent oasis-states that prospered from trade passing along the Southern Route. During the third century CE the oasis was absorbed into the kingdom of Kroraina, a powerful trading empire that stretched from the western border of China to the Khotan region. By the seventh century, however, climatic changes and tribal incursions in the region had diverted trade away from the Southern Route to the 'Northern Route' that passed to Kashgar via Turfan. As trade gradually dwindled along the Southern Route both Niya and Loulan, another oasis-state belonging to Kroraina, were abandoned to the shifting dunes of the Taklamakan Desert.

This document is dated year 21, month 7, day 21 of the reign of King Masiri [Mehiri?]. The records of the reign of this ruler contain many cases concerning relations with the neighbouring kingdom of Khotan. The discovery of the site of Niya in 1901 was one of the major triumphs of the great explorer and archaeologist Aurel Stein. Among the objects unearthed by Stein in Niya and Loulan were wooden tablets of the same type as the one here. For published examples of these, see Susan Whitfield, The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith, British Library, 2004, p. 151, no. 47, and Wang Jiaping, "Photographs in the British Library of documents and manuscripts from Sir Aurel Stein's fourth Central Asian expedition", The British Library Journal, vol. 24, Number 1, Spring 1998, pp. 23-75.