According to Stein, Jiang loyally did his best to persuade Wang that

the removal of the collection to a place of learning in Peking or England, would in truth be an act which Buddha and his Arhats might approve as pious. He also urged that the big sum I was prepared to pay (I hinted at 40 [silver] horse-shoes, about Rs. 5000, and was resolved to give him twice as much, if need be, whatever the excess over my sanctioned grant) would enable Wang to return to a life of peace in his native province . . . if Dunhuang should become too hot for him. Or else he could allay any scruples by using the whole sum for the benefit of the temple, which by his restoration he could claim to have annexed as his own with all its contents known or unknown. But all in vain.

Not only did Wang not agree but he moved some bundles of manuscripts back to their "gloomy prison of centuries". Stein persisted and "the advantage we possessed by already holding loads of valuable manuscripts and antiques, and Wang's unmistakable wish to secure a substantial sum of money, led at last to what I had reason to claim as a substantial success in this diplomatic struggle". A week later, Stein tried again and Wang "allowed me to add some twenty more bundles of manuscripts to my previous selections, against an appropriate donation for the temple". Stein continued to press Wang and, eventually, 24 cases of "manuscript treasures" and "five more filled with paintings and other art relics from the same cave" were despatched from Dunhuang. Stein fully realised the clandestine nature of his activities for he noted that when it came to packing, "there was some little trouble about getting enough boxes without exciting suspicion at Dunhuang. Luckily I had foreseen the chance and provided some "empties" beforehand..."
ABOVE. Camels at Yarkand-Huluk, 1915. Stein relied on various types of pack animals to transport his equipment and his finds. Crossing into China from India over the Pamirs, he used yaks but in most of the desert areas from Kashgar onwards, he relied on camels. His preparations for the removal of antiquities and manuscripts were meticulous, with specially prepared boxes in sufficient quantity for speedy removal. The two-humped Bactrian camels were used across Central Asia and into northern China, where only 30 years ago they could still be seen hauling loads of coal on the outskirts of Peking.
CHAPTER TWO

A CAVE
WHY WAS the Diamond Sutra hidden away at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas? The existence of a cache of manuscripts and documents there remained a secret from the time that it was deposited, over 1000 years ago, until its rediscovery in 1900. In the last years of the nineteenth century, a wandering Taoist preacher named Wang Yuanlu (1849–1931) came upon the caves and set himself the task of restoring them, collecting money to pay for new wall paintings and sculptures. As he supervised the restoration of Cave 16, he found cracks in the wall that revealed the hidden niche, a tiny side chamber leading off Cave 16, later to be numbered Cave 17.

Cave 17 was of particular significance in the history of Dunhuang for it had been constructed between 851 and 862 in honour of the most important monk in the area, Hong Bian, who died in about 862. Hong Bian was a local monk who had studied Sanskrit and translated Buddhist texts into Chinese. Between 832 and 834 he presided over the carving out of 17 caves. However, it was his support of a local Chinese leader, Zhang Yichao, who drove the occupying Tibetans out of Dunhuang in 848, that led the Emperor of China to issue a decree in 851 allowing Hong Bian to wear purple in commemoration of the return of Dunhuang to Chinese rule. The decree was carved on a stone stele placed in his memorial cave. Apart from the emperor’s stele, the cave contained a stone sculpture of Hong Bian set against a wall painting of overhanging pibal trees flanked by attendant figures. At some time in the early eleventh century, Hong Bian’s statue was moved to another cave higher up the cliff and his niche, now known as Cave 17, filled with documents, paintings and bronzes.1

Though now often referred to as the ‘library cave’ because of the great mass of more than 50,000 documents that emerged from it, the niche also contained hundreds of religious paintings and many small bronze Buddhist figures. As soon as he had discovered the hoard, Wang Yuanlu removed everything from the niche, presumably to explore the contents but thereby possibly destroying much evidence as to how and why the hoard was deposited in the first place. He made
presents of Buddhist bronzes, paintings and scrolls to local officials, probably in order to ingratiate himself and reinforce his unauthorised position at the caves. The local officials, in turn, passed on some of these gifts to higher officials. The local officials seem to have preferred the bronze statuettes which were soon all dispersed.  

One distinguished provincial official who expressed interest in the finds was Ye Changchi (1849–1917), who served as Education Commissioner for the province of Gansu from 1902 to 1906 with his office in Lanzhou. He was a scholar, a connoisseur of fine calligraphy who amassed a considerable collection of rubbings of famous stone inscriptions, whose own works include ‘On Stone Inscriptions’ and ‘Poems Recording Incidents of Book-Collecting’. In his diary entry for 30 December 1903, he recorded a gift from the District Magistrate of Dunhuang which included ‘... an old Buddhist scroll painting depicting a sermon at the festival of water and land ... also four manuscript scrolls all of the Mahaparinirvana Sutra.’ And he continued,

Dunhuang is hidden in the western wastes, among remote mountains and ancient Buddhist temples, and it is therefore not surprising that it has such progeny. I have heard that these sutras come from a rock cell in the Thousand Buddha Caves and that the door of the cave had been sealed with molten lead and not opened since ancient times. It was only a few years ago that it was discovered and opened. Inside were stone tables and ledges piled high with several hundred scrolls and the sutras I have received are from among these. At the time, the monks and laymen did not realise their value and so divided them amongst themselves.

Ye Changchi did not visit the site itself but mentioned the finds again in his diary on 28 December 1909, with reference to Paul Pelliot’s visit to Dunhuang in 1908. ‘A Frenchman had taken all the bundles [paying] 200 yuan. This is a pity. The local officials and the people on the borders do not know how to appreciate ancient objects...’ The following month Ye wrote,

Classics, steles and works from the Buddhist canon were all deposited there in the Tang to Song period. The Frenchman Pelliot acquired most of the choice examples to place in the Paris library and an Englishman [Stein] also acquired some odd lots. The Chinese local official turned a blind eye. My circuit took me to Jiuquan but I did not go beyond Jiayuguan which is not more than 1000 li [300 miles] from Dunhuang. By this time I had heard of the discovery of the cave and had also received two Buddhist paintings and five manuscripts. Was it really not possible for its contents to be emptied? What was my role as an imperial envoy? I am ashamed and full of remorse that I dared to blame others.