INTRODUCTION

Shortly after western missionaries first reached China, they had already begun to take notice of Chinese unearthed documents. In 1625, a farmer digging in the soil in the western suburbs of Xi’an 西安 (perhaps in Zhouzhi 周至 county, Shaanxi) discovered an ancient stone stele. On the top of the stele was engraved in large characters: “Stele Commemorating the Entry Into China of the Greater Qin Outstanding Religion” (Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei 大秦景教流行中國碑); beneath this heading there was a much longer inscription (1780 characters), also in Chinese. “Greater Qin” 大秦 is the ancient Chinese name for Rome, or more particularly, for areas of the Middle East now part of Syria. The “Outstanding Religion” (jingjiao 景教) is the Chinese name for Nestorianism, a Christian sect popular throughout the Eastern Roman Empire beginning in the fifth century. Aside from the Chinese text, the foot and two sides of the stele had other inscriptions in both Syriac and Chinese. The inscription had been carved in the 2nd year of the Jianzhong 建中 reign era of the Tang dynasty (i.e., 781), and recounts Nestorianism’s 146 years of history in China to that point, as well as its central teachings. However, sixty some years later, in 845, when the emperor Wuzong of Tang 唐武宗 (r. 840-846) proscribed Buddhism, Nestorianism was linked with it and persecuted as well; the Nestorian Stele must have then been buried at that time, not to re-surface until more than seven hundred years later.

By the late Ming dynasty, when the stele was unearthed, the religious situation had changed considerably and Christianity had already gained a foothold in China. The Nestorian Stele, as the stele is now usually called, quickly attracted the attention of Christians elsewhere in China, and a rubbing of the inscription was sent to LI Zhizao 李之藻 (1571-1630), a prominent literatus and Christian living in Hangzhou 杭州. Li, in turn, introduced the contents of the inscription to the Portuguese missionary Alvaro SEME DO (1585-1658; known by the Chinese names XIE Wulu 謝務祿 or ZENG Dezhao 曾德昭). According to Semedo’s own account, in 1628 he went to Xi’an to inspect the stele personally. He then translated the inscription into Portuguese, sending the translation back to Lisbon.
Fig. 1: Photo of the Nestorian Stele (大秦景教流行中國碑), c. 1892; Henri Havret, *La stele chrétienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Chang-hai: Mission catholique, 1895-1902)
Sometime before 1631, the Portuguese translation had already reached the Jesuit headquarters in Rome, where it was then translated into Latin. In 1636, the young Jesuit polymath Athanasius KIRCHER (1602-1680) included a description of the stele in his book *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*. Later, he included two different translations of the inscription in his book *China Illustrata* (published in 1678). From this well-known book, scholars all over Europe learned of the Nestorian Stele. Those who have made translations into other languages include such notable figures as Alexander WYLIE (1815-1887), James LEGGE (1815-1897) and Paul PELLIOT (1878-1945).1


Paul Pelliot was one of the foremost Sinologists of the first half of the twentieth century. His name became forever linked with Chinese paleography after his visit to Dunhuang in 1908 and his purchase there of thousands of silk and paper manuscripts from the Mogaoku caves. The picture of him sitting in the cave at Dunhuang examining the manuscripts by candlelight has inspired much interest in early manuscripts. However, ironically, aside from his interest in the Nestorian Stele and the Dunhuang manuscripts, Pelliot did not have any sustained interest in other sorts of documents that were being unearthed in China in his own day, almost never mentioning them in his writings.
A second name indelibly linked with western scholarship’s first engagement with Chinese unearthed documents is that of the Hungarian-English explorer Marc Aurel STEIN (1862-1943), who had arrived in Dunhuang even before Pelliot. In the course of his three expeditions to Central Asia, not only did Stein purchase a great number of Dunhuang manuscripts, which he brought back to London and where they are still in the collection of the British Library, but he was also the first to publish a report of still earlier Chinese texts, these written on wooden strips.2 Despite the importance of his discoveries of ancient Chinese textual materials, Stein could not read them, thus limiting the contribution that he himself could make to their understanding. Fortunately, as we will describe in this book, others

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have followed in his footsteps and have made considerable contributions to that understanding.

Fig. 4: Marc Aurel STEIN (1862-1943) in the course of his Third Expedition to Central Asia

Quite by chance, the first scholarly study of Chinese unearthed documents by a westerner came in the very year that Stein was at Dunhuang, but on the other side of China. In 1906, Frank H. CHALFANT (1862-1914), a long-time resident of north China as a protestant missionary, gave a public lecture at the Carnegie Library of his hometown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in which he opened for the western scholarly world an entirely new field of study. In the lecture, which was subsequently published as *Early Chinese Writing* (100050), Chalfant began rather traditionally by giving a detailed discussion of the six types of Chinese characters according to the *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 (Discussing pictographs and explaining compound graphs), but he then went on also to cite two different types of paleographic materials. One was the inscription on the bronze vessel *San shi pan* 散氏盤. This was the first time that a western scholar had made use of a bronze inscription as evidence for historical linguistics. The second type of paleographic material was even newer: Chalfant introduced oracle-bone inscriptions that had been discovered just a few years before his lecture. In the pamphlet *Early Chinese*
Writing, he included more than a dozen line drawings of oracle bones that he had himself collected.

Fig. 5: Hand-copy, transcription and translation of the opening portion of the San shi pan 散氏盤 inscription; Frank H. CHALFANT, Early Chinese Writing (Pittsburgh: The Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1906), p. 22
From the vantage point of a century later, we could find many mistakes in Chalfant’s understanding of the San shi pan inscription and the oracle-bone inscriptions. Nevertheless, by opening this exciting new field of inquiry, he made an undeniable contribution to western Sinology, a contribution well worth remembering. The present book will survey the work of the scholars who have come after Chalfant. While the book will include some discussion of China’s earliest stone inscriptions, I regret that it will not be possible to say anything more about the inscription on the Nestorian Stele or the thousands of other stele inscriptions from after the Han dynasty. Nor will it be possible herein to address the manuscripts that Stein and Pelliot recovered from Dunhuang. Even though these texts have inspired much important work from numerous western scholars, this work is far outside of my own limited field of expertise. However, the book will provide a full account of studies of both oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, as well as an account of the field of bamboo and silk manuscript studies that was opened by Stein. It is my hope that readers everywhere will join me in marveling at the many great discoveries and great advances in the understanding of all of these fields that have taken place over the course of a century since his time.