



PELLIOT, PAUL

PELLIOT, PAUL (b. 28 May, 1878, d. 26 Oct. 1945), French orientalist who particularly contributed to the study of the languages and the history of the diverse religions and cultures of Central Asia. Trained as a Sinologist, Pelliot arrived in China in 1900 via Vietnam in time to be trapped in the legations in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion and was eventually decorated for acts of courage during the siege. After publishing seminal works on the historical geography and anthropology of both China and of Vietnam, he turned his attention to Turkestan and led an expedition which left Paris in June, 1906 and arrived in Peking (Beijing) in December, 1910. He spent three weeks at the Cave of Thousand Buddhas at Tun-huang (Dunhuang) and was the first major western scholar to visit to the site after the famous initial visit by Marc Aurel Stein in 1907. Like Stein he removed a large number of manuscripts from the cave and these became the core of the Collection Pelliot in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Musée Guimet of Paris but sadly one manuscript which he neglected to take was a long Manichean treatise on the Light-Nous (commonly known as the *Traité*) in Chinese which he would later publish with a more senior Sinologist, Professor Eduard Chavannes (Pelliot- Chavannes, 1911, 1913) from a facsimile published by Lo Ch'en-yu. (Lo Jenyu). In the commentary to their translation, much use was made of the pioneering works of F. W. K. Müller and of Alber von Le Coq on the Turfan Middle Iranian and Turkish Manichean texts respectively. Pelliot remained a great admirer of both these German scholars and like Müller; he would combine his Sinological research with serious study of Central Asian languages and texts. For the Iranologists an important aspect of Pelliot's expedition was the identification of Buddhist texts



in Sogdian among the texts he brought back to Paris and the most famous of these was the *Sutra of Cause and Effect* which at the time of the publication of the edition of the Sogdian by Paul Gauthiot was one of the longest texts in that language and laid the foundation for the study of the grammar of Sogdian by scholars like Gauthiot and Emile Benveniste. Pelliot was one of the first scholars to realize the enormous importance of Middle Iranian languages, especially of Sogdian, in the transmission of religions and cultural motives between Iran and Chinese Central Asia. His article (based on his inaugural lecture of 1911) on Iranian influence on Central Asia (Pelliot. 1912) remains a starting point to research in the subject.

In 1911 he was appointed to the Chair in Central Asian Languages at the Collège de France which meant that he was able to devote the rest of his career to the study of both China and of her western neighbors. His ability to acquire languages was unrivalled and like Müller he became sufficiently competent to edit texts in many Central Asian languages. However, he remained at heart much more of a Sinologist than Müller, and his competence in Classical Chinese enabled him to make full use of the rich and untapped Chinese sources on Central Asia especially on the study of Buddhism.

The First World War saw Pelliot once more in China serving as a military attaché and even leading an expedition into Siberia. His much-circulated photograph in military uniform from this period gave rise to the myth among many Chinese scholars that his earlier visit to Dunhuang had been part of a French military expedition to the region. In the post-war years he was an active member of the Société Asiatique, which, like the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain was then a major meeting place of serious research scholars. In 1920 he succeeded Chavannes as the editor of *T'oung Pao*, the pre-eminent journal in Far East Asian (especially Chinese) studies and graced it with many distinguished articles of his own on both Chinese and Central Asian history. His vast erudition, his eye for details together with his ability to combine sources from Chinese as well as Altaic, Semitic and Iranological languages to solve particular historical or geographical or onomastic problems made him a scholar of the first rank, and much of his work from 1920s and 1930s have remained and are likely to remain authoritative. He continued his research in Paris under German occupation (1940-44) and made a brief visit to the USA after Liberation, but sadly died shortly after the final armistice. His untimely demise deprived him of the opportunity to make an impression on a new postwar generation of scholars many of whom had acquired their training in



Oriental languages as part of their military service and had little or no access to Mainland China let alone to Chinese Central Asia after 1948. With the exception of students of the period of Mongol ascendancy, the works of Pelliot is now more cited than actually read by Sinologists. Most post-war Sinologists regard him as a monument to a bygone imperialist and colonial past – a time when the European scholar-adventurer could roam with impunity and with virtual diplomatic immunity the steppes and the byways of China and of Central Asia. The research he did before and during the Second World War would later be published in a lengthy series of posthumous volumes (*Œuvres Posthumes*) edited by L. Hambis *et al.* These are mainly on the history and culture of Tibet and of the Mongol Empire.

Two areas of Pelliot's research, which will be of particular interest to Iranologists other than his seminal study of Manicheism in China, are his contributions to the study of Nestorianism in China and to the history of Mongol Empire, especially with regards to the Mongol missions to the Papacy. The first was an obvious area for a scholar of Pelliot's expertise in the diffusion of foreign religions and cultures in China. He published an important and wide ranging article on this subject as early as 1914 but his major edition of the Nestorian Monument (i.e. the Sianfu Inscription) was not published until long after his death in 1984, and an expanded and revised edition by A. Forte appeared only in 1996. In this Pelliot deployed his formidable skills as a Sinologist to tackle the more literary aspects of the inscription. On the history of the Mongol period, Pelliot's contribution was massive and ranges from the Mongol rule in China to the fate of the Mongol crusade in the West. His knowledge of the history of Il-khanate from both western and Persian sources was superb and his series of studies on the Mongols and the Papacy published in the *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* (and later separately) remains the cornerstone of research for Orientalists and scholars of the medieval period, serving as the foundation for important works by later scholars such as J. Richard and I. de Rachewiltz. The same goes for his edition of the Z manuscript (Latin) of the *Il Milione* of Marco Polo, which he edited with Prof. A. C. Moule in England, and the three-volume *Notes on Marco Polo*. His thorough knowledge of Persian, Arabic, Mongol and Chinese enables him to tackle almost any issue of history, historical geography or onomasticon. The linguistic skills and erudition were effectively put into use in the study of Christian envoys from both East and West in his posthumous volume on Christians in Central Asia and the Far East. His mastery of Persian sources, so essential for the study of the life of Cinghis Khan, was evident in his article on this first great Mongol ruler (Pelliot, 1963, I,



pp. 281-363). His article on the great port-city of Zayton (modern Quanzhou) on the South China coast much frequented by Arab and Persian seafarers (*ibid.*, pp. 583-59) settled the geographical situation of the port and anticipated much archaeological discoveries on the foreign communities made from 1938 onwards in Zayton (which Pelliot sadly had no opportunity to study. On these discoveries see [CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS](#) vii).

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