

# Orientations

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Head of a brahmin, p. 40

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Cover: Axe fitting  
Neolithic period. Liangzhu culture, c. 2500 BC  
Jade  
Length 8.6 cm  
Hotung Collection

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# Paul Pelliot: A Bridge Between Western Sinology and Chinese Scholarship

Alain Thote

To this day, Pelliot's massive and elegant studies have hardly been mined of their riches. Few scholars of our time realize that the solution to many linguistic, textual, and cultural problems that trouble them have been solved in the footnotes – often short essays in themselves – to Pelliot's studies published in the *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* and in *T'oung Pao*, easily the best sinological journals in the world.

These laudatory words were pronounced by Edward H. Schafer (1913-91) during his inaugural lecture for the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures at the University of Colorado in Boulder, on 14 October 1982 (*T'ang Studies*, nos 8-9 [1990-91], p. 33). Since any brief presentation of the far from ordinary man who was Paul Pelliot (Fig. 1) could easily be mistaken for hagiography, one cannot resist quoting Schafer's words: coming from such an eminent sinologist, no better homage could in fact be paid to this scholar whose heritage is still alive some fifty years after his death.

It is quite rare for a scholar, whom one usually expects to spend most of his life among books in the silence of his study, to lead a life in which adventure plays an equally prominent role, sustaining, and even shaping his knowledge. This is, however, the case with Paul Pelliot, who displayed his remarkable human qualities on several occasions, and whose exceptional intellectual gifts helped to put on an equal footing, for the first time, scholarly exchanges between Chinese scholars and Western sinologists.

Born on 28 May 1878, Pelliot demonstrated his capacities early on. At 21, he held a BA in literature and had also graduated from both the Institute of Political Sciences and the School of Oriental Languages in Paris – this last programme completed in two years instead of three on the suggestion of his professors. He first intended to take up a diplomatic career, but his *maîtres* Édouard Chavannes (1868-1918) and Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935) were so impressed by this talented young man that they encouraged him to work in the field of the humanities. He was thus appointed as an intern in the Archaeological Survey of Indochina in August 1899. He arrived in Saigon in mid-November, and from there travelled throughout Tonkin and Annam (present day Vietnam). He seems, however, to have soon felt the need to broaden the range of Chinese books available to him, and in February of the following year he was commissioned to go to China to buy on the open market as many books and objects of study as could be found. Little did he know then that once he left Hanoi for Shanghai and Tianjin his life had taken a decisive turn.

The notes he took at the time reveal that he arrived in Beijing on 29 March 1900. From 16 May onwards, he wrote about alarming events: Boxers attacking missionaries and killing Chinese converted to Christianity, and the besieging of the Legations Quarter. For two months, as a volunteer fighting for the foreigners entrenched in the embassies – he was one of the youngest – Pelliot wrote as much as he could on the events he was witnessing, sometimes making notes every fifteen minutes. The notes he made were lead pencil scribbles covering sheets of paper – sheets just the size of his pocket – and were published together with a few other documents in 1976 under the title *Carnets de Pékin, 1899-1901*. They are an eloquent testimony

to his qualities as a keen observer of a complex situation. On two notable occasions his courage commanded the admiration of his companions in misfortune. He once took a large banner from the Chinese army; on another occasion, facing the greatest dangers, he decided to climb the barricade to pay a visit to Rong Lu, the general-in-chief of the opposing army, to whom he described the situation of the besieged foreigners under exaggeratedly optimistic terms. A few hours later, when all had given up hope of seeing him again, he came back protected against the Boxers by none other than his new Chinese friends. For these actions, and no doubt for his courageous behaviour throughout the siege, he was rapidly rewarded with the *Légion d'Honneur*, a medal rarely given to anyone so young and socially unprominent.

The books that Pelliot had previously bought were burnt to ashes on the first day of the uprising in Beijing. However, during the troubled months of occupation

that followed the siege, Pelliot managed to procure a selection of works of art, such as paintings, jades, ceramics, lacquers and bronzes. Among the 152 paintings he collected were a set of thirty-three made under Ming imperial patronage and dated to the fifth year of the Qingtai reign (1454) (Fig. 2). Besides their high artistic value (unrecognized at the time they were first discussed on the occasion of an exhibition of Chinese paintings at the Louvre in 1904, and indeed only recognized very recently), the iconography of these religious paintings is also of great interest, since they were used during either Buddhist or Daoist *Shuilu zhai* (Fast of Water and Earth) rituals, a comprehensive, seven-day liturgy of universal salvation.

From mid-1901 to mid-1904, with the exception of two short trips to France, Pelliot split his time between Indochina and Beijing. His journeys between China and the peninsula certainly influenced the first important studies he published in the *BEFEO* (*Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*), which deal with accounts written by Chinese travellers between



(Fig. 1) Paul Pelliot (1878-1945)  
Photograph courtesy of the Musée Guimet

the sixth and thirteenth centuries of the itineraries they followed on their way to Southeast Asia or India, and the customs of the countries they visited. Conscious of the fragility of Annamese written sources, he also had several of these texts reproduced by Vietnamese copyists. With funding received from the newly founded *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* and with his own money (partly gained by playing bridge or poker in Beijing's bars and salons), he was able to buy thousands of books. Among his acquisitions, which for the most part were deposited in the collections of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and the Louvre as early as 1904, one counts rare editions in Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian. His interest in religious studies during these years is also evidenced by short articles and notes, in particular on heterodox beliefs and foreign religions introduced into China, a subject to which he returned repeatedly in later years. His first articles clearly illustrate one of the methodologies he would use throughout his long career, the comparative study of words in various ancient languages, a method further developed by Bernhard Karlgren (1889-1978) and Henri Maspero (1883-1945), following in Pelliot's footsteps.

At this point Pelliot turned his interest towards Central Asia. He was asked to lead a scholarly expedition in this part of the world, which had already attracted many travellers and scientists. To prepare his mission, Pelliot spent a few months in Russia to learn Russian. On 15 June 1906, he left Paris with two other Frenchmen; Dr Louis Vaillant was in charge of geographical surveys and studies in astronomy and natural sciences, while Charles Nouette was to collect data through photography.

The month spent by the team in Russian Turkestan allowed Pelliot to practise oriental Turkish, a language he had learned from books. The first aim of the expedition was to find pre-Islamic Buddhist remains in the Kashgar area (in the present day

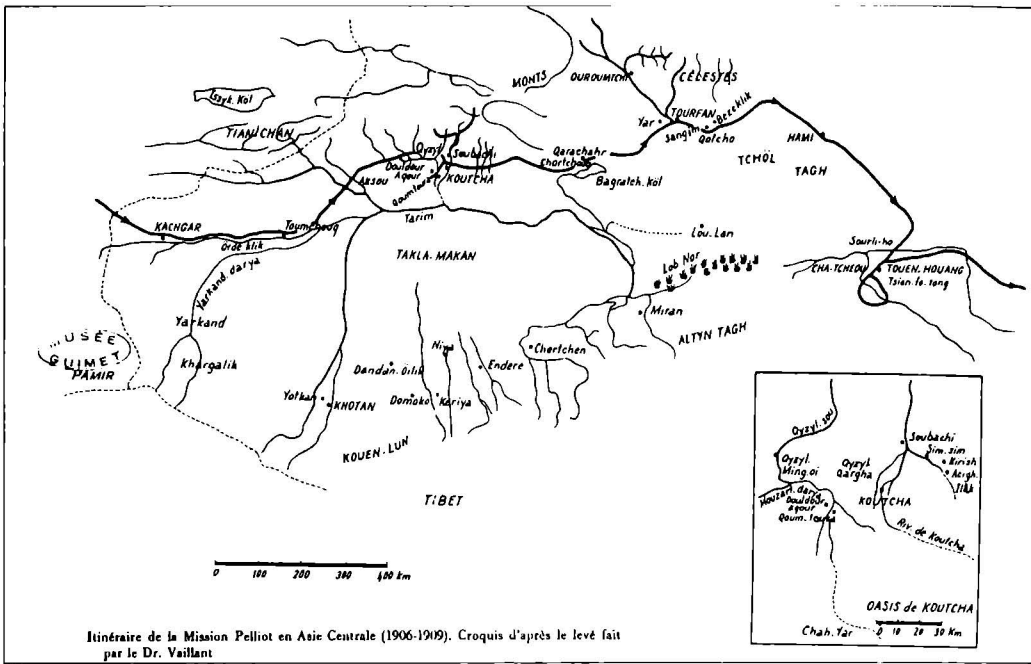
Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China) (Fig. 3), but the results were poor. It turned out that a German expedition led by Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935) and Albert von Le Coq (1860-1930) had worked on the same

region and for the same purpose (from December 1905 to June 1906), a cause of great disappointment for the French team. However, it was on his way to Kucha that Pelliot, idly scratching the ground with his whip, found a small sculpture that he instantly identified as belonging to the so-called Greco-Buddhist style. The site, known as Tumshuk, was investigated and excavated in the autumn of 1906. Many interesting finds were made, including that of stucco figures from a shrine. The areas that had been neglected at Kucha by German, Japanese and Russian expeditions were also carefully studied by Pelliot, guided by the commentaries made by the monk Xuanzang while passing through the kingdom of Kucha in 630. This had interesting results: temples to the west and north of Kucha, at Duldur-âkhour and Subâshi, were discovered, providing coins, wooden sculptures, fragments of wall paintings (Fig. 4); painted wooden reliquary boxes (Fig. 5) and a wood block for printing the Buddha image on paper (Fig. 6). In addition to mapping the Kashgar oasis and making a photographic record of the Kucha caves, Pelliot rediscovered two passes at four thousand metres above sea level in the Tianshan mountains to the north, used in the distant past by travellers of the Silk Road.

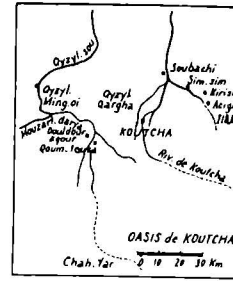
In October 1907, the caravan arrived in Urumqi (the capital of present day Xinjiang), where they had to stay longer than planned. However, the three months spent there were not wasted. Pelliot's broad scholarship, together with his fluency in Chinese, English, Russian and Uighur were an introduction to the small circle of local scholars, many of whom had been exiled by the Qing government to this small remote city. Pelliot shared with them the data collected along the route through Xinjiang. He also met Duke Lan, none



(Fig. 2) The Ten Great Generals  
Qingtai period, 1454  
Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk  
Height 141 cm, width 41 cm  
Musée Guimet, Paris, MG 5874



(Fig. 3) Map of Paul Pelliot's route in Central Asia (After Hallade and Gaulier, p. 13)



(Fig. 4) Head of a brahmin From Duldur-äkur, Kucha, Xinjiang, 6th century Fragment of a mural painting Height of fragment 19 cm Musée Guimet. EO 3669

other than the brother of the former Boxer leader. They became good friends, and when Pelliot left Urumqi, Duke Lan gave him an old manuscript from a cache of manuscripts at the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, Gansu province. The cache had been discovered some seven years earlier by a certain Wang Yuanlu, and Dunhuang had been planned as one of the major stops of the expedition. When Pelliot identified Duke Lan's gift as having been written in the eighth century, he was even more intent on reaching the site. He did not yet know that Aurel Stein (1862-1942) had already visited the site a few months before, and purchased a sizeable portion of the cache for the British government.

Although arriving after Stein, the work done by Pelliot in Dunhuang is impressive: he recorded and numbered 182 caves he considered to be important either for their decoration or for their inscriptions. He then started describing them one by one, his notes being illustrated by the first photographic survey ever undertaken of the caves. Edited and published many years after his death (Pelliot, 1981-92), the notes describe in detail the caves' architecture and wall paintings and transcribe all the caves' inscriptions. Pelliot also makes many iconographic identifications, as well as a first attempt at dating the caves. For this, he had to clarify the modifications made to the caves over time, since the first paintings could have been covered by later layers of decoration. His tripartite periodization (*primitive* for the 5th century to the beginning of the Tang dynasty [618-906], *archaïque* for the 7th century, *usuelle* for the 8th to 11th century) was a pioneering attempt to date the caves systematically.

However, this important work on the caves was suspended soon after it started. On 3 March 1908, Pelliot was finally



allowed by Wang Yuanlu into the small cave housing the manuscripts, which had been sealed, it appeared, in the early eleventh century. What he saw inside prompted him to turn his attention from the caves to a first examination of the fifteen thousand or so manuscripts, paintings and printed images left over after Stein's visit (Fig. 7). His purpose was to select and purchase everything for which the date, topic, quality or language used (such as Chinese, Brahmi, Uighur or Tibetan) marked out as significant. In fact, nobody was better prepared for such a task than Pelliot, who not only knew several ancient languages but also harboured a keen interest in Buddhist literature. He was deeply conscious of the importance of having

(Fig. 5) Box for funerary use  
From Subāshi, Kucha, Xinjiang, 6th century  
Polychromed wood  
Height 15 cm  
Musée Guimet, EO 1094



(Fig. 6) Wood block for printing the  
Buddha image on paper  
From Duldur-ākhur, Kucha, Xinjiang, 8th century  
Height 5.8 cm, width 4.5 cm, depth 2.3 cm  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Pelliot Koutcha 512

access for the first time to archives and documents that had been neglected by the Chinese scholarly tradition. None of the Chinese scholars of the time, mostly interested in texts that had been transmitted and glossed by generations of scholars, had come to Dunhuang in the seven years since the repository had been discovered. Three weeks of constant work allowed Pelliot to select about one third of the cave's contents. His acquisitions included numerous precious artworks, such as the oldest extant rubbing of a stone inscription, which is of the Tang emperor Tai-zong's (r. 627-49) 'Wenquan ming', a poem praising the Lishan hot springs near the Tang capital Chang'an (Fig. 8); twenty-one wooden objects, for the most part sculptures of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and *lokapālas* (Fig. 9); and several religious paintings of the highest quality (Fig. 10).

By May 1908, the team had completed its study of the site. When Pelliot arrived in Beijing in early October, he at once informed the Chinese scholars of his finds, and also contacted the Viceroy Duanfang (1861-1911) – from whom Pelliot would later receive some oracle bones from the Shang dynasty (c. 1500-c. 1050 BC) site of Anyang in Henan province. To their growing enthusiasm Pelliot showed his Chi-



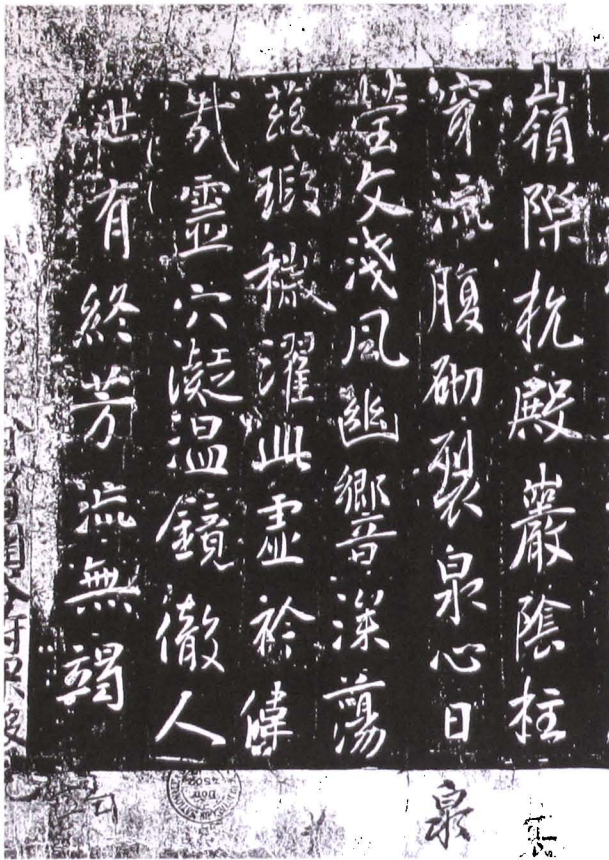
(Fig. 7) Paul Pelliot examining manuscripts in Cave 17 of the Mogao caves at Dunhuang, Gansu province  
Photograph courtesy of the Musée Guimet

nese audience a choice of his acquisitions and had the pieces photographed for them. As a consequence, the scholars submitted a request to their government to protect the repository, with the remaining manuscripts being transferred to the newly created Library of the Capital in Beijing. Meanwhile, an association of scholars was created for the purpose of reproducing in facsimile, and editing, the most important of the texts that Pelliot had acquired at Dunhuang.

The scholarly results of the mission headed by Pelliot in Xinjiang and Gansu province are very important, and also sizeable: under the general title of the collection *Mission Paul Pelliot*, sixteen thick volumes on the archaeological excavations and material were published between 1961 and 1992. In addition to all kinds of archaeological objects, the team brought back thousands of photographs, geological samples and animal specimens, and eight hundred plants gathered in a herbarium. In addition, in Beijing thirty thou-

sand volumes were purchased or received as donations from his Chinese colleagues for the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Following his return to France, Pelliot was praised by officials to such a point that jealousies came into play. Polemics



(Fig. 8) Detail of a rubbing of a stone inscription reproducing Tang Jizong's 'Wenquan ming'. From Cave 17, Mogao, Dunhuang, Gansu province, c. 648-53. Incomplete handscroll. Scroll: height 27 cm, length 144 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 4508.

as to the authenticity of the manuscripts arose, soon amplified by the press. They culminated during a banquet where Pelliot slapped vigorously the face of the man who had initiated the rumours (and who had also severely criticized, erroneously, translations from the Chinese by Édouard Chavannes, a fact Pelliot resented even more). Pelliot was sentenced to pay a fine, and the polemics quickly died away.

Although Pelliot was only thirty-three, a chair was created for him at the prestigious Collège de France. This nomination rewarded not only his field work, but also his written work: in the span of ten years he had published eighteen articles, twelve 'notes' (without counting several 'anonymous' chronicles and bibliographic presentations in the *BEFEO*), and no less than fifty reviews, some of them articles in their own right. Focusing on the languages, history and archaeology of Central Asia, his teaching diverted him from purely Chinese culture for many years. He taught from his inaugural lecture in December 1911 up to his death in 1945, interrupting his teaching only for five years during World War I.

Drafted as an intelligence officer in the Army of the Orient, he went first to the Dardanelles, and then to Mongolia, China and Siberia, where he perfected his knowledge of foreign languages, including Turkish and Mongolian. After the war, he went to the United States to lecture and give public talks at Columbia University (1926) and Harvard University (1928).

Throughout his career, he continued to strengthen his bonds with Chinese scholars, and his major articles were translated into Chinese. In 1939, he was made a Corresponding Member of the Academia Sinica in Beijing.

Pelliot's merits were widely recognized by his peers. In 1920, he became the co-director of the journal *T'oung-pao*. In 1927, a chair of Chinese Philology, Literature and Art was created at the Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, a new institution attached to the Sorbonne, and Pelliot was appointed as its first occupant. He was elected president of the Société Asiatique in 1935, and in January 1945, he was a delegate at the Congress of the Institute of Pacific Relations, held at Hot Springs, Virginia, which brought him back to his old interest in diplomacy. This responsibility preceded, by only a few months, his death on 26 October 1945.

Pelliot's untiring work during a career of forty-five years is only partly visible from his bibliography, which consists of hundreds of articles, notes, reviews, chronicles and lectures. Very early on, he became conscious of the need to give a firm basis to Western sinology by acquiring books from China for the benefit of the students of both Chinese language and culture.



(Fig. 9) Lokapala. From the Mogao caves, Dunhuang, Gansu province, 7th/8th century. Polychromed wood with traces of gold. Height 79 cm. Musée Guimet, MG 15143.



Pl. 10) *The Assault of Mara*  
From Cave 17, Mogao, Dunhuang, Gansu province, 1st half of the 10th century  
Fringing scroll, gold and colours on silk  
Height 96.8 cm, width 65 cm  
Musée Guimet, MG 17655

by reviewing all the new specialized journals created in China and by establishing strong relations with Chinese scholars. He proposed to follow a standard transcription of Chinese into the Roman alphabet in order to establish common rules and thus eliminate erratic spellings. His lengthy notes in his articles are a deliberate choice to provide as much information as possible on the subject under discussion, using sources of all possible kinds. His sharp critical sense, as revealed by lists of *errata* and *addenda* covering pages in reviews, certainly made him many enemies – as witnessed by his controversies with Carl Hentze, one of the directors of *Artibus Asiae*, or John C. Ferguson (see Pelliot, *Revue des Arts Asiatiques*, 1930; Pelliot, *T'oung-Pao*, 1936 and Pelliot, *T'oung Pao*, 1937). Such criticism from Pelliot, however, had the sole purpose of contesting amateurism and careless work. Since Pelliot applied his comparative method to ancient pronunciations and the transmission of words from one culture to another, this sense of rigour was particularly important to him.

Pelliot's research was, in fact, based on a deep knowledge of the languages used in Central Asia at different stages of its history. This often led him to compare and discuss complementary sources of various origins focusing on a common subject: for example the life of Genghis Khan based on Chinese, Mongolian and Persian sources. Pelliot was, first and foremost, a philologist and a linguist, and this was the key to his studies of an extremely wide range of subjects.

Although Buddhism takes the leading place in his studies on religion, with a bibliography that already counted 103 items in January 1928, studies on Manicheism, Daoism or Mazdeism should also be mentioned. Also among the major topics tackled by Pelliot are Christians and Christianity in East Asia from the Nestorians of the Tang period (618-906) to the time of the Jesuits in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods; relations between the Papacy and the Mongols; and Western travellers in Central Asia and China (such as Marco Polo and Isol the Pisan).

Pelliot's constant interest in Chinese art is evidenced by his research on topics such as the painters of the Six Dynasties (265-581) and Tang periods, the history of Chinese ceramics, European influences on Chinese art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the copper plates made for or under the patronage of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95), to cite but



(Fig. 11) Shakyamuni and Prabhutaratna, inscribed with a date corresponding to 518 Northern Wei dynasty (386-534)  
Gilt bronze  
Height 25.5 cm, width 16.7 cm  
Musée Guimet, EO 2604

a few of his major studies. Nor should his 'short' studies on the meaning of specialized words, or on texts and inscriptions related to arts and crafts, for example porcelain or sculpture (Fig. 11), be forgotten. Although they show no real interest in the style or the evolution of a given art form, they provide invaluable information on the historical background, relevant written sources and manufacturing techniques. Pelliot's interest in archaeology seems to have been largely restricted to important discoveries of his time, at Anyang or Xinzheng in Henan province, for example. Indeed, the material he himself collected in his excavations was only studied and published by other scholars after his death.

Many of the major studies he initiated at the Collège de France were unfortunately left unfinished at the time of his death: this is probably due to the fact that professors at this institution are requested to change the topic of their courses every year. About a dozen books were edited posthumously on the basis of his unpublished works, notably on the Mongol and Turkish peoples, on Tibet and on Marco Polo. He also dealt with the origins and the development of printing in China, a subject that may have stemmed from Pelliot's taste for rare editions, such as the *Dafang guangfo Huayanjing (Garland Sutra)*, which was first printed at Dawanshou si in Hangzhou in circa 1302. The frontispiece of this edition (Fig. 12) is from a wood block of 1302 that was probably recut during the Ming dynasty. His scholarly discourse on printing is perhaps best exemplified by his lengthy review of Thomas Francis Carter's *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward* (New York, 1925), which served as the basis for one of his posthumous publications, *Les debuts de l'imprimerie en Chine* (Paris, 1953).

At about the same time as Pelliot, two other giants of sinology passed away: Marcel Granet (1884-1940) and Henri Maspero (1883-1945). The deaths of these three men must have been felt by their immediate followers as the sign of the end of an era. By their astounding work, they had given a firm basis to sinology, defining its methods and scope. Their brilliant achievements, and those of Pelliot in particular, demonstrate that erudition and rigour need not exclude breadth of vision.

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(Fig. 12) Frontispiece of the *Dafang guangfo Huayanjing*  
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)  
Wood-block print  
Height 25 cm, length 55 cm (approximate)  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Chinois 10065

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Neolithic period. Liangzhu culture, c. 2500 BC  
Jade  
Length 8.6 cm  
Hotung Collection

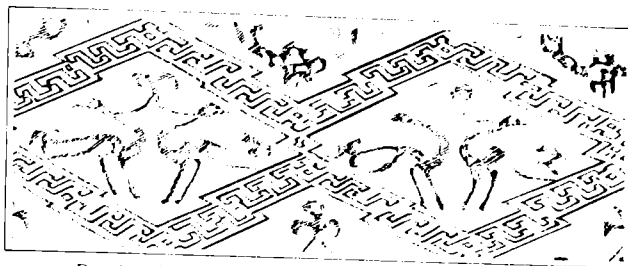
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Cover: Daoist robe (*daopao*)  
Qing dynasty, 19th century  
Embroidered satin  
Length 128 cm, width 166.5 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, 1620-1901

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