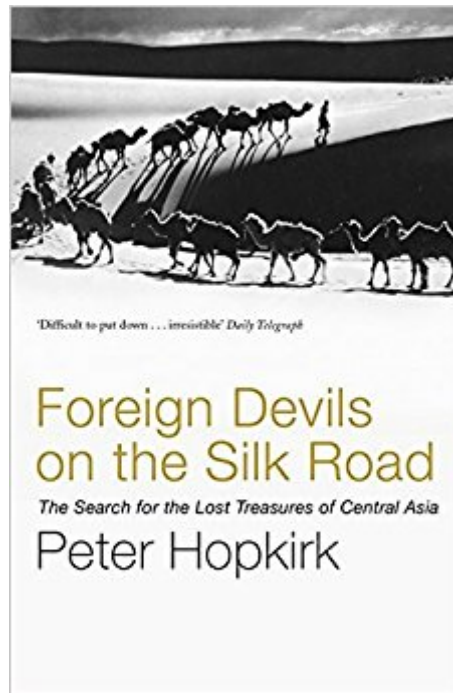




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Foreign Devils On The Silk Road



Synopsis

The Silk Road, which linked imperial Rome and distant China, was once the greatest thoroughfare on earth. Along it travelled precious cargoes of silk, gold and ivory, as well as revolutionary new ideas. Its oasis towns blossomed into thriving centres of Buddhist art and learning. In time it began to decline. The traffic slowed, the merchants left and finally its towns vanished beneath the desert sands to be forgotten for a thousand years. But legends grew up of lost cities filled with treasures and guarded by demons. In the early years of the last century foreign explorers began to investigate these legends, and very soon an international race began for the art treasures of the Silk Road. Huge wall paintings, sculptures and priceless manuscripts were carried away, literally by the ton, and are today scattered through the museums of a dozen countries. Peter Hopkirk tells the story of the intrepid men who, at great personal risk, led these long-range archaeological raids, incurring the undying wrath of the Chinese.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'Highly readable and elegant' [The Times Literary Supplement](#) 'Recounted with great skill . . . opens a window onto a fascinating world' [The Financial Times](#)

Peter Hopkirk travelled widely in the regions where his six books are set - Central Asia, the Caucasus, China, India and Pakistan, Iran, and Eastern Turkey. He worked as an ITN reporter, the New York correspondent of the old Daily Express, and - for twenty years - on The Times. No stranger to misadventure, he was twice held in secret police cells and was also hijacked by Arab

terrorists. His works have been translated into fourteen languages.

Peter Hopkirk's books consistently succeed in highlighting fascinating episodes of 19th-20th century history in ways that are accurate, well written, and highly readable. Hopkirk's books are also extremely relevant for our understanding of the modern world. One cannot really understand current events in Afghanistan, South Asia, and the newly emergent independent republics of Central Asia without knowing their deep cultural histories and the role of competition between European powers in shaping the boundaries, internal rivalries, and political structures of these countries. Hopkirk's book "The Great Game" did a brilliant job of describing 19th Russian-British shadow struggle for control over India and its borderlands. In "Foreign Devils on the Silk Road", Hopkirk explores a different, but equally fascinating rivalry - the competition among English, French, German, Japanese, and Scandinavian adventurer-scholars to explore the newly discovered early Buddhist civilizations that flourished in the desert oases of Xinjiang in westernmost China. These first millennium AD sites along the Silk Road trade route literally were the missing link connecting the civilizations of the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and China; and as such they had tremendous historical importance. As soon as European researchers learned of the remains of lost cities poking through the sands of the Taklamakan desert, archaeologists, philologists and art historians began a race to "acquire" the priceless artwork and manuscripts at these newly discovered sites. "Foreign Devils" describes the intrepid European (and even American) explorers who struggled through dangerous deserts and bandit-infested territories to reach these sites and explore their remains. Hopkirk focuses much of his account on the explorations of Sir Aurel Stein (no relation to this reviewer), and his acquisition for the British Museum of the priceless Buddhist manuscripts from the monastic caves of Dunhuang. But the story is much more than a tale of exploration. Hopkirk correctly and directly addresses the ethical questions involved in the removal by westerners of these irreplaceable items of cultural heritage - sometimes by purchase, sometimes through deception, and sometimes through outright looting and theft. From our modern standpoint, it is easy to say that the Europeans had no right to take these treasures of Buddhist civilization. And yet - Chinese scholars were slow to recognize the importance of the sites and monuments of the Taklamakan, and did not act to assert their right to protect them by excluding foreign explorers until the 1920's. Had scholars such as Stein and Pelliot not removed them, most of these treasures would most likely have been destroyed, looted, or vandalized and otherwise lost forever. Ironically - some of the most important early Buddhist frescoes from western Xinjiang that were brought back to Germany ended up being destroyed in the Allied bombing of Berlin. Hopkirk reminds us that the loss

of these treasures - especially the Dunhuang library - is still a source of deep anger to China. This raises the complex question of the rights of modern countries to demand the repatriation of cultural heritage that had been removed from the lands under their sovereignty - whether legally or illegally under the laws that were in force at the time of their removal. "Foreign Devils" is thus a fascinating piece of history that has very real and immediate implications for modern politics and international relations. This is a thought-provoking tale that should be pondered by all who wonder at the treasures on display in the great art museums of the world. I strongly recommend this book.

Hopkirk's book focuses primarily on the men who travelled the Silk Road in search of ancient treasures. Clearly I was born the wrong sex, in the wrong time; while a lot of these men may be considered treasure-hunting rogues, many of them were highly intelligent, gifted, and brave to have completed these expeditions and excavations, and they have my awe and respect. Their stories and rivalries were very interesting to read. The other theme of the book touches on the status of these lost treasures. Many pieces were lost before the "foreign devils" even found them, and others were destroyed during the World Wars. Others were moved only to remain in storage to this day! Despite some of the sad demises of men like Hedin, Stein, and von Le Coq, I find the avoidable losses of these "lost treasures" most depressing. The positive I've taken from this book is my desire to learn more and the addition of the other books and journals I've added to my reading list on this topic.

I recently visited Xinjiang province on a Silk Road tour. This book had been recommended to me, but I didn't get a chance to read it until I returned from the trip. In some ways, perhaps that was better, since although the story is very engaging, it does presume some knowledge of the geography and history of the region, and there are a lot of place names to keep straight, which is much easier once one has been there. (It's also the case that spelling conventions have changed in the years since this book was published. For example, the town referred to as Tun-Huang in the book is now generally spelled Dunhuang; similarly, Kuche is now more frequently Kuqa.) But these are minor concerns. Peter Hopkirk is an engaging writer and makes the story of "foreign devils" from Britain, France, Japan, Russia, and the US who visited "Chinese Turkestan" in the late 19th and early 20th century accessible to non-experts. He navigates the tricky question of whether they did more good than harm in removing art treasures from their native locations, and his perspective is a balanced one that addresses, but doesn't overly dwell on, the unresolvable question of whether these artifacts, protected for centuries by inaccessibility and the dryness of the Taklamakan desert, would have survived the political and religious attacks in modern times without removal. Hopkirk

spends considerably more time piecing together the hair-raising adventures that the "foreign devils" endured in the extreme climate of the Taklamakan, including stories that remind the modern traveler how much has changed in the past century. If you don't have the opportunity to visit this part of China, but want to know more about what the fuss is about and why these explorers were so motivated, I recommend "The Caves of Dunhuang", a beautiful book of photographs of the Mogao Grottoes, as they are now generally called. The photography is stunning. The book is available on Amazon.

• The Caves of Dunhuang

This is a fascinating story of how several archeologists found and removed the rich art treasures of China's ancient Silk Road, including huge wall paintings, sculptures, and priceless old manuscripts. Hopkirk is a wonderful story teller, going out of his way to be objective while simultaneously presenting his view of this treasure-hunting episode that spanned roughly 30 years. By the time I had finished reading the book, I didn't know whether to praise these early explorers for saving these treasures for posterity or to condemn them as opportunists, ruthless treasure seekers, and thieves. I'm still not sure where I fall on this matter.

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