Yesterday, Having Drunk Too Much...

In ancient China, the value of a domestic slave could be measured in silk. A petty official and his wife, having fallen on hard times in 891, relinquished their twenty-eight-year-old servant to settle a bill. She was worth three pieces of raw silk and two of spun. The deal was formalized on a single sheet of pale, coarse paper and signed with the brush marks of the slave and her owners. Once the pact had been witnessed by two Buddhist monks, her future was decided.

The contract to sell the young slave was among the thousands of documents sealed in the Library Cave. The material spans more than 600 years, and while not every manuscript is dated, many show not only the year of their creation, but also the month and day. Some fastidious scribes even recorded the time.

Although the cave was predominantly filled with religious texts, the secular documents are particularly revealing. They give poignant, amusing and remarkable detail about life along the
Silk Road over hundreds of years. The documents range from ways to entertain the living (such as hints for playing the board game Go) to funeral speeches for the dead (including a eulogy for a donkey). Stein’s haul contains a list of ten reasons why children should be grateful to their mother, not least because she has endured the agony of childbirth and the stinky ordeal of toilet training. Another manuscript sets out the punishment for disrupting proceedings at a women’s club; the rattle-rouser had to provide wine-syrup for an entire feast. This hardly seems the ideal way to prevent such brawls—especially for a club probably comprised of nuns. And lest an offender try to abandon her membership, the penalty for leaving the club was three strokes with a bamboo stick.

Among the more frivolous manuscripts is a debate between Tea and Wine in which each beverage claims supremacy. Lionel Giles, who spent decades cataloguing Stein’s collection, offered a translation in his book Six Centuries at Dunhuang. The debate begins with Tea introducing itself: “Chief of the hundred plants, flower of the myriad trees, esteemed for its buds that are picked, prized for its shoots that are called, lauded as a famous shrub—its name is called Tea.” But Wine dismisses Tea’s boasts as ridiculous. “From of old until now Wine has always ranked higher than Tea. What cannot Wine singly achieve? It will intoxicate a whole army; it is drunk by the sovereigns of the Earth, and is acclaimed by them as their god.” Tea responds, Wine retorts. And the dispute continues as the two immodestly engage in self-promotion until Water finally intervenes, telling both Tea and Wine that their argument is pointless—without Water, neither could exist.

The cave also surrendered a series of model letters designed to resolve matters of etiquette. Some letters suggest a choice of words for offering condolences, others provide suggestions on inoffensive topics such as the weather. Among the trickier situations addressed is a pro forma apology for drunken behavior.

Giles translates: “Yesterday, having drunk too much, I was so intoxicated as to pass all bounds; but none of the rude and coarse language I used was uttered in a conscious state.” The letter continues, explaining that the writer did not learn of his lack of decorum until others told him, at which point he wished “to sink into the earth for shame.” The writer then promises to apologize in person, signing the letter: “Leaving much unsaid, I am yours respectfully.”

If such letters are evidence of a pressing need, it must have been considerable, for another form letter offers the recommended reply: “Yesterday, Sir, while in your cups, you so far overstepped the observances of polite society as to forfeit the name of gentleman, and made me wish to have nothing more to do with you. But since you now express your shame and regret for what has occurred, I would suggest that we meet again for a friendly talk.” Presumably not over a bottle of wine.

When sifting through the Library Cave manuscripts, a moment of time, seemingly lost among the centuries, can return to life. Sometimes all that survives is a fragment. One such scrap mentions Ming Sha—the Singing Sands—and confirms that the sand dunes were as entertaining for men and women in the tenth century as they were for Chiang and Stein in the twentieth century. Another telling fragment is a pledge signed by sixteen men who swear to care for the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. “Even if Heaven and Earth collapse, this vow shall remain unshaken,” the document says. Given the date of their promise—March 25, 970—it is unlikely any of the men lived to see the Library Cave sealed early in the next century, but they may have helped amass the documents placed inside.

Other material about Dunhuang includes ancient topographical records with details that Stein verified from his own travels.
One manuscript tells how a general drew his sword and stabbed a mountain to create a waterfall and quench the thirst of his men. Based on the precisely recorded distances in the ancient manuscript, Stein was convinced he knew the waterfall referred to. The same document also tells of a Dunhuang dragon that required regular sacrifices of local livestock. The dragon—Giles likened it to a local Loch Ness monster—was said to live in a spot known as the Spring of the Jade Maiden. Again, Stein matched the topographic details in the manuscript with his own surveys of the region and concluded he once camped beside the spring-fed lagoon considered to be the dragon’s lair.

Most of the manuscripts in the Library Cave were written in Chinese, but some were in Sanskrit and others in Tibetan, including what is believed to be the world’s oldest known collection of Tibetan sutras. Others contained the angular characters of Bactri Turki (an early Turkish script), Syriac (a branch of Aramaic) and the vertical writing of Uyghur. The cave even held a fragment in Hebrew acquired by Paul Pelliot—all evidence of Dunhuang’s rich monastic libraries and the cosmopolitan nature of the oasis.

For Stein and Pelliot, the presence of each language exposed an aspect of the region’s past. The abundance of Tibetan Buddhist documents attested to Tibet’s dominance two centuries before the cave was sealed. Others scrolls raised questions about the spread of religious beliefs, including Manichaeism. Once among the world’s most widespread religions, Manichaeism became a rival to Buddhism and Christianity. “What had this neat, almost calligraphic manuscript to do in the Buddhist chapel?” Stein muses.

The Library Cave held several Manichean documents, including two hymns titled “In Praise of Jesus.” A translation, published in 1943, includes numerous references to “Jesus the Buddha”—evidence of the Manichean belief that Jesus and Buddha were different incarnations of the same person.

The Library Cave also yielded a painted portrait on silk, rendered at half-life-size but with some unexpected features. In Stein’s five-volume *Serindia*, the male figure with a halo around his head was listed as a bodhisattva, but this face was like no other in the cave. The nose was decidedly Western, as were the mouth and lips. And there were other strange features: the saintly figure, with a cross on his headband, had a red moustache and beard, and the painting’s only surviving eye was blue. After *Serindia* was published in 1921, Stein wrote to his one-time rival Albert von Le Coq to say he thought the figure was a Buddhist image that “Nestorian Christians could safely address their prayers to.” How the Christian image found its way into the cave remains as unanswered as Stein’s musings about the Manichean documents.

Overwhelmingly the material in the Library Cave was religious, and some dealt with life beyond the grave. An illustrated copy of The Sutra of the Ten Kings, sixteen feet long, depicts the Chinese Buddhist version of Judgment Day, when the deceased pass through ten courts, and the kings of the underworld decide whether the dead will be reborn into a higher or lower realm. Colored paintings on the scroll depict a hell where sinners carry wooden stocks fastened around their necks, whippings are commonplace and limbs are gouged with spears.

Another Library Cave manuscript offers even more graphic descriptions through the story of one of literature’s most devoted sons, Maudgalyayana. After her death, Maudgalyayana’s greedy, deceitful mother is sent to the underworld. The son approaches the Buddha for help and learns his mother is suffering in the Avici— the worst of hell’s eight levels. The young monk attempts a rescue. He arrives in a world as terrifying as anything Hieronymus Bosch imagined. A translation of the tale, by American professor Victor H. Maiz, describes the horrific scene:
Iron snakes belched fire, their scales hissing on all sides. Copper dogs breathed smoke, barking impatiently in every direction. Metal thorns descended chaotically from mid-air, piercing the chests of men. Axes and augers flew by every which way, gouging the backs of the women. Iron trees flailed at their eyes, causing red blood to flow to the west. Copper pins poked at their toes until white fat oozed to the east.

There were more than several tens of thousands of jailers and all were ox-headed and horse-faced.

When Maudgalyayana locates his mother, her agonies are abundant. "At every step, metal thorns out of space entered her body; she clanked and clattered like the sound of five hundred broken-down chariots."

Through the Buddha's intervention she is released, only to be sent to the realm of the Hungry Ghosts where wants cannot be satiated. When she spots a stream of cool water, it transforms into pus. Her throat constricts until she is incapable of swallowing even a drop of moisture. Once more the Buddha tells Maudgalyayana how his mother can be saved, but her greed ensures she is reincarnated as a black dog that eats excrement from latrines before the diligent son finally helps her attain a human rebirth.

One of the richest themes to emerge from Abbot Wang's cave is science, although the scrolls that fall within this broad heading range from the practical to the perplexing. A first-aid manual, "Single Ingredient Empirical Remedies to Prepare for Emergencies," offered prescriptions for cholera, vomiting, gastric reflux, sores, ulcers, and more. In a preface, the unknown author wrote of his intention to have the medical manual's advice carved into rock so that its wisdom would be available for all.

It is possible that gold was achieved about 1.000 miles southeast of Dunhuang. In the Longmen Grottoes in Henan province is a cave with a stone stele engraved with 140 treatments known as the Longmen prescriptions. Wang Shumin, a Beijing scholar of traditional Chinese medicines, has pointed out that many similarities exist between the early first-aid manual written in ink on the Dunhuang scroll and the advice set in stone at the Longmen Grottoes.

Mere snippets remain of what was once part of a fifty-volume encyclopedia of medical knowledge. The Dunhuang copy survives as five scrolls that discuss herbal uses for garlic, calabash (an edible gourd), various grains and fruits. The full text, compiled in 649, was so revered that the Tang dynasty's rulers distributed copies of the encyclopedia across the country, and it remained the definitive source of medical knowledge for 400 years. As China's first official medical handbook, it predates the earliest European counterpart, the Nuremberg Pharmacopoeia, by 500 years.

What constitutes medicine among the Dunhuang texts sometimes extends to what would now be considered cosmetics and domestic products. One scroll contains an ointment for skin rashes, a breath freshener, a fabric deodorizer, and even a hair tonic made from the leaves of a watermelon vine. Another medical manuscript attempts to divine the future based on where moles appear on the body. In auspicious locations, they predict that a woman will respect her husband and bear good sons. Elsewhere, they bode ill, such as one mole said to foretell that a wife will kill each of three husbands.

In the Dunhuang scrolls, medical science sometimes merges with the metaphysical. An intact text titled "Wonderful Instructions on the Skill of Quiescent Breathing" includes Daoist spells. Among these are an invocation to the crane spirit and "secret instructions conferring invisibility." A separate text promises to enable a person to fly. The levitation recipe is simple enough, but the ingredients could be hard to procure: the potion requires the seeds and root of a lotus plant that has been stored for a thousand years.
The dating of the Dunhuang manuscripts is a mix of science and art. Some documents contain elaborate colophons that pinpoint their creation. In other instances, scholars look for changes in how Chinese characters are written. One trusted method of determining a document’s age involves checking whether certain characters appear at all. As each new dynasty came to power, some characters became taboo and were banned from use. This was done out of respect for an important person, typically the emperor, but the effect was to leave a means of dating documents as leaders rose to power and fell from grace. Even the absence of a single stroke on a character can help date a manuscript.

China’s preoccupation with documenting and dating events shows up elsewhere in almanacs and calendars found in the Library Cave. Almanacs could only be printed with the emperor’s approval, although the cave’s treasures prove there was some bending of these rules. In the West, almanacs with their voluminous facts may seem like statements of the obvious, but China placed great importance on them. Their use in predicting cosmic events—eclipses, the alignment of planets and the like—was viewed as evidence of an emperor’s perfection. If, through his diviners, the emperor could distinguish auspicious days from catastrophic ones, it was proof of his divine entitlement to rule. But there was a downside to what was known as “heaven’s mandate.” Fail to predict the arrival of a celestial event such as a comet or even sun spots and the masses didn’t merely grumble. They felt entitled to rebel against a leader who they believed had been abandoned by the gods.

The Library Cave contained a handful of black-market almanacs, including a complete copy for the year 877. Produced nine years after the Diamond Sutra was printed, it shows entrepreneurs willingly muscled in on the emperor’s monopoly, even though the punishment for printing or possessing banned documents was harsh. Merely owning books on astronomy or prophecy could incur two years’ forced labor. The rewards for printers, though, were abundant. For sellers, the books were in high demand but cheap to make, courtesy of the same woodblock-printing techniques that produced the Diamond Sutra. For buyers, an almanac could divine the opportune days for marriage or moving into a new house, even the best time to trim one’s fingernails. In short, they provided the recipe for a better life.

The need for almanacs and calendars was acute, in part because China employed a complex method of calculating dates using the moon as well as the sun. Much as we now add a leap day to a modern calendar, the emperor occasionally added an entire month to reconcile solar and lunar time. While the superstitious modern man can easily work out the next Friday the thirteenth, his counterpart in ancient China was helpless without consulting the works of the emperor’s astronomers.

Of course, to make such predictions required great precision in reading the heavenly omens. Chief among those were the stars and planets, and here, too, the mountain of documents inside the Library Cave contained vital material, including a seventh-century star chart. The 11-foot-wide chart is the oldest known map of the stars from any civilization. In China’s world view, the heavens were part of the human realm, not distinct from it. The role of astronomers and astrologers was to monitor the celestial and terrestrial to ensure the two were in harmony.

The great Sinologist Joseph Needham is believed to be the first to recognize the significance of the Dunhuang star chart. In the late 1950s, he estimated the chart was created in 940. More recently, French scholars Jean-Marc Bonnet-Bidaud and Françoise Fraderie, together with the British Library’s Dr. Susan Whitfield, concluded it is centuries older. Chinese taboo characters
were one factor, but the other involved a crudely drawn illustration on the far left of the scroll. The image depicts an archer, believed to be the god of lightning. Just as the fashion-conscious today can date a dress by its hemline or shoulder pads, the hats of ancient China can be assessed by the ear flaps. Those on the archer's hat are flat; later fashion saw men starch the flaps so they stuck out. The result of this detective work into language and millinery has been to push back the date of the star chart's creation to between 649 and 684.

Aside from the fact that it survived at all—the chart is the thickness of cigarette paper—the chart's accuracy and comprehensiveness are remarkable. Where Greek mathematician and astronomer Ptolemy catalogued 1,022 stars, Chinese astronomers recorded 1,339 stars. The celestial scroll begins with drawings and interpretations of clouds and vapors—one in the shape of a prancing wolf portends a son becoming a general or high official. It unfolds to reveal twelve panels showing the positions of the stars in black, white, and red, corresponding to three schools of Chinese astrology. The star chart is also notable for solving the challenge of how to render the three dimensions of a spherical world onto the two dimensions of paper. The West wrestled with the problem until the sixteenth century, when the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator produced the solution still used today.

A comparison of the ancient map and the charts of modern astronomers reveals that the Chinese rendered the sky with startling accuracy. But there is one significant omission: the North Star. As with the prohibition of certain Chinese characters, the polar star is absent because it symbolized the emperor.

Apart from manuscripts on paper, the other great finds in the cave were splendid paintings on silk. At one point when Abbot Wang was fetching items from the Library Cave in 1907, Stein rescued some cloth Wang used to level the floor on which the Library Cave's scrolls were stacked. Today, that fabric is among the most prized pieces of Chinese silk embroidery in the British Museum. The eighth-century piece, "Shakyamuni preaching on the Vulture Peak," is nearly eight feet long and more than five feet wide. The British Museum considers the split-stitch embroidery to be "one of the most magnificent of all the compositions found in the hidden library at Dunhuang." At its center is the Buddha, who stands on a lotus pedestal, flanked on each side by a crouching lion. From his indigo hair to his toenail on his bare feet, he has been rendered with exquisite Tang dynasty care. His right shoulder is bare and he preaches the Lotus Sutra. On each side he is accompanied by a bodhisattva and a disciple, and the cheek of the bodhisattva on the left is rendered in a whorl of tight stitching.

Of China's four great inventions—paper, printing, gunpowder, and the compass—the first three feature in the Library Cave. Paper and printing are obvious, but gunpowder figures as well. A painted silk banner, obtained by Pelliot and now in the Musée Guimet in Paris, contains the world's earliest known depiction of firearms. The banner shows the Buddha Shakyamuni withstanding an assault by the demon Mara and his fellow tormentors who are trying to prevent the Buddha's enlightenment. As the Buddha sits imperturbable in lotus position, the demons deploy a flamethrower—an early flamethrower—and a hand grenade against their serine target.

Another textile, one that speaks of human yearning, is an altar valance with colored strips of silk that dangle like a row of men's ties. Stein noted small knotted tassels hung from some of the streamers—indicating they were offerings by devotees praying for children. Stencils, too, were tucked among the piled manuscripts. Just as woodblock printing enabled mass production,
stencils could render multiple images of the Buddha and hasten the accumulation of merit. Examples of stenciled art abound on the walls of the Mogao Caves.

Other uses of paper that emerged from the Library Cave include Buddhist paper flowers. Spanning four inches, the six hand-cut votive flowers probably once decorated the caves of Mogao. Glued to the walls, such flowers adorned the caves in lieu of real flowers that would have struggled in the extremes of the Taklimakan Desert. Stein even found a brush inside the Library Cave that was used to apply glue.

The Library Cave was a source of knowledge about ancient music, too, and Pelliot collected some of China’s oldest surviving musical scores—works from the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907). Some of the music is for the pipa, a pear-shaped stringed instrument that features in the murals of numerous grottoes. The music is still played today. In 1987, twenty-five of the Dunhuang songs were recorded by Beijing’s Central Folk Orchestra and released on compact disc.

Study of the scrolls, silks, and other items in recent decades has resembled piecing together a global jigsaw puzzle as fragments held in different countries are matched up. Some material, even more minute than the scattered fragments, has occupied the attention of scholars. Debris from Stein’s packing crates that once held Library Cave material—stored for a century in two jars—has been the object of recent investigations. “Steen dust,” as the British Library calls it, has undergone chemical analysis for what it might reveal about conditions inside the Library Cave in 1907. But it is the preoccupations of people, rich and poor, that have proved most illuminating. Across the centuries, some aspects of the human condition are unchanging, whether they concern a fascination with the heavens, questions about an afterlife or just the search for the right words after a drunken night on the town.

After the excitement and freedom of the expedition, Stein, now in London with his cargo, faced a period of what he considered drudgery and servitude. His desert finds needed to be unpacked, sorted, listed, photographed, and published. The task was immense but necessary if scholars were to benefit from the discoveries, and he wanted that work undertaken while the collection was still together, before London and Calcutta divided the spoils.

Stein was relieved when his friend Fred Andrews, whose case Stein had been pushing, was able to work with him on the sorting. The pair previously worked together on the finds from Stein’s first expedition, and the General—as Stein’s friends dubbed him—knew Andrews was the ideal loyal lieutenant. An artist, teacher and, by 1909, head of Battersea Polytechnic’s art school, Andrews was reliable and attentive to detail. While Stein was in the desert, Andrews dutifully filled every request: for candles, a fountain pen, pince-nez, and far more. “I am afraid you will find that distance is no protection from me,” Stein had once warned Andrews. The requests were undiminished by Stein’s return to