

A FOCUS ON DUNHUANG

Frances WOOD*

Chair of Editorial Board

For the last few years, the summer workshop program of the Sinological Development Charitable Foundation (SDCF) has focused on Dunhuang, the place, and its significance. As former curator of the Dunhuang collections in the British Library, this was of great interest to me and a privilege to participate in. The corpus of manuscripts found at Dunhuang in 1900, dating mainly from the 4th to 11th centuries, has enabled scholars to reconstruct many aspects of Chinese life as experienced in the oases of the Silk Road, and has thrown light on access to philosophical texts and their use. Though Buddhism and Buddhist texts dominated the collection, Taoist and Confucian works were also much in evidence.

On the edge of the great desert in Gansu province, not far from the oasis town of Dunhuang, near the point where the historical Silk Road split to lead north and south along the edge of the dunes of the desert, a stream runs beneath a long cliff, its banks planted with slender poplar trees. Behind the trees, the cliff is pierced with hundreds of caves, carved

* PhD, University of London; Research Associate, SOAS China Institute.

out of the rock and filled with magical wall paintings and serene statues. The Thousand Buddha Caves (*Qian fo dong* 千佛洞) were hollowed out and decorated over nearly a thousand years from the 4th century CE, with a peak of activity during the Tang dynasty. One of the greatest sites of Buddhism in China, Dunhuang had a special significance for it lay on the route taken by Chinese monks who travelled to India to collect Buddhist images and Buddhist texts, which they brought back to China for translation and as inspiration for the creation of Buddha images. On some of the wall paintings in the caves, we can find depictions of exhausted pilgrim monks, their shoulders bowed down by Indian palm leaf texts in their backpacks, as well as laden camels and horses who carried goods along the Silk Road, from east to west and vice versa.

Aside from its significance as a major Buddhist site, central to many flourishing temples in the nearby oases, Dunhuang also came to represent the history of the Silk Road, the rise and fall of local kingdoms and the relationships between them and the outside world. This arose from the discovery in 1900 of a small cave, Cave 17 as it is now known, which had been walled up and hidden from sight for a thousand years. Tens of thousands of paper rolls and hundreds of paintings on hemp and silk were discovered, placed in the cave for safekeeping. Though most of the paper rolls were inscribed with texts in Chinese relating to Buddhism, there were also texts in Sanskrit, Sogdian, Brahmi, Tangut and Tibetan, illustrating the cosmopolitan nature of the area in the past. There were also Taoist, Confucian, Nestorian and Manichaean texts, and non-religious texts on medicine, divination, music, local history and topography, literature and education, including a thousand-year-old copy of the *Thousand Character Classic* (*Qian zi wen* 千字文) memorized by schoolboys over the centuries. This and other Confucian texts found at Dunhuang, used in local schools throughout the Tang dynasty, demonstrate for SDCF students the enduring dominance of Confucianism in education throughout China, even in remote settlements in Gansu. There were many fragments of secular items, illustrating all sorts of aspects of daily life, including illegally

produced almanacs, wills, club circulars, deeds of sale and loan, government circulars, censuses and monastic shopping lists.

For students of Chinese history in all its many aspects, and for those studying the history of Central Asia and the rise and fall of local kingdoms and cultures such as the kingdom of Khotan or Sogdian merchants, Dunhuang manuscripts offer a wealth of information covering the period from the 4th to 10th centuries. For SDCF students following the summer school program on Chinese thought and religion, the Dunhuang manuscripts offer a very broad introduction to Chinese Buddhism but also demonstrate the circulation and use of Confucian and Taoist texts in the period before printing, when such texts existed only in manuscript.

Though the myriad temples of the Dunhuang area had fallen into disuse by the Song dynasty, the Thousand Buddha Caves enjoyed a new focus of concern in the first years of the 20th century. With new interest in the area fostered by distant and competing powers such as Russia, Great Britain, France and Germany, explorers, part spies and part archaeologist-collectors, vied with each other for ancient treasures of the area as they also made maps and observations on this edge of the area involved in the “Great Game.” A great part of the Dunhuang manuscripts and other treasures from nearby sites were taken away to European museums. At the time, as the Qing dynasty fell and China struggled to re-establish itself as a republic, China’s central governmental power was weak and unable to resist the activities of these treasure-seekers, but by the 1940s, there were serious efforts made by Chinese archaeologists, scholars and artists to protect and secure the caves and their contents. Today, the caves receive some two million visitors every year and conservation is a major concern. Visitors are carefully conducted to specific caves after introductory videos, and they can also see reconstructed caves and displays of artefacts in the museum on site. For those interested in conservation and museum management, and the exploitation and explanation of the past, Dunhuang offers one of the best examples in China.

Dunhuang’s position on the Silk Road also offers a vision of the future. Where travelers in the past had to struggle for days on ox-carts

or camels, new, fast, roads traverse the desert region, many lined with millions of solar panels planted in the fields alongside, demonstrating China's concern to exploit renewable energy. Traffic on the Silk Road highways also illustrates the contemporary desire to renew the Silk Road, encouraging traffic between east and west. While the Dunhuang manuscripts can help students understand China's past and appreciate, in particular, the significance of Buddhism in China's history, visiting Dunhuang itself can reveal something of the future, of a hope for communication and for conservation of the national heritage. We can think back to an era in the 4th–6th centuries when Sogdian merchants, famous for their sweet talk, dominated the economic life of the oases; when translation of Buddhist texts from Indian languages and scripts, sometimes through the medium of yet more languages such as Khotanese and Kuchean, created the great Chinese Buddhist canon; when Chinese manuscripts in paper re-created the format of the Indian palm-leaf originals; and when imperially commissioned manuscripts of Buddhist sutras, copied in the distant capital, were sent to the temples of Dunhuang on the order of the Empress Wu—in short, a time of considerable communication and cosmopolitanism. With greater understanding of the philosophical background to Chinese culture, I hope that SDCF graduates can communicate something of the same openness and shared optimism.