

# A Snapshot of Dunhuang Studies, *circa* 2016

*Imre Galambos*

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The Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered in the summer of 1900 in a sealed-off cave within the Buddhist cave-temple complex (also known as Qianfodong, or ‘Thousand Buddha Caves’), at Mogao, near the city of Dunhuang in present-day Gansu province. (The cave complex itself was ‘discovered’ by European scholars in 1879, when members of the expedition led and financed by Count Béla Széchenyi [1837–1918] reached the caves.) This revelation, made by a Daoist monk living at the caves, soon attracted the interest of foreign explorers and archaeologists, who purchased many of the manuscripts and paintings from the monk and shipped those back to their respective countries. The acquisition and dispersal of the Dunhuang manuscripts was part of the larger process of colonial exploration of Central and East Asia—events that have been viewed in radically different ways in China and the West.

The manuscripts from the Library Cave (Cave 17) numbered over 50,000 in total and were written in nearly twenty different languages and scripts, including Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur, Khotanese, Sogdian and Sanskrit. The discovery provided an unprecedented amount of material for scholarship, in some cases leading to the establishment of entirely new fields of research. The manuscripts and art contributed to practically every field of knowledge connected to medieval China and Central Asia—from popular literature and religious practices to linguistics and art history. The enormous quantity of material discovered in this trove also led to the development of a separate field, known by the name of Dunhuang studies (*Dunhuang xue*), a term that gained currency

in Japan and China from the 1960s.

As a result of the early dispersal of the Dunhuang collections and the turbulent history of the 20th century, Dunhuang studies has developed as an international field of research. Researchers from different countries made important contributions in the form of catalogues, books and articles published in their respective languages. It is hard to deny that, to some extent, this situation mirrors the cultural and linguistic background of medieval Dunhuang. Even though in the past decades China has gradually grown to be the dominant player in this field, Dunhuang studies as a whole remains an international field, with researchers working in institutions around the world, forming a vibrant and exciting community with lots of new projects, exhibitions, conferences and an ever-increasing stream of scholarly output. The list of publications specifically devoted to Dunhuang that came out just last year runs into the hundreds, making it almost impossible to keep up with all the new developments in the field.

Among the most important trends is that manuscripts and art are being made increasingly accessible to researchers. With China’s newfound economic prosperity and accompanying policy changes, mainland Chinese scholars are now able to travel overseas to visit and study the major collections. Another aspect of increased accessibility is that images of manuscripts, artefacts and cave murals are being made available in printed and digital forms. The publication of high-quality facsimiles of manuscripts from the major collections began in the 1990s and continues to this day. This enterprise,



Fig. 1 Detail of  
*Baoenjing* (*Sutra of*  
*Requiting Kindness*)  
From Cave 17, Mogao  
caves, Dunhuang,  
Gansu province, China,  
mid-to late 8th century  
Banner painting,  
ink and colours on silk,  
177.6 x 121 cm  
British Museum  
(1919,0101,0.12)  
(Image © The Trustees  
of the British Museum)

carried out by large academic publishers in China (for example, the Shanghai Ancient Books Press; the Sichuan People's Press), enables researchers not only to read the manuscripts with greater precision but also to examine their codicological features. A major problem with the volumes is their size and price, putting them beyond the reach of anyone but major libraries. Moreover, the images are black and white, and in some cases the quality is still insufficient for a more detailed study of the non-textual characteristics of the manuscripts.

These problems are effectively resolved by the digitization projects sponsored by philanthropic foundations such as The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Getty Trust, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. As a result of these efforts, scholars are able to access colour images of murals, silk paintings, banners and manuscripts online. One of the most important

such resources is provided by the International Dunhuang Project (IDP; [idp.bl.uk](http://idp.bl.uk)) at the British Library, the website of which, along with those of its partner institutions around the world, offers close to a half a million images of manuscripts and artefacts collected from Dunhuang and other sites in Central Asia. Since its establishment in 1995, one of the focal points of the project has been to digitally reunite the dispersed contents of the original cave library and to make these available for the academic community. Other important online sources are the Artstor Digital Library ([artstor.org](http://artstor.org)), which offers high quality zoomable images of Dunhuang art and—to a smaller degree—manuscripts. In addition, the digital library site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF; [gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)) includes digitized images of the entire Pelliot collection of Dunhuang manuscripts, in a user-friendly form. Often the same material is available on multiple sites, making access even easier—thus the Dunhuang paintings from the British Museum can be seen on both the website of the museum and that of the IDP, as it is the case with the detail of the silk banner in Figure 1, showing a narrative accompanying a Buddhist sutra.

Along with greater access to photographic images of the original material, research is moving in new directions. Initially, scholars working on Chinese manuscripts were mainly interested in secular texts of the traditional 'four-fold' categories (*sibu*) of old-school Sinology. Thus much attention was devoted to manuscripts of the Confucian classics, dictionaries, histories and various literary genres, ranging from poetry to newfound examples of popular literature. In contrast with the excitement generated by these types of texts, Buddhist manuscripts seemed to arouse less interest, even though they were by far the most numerous in the original cave library. A notable exception in this regard was the work of Japanese scholars, who did much groundbreaking research on religious texts, revolutionizing the field of Chan/Zen studies. In addition, most of the early work was specifically text oriented, leaving the physical manifestation of those texts (that is to say, the manuscript) aside and focusing on the connection of the text with the transmitted tradition, including other versions of the same or related texts.

Recent decades, however, have witnessed a marked change to appreciating the context in which the manuscripts and paintings came into being, including the social and religious circumstances of their production (for one of the early examples



Fig. 2 Human figures from the verso of a student's manuscript From Cave 17, Mogao caves, Dunhuang, Gansu province, China, c. 10th century Manuscript scroll, ink on paper, 15.5 x 150 cm British Library (Or.8210/S.5655) (Image © The British Library Board)



Fig. 3 Illustration of female figure protecting a small child From Cave 17, Mogao caves, Dunhuang, Gansu province, China, Tang dynasty, c. 9th century *Pothi*-leaf manuscript, ink and colours on paper, 33 x 8 cm British Museum (1919,0101,0.177.3) (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum)

of a focus on the reconstruction of the liturgical background of manuscripts, see Teiser, 1994). This approach often leads to new insights regarding the functionality and use of the manuscripts (Copp, 2014), and entails the appreciation of the religious dimension of the material and the fact that it was produced and preserved in a Buddhist cave complex. The study of Buddhism is now regarded as being among the most important directions in Dunhuang studies, as shown by the wealth of recent publications devoted to religious practices (Yu Xin, 2011), Buddhist-related popular literature (Cartelli, 2013; Wang Sanqing, 2009; and Huangjian Taishi [Arami Hiroshi], 2010), and the composition of the Buddhist canon (Fang Guangchang, 2006). Along with the Chinese material, manuscripts in Tibetan and other languages have generated just as much exciting new research (Kapstein and Dotson, eds, 2007; Dotson, 2009; Kapstein and van Schaik, eds, 2010; and Skjærvø, 2002). In parallel with this, there has been a growing interest in other religions, including Daoism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism, the study of which has yielded a sizeable body of scholarship (Mollier, 2008; and Li Tang, 2001).

Related to the social and religious aspect of the material is the study of the lives of the people who produced the manuscripts and paintings, including the monks and nuns, pilgrims and lay people whose names we encounter in the colophons and inscriptions (for a recent study on the lives of nuns, see Shi Xiaoying, 2013). Again, early on, Japanese scholars paved the way for this research but there is now a new wave of related scholarship in China and the West (for studies on lay local associations, see Hao Chunwen, 2006; and Meng Xianshi, 2009). Among the promising topics is the study of student life in Buddhist monasteries in Dunhuang, based on the colophons and poems left behind by students (Itō Mieko, 2008; as Figure 2 shows, sometimes the manuscripts of students involved an element of playfulness). Equally interesting are multilingual and multicultural aspects of life at Dunhuang, which are evidenced not only by the variety of languages and scripts found in the Library Cave but also by the wall paintings inside other caves at Mogao (for example, Russell-Smith, 2005). Often the same manuscript contains different languages and scripts, pointing to the multilingual nature of Dunhuang society—seen in the *pothi*-leaf manuscript illustrated in Figure 3.



Although there has been a considerable amount of research on the Tibetan manuscripts and the period of Tibetan control over Dunhuang in general, in recent years we also see an increased interest in contacts and interaction with other Central Asian peoples (Rong Xinjiang and Zhu Lishuang, 2013a).

Partly as a result of the availability of good-quality digital images, and partly due to parallel trends in Western scholarship, researchers are paying more attention to the visual aspects of manuscripts, appreciating their codicological and palaeographic features, including their layout, book form, punctuation and variant characters (see the red corrections and markup on a manuscript in Figure 4). The French team of Dunhuang scholars has been most active in this respect over the past few decades; their expertise in this regard is probably directly related to their having catalogued the Pelliot collection at the BnF and their experience in working with the original manuscripts (the latest example of this line of research is Drège and Moretti, 2014). In recent years this approach also found its way into English-language scholarship and the physicality of manuscripts played a central role in several recent monographs (Nugent, 2010; van Schaik and Galambos, 2012).

Scientific analysis being carried out on paper and

silk offers another promising direction, results from which are bound to have an impact on a variety of issues, especially dating and determining provenance (a new result of this line of work is Helman-Ważny, 2014; another important centre for the scientific analysis is at Ryukoku University, Kyoto). Finally, there is also research aimed at exploring the manuscripts and images from the standpoint of the history of science, such as medicine and astronomy (Lo and Cullen, eds, 2007; Despeux with Ang, 2010; Bonnet-Bidaud, Praderie and Whitfield, 2009; as Figures 5 and 6 show, some manuscripts also contain technical illustrations that provide additional information not available in the text).

The caves themselves have also, though to a lesser extent, been the object of study since their discovery in the late 19th century, and the murals have attracted considerable attention among scholars working on art history and religious studies. The inscriptions have proven invaluable in supplying specific names and dates that can be connected with our existing knowledge of the region. Still, recent approaches have opened up new directions of research on art in the Mogao caves (Fraser, 2004; Qiang Ning, 2004; Sha Wutian, 2013). In addition, it has been recognized that the murals and the caves on the whole have a great potential to popularize the phenomenon of Dunhuang

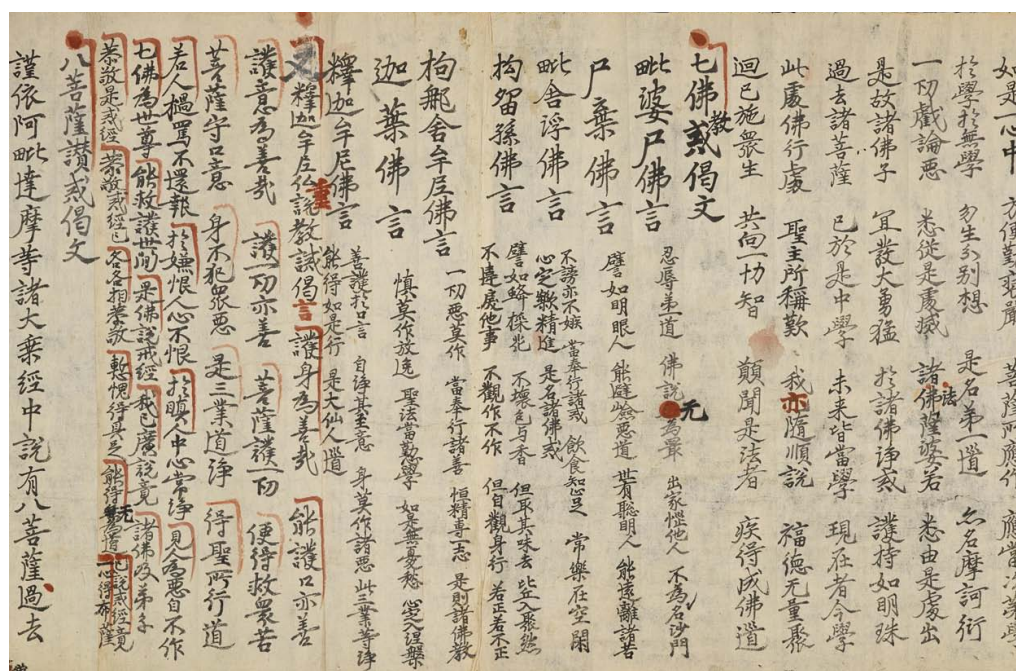


Fig. 4 Buddhist text with red corrections and mark-up From Cave 17, Mogao caves, Dunhuang, Gansu province, China, Tang dynasty (618–907) Manuscript scroll, ink and colour on paper, 29 x 785 cm British Library (Or.8210/S.102) (Image © The British Library Board)



Fig. 5 Illustration in a medical manuscript  
From Cave 17, Mogao caves, Dunhuang,  
Gansu province, China, Tang dynasty (618–907)  
Manuscript scroll, ink on paper, 27.5 x 192 cm  
British Library (Or.8210/S.6168)  
(Image © The British Library Board)

for the general public, and this insight has led to some noteworthy publications (Fan Jinshi, 2010; Whitfield, 2015). Among the efforts to make Dunhuang studies accessible to a wider scholarship is Brill's decision to commission an English translation of Rong Xinjiang's *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang*, a seminal work that presents a well-rounded overview of the field (Rong Xinjiang, 2013).

To this day, Dunhuang studies remains a dynamic and inspiring field comprising a truly international group of scholars. Each year numerous international conferences are held in China, Japan, Europe and the US to share the fruits of new research (see the proceedings published as Popova and Liu, 2012). Several academic periodicals, some of which appear multiple times a year, are devoted specifically to Dunhuang. Just to name some of the most important ones, *Dunhuang yanjiu* comes out every other month; *Dunhuangxue jikan* is published four times a year; the *Newsletter of [the] International Liaison Committee*

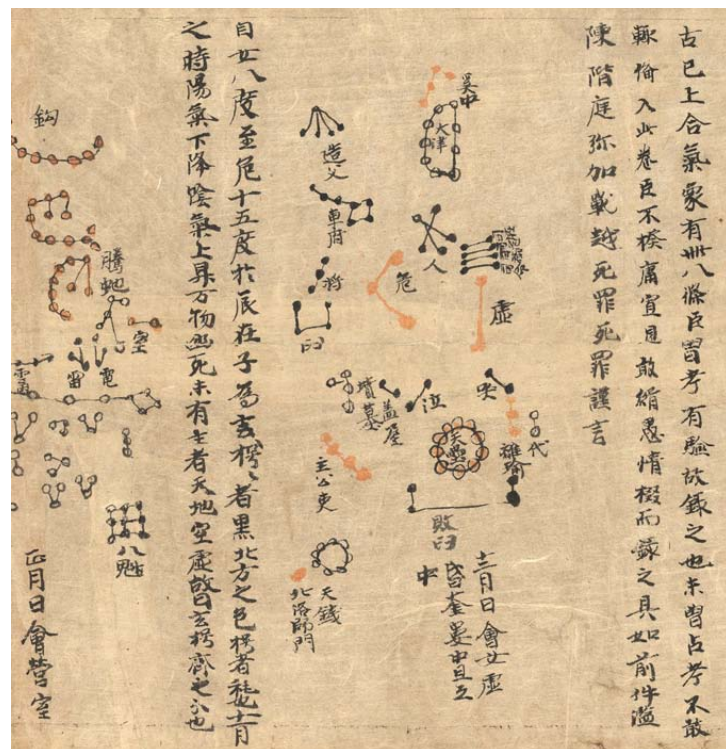


Fig. 6 Detail from a manuscript thought  
to be the earliest known star chart  
From Cave 17, Mogao caves, Dunhuang,  
Gansu province, China, early 8th century  
Manuscript scroll, ink on paper, 24.4 x 330 cm  
British Library (Or.8210/S.3326)  
(Image © The British Library Board)

for *Dunhuang Studies* and the Kyoto-based *Tonkō shahon kenkyū nenpō* are each published annually. Many other Chinese periodicals devoted to textual scholarship, history or other subfields within the humanities or social sciences regularly include content related to Dunhuang. All in all, over a century after the discovery of the caves and the manuscripts, the incredible body of data, part of which is still being made available, continues to stimulate research and will go on doing so into the future. Unquestionably, there is still much to be learned from the material, and newer generations of scholars will be able to find just as much food for research as those who came before them.

*Imre Galambos is Lecturer in Pre-modern Chinese Studies at the University of Cambridge.*

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