

The Beginning and End of Dunhuang Manuscripts

Stephen F. Teiser, Princeton University

From the time the manuscripts from Dunhuang were first discovered until now, some of the best scholarship has focused on the reasons for the sealing of the library cave, Mogao Cave 17. As is well known, two major reasons have been proposed for the depositing of the manuscripts in the cave and its subsequent sealing-up in the early eleventh century. The “sacred waste” theory, followed by Stein, Fujieda, Fang, and others, proposes that the texts, wrappers, and paintings in the cave had outlived their usefulness in religious and social life but were too sacred or rare to be simply burned or disposed of. Hence, batches of manuscripts from several temple libraries were collected and preserved. Another theory, most recently reformulated by Rong, is that the manuscripts were consciously placed into the cave in order to “avoid disaster,” in this case the rumored invasion of the Karakhanids. Some scholars have hypothesized other possible disasters that motivated the preservation of the manuscripts, including invasion by the Tanguts and the decline of the Dharma.

These important theories have guided research and generated important scholarship. But they have also led us to ignore some of the other important aspects of Buddhist manuscript culture. In particular, in assuming that the entire body of manuscripts from Dunhuang constitutes a library or single corpus, these theories obscure the multiple origins of the manuscripts and the diverse range of religious and social institutions in which the texts were produced. Instead of focusing on the end of the manuscripts, my paper considers how the beginning—the creation and use—of the manuscripts can provide invaluable information about Buddhist religious practice and the institutions of literacy in East Asia.