Buddhism in Central Asia III

Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines

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Contents

CHAPTER 11

The Funerary Context of Mogao Cave 17

Mélodie Doumy and Sam van Schaik

Abstract

The sealed Cave 17 in the Mogao cave complex (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟) has given us many of the most important primary sources for understanding Buddhist, and to some extent non-Buddhist, doctrines and practices in Eastern Central Asia, China and Tibet. The best-known theories about the original function of the cave have paid little attention to the details of Buddhist ritual practice. In this paper we reorient the approach to Cave 17 at Dunhuang towards the funerary function of the cave and its contents. We argue that we need to look at the role of the Cave 17 as a Buddhist funerary shrine for a better understanding of its contents, and put this in the context of Buddhist funerary practices involving the interment of books and other religious objects as relics in *stūpa*s and shrines.

1 Introduction[1]

The manuscripts, printed documents, paintings, and other ritual objects discovered by Wang Yuanlu (ca. 1849–1931, 王圓籙) in 1900 in a hidden cave at the Mogao cave complex, near Dunhuang (敦煌), constitute the biggest find of medieval material anywhere in Central and East Asia. Since the early 20th century, the contents of the cave, now known as Cave 17, have had a huge impact on the study of Asian religions, history, art history, linguistics, and other fields. Despite their overwhelming connection to Buddhism, they also include texts from the Daoist tradition, as well as Manichaeism, Christianity, and other religions; also found there were letters, contracts, and diverse secular documents ranging from poetry to medical charts. Much of the material placed in the cave, manuscripts and otherwise, was in a well-used, damaged or fragmentary state. In English-language scholarship, Cave 17 is often referred to as the Library

1 The authors would like to thank Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, Neil Schmid, Carmen Meinert, Lewis Doney, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions and contributions to this paper.

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Cave.[2] However, when we look at the contents of the cave as a whole, they are far from what the word 'library' usually means.

The cave was a funerary shrine for a monk called Hongbian or Wu Sanzang (d. 862, 洪辯, 吳三藏, Tib. Hong pen), whose statue, originally situated in the cave, had been moved at some point as the cave was filled with other material. What ended up in the cave was an assemblage of items representing the everyday life of Dunhuang and its monasteries.[3] As such, they constitute an extraordinary time capsule,[4] but there is no evidence that preserving this content for future generations was the primary motivation behind their deposit. In fact, we have frustratingly little knowledge as to why this very varied collection ended up in the small cave. Two main suggestions have gained currency over the years. The first, put forward by Aurel Stein (1862–1943) in his account of his second expedition, was that the manuscripts and other objects placed in Cave 17 were 'sacred waste'. Stein suggested that these items had outlived their use in the Buddhist communities from which they came, but could not be thrown away because of their religious content; hence they were placed in this shrine cave in perpetuity. However, this theory did not draw on precedents in Buddhist textual or archaeological data.[5]

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2 The earliest published reference to the cave as a library seems to be Paul Pelliot's report of 1908, which was titled "Une bibliothèque médiévale retrouvée au Kan-sou," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 8 (1908): 500–529. Similarly, Aurel Stein's published account of his second expedition refers to Cave 17 as "a walled-up library" or "a walled-up temple library"; see Marc A. Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1912), vol. 2, 182–185. In Chinese language, Cave 17 is widely referred to as the 'scripture repository cave' (Chin. Cangjing dong 藏經洞), which is perhaps more accurate.

3 For a review of the textual contents of Cave 17, see Mélodie Doumy, "Dunhuang Texts," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), accessed July 18, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.771.

4 Recently, Valerie Hansen has referred to the Dunhuang Caves as the "Time Capsule of Silk Road History." Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167–197.

5 The lack of evidence for this kind of waste deposit has been mentioned by Richard Salomon, "Why Did Gandharan Buddhists Bury Their Manuscripts?," in *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual and Art*, ed. Stephen C. Berwitz, Juliane Schober, and Claudia Brown (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 24. Salomon has stated that he originally considered a similar reason for the deposit of the Gāndhārī scrolls, but later revised it: "This explanation for the rationale of the interment of the British Library scrolls is, however, by no means beyond doubt. For one thing, although taboos on the profanation of discarded scriptures are common in many cultures, I have not been able to locate any explicit textual reference to such a rule in Buddhist literature." See also for descriptions by Lajos Ligeti of what he considered 'manuscript cemeteries' in Northern China: Sam van Schaik and Imre Galambos, *Manuscripts and Travellers: The Sino-Tibetan Documents of a Tenth-Century Buddhist Pilgrim*

Another suggestion, explicitly opposed to Stein's, was put forward by Rong Xinjiang. Rong argued that the contents of Cave 17 were actually the library of the Sanjie Temple (Chin. Sanjie si 三界寺, Tib. Pam kye zi), which was moved to the cave and sealed to keep it safe from a feared invasion by non-Buddhists.[6] Drawing on an idea first put forward by Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), Rong suggested that the invasion of Khotan by Turkic armies in 1006 might have frightened the monks of Dunhuang into sealing the cave, though these armies did not actually come near to Dunhuang.[7] However, neither Pelliot nor Rong offered any supporting evidence that the Buddhists of Dunhuang feared for their manuscript collections at this time or took steps to protect them.

A more prosaic reason seems more plausible, as Yoshiro Imaeda has argued:

> Would it not be more natural to assume that during the course of more than one and a half centuries following its excavation old documents were steadily brought into the cave with the result that, even after Hongbian's portrait statue had been moved elsewhere, there was no longer any space for storing further documents, and the cave was sealed when it could no

(Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 20–22. However, it is interesting that Ligeti's account is not supported by textual or archaeological scholarship.

6 Rong Xinjiang, "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reasons for its Sealing," tr. Valerie Hansen, *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 11 (1999–2000): 247–275. The argument is based on manuscript colophons about the collecting activities of Daozhen (ca. 915–ca. 987, 道真) (on whom, see below) and the fact that a number of the Dunhuang manuscripts bear the seal of Sanjie Temple. Though well received, Rong's theory has also been subject to criticism. The original Chinese article by Rong was criticised in 1996 by Dohi Yoshikazu 土肥義和, "Tonkō isho fūhei no nazo wo megutte 敦煌遺書封閉の謎をめぐって [On the Mystery of the Sealing of the Dunhuang Manuscripts]," *Rekishi to chiri: Sekaishi no kenkyū* 歴史と地理：世界史の研究 [History and Geography: A Study of World History] 486 (1996): 32–33. Dohi argued that there are only around 200 manuscripts from the cave that can be linked with Sanjie Temple. In this article, he also showed that the monks of the Bao'en Temple (Chin. Bao'en si 報恩寺) in Dunhuang were auditing and restocking their library at the end of the tenth century; thus, Daozhen's activities were not an isolated case. The other argument in Rong's article is that there were intact objects, especially paintings, found in Cave 17; as he argues, this makes Stein's theory of 'sacred waste' less plausible. However, Rong does not take into account other options based on Buddhist ritual practice, including the creation of sacred objects as a meritorious act in itself, requiring no further use for the object, except for its deposit in an appropriate place. As we will argue here, the funerary context of Cave 17 helps us to understand the ritual context for the deposit of both fragmentary and intact items like this.

7 Rong, "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave," 272–273. Pelliot had previously suggested that an invasion by the Tangut Kingdom (ca. 1038–1227, in Chinese sources known as Xixia 西夏) in 1035 might have been the trigger for the sealing of the cave. Pelliot, "Une bibliothèque médiévale retrouvée au Kan-sou," 506.

> longer function even as a storage room, which occurred in the first half of the eleventh century?[8]

It is also possible that the cave remained open for much longer. After the cave was sealed, a mural was painted across both sides of the entrance to Cave 16. This renovation project, which probably dates from the period of Tangut influence in Dunhuang in the 12th and 13th centuries, is perhaps the most convincing reason for the sealing of the opening into Cave 17. Thus, a firm dating of this painting would be the best way of reaching a *terminus ad quem* for the cave as a potential repository.[9]

In 2011, Sam van Schaik and Imre Galambos put forward another reason for the presence of manuscripts in Cave 17, based on its role as a funerary shrine for the Buddhist monk Hongbian:

> It is likely that manuscripts belonging to the monk were interred at the time of the cave's consecration. Later, as a continuation of this practice, manuscripts belonging to, or connected with, other revered monks might also have been deposited in the cave.[10]

In the present chapter, we follow up van Schaik and Galambos' suggestion by further exploring the Buddhist ritual context for the interment of manuscripts and other religious objects in *stūpa*s and shrines in funerary practices. We start with the local ritual context of the Mogao Caves themselves and the function of Cave 17 as a Buddhist funerary shrine. We then explore whether the contents of the cave are contact relics, or 'relics of use', as well as the precedents for an initial deposit of relics being followed by secondary deposits over time. We argue that the funerary context of Cave 17 has to inform any of our theories about how the materials found in the cave came to be there in the first place. Even more, a theory that fits within this funerary context should be considered more plausible than those that do not.

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8 Yoshiro Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 66 (2008): 98.

9 This argument was made by John Huntington who suggested that Cave 17 may have been sealed up as late as the mid-13th century, based on the dating of the murals in the entrance corridor to Cave 16. John Huntington, "A Note on Dunhuang Cave 17, 'The Library' or Hong Bian's Reliquary Chamber," *Ars Orientalis* 16 (1986): 93–101.

10 van Schaik and Galambos, *Manuscripts and Travellers*, 25.

2 The Funerary Context of the Mogao Caves and Function of Cave 17 as a Stūpa Shrine

Rather than looking at Cave 17 in isolation, let us first turn to the funerary context of the Mogao Cave complex as a whole. In "Art in the Dark," Robert Sharf has argued convincingly for seeing it as a site for funerary rituals:

> I would suggest that we approach Mogao, Kizil and other larger sites in Xinjiang and Gansu as we do Yungang and Longmen: rather than regard the grottoes as intended for monastic practice such as meditation, we would do better to treat them as mortuary shrines donated by well-heeled patrons to produce merit for their deceased parents and ancestors. The caves were not there to serve the clerics; rather, the clerics were there to serve the caves.[11]

Sharf argues that there is no reason to think the caves were used frequently after they were created: "Insofar as the caves were built to generate merit, the task was largely complete at the time the shrine was finished and the icons consecrated."[12] He suggests that there were probably regular ceremonies, but these would have been the usual annual festivals such as those celebrating the Buddha's birth and enlightenment, and these probably did not take place inside the caves, which were too small and dark.[13] While we agree with Sharf's general argument against the idea that the caves were in continuous use by Buddhist monks for activities such as meditation, it is also clear that ritual practices for the community of Dunhuang did take place at the Mogao site, and at least occasionally in the caves themselves, as Sørensen and Meinert have argued.[14]

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11 Robert Sharf, "Art in the Dark: The Ritual Context of Buddhist Caves in Western China," in *Art of Merit: Studies in Buddhist Art and its Conservation*, ed. David Park, Kuenga Wangmo, and Sharon Cather (London: Archetype Publications, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013), 49.

12 Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 49.

13 Ibid., 49–50. For a counter-argument, though not primarily concerned with the Dunhuang caves, see Angela Howard, "On 'Art in the Dark' and Meditation in Central Asian Buddhist Caves," *The Eastern Buddhist* 46.2 (2015): 19–40.

14 Henrik H. Sørensen, "Light on 'Art in the Dark': On Buddhist Practice and Worship in the Mogao Caves," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.6 (2021). On the specific tantric ritual function of the later Cave 465, see Carmen Meinert, "Beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies: Tantric Rituals in Eastern Central Asia under Tangut Rule, 11th–13th C.," in *Buddhism in Central Asia II—Practices and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer*, ed. Yukiyo Kasai and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 313–365. See also Michelle Wang, "Dunhuang Art," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), accessed August 26, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.173.

Moreover, funerary feasts were a major feature of this ritual programme. A few texts containing monastic accounts in the Dunhuang manuscripts shed some light on the Buddhist festivals held at the local monasteries and at the caves themselves. Jacques Gernet discussed this, mainly based on the scroll P. 2049, which contains monastic accounts for the purchase of oil for lighting ritual lamps, and food for funerary feasts.

The feasts for the benefit of the deceased could be held at any time, but there was also a regular calendar of festivals. From the accounts of the Jingtu Temple (Chin. Jingtu si 淨土寺) discussed by Gernet, which are for the years 924 and 930, there are four main festivals, including two that were held at the caves: a lamp festival in the first month of the year, and the festival of the dead in the seventh month of the year.[15] The festival for the dead was a major annual event across medieval East and Central Asia, and remains so to the present day. Funerary feasts were held at the Mogao complex as a matter of course. In the context of the festival of the dead, Gernet shows that the Jingtu Temple allocated funds for flour to make Buddha bowls (Chin. *fopen* 佛盆) and invited local officials to a banquet at the caves.[16] There is also plentiful evidence in manuscript copies of society bylaws interred in Cave 17 that lay Buddhists were active at the Mogao caves. These lay Buddhist associations (Chin. *she* 社) were often involved with fundraising to support donations to the Buddhist community, the performance of rituals, or the construction of new cave shrines. In a recent study, Stephen Teiser has argued that the most important role of these associations was a funerary one: "Providing mutual assistance for funerals and memorial rites was likely the most important function of Buddhist lay associations."[17]

The many small *stūpa*s constructed in front of the cliffs and along the road leading to the site from the town of Dunhuang further hint at the funerary context of the Mogao site as a whole. The fragmentary illustration on P. T. 993, which depicts a monastery near the caves, along with several *stūpa*s, shows that these were already a feature of the site in the ninth and tenth centuries.[18] Cave 17, as we have already mentioned, was set up as a funerary shrine for the monk Hongbian, and blends seamlessly within this wider funerary context.

15 Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 201–202.

16 Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 202.

17 Stephen Teiser, "Terms of Friendship: Bylaws for Associations of Buddhist Laywomen in Medieval China," in *At the Shores of the Sky: Asian Studies for Albert Hoffstädt*, ed. Paul Kroll and Jonathan A. Silk (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 164.

18 We would like to thank Neil Schmid for discussing with us the relevance of the *stūpa*s at the Mogao site, and their connection with P. T. 993.

A member of the wealthy Wu (吳) family, and also known as the Tripiṭaka Master Wu (Chin. Wu Sanzang), Hongbian who was active in the ninth century, during the Tibetan rule of Dunhuang and the beginning of the Guiyijun period (851–1036?, 歸義軍, Return-to-Allegiance Army).[19] During his lifetime, he became the highest-ranking monk in the Dunhuang monastic community, as well as a politically influential figure. A painted stucco statue, depicting a male figure seated with his legs crossed and dressed in monastic robes, was placed in Cave 17, facing the entrance. It was intended as a life-sized portrait of Hongbian and contained his ashes, which were held in a silk bag placed in an opening at the back.[20] The bag has since been removed and is now kept in the local Dunhuang Museum.[21] As Hung Wu pointed out, the ashes themselves are sacred relics, making this statue the earliest surviving example of an eminent monk's 'ash icon'. Combining Buddhist and Confucian concepts, this elevates the statue as an embodiment of Hongbian to serve as the focus for continuing ritual practices.[22]

The statue is set against the background of a mural painted on the north wall of the small cave. The mural represents two trees, whose foliage forms an arched canopy around the figure of Hongbian. A satchel and a flask of water, both iconographical attributes of the monk, hang from the branches of both trees, flanking him. Further to the side, under each of the trees, are two female

19 Several dates have been suggested for the beginning of the period of Tibetan rule of Dunhuang, with 786 often used, though Bianca Horlemann's suggestion of the late 750s or early 760s now widely accepted; see Bianca Horlemann, "A Re-evaluation of the Tibetan Conquest of Eighth-century Shazhou/Dunhuang," in *Tibet, Past and Present: Tibetan Studies 1. Proceedings of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 2000*, ed. Henk Blezer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 49–66. The transition from the end of Tibetan rule of Dunhuang to the Guiyijun period was between 848 and 851; see Henrik Sørensen, "Guiyijun and Buddhism at Dunhuang: a Year by Year Chronicle," *Buddhist Road Paper* 4.2 (2019).

20 The bag, 14 cm high by 8.5 cm wide, was discovered in October 1965 when the statue of Hongbian was transferred from Cave 362 to Cave 17. Tied with white silk thread, it is made of two layers of silk: purple silk inside and white silk outside. Within the bag, the remains were wrapped in white silk wadding and a piece of white hemp paper. The bag itself was enclosed in a hemp paper manuscript containing a writing exercise. See Ma Shichang 马世长, "Guanyu Dunhuang Cangjingdong de ji ge wenti 关于敦煌藏经洞的几个问题 [Several Questions Regarding Dunhuang Cave 17]," *Wenwu* 文物 [Cultural Artefacts] 12 (1978): 27.

21 Ueyama Daishun 上山大峻, "Tonkō monjo fūnyū kō 敦煌文書封入考 [A Study of the Sealing of the Dunhuang Documents]," *Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 佛教学研究 [Studies in Buddhism] 56 (2002): 26. Also Mogao Cave 17 (Later Tang Dynasty (923–935, 後唐)), http://public.dha.ac.cn/content.aspx?id=898738212291; and Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 57.

22 Hung Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 142–143.

attendants: on his right-hand side, an *upāsikā* is carrying a staff and a towel; on his left, a *bhikṣuṇī* is standing with a large silk fan.[23] According to Sharf, these could equally "constitute *mingqi*–surrogates and grave goods meant to serve Hongbian in the afterlife."[24] A stele was placed on the west wall and can still be found *in situ*.[25] It records Hongbian's accession to the role of district *saṃgha* overseer of the Hexi region (Chin. *Hexi du sengtong* 河西都僧統) in 851 and also lists the gifts that he received on that occasion: silks, *sūtra* wrappers, and a purple robe, the latter representing the highest honour a Buddhist monk could receive from the emperor.[26] As we will see, these are the same sort of objects that were also placed in Cave 17. Hongbian's stele is an important mortuary object and key to understanding the making of the cave. The link between steles and public memory in Chinese funerary culture was highlighted by Ken E. Brashier:

> The stele represents yet another mortuary object that preserves a relationship net around the ancestor both in terms of what it says about its dedicatee and the process by which it came to be erected. It prevents his knot from unraveling.[27]

It is not clear exactly when Cave 17 was built as a niche in the corridor of the much larger Cave 16. Scholars have generally assumed that it was part of the original plan of Cave 16, and therefore had another use before it was excavated; suggestions have included a space for storing food, or a meditation cave for Hongbian himself.[28] However, it is unlikely that the Mogao caves were in use frequently enough to require food storage, and the idea that they were built as meditation caves has been criticised.[29] It is also possible that Cave 17 was carved out later and for the specific purpose of serving as a shrine for Hongbian

23 Digital Mogao Cave 17. https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0017, accessed November 29, 2023. A sketch on paper from the cave depicting a seated monk with a similar iconography is in the British Museum manuscript 1919,0101,0.163 (Ch.00145).

24 Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 58–59.

25 According to Stein's original account, the stele was removed by Wang Yuanlu after he opened Cave 17; see Marc A. Stein, *Serindia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), vol. 2, 808–809. It was subsequently replaced on the west wall of the cave.

26 Sarah Fraser, *Performing the Visual* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 4.

27 Ken E. Brashier, *Public Memory in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 303.

28 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 86.

29 See the critique of the idea that small caves were used for meditation at Mogao in Sharf, "Art in the Dark."

around the time of his death in 862.[30] In an article published in 2006, Zhang Jingfeng explained that Cave 17 was not the only one of its kind at Mogao. In fact, it shares similar characteristics with seven other small caves that he refers to as 'shadow caves' or 'image caves' (Chin. *yingku* 影窟): Cave 137, Cave 139, Cave 174, Cave 357, Cave 364, Cave 443 and Cave 476. Three of these are located near Cave 17; Cave 476, for instance, was carved right above Cave 17, leading Zhang to consider whether they were perhaps linked, if not to Hongbian, at least to the Wu clan. Shadow caves were established as funerary shrines during the Guiyijun period for Hexi's district *saṃgha* overseers or other eminent monks, whose images were contained inside the caves in the form of paintings or statues. These caves are the Dunhuang equivalent of ancestral temples or shrines. They symbolised the status of specific individuals as venerated masters, and performed the function of commemorating them.[31] As such, they are a "striking case of the conflation of cave and tomb."[32]

All this raises the question of how to understand the original purpose of Cave 17, as well as that of these other similar small caves at Dunhuang. Buddhist funerary structures can be *stūpa*s, which house relics and tend to be sealed, and shrines, which house remains and/or representations of the dead, and tend to be open.[33] However, if we look at accounts in medieval Chinese sources, these two concepts may have been somewhat interchangeable. Robert Sharf's study of the funerary practices for Chan (禪) teachers in the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐) cites several texts in which a mummy or statue representing the teacher was placed in a *stūpa*; yet it is clear that what is referred to as a *stūpa* is not a fully-enclosed dome structure, but a room with doors.[34] Sharf describes these

30 Ma, "Guanyu Dunhuang Cangjingdong de ji ge wenti," 25; 27–28.

31 Zhang Jingfeng 張景峰, "Dunhuang Mogao ku de yingku ji yingxiang—you xin faxian de di 476 ku tan qi 敦煌莫高窟的影窟及影像—由新發現的第476窟談起 [Dunhuang Mogao Caves Shadow' Caves and Shadow Images—Discussion on the Newly Discovered Cave 476]," *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊 [Journal of Dunhuang Studies] 3 (2006): 107–115.

32 Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 57.

33 As Gregory Schopen has pointed out, in India a *stūpa* could take different forms, with only the most prestigious being large architectural structures; most *stūpa*s were a 'humble little structure' built to house pots containing bones and other relics; see Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 293.

34 In some cases, the texts also mention a stele placed in the *stūpa*, as seen in Cave 17. Robert Sharf "The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch'an Masters in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 32.1 (1992): 9.

structures as "*stūpa*-mausoleums." These could be constructed outside of the city, in locations including cemeteries and mountain shrines.[35]

> We find, then, that the *stūpa*-mausoleums that housed the embalmed remains of a saint or marked the site of his interment were frequently outfitted with a portrait or effigy. It would appear that these modest mausoleums were the precursors of the substantial buildings known in later times as 'memorial halls' (*ch'ung-t'ang*), 'portrait halls' (*chen-t'ang*), or 'image halls' (*ying-t'ang*).[36]

Sharf also highlights the economic role of *stūpa*-mausoleums, namely that the representation of a highly-regarded deceased master allowed for a continuation of regular offerings to him.[37] The form of Cave 17, as a small shrine containing an image of Hongbian with his ashes and a stele recounting his meritorious activities, matches the *stūpa*-mausoleums as described in these texts of the Tang Dynasty.[38] Thus, we can say with some confidence that such structures, encompassing the funerary roles of both *stūpa* and shrine, were known in China at the time of the consecration of Cave 17 as Hongbian's shrine.[39]

In East Asia from the seventh century onward, the form of *stūpa*s evolved into tall, multi-tiered, pagodas.[40] In Eastern Central Asia, Mogao Caves 16 and 17 are actually both part of a larger cave temple carved over three storeys that was commissioned by Hongbian over several decades in the ninth century.[41] The caves were excavated from top to bottom, starting with Cave 366 and

35 Sharf, "The Idolization of Enlightenment," 20.

36 Ibid., 21.

37 Ibid., 25.

38 Huntington has pointed out the similarity between the interior spaces of *stūpa*s to the east of the Dunhuang cave site and the interior of Cave 17 itself, all of which feature a statue of a monk against the rear wall along with flanking paintings. See Huntington, "A Note on Dunhuang Cave 17," 101.

39 Although we argue for the funerary dimension of the cave, we here steer away from referring to it as a grave owing to the more restrictive definition of that term, which usually signifies a place dug in the ground where the body is buried. The term can be better applied to other structures in the Dunhuang landscape; see Hung Wu, "What is Dunhuang Art," in *Nomads, Traders and Holy Men Along China's Silk Road*, ed. Annette Juliano and Judith Lerner (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 8–9. For a wider study of Chinese mortuary culture, see James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

40 Elizabeth Errington et al., "Stupa," *Grove Art Online*, accessed October 28, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T082073.

41 Zhang, "Dunhuang Mogao ku de yingku ji yingxiang," 111; Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 81–102.

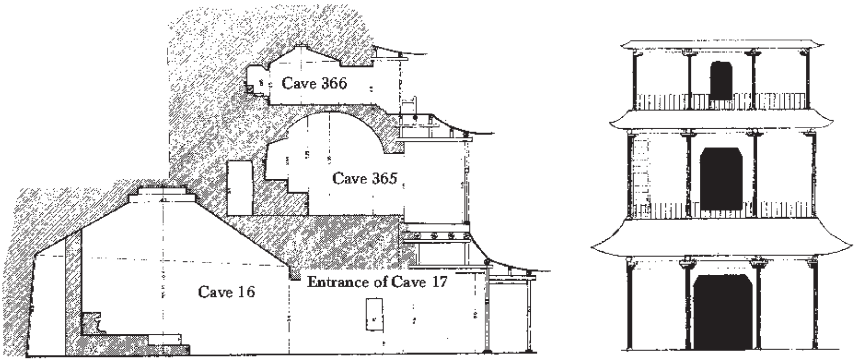

FIGURE 11.1 Sketch of the three-storey complex of Mogao Caves 16, 17, 365, and 366 DIAGRAM BY SHI ZHANGROU 石璋如, *MOGAO KU XING* 莫高窟形 [SECTION AND PLAN MEASUREMENTS OF THE MOGAO GROTTOES], VOL. 2. TAIPEI: ZHONGYANG YANJIUYUAN LISHI YUYAN YANJIUSUO, 1996, PLS. 126–127. REPRODUCED FROM YOSHIRO IMAEDA, "THE PROVENANCE AND CHARACTER OF THE DUNHUANG DOCUMENTS," 87

ending at ground level with Cave 16.[42] Cave 365, on the middle floor, contains an inscription in Tibetan indicating that its construction was sponsored by Hongbian in the years 832 to 834, when the region was still under Tibetan rule.[43] Cave 16, the largest of the three caves, is said to have been created around 851, at the time when Hongbian became the district *saṃgha* overseer of Hexi. This network of caves, which are vertically aligned to form a tall pagoda, is further complemented by an earth *stūpa* erected at the top of the cliff-face, possibly the 'Pagoda of the Immaculate Dharma Flower' (Chin. Fahua wugou zhi ta 法華無垢之塔) mentioned in the manuscript P. 4640.[44] The whole structure, referred to by Sha Wutian as a 'vertically combined cave pagoda' (Chin. *taku chuizhi zuhexing shi* 塔窟垂直組合形式) follows a model that emerged at Dunhuang from the late eight to the early tenth century and replicated multi-tiered pagodas.[45] In addition to Caves 16, 365 and 366, there are at least

42 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 86.

43 Ibid.

44 Sha Wutian 沙武田, "Dunhuang Tubo yijing sanzang fashi Facheng gongde ku kao 敦煌吐蕃譯經三藏法師法成功德窟考 [Study of the Merit Cave of Master Facheng, the Tripiṭaka and Sūtra-translator of Tibetan Ruled Dunhuang]," *Zhongguo zangxue* 中國藏學 / *China Tibetology* 3 (2008): 45.

45 Sha, "Dunhuang Tubo yi jing sanzang fashi Facheng gongde ku kao,"40–47.

two other such instances at Mogao: Caves 234 and 237; and Caves 161 and 156.[46] Another feature that reinforces their similarity with pagodas when they are viewed from the outside is that the caves decrease in size from the bottom to the top.[47] According to Zhang Xiantang, this suggests that the cave complex connected to Hongbian embraced both the appearance and the function of a *stūpa*, thus confirming the nature of Cave 17 as a *stūpa* shrine.[48]

We know from the Dunhuang manuscripts that the kind of rituals mentioned above actually took place in the system of caves connected to Hongbian, if not directly in Cave 17. A document held at the Dunhuang Academy (Dunhuang 322) records how, in 951, a group of lay Buddhists led by the monk Daozhen (ca. 915–987, 道真) made lamp offerings at eleven or more major caves on the occasion of the Laba or lantern festival (Chin. *laba jie* 臘八節). This notably included the Seven Buddhas Cave (Chin. Qifo ku 七佛窟) and the Cave of Wu Heshang (Chin. Wu heshang ku 吳和尚窟). The former can be identified with Cave 365, which was excavated by the monk Hongbian and dedicated to seven Buddhas; the latter could correspond to Cave 16. As Imaeda points out, "[t]his means that even in the middle of the tenth century, about one century after their excavation, the caves associated with Hongbian were still being maintained by devotees."[49] These ritual activities may also have resulted in the deposit of further materials into Cave 17, a possibility to which we will return later.

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46 Interestingly, Caves 161 and 156 are both possibly linked to the eminent monk Wu Facheng (fl. first half of 9th c., 吳法成, Tib. 'Go Chos grub), contemporary of Hongbian. See ibid., 40–47.

47 Zhao Xiaoxing 趙曉星, "Mogao ku Tubo shiqi ta, ku chuizhi zuhexing shitan xi 莫高窟吐蕃時期塔, 窟垂直組合形式探析 [An Analysis of the Vertically Combined Pagoda-caves at the Mogao Caves during the Tibetan Era]," *Zhongguo zangxue* 中國藏學 / *China Tibetology* 3 (2012): 95. In her article, Zhao also suggests that this type of structure, of which Cave 143 and its associated earth *stūpa* may be another instance, were influenced by Tantric Buddhism.

48 Zhang Xiantang 張先堂, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang yujing xiangyi mai—jiantan Dunhuang Mogao ku cangjing dong de fengbi yuanyin 中國古代佛教三寶供養與經像瘞埋—兼談敦煌莫高窟藏經洞的封閉原因 [Offerings to the Three Jewels in Ancient Chinese Buddhism and the Burial of Scriptures and Images—Also on the Reasons for the Sealing of Cave 17]," *Tonkō shahon kenkyū nenpō* 敦煌寫本研究年報 [Dunhuang Manuscripts Research Annual Report] 10.2 (2016): 263–264.

49 Stephen Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 148–149; Henrik H. Sørensen, "The Life and Times of Daozhen—a Saṃgha Leader and Monk Official in Dunhuang during the 10th Century," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.3 (2020): 20; Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 92.

3 The Contents of Cave 17 as Relics of Use

In a 2016 article, Zhang Xiantang pointed out that Cave 17 had long been regarded by scholars as an isolated phenomenon, despite the growing number of Chinese sites attesting to the depositing of Buddhist items in a wide range of places such as crypts, graves, caves, and *stūpa*s. Taking a macroscopic view, he surveyed the archaeological discoveries made across the country in the previous decades and established a list of the sites where scriptures, images or other artefacts had been buried, thus demonstrating that this was a widespread Buddhist practice in ancient China.[50] Zhang distinguished two intrinsically connected types of burials: burials of Buddha images; and burials of mixed materials, including Buddha images and scriptures. The latter, which are particularly relevant to our analysis of Cave 17 and its contents, are linked to *stūpa*s. In addition to hosting relics of the Buddha and of then becoming a way to consecrate and bury the relics of eminent monastic figures, *stūpa*s were used to inter and consecrate Buddhist images and Buddhist scriptures. Due to their limited space, most of the *stūpa*s that were found to host composite deposits contained a relatively small number of images and manuscripts. There are three notable exceptions: the Shende Temple *stūpa* (Chin. Shende si ta 神得寺塔) in present-day Shaanxi Province; the Hongfo *stūpa* (Chin. Hongfo ta 宏佛塔) close to the former Tangut capital Zhongxing (中興); and the large *stūpa* in Karakhoto.[51]

The most immediate comparison to Cave 17 is the large *stūpa* discovered at the beginning of the 20th century in the city of Karakhoto (Chin. Heishuicheng 黑水城), at the northern periphery of the former Tangut Empire.[52] Commonly referred to as the *suburgan*, which is the Mongolian term for *stūpa*, it is located only a few hundred meters away from the northwest corner of the city wall. When the Russian explorer Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov (1863–1935) and his team started excavating the structure, they unearthed a large trove of Buddhist scriptures, prints, *thangka*s, and other artefacts, such as miniature *stūpa*s, bronze and wooden statues.[53] Around the central pole of the *stūpa* were arranged

50 Zhang, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang," 253–273. For a list of archaeological discoveries in the same article, see his Annex, 264.

51 Ibid., 253–273. For the location of Hongfo *stūpa* and Karakhoto see the following map: Carmen Meinert, "Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia," in *Buddhism in Central Asia 1—Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 252–253, map 10.1.

52 Zhang, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang," 262–264.

53 The collections are now divided between the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and the Hermitage Museum.

about twenty life-size clay statues "resembling lamas, conducting a religious ceremony in front of hundreds of manuscripts in Tangut script, stacked one upon the other."[54] The collection, which encapsulated "the essence of the culture of the Tanguts,"[55] also contained a small group of non-Buddhist artefacts, both manuscripts and paintings.

According to Kozlov, a wide range of items were jumbled up together in the upper part of the *stūpa*, while some of the books found on the bottom level were neatly stacked and possessed cloth wrappers. In the words of Kira Fyodorovna Samoyuk:

> The disorder gave reason to suppose that after the burial of some member of the priesthood, further items were added to those originally in the tomb. While such a possibility cannot be excluded, given that the town was faced with imminent enemy assault, it is difficult to accept it without question. The sheer quantity, quality and diversity of the books and scrolls in the tomb point to the treasure's having belonged either to some person of high station, or to a wealthy monastery. We have no clues as to who precisely was buried there.[56]

The base of the *stūpa* further revealed the remains of a body. The skull was taken to St. Petersburg, where it was studied by the anthropologist F. Volkov and identified as that of a female of over fifty years of age.[57] Professor Lev N. Menshikov (1926–2005) proposed that the body was that of a member of the ruling family, possibly none other than the Empress Lo herself, buried with her personal collection. However, this theory has been criticised and other scholars have suggested that the deceased was most likely an eminent nun.[58]

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54 Pyotr K. Kozlov, *Mongolia i Amdo i myortvy gorod Khara-Khoto: Ekspeditsiya Russkogo Geograficheskogo obshchestva v nagornoy Azii P.K. Kozlova, potchotnogo chlena Russkogo Geograficheskogo obshchestva. 1907–1909 gg* [Mongolia and Amdo and the Dead Town of Karakhoto: The Russian Geographical Society's Expedition to the Mountains of Asia, led by Pyotr K. Kozlov, Honorary Member of the Russian Geographical Society, 1907–1909] (Moscow, St. Petersburg: n.p. 1923), 556.

55 Kira Fyodorovna Samosyuk, "Preface," in *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto* (*x–xiii th Century*), ed. Mikhail Piotrovsky (Milano: Electa, 1993), 18.

56 Kira Fyodorovna Samosyuk, "The Discovery of Khara Khoto," in *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto* (*x–xiii th Century*), ed. Mikhail Piotrovsky (Milano: Electa, 1993), 45–46.

57 Samosyuk, "The Discovery of Khara Khoto," 44–45.

58 We would like to thank Maria Menshikova, Hermitage Museum, for discussing this with us.

Based on the colophons on the manuscripts, it has generally been accepted that the *stūpa* was constructed in the 13th century, before the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227, in Chinese sources known as Xixia 西夏) was conquered by the Mongol army in 1227. However, the sealing of the *suburgan* was probably not related to the fear of a Mongol invasion. The *stūpa* was filled with texts, paintings and sculptures out of respect for the deceased, and its closure was part of the funerary rituals associated with this.[59] Carmen Meinert has argued that the filling of the Karakhoto *stūpa* with religious objects also enhanced its status as a sacred site:

> Just as a consecrated *stūpa* is regarded as a representation of the body of the Buddha on the level of absolute truth, its being filled with Buddhist scriptures represents the Buddha's teachings and the scriptures may be seen as the bases for the realization of Buddhist ideas and accumulation of merit on the level of relative truth. They serve as an inspiration for the practitioner and lend an aura to the site, charging it with religious meaning.[60]

Quoting the Tangut scholar Shu Xihong, who suggested that both the contents of the Karakhoto *stūpa* and Cave 17 were offerings, Zhang Xiantang drew the conclusion that the origin, construction and sealing of Cave 17 were not only closely linked to but also the result of offerings to the three jewels (Skt. *triratna*; Chin. *sanbao* 三寶).[61] Making offerings to the three jewels is a fundamental Buddhist practice, which includes gifts made to relics housed in *stūpa*s.[62] Zhang also explained that, given the original nature of *stūpa*s as repositories for Buddha relics, it was natural that Buddhist followers would deposit images and texts that were for the most part fragmentary, old fashioned and out-of-use, although he does not exclude the possibility that they could in addition have chosen to donate completely intact items.[63]

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59 Kira Fyodorovna Samosyuk, "Preface." In *Ecang Heishuicheng yi shupin* 俄藏黑水城藝術品 [Karakhoto Art Works in Russian Collections] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 2011).

60 Carmen Meinert, "Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice: Examples from the Chinese Kharakhoto Manuscripts from the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227)," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 50 (2019): 61–62.

61 Zhang, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang," 262–264.

62 Michael Willis, "Offerings to the Triple Gem: Texts Inscriptions and Ritual Practice," in *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma*, ed. Janice Stargardt and Michael Willis (London: British Museum Press, 2018), 66–73.

63 Zhang, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang," 264.

Traditionally, offerings to the three jewels were made at shrines and *stūpa*s. Since the relics contained therein were equivalent to the living bodies of eminent monks, the same kinds of things were offered to them. As Michael Willis has shown, traditional lists include a robe, begging bowl, seat and bed, but also food, scented ointments and lamps. The bulk of the material found in Cave 17 is of a different nature, and may be better understood as relics.[64] As we mentioned earlier, other materials were deposited in Cave 17 alongside the manuscripts and printed documents. Textiles, now for the most part kept at the National Museum of India in New Delhi and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, include banners, rugs, altar coverings, and possibly monks' robes. These textiles all appear worn, and thus seem to have been in use before they were placed in the cave. Like the manuscripts, most of these objects have the character of ritual ephemera or personal possessions rather than luxury goods. For example, there is a large and very worn patchwork textile (ca. 1 × 1.5m) that may have been a monk's robe or a bed cover, which has been dated to the eighth to ninth century, and therefore may have belonged to Hongbian or another monk.[65]

The majority of the textiles in the cave are banners, most of which are damaged. Banners also maintain a strong association with funerary practices in Dunhuang; for example, the rules of a local lay association state that "when a member dies, his family should report the death and all members should lend their support by contributing one piece of cotton or hemp cloth towards the funeral."[66] When considering material like this we might need to make a distinction in the funerary nature of the contents of the cave between the personal possessions of the dead on the one hand, and objects that were used in their funerary rituals on the other. However, both types may be described as relics due to their close association with the deceased.[67]

64 Willis, "Offerings to the Triple Gem," 69.

65 MAS.856 (Ch.lv.0028). Other examples include canopies (e.g., 1919,0101,0.202) and rugs (e.g., LOAN:STEIN.378, Ch.00337).

66 Mingxin Bao and Shen Yan, "The Use of Textiles as Recorded in the Documents Found at Dunhuang," in *Textiles from Dunhuang in UK Collections*, ed. Feng Zhao et al. (Shanghai: Donghua University Press, 2007), 29.

67 The entry on "Contact Relics" in the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* suggests the following distinctions in the category of contact relics: "The rather vague term 'contact relic' can be used to describe two entirely different classes of relic. Secondary relics are items that came into contact with a saint during his or her lifetime, such as the tunic of Francis of Assisi. Tertiary relics are items that have come into contact with relics and thereby absorbed some of their power, becoming another form of contact relic, such as the strips of cloth (*brandea*) that were touched to the tombs of saints." Scott Montgomery,

According to Zhang, there is no evidence that objects such as these were interred as relics, and characterising them as such is an abuse of language.[68] However, we believe the concept of relics actually fits well with the contents of Cave 17. Buddhist traditions have offered various classifications of types of relics, which have included both physical remains, and objects associated with the Buddha, or other holy persons. The Buddha's begging bowl, robe, and other belongings were classified as 'objects of veneration by association' (Skt. *paribhogacetiya*). A range of objects therefore came to be treated as relics in that they were given status and ritual attention equivalent to bodily remains. Scholars have also referred to this kind of object as a 'contact relic' or 'relic of use', though some have criticised this wider use of the word 'relic'.[69]

In this chapter, we are using a broader definition of 'relic' to refer to objects interred in *stūpa*s and equivalent structures and treated for ritual purposes as equivalent to bodily remains. In the study of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, this has been explored mainly through the examples of the robes of deceased monks.[70] Based on the Chinese and Tibetan traditions, Yael Bentor has offered the following threefold classification of Buddhist relics:

> (1) The bodily remains of the Buddha and other important (even if subsequently anonymous) saintly persons. (2) Various objects that came into contact or were otherwise associated with them. (3) Relics of the dharma, including entire scriptures.[71]

While these classifications are useful, we should also keep in mind that, in practice, the different categories of Buddhist relics overlap to some extent and should be seen as, in the words of Michael Willis, "points on a sliding scale

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"Contact Relics," *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, accessed September 28, 2021. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2213-2139_emp_SIM_00235.

68 Zhang, "Zhongguo gudai fojiao sanbao gongyang," 259.

69 Skilling argues that these 'objects of veneration' or shrines (Skt. *cetiya*) should not be called 'relics' but in this context Skilling's definition of relics is restricted to the physical remains left behind by the Buddha himself. Peter Skilling, "Relics: The Heart of Veneration," in *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma*, ed. Janice Stargardt and Michael Willis (London: The British Museum, 2018), 5.

70 See the discussion and references in David Quinter, "Relics," *Oxford Bibliographies, Buddhism* (2014), accessed September 15, 2021. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0196.xml.

71 Yael Bentor, "Tibetan Relic Classifications," in *Tibetan Studies* (*Proceedings of the Sixth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes, 1992*), ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 16.

which to some extent allowed one type of relic to be substituted and transformed into another."[72]

In the case of Cave 17, we can see this overlap in the combination of 'relics of use' with 'relics of the *dharma*'. The *Aparimitāyurjñānasūtra*, over 2,000 copies of which were placed in the cave, states that wherever it is copied will become equivalent to a *stūpa*: "Wherever this sūtra is written or caused to be written, that place will be a stūpa and worthy of veneration."[73] Other *sūtra*s heavily represented in the collections from Cave 17, such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, also contain passages encouraging the copying of the text of the *sūtra*, with the reward of vast amounts of merit for doing so, resulting in better rebirths in future lives. This theme was pointed out by Gregory Schopen in an influential article on 'the Cult of the Book'.[74] Schopen's specific argument that Mahāyāna Buddhists challenged the existing cults of *stūpa*s and relics with a cult of the book has been criticised, however, and the number of texts found in Cave 17 with funerary colophons and contents suggest that the cult of the book at Dunhuang was closely tied to the rituals around *stūpa*s.[75]

Some of the earliest examples of relics of the *dharma* are the Gāndhārī manuscripts from the second or third century CE, the earliest surviving Buddhist manuscripts. They were found in modern Afghanistan in the ruins of a Buddhist monastic *stūpa* complex. On these, Richard Salomon has written:

> It can be safely assumed that the manuscripts in question, regardless of their specific character or condition, were understood and treated as relics. The status of written representations of the words of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) as dharma-relics (*dharma-śarīra*), functionally equivalent to bodily relics (*śarīra*) of the Buddha or other Buddhist venerables, is widely acknowledged in Buddhist tradition.[76]

72 Michael Willis, *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 13.

73 On the number of these scrolls originally placed in the cave, see Sam van Schaik, "The Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts in China," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65.1 (2002): 135–136. Translation from *Aparimitāyurjñānasūtra* (Toh 675, 219a), trans. Peter Allan Roberts and Emily Bower, accessed January 24, 2022. https://read.84000.co/translation/toh675.html.

74 The article was originally published in 1975; it is reprinted in Gregory Schopen, *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 25–62.

75 See for example David Drewes, "Revisiting the Phrase 'sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' and the Mahāyāna Cult of the Book," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 50.2 (2007): 101–143.

76 Salomon, "Why Did Gandharan Buddhists Bury Their Manuscripts?," 30.

The first group of Gāndhārī manuscripts that was discovered, now kept at the British Library, was originally inside a pot interred in a *stūpa*. As Salomon has written, the pot contained a disparate and apparently well-used set of manuscripts:

> As for the manuscripts contained in the British Library pot, they are a very mixed lot indeed. The twenty-nine fragmentary scrolls contain at least two dozen distinct texts of very diverse contents and genres, written by twenty-one different scribes. Thus they seem to constitute a miscellaneous, unplanned, and more or less random collection.[77]

Though Salomon does not consider this, the category of 'relics of use' may also apply to these manuscripts, which could well have been the former possessions of a deceased eminent monk. Thus, the combined factors of a deposit of these Gāndhārī manuscripts in a *stūpa*, and the miscellaneous and used nature of those manuscripts, might offer an early precedent for manuscripts being both relics of use and relics of the *dharma*.

4 Different Collections as Secondary Deposits

We will now explore the possible processes by which manuscripts and other material associated with Hongbian were placed in Cave 17 as relics, followed by deposits of further manuscripts, paintings, and artefacts over the course of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th centuries. To begin with the initial deposit, several manuscripts found in the cave are associated with Hongbian directly, including letters addressed to him.[78] Others are associated with his period in office, such as the copies of the *Aparimitāyurjñāna* and *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*s in Tibetan and Chinese, which were copied at the behest of the Tibetan emperor.[79] The *Aparimitāyurjñānasūtra* promises purification and rebirth in a pure land when it is copied, and these scrolls may have been commissioned either towards the end of the emperor's life, or upon his death.[80]

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77 Salomon, "Why Did Gandharan Buddhists Bury Their Manuscripts?," 24.

78 The Hongbian letters include P. T. 999, 1079, 1199, 1200, 1201, 1202 and 1203.

79 P. T. 999, connects Hongbian to the scrolls of the *Aparimitāyurjñānasūtra* copied at the behest of the Tibetan emperor.

80 Texts like this offered the assurance of both *premortem* and *postmortem* protection, a feature that Neil Schmid has discussed in terms of the Mogao cave murals, lectures, and rituals. See Neil Schmid, "The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves, ca. 700–1000," *Asia Major, Third Series* 19.1–2

The number and bulk of these scrolls and large *pothī* manuscripts, means that they constitute a significant proportion of the cave's contents; there were approximately 3,500 scrolls containing these two texts copied for the emperor, and eleven *pothī* volumes comprising over 1,000 large format folios each.[81] These materials may have been deposited in Cave 17 as a part of its consecration as a funerary shrine for Hongbian, or not long afterwards; here we agree with Imaeda's assessment:

> Various items, documents, and so on in the former possession of or pertaining to Hongbian would have been kept in this memorial chapel. In view of the cave's position, its origins, and the fact that Hongbian's name or seal is found in a considerable number of documents from the cave, both Chinese and Tibetan, there is nothing unnatural about this assumption.[82]

By means of this process, the material associated with the life of Hongbian gained the status of relics after being placed in Cave 17 when it was consecrated as a funerary *stūpa*. However, this only accounts for a portion of the contents of the cave. Many of the manuscripts, paintings and other artefacts bear no direct relation with Hongbian, and were placed there long after his death, through to the early 11th century. This suggests a gradual process of further deposits into the cave. As we have seen, the nature of these artefacts is also in keeping with the possibility that they were placed there as a form of relic deposit, through personal association with the deceased, as a '*dharma* relic' due to the texts or images they contained, or simply as the ritual ephemera of a funerary ceremony. In some cases, we have evidence of specific monk residents of Dunhuang whose collections of manuscripts (and perhaps certain other belongings) ended up in Cave 17.

For example, another important resident of Dunhuang, and a relative of Hongbian, Wu Facheng (fl. first half of 9th c., 吳法成, Tib. 'Go Chos grub), was a translator responsible for several translations of *sūtra*s from Chinese into

(2006): 171–210. See also Neil Schmid, "Giving While Keeping: Inexhaustible Treasuries and Inalienable Wealth in Medieval China," *Studies in Chinese Religion* 5.2 (2019): 151–164.

81 See Sam van Schaik, "The Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts in China," and Kazushi Iwao, "The Purpose of Sutra Copying Under Tibetan Rule," in *Dunhuang Studies: Prospects and Problems for the Coming Second Century of Research*, ed. Irina Popova and Liu Yi (St. Petersburg: Slavia Publishers, 2012), 102–105. In the famous photograph of Paul Pelliot examining manuscripts inside the cave, the large *pothī* pages immediately behind him are probably some of the Tibetan *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*s.

82 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 89.

Tibetan that are still preserved in the Tibetan canon.[83] The Dunhuang collections have revealed more of his translation work, as well as his own original compositions of Buddhist texts. Scholars have argued that a batch of manuscripts associated with Facheng were actually written by the translator in his own hand. It is therefore likely that they were put in the cave after the death of Facheng in the late ninth century. Thus, we can see that a similar process by which manuscripts associated with Hongbian were placed in the cave may apply to other figures who died in the following decades. As Imaeda has shown, there may have been a family connection between Facheng and Hongbian that would help to explain the use of Hongbian's shrine cave to house Facheng's relic deposits.[84] Imaeda suggests that the contents of Cave 17 could thus have been considered 'family documents', which helps to understand the nature of the collection:

> Rather than having value as treasures in their own right, these documents would have been prized as 'family documents' connected with ancestors of the Wu family. It would be precisely for this reason that there have been discovered many secular documents such as contracts, rather than Buddhist texts, that bear Hongbian's signature or seal.[85]

The cave contained other similarly personal collections of manuscripts as well. Another significant figure whose collection may have been placed in the cave after his death is a monk from the Sanjie Temple called Daozhen. In the words of Henrik Sørensen, he is "one of the best-documented figures in the history of Buddhism in Dunhuang," and, "given the extent of his activities, it is clear that, in his own time, he was perhaps as important and significant a figure as the exegete and Buddhist master Hongbian."[86] Daozhen's name is connected to several documents from the cave. Some of these are *sūtra* scrolls recorded as belonging to him, while the majority are certificates of people who have received the Buddhist precepts given to lay people, in which Daozhen is recorded as the preceptor. Daozhen was also involved for many years in a

83 Ueyama has argued that several manuscripts from Cave 17 are written in Chödrup's own hand. Ueyama Daishun 上山大峻, *Tonkō bukkyō no kenkyū* 敦煌佛教の研究 [A Study of Dunhuang Buddhism] (Kyōto: Hōzōkan, 1990), 84–219; see esp. 93, 154. For recent work strengthening this argument, see Channa Li, "Toward A Typology of Chödrup's (Tib. Chos Grub, Chin. Facheng 法成) Cursive Handwriting: A Palaeographical Perspective," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 1.2 (2021).

84 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 91.

85 Ibid., 91.

86 Sørensen, "The Life and Times of Daozhen," 3 and 6.

project of collecting manuscripts to supplement and repair the collections of the Sanjie Temple.[87]

Was Daozhen's own collection of manuscripts, including these records of his collecting and donation activities, deposited in Cave 17 after his death? We have no clear evidence that this happened, but we can see an association between Daozhen and the cave. Daozhen is also associated with the restoration of a Buddhist cave at Mogao.[88] And as we have already mentioned, Daozhen held a lamp offering ritual on the occasion of the Laba festival in the Dunhuang caves in 951, including 'the cave of Monk Wu'.[89] Thus, he seems to have had some association with the three-storey cave complex originally created by Hongbian. The last of Daozhen's precept certificates is dated to 987, and if he died a few years after this, his manuscripts (and perhaps other items) would have been placed in the cave just before the end of the tenth century. Thus, Daozhen's collection could have been one of the last major funerary deposits into Cave 17, towards the end of the tenth century.[90]

The site numbers given by Aurel Stein to the manuscripts from Cave 17 may help us to identify further deposits, even where the individual who owned the manuscripts is anonymous. Though Stein did not say much about how he assigned these numbers to the manuscripts, they seem to have been associated with the various manuscript 'bundles' that he writes of in his account of removing the contents of the cave. Thus, Stein's site numbers are the best indication we have of the arrangement of the manuscripts deposited in the cave. In 2007, Jacob Dalton, Sam van Schaik and Tom Davis published the results of carrying out forensic handwriting analysis on the Tibetan manuscripts from the cave. One striking result of this analysis was that a group of manuscripts written in the same hand also shared the same Stein site number. This indicated that

87 Sørensen, "The Life and Times of Daozhen," 3 and 6.

88 Text of the verso of P. 2641.

89 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 92. See also Rong Xinjiang, *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang*, trans. Imre Galambos (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 124, and Sørensen, "The Life and Times of Daozhen," 20.

90 This is somewhat different from the explanation proposed by Rong, "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave." Rong argues that the entirety of the contents of Cave 17 are manuscripts from the Sanjie Temple, including those collected by Daozhen. However, the idea that Cave 17 contains a monastic library is not well supported by the nature of the manuscripts as a whole, of which so many are damaged and incomplete. Furthermore, there are only around 200 manuscripts that can be directly linked to the Sanjie Temple among the many thousands that were deposited in Cave 17 (see Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents"). However, our suggestion does overlap with Rong's, allowing us to understand the importance of Daozhen and his manuscript preservation project on the contents of Cave 17.

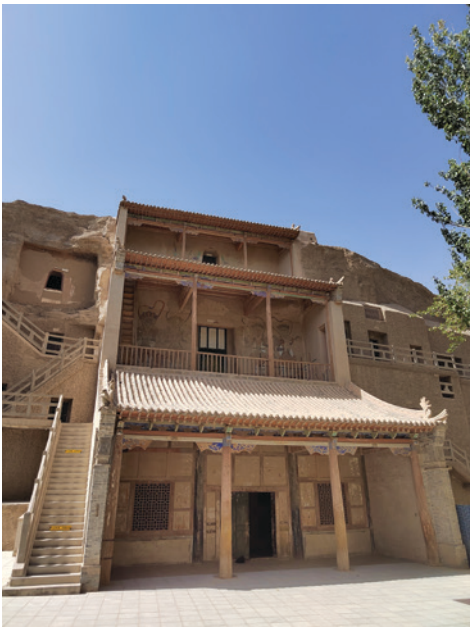

FIGURE 11.2A+B Front and side view of the three-storey complex of Mogao Caves 16, 17, 365, and 366
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEIL SCHMID, DUNHUANG

they had been placed in the cave in a single bundle.[91] More work needs to be done on this, but the association of Stein's site numbers with bundles of manuscripts, and the possibility that some of the bundles belonged to single individuals, would fit the theory that Cave 17 was mainly filled with a succession of funerary deposits.

At some point, the statue of Hongbian was moved from Cave 17. It was relocated to another small shrine, numbered Cave 362, which adjoins Cave 365 in the middle part of the three-storey complex that Hongbian had commissioned.[92] The similarity in the size and position of Caves 17 and 362 in relation to the larger caves provides continuity to the statue's setting. If we consider the three-storey complex as a whole, then moving Hongbian's icon would

91 Jacob Dalton, Tom Davis, and Sam van Schaik, "Beyond Anonymity: Paleographic Analyses of the Dunhuang Manuscripts," *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 3 (2007): 17. See also the forthcoming work by Susan Whitfield and Paschalia Terzi.

92 Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents," 94–95 suggests that the statue was moved out of respect for Hongbian at some point before Cave 17 was sealed, due to a change in the usage of the cave. It is possible that the statue was moved as the cave became full; however this would not necessarily entail a significantly different change in the use of the cave.

not necessarily entail a radical change in the function of Cave 17, which could have continued to serve as a funerary repository. In this case, would the gradual deposit of relics of use into Cave 17 over many decades exclude it from being understood as a Buddhist *stūpa* or reliquary? We can compare this process to the development of mortuary shrines in India, where the gradual deposit of relics, or objects that were equivalent to relics over a period of time was commonly practised in Indian Buddhism.

Gregory Schopen has discussed the archaeological evidence showing that the deposit of relics in and around the area of *stūpa*s in India was a gradual process: "These mortuary deposits have been purposely brought and placed here at different times. They do not form a part of an original or ordered plan."[93] The remains of the dead person might be among the first deposits, but subsequently anything associated with the dead could function as a relic, and any relic was as precious as the body of the Buddha himself. Schopen quotes the following from the *Ratnarāśisūtra*: "Whatever belongs to a *stūpa*, even if it is only a single fringe that is given [...] that itself is a sacred object for the world together with its gods."[94] Schopen argues that, "it was this presence that drew to it the secondary mortuary deposits and a host of subsidiary structures."[95] The concept of 'secondary mortuary deposits' is a significant one for understanding the gradual accumulation of materials in Cave 17.

Schopen's analysis shows that a single *stūpa* or deposit sanctified an area and acted as a 'seed' for further deposits. These secondary deposits did not need to be remains of the dead, but anything bearing an association with them. We also have examples from Indian Buddhist sites of the relics of monks from several successive generations being placed in the same *stūpa*. In an article on the 'cult of the monastic dead', Schopen gathered archaeological and epigraphical evidence from Indian sites for the practice of monks and nuns interring the relics of their eminent colleagues in *stūpa*s. The *stūpa*s built to house such relics are found in cave complexes, where they are relatively small shrines, and can also be small brick structures in the grounds of monasteries.[96] The date

93 Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 114–147. Elsewhere, Schopen has also discussed the fact that Buddhist *stūpa* complexes and monasteries were often built on top of previous funerary ritual sites; see Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, 360–381.

94 Ibid., 130.

95 Ibid., 135.

96 "There is also—although, again, not yet systematically studied—an important body of independent evidence for the monastic preoccupation with permanently housing their dead from well preserved cave sites like Bhājā, Bedsā, and Kānheri." Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*, 166.

range for these small *stūpa*s and shrines for the monastic dead is roughly from the second to the eighth century. Citing the archaeological report of Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893) from the Sāñcī site, Schopen noted that:

> Cunningham discovered that the remains of ten individual monks—representing at least three generations—had been deposited in *Stūpa* no. 2 at Sāñcī. The remains of some of these same monks also had been deposited in Sonārī *Stūpa* no. 2, which contained the relics of five individuals, and in *Stūpas* nos. 2 and 3 at Andher.[97]

The sources discussed by Schopen show that the interment of relics associated with deceased monks and nuns in *stūpa*s and shrines was a common practice, and that it was also an acceptable practice to place later deposits of relics into the same *stūpa* or shrine, a process that could extend over generations of monks. Thus, our suggestion that the contents of Cave 17 are the result of a series of successive deposits of the relics of local monks has a precedent in Indian Buddhism as well.

While Schopen's discussions are exclusively based on archaeological sites in India, the Buddhist context, and scriptural sources, overlap with our investigation into Cave 17. Deposits of manuscripts, banners, paintings and other material in the century and more after the cave was consecrated to Hongbian may have been linked to ongoing funerary ritual activities at the caves. Such acts of deposit could have taken place during the funerary ceremonies in the weeks after the death of Hongbian and later significant figures, and then in the following decades upon the death of other monks whose relics were placed in Cave 17 alongside the earlier deposits. Given their incomplete and worn state, and the inclusion of non-Buddhist material, they are more likely to have been deposited as relics than as offerings, although these categories may sometimes have overlapped.

5 Conclusion

The funerary context of Cave 17 is apparent in its role as a funerary shrine, functionally equivalent to a *stūpa*, and in the funerary role of the Dunhuang cave complex as a whole. With the widespread use of books as '*dharma* relics' seen elsewhere in Buddhist cultures, and the construction of similar mortuary shrines both locally at the Mogao caves and elsewhere in China, this is the

97 Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*, 178.

most convincing explanation for the contents of Cave 17. While we should not exclude other reasons for depositing things in the cave, we argue that these would be supplementary to their role as funerary deposits. We have discussed how the consecration of Cave 17 as a shrine to Hongbian in the late eighth century could have included the interment of manuscripts and other items that belonged to the monk in the first place. Then, other collections of deceased monks, perhaps with a family or other relationship to Hongbian, may have joined that original deposit over the following decades, through the process of secondary mortuary deposit.

When we approach the cave in this way, the idea that the contents were deliberately deposited and then sealed up in an act of protection or preservation is less convincing. The idea of burying, hiding or sealing away Buddhist texts for the purpose of preservation is also not borne out by a close analysis of the contents of the cave itself. As we have seen, the majority of the manuscripts placed in the cave were damaged or incomplete, or both. Furthermore, the cave contains things that are unlikely to have been chosen to be preserved for future generations. As mentioned earlier, the cave contained not just manuscripts and paintings, but also worn textiles and other objects that seem to have been in heavy use previously, either as monastic property or personal effects. Manuscripts placed in the cave include ephemera such as doodles depicting people and animals, some of which are quite risqué.[98] Tsuguhito Takeuchi studied the waste paper that scribes used for their own purposes, which is found in the caves' collections; as well as pen tests and practice letters, these include satirical verses, and complaints.[99] It is easier to see how these might have found their way into Cave 17 among the personal effects of deceased monks rather than through a deliberate act of gathering and depositing sacred texts. Again, these may well have been used by Buddhist monks and lay people in their daily lives, yet are unlikely to have been selected to be preserved in perpetuity in a Buddhist archive. Thus, the presence of non-Buddhist texts in the cave is also, we believe, best explained by understanding the funerary context which we have outlined here.

98 For example, the sheet of paper S. 1360 at the British Library features a sketch of a man with a comically large penis, with satirical commentary in Sogdian. See also the verso of P. 2702 and on P. T. 1149 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, with sex scenes.

99 For example, in P. T. 1155 it is written that a scribe named Bung Dzéweng (d.u., Tib. Bung Dze weng) assaulted his colleague's wife. Tsuguhito Takeuchi, "*Glegs tshas*: Writing Boards of Chinese Scribes in Tibetan-Ruled Dunhuang," in *Scribes, Texts, and Rituals in Early Tibet and Dunhuang*, ed. Brandon Dotson, Kazushi Iwao, and Tsuguhito Takeuchi (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013), 104, n. 13.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is a tendency when dealing with a rediscovered trove of manuscripts to think of it as an archive. Yet, we should distinguish between what the manuscripts mean to us and what they meant to those who deposited them in the first place. Undoubtedly, they are an archive for us but it is, in the words of Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, an "accidental archive."[100] There is no evidence in the materials from Cave 17, or the context around it, that the manuscripts, paintings and other materials were placed there with the intention of forming a coherent collection of *dharma* for future generations. Nor were they gathered and sealed away as a kind of time capsule. Of course, the contents of the cave did become a time capsule because they remained there so long before their eventual discovery, but again, there is no sign of this being the intention at the time.[101] We can contrast this with other sites containing buried scriptural texts in which there is a clear context of preserving the Buddhist canon; for example, complete collections of scriptures printed and carved into stone, such as those found at the Yunju Temple (Chin. Yunju si 雲居寺) to the southwest of Beijing. The nature of these textual objects is quite different: they are complete, inscribed in stone, and form a coherent set.

The funerary context of Cave 17, its contents, and the Dunhuang complex as a whole would have been even more apparent at the time when the manuscripts were being deposited than it is now. As we have seen, Cave 17 is far from an individual case, but is part of a pattern of funerary interment along with scriptures and other objects, seen in numerous archaeological sites across China. So, it would have been nearly inconceivable for a deposit to be made into Cave 17 independently of this funerary context. We do not consider the

100 Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, "Towards Reconstructing a Medieval Library of Eurasian Medical Knowledge: Two Accidental (?) Case-Studies," paper presented at the conference: "Establishing of Buddhist Nodes in Eastern Central Asia 6th to 14th c.—Part III: Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences and Doctrines," Ruhr University Bochum, July 12th–14th, 2021.

101 The closest thing we have in the manuscripts is the expression of the aspiration to preserve the *dharma* for future generations, which is found in some colophons. Daozhen, whose preservation activities have already been mentioned, expresses this the colophons of some of his manuscripts; for example, in Dunhuang 0345 he writes of the scrolls he has collected and repaired that "thereby he has assured that they would be transmitted in the world, their light embellishing the abstruse gate for ten thousand generations and a thousand autumns, and forever serve as an offering" (from Dunhuang 0345, quoted in Sørensen, "The Life and Times of Daozhen," 11). It was these colophons that provided the inspiration for Rong Xinjiang's theory that Daozhen's activities were responsible for the manuscript store that was found in Cave 17. However, we need to distinguish between the aspiration expressed here, to repair the manuscripts so they may be transmitted through future generations, and the act of sealing them away.

funerary context of Cave 17 as a theory that replaces Stein's theory of 'waste deposit' or Rong's theory of a monastic library storehouse. This funerary context is not a theory at all, but a series of facts that need to be taken into account whenever we consider the contents of the cave—whether Buddhist, non-Buddhist or secular—the reasons for their deposit, and the circumstances that have led to them being available to us today.

An effect of fully establishing the funerary context of Cave 17, as well as the multi-storeyed cave structure of which it was a part, modelled on the *stūpa*, and the mortuary function of the Mogao site as a whole, is that theories that come from outside of this context seem less compelling. We do not need to speculate about radical changes in the function of Cave 17—such as turning into a sacred waste repository or a monastic storehouse—to explain the items deposited there. What we currently know about practices of relic deposit and offerings to *stūpa*s can account for the nature of what was placed inside the cave, leaving a higher burden of proof on theories that stand outside of this context. Whether objects were placed in the cave as relics, or as offerings to relics, they were interred in the cave as part of funerary ritual practice. Why does this matter? Because almost any conclusion we draw from any individual item from the cave will depend on the wider context, and perhaps the most important part of that context is how and why this particular collection came together at this particular place and time.