

## Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

25 May 2022 Neil Schmid (Dunhuang)

### **CHINESE DUNHUANG STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE LAY OF THE LAND**

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The team of the *BuddhistRoad* project invited Neil Schmid, Research Professor at the Dunhuang Academy (Chin. Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院), to give a lecture on the general outline of Dunhuang Studies in mainland China as of 2022. As an academic field in China, Dunhuang Studies has been shaped by a variety of intellectual and social forces, tied in part to nation-building throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The visit of General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) to the Dunhuang Academy August 19, 2019 and his official speech raised the profile of the institution, while simultaneously inscribing the field of study further into larger agendas such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Chinese Dream (Chin. *Zhongguo meng* 中国梦). In the domestic realm, Dunhuang Studies is increasingly linked to the concept of ‘Dunhuang Culture’ presented in Xi’s 2019 speech to the Dunhuang Academy as a fundamental aspect of ‘national essence’, to be protected and exemplary of China’s growing cultural self-confidence. Read through the lens of heritage, Dunhuang Culture stands as an idealised formulation of aspirational characteristics that are at once multicultural, harmonious, tolerant, and oriented toward the accumulation of ‘civilisational wealth’ for the creation of ‘human happiness’. The essentialising of Dunhuang Culture as inherently Chinese, though the study of as accessible to all (i.e., Xi’s pronouncement that, “Dunhuang Culture belongs to China, but Dunhuang Studies belong to the world”), finds further reiteration with its incorporation into the framework of the ‘Three Great Regional Cultures of China’ (Chin. *Zhongguo sanda diyu wenhua* 中国三大地域文化), that also includes Huizhou (徽州) and Tibet, each with their respective academic fields, i.e., Hui Studies (Chin. *Huixue* 徽学) and Tibetan Studies (Chin. *Zangxue* 藏学). Understanding the conceptual and practical commonalities among these fields helps shed a comparative light on the multiple stakeholders for each at both local and national levels while providing a possible bell weather for future developments.



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Another comparative framework for understanding the ongoing evolution of Chinese Dunhuang Studies as imbricated in nation-building is historical and East Asian: the striking parallel of Japan one hundred years earlier. In 1909, Dunhuang Studies first developed at Kyoto University as a nationalist response to its rival, Tokyo University, and its western-oriented approach to historiography. Japan's successes in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 empowered Japan to consider wider spheres of economic and political influence in East Asia. Kyoto University rode this trend with an increasing focus on Asia and Asian languages, and Dunhuang Studies expeditiously became a foundational feature of Kyoto's Oriental Studies (Jap. *Tōyō gaku* 東洋学) programme.

A further parallel between nations also exists among Japanese cultural phenomena of the early 20th century and those of China in 21st century: the formulation of essentialised national identity (Jap. *kokusui* 国粹) through the interactions among academia, state ideology, and consumerism. In tandem with the expansion of Dunhuang and Oriental Studies in Japan, there was increasing collaboration between the academic study of Dunhuang and East Asia, consumerism, and Japanese state interests. Widespread consumer interest in 'Oriental' culture or 'Oriental taste' (Jap. *Tōyō shumi* 東洋趣味) was promoted through the sale of objects and artefacts, often from China, in national department store chains in close association with exhibitions and academic catalogues, thereby enabling their customers to acquire not only consumer goods but crucially the associated cultural pride and confidence commensurate with Japan's standing in the world.

A similar phenomenon is currently unfolding in contemporary China with Dunhuang art and design serving as aesthetic fodder for a wide range of IP and consumer goods predicated on the theme of 'China chic' (Chin. *guo chaofeng* 国潮风), a patriotic movement valorising China-centric design. The Dunhuang Academy partners with a number of large companies in an effort to disseminate Dunhuang Culture via state-corporate cooperation through content creation for distribution across apps, social media, and online/tv broadcasts. Notably, in 2017–2018 the Dunhuang Academy signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Tencent to launch the 'Digital Silk Road' programme, as part of Tencent's larger project to create a digital parallel to infrastructure for the BRI. Such mutually beneficial state-corporate projects embrace national heritage and corporate power, while defining cultural knowledge and its distribution. The above review and historical comparisons contextualise the on-the-ground



developments of Dunhuang Studies in China, perhaps not readily apparent to a western audience, and the field's multiple stakeholders—academic, public, corporate and state—all of whom will engage the field in the coming years.

The talk then turned to a brief discussion of the current academic infrastructure for Dunhuang Studies in China: major institutes and universities centres for the field in China, major publications and their distribution, etc. Following was an overview of the Dunhuang Academy, outlining its newly expanded administrative purview incorporating major Gansu (甘肃) grotto sites, its areas of concentration (conservation, research, heritage tourism, etc.), as well as a review of several large-scale research projects supported by national-level funding. The talk ended with a presentation and run-through of two online databases: the Digital Dunhuang Project (Chin. Shuzi Dunhuang 数字敦煌, [www.e-dunhuang.com](http://www.e-dunhuang.com)) providing digital, interactive views and information on thirty Mogao caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟), and the Dunhuang Academic Resources Database (Chin. Dunhuang xue xinxi ziyuan ku 敦煌学信息资源库, <http://dh.dha.ac.cn>) with its wide range of academic publications and reference materials accessible worldwide.

