

## Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

28 October 2021 Neil Schmid (Dunhuang)

### **DUNHUANG CAVES AND THE AESTHETICS OF SCALE**

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

The BuddhistRoad team invited Neil Schmid, Research Professor at the Dunhuang Academy, to give a virtual presentation on his latest research, small-scale caves from dating from the 8th–10th century at Dunhuang (敦煌). Numbering in the dozens, these diminutive caves are less than 1.5sq metres in size, have been neglected by scholars as insignificant and so never investigated as a coherent phenomenon. Their close analysis raises a number of fundamental questions about the creation, contents, and functions of Dunhuang caves during this period.

In order to analyse these spaces, their contents and related issues, Dr. Schmid introduced two interrelated concepts, skeuomorphia and defunctionalisation, as useful lenses for understanding these caves in connection to larger cross-cultural phenomena. The term skeuomorph was initially coined in the late 19th century archaeological studies to describe artifacts crafted to resemble other objects via prototypes but mimicking them in different materials, for example ceramic imitation of bronze vessels or wicker containers used as models for pottery forms. The concept is linked to defunctionalisation, especially in mortuary contexts, wherein objects and spaces are rendered useless for the living through transformations in material or scale. The classic example of defunctionalisation in the Chinese context are ‘luminous objects’ (Chin. *mingqi* 明器) imitative items used as grave goods.

Dr. Schmid then examined a range of skeuomorphs appearing in the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟) during this period, e.g., skeuomorphic hinges on mock screens, the extensive use of trompe l’oeil textiles, wall hangings in the form of transformation tableaux and valances, etc. All of these items represent portable *realia* made of ephemera, which the new stylistic modes of 8th–10th century Dunhuang caves took great pains to recreate in exacting detail. Indeed, a wide range of these otherwise portable and ephemeral objects, namely textiles, are precisely those discovered in the Library Cave: wall hangings in the form



of transformation tableaux, paintings on fabric, textile hangings of the thousand buddha motif as well as silk valances were all prototypical objects used in liturgical settings outside the caves on a regular basis. In this sense then, Dunhuang caves during this period function very much as localised articulations of *mingqi* assemblages with their contents as skeuomorphic defunctionalized objects for the dead.

This latter point is most clearly evident in core materials of the talk, small-scale caves. Examples, such as Mogao Caves 160, 173, and 337, provide cogent examples of the conceptual dynamics discussed above through their exact replication of larger Dunhuang grottoes as assemblages of votive objects, though far too small in fact to enter. Their existence fundamentally challenges previous assumptions about the construction and use of Dunhuang grottoes during the 8th–10th centuries: if the construction of Mogao caves during this period was predicated on their function as spaces for ritual practice within, there would be little justification for the creation of large numbers of diminutive caves that rigorously defy any physical presence. The analytical concepts of skeuomorphia and defunctionalisation thus provide conceptual tools to understand how these caves and their contents reflect both cross-cultural phenomena at an analytical level and specific indigenous trends as Dunhuang caves became increasingly sinicised in form, content and function.

In the final section of the talk Dr. Schmid demonstrated that mortuary associations among Dunhuang caves during 8th–10th centuries extend beyond these defunctionalized assemblages, either kinaesthetically accurate and diminutive, in the form of a number of spaces that specifically sought to replicate Buddhist reliquaries on a large-scale. Contemporaneous with the shift in style, content and functions elaborated above, local elites constructed a series of caves (e.g., Mogao Caves 148 and 158) in the form of coffin-like reliquaries current at the time, and also as composite structures (Mogao Caves 235, 233, and Mogao Caves 156, 161, both sets with stupas positioned on the cliff above) that architecturally imitated *stūpas*. Similar in form is the singular configuration of Mogao Caves 16, 366, and 365, which raises intriguing possibilities for why the Library Cave was sealed as such. Concluding the lecture, Dr. Schmid emphasised the necessity of onsite research and of the comprehensive examination of Dunhuang resources as a coherent dataset, here exemplified by the hitherto neglected data of small-scale caves, that in conjunction with innovative archaeological methodologies



drawn from further afield can provide new approaches to, and novel readings of the Dunhuang caves.



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