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ON MEDITATION CAVES AND CAVE-DWELLING ASCETICS IN DUNHUANG, 9TH TO 13TH CENTURIES

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ON MEDITATION CAVES AND
CAVE-DWELLING ASCETICS IN DUNHUANG:
9TH TO 13TH CENTURIES

HENRIK H. SØRENSEN

Abstract

This essay discusses cave-dwelling ascetic monks in Dunhuang from the 9th to 13th centuries. First, I provide a brief and general presentation of cave-dwelling monks in Buddhism, followed by a more specific discussion of the phenomena in Chinese Buddhism. Then, I give a critical review of current Chinese Mainland scholarly positions on cave-dwelling monks and ‘meditation caves’ in Dunhuang, followed by an analysis of the primary sources, and lastly, a survey of archaeological data that has emerged in the past two decades regarding the residential caves in the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves.

1. Introduction

The study of the Dunhuang (敦煌) manuscripts and the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟) has advanced greatly in the last few decades, based on the foundation of earlier, pioneering research. As a result, our combined knowledge regarding Buddhism in Dunhuang has become quite comprehensive and detailed, but of course, it is still far from complete. Because of these advances, it is now possible for a more comprehensive and rounded picture to emerge. Establishing such a well-documented field requires a large number of focused case studies on a range of topics, with attention to the finer details hitherto provided. What follows is one such attempt.

While a general understanding of what life in Dunhuang was like for communities of Buddhists during the late medieval and early pre-modern periods has gradually emerged in the past few decades, there are still many unanswered questions. Among the questions that have not been fully addressed, is that concerning the monks (and presumably nuns as well)



who inhabited the caves at Mogao constructed for living purposes. An understanding of this issue is especially relevant to those caves located in the Northern Section (Chin. *beiqu* 北區)¹ of the cliff face, as opposed to the caves mainly found in the Southern Section (Chin. *nanqu* 南區), which were meant for worship. I reject the idea put forward by Robert Sharf, who appears to believe that the votive caves in Dunhuang were basically not meant for worship, but were created as a sort of mausoleum.² In contrast, Niel Schmid describes the caves and their decorations as “ritual settings,” thereby agreeing that they were indeed active, ritual spaces.³ That being said, I obviously do accept Sharf’s view that the caves were not meant for monastic Buddhist practice *per se*. In my understanding of the site, the caves were indeed for Buddhist practice but probably not used all the time as a free-standing temple would.

¹ See the archaeological reports in *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku* 敦煌莫高窟北区石窟 [The Northern Caves of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang], vols 1–3, ed. Peng Jinzhang 彭金章, and Wang Jianjun 王建军 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2000–2003). The archaeological reports constituting these three volumes were later reworked and augmented with additional material and interpretations in Peng Jinchang 彭金章, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku yanjiu* 敦煌莫高窟北区石窟研究 [Studies in the Northern Section of Caves at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang] (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2011).

² Cf. 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), 38–65. One reason for not accepting his view is that we actually do know that rituals were performed in the Mogao Caves by the local Buddhists. This is documented in several sources, but for the time being, it must suffice to point to a few of these, including one that references the monk Xianshi (d.u., 賢師), who visited Mogao Cave 444 and worshipped there. Several other pilgrims, including early ones are also noted to have made offerings in the same cave (DMGT, 169). Another source mentions an offering of lamps in the Eastern Caves (Chin. *dongku shang randeng* 東窟上燃燈) (P. 4909). In short, the site of the Mogao Caves was an active place for Buddhist worship in the course of its long history, not a mausoleum.

³ See Niel Schmid, “The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves, ca. 700–1000,” *Asia Major* 19.1–2 (2006): 171–210. For the use of caves in the Northern Section of the Mogao Cave complex for Tantric ritual practice see, Carmen Meinert, “Tantric Rituals to Usher in a Transcending Process Leading to a State beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies: Materials from Eastern Central Asia during Tangut Rule, 11th–13th C.,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia II: Practice and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer*, ed. Yukiyo Kasai and Haoran Hou (Leiden, Boston: Brill, forthcoming).

Some years ago, Chinese Mainland scholars began to formulate a set of theories concerning the use of certain caves at Mogao, including identifying a specialised class of Buddhist practitioners designated ‘cave-dwelling monks’ (Chin. *zhuku seng* 住窟僧)—a category of practitioners documented in the primary sources. The various studies produced on this interesting topic have, in my view, been rather wide off the mark, in many cases. However, these studies do raise important questions and direct attention to an interesting aspect of Buddhist activity at the Mogao Caves during the late medieval and early pre-modern periods, which merits further investigation.⁴

Information on cave-dwelling monks and cave-dwelling meditators is available in both manuscripts and *in situ* donor inscriptions in the Mogao Caves. This material establishes that such categories of monks were, indeed, living at Mogao during the 9th–10th centuries, and earlier, especially in the caves of the Northern Section.

What follows attempts to come to terms with these ascetics and their place in Dunhuang’s Buddhism. I begin by reviewing what has been produced so far on the topic of cave-dwelling monks, providing a critique of the points raised by a number of primarily Mainland scholars, many of which I find superficial, or downright mistaken. I then investigate the primary sources—including inscriptions *in situ* in the caves and information provided by the Dunhuang manuscripts themselves—and explore and discuss the physical evidence of the caves, and pronounce an

⁴ There are several studies on the topic in Chinese, but only a few of them merit attention. Among these are Wang Shuqing 王书庆 and Yang Fuxue 杨富学, “Dunhuang Mogao ku chanku de lishi bianqian 敦煌莫高窟禅窟的历史变迁 [Historical Transformations in the Meditation Grottoes in Dunhuang’s Mogao Caves],” *Zhongguo chanxue* 中国禅学 [Studies in Chinese Chan] 4 (2006): 310–318; Sha Wutian 沙武田, “Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku yu sengren chanxiu 敦煌莫高窟石窟与僧人禅修 [The Grottoes of the Mogao Caves and Monks’ Cultivation of Meditation],” in *Dunhuang fojiao yu chanzong xueshu taolunhui wenji* 敦煌佛教与禅宗学术讨论会文集 [Collected Research Papers on Buddhism in Dunhuang and the Study of Chan], ed. Zheng Binglin 郑炳林, Fan Jinshi 樊锦诗, and Yang Fuxue 杨富学 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2007), 438–448; and Peng Xiaojing 彭晓静, “Tubo tongzhi Dunhuang shiqi chanzong de liuchuan yu yingxiang 吐蕃统治敦煌时期禅宗的流传与影响 [The Spread and Influence of Chan Buddhism in Dunhuang under the Tibetan Imperial Period],” accessed November 25, 2017. http://fo.ifeng.com/special/tanmidalifoguo/lunwenjicui/detail_2013_11/05/30973000_0.shtml.



overview of these findings in conclusion. The views presented here are not exhaustive nor the final statements on cave-dwelling, ascetic monks from Dunhuang. I anticipate and look forward to future corrections and additions to the interpretation of the materials and findings presented in what follows.

2. Cave-dwelling Monks in Buddhism: A Brief Historical Overview

Some of the earliest examples of rock-carved temples in India show that members of the Buddhist *saṃgha* inhabited these sacred spaces, a tradition that was not the domain of Buddhism alone, but was also shared by Jainism.⁵ The most impressive of these early Buddhist cave complexes, which are mainly concentrated in the Deccan, are at Karle, Bhaja, Bedse, Pandu Lena, etc.⁶ There we see monks' cells in combination with large halls for worship. Some of the oldest of these complexes date back to the Aśokan period (r. ca. 268–232 BCE) and slightly later (figs. 1–2).

One can still see well-preserved caves in virtually all of them, where monks lived and ostensibly practised. These types of caves are typically small confines with floor spaces often measuring as little as a few square meters. Common to all of them are carved-out ledges, large enough for a person to lie down, and, of course, also well suited for meditation. Water tanks carved into the bedrock and relic *stūpas* containing the cremated remains of deceased monks are further proof that ascetics lived here on a more or less permanent basis for extended periods of time.⁷

⁵ Early complexes of Jain cave sanctuaries featuring caves for meditation are found at Udayagiri and Khandagiri, a site on the outskirts of the modern city of Bhubanesvar in Odisha.

⁶ For information on these cave complexes, see James C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* (London: Pelican Books, 1987), 45–57.

⁷ For a pictorial guide to many of the relevant sites in the Deccan, see Shreekant Jadhav, “Ancient Cave Architects: A Study of Relatively Unknown Caves in the Garbhagiri Hills,” accessed July 12, 2018. <http://www.tifr.res.in/~archaeo/FOP/FOP%20pdf%20of%20ppt/Shrikant%20Jadhav%20Ancient%20Caves.pdf>.



Figure 1. The Cave Temple of Bedsa. Maharashtra, 2nd c. BCE.
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Figure 2. Monk's Cell at Bedsa. Maharashtra, 2nd c. BCE.
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As Buddhism began to move eastward along the Central Asian Silk Road on its way to China, the Indian practice of monastic cave dwelling came with it. This is documented in several sites, including the cave complexes at Kizil and Kumtura, as well as several groups of caves and semi-caves in and around Turfan.⁸

In the Chinese cultural sphere, there are numerous Buddhist cave sites, some of which have caves that were almost certainly used for ascetic practices, including meditation. Among these sites are the Mogao Caves and its affiliate groups—the main topic of this essay and the western-most group of caves within the Sinitic cultural sphere—Bingling Temple (Chin. Bingling si 炳靈寺) near Lanzhou (蘭州), Mt. Maiji (Chin. Maiji shan 麥積山) near Tianshui (天水), and finally the Yungang Caves (Chin. Yungang ku 雲崗窟). Likewise, several such caves are found among the many Buddhist sites scattered throughout Central and Eastern Sichuan (四川), but all are from the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐) and later. Ascetic monks resided at all of these sites, in some cases in whole communities and in others with only a handful of monks. Despite the considerable cultural differences, these monks emulated the ancient model of cave-dwelling ascetics from Buddhist India, a tradition that continues to be practised in places like Tibet and elsewhere in the Himalayas, even today.

3. *On ‘Meditation Caves’ and Cave-dwelling Monks in Dunhuang*

Since the publication of archaeological reports regarding the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves, an abundance of new material important to our understanding of the cave-dwelling monks in Dunhuang has become available. Of special interest to the present topic is the information concerning the physical living conditions for the cave ascetics, which includes the arrangements of the inhabited caves, their cooking and heating facilities, and the fact that a number of caves evidently served as tombs for some of their inhabitants after they died.

⁸The Japanese scholar Yamabe Nobuyoshi (山部能宣) investigated a number of caves in the Buddhist centres along the Silk Road, and in his various published studies demonstrates that a considerable variety of meditation practices were performed there. Cf. e.g., Yamabe Nobuyoshi, “Practice of Visualization and the Visualization Sūtra: An Examination of Mural Paintings at Toyok, Turfan,” *Pacific World* 4 (2002): 123–152.

Even though the discoveries that have emerged from the excavation and clearing of the caves in the Northern Section are substantial as well as important, there are a number of cases where the Chinese reports either over-interpret the material or simply misunderstand it, such as is the case with the so-called ‘suicide-caves,’ a topic to which I will presently return. I will not deal with all the instances here, but will take a detailed look at a few of the more problematic ones.

Current Chinese scholarship makes much out of what it refers to as ‘meditation caves’ (Chin. *chanku* 禪窟)⁹ at the Mogao Caves, identifying what they believe are a number of examples.¹⁰ The most controversial assessment of such meditation caves concern Caves 268, 285 and 487. In the following I shall be focusing on Cave 285 as it is the most well-known of the three. It dates from around 538 of the Western Wei (535–556, 西魏).¹¹ This large cave features eight side niches set in the left and right walls of the main shrine, which are believed by some Chinese Mainland scholars to have been used for meditation.¹² There are several reasons why this view is not tenable and results from a rather poor understanding of how meditation was conducted during that period.¹³ What is perhaps most

⁹ See e.g. Wang and Yang, “Dunhuang Mogao ku chanku de lishi bianqian,” 310–318. This article features an entire series of rather unbelievable assertions regarding cave ascetics, including weird explanations for the presence of the human skeletons found in a number of the caves in the Northern Section at Mogao. A list of so-called meditation caves is found in *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqiu shiku*, vol. 2, 232–234. Needless to say, there is no solid proof that meditation was actually practised in these caves. For an interesting take on skeletons and meditation in Buddhist caves, see Eric M. Greene, “Death in a Cave: Meditation, Deathbed, Ritual, and Skeletal Imagery at Tape Shotor,” *Artibus Asiae* 73.2 (2013): 265–294. Although far removed in space and time from the ‘meditation caves’ of Dunhuang, there is a clear functional connection between them and the finds from Tape Shotor.

¹⁰ Recent reports claim that more than thirty meditation caves from the pre-Tang period alone have been identified. Cf. Wang and Yang, “Dunhuang Mogao ku chanku de lishi bianqian,” 310–318.

¹¹ For detailed information and images of this important cave, see Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 43a–45a.

¹² Cf. eg. Wang and Yang, “Dunhuang Mogao ku chanku de lishi bianqian,” 310–318.

¹³ Criticism of the view that Cave 285 should be designated as a meditation cave is found in Yamabe Nobuyoshi 山部能宣, “‘Zendō kutsu’ saikō ‘禪定窟’ 再考 [A Reconsideration of ‘Meditation Caves’],” in *Ajia bukkyō bijutsu ronshū 3 chūōajia 1 Gandāra—Tōzai Torukisutan* アジア仏教美術論集 3 中央アジア 1 ガンダーラ～東西トルキスタン [Collected Papers on Asian Buddhist Art 3, Central Asia 1:



absurd in describing the niches as ‘meditation chambers’, is the fact that they are actually too small for a person to fit into, unless of course one were to imagine the early monks of Dunhuang to be exceptionally short (!).¹⁴

These scholars also propose the idea that some of these meditation monks sealed themselves inside special meditation caves for the purpose of religious suicide. They supposedly remained in a suspended state of meditation, without eating and drinking, until their bodies gave out and they died. Such a view is, in fact, not based on any known sources, and to my knowledge, does not figure anywhere in the manuscripts found at Dunhuang.¹⁵

Gandhāra—East-West Turkestan], ed. Miyaji Akira 宮治昭 (Tokyo: Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 2017), 473–498. There, based on rich, comparative material, Yamabe shows that it is rather unlikely that the niches would have been used for meditation. His article is, in a sense, a summation of more than a decade’s work on Buddhist caves for practice in Central Asia.

¹⁴ Although not the first to raise doubts about Cave 285 as a meditation cave, Sharf has undoubtedly produced the most searing critique of this view, attacking it from a variety of angles. Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 43a–45a. He also offers a viable explanation of how a possible misinterpretation of images of meditating monks found on certain wall paintings may have occasioned scholars to interpret the niches in Cave 285 and others in this manner. Cf. *ibid.*, 51–52, fig. 19.

¹⁵ It would appear that the origin of designating a number of the Mogao Caves as meditation caves in modern Chinese scholarship originated with the writings of Su Bai. Cf. e.g. Su Bai 宿白, “Dunhuang Mogao ku xianzai caoqi dongku de niandai wenti 敦煌莫高窟現存早期洞窟的年代問題 [Questions Regarding the Dating of the Early Caves at the Mogao Caves],” *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 [Journal of Chinese Cultural Studies] 20 (1989): 15–31. However, in his understanding of meditation caves and meditation monks, Su Bai would appear to have based himself on the much earlier work of Liu Huida (劉慧達) as is formulated in latter’s lengthy “Bei Wei shiku yu chan 北魏石窟與禪 [Northern Wei Caves and Dhyāna]” from 1962 (not published until 1978). For this, see the appendix in Su Bai 宿白, *Zhongguo shiku si yanjiu* 中國石窟寺研究 [Studies in China’s Stone Caves and Temples] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), 331–348. Moreover, the meditation caves at Mogao are also provided an entry in the DXDC, 22ab. Li Yü 李玉, “Dunhuang Mogao ku 259 ku zhi yanjiu 敦煌莫高窟二五九窟之研究 [A Study of Mogao Cave 259 at Dunhuang],” *Guoli Taiwan daxue meishu shi yanjiu jikan* 國立臺灣大學美術史研究集刊 [Collated Publications of the National University of Taiwan Research of Art History] 2 (1995): 1–16. This article also deals with ‘meditation caves’ and perpetuates some of the same formal mistakes as found in Su Bai’s writings.

Even though ‘meditation cave’ is mainly used as a characterising designation in Chinese archaeological and art historical discourses, it most surely has had a wider impact on the study of Chinese Buddhism in contemporary Chinese scholarship in broader terms. Even

In response to the issue of suicidal cave monks, I instead propose that it is likely there were monks (and nuns?) living in the Northern Section caves, who had themselves walled up for prolonged periods of time. Such retreats were undertaken for the attainment of enlightenment or some other soteriological goal.¹⁶ Practices of this kind are well-known in both the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist traditions, and it should not surprise us that such cave retreats were also conducted at the Mogao Caves during the medieval period and later. Indeed, it is tempting to think that it would be strange if such practices were not carried out there. It is also possible that some of these ascetic monks passed away while seated in meditation, due to old age or sickness. There are numerous documented cases of this in the primary sources, including in Chan Buddhist literature.¹⁷

Secondly, there is the issue of the category of meditating monks, i.e. those practitioners who allegedly inhabited or used the so-called ‘meditation caves.’ Documentation of actual cases of meditation monks are necessary in order to make this concept meaningful and establish the actual nature of their practices. Often, proper documentation is missing in the secondary Chinese sources, which again would seem to be based on speculation deriving from the idea of meditation caves, even though the

the highly respected Zheng Azai appears to have bought into this unsupported theory. Cf. Zheng Azai 鄭阿財, “Dunhuang fojiao siyuan gongneng zhi kaocha yu yanjiu—yi Dunhuang wenxian yu shiku wei zhongxin 2/2 敦煌佛教寺院功能之考察與研究—以敦煌文獻與石窟為中心 2/2 [An Investigation and Study of the Functioning of Dunhuang’s Buddhist Temples: Focusing on the Dunhuang Manuscripts and the Stone Caves, 2/2],” *Yanjiu chengguo baogao* 研究成果報告 [Research Report] (2006): 2, 108, 112, 141–142, 156, etc., accessed October 1, 2017. <http://nhuir.nhu.edu.tw/bitstream/987654321/7315/1/952411H343002.pdf>. Peng Xiaojing (彭曉靜) discusses meditation caves under the period of Tibetan rule over Dunhuang by comparing a series of early caves with those in the Northern Section of caves at Mogao, but in doing so appears to ignore the different historical and religious frameworks that underlie the later practitioners. See Peng Xiaojing, “Tubo tongzhi Dunhuang shiqi chanzong de liuchuan yu yingxiang.” Later ‘meditation caves’ are discussed in Sha Wutian 沙武田, “Dunhuang Xixia shiku yingjian shi goujian 敦煌西夏石窟營建史构建 [The History of the Construction of the Tangut Caves at Dunhuang],” *Xixia yanjiu* 西夏研究 [Tangut Studies] 1 (2018): 3–16.

¹⁶ See John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 16–66.

¹⁷ See e.g. *Gaoseng chuan* 高僧傳 [Accounts of Eminent Monks] (T. 2059.50: 396b, 399a, 399b, etc.); *Xu gaoseng chuan* 續高僧傳 [Continuation of the Accounts of Eminent Monks] (T. 5060.50: 552c, 557b, 560c, etc.).

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primary sources do indeed refer to a number of local monks as ‘Chan monks’ or simply ‘meditators’ (Chin. *chanseng* 禪僧), and reference meditation caves, where austere practices of various kinds were probably carried out.

Thirdly, there is the fundamental problem with designating a given cave as a ‘meditation cave,’ in the absence of evidence that meditation in some form was actually performed in the cave in question.¹⁸ There is no solid evidence that meditation was practised in any given cave, although it is, of course, quite possible that it was. But a number of other practices might also have been performed in those caves, such as penance, recitation of spells, Buddha invocation, recitation of scriptures, etc. In fact, I strongly suspect that a wide range of practices that do not fall directly (or indirectly) under the heading of ‘meditation’ may have occurred in those caves. Hence, in the absence of evidence to identify precisely which practices occurred in caves inhabited by ascetic monks, let us instead refer to them as ‘caves for Buddhist practice.’

4. Cave-dwelling Meditation Monks in Donor Inscriptions

Information on monks in Dunhuang who lived in caves, i.e. cave-dwelling ascetics, mostly derives from donor inscriptions *in situ* in the Mogao Caves, dating from the 7th to the 10th centuries. According to these sources, the monks in question are referred to as ‘cave-dwelling meditation-monks’ (Chin. *zhuku chanseng* 住窟禪僧). In fact, the donor inscriptions—especially from the 10th century—document that a good many ascetics lived in caves during that period. Moreover, these practitioners were affiliated with a number of the important temples in the area and enjoyed a special, hallowed status, based on their appellations.

In one informative record, cave-dwelling meditation-monks from various temples offered prayers in connection with making or repairing Cave 443, including the Chan Master Jiechang (d.u., 戒昌) of Sanjie Temple (三界寺). This evidence indicates that the Sanjie Temple and several other temples in Shazhou, including the Xiande Temple (顯德寺),

¹⁸ This is also discussed briefly by Sharf, who points out the absurdity of designating such caves as ‘meditation caves’ without any clear idea of what kind of practices were actually performed there. See Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 43a–44b.

owned or operated caves at the site, some of which were used for habitation and practice.¹⁹ Moreover, Cave 443 appears to have been exclusively created by a fraternity of monks who undertook this collective enterprise despite hailing from different temples (DMGT: 167).

The donor inscriptions in Cave 148 mention that several of the monks participating in its creation were all cave-dwelling meditators (Chin. *kuchan* 窟禪), i.e. local practitioners (DMGT: 70), including Fusui (fl. 9th c., 福遂),²⁰ Xingdao (fl. 9th c., 興道), Xingsui (fl. 9th c., 興遂), Zuoxing (fl. 9th c., 左興), Huizhang (fl. 9th c., 會長), and Suo Huicun (fl. 9th c., 索會存), etc.²¹ This is highly significant in light of their affiliated temples, which include several of the most important Buddhist institutions in Dunhuang: Bao'en Temple (報恩寺), Liantai Temple (蓮台寺), Shengguang Temple (聖光寺), Xiande Temple (顯得寺), Lingtu Temple (靈圖寺), Sanjie Temple (三界寺), Longxing Temple (龍興寺), and Kaiyuan Temple (開元寺).²² This terse piece of information provides solid evidence that most, if not all, of Dunhuang's major temples had their own affiliated caves for meditation among the Mogao Caves. These caves were most likely located in the Northern Section of the cliff. Although this does not solve the question of where most of Dunhuang's temples were actually situated, it does indicate that part of their religious activities was centered at Mogao.

Although the sources refer to the monks as cave-dwelling meditators, these were not necessarily Chan monks (Chin. *chanseng* 禪僧) in the sectarian sense of followers of a form of Chan Buddhism (Chin. *chanzong*

¹⁹ The *Gongde ji* 功德記 [Record of Virtuous Activity], which dates from the early Tangut period (11th c.) and is found on the eastern wall of Cave 443, refers to “[...] Western pair of cave temples (Chin. *xi er ku cha* 西二窟剎),” DMGT, 167. Given that *cha* (剎) in Buddhist usage usually refers to a monastic dwelling, this may be further evidence that a number of Dunhuang's major temples operated cave-dwellings. This again substantiates the view that the majority of the sixteen temples known to have existed in Shazhou, were indeed located at the Mogao Caves.

²⁰ There is a very brief bibliographical note in *Dunhuang cuijin*, 32–33.

²¹ The primary donor of Cave 148 was the military official Li Mingzhen (839–890, 李明振), who hailed from Liangzhou (涼州) (DMGT: 70). For a biographical note, see DXDC, 354a.

²² For a survey of Dunhuang's Buddhist temples, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Buddhist Temples in Dunhuang: Mid-9th to Early 11th Centuries,” *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.2 (forthcoming 2020).



禪宗) current during the late 8th/early 9th centuries.²³ Such a mistaken correlation is easy to make because a term like *chanshi* (禪師), ‘master of meditation,’ can also mean ‘Chan Master,’ a master of sectarian Chan Buddhism. Because the sources are not sufficiently specific, we do not always know which of the two designations is appropriate to a given case, as we have just seen with regard to Hongbian (d. 862, 洪誓). There certainly were Buddhist monks and nuns in Dunhuang who practised meditation in some form or the other, e.g. Pure Land visualisation, either the Tiantai-type *śamatha vipaśyana* (Chin. *tiantai zhiguan* 天台止觀) or that performed by adherents of the Faxiang (法相) or Yogācāra tradition, who were especially active in Dunhuang during the 9th century, due to the influence of the important Chinese translator and exegete Facheng (d. 864, 法成, Tib. Chos grub).²⁴

There were also Buddhist practitioners in Dunhuang who saw themselves as formally adhering to Chan Buddhism in the more narrowly-defined sectarian sense.²⁵ They saw themselves as followers of one of the

²³ For a system of classifying the different lineages of Chan Buddhism during the Tang that also takes the Dunhuang material into account, see Jan Yün-hua 冉雲華, *Zongmi* 宗密 [Zongmi] (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongju, 1988), 101–139.

²⁴ There are a number of available studies on Facheng, but the most informed and well-rounded is undoubtedly Ueyama Daishun, *Tonkō bukkyō no kenkyū*, 84–246. It is also worth consulting Wu Qiyu 吳其昱, “Taiban goku daitoku sanzō hōji Hōsei denkō 大番国大德三藏法師法成伝考 [A Discussion of the Life of the Great Virtuous One from Tibet, the *tripiṭaka* and *dharma* Master, Facheng],” in *Tonkō to Chūgoku bukkyō* 敦煌と中国仏教 [Dunhuang and Buddhism in China], trans. Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅 and Higuchi Masaro 樋口勝, ed. Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮 and Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅 (Tokyo: Daitō shūppansha, 1984), 383–414.

²⁵ A considerable amount of material relating to sectarian Chan Buddhism was found among the Dunhuang manuscripts. Cf. *Dunhuang chanzong wenxian jicheng* 敦煌禪宗文獻集成 [Complete Collection of the Chan Buddhist Material from Dunhuang], 3 vols, ed. Lin Shitian 林世田, Liu Yanyuan 刘燕远, and Shen Guomei 申国美 (Beijing: Quanguo tushuguan wenxian fuzhi zhongxin, 1998). For a general survey of the Chan material in Chinese, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “Some Observations on the Chan Manuscripts from Dunhuang,” *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 2 (1989): 111–139. Another useful source is Ma Gexia 马格侠 and Yang Fuxue 杨富学, “Bei ming zansuo jian Tang, Wudai Dunhuang de chanzong xintu 碑铭赞所见唐五代敦煌的禅宗信徒 [Adherents of Chan Buddhism in Dunhuang during the Tang and Five Dynasties Period as Seen in Steles, Inscriptions and Eulogies],” *Xi’nan minsu daxue xuebao* 西南民族大学学报 [Journal of the South Western Minority University] 11 (2009): 205–209, accessed October 10, 2017. http://www.sxlib.org.cn/dfzy/sxfjwhzybk/sxhcfjztysywh/yjwx_5241/201701/t20170122_623158.html. One of the problems with this otherwise informative study is that

traditions or lineages of transmission that—both concretely and imaginatively—traced themselves back to the semi-mythical Indian monk Bodhidharma (fl. early 6th c.).²⁶

One example of an identifiably-Chan monk is the cleric Yibian (793–869, 義辯).²⁷ Information on him derives primarily from the eulogy *Da Tang Shazhou shimen Suo falü Yibian heshang xiu gongde ji bei* 大唐沙州釋門索法律義辯和尚修功德記碑 [Stele Inscription of the Cultivation of Virtues by the Buddhist of the Suo Clan, the Venerable Senior Monk Yibian of Shazhou in the Great Tang] (S. 530). This text mentions that he was a follower of the Great Vehicle of Sudden Enlightenment (Chin. *dunwu dasheng* 頓悟大乘), which is a reference to the tradition of Southern Chan (Chin. *nanchan* 南禪), as transmitted during the mid-Tang by Huineng (638–713, 慧能) and his supposed disciple Shenhui (670–762, 神會),²⁸ the latter of whom is sometimes referred as the Seventh Patriarch (Chin. *qi zu* 七祖).²⁹ The text also mentions the Secret Transmission of the Mind Seal (Chin. *xinyin michuan* 心印密傳), another reference to sectarian Chan Buddhism. However, Yibian lived in the Benju Chan Cloister (Chin. *Benju chanyuan* 本居禪院) of the Jinguangming Temple (Chin. *Jinguangming si* 金光明寺), not in a cave.³⁰ It is important to note

its authors largely fail to discern between sectarian Chan on the one hand, and meditation and meditators more broadly defined on the other. This lack of precision subverts the paper's arguments on a number of points, and obfuscates whatever details on meditation practices of both categories might otherwise have divulged. Otherwise, the most comprehensive collection of studies on Chan Buddhism in Dunhuang is Tanaka Ryōshō 田中良昭 and Shinohara Toshio 篠原壽雄, ed., *Tonkō butten to zen* 敦煌佛典と禪 [Dunhuang Buddhism and Chan] (Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha, 1980). The articles in this work discuss local Chan Buddhism in Dunhuang, as well as what the Chan material from Dunhuang says about Chinese Buddhism as such.

²⁶ A discussion of Bodhidharma and his connection with formal Chan Buddhism is found in John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 15–19. See also Jinhua Chen, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2002), 155–156.

²⁷ For a biographical note, see DXDC, 351b.

²⁸ John McRae, “Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment in Early Ch'an Buddhism,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 227–275.

²⁹ See also P. 4660 (2), and P. 4640 (3).

³⁰ For information on this important temple, see Sørensen, “The Buddhist Temples in Dunhuang.”



that there are a few surviving documents that indicate some of the Chan monks in Dunhuang during the 9th–10th centuries practised a type of Chan that somehow integrated the Northern and Southern Chan traditions, i.e. ‘sudden enlightenment’ and ‘gradual practice.’³¹

During the 10th century, there were practitioners of sectarian Chan Buddhism who mixed or tempered their beliefs and types of meditation with Esoteric Buddhism, in a variety of ways, including the use of rituals and spells.³² Moreover, a number of Tibetan texts from Cave 17 document that local Tibetan monks may have followed, or at least studied, the teachings of sectarian Chinese Chan Buddhism during the 9th–10th centuries.³³

³¹ For a review of these cases, see Peng Xiaojing, “Tubo tongzhi Dunhuang shiqi chanzong de liuchuan yu yingxiang.” Peng’s observation is rather important, and could help explain why we find Northern Chan texts and excerpts in the Tibetan material from the 10th century in Dunhuang. Related to this, Tibetan Chan materials are discussed in Carmen Meinert, “Legend of *Cig car ba* Criticism in Tibet: a List of Six *Cig car ba* Titles in the *Chos ’byung me tog snying po* of Nyang Nyi ma ’od zer (12th Century),” in *Tibetan Buddhist Literature and Praxis. Studies in its Formative Period 900–1400*, ed. Ronald Davidson and Christian Wedemeyer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 31–54.

³² See Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Meeting and Conflation of Chan and Esoteric Buddhism during the Tang,” in *Chan Buddhism—Dunhuang and Beyond: Manuscripts, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Christoph Anderl and Christian Wittern (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 135–173.

³³ Among the few studies to actually deal with Tibetan Chan Buddhism in Dunhuang are Kenneth Eastman, “Mahāyoga Texts at Tun-huang,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Cultural Studies at Ryukoku University* 22 (1983): 42–60; and Sam van Schaik, “The Limits of Transgression: The Samaya Vows of Mahāyoga,” in *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 61–83. For an interesting example of a text showing signs of integrated Chan and Tibetan Tantric Buddhist lore in Dunhuang, see Ueyama Daishuin 上山大峻, “Tonkō shutsudo Chibetto bun mahāyōga bunken Kongōsatta mondō wayaku 敦煌出土チベット文マハーヨーガ文献 金剛薩埵問答 和訳 [The Excavated Textual Material of the Mahāyōga Text, *Vajrasattvas’ Questions and Answers*],” in *Zengaku kenkyū no shosō: Tanaka Ryōshō hakase koki kinen ronshū* 禅学研究の諸相: 田中良昭博士古稀記念論集 [Aspects of Zen Studies: Commemorative Volume of Essays for Professor Tanaka Ryōshō], ed. Tanaka Ryōshō hakase koki kinen ronshū kankō-kai 田中良昭博士古稀記念論集刊行 [Editorial Committee of the Festschrift for Professor Tanaka Ryōshō] (Tokyo: Daito shuppansa, 2003), 3–22. See also Kammie M. Takahashi, “Ritual and Philosophical Speculation in the Rdo rje sems dpa’i zhus lan,” in *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 85–141. This study builds, in part, on Ueyama (see above). For a survey of Tibetan Chan Buddhist texts, see Sam van Schaik, *Tibetan Zen:*

The complexity of the possible sectarian affiliations of these meditation monks is further complicated by the fact that ordinary Buddhists may have studied a number of different Buddhist teachings and practised a variety of different types of meditation, without actually belonging to a particular sectarian lineage or school. One case from Dunhuang involves such a monk—in fact a very important one—the celebrated Daozhen (ca. 916–ca. 987 or 995, 道真),³⁴ famous for initiating the repair of scriptures in his home temple’s library at Sanjie, one of Dunhuang’s most important Buddhist institutions.³⁵ We have a fairly good understanding of his life and the types of Buddhism he was concerned with, which include the teachings of a number of major Mahāyāna *sūtras* and apocryphal scriptures, as well as various *vinaya*-related works (S. 4160). Most importantly, he also studied Chan Buddhism, including meditation, based on the books from his private library, including the *Quanzhou qianfo xinzhu zhu zushi song* 泉州千佛新著諸祖師頌 [Newly Composed Songs of the Patriarchal Masters from the Thousand Buddhas of Quanzhou] (T. 2861.85)³⁶ and the *Dacheng wu fangbian beizong* 大乘五方便北宗 [The Five Mahāyāna *upāyas* of the Northern School], the latter work belongs to the Northern

Discovering a Lost Tradition (London: Snow Lion & Shambala, 2015). While this somewhat popular study presents a good selection of the relevant primary sources, it largely fails to discuss Tibetan practitioners of Chan in Dunhuang itself, not to mention their wider relationship with Chinese Chan Buddhism and its history. See also Carmen Meinert, “The Conjunction of Chinese Chan and Tibetan rDzogs chen Thought: Reflections on the Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts IOL Tib J 689-1 and PT 699,” in *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein and Brandon Dotson (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 239–301. Carmen Meinert, “A Pliable Life: Facts and Fiction about the Figure of the Chinese Meditation Master Wolun,” *Oriens Extremus* 46 (2007): 184–210. Carmen Meinert, “Gestückelte Schriften: Überlieferungsgeschichten der dem Meditationsmeister Wolun zugeschriebenen Dunhuang-Manuskripte,” *Oriens Extremus* 47 (2008): 215–245.

³⁴ See 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).

³⁵ See Sørensen, “The Buddhist Temples in Dunhuang.”

³⁶ Based on S. 1635. This collection of Chan verses documents that the so-called Southern Chan transmission (Chin. *nanchan chuan* 南禪傳) from Bodhidharma to Huineng, followed by both the Niutou (牛頭) and Hongzhou (洪州) Schools, was present in Dunhuang during the 10th century. This fact makes it somewhat implausible that the local Tibetan Buddhists should have been unaware of the currently established orthodoxy of Chan Buddhist transmission at that time.

BuddhistRoad Paper 5.1. Sørensen, “On Meditation Caves and Cave-dwelling Ascetics in Dunhuang”



Chan tradition of Shenxiu (605–706, 神秀).³⁷ Daozhen was not a cave-dwelling practitioner of meditation, nor an adherent of Chan Buddhism *per se*, but he is an example of a mainstream practising monk living in Dunhuang during the 10th century. That being the case, the cave-dwelling meditators under discussion here may have followed a similar career, and engaged in a variety of practices and doctrinal studies, instead of belonging to one particular lineage of transmission or sect.

5. Concerning the Monk Official of the Three Meditation Caves

A number of minor yet important issues have assisted in obfuscating our understanding of the meditation caves and those who dwelled in them.³⁸ One such issue concerns the title ‘Meditation Master of the Three Caves’ (Chin. *sanku chanshi* 三窟禪師), a formal designation that evidently refers to a type of important monastic official. The contemporary scholar-monk Zhanru has discussed the meditation caves in Dunhuang as part of a larger study, primarily dealing with *vinaya*-related ceremonies in Chinese Buddhism, in the course of which he touches on the monastic communities of Dunhuang as well.³⁹ He refers to a passage in an official document from 863, in the early years of Guiyijun rule, that mentions that “under the jurisdiction of Dunhuang there were sixteen temples and three caves for meditation” (S. 1947 (2)).⁴⁰ How to interpret the phrase “three caves for meditation” has troubled researchers for a considerable time now, with some taking it to refer to the Mogao Caves, the Western Thousand Buddha Caves (Chin. Xi Qianfodong 西千佛洞), and the Yulin Caves

³⁷ The manuscripts representing this text have been extensively studied and partly translated in John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), 148–149 and 171–196.

³⁸ Zheng Binglin 郑炳林 and Zheng Yinan 郑怡楠, “Dunhuang xieben Zhu sanku chanshi Bo shamen Faxin zan kaoshi 敦煌写本住三窟禅师伯沙门法心赞考释 [A Translation of the Dunhuang Manuscript of the *Zhu sanku chanshi Bo shamen Faxin zan*],” *Cizhou zhi lu 丝绸之路* [Silk Road] 12 (2014): 8–12. The same argument is found in Peng Xiaojing, “Tubo tongzhi dui huang shiqi chanzong de liuchuan yu yingxiang.”

³⁹ Zhanru 湛如, *Dunhuang fojiao luyi zhidu yanjiu 敦煌佛教律儀制度研究* [A Study of *vinaya* and Ritual Regulations in Dunhuang Buddhism] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 50–55.

⁴⁰ S. 1947 (2): 敦煌管内十六所寺及三所禪窟。

(Chin. Yulin ku 榆林窟).⁴¹ A more likely interpretation is that the above sentence indicates three separate caves or cave complexes for practicing meditation at the Mogao Caves themselves, specifically those which served as affiliates or branch temples of some of Dunhuang's major temples, as indicated elsewhere in the primary sources. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that meditation was also practised at the other two sites, the Western Thousand Buddha Caves and Yulin. However, if it is the case that these sites are referred to in this document, one would expect the use of more precise names. Moreover, it makes little sense to refer to meditation caves in a place such as Yulin without considering the other freestanding temples in Guazhou as well. In my view, the above sentence refers to local temples and caves in Shazhou, and the “three caves for meditation” it mentions were most probably among the Mogao Caves. As it happens, the formal title of Meditation Master of the Three Caves appears in various documents and inscriptions from the second half of the 9th century onwards, referencing important clerics who were appointed to this position. Whatever their actual official functions, it is clear that they enjoyed a special status, and in some cases at least, we can imagine that they were actual masters of meditation. Perhaps these three caves actually referred to three specific caves at Mogao?

An eulogy written for the funerary portrait of the monk Faxin (fl. 9th c., 法心)⁴² glosses him as a “Meditation Master, Residing in the Three Caves” (Chin. *zhu sanku chanshi* 住三窟禪師), indicating that he was not only a master of meditation but also a monastic administrator in charge of the meditation caves.⁴³ Another eulogy for a Lord Cao (fl. first half of 10th c., 曹公), who served as a Rector of Monks (Chin. *sengzheng* 僧政), refers

⁴¹ Cf. Ma De 馬德, *Dunhuang Mogao ku shi yanjiu* 敦煌莫高窟史研究 [Studies in the History of the Mogao Caves] (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 212.

⁴² He appears as a donor in Cave 119, which dates from the late Tang (DMGT, 56). For a biographical note, see *Dunhuangxue da cidian* 敦煌學大詞典 [Comprehensive Dictionary of Dunhuang Studies; hereafter DXDC], ed. Li Meilin 李泯林 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1998), 350b. He was the paternal uncle of Tanguang (fl. second half of 9th c., 談廣), a monk official from the Jingtu Temple (Chin. *Jingtu si* 淨土寺) in Dunhuang. See also, Zheng Binglin and Zheng Yinan, “Dunhuang xieben Zhu sanku chanshi Bo shamen Faxin zan kaoshi,” 8–12. This concerns P. 4640 (8).

⁴³ Cf. *Zhu sanku chanshi Bo shamen Faxin zan* 住三窟禪師伯沙門法心讚 [Eulogy for the Meditation Master Bo, Dweller in the Three Caves, the *śramaṇa* Faxin] (P. 4640 (8)).

to him as in charge of the ‘Three Caves,’ but does not directly say that he was a master of meditation. The text in question is the *Dunhuang guannei sengzheng, jiangou dang sanku Cao gong maozhen zan* 激煌管内僧政兼勾當三窟曹公貌真讚 [Eulogy for the Funerary Portrait of the Official of Internal Affairs, the Rector Conjointly in Charge of the Three Caves, Lord Cao of Dunhuang] (P. 4660 (3)).⁴⁴ This text states that he practised meditation in the course of his life and that he attained awakening.

The celebrated Hongbian is an example of a cave-dwelling meditation master from the Guiyijun period. He served as a Buddhist leader under the Tibetans and later as Saṃgha Overseer under the Guiyijun during the mid-9th century (P. 4640, P. 4660, S. 77, etc.).⁴⁵ His funerary portrait on a wall in Cave 17 provides, in my view, an excellent idea of what such a master of meditation may have looked like (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Line-drawing of Hongbian based on his funerary portrait on the rear wall of Mogao Cave 17. © Henrik H. Sørensen

⁴⁴ It was authored by the celebrated literatus and monk Wuzhen (ca. 811–895, 悟真). For details on his life, see Chen Tsu-lung, *La vie et les œuvres de Wou-tchen (818–895)* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1966).

⁴⁵ For a study on Hongbian, see Peng Jianbing 彭建兵, “Guiyijun shou ren Hexi du sentong Wu Hongbian shengping shiji shuping 归义军首任河西都僧统吴洪辩生平事迹述评 [A Review of the Life Story of the First Saṃgha Overseer Wu Hongbian of the Hexi District under the Guiyijun],” *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌学辑刊 [Journal of Dunhuang Studies] 2 (2005): 157–163.

Even though Hongbian is usually associated with Yogācāra Buddhism and not with the Chan tradition as such, the portrait shows Hongbian seated in meditation on a ceremonial cloth with his shoes in front, a water flask (Skt. *kuṇḍikā*) to his right, and a rosary and monk's pouch on the stylised tree behind him. That he is rendered in meditation is obvious from his seated lotus posture, with his hands held in front of his lap in the special gesture of meditation (Skt. *dhyānamudrā*). Although we do not know whether Hongbian actually practised meditation in one of the caves at Mogao, his depiction is, nevertheless, a typical example of a local meditator, similar to others who lived and practised in the caves during the 9th century.⁴⁶

6. Archaeological Data from the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves

While the major section of caves at Mogao, which features many votive caves and is usually referred to as the Southern Section, has been extensively explored and researched, it was only after the mid-1990s that the Chinese authorities, led by the Academy of Dunhuang Studies, initiated a thorough archaeological excavation and survey of the caves located in the Northern Section. Most of these caves were devoid of wall paintings and were partly filled with sand from centuries of disuse. Archaeological reports on the Northern Caves at Mogao that have appeared since then, have yielded many significant discoveries on the nature of these caves, and insights into how the lives of cave-dwelling ascetics unfolded there during the late medieval and early pre-modern period. It is not possible to do the truly variegated data from these caves' full justice here, but I will, nevertheless, discuss a number of the most interesting findings that the reports bring to the fore, as they are directly relevant to understanding the Mogao Caves as a sacred space. The mainly archaeological material from the caves in the Northern Section can be approached from various angles depending on scholarly interest. For the present purpose, I focus on data that informs us of how life might have been for cave-dwelling monks (and nuns?).

⁴⁶ Sharf, who also takes special notice of Hongbian's funerary portrait, points to the conceptual affinity between meditation cave and mausoleum/funerary cave. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 57b.



The original impression I had regarding the caves in the Northern Section was published in 1990 regarding the nature of the caves in that section, was confirmed by the excavation reports published by the Dunhuang Research Academy in Chinese between 2000 and 2003.⁴⁷ The excavation confirmed that the majority of the caves in this section were primarily used for habitation, because many of them include carved-out bunks or beds, shelves, and kitchens (B111; B113; B115; B116; B17, B118; B119, etc.).⁴⁸ Some of the caves may have originally been made for burial purposes, although this is debated, while others were clearly converted for this use. The reports describe finding fifty-three human skeletons in the caves in the Northern Section, which date from the early Tang up to the early Mongol period, a period covering the 7th–13th centuries.⁴⁹

A fairly large number of mainly Buddhist text fragments were found there, probably due to the fact that these caves were used for habitation and solitary practice. They include written and printed materials in Uyghur, Tangut, Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian. The majority of these materials is in Uyghur, less in Chinese, and fairly little in Mongolian. However, the

⁴⁷ My findings regarding the Northern Section of the caves were first communicated to the assembly at the Dunhuang Academy in August of 1990, when I participated in the UNESCO-sponsored ‘Silk Road Expedition,’ which convened a scholarly meeting at the academy. Henrik H. Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang during the Tang and Five Dynasties Period,” in *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*, ed. Vadime Elisseeff (Paris: UNESCO Publishing/Berghahn Books, 2000), 27–48. It was belatedly published a decade later, in the best tradition of UNESCO. However, due to the political climate at the time, local mistrust, and the inability of the local Chinese scholars to communicate openly under the directorship of Duan Wenjie, my ideas at that time went largely unheeded. My view was accepted only ten years later, with the publication of the first volume of the *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku* in 2000, and is now fully endorsed by the Dunhuang Academy as if it were entirely their own idea. Cf. *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 1, 1–11.

⁴⁸ An entirely different opinion on the caves’ use is found in Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 50a. He considers the caves in the Northern Section to be residences for the workers who were engaged in the creation of the Mogao Caves. What the supposed workers would have done with Buddhist scriptures in several languages, religious paintings, ritual objects, etc., that were found in the caves is not clear from such a reading of the site.

⁴⁹ See e.g. the chart in *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 3, 487 (and pls. 192.1–6). Among these remains is one skull that was used for making a *kapāla*, indicating the presence of Tantric practitioners at the site, which I discuss below.

Chinese material is by far the oldest, with some of the manuscript fragments dating from the mid-Tang period, the 7th–8th centuries, and includes a number of important *sūtras* (Cave B128: 2, 18).⁵⁰ As such, this material forms a typological match in terms of their content and date with the manuscripts from Cave 17. This indicates that at least some of the caves in the Northern Section were already inhabited during that time. Even so, the majority of the Tangut and Uyghur Buddhist texts date from the 11th–13th centuries, well after Cave 17 was sealed. Interestingly, a number of spell amulets and text fragments have also been found. Most of this material is directly related to Esoteric Buddhism.⁵¹

Although we cannot be certain, it is possible that groups of these caves functioned as entire temple units for habitation, and perhaps belonged to—or represented—some of the major temples that once flourished in Shazhou and at the Mogao Caves. If so, they would have served as homes for at least part of the monastic population at the Mogao. The caves in this section continued to be excavated over several centuries, with the last ones dug out during the middle of the 13th century, or thereabouts. Even as late as the early 14th century, the caves in the Northern Section continued to be inhabited by Buddhist ascetics.

7. Esoteric and Tantric Buddhist Practices in the Northern Section Caves

We should not designate all the caves in the Northern Section that are known to have been inhabited as ‘meditation caves,’ but rather, understand

⁵⁰ One fragment found in B47 dates from Jinglong (景龍) 2nd year, i.e. 708, and another fragment dates from the 5th year of Kaiyuan (開元), i.e. 717. Cf. *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu ku*, vol. 1, 137–141.

⁵¹ For the material in Tangut, see Shi Jinbo 史金波, “Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu chutu Xixia wen wenxian chutan 敦煌莫高窟北区出土西夏文文献初探 [A Discussion of the Tangut Textual Material Discovered in the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang],” *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 [Dunhuang Research] 3 (2000): 358–370. For a somewhat rigid description of the Uyghur material, see Abdurishid Yakup, “Uyghurica from the Northern Grottoes of Dunhuang,” in *Shōgaito Masahiro sensei tainin kinen ronshū* 庄垣内正弘先生退任記念論集 [A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Masahiro Shōgaito’s Retirement: Studies on Eurasian Languages] (Kyoto: Yūrasia shogengo no-kankōkai, 2006), 1–41. Although fairly comprehensive in its report, this article fails to account for the religious and practice-related contexts that the Uyghur material signals. In short, we learn virtually nothing about the practitioners themselves, nor the situation in which they lived.



them as the homes of ascetic practitioners who engaged in a wide range of Buddhist practices.⁵² Again, this does not exclude the possibility that both meditators and Chan Buddhists proper lived there, but rather reframes them as living and practice spaces for Buddhists.

While the fragments of scriptures in Chinese recovered from the caves in the Northern Section are not very numerous, at least two relatively important Esoteric Buddhist scriptures were found. One consists of several fragments, some lengthy sections of which belong to the partly apocryphal *Guanding jing* 灌頂經 [Scripture of Consecration] (T. 1331.21; B175: 2–3, 4–8).⁵³ This is an important anthology of spell texts that continued to inform Chinese Buddhism for several centuries after its first appearance during the late Northern and Southern Dynasties period (386–589, 南北朝). A Chinese manuscript fragment of the *Sitātapatrādhāraṇī*⁵⁴ was found in Cave B59, which indicates that practitioners of Esoteric and Tantric Buddhism were active in the caves in the Northern Section.⁵⁵ This scripture enjoyed considerable popularity in Dunhuang from the late Tang onwards, including in the Tibetan Buddhist communities there. Later, it also featured prominently in the Tangut sources.

The fragmented Uyghur textual material found in the Northern Section caves is relatively substantial and represents several different scriptures, mostly in manuscript form. However, some of the latest material is block-printed texts and seems to date from the Mongolian period, in the 13th–14th centuries. While most of the fragments are standard Buddhist *sūtras* and *vinaya* texts, there are also a number of Esoteric and Tantric Buddhist texts. It is estimated that the better part of this material was translated from

⁵² In this I largely agree with Peng's observations on the caves in the Northern Section, found in "Tubo tongzhi dui huang shiqi chanzong de liuchuan yu yingxiang." He enumerates several practices that he conjectures were practised in the caves, including chanting spells, strictly maintaining precepts, quiet contemplation, visualisation, chanting scriptures, and reciting Amitābha's name.

⁵³ See Michel Strickmann, "The Consecration Sūtra: A Buddhist Book of Spells," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 75–118.

⁵⁴ This was a spell of paramount importance for the Buddhists at Dunhuang during the late medieval and early pre-modern periods. Numerous examples in both Chinese and Tibetan are reported to be among the Dunhuang manuscripts.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 1, 227, pl. 83, 1–3. The writers of the report were seemingly unable to identify the fragment in question, even though several examples of the spell are found among the manuscripts from Cave 17.

Tibetan, similar to the late material found at Turfan.⁵⁶ One Uyghur fragment of an Esoteric Buddhist text features Sanskrit seed syllables (Skt. *bīja*) (B97: 7V°).

The Tangut material, mostly in the form of fragments, consists of both Buddhist and secular texts, in manuscript and block-print form. As with the Uyghur material, the Tangut Buddhist scriptures include both mainstream *sūtras* and Esoteric and Tantric Buddhist texts. However, in this case, the latter category dominates by far, indicating that Tangut Buddhism—as practised in Dunhuang—consisted of this form of Buddhism in particular.⁵⁷ Since the Esoteric and Tantric Buddhist material is of special interest to us here, it makes sense to look closer at the related scriptures identified so far.

First, we have a fragment of a printed version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārajñīsūtra* (B127: 9–1).⁵⁸ This Esoteric Buddhist scripture was not only important to the Tanguts, but also enjoyed great popularity in China and elsewhere in East Asia. This Tangut version evidently derived from Amoghavajra’s (705–774, Chin. Bukong 不空) extended version translated during the mid-8th century (T. 982.19).⁵⁹ Then there is the *Sheng liuzi zengshou da ming tuoluoni jing* 聖六字增壽大明陀羅尼經 [Holy Six Letter *Mahāvidyādhāraṇī* Scripture for Increasing the Span of Life] (B166: 5).⁶⁰ This is a short spell text for invoking six categories of divine protection and aid. Then we have a fragment of the *Sheng Guanzizai dabeixin congchi gongnengyi jing lu* 聖觀自在大悲心聰持功能依經錄 [Record of the Holy Avalokiteśvara’s Great

⁵⁶ Personal communication with Jens Wilkens of Göttingen University (April 12, 2018).

⁵⁷ Dai Zhongpei 戴忠沛, “Mogao ku beiqu chutu Xixia wen sanpian bukao 莫高窟北區出土西夏文殘片補考 [A Supplement to the Tangut Text Fragments found in the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves],” *Xixia xue* 西夏學 [Tangut Studies] 2 (2007): 120–124. Carmen Meinert has shown that Tantric ritual practice was also performed in caves of the Northern Section, including CAve 465. See, Meinert, “Tantric Rituals to Usher in a Transcending Process Leading to a State beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies.”

⁵⁸ Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku, vol. 2, 176 (pl. 78.2).

⁵⁹ For a complete translation of this work, see Marc J. F. des Jardins, *Le sūtra de la Mahāmāyūrī: Rituel et politique dans la Chine des Tang (618–907)* (Quebec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2011).

⁶⁰ This is evidently based on T. 1049.20, which was translated by the Indian monk Dānapāla (963–1058) under the early Northern Song.



Compassionate Heart for Up-holding its Virtuous Power by Relying on the *sūtra*] that was found in Cave 464.⁶¹ This scripture is concerned with the propagation and practice of the *Nilakanṭhakasūtra*'s spell of the Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara. Finally, there is a single page of a Tantric ritual text in the form of a *sādhana*, the performance of fire offerings (Skt. *homa*). It also includes a number of *mantras*, and was given a provisional title in Chinese, *Zhu mizhou yaoyu* 諸密咒要語 [Essential Words of All Esoteric Spells] (B121: 18, 1–16).⁶²

Much of the Tibetan material found in the caves of the Northern Section is very fragmented, but contained at least one copy of the *Prajñāpāramitānāmāṣṭaśataka* (B52: 4ab). Another group of fragments, which the Chinese investigating team failed to identify, refers to the hells and to a *dhāraṇī* pillar in conjunction with the use of spells (B59: 9–1–3).⁶³ This material appear to belong to either the *Uṣṇīṣavijāyadhāraṇī* complex of scriptures, or possibly even to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-uṣṇīṣavijāyatantra*, a major Tantric Buddhist work.⁶⁴ A number of

⁶¹ This work was rendered into Tangut by Xianbei Baoyuan (fl. 12th c., 鲜卑寶源), who was part of a larger translation team, and was first published in the Tangut Empire in 1149, during Renzong's reign (r. 1139–1193, 仁宗). Baoyuan was a leading translator at Renzong's Tangut court, however his exact ethnic background is unclear. For a discussion of him and his activities, see Ruth Dunnell, "Esoteric Buddhism under the Xixia (1038–1227)," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 473–474. A copy of this ritual text was found in the Karakhoto text hoard (TK 164 (2)). Cf. *E'cang Heishuicheng wenxian* 俄藏黑水城文献 [The Textual Material from Karakhoto in the Collection of the Hermitage], vol. 4, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan minsu yanjiu 中国社会科学院民族研究所 and Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 29–51. For a discussion of its place in Tangut Buddhist history, see Sun Bojun 孙伯君, "Xixia Baoyuan shi *Sheng guanzizai dabei xin zongchi dong nengyi jing lu kao* 西夏宝源译圣观自在大悲心总持动能依经录考 [A Propos Xianbei Baoyuan's Translation of the Record of the Holy Avalokiteśvara's Great Compassionate Heart for Up-holding its Virtuous Power by Relying on the *sūtra* under the Tangut]," *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌学辑刊 [Journal of Dunhuang Studies] 2 (2006): 34–43.

⁶² Cf. *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 2, 139–141. See also Shi, "Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu chutu Xixia wen wenxian chutan," 358–370.

⁶³ For an attempt at rendering some of the fragmented text into Chinese, see *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku*, vol. 1, 231–235.

⁶⁴ A study and complete translation of this work is found in Tadeusz Skorupski, *Sarvadurgati Parisodhana Tantra: Elimination of All Evil Destinies* (New Delhi:

fragments in Phakpa script have also been found, all of which date from the Mongolian period, i.e. the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368, 元) (B163: 76–77; B168: 4–6). Thus, most of the Tibetan material actually dates from the 12th to the 14th centuries.

Many spells in several languages appear on the walls within and outside of the caves in the Northern Section, including the celebrated *Om mani padme hum* in Tibetan and Uyghur (Cave 464). Others appear on the lintels above the entrance to passageways (B126; B134, etc.).⁶⁵ These powerful, religious slogans were evidently added to the caves by their inhabitants, underscoring their relationship with the Indo-Tibetan tradition.

In addition to the numerous, but unfortunately, highly-fragmented textual material found in the caves in the Northern Section, a large number of artifacts were retrieved from the debris cleared from the caves. What interests us here are those aspects of material culture that directly relate to religious practices, and shed further light on the lives of the cave-dwelling ascetics.

In Cave B121: 2, researchers found one skull cup (Skt. *kapāla*), which indicates that Tantric Buddhist rites were indeed conducted by some of the inhabitants of the caves.⁶⁶ Moreover, there are at least two cases where a human skull with its top sawed off for making such a skull cup, was found in the caves (B42: 5–6, B109: 4–5).⁶⁷ The use of skull cups for the ingestion of transgressive substances is, of course, a central element in ritual practices in Tantric Buddhism. Therefore, these finds indicate that Tantric practitioners once inhabited these caves, and in all likelihood, also engaged in Tantric ritual practices there. However, the exact circumstances of these are, for the time being, unclear. Most likely, Tantric Buddhism in the fully-developed form probably did not find its way to Dunhuang until after the demise of the Guiyijun government, around the time the Tanguts first arrived in Shazhou, at the beginning of the 11th century.⁶⁸ Since all we have is archaeological evidence, with very

South Asia Books, 1983). This work, or its derivatives, are found among the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts (IOL Tib J 318).

⁶⁵ Cf. Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku, vol. 3, pl. 6.2.

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, 146.

⁶⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, 107; vol. 2, 51.

⁶⁸ For a discussion on the production of Tantric sacred spaces in Dunhuang under Tangut rule see, Carmen Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern



little textual material, the significance of the presence of these skull cups and their use remains in the realm of speculation. That being said, we still should be open to the possibility that a community of Tantric Buddhist practitioners inhabited the caves in the Northern Section, at least during the final centuries of active Buddhist history at the Mogao Caves.⁶⁹

The remains of a square, free-standing altar were found in one cave, indicating that ritual practices were conducted there (B175). The remains of *stūpas* in a Tibeto-Nepali style from the Tangut period were found in front of one cave. They probably date to the 12th century (B142).

A large number of smaller votive objects were also found in the caves, including several clay figural amulets (Tib. *tsa tsa*) and miniature clay *stūpas* (B160: 47–2; B200: 4–7; B142: 2).⁷⁰ When considered together with the other Tantric material, this evidence indicates that practitioners associated with Tibetan, Tangut, or Uyghur Buddhism—most likely all of them—did indeed inhabit the caves in the Northern Section at some point in time during the 11th to 13th centuries.⁷¹

A special category of material objects related to Esoteric and Tantric Buddhism are the drawn, written and printed spell-amulets of which a fairly large number has been found.⁷² Although this material is essentially textual as well as visual in nature, spell-amulets were functional ritual

Central Asia,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I—Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 244–271.

⁶⁹ Carmen Meinert contextualises these findings further and argues in favour of the presence of a Tantric Buddhist community in Tangut ruled Dunhuang. See, “Tantric Rituals to Usher in a Transcending Process Leading to a State beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies.”

⁷⁰ *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqiu shiku*, vol. 1, 282.

⁷¹ A large fragment of a Uyghur Buddhist text was also found in the cave. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 281, pls 109–110.

⁷² Chinese Buddhist spell-amulets are extensively discussed in Paul F. Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 59–140. See also Katherine R. Tsiang, “Buddhist Printed Images and Texts of the Eighth-Tenth Centuries: Typologies of Replication and Representation,” in *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 201–252. For a recent study of a Tibetan example from Dunhuang, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “A Padmapāni Spell-Amulet from Dunhuang: Observations on OA 1919,0101,0.18,” *BuddhistRoad Paper 2.1* (2018).

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objects carried on the person for a variety of purposes, including protection against dangers and securing spiritual benefits for the bearer. The wide popularity of these magical objects among Dunhuang's cave-dwelling Buddhist practitioners is evident, as examples of Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Tangut origin were found in the Northern Section caves.

The first example of interest here is a fragment of a Chinese spell-amulet featuring the spell for achieving rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land. The accompanying text reads: "[...] Heart Spell Enabling One to be Reborn in the [Pure] Land."⁷³ In the bottom of the design is a lotus seat with Sanskrit *bījas* (B194: 7–1, 2). Another example is a fragment of a star-shaped spell-amulet with a double *vajra*—a potent Esoteric Buddhist symbol—in its center. The accompanying text is written in a mixture of Sanskrit and Tibetan (B147: 3).⁷⁴ Another Tibetan spell-amulet consists of a sheet of coarse paper with the remains of a series of spell-wheels on the front side inscribed in Tibetan. It features a spell-amulet on the reverse side (B147:36). One spell-amulet with *swastikas* and what appears to be Tangut script (?) was also found (B192:3). Finally, there is a fragment of a spell-amulet in *maṇḍala* form, with the text written in Uyghur script (B165:3). The dates of these spell-amulets fall within the later period of the caves in the Northern Section, and were probably produced some time between 1200–1400.

8. Conclusion

In this article I have surveyed the topics relating to cave-dwelling ascetics in the Mogao Caves and the associated issue of 'meditation caves.' While cave-dwelling ascetics are well-documented in the primary sources, and played important roles in maintaining the sanctity of sites, the concept of 'meditation caves' *per se* should be viewed with a considerable degree of suspicion at this point, especially because there is little or no solid evidence of them being so. This is not to say that there were no caves used for meditation at Mogao; there surely were. But we cannot link a single one of the caves we see today with the designation 'meditation cave.'

⁷³ B194: 7–1, 2 : [...] *xin Zhou neng sheng [jing] tu* [...] 心呪能生[淨]土.

⁷⁴ Cf. Dunhuang Mogao ku bei qu shiku, vol. 2, 290.



The monks who occupied these caves were foremostly ascetics, who lived and practised under relatively austere conditions, as prescribed by the Buddhist monastic tradition. Undoubtedly, many of them were meditators, who spent their time in prolonged mental concentration (Skt. *dhyāna*) in order to attain various states of absorption (Skt. *samādhi*). Some of them may even have walled themselves in, in order to achieve these goals. However, one finds it hard to believe that some of them did should have done so in order to commit suicide.

There may also have been actual Chan monks among these ascetics, monks who considered themselves to be adherents of one of the Buddhist schools that traced themselves back to Bodhidharma and/or Huineng. However, given the information reviewed here, it is more likely that most of these ascetic, cave-dwelling monks were simply Buddhist practitioners, and as such, would have engaged in a variety of different practices, among which meditation was just one way of reaching the desired eschatological goal. Indeed, cave-dwelling ascetics continued to occupy the caves in Mogao's Northern Section for several centuries, and included practitioners of many types. The recently-excavated debris revealed that during the post-Guiyijun period, in the 11th to 14th centuries, many monks living in the caves followed Esoteric or Tantric Buddhism in some form, which is reflected in the scriptural fragments in Tibetan, Uyghur, and Tangut. This is supported by the religious items of material culture recovered from the caves.

There are still a number of unanswered questions to contend with, concerning the caves for practice and habitation. These include how the cave-dwelling monks were materially sustained (especially in the post-Guiyijun period), the relationship between the caves and the free-standing temples, sectarian affiliation of the monks, and last, but not least, how local Buddhism, in particular the class of cave-dwelling monks developed, (or declined) in the post-Guiyijun period, between the take-over of Dunhuang by the Tanguts during the early 11th century, and the advent of the Mongols during the first half of the 13th century. Hopefully, we will be able to answer some of these questions as further research is forthcoming within the next few years.

Abbreviations

- Derge Tōhoku no. *Chibetto daizōkyō sōmokuroku* 西藏大藏經總目錄 *Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (Bkaḥ-ḥgyur and Bstan-ḥbyur)*, ed. Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽 et al. Sendai: Tōhoku Imperial University, 1934.
- DMGT *Dunhuang Mogao ku gongyangren tiji* 敦煌莫高窟供养 [Donor Inscriptions from the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang], comp. Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1986, 1–5.
- DXDC *Dunhuangxue da cidian* 敦煌学大辞典 [Comprehensive Dictionary of Dunhuang Studies], edited by Ji Xianlin 季羨林. Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1998.
- IOL Tib Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London (formerly in the India Office Library (IOL))
- P. Pelliot Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris
- S. Stein Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London
- T. Takakusu Junjirō 高順次郎 et. al., ed. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [Taishō *tripitaka*]. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1935.
- TK Tangut and Chinese Manuscripts in the Karakhoto Collection of Koslov in The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

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