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LIGHT ON 'ART IN THE DARK': ON BUDDHIST PRACTICE AND WORSHIP IN THE MOGAO CAVES

HENRIK H. SØRENSEN

Abstract

This piece has partly been written in response to a series of claims put forward by Robert Sharf almost a decade ago in his article *Art in the Dark* in which he argues that the Buddhist caves in Dunhuang (and elsewhere in China and Central Asia) were not for worship, but were created as a sort of ancestral memorials, or decorated mausoleums meant to be left in the dark. Given that the implications of such reading of Buddhist cave-art in the Sinitic cultural-sphere would surely have a profound impact on our overall understanding of Buddhist ritual practices and cave-art, should Sharf's readings turn out to be correct, the evidence and speculations he uses as underpinnings for his line of argument in particular merit closer scrutiny. Moreover, as he touches upon a range of other related issues, all of which concern Buddhist ritual practices one way or another, it seems worthwhile to devote a lengthier essay to a more detailed discussion.

1. Introduction

Almost a decade ago Robert Sharf published a thought-provoking essay on Buddhist cave-shrines in Central Asia, including Dunhuang (敦煌) and the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟), in which he made the rather revolutionary proposal that the caves were never meant for worship or other religious practices, but were essentially memorial shrines created for the adornment of the dead by wealthy family members. Hence these 'mausoleums' were not meant to be seen or visited, and their pictorial and sculptural art was to function as virtual time-capsules reflecting the piety of their creators.¹ As is characteristic of

¹ 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.



most of Sharf's published work, "Art in the Dark" (as the piece in question is entitled) offers an interesting and engaging read, even if it is often overly provocative. No matter what, it certainly provides challenging and stimulating food for thought. Even so, I am inclined to think that on this particular occasion Sharf's scholarly imagination and speculation may have taken him a bit too far afield. In effect he has landed himself in a position with a theory that is somewhat problematic and hard to defend in light of the evidence available today, not only from Dunhuang, but for the rest of Central Asia as well. In other words, I would propose that if one chooses to have a different take on the primary sources and examples of material culture relating to the Mogao Caves, it should be relatively easy to refute the idea that the Buddhist caves were meant as mausoleums, as Sharf seems to think. Such a view constitutes a reversal of most standard understandings of the caves' function(s), namely that they were intended for worship, and that extensive worship was undoubtedly being carried out in the course of their active history.

Given that, in addition to his 'caves in the dark theory', which is the core argument in his essay, Sharf uses the occasion to air a number of other equally controversial observations with regard to the role of caves for worship in primarily Central Asia, in what follows I shall look at the various points raised by Sharf and seek to provide a meaningful discussion of them one by one in the light of primary sources currently available.

It turns out that Sharf did not arrive at his theories about the use of the Buddhist caves at Mogao entirely on his own, but appears to have been inspired by an equally provocative article published by Neil Schmid seven years earlier, which for some unknown reason has managed to avoid attracting the same degree of attention as Sharf's essay.² Because of its controversial nature, Sharf's essay has naturally evoked various responses from the scholarly community, including rebuttals as well as praise from those who support his ideas. Perhaps the best of the critical responses to his essay is a lengthy rebuttal by Angela F. Howard,

² 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 (2006): 171–210. In many ways Schmid's study is much more radical in its conclusions than Sharf's, as it not only ignores a good many primary sources but also has a somewhat convoluted take on the function of the Mogao Caves.

published in 2017, which refutes most of his claims and ideas point by point. Howard mainly bases her criticism of Sharf on her own research of the Kizil Caves³ and religious caves elsewhere in Eastern Central Asia, and in doing so seeks to rectify his views which are chiefly based on his reading of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang.⁴ Although one may argue that these two studies are set in different cultural and historical contexts from the cave complexes in Xinjiang, the fact that Howard's response to Sharf remains focused on the caves as places of Buddhist practice, especially meditation, makes her observations of considerable relevance for the present essay.⁵

Prior to Sharf's publication of the article under discussion, the Korean scholar Kim Sunkyung published an essay which also deals with practice in Buddhist cave temples.⁶ In that study, Kim focuses on meditation and visualisation practices, spending considerable amounts of ink musing on how correctly to address these. Given that meditation is a very broad umbrella term covering a wide variety of practices, it goes without saying that one term hardly does justice to all of these, so that Kim's suggestion that each case be dealt with on its own certainly merits our attention. Clearly there are salient differences between 'introspection', 'analytical contemplation' (i.e. thinking), 'visualisation', and certain aspects of contemplation such as the type of Sinitic *śamatha-vipaśyanā* (Chin. *zhiguan* 止觀) recommended by Zhiyi (538–597, 智顓) of the Tiantai (天台) tradition, all of which can readily be identified in medieval Chinese Buddhist contexts, with or without caves.

Another scholar who has questioned the relationship between cave-art and religious function is Eric M. Greene, whose line of argumentation to some extent follows those found in Sharf. Greene is much less radical in his views, however, and remains more focused on the issue of meditation in specific Central Asian cave sites, rather than the more general issue of

³ For a Wikipedia entry that is for once truly informative and comprehensive, see Wikipedia, "Kizil Caves", accessed March 16, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kizil_Caves.

⁴ Angela F. Howard, "In Support of a New Chronology for the Kizil Mural Paintings," *Archives of Asian Art* 44 (1991): 68–83.

⁵ See Angela F. Howard, "On 'Art in the Dark' and Meditation in Central Asian Buddhist Caves," *The Eastern Buddhist* 46.2 (2017): 19–39.

⁶ See Kim Sunkyung, "Seeing Buddhas in Cave Sanctuaries," *Asia Major Third Series* 24.1 (2011): 87–126.



Buddhist worship there.⁷ One can say that Greene took to heart Kim's injunction on specificity with regard to each case, and acted accordingly.

Finally there is the work of Yamabe Nobuyoshi, whose research took him from the topic of 'visualisation-*sūtras*' to meditation in caves, most notably the caves of Central Asia and Dunhuang.⁸ With regard to meditation in the Mogao Caves, Yamabe has been highly critical of the views held by several Chinese Mainland scholars, who tend to imagine meditation caves right and left without showing much empirical proof.⁹ Having outlined the field of discussion, let us now take a closer look at Sharf's positions, beginning with the link between architectural form, iconography and ritual function.

2. Linking Architectural Form, Iconography and Ritual Function

Sharf's understanding and criticism of what he sees as art historical assumptions regarding the relationship between architectural form and ritual function in Buddhist caves is meaningful to address first, as this issue underlies the overall argument of his essay. In his view, some art historians wish to understand religious art in its ritual setting (in this case that of an adorned Buddhist cave) and they sometimes tend to regress to romantic imaginings regarding it as "a vehicle of, or an expression of enlightenment."¹⁰ Why Sharf thinks this is not really clear, but it would seem to hinge on his impression that in dealing with ritual function "scholars tend to conjure up images of meditating monastics earnestly

⁷ See Eric M. Greene, "Death in a Cave: Meditation, Deathbed, Ritual, and Skeletal Imagery at Tape Shotor," *Artibus Asiae* Vol. 73.2 (2013): 265–294. A critique of the readings provided by Greene in this article can also be found in Howard, "On 'Art in the Dark' and Meditation in Central Asian Buddhist Caves," 19–39 (esp. 32–39).

⁸ Cf. Yamabe Nobuyoshi, "Practice of Visualization and the Visualization Sūtra: An Examination of Mural Paintings at Toyok, Turfan," *Pacific World, 3rd series* 4 (2002): 123–152.

⁹ See Yamabe Nobuyoshi 山部能宣, "'Zendō' saikō '禪定窟'再考 [A Reconsideration of 10 'Meditation Caves']," in *Ajia bukkō bijutsu ronshū 3 chūōajia 1 Gandāra - Tōai torukisutan* アジア仏教美術論集 3 中央アジア 1 ガンダーラ～東トルキスタン [Collected Papers on Asian Buddhist Art 3, Central Asia 1: Gandhara—East-West Turkestan], ed. Miyaji Akira 宮治昭 (Tokyo: Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 2017), 473–498.

¹⁰ Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 39a.

engaged in the quest for liberation.”¹¹ Being one of those scholars to whom Sharf appears to be referring, I cannot immediately recognise myself in his description. Rather, I think it reasonable to expect some degree of correspondence between ritual worship and its locus, as well as whatever related adornment it may have. In other words, I would not make use of my ‘imagination’ towards this endeavour, but carefully weigh up the concrete data available for each case. Therefore, whenever we are dealing with a given, adorned *ritual space* in a Buddhist context, such as a cave, a carved niche with images, or a temple hall, it seems reasonable to assume that ritual practices in some form would also have been conducted there. If we compare this to a Christian church room or chapel, surely nobody would imagine that such a space is not meant to be used for worship. The idea that a Buddhist sanctuary is to be used in much the same way is predicated on an understanding that ritual practices generally reflect certain structural and conceptual relationships between text and image on the one hand, and material constraints and function on the other. Of course, one cannot claim that a Buddhist wall-painting in a cave depicting say, Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna seated inside a *stūpa*, necessarily indicates that rituals related to or based on the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* must always have been conducted in said location. However, at least it signals a familiarity with the imagery of this particular *sūtra* on the part of those who painted the walls. As such, the painting, whether or not it is directly related to a hypothetical ritual performed in its vicinity, may therefore with some reason be considered to have formed part of the religious context in which said rites took place. Likewise, it goes without saying that an image of a series of meditating buddhas on the wall of a cave does not allow us to deduce that meditation was also performed there. Nevertheless, it may well signal some degree of familiarity with the concept of the buddhas of the ten directions, a major vision and concept of many Buddhist scriptures. Obviously, one needs to have more ‘hard’ contextual evidence before claiming that meditation was actually practised there. Hence, on this score Sharf is right (and Greene as well) to warn against jumping to conclusions of ritual use simply on the grounds of a depicted row of buddhas in meditation pose.

¹¹ Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 39a.



However, there are exceptions. Exceptions where a special iconographical decoration in a cave actually does allow us to ‘imagine’ that a corresponding type of ritual took place. If we once again turn to the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and take a look at Cave 465, a late cave located at the very end of the Northern Section, we find the splendid Tantric Buddhist cave created under Tangut rule during the second half of the 12th century. This cave is decorated all over with Tibetan-style iconography reflecting themes associated with the Kagyü school (Tib. *bka’ brgyud pa*) and its cycles of ritual texts (Skt. *sādhana*). Moreover, in the centre of this cave we have a round, tiered altar.¹² Now, to anyone even slightly familiar with Tantric Buddhist ritual practices, it is obvious, even self-evident, that Cave 465 was a functioning ritual space.¹³ Therefore, in this case (and I am confident in several other cases at Mogao as well), we have here a cave in which its architectural form and wall-paintings do in fact indicate that it was a site for Tantric Buddhist practice. Incidentally, among the Tangut *thangkas* (offered paintings for display) found at Karakhoto, some are directly related to the wall-paintings of Cave 465.¹⁴

With regard to the cave-sanctuaries found along the so-called Silk Road, Sharf also speculates on “how little is known about the purposes for which they were built.”¹⁵ By this I suppose he means that in many cases we have little or few written sources which may serve to inform us on the issue of their donors/ patrons? In this he is again partly right, but also partly wrong. It is true that for many of these cave sanctuaries located along the northern stretches of the Silk Road, especially those created by non-Chinese cultures, we have no or at least very scanty sources to inform us about who created them. Hence, hypothetically, if

¹² Carmen Meinert, “Creation of Tantric Sacred Spaces in Eastern Central Asia,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I—Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen, 244–271 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020).

¹³ Carmen Meinert convincingly argued that Cave 465 had a ritual function. See her forthcoming publication: “Beyond Spatial and Temporal Contingencies: Tantric Rituals in Eastern Central Asia under Tangut Rule, 11th–13th C.,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia II—Practice and Rituals, Visual and Material Transfer*, ed. Yukiyo Kasai and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022), ca. 50 pp.

¹⁴ Carmen Meinert, “Embodying the Divine in Tantric Ritual Practice: Examples from the Chinese Karakhoto Manuscripts from the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227),” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* 50 (2019): 56–72.

¹⁵ Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 40a.

informed speculation based on comparison with other sites is all that is available, concerned scholars often find themselves in a historical limbo of sorts and therefore have had to resort to various alternative strategies in order to come up with a viable dating, as well as trying to arrive at some degree of reliable historical understanding of the functioning of said caves outside the written context.¹⁶ However, in some cases, such as at Turfan and in Dunhuang (the Mogao Caves, etc.), we actually do have a fairly good understanding of the caves' histories, why they were made and by whom. This understanding is not reached on the basis of material evidence alone, i.e. analysis of archaeological remains, but is also based on written sources including manuscripts and donor inscriptions in situ. One could take the famous Cave 17 in Mogao, the celebrated 'Library Cave' as a rather clean-cut example of this, a case to which Sharf himself makes reference.¹⁷ The cave was originally meant as a sort of mausoleum in which the clay effigy of Hongbian (?–862, 洪誓), the first *samgha* overseer (Chin. *sengtong* 僧統) under the Guiyijun rule (851–1036?, 歸義軍, Return-to-Allegiance Army), was installed.¹⁸ On the wall behind the image is a funerary portrait of the master flanked by acolytes.¹⁹ Moreover, next to the image is the stele with his engraved

¹⁶ See e.g. Ciro Lo Muzio, *Archeologia dell'Asia centrale preislamica Dall'età del Bronzo al IX secolo d.C* (Milano: Mondadori Università, 2017); and Howard, "In Support of a New Chronology for the Kizil Mural Paintings," 68–83. It should be said that neither of these scholars are basing themselves on imagination, but use proper investigative research in order to arrive at their conclusions.

¹⁷ Cf. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 57b.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Hongbian's role as *samgha* overseer, see Henrik H. Sørensen, "On the Office of *Samgha* Overseer in Dunhuang during the Period of Guiyijun Rule," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.5 (2021).

¹⁹ For a sketch for what was probably the funerary portrait of Hongbian, see Roderick Whitfield and Ann Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas: Chinese Art from the Silk Route* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 76, pl. 56. See also, *Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogao ku* 4 中國石窟 敦煌莫高窟 4 [China's Stone Caves: The Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang 4], ed. Dunhuang wenwu yanjiu 敦煌文物研究 [Studies in Dunhuang's Cultural Artefacts] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987), 126, pls 126–128. The funerary statue is also reproduced in Sharf, *Art in the Dark*, 41, fig. 4. A comparison with a surviving drawing on paper depicting the early Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐) monk Sengqie (ca. 660–710, 僧伽), shows that the iconographical arrangement in which the portrait of Hongbian was conceptualised is actually a template for depictions of famous or important monks that was used in Dunhuang during the 9–10th centuries. Cf. P. 4070.



funerary inscription.²⁰ The small size of the cave in combination with the images and related stele allow us to understand that the cave was a memorial shrine for Hongbian. Even so, there are a few Chinese scholars who have come up with the somewhat daft idea that the small cave-shrine was a place where Hongbian meditated, i.e. that the cave should be understood as a ‘meditation cave’ (Chin. *chanku* 禪窟). It is of course not possible to argue against the possibility that Hongbian once meditated or sat down there at some point. However, it is absurd to consider Cave 17 a ‘meditation cave’ just because we have a clay portrait statue and a portrait painting there. Therefore, Sharf’s injunction against jumping to easy conclusions with regard to Buddhist cave art and their functions should indeed be taken seriously. It therefore makes good sense to appreciate his warning against relying too much on one’s readings and interpretations of examples of material culture without trying to encompass the wider context, i.e. without relying on textual sources as well as other material useful for comparative purposes.²¹ However, in retrospect, I wonder how many art historians would actually do so today? Especially when we discuss Chinese Buddhist art. I believe that the field has improved tremendously in the course of the past two decades or so, and it is quite rare nowadays to find studies on religious art in China, particularly Buddhist art, that do not try to make use of primary, written sources whenever available. And the same goes for the study of Chinese Buddhism broadly defined, in which it is common, if not the norm, to include aspects of art history and material culture. The current trend in which the demarcation between art history, political (?) history, social history, religious practice and textual studies have been broken down, is one of the truly great achievements in the field of religious studies and a most fruitful aspect in the current study of Chinese Buddhism. So why Sharf believes it has turned out to be “no easy task”²² to navigate material culture and text is, on the face of it, difficult to appreciate. The same applies when he states:

[...] with regard to the conditions of reception: with few exceptions the pious patrons, pilgrims and sundry worshippers who comprised the

²⁰ This had been moved from the cave at some point, but was again placed in its proper location during the second half of the 20th century.

²¹ Cf. Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 38a.

²² Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 38a.

audience for such objects left little in the way of critical response or commentary.²³

In this Sharf is not entirely wrong, especially if it is medieval Dunhuang and the Mogao Caves that are under discussion. It is largely correct that few patrons, donors and pilgrims have left *much* in the way of ‘critical response’ with regard to their own experience of the caves, i.e. formal autobiographical statements regarding their interaction with the religious art there. On the other hand, we do have an abundance of primary sources to inform us about how local Buddhists reacted, and indeed interacted, with the material used for “liturgical and devotional purposes”²⁴ to use Sharf’s own wording. This is not the place to give a complete list of the scores of instances in the Dunhuang material where information of various kinds can be had concerning worship by the local Buddhists, however so as not to be talking in abstract language, a few concrete examples will be provided below.

Among the many previously held views that are singled out for criticism by Sharf is the wide-spread idea that “shrine caves were used by resident monastics for worship and meditation”.²⁵ In this he is absolutely right, the shrines and chapels at Mogao were surely not places for meditation, just like Buddha halls in the free-standing temples were not so, nor were they used for resident monks and nuns. Meditation and related practices were normally performed in designated spaces, whether they be caves or free-standing buildings. Here I would reassert that the shrine caves, i.e. the vast majority of the caves in the Southern Section of Mogao, were places for Buddhist worship per se, similar to buddha halls and as such accessible to those desiring to offer worship, at least in principle. In the case of the Mogao Caves, certain caves were maintained by or were for the use of certain clans only, which is why they have been referred to as ‘family caves’ (Chin. *jiaku* 家窟) and, in some cases, as ‘merit caves’ (Chin. *gongde ku* 功德窟). Even so, we know that worship

²³ Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 38b.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38ab.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40a. See e.g. Sha Wutian 沙武田, “Dunhuang Mogaoku 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.



performed in these special caves also included persons who did not belong to the clan in question. Probably such worshippers were invited for the occasion, including visiting dignitaries from Dunhuang's neighbours, the Uyghurs and Khotanese.

With regard to the small and mostly unadorned caves located in the Northern Section (北區) of the cliff at Mogao, Mainland scholars have often designated these caves as 'meditation caves', as pointed out by Sharf.²⁶ Whether they were used for meditation or other Buddhist practices is less important than the fact that they were caves for habitation. As such they are similar to the monks' cells we see in many of the rock-cut temples in the Deccan.²⁷

Sharf is also critical with regard to those caves that feature a central pillar, or central shrine with a passageway around it. Since I began my studies in Chinese Buddhist art and architecture, more than four decades ago, we were always told that those passageways around the central 'altar-pillars' were for circumambulation (Skt. *pradakṣiṇa*), and indeed they can be found in virtually all cave shrines from Eastern Central Asia to the central provinces of China. I sympathise with Sharf's hesitation to accept the designation 'central-pillar cave' as a salient method for identifying a given architectural shape linked with a specific practice.²⁸ However, the practice of circumambulation around a central altar or a *stūpa* is one that can be historically verified by the written sources, and there is therefore no particularly good reason to reject such an understanding of some of the 'central-pillar caves' that feature a passage-way around and behind the central altar, whether they should be understood as shrines, pillars and *stūpas* or something else. If the caves at Mogao that we suspect were used for circumambulation were not meant for such practice, one wonders why anyone would have made the effort to carve a passage around the main shrine/altar? And not only that, why decorate the walls behind it if they were not meant to be seen? Surely such an effort would not have much merit, imagined or not? Religious merit of course being the primary reason for the existence of religiously dedicated caves in the first place.

²⁶ Cf. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 43a.

²⁷ See Henrik H. Sørensen, "On Meditation Caves and Cave-dwelling Ascetics in Dunhuang, 9th to 13th Centuries." *BuddhistRoad Paper* 5.1 (2020).

²⁸ Cf. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 43b.

In this regard I would also like to draw attention to one large group of caves in Northern Sichuan province, more specifically in Guangyuan (廣元), where there are several caves that would appear to have been used for worship, including circumambulation.²⁹ Among these caves is one from the early part of the 8th century with a central altar featuring a large image of the adorned Vairocana (Guangyuan Cave 366). This cave also has a passage proceeding around the central altar, but of most significance for the present purpose are the donor portraits in flat relief on both side-walls of the cave, including the representation of an entire band.³⁰ These donors are clearly depicted engaged in ritual worship, indicating that the cave was indeed a place for ritual practices, as indeed were most of the larger caves on the Cliff of a Thousand Buddhas (千佛岩).³¹ Inside the Dayun Cave (大雲窟), the largest cave in the complex, we find multiple smaller niches and various secondary groups of images, apart from the central standing image at the back wall of the principal cave.³² Numerous donor inscriptions adorn the walls, providing historical documentation for the images in situ. While one could of course argue that these well-documented caves and niches in this part of Sichuan differ radically from those in Central Asia and Dunhuang, I do not agree that this is really the case when talking about function and typology of Buddhist caves, all of which are largely similar in function. The main difference being that the Sichuanese caves and rock-cut shrines are generally better documented because epigraphy tends to be long lasting.

Were there ‘meditation-caves’ in Sichuan, i.e. caves where meditation or other forms of Buddhist practice were conducted? Where monks lived? Surely. Can we reasonably assert that circumambulation around a

²⁹ Cf. *Guangyuan shiku yishu* 廣元石窟藝術 *Grotto Art in Guangyuan City*, ed. Huangze si bowuguan 皇泽寺博物馆 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005), 106–107 (Cave 400), 102–105 (Cave 689), 94–97 (Cave 744), etc.

³⁰ Cf. *Guangyuan shiku yishu*, 64–80.

³¹ In contrast to the Mogao Caves, in the Cliff of a Thousand Buddhas there is rich epigraphical material to be found which reveals the sponsors of many of the individual caves, as well as their motives for doing so. Cf. Yao Chongxin 姚崇新, *Ba Shu fojiao shiku zaoxiang chubu yanjiu: Yi chuanbei diqu wei zhongxin* 巴蜀佛教石窟造像初步研究: 以川北地区为中心 [A Study of the Early Phase of Buddhist Cave Images in Sichuan: With Focus on the Northern Region] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011),

³² Cf. *Guangyuan shiku yishu*, 124–125, 98–99 (Cave 512).



central shrine took place? Well, of course.³³ Is the Sichuanese material relevant as comparative examples for our understanding of the caves in Eastern Central Asia? I should think so, since their lay-out, manner of organisation and architecture are similar to those at the Mogao Caves and elsewhere on a number of important points. Moreover, the vast majority of them date roughly from the same period as the late medieval caves of Dunhuang.

As part of the same discussion, Sharf also rejects the idea that the adorned caves were temples or even monasteries. This is another point with which I fully concur. However, it should be noted that at Mogao certain caves were controlled by certain Buddhist temples, whether these were located on the site or elsewhere, and one supposes that the Longxing Temple (龍興寺), the central and largest Buddhist institution in Dunhuang, would have been in control of several caves.³⁴ Being formally in charge of certain caves, the monasteries were probably managing them for profit. At least they are likely to have maintained booths on the site for the selling of incense, flowers(?) and religious souvenirs. We know that at least two of the major temples in Dunhuang, the Sanjie Temple (三界寺)³⁵ and the Dasheng Guangyan Temple (大聖光巖寺),³⁶ were located next to the Mogao Caves and that both of these had control over a number of caves for worship. This idea, which Sharf also refers to, is attributed to Rong Xinjiang.³⁷ What is important here is to acknowledge that the adorned caves at Mogao were shrines for worship, and on this point, I disagree radically with Sharf.³⁸

³³ Caves for habitation, and presumably meditation, are documented in several locations in Central Sichuan (四川). In particular, in Anyue County (安岳縣) there are a few such caves on Qianfo Cliff (千佛寨) on Mt. Dayun (大雲山), on the outskirts of the county seat. The site of Datong Temple (大通寺) in Gaosheng (高升) township also features an adjacent meditation cave. Circumambulation was surely practised in several of the caves of Qianfo Cliff in Guangyuan including caves 366, 689, 744, 746, etc.

³⁴ See Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Buddhist Temples in Dunhuang: Mid–8th to Early 11th Centuries,” *Buddhist Road Paper* 5.2 (2021).

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

³⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁷ Cf. Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 50b.

³⁸ Cf. Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 39b–46b. For a lengthy and useful discussion of the relationship between decorated caves and Buddhist practice in medieval Chinese Buddhist art, see Kim Sunkyung, “Seeing Buddhas in Cave Sanctuaries,” *Asia Major Third Series* 24.1 (2011): 87–126.

3. *Dark Caves?*

This leads us to the primary issue and topic of this paper, namely to Sharf's view of the Mogao Caves as mausoleums. In support of his view he presents a range of arguments, including that "many of the caves would have been so dark that the elaborate paintings and sculptures would have been barely visible, if visible at all."³⁹ Obviously this is correct. If no source of light is brought to bear on them, most of the caves would indeed be left in total or near darkness. But was that actually the case? In many of the caves in the Deccan on the Indian subcontinent used for habitation we find small niches in the wall for oil lamps, indicating that light was indeed available. Surely light in some form would also have been present in the larger caves for worship, as indeed they are in, for instance, Karle and the Buddhist caves at Ellora. And if we remain focused on Dunhuang, there is also good reason to insist that lamps for worship were used inside the caves. (Needless to say, they would also have been used in the inhabited caves in the Northern Section of the Mogao Caves.) Summing up his view on the function of the caves, Sharf further states:

It is not obvious, in other words, that the elaborately adorned interiors of these caves were designed with the expectation of being seen. This, I submit, is a long-ignored clue to the religious function of the caves.⁴⁰

Whether he is actually right or not, I personally find it hard to believe that generation after generation should care to maintain and renovate the Mogao Caves if they had no function other than to serve as memorials for the dead. Therefore, I do not really see where his 'clue' to a supposedly religious function might be.

Once the discussion focuses on Central Asia, and Dunhuang in particular, Sharf does have a point that the wall-paintings and images in the majority of the larger shrine-caves are naturally in the dark so long as no light is brought to bear on them. He further argues that their being in perpetual darkness was intentional, otherwise we would find them covered in soot from oil lamps and incense from centuries of worship. All of this sounds both logical and reasonable. However, his

³⁹ Sharf, "Art in the Dark", 46a.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46b.



presumption that the absence of soot means that no rituals were performed in the caves sounds a bit far-fetched. Are we to believe that those who had a given cave excavated, its walls decorated with elaborate religious tableaux and furnished with a central altar, and that later generations who had them repaired and re-adorned, would have done all this for no reason other than their belief in karmic benefits for their ancestors? And that, having invested a lot of money and prestige on them, sometimes as part of an inter-cultural religious enterprise (as a number of the caves at Mogao demonstrably are), would they then abandon them to darkness and oblivion never to be seen again? No, upon further reflection, this sounds neither logical nor reasonable. Surely a Buddhist shrine—even a cave—is not a tomb, it is a place for repeated worship, and I openly venture that this surely was the case with the Mogao Caves.

In order to counteract the ‘no soot’ argument, I would suggest that the caves for worship were not in constant use, as for instance were (and still are) halls in free-standing temples. Moreover, in cases where caves were used for ritual purposes, the absence of soot can easily be explained if the caves were kept clean and maintained on a regular basis, such as is the case with most functioning temples in both Korea and Japan today. I see no good reason why such maintenance would not also have been carried out in the Mogao Caves, at least occasionally.⁴¹ Also: The oil used for the lamps may have been of quite a different variety than the animal-based butter and ghee lamps we know from Tibetan and Indian cultic practices, which normally do leave particularly visible stains and oily soot on their surroundings. Incense used for worship in Dunhuang during the medieval and early pre-modern periods was normally burned in long-handled incense burners held by worshippers, and not in the form of incense sticks as used in later periods.

⁴¹ There are actually many examples supplied by the Dunhuang manuscripts where repair of the caves at Mogao are mentioned. Cf. P. 3541, P. 3100, S. 3540, Dunhuang 207, Kyushu 20, etc. See also the many donor inscriptions found in situ in the caves, including the ruler Cao Yan’gong’s (r. 974–976, 曹延恭) repair of Cave 444 (DMGT: 168), and Zhai Fengda’s (881–961?, 翟奉達) repair of Cave 220 (DMGT: 101)



Figure 1. Long-handled incense burner as used in Dunhuang. Donor portrait. Detail of MG 17775.

This means that incense was not left to burn for long periods of time as we see in contemporary Chinese temples today, but was only lit on special occasions, namely during concrete ritual proceedings. Hence, if one can imagine that lamps and incense were mainly used in the caves at particular moments in connection with designated ceremonies and rituals, and not necessarily on a daily basis, as Sharf himself suggests, it might also explain why the caves are relatively free from traces of this type of pollution. It is also possible that there was too little oxygen in a



cave where a given ritual was conducted to leave many oil lamps and incense burning for longer periods of time. And, as a last argument to explain why we find so few traces of soot in the caves, it could be that these traces have been removed in more recent times in the course of preservation-work. After all, we know that extensive clean-up and repairs have been made in Mogao during the past three to four decades, and most probably a lot of dirt (and soot?) would have been removed as part of those efforts.⁴² Therefore, while Sharf's statement to the effect that much of the public worship at the caves would have been conducted under the wooden structures that originally covered most of the cave-entrances, does make a lot of sense, it does not in my view support the notion that worship was not also performed within the caves themselves.⁴³

As for the question he poses regarding the artisans who decorated the caves, how on earth does anyone imagine that this elaborate and time-consuming work could have been accomplished in semi-darkness, not to mention darkness?⁴⁴ Obviously the artisans must have worked with a light source of sorts, most likely oil lamps. And if some degree of lamp-smoke should have occurred, is it too far-fetched to imagine that this was either cleaned away or painted over after the work had been finished?

Although not comparable to the Mogao Caves in scope, manner of organisation or decoration, it may be profitable to look at another important ritual space of Chinese Buddhism and use this as a mirror for comparison. If one looks to Dazu county (大足縣) again in Sichuan, in particular to Mt. Baoding (寶頂山) with its Dafowan (大佛灣) or 'Big Buddha Bend,' some fifteen kilometres from the county seat, one will find there among the large niches a number of man-made caves.⁴⁵ These

⁴² Cleaning of the wall-paintings in the Mogao Caves is discussed in, *The Conservation of Cave 85 at the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang: A Collaborative Project of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Dunhuang Academy*, ed. Lori Wong and Neville Agnew (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013), 103b, 261a, 290a–291b. Although this specific report is mainly concerned with the conservation of Cave 85 created during the late Tang, it nevertheless gives an indication of the type of repair and cleaning to which many of the wall-paintings have been subjected during recent decades.

⁴³ Cf. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 46ab.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 46b.

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion of this site and its ritual implications, see Karil J. Kucera, *Ritual and Representation in Chinese Buddhism: Visualizing Enlightenment at Baodingshan from the 12th to 21st Centuries* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2016).

are roughly two to three hundred years younger than the bulk of the Mogao Caves, and they have an indisputable and explicit ritual function, in fact the entire site is one large, inter-connected ritual space.⁴⁶ Now, while the proper caves at Dafowan are small in comparison with the larger caves at Mogao, there can be little doubt that the Dazu caves and sculptural niches were meant for worship. It is obvious, for example, that the Yuanjuedong cave (圓覺洞), which even has a free-standing altar table complete with carved offerings and an incense burner (from the time) in front of the main group of images, was a place where ritual worship took place.



Figure 2. Cave of Perfect Enlightenment, Mt. Baoding, Dazu. Southern Song.
Copyright the author.

One even finds a religious sculpture showing a Buddhist cleric in the act of worship in front of the cave's main group.⁴⁷ One could of course argue that this sanctuary was also just a religious prop, made for the edification of the buddhas and bodhisattva images found therein, and little else. But really, ...? To be left in the dark?

⁴⁶ Kucera, *Ritual and Representation in Chinese Buddhism*, 47–49.

⁴⁷ For images of this cave, see Kucera, *Ritual and Representation in Chinese Buddhism*, 71–74.



4. *Mortuary Caves and Mortuary Practices in Traditional China*

As stated above, Sharf built his line of arguments up in such a way as to arrive at a new reading of the Mogao Caves, namely that the majority of them were essentially a kind of mausoleum or, as he states, “mortuary shrines”,⁴⁸ and their lavish decorations were therefore only meant to glorify the dead. As he himself expresses it:

I have suggested that the majority of the shrine caves at Mogao functioned as private memorial chapels, and that the inner precincts of these chapels were entered only rarely.

What might this tell us about the artwork found therein? For one thing, insofar as the purpose of the caves was the creation of merit for the family line, this was largely realised as soon as the shrines were completed and the images consecrated—once complete, the caves need not have been opened nor the murals and icons seen for the caves to fulfil their intended function.⁴⁹

Sharf’s argument becomes a bit convoluted, however, when he states that there is evidence that the caves, like so many Buddhist monuments, also served to flaunt the piety and social status of the donors.⁵⁰ Exactly how he imagines that the cave-mausoleums served a social function in which they were meant as a show-off or demonstration of piety is hard to follow if no one was actually meant to see them? I do not disagree that the caves were surely meant to express piety, both with a specific Buddhist twist and as a more general display of filial piety as known from Chinese traditional culture, but that this was their main purpose is hard to accept. Moreover, such pious display was obviously done in a manner that allowed for other Buddhists to see the caves and to participate in the worship there. Otherwise, what would have been the purpose of having a communal group of donors participating in the inauguration of a given cave, and even have their portraits depicted on its walls? The idea of a ‘family cave’ does not necessarily indicate a shrine exclusively for those that had sponsored its creation, but for all those, high and low, who were invited to participate in its inauguration and worship there, as mentioned above. The many donor inscriptions left in

⁴⁸ Cf. Sharf, “Art in the Dark,” 46b.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60b.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

situ in most of the caves indicate that their creation—especially that of the larger ones—were full scale, communal enterprises involving members of the leading clans, important monks and nuns, as well as foreign dignitaries, even royalty.⁵¹

The portrayal of deceased ancestors among donor images is a phenomenon that was widespread in the production of religious imagery in Dunhuang, and can also be seen in the dedicated and/or offered paintings intended for display in the halls of worship.⁵² This fact, however, does not mean that caves featuring donor images of deceased ancestors or family members are to be understood as mausoleums or tombs. This is a misunderstanding on Sharf's side, especially when we know that many of the portrayed donors were still alive and well when their portraits were painted. The purpose of these portraits of the dead in the context of the caves is to allow the deceased to partake in the merit created by the living, a merit that derived from making a religious offering such as the adornment of a cave, dedication of a holy image, the lighting of lamps, and of course the burning of incense. What could be called 'an auto-depiction of a religious practice.' Extending this argument a bit further, one may say that the post-mortem participation in a merit-garnering activity was part of the conceptual complex of the so-called 'practice of merit transference' (Chin. *huixiang* 迴向).⁵³ In the

⁵¹ See e.g. the people involved in the creation of Cave 98. It involved members of virtually all the leading clans in Dunhuang as well as the participation of foreign dignitaries (DMGT: 32–49).

⁵² For various examples of this, see Henrik H. Sørensen, "Donors and Esoteric Buddhism in Dunhuang during the Reign of the Guiyijun," in *Buddhism in Central Asia I: Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage*, ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 91–122; Henrik H. Sørensen, "Giving and the Creation of Merit: Buddhist Donors and Donor Dedications from 10th Century Dunhuang," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 4.3 (2020); and Henrik H. Sørensen, "Donors and Image at Dunhuang: A Case Study of OA 1919,0101,0.54," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 4.1 (2019).

⁵³ A classical example of the practice of transference of merit can be found in the various donor dedications produced by Zhai Fengda for his deceased wife. For a detailed discussion see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 102–120. Transference of merit in Dunhuang is also dealt with in Henrik H. Sørensen, "Offerings and the Production of Buddhist Scriptures in Dunhuang during the 10th Century," *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 3 (2020): 70–107; and Sørensen, "Giving and the Creation of Merit".



Sinitic cultural sphere this practice served as an important compromise between traditional Chinese mortuary practices and beliefs guided by filial piety (Chin. *xiao* 孝), and those of Buddhism which are more oriented towards the creation of good *karma* and a happy after-life.

It is of course true that tombs were decorated in traditional, medieval China, and that these were sealed off and never actually visited, not even by descendants of the occupant(s). An example of this can be seen in the relatively well-preserved Khitan tombs at Xuanhua (宣化) in present-day Shanxi (山西) province, where the walls are in a number of cases decorated with portraits of the deceased as well as those family members who had adorned the tombs in question.⁵⁴ However, there is an important religious difference that we should not overlook between decorated tombs with corpses or effigies in them, as in the case of the Xuanhua tombs, and Buddhist cave-shrines. The tombs were sealed after burial and left in the dark, while the adorned caves were visited repeatedly for worship, for which light as well as incense were needed.

5. *Worship in the Mogao Caves?*

Sharf's view concerning the Mogao Caves as places for worship also stands in sharp contrast to work by a host of Chinese Mainland scholars, including Liu Yongzeng (刘永增) who has written a lengthy and detailed study of Cave 98 and its possible use as a ritual space for the performance of rites of repentance (Chin. *chanhui daochang* 懺悔道場).⁵⁵ The rows of numerous donors depicted on the walls of this monumental cave clearly show them holding handled incense burners

⁵⁴ See *Xuanhua Liao mu: 1974–1993 nian kaogu fajue baogao* 宣化遼墓 1974–1993 年考古發掘報告 [The Liao Tombs at Xuanhua: Archaeological Report of the 1974–1993 Excavation and Conservation], 2 vols, comp. Hebei sheng wenwu yanjiu 河北省文物研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001). See also the more detailed and comprehensive study by Li Qingchuan 李清泉, *Xuanhua Liao mu: Muzang yishu yu Liaodai shehui* 宣化遼墓: 墓葬艺术与辽代社会 [Liao Tombs of Xuanhua: Tomb Art and Liao Society] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2008).

⁵⁵ See Liu Yongzeng 刘永增, “Mogao ku di 98 ku shi yi chanfa daochang 莫高窟第98窟是一仟法道场 [Mogao Cave 98 is a Ritual Space for Repentance],” *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 [Dunhuang Research] 6 (2012): 29–40. Incidentally Liu's study tallies with work by Li-ying Kuo on repentance practices as evidenced in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Cf. Li-ying Kuo, *Confession et contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois d V° au X° siècle* (Paris: Publications de l'École française d'Extrême Orient, 1994).

(Chin. *shoulu* 手爐) and other offerings. Although these donor portraits were evidently painted after the cave was officially initiated and ‘opened’, there can be little doubt that they were meant to depict real persons in the act of worship. We know that worship took place in the cave because the donor inscriptions *in situ* clearly document the acts of worship that had taken place on the occasion of the opening of the cave (DMGT: 32–49).

As it is probable that Neil Schmid’s 2006 article referred to above gave rise to some of the ideas that Sharf developed in his essay, it would seem in order to take a critical look at them as well. Schmid’s conclusion is particularly relevant in this regard when he states:

Scholars repeatedly pose the question of what went on in these caves: what did people actually do in them? As my article has illustrated, the family shrines were configured around the very visible but immaterial liturgical ritual of expounding the Law 說法, modelled in this case on the contemporaneous *sūtra* lecture. Through their material donations the patrons constructed an ‘as-if’ space. I would argue that few activities were ever held in the caves, because something else was already going on, namely an interaction with the Buddha within the familiar setting of the *sūtra* lecture. The primary function of the caves was in creating an ideal imagined world, an as-if world that condenses time and space. Here there is no need for a *dharma* master and a *dujiang*. In this ideal world the Buddha is continually present. Rather than the mediation of *dharma* through Ānanda and a *dharma* master, it is the Buddha who, thanks to the donors’ material gifts, can present the Law directly. As sacred spaces configured around enacting the Law, the caves present a kind of double as-if scenario: the initial ritual frame of the liturgy further inscribed into a simulacrum of the first frame.⁵⁶

This is a proper mouthful of theoretical conceptualisation and speculation, and as such it requires a detailed response.⁵⁷ However, while we cannot address all of Schmid’s theoretical musings here, we need to question a few of the more radical ones, including why a ‘*sūtra* lecture,’

⁵⁶ Schmid, “The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves,” 208.

⁵⁷ Recently, Schmid has enhanced and reworked his ideas on the mirroring of cultural markers in the wall-paintings, as well as his ‘agency of objects’ theory. These were presented in a BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture entitled “Dunhuang Caves and the Aesthetics of Scale” given on October 28, 2021. See <https://buddhistroad.ceres.rub.de/en/events/dunhuang-caves-and-aesthetics-scale-en-1/>.



probably intended to mean tableaux depicting the sermon of a buddha, should be understood as a representation of an ‘immaterial, liturgical ritual’? That “the family shrines were configured around the very visible but immaterial liturgical ritual of expounding the Law, modelled [...] on the contemporaneous *sūtra* lecture,”⁵⁸ also needs some sort of comment. What exactly is an immaterial liturgical ritual? Is it something the Buddhists believed they were doing, or is it something Schmid imagines they were doing? Looking at the donor portraits in the caves, we clearly see them performing a concrete ritual. By ‘inscribing’ themselves and their pious act into the ritual space, the donors re-enacted the initial dedication or offering of a given cave, thereby ensuring that the act was documented for posterity if not eternity. It is therefore not as ‘immaterial’ as Schmid may believe.

He also states that, through their material donations the patrons constructed an ‘as-if’ space; and, the primary function of the caves is the creation of an imagined world condensing time and space.⁵⁹ All Buddhist temples and ritual spaces are de facto ‘as-if spaces’ to use Schmid’s own term. Any ritual space is a transcendent space in which belief, imagination, aspiration and performance are fused onto a single sacred vision. Moreover, a cave for worship is also a very concrete space, one that was carefully constructed, adorned and ‘kept alive’ by way of a series of cultural practices including worship. It should be noted, too, that for the performance of such rituals, ritual specialists were often used. Therefore, the Buddhist worshippers at the Mogao Caves, including the rulers of Dunhuang, most certainly needed ‘*dharma* masters’ as documented in the primary sources, in which we find that many of the leading clerics officiated at rituals performed in the caves. Therefore, such an observation regarding the ritual space is inherently unnecessary.

6. *Light in the Darkness*

Since the issue of light/illumination with regard to the functioning of the Buddhist caves is at the core of Sharf’s essay, it is necessary to return to

⁵⁸ Schmid, “The Material Culture of Exegesis and Liturgy and a Change in the Artistic Representations in Dunhuang Caves,” 208.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

this issue in more detail. Essentially the question concerns whether or not lamps and illumination played a major role inside the caves during the course of their history. Sharf is not arguing against the use of light on the occasion when a given cave was being inaugurated, but more in its afterlife, i.e. his view that the caves were left in the dark after such event is at the heart of his line of argument. When first reading this, I was a bit nonplussed as to why he would think so but, as my reading progressed, I understood (or I think I understood) the rationale behind his argument. Nevertheless, at that time I felt that in order to make his theory convincing, he must have accessed a substantial number of primary sources, i.e. the Dunhuang manuscripts, or at least read the numerous Chinese studies on the subject. Apparently he has not done so, or at least he has only read a few of them. For this reason, I shall in the following make use of some of this material in order to show that the caves in Dunhuang were in fact illumined by lamps whenever rituals were performed there.

Beginning with the two Buddhist festivals at the end of the calendrical year, the Winter Sacrifice on December Eighth (Chin. Laba jie 臘八節) and the celebration of New Year, it seems incredible to claim that worship was not being performed in the Mogao Caves on those occasions. Let us therefore look briefly at what a few of the relevant sources have to say on the issue of lamps. To this end I want to begin with the Laba festival, performed on the 8th of December to celebrate the return of the light, arguably one of the most important Buddhist festivals in late medieval Dunhuang.⁶⁰ Since the lighting of lamps was indeed customary at these events, it is worthwhile checking to see what the primary sources have to say in this regard. Thus we find on the eastern wall above the entrance inside Cave 192, which dates from 867, a donor inscription entitled *Fayuan gongde zanwen* 發願功德讚文 [Text of Praise on the Virtue of Giving Rise to Vows] authored by a certain Mingli (fl. second half of 9th c., 明立), a monk from the Longxing Temple located in Dunhuang's capital. It reads:

⁶⁰ For details on the celebration of this festival in Dunhuang, see Ji Zhigang 冀志剛, "Randeng yu Tang Wudai Dunhuang minzhong de fo xinyang 燃灯与唐五代敦煌民众的佛教信仰 [The Lighting of Lamps and Popular Buddhist Belief in Dunhuang during the Tang and Five Dynasties Period]," *Shoudu shifan daxue xuobao* 首都师范大学学报 [Journal of Capital Normal University] 5 (2003): 8–12.



On the 15th day of the 1st month in the year, [...] ⁶¹ [as well as] on the 7th day, and on the 8th, Laba Day, one must surely seek to burn lamps in the caves [(Chin. *xijiu ku randeng* 悉就窟燃燈)], year after year [so that] the offerings are not cut off (DMGT: 84–85).

To my understanding, this passage offers pretty good evidence that lamps were lit inside the Mogao Caves during the celebration of Laba. After all, the inscription itself was written on a wall inside Cave 192. It is of course possible to read ‘*xijiu ku randeng*’ to mean that ‘one must surely seek to burn lamps at the caves.’ However, it is not permissible to read it as ‘one must surely seek to burn lamps *outside* or *in front of* the caves.’ Of course this does not preclude lighting more lamps in the antechambers and buildings erected in front of some of the caves on the ground level at Mogao, or higher on the cliff-wall, or even that lanterns were hung outside, as intimated by Sharf.⁶² Most likely, they were. However, we know that lamps were lit all over the Mogao Caves, including in the upper levels, many of which do not have front buildings.

Given that the above passage is too imprecise and brief to give us indisputable evidence for the lighting of lamps *inside* the caves, let us therefore turn to the example published by Ma De (馬德).⁶³ This is the

⁶¹ One character missing.

⁶² Interestingly there are Dunhuang manuscripts which refer to a practice in which lamps were actually burned outside the Mogao Caves, namely the so-called wheel lamps (Chin. *denglun* 燈輪), made with cart wheels set up in a tiered fashion similar to an artificial Christmas tree and covered with lamps. These wheel lamps are depicted in the wall painting of the Bhaiṣajyaguru tableau on the northern wall in Cave 220 dating from 712 (DMNC: 77a). However, it is evident that these lamps were of a specific order, namely part of a particular ritual for the Buddha of Medicine. For the cult of this Buddha in Dunhuang, see Li Yukou 李玉口, *Dunhuang Yaoshi jingbian yanjiu* 敦煌藥師經變研究 [A Study of the Bhaiṣajyaguru Scripture Tableaux in Dunhuang], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [Palace Museum Academic Quarterly] 7.3 (1990): 1–39.

⁶³ Ma De 馬德, “10 shiji zhongqi de Mogao ku yamian gaiguan: Guanyu Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu de jige wenti 10世纪中期的莫高窟崖面概观—关于腊八燃灯分配窟龕名數的几个问题 [An Overview of the Cliff Face of the Mogao Caves during the mid-10th Century: Concerning a Number of Questions in Regard to the *Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu*],” *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 [Dunhuang Research] 2 (1988): 6–8. Despite the importance of this data, Ma is not really to be credited for bringing it to the fore. He actually copied the data directly from Wu Man’gong 吳曼公, “Dunhuang shiku Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu 敦煌石窟臘八燃燈分配窟龕名數 [The *Laba randeng fenpei kukan mingshu* from the Stone Cave at Dunhuang],” *Wenwu* 文物 [Cultural Relics] 5 (1959): 49.

document with Daozhen's (ca. 915–ca. 987, 道真)⁶⁴ report in connection with the celebration of the Laba festival from 951 (Dunhuang 322) referred to above. This document bears a short colophon written by the important clerical leader Daozhen, which consists primarily of a listing of the caves in which lamps were to be lit during the celebration. The implications of the data conveyed in this seemingly trivial document have helped to shed light on a series of other important questions concerning Buddhism and religious life in Dunhuang. Sharf acknowledges the great importance of this manuscript in documenting this practice at the Mogao Caves (Dunhuang 322), but insists that it does not document the burning of lamps *inside* the caves, but rather *outside* them.⁶⁵

I shall not here translate the entire text, but just a brief excerpt which I trust will be enough to show that lamps were surely lit inside the Mogao Caves on this occasion. The context concerns a local Buddhist association being assigned the task of providing lamps to various Buddhist notables for use in a series of important caves during the Laba festival. The listing of these important donors and the lamps they sponsored to be lit reads:

[Offerings made by] Ācārya Tian [(田闍梨)]: [Extending from] the Southern Great Image to the north until the Situ Cave [(司徒窟)], sixty one lamps. In the Cave of Dujie Zhang [(張都衙窟)] two lamps, at the Great King's [(大王)] Cave, and the Cave of the Heavenly Sovereign [(天公主窟)], each two lamps, in the lower level of the Great Image⁶⁶ four lamps, in the Situ Cave two lamps, at the images of the Heavenly Kings four lamps [...].⁶⁷

This data is really straightforward and does not require much talent to appreciate. The meaning is very clear, lamps were offered *inside* the caves themselves. Moreover, and I believe significantly so, the measure word for lamps used in the text is *zhan* (盞), which actually means 'oil

⁶⁴ For a study of this important local monk, 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).

⁶⁵ Cf. Sharf, "Art in the Dark," 49b–50a.

⁶⁶ Probably this is the Great Northern Image of Maitreya also referred to in Dunhuang 207.

⁶⁷ Dunhuang 322: 田闍梨: 南大像以北至司徒窟, 六十一盞. 張都衙窟兩盞, 大王, 天公主窟各 兩盞, 大像下層四盞, 司徒窟兩盞, 大像天王四盞.

cup.' This cannot be taken to mean a lantern, i.e. a lamp to be hung from a pole outside as Sharf seems to think, but indicates obviously an oil lamp, probably a bowl similar to the butter lamps known from Tibetan religious culture, and/or a tripartite lamp similar to those depicted in MG 17780 (see Fig. 3).

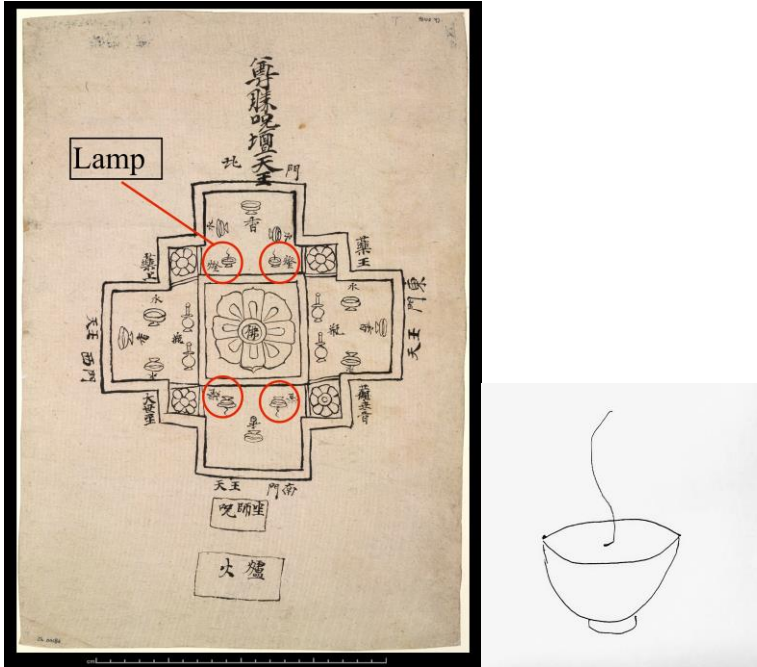


Figure 2a and b. Line drawing of a Buddhist altar with various implements, including lamps, and oil lamp enlarged.
BM OA 1919,0101,0.174 R°. HHS

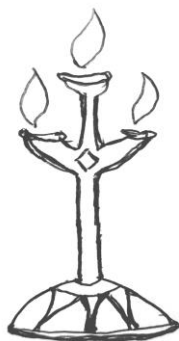


Figure 3. Tripartite lamp. Based on those illustrated in MG 17780. HHS.

That such lamps were used is also clear from another manuscript, a document which features a decree by the Saṃgha Overseer Xianzhao (d. 904, 賢照)⁶⁸ to the effect that ‘during fifteen days and nights the large monks’ temples and those of nuns were to burn one lamp (Chin. *huo yi zhandeng* 燃壹盞燈) each (S. 1604). Here *zhan* is used as part of the compound, i.e. oil lamp. This indicates without any doubt the nature of the lamps used for worship in Dunhuang, and at the Mogao Caves in particular. Moreover, such lamps had ‘floating’ wicks and were therefore not suited for use in the open air.

There is yet another significant source which mentions the offering of lamps in the caves; the *Xin sui nian xun shangshu yu sicheng jiao jietan wen* 新歲年旬上首於四城角結壇文 [Text of the Elevated Leader Setting Up Altars in the Four Corners of the City for Ten Days of New Year] (P. 3149), a short text on worship at New Year. It reads:

As it is now the end of the Old Year, we welcome the New Year by setting up altars⁶⁹ [...] ⁷⁰ at the four gates and four corners. We practise in this manner simply because in the land and territory of Dunhuang the scriptural

⁶⁸ For a short bibliographical discussion of this important monk, see Sørensen, “On the Office of Saṃgha Overseer in Dunhuang during the Period of Guiyijun Rule.”

⁶⁹ Literally ‘cordoning off or binding altars’ (Chin. *jietan* 結壇).

⁷⁰ One character missing.



standards are not [fully] developed.⁷¹ [As] the received conditions of these matters are limited [here], we encourage [those concerned] that they [(i.e. the Buddhist scriptures)] be recited for the duration of a full seven days and nights, [as well as] the transmission of the secret mind seal,⁷² and the scattering of pure food [to all] in the ten directions. The bright lamps are only to be burned in the temple caves [(or temples and caves)]. Furthermore, it is essential that it be done at the Mogao Caves, [so that] the divine bright light may illumine the darkness in the three-fold worlds [...].⁷³

While it is clear that the description of the illumination of the offered lamps is partly metaphorical, i.e., in the sense that their light dispels the darkness of ignorance, the lighting up of the dark caves is intended as well.

Another primary source, provisionally entitled *Hexi jiedu shi sikong zao foku fa yuan wen* 河西節度使司空造佛窟發願文 [Prayer Text for Giving Rise to Prayers on the Occasion of the Commissioner of Hexi and Minister of Public Works Creating a Buddhist Cave], also provides information on worship in the Mogao Caves (S. 4245V^o).⁷⁴ It concerns a prayer written for the inauguration of Cave 100, which was opened during the short-lived reign of Cao Yuande (r. 935–939, 曹元德).⁷⁵ The opening passage of this text reads:

It is [hereby] decreed that we must extensively venerate the Buddhist teaching, [and] strengthen it by visiting the numinous cliff [(i.e., the Mogao Caves)]. [There] we are to offer up our valuables and riches in front of the

⁷¹ ‘Scriptural standards’ (Chin. *jingji* 經濟) probably refers to proper canonical instructions.

⁷² ‘The transmission of the secret mind seal’ (Chin. *xin chuan miyin* 心傳密印) appears to invoke the transmission of mind from master to disciple in the Chan Buddhist tradition, however it may also refer to a ritual procedure of a more general nature.

⁷³ P. 3149: 厥今舊年將末, 新歲迎初, 結壇 □四門 四隅行, 只是由於敦煌地區經濟不發達, 受條件所限, 課念滿七晨七夜. 心傳密印, 散淨食於十方; 燈朗一般只在寺窟燃燈, 而且主要是在莫高窟, 神明光照昏冥於三界 [...].

⁷⁴ Cf. *Dunhuang yuanwen ji* 敦煌願文集 [Collated Prayer Texts from Dunhuang], comp. Huang Zheng 黃徵 and Wu Wei 吳偉 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1995), 394–395.

⁷⁵ For his reign, see Rong, *Guoyijun shi yanjiu*, 107–110. The cave in question features the donor portraits of both Cao Yijin (r. 914–935, 曹議金) and his son Cao Yuande, the former posthumously represented (DMGT: 49). For a study of the full inscription, see Mi Defang 米德昉, “Dunhuang Mogao ku di 100 ku kuzhu ji niandai wenti zaiyi 敦煌莫高窟第100窟窟主及年代问题再议 [A Reconsideration of the Issues Concerning the Creator and Date of Cave 100 in Dunhuang’s Mogao Caves],” *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 [Dunhuang Research] 4 (2012): 61–66.

ten-thousand images, [and place] bright, golden lamps inside the thousand-niches [(Chin. *kan* 龕)]. The fragrant wind of the incense-burners with their hundred precious types of incense, their fragrant wind [spreading] all over the valley, will hover in the air as music sounds the eight notes, its wondrous sounds penetrating as far as the grove of trees [...].⁷⁶

It may be that this passage is also not enough to convince die-hard skeptics regarding lamps being lit in the caves, but I suspect few will argue too vehemently against the rather straightforward evidence provided by this source.⁷⁷ No matter what philological approach one chooses to take with regard to the reading of this text, it is hard to argue that it does not stipulate that Buddhist worship did indeed take place at and inside the Mogao Caves. In other words, the caves were illuminated by lamps during these ritual proceedings and incense was surely burned there as well.

Thus, in a general way one can certainly argue on the basis of the primary sources that worship did indeed take place in the Mogao Caves. If we recall the many documented times the Guiyijun rulers, as well as foreign dignitaries, such as Khotanese and Uyghur envoys, went to the site on official tours of the caves, it would seem unlikely that they did not engage in ritual worship there as well.⁷⁸ In fact, the majority of donor portraits in situ show these people in situations of worship, something which is underscored by their holding of incense burners and trays of flowers.

In this regard it is rewarding to look at the description provided in another important manuscript source, which concerns the repair of the Great Northern Image of Maitreya (Chin. *Beida xiang* 北大像) that took place as a public enterprise under Cao Yuanzhong (r. 944–974, 曹元忠)

⁷⁶ S. 4245: 厥令廣崇釋教, 固謁靈巖, 舍珍財於萬像之前, 炳金燈於千龕之內. 香氣遍谷 而翔空; 樂奏八音, 妙響遐通於林藪 [...] 時則有我河西節度使, 司空先奉為龍天八部, 護塞表而 恒昌; 社稷無危, 應法輪而常轉 [...] 三農秀實, 民歌來暮之秋; 霜疽無期, 誓絕生蝗之患.

⁷⁷ Another important source is the *Fayuan gongyang zanwen* 發願供養讚文 [Hymn Text for Giving Rise to Vows for Making Offerings] written by the above-mentioned 9th century monk Mingli of the Longxing Temple (DMGT: 84–85). It also refers to lighting lamps *inside* a specific cave (i.e., Cave 192).

⁷⁸ For a study of worship with lamps in the Buddhist context of medieval Dunhuang, see Ji Zhigang, “Randeng yu Tang Wudai Dunhuang minzhong de fojiao xinyang,” 1–12. This study is very useful for listing many of the most relevant manuscripts relating to the burning of lamps during Buddhist rituals in Dunhuang.



in 966 (Dunhuang 207). This document provides us with a highly important description of the event, and actually touches upon the issue of whether or not rituals were being conducted inside the Mogao Caves. We should remember that the occasion for Cao Yuanzhong and his consort to go to the Mogao Caves in the company of a substantial entourage of followers, including members of the important clans, was a tour of inspection. Following this inspection, it was decided to repair the pagoda containing the large Maitreya image, the ‘Great Northern Image.’ Having repaired the pagoda, and after extensive work was carried out, a ritual was held at which Dunhuang’s attending grandees all promised to support the continued worship at the caves. The text reads:

[...] during the first month, all of them [(i.e., the ruler and the members of the great clans)] thought of the Thousand Image Caves [(Chin. *qian zun kankan* 千尊龕龕)], and each of them agreed to provide silver lamps [so that] *their bright light would permeate the empty realm of the many caves* [(Chin. *kongjie kuku* 空界窟窟)], and that there would constantly be the burning of precious and fragrant incense, its fumes [(Chin. *qi* 氣)] extending to the heavenly thoroughfare. At night there was the playing of the mouth-organ, its blissful sound and the sound of the *dharma* in enlightened harmony [went on until] the morning birds were heard.⁷⁹

It is really not easy to dismiss this passage, brief as it is, as a record of ritual worship in the Mogao Caves, not just in front of them but actually inside. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that incense was most certainly burned inside as well.

Lastly, if one were to make a detailed survey of the manuscripts featuring the so-called prayer texts, similar to the one quoted above, one would find an abundance of references to the lighting of lamps and the burning of incense. It is true that many of these references are formulaic in nature, i.e. they do not represent reports of actual happenings but are in the majority generalised references to ritual practices involving lamps and incense.⁸⁰ Even so, and given the omnipresence of these particular offerings in Buddhist ritual, it seems illogical to imagine that they should

⁷⁹ Dunhuang 207: [...] 於一月系想念於千尊龕龕，而每契銀燈光明澈於空界窟窟。而常焚寶馥香氣遍於天街。夜奏簫韶，樂音與法音覺韻畫鳥聆哉。

⁸⁰ In this connection it is also interesting to read Yongzeng, “Mogao ku di 98 ku shi yi chanfa daochang,” 29–40. Knowing the context for this type of ritual in medieval Chinese Buddhism, one would think that a ritual for repentance could not take place without incense (nor is it likely to have been performed in the dark).

have been absent from worship in the caves when they appear everywhere else. Here we should also remind ourselves that the many donor portraits in situ actually depict worshippers in the caves, i.e. these paintings are de facto documentation of ritual procedures that took place there. A cursory survey of these portraits shows that in a large number of cases the officiants, all meant to be portrayals of historical figures, are holding offerings in their hands, including incense burners, trays with flowers, etc.⁸¹ Would it not be obvious that lamps were part of these rites as well?

7. Conclusion

Following Sharf's suggestion, are we really to imagine that Buddhist devotees at the Mogao Caves were actually worshipping outside the caves, or in the frontal wooden structures only? Not only do I find such a scenario very unlikely, I would go so far as to say that if that was really the case it would contradict everything we know about Buddhism and Buddhist worship in late medieval China. Not to mention ritual proceeding being carried out in Buddhist caves elsewhere. Therefore, on the basis of what has been shown above, we should now be in the position to make a number of relatively 'safe' statements with regard to the function of the Mogao Caves:

- (1) Buddhist rituals we certainly performed inside the Mogao Caves. One would need oil lamps, incense and some sort of ritual music for worship as indicated in the primary sources.
- (2) Worship was offered on special occasions such as holidays, at festivals, and other events including pilgrimages to the site by all manner of people, including Dunhuang's rulers, elite, commoners and foreign dignitaries, not to mention ordinary pilgrims from afar. This is all referred to in the primary sources.
- (3) Were the caves left in the dark and in disuse for extensive periods of the year? Yes, most probably so, with the possible exception of those being used by local worshippers living at Mogao, including

⁸¹ For an example of donor portraits from various late caves, see *Zhongguo shiku: Dunhuang Mogao ku* 中國石窟敦煌莫高窟 5 [China's Caves: The Mogao Caves of Dunhuang], ed. Dunhuang wenwu yanjiu 敦煌文物研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987), pls 12–13, 20, 77, 78b, 80.



the community of monks of the local Sanjie Temple, as well as the cave-dwelling ascetics living in the Northern Section. The fact that repairs and redecoration of the walls of many caves had to be carried out at certain intervals indicates that they were not maintained on a regular basis, but only at certain times such as when the Zhai clan had its family cave repaired by Zhai Fengda.⁸² All of this points to the fact that many caves were not always in use, but were left unattended for parts of the year.

- (4) The caves were clearly created as expressions of Buddhist piety, and in some cases as ways of commemorating deceased family members of the elite, or important monks, e.g. Wu Facheng (fl. first half of 9th c., 吳法成, Tib. 'Go Chos grub), Hongbian, etc. In this sense one can accept part of Sharf's argument regarding some of the caves functioning as a sort of memorial chapel.
- (5) Did social prestige play a role in the construction of the caves? It clearly did. Including displays of power and wealth. Possibly some degree of cultural pride and the creation of caves as political showpieces played a role as well.
- (6) Were the adorned caves used as mausoleums? If they were, the primary sources do not give us any direct reason to believe so. Were some caves used for burial? Yes, in the Northern Section where the caves for habitation are found, there are caves in which local practitioners were entombed. However, these caves are small and unadorned, and could in the majority of cases have been the homes of those who died.

When we remember that Sharf invokes 'the ritual context of Buddhist caves in Western China' in the title of his essay, one could see this as a bit overblown in the light of what he actually shows in his essay. This is not to denigrate the other important points he makes, as have been reviewed above, many of which are certainly relevant and meaningful. However, one could wish that he had been a bit more conscientious with regard to the available primary data. One supposes that Sharf's eagerness

⁸² See Ning Qiang, *Art, Religion and Politics in Medieval China: The Dunhuang Cave of the Zhai Family* (Honolulu: Hawai'i Press, 2004). For additional aspects of Fengda's involvement with Buddhism, see Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*; and Sørensen, "Offerings and the Production of Buddhist Scriptures in Dunhuang during the 10th Century."

to present the scholarly community with a novel theory and exciting new angle with regard to the Buddhist caves in Dunhuang led him in the direction of the funerary/mausoleum theory. As shown above, however, that interpretation has as many problems as the previously held views of those art historians he criticises in his essay.

I presume that few will now argue against the fact that worship with incense and oil lamps did take place inside the Mogao Caves. Although this may not necessarily have been on a daily basis, we should rest assured that there were indeed lamps being lit in the dark and smoke rising from incense burners held in the hands of devotees.



Abbreviations

- Dunhuang Manuscripts in the Collection of the Dunhuang Academy.
- DMGT *Dunhuang Mogao ku gongyangren tiji* 敦煌莫高窟供养人题记 [Donor Inscriptions from the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang], comp. Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1986, 1–5.
- DMNZ *Dunhuang Mogao ku neirong zonglu* 敦煌莫高窟内容总录 [Comprehensive Catalogue of the Inside of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang]. Edited by Dunhuang wenwu yanjiu 敦煌莫高窟 内容总录. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982.
- Kyushu Manuscripts in the Collection of the Kyushu University.
- MG Musée Guimet Collection in Paris.
- P. Pelliot Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque National in Paris.
- S. Stein Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London.

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