

Sam van Schaik/Imre Galambos
Manuscripts and Travellers

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Manuscripts and Travellers

The Sino-Tibetan Documents
of a Tenth-Century Buddhist Pilgrim

by

Sam van Schaik
Imre Galambos

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1 Introduction

Pilgrimage is a point at which several different spheres of activity, often considered in separation, intersect. While the religious aspect of pilgrimage might be considered primary, pilgrimage usually involves the realms of commerce and politics as well. Pilgrims often travel with merchants, where there is safety in numbers, and may engage in some trade themselves, such that it is often difficult to distinguish the pilgrim from the merchant. Equally, political factors become involved as soon as the pilgrim plans an extended journey, since travel over long distances invariably entails crossing political borders. In these circumstances pilgrims need to obtain official permission to travel, or the support of local authorities in the form of an escort or a letter of recommendation.¹

The manuscript that forms the basis for this book is a record of the pilgrimage of a Chinese monk in the late tenth century. The manuscript was one of thousands that were sealed in a cave in Dunhuang, in Chinese Central Asia, in the early eleventh century AD. The cave contained multitudes of Buddhist texts, and a smaller but significant amount of ephemeral material as well, including old contracts and letters. The cave was opened in the early twentieth century, and its contents taken away by explorers to several major institutions located in different countries. One of the major depositories of the Dunhuang material today is the British Library. It is here that our manuscript is now located.

The Chinese monk who owned the manuscript was on a pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy land of India. The main part of the manuscript (Manuscript A) is a scroll containing the monk's letters of passage for his journey through Tibetan regions of what are now the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu.² This scroll was found glued together with two other manuscripts

1 On the overlapping of mercantile and religious activities see for example van Spengen 1998 on Tibetan pilgrims and Clarke 1998 on Hindu trading pilgrims.

2 Here "Tibetan regions" refers to the fact that these areas were dominated politically and culturally by Tibetans and Tibetophone peoples like the Azha (Ch. Tuyuhun 吐谷渾). It includes much of the Hexi corridor 河西走廊, the trade route that connects Central China with the trade routes to the west. The region is known to Tibetans as Dokham (*mdo khams*) or Amdo (*a mdo*).

that the pilgrim acquired on his travels. The longest part is what we call Manuscript B, with a Chinese sūtra on the recto and Tibetan tantric texts on the verso. Finally, the smallest part is Manuscript C, which has a Chinese text commemorating the building of a monastery near Liangzhou, which turns out to be a copy of an inscription from the early seventh century. Crucially, the colophon to this manuscript states that the copy was made in 968 by the monk Daozhao, thus providing us with a date and a name.

These three manuscripts together form a single record of a pilgrimage. They are referred to throughout this book as the “Daozhao manuscript”, after what was probably the name of the monk himself.³ The manuscript is a unique record of a pilgrimage, its multiple nature opening up for us the multifarious purposes of pilgrimage and the many functions of the manuscript. It also sheds light on a crucial period of history, the second half of the tenth century, when both China and Tibet were just beginning to attain some level of stability after more than a century of fragmentation.

1.1 Passports and letters of passage in China

The passport has a long history in China.⁴ Passports are attested as far back as the beginning of the first century AD, during the Han dynasty. Among the wooden documents from the Etsin-gol region there are several permits for travel, in which the issuer of the passport requests that the holder be allowed to pass through official boundaries, primarily customs posts.⁵ By the third century Silk Road trade was flourishing, and numerous traders, especially Sogdians from the Iranian regions, travelled east to Central Asia and China. The biography of an official from the Central Asian town of Dunhuang, Cang Ci 倉慈 (fl. 227–232) relates how he helped Sogdian traders complete their journeys.⁶ The biography states that previously such merchants had

3 The manuscript is IOL Tib J 754. As we will see below, the name Daozhao 道昭 appears in the colophon of part C of the manuscript. It is quite possible that this is the name of the pilgrim monk, although it might equally be the name of a scribe hired by the monk. In calling this manuscript the “Daozhao manuscript” we intend to give it a memorable name, but the reader should keep in mind that the application of the name Daozhao to the pilgrim monk is only a hypothesis.

4 On the history of the passport in general, see Torpey 2000, Alter 2003, and Lloyd 2003.

5 At this time passports appear to have been known by various names. By the end of the Han dynasty (206BC–220AD), *guosuo* seems to have become standard. The term *guosuo* was then used through to the end of the Tang dynasty.

6 *Sanguozhi* 三國志: 512.

been stopped at Dunhuang so that the officials there could buy their goods at prices much lower than they would fetch in China. Cang Ci allowed them to pass, and facilitated their journeys with the issue of passports (*guosuo* 過所).⁷

During the Tang dynasty (618–907) the use of the official passport became especially widespread as the movement of every private individual was regulated by means of the *guosuo*. During this period the form of the passport was standardized, and the contents held very specific information about the route that the bearer was allowed to travel. This regulation of the movement of private individuals, including merchants and pilgrims, was undoubtedly restrictive, but the high degree of state control also allowed long-distance trade and pilgrimage to flourish. This degree of regulation could no longer be maintained after the interregnum of 755–763, when the previous level of centralized state control, especially of China's western regions, was no longer possible. The next strong dynasty to emerge in China, the Song (960–1279), did not revive the *guosuo* passport of the Tang, but instead opted for a more general official certification for travel (*gongping* 公憑).

Outside of the areas of China under centralized state control, less official forms of the passport were also used. We find an example of this in the biography of the pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (596–664), who travelled from China to India via the Silk Road. The king of Turfan, one of the major oasis states on the pilgrim's route, gave Xuanzang twenty-four letters addressed to local rulers at various points on the journey. Each letter requested an escort and new horses for the pilgrim.⁸ Letters of passage like these are to be distinguished from the passports issued by a centralized state. In the pre-modern period, such letters were often associated with pilgrimage.⁹

7 Arakawa 2001: 2–3. The following section is mainly drawn from Arakawa's excellent survey of the passport system of the Tang dynasty. On the Tang *guosuo*, see also Cheng 2000.

8 This is recounted in Xuanzang's biography. See Beal 1911: 30.

9 We have examples from Medieval England, for instance, of petitions for letters of passage from would-be pilgrims to Rome, now held in the UK National Archives. In 1378, Robert de Kyrkeby requested a writ of passage through the English ports of Dover and Sandwich, for a pilgrimage to Rome (Doc. no.SC 8/206/10270; a record of the granting of this license is found in CCR 1377-81: 528). A little later, in the early fifteenth century, William Fynche, a chaplain, made a similar request for "letters of passage to the keepers of passage at the ports of London, Dover, Sandwich and Orwell" (Doc. no. SC 8/206/10270).

1.2 Light on the dark ages

By the end of the ninth century, both the Tang dynasty of China and the Yarlung dynasty of Tibet had been fatally weakened by internal strife. By the tenth century both China and Tibet experienced the usurpation of centralized control by regional warlords. This led to a lapse in the keeping of official records, which means that we know much less of the tenth century than the centuries that preceded and followed it. In traditional Tibetan histories, the tenth century is known as “the era of fragmentation” (*sil bu'i dus*), and is chiefly characterised as a period of uprisings against the representatives of the Tibetan imperial authorities, and a persecution and collapse of the Buddhist monastic system that they had supported.

The Tibetan historical tradition, which is mainly concerned with religious matters, presents a consistent narrative of this dark period. This is the story of the preservation of the Buddhist monastic lineage by certain monks in the far north-eastern corner of Tibet, known to Tibetans as Amdo. According to this narrative, refugee monks from central Tibet passed on the monastic ordination to local monks in Amdo at the end of the ninth century, and this monastic community was instrumental in re-introducing monastic Buddhism to Central Tibet in the late tenth century.¹⁰

There is little contemporary evidence to support these traditional narratives. But Daozhao's letters of passage were written by Tibetan officials and monks from this very same area, at this crucial time. They represent a chance to cast some light upon this dark period, and they confirm that there was indeed a thriving Buddhist monastic culture in the region during the latter part of the tenth century. In fact, they show that the geographical extent and social influence of Tibetan monastics was greater than what is suggested in the traditional narratives. And they also show something not stated outright in these narratives: a close relationship between secular and monastic power. This was to be a significant feature of Tibetan history from this point through to the twentieth century.¹¹

1.3 Materiality and the manuscript

There is much to be said for approaching the study of manuscripts as an investigation of their *materiality*, that is, their role in material culture. In

¹⁰ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of these narratives and their sources.

¹¹ On this aspect of Tibetan culture see Cüppers 2004.

anthropological discussions *materiality* signifies the foregrounding of the material objects produced by a society, rather than subjects that compose that society. Of course, there is also a recognition here of the interdependence of human subjects and the objects they create. The changing status of objects, in dependence on how they are perceived and valued by people, was the subject of *The Social Life of Things*, an influential collection of anthropological studies published in 1986, in which the introductory essay argued for the study of the trajectory of objects as they move in and out of different conditions of identification.¹² In a chapter of this collection entitled “The Cultural Biography of Things,” Igor Kopytoff explored the basic principles required for the biography of a material object:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens when it reaches the end of its usefulness?¹³

It is clear that many of these questions can be asked of the manuscripts that reside in museums and private collections all over the world. Most manuscripts have passed through several different stages in their “lives” and been accorded different kinds of status by those who have commissioned, written, owned, repaired, sold or collected them. The attempt to reconstruct a manuscript’s biography is initially helpful in alerting us to the cultural specificity of our own perception that the manuscript has a particular status and use – such as being in a museum collection and containing a text which engages our interest. Subsequently, as we study the manuscript’s historical trajectory, we can move toward a reconstruction, if only partial, of the way a manuscript functioned, and the way it was perceived, at various points in its career.

Thus the study of manuscripts is, whether implicitly or explicitly, also a study of materiality. When we study a manuscript we must take into account the circumstances of its creation. These include the individuals who crea-

¹² Appadurai 1986.

¹³ Kopytoff 1986: 66–67.

ted it, as well as the wider social norms that allowed it to come into being. We must also consider the physical elements that had to come together to produce the manuscript, including the paper, ink and writing implement.¹⁴ In this activity we are engaged in a mental disassembling of the manuscript into its social and physical causes and conditions. A manuscript is never truly finished, but goes on to perform a variety of functions. It may evolve textually through later emendation and additions, and even if it does not, it may still change its role over time, and this changing role may help us understand the cultures in which the manuscript existed. This was the argument of a pioneering work of art historical theory published in 1962, George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*. Kubler wrote:

Our choice of “the history of things” is more than a euphemism to replace the bristling ugliness of “material culture.” This term is used by anthropologists to distinguish ideas, or “mental culture” from artefacts. But the “history of things” is intended to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of visual forms: the term includes both artefacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions—in short, all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in a temporal sequence. From all these things a shape in time emerges.¹⁵

Kubler thus argued that every cultural object should be considered as multiple, a collection of traits, each of which has its own “systematic age”, that is, its particular links with tradition and past cultural practice. Thus he hoped that the analysis of an object could return it to the flow of time, rather than placing it in an arbitrary, static category. Such an approach is eminently suited to the deep study of a single manuscript. The manuscript at the centre of this study is itself many kinds of object. It is not just an administrative document, a religious souvenir, or a carrier of sacred texts; it is all of these things and more, in that it is an artefact of a particular activity: pilgrimage.

In this book we will trace the trajectory of the manuscript over time during the course of the pilgrimage; we will see how it performed different functions for different people; we will show the composite nature of the

14 One of the few comprehensive studies of a Dunhuang manuscript that takes these factors into account is Teiser 1994.

15 Kubler 2008 [1962]: 8. Priscillia Colt's review is a clear summary of Kubler's approach and aims in the book (of which he approved); see Colt 1963.

manuscript by notionally taking it apart and seeing what we can learn from its composite parts. Each of these parts has its own trajectory in time; that is to say, each part has different cultural antecedents, had different meaning and value when it was created and first used, and is treated differently by different fields of study in modern scholarship. And yet the parts of the manuscript are also interlinked in that they were put together by a certain pilgrim in the tenth century, and carried with him as personal property, before being deposited in Dunhuang. Thus at the end of this book we will notionally put the manuscript back together again, and look at how the cultural paths of its individual parts meet in this singular artefact.

1.4 The structure of the book

In Part I we discuss the cultural setting for the Daozhao manuscript, beginning in Chapter 2 with an introduction to the Dunhuang manuscript collection. This was the home of the manuscript for a thousand years, the quietest years in its biography. The question of how the manuscript ended up in this great hidden cache is inseparable from questions about the nature of the cache itself. Was it a sacred rubbish heap? Was it an extension of a nearby monastic library? Arguments about the identity of the cave have tended to focus on one particular function, but here we argue that these functions are not exclusive, and we highlight the sometimes neglected magical aspect of Buddhist manuscripts as representations of the Buddha's body.

In Chapter 3 we look at the tradition of pilgrimage in China. Considering the prevalence of the theme of the journey to the West in Chinese history and culture, it is of major significance to find first-hand material like the Daozhao manuscript which documents such a journey. Material evidence related to the pilgrimages is scarce, as most of what has come down to us (in artistic and literary forms) was intended to be preserved and in many ways represents the result of a conscious, and consequently artificial, effort to create an idealized image of the pilgrim and the act of pilgrimage. In contrast, our manuscript is one of the few which affords us a glimpse into the details of how such journeys were carried out and who supported the pilgrims along the way.

In Chapter 4 we discuss the political and cultural role of Tibetan-speakers in what is now the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu. This was the world through which the pilgrim passed in the second half of the tenth century, a realm of petty kingdoms and gilded monasteries. The letters in the Daozhao manuscript allow us a unique insight into the day-to-day affairs

of these Tibetan kingdoms, and in their correspondence between secular and monastic officials, they give an impression of how the religious and secular spheres were interacting, and to some degree merging during this period.

Then in Part II the Daozhao manuscript itself comes to the centre of our study. In Chapter 5 examine the composite nature of the manuscript, and how it came to be put together in this form. This is a kind of archaeology, in which we travel back from the current state of the manuscript in the British Library, through the changes imposed on the manuscript by the archivists of the India Office Library, to the function of the component parts of the manuscript as it was assembled by the pilgrim. Each component is then analysed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 6 we look at one panel of the manuscript that is a copy of a stele inscription (Manuscript C), and argue that this is a souvenir of pilgrimage. The inscription commemorates the building of the Gantong monastery on Mount Yu near Liangzhou, and this copy of it is particularly important because its colophon contains a name and a date. The inscription was copied by the monk Daozhao in the year of 968. There is also evidence that while this particular manuscript copy was produced in the tenth century, the original inscription (i.e. the text itself) commemorates the building of the Gantong monastery three and a half centuries earlier. In terms of the handwriting, Daozhao's copy of the inscription is very similar to the Chinese notes that appear between the Tibetan letters on another part of the manuscript, suggesting that the two were either written by the same person, or produced within the confines of the same monastic community. In either case, it is clear that the date of 968 in Daozhao's colophon holds true not only for the copy of the inscription but also, at least approximately, for the Tibetan letters. This also suggests that the pilgrim whose advancement the letters of introduction were supposed to facilitate was in fact Daozhao, and thus we have put his name to our group of manuscripts.

In Chapter 7 we examine the Chinese sūtra that is found on the large scroll section the manuscript (Manuscript B). This is a copy of *juan* 3 of the *Dafangbian Fo baoenjing* 大方便佛報恩經 (*T.03.0156), or the *Sūtra of Repaying Kindness*, an apocryphal Buddhist scripture which was highly popular as an artistic theme in the wall paintings at the Dunhuang caves. The text itself also occurs in numerous copies among the Dunhuang manuscripts. One of these includes a colophon stating that it was copied on behalf of the monk Daoyuan, who is known to have returned from India in 965, only a few years before Daozhao's pilgrimage. This copy has a Khotanese medical text on the verso. Therefore, these two copies of the text

show a number of similarities: both were created in the 960s in the course of a pilgrimage of Chinese monks to India. In addition, the verso of both manuscripts contains non-Chinese texts of pragmatic nature.

In Chapter 8 we look at the Tibetan texts that are written on the verso of this scroll. These are tantric texts, and we show here that they are closely aligned with developments in Tibetan Buddhism elsewhere during the same period, including for example rituals focused on the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara and the wrathful rituals of the *kīla* dagger. The scroll also contains a treatise on Mahāyoga, by far the most popular expression of Buddhist tantric practice in tenth-century Tibet. An analysis of the handwriting on this scroll shows that it was written by more than one person, and this suggests that the scroll that originally contained a Chinese copy of the *Baoenjing* was later re-used by a community of tantric practitioners to record texts in an ad-hoc fashion, possibly from itinerant tantric teachers. We also show that Tibetan was the language for teaching and recording the texts of Mahāyoga, even for Chinese people, and that the authors of these texts may have been non-Tibetans using the language for this specific purpose.

Finally in Chapter 9 we offer a transcription and discussion of the Tibetan letters of passage and the Chinese notes that surround them. We discuss here the fact that all of the letters are written by officials with Tibetan, or partially Tibetan names and apart from one ‘open letter’ are addressed to high-ranking monks. This close relationship between secular and monastic spheres becomes even closer in the final letters, which are written by a figure who seems to straddle the secular and religious realms. Other historical sources suggest that this was increasingly common from the eleventh century onwards, both here and in other parts of Tibet, and these letters suggest that this process was well-underway already by the 960s. Having thus disassembled the Daozhao manuscript in order to consider its parts in isolation from each other, we then bring them together again in the Conclusion, and discuss their relation to each other, and the changing roles occupied by this composite manuscript as it moved through time and space.

Part I

Cultural Context and Historical Connections

2 The Dunhuang Manuscripts

2.1 The discovery of the cave

At the very beginning of the twentieth century a huge cache of ancient manuscripts was discovered in the Buddhist cave complex near the desert town of Dunhuang in China. Dunhuang had once been a great centre of Buddhism, located at a crossroads on the ancient Silk Road, but by the twentieth century it had become a quiet town in China's western provinces. Dunhuang was particularly well known for the Buddhist Mogao cave complex, a long cliff face studded with hundreds of beautifully painted caves located to the southeast of the town.

In the year 1900 the caves were in the care of a single monk, Wang Yuanlu 王圓籙, who was using what little funds he had to restore some of the caves. In the course of his work Wang discovered a hidden chamber off the side of one of the large caves. This chamber was packed from floor to ceiling with manuscripts and paintings. Rumours of the find began to circulate through the area as Wang sold some of the scrolls, or gave them away as presents. The news soon reached the British-Hungarian explorer Aurel Stein (1862–1943), who was in the middle of his second Central Asian expedition. Stein hurried to the caves, realizing that other explorers active in Central Asia would not be far behind.¹

Over the course of several days, Stein negotiated with Wang, who was initially unwilling to part with any of the manuscripts. Stein described his first glimpse of the cave thus:

The sight of the small room disclosed was one to make my eyes open wide. Heaped up in layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest's little lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly ten feet, and filling, as subsequent measurement showed, close on 500 cubic feet. The area left clear within the room was just sufficient for two people to stand in.²

1 On Stein's explorations, see Mirsky 1998 and Whitfield 2004b.

2 Stein 1912 (*Ruins of Desert Cathay*), vol. II: 172.

Ultimately a combination of monetary payments and Stein's canny comparison of himself to Xuanzang, the iconic seventh century pilgrim who carried Buddhist scriptures from India to China, convinced Wang to part with a significant portion of the manuscripts. Other explorers soon followed Stein. Eight months later the Frenchman Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) arrived. Pelliot spent several days selecting manuscripts, compiling a haul comparable to Stein's. In 1909 Pelliot showed a selection of his newly acquired manuscripts to local scholars in Beijing. The Chinese authorities, spurred into action, issued an order for all of the Chinese manuscripts remaining in the library cave to be brought to Beijing. This was carried out with only partial success, and later visits to Dunhuang by Japanese and Russian expeditions also carried away smaller but still significant collections of manuscripts.³

By the end of this period of acquisition the original contents of the Dunhuang cave were scattered across the globe. The largest manuscript collections are now held at the British Library (London), the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris) and the National Library of China (Beijing). Other major Dunhuang collections are held at the National Museum of India (New Delhi) and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (St Petersburg). The objects that Aurel Stein acquired from Central Asia were initially split between several different institutions. The manuscript material was given to the British Museum, the India Office Library and the British Government of India. By 1982 most of the manuscript material from the British Museum and India Office Library had been transferred to the British Library. The British Museum collection now comprises mainly the illustrated and three-dimensional items brought back by Stein. The manuscript that is at the centre of our study was one of those that were originally deposited in the India Office Library, and now resides at the British Library.

2.2 The contents of the cave

The contents of the manuscripts that came out of the cave are extraordinarily diverse. They are written in over a dozen languages, of which Tibetan and Chinese are the most common, followed by Sanskrit, Khotanese, Sog-

3 It was originally thought that a number of Chinese scrolls had been stolen *en route* to Beijing. In fact these scrolls were stolen from the Ministry of Education in Beijing, as explained in Rong Xinjiang 2002. Moreover, the remaining Tibetan manuscripts appear to have been of no interest to the Chinese authorities at this time, and were left in Gansu, where they remain today; see van Schaik 2002.

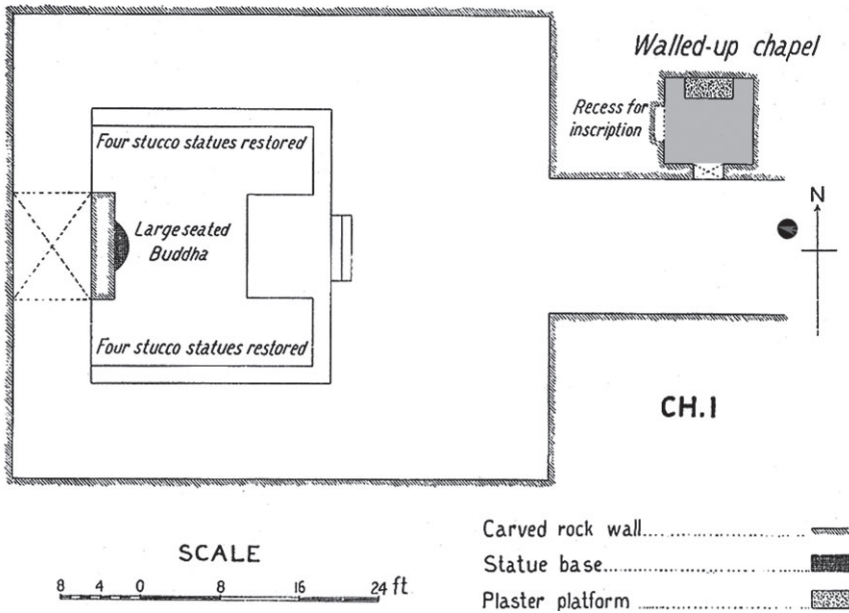


Fig. 1 Stein's plan of the manuscript cave, showing the location of the altar and the inscription commemorating the monk Hongbian (*Serindia*, v. 3, Plans: 43).

dian and Uighur, among others. The texts themselves range across a variety of genres; the following is an attempt to map out the most important of these:

(i) First of all, the largest group is the Buddhist sūtras. These include thousands of copies of certain popular texts like the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Sūtra of Golden Light*. Most of these sūtras are translations from Indic texts, though some are so-called apocryphal sūtras, composed or compiled from existing material in China or Central Asia. Often we have many copies of the same sūtra, sometimes running into hundreds or even thousands. This can be understood in the light of the emphasis in the Mahāyāna on the merit to be gained from making copies of sūtras. Some of the Mahāyāna sūtras contain passages that encourage their own propagation, enjoining their readers to spread the sūtra by reading, memorizing and reciting it. Some, like the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra*, also specifically suggest making copies of the sūtra.⁴

⁴ For a recent discussion of this aspect of Buddhist cultures, see Kieschnick 2003, chapter 3.

All such activity is said to generate religious merit resulting in better circumstances in this life and those that follow. In China, folk-stories tell of ordinary folk who copied sūtras, or paid for them to be copied, and were rewarded after death. The colophons of many of the sūtras from the Dunhuang cave are proof of the general belief in the efficacy of the merit generated from copying sūtras. They usually dedicate the resulting merit to their own future lifetimes, to their families, or to sentient beings in general. Sometimes a local lord or distant king might sponsor a mass sūtra-copying project. The Tibetan emperor Tri Tsug Detsen (r. 815–841), for example, ordered hundreds of copies of the large *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* to be made at Dunhuang when it was under Tibetan rule in the ninth century. Many of these ended up in Cave 17.

(ii) Other Buddhist scriptures that were not so heavily copied include the texts of the vinaya (the basis for the monastic rule), commentaries explaining the sūtras, treatises by great Indian Mahāyāna exegetes like Nagārjūna and Vasubhandu, and a few tantras. With the advent of printing we find some sūtras made from woodblock prints, like the famous *Diamond Sūtra* printed in 868. By the tenth century hundreds of prayer sheets were being printed, mostly with images of a buddha or bodhisattva above the syllables of a sacred spell (*dhāraṇī*).

Other Buddhist manuscripts are of a more local nature, works written by Buddhists from China, Tibet, and Central Asian kingdoms like Khotan. Here we find more evidence of the culture behind the manuscripts. There are collections of prayers to be recited, instructions on meditation known as *sādhana*, rituals for funerals and other important occasions, notes from lectures, simple catechisms of Buddhist doctrine, and so on. There was apparently a thriving Buddhist society in and around Dunhuang through to the beginning of the eleventh century when the cave was closed (and probably after this as well, through to the period of Mongol rule in the thirteenth century).⁵ Buddhist monks received financial support from the local laity, and in return performed various kinds of ritual for them.

(iii) Though no other religion challenged the popularity of Buddhism at Dunhuang in the first millennium CE, several other religions are represented in the manuscripts, including Christianity (of the Nestorian heresy), Judaism, Manichaeism, Daoism. A series of unnamed local practices that are not so easily classified as one religion or another are also present, such as the cults of local spirits, which sometimes came into conflict with Buddhism, as they

5 On the social role of the monks (and nuns), see Gernet 1995 and Hao 1998.

involved animal sacrifice.⁶ We also find divination practices of various kinds, including astrology, reading the shapes of clouds, and mirror divination. Popular literature is represented in stories known as “transformation texts” (*bianwen* 變文), that would often have been told by travelling storytellers and took elements from Buddhism as well as other popular traditions.⁷

(iv) Though much outnumbered by the religious material, there is a significant number of secular manuscripts – mainly official records of one kind or another. We have for instance official letters, contracts, land and tax registries and royal chronicles. These may have originally been part of a local official archive. They certainly contain documents from the various rulers of Dunhuang, especially from the Tibetan overlords, and the local Chinese rulers that followed the fall of the Tibetan empire.

(v) Finally, there are the non-textual items. Most numerous are the paintings, most of which are of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Portraits of patrons are sometimes included in the lower half of the painting, demonstrating that, like the manuscripts, many paintings were commissioned. Again, these are evidence of the belief in the meritorious nature of such commissions. Other non-textual material includes paper printed with numerous small images of buddhas and flowers made of paper.

The forms of the manuscripts are almost as diverse as their contents, and represent some five centuries in the history of bookbinding. The most common form is the scroll, a long roll of paper created by pasting together rectangular sheets. The scroll was used both for Buddhist scriptures and secular documents in China. It has been suggested that the scroll form developed from the earlier Chinese practice of tying bamboo or wooden slips together and rolling them up, though recent discoveries of Buddhist scrolls from Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan suggest that the form may have come to China along with Buddhist manuscripts from the west. Another popular form, the pothi, was also closely linked to Buddhism, being based on the long and slim Indian palm leaf book form. Pothi pages made from paper seem to have appeared first in Central Asia, and then been adapted by Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists.

A later development (probably from the ninth century onwards) in the form of the book was based on the scroll form but folded in concertina fa-

⁶ This has recently been the subject of a book by Yu Xin (2006) of Fudan University.

⁷ On *bianwen* literature, see Victor Mair’s books *Tun-huang popular narratives* (Mair 1983) and *T’ang transformation texts* (Mair 1989).

shion so that each fold was the same size as a pothi leaf. Thus the concertina combined two different forms of the book, and can also be seen as a precursor of the bound book or codex, which is the latest stage of bookbinding found in the Dunhuang manuscripts. The codex, similar to the concertina, provides easier access to the text at various points than the scroll, while avoiding the problems of loose-leaf books presented by the pothi. In Dunhuang it seems to have first appeared in the tenth century, and like the concertina, was mainly used to record Buddhist texts. This was to become the dominant form in China. Though scrolls and codices were also used in Tibet, the pothi remained by far the most popular book form there for Buddhist texts.

The Daozhao manuscript is composed of three scrolls. Though all of the book forms mentioned above were in use by the time it was written, the scroll form remained the most popular for both secular documents and Buddhist scriptures. The scroll form was also quite adaptable, so that manuscripts could ‘grow’ through the addition of further sheets or become an aggregate of several manuscripts.

2.3 The functions of the cave and the reasons for its sealing

The hidden chamber in which these manuscripts were found (known in Stein’s numbering as Cave 17) was originally a meditation cave, and then funerary shrine, for a monk called Hongbian 洪辯 who served as the head abbot of the Buddhist institutions at Dunhuang during the early to mid ninth century. The centrepiece of the cave was a statue of the abbot in meditation, placed on a raised altar with decorative murals on either side. A small recess on one wall contained a stone stele with the text of an imperial appointment decree honouring the monk.⁸ Funerary caves like this are indeed a common feature in Dunhuang, though most, commemorating wealthy locals, were of larger size.⁹

Hongbian’s cave may have originally contained some or all of his remains, serving as a reliquary. Some of the monk’s own manuscripts and paintings may have been placed here as well; the manuscripts found in the

8 Hongbian’s statue, though not the stele, was removed before the cave was sealed, and was in Cave 362, until it was moved back into the library cave in 1965. See the extensive discussion of this issue in Imaeda 2008: 92–95. Imaeda suggests that the statue was moved merely to create more storage space in the cave, disputing the conclusion of Ueyama (2002) that the removal was an act of disparagement.

9 See Ma Shichang 1995: 314. Ma states here that the number of burial caves at the Dunhuang site exceeds that of any other Chinese cave site. See also Ma Shichang 1978: 22–28.