WHAT IS DUNHUANG ART?

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Although many learned books and articles have been written on Dunhuang art, these are primarily about specific examples, and not so much about Dunhuang art as an all-inclusive and ever-changing visual culture. In other words, in studying Dunhuang art we have mainly been focusing on what we see, not what they saw. Can we utilize the rich evidence and scholarship on Dunhuang art to reconstruct historical perceptions of this art? What further research would this reconstruction require? What methodological challenges would be entailed? This essay responds to these questions by exploring the content and spatial complexity of Dunhuang art.

We often automatically equate Dunhuang art with Dunhuang Buddhist art. This conceptual slip is understandable because we are willingly overwhelmed by the splendid murals and sculptures in the Mogao Caves. But this slip is serious, because it prevents us from understanding the full range of Dunhuang art and in turn diminishes the context of Dunhuang Buddhist art. It is important to remember that Dunhuang was a place and that the Mogao Caves, a Buddhist complex located about 25 kilometers southeast of the township, only formed a small portion of it. During the medieval period, many other temples and ritual structures were constructed both inside and outside the city of Dunhuang, to facilitate not only Buddhist teachings and rituals but also those of Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, local cults, and ancestral worship. The social conditions for such a polycentric visual culture are well-known: medieval Dunhuang was a city of immigrants, inhabited by people from different regions with different religious affiliations and cultural heritages.

Buddhist art at Dunhuang was therefore never an insulated tradition, and its historical significance must be comprehended in relation to other visual traditions that developed alongside it. Now when we visit the Mogao Caves on the cliffs of Mt. Three Perils, we drive across a wide-open desert. This enormous area, in fact, was used as a public cemetery for local residents from the third century onward. Archaeological excavations conducted here over the past 60 years have uncovered some 1,000 tombs dating from the Western Jin (265-317) to Tang (618-906); many more burials still lie beneath the sand. The dating of the tombs is important because it means that the establishment and development of this cemetery basically paralleled the nearby Mogao Caves, and it means that the earliest Buddhist icons were installed in the Mogao Caves roughly around the same time as tombs which contained Taoist prayers or were painted with empty tents for the invisible spirits of the
dead. We wonder why two such radically different visual languages were employed for the caves and the tombs and what their relationship was, especially when more and more Mogao caves were built as "family shrines," in which deceased members of a family were portrayed as living worshippers of the Buddha. It seems that a traditional dichotomy in ancestral worship—a "pairing" of a collective family temple and tombs of individual family members—still provided a general framework for the juxtaposition of the caves and tombs at Dunhuang: tombs built near the residential area provided the dead with posthumous homes; a "family cave-chapel" celebrated the family's prosperity with the Buddha's blessing.

One way to understand the content and spatial complexity of Dunhuang art is therefore to identify various religious and ritual centers in the area, which in the medieval period served as the most important sites for both public activities and art production. Although none of these structures have survived except for the Mogao Caves, manuscripts found in the "secret library" at Dunhuang yield rich information about their past existence. This information, which is particularly rich about the period from the eighth to tenth centuries, has allowed scholars to identify some twenty Buddhist monasteries at Dunhuang. The large ones in town played dominant roles in organizing Buddhist activities; inventories of their properties found in Dunhuang manuscripts list many sculptures and paintings. Smaller temples and shrines were sponsored by individuals. A rare record preserved in the British Library (S. 3929) praises the merit accumulated by the Dunhuang painter Dong Baode, who transformed his former residence in town into an exquisite Buddhist temple. The same document also records that Dong collaborated with patrons to create five cave-chapels.

Dong Baode was a senior painter (du liao) in the painters' guild (hua hang) of the region. Tenth-century manuscripts also record an official hua yuan or "painting academy" at Dunhuang, in which painters had different ranks such as senior academy painter (hua yuan shi), one who knows how to paint (zhi hua shou), and academy student (yuan sheng). These official and unofficial artists, as well as ordinary painter-craftsmen called hua jiang, were involved not only in decorating Buddhist temples, but also in painting ancestral portraits, Confucian sages, and Taoist and Zoroastrian deities. Dong Baode, for example, was praised for his art of portraiture, while Dunhuang manuscript P. 4640 records that official painters were assigned to make images of Zhong Kui, the Demon Queller.

From Dunhuang manuscripts we also know the names of at least eleven Taoist temples in this area during the Tang. One of them, the Palace of the Purple Pole (Zijigong), was possibly founded in 739 to 741, when Emperor Xuanzong ordered temples to be constructed for the deified Laozi in the capital and all prefectures. Those in the prefectures were called Zijigong, which housed Laozi's
“true images” issued by the court. There is little doubt that Taoism maintained popularity at Dunhuang at least until the tenth century. Dunhuang manuscripts include at least 649 Taoist scriptures. Four hundred more manuscripts are devoted to Taoist arts including songs, poems, medicine, astronomy, and various divinatory techniques.

Also among Dunhuang manuscripts, several local geographies record shrines and altars dedicated to the God of Earth, Lord of Wind, and Master of Rain; Confucian academies housing images of Confucious and Yan Hui; and a Zoroastrian Temple (Xian Miaoy) about 500 meters east of the prefecture. With a square floor about 35 meters each side, this temple contained icons of Zoroastrian deities in 20 niches. Dunhuang manuscript S.0367 further records that a Zoroastrian temple in Yiwu County was furnished with “innumerable images executed in plain ink lines.” The Dunhuang local government also regularly supplied drawing paper, as well as wine, oil, and other materials, to a popular Zoroastrian festival (Sai Xian). Jiang Boqin has identified a Dunhuang manuscript (P. 4518) as a surviving example of this type of Zoroastrian drawing. Retaining strings for hanging, it was possibly used in a Zoroastrian temple or in the Sai Xian festival.

This leads us to consider another important aspect of Dunhuang visual culture, namely the many local festivals and rituals organized by different religious institutions and the local government throughout the year. These activities are significant to art historians because they offered important occasions for producing and exhibiting images and because a ritual or festival often aimed at creating visual spectacles. The Zoroastrian Sai Xian, for example, was an exuberant festival that included offering food and wine to gods, banqueting, singing, dancing, magical performances, and masquerades. Believed to be capable of invoking rainfall, it was held at least four different months per year and sometimes four months in a row. Probably because of its similarity to a traditional rite called the Great Exorcism (Da Nuo), elements of the Zoroastrian Sai Xian were absorbed into this Chinese ritual, held on the last day of the year, to ward off evil spirits. Performers wore masks and painted their hair red; holding shields and halberds they shouted loudly through the streets. To dispel ghosts and demons they invoked divine beings such as Zhong Kui and the Spiritual Beasts of the White Marsh; the latter are illustrated in Dunhuang manuscripts.

As for Taoist rituals, the Zhai Jiao service was offered six months a year ten days each month. Special altars were prepared for such occasions, and various Taoist deities were invoked during the service. The Taoist and Zoroastrian ritual calendars overlapped with the Buddhist one. Dunhuang manuscripts record at least twenty-five kinds of Buddhist rituals and festivals, of which the three major ones were the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the
Parade of Buddhist Images on the eighth day of the second month, and the Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

These festivals and rituals attracted large crowds with varied visual effects. During the Lantern Festival, for example, oil lamps brightened the Mogao Caves at night. One “Essay on Lighting the Lanterns” (Randeng Wen) found at Dunhuang (P. 3497) states: “When the yang ether rises at the beginning of a year, we light lanterns and keep them burning through the night. Their scattered flames are like stars above the horizon; a bright one resembles the moon in the sky.” The Festival of Parading Images commemorated the Buddha’s birthday. A ritual procession, assembled before dawn, paraded the most precious Buddhist statues from various monasteries through the town. During the Ghost Festival, offerings were made to bring merit to seven generations of one’s ancestors. For lay people this was also the time to listen to lectures on the Yulanpen Sutra and the story of Mulian’s saving his mother from Hell. This story is transcribed in a Dunhuang manuscript (S. 2614); according to its title the storytelling would have been aided by illustrations and conducted on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. Scholars have asked why this extremely popular story in medieval China was never illustrated in the Mogao Caves. The reason may be that the cave-chapels were not the right place for this particular ritual performance.

The Ghost Festival was held for the benefit of the dead. The same intention motivated the art of portraiture. The popularity of portraiture at Dunhuang is demonstrated by a large number of “eulogies on depicting true images,” (miaochen zan), found among Dunhuang manuscripts. These texts can be studied together with surviving examples of such “true images”. According to these eulogies, a “true image” (zhen rong, zhen xing or zhen yi) was also called a shadow (ying), a likeness (mao), or an image (xiang). It was often modeled on a living person; but the purpose of making it was to use it as the subject for posthumous ritual offerings. A “true image” was often installed in a special room inside a household or a temple. This room thus acquired the name of a “shadow hall” (ying tang) or a “hall of true likeness” (zhen tang). One such room dedicated to the monk Hong Bian is still preserved in the Mogao site. Numbered Cave 17, it was probably created for Hong’s private meditation in his lifetime, but was turned into his “shadow hall” after he died in 862.

To sum up, our study of Dunhuang Buddhist art should be balanced by an awareness of the larger visual environment of which this art formed an integral part. Examples from Dunhuang reveal intense fusion of different religions and religious art. It was such a fusion, not the purity of any cultural and artistic tradition, that gave Dunhuang art the inner strength to renew itself over a period of close to one thousand years.