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An Introduction to the Material Culture of Dunhuang Buddhism: Putting the Object in Its Place

For those who research Buddhism, multidisciplinary studies are nothing new. Early-twentieth-century sinologists such as Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940), Matsumoto Eiichi 松本英一 (1877–1961), and Lionel Giles (1875–1958) assessed finds from excavations across the Asian continent and constructed comprehensive, holistic perspectives of medieval Chinese society.¹ Even as a flood of Buddhist and Silk Road objects came out of western China, Tibet, and Central Asia in the first quarter of the century as a result of the Pelliot, Stein, and Otani expeditions, scholars were eager to produce more than just a *catalogue raisonné* of the objects that inundated their museums and libraries. Meanings of objects were naturally contingent upon dated inscriptions, but scholars were also very attentive to an object's position within the original architectural environment and how conditions of excavation might produce relevant data. This range of coordinates was a lot to juggle – even in Dunhuang studies. Both scholars and curators experienced the challenge of accounting for religious, historical, archeological, and artistic data when connected items were often separated from each other in museums and libraries as far flung as Fukuoka, New Delhi, London, Moscow, Paris, and Berlin.²

One might also argue that even today the primary issue for scholars of medieval sinology and Buddhist studies still is initially to place an object in its spatial environment—both at the time of its discovery and what the archeological data tell us about its function in from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries. Once spatial position in an archeological

¹ Luo, *Dunhuang shishi yishu* 敦煌石室遺書 ([China: s.n.], Xuantong siyou [1909]); Matsumoto, *Tonkōga no kenkyū* 燉煌画の研究 (Tokyo: Tōhō bunka gakuin, 1937); *Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1957).

² An example of this type of comprehensive work is Lionel Giles' series of articles that presented the Stein manuscripts in a chronological framework to demonstrate historical continuity at the site: "Dated Chinese Manuscripts in the Stein Collection," *BSOAS* 7.4 (1933–1935), pp. 809–36; 8.1 (1935–1937), pp. 1–26; 9.1 (1937–1939), pp. 1–22; 10.1 (1939–1942), pp. 317–44; 11.1 (1943–1946), pp. 148–73.

setting is confirmed, an object's mobility within a larger social system – its deployment in space, is the next perhaps more difficult issue to consider. The essays in this volume aim to achieve just that: to determine how and why specific objects were used at which times. The close relationship between temple and governmental administrative units in Silk Road kingdoms blurred precise divisions between secular and religious, economic and spiritual, and political and monastic. A good deal of the puzzle has been to understand how objects moved and circulated within this particular system in medieval China and Central Asia. The study of material culture involves tracking the status and deployment of material within a broader cultural framework; it determines the biography of a single object and then ascertains how it circulates and becomes associated with other things, too.

The cache of 42,000 manuscripts discovered in Dunhuang's Library Cave by Wang Yuanlu on June 22, 1900, best exemplifies the ways in which transitive archeological objects found together in a deposit are codependent in meaning. A manuscript or painting once associated in a ritual environment viewed solely in isolation almost certainly yields an incomplete account; the meanings of these works on paper and silk are best understood as relative. Therefore, a great deal of Buddhist research, and Dunhuang studies in particular, has involved taking massive amounts of data and objects and publishing them together as a first step to excavating meaning.³ But this approach has unintended pitfalls. Keeping together objects from one site without conducting independent analysis has rendered the finds of Dunhuang so special and unique as to isolate them from productive relationships with other Buddhist sites. A complete, precise understanding of why thousands of objects were sealed together in the Dunhuang sūtra cave still eludes us (the news in about 1002–1006 of a Muslim invasion of Khotan is the latest, most reliable theory).⁴ Yet, scholars now have enough information on individual objects and an understanding of the site as a whole to probe the complex network of exchange, gift giving, merit making, labor practices, and religious beliefs in order to chart the social circulation of objects between government, monastic, and private enter-

³ At least fifteen major sets of photographs and descriptive catalogues have been published since 1920, many in the last twenty years. Bibliographic references in Sarah E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual: Buddhist Wall Painting Practice, 618–960* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2004), pp. 302–3.

⁴ Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, "Dunhuang zangjingku de xingzhi ji qi fengbi yuanyin 敦煌藏經窟的形制及其封閉原因," *Dunhuang Tulufan yanjiu* 敦煌吐魯番研究 2 (1996), pp. 23–24, 38–39; republished as "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reasons for Its Sealing," *CEA* 11 (1999–2000), pp. 247–75.

prises. The four articles in this special issue on the material culture of Chinese Buddhism, and the larger project from which they emerge, represent efforts to press at a larger regional picture of how the finds from western China and Central Asia that were gathered during the aggressive collecting efforts a century ago fit into a broad matrix of Buddhist material culture. This question was at the heart of our 1998–2002 project “Merit, Opulence and the Buddhist Network of Wealth” – a collaborative institutional project funded The Henry Luce Foundation. Under the direction of Sarah E. Fraser, Rong Xinjiang, and Fan Jinshi 樊錦詩, affiliated with Northwestern University, Peking University, and the Dunhuang Research Academy, respectively, we organized scholarly fieldwork in Gansu and Sichuan provinces in 1999, hosted an international conference in 2001, and published proceedings in Chinese in 2003.⁵ The fieldwork team and conference participants were drawn from disciplines across the humanities, including archeology, art history, labor and political history, and religious studies; we also represented diverse methodologies and scholarly traditions from China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, France, and the United States. One of the additional goals of that project was to develop technologies that would better capture the spatial environments of Buddhist art.

TECHNOLOGIES IN BUDDHIST STUDIES

Indeed, technological advances in the last decade have changed our ability to contextualize data and will speed the pace of Dunhuang studies. A great deal of comprehensive photography is now at our disposal and the study of Buddhist art is now poised on the brink of some stunning breakthroughs. Digital surrogates of the caves and manuscripts brought together in ARTstor in the Mellon International Dunhuang Archive (MIDA) now make it possible to view thousands of objects, figures, and inscriptions together in one desktop workspace. Under the auspices of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Northwestern University worked closely from 1999 to 2004 with the Dunhuang Research Academy and the Cultural Heritage Bureau to create three-dimensional representations of cave shrines from both the Dunhuang and Yulin sites. Using high-resolution photography of the interiors, this core of

⁵ The four articles published in this issue of *Asia Major* first appeared in Chinese in the project conference proceedings, Hu Suxin 胡素馨 [Sarah E. Fraser], ed., *Siyuan caifu yu shisu gongyang, guoji xueshu yantao lunwenji* 寺院財富與世俗供養國際學術研討論文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2003). An online version of the conference proceedings and 1999 fieldwork photography is available on <http://buddhist-art.arthistory.northwestern.edu/buddhistweb/>.

three-dimensional recreations represents the entire eight-century range of Dunhuang's stunning wall painting from the early to late periods (fifth to thirteenth centuries).⁶ Another path-breaking feature of MIDA is to make available in one image database the cave wall-paintings still *in situ* and the sūtra cave materials now housed in the Musée Guimet, The British Library and Museum, and the Bibliothèque nationale.⁷ The advantages of uniting transitive archeological material with the architectural spaces and objects remaining at the site are obvious and will be transformative for our field. The early black-and-white pictures of the site taken by Pelliot's photographer Charles Nouette in 1908 and later by James and Lucy Lo in 1942 are also included in the extensive image database. And over 14,000 photographs of Nepalese and Indian art taken by Professors Susan and John Huntington since the 1960s are also available on ARTstor. Thus, it is a resource that also documents the history of the practice of Buddhist archeology over the last 100 years. The contextualizing of Inner Asian Buddhist art objects is vastly improved when each new generation of scholars can assess the research methodologies of previous scholars. And in many cases photos of paintings taken almost a century earlier contain data no longer available; for example, the cliff façade at Mogaoku was restored with a consolidating concrete face added in the 1960s, and early pictures show the architectural features (albeit in a damaged state) of the façade before it became a museum and was made safe for visitors.⁸

Dunhuang materials, in particular, benefit from this digital environment for several important reasons. First, the collections that hold the site's materials are scattered all over the world: well over forty institutions have objects from the site in their collections. For all scholars over the last five or six decades, it is an enormous challenge to

⁶ Fan Jinshi and Hu Suxin [Sarah E. Fraser], "Rang gaoxin jishu wei shiku kaogu fuwu" 讓高新技術為石窟考古服務, in Hu, *Siyuan caifu*, pp. 454-62.

⁷ Under the direction of Sarah E. Fraser, Northwestern University comprehensively photographed, measured, and created bilingual (Chinese and English) metadata for 42 cave temples at the Dunhuang Mogao grottoes from June, 1999, to June, 2004. These are available on the image library at ARTstor <http://www.artstor.org/info/>. (The digital caves available, ranging in date from the mid-N. Wei (386-534) to the early Mongol periods (1227-1271), include nos. 3, 9, 12, 14, 16-17, 45, 46, 57, 61, 112, 130, 146, 154, 156, 158, 172, 196, 231, 249, 254, 259, 275, 285, 288, 290, 296, 303, 305, 321, 322, 329, 335, 365, 419, 420, 427, 428, 431, 465; undecorated, residential northern caves B43 and B142; and Yulin cave no. 25.) The British Library is also working with the National Library in China to digitize the Beijing Dunhuang materials; <http://idp.bl.uk/>.

⁸ Ma Shichang 馬世長 and Pan Yunei 潘玉閔 analyzed the archeological condition of the cave façade and hall ruins prior to the consolidation of the cliff; Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 敦煌文物研究所, *Mogaoku kuqian diantang yizhi* 莫高窟前殿遺址 Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985).

access optical (still) pictures in hundreds of books published in many languages and according to many different scholarly mandates. Now, having the bulk of Dunhuang and Inner Asian materials united in one place expands the community of scholars and quality of research beyond those who have the means to travel or access to extensive libraries. Second, murals at the site in China can be viewed simultaneously with manuscripts in European collections in an interactive environment that permits zooming and close study of brushwork and content. Manipulating the size of images increases comparative options. Third, the difficult viewing conditions in the original caves are another reason why digitization brings an added dimension to Buddhist studies. Dark, often pitch black circumambulation paths, sixty-foot ceilings covered with cartouche-laden murals, and niches filled with relief sculpture and obscured murals create an exciting sensory environment for the practitioner and scholar. Yet, in order to fully explore a cave-shrine its full contents have to be known. Previously undocumented and unexplored sections of these dark ritual caves are now available in evenly lit, comprehensive online photographic formats that are conducive to in-depth analysis.

Until the early 1980s Chinese research-artists assigned to the Dunhuang Academy felt the most comprehensive method of study and documentation was to make full-scale renderings of wall paintings because they felt no other available method captured pictorial qualities as their own copies executed by hand. This essentially limited the study to sections of the cave at eye level or portions easily reached with a ladder. Conventional, optical photography retrieved incomplete and inorganic representations of the cave interiors artists. Now high-resolution photography taken with macro lenses and stitched together to create high-resolution, zoomable image files allows details only perceived in person to be recorded faithfully by technical means. The relationship of one cave section to the next is captured comprehensively avoiding disjointed, non-sequential views of large mural tableaux and seventy-five foot colossal sculpture. Fourth, with QTVR (QuickTime virtual reality), photographic techniques, and software that assembles nodes into 360 degree panoramic views, the researcher can access the relationship of murals, sculpture, and inscriptions in the original space after leaving the site. That is, the viewer's experience of moving through the interior can be reconstructed at will in office or home by panning through the interior in comprehensive photographs which recreates the physical sensation of being in the original archeological or ritual space. Digital technologies offer new research methods that were unimaginable even

ten years ago. Our ability to connect disparate pieces of the medieval Buddhist puzzle just became immensely easier.

TRENDS IN DUNHUANG STUDIES

In the last decade, an interest in contextualizing the medieval temple is also evident in a group of significant books that address the lives of monastic and secular figures in the temple and their material culture – some of it precious, most of it mundane. Much of the lists and records, such as inventories of monastic holdings used in these studies, tell us a great deal about how and why goods circulated, the function of the exchanges, the status of their users, and the considerable extent to which goods circulating between donor and temple were fungible.⁹ Indeed, material within the temple often moved in unrecognizable ways – from a donor’s gift of foodstuffs to a fermented beverage used in a visit by officials; from powder to textile dye; and from damaged sūtra scroll to paper-filler buried in padding for a sūtra wrapper, and so on. If a large enough sample of documents is analyzed, details of use and exchange of these mundane articles allow us to draw broad conclusions about medieval life, religious belief, and image production. Hao Chunwen 郝春文 has made a contribution to our understanding of monastic life at Dunhuang by gleaned important, often surprising, information about medieval monks and nuns from inventories and other documents. Temple economic records tell us that many monks did not live at monasteries but at home and received notices about important developments via written circulars. Income and expenditure reports describing the flow of goods in and out of the temple further reveal that monks who did reside at the temple were not located in communal quarters nor received regular rations of food from the monastic administration, but lived and ate separately.¹⁰ One of the appeals of

⁹ Many pioneers defined areas for future research in the subject of temple economy; notably, Jacques Gernet, *Les aspects économiques du bouddhisme dans la société chinoise du v^e au x^e siècle*, Publications de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient 39 (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1956); trans. Franciscus Verellen, *Buddhism in Chinese Society, An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995), and Ikeda On 池田温, who has published widely on Dunhuang contracts and economic documents; *Chūgoku kodai sekichō kenkyū* 中國古代籍帳研究 (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1979; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984; Taipei: Hongwenguan, 1985); and coedited with Tatsurō Yamamoto 山本達郎, *Tun-huang and Turfan Documents, Concerning Social and Economic History* (Tokyo: Committee for the Studies of the Tunhuang Manuscripts, Tōyō bunko, 1978–1989).

¹⁰ Hao, *Tang houqi Wudai Songchu Dunhuang sengni de shehui shenghuo* 唐後期五代宋初敦煌僧尼的社會生活 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1998); reviewed by John Kieschnick, “The Social Life of Monks and Nuns at Dunhuang in the Late Tang, Five-Dynasties Period, and Early Song,” *JAS* 120.3 (2000), pp. 477–78.

being a clergy member then, was the prospect of earning extra income by performing ritual ceremonies for the laity. Hao explores documents that confirm that monks paid taxes often in the form of *corvée* labor and drank spirits. Thus the model presented by the *vinaya*, or precepts of monastic life, is at odds with the reality of medieval Dunhuang life and perhaps monastic life in other parts of China as well.

This contradiction between ideal and real, precept and practice, in Buddhism introduces a complexity that extends through the illuminating work of John Kieschnick on Buddhist material culture.¹¹ He addresses the wide range of objects in China that exists due to the practice of Buddhism, including the monastic habit, relics, and items transmitted from India to China via Buddhist culture (chairs, sugar, and tea); this concrete discussion of material culture is coupled with a full exploration of the ways in which merit is the driving force in object production and theoretical issues about the nature of materiality in Buddhist philosophy. The key conundrum is the Buddhist admonition against attachment to material things, which stands in direct contrast to the opulence evident in the temple compound. The temple's role as a powerful economic force within medieval society further complicates the issue; temples functioned as the main educational body in many communities instructing monks through regular liturgical practices but also disseminating literacy skills among the laity through *sūtra* copying practice. Temples also lent money and milled foodstuffs – both for a fee. They accepted large amounts of grain into their coffers as gifts from the devout. The storehouse and granary of the temples enjoyed a regular influx of goods considered to be income. Donations included many types of finished and unfinished textiles, such as bolts of untreated cloth that could be transformed into any number of items (clothing, scrolls, or used as a form of currency to “purchase” other needed items). The temple economy was constantly in motion with goods moving in and out, from one form to another as the monastic administration recorded and assessed each object in their possession. The constant infusion of newly donated objects to accrue merit made the temple a central institution in any town in medieval China and Inner Asia.

The economy of mundane goods (textiles, millet, rice, tea) put in motion by economic factors and the patronage cycle, generated the resources to maintain the assembly of monks and nuns as well as the sacred spaces of the temple. An insistent materiality surrounds the worship-

¹¹ Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2003).

per in the Buddhist environment; gilded sculpture, overflowing altars, brilliantly covered painting surfaces, and silk textiles, are examples of objects made and donated for merit in the monastery. And this persistence of the material extends into the imaginary realm of the pictorial space. By late in the Tang dynasty (ca. 850), an overflowing vision of material wealth and well-being would permeate the paradise tableau – the gold-standard for compositional format; scenes of paradise signal the ultimate perfection in material wealth equated with spiritual perfection referencing courtly settings and grand, monumental form. This scenery is used broadly regardless of differences in doctrinal thought and practice, including such diverse strains as the *Avatamsakasūtra* 大方廣佛華嚴經, *Sukhāvati[amita]-vyūha* 阿彌陀經, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 妙法蓮華經 *Viśeṣacintibrahmapariṣcchā* 思益梵天經, and *Maitreya-vyākaraṇa* 彌勒下生成佛經.¹² Lavish pictorial features replete with obsessive details (*horror vacua*) fill the available space: musicians play court instruments, elaborate palatial-style architecture is depicted, with long corridors and attention given to the bracketing system of each structure. Water is rippled by waves, flowers are airborne, and costumed bodhisattvas and Buddhas are conveyed with notations of the weave, variegated dye patterns, and layers. Attempts to convey the intangible in formal, pictorial means are also evident for qualities such as sounds, smell, and magical power. It is not only the imaginary and mundane property of the temple that is embellished in the paintings but the brushwork itself that takes on a tactile materiality of its own.

A study by this author of the artist's practice and the workshop system reveals that for the most part, artists were not monks.¹³ Again, findings are often surprisingly different from commonly held assumptions. My research does not preclude monk participation in image production; evidence abounds that the monastic community consulted in all aspects of the process. But generally speaking, it was a professional class of artisans – painters, sculptors, metal smiths, and textile workers – who performed the bulk of artistic production. They were organized hierarchically according to expertise and their titles reflected their standing in this skill-based ranking. A painting academy served the Guiyijun (Returning Commandery) Government in the tenth century. Sketches used in the preparation of the caves and banners were found among the materials in the library cave, providing a clear picture

¹² Many caves dating from the late-9th to early-11th c. have a combination of these compositions, translated as Flower Garland Sūtra; Amitābha Sūtra, Sūtra of Brahma's Questions, Lotus Sūtra, and Sūtra of Maitreya's Rebirth Below, respectively.

¹³ Fraser, *Performing the Visual*.

of what tools and techniques were employed by the Shazhou artists. The sum of this evidence dispels the commonly held assumption that amateur devotees and monks made paintings and objects to express their devotion. Instead, artistic production was structured in a larger system that also tracked merit-making gifts and monitored the circulation of these goods in the temple's economy where they were applied to temple repair, ceremonies to dedicate painting and sculpture, and daily rations meted out to artists and their supervisors. Temple controllers treated these disparate activities neutrally, noting the diverse purposes of revenue and expenditures in financial accounts. A formal system of review and evaluation was in place to assess progress and, if the donor was important enough, the donor's approval factored into the completion of a mural program.

The donors responsible for adhering to Buddhism's call to create a "field of merit" provided the resources to keep in motion the cycle of gift-giving to accrue good karma. Rong Xinjiang has made an unparalleled contribution to the field of Dunhuang and Buddhist studies by charting with precision and clarity the chronology of ruling government figures that committed themselves to the sponsorship of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang. Rong's 1996 book characterizes the political power and patronage of the Guiyijun jiedushi 歸義軍節度史 government that commanded the Gua and Sha prefectures from 848–1036. Successive generations of Zhang and then Cao family members ruled the government of the Dunhuang region and supported many important Buddhist projects during the nearly two centuries between the end of Tibetan rule the arrival of the Tanguts.¹⁴ Providing reign dates for each ruler and their changing political titles, Rong in effect gives us secure dates of manufacture for many objects that do not contain precise dates of dedication. Establishing the precise succession of administrative titles for each Guiyijun leader as his power and clout increased, provides *de facto* dates for many building projects, works of art, and many other social and political events. Analyzing the nature of the political and court events as they impacted the temple network in the region allows other scholars to have reliable data on which to secure their discussions of temples, objects, and religious activities that bear on extant materials from the site.

¹⁴ *Guiyijun shi yanjiu* 歸義軍史研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1996).

OVERVIEW OF THE ESSAYS: BUDDHIST
MERIT, TEMPLE ECONOMY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Rong Xinjiang's essay in this volume, "Khotanese Felt and Sogdian Silver," brings the political discussion beyond the immediate history of the Dunhuang region itself to address the complex, important connection that temples and worshippers in that area had with foreign-imported items with practical applications or efficacious (perhaps even exotic) appeal within the temple system.¹⁵ One of the pitfalls in the field of Dunhuang studies has been to see the site and its treasures in isolation – either as a way station to some distant cultural center (Chang'an, the Tang capital, to the east, on one hand, and, on the other, Gandhara – an important kingdom in the history of Buddhism, in modern-day Pakistan, to the west) or as a region where eclectic styles circulate but nothing matures or has a distinct indigenous quality. The problem with either view is that Dunhuang is characterized in a non-chronological framework in which its features exist in a long continuum lacking meaningful change. Too often Dunhuang has served as a cipher for whatever period-style or political moment is being described. Rong's emphasis on foreign items in temple inventories tells us how outmoded and inaccurate the view of Dunhuang as a dumping ground for Silk Road cultures is. "Foreignness" is relative. And during the eighth to tenth centuries in Dunhuang, objects associated with manufacture in Sogdia, Khotan, Tibet, and Uighur areas (such as Turfan) were of high value; their foreign origin was noted in their records and part of their worth. This study opens a much-needed discussion of circulation of objects in Inner Asia to consider how trade, exchange, and merit making were an integral part of the temple economy across this vast area. Objects did not just move on the Silk Road without specific institutions and people generating those exchanges. Objects were not just destined for an "eastern" or "western" destination; rather the communities on the Silk Road were consumers of the objects that moved on its routes.

Records of income and expenditure tell us that silver cups, gold vajras, glass vases, jade handled-knives, agate, amber, coral, lapis lazuli, and pearls were specifically noted as non-indigenous gifts to Dunhuang-area temples. Most definitely in medieval Dunhuang there was a sense of place identifying the local from the distant – of concepts creating categories of "here" and "there." Specific types of objects, clearly based on the nature of raw materials, signaled they were not typical of local

¹⁵ Special thanks to John Kieschnick for his translation of Prof. Rong's article.

manufacture but rather their presence in Dunhuang was the result of exchange and, Rong argues, of strategic gift giving in the context of piety. Their presence implied a network of foreign relations. Rong's analysis of these foreign objects noted in the inventories of Dunhuang's seventeen temples and their obvious value to the monastic community allows us to track the circulation of objects with an emphasis on the objects themselves. This cultural anthropological emphasis in material culture studies concentrates on where the object travels, its destination, and how it is treated in an exchange. The inventories in medieval temples give enough information about these objects, albeit in a neutral way, that we can consider writing biographies of things or categories of items. Rong has given us a biography of the "foreign" object in Dunhuang storehouses.

In the introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai argues that the distinction between gift and commodity is a dichotomy that does not hold when we consider that exchangeability is intrinsic to both types of objecthood.¹⁶ That is, the "gifts" to the Dunhuang monasteries of things foreign should be understood in terms of their fungibility – the quality that makes them valuable is that they can be exchanged into something else. Rong makes this point in discussing the "Iranian powder" that is noted in financial accounts and then is exchanged (or sold, bartered) for grain; this powder was composed of white lead and often used as the base in various cosmetic creams (see Eric Trombert's essay). Once donated to the monastery, items such as white powder and silver platters (the latter mostly likely of Sogdian origin), were bartered to support necessities in the production of sūtras – most likely to provide the basic sustenance for the scribes (and, of course, grain could in turn be bartered by the scribes for other things as well or made into a kind of ale). That is, in both cases the donor gave something of value (a "gift") to the monastery not with the intention of the temple keeping it but using the item as a commodified tool to support merit-making activities.

Eric Trombert's essay on substances made from the safflower further demonstrates the ways in which commodities circulated as gifts from the hands of donors and to support the temple economy and accrue merit. Trombert mines the *shiruli* 施入曆 or *shirushu* 施入疏 – the same records of donations into monastery storehouses that Rong uses to generate his data, to track the use of red flower and iron in eighth

¹⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986), p. 11.

and ninth century Dunhuang. The safflower had many uses; it generated high-quality oil, red and yellow dye for textile production, and cosmetic rouge. Trombert's detailed study, coupled with his extensive work on credit and the Dunhuang financial structure, points to the important role of the monastery in negotiating cultural life in medieval China and Inner Asia.¹⁷ Implied in the acceptance of raw materials in such large quantities (Trombert cites cases where donors gave a hundred pounds of red flowers) is the temple's ability to process these materials and apply them usefully in their transformed state. For example, the dyes extracted were coupled with other donations of untreated cloth and wood for fires placing the monastery in a critical role as major artistic center. They had the technical know-how and need for raw materials. Dyes from safflower were used to make murals and banners and therefore were in great demand. As mentioned, monasteries also milled grains, lent goods that functioned as currency, and encouraged basic literacy through the practice of calligraphy and sūtra copying. The transformation of goods from one form to another and the circulation of these goods in the merit and financial economy of the temple worked to establish the monastery as central to life in most towns and villages.

The architectural importance of the temple is explored by Puay-peng Ho in his essay "Building on Hope." His analysis makes clear that there were at least three major types of divisions in monastic institutions. State sponsorship of large monasteries is vastly different than smaller-scale enterprises; these in turn should be differentiated from the private *lanruo* or shrine that an individual or a small communities of donors erect. Ho outlines and distinguishes between public and private temples, imperial and town sponsorship of cloisters and distinguishes the scale and type of buildings included in each type. Again, much of this evidence is gleaned from donor records, which often demonstrate that the donations given to the temple support building repair and new construction. The process of adding to the vast temple establishment across China and Inner Asia was a constant, unrelenting process of upkeep and new construction. Temple buildings served as the social space for the circulation of merit and the wealth of material goods that flowed through this built environment; their architectural form needed to be maintained.

¹⁷ Eric Trombert, *Le crédit à Dunhuang: Vie matérielle et société en Chine médiévale* (Paris: Collège de France and l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1995).

The persistence of architectural form is abundantly evident in the murals and banners that occupy temple walls. Vast cloisters and elaborately detailed structures provide the setting in paradise scenes that serve as a backdrop to the sūtra tableau. Cave 61 at Dunhuang, constructed between 947–951 AD is an example of how the fervor for temple building in the middle period – Ho estimates that there were over 6,000 temples extant in the mid-tenth century representing an increase prior to the 845 AD Buddhist persecution, came to dominate subject matter in wall painting. Over 200 temples line the compressed, imaginary pilgrimage routes to Mt. Wutai on the west wall of Cave 61 alone. It is a tour de force of monastic representation depicting the range of public and private, small and grand institutions that Ho outlines. The question remains, in what ways did the delineation of temples in the imaginary two-dimensional space of the picture impact the types of structures that were made in three-dimensional form on the ground? The representation of material culture in pictorial space received as much attention and finesse as the making of those objects did as freestanding forms. Architecture, vajras, fine textiles, gilded icons, and large congregations of Buddhist worshippers embellish the interior walls of temple structures creating a vision replete with lavish gifts for merit.

Stephen Teiser's essay on the Wheel of Life embodies another major area of research the project pursued in fieldwork excursions and exemplifies productive directions in the field. He studies the relationship between representations of the karmic wheel in cave shrines of the Dunhuang area, Sichuan, Kizil and Ajanta, India. These wheels are placed in the porches of temple structures across Asia; their similar placement in disparate locations suggests common conceptual and compositional strategies of artists in workshops at different times and places. By identifying structural similarities and functions of the wheel at the entrance in grottoes, Teiser provides a model for addressing the regional and international connections between temples. One of the questions that looms over Dunhuang studies is what percentage of its art has particular, local meaning and what features link to broader trends across Asia. In June 1999, the project team visited two of the wheels in Teiser's study – painted in Cave 19 in Yulin, Gansu, and carved in the cliff façade at Dazu, Sichuan. Analyzing the relationships between sites is needed in the study of temples across western China. These four essays chart strategies for mapping the local, regional, and international features of Buddhist material culture and art, and provide precise readings of documents and monuments that place the object in context.