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Preface to An Overview of Dunhuang Studies: Past, Present, and Future

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Since the discovery of the Dunhuang 敦煌 Caves in 1900, research on the manuscripts and artistic works unearthed from the caves has greatly advanced the study of ancient Chinese history, literature, art, religion, and many other fields. Almost all discoveries from the Dunhuang Caves have been published after a century-long process of accumulation and research. Crucial breakthroughs in the research on these materials have helped elevate the field of Dunhuang Studies onto the international stage.

In recent years, several changes in the field of Dunhuang Studies have occurred. Thanks to years of rigorous academic work, including meticulous research on the source material and related case studies, mainstream scholars of Dunhuang Studies are now approaching the discipline from a more holistic, reflective, and comprehensive perspective. Developments in scholarly perspective and technological innovation have empowered researchers to establish novel approaches to the discipline, a phenomenon that attests to the significant potential of Dunhuang Studies as a whole. This issue of *Journal of Chinese Humanities* aims to demonstrate this evolution in Dunhuang Studies within mainstream Chinese academia, and to provide an overview of its past, present, and future. To this end, five articles have been selected that represent the field of Dunhuang Studies with respective focuses on history, literature, art, manuscriptology, and bibliography.

Renowned Dunhuang Studies Professor Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 of Beijing University showcases the centrality of Dunhuang Studies in new developments in research on the history of the Silk Road. In his article, Professor Rong

discusses the eastward expansion of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism; the journeys of Sogdian merchants to the east, along with the trade networks they established; and transportation along the Silk Road during the 9th and 10th centuries, with a specific focus on military and political developments of the Guiyi Circuit and the Tibetan Empire. Evidence provided by the Dunhuang manuscripts presents a vivid, historically detailed depiction of how east-west exchange developed during the 5th to 11th centuries, largely facilitated by the Silk Road.

From the perspective of literature, Professor Xu Jun 徐俊 of Shandong University demonstrates the unique literary value of the Dunhuang manuscripts. In his article, Professor Xu enumerates four methods of literary expression found in the manuscripts: *bianwen* 變文 (transformation texts, a genre of performance literature featuring a mix of rhyming and prose elements), poetry, lyrics, and rhapsodies, while also introducing important findings from his research into these forms of expression. Nuances within these discoveries would have been difficult to understand without the Dunhuang manuscripts. Research on Dunhuang literature not only reveals the existence of works that had previously been deemed lost to time, it also provides valuable insight into the spread of literature among the common people. Such research has fundamentally improved our understanding of the historical development of Chinese literature as a whole.

As source material, the numerous murals, sculptures, paintings, and calligraphic works from the Dunhuang Caves and manuscripts contribute greatly to research on Chinese art history. In his article, Zhao Shengliang 趙聲良, director of the Dunhuang Research Academy, presents an overview of the century-long research on Dunhuang art. Zhao convincingly utilizes artistic material from the Dunhuang Caves to fill in gaps in our understanding of Chinese art history, including the history of paintings, sculptures, architecture, music, dance, and clothing, as well as Buddhist iconography. Additionally, research on Dunhuang art has greatly inspired new developments in Chinese contemporary art.

In recent years, Professor Hao Chunwen 郝春文 of Capital Normal University has served as the director of an ambitious academic project titled “A Descriptive Catalogue of Historical Manuscripts from the British Dunhuang Collection.” In this capacity, Professor Hao puts forward his perspective on research methods used for Dunhuang manuscript studies (*Dunhuang xieben xue* 敦煌寫本學). According to Professor Hao, a formal Dunhuang Manuscript Studies discipline should be established, which would provide the basis for the creation of a broader specialty, ancient Chinese manuscript studies (*Zhongguo gudai xieben xue* 中國古代寫本學). Using research on the Dunhuang manuscripts as an example, Professor Hao lists several topics in the field of manuscriptology

that are deserving of more academic attention and could serve as potential guidelines for future scholarship.

Similar to the suggestions made by Professor Hao Chunwen, Professor Shi Rui 史睿 of Beijing University presents his own views on the future of Dunhuang Studies from a perspective centered on the history of books. In Professor Shi's opinion, the history of material culture could serve to greatly expand the scope of Dunhuang Studies. Aside from focusing on writing instruments and rhetorical style found in Dunhuang manuscripts (*xieben* 寫本), scholars should seek to address social and historical factors that manifested themselves in the Dunhuang manuscripts. This inclusive and holistic research method transcends the study of pure manuscript texts, and combines Dunhuang manuscriptology with historiography in the hope of attaining a more comprehensive historical research model.

Translated by Kevin Wang