BRILL

JOURNAL OF CHINESE HUMANITIES 11 (2025) 4–26

brill.com/joch

Rewriting the Silk Road: a New Chapter for Dunhuang Manuscript Studies

Rong Xinjiang 荣新江
Professor, History Department, Peking University, Beijing, China
rxj@pku.edu.cn

Received 23 November 2024 | Accepted 10 December 2024 |
Published online 9 June 2025

Abstract

This article examines how the Dunhuang manuscripts, discovered in 1900 and gradually published throughout the twentieth century, have fundamentally reshaped our understanding of Silk Road networks during the fifth through eleventh centuries. While traditional Chinese sources have long provided a basic framework for understanding trans-Eurasian exchange during this period, the Dunhuang materials offer unprecedented insights into the actual mechanisms of cultural and commercial interaction. Drawing on both Chinese and non-Chinese documents from the Dunhuang corpus, this study focuses on four key aspects: the westward transmission of Chinese textual traditions, particularly Buddhist manuscripts; the eastward spread of multiple religious traditions including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism; the establishment and operation of Sogdian trading networks; and the maintenance of Silk Road commerce under Tibetan and Guiyi Circuit administration during the ninth and tenth centuries. Through analysis of these materials, this article challenges the conventional view that Silk Road exchange was severely disrupted after the An Lushan rebellion, demonstrating instead the continuation of vigorous commercial and cultural interactions throughout this period. The Dunhuang manuscripts thus provide crucial evidence for understanding the Silk Road not merely as a trade route but also as a complex network facilitating multi-directional cultural exchange across medieval Eurasia.

Keywords

Dunhuang manuscripts – Silk Road – Sogdian merchants – Guiyi Circuit (Guiyijun)

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/23521341-12340188

The discovery of documents in the Dunhuang Library Cave in 1900 has provided historians with invaluable primary sources dating from the early 5th to early 11th centuries. As these manuscripts have only gradually become available over the course of the twentieth century, their utilization by historians has also been incremental. Now that nearly all the cave manuscripts have been released across a number of publications, researchers can plot out a broader picture of their implications and can fully use these materials in reconstructing the historical landscape of medieval China. Dunhuang's location at a crucial junction of the Silk Road has resulted in particularly rich documentation of cross-cultural exchange. Beyond Chinese-language documents, the trove includes texts in various languages used by different peoples along the trade routes, offering unprecedented insights into cultural interactions, religious practices, and daily life along the Silk Road—aspects often absent from received historical sources. Building on previous scholarship as well as my own research, this article examines several important ways in which the Dunhuang manuscripts have revised our understanding of the Silk Road.

1 The Eastward Spread of Buddhism and the Westward Transmission of Chinese Texts

The period from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) to the Tang dynasty (618–907) marked a crucial era for the transmission of Buddhism from India to China. This is evidenced in texts such as the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 and *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, as well as by the numerous cave temples stretching from Xinjiang through the Hexi Corridor to the northern reaches of the Central Plains. While Dunhuang served as a significant way station along this eastward transmission route, surprisingly, no early Sanskrit or Central Asian language Buddhist texts have been found among the Dunhuang manuscripts. Instead, the evidence reveals a different pattern: from the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) to the Northern Dynasties (439–581) period, the region was a locus for the circulation of Chinese-language Buddhist texts, which were subsequently transmitted further westward to the kingdom of Gaochang 高昌 in the Turpan Basin.

1.1 *Early Buddhist Transmission along the Silk Road*

According to traditional sources, the introduction of Buddhism to China can be traced back to 2 BCE, when the Yuezhi 月氏 envoy Yicun 伊存 is recorded to have orally transmitted Buddhist sutras to Jing Lu 景盧, a student of the Han

imperial academy.[1] Excavated texts provide further evidence of early transmission, with the early Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) bamboo slips unearthed at the Xuanquan 懸泉 site documenting the presence of what is likely a Buddhist monastic structure, suggesting that Dunhuang had an early role in Buddhism's eastward transmission.[2] By the Western Jin period (266–316), Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (ca. 231–310), a Dunhuang-born monk with Yuezhi heritage, had traveled to various Central Asian kingdoms to study Buddhism and collect scriptures. Upon returning to Dunhuang, he translated these works with his disciples, for which he became known as the "Bodhisattva of Dunhuang" (*Dunhuang pusa* 敦煌菩薩). Dharmarakṣa later traveled to Chang'an 長安 and Luoyang 洛陽 to continue his work, producing translations of Sanskrit works that included the *Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經 (an early recension of the *Lotus Sutra*) and the *Guangzan bore jing* 光讚般若經 (Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra). Following this, during the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern and Southern (420–589) Dynasties periods, Buddhist masters from India and the Western Regions (*xiyu* 西域) regularly passed through Dunhuang and other Hexi Corridor towns en route to the Central Plains, where they translated scriptures and spread Buddhist teachings. Logically, one might therefore expect that Dunhuang would have preserved a substantial number of Sanskrit or Central Asian-language Buddhist texts brought by these early missionaries. However, to date, no such evidence has been found. Instead, what survives is a substantial corpus of Chinese-language Buddhist scriptures circulating continuously since the Sixteen Kingdoms period. The following is a list of several representative manuscripts (excluding those of questionable authenticity), along with information on their translation dates and locations.

1. ***Faju jing* 法句經 (*Dharmapada*)**
Cataloged as Gansu Provincial Museum Manuscript No. 001, this copy is based on a translation attributed to the Indian monk Weiqinan 維祇難[3] and Zhu Jiangyan 竺將炎 during the Kingdom of Wu (222–280).

1 For a discussion of this event as recorded in Pei Songzhi's 裴松之 commentary on the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志, see Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 24–25.

2 Hao and Zhang suggest that the phrase identified on the bamboo slips—*xiao futu li* 小浮屠里—is likely a referent to a place that had a Buddhist tower or temple. See Hao Shusheng 郝樹聲 and Zhang Defang 張德芳, *Xuanquan Hanjian yanjiu* 懸泉漢簡研究 (Lanzhou: Gansu wenhua chubanshe, 2009), 191.

3 Though often rendered as "Vighna," the reconstruction of the name Weiqinan is now contested. See Jan Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han and Three Kingdoms Periods* (Tokyo: Meiwa Printing, 2008), 113.

The manuscript contains two colophons by the novice monk Jingming 淨明, dated to 368 and 373 during the Former Liang dynasty (318–376), suggesting it was copied in the Former Liang capital of Guzang 姑臧 (modern-day Wuwei 武威) and later found its way to Dunhuang.

2. *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (*Vimalakīrti sutra*), *Juan One*
Held at the Shanghai Museum, this manuscript preserves a version translated by Zhi Qian 支謙 during the Kingdom of Wu. It bears a colophon by Wang Xianggao 王相高 dated to 393 during the Later Liang dynasty (386–403), indicating that it was copied by someone from the Later Liang using Zhi Qian's southern translation and then transmitted to Dunhuang.

3. *Shisong biqiu jie ben* 十誦比丘戒本 (*Sarvâstivāda bhikṣu pratimokṣa sutra*)
British Library S.797. The oldest dated manuscript in the Stein collection, this copy bears a colophon indicating that it was transcribed in 406 by the bhikshu Deyou 德祐 in southern Dunhuang during the Western Liang (400–421).

4. *Jin guangming jing* 金光明經 (*Suvarṇaprabhâsa sutra*), *Juan Two*
Bibliothèque nationale de France P.4506. A silk copy of a translation by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (385–433) made during the Northern Liang dynasty (397–460). This manuscript includes a colophon by Zhang Chaozhu 張㙔主, a man from Zhongshan 中山 Commandery in Dingzhou 定州 (present-day Hebei province), dated to 471 during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). Zhang, originally from Liangzhou 涼州, had silk copies made of this text and other sutras, including the *Lotus Sutra*, with the intent of having them sent back to his native Liangzhou. This suggests that a set of high-quality yellow silk manuscripts copied in Dingzhou were sent back to Liangzhou, with one of them eventually finding its way to Dunhuang.

5. *Za apitan xin jing* 雜阿毗曇心經 (*Saṃyuktābhidharma hṛdaya sutra*), *Juan Six*
British Library S.996. A translation by the Kashmiri Tripiṭaka master Saṃghadeva 僧伽提婆 in the early Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). It includes a colophon by Feng Jinguo 馮晉國 (also known as Feng Xi 馮熙), Prince of Changli 昌黎王 and regional inspector of Luozhou 洛州, dated to 479 during the Northern Wei dynasty. The colophon states that he "commissioned ten copies of the complete Buddhist canon, with each

set consisting of 1,464 *juan*." This would have totaled 14,640 *juan*, and it is likely that this manuscript was part of one of these sets that was transmitted to Dunhuang.

6. *Weimo yi ji* 維摩義記 (*Commentary on the Vimalakīrti sutra*)
British Library S.2106. An anonymous commentary on Kumārajīva's 鳩摩羅什 (343–413) translation of the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經. The manuscript includes a colophon by the bhikshu Tanxing 曇興 dated to 500 during the Northern Wei dynasty, noting that it was copied at Fengle Temple 豐樂寺 in Dingzhou. This indicates that it was copied in Hebei and later transmitted to Dunhuang.[4]

1.2 *The Westward Flow of Chinese Buddhist Culture*

The manuscripts discussed above—dated examples of Buddhist scriptures preserved in Dunhuang from the fourth and fifth centuries—include some early Hinayana works, though most are Mahayana sutras, supplemented by Vinaya texts and commentaries. In many cases, these manuscripts were not copied in Dunhuang but were brought in from areas such as Liangzhou, Luozhou, and Dingzhou. A substantial number of additional Dunhuang fragments without dates or colophons likewise fall into these same categories, and calligraphic analysis suggests that many may have originated from other areas within the Central Plains as well. This situation stands in marked contrast to the Sanskrit and Central Asian-language Buddhist texts unearthed in the Tarim Basin sites of Kucha and Khotan. Accordingly, it appears that following Dunhuang's incorporation into the Han empire under Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE), the area effectively became a frontier outpost of Central Plains culture, with the Buddhist manuscripts circulating in the region primarily consisting of copies of texts that originated closer to the center of empire. As local literacy and scribal activity grew, the number of manuscripts produced in the Dunhuang region increased, yet their base texts were invariably derived from those created in the Central Plains. This pattern likely holds true for other, non-Buddhist texts as well. Thus, from the Han and Wei (220–265) dynasties onward, Dunhuang served as a locus for the dissemination of Central Plains culture along the Silk Road.

Although the wider flow of Buddhism is typically described as traveling eastward from India into China, Dunhuang's own Buddhist tradition largely arrived from the east, taking root and flourishing on the desert frontier.

4 See Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤 [Rao Zongyi], *Xuantang jilin: Dunhuangxue* 選堂集林・敦煌學 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 13–17, 38–42, 84.

This dynamic parallels developments in Buddhist art. From the time the monk Le Zun 樂僔 is said to have begun work on the Mogao Caves in 366, Dunhuang's artistic styles consistently show influences from the east—starting with the westward spread of the "Liangzhou type" cave temples[5] under the Northern Liang and continuing through the sculptural techniques associated with the Northern Wei at the Yungang Grottoes. In this respect, Dunhuang remained deeply connected to the broader currents of Buddhist culture emanating from central China.

Dunhuang's legacy of Chinese classical culture and Central Plains Buddhist scriptures not only shaped local religious life but also traveled onward to Gaochang in the Turpan Basin. Established as a commandery (*jun* 郡) in 327, Gaochang successively came under the jurisdiction of numerous regimes—including the Former Liang, Former Qin (351–394), Later Liang, the short-lived Northern Liang under Duan Ye 段業 (r. 397–401), Western Liang, and again Northern Liang—each of which helped funnel Central Plains culture westward via the Hexi Corridor. Much of this cultural transmission would have passed through Dunhuang. After the fall of the Northern Liang in 439 at the hands of the Northern Wei, members of the Northern Liang royal family, including brothers Juqu Wuhui 沮渠無諱 (r. 442–444) and Juqu Anzhou 沮渠安周 (r. 444–460), fled from Dunhuang through Shanshan 鄯善 to Gaochang, where they established the Greater Liang 大涼 regime (440–460). They brought with them eminent monks, literati, and artisans from the Hexi region, with evidence of this cultural transmission seen in an inscription discovered at the Gaochang ruins commemorating the construction of a Buddhist temple by the "Great Juqu Anzhou, King of Liang."[6] Written in elegant classical Chinese by Xiahou Can 夏侯粲 (dates unknown), a noted scholar from a prestigious Central Plains family, the inscription records that the temple's principal icon was the Maitreya, a fact that—along with sculptural details—supports the modern scholar Su Bai's 宿白 theory regarding the westward diffusion of Liangzhou temple architecture. Some of the craftsmen who created these Buddhist

5 "Liangzhou type" (*Liangzhou moshi* 涼州模式) serves as an appellation to identify a unique style of cave temple architecture that emerged in the Liangzhou region (stretching across the areas of the Hexi Corridor east of Dunhuang and centering on modern day Wuwei, Gansu). This cave temple type is characterized by square or rectangular caves with tapering central pillars and statues of Sakyamuni and Maitreya. See Su Bai 宿白, "Liangzhou shiku yiji he 'Liangzhou moshi'" 涼州石窟遺蹟和 "涼州模式", *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報, no. 4 (1986): 441–42.

6 The full title of this inscription is the *Liang wang da Juqu Anzhou zao ci gongde bei* 涼王大且渠安周造祠功德碑.

images had themselves migrated or fled from Dunhuang.[7] Although later Sanskrit fragments have been unearthed in the Turpan Basin, the earliest Buddhist texts there, much like those at Dunhuang, are in Chinese. This widespread circulation of Chinese-language sutras attests to the strong influence of Central Plains culture along the Silk Road. Indeed, it appears that Chinese Buddhist scriptures reached as far as Kucha—the hometown of the eminent Buddhist translator Kumārajīva—though no comparable early Chinese manuscripts have yet been discovered in Khotan.

2 The Eastward Migration of Sogdian Merchants

The Sogdians, an ancient Iranian people, inhabited oasis city-states in the region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers in Central Asia. Traditional Chinese historical records refer to them as the "Nine Zhaowu Lineages" (*Zhaowu jiuxing* 昭武九姓).[8] While the presence of Sogdians in China has long been known from traditional Chinese sources, the discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts has provided a more systematic understanding of Sogdian merchants' involvement in trade and their integration into Chinese society during the medieval period.

2.1 *Sogdian Trade Networks and the Ancient Letters*

Eight Sogdian-language letters, dating to around 312 and discovered in a mail pouch beneath a watchtower northwest of Dunhuang, offer a glimpse into these activities. These "Sogdian Ancient Letters," as they are known, were sent from Sogdian traders stationed in the Hexi Corridor to correspondents in the Western Regions. One of these letters—designated as Letter No. 2—is particularly revealing. Written by a Sogdian caravan leader based in Guzang to his financial backers in Samarkand, it details the activities of merchant

7 See Rong Xinjiang, "Juqu Anzhou's Inscription and the Daliang Kingdom in Turfan," in *Turfan Revisited: The First Century of Research into the Arts and Cultures of the Silk Road*, ed. Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst et al. (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2004), 268–75.

8 Chinese traditional documents frequently record the native homelands of foreign peoples as the surname when transliterating their names. These surnames could then be used to identify the geographical places from which non-Chinese people were said to have originated from. Surnames used for Sogdians in traditional sources include Kang 康 (Samarkand), An 安 (Bukhara), Shi 石 (Shash), Shi 史 (Kish), Mi 米 (Maimargh), Cao 曹 (Kabudhanjakath), and He 何 (Kushaniyah). See Jonathan Karam Skaff, "The Sogdian Trade Diaspora in East Turkestan during the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46 (2003): 479–80.

agents he had dispatched to various Chinese cities including Yecheng 鄴城 (modern-day Anyang 安陽), Luoyang, Jincheng 金城 (modern-day Lanzhou 蘭州), Jiuquan 酒泉, and Dunhuang. Despite reporting difficulties caused by local warfare, the letter indicates that these merchants were actively engaged in exchanging Central Asian precious metals, spices, and medicinal materials for Chinese silk and other commodities.[9] This letter highlights how Sogdian caravans operating from bases in major Silk Road entrepôts would send smaller groups to conduct trade in other cities. When combined with additional sources, we can reconstruct how these merchant ventures operated.[10] After securing financial backing in their homeland, Sogdian leaders would organize substantial trading caravans and establish enclave settlements in key Silk Road cities such as Gaochang, Yizhou, Dunhuang, Jiuquan, Liangzhou, Chang'an, Luoyang, and Yecheng. These settlements served both as Sogdian residential communities and as trading depots for their caravans. Documents excavated from Turpan, including a royal treasury customs register[11] and various commercial contracts, reveal that Sogdian merchants often traded exclusively with other Sogdians in the Gaochang marketplace. Through this network, they transported precious metals, spices, medicines, rare plants, exotic animals, and even slaves from Central Asia into Chinese markets. By establishing settlements along the Silk Road, the Sogdians gradually built a sophisticated trading network that gave them considerable control over trans-Eurasian commerce. This may explain the relative scarcity of evidence for Indian or Persian merchants on the Silk Road between the third and tenth centuries.

2.2 *Religious and Social Life in Sogdian Settlements*

The records preserved in the "Sogdian Ancient Letters" suggest that Sogdian settlements exhibited considerable autonomy and typically included Zoroastrian temples. In the Sogdian states themselves, religious and political authority were intertwined, with temple leaders playing a significant role in administrative

9 See Nicholas Sims-Williams, "The Sogdian Ancient Letter II," in *Philologica et Linguistica: Historia, Pluralitas, Universitas. Festschrift für Helmut Humbach zum 80. Geburtstag am 4. Dezember 2001*, ed. Maria Gabriela Schmidt and Walter Bisang (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), 267–80.

10 See especially the *Shazhou tujing* 沙州圖經 and *Shazhou Yizhou dizhi* 沙州伊州地志—two Dunhuang manuscripts which document Sogdian settlements led by Kang Yandian 康艷典 (fl. 627–649) near Lake Puchang 蒲昌 (modern-day Lop Nur) and by Shi Wannian 石萬年 (fl. 630) in Yizhou 伊州 (modern-day Hami 哈密).

11 Full title: *Gaochang neicang zoude chengjiaqian zhang* 高昌內藏奏得稱價錢帳, (73TAM514). See *Tulufan chutu wenshu* 吐魯番出土文書, ed. Tang Zhangru 唐長孺 et al. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 1: 450–53.

functions. This interplay between religious and political spheres is illustrated by a passage in the *Weishu* 魏書 concerning Samarkand:

> They have a foreign legal code (*hulu* 胡律), stored in the Zoroastrian temples. Whenever punishments are to be decided, the code is consulted. Serious crimes are punished by exterminating the entire family, while lesser crimes warrant execution. Thieves have their feet amputated.[12]

Letters No. 1 and 3 provide a poignant example of these temples' social role. They describe how a woman who had followed her merchant husband to Dunhuang found herself destitute after he failed to return from a prolonged trading expedition. With no means of support, she appealed to the temple priest for assistance, with the priest arranging for her and her daughter to return home with another merchant caravan.[13] This episode illustrates how Sogdian merchant communities and their Zoroastrian temples operated as part of an integrated system, with religious and community leaders managing both commercial operations and social welfare.

The Dunhuang manuscripts provide our most detailed documentation of Sogdian settlements along the Silk Road, offering observations of their internal organization and social structure that are unobtainable from other sources. The term "settlement" (*juluo* 聚落) itself appears in manuscript S.367, the *Shazhou Yizhou dizhi* 沙州伊州地志, which describes how the ancient site of Shicheng 石城—originally part of the Han dynasty kingdom of Loulan 樓蘭 and later a Sui dynasty (581–618) garrison town—was resettled during the Tang dynasty's Zhenguan 貞觀 era (627–649) when the Sogdian leader Kang Yandian led his people to occupy the abandoned city, establishing a settlement there.[14] These Sogdian immigrants, originally from Samarkand, went on to inhabit neighboring territories and establish new settlements to the east and west of Shanshan, with their substantial numbers leading to the foundation of

12 See the "Xiyu zhuan" 西域傳 chapter in the *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 102.2281.

13 Nicholas Sims-Williams, "Towards a New Edition of the Sogdian Ancient Letters: Ancient Letter 1," in *Les sogdiens en chine*, ed. Étienne de la Vaissière and Éric Trombert (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2005), 181–93.

14 See *Dunhuang shehui jingji wenxian zhenji shilu* 敦煌社會經濟文獻真蹟釋錄, ed. Tang Geng'ou 唐耕耦 and Lu Hongji 陸宏基 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1986), 1: 39. For an English translation of the entire *Shazhou Yizhou dizhi* see Lionel Giles, "A Chinese Geographical Text of the Ninth Century," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6 (1932): 825–46.

additional urban centers, including Putao 蒲桃 and Sapi 薩毗. The same text notes that in the Yiwu 伊吾 commandery of the Yizhou region, which came under Sogdian rule after the fall of the Sui, another Sogdian leader named Shi Wannian submitted to Tang authority in 630, bringing seven cities under his control into the Tang fold.[15] Shi, likely originating from the Tashkent region, evidently commanded significant influence over these Sogdian settlements. The term for settlement leader used in these texts was the Sogdian word *s'rtp'w* (leader), the Chinese transcriptions of which were commonly given as *sabao* 薩保 (or 薩寶 during the Tang) and *safu* 薩甫. Initially designating the head of a merchant caravan, this title eventually came to signify the leader of a settlement. As autonomous Sogdian settlements were gradually incorporated into the imperial administrative structure as military garrisons (*zhechongfu* 折衝府) or rural districts (*xiangli* 鄉里) during the late Northern Dynasties and early Tang period, these settlement leaders were integrated into the bureaucratic hierarchy as local officials or community heads. The title of *sabao* was eventually formalized as part of the imperial bureaucracy and recognized as a nominal grade (*liuwai guan* 流外官) in the central and local official system.[16]

Included among the Dunhuang documents is a labor service register (P.3559) dated 751 which provides details of a Sogdian settlement in Conghua 從化 township, one of Dunhuang's thirteen administrative districts during the High Tang period. The predominance of Sogdian-style names in this register suggests that the township evolved from an earlier Sogdian settlement, and that it continued to attract new Sogdian arrivals. Analysis of related Dunhuang documents reveals that these residents were primarily engaged in commerce rather than agriculture, with their official corvée duties (*seyi* 色役) often including roles such as that of market supervisor (*shibishi* 市壁師). The township's location, one *li* east of Dunhuang city proper, coincided with the site of the Zoroastrian temple mentioned in the *Shazhou tujing* 沙州圖經, marking it as the spiritual center of the Sogdian community. By the mid-eighth century, however, turmoil in Sogdiana, internal strife within the Tang empire, and Tibetan occupation of the Hexi Corridor led to a gradual

15 See *Dunhuang shehui jingji wenxian zhenji shilu*, 1: 40.

16 Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, "Sabao yu sabo: Beichao Sui Tang huren juluo shouling wenti de zhenglun yu bianxi" 薩保與薩薄：北朝隋唐胡人聚落首領問題的爭論與辨析, in *Yilangxue zai Zhongguo lunwenji* 伊朗學在中國論文集, ed. Ye Yiliang 葉奕良 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2003), 3: 123–43. For an English analysis of the *sabao*, see Rong Xinjiang, "*Sabao* or *Sabo*: Sogdian Caravan Leaders in the Wall-Paintings in Buddhist Caves," in *Les sogdiens en chine*, ed. Étienne de la Vaissière and Éric Trombert (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2005), 207–30.

decline in the township's population until it eventually ceased to exist as a distinct entity.[17]

2.3 *From Merchants to Patrons and Leaders*

Despite the dissolution of Conghua township, Sogdian communities continued to persist in various parts of Dunhuang, where they played increasingly significant roles as they gradually acculturated to Chinese society. During the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (786–848), many Sogdians abandoned their ancestral Zoroastrian faith in favor of Buddhism, which was actively promoted by the Tibetan Kingdom (633–842). The discovery of Sogdian-language Buddhist texts in the Dunhuang Library Cave provides compelling evidence of this religious transition. These texts, primarily translated from Chinese Buddhist sources, include popular Mahayana works such as the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Vimalakīrti sutra*, as well as dhāraṇī texts and apocryphal sutras composed by Chinese monks.[18] This reliance on Chinese Buddhist sources suggests that the Dunhuang Sogdians embraced Buddhism through Chinese rather than Indian transmission networks.[19]

The wealth amassed by Sogdian merchants enabled them to become generous patrons of Buddhism in Dunhuang. A notable example of this patronage can be found in Dunhuang manuscript P.2912, which records a donation made by the Sogdian Kang Xiuhua 康秀華 on the occasion of the Buddha's birthday in 821. The text reads:

> One written copy of the *Great prajñāpāramitā sutra*, donated together with three swirled silver plates, weighing thirty-five *liang* 兩, one hundred *shi* 碩 of grain, fifty *shi* of millet and four *jin* 斤 of flour. As for the previously mentioned donations given with the scripture, Master Xuan 炫和尚 was respectfully requested to oversee their resale for the purpose of supporting the copying of scriptures. He is to supply paper, ink, and

17 Ikeda On 池田温, "Hachi seiki chūyō-ni okeru Tonkō-no sogudo-jin juraku" 8世紀中葉における敦煌のソグド人聚落, *Yūrasha bunka kenkyū* ユーラシア文化研究 1 (1965): 49–92.

18 For a comprehensive list of Sogdian-language Buddhist texts, see Yoshida Yutaka, "A Handlist of Buddhist Sogdian Texts," *Memoirs of the Faculty of Letters Kyoto University* 54 (2015): 167–80.

19 See Yoshida Yutaka 吉田豊, "Sogudogo Butten kaisetsu" ソグド語仏典解説, *Nairiku Ajia gengo no kenkyū* 内陸アジア言語の研究 7 (1992): 95–119.

> brush himself. Respectfully submitted by disciple Kang Xiuhua on the eighth day of the fourth month.[20]

This passage is followed by a detailed record regarding Master Xuan's proceeds from the resale of the flour for the funding of the copying project. The scale of this undertaking was considerable—Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602–664) translation of the *Great prajñāpāramitā sutra* comprises six hundred *juan* and would require significant financial resources to reproduce in its entirety. Kang Xiuhua's donation of silver plates, grain, and flour entrusted to the Master Xuan for resale, would have provided part of the necessary funds for this endeavor. Kang Xiuhua's prominence is further attested by his donor inscription in Cave 44 of the Mogao Grottoes, which identifies him as a "commissioner" (*shi* 使) and thus an influential member of the local Sogdian elite. Other influential Sogdians of this period included An Wushe 安勿賒 (dates unknown), who donated over fifty *shi* of wheat to Bao'en Temple 報恩寺, and numerous other individuals who held significant religious administrative positions.[21] Collectively, these figures exemplify the immense influence of Sogdians in Dunhuang during the Tibetan period, as well as their substantial support for Buddhist institutions in Dunhuang.

In 848, Zhang Yichao 張議潮 (799–872), a local magnate in Shazhou 沙州, took advantage of internal turmoil within the Tibetan Kingdom to stage an uprising. Joining forces with the Sogdian An Jingmin 安景旻 and the district commissioner Yan Yingda 閻英達, he successfully expelled the Tibetan garrison and recaptured Dunhuang and Guazhou 瓜州, subsequently dispatching envoys to report these developments to the Tang court. In 851, the Tang established the Guiyi Circuit 歸義軍 (the Army which Returns to Righteousness) at Dunhuang, appointing Zhang as military commissioner and concurrent surveillance commissioner of eleven prefectures in the region. During the Guiyi Circuit period (851–1035), Sogdians continued to wield considerable influence in both political and religious spheres. Notable figures included Kang Tongxin

20 Translation taken from Rong Xinjiang, "Khotanese Felt and Sogdian Silver: Foreign Gifts to Buddhist Monasteries in Ninth- and Tenth-Century Dunhuang," *Asia Major* 17 (2004): 15–34.

21 These included Kang Zhiquan 康智詮 who served as general administrator of the sangha in Dunhuang; Kang Zhiding 康志定, abbot of Lingtu Temple 靈圖寺; Mi Jingbian 米淨辯, who served as a commissioner for the religious division of Buddhist monks and nuns; and district commissioner Kang Zairong 康再榮. See Zheng Binglin 鄭炳林, "Tang Wudai Dunhuang de Suteren yu Fojiao" 唐五代敦煌的粟特人與佛教, *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究, no. 2 (1997): 151–68.

康通信, who served as military inspector under Zhang Yichao, An Huai'en 安懷恩, who held the position of a military inspector, and Cao Fajing 曹法鏡 (d. 883), who succeeded the Tibetan Buddhist master Chos grub (ca. 755–849) as the senior Buddhist officer of the region. Perhaps most significantly, Cao Yijin 曹議金 (d. 935), who succeeded Zhang Yichao's grandson as military commissioner in 914, may himself have been of Sogdian descent.[22] Through a calculated policy of marriage alliances—taking a daughter of the Ganzhou 甘州 Uyghur khagan as his wife and giving his own daughter in marriage to the king of Khotan Li Shengtian 李聖天 (in Khotanese Viśa' Saṃbhava, r. 912–966)—Cao and his descendants cultivated diplomatic relations with neighboring powers through intermarriage. These policies helped reestablish the ancient route through the Hexi Corridor, effectively reopening the Silk Road to trade.

Traditional Chinese historical sources, with their focus on official matters of state, rarely documented the activities of merchants and foreign immigrants. Without the Dunhuang manuscripts, our understanding of the Sogdian presence in medieval China would be considerably diminished.

3 The Entry of West Asian Religions into China

The medieval period witnessed the successive arrival of three West Asian religions in China: Zoroastrianism (known in Chinese sources as *Xianjiao* 祆教), the East Syriac Church (known as *Jingjiao* 景教), and Manichaeism. While these traditions significantly influenced Chinese religious and social life, traditional Chinese sources offer only limited documentation of these religions, much of it colored by Buddhist polemics. The Dunhuang manuscripts, however, provide firsthand accounts written by adherents of these faiths, along with incidental references that substantially enrich our understanding of their historical development in China.

3.1 *Zoroastrian Communities along the Silk Road*

Zoroastrianism arose in Persia around the sixth century BCE and was proclaimed the state religion under the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE). As the empire expanded to Bactria and Gandhāra, Zoroastrian teachings reached northwestern India and even further to the Tianshan 天山 region, where they were adopted by certain Saka (Scythian) communities. This initial

22 Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, "Dunhuang Guiyijun Caoshi tongzhizhe wei Sute houyi shuo" 敦煌歸義軍曹氏統治者爲粟特後裔說, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, no. 1 (2001): 65–72.

wave of eastward expansion, however, does not appear to have extended beyond the Yumen Pass and into Chinese territory.

Zoroastrianism's arrival in China proper was closely tied to the eastward trading activities of Sogdian merchants, for whom Zoroastrianism was the predominant faith. One of the earliest attestations for this comes from the ancient Sogdian letters, with Letter No. 1 containing the term *βγnpt* in reference to a Zoroastrian temple official,[23] likely translatable as "priest" or "head of the temple." Several personal names in the other letters incorporate Zoroastrian theonyms, such as Nanai-Vandak, the sender of Letter No. 2, whose name means "servant of the goddess Nanai,"[24] with these naming practices underscoring the role of Zoroastrian faith in Sogdian merchant society. According to the *Shazhou tujing*, when the Sogdian leader Kang Yandian settled in Shanshan during the early Tang, his followers established a *xianshe* 祆舍, or Zoroastrian temple, in the city.[25] Similarly, in Yizhou, the Sogdian chieftain Shi Wannian sponsored a temple dedicated to Zoroastrian deities that was apparently replete with numerous wall paintings and maintained by a priest named Di Pantuo 翟槃陀 (dates unknown).[26] In Dunhuang proper, a Zoroastrian temple stood one *li* east of the city. Notably, its deities (*xianshen* 祆神) were officially recognized alongside Chinese gods of wind and rain as part of the "Four Miscellaneous Deities" (*si suo zashen* 四所雜神) of Dunhuang, and received regular ritual sacrifices. The *Shazhou tujing* provides a detailed description of this temple: "They erected halls and painted the various Zoroastrian gods. There is a total of twenty niches. Its courtyard extends one hundred paces around."[27] This is an exceptionally rare description of a Zoroastrian place of worship in China. Even after Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang and the conversion of many local Sogdians to Buddhism, Zoroastrian ritual practices continued to persist as part of local folk traditions. Activities such as the *saixian* 賽祆 folk cult continued into the Guiyi Circuit period, highlighting the enduring influence of Zoroastrianism in the region, even as its formal practice waned.

3.2 *East Syriac Christianity in Medieval China*

The Nestorian Stele (*Da Qin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑) unearthed in the suburbs of Xi'an in 1625 provides an important record

23 W. B. Henning, "The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12 (1948): 602–5.

24 W. B. Henning, "A Sogdian God," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 28 (1965): 252–53.

25 See *Dunhuang shehui jingji wenxian zhenji shilu*, 1: 37.

26 Ibid., 1: 40.

27 Ibid., 1: 13.

of the arrival of the East Syriac Church, also known as the Church of the East, to the Tang empire. The stele recounts how in 635 the Persian monk Alopen arrived in the Tang capital of Chang'an carrying with him East Syriac Christian scriptures and images. Within three years, Alopen had received imperial permission to establish a church and conduct missionary activities in China. Over the next century, this East Syriac branch of Christianity flourished in Tang territory, receiving particular favor after a clergyman from this religion Yazdbozid (Chinese name Yisi 伊斯) provided crucial material support to Tang forces during the An Lushan rebellion. In 781, Yazdbozid erected a stele at the Da Qin Monastery 大秦寺 in Yining District, Chang'an, commemorating both the history of the spread of Christianity and his own achievements. Although records of Christian activities become scarce after this period, especially following Emperor Wuzong's 唐武宗 (r. 840–846) sweeping campaign to suppress foreign religions in 845, the Dunhuang manuscripts help fill critical gaps in our historical understanding, offering glimpses into the continued presence of this community well beyond official notice.

While the Nestorian Stele primarily chronicles the development of Christianity during the Tang dynasty, texts unearthed at Dunhuang allow for a much more detailed understanding of Christianity in China. One of these, the *Zunjing* 尊經, provides a catalog of thirty-five Christian texts translated into Chinese from the time of Alopen's entry into China to that of Adam's stele inscription. Three of these works survive in Dunhuang copies, offering invaluable insights into East Syriac Christianity and allowing us to trace earlier textual layers.[28] Several additional titles mentioned in the *Zunjing* have yet to be located in manuscript form, though some can be cross-referenced in other sources. For instance, the *Simen jing* 四門經 may be related to the *Duliyusi jing* 都利聿斯經, which consisted of five *juan* said to have been brought from "Western India" (*Xi tianzhu* 西天竺) by Li Miqian 李彌乾 (fl. 785–804), and later redacted by Chen Fu 陳輔 (dates unknown) at the Hanlin Academy (*hanlin yuan* 翰林院) into one volume under the title *Yusi simen jing* 聿斯四門經.[29] Modern research suggests that "Duliyusi" may have been a

28 These three texts are the *Xuanyuan zhiben jing* 宣元至本經 (Sutra on the Origin of Origins), the *Zhixuan anle jing* 志玄安樂經 (Sutra of Ultimate and Mysterious Happiness), and the *Sanwei zan jing* 三威贊經 (Hymn of Perfection of the Holy Trinity). For a detailed exposition of these three texts, see Zhu Donghua, "The Chronology of the Tang Dynasty Jingjiao Nestorian Theologian Jingjing's Writings and Translations in Relation to His Thought," in *Beyond Indigenization: Christianity and Chinese History in a Global Context*, ed. Tao Feiya (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 25–45.

29 See the "Yiwenzhi san" 藝文志三 chapter of the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書. *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 59.1548.

Middle Persian transliteration of Ptolemy (PTLMYWS), implying that this *Simen jing* was likely a Chinese adaptation of the *Tetrabiblos*, Ptolemy's (ca. 100–175) treatise on horoscopic astrology.[30] Much like later Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Syriac Christian monks evidently used Western scientific knowledge to support their evangelical endeavors—a strategy that inadvertently contributed to the transmission of Western scientific knowledge to China. Notably, the Tibetan Kingdom did not oppose the Church of the East. Some Tibetan-language manuscripts from Dunhuang even feature Christian crosses and divinatory passages with Christian elements, suggesting at least a limited level of tolerance for the Church under Tibetan rule.[31] Although Buddhism monopolized much of the religious landscape in Dunhuang during the Guiyi Circuit period, Christianity was not entirely eclipsed. Intact copies of works such as the *Sanwei mengdu zan* 三威蒙度贊 and the *Zunjing* itself remained in the cave library at Mogao, indicating that, even in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, this East Syriac Christian tradition still retained a readership on the Silk Road frontier.

3.3 *Dunhuang's Manichaean Legacy*

Manichaeism, founded in the third century by the Persian prophet Mani (ca. 216–274), drew upon the dualism of Zoroastrianism to formulate its distinctive doctrine of the "Two Principles and Three Times."[32] However, its world-renouncing tendencies often led political authorities to view it with suspicion, with many ruling regimes branding it a heterodox creed. Following its proscription under the Sasanian Empire (224–651), Mani's disciples embarked

30 See Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, "Yige rushi Tangchao de Bosi Jingjiao jiazu" 一個入仕唐朝的波斯景教家族, in *Yilangxue zai Zhongguo lunwenji* 伊朗學在中國論文集, ed. Ye Yiliang 葉奕良 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 2: 82–90; and Yano Michio, "A Note on Ptolemy in China," in *Documents et Archives provenant de l'Asie Centrale*, ed. Akira Haneda (Kyoto: Association Franco-Japonaise des Études Orientales, 1990), 217–20. For an alternative reconstruction "Duliyusi" as "Dorotheus," see Bill M. Mak, "Greek Astral Sciences in China," in *Overlapping Cosmologies in Asia: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Bill M. Mak and Eric Huntington (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 55–56.

31 Géza Uray, "Tibet's Connections with Nestorianism and Manicheism in the 8th–10th Centuries," in *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History and Culture*, ed. Ernst Steinkeller and Helmut Tauscher (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing, 1995), 399–429.

32 The doctrine of the Two Principles (Light and Darkness) and Three Times remained constant in Manichaeism from Europe to East Asia, despite the religion's complex evolution. These Three Times comprise: the primordial separation of Light and Darkness, the present era of their intermingling, and the future permanent division. See Johannes van Oort, "Manichaeism," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 763.

on a mission of global proselytization, establishing an eastern diocese of the Manichaean church in Khorasan and Khwarazm by the late third century and further extending its reach across Sogdiana and Tokharistan between the fourth and seventh centuries. Paradoxically, while Persia and Central Asia have yielded no surviving Manichaean texts, the Buddhist cave temples of Dunhuang have preserved three substantial Manichaean texts, offering invaluable glimpses into this enigmatic faith.

A brief mention in *juan* 40 of the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 offers a glimpse into Manichaeism's arrival in China:

> In the first year of the Yanzai 延載 era, a "bishop" (*foduodan* 拂多誕) from the state of Persia maintaining the false teachings of the *Erzong jing* 二宗經 (Sutra of the Two Principles) came to the court.[33]

This Buddhist chronicle, despite dismissing Manichaeism as heresy, nevertheless provides a precise account of its arrival into China during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705). Wu Zetian, known for her religious eclecticism, not only welcomed this heterodox faith but also sanctioned the establishment of temples and the translation of its scriptures, of which three extant works have been preserved at Dunhuang. These include:

> 1. ***Monijiao can jing* 摩尼教殘經 (*A Fragmentary Manichaean Treatise*)**
> Beijing National Library BD00256. Though incomplete and lacking both beginning and end, this manuscript retains 345 lines of text and is an early Chinese translation of a foundational Manichaean scripture. Its doctrinal content provides crucial insights into the religion's core tenets.
>
> 2. ***Moni guangfo jiaofa yilüe* 摩尼光佛教法儀略 (*Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teaching of Mani, the Buddha of Light*)**
> British Library S.3969 and Bibliothèque nationale P.3884. This work, dated to 16 July 731, carries a heading attributing its compilation to a Manichaean bishop, who was ordered by the Tang court to produce it

33 This passage can be found in the "Fayun tongsai zhi" 法運通塞志 (Monograph on Success and Obstructions in the Spread of the Dharma)—a section towards the end of the *Fozu tongji* that provides an annalistic chronicle of Buddhism in China. It is recorded within *juan* 39 in the Taisho Tripitaka recension. Translation taken with modifications from Thomas Jülch, *Zhipan's Account of the History of Buddhism in China, vol. 2:* Fozu tongji, juan *39–42: From the Sui Dynasty to the Wudai Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 116. See Shi Daofa 釋道法, *Fozu tongji jiaozhu* 佛祖統紀校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 931.

at the College of (the Hall) of Gathered Worthies (*jixian yuan* 集賢院).[34] The text is, in fact, not a translation but rather an original exposition on Manichaean history, doctrine, liturgy, and monastic rules. Its composition may have been commissioned by Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756) in response to perceived threats from the religion—notably, he issued an edict the following year outlawing Manichaeism, albeit exempting Central Asians (*Xihu* 西胡) from this prohibition. Today, the *Compendium* serves as a foundational text for the study of Manichaeism.

3. *Xiabu zan* 下部讚 (*Hymns of the Lower Section*)
British Library S.2659. Also known as the *Hymnscroll*, this text comprises of a collection of Manichaean devotional hymns extending over four hundred lines. Rendered in elegant classical Chinese, it preserves a substantial corpus of Manichaean poetry and offers insights into the liturgical practices and spiritual world of Manichaean monasteries.

Although the body of Manichaean, Syriac Christian, and Zoroastrian materials in the Dunhuang manuscripts pales in comparison to its voluminous Buddhist holdings, these documents are of extraordinary importance. Without them, our current understanding of how these three West Asian religions entered and evolved in China would be considerably diminished.

4 Tibetan and Guiyi Circuit Contributions to the Ninth- and Tenth-Century Silk Road

A prevailing historical narrative has argued that the Tibetan occupation of the Hexi Corridor and Western Regions following the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755–763) severed the arteries of communication along the Silk Road. According to this view, exchanges between China and Central Asia remained dormant from 790—when the monk Wukong 悟空 was forced to circumvent Tibetan-held territories via the Uyghur Khaganate (744–840) north of the Gobi on his return to Chang'an—until the early Northern Song dynasty. However, this perspective, rooted in the Sino-centric narratives of traditional Chinese sources, is contradicted by abundant evidence from Dunhuang's Chinese and Tibetan documents, which reveal a vibrant Silk Road continuing to function throughout the ninth and tenth centuries.

34 See Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 204.

4.1 *Tibetan Networks and Cultural Exchange*

Building upon its power base on the Tibetan Plateau, the Tibetan Kingdom capitalized on the internal strife that engulfed the Tang dynasty following the An Lushan rebellion to first seize the Longyou 隴右 region (modern-day southwestern Gansu), and then systematically advance westward along the Hexi Corridor. By 786, they had forced the military and civilian population of Shazhou (Dunhuang) to form an alliance and surrender under the condition that they would not be relocated elsewhere. The Tibetans subsequently transformed Dunhuang into a center of Buddhist devotion, actively promoting Buddhist institutions and communities. Eminent monks from both Chinese and Tibetan traditions—from Tan Kuang 曇曠 (fl. 763) of Ximing Monastery 西明寺 in Chang'an to the Tibetan Tripiṭaka master Chos grub—translated scriptures and expounded Buddhist doctrine there. Dunhuang also served as a springboard for the spread of Chan Buddhism to Tibet, which was accompanied by the widespread transmission of other Chinese secular texts.

Along its northern frontier, the Tibetan Kingdom established a series of military garrisons, stretching from Maqu 瑪曲 (southern Gansu) in the east to Little Balur (modern-day Gilgit-Baltistan) in the west, that were connected by a sophisticated transportation system. Couriers and messengers known as "winged envoys" (*feiniao shi* 飛鳥使) traversed the vast distances between the Tsenpo's court and these garrisons, their unimpeded communication facilitating both the dissemination of Buddhism and broader cultural exchange. The effectiveness of these networks is demonstrated by the lineage record of the Tibetan Chan master Nam-kha'i snying-po (fl. 8th–9th century) preserved in Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot tibétain 996. This text documents a route of religious instruction that stretched from India and Kucha through to Dunhuang and Ganzhou[35]—evidence that the traditional Silk Road corridors were by no means sealed off. Moreover, the old Tang-Tibet road, established in the early Tang, became even more active during this period. As the inscription of the Sino-Tibetan Treaty (erected in Lhasa in 822) records, diplomatic envoys from both sides "shall travel back and forth along established routes."[36] These routes saw a substantial number of Chinese texts circulate into Tibetan areas, with extant Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang encompassing Confucian classics and Chinese character primers, as well as several Chan lineage

35 Cai Rang 才讓, *Puti yizhu: Dunhuang zangwen Fojiao wenxian de zhengli yu jiedu* 菩提遺珠：敦煌藏文佛教文獻的整理與解讀 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 457–501.

36 For a complete English translation of the stele inscription, see Li Fang-Kuei, "The Inscription of the Sino-Tibetan Treaty of 821–822," *T'oung Pao* 44 (1956): 1–99.

genealogies.[37] Such manuscripts reveal the robust flow of textual exchange that continued between the Chinese and Tibetan realms throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, long after traditional historical sources would have us believe the region lay isolated.

4.2 *New Political Order and Trade*

With the decline of Tibetan power over Hexi and Central Asia precipitated by the assassination of Tsenpo Langdarma (d. 842) and the internal conflict that followed, a new polity—the Guiyi Circuit led by military commissioner Zhang Yichao—emerged in the Dunhuang region. After a decade of campaigns, Zhang successfully reopened the old Hexi Corridor route and captured Liangzhou in 861, breaking Tibetan control of the region. This achievement restored Dunhuang's connections with the Tang dynasty and facilitated the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Uyghur kingdom of Qocho (866–early 13th century) in Turpan and the Kingdom of Khotan along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin. When the Cao family assumed control of the Guiyi Circuit in 914, these connections deepened, particularly with the Ganzhou and Qocho Uyghur polities and the Kingdom of Khotan. These relationships facilitated the burgeoning of trans-regional trade along the Silk Road. Jade from Khotan once again found a ready market in the Central Plains, while sal ammoniac (*naosha* 硇砂) from the Uyghur domains in Turpan was funneled into China via Dunhuang. Documentary evidence of this trade survives in numerous Dunhuang manuscripts, including one record (P.4638) dated 916 in which "one lump of jade weighing one *jin* and one *liang*, five pairs of antelope horns, and five *jin* of sal ammoniac" were sent from Dunhuang as a tribute to the Chinese court.[38] Another text (S.4398) from 949 similarly records a tribute of "ten *jin* of sal ammoniac" sent by the new military commissioner of Guiyi Circuit Cao Yuanzhong 曹元忠.[39]

37 Such Tibetan texts included translated copies of the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Pelliot tibétain 986), *Chunqiu houyu* 春秋後語 (Pelliot tibétain 1291), Zachao 雜抄 (Pelliot tibétain 1238) and *Qianziwen* 千字文 (Pelliot tibétain 1046). For a detailed overview of these Tibetan copies see Imre Galambos, "Chinese Primers Along the North-Western Frontier," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34 (2024): 718–21. Chan genealogies included the *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記 (IOL Tib J 710) and the *Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記 (attested in Pelliot tibétain 116 among others).

38 See *Dunhuang shehui jingji wenxian zhenji shilu* 敦煌社會經濟文獻真蹟釋錄, ed. Tang Geng'ou 唐耕耦 and Lu Hongji 陸宏基 (Beijing: Quanguo tushuguan wenxian suowei fuzhi zhongxin, 1990), 4: 387.

39 Ibid., 4: 398.

4.3 *Dunhuang Pilgrims and Khotanese Sources*

During the Cao family's governance of the Guiyi Circuit, the military commissioners not only patronized Dunhuang's Buddhist communities but also generously supported monks who traveled westward in search of sacred texts. The Dunhuang manuscripts reveal a steady stream of such pilgrims passing through the oasis throughout the early and mid-tenth century. Records mention various distinguished figures making this journey, including temple abbots, local śramaṇas and imperially recognized masters, with these travelers hailing not only from monasteries in the Dunhuang region but also from major Buddhist centers across the empire.[40] A particularly significant development came in 966, when the founding Song emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (r. 960–976), as part of his program to revitalize Buddhism, sponsored a major official pilgrimage which saw 157 monks depart from the Song capital Kaifeng 開封 for India. The Dunhuang manuscripts record several of these pilgrims passing through the region between 968 and 995, demonstrating the continuing vitality of this pilgrimage route.[41] Among these documents is a fascinating twenty-one-line text (S.383) titled *Xitian lu jing* 西天路竟 (*Route to India*) which provides a detailed itinerary from Kaifeng to South India—likely the travel notes of one such pilgrim.[42] While traditional Chinese sources have largely overlooked these pilgrims, their occasional appearances in Dunhuang documents suggest that many more monks—whose names we do not have—must likewise have traversed Dunhuang en route to study the Dharma in India.

The Dunhuang manuscripts also include a significant corpus of documents in the Khotanese language, reflecting the close diplomatic ties between

40 These pilgrims included Zhiyan 智嚴 (S.5981), abbot of the Guanyin Monastery 觀音院 at Kaiyuan Temple 開元寺 in Fuzhou 鄜州 (present-day Fuxian 富縣, Shaanxi), and Guiwen 歸文 (S.529), a monk from Kaiyuan Temple in Dingzhou, who both set out for India in 924. They were followed by Yanxi 彥熙 (P.2605), a śramaṇa from the Fuxian 福先 Temple in Luoyang, who traveled to India between 931 and 935. In 944, the sangha regulator Shanguang 善光 (S.4537) of Shazhou embarked on his pilgrimage, followed by Fazong 法宗 (BD02062), the abbot of the Western Cloister 西院 of the Great Shanxing Temple 善興大寺 in Xichuan 西川, in 958. Daoyuan 道圓 (S.6264), a śramaṇa and recipient of the purple robe, departed during the Later Jin dynasty (936–47) and returned in 965. See Rong Xinjiang, *The Silk Road and Cultural Exchanges Between East and West*, trans. Sally K. Church et al., ed. Sally K. Church and Imre Galambos (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 155–68.

41 Dated manuscripts record the names of Jicong 繼從 (BD13802 and P.3023) in 968, Fajian 法堅 (P.2726) during the period from 964–74, Yongjin 永進 (BD15387) in 971, Zhijian 志堅 (S.3424) in 989 and Daoyou 道猷 (BD01904) in 995. Rong Xinjiang, *The Silk Road and Cultural Exchanges*, 168–72.

42 Huang Shengzhang 黃盛璋, *Zhong-wai jiaotong yu jiaoliushi yanjiu* 中外交通與交流史研究 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 88–110.

Dunhuang and Khotan throughout the tenth century. These relations were strengthened through marriage alliances between the ruling houses, resulting in extended stays in Dunhuang by Khotanese envoys, monks, and royal family members. This prolonged interaction left behind a number of Khotanese documents, many of which provide invaluable records of Silk Road activities. One particularly significant manuscript, formerly in the collection of Alexander von Staël-Holstein (1877–1937), preserves a detailed itinerary from around 925 recording place names along the route from Khotan through Shazhou to Shuofang 朔方. The document also lists settlements along both the northern and southern branches of the Tianshan routes, providing a precious snapshot of Silk Road geography in the tenth century.[43] Another remarkable document chronicles a journey from Khotan to Kashmir, providing one of our earliest firsthand accounts of travel between these two regions.[44] Due to Khotan's diplomatic ties with Dunhuang, a substantial portion of the remaining Khotanese documents consist of envoy reports. These texts offer detailed, first-hand insights into the conditions, political dynamics, and trade networks that shaped the region during the tenth century.

The library cave at Dunhuang was likely sealed around 1006, which explains the relatively abundant preservation of ninth- and tenth-century documents that provide us with invaluable records of the Silk Road during this period. Yet we must also recognize that many of these manuscripts are fragmentary, and most were not created with the specific purpose of documenting Silk Road activities. The actual volume and variety of trans-Eurasian exchange during this period was likely far greater than even these rich sources reveal.

This article has demonstrated how the Dunhuang manuscripts fundamentally reshape our understanding of medieval Silk Road networks. Through examination of these documents, we can trace multiple concurrent developments: the westward transmission of cultural traditions from the Central Plains; the flourishing of multiple religious traditions including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism; the establishment of Sogdian trading colonies and their eventual integration into Chinese society; and the maintenance of robust commercial and diplomatic networks under both Tibetan and Guiyi Circuit administration. These materials challenge the conventional view that

43 See Huang Shengzhang 黃盛璋, "Yutianwen 'Shi Hexi ji' de lishi dili yanjiu" 于闐文《使河西記》的歷史地理研究, *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, no. 2 (1986): 1–18. Continued in *Dunhuangxue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, no. 1 (1987): 1–13.

44 See Huang Shengzhang 黃盛璋, "Dunhuang xiejuan Yutianwen 'Keshimier xingcheng' lishi dili yanjiu" 敦煌寫卷于闐文《克什米爾行程》歷史地理研究, *Xinjiang wenwu* 新疆文物, no. 4 (1994): 27–48.

Silk Road exchange was severely disrupted after the An Lushan rebellion, demonstrating instead the continuation of vigorous commercial and cultural interactions throughout the ninth and tenth centuries.

The evidence presented here suggests that we must reconceptualize the Silk Road not as a simple trade route periodically interrupted by political upheaval, but as a resilient network of cultural and commercial exchange that adapted to changing political circumstances. The Dunhuang manuscripts reveal how local actors—whether Sogdian merchants, Buddhist pilgrims, or regional administrators—maintained these networks even during periods of apparent political fragmentation. As research continues on both the Chinese manuscripts and documents in various Central Asian languages, we will undoubtedly uncover even richer and more colorful chapters in the history of the Silk Road.

Translated by Michael Broughton and Claude Sonnet 3.5