

TUN-HUANG AS POWER AND VIRTUE

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The paper places the history of the Dunhuang caves and the Buddhist material found in them in the broader context of Asian history. It deals with the role of the Yuezhi (Yueh-chih) in the introduction of Buddhism, further with the role of Khotan in the spread of the Buddhist literature. After the conquest of Khotan by the Muslims the Buddhist monks fled to the region of Dunhuang. The paper ends with discussing the threat by the Tanguts and the walling up of the famous library of Dunhuang.

Key words: Dunhuang, Tun-huang, Buddhist literature, sūtra, Yuezhi, Khotan.

As early as Emperor Mu (reigned: 1001–945 BC) the Chinese state became interested in Central Asia. He was the fifth sovereign of the Chou dynasty, who reigned for fifty-five years from 1001–945 BC, and toured around the “world” by marking kingdoms under the sky with the wheels of his chariots and the hoofs of his horses. His eight steeds carried him a thousand *li* a day. On a visit to the Kunlun mountains he had an entrancing encounter with the goddess Queen Mother of the West. The Emperor named the place the “Mountain of the Queen Mother of the West” (Mirsky 1965, p. 9). There is a famous painting of the Eight Horses of Emperor Mu by Han Kan of 750 AD (Williams 1976, p. 225). Emperor Mu laid the foundations of Chinese power in the deep sands, the role of fine steeds, and the Queen Mother of the West. The West should be the kingdoms of Western Central Asia.

Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, who ruled from 140 to 87 BC, sent Chang Ch’ien to find out the Yueh-chih and to enlist their support to wipe out the Hsiung-nu, who were a constant threat to the empire. The Yueh-chih had lived between Tunhuang and Ch’i-lieu to the southwest. Their king was killed by Lau-chang, the king of the Hsiung-nu and he made a drinking bowl out of his skull. They migrated to the river Oxus. Chang Ch’ien went to Ferghana (Ta-yuan), Sogdiana (K’ang-chu), and other kingdoms. The Sogdians sent him to the Yueh-chih. Southern Sogdiana was under the political influence of the Yueh-chih. He could not persuade the Yueh-chih to

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move against the Hsiung-nu. In a report to the emperor he said that Ferghana has many good horses that come from the stock of the Heavenly Horse. He also noted that Khotan contains much jade.

To defend the empire, control over the barbarians required fine breed horses, which came from Ferghana (Ta-yuan) and from the Yueh-chih. The Yueh-chih horses were famous as "Heavenly Horses" or T'ien-ma. On being settled the Yueh-chih created their powerful kingdom by conquering Bactria and their economy prospered by trading in horses. The fame of their horses had spread as far as Southeast Asia. Between 240 and 245 AD the king of Funan (Cambodia) had sent one of his relations to a Murunda king on the Ganges, who sent four Yueh-chih horses as a present to him (Coedes 1968, p. 46).

Tun-huang was founded under the reign of Emperor Wu as one of the four military commanderies (chun) in 111 BC, along with Chiu-ch'üan (Su-chou), Wu-wei (Liang-chou) and Chang-i (Kan-chou). Their foundation is attributed to the Light Horse General Ho Ch'u-ping, who also brought colonists to people the territory (Giles 1933, p. 553). Tun-huang became the crowning centre of China's military power, which lent glory to the desert and oases of Central Asia. It was here that the great civilisation of China shared with the Central Asian peoples' scriptures and sculptures, horses and garrisons, jade stones and jade beauties. It was both her wound and her wonder. Here blossomed the Power and Virtue of China. Tun-huang was a symbol of Han power.

Two military barriers were set up for the protection of Tun-huang, which are known as Yü-mên or Jade Gates:

(i) Yang Kuan or Jade Gate Barrier in the Nan-hu Oasis, constructed as the furthest outpost of the Chinese Empire from about 111 to 100 BC. It was 30–40 miles west–southwest of Tun-huang.

(ii) The later Jade Gate was on the extension of the Great Wall, 50–60 miles west of Tun-huang. The Great Wall could reach this point as late as 96 BC.

The nomenclature Jade Gate connotes that jade was imported through this area. Jade symbolised the perfection of human virtue. Confucius said in the *Li Ki* 45.13: "In ancient times men found the likeness of all excellent qualities in jade." The emperor could commune and consult with Heaven through the medium of the jade disc (*pi*). A piece of jade worn on the body was believed to prevent a person from being thrown from his horse. Jade from the Han dynasty (*Han yü*) is famous.

Emperor Wu built a line of military watchtowers to the north and west of Tun-huang, which were discovered by Stein in 1907. T'ang poets like Li Po (705–762) evoked the aching loneliness of garrison soldiers who fought against the barbarians to the west beyond the Jade Gate of the Han in westernmost Kansu. Whitfield (1995b, pp. 262, 265) cites a poem by Wang Changling (698–c.765):

Where the lingering clouds of Qinghai shade the snow-clad ranges
The lonely wall gazes afar to Jade Gate Barrier.
Yellow sands of a hundred battles clog our golden armour,
Not until we have stormed Loulan will we ever return!

The poet goes on to say that men march a thousand miles, none have yet returned. But no barbarian horse will cross Yin Mountain!

As one of the four military commanderies, protected by the two Jade Gates, Tun-huang was a sensitive strategic centre for thirteen or more centuries and a crucial link in the defence of the empire, being a purchasing centre for horses and jade, the latter having been a must for imperial rites.

Emperor Wu despatched an army of 40,000 men in 102 BC to demand a supply of horses from the Court of Ferghana (Ta-yuan, now in Uzbekistan). The Han army was defeated. A second force of 60,000 men under General Liguangli was sent to bring back 3,000 blood-sweating horses to Ch'ang-an. A marriage alliance was concluded between a Turkish Khan and a Chinese princess for 50,000 horses, camels and sheep. The Yueh-chih sent fine horses from the Ferghana kingdom which reinforced the military capability of Han China, so that they could eliminate the menace of the Hsiung-nu and expand their power into the Korean peninsula, Nanyue and Yunnan. A topographical text from Tun-huang, no. 788 in the Stein Collection, refers to the legend of the Êrh-shih Spring, where men and horses could drink, as its flow was never interrupted (Giles 1933, p. 545). As late as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Horse Trading Offices were established at Tun-huang, Hami and other places.

Yueh-chih introduced Buddhist sūtras

The Yueh-chih were great scholars of Buddhism. A Yueh-chih crown-prince gave oral instructions to Ching Lu on Buddhist Sūtras in 2 BC. Ching Lu was a student at the Imperial Academy. The Chinese term for a Buddhist monastery *ssu* 寺 exclusively means 'government office, bureau' in Han texts. The phonetic transcription of Buddhist terms can be traced to the government system of transliteration of former Han times. It points to a connection between the Department of Foreign Relations and the Buddhist Saṅgha (Zurcher 1972, pp. 39–40). The Yueh-chih who once lived near Tun-huang, traded in horses, and were close to the government, must naturally have been influenced by official terminology while translating Buddhist works. Lokakṣema(?), the Yueh-chih (in China 168–188 AD), introduced Mahayana Buddhism into China (Zurcher 1972, p. 35). I would like to restore the Chinese Chih Lou-chia-ch'ien to Laukākṣin, and not Lokakṣema. The family name Laukākṣa occurs in the Divyāvādāna (632:23, 25). Chih Ch'ien (active 221–252 AD) was the grandson of a Yueh-chih who came to China in 168–188 AD. He translated 36 works of which 23 have survived. His translations of the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa and Sukhāvātī-vyūha have been the most highly venerated sūtras. The greatest Buddhist translator before Kumārajīva was the Yueh-chih Dharmarakṣa (active ca. 266–308 AD). He was born in Tun-huang around 230 AD where his family had been living for generations. He was called the 'Bodhisattva from Tun-huang'. While staying in Tun-huang he got Sanskrit texts from Kashmir, Kucha and Khotan. In 265 AD he left Tun-huang for Ch'ang-an. Around 280 AD, his Chinese disciple Fa-ch'eng came to Tun-huang and founded a large monastery. Thus we see that Tun-huang was in touch with other

Buddhist kingdoms and a large monastery came up in Tun-huang which became an important centre for the translation of Buddhist texts. In 373 AD Chih Shih-lun translated the *Surata-paripṛcchā* at Lanchou in Kansu. Ever since the Yueh-chih were defeated by the Huns in 170 BC they established themselves in the north of Oxus, conquered Sogdiana and Bactria. Though they stopped to engage against the Huns, they continued to supply horses to China, but above all to communicate with the Chinese on a cultural level by propagating Buddhism and translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese. Under Yueh-chih influence, from a military commandery Tun-huang rose to be a major Buddhist centre of China with great Buddhist masters, sculptors and painters. The drudgery of the lonely garrisons was replaced by the glory of daily Buddhist rites and seasonal festivals. As the Zen masters say: *ken zen ichi* 'the sword and meditation are one'. The *śāstra* or 'weapons' and *sāstra* or 'scriptures' converged. Tun-huang was an ideal ground for Buddhism till the 11th century, and even in later times it lingered on as such and as a strategic centre. The desert and the oasis symbolised hell and heaven in terms of Buddhist philosophy: "everything flows and nothing is permanent".

Khotan as a source of jade and sūtras

The Yueh-chih spoke an Iranian language as can be seen also from the names of the Kushan Kings: Vima, Kaniška, Huviška. They were in touch with other Iranian-speaking peoples of Sogdiana, Parthia, and Khotan. They used to bring horses, jade, turquoise, glass eye-beads to China from different states. As pointed out earlier, jade was of the highest significance to the Chinese emperors. Chang Ch'ien who was in this area around 125 BC says that Khotan had much jade. He traces the source of the Yellow River to the south of Khotan. Khotan was one of the, if not the, main source of jade. Jade must have passed through the two Jade Gates which guarded the frontiers. The Spring of the Jade Maiden (Giles 1934:7.548) can be one of the spring-fed lagoons about 16 miles north-northwest of Tun-huang. Jade Maiden may refer to the jade beauties of Khotan who came to the Imperial court. Khotan is called *Ratnanajapada* 'The Land of Jade' in the panegyric of King Viśa Saṅgrāma in the Khotanese language (Bailey 1982, p. 71).

The Central Asian states commanded respect of the Chinese Court, mandarins and literati because of their profound knowledge of Buddhist thought and its transmission to China. Chu Shih-hsing journeyed to Khotan in 260 AD to get 25,000 *Prajñāpāramitā*. Mokṣala, who translated it as *Prajñāpāramitā* in 291 AD, was Khotanese. In 296 AD Gītamitra of Khotan collaborated with Dharmarakṣa to translate this text again (Zurcher 1972, p. 62).

Avataṃsaka sūtras and state (Thousand Buddhas, colossi)

Gaṇḍavyūha is the most important sūtra of the Avataṃsaka. It speaks of the Thousand Buddhas. Māyā, the mother of Buddha, says that she was the mother of all the past Buddhas and she will also be the mother of all the future Buddhas of this aeon (Bhadrakalpa): Maitreya, Śiṃha ... and others ending with Abhyuccadeva, the 1000th Buddha. Abhyuccadeva is Rocana Tathāgata (Roshana Daibutsu in Japanese). Lots'un (now Yuezun) began the construction of the Mo-kao caves in 266 AD. Mo-kao means the caves of 'Unequalled Height' or 'Marvellous Height'. The monk dreamt of "a cloud with a Thousand Buddhas floating above one side of the valley" (Whitfield – Farrer 1990, p. 12; Giles 1933, 7, p. 546; Giès 1996, 1, p. 13). Toki (1899, p. 145 mudrā no. 315) says that Sumeru is called Myō-kō 'Marvellous Height', and it is the King of Mountains. Mo-kao can be equated with *Abhyucca*, which means 'supreme height'. Rocana Tathāgata is called Abhyuccadeva because his image has to be a colossal statue (Daibutsu), as can be seen in Japan at the Todaiji monastery commenced under orders of Emperor Shōmu in 743 AD. It is a "symbol of the Emperor as the controlling head of the state" (Kobayashi 1975, p. 22) to consolidate the sovereignty of the nation in a harmony of the Emperor and his people on the deeper spiritual levels (Lokesh Chandra 1997, 6, pp. 32–51). The excavation of the Mo-kao caves could have had a political motivation. Only two decades later we find that Āryasthira (Shengchian 388–407 AD) translated the Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra under the title Lo-ma-chia-ching (T294, K102) or Ramyaka-sūtra, where Ramyaka connotes Lamkan valley near Bamiyan. In the beginning of the fifth century Chih Fa-ling the Yueh-chih got the Gaṇḍavyūha from Khotan. It was translated by Divākara in 685 AD (K 104), and by Prajñā in 798 AD. The complete collection of Avataṃsaka-sūtras was translated in 422 AD by Buddhahadra and next by Śikṣānanda between 695 and 699 AD with a preface by Empress Wu Tso-thien (ruled 684–705 AD). Empress Wu sent a special envoy to Khotan for the Sanskrit original, took part in the translation, and also wrote an Imperial preface. Śikṣānanda was born in Khotan in 652 AD. Empress Wu took keen interest in the Avataṃsaka as conducive to the stability of her state. Empress Wu invited Fa-tsang (ca. 704 AD) to lecture at the palace. She found the philosophy of the Avataṃsaka too abstruse, and Fa-tsang used the figure of a lion in the palace architecture to illustrate his points. He was from Sogdiana. Two colossal statues were constructed at Tun-huang: the Northern Great Image of Maitreya in cave 96 in 695 AD and the Southern Great Image in Cave 130 whose inscription is dated 721 AD. The first should be due to Empress Wu who was great devotee of the Gaṇḍavyūha. The Northern Colossus portrays Maitreya, the first of the Future Buddhas, and the Southern Colossus should represent the last Future Buddha, Rocana. As I have pointed out in my article on the colossal images and the State in Buddhism, the Thousand Buddhas as the power and splendour of the State were represented by two colossi of Maitreya and Rocana. In the Yun-kang caves the barbarian Northern Wei overwhelmed the Chinese by the magnificence of their sky-kissing images of Rocana (later on called Virocana or Vairocana in Śikṣānanda). So, there were times when the translation of Buddhist sūtras had political relevance.

The relationship of China and Khotan was intimate, constant for centuries and multidimensional: strategic, diplomatic, commercial and religious. Jade, horses, scriptures and pilgrims were ever on the route. Fa-hsien and Hsüan-tsang stayed at Khotan in 401 AD and 644 AD respectively on their way to India.

Khotanese art and Tun-huang

Khotanese artists were famous. A chapel at the Tibetan monastery of Iwang was embellished in the Khotanese manner (Tib. *Li.hugs*) as mentioned in the inscription. The *Rgyal.rabs* (p. 135) also states that artists were invited from Khotan in the times of Ral.pa.can (reigned 815–836 AD). Prof. Roderick Whitfield (1995a, p. 151) has pointed out the association of the Scroll of Famous Images with the art of Khotan and has rightly said that future studies will cast more light on their stylistic connections. A tiny fragment of purple silk of the original border gives this painting special importance. It is an evidence of the Imperial grant of purple silk to Monk Hongbian who had worked closely with Zhang Yichao for the expulsion of the Tibetans in 848 AD. It is likely that Monk Hongbian as the religious head of the Hexi area used his connections with the Buddhists of Khotan and Tibet to find an amicable settlement. We know that during the reign of Ral.pa.can “Buddhists in China and Tibet sought mediation, and finally both countries sent representatives to the border. A meeting was held in 821 and a peace treaty concluded” (Shakabpa 1967, p. 49). The text of this treaty is inscribed on the pillar in front of the main gate of the Jokhang in Lhasa. The fraternity of Buddhism had led to this treaty, and the same spirit could have played a role in the re-establishment of Chinese power in Tun-huang in 848 AD. The Scroll of Famous Images shows stylistic and iconographic nexus with Khotan, and it belonged to Monk Hongbian. Monk Hongbian could have persuaded Khotan to play a role in bringing about a rapprochement between Tibet and China. Khotan and Tibet had close relations. Emperor Ral.pa.can of Tibet had invited Khotanese artists to paint Tibetan monasteries, and favoured an ecumenical approach among Buddhist kingdoms.

Islamic conquest of Khotan and Tun-huang

Tun-huang played an important role in Chinese affairs as long as Buddhism prevailed in Central Asia and especially in Khotan. In 938 AD a Chinese envoy to Khotan passed through Tun-huang (Stein 1928, 1, p. 356). The sister of Cao Yuanzhong (reigned 946–974 AD) was married to the king of Khotan. The Ruler of Tun-huang Cao Yanlu (reigned 980–1002 AD) was married to the third daughter of the king of Khotan. Both of them are painted in the caves of Tun-huang (Whitfield 1995b, pp. 336, 337; Giles 1933, 7, p. 570). The fine jade and horses sent by the ruler of Tun-huang to the Liao and Sung courts in 999–1007 came from Khotan and other Central Asian kingdoms. The scroll of the Khotanese Bhadrakalpika-sūtra, dated 943 AD, contains the names of the Thousand Buddhas, who are painted all over the walls of the Tun-

huang caves. There are Khotanese translations of the Chinese explanations on three pothi (long manuscript) leaves of the 9th century illustrating six female spirits that protect children (Whitfield 1983, 2, p. 75). Khotan's links with Tun-huang were between the royal families, by exchange of books and scholars, as well as by sharing of life like the appeasing of spirits causing children's diseases.

In 1010 AD, Kadir Khan Yusuf, the ruler of Kashghar, decided to conquer Khotan. The conquest of Khotan must have been completed between the years 1013 and 1032 (EIs. 5.38). Gardizi mentions a Muslim cemetery to the north of the town in 1040. The Buddhists of Khotan must have fled for refuge to Tun-huang and to other parts of China along with their sūtras, sacred relics, and other precious belongings. There were earlier precedents in the Iranian world. After the defeat of the Sassanian dynasty in the mid-7th century, the Persians sought refuge in T'ang China as the only safe place for them. The forces of the Caliph Uthman crossed the Amur River and threatened to invade Sogdiana, the Sogdians started fleeing from their homeland for China. Seventy years after the fall of the Sassanian dynasty there were hundreds of thousands of Iranian refugees in Ch'ang-an and other cities. Ch'ang-an became a centre of Persian culture (Nara Exhibition 1988, p. 26). A massive influx of refugees into Tun-huang must have taken place after the Islamic conquest and the collapse of Buddhist culture in Khotan. The royalty, nobility, common people and monks must have arrived in Tun-huang where the queen was a princess of Khotan. The tiger monk symbolises the fleeing Buddhist monks, trying to save relics, precious statues and above all sacred books. They knew well that the Chinese were coming to Khotan not only for jade, but also for original manuscripts of Sanskrit books. Thirteen paintings of a monk accompanied by a tiger have been discovered at Tun-huang (Giès 1996, pp. 151–152). Jean-Pierre Drège describes two of them in the Musée Guimet, and remarks "the figure remains mysterious". He notes the different identifications by scholars without accepting any. One identification is Dharmatāla. Dharmatāla acts as a servant to the Sixteen Arhats. He carries a bundle of books on his back, there is an image of Amitābha before him, and he holds a water vase and a fly-whisk. When Śākyamuni Buddha attained nirvāṇa, his followers feared that the Dharma would decline as their Spiritual Teacher was no longer amongst them. Dharmatāla consoled them with the words: "The teaching of the Buddha is still with us. Do not be filled with doubt and fear..." When the Sixteen Arhats visited China at the invitation of the Chinese Emperor Thaṅ Dzuḥi.dzun, they observed the summer retreat enjoined by Buddhist vinaya, on the Ha-la-śan hill. There were many dangerous animals on the hill. Dharmatāla created a tiger from his right knee to guard the Arhats. Thus the tiger is portrayed to his right (Dagyab 1977, p. 113). Drège is cautious to leave it as "initially identified as... Dharmatrāta" (Giès 1996, p. 152). The ambience of Dharmatāla 'Protector (*tāla* = *trāta*) of Dharma' for the perils faced by the Khotanese diaspora is evident.

Drège notes the following characteristics of painting EO 1138: (i) He walks over rough and arid ground from which sparse tufts of grass grow. (ii) He appears to be exhausted. (iii) The nose betrays his non-Chinese origin. (iv) He holds a rosary in the right hand and a crooked staff in the left. (v) Two knives and a censer hangs from his waist. (vi) The basket on his back contains sūtra scrolls. (viii) A tiger walks on

his right. The tiger is 虎 *hu* in Chinese, and 胡 *Hu* normally implies an Iranian person (Bailey 1982, p. 95). The character *Hu* for an Iranian also means a 'beard' (Dict. of Giles no. 4930). The thick black beard of the Iranians was famous: Kālidāsa in his *Raghuvamśa* alludes to the beards of the fallen Persian soldiers which made the whole battle-field appear as if strewn with beehives. The painting reflects the arid topography of the Central Asian route from Khotan. He is dead tired because of the harried fleeing away from persecution. The physiognomy of the nose and the tiger (*hu*) mark him out as a *Hu*, an Iranian monk from Khotan. The rosary and crooked staff speak of his piety and devotion. The two knives hanging by the waist are for protection. The books in the basket are scrolls and not pothis in Indian style. In Tibetan illustrations too, Indian teachers are sometimes shown with scrolls and not with pothis. The Sanskrit–Khotanese bilingual scroll from Tun-huang (Pelliot [P] 5538) records the conversation of a Khotanese monk who had been to India and was now going to China to visit Mañjuśrī on Wu-t'ai-shan. He had books of Sūtra, Abhidharma, Vinaya and Vajrayāna. The other person to whom he was speaking was interested in Vajrayāna (Bailey 1937, pp. 528–529). The Khotanese monk must have brought Sanskrit manuscripts from India and was taking them along to China to defray the expenses of his pilgrimage to Wu-t'ai-shan. Nepalese scrolls have three rondels at the top: Dharma-maṇḍala, Buddha-maṇḍala and Saṅgha-maṇḍala. The Nine Scriptures of Nepalese Buddhism are shown as manuscripts in the Dharma-maṇḍala. Likewise the Chinese expression to secure texts after arduous journeys is 'to obtain the Dharma', where 'Dharma' means books. Dharma in East Javanese royal names refers to literature (Lokesh Chandra 1998, p. 239f). To save the Dharma, the Tiger Monk is carrying books, in spite of the fact that he is loaded with everyday objects.

Another painting EO 1141 has a cartouche which terms it an image of Prabhūtaratna (Chin. Baosheng). This painting is in the Nakayama collection, while the other eleven paintings of the Tiger Monk do not bear any name. Khotan is called Ratna-janapada in the Khotanese panegyric of Vijayasāṅgrāma (P 2787. Bailey 1982, p. 71). The Chinese phrase for Khotan is 大寶子國 "Khotan of Great Jewels". As the monks were from the Ratna Country, the Country of Precious and Profuse Ratnas, they were nicknamed Prabhūtaratna. They were highly pious and full of devotion and are depicted as such in the scrolls. Prabhūtaratna refers to Khotan as the Land of Ratnas as well as to the Tathāgata Prabhūtaratna who occurs in the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra as a former Buddha in the distant world of Ratnavisuddhā. The nearly complete Petrovsky manuscript of the Sanskrit Saddharma-puṇḍarīka and fragments of other manuscripts have been found in Khotan. It was a popular text there and the Khotanese refugee monks could have given sermons on them. Rites and ceremonies of this sūtra were popular in China and Japan (Visser 1935, 2, pp. 416–702). The risk of Muslims pursuing Buddhist monks was preempted by the tiger. A letter of Ma Wên-pin dated 970 (Stein 1973) has his verses on a tiger in a wall-painting at Tun-huang. The verses end:

"Let a mere rumour of his presence be heard by the evil sort,
And which of them will then dare to stir up trouble and calamity?"
(Giles 1965, p. 32)

Walling up of cave 17

The refugee monks from Khotan must have reported on the demolition of monasteries and burning of libraries of Buddhist manuscripts in their country.

There is a chilling account of the last days of Nalanda in the Biography of Chag lotsava Chos.rje.dpal, the Tibetan monk-pilgrim who was in Bihar in 1234–1236 AD (Roerich 1951). Warned of a fresh raid on Nalanda, the only monk there, nonagenarian Rāhula-śrībhadrā and his Tibetan disciple Chag lotsava fled. The disciple carried the master on his back along with a small supply of rice, sugar and a few *books*. Similarly, because of the threat of impending raids by Islamised Khotanese, the wealth of manuscripts had to be saved. The walling up of cave 17 must have been done to conceal the scriptures. Even in modern times, during the communist destruction of monasteries and private chapels in the Mongolian People's Republic, statues and manuscripts were buried in the ground for being exhumed in the future. Professor Rinchen used to call them “cemeteries of the gods and books”. The elder generation of the Mongols knew the whereabouts of these cemeteries. Books were of high value in the Buddhist tradition. The library of Nalanda is called Dharmagañja ‘Treasury of Dharma’ in Sum.pa.mkhan.po (S.C. Das, Pag.sam.jon.zang p. 92). The king of Suvarṇadvīpa (in Indonesia) had a special concord with King Devapāla (ca. 810–850) for having manuscripts copied in Nalanda. The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra, which was popular in Khotan, has a special chapter on its preservation: those who write, keep, or comprehend it will be reborn in paradise.

The hasty and disordered heaping of the rolled-up bundles in cave 17 “indicate protective measures adopted in the face of some great impending danger” (Giès 1996, p. 14). Pelliot surmised that the most recent documents date from around 1030 AD, which corresponds to the Hsi-hsia invasion in 1035 AD. So the closure of cave 17 was connected with the Hsi-hsia invasion. But, now we know for sure that the dated manuscripts are not later than 1002 AD, and there is no evidence in the Hsi-hsia documents that such an action was necessary. The Hsi-hsia were devout Buddhists. King Li Yuanhao (reigned 1003–1048 AD) of the Hsi-hsia proclaimed himself emperor in 1038 AD. Buddhism was the basis of his rule, and he sought the Sung edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka from the Sung court. About eighty caves were built or renovated at Tun-huang in the Hsi-hsia period (1036–1227 AD). The Hsi-hsia cannot be the cause of the walling up of cave 17.

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