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The Dunhuang Manuscripts Project: Reaping the Rewards

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At last the efforts of all who have contributed to the Dunhuang Manuscripts Project are being rewarded: the first published volumes of facsimiles have appeared. By the end of 1991 the Sichuan People's Publishing House had produced two volumes of *Ying cang Dunhuang wen xian/Dunhuang manuscripts in British collections* (Chinese texts other than Buddhist scriptures), and volumes 3 and 4 were available in final page proof. Owing to endless delays, the last volumes will not appear until late 1993 but then the most significant and frequently consulted portion of the manuscripts found at Dunhuang by Sir Aurel Stein — secular texts from the early 5th to the 10th century A.D. — will be available to a very wide public. The manuscripts have been photographed and printed in such a way as to ensure that the text is often clearer, and frequently more legible, than in the original. In the past, a moral obligation was felt to grant access to the originals, for the microfilm substitute was notoriously unclear, particularly in reproduction of the secular manuscripts. Now the existence of high-quality published facsimiles will make preservation of the originals much easier.

Many people have worked hard towards this end. From November 1990 to May 1991, Zhuang Xiaoming, photographer of the Chinese Buddhist Association, struggled to complete his 14,000 photographs, helped by Wang Tao, a part-time Ph.D. student at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Zhuang Xiaoming was supported by a generous grant from the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and, latterly, by the Getty Grant Program (which has been involved in preservation work in the Caves of the Ten Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang, where these manuscripts were discovered). Wang Tao was given a part-time grant by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust. Shortly before Zhuang Xiaoming returned to China, Rong Xinjiang of Peking University's History Faculty and Dr. Fang Guangchang of the Rare Book Section, National Library of China, arrived to begin cataloging the Stein Dunhuang "fragments". They were both supported by the K. C. Wong Education Foundation, their awards administered by the British Academy. As they worked on the identification of the "fragments", all of which had been photographed by Zhuang Xiaoming, two more conservators, Dai Liqiang and Shao Zhuangwen, both from the Liaoning Provincial Museum in Shenyang, began the last stage of the conservation work. Their living expenses and some materials were provided through the grant from the Getty Program. Dai and Shao sewed the majority of the "fragments", some 6,500 items, into Melinex sheeting during their stay in London from May to September 1991. After encapsulation, the manuscripts have been placed in specially-made folders. The few tens of so-called "fragments" that are hardly fragmentary (in practice, longer than 40 cm, the largest size that fits comfortably on the shelves of the cabinets made to house the Stein collection) are being mounted as scrolls by the staff of the Oriental and India Office Collections' Conservation Studio.
The last stage of the project is the production of the English-language sections of volume 15. Dr. Judith Boltz was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship and arrived in September to work for a year producing an English-language "catalog/index". From the beginning she was assisted by Susan Whitfield, a postgraduate student at SOAS whose research is in the field of Tang literature. Sha Zhi, a Tang expert from Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, helped Dr. Boltz and Susan Whitfield in their work from January to September. Funds to support Susan's part-time work on the project have been donated by the Universities' China Committee. When Dr. Boltz suddenly returned to the United States for personal reasons, it was most fortunate that Susan was able to take over the work. The "catalog/index" will in practice be far more than just that, for the brief titles assigned by the Chinese editors of the series are frequently not translatable. Their brevity and the very different context render them incomprehensible in English. We are concerned to produce useful entries, to summarize the state of current work on the texts, and to create a bibliographical data base that will provide a useful starting-point for future Dunhuang studies, whether exegetical or analytical. Both Susan and Judy were helped by Professor Sha Zhi of Renmin Daxue (supported by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust) who worked with us from January to September 1992 and was a most helpful and patient "tutor".

The work of Susan Whitfield and Judith Boltz is to some extent a revision of Lionel Giles's *Descriptive catalogue of the Chinese manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum* (1957) in the light of current scholarship, but it will also include sections of the "fragments". It seems likely that the Chinese editorial side will remain faithful to the original title of the publication and publish only those "fragments" deemed to be non-scriptural, saving canonical Buddhist texts for a later publication. Rong Xinjiang is currently working on a catalog of the non-canonical "fragments", having returned to Peking in August via a Tang studies conference in Hong Kong. The far smaller number of items involved makes it seem likely that his catalog, which will give complete bibliographical descriptions, going far beyond the terse definitions in *Ying cang Dunhuang wen xian*, could appear within a couple of years. Dr. Fang Guangchang's catalog of the Buddhist "fragments" will necessarily take much longer.

The end of the project is in sight, though publication will mean a new beginning of Dunhuang studies as the material becomes widely available. I hope that the British Library can take pride in its pioneering role; we now learn that the Leningrad Dunhuang manuscripts have been photographed for publication in China, and negotiations are underway to do the same for the Pelliot collection in Paris. A number of Chinese publishing houses have been competing to carry out the same sort of facsimile publication as ours, for it is recognized as one of the most prestigious and significant publishing ventures carried out in China. Indeed, the first volumes won a prize as one of the ten best-produced books in China in 1991. However, in order to achieve the end-product of a handsome and useful publication, a great deal of effort has been demanded from British Library staff.

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