

Concluding Remarks

The Dunhuang manuscripts are the largest body of handwritten texts that have survived from medieval China. They come from the north-western region of the modern People's Republic, which for most of history lay either in the frontier zone or beyond the borders of the Chinese states. During the period that forms the timeframe of this book (i.e. the Guiyijun period), the region was an independent kingdom with close ties to Central Asian polities. Even though nearly two-thirds of the total number of manuscripts were written in Chinese, the original collection contained an array of other languages, evidencing the multilingual and multicultural nature of local society during this period. The question that arises concerning the Chinese manuscripts is how representative they are of Chinese manuscript culture in general, that is, of the literary tradition that had existed, but did not survive, in Central China.

Although the library cave at Dunhuang yielded an enormous body of manuscripts, medieval books were also discovered in significant quantities at other sites. Excavations at sites in the vicinity of Turfan in Xinjiang or at the ruins of Khara-khoto in Inner Mongolia have brought to light a large amount of manuscripts and printed books written in Chinese and other languages. Equally valuable is the multitude of early manuscripts preserved in Japan, whether imported from the continent or copied from imported exemplars in Japan. It is significant that all of the major discoveries were made on the peripheries of the Chinese cultural sphere in regions that lay—at the time when the manuscripts were actually produced—outside the borders of the Chinese empire. Furthermore, the Silk Road sites of Turfan, Dunhuang and Khara-khoto all yielded manuscripts in multiple languages, attesting to the multicultural makeup of the regions. Although the Chinese language and script remained in wide use, politically, or even culturally, each of these regions represented a unique amalgam of cultures and languages, which continued to evolve in time.

It is inevitable that the recent history and the current situation of these locations should influence how their past is perceived today. Turfan (i.e. Turpan) today is a prefecture-level city in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with a large Uyghur population.⁵⁴⁴ Although the modern Uyghurs are probably not the direct descendants of the pre-modern Uighurs who produced the Old Uighur—and many of the Chinese—manuscripts excavated at local sites, their

⁵⁴⁴ I intentionally use spelling to differentiate the ethnonyms of modern Uyghurs and the Uighurs of the pre-modern period.

presence makes it much easier to envision Turfan as a non-Chinese region. The site of Khara-khoto had been part of the Tangut realm since the early eleventh century until the fourteenth. The city survived the Mongol conquest but was destroyed by Ming forces, who redirected the course of the river that acted as the main water supply, turning the area into arid desert. As a result, the site was abandoned and the ruins remained under sand until their re-discovery and excavation by a Russian expedition at the beginning of the twentieth century. The city never developed into a modern Chinese city and had no history of Chinese presence at any point during its existence. It is easy, therefore, to conceive it as an 'ancient' city in a non-Chinese region.

Dunhuang, however, has had a history of Chinese presence spanning over two millennia and is firmly established as part of China today. Although there have been longer stretches of time when the Chinese states exercised no real authority over the region, it has been under the control of the central dynasties and regimes since the mid-seventeenth century. The political and historiographical discourses over these past centuries have greatly contributed to envisioning the oasis as a Chinese city that had 'always' been part of the imagined continuum of 'China'. But we know for a fact that this was by no means always the case, as there were periods when control over the region was exercised by political entities not governed by the central dynasties. Appropriately, it is these periods that are the least documented in traditional histories, making them almost invisible when viewed from the perspective of Chinese historiography.

This book has examined manuscripts produced during one such non-Chinese period, when the region was under the rule of the Zhang and later the Cao families. Their reign is known as the period of the Return to Allegiance Circuit (i.e. Guiyijun), an appellation that referenced the domain's relationship to the Tang empire and its successor states. Otherwise the region was called Shazhou, a name that was also directly adopted into other languages (e.g. Şacū in Khotanese, Sha cu in Tibetan and Šaču in Old Uighur). One of the arguments of this book is that local manuscript culture during this period differed substantially from earlier periods and was characterised by a strong presence of Central Asian elements. Guiyijun society was much less 'Chinese' than normally believed. This, of course, did not prevent the ruling stratum from adopting a rhetoric portraying them as loyal subjects of the Tang and its successor states.

In other words, the caves, murals, silk paintings and a considerable portion of the manuscripts were produced by a mixed society that combined elements of Chinese and Central Asian origin. Guiyijun culture, at least as far as it appears in the surviving body of manuscripts and paintings, was a unique amalgam of Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian and Uighur elements. The oasis developed a new

type of culture that was not yet in existence when Dunhuang was still part of the Tang and Tibetan Empires. This regional culture, however, was not arbitrary, instable or volatile. Most of the patterns and features described in this book had been in place for over a century, demonstrating a continuity throughout most of the period. They also exhibit a number of typological similarities with other regions, both in East and Central Asia.

To demonstrate the unique nature of Guiyijun scribal culture, this book discussed four groups of manuscripts (organised into four chapters), each selected on the basis of shared codicological and textual features. Although the selection criteria were different for each group, the manuscripts exhibited considerable overlap, suggesting that they had at least partly been produced by the same segments of society. The first of the four groups are multiple-text codices and concertinas, i.e. book forms that appeared in Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period and represented a distinct deviation from the dominant scroll. These booklets contain a series of shorter Buddhist spells and scriptures with an apotropaic function. They typically reflect the hand of several individuals, who may or may not have belonged to the same family. The fact that each individual copied several pages in their own hand demonstrate that personal participation was essential for ensuring the manuscript's religious efficacy. The physical form of the booklets and their small size suggest that believers carried them on their person as amulets. The unfinished exemplars featuring blank pages reveal that the donors added the texts successively over an extended period of time and the actual completion of these booklets was never a goal in and of itself. In this sense, they were not 'incomplete' but still useable, having the capacity for accommodating additional contributions.

The second group of manuscripts are scrolls with student colophons. Although there is evidence for the existence of other types of schools in Dunhuang, the majority of manuscripts with such colophons were produced by lay students from elite families studying in Buddhist monasteries. Despite the monastic setting, the students almost always copied secular texts, including classical texts such as the *Lunyu* and *Xiaojing*, or primers such as the *Qianziwen*, *Taigong jiajiao* and *Baixing zhang*. Among the shared characteristics of the scrolls is the presence of scribble-like notes on the verso, which former scholarship has often described as random jottings or writing exercises. This book argues that they were neither. Instead, many of those so-called 'scribbles' constituted records of assignments students were expected to complete elsewhere. As their handwriting makes clear, the students writing them were usually not those who had copied the main text on the recto but subsequent students who continued using the scroll while they studied at the same monastery. This means, on the one

hand, that the seemingly random notes on the verso had a practical import, and on the other, that students continued to engage with the manuscripts for years or even decades.

Manuscripts and paintings featuring bits of text reading from left to right form the third group examined in this book. Chapter Three divided the examples into two typologically distinct groups, depending on whether the lines of text read horizontally and vertically. Pothi leaves with horizontal lines of Chinese characters point to a connection with Tibetan scribal culture and Chan Buddhism. Examples written in vertical columns present a less homogenous group and could be divided into three subgroups according to the context in which they occurred.

The first subgroup is made up of examples that occur in manuscripts with mandalas and other geometric designs related to esoteric Buddhist practices. Once again, these have an obvious link to Tibetan scribal culture, which was the catalyst for the change of direction in writing. Such cases combine the Chinese (i.e. vertical) and Tibetan (i.e. left to right) ways of writing. Similarly, the second subgroup comprises manuscripts with examples of left-to-right columns but in an entirely different context. These examples are typically shorter bits of texts or disconnected textual fragments written on the margins or verso of scrolls produced by students. This subgroup seems to be closely related to the third subgroup, which incorporates left-to-right examples of donor inscriptions on votive paintings written on silk, canvas and paper. The paintings were commissioned by prominent families in Dunhuang which commanded the financial resources required for the production of such art objects. The fact that almost all donor inscriptions read from left to right indicates that in such contexts the direction of writing was a deliberate choice and possibly a means of self-expression. Of the writing systems available in the region at the end of the first millennium, it was the genetically related Sogdian and Uighur scripts that featured vertical columns reading in a left-to-right direction. As a result, this way of writing suggests the influence of Uighur and/or Sogdian scribal culture.

The last of the four groups of manuscripts, examined in the book's final chapter, comprises manuscripts with fragments of texts known as association circulars. In many cases the circulars are incomplete, often only a few characters in length. When long enough to determine the direction of writing, they often read from left to right and are found on the verso of scrolls written by lay students. The circulars often include the list of intended recipients, and the names evidence of a strong Central Asian, more specifically Sogdian, substratum in Guiyijun society. In addition to the surnames commonly linked with a Sogdian background (e.g. An, Kang, Mi, Shi), the given names in particular

reflect naming practices that differ not only from those in transmitted literature but also from earlier periods in Dunhuang. Among the unexpected features of names is the relatively narrow stock of given names, many of which seem to translate or transcribe non-Chinese names. Some of the given names can be traced to Central Asian theophoric names (i.e. Servant of the Buddha, Servant of Purity), whereas others seem to have been childhood names or apotropaic nicknames that continued to be used in adulthood. Overall, the given names attest to a shift in naming practices, which in turn points to changes in the cultural makeup of local society.

The four groups of manuscripts analysed here all date to the Guiyijun period and show a number of intersections. The influence of Central Asian manuscript cultures is detectable in three of the four chapters, namely, Chapters One (i.e. multiple-text codices and concertinas), Three (i.e. texts reading from left to right) and Four (name lists in association circulars). Another overlap is the connection with lay students studying in local monasteries, perceptible in all but the first chapter. Most significantly, all four groups are closely interlinked, in one way or another, with the life of the local Buddhist community.

A major theme of this book was its emphasis on codicological and palaeographic examination, arguing that these could offer insights into how the manuscripts had been produced, used and, at times, re-used. Some of the features analysed here, such as the direction of writing, may seem a technical matter, a pedantic interest in insignificant details. But it is precisely these aspects that can help document the influence of other scribal cultures or offer objective criteria for dating undated manuscripts and artefacts. Equally important is that they evidence the unique characteristics of the Guiyijun's regional culture in comparison with earlier periods.

The appreciation of manuscripts as physical artefacts is by no means a modern preoccupation. As shown in Chapter One, the codices and concertinas produced by lay believers were very likely carried on the body and performed an apotropaic function. Although the texts may have also been recited at particular occasions, the booklets themselves were thought to possess numinous power and functioned as amulets. The same holds true for the dhāraṇī-amulets discussed in Chapter Three, some of which were either extremely brief or in Sanskrit, and thus illegible for most believers. They were meant to be worn, rather than read.

Neither was the value attached to the physical manuscript an exclusively religious phenomenon, as it was part of the equation even for scrolls with secular texts. Chapter Two demonstrates how some students used scrolls written by earlier students for recording information related to their own studies. Rather

than doing this on a blank sheet of paper, they employed a scroll copied by an older peer, sometimes a member of the same family. Although in such manuscripts the object itself possessed no religious potency, its physical form bore a significance beyond its mere function as the carrier of texts. It embodied a continuity between successive students who studied in the same monastery and who likely belonged to the same social and political circle.

It is also relevant that the entire Dunhuang corpus was found inside a hidden side-chamber of a Buddhist cave. Whether this vast body of chiefly Buddhist manuscripts came into being through a gradual accumulation of religious books no longer needed (but which could not be destroyed either) or formed part of the burial of a clergy, or both, it is clear that the sealing of the chamber intended to preserve the manuscripts in their physical form. Once written down on paper, the texts could not be separated from their writing support. Just as the act of copying scriptures constituted a ritual exercise with a meaning going beyond the transcription of the text, the resulting manuscripts came to embody the Teaching, even when damaged to the point of illegibility. As a result, they could no longer be disposed of or destroyed.

