

## Eastern and Western Conservation Approaches reflected on Dunhuang Manuscripts

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**Introduction:** The Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered in a hidden cave in the northwest of China in 1900 (Whitfield et al. 2000, 34). These manuscripts were subsequently separated and dispersed around and in doing so have documented the cultural exchanges between the East and the West in the past and continue to do so in the present (Lee 2000). The manuscripts have been collected, treated, and researched by both European and Asian national institutions including countries such as Japan, France, Germany and Russia (IDP 2008). The holding institutions' perspective on its ownership reflects the different attitudes of the national institutions to past events. For these reasons the manuscripts are an ideal collection to investigate a perceived difference between Eastern and Western approaches to conservation decisions. In order to achieve this aim this research focuses on the Dunhuang manuscripts that are currently held in two institutions; the British Library in London (BL) and the National Library of China in Beijing (NLC). These institutions provide a focus around the notion of an Eastern and Western perspective. They are selective representations and are studied with a recognition that the differences between the East and West are much more complicated. The research was undertaken in a period of four months, based on the existing published literature on the Dunhuang manuscripts and written materials on related conservation and theoretical approaches. Communications in the form of personal interviews and e-mail were also carried out with relevant members from both libraries.

**Key Words:** Eastern and Western Conservation Dunhuang Manuscripts

### East and West

Following the removal and dispersion of the Dunhuang manuscripts of Cave 17 in the early 1900s, the collections were subject to a differing conservation history. That reflects the specific cultural' perspective of the different host institutions. Since the acquisition of the London col-

lection (Note 1: When Stein's Dunhuang collection first arrived in the UK it was stored in the British Museum. After the establishment of the BL in the 1970s, the manuscript division of the collection was transported into this new library. This collection is referred to as the London collection) the manuscripts have been valued as documents by British scholars and distributed accordingly into the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts (OPBM) in the British Museum (Barnard and Wood 2004, 97). This can be viewed through the framework of "Orientalism" in which the collection was first acquired and conservation decisions were made (Said 2003, 35). From the beginning of the twentieth century until the mid 1970s the British restorers/conservators have treated their Dunhuang scrolls using a Western framework of care that valued the manuscripts as "document" and utilized bookbinding and print mounting techniques in their repair and conservation. This notion of "Orientalism" is reinforced by the restricted access given to Chinese scholar's to many manuscript in the London collection in 1930s (Wood 2007, 20). This can be explained through the belief in Western domination and superiority over the "other" at the time. In contrast, Beijing's conservation treatment in the 1920s had showed a division between the Dunhuang collection's artistic and textual characteristics. Only a small amount of the collection was treated during this time, because the collection was kept in storage for most of the twentieth century. However, when there was a treatment, the collection was valued as Chinese heritage and the traditional Chinese painting mounting formats were used to repair the Dunhuang manuscripts (Zhang, P. 2008b, 183). It can therefore be said that the two institutions began with diverse attitudes and theoretical approaches toward their collection.

Both the BL and the NLC later identified problems related to their previous conservation methods and begin to seek for more appropriate treatments (Barnard and Wood 2004, 101). The challenge in conserving the Dunhuang manuscripts leads to the new phase of collaboration between the Eastern and Western institutions. In 1975, Lawson and Nelson from the BL visited Japan and the NLC and were exposed to the benefits and methods of the Eastern traditions (Barnard 1996, 17). Later, in 1990 Mr. Du from the NLC was sent to the BL to work on London's Dunhuang collection. He was able to exchange his Chinese experience with the BL's conservators and derive benefit from their past errors and current approaches and brought what he learned back to Beijing to share with other staff members (Zhang, P. 2008b, 184). Those are two early examples of successful interaction and exchanges between Eastern and Western institutions. Both libraries share and exchange knowledge that broaden their prospective and led to the development of their present approach to conservation. This can be illustrated in the following two examples: the removal of ancient patches and the conservation material used in the libraries. Due to space limitation, the conservation history of the manuscripts cannot be discussed in details and interactions with other institutions are excluded. Please refers to Table 1: "Timeline" for more detailed information.

**Table 1: Timeline**

Time	London's collection	National Library of China's collection	Related Events
1900	Discovery of the Library Cave		
1907	Stein's purchases sent to British Museum		1908 French sinologist Paul Pelliot arrived at Dunhuang
1909—1910	1909: Collection arrived in British Museum 1909: Conservation work started immediately	Remaining manuscripts were transported to Beijing	
1911—1939	1918: Repair work done by British Museum Bindery • Lining with thick grey paper • Paste adhesive and animal glue 1920s: Detaching of the original inscribed patches	Application of traditional Chinese hand scroll full mounting technique	1911: Republic of China founded
		1930s: Collection moved to Shanghai for safe storage	1924: Langdon Warner's visit to Mogao
		1936—1937: visiting scholar Xiang Da tried to gain access to the London collection	1925: Palace Museum was founded
			1937: Second Sino-Japanese War
1940—1945	Stein's collection stored in Wales for safe keeping		World War II 1944: Dunhuang Research Institute established
1946—1949	1946: Collection return to London 1946—1973: Repair work • Thick Kraft paper, a Japanese tissue, silk gauze • Wheat paste, Clam and Stalex proprietary adhesives		1945—1949: Chinese Civil war 1946: First Dunhuang Conference 1947: Second Dunhuang Conference 1949: People's Republic of China founded
1950		1950: Collection moved back to Beijing	1951: Dunhuang Institute for Cultural Relics founded.

Time	London's collection	National Library of China's collection	Related Events
1960s	Late 1960s; almost 1000 fragments rolled into tight manilla scrolls by Alf Crowley		1961: Mogao caves listed as China's cultural Treasures of National Importance
1970s	1973: Collection transferred to the British Library		1964: Venice Charter
	1970s: Use of thermoplastic polyester films		1966—1976: Cultural Revolution in China
	1975: Peter Lawson and Howard Nelson's visit to China		
	1975—1983: The BL favoured mounting the manuscripts as oriental paintings.		
1980s	1985: Mark Barnard sent to the National Library	1985: Conservation work using traditional hand scroll mounting method on small parts of the collection	1987: Establishment of Dunhuang Academy
	1988: Peter Lawson sent to the National Library		1987: Mogao listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site
1990s	1990: Fully air-conditioned storage	1990: Du Weisheng visited the British Library 1991: Dunhuang manuscripts' conservation program began	
1994			IDP founded
After 2000		2004: Newly constructed modern storage	

(The chronology of the two libraries' conservation history is the result of consultations with members of the current library staff in the two institutions and research of the existing written materials. Please keep in mind, this may be a selective interpretation of the history of the two libraries. )

## Differing Approaches

The successful and beneficial exchanges between the BL and the NLC has resulted in developments in the way both institutions approach the conservation of their Dunhuang collections, leading to greater similarities in approach. However some of their conservation decisions are different which reflects the different identities of the two libraries and their reasons for conserving their Dunhuang collection. The expression of the difference between the two institutions

can be seen through the attitudes toward the removal of patches and the choice of conservation materials.

When the scrolls were first discovered there were many areas of previous repairs on some manuscripts. Based on the “diary of repair work” discovered within the Dunhuang collection, it is known that many of the ancient repairs were performed by the local Buddhist monks (Zhang, P. 2008b, 183). The monks used leftover sutra paper and discarded documents to create patches which they pasted to the back of the cracked scrolls. For this reason some of the patches contain valuable written inscriptions. Prior to the sealing of the cave, the monks seemed to use large, hard patching paper in the belief that it was better for preventing the manuscripts from further damage (Zhang, P. 2008b, 183). Unfortunately, the eventual outcome of their repair work has, in some cases, turned out to be the opposite of what they had intended. The thickness of the patches made the rolling of manuscripts difficult and caused uneven thickness throughout the scroll. Both of these lead to further cracking and creasing of the manuscript, which continues to cause conservation issues today.

The above conservation issues and the textural knowledge of the inscribed patches led both the BL and the NLC to detach many of the ancient patches from the back of their manuscripts in the past (Zhang, P. 2008a, 88; Wood 2007, 20). However, the removal of those patches is an invasive process that results in direct interference with the scroll, which conflicts with the principle of minimal intervention and alters the original integrity of the manuscripts (Du 2008, 117). Today, both institutions have taken a step back to reassess their approaches to the detachment of the patches. As a result, the NLC has chosen to detach patches that may threaten the preservation of the manuscripts, or any inscribed patches that they deem extremely valuable for research studies (Zhang, P. 2008a, 88). The NLC places high value on the importance of discovering rare textual information. On occasion they have even valued the inscribed patches over the original manuscript, such as in the case of manuscript “Wei 86” (Hu 2008, 155).

On the other hand, the BL tries to maintain the integrity of the manuscript at the extensive level. Even in some cases where the patches on the scroll are compromising the condition of the manuscripts they are left in place in order to maintain the integrity of the object (M. Barnard, pers. comm., 20th July 2009). The BL receives many requests to reveal hidden text so that they can be viewed. Every patched manuscript is an individual case and a different conservation decision is made according to the situation (M. Barnard, pers. comm., 20th July 2009). The BL conservators try to find ways to reveal important inscriptions using methods such as sophisticated photographic techniques without compromising the original format of the manuscripts (Wood 2007, 21). However, it is not always possible to reveal a patch while keeping it on its manuscript. When an alternative cannot be found, the patches may still be detached from the back of the scroll.

Based on the above evidence one can see the two libraries began with similar approaches, which were to automatically detach the existing patches from the scrolls. In re-examining this

approach, the two institutions developed different viewpoints, which are now reflected in their approaches on the collection. The NLC values textual knowledge over keeping the materials' physical integrity. They want to reveal more information and are willing to make some sacrifices. On the other hand, the BL values the unique history of every scroll, so all parts should be preserved and compromises should only be made at a time of necessity. In comparison, the NLC has a more selective value, while the BL tries to include a wide range of values and handles each manuscript as an individual case. This has to do with the two libraries' different identities and their motivation for conserving their Dunhuang collection.

The BL approach was explained by Mr. Barnard, the Chief Conservator in the Oriental Conservation Studio of BL. The BL currently identifies itself as the "custodian" of their Dunhuang collection. By avoiding the terms "keeper" and "owner," the BL cleverly avoids the sensitive topic of ownership. As a library, one of the BL's aims for conserving the Dunhuang manuscripts is to provide access to the public (M. Barnard, pers. comm., 20th July 2009). "...we have to be seen as a responsible custodian for that material and it is only right if the materials can be safely handled by researchers" (M. Barnard, pers. comm., 20th July 2009). The BL displays their manuscripts in relation to diverse audience. From textbook historians to Buddhist scholars, from professional researchers to students, the BL tries to take into consideration a range of needs and interests, so they aim to preserve all parts of the manuscripts and tried to avoid alterations to the original artifact.

In contrast, the Dunhuang manuscripts held by the NLC are identified as a national treasure of China and the NLC, as one of the leading national libraries, it is placed with the responsibility of housing the documents (Zhang, Z. 2008, 3 and 13). The NLC makes it clear that the collection is part of Chinese cultural heritage (Zhang, P. 2008b, 182). They seek to conserve the collection so that Chinese culture can be handed down to future Chinese generations (Su 2008, 5). Ms. Su, the former vice-curator of the Ancient Books Library of NLC, said in her research report that it is their duty and obligation to preserve the ancient manuscripts so "the Chinese civilization can be passed down and we will not fall short of our ancestors' expectations and disappoint our descendents" (Su 2008, 5). The Dunhuang collection is clearly identified as part of Chinese ancestral heritage and it is the NLC's "filial duty" to preserve that heritage.

The above notion is also reflective in the choice of conservation material used in the two libraries. The BL conservators use long fibred Japanese kozo paper as their primary repair paper (Lawson and Barnard 1996, 11). This is because their conservators found the traditionally produced Japanese *kozo* paper has the closest resemblance to the Dunhuang manuscript's characteristics (M. Barnard, pers. comm., 20th July 2009). From a Chinese perspective this suggests that the BL is valuing the physical condition of the manuscripts over preserving the cultural integrity. In addition, the BL also has a less apparent division between different Asian cultures. This is made clear by their use of Japanese brushes as their Dunhuang conservation

tools. On the contrary, the NLC conservators use a Chinese produced hand-made long fibered mulberry paper as their repair paper (Hu 2007, 115). They believe that Chinese objects should be conserved with Chinese materials and China (as the world's earliest paper producer) has the ability to make high quality paper to supply its own conservation demands (B. Liu, *pers. comm.*, 20th July 2009). Apart from paper the NLC's other conservation materials, tools, and dyes are all produced in China (B. Liu, *pers. comm.*, 20th July 2009). This is not only for economic reasons, but also because of a feeling that Chinese materials are the most appropriate for this work. The NLC conservators point out that traditional Chinese materials have already been through thousands of years of experimentation and their results are predictable (Du 2008, 121). They believe that despite cultural or material reasons Chinese artifact should be conserved with Chinese materials (B. Liu, *pers. comm.*, 20th July 2009). For these reasons, unlike the BL, the NLC does not mix other Asian materials with their Chinese materials. This can be seen to reflect a difference between the Eastern and Western perspectives on the Dunhuang collection. Through the BL's mix use of the Eastern materials, traces of Orientalism that generalized what was not the Occident as the "Orient" can still be seen.

## Conclusion

Apart from some minor details the two institutions share many conservation treatments, but their individual historical, cultural, and political backgrounds have intermingled and created the different current perspectives. As an Enlightenment institution, the BL still retains the idea of universal human culture and the belief of a world of knowledge under one roof, which is in opposition to the popular modern idea of cultural patrimony. Because of the London collection's origin, the BL not only faces the challenging question of rightful ownership, but also the pressure of looking after another culture's ancient heritage. The BL tries to be a responsible custodian by taking great care in its decision-making, while trying to please a diverse audience from both Eastern and Western backgrounds (M. Barnard, *pers. comm.*, 20th July 2009). Although it is impossible to preserve all data and give everyone's desire the same consideration, the BL's recognition of the manuscript's importance and their effort to preserve them as world heritage has given them a unique perspective of the collection.

In contrast, the NLC sees the Dunhuang collection as an evidence of great Chinese culture and its historical past (Lee and Zhang 2009). Cultural heritage can be used to build justifiable pride within a nation (Kohl and Fawcett 2005, 5). The flourishing past and its exquisite cultural remains helps people to develop and recognize their cultural identity. The Dunhuang manuscripts with their rich cultural significance assist modern Chinese in remembering their ancestors' past accomplishments and helps establish their current pride (Su 2008, 25). In addition, the loss of elements of this collection to foreign institutions is seen as a national dis-

grace. Ms. Su (the former vice-curator of the Ancient Books Library of NLC) stated in her report that the conservation of ancient manuscripts can encourage the continuation of Chinese culture, bring together the national spirit, protect the unification of China, and stabilize Chinese society (Su 2008, 25). All of the above can encourage the integration of people and help develop a stronger and more clearly defined Chinese national identity. The selective conservation treatments at NLC, such as the removal of patches, are aimed at revealing an impressive side of the collection. In doing so it can be said that the Chinese want to show their strength, and prove the ability to conserve and protect their own heritage (Lee and Zhang 2009). The NLC want to show the world that China was not only great in the past, but continues to be so in the present.

It was in response to their different cultural, political, and historical backgrounds that the different understandings of the Dunhuang collection were developed and led to minor differences between conservation approaches mentioned in this article. However, this does not influence the overall framework of the two institutions conservation work. They have different reasons for selecting the same conservation treatments, but the differences are fewer than their similarities. Therefore, one can conclude that the differences in approach reflect the specific cultural, political, and historical context evident within each institution. Elements of a division between East and West perspectives reflect the differing historical experiences of these two national institutions. Since the founding of the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) there have been many open discussions and exchanges between the BL and NLC and other worldwide institutions (IDP 2008). They work together to share and exchange ideas and jointly seek the best possible practices. This helped to break down boundaries between nations and institutions and to get past the limitations of the physical separation of the collection of manuscripts. For this reason, similarities between the approaches of the two institutions have increased in the past twenty years. Although the Dunhuang collection is still scattered around the world, with the IDP's digitization program they are reunited online in a digital format. The Dunhuang collection is the epitome of Chinese history and Chinese foreign relations. The collection was first created as a result of cultural exchanges on the Silk Road, then separated because of foreign invasions, and now reunited due to modern technology. It has always been a media between the East and the West, which has now lead the two institutions to collaborate and create joint conservation approaches and will continue to influence relations between the East and the West in the future.

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