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Research Roundtable:
“East Asian Manuscript and Print as Harbingers of
the Digital Future”

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Writing on the Wall: Manuscripts & Caves

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The significance of manuscript and print culture in the historical transmission of religion, art, and literature in East Asia can be paralleled with today's digital media. The transition from manuscript to print and the historical development of reading and printing techniques in pre-modern Asia may inform our understanding of the modern transition from print to digital media, as well as our changing relation to texts. To examine the role of manuscript and print technologies in East Asian societies, a roundtable titled “East Asian Manuscript and Print as Harbingers of the Digital Future” was held at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of British Columbia from May 26th to 28th, 2016.

The roundtable was structured as a series of five panels that brought together scholars, curators, librarians, community leaders, and policymakers to share their studies in East Asian religion, history, visual art, education, and library studies. Panel 1 considered what the manuscript-print relationship told us about technological transformations and written culture in East Asia. Panel 2 discussed why manuscript remained a tenacious presence in Asia after the introduction of print culture. Panel 3 examined the role of manuscripts in East Asian material culture. Panel 4 explored how new technologies have impacted the ways in which we preserve the past, document the present, and shape the future. Panel 5 sought the future of books in the age of digitisation.

As part of Panel 3 on May 28, Professor Eugene Wang from Harvard University gave a talk titled “Writing on the Wall: Manuscripts & Caves.” Professor Wang is the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Asian Art (Chinese) at the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University. He also serves on the advisory board of the Center for Advanced Studies, National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the editorial board of *The Art Bulletin*. His extensive research in Chinese art history has led him to discover significant values in the Mogao caves’ murals in Dunhuang which may remain unrecognized otherwise. Focusing on Cave 254, he explained how the Thousand Buddhas sutras were manifested differently in visual materials (cave murals) and in the Dunhuang manuscripts. While the murals depict stories of the Buddha’s past and future lives, the manuscripts focus on his present life. Professor Wang argued that the unique take on the sutras depicted in the murals was because they were visualizations of the Buddha’s meditative mental process before he reached enlightenment.

Cave 254's Murals

Professor Wang started his talk by presenting several pictures of the murals in Cave 254, which are presumably dated to the end of the fifth century (in the Northern Wei dynasty). The cave has a central pillar with niches filled with Buddha statues on each side. Four walls of the cave are covered by paintings of the Buddha and his life stories. On the west wall (back wall) is a large image of the Buddha painted at the central bottom, with the Thousand Buddhas of the past kalpa on his left, and Thousand Buddhas of the future kalpa on the right. All the miniature images of the Buddhas (1,235 in total) were inscribed with Chinese names based on the sutras of *Guoqu zhuangyan jie qian foming jing* 過去莊嚴劫千佛名經 (Sutra of the names of the Thousand Buddhas of the Glorious Past Kalpa) and *Weilai xingsu jie qian foming jing* 未來星宿劫千佛名經 (Sutra of the names of the Thousand Buddha of the Kalpa of the Constellations).

The three other walls of the cave are mostly covered with depictions of the Buddha's lives including *jātakas*, which are tales of his previous lives. The murals were designed in strict symmetry, with the Buddha's subjugation of Mara and the Tigress *jātaka* painted on the south wall, and the Sivi *jātaka* and the Enlightenment of the Buddha painted on the north wall.

Oddities

Upon describing the murals, Professor Wang pointed out the oddities in this cave's mural on the west wall. First of all, it emphasizes the past and future Thousand Buddhas while Dunhuang manuscripts related to the *Xianjie qian foming jing* 賢劫千佛名經 (Sutra of names of the Thousand Buddhas of the Present Kalpa) focus on the present era. Secondly, the stories on the two sidewalls do not chronologically follow the timeline of

the Buddha's lives. Instead, they depict a mixture of stories from both his past lives (*jātakas*) and from his present one. Furthermore, the story of his final life (from birth to the defeat of Mara) was omitted.

Meditation as A Key to Understanding

The key to figuring out these oddities is the significance of meditation. Professor Wang explained that through the meditation process, Shakyamuni entered a succession of four levels of meditative trances. These four levels can be conceptualized as a progression through cycles of universal destructions by the natural elements: the destruction by fire, the destruction by water, the destruction by wind, and the fourth destruction which is beyond this universal realm. After the four destructions, the universal realm will enter the formless and indestructible emptiness. In terms of meditation, upon reaching the fourth level of meditative trance, one could attain the six supernormal cognitive abilities (*liu shentong* 六神通), including the power of unimpeded bodily action (*shenjing tong* 神境通, *shentong* 身通, *shen ruyitong* 身如意通, or *shenzu tong* 神足通), the power of divine vision (*tianyan tong* 天眼通), the power of divine hearing (*tianer tong* 天耳通), the power of awareness of the minds of others (*taxin tong* 他心通), the power of the knowledge of previous lifetimes (*suming tong* 宿命通), and the power of the extinction of contamination (*loujin tong* 漏盡通).

How do the meditative trances and supernormal cognitive abilities relate to the special order of the stories on the murals? In Buddhist stories, Mara is a demon who tries to disturb the Buddha before he attains enlightenment. After his victory over Mara, the Buddha enters the four levels of meditative trance. Through deep contemplation, he attained the power of divine vision, and was able to know his previous lives. Accordingly, the murals were designed to replicate the Buddha's

mental process during meditation rather than to follow a temporal order.

Professor Wang further theorized that these mural stories could invoke heavenly feelings similar to those experienced in the final stage of meditation. In the first *jātaka*, the Bodhisattva sacrifices himself to feed a hungry tigress and save her cubs. In the second *jātaka*, the Bodhisattva, who is born as King Sivi, give his eyes to a blind Brahmin. Both *jātakas* suggest compassion and generosity. Professor Wang pointed out that generosity leads to the accumulation of good karma, which generates good feelings and brings the meditator to heavenly psychological experience. Such a mental state may also be achievable through meditation when the practitioner reaches the final level.

Meditation and Nirvana

Nirvana is the purpose and final stage of meditation. Professor Wang suggested that the seated Buddha at the centre of the back wall illustrated nirvana in which the Buddha existed beyond ordinary space and time when he reached the final meditative level.

Many explanations have been put forward to discuss this unusual design. Professor Wang suggested that we should view this image as being intentionally uncoloured rather than white. The achromatic Buddha is in the state of nirvana departing from this world and thus being beyond any colour spectrum. This is an intended depiction of the special existence of the Buddha when he achieved enlightenment through meditation.

Gap between Manuscripts and Cave Murals

Although the murals were designed to demonstrate the meditation process, Professor Wang reminded the audiences that the cave was not used as a place of meditation since it was located in a remote mountainous area. Not to mention that meditation is a mental activity which cannot be captured on the wall. Nevertheless, the murals' imitation of the Buddha's meditative process, as Professor Wang suggested, may be a way for the patron to accumulate merit and generate good karma. In comparison, sutra manuscripts usually emphasize the present era of the Buddha because readers wish to gain instant knowledge of Buddhism and benefit in this life. That is why the mural and the manuscripts emphasize different lives of the Buddha even though they are based on the same sutras.

Professor Wang's talk has presented a detailed study of the Buddha's image in Mogao Cave 254, and opened the discussion on the relationship between visual materials and manuscripts for future research. His talk was followed by presentations from other scholars and a Q&A session. If you are interested in this topic, please read his article "Painted Statue in An Optical Theater: A Fifth-century Chinese Buddhist Cave"¹ for more details about the uncoloured Buddha image and the Mogao Cave 254.

¹ Eugene Wang, "Painted Statue in An Optical Theater: A Fifth-century Chinese Buddhist Cave," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 30, no. 3 (2011): 25-32, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/stable/23208558>.

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