

Transcript of April 17, 2015 Interview with Dr. Neil Schmid

This is *China Law & Policy* and welcome to our podcast. Tibet is considered the Buddhist capital of China, causing many not familiar with China's geography to believe that Buddhism came to China from India through Tibet. But with the highest mountain peaks in the world, the Himalayas, separating India and China, Buddhism had to take a different route. Instead, it entered northern China through what has become known as the Silk Road. As a result, some very early Buddhist art can be found in remote northwestern regions of China. One such example are the Buddhist cave art in Dunhuang, an oasis town situated in the Gobi Desert. The Mogao Caves are probably the best known.

But any trip to the Mogao caves by a Buddhist art novice leaves one with many questions on the art, the history and its significance. Fortunately, *China Law & Policy* had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Neil Schmid, an American expert on Buddhist Studies and Dunhuang.

[00:57] *EL: Thank you for joining us today. First, can you give us a little bit of background on the caves: when were they first constructed, why and by whom?*

[01:05] *NS: Elizabeth, thank you for inviting me. So there's a story, maybe apocryphal, that in 366 [CE] a monk by the name of Le Zun had a vision. This is a vision that happened outside of the oasis of Dunhuang, in a small, small ravine with a cliff face. There he had this vision that he was basically to build a cave. This is, again maybe it is apocryphal, is the originating story of the Mogao caves.*

[01:36] *EL: And what year was that again?*

[01:38] *NS: 366. So he was followed by another monk, Fa Liang, and then a series of monks after that.*

[01:45] *EL: So can you explain more why these caves were created?*

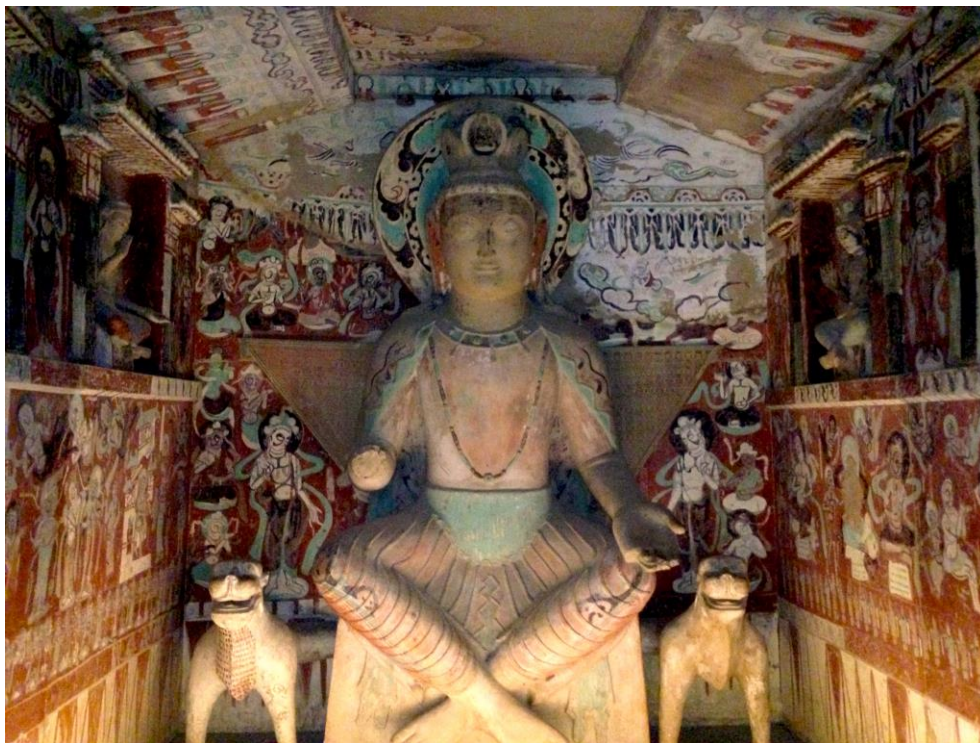
[01:49] *NS: As I said initially they were dug out as meditation spaces. Spaces where monks could live relatively distant from Dunhuang or some sort of urban or town center due to spiritual practices. This is the origin of these caves. Then what happens over time, over the centuries, is that the site becomes a pilgrimage site and with these powerful monks - spiritually that is - people began to patronize them. In doing so, they began building caves themselves. These people were typically the elites or also groups of people who would gather together and fund the digging and the construction of a cave in Mogao, in this area.*

[02:41] You asked about whom they were actually built by. So they had funders, they had donors, but there was - and we have a lot of information especially from the 10th century on. We know that it was a professional class of artisans who actually did the construction work -

painters, sculptors, metal smiths, textile workers.¹ They were organized hierarchically according to their expertise and their titles reflected their skill and their standing. So these are the people who actually built the caves and we can talk a little bit later about that process of building itself.

[03:21] *EL: So that's interesting that you talk about the professional class of artisans and also just the changes over who was sponsoring the building over centuries. When you go to the Mogao caves themselves, you do see some changes to the art when you visit different caves. Can you explain more or highlight what some of those changes are from the beginning to the later parts. And do you believe there's a high point to the art itself?*

[03:51] *NS: The earliest caves we have are from the Northern Liang and that's 397 [CE] to 439 [CE]. These caves are very, very heavily influenced by Indian and also Central Asian styles. The motifs, the iconography, the sculpture, is very, very much dominated by something other than Chinese. Over the years, these artistic forms and iconography and also the ritual space itself begins to shift away from monks towards an increasingly lay-oriented perspective. What the caves also take on in terms of transformation of the artistic styles and ritual styles is an increasingly sinicized, i.e. Chinese aesthetic. So for example what happens later, you have stories about Indian, about the Buddha done completely in Chinese costume, in Chinese-like settings. It naturalizes in some ways Buddhism for Chinese. We see this very clearly evidenced in the caves.*



¹ On the construction of the caves and guilds, see Sarah Fraser's excellent overview, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618-960* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

Mogao cave 275, Northern Liang (397-439)

[05:06] **EL:** *I know some art historians believe that some dynasties have better art than others or higher-end art than others. Do you agree with that? I think everyone always thinks the Tang Dynasty but how do you deal with that?*

[05:29] **NS:** That's a good question. I could talk about my personal favorites.

[05:34] **EL:** *That's okay.*

[05:36] **NS:** I particularly like Tang, what's known as high Tang style. But it is very, very difficult to say one style is a highpoint. Obviously it depends on the reference points of what you consider a highpoint. There's amazing artistic skill that goes into the creation of earlier caves in terms of actual painting styles which are now lost in China. So in some ways you could say that due to their introduction and disappearance, these were high points in particular artistic styles.

[06:14] **EL:** *That's fair. I guess the other thing is when visiting the caves you can't help but wonder how starting in 400 AD, people were able to paint and build such amazing art. In particular, there is that one awe-inspiring Buddha. Do we know exactly how these caves were built? How the painting was put onto the walls? How many people it took to build these caves? I think you were already talking a little bit about the professionalization of the artisans. If you could go into a little bit more depth about that.*

[06:47] **NS:** So what happens in the Tang, the Five Dynasties period, and also in the Song, is that you have elite families funding the construction of caves and in the process they create what is essentially a painting academy. At this painting academy you have trained artisans. Note that they are laity; they are not monks, they are not clerics. We have lots and lots of documentation from this period and detailed manuscripts about what they were paid, how often they were paid, where they lived, the types of work, individual specialties. We know that laborers were typically paid in food, so cooked meals. Also oil, also grains. This was a typical form of payment.

[06:46] How the caves themselves were actually constructed, they were constructed by starting at the top of the interior of a cave and then digging it out and down. So what they would do then after it was dug out is they would begin to furnish the walls and then apply a straw and stucco mix. Then on top of that begin the painting process.

[08:13] In this period, again very late Tang, Five Dynasties period, Song period, it became very programmatic, very organized in terms of the pictorial program of the caves themselves. And very standardized. They used a variety of drawings for example to create on a regular basis the paintings in the caves. They also used something called "pounces" which is a piece of paper with dots cut in that they would then typically blow a paint across to get an outline. Then they would color that in. One of the motifs you see again and again at Dunhuang in the Mogao caves is the Thousand Buddha motif.



Mogao cave 249, Western Wei (534-556AD)
Early version of Thousand Buddha motif.

[08:58] *EL: Right, right. You see that it is painted like in an assembly line.*

[09:02] *NS: Exactly. There is this whole modularity to the construction and also the painting process. Then the painters themselves typically use things like -the expensive ones - lapis lazuli and malachite. The painting was done on dry stucco and again through a series of artisans. The construction of a cave, or a large cave, during this period would be perhaps a year. It would take a year.*

[09:32] *EL: Just to move away from the art to the political. I know when I visited the Mogao caves, it appears that for foreigners visiting the caves, part of the tour is a stop in a separate building documenting the Western countries' purchasing and taking of the Mogao's manuscripts and cave art at the turn of the 20th century. We know that in the case of the British, they purchased from the monk in charge of the caves at the time, the world's oldest printed book, the Diamond Sutra. They had examples of an American explorer also purchasing some old Buddhist manuscripts, as well as physically lifting some of the cave art out of the caves. In that period, why were Westerners so interested in the Mogao caves and how did they even know about it to go out there?*

[10:22] *NS: Great questions. So the first visitors were before 1900 and they were typically involved in exploration and survey. This has to do with what was called the Great Game, the machinations between the United Kingdom and Russia, the Russian Empire, to control Central*

Asia.² So it was through that process that Central Asia began to be known. While we have these military and quasi-military figures in Central Asia, the first sort of striking discovery was something called the Bower Manuscript. This manuscript was a shock because here in Central Asia we find a birch bark manuscript from the 4th to 6th Centuries in what's called Hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit or Prakrit.

[11:29] Before nobody ever thought that we would find these types of materials. What it means is that the Indian civilization in many ways reached into Central Asia. This got people very excited. Number one because these materials don't exist in India for the most part because the climate is much too moist.

[11:48] So what happens is after they discovered that manuscript you began to have so-called scholar-explorers, archeologist, Sir Aurel Stein is a perfect example of that combination, come in and began to do surveys and archeological surveys of Central Asia.³



Sir Aurel Stein, 1909

[12:10] It was during this period that they began to get word of this great Buddhist site and also a site with lots of manuscripts and that got them very, very excited.

[12:22] *EL: Based on the fact that the tours with Westerners in Dunhuang make it a point to recount this history of the Western explorers and the purchasing of many of the manuscripts, is China making any efforts to get these manuscripts back? Especially the Diamond Sutra.*

[12:42] *NS: Not on a large basis. So what we have is a lot of scholars working together, e.g., Chinese scholars with British scholars or French scholars, on an increasingly large basis. Also*

² See, for example, Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (London: Kodansha International, 1992).

³ Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980)

museums and institutions working together. So what we find now is that on the scholarly end of things, a lot of these materials have been digitized by the International Dunhuang Project. It's a remarkable project for the amount of material and it is based out of the British Library. They in the process, over the years, have gotten a number of other institutions on board - the Chinese, also the French, the Russians, the Germans - to begin to digitalize their materials, manuscripts and paintings. So this is one thing that has sort of lessened the desperation for return finds because scholars have access to the materials world-wide now.

[13:46] Regarding so-called plunderer, Aurel Stein is often labeled that, but as you mentioned, he actually purchased the manuscripts. Of course that is controversial. Also there was Langdon Warner, who is from your *alma mater* [Harvard], and he is notorious for having used a technique which he felt was innovative. Basically to use tape - I am simplifying it - to put on the murals and rip them off. In the process some were damaged. He actually has a receipt for these. So Harvard's response might be, for example, "Oh, we have a receipt, they were paid for, we bought them in good order."

[14:27] *EL: So it's all very legal.*

[14:28] *NS: It's all very legal, exactly. People might disagree with the methods and the authorities he spoke to actually purchase the materials. Of course, there is a lot of room for debate on this issue.*

[14:42] *EL: I think in a talk you gave previously, you had mentioned that the Abbot [at the Mogao Caves] had tried to get the Qing Dynasty and the Emperor interested in it. Could you just talk a little bit more about that?*

[14:53] *NS: Yes. Wang Yuanlu was the person who was renovating the cave site in around the year 1900 when he discovered the cache of manuscripts. And it is a fantastic cache of manuscripts. He recognized that they were important, he wanted to get in touch with the authorities in order to know what to do with these manuscripts. And in fact the Qing Dynasty authorities weren't that interested. Part of the slow response by the Chinese government at the time was that it was dominated by Confucian elites. They saw Buddhist materials as simply not that interesting. So this is one reason I believe that the process was slowed down for the Chinese government to recognize the value of this incredible find.*

[15:41] *EL: Just to fast-forward a bit in time, when you go to the Mogao Caves you still see a tremendous amount of art on the walls, you still see a tremendous amount of the carvings. How were these cave arts able to survive the Cultural Revolution as well as the campaign against the Four Olds that sought to destroy a lot of Buddhist art?*

[16:00] *NS: Mogao and Dunhuang was fortunate because they had a powerful patron if you will, Zhou Enlai, Premier Zhou Enlai. He was hugely supportive of the renovation project, the project to stabilize the cliff face, to begin the catalogue process and also research in general. He specifically said that Mogao Caves were not to be damaged. And I have to put in a plug here also for the Dunhuang Research Academy and the people there, scholars there, who had been*

working on the materials for literally dozens of years at that point, they made a serious effort to talk to Red Guards, to discuss the value of the materials.

[16:50] *EL: And what about today, what's being done to preserve the caves and will preservation be successful especially as more tourists come to Dunhuang?*

[16:59] **NS:** Part of the problem with the caves today is that moisture and also carbon dioxide is beginning to deteriorate the caves. There's also ground water coming up because there's a lot of irrigation to make pretty gardens, if you will, in front of the attraction. So that water is seeping up into the caves so that the lower level of caves, at the bottom of the murals, they're beginning to completely deteriorate.

[17:30] So what's been done over the last three decades is that the Getty Conservation Institute has gotten involved - of the Getty Museum in L.A.. That's since 1985. It's been their longest running project of conservation, heritage conservation. They have been instrumental in working with the Dunhuang Research Academy and also the Chinese government in creating, number one an analysis, a very detailed analysis, of the materials involved in the construction of the caves, how they deteriorate, why they deteriorate and ways to prevent it. On top of that there's also a digitalization project going on [and a major upcoming exhibit on Dunhuang caves May 2016 at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles]

[18:12] Part of that, along with the visitors center that recently opened, is to provide tourists with an alternative experience. So through the digitalization or the immersive digitalization of the case themselves at the visitor's center and then to decrease the number of visitors actually going into the caves.

[18:36] *EL: The visitor's center is very, very impressive and a lot of fun which leads me to think they're hoping a lot more people come to visit it. For people who aren't China people, China scholars, what do you think is the significance of these caves? Why should just regular Americans, when they take a trip to China, why should they go out to Dunhuang?*

[19:00] **NS:** The caves which span in their creation 1,000 years are the largest repository of Chinese art. Maintain and contain items and designs and styles, aesthetics, and also the very space itself that doesn't exist anywhere else in China. So in terms of this kind of immersive experience, you can't get better than Dunhuang to see how people experienced Buddhism in the Tang, for example, period. So that's a major reason. Dunhuang itself and the Mogao caves, the site is stunning and gives you a sense of what the power of trade that unfolded over 1000 years on the silk roads or silk route if you will. The caves themselves have a cosmopolitanism. Dunhuang at that time we know from manuscripts was incredibly mixed and well-integrated. So there is a fascination with that as well.

[20:11] *EL: Finally, can you describe your favorite cave and why it is your favorite cave? You have to have a favorite.*

[20:19] **NS:** [laughter]

[20:20] *EL*: *You can't love them all.*

[20:22] *NS*: In spite of its formulaic nature, there's a cave, Cave 98, which is remarkable. It's quite large; it's a large family cave, it's an elite's cave. But what's fascinating for me is it's well preserved but it also lays out the political nature of the caves, the political nature of Buddhism also. You have large donor portraits of the King of Khotan and his relations to the Dunhuang elite. It's remarkable for that reason that here we have a sort of detailed outline of political alliances that were being constructed and set in a ritual space, which is a cave. This sort of liturgical moment that in some ways is frozen in time. That's what these caves do, they maintain relationships both among people and also with the Buddha forever and forever. I find that fascinating and Cave 98 is particularly rich in the historical-political elements.



Mogao cave 98, King of Khotan and retinue (c.920)



Mogao Cave 98, Uighur retinue

[21:35] *EL: Okay, well, thank you again Dr. Schmid for your enlightening explanation of the Mogao caves. Hopefully, more people will go there but not breathe on the caves. Thank you.*

[21:46] *NS: Thank you very much*

TOTAL TIME - 21:47

A selection of Dr. Schmid's publications and talks can be found at
<http://independent.academia.edu/DNeilSchmid>

Further Reading:

Hansen, Valerie. *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

China Law & Policy Interview with Dr. Neil Schmid
Scholar-in-Residence at the Dunhuang Academy & Leading Authority on medieval Buddhist art
April 17, 2015

Hopkirk, Peter. *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

Rong, Xinjiang, and Imre Galambos. *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Whitfield, Roderick, Susan Whitfield, and Neville Agnew. *Cave Temples of Mogao at Dunhuang: Art and History on the Silk Road, Second Edition*. Second Edition, Revised edition. Los Angeles, California: Getty Conservation Institute, 2015.