

## The International Dunhuang Project Site

<http://idp.bl.uk/> (March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009)



Elias Manuel Morgado Pinheiro

The International Dunhuang Project (IDP) site has taken as its prime objective to provide free on-line access to documents and resources relating to the Dunhuang archaeological site, mainly the Mogao Caves. As an international project, it results from the combined efforts of several institutions, namely the British Library, the National Library of China, the Institute of Oriental Studies of St. Petersburg, the Ryukoku University and the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin* [sic]. Its primary goal is to promote the conservation of the Dunhuang archaeological patrimony and spoils. The following review pertains to the English version of the site, hosted in the British Library domain.

Dunhuang is located at the junction of the modern-day Chinese provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang. Due to its geographical location, on the eastern end of the Taklamakan desert, it was one of the convergence points between the Northern and the Southern Silk Road. On the other hand, it was the westernmost Chinese outpost, thus becoming China's door to the west, as well as its entry point. This allowed Dunhuang to become one of the Silk Road's most important centres, gathering the several cultural and religious trends which travelled through it.

After the introduction of Buddhism in the periphery of China (not China Proper), during the Eastern Han dynasty (20 CE-220 CE), the Buddhist monks began the construction of a temple complex, excavated into the rock, which we know today as the Mogao Caves, famous for their parietal art. There, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century forward, and for a thousand years, the monks collected and stored texts brought by pilgrims and merchants from the west.

At the time of their discovery, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the documents of Dunhuang, whether textual or iconographic, were scattered across the globe, divided by many different institutions, due to the different expeditions that recovered them. The IDP represents the first effort to gather them and make them available not only to scholars and experts, but to the general public as well. As of March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009, the site features 224.549 images.

In order to provide on-line access to the documentation, the IDP database hosts several thousands of documents, ranging from high quality photographs of manuscripts and paintings, to archaeological site plans and photography. Optimally, every digitalised document, when applicable, is to be accompanied by a translation and a transliteration, but being a work-in-progress, this is not always the case. On the other end, certain items are listed, or even translated, but without a digitalised image.

The information is accessed through an internal search engine. Despite being highly versatile, the engine itself is complex and requires a certain degree of familiarization in order to be used effectively, being sometimes hard to find a particular item, especially without knowing its pressmark. Nonetheless, being aimed at expert usage rather than casual approach makes this particular limitation easy to overlook.

As noted before, the search engine is very versatile, having several search *criteria*, which makes it a useful prospecting tool. Besides the pressmark and free text searches, one can search by type of artefact, language, holding institution, etc., and each having several subcategories. Furthermore, it is possible to search by catalogue, if one requires a broader inquiry into a particular subject, as well as for

the bibliographic references used in the texts and translations which accompany each document.

Regarding the documents themselves, the images are of excellent quality and of appropriate size and resolution, always including a scale, and when justified, a close-up of particularly relevant details. Despite their size and definition, they download fairly quickly. Besides the images, each item overview also includes the holding institution, copyright owner, site of origin, form, materials and size. Additionally, and when applicable, it is also presented the catalogue, the translation, and the appropriate bibliography. Due to the high number of documents featured, many do not contain the former fields, as it is especially noticeable in the great number of text fragments lacking translation. Those who are indeed translated lack critical content, which limits its usefulness as an academic source.

The layout of each item overview is simple and competent, although at times awkward, especially when displaying large texts. Still, the information is clear and easy to find, with the different fields properly identified. Occasionally, one might stumble upon a technical error which might compromise the access to certain *data*, but these are few and far between, especially for a site of such complexity and dimension. The only major flaw is the absence of a print-friendly version.

In addition to the digitalised documents, the site features many other resources. One of the most useful, especially for the scholar who might require a more exhaustive listing of documents or direct contact with them, is an overview of the different collections, divided by country and institution. Not only does the site offer background information on each collection, it also gives extensive information on the amount of documents available, where to find them, and their access conditions, as well as selected bibliography.

Apart from the documents themselves and the information regarding the collections, the site offers other educational resources. Despite having differentiated pages for students and educators, the content is virtually the same, with the only difference being the presence of information on educational projects and upcoming events

on the second. Both feature the same texts, all of them pertaining to either Dunhuang itself, or the Silk Road in general. These texts hold neither extensive information, nor an exhaustive treatment of it, thus rendering them somewhat useless to specialists and advanced level students. Nonetheless, at an introductory level, they are quite useful, since many concern subjects in which is difficult to obtain a simple and efficient synthesis.

In addition to these texts, the section also contains information on current research, as well as an extensive listing of links to sites dedicated to different subjects relevant to the study of Dunhuang.

Finally, the site provides information regarding the IDP itself, as funding, assets, contributors, conservation, archives, etc. In addition, it also features user-contributed content, most noticeably a gallery of images of Buddha.

In conclusion, the IDP site is a useful tool, mainly aimed at scholars and specialists. It features quality information regarding the documents found at Dunhuang, being an extraordinary prospecting tool, and the only one of its kind in existence. Despite being a work-in-progress, it features a great amount of information on several documents, as well as translations of the most relevant ones. Unfortunately, the lack of critical translations hampers its use as a source.

Although primarily aimed at specialists, it features content directed at a broader public, namely several introductory texts on different subjects. These are extremely useful, particularly the ones regarding the Silk Road, to both students and educators, offering some perceptiveness on otherwise extremely complex topics.

Ultimately, the IDP site is a useful and ambitious tool, but being very early on its development process, is yet to achieve its full potential.