

**Workshop on Chinese Buddhism and Dunhuang Manuscripts:  
A Conversation with Emerging Scholars and Chunwen Hao  
April 1 & 14, 2022**

On April 1, 2022, the “Workshop on Chinese Buddhism and Dunhuang Manuscripts: A Conversation with Emerging Scholars and Chunwen Hao” convened at Jones Hall, Princeton University. Graduate students from the departments of Religion, East Asian Studies, and Architecture shared their current research on Dunhuang materials. Prof. Chunwen Hao 郝春文, one of the most eminent scholars in Dunhuang manuscript studies, responded to their research. Hao is a Yenching Professor of the Humanities 燕京人文講席教授 and former dean of the School of History at Capital Normal University 首都師範大學, as well as a Roger E. Covey Member in East Asian Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies (2021–2022). The event was organized and moderated by Prof. Stephen F. Teiser, D. T. Suzuki Professor in Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. The workshop consisted of two presentations by Ph.D. candidates in Religion, Sinae Kim and Minhao Zhai 翟旻昊, followed by short reports from five other emerging scholars.

In Session I, Kim presented, “Speaking for the Buddha, Speaking as the Buddha: Buddhist Preachers’ Literary Techniques in Late Medieval China.” By examining twenty-nine *sūtra* lecture texts (*jiangjingwen* 講經文) preserved in Dunhuang’s Cave 17, Kim provided a thorough and insightful study into the literary techniques and rhetorical devices employed by late medieval Buddhist preachers in Dunhuang and Sichuan. Kim illustrated how preachers used an “accordion structure” to expand or condense scriptural texts, creatively tailoring their performances and explications of *sūtras* to suit their audience. She assessed preachers’ literary techniques in three parts: 1) the rhetorical functions of quotations, through which lecturers established hermeneutical authority and forged intertextual connections; 2) techniques of repetition, including reiteration through prose and verse, as well as the strategic vernacularization of scriptural language; and 3) the fluidity with which lecturers shifted among speech, narration, and dialogue. Kim argued that, through these techniques, medieval Chinese Buddhist preachers not only spoke *for* the Buddha as exegetes, but also spoke *as* the Buddha by actively extending, contracting, supplementing, or omitting parts of scriptural texts.

Hao, in his subsequent response, praised Kim’s novel approach to Dunhuang *sūtra* lecture texts. Whereas previous scholarship has mainly interpreted *sūtra* lecture texts through a philological lens, Kim situated the texts in their performative and didactic contexts, thus shifting focus to the roles of speaking and listening in the dissemination of Buddhist doctrine. Hao argued that Kim’s study contributes to the field by highlighting how *sūtra* lecture texts functioned as preaching scripts and foregrounding the roles of speakers and listeners in medieval Chinese Buddhist sermons. Hao commented that Kim draws upon a broad, international tradition of hermeneutical analysis to deconstruct and classify *sūtra* lecture texts’ various interpretative techniques, including quotation, repetition, speech, narration, and dialogue. He suggested that she further consider how Buddhist preachers comprehensively applied literary techniques within a single lecture, as well as provide statistics on the frequency of each literary technique across surviving lecture texts. Additionally, he stated that the study of the audience’s participation in Dunhuang performance literature would likewise be fruitful.

Following Hao’s response, Yunxiao Xiao 肖芸曉 (Ph.D. candidate, East Asian Studies, Princeton) provided a summary of Kim’s presentation and Hao’s comments in Chinese.

In Session II, “Curating Ritual Repertoires in Medieval China: A Case Study of Dunhuang Manuscript S.2498,” Zhai presented a meticulous case study of S. 2498, a long, handwritten scroll from Dunhuang. The scroll exhibits several multiplicities: it was compiled by many hands, constructed from numerous adjoined pieces of paper, and contains instructions for various ritual techniques, such as incantations, talismans, seals, and *mandalas*. By taking S. 2498 as representative of medieval ritual repertoires, Zhai illustrated that talismanic objects—the subject of his wider dissertation project—were just one part of larger, more varied ritual repertoires in medieval China. Zhai argued that S. 2498 was written by medieval Dunhuang professionals, rather than being a product of devotional practice or merit-making. These professionals drew from multiple sources, including translated Indian Buddhist texts, apocryphal Chinese Buddhist texts, and indigenous Chinese practices, to construct the text. With its different handwritings, mistakes, corrections, and additions, the scroll is tangible evidence of the process through which medieval Chinese ritual professionals developed and managed ritual repertoires. While the scroll lacks a clear categorization system, Zhai explained that its contents are nevertheless interrelated, and that the professionals who used and modified this scroll viewed the items as part of a cohesive system.

In response, Hao commended Zhai’s systematic study of S. 2498, which provides significant insight into the integration of medieval Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religious practices. He agreed with Zhai’s assessment that professionals assembled the scroll for their own use; S. 6417, another professional text compiled by the monk Jierong 戒榮 of Jinguangming Temple 金光明寺 in 920 CE, corroborates Zhai’s conclusions. Hao argued that the scroll should be recognized as an esoteric Buddhist document with elements from Daoism and popular religion, and suggested that it could be named “Esoteric Seals and Ritual Altar Methods” (*mijiao fuyin ji tanfa* 密教符印及壇法). Further, Hao provided information on the identity of Disciple Yan Junhui 弟子嚴君會, whose name appears in the text. The name Yan Junhui also appears six times on the *verso* side of an expenditure text, P. 4640. On the basis of information gleaned from P. 4640, Yan may be identified as a government official during the “Return to Righteousness Army” (Guiyijun 歸義軍) period, while the date of S. 6417 may fall between 899 and 901 CE.

Subsequently, Kelly Carlton (Ph.D. candidate, Religion, Princeton) provided a summary of Zhai’s presentation and Hao’s comments in English.

The question-and-answer sessions covered a range of topics. The audience expressed interest in Kim’s argument that Buddhist preachers spoke both for the Buddha and as the Buddha. Questions arose concerning whether Kim might instead consider Buddhist preachers to have spoken as *a* Buddha, rather than the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni. Conversation then turned to how Buddhist preachers, by speaking as the Buddha, obscure the temporal divide between the past—at which time the Buddha purportedly expounded a certain *sūtra*—and the lecturer’s present sermon on the scriptural text. Zhai’s question-and-answer session commenced with a discussion on the relevance of Yan Junhui receiving paper from the Guiyijun government in P. 4640. Other questions focused on the transition of S. 2498 between hands, how much of the manuscript was copied before changing ownership, and the identification of different copyists through variations in handwriting.

Session III consisted of short presentations by five other emerging scholars. Yalin Du 杜亞琳 (Ph.D. candidate, East Asian Studies, Princeton) examined narrative images on the northern and southern walls of Dunhuang Cave 323. Diverging from previous scholarship, Du shifted the research focus from “what the images mean” to “what the images look like.” In addition to

locating the textual sources for, as well as establishing historical background of, these narrative murals, Du aims to explore the visual effects, symbolic significance, and ritual functions of Cave 323 as a whole. Kelly Carlton considered the distinctive literary and ritual features of memorial texts (*wangwen* 亡文) for deceased children in Buddhist liturgical text formularies (*zhaiwen fanben* 齋文範本). By comparing such texts with representations of children in contemporaneous miraculous tales, she aims to ascertain wider medieval Chinese Buddhist notions of children's vulnerability, the extent of their karmic liabilities, and their ability to navigate the afterlife. Echo Weng (Ph.D. student, Religion, Princeton) assessed conceptualizations of the human body and its transformation into buddha-bodies in the "causal conditions" (*yuanqi* 緣起) narrative, "Ugly Girl" (*Chounü* 醜女), which survives in five Dunhuang manuscripts. Weng illustrated that the motivations for attaining a buddha-body, and what must be done to achieve this end, differ between *yuanqi* narratives and representations of bodily transformations in canonical *sūtras*.

Yunxiao Xiao presented on the complex relations between the Dunhuang manuscript S. 3877—containing literary texts, geomantic maps and diagrams, and seven commercial contracts belonging to the Linghu 令狐 family—and its users. By considering the manuscript's materiality and textuality, Xiao challenged the prevailing idea that S. 3877 is a "miscellaneous" manuscript, and demonstrated how the multilayered process of producing, using, and reusing the manuscript provides crucial insight into the history of writing. Priscilla Zhang 张綺真 (M.A. student, School of Architecture, Princeton) delved into the ritual relationship between a house and its residents in Dunhuang popular culture. Through an analysis of surviving ritual texts (*yuanwen* 願文) on constructing, entering, and protecting the family within a new home, Zhang explored the perspectives and roles of religious practitioners who oversaw such rituals, as well as the Dunhuang residents who commissioned them.

On April 14, Stephen F. Teiser facilitated a follow-up session with the presenters to reflect on the interesting conversations and helpful conclusions that arose during the workshop. Presenters discussed scholarship's metropolitan prejudice against sources outside of the Tang capital, Chang'an 長安, and the importance of incorporating Dunhuang materials into studies on medieval China. They also discussed Hao's distinction between the fabricators and users of documents, and how texts are employed in innovative ways that do not necessarily align with creators' intentions. Another interesting conversation focused on the specialty and practicality of the materials at the center of Kim's and Zhai's research: both *sūtra* lecture texts and ritual repertoires like S. 2498 were written by and for religious professionals; and as working documents, *sūtra* lecture texts and ritual repertoires allow for a significant degree of flexibility. Questions for further consideration included whether literate men had access to *sūtra* lecture texts or ritual repertoires, and whether they may have used such texts without specialists' interpretation or help.

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