Digitizing the Ancient Past: The Use of International Collaboration to Reunite the Dunhuang Collections

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Background:

Located in an oasis of the Taklamakan Desert in western China, Dunhuang was an important crossroads along the Silk Road, serving as an entry and exit point of China. More than just goods traveled along the Silk Road; Dunhuang also served as the entry point of Buddhism into China. Buddhism quickly spread and became the dominant religion in Dunhuang. Starting in the late 4th century and continuing into the mid-14th century, caves were dug out of the cliff faces near Dunhuang to create Buddhist temples and shrines, now called the Mogao Caves. By the end of this period, more than a thousand caves had been formed and over 400 of them were decorated. Centuries later in 1900, long after Dunhuang had been abandoned, a Buddhist monk discovered a cache of hidden manuscripts. Roughly 50,000 documents were discovered in a cave that was sealed in the early 11th century. These records include copies of sutras, contracts, literature, prayer sheets, letters, and several other types of documents. Soon after this “Library Cave” was discovered and opened, western explorers including Sir Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot, traveled to collect some of this material for museum collections. These explorers collected thousands of these manuscripts, removed them from their original context and into public and private collections all over the world.

What is “virtual reunification”?

- A potential compromise to repatriation in the case of past archaeological explorers coming and taking away artifacts from the countries where they were first found
- Often accomplished through creating shared databases and online exhibitions between two or more collaborating institutions

Benefits of Virtual Reunification:

- Increased international collaboration
- Larger audience
- Creation of conservation standards, including: storage guidelines, digitization methods, and cataloging standardization

Challenges of Virtual Reunification

- A chronic need for additional funding
- Conflicting institutional priorities, for example focusing on the institution’s own database before working on the IDP database
- Different interpretations of historical events
- Limitations of a database and current technology

What is the International Dunhuang Project (IDP)?

- International collaboration founded in 1994
- Goal is to digitize the manuscripts, cave paintings, and archaeological material from Dunhuang and related Eastern Silk Road Sites
- Collaborators include: the British Library, the National Library of China, the Dunhuang Academy, Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Importance of Context:

The most valuable information an archaeological artifact can have is provenance, the place of origin. Knowing an artifact’s context is key to understanding how it was produced, used, and valued by a culture. At the site of the Mogao Caves as well as in the IDP database, there is a struggle to reproduce the context in both the physical and digital space. With many of the artifacts and manuscripts removed from the caves, these once functional spaces are now sterile and missing important parts of their history. On the database, artifacts are completely removed from their context and often evaluated as singular objects rather than part of a larger collection.

Conclusion:

In a situation where repatriation is unrealistic, the IDP has virtually reunited the collection found within the Library Cave. The public nature of the database allows the information and material to simultaneously be owned by multiple institutions and the broader public. The sharing of information has lead to international collaborative research on the collections, which in turn brings in increased funding for the continued conservation and research of the artifacts. The boundaries of the digital space are constantly being pushed and perhaps in the future a more immersive representation of an artifact’s context will be possible. The University of Chicago’s Xiangtangshan Caves Project has made great strides in developing such technology by creating interactive 3D models of the Xiangtangshan sculptures and cave shrines. Every year more inter-institutional collaborations begin, often with a final product of a database or an online exhibit. “Virtual reunification” is a compromise in terms of repatriation, but a vital step in expanding and enhancing the research done on related international collections.

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