

# Atoms and Bits of Cultural Heritage: The Use of Dunhuang Collections

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The Dunhuang collections—discovered by a Chinese Taoist abbot and by many Western archaeological expeditioners like Stein, Pelliot and Oldenburg through the Silk Roads to Chinese Turkestan during the Great Game of New Imperialism—are very little discussed in the field of museology or critical heritage studies. *Atoms and Bits of Cultural Heritage* bridges this knowledge gap by exploring the public uses of Dunhuang objects in both the West (universal or encyclopedia museums) and China (their ‘country of origin’).

From being a material witness to rich cultural exchange between civilizations during the Middle Ages to entering the World Heritage List at the end of Cold War, the Dunhuang collections are an exceptional example demonstrating how cultural heritage can be used for knowledge making, empire and nation building, heritage and museum diplomacy, cultural tourism and digital innovation economy. Mainly applying historical method and traversing a vast temporal and spatial ground covering various disciplines, social paradigms and cultural systems, this research reconstructs the biography of Dunhuang collections based on the concept of object’s biography and Wittgenstein’s family resemblance, from the Belle Époque to the Digital Age and from the wild west of China to the former colonial metropolises like London, Paris and St. Petersburg. Scattered and (de-/re-) contextualized into dozens of GLAMs worldwide, the Dunhuang objects

are also the very first in the world to be reunited in virtual space in the mid-1990s.

The performative lives of Dunhuang collections with their many imposed identities—scientific specimens, works of (fine) art, colonial acquisitions, public property, national treasures, token of diplomatic ties, tourism destination or digital content for experience economy—forged and crafted by entangled world history are likely to continue in the 21st century, with new inputs, as seen in the Belt and Road Initiative of China Dream and beyond.

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