Esoteric Buddhism in the Provinces and Neighboring Regions
Situated on the Silk Route on the northwest frontier of the Chinese Empire, the oasis of Dunhuang served as a pivotal site for trade and cultural interaction for over two millennia. This unique position enabled the creation of a sacred site of startling brilliance—the nearby Mogao Grottoes (Mogao ku 莫高窟). These 492 Buddhist cave-shrines date from the fourth to fourteenth centuries and contain a wealth of murals and iconography chronicling changes in belief and practice.¹ The discovery and subsequent dispersal of a vast cache of manuscripts in the early twentieth century brought worldwide attention to the Mogao Caves. Hidden behind a wall in the Mogao grottoes in the year 1000 were over 45,000 manuscripts together with paintings, statuary, and ritual paraphernalia.² Buddhist texts predominate but there are also documents representing religions from Nestorian Christianity to Daoism; the types of manuscripts range from writing exercises and

¹ The Mogao caves (Mogao ku 莫高窟, “Caves of Unparalleled Heights”), also known as the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas (Qianfo dong 千佛洞), consist of a total of 735 caves divided into northern and southern sections. The northern portion of 243 caves was used by monks as living quarters and for religious practice. The 492 caves of the southern section are shrines in various scales created by individuals, families, and associations (she 社). The greater Dunhuang area (Dunhuang prefecture) contains four other major sets of caves dating from roughly the same period: The Western Caves of a Thousand Buddhas (Xi qianfo dong 西千佛洞), the Eastern Caves of a Thousand Buddhas (Dong qianfo dong 東千佛洞), the Five-Temple Grottoes (Wuge miao shiku 五個磨石窟), and the Yulin Caves (Yulin shiku 穩林石窟) in nearby Anxi 安西 county. The use of the term “Dunhuang” in this entry refers to all five sets of caves, with individual caves designated by their location and number within that location, i.e., Mogao cave 217. Research on Dunhuang exists as its own field of study (“Dunhuangology” Dunhuangxue 敦煌學) and there are voluminous resources. Whitfield, et al. 2000, Zhang 2000, and Fan 2010 provide general overviews of Dunhuang and its materials. Enoki 1980 furnishes a detailed historical survey of Dunhuang, while Rong 1996 and Yang Jidong 1998 discuss the Tang and Song eras, the periods most relevant to the study of esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang. The most extensive single source of information on all things Dunhuang is Ji Xianlin, ed. 1998.

² For a presentation of the different hypotheses for the nature of the cache and its concealment, see Rong 1999–2000.