Book Reviews


The publication of this volume (hereafter: La fabrique) has been anticipated for several years and it is a pleasure to be able to finally hold it in hand. Over the years the book took to materialize, the project was headed by Professor Jean-Pierre Drège, the eminent specialist of Dunhuang manuscripts, with the collaboration of Dr Costantino Moretti. The thirteen contributors are all scholars based at French institutions, who have participated in the research seminars at the Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l’Asie orientale (CRCAO), led by Professor Drège. In fact, Professor Drège himself authored seventeen of the total of fifty-one articles in the volume. Other contributions, in descending order, were by Olivier Venture (9); Costantino Moretti (5); Françoise Bottéro (4); Dimitri Drettas (3); Françoise Wang-Toutain (3); Sylvie Hureau (2); Valérie Lavoir (2); Jean-Claude Martzloff (2); Christine Mollier (2); Alain Arrault (1); Catherine Despeux (1); and Éric Trombert (1). All contributors are well-known researchers working on various aspects of Chinese manuscripts from either early or medieval China.

Dunhuang studies has a long and illustrious tradition in France, going back to the early twentieth century when Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) acquired several thousand manuscripts at the Mogao Caves, which were eventually deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), where they still are today. Pelliot was also among the first scholars, and arguably one of the most important ones, who utilized the newly discovered material for research purposes. He was the person who initially began the task of cataloguing the collection, and this enterprise continued, with longer interruptions, until the twenty-first century.¹

The cataloguing work had a significant impact on the course of French sinology as generations of researchers worked with the manuscripts. Following the discovery of the library cave, French scholars—along with Japanese ones—became the leaders in the newly emerging field of Dunhuang studies. In the course of the past century, French scholarship has made a lasting contribution to almost every sub-field, from the study of medieval literature and economy to historiography and codicology. Along with Pelliot, scholars such as Henri Maspero (1883-1945), Paul Demiéville (1894-1979) and Michel Soymié (1924-2002) took active part in the work of manuscripts from Dunhuang and other sites in northwest China.

La fabrique is the latest product of this distinguished tradition. It aims to provide an introduction to the visual aspects of ancient and medieval Chinese manuscripts, including their layout, textual division and other codicological features. The term ‘ancient’ in this case refers to early China, as some of the discussion involves manuscripts written on bamboo, wood and silk from the Warring States and Qin-Han periods. At the other end of the temporal spectrum, the latest material discussed in the book are the twelfth-century manuscripts and imprints excavated at the ruins of the Tangut city of Khara-khoto. Still, the bulk of the material in the book (about 380 out of the total of 450 plus manuscripts, i.e. over 82%) comes from Dunhuang and is written on paper. To some extent, this imbalance reflects the disparity in the quantity of manuscripts found in China, as most discoveries are minor when compared with the tens of thousands of manuscripts yielded by the Dunhuang library cave, even though the greater accessibility of the Pelliot and Stein collections in Paris and London probably also plays a role. The ‘Introduction’ explains that the decision to include earlier material was made in order to connect the fields devoted to the study of early and medieval Chinese manuscripts and, at the same time, to emphasize the continuity of Chinese book culture from pre-Han times through the medieval period (p. 3). Similarly, although the majority of the material cited in the book comes from northwest China (e.g. Dunhuang, Turfan, Kucha, Loulan), there are also some from other parts of the country, such as the ancient state of Chu and several sites in the north. The inclusion of material from other regions and time periods certainly goes a long way towards making the book more representative for the study of the history of

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2 For a convenient display of archaeological sites, see the map at the end of the volume, on p. 381.