



INTERNATIONAL DUNHUANG PROJECT

INTERNATIONAL DUNHUANG PROJECT (IDP), founded in 1994, a collaboration among libraries, museums, and research institutes worldwide to conserve, catalogue, digitize and research archeological artifacts, manuscripts, and archives relating to the archeological sites of [Central Asia](#) during the period of the ‘Silk Road’ ([Figure 1](#)). The members agree to formulate, implement, and disseminate standards for conservation and digitization, to make all the digitized material freely available online via the IDP multilingual websites, and to encourage use of this material for education and research.

The origins of IDP date to the early twentieth century when explorers from the imperial powers of the time, such as [M. Aurel Stein](#), started excavations in Chinese Central Asia. Many of the sites had been abandoned and had lain largely undisturbed in the deserts of the Taklamakan, Lop, and Gobi, providing excellent conditions for preservation. The archeologists discovered evidence of distinctive local cultures showing influences from the surrounding empires, including Indian, Iranian, Turkic, Mongolian, Arabic, Chinese, and Tibetan. Over a hundred thousand manuscripts found at these sites included all these languages and a variety of scripts. The art and iconography showed a similar diversity. Many religions were represented, including [Zoroastrianism](#), Nestorian [Christianity](#), [Buddhism](#), and [Manicheism](#).

It was in a cave at the Buddhist cave temple site of Mogao outside the town of



Dunhuang, in present-day Gansu province, China that one of the richest discoveries was made in a hidden library with documents dating from ca. 400 to ca. 1000 CE. The cave, probably sealed around this latter date, was not uncovered until 1900 and found to contain over 40,000 manuscripts—as well as early printed documents—and paintings. Within fifteen years of its discovery its contents were dispersed to three continents and about ten major institutions, with numerous other small and private collections worldwide.

In October 1993, the British Library hosted a conference to bring together for the first time curators and conservators from all the major collections worldwide. During discussions it was agreed that all parties should work together to make this material more accessible while ensuring its preservation. The dispersal of the Dunhuang library cave and the limitations that imposed on its research during the twentieth century exemplified the motivation behind the collaboration and was therefore used in the name (although the remit was always wider than Dunhuang). IDP was thus conceived, and in 1994, with a grant from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, its secretariat was established at the British Library. A newsletter, *IDP News*, was published in 1994 with details of the conference and the aims of the new organization. It continues to be published biannually. The logo was taken from a Chinese manuscript from Dunhuang (Or.8210/S.11287), being a cursive rendering of the word 詔 *chi* “imperial dictate.”

Apart from coordinating the collaboration, fundraising, and production of the newsletter, the major task of the secretariat over the first five years was to design, implement, and populate a multi-lingual database capable of holding cataloguing and digitization metadata and images relating to all the manuscripts, artifacts and archives and to serve them online. The IDP website (<http://idp.bl.uk>) went live in 1998 holding a selection of data from the British Library collections.

In 2001 the British Library and the National Library of China (NLC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding for collaboration on IDP and a Chinese-language IDP website, hosted by the NLC, was launched in November 2002 (<http://idp.nlc.gov.cn>). In order for each institution to retain autonomy over its data and website, IDP pioneered a model of locally hosted, standard IDP databases and websites in local languages, with the host institution having full rights over its own images and data and read-only access to data from other IDP institutions. Data was synchronized constantly between the databases. This model was retained successfully until 2015, when it started to be replaced



by commercially hosted servers using open source software and data pulled by application program interfaces from local repositories (with images and metadata from the Swedish Open Cultural Repository available on IDP since 2012). However, each major institution remains responsible for creating and storing its own web and archive images.

Other IDP holding institutions started adding their material and hosting local sites over the following decade using the same model: in 2004, a Russian (<http://idp.orientalstudies.ru>) and a Japanese site (<http://idp.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp>) at, respectively, the Institute for Oriental Manuscripts (IOM), St. Petersburg, and Ryukoku University, Kyoto; in 2005 a German site (<http://idp.bbaw.de>) hosted by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities with material from the Staatsbibliothek and the Museum for Asian Art, Berlin; in 2007, a further Chinese site (<http://idp.dha.ac.cn>) hosted by the Dunhuang Research Academy; and in 2008, a French site (<http://idp.bnf.fr/>), hosted by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), also with material from the Musée Guimet (MG). A Korean language site was hosted between 2010 and 2015 by the Research Institute for Korean Studies, Korea University (<http://idp.korea.ac.kr>). The IDP site has also been translated into Persian, Turkish, and Spanish; online pages for these versions, and an Arabic-language site, are planned.

IDP partners act as regional hubs, conserving, cataloguing, and digitizing their local collections and hosting them through IDP. Such collections include the textiles from the Victoria and Albert Museum, the artifacts and paintings from the British Museum, the manuscripts at Princeton East Asian Library, and photographs from the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. As of 2015 there were over 30 contributing institutions and individuals. IDP also works closely with the archeologists and scholars who continue to work on existing sites and to excavate new sites, including preparing modern photographic and video documentation. The new discoveries are also within its remit.

Although those working on IDP are employed as staff members of the holding institutions, including curators, conservators, and photographers, IDP has been dependent from its inception on external funds to fund some of these staff and enable its digitization and other activities. In 2001, digitization was accelerated with the award of grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the British Library, the BnF, the MG, and the IOM covering their Dunhuang material. The material has become available on the IDP website over the years



since then. Funds have come from numerous other sources, private and public foundations, and individuals. As of 2015, IDP gave access to over 450,000 images along with detailed catalogue records. Work remains ongoing,

IDP has led or been an active partner in a wide range of research and publication projects, including manuscript forgeries, the codicology and paleography of the manuscripts; fiber analysis of the paper; cataloguing of the Tibetan tantric manuscripts; the history of medicine; cultural routes of Eurasia; and Asian history during the Gupta period. It has been involved in several major exhibitions worldwide and carries out a program of scholarly, educational, and public activities.

In 2010, IDP was presented with the Casa Asia award (for which, see http://www.casaasia.eu/casa_asia/premio) “for its enormous task in the recovery, preservation and exhibition of information and images of the manuscripts, paintings and textiles found in the Chinese city of Dunhuang and of the Silk Route” (*IDP News*, no. 35, 2010, p. 12).

IDP’s remit focuses on Chinese Central Asia but also includes material from further west, including [Afghanistan](#), and is open to the inclusion of other material, or to collaboration with other bodies already giving access to this material.

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