

Uncovering the Secrets of a New Archaeological Case at Dunhuang—A Textual Study on the Newly Found *Qianzi Wen* Written on the South Wall in Mogao Cave 9*

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This paper investigates a unique and interesting archaeological case, namely the newly found inscription copied from *Qianzi Wen* (*The Thousand Character Essay*) on the south wall in the main chamber of Mogao cave 9, and analyzes a series of research topics related to the inscription, hoping to thoroughly reveal the historical and cultural phenomenon of the high popularity and extensive spread of *Qianzi Wen* in the Tang dynasty, and attempt to restore some living scenes of ancient school students and cave-making artisans. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time to find *Qianzi Wen* on the wall in Mogao caves.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Mogao Caves, an inscription in cave 9, *Qianzi Wen*, temple school students, cave-making artisans

Proposing Questions

Qianzi Wen (*The Thousand Character Essay*), written by Zhou Xingsi of the Southern Liang dynasty, was not only a primer for school children but also a model for practicing calligraphy; therefore it was extensively spread in ancient China. The hundreds of manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen* found in Dunhuang Library Cave have proved the historical fact that it was one of the most popular enlightening education textbooks for children. Since the inception of Dunhuangology, scholars from home and abroad studied these manuscripts (the research papers include: Pelliot, 1925-1926; Feng, 1932; Tamaki, 1977; Huang, 1987; Zhou, 1988; Zhou, 1995; Tai, 1997; Zhang, 2001; Zhang, 2002; Wang, 2005; Zhang, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Gao, 2016; Li, 2018; The monograph includes: Zheng & Zhu, 2002) extensively and published many research results to provide a comprehensive understanding of these manuscripts.

During a thorough investigation of Mogao caves' inscriptions, on the south wall in the main Chamber of Mogao cave 9, we are surprised to find the words from *Qianzi Wen* beneath the illustration of the Battle between Sariputra and Raudraksa. This is the first time to find *Qianzi Wen* on the wall of Mogao caves, and could be a very unique and interesting archaeological case. Naturally, this aroused our keen interest in a series of related questions. For example, when was it written on the wall? Who wrote it? Why was it written

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on the wall in a Mogao cave? What kind of historical and cultural phenomenon did it reflect? What meaning and value does it have? This article attempts to explore and provide explanations on these related questions.

The Discovery of *Qianzi Wen* Written on the South Wall in Mogao Cave 9

On 24 December 2017, we visited the Second Silk Road (Dunhuang) International Cultural Expo, held in Dunhuang International Convention and Exhibition Center. During the digital exhibition of “Beauty of the Silk Road: Dunhuang”, organized by Dunhuang Academy, a high definition image of the Battle between Sariputra and Raudraksa was presented. While watching the image, we found several lines of words written in green, red, and yellow. The style of these words was quite different from the style of the cartouches that were used to explain the wall paintings. By examining it carefully, we identified just a few words like “□□□□ the cold arrived□□□□□□ / □□heaven□□□universe□□the Sun and the Moon□□ / □□Text□□□□□□Zhou Xing□”. Meanwhile, we had doubts about why they were written on the wall surface in such colorful ink. After much thinking, it’s still hard to get a reasonable answer. In the evening of December 30th, Professor Sha Wutian from Shaanxi Normal University and Professor Xie Jisheng from Zhejiang University visited Dunhuang, and we showed them the photo of the digital copy of the inscription. Prof. Sha thought that the inscription could be written by a painter rather than by a visitor, and could be very important. Later, we had to put this aside due to heavy scientific research responsibilities and administrative tasks.

Three years later, on July 22-23, 2021, we went to examine the caves at Mogao with Mr. Ma De and we visited cave 9 in particular, which was one of the representative Late Tang caves and was situated on the second level of the cliff in the Southern Area (Figure 1). The main chamber has a truncated pyramidal ceiling in the front and a central pillar in the back, in the east-facing side of which is a tent-like niche housing a group of seven statues including one Buddha, two disciples, two bodhisattvas, and two heavenly kings. Some statues were repainted several times in the Song dynasty, Yuan dynasty, and Qing dynasty (Figure 2). The inscription was in the middle of the western end of the south wall in the main Chamber (Figure 3).

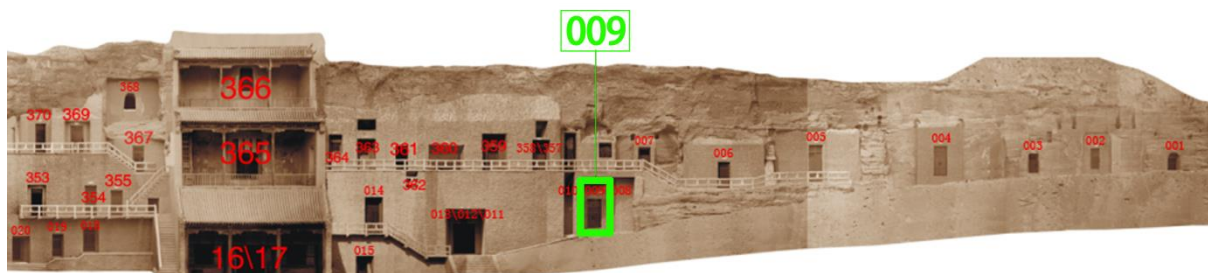


Figure 1. A sketch map showing the position of Mogao cave 9 in the cliff.



Figure 2. Full view of the main chamber of Mogao cave 9 (from east to west).



Figure 3. The position where *Qianzi Wen* inscription was written on the south wall in Mogao cave 9 (from north to south).

After careful examination, we identified that the inscription beneath the illustration of the Battle between Sariputra and Raudraksa was the beginning part of *Qianzi Wen*, which was written by Zhou Xingsi in the Liang dynasty of the Southern dynasties. This discovery not only provided a preliminary answer to our doubt that appeared three years ago but also greatly stimulated our research interest.

To accurately identify and record the words of the inscription on the wall, we visited cave 9 many times to examine and transcribe the inscription. We also asked our colleague, Cai Bolong from Conservation Institute, to take photos using multispectral photography, which is very helpful to identify the words. After many efforts, we have finally collected the basic information of this inscription.

The inscription of *Qianzi Wen* is beneath the wall painting of illustrating Raudraksa's battle against Sariputra, which is located on the west side of the south wall. The first sentence "imperial councilor and attendant Zhou Xingsi" starts from the image of a cow that is feeding a calf. There are total five vertical lines

from left to right, and the inscription ends at the spot of the cartouche containing the words “the fifth Kanakamuni Buddha”¹ in front of a disciple with palms joined. The row of “imperial councilor and attendant Zhou Xingsi” and the first two lines from *Qianzi Wen* are relatively clear. However, the following two lines from *Qianzi Wen* were covered by following: (i) a brown-color cartouche; (ii) the image of a bull riding by two children, the child in black is standing on the white bull and the child in white is sitting on the same bull²; (iii) as well as the surrounding wall paintings in green, white, and black. Therefore, the text on the bottom layer shows red, green, yellow, and other different colors in the position of the murals in different colors of red, green, and yellow (Figure 4).

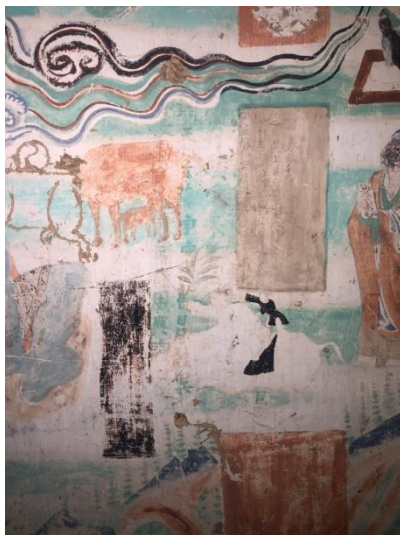


Figure 4. The colors of the words from *Qianzi Wen* in cave 9 vary with the color of the wall paintings.

After iterative examination and analysis with the aid of multispectral photos, we finally identified the words of the inscription as follows:

1. *Qianzi Wen* compiled by Zhou Xingsi, a Yuan wai San qi Shi lang (an official title refers to the imperial councilor who also acted as a horse-riding attendant when the emperor was out of imperial palace).

2. Ciyun (次韻, a way for writing old style poetry). Tiandi xuanhuang, Yuzhou honghuang. Riyue yingze (天地玄黃, 宇宙洪荒。日月盈昃, The darkling skies and yellow earth, amid great chaos had their birth. The sun can be straight or oblique and the moon is waxed and waned).

3. Chensu liezhang. Hanlai shuwang, Qiushou dongcang (辰宿列張。寒來暑往, 秋收冬藏。the stars filled the boundless space. The cold weather and heat weather arrived by turns, with reaping in autumn and keeping in winter).

4. Runyu chengsui, Lülü taoyang. Yunteng zhiyu, (閏餘成歲, 律呂調陽。雲騰致雨, The extra days in leap years strewn, it's yin and yang that call the tune. When clouds are formed, the rain is made).

¹ The inscription attached to the wall paintings has been recited often in passing by scholars without deep research. We make use of the multispectral photography technology to identify and take note of the words completely. Relevant historical documents contain the text similar to the inscriptions, and the complete paragraph can be found in Vol.52 of *Fayuan Zhulin* (Buddhist reference book) written by Shi Daoshi in the Tang dynasty, namely “In the time of Kanakamuni Buddha, people can live thirty thousand years along. There is an elder named Dajiazhu. He has a garden which is thirty *li* wide, which is full of silver clothes and filled with cows and calves. He donates the garden to Buddha as his residence”. The inscription in Mogao cave 9 is basically the same with those in *Fayuan Zhulin*, though a little different in words.

² Here is a white ox whose head and tail are upwards. The child in white sits on the back of the ox, while the child in black stands barefoot on the back of the ox, they together with the green grass form a vivid story picture.

5. Lujie weishuang. Jinsheng lishui. Yuchu kungang. Jianhao juque (露結為霜。金生丽水，玉出崑崗。劍號巨闕...when dew drops freeze, the frost is laid. Gold is produced in the Jinsha River, jade is found from the Kunlun Mountains. The keenest sword is called the *Juque*).

The currently identified five rows of words include the title, the author's name, and the first 13 sentences of *Qianzi Wen*.

On the Questions Related to the Inscription of *Qianzi Wen* in Mogao Cave 9

With the identification and transcription of the inscription, a series of related questions continue to emerge in our mind: When was it written? Who wrote it? Why was it written on the cave wall? Why were the words beneath the wall paintings preserved and indicated? These questions inspired us to explore the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* in Mogao cave 9 step by step just like a detective solving a case.

When Was the Inscription of *Qianzi Wen* Written?

The answer depends on the exact time of the construction of Mogao cave 9.

Since neither inscription with exact construction date nor corresponding cave-making records are available, the exact Mogao cave 9 construction time remains unknown. When discussing the construction time of cave 9, scholars mainly rely on the historical information obtained through the relevant official titles from the donor figures' inscriptions on the side walls of the corridor. So far, there are few different opinions:

(I) Mr. Xiang Da (1957, pp. 423-424) thought cave 9 was constructed in the time when Suo Xun was the governor of the Gui-yi-jun, as "at first Zhang Yichao's sons and grandsons have not been got rid of completely", Zhang Chengfeng's portrait was painted on the north wall as deputy governor. However, the official titles in Zhang Chengfeng's inscription in cave 9 are incomplete, which might be the titles used by the third year of Guanghua era (900) when Zhang Chengfeng was appointed as governor of the Gui-yi-jun regime. (II) Mr. Tang Changru (1962, pp. 280-282) pointed out that the titles attached to Zhang Chengfeng in cave 9 were so high that it should have been a reverent title conferred upon by Suo Xun, and construction of cave 9 started when Suo Xun became the governor. (III) Mr. Su Yinghui (1974, pp. 91-93) suggested that the portraits of a member from the Li family on the north wall of the corridor in cave 9 should be Li Hongyuan, and it should have been painted earlier than October in the first year of Qianning era (894), contemporary with that of Suo Xun, but Zhang Chengfeng's portrait was painted later than Suo Xun's, no earlier than August in the third year of Guanghua era (900). (IV) By interpreting Zhang Chengfeng's inscription, Mr. Jiang Liangfu (1979; 1985) came to the conclusion that cave 9 was a family temple of the Zhang family when Zhang Chengfeng came into power, and the cave might have been constructed in the second year of Dashun era (891), when Zhang Huaiding entrusted his son to Suo Xun, and Suo Xun did not grab Zhang's power. (V) According to Suo Xun's title as the governor of the Gui-yi-jun, Mr. He Shizhe (1986, p. 214) thought that all the titles of Zhang Chengfeng mentioned in his inscription should have been used in the year 892, on which Mr. Ma De (1996, pp. 104, 231) agreed, who thought that construction of cave 9 might have been completed around the first year of Jingfu era (892) in the Tang dynasty. (VI) Mr. Liang Weiying (1994, pp. 10-11) thought it was constructed in the period between the Dashun era and Jingfu era (890-893). (VII) Mr. Rong Xinjiang (1996, pp. 91, 206) analyzed the inscription of Suo Xun and came up with the idea that the inscription of Zhang Chengfeng should also be written in about September in the second year of Jingfu era (893), his tile *Situ* was just a nominal one used by Suo Xun to win common people's support, and the titles of the two brothers from the Li family should

be later than 894, namely they were not painted or written at the same time. (VIII) Mr. Li Zhengyu (2001, pp. 118-119) combined the titles of Zhang Chengfeng in cave 9 and Zhang's self introduction as *Situ* in the period later than his self introduction as "*Jianjiao sikong*" and earlier than his founding of "Jinshan Kingdom", and came to the conclusion that the portrait and inscription of Zhang Chengfeng should have been painted or written between August in the fourth year of Tianfu era (904) and the third year of Tianyou era (906), and cave 9 should have been constructed in this period too. (IX) Mr. Li Jun (2011, pp. 349-358) pointed out after textual research that in cave 9, Zhang Chengfeng still used his self introduction as *Jianjiao situ*, therefore cave 9 might be constructed before the time when Zhang proclaimed himself king, namely between the February in the fourth year of the Qianning era and June in the first year of Guanghua era (897-898), and the four male donor figures painted on the wall surface over the entrance might be the donors of the cave, namely brothers from the Li family. (X) Mr. Zhang Jingfeng (2009, pp. 20-26) analyzed the titles of Li Hongding and Li Hongjian on the side walls of the corridor in cave 9, the inscriptions of Suo Xun in cave 196, inscription text of the *Qianning Stele*, and S.1177, the *Suvarṇaprabhā Sūtra*. Based on his analysis, he inferred that the donor figures and inscriptions were painted or written in the period between the beginning of the third year of Qianning era and June 9 in the fourth year, construction of cave 9 started in the third year of the Qianning era or slightly earlier, and ended before June 9 in the fourth year of Qianning era. (XI) Dr. Wei Jianpeng (2011, p. 161) presented a special study on cave 9, and he thought that it was a family cave of Tibetan people in the Gui-yi-jun period, and it might have been constructed in the time when Li Hongyuan died and Zhang Chengfeng claimed throne, namely it was completed after the year 898, but no later than June 5 in the third year of Guanghua era (900) when Mrs. Zhang wrote her votive text of the *Suvarṇaprabhā Sūtra*.

While scholars had different opinions about the exact construction time of Mogao cave 9, they all agreed that it was probably between the second year of Dashun era and the third year of Guanghua era (891-900). Therefore, we have a good reason to infer that *Qianzi Wen* should have been written on the wall between 891 and 900.

According to previous research of the Mogao caves, the typical cave construction procedures are: cave makers first dig a cave on the cliff surface, and then masons prepare the plaster layer with straw and mud on the wall, and then painters paint the wall, and finally sculptors make the statues. *Qianzi Wen* should have been written on the south wall when construction of the cave was completed and the plaster was prepared, but the south wall had not yet been painted.

Who Wrote the Text of *Qianzi Wen*?

The answer is mainly based on calligraphy.

There is a conjecture arguing it might be written by a painter for exercising handwriting.

We think this conjecture is untenable for two reasons: firstly, for Dunhuang people in the Tang dynasty, it was a serious matter to build caves, so the painters should not scrawl on the wall prepared for sacred Buddhist paintings, and the cave donors would not allow any painters to do such rude things neither; secondly and more importantly, a comparison of the writing of the cartouches and *Qianzi Wen* indicates that they were very different in style. However, the many cartouches were written by the same person in fluent running script and were well-spaced, and obviously these cartouches were written by someone of high calligraphy level (Figure 5). But *Qianzi Wen* was written in regular script, looking bold and clumsy and lacking changes in thickness and transition. The skew vertical lines of words, especially the words in the first two lines, indicate it was written by

a beginner in calligraphy (Figure 6). For the two reasons stated above, the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* should not have been written by the painter.

Who on earth could possibly have written it on the wall in cave 9? Since it is a calligraphy beginner's handwriting, we can conclude that it is very likely to have been written by a school student for the following two reasons:

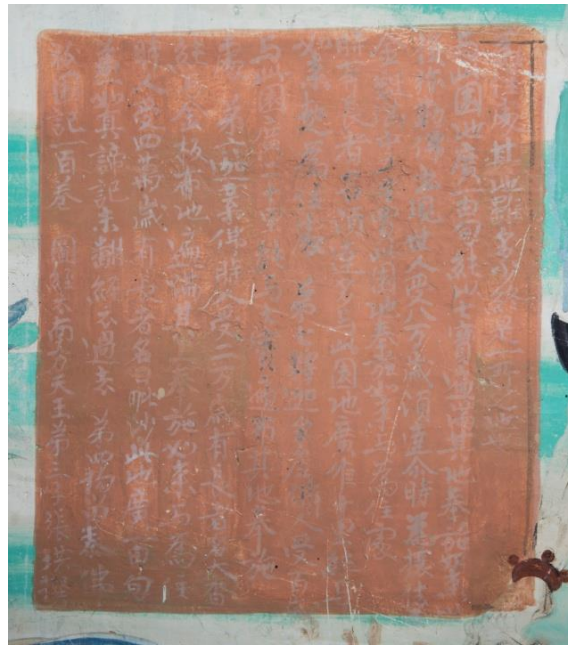


Figure 5. Inscription written by the painter on the south wall in Mogao Cave 9.



Figure 6. Inscription of *Qianzi Wen* on the south wall in Mogao cave 9.

Firstly, in the Tang dynasty, *Qianzi Wen* was very popular and was used by schools as teaching materials. Copying *Qianzi Wen* was regular homework for school kids to learn words and practice handwriting. There are hundreds of manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen* found in the Library Cave. Among them, the manuscripts of practicing handwriting and learning words account for the largest number. This will be elaborated in the following text. A comparative investigation suggests that the calligraphy of the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* in cave 9 is very similar to that copied by school kids on some Dunhuang manuscripts found in the Library Cave such as S.2894, P.2059 and P.3108 (Figures 7-10).



Figure 7. Writing style of *Qianzi Wen* in Mogao Cave 9.



Figure 8. Writing style of *Qianzi Wen* in S.2894.

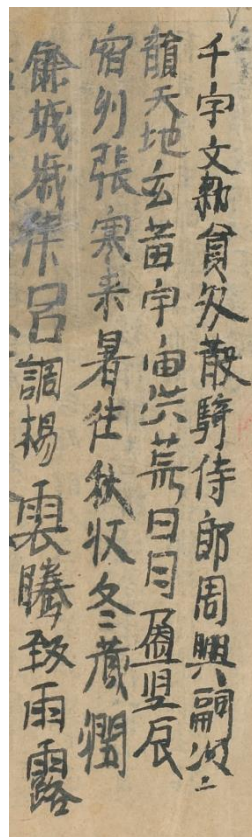


Figure 9. Writing style of *Qianzi Wen* in P.2059.



Figure 10. Writing style of *Qianzi Wen* in P.3108.

By carefully comparing the calligraphy of *Qianzi Wen* in cave 9 with that of S.2894, P.2059, and P.3108, we find that the four versions are very similar in the writing of a few words. For example, the two sides of the top of the words “yuzhou (宇宙, universe)” extend longer downwards in the four versions; The calligraphy of the version in cave 9 is similar to that of P.3108 as far as the writing style of “ze 昊 (昊), meaning the sun in the sky in the afternoon”, is concerned. But, overall comparison indicates that the writing of the three manuscripts is more fluent while the inscription on the cave wall is more simple and clumsy. This suggests that the author might be a younger person with poor calligraphy skills.

Secondly, copying *Qianzi Wen* on the cave wall was more in line with young student’s ignorance, reckless age, and psychological characteristics. Since it was a solemn thing to construct Buddhist caves, adults would not write randomly on the wall, which was already prepared for sacred Buddhist wall paintings. Only the school age kid, who did not understand the solemnity of building Buddhist caves, would write *Qianzi Wen* on

the cave wall willfully. Since young student practiced *Qianzi Wen* every day, and might even think it was worthwhile to show it off to adults.

What kind of school kids might be able to enter the Buddhist caves under construction and write freely on the wall? We speculated that they were most likely the children of two kinds of people, namely the kids of the cave donors, and those kids of the cave makers.

There is still no clear conclusion about the donors of cave 9. There are four donor figures painted on the side walls of the corridor. On the north wall, donor figures are Zhang Chengfeng, Lord Kaiguo of Nanyang Prefecture, and Li Hongding, military governor of Guazhou. On the south wall, donor figures are Suo Xun, governor of the Gui-yi-jun, and Li Hongjian, military governor of Shazhou. All the four persons were top figures among the local officials in Dunhuang at that time. But this did not mean that they should be the donors of cave 9. From the Late Tang dynasty to the Five dynasties and Early Song dynasty, it was popular to pay respect to local governors by depicting them and their family members on the sidewalls of the corridor in the caves donated by local people, which we had discussed elsewhere and will not repeat here (Zhang, 2011, pp. 455-466). According to the title “deceased brother, ...[father]-in-law” in the inscriptions attached to the fourth boy among the row of donor figures on the south side of east wall in cave 9, Mr. He Shizhe thought that “since the cave donors call the boy deceased brother, the cave donors might not be the members from the three powerful families, namely the Zhang families, Suo families and Li families, but their staff members” (He, 1986, p. 214). Even though we are not certain about who sponsored the construction of cave 9, based on the medium cave size, the elaborate wall paintings, the gorgeous costumes in cave 9, and its similarity in both scale and style to the Late Tang caves 12 and 144 of the Suo family and Late Tang cave 138 of the Yin family, we can infer that the donors of cave 9 might be the people from a powerful family who had enjoyed relatively high social status and power.

The artisans who created cave 9, just like those artisans who created most Dunhuang caves, came from low-level social classes. Although they created brilliant Buddhist art works, they did not leave their names. We can only call them anonymous artisans.

For the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* randomly written on the wall by school kids, it could be completely removed by erasing, scraping, and other measures by the anonymous artisan. But he apparently did not take similar steps, he just covered the words with wall paintings as if he appreciated the inscription and let it be there. Therefore, it can be inferred from this point that the inscription was most likely written by the child of the artisan who painted the murals.

Why Was *Qianzi Wen* Written on the Wall in Mogao Caves?

This question needs to be answered in the context of the following two historical backgrounds.

Firstly, in the Tang dynasty, the school education at Dunhuang was well developed.

In the Hexi region, including Dunhuang, great importance was attached to education. From the Han dynasty, Wei dynasty to the Northern dynasties, the Hexi Region once became a place with prosperous culture and education in north China. In February 624, the seventh year of Wude era, imperial edict was issued to “found schools in all provinces, counties and even rural countries” (Si, 1956, p. 5976) and Dunhuang’s school education began to prosper. In the Tang dynasty, Five dynasties, and Song dynasty, the education at Dunhuang was widespread and prosperous. There was not only official education system, but also well-developed private school education system, and unique temple school education system. In the Tang dynasty, the teacher was

usually called Doctor or Professor; the students were self-claimed to be “*xueshi* (school kids)” or “students”. The particularly noticeable education system in Dunhuang is well-developed temple schools (Li, 1986, pp. 39-47). According to the statistics made by Mr. Li Zhengyu (1987, pp. 26-40.), in his paper “Notes about the Collected Inscriptions of the Student in Ancient Dunhuang”, there are 144 items from Dunhuang documents and inscriptions in Mogao caves of the Tang dynasty, Five dynasties, and Song dynasty which mention school kids, while more than 50 items mention temple school education. The temple school students include both children from layperson and samaneras (monks). The postscript to P.3620 reads: “Written by student Zhang Yichao on March 25 in the current year”. According to this record, Zhang Yichao had once been a temple school student and learned from Fa Cheng, a Buddhist Master during the Tibetan Occupation period. Since childhood, Zhang Yichao has cherished the world and has big ambitions. He was very skilled in calligraphy when he was very young. No wonder he later became a hero endowed with civil and military virtues. He accomplished the great feat of driving the Tibetans out of Dunhuang, and pledging allegiance to the Tang dynasty. Mr. Gao Mingshi (Gao, 1986) also presented a comprehensive study on the official and private school educations at Dunhuang in the Tang dynasty. He thought that private school education section contributed far more than official school education system. The temple school education in the period of Buddhist prosperity is particularly noteworthy. In addition, the kids of some rich families also studied in the temple schools in the Gui-yi-jun period at Dunhuang. For example, according to the postscript of S.707, the Gui-yi-jun governor Cao Yijin’s second son Cao Yuanshen studied in the San-jie Temple; according to the postscript of P.3692, Suo Futong, the grandson of Suo Xun and grandson-in-law of Zhang Huaishen, studied in the Jin-guang-ming Temple. Under normal circumstances, the kids from these official families were fully qualified to enroll in local official schools. The fact that they studied in temple schools rather than official schools indicates that special attention had been paid to temple school education at Dunhuang, a Buddhist holy land, and also reflects that the faculty conditions and teaching level were superior to that of the official schools. Therefore, the leading figures of the Gui-yi-jun regime paid much attention to temple schools and they were willing to send their children to study there (Li, 1986).

Secondly, copying *Qianzi Wen* was prevalent among the school kids at Dunhuang in the Tang dynasty.

Qianzi Wen, rich in content, and easy to understand, pronounce, and spread, could have been used not only as a textbook for enlightening education, but also as an example for school kids to practice calligraphy. Therefore, it was widely spread in ancient China. A lot of the Dunhuang manuscripts of the Tang dynasty and Song dynasty found in the Library Cave contain the text from *Qianzi Wen*. The beginning of S.5961, *One Volume of Xinhe Six-Word Qianzi Wen*, reads at the very beginning: “Zhong Zhu (钟铢³) compiled the Thousand Character Essay with the only purpose to teach (童男⁴) boys as a primer”. This clearly states the function and purpose of *Qianzi Wen*.

According to the statistics of Zhang Yongquan and Zhang Xinpeng, there are altogether more than 140 (the number is 118 after some of them have been spliced together) manuscripts among Dunhuang documents which refer to *Qianzi Wen*, including the manuscripts used for word learning and calligraphy exercising (Zhang, 2009).

³ It was written as “铢” in S.5961. According to previous research, it was also identified as “銖” or “録” and was revised to be “繇”. Most are based on conjecture. Here it is recorded as it is in the original manuscript.

⁴ It was “男” in S.5961, which has been often identified as “男 (male)” or “兒 (son)”. Here it is recorded according to the original manuscript.

A General Index to Dunhuang Documents, edited by Wang Chongmin (1962), and the *Latest Catalogue of Dunhuang Documents*, edited by Huang Yongwu (1986) each record 35 Dunhuang manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen*; *The Newly Compiled General Index to Dunhuang Documents*, edited by Shi Pingting and Tai Huili (2000), records 42 Dunhuang manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen*; *The Research of Children Education Books* by Zheng Acai and Zhu Fengyu (2002) records 47 Dunhuang manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen*. We anticipate that the number of Dunhuang manuscripts with *Qianzi Wen* will continue to increase.

The more than 140 manuscripts from Dunhuang documents can be classified into many types. From binding form, they can be classified into two types: scrolls and sheets. The scrolls form is the majority form, which was the most popular form of manuscripts in the Tang dynasty and Early Song dynasty. The sheet form manuscripts are much less in number, and they include S.5454, S.5467, S.5592, S.5594, P.3062, P.3626, and P.4809. It was a new binding form developed from the scrolls via the folding form, easy to read and carry. Most of the Dunhuang manuscripts of *Qianzi Wen* in sheet form indicate a clumsy writing style and usually contain wrong words. This suggests that they might have been copied by school kids and were carried by them for reading and writing.

From contents and transcription form, they can be classified into six categories: seal character, cursive script, Chinese-Tibetan transliteration, annotated version, common version, and six-word version (each sentence contains six words). Among them, the versions in seal character and cursive script were used for copying handwriting; the Chinese-Tibetan transliteration and annotated versions were used by the Han Chinese and even the people of ethnic minorities to accurately read and understand the words and their meanings. With total 121 manuscripts, the common version is the majority category, including 44 formal manuscripts and 77 word-learning manuscripts with various contents. The formal version was written in neat and skillful handwriting, probably written by adults or school kids with good calligraphy skills. The word-learning manuscripts do not have author's signature except a few of them with the title of the school kids in clumsy handwriting. Most of such manuscripts contain repeated and wrong words. Obviously, they were word-learning manuscripts for school kids. For example, P.3170 *Qianzi Wen* shows childish handwriting with a postscript which reads: "a volume of *Qianzi Wen*/...written by Zhang Chengzi, a student of the Xiande Temple school, on March 19, in the year..." For another example, P.3211 *Qianzi Wen* shows skillful handwriting, suggesting the person who wrote it had been much better in calligraphy. The postscript reads: "a volume of *Qianzi Wen*...written by student Fan Xianxin on February 19 in the month of Bingchen in the third year of Qianning era." After this sentence, the signature "Bingchen in the third year of Qianning era" was repeated twice. And next to it is another signature: "written by student Fan Xianxin of the Lingtu Temple school on February 19 in the month of bingchen in third year of Qianning era." So, we know this manuscript was written by student Fan Xianxin of the Lingtu Temple school. In the original *Qianzi Wen* copied on Dunhuang manuscripts, there are symbols of circles, dots, and deletion as well as many traces of deletion and modification. Here are four examples.

1. In the sentence "Pipa wancui (枇杷晚翠, meaning the leaves of the loquats remains green in winter)", the two words "pipa (枇杷)" were deleted by drawing a circle "○", and two other words "pipa (琵琶)" were added between the lines on the right side. Obviously, it was wrongly modified. Probably, Dunhuang students lived in isolated northwest China and did not know there was a kind of fruit in south China called "pipa (枇杷)", so they took it for granted to change "pipa (枇杷)" into "pipa (琵琶)" which they knew well.

2. In the word “Luoye piaoyao (落葉飄搖, the falling leaves are swaying)”, the word “ye (葉)” was deleted by drawing a circle and changed to the word “菜,” which was a substitute for “葉” in order to avoid the taboo of Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty.

3. In the sentence “Zhuer yuanqiang (属耳垣墙, be one your guard, for walls have ears)”, the word “er (耳)” was wrongly written as “qu (取)”, therefore, it was marked to be a wrong word by drawing a small circle below the right part of “qu (取)”.

4. Following the sentence “Jushan canfan (具膳餐饭, preparation your meals)” should be “Shikou chongchang (适口充肠, in proper taste and keeping off hunger)”, but they were written to be “qi gu jiu ([亲]戚故舊, relatives and friends)”, therefore, on the right side there were three deleted symbols of deletion “bu (丿)” (Figure 11).

At the end the postscript “one volume of *Qianzi Wen*” was repeated twice in different thickness of ink and in different strokes, suggesting they were written in two different times (Figure 12). These signs indicate that, in the third year of Qianning era in the Late Tang dynasty, Fan Xianxin, a student of the Lingtu Temple, had transcribed and proofread and revised the text of *Qianzi Wen* at least two times on the same day. It can be inferred from this that copying and reading the text of *Qianzi Wen* was the daily work for the students in the Tang dynasty.

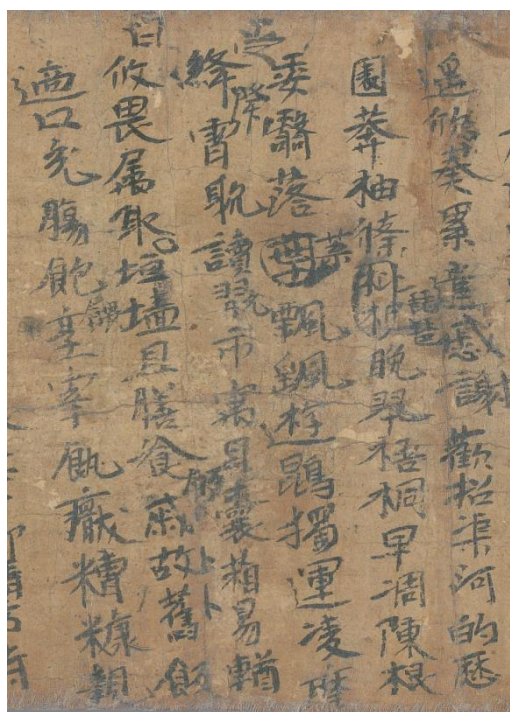


Figure 11. Traces of modification and deletion in P.3211 *Qianzi Wen*.

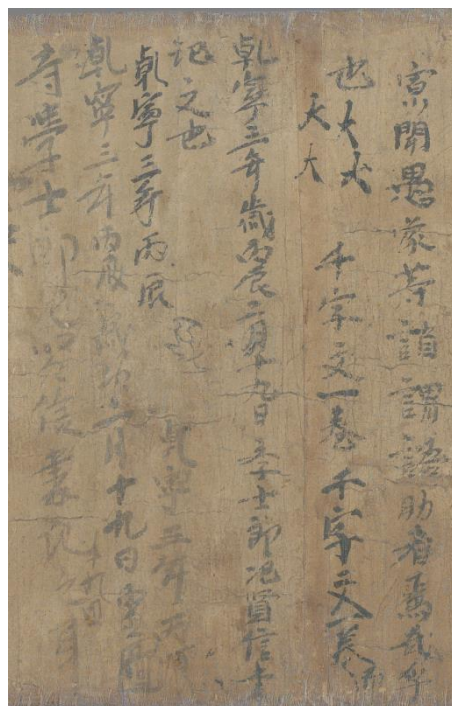


Figure 12. Traces of transcription in many times in P.3211 *Qianzi Wen*.

For the 121 manuscripts of common version, we find only a few manuscripts contain complete content from *Qianzi Wen*. In most manuscripts, only the title or a few beginning sentences, no more than twenty sentences of *Qianzi Wen* were copied. In some cases, the *Qianzi Wen* content was followed by other contents. For example, S.5139 has four lines of words on its back side from *Qianzi Wen*, which ends with the sentence “Haixian hedan, Lin (海咸河淡, 鳞 the sea salty the river tasteless, the scaled)”, following which is a notice from the official in charge of community grain storage. P.3391 has five lines of words on its back from *Qianzi Wen* which ends with “Yuchu kungang (玉出崑岗, jade is found from the Kunlun Mountains)”, which are followed by a title of Buddhist incantations. S.2894 contains three lines of words from *Qianzi Wen* on its back side, which stops till the sentence “Guozhen linai (菓珍李柰, The most precious fruits are plums and kaempferia ferri)”. S.4747 has two lines of words from *Qianzi Wen* on its back side which copied till the sentence “Hanlai shuwang (寒来暑往, cold weather and heat weather arrived by turns)”. According to our statistics, there are 92 manuscripts with various contents for word learning, which account for 76 percent of the common version. The reason should have been associated with the age and psychological characters of school kids. The kids could not concentrate on one thing for long, and their attention was very easy to be distracted. Therefore, they usually wrote only the beginning part of the text and then stopped for something else. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why only five lines of words from *Qianzi Wen* were written on south wall of the main chamber in Mogao cave 9. In fact, it is the same case with the version in Dunhuang manuscripts found in the Library Cave.

According to Dunhuang manuscripts, school kids usually took advantage of any convenient opportunity to learn words or practice calligraphy by copying *Qianzi Wen*. For example, the text on S.3287 has 41 lines which have no head and tail, starting from “[Ren]ci yince, Zaoci fuli ([仁]慈隐恻, 造次弗离, with pity or mercy one proceeded, and never leave a brother in need)” and ending with “Yanzai huye (焉哉乎也, modal particles)”

with a postscript which reads “One Volume of *Qianzi Wen*”. After the postscript there is a ragged woo poem which is written in two lines in small size: “Today, I wrote on his manuscript, he would be angry when he come. Now I will go home, would be doubt Who have written it?” Mr. Li Zhengyu says, “*Qianzi Wen* was a reading material for school kids, and this poem is written at the end of *Qianzi Wen* in a child’s tone, so it should be written by a school kid.” He also thinks that “today I write about his wisdom (智)” should be understood as “today I write down his words (字)” (Li, 1987, p. 40). Though we agree with Mr. Li Zhengyu about his opinion that the poem was written by a school kid, but we have different opinion about the word “zhi (智, wisdom)” in the poem, which should have been written as “zhi (紙, paper or manuscript)”. “zhi (紙)” were often written as “zhi (緝)” in the Tang dynasty manuscripts, but “zhi (緝)” was much complex for school kids to write it correctly and therefore it was expediently written as the homophone “zhi (智)”. A naughty kid randomly copied some words from *Qianzi Wen* on someone else’s manuscript, and he soon felt it was improper to do so. Then he wrote down the ragged poem to express his uneasy feeling.

Interestingly, we noticed the existence of school kids in Dunhuang Mogao caves. For example, in Mogao cave 386, on the lower parts of the north wall, there are portraits of the supporting figures in the Middle Tang dynasty and the eighth body in the west direction is a school kid. His inscription reads: “Buddhist school student Shao, a Lintan Dade (the samanera who has been initiated into monkhood) paid tribute to the Buddha wholeheartedly” (Dunhuang Academy, 1986, p. 146). This is to say, he was not only a temple school kid but also a Buddhist monk. There were many examples of people who served as both a school student and a Buddhist monk, in certain cases even as an official at the same time, which was discussed by Mr. Li Zhengyu (1986, p. 43).

We also noticed that there were inscriptions written by school students on the wall in Mogao cave 199. *The Inscriptions Left by the Donors in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes* records that there are two inscriptions of school students below the bhiksu of the Middle Tang dynasty on the south wall in Mogao cave 199. One inscription reads: “School student of the Longxing Temple on April 3, in the year of Dingchou”. The other reads: “School student from the Longxing Temple” (Dunhuang Academy, 1986, pp. 90-91). A careful examination of the two inscriptions suggests that they were not written by school students who took part in the construction of the cave, but by students in later time. Accurate judgment can be made according to the location and writing style of the two inscriptions.

Mogao cave 199 was built in the Prosperous Tang dynasty, and only the west wall, the statues in the west niche, the ceiling center, and the four slopes were painted. Some paintings were added in the Middle Tang period, including the images of Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta in center of the south wall, an attendant bodhisattva on the west side and an attendant bhiksu on the east side. The bhiksu holds a long-handle censer, standing sideways and paying tribute to the central bodhisattvas. This bhiksu presided over the repainting of the south wall. Judged from his portrait, he should be a Buddhist master of higher ranks. Above his head is a cartouche painted on brown ground with ink words “painted under Buddhist supervisor Wu Zhengzhi”. The first inscription left by school kids was written on the belly of the bhiksu in earth red pigment and in a vertical line, obviously it was written at a later time. Being short of relevant evidence, it is hard to tell when is the exact year of “the year of Dingchou” mentioned in the inscription, but it can be inferred to be a year in the period from the Middle Tang dynasty to Early Song dynasty. The second inscription was written on the patchwork kasaya around the belly of the bhiksu, therefore, it is less likely to be an inscription left by a donor but is believable to be a graffiti left by a visitor. The two inscriptions were written in the same earth red pigment and

in the same handwriting and this indicated they might be written by the same student from the Longxing Temple. To randomly write inscriptions on the body of the attendant bhiksu was just what could be done by some kid who was willful at the school age (Figure 13). From the above analysis, we know that there were temple school students at Dunhuang who entered the Mogao caves and left inscriptions willfully on the cave walls in the Tang dynasty.



Figure 13. An attendant bhiksu and his inscription as well as the inscription left by a school kid on the south wall in Mogao cave 199.

From the above discussions, we come to a conclusion that the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* on the south wall in Mogao cave 9 was a daily homework for school kid to learn words by transcribing the text of *Qianzi Wen*, which reflects a natural manifestation in the Tang dynasty. For some special reason, the student entered cave 9 and wrote the text randomly on the south wall which was well prepared with pilaster but not yet painted.

Based on the above discussion, with our imagination, let's try to restore and depict the following scene: one day between the second year of Dashun era (891) and the third year of Guanghua era (900) in the Late Tang dynasty, the painter of Mogao cave 9 brought his son, a student, into the cave to see how the Buddhist cave was constructed. However, the boy knew nothing about the cave construction, and his curiosity about the cave was gone quickly. Feeling dull and boring, with nothing to do, and driven by his playfulness, he felt like to do something. Maybe he had seen how the painter wrote the cartouches of the wall paintings. There were various tools for painting the wall and writing the inscriptions. Since he was very familiar with the brush and ink, he then took the brush with ink box and wrote the text from *Qianzi Wen* which he had been practicing lately. The painter might be too busy to keep an eye on his son, or he loved his son so much that he did not want to stop what he was doing, or he was even very happy to see that his son could transcribe the words from his textbook proficiently. Regardless of which reason, the inscription occasionally written by a school kid had remained on the wall in Mogao cave 9 till today.

This may be the origin of the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* beneath the Late Tang wall paintings on the south

wall in Mogao cave 9.

In the Tang dynasty, in Dunhuang area, the cave construction not only expresses the devout Buddhist beliefs and religious merits of the cave owners and their families but also a face-project that consumed huge human, material, and financial resources. At the same time, it was also a competitive action to show family's social status and prestige. Just like people in modern society show off their social status with grand houses and luxury cars, people in the Tang dynasty would also compete against each other by building Buddhists caves, creating wall paintings, and making painted statues. Once a cave was completed, Dunhuang people would hold some unique activities, such as the religious rituals to commemorate the completion of a cave or statue⁵, turning scriptures, or fasting monks; they might also invite some celebrities to write about their cave construction activities or even erect a stele to record their feat so as to pass on their family glory generation by generation. Dunhuang manuscripts contain a lot of such examples. P.3608, and S.6203, *Records about the Cave Construction of the Li Family from Longxi in the Great Tang*, says: "To assist with Buddhist enlightenment, to bless the deceased, to protect the prefecture, and to light the way for all the relatives". P.4638 and P.4640, *The Stele Inscription about Hermit Yin Jiazheng Building Caves at Mogao in the Tibetan Occupation*, says: "to be immortal and to be remembered in the future".

We conclude that at the time, murals in cave 9 were painted, the inscription on the south wall should have been covered and hidden from view. Otherwise, it wouldn't be acceptable for either cave donors who paid a lot of money for the cave or the painters who spent a lot of time and efforts to build the cave. Only a thousand years later, the inscription is clearly visible again. This phenomenon is actually a combination of effects of the characteristic of Chinese calligraphy ink used for the inscription and the property of the mineral pigments used for the wall paintings in Buddhist caves.

The ink for ancient brush calligraphy was made by extracting the smoke from natural pine branches or oils and making it into the ready-to-use ink through many procedures including purifying, mixing, producing, and drying. The inscription written using such ink on paper, silk, and walls can be preserved for very a long time. They won't disappear even when they are covered by something above. The ancient cave temple paintings were mainly painted with mineral pigments and some plant dyestuff. The mineral pigments were grinded into fine particles, which were mixed with animal bone glue to make different pigments for the wall paintings in Buddhist cave temples. When the wall paintings were initially finished, the paint layer was at its thickest state and the inscription in discussion was invisible beneath the paint layer. As time goes by, the glue material has gradually aged and the particles of the painter layer have gradually fallen off, making the paint layer thinner and lighter. Then, the originally inscription covered by the paint layer becomes visible. Today, more than 1100 years after the completion of the construction of Cave 9, we can again see and recognize the words transcribed from *Qianzi Wen*.

Conclusions

Archaeological work is an effective means and an important approach to understand history. By investigating, analyzing, and studying historical remains and relics, modern people can understand the historical situation of ancient society and reveal the process of historical development, evolution process as

⁵ For example, P.2991 contains the sentences which read: "After the merit making cave construction, it was time to commemorate." In P.4640, there are words saying: "to commemorate after the completion of the cave construction for making merit."

well as the development pattern.

From his foot you may know Hercules. A deep investigation and analysis of some exact archaeological cases can help deepen and refine our understanding of ancient ancestors' living conditions and restore their living scenes.

An investigation and study of the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* written on the south wall in Mogao cave 9 can help us better understand why *Qianzi Wen* was so popular and so widely circulated in the Tang dynasty. Exploring and analyzing the appearance of *Qianzi Wen* in Buddhist cave temples as a unique and interesting case and the series of related issues can help restore some living scenes of the school kids and artisans in the Tang dynasty, from which we can see how the school kids and cave-making artisans did their job. Maybe this is the very value of this study.

While archaeological work is boring and laborious, archaeological disclosure is interesting and valuable. The investigation and exploration of the inscription of *Qianzi Wen* in Mogao cave 9 turns out to be a very interesting and rewarding experience.

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