Distance and transport difficulties deterred Ye Changchi from investigating the cave. Amongst most other officials there was a general lack of interest, particularly in Buddhist literature. Local officials, trained in the Confucian classics, would have been unaware of Buddhist literature or the history of Buddhism in the area, as was Stein's Chinese secretary. The Chinese government moved very slowly for it was not until 1910, after Paul Pelliot had shown some of his Dunhuang finds to scholars in Peking in September 1909, that the Ministry of Education ordered all the remaining documents to be brought to Peking.  

Though few Chinese scholars of the time showed interest in the remarkable find, both Stein and Pelliot advanced theories as to why and when the cache of documents was made. Pelliot was the first to publish his theory that the cave was sealed at a time of imminent invasion, a claim which he made with characteristic certainty.

The first problem was to determine the rough date of the cache. There is no possibility of doubt. The latest reign dates on the documents are from the early Song: 976–83 and 995–7 and there is not a single Tangut character in the whole library. It is therefore clear that the cave was sealed up during the first half of the eleventh century and probably at the time of the Tangut conquest around 1035. Chinese and Tibetan manuscripts, paintings on silk, hangings and bronze statuettes were piled in higgledy-piggledy with the stone stele [in honour of Hong Bian] engraved in 851. The confused order in which the rolls were sewn into bundles may be attributed to the fear of invasion but I think it more likely a sign of the decadent state into which Chinese civilisation had fallen in the Dunhuang area ... the monks had preserved beautiful manuscripts of the seventh and eighth centuries but did not produce any more and the precious scrolls tore in their clumsy hands. The arrival of the [Tangut] enemy only served to accelerate this decline...

In 1908 Pelliot was probably unaware that the confused state of the contents of the cave owed more to Wang Yuanlu's activities than to the 'decadence' of Chinese civilisation more than 1000 years before. Others have noted that, whatever the effect on the neatness of the hoard of Wang's moving the entire cache out and then putting it back, the fact that, when the original deposit was made, Hong Bian's statue was moved and the entire wall carefully repainted after the cave was bricked up suggests deliberate, planned action rather than panic at the arrival of the Tanguts.

Stein, who knew that Wang had emptied and repacked the entire cave, formed a different opinion as to why the Diamond Sutra and tens of thousands of other paper scrolls had been walled in. He surmised that though they 'had belonged to monastic libraries', they were 'no longer required for use' and 'had been collected from shrines where they had once been deposited and stored away here'.

Chinese scholars today share Stein's view, their conclusions based on long study of local history and the documents themselves. One scholar pointed out that the latest date on a document found in the cave was 1002, over 30 years before the Tangut invasion, which rather contradicts Pelliot's theory that the cave was filled in a panic to protect the manuscripts from the Tanguts. On the other hand, Chinese scholars have suggested that the gradual realisation of the threat posed by the rise of the Turkic Khara-khanids, an Uighur group that ruled Transoxiana from 840 to 1211, might have aroused local temples to action. In 1006 the Muslim Khara-khanids invaded the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan which had close links to Dunhuang through the marriage of a Khotanese princess with one of the sons of the local ruler. The arrival of refugees from Khotan may have encouraged local monks to collect and seal up the ancient documents and Buddhist scrolls and paintings that had long been stored in their temples. Their activities were deliberate and not the least hurried. Stein noted that most of the documents had been sewn into 'uniform packets'. From the many and varied colophons and seals on the manuscripts, it is clear that they were gathered from many temples in the Dunhuang area.

Some Japanese scholars advanced the theory that these many manuscripts were discarded because, by about AD 1000, printed Buddhist sutras were arriving in Dunhuang from central China. This theory ignores the fact that the Diamond Sutra, printed in 868, was packed away in Cave 17 along with dozens of other printed items. Fang Guangchung, a Chinese scholar who has been working on Dunhuang manuscripts for some 40 years, concluded that the documents and paintings in Cave 17 were put there because they were no longer usable. He found that sets of scrolls of different sutras were lacking parts, indicating that
they had been put aside because they were incomplete and could therefore no longer be used. He also noted that there were no complete sutras written in gold or silver characters in Cave 17, which suggests that these may have been more carefully looked after.  

Other indications that the contents of Cave 17 represented a deposit rather than a heand include the fact that very many of the scrolls were quite worn, torn and patched. Even the Diamond Sutra had been patched many times before it was placed in the cave. And although the survival of this mass of Buddhist sutras is unique, there are other examples of Buddhist sacred deposits elsewhere in China. In 1996 a great quantity of Buddhist sculptures was found in Qingzhou, in what had once been the grounds of a famous temple. The sculptures all dated from the sixth century but had been ‘buried’ in the twelfth century and all had been broken before they were buried. The breakages do not seem to have been deliberate or iconoclastic but the result of wear and tear, or fire, and possibly earthquake damage. In the former Mingdao temple nearby, a stone inscription recorded that, in 1064, two travelling monks found 300 broken sculptures in the temple and reverently buried them as an act of piety. When Buddhist images were damaged or ready for replacement, it would have been impious to destroy them, so instead they were carefully buried. The same could have been true for Buddhist sutras. When damaged beyond repair or suffering loss, they were not thrown away but reverently stored, in what was almost a form of burial.

Apart from fine, but worn out or incomplete, Buddhist works, there were a large number of secular documents in Cave 17. Most of these are short items: contracts for the loan of draught animals, sales of slave girls and bolts of cotton, shopping lists and odd items of local government interest such as fragments of official census returns and official gazettes. There were also calendars, club circulars, schoolbooks and fragments of literary works and dictionaries, even copies of the Yijing, the Confucian classic of divination. These scraps of paper might have survived in the monasteries after being deposited for safe-keeping; but they most probably owe their survival to an old Chinese tradition. This held that any piece of paper with writing on it was regarded as almost sacred and had to be collected ‘to save it being put to base uses’. Boxes for the reverent and safe disposal of such papers were often found in Chinese temples.

The smaller pieces of paper thus collected and which ended up in Cave 17 were sometimes used to patch damaged manuscripts or cut out to form cloud collars and crowns and paper flowers to decorate Buddhist figures on festival days and even cut up into tiny squares to be burnt and made into magic medicine. Thus the cave was most importantly a sort of graveyard for texts but also a recycling centre.

OPPOSITE: Unidentified extra written in gold on paper dyed with indigo. Paper dyed yellow, the Buddhist colour of solemnity, was commonly used for Buddhist manuscripts although the dye was also protective. Produced from the bark of the Amur cork tree, the dye was insecticidal and prevented worm damage to the paper which was not uncommon. A very small number of coloured papers, pink, pale blue and pale green, have been found amongst the items removed from Cave 17 but, as Chinese scholars noted, though manuscripts written in gold or dark indigo-dyed paper became more popular in the late Tang period, there are extremely few fragments from Cave 17, suggesting that they were treated with special care to prevent damage within the temples.
A SUTRA
THE 'DIAMOND SUTRA' and all the other sutras are the discourses or sermons of the Buddha. The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyans tribe in Nepal, probably lived between 563 and 483 BC, and is venerated for having achieved enlightenment and taught a way to salvation. Very little information on his life can be discovered, although there are many legends about him, and even his own teachings are difficult to retrieve from the scriptures attributed to him, many of which were clearly composed centuries after his death. From other pre-existing Indian religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism incorporated the idea of rebirth, that individual life was one of a series, whose condition was shaped by deeds performed in previous existences. Buddhists also held the view that animals were part of that cycle of rebirth and some said, for example, that birds had been human thieves in a previous existence. In the early period, Buddhism was also characterised by a rejection of other local beliefs such as the importance of caste, and it denied the efficacy of gods and ritual. However, by the time that the Diamond Sutra was produced in China, Chinese Buddhism had developed very different characteristics, with temples filled with statues of gods of all sorts and special rituals enacted for funerals, the Buddha's birthday, the lantern festival and All Souls' Day.

The historic Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was believed to have been conceived immaculately and born, without pain, from his mother's side. Though a prince, living a protected life within the palace, he was said to have gone out into the...

ABOVE: Over the subsequent pages, the entire sutra is shown, following its most recent convention. The end of the sutra (above, left) is at the beginning of this chapter since Chinese books and manuscripts were written from right to left.
city where he saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a religious ascetic. These 
so-called ‘four encounters’, the first three shocking and sad, the last inspiring, 
led him to renounce the world and seek enlightenment. In the legends about 
his life, he braved many attacks, survived many ordeals and acquired many 
followers. On his death, enlightened, he achieved nirvana, eliminating the causes 
of rebirth.

The Buddha’s view, transmitted orally by his disciples in the centuries after 
his death, was that life was essentially painful. This was the first of the ‘four 
noble truths’: the suffering of sickness, old age and death, disappointment and 
frustration. The second noble truth defined the cause of suffering as desire for 
material things, for illusory pleasure. The third truth was the suppression of 
desire and the fourth the means to achieve it through the ‘noble eightfold path’:
right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, 
right mindfulness, right concentration. Fundamental to the four truths was the 
belief that individuals have no permanent self or soul, for these components 
are subject to constant change and reassembly into a new life (or rebirth). These 
changes are not arbitrary but determined by actions, ruled by cause and effect, 
depending upon meritorious acts to determine reward and retribution in the 
cycle of rebirth.

The best way to follow the spiritual exercises of the eightfold path was by 
retreating into a monastery. By clearing the mind of the ‘five hindrances’ (longing 
for the world, malice, sloth, distraction and doubt) through ‘four stages of trance’.
to the cessation of perception and the elimination of passion, the believer hoped to progress towards nirvana. Laypersons could achieve merit by supporting monks, giving food and clothing and seeking instruction; they could also practise meditation and breathing exercises and follow the monastic discipline in matters of food and clothing. These principles can still be seen in many Buddhist communities throughout the world, although in a number of places Buddhism itself has changed over the centuries to suit local beliefs. Though monasteries did flourish in China, for example, there was a fundamental contradiction between Confucian family duties such as caring for elderly parents and worshipping ancestors in the home on a regular basis and the retreat from family implicit in the lives of monks and nuns. This led to a growth in the patronage of monasteries in China, which became rich through donations of land and treasure. The government felt threatened by this to

the point that, in 845, Buddhism was officially suppressed with the expulsion of thousands of monks and nuns and the confiscation of Buddhist land and property. Buddhist believers, however, continued to sponsor projects which would accrue merit, as Wang Jie did when he paid for the printing of the Diamond Sutra for universal distribution.²

According to tradition, the texts of Buddhism were transmitted orally for several centuries and first written down in Pali in Sri Lanka, with Sanskrit versions written on palm leaves in the second century AD. At a Grand Council held soon after the Buddha’s death, a three-fold division of the scriptures had been established. This included the sutras or sermons, the rules for monks (Vinaya) and scholastic commentaries (Abhidharma).²