I attended the 2013 International Conference on Chinese Digital Publishing and Digital Libraries held in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China, from July 11-15. The conference was sponsored by the Tsinghua University Library, the University of Hong Kong Libraries, the Dunhuang Academy China, and China Academic Journals Electronic Publishing House. In total, 435 attendees from 15 countries and regions attended the conference with 120 delegates from China Mainland libraries and publishers. Thirty-one reports were presented by colleagues from China, Macao, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, U.S., and Taiwan. The conference was focused on the following topics: 1) Digital Publishing in the Age of Big Data, 2) Chinese Digital Publication and Digital Collection Development, 3) Chinese Digital Library and China Study, and 4) Construction and Service of Digital Collection, and 5) Digital Dunhuang and World Culture Heritage.

One highlight of the conference was a session on the International Dunhuang Project held at the Dunhuang Academy. The project is a technological solution to document the hundreds of rock-cut Buddhist grottoes in a city on the lip of the Gobi desert. The caves are deteriorating because of incessant sand from the dunes swept into the grottoes, high levels of carbon dioxide and humidity. Since 1994, this significant and ambitious project (http://idp.bl.uk/) has been an international collaboration to make information and images of all manuscripts, paintings, textiles and artifacts from Dunhuang and archaeological sites of the Eastern Silk Road freely available on the Internet and to encourage their use by educational and research programs.

As the conference was co-sponsored by the Dunhuang Academy, all attendees had the opportunity to visit both the Mogao Caves and the nearby Yulin Caves. During guided tours, we visited ten of 491 cave-temples of the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 and eight cave-temples of the Yulin Caves 榆林窟. We were able to view, on-site, some of the finest examples of Buddhist art spanning a period of 1,000 years, from the Northern and Southern dynasties in the 4th century to the Tang dynasty in the 8th and 9th centuries then to the early 14th century of the Ming dynasty. For example, inside grotto temple 45, created during the Middle Tang period (781-847), we saw the magnificent sculptures of seven painted Buddhist figures, all standing, save the Buddha who is seated with his hands raised in the gesture of absence of fear. On the ceiling and wall are mural paintings illustrating tales from the Buddha’s past lives, decorative patterning invoking illusion of fabric pavilions, and figures of tiny deities.
The IU Libraries have collected some valuable Chinese and Tibetan monograph sets related to Dunhuang art, manuscripts, and documents published by the Dunhuang Academy China. This conference trip allowed me to learn new digital projects related to Chinese studies across East Asia, exchange ideas and thoughts with colleagues overseas, and in addition, experience the spectacular and encyclopedic archive of Buddhist art, styles, and ideas from one thousand years ago.