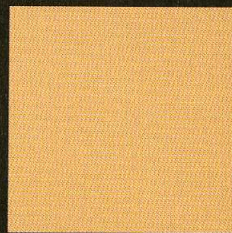


THE SILK ROAD

TRADE, TRAVEL, WAR AND FAITH



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DUNHUANG
CHARACTERS AND
THE DATING OF
MANUSCRIPTS

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The discovery of the Dunhuang documents in the early part of the twentieth century has been the largest single find of Chinese manuscripts and their content has been the subject of considerable scholarly activity over the past decades. In recent years, however, there has been an increased interest in the manuscripts as physical objects. This new attitude focuses not only on the content but also the material manifestation of that content, including the paper, layout and character forms.

As part of the new approach towards manuscripts, in this paper I will address certain aspects of dating manuscripts on the basis of their character forms. I will demonstrate that the analysis of a limited amount of data can be misleading and only a comprehensive large-scale study will yield reliable results.

The benefits of studying Dunhuang character forms

There are several reasons why it is important to study the Chinese character forms on Dunhuang manuscripts. First of all, it helps us to read the manuscripts. Problems with deciphering individual characters are especially prominent in the case of the so-called transformation texts (*bianwen* 變文) where the inability to match every character with its modern equivalent has been a major obstacle in understanding the meaning of the text. But often a match by itself is not enough because the character is a phonetic loan or a graphic variant of another character. In this case the researcher

needs to determine which *word* the scribe intended to record with the graph in question. Therefore, the character forms can help us get closer to the original meaning of the text.

Learning about character forms in the Dunhuang manuscripts also helps us to reach a better understanding of the evolution of Chinese writing. The Dunhuang manuscripts are not an isolated corpus of documents in a script that was used in Dunhuang alone but an integral part of the written output of Chinese civilization in general. Therefore, the character forms found here are closely connected with those before and after them in time. The more manuscripts we find the clearer this connection is. In addition, because of their wide range in time, the Dunhuang manuscripts can tell us about the processes that governed the evolution of the Chinese script during the six hundred years between AD 400–1000.

The character forms also help to date the manuscripts. Although most scholars would not dispute the general notion of being able to determine the date of a manuscript based on its calligraphy or peculiar character forms, surprisingly little work has been done in this field to date. This principle depends on the belief that each time period had its own distinguishing character forms. As characters and writing habits evolved, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes as a result of administrative actions, the various stages of their development were recorded in the manuscripts.

Therefore, if one was able to work out the characteristics of each time period, one could match other manuscripts against those.

The time range of the Dunhuang material – based on the earliest and latest dated documents – is hypothesized to be between 400-1000, leaving us with a period of 600 years which is far too imprecise as a manuscript date. We need greater accuracy. There are several methods one can employ in order to determine the age of a manuscript on the basis of its writing. The most obvious method is using the date, if there is such, on the manuscript itself. Fortunately, a small portion of the manuscripts includes a colophon and a date, thus providing valuable material for the comparison of other manuscripts.¹ For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.81 contains a copy of

the *Mahāparanirvāṇa-sūtra* (T.374) with a colophon (Fig. 1). The colophon says that the Buddhist disciple Qiao Liangyong 譙良顯 copied the sutra on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month of the fifth year of the Tianjian reign period (29 August, 506).² Thus the character forms and calligraphy of the text can be ascribed to the beginning of the sixth century.

The other method of dating is based on locating character forms that are known from history to be particular to certain eras. This method essentially consists of detecting instances of name taboos and so-called Empress Wu characters. Name taboos refer to character changes, complete or partial, effected in order to avoid using the names of emperors or other respected personages – use

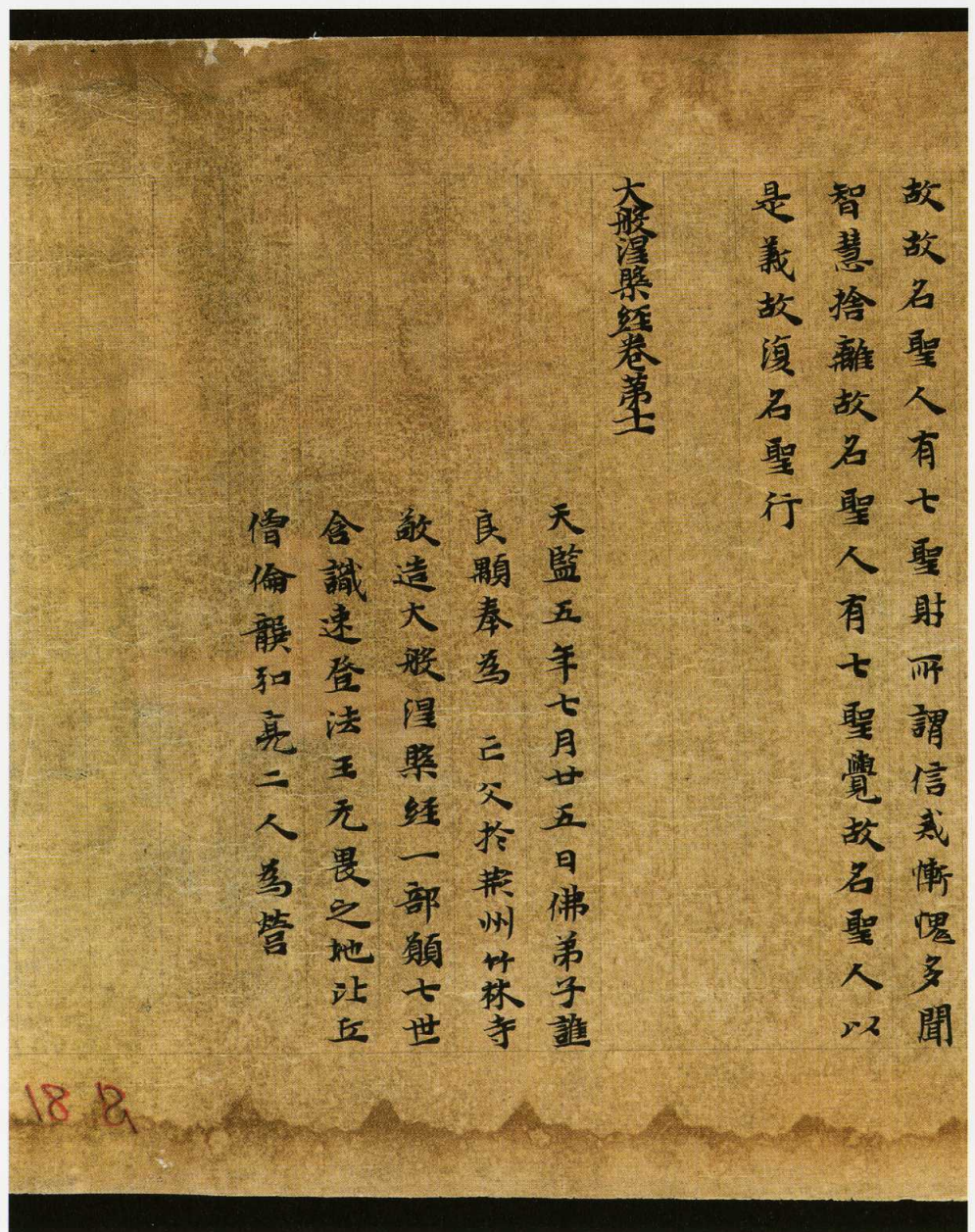


Fig. 1 Colophon to the *Mahāparanirvāṇa-sūtra*.

The colophon to this Dunhuang manuscript dates it to 506, making it one of the earliest dated scrolls from cave 17 at Dunhuang and a useful model for early sixth-century character forms and calligraphy.

The British Library, Or.8210/S.81 (detail)

