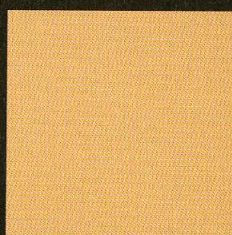


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DUNHUANG CHARACTERS AND THE DATING OF MANUSCRIPTS

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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

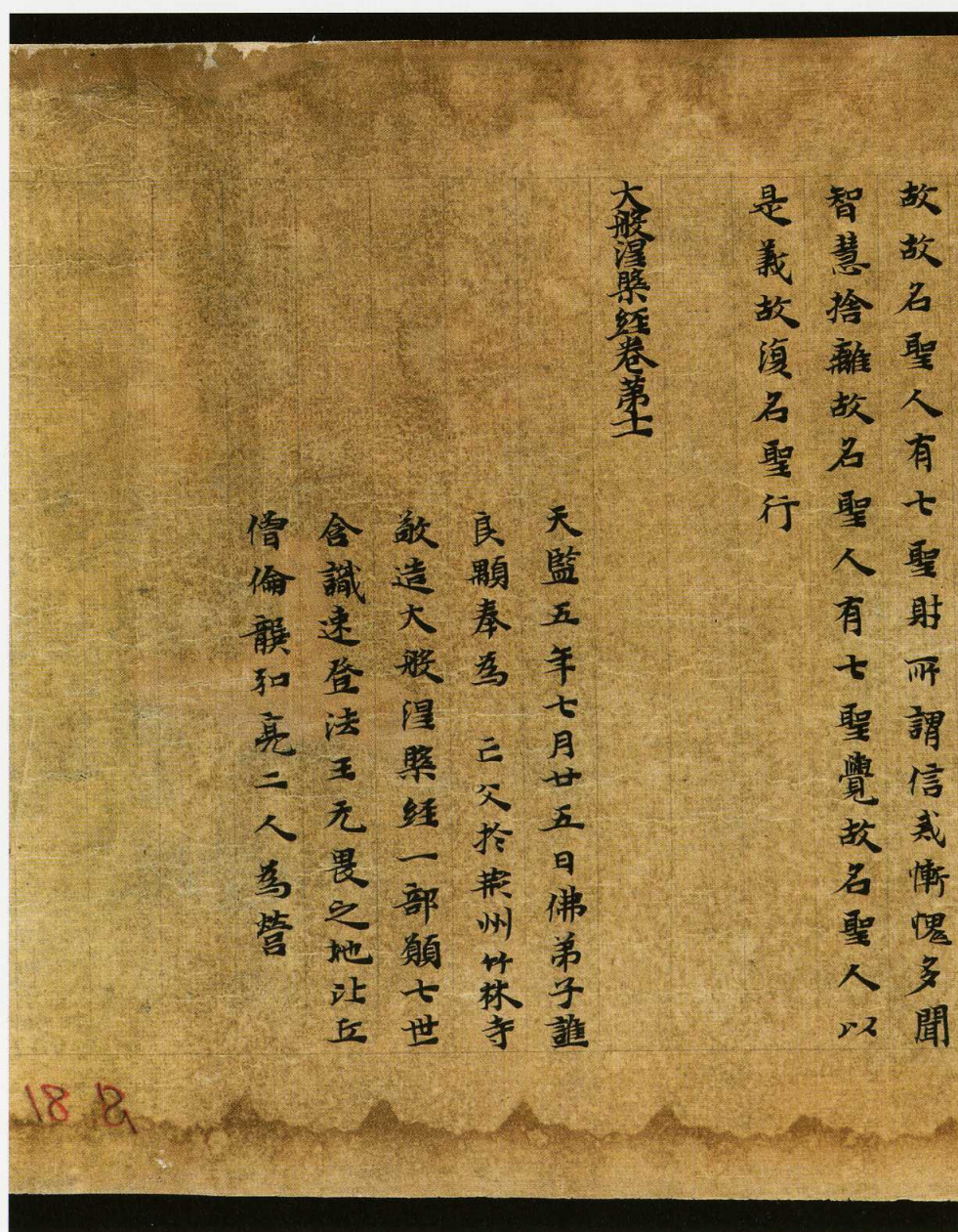


Fig. 1 Colophon to the *Mahāparanirvāṇa-sūtra*.

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)

of these characters was forbidden during the emperors' reigns and thereafter. For example, in the 'Ballad of a Swallow' on Or.8210/S.6267 the character 治 ('to manage') is written as 理 ('to arrange') in order to avoid writing the name of the Tang-dynasty (618–907) emperor Gaozong (r. 649–83), whose personal name was Li Zhi 李治. The same text in P.3666 and P.2491 is written with the character 治. Because of this instance of a name taboo, we can deduce that manuscript Or.8210/S.6267 dates sometime between Emperor Gaozong's accession to the throne (i.e. 649) and the end of the Tang dynasty (i.e. 907).³

'Empress Wu characters'

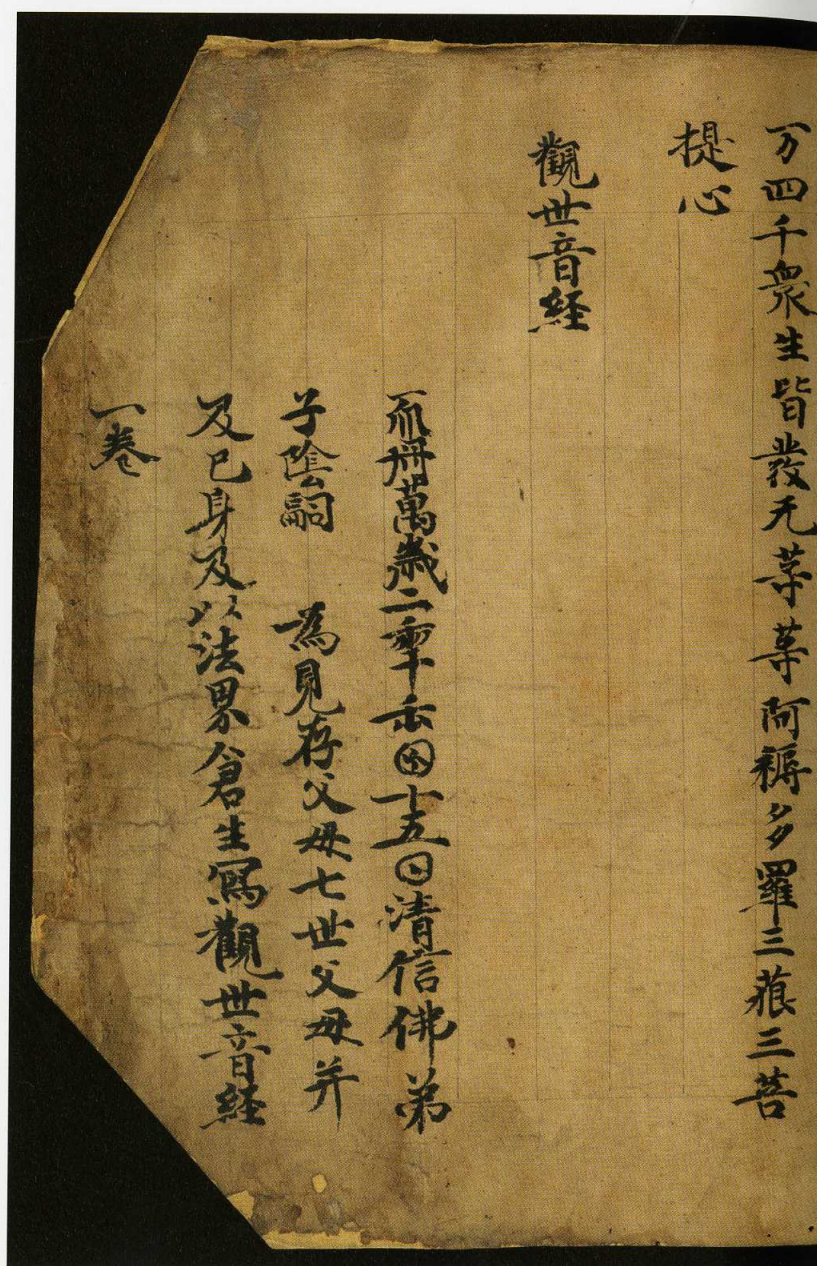
The term 'Empress Wu characters' refers to the characters introduced by Empress Wu Zetian in her reign (690–705), during which she declared a new dynastic name, the Zhou. Out of ritual and spiritual considerations she changed over a dozen characters at the beginning of her reign. The *Xin Tangshu*⁴ recorded that she changed twelve characters, namely, 照, 天, 地, 日, 月, 星, 君, 臣, 人, 載, 年, 正. Hu Sanxing's 胡三省 (1230–87) commentary to the *Zizhi tongjian*⁵ added a further two, 證, 聖.⁶ In reality, however, the empress probably changed more than these fourteen characters.⁷ After the restoration of the Tang dynasty at the end of her reign, the new characters were changed back to their original forms. Therefore, the presence of Empress Wu characters indicates that the text was written during the reign of Empress Wu, i.e. 690–705. Because of this distinctiveness, the easiest Tang manuscripts to identify are those written during this period.

Sometimes, however, the Empress Wu characters are used not as consistently as one would expect. Manuscript Or.8210/S.217, which is a fragment of the 'Guanshiyinjing' (i.e. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, chapter 25), has the following colophon (Fig. 2):

On the fifteenth day of the first month of *Tiancewansui* 2 [23 Feb. 696] the Buddhist disciple of pure faith Yin Si copied out the *Guanshiyinjing* in one roll on behalf of his parents now living and his parents of seven previous incarnations, as well as on his own behalf and that of the multitude of living beings in the universe.⁸

天冊萬歲二年正月十五日清信
弟子陰嗣為見存父母七世父母
并及己身及以法界倉生寫觀世
音經一卷

The colophon records a precise date which falls within the reign period of Empress Wu. In his catalogue, Giles also notes that 'the text contains Empress Wu characters for 'tian', 'nian', 'zheng', 'yue' and 'ri'.⁹ Indeed, these characters are clearly discernible in the



Figs 2 and 3 *Guanshiyinjing*.

Guanshiyinjing, or chapter 25 of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Lotus sutra*) became very popular in Dunhuang as it described how, by calling on the name of the bodhisattava Avalokiteśvara (Ch: Guanshiyin), travellers besieged by bandits or others in trouble would be saved.

The colophon (above) dates this manuscript to 696 during the reign of the Chinese Empress Wu Zetian. Various character forms were proscribed during her reign and common alternatives used, as seen in the colophon. However, the alternative forms are not found in the main body of the text (right) suggesting either that the text and colophon were written at different times or, more probably, that the rules were not always enforced.

The British Library, Or.8210/S.217 (details)

羅門身而為說法應以比丘比丘尼優婆塞優婆夷身
 得度者即現比丘比丘尼優婆塞優婆夷身而為說法
 應以長者居士宰官婆羅門婦女身得度者即現婦
 女身而為說法應以童男童女身得度者即現童男童
 女身而為說法應以天龍夜叉乾闥婆阿脩羅迦樓羅
 緊那羅摩睺羅伽人非人等身得度者即皆現之而
 為說法應以執金剛神得度者即現金剛神而為說法
 無盡意是觀世音菩薩成就如是功德以種種形遊
 諸國土度脫衆生是故汝等應當一心供養觀世音
 菩薩是觀世音菩薩摩訶薩於怖畏急難之中能施
 无畏是故以此娑婆世界皆号之為施无畏者無盡意菩
 薩白佛言世尊我今當供養觀世音菩薩即解頸衆

colophon. However, a closer look at the text of the sutra reveals that there are standard forms for characters which should have been changed to Empress Wu characters (Fig. 3). If we arrange the Empress Wu characters that occur within this manuscript in a table format, we can see that there is a distinct difference between the uses of the forms of these characters in the colophon and the text of the sutra itself.

Table 1 (below) shows that the modified versions of characters 天, 日, 月, 年 and 正 occur only in the colophon. The characters in the body of the text, on the other hand, appear only in their standard form. The character 天 written in the colophon as an Empress Wu character occurs three times in the text, in each case written as a standard form. Similarly, the character 日 used in the colophon as an Empress Wu character occurs twice in the text in its standard form. In other words, the colophon is consistent in using the Empress Wu characters, and the text of the sutra is similarly consistent in using the standard forms.

The above finding leaves us with two different possibilities. First, perhaps the sutra and the colophon were written at different times. Although the calligraphy on the text of the sutra and the colophon seems similar, the ruling on the last sheet of paper containing the colophon noticeably differs from that on the rest of the scroll. The lines on the last sheet are nearly 2 cm shorter than on the rest of the manuscript. The writing, on the other hand, preserves the original height of the lines, thus protruding beyond the boundaries of the ruled margin. The colophon uses a slightly larger script and mostly disregards the ruled lines. However, even if this last sheet of paper was attached to the manuscript subsequently, which

might not be the case at all, the character 人 occurs on this last page at the end of the sutra in its standard form. Thus we are still left with the problem of having standard and Empress Wu characters side by side on the same sheet of paper.

The second possible explanation for the co-existence of different types of character forms is that either the practice of using the Empress Wu characters was erratic or the rule was not enforced efficiently. Perhaps there were exceptions to the rule, such as the option of maintaining the original character forms of an earlier document when making a new copy. Manuscript Or.8210/S.238, dated 692 by the colophon, supports this assumption, showing a similar binary distinction between the use of Empress Wu characters in the colophon and the lack of those within the main text. Once again, both the colophon and the main body of the text are consistent in using their respective character forms.

In manuscript Or.8210/S.5765, on the other hand, the characters 人, 天 and 日 appear as Empress Wu characters within the main text itself. The application of these forms is consistent throughout the document; there are no exceptions. This manuscript, however, has no colophon.

The analysis of Empress Wu characters on brick inscriptions from Turfan reveals an even greater inconsistency. Out of the eleven brick inscriptions analysed by Hou Can in his study, ten use the character 君, always in its standard form.¹⁰ However, the *Xin Tangshu* and Hu Sanxing listed this character as having been altered by the empress. Another inconsistency among the inscriptions is that the character 月 is used in two different forms. Although Hou has originally detected a pattern in using one form of the character 月 from 689 to 690 and then switching to another form, he had to modify his hypothesis after he discovered another brick inscription in which the second form was used already as early as 694.¹¹

The inconsistency of the use of Empress Wu characters in manuscripts and inscriptions constitutes a problem for the precise dating of documents. It is very likely that these inconsistencies are simply due to lack of knowledge on our part and will be effectively solved upon examining a much larger pool of manuscripts.

The *Ganlu zishu*

Among the extant traditional dictionaries, perhaps the most important one for the study of Dunhuang manuscripts is the *Ganlu zishu* 干祿字書 by Yan Yuansun 顏元孫 (d. 714) of the Tang dynasty. He was the grandson of Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645), the famous scholar who wrote the commentary to the *Hanshu*. In the *Ganlu zishu*, Yan Yuansun categorized the characters of his time into three major groups: *su* 俗 'popular', *tong* 通 'common', and *zheng* 正 'standard'. In this regard, his attitude towards writing was that of a descriptive linguist. He did not try to enforce a standard by saying that people should write a character a certain way and avoid writing it in any other way. Instead, he believed that the various forms of the characters could all be used in the appropriate situation. He explained in his preface that each of his three categories

No.	Modern form	Form in main text	Form in colophon
1.	照	照	—
2.	天	天	𠀤
3.	地	地	—
4.	日	日	𠄎
5.	月	—	𠄎
6.	人	人	—
7.	年	—	𠄎
8.	正	—	𠄎
9.	聖	聖	—
10.	國	國	—

Table 1. Empress Wu characters in Or.8210/S.217

had different uses: *su* characters were used in tax records, archives, contracts and medical prescriptions where sophisticated language was not necessary; *tong* characters were used in submitted proposals, letters and court verdicts; *zheng* characters were used for writing essays at examinations or producing documents to be carved onto steles.¹²

This description is important because it tells us that at the time of Yan Yuansun, character forms that did not fall within the official standard were not only in common use but were an accepted part of the writing system. Moreover, the description also reveals that, in terms of the general rate of literacy, only a very small circle of people at the time was using standard characters, whereas the majority of the population was using other forms in its daily routine. Without trying to eliminate alternate character forms, people were accustomed to writing with different degrees of sophistication in different areas of their lives.

The differentiation between domains of use also tells us why later generations, including ours, saw a skewed picture of the writing habits of the Tang, even if looking at first-hand epigraphical evidence. The reason is that people wrote those documents which were important enough to be transmitted in standard forms. At the same time, documents written in non-standard forms did not live beyond the generation that had created them. Thus this highly selective process of textual transmission had been continuously weeding out documents created in non-standard forms. Consequently, the decisions of a relatively small scholarly and political circle have shaped the way we perceive the writing habits of the past.

Document Or.8210/S.6203 describes the merits for a person for rebuilding the Mogao caves. The inscription is dated to the eleventh year of Dali (776), which is very close to the time when the famous calligrapher Yan Zhenqing (顏真卿 (709–85), who was also Yan Yuansun's nephew, copied the *Ganlu zishu* and gave it its current shape (the ninth year of Dali, i.e. 774).¹³ Thus Or.8210/S.6203 is a document written about the same time as the extant form of the *Ganlu zishu*, making the manuscript an important witness of the time period and environment in which the dictionary was shaped (Fig. 4). Comparing these two sources to each other would shed light on the reliability of the dictionary in terms of dating manuscripts. Table 2 (left) shows a selection of character forms from Or.8210/S.6203 in comparison with the *Ganlu zishu* classification. Column 1 shows the standard modern form for each character; column 2 its form in which it occurs in the manuscript; and columns 3–5 mark the category under which the *Ganlu zishu* classifies the form in column 2.

Table 2 shows that eleven characters – 足, 明, 取, 於, 蒙, 景, 虛, 龍, 能, 或, 光 and 師 – in the text that appear in the *Ganlu zishu* fall into the category of *tong*, i.e. commonly used, characters. A smaller group of six characters (當, 操, 坐, 節, 流, 況) are classified by Yan Yuansun as *su*, i.e. popular. There are also two characters (圖, 御) that appear in their standard form, despite the fact that the dictionary also contains common or popular forms for them. Moreover, three of the characters (照, 就, 因) appear in the manuscript in non-standard forms that are not listed in the dictionary, showing that there were other forms in use at the time too.



Fig. 4 Document describing the merit of a donor to the Dunhuang caves.

This manuscript was written in Dunhuang in 776 about the same time as a dictionary was completed in China – the *Ganlu zishu* – which categorized the character forms of the time into three groups: popular, common and standard. This document contains character forms from all these groups.

The British Library, Or.8210/S.6203 (detail)

Modern form	Form in S.6203	<i>su</i> 俗	<i>tong</i> 通	<i>zheng</i> 正
足	𧇖		√	
當	𧇖	√		
操	𧇖	√		
坐	𧇖	√		
明	𧇖		√	
取	𧇖		√	
於	𧇖		√	
蒙	𧇖		√	
景	𧇖		√	
虛	𧇖		√	
龍	𧇖		√	
能	𧇖		√	
圖	𧇖			√
就	𧇖			
或	𧇖		√	
節	𧇖	√		
光	𧇖		√	
師	𧇖		√	
御	𧇖			√
流	𧇖	√		
況	𧇖	√		
照	𧇖			
因	𧇖			

Table 2. Comparison of character forms in Or.8210/S.6203 with the *Ganlu zishu* categories.¹⁴

The above comparison of character forms tells us that neither was the threefold classification of the *Ganlu zishu* absolute nor was the dictionary comprehensive. Finding a character form on a small fragment that appears in the dictionary under one of the three categories would not be sufficient to draw any definite conclusions about the fragment itself. One could never be certain how a larger fragment from the same manuscript would modify the initial assessment. Therefore, the *Ganlu zishu* should only be used as one of several tools to decipher, read and, ultimately, date eighth-century manuscripts. It should not be applied as a definite benchmark because the actual state of affairs with respect to Tang writing was much more complex and variable. In fact, the dictionary's primary value lies in showing us that the character forms in the Tang were variable and that at the time this variability was an accepted phenomenon within society.

The written dialect

In order to be able to date manuscripts based on their character forms, one must be able to identify those forms which are unique to a particular time period. During the process of identifying such unique features among various character forms, one must be aware of the inherent variability of character forms at any given time in Chinese history. If one looks at a larger amount of material, it becomes apparent that character forms could differ significantly even within the same text, not to speak of an entire time period. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.227 (dated to 593 by the colophon) writes the character 因 as 囧 and 囧; the character 尼 as 尼 and 尼; and the character 於 as 於 and 於. Manuscript Or.8210/S.81 writes the character 止 as 止 and 止; the character 體 as 體 and 體. These examples reveal that the differences in character structure were not necessarily the result of temporal or geographical differences. One cannot determine the date of the document simply by observing whether a certain character form appears in it or not. Although the existence or absence of particular character forms is undoubtedly an important factor in dating the documents, in practice the actual pattern is much more complicated than can be seen from a few characters written on a few manuscripts. The analysis of a larger selection of data would almost inevitably force us to modify our findings.

Generally speaking, I see the issue of dating a manuscript on the basis of its character forms as the task of identifying a *written dialect*. I use the word 'dialect' here not as a distinction from a standard but as one of the many different entities with unique characteristics; in this sense, the so-called 'standard' is merely one of the many dialects. A dialect is a linguistic product of a community defined in both spatial and temporal terms.¹⁵ Such a community would be a group of people who lived in approximately the same area at approximately the same time.

In terms of their connection to each other, written dialects are similar to spoken ones. The individuals within the same dialect all speak slightly differently, depending on their age, gender, educa-

tion, mood, health, etc.; yet they all understand each other and share certain common characteristics which together distinguish their dialect from all the other ones. For those not familiar with a dialect some of the distinctions might be too subtle to notice, but for those who know the dialect well they are obvious. Therefore, despite the idiosyncrasies of the individuals there are common traits within the entire group. The task for the researcher is to detect the boundaries of this dialect, that is, determine those collective peculiarities that set the dialect apart from other dialects and yet are commonly shared by all of its speakers. At the same time, the researcher should allow a certain degree of flexibility and disregard, just as all members of a dialect do, the idiosyncrasies that pertain to individuals.

The same capability of distinguishing individual dialects from each other holds true for written dialects within the Dunhuang corpus. There are peculiarities the researcher needs to take into account and others he needs to disregard. The important task is to differentiate between those particular to a scribe and those shared by other members of the community, but not members of other communities. Dating a document is essentially identifying the written dialect of a manuscript.¹⁶ The most important factor in defining a written dialect is a statistically sufficient amount of material. A written dialect is the sum total of the characteristics of the writing habits of people from the same general period and location. It is a concept that is only meaningful for a group of manuscripts, not individual documents. There is no ideal or perfect specimen that would embody the characteristics of a written

dialect. Therefore, when studying manuscripts, one needs as many witnesses as possible in order to be able to reach reliable conclusions. Individual character forms by themselves are only examples of possible configurations. Just as in spoken language where the dialect can only be studied on the basis of the innumerable utterances of a large number of native speakers, an analysis of the written dialect must involve a large number of texts written by various scribes. The larger the pool of examined documents is, the more accurate the results are. The examples given in this paper were all examples of how the analysis of singular instances of unique character forms can be imprecise.

In summary, up until now the fundamental problem with dating manuscripts on the basis of character forms is the limited nature of the material examined. The above examples of inconsistencies in using the Empress Wu characters and the *Ganlu zishu* categories demonstrate the inherent uncertainties in this task. Any study that is based on but a few examples of individual character forms will inevitably be inaccurate and subject to revisions upon the examination of a larger pool of data. Only a comprehensive study of Dunhuang materials will allow us to identify the various written dialects and subdialects that comprised the writing habits shared by, and peculiar to, certain communities.

Imre Galambos is Project Manager on the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library and is currently preparing the Dunhuang Character Database.