

Non-Chinese Influences in Medieval Chinese Manuscript Culture

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Introduction

The Chinese script is among the most powerful symbols of Chinese culture, one of the key elements by which the people of China to this day define their national identity.¹ With a documented history of over three millennia, it lies at the core of the modern vision of historical continuity, and its significance in the formation of a coherent cultural narrative cannot be overstated. Paradoxically, the majority of written witnesses from the country's iconic and quintessentially "national" dynasties, the Tang and the Song, come from the northwestern peripheries of the Chinese domain, from sites such as Dunhuang, Turfan and Khara-khoto. Perhaps the biggest sensation of all was the discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts at the beginning of the twentieth century in a sealed-off library cave at the Mogao site about 30 km from the city of Dunhuang. Part of their fame was due to the fact that the manuscripts were subsequently utilised in the nationalist movement of the late 1920s. Shortly after the discovery of the cave library, the main bulk of the material was purchased by foreign explorers and shipped out of the country, causing leading Chinese intellectuals to join forces in a publicity campaign to prevent the export of cultural artifacts. Partly as a result of this campaign, many artifacts discovered or excavated during the first decades of the century gradually acquired the status of national treasures, with the Dunhuang manuscripts at the top of the list.²

The largest collection of Dunhuang manuscripts was assembled by Aurel Stein on two subsequent visits to the cave library in 1907 and 1913. As part of his general quest to document traces of Western civilisation, Stein saw the cave complex as one of the easternmost reaches of Hellenic influence. He found many of the faces depicted on the

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2 The antiquities campaign eventually managed to put a halt to most foreign expeditions at the time. In 1931, Aurel Stein was forced to interrupt his fourth expedition to Chinese Turkestan and go back to India, leaving behind all of the material excavated or purchased during this trip. Another major enterprise which had to give up working in China was Roy Chapman Andrews's Central Asiatic Expeditions mainly known for discovering a large and important collection of fossils and dinosaur bones in Outer Mongolia. The Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, however, managed to continue working in northwestern China under the auspices of the newly formed Sino-Swedish expedition. See Brysac 2004 and Galambos 2010.

murals to be distinctly Western. In contrast with this, early Chinese researchers sought to document Chinese cultural influences in the West and marveled at the East-Asian appearance of the same faces. In a way analogous to the conflicting interpretation of facial features in Dunhuang art, the rich collection of manuscripts was also viewed from conflicting perspectives. While Chinese intellectuals and the general public visualised the collection as Tang scrolls with unmatched calligraphy, foreign researchers rushed to work on the unprecedented abundance of Khotanese, Sanskrit and Tibetan texts.

Looking at the corpus more than a century after its discovery, one of its most astonishing features is the linguistic diversity of the material, manifested in a mixture of languages and scripts. There are texts in more than a dozen and a half different languages and scripts, including some remarkable combinations of these. We have examples of Tibetan written with Chinese characters as a way of recording the pronunciation of Tibetan names and titles. Conversely, there are also Chinese sūtras written phonetically in the Tibetan script, no doubt so that someone could chant the scripture without being able to properly read, or perhaps even understand, Chinese. Some Uighur manuscripts have Chinese characters interspersed in the text, which would have been read either in Uighur or using a Sino-Uighur pronunciation.³ But even in monolingual manuscripts we occasionally find traces of multilingualism, as some of them are written with such poor orthography and grammar that we have to assume that they were either produced by semi-literate people, perhaps children or adults with a manifestly low level of proficiency in that particular script. In the following, I will look at some Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang and examine to what degree they were influenced by non-Chinese elements.

Multilingual community at Dunhuang

The Dunhuang corpus represents the largest collection of manuscripts ever discovered in China. Leaving aside the significant number of documents in other languages, the Chinese material now housed in institutions around the world is estimated to exceed forty thousand items.⁴ Although only a fraction of the manuscripts are dated, based on the earliest and latest attested dates, the time frame for the entire corpus is thought to range from the late fourth century until the first third of the eleventh century.⁵ Within this stretch of over 600 years, the majority of the documents come from the time known as the *Gujiyun* 歸義軍 (Return to Allegiance Army) period, that is, between the mid-ninth and early eleventh centuries.

During the early Tang, Dunhuang was known under the name of Shazhou 沙州, and was an important military garrison in the northwestern region of the empire. As one of the last Chinese outposts along the commercial and pilgrimage route connecting China with the West, it was a city with a multiethnic and multilingual population, hosting large numbers of visitors of equally diverse origin. Although originally an integral part of the Tang realm, as

3 On the subject of the Uighur reading of Chinese characters, see Takata 1985 and Shōgaito 2004.

4 Estimates to the number of manuscripts vary, depending on whether fragments, some of them so small that they only contain a single character, count as individual items. In addition, there is also the question of forgeries and unknown items in private collections. From the point of view of the cataloguer, Fang Guangchang 方廣鎔 puts the total number of the Chinese content of the library cave between fifty and sixty thousand items (Fang & Xu 1996, p. 40).

5 Fujieda Akira (1969, p. 17) estimates that about a thousand Chinese manuscripts are dated.

a result of the internal political turmoil leading to the outbreak of the An Lushan rebellion in 755, the city gradually lost its connection with the Tang and eventually fell to the Tibetans in 786. Under Tibetan rule, the majority of the population remained Chinese, but it is likely that there would have been increased pressure for those who were employed by the administration to learn to speak and write Tibetan. In addition, large government projects included the mass copying of Chinese and Tibetan sūtras, which would have involved larger segments of the general population.⁶ There is evidence, for example, that many of those who were commissioned with copying Tibetan sūtras were in fact Chinese.

Starting from the early 840s, as a result of internal political struggles, the Tibetan empire began to lose control over its Central Asian colonies. Taking advantage of the situation, in 848 a local Chinese by the name of Zhang Yichao 張義朝 with a group of armed soldiers drove out the Tibetan troops stationed in the garrison and established his own rule. Although the city remained cut off from Central China, it submitted to the Tang court, and its local rulers assumed the title of military governors (*Guiyijun jiedu shi* 歸義軍節度使). This marked the beginning of the reign of military governors known as the Guiyijun period, which lasted until the early eleventh century. Even though the city was no longer under Tibetan military control, Tibetan culture and language remained important both in secular and monastic environments. In fact, Tibetan was used as a *lingua franca* in much of Hexi 河西 even when Central China was already under the control of the newly established Song dynasty.⁷

The manuscripts from the cave library are evidence of the multilingual community of Dunhuang. We can see that during the time of Tibetan rule of the region, Tibetan became as important as Chinese. In addition, there are many manuscripts in other languages, such as Sanskrit and Khotanese. Often, the same manuscript bears more than one language, attesting to the complex interaction of different cultural and linguistic elements.⁸ Of these, most common are the bilingual texts with Chinese on one side and another language on the other, but there are also a number of glossaries and phrasebooks specifically designed to mediate between languages. Rarer, yet linguistically more interesting, are the cases in which one language is written in a different script. We thus have several examples of Chinese versions of Buddhist sūtras transcribed phonetically using the Tibetan script.⁹ A reversed example is seen in the letters of passage carried by the Chinese pilgrim travelling through the Hexi region, who had written some of the names and titles appearing in his Tibetan letters of introduction on the side in Chinese characters.¹⁰ The reason for such phonetic annotation might have been the necessity to be able to read these names aloud when either meeting the people in person or asking others for them.

In his article on multilingualism in Dunhuang, Takata Tokio draws attention to a number of bilingual text-types that have been found in Dunhuang, including Buddhist scriptures, literary works and primers, pointing out that these manuscripts date not only to

6 See Fujieda 1969, pp. 36–9; Nishioka 1985 and Ueyama 1988.

7 See van Schaik & Galambos 2012, esp. pp. 67–74.

8 For a discussion of bilingual Sino-Tibetan manuscripts in Dunhuang, see *ibid.*, pp. 29–34.

9 The Tibetan transcriptions of Chinese texts have been extensively utilised for reconstructing the local dialect of the Hexi region during the ninth-tenth centuries. See, for example, Luo 1933, Csongor 1960 and Takata 1988.

10 On this group of manuscripts, see van Schaik & Galambos 2012.

the period of Tibetan rule (786–848) but up to the late tenth century when the area was already under the Cao family's control.¹¹ He believes that, despite the lack of political pressure to use the Tibetan language and script, "once a particular custom has been established, it does not vanish all that easily". In addition, he also raises the possibility that these manuscripts were produced during the Guiyijun period by "a social stratum that had been alienated from the study of Chinese writing".¹²

Non-Chinese influences in Chinese manuscript culture

Chinese manuscripts represent the largest portion of the content of the original cave library at Dunhuang. Despite their dominance in number, not all of them are as Chinese as they appear at first glance. Even monolingual scrolls with no immediate signs of multilingualism (e.g. other languages or scripts) bear a number of traits that can be attributed to non-Chinese influences. At the same time, these attributions are not entirely unproblematic, and more research is needed to develop a reliable typology of such manuscripts. Yet several of these traits are highly conspicuous and should be pointed out: 1) the use of a stylus instead of a brush; 2) deterioration of paper quality; 3) introduction of new bookbinding formats.

The use of a stylus

One of the most common non-Chinese elements in the Dunhuang corpus is the use of the stylus, or hard pen (*yingbi* 硬筆), as it is called in modern Chinese. This phenomenon can be documented from the beginning of Tibetan rule and is thus widely accepted as a means of dating: anything written with a stylus dates after the beginning of the Tibetan period (786); anything written with a brush must have been produced before that. This identification ultimately goes back to the research of Fujieda Akira who demonstrated the validity of this rule on a number of manuscripts.¹³ Although recently a monograph-length study has been published by Li Zhengyu 李正宇,¹⁴ research on the subject is still in its infancy. In terms of their visual characteristics, the typical feature of such manuscripts is a particular pattern of character strokes. Because of its softness, the brush has the ability to change the thickness of lines within the same stroke, whereas the stylus is more rigid and is therefore thought to produce lines of roughly equal thickness. Yet when copying sūtras or other texts in which calligraphy was of significance, we see that users of a stylus made an effort to emulate brush-written characters. This was achieved by retouching existing strokes, in order to create endings characteristic of brush-written characters.

Such a sudden and conspicuous shift to a new writing instrument is habitually explained as a necessity because Dunhuang became severed from China proper and they could not import brushes.¹⁵ There are obvious problems with this reasoning. First, we do not have evidence that brushes would have been imported whole-scale from China even before the Tibetan period. They were certainly not exotic commodities and there is no reason to

11 Takata 2000, p. 65. J.-P. Drège counts some 350 manuscripts in the Pelliot collection at the BnF with both Tibetan and Chinese in them, of which the most numerous are the type where the Chinese was written first and the manuscript was reused to write Tibetan (Drège 1985, pp. 496–500).

12 Takata 2000, p. 65. On this point, see also Takeuchi 2004.

13 E.g. Fujieda 1969.

14 Li 2005.

15 See, for example, Fujieda 1969, p. 21 and Fujieda 1975, p. 122.

suppose that they could not have been produced locally, from local material. After all, the Dunhuang region was home to rabbits, foxes and other animals whose hair was typically used for making brushes. Thus it is more likely that the shift to using a stylus can be explained as a cultural influence rather than a matter of inaccessibility. Having said that, there is no evidence to what writing tool Tibetans themselves used before their arrival in Dunhuang, as the majority of textual material for the early stages of Tibetan literacy actually comes from Dunhuang. In other words, the manuscripts provide evidence that the Tibetans used a stylus from around the same time when we have traces of its use for writing Chinese. Therefore there is still much work to be done in this field, which will no doubt improve our ability to date manuscripts on the basis of the writing instrument they had been produced with.

Deterioration of paper quality

One of the other characteristics commonly associated with Tibetan rule in Dunhuang is the quality of paper. From about the end of the eighth century, we notice a visible deterioration in the quality of paper used for the manuscripts.¹⁶ As is the case with the use of the stylus, this is often linked to the fact that Dunhuang was cut off from China proper and they could not import good quality paper.¹⁷ The low quality paper seen in manuscripts from this period is believed to have been produced locally.¹⁸ Thus the difference is essentially between local paper and proper Chinese paper imported from the Tang.

Once again, there are problems with this scenario. After all, paper was obviously made in Dunhuang at other times, yet it is during the ninth–tenth centuries that we see a wide-scale deterioration of quality. What happened to local papermakers who had been producing high quality paper before – did they forget their skills? Or did they lose access to raw materials? We do not have clear answers to these questions at the moment, but several important projects aiming at the scientific analysis of paper from Dunhuang are being carried out.¹⁹ There is therefore hope that we will soon have a better understanding of what happened to paper production after the Tibetans gained control. For now, we can see that the paper of the Tibetan period is different from that in other times, and in many cases this observation can indeed be used for dating purposes.²⁰

¹⁶ Fujieda 1975, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Iwao Kazushi points out that Chinese copies of the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* manufactured during Tibetan rule were deliberately produced in imitation of the standard format used for Chinese sūtras of Central China, including the type and size of paper, as well as the emulation of brush-written character forms, even though the actual writing instrument was a stylus. In contrast, Chinese copies of the *Aparimitāyur-nāma-sūtra* were produced using paper of local format. Iwao argues that it was the sūtras originally created for the purpose of being shipped to other places that were produced in the traditional Chinese format. See Iwao, forthcoming.

¹⁹ One of the researchers currently working on the typology of Chinese manuscripts from Central Asia, including Dunhuang, is Agnieszka Helman-Ważny at the University of Hamburg. Another team from Ryūkoku University (Sakamoto Shouji, Enami Kazuyuki and Okada Yoshihiro) has been gathering scientific data from manuscripts preserved in Kyoto, London and Paris and their results are likely to increase our ability to date paper and establish its provenance.

²⁰ For a typology of paper used for manuscripts, including a number of key codicological data, see Drège 2002. Drège also points out that paper was made in the Dunhuang region before the Tibetan period: we

Introduction of new bookbinding formats

By the Tang period, the classic format for Chinese text was the scroll. This meant that rectangular sheets of paper were glued together to form a long and continuous paper surface, which was then rolled up. Typically, this was done from the end of the text, where a wooden stave (*zhou* 軸) was placed for support, towards the beginning. From around the ninth century, or perhaps the end of the eighth century, we begin to see a number of formats that had not been used for Chinese texts before. These obviously bear the influence of Central Asian manuscript cultures (e.g. Tibetan, Uighur and Khotanese). The new formats include the pothi, concertina (accordion), booklet, codex, and whirlwind.²¹ Manuscripts in these formats are usually written on coarse paper.²² The connection with other manuscript cultures is also underlined by the fact that only a fraction of the total number of manuscripts in these formats are written in Chinese. Jean-Pierre Drège notes, for example, that 90% of all concertina manuscripts are written in Tibetan.²³ Therefore these formats are typical of Central Asian manuscript cultures and their use for Chinese manuscripts can be safely attributed to a non-Chinese influence.

On some of these manuscripts we can document the process of switching to the new format from the more orthodox scroll. For example, manuscript Pelliot chinois 3760 is a copy of the popular chapter on Avalokiteśvara (*Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin diershiwu* 觀世音菩薩普門品第二十五) from the *Lotus sūtra* 妙法蓮華經 (T9.262) and two smaller texts, the *Foshuo Dizang pusa jing* 佛說地藏菩薩經 (T85.2909) and the *Foshuo xuming jing* 佛說續命經 (T85.2889). These three texts together were bound as a small booklet in a concertina (i.e. accordion) format. There are indications that the manuscript used to make this particular copy was of a different format, perhaps a scroll. This is apparent in the five-character verses in the sūtra, which appear in traditional scrolls in a visually distinct layout as four sets per line, with characters closely squeezed together. In this booklet, however, we can see that the copyist began copying the stanzas as continuous text, fitting six to seven characters per line of the small pages. But after several stanzas, on page 68 of the manuscript, he adjusted to the rhythm of the verses and began separating the individual stanzas by placing each five-character unit in a separate line. Accordingly, while making this particular copy, the copyist arrived at a new format which created a visually transparent layout. With the end of the stanzas, he immediately switched back to the six-seven characters per line format he used earlier for continuous text.²⁴

know of Taoist manuscripts written in Dunhuang in the middle of the eighth century, probably on locally produced paper.

21 For a short overview of what Fujieda calls 'irregular forms', see Fujieda 1975, pp. 24–7. For more detailed studies, on the concertina (accordion) format, see Drège 1984; on the whirlwind format, see Drège 1996; on the booklet format, see Drège 1979.

22 Fujieda (1975, p. 122) believes that this was local paper made in Dunhuang. He also claims that manuscripts in these new formats were always written with a stylus (*Ibid.*). J.-P. Drège, however, is of the opinion that this is true only for the majority of codices, but much less for manuscripts in concertina or whirlwind formats (personal communication, December 2011).

23 Drège 1984, p. 197.

24 Manuscript Or.8210/S.6983 is a booklet with the same chapter of the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Foshuo Dizang pusa jing* (but without the *Foshuo xuming jing*), only illustrated. Here the five-character per line layout for the stanzas is a feature that has been implemented from the start, perhaps because this copy was already made from a similar booklet. But the copyist accidentally omitted the character 答 in the

The development of the new layout can also be observed when the Buddha lists the possible manifestations of Avalokiteśvara using the structure “for those who need to be saved by someone in the body of X, Avalokiteśvara immediately manifests himself in the body of X and preaches the dharma to them” 應以 X 身得度者，觀世音菩薩即現 X 身而為說法。Here, a series of segments identical in structure is presented, and only the concrete form of manifestation (marked here with ‘X’) changes. Noting their parallel structure, the copyist soon began separating the segments from each other, first by inserting an empty space between them and later by starting each one on a new line. Once again, the evolutionary process of arriving at this new layout shows that he was inventing it as he was copying the sūtra, most likely because the layout of the source text was different. In concrete terms, this probably meant that he was copying the text from a scroll, the line length and general layout of which was very different from the booklet format he was using.

Problems with calligraphy and orthography

An intriguing example of non-Chinese characteristics in a Chinese manuscript from Turfan was recently introduced by Kitsudō Kōichi. He demonstrated that part of a Chinese colophon written by a Uighur Buddhist devotee using an awkward grammatical style could actually be reconstructed as Uighur sentences.²⁵ Thus the ungrammatical phrase *shang zi Xumishan ru* 上字須彌山如 would read smoothly after a word-for-word conversion to Uighur as *üzäki üžik-läri sumer tay täg* (“the characters above are like Mount Sumeru”). With respect to Chinese texts written by Uighurs, Kitsudō identifies three criteria: 1) unskilled Chinese characters with particular idiosyncrasies; 2) vertical lines written from left to right, as opposed to the usual direction from right to left; 3) grammatical problems in the text.²⁶ Although his observations are based on Turfan manuscripts written by Uighurs, similar problems occur in the Dunhuang corpus, even if the foreign influence in this case cannot be unambiguously identified as Uighur. Having said that, grammatically incorrect Chinese sentences are relatively rare, partly because a large portion of what survives today are copies of pre-existing texts such as Buddhist sūtras and commentaries, popular poetry, or formulaic compositions such as letter models, society circulars, etc. But unskilled Chinese characters and vertical lines written from left to right are not uncommon in the Dunhuang manuscripts either.

As an example of the orthographic mistakes atypical of adult Chinese users, we can cite manuscript Pelliot chinois 3886 kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which is a small scroll on dark brownish paper. The recto contains sample letters sent out as

stanza 偈答無盡意 and wrote only 偈無盡; he realised his error because he still had two characters worth of space on the line but only one character to copy (i.e. 意). Accordingly, he placed the character 意 at the end of the line, creating an empty space before it. At the same time, as shown by J.-P. Drège (1999, pp. 124–34) with regard to illuminated copies of the chapter on Avalokiteśvara from the *Lotus sūtra*, including Or.8210/S.6983, in these manuscripts the text is spaced to follow the illustrations. This creates an abundance of empty spaces, such as unfinished or empty lines, which reflect the scribe’s effort to synchronise the text with the images above it.

25 Kitsudō 2011, pp. 329–31.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 326; his criteria are only paraphrased here. As a reversed example of using non-Chinese scripts, Sam van Schaik shows some cases of Tibetan written by Chinese people, resulting in non-standard stroke order for some of the letters (see van Schaik & Galambos 2011, pp. 33–4).

condolences for funerals with a colophon at the end reading “Written in his own hand by Deng Qingzi, student at the Dayun [monastery] on the 1st day of the seventh month of the *gengshen* year, the 7th of the Xiande reign of the Great Zhou (July 27, 960)” 維大周顯德七年歲次庚申七月一日大雲學朗鄧清子自手記. The name indicates a Chinese person, although the calligraphy is rather crude. Yet the verso of the same manuscript, with a collection of poems written in honour of the monk Wuzhen 悟真, was written by a different hand, and the calligraphy is also visibly inferior.²⁷ Some of the mistakes make us consider the possibility that this was done by a non-Chinese person. For example, the character 千 in the phrase *qiannian* 千年 (‘thousand years’) appears as 𠂇, with an extra horizontal stroke, a type of error we do not expect from a Chinese writer. It is likely that the extra stroke in the character was influenced by the character immediately following it (年 ‘year,’ written as 𠂇), but this type of mistake reveals a person who was not proficient in writing even the most basic Chinese characters.

The small booklet in concertina format already mentioned above (Pelliot chinois 3760) is yet another manuscript with a large number of similar mistakes that would not be expected from a literate Chinese person.²⁸ There are a number of cases in which an entirely different character is used, and because some of these form parts of compound words, it is obvious that the copyist did not understand or was not paying attention to the meaning of the sentences. For example, the word *jishi* 即時 (‘immediately’) is written as 即是 (‘this is’), which is meaningless in this context. The character 多 (‘many’) in the phrase “if there are sentient beings with many sexual desires” 若有眾生多於姪欲 is written as 名 (‘name’), a graphically similar yet completely unrelated character. The same mistake is repeated a few characters later, although the character is written correctly the third time it occurs in a parallel phrase.²⁹ Finally, the name of Avalokiteśvara is miswritten several times, omitting various characters from it. Thus while the correct form of *Guanshiyin pusa* 觀世音菩薩 does appear in the text, we also have some startling variations (e.g. *Guanshiyin pu* 觀世音菩, *Guanyin pusa* 觀音菩薩, *Yin pusa* 音菩薩). Since this is a copy of a chapter of the *Lotus sūtra*, which is a pre-existing text, we can only see these alternate renderings of the name of Avalokiteśvara as mistakes, not as abbreviations.³⁰

Orthographic problems include writing the two identical characters of the word *zhongzhong* 種種 (‘all sorts of’) in dyslexically reversed forms as 𣎵 and 𣎵. Then, the compound word *shouzu* (‘hands and feet’) is written as 𣎵足, where the top part of the character 手 somehow emulates the following character. Another strange phenomenon is the total confusion of the characters 便 and 使, including several instances of the nonexistent in-between form 𣎵 (used for 使). There are quite a few nonexistent orthographic forms in this manuscript, most of them for basic characters (e.g. 因, 欲, 常, 極,

27 Some of these poems also appear in the manuscript Pelliot chinois 3720. For a study of Wuzhen’s life and his works, especially as preserved in the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Chen Tsu-lung’s monograph (Chen 1966).

28 Note that this manuscript is written in at least two hands.

29 In his article on the oral transmission of texts in Dunhuang, Sam van Schaik looks at a surprisingly similar group of manuscripts, only in Tibetan. He believes that the mistakes found in the texts were introduced by students copying quickly from oral sources. See van Schaik 2007.

30 Of course, some of these forms would not make sense even as abbreviations, e.g. *Guanshiyin pu* 觀世音菩, *Yin pusa* 音菩薩.

著, 異, 甚, 醫, 怨, 服, 軍, 迎, 蓮, 臨) which would have been learned in the first couple of years of school. Finally, we should note that the second of the two hands in this manuscript has a tendency to write the 礻 radical in a way identified by Kitsudō as being typical of Chinese characters written by Uighurs (e.g. writing 沙 as 𠂔).³¹

Similarly blatant mistakes often appear in inscriptions on silk paintings. For example, on a painting from the Dunhuang cave showing Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings of Hell (MG.17793), in the collection of the Musée Guimet, the name “Mrs Guo” 郭氏 appears reversed, written as 氏郭. Although the mistake was immediately noticed and corrected by inserting the customary swoosh-like reversal mark, it is nevertheless remarkable to find an error of this magnitude in a single line of text.³² Note that Lilla Russell-Smith, in her book on Uighur patronage in Dunhuang, lists this item among the paintings showing Uighur influence.³³ Another inexplicable mistake is writing the name of Amoghapāśa (*Bukong juansuo pusa* 不空羼索菩薩) as 伯空卷索菩薩 on a painting dated 950 (MG.23079). This is especially interesting because it shows that the person who wrote the inscription was apparently unaware of the meaning of the word *bukong* 不空 (‘not empty’, ‘unerring’) and at the same time miswrote the character 菩 (*pu*) used in the word ‘bodhisattva’ for its phonetic value as 苦 (*ku* ‘hard; bitter’). The name of Amoghapāśa appears once again in the inscription at the bottom of the composition, and here *bukong* is miswritten the same way. We should also note that this latter inscription is written from left to right.³⁴

Chinese written from left to right

As to the direction of writing, although there are sporadic examples of unorthodox arrangements of characters on earlier inscriptions, we can safely state that during the dynastic period Chinese was generally written in vertical lines going from right to left.³⁵ Yet among the Dunhuang material we find several dozen examples where two or more vertical lines of text are written from left to right. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.4747 is a copy of a short apocryphal sūtra called *Xin Pusa jing* 新菩薩經 (T85.2917). The manuscript is undated, but the quality of paper and the type of calligraphy suggest that it was copied between the ninth and tenth centuries. The verso is empty, except for the very end where we see one and a half lines from the *Qianziwen* 千字文, apparently in the same hand as the sūtra on the recto. The text here is preceded by the words 千字文敕員外散騎侍郎周興嗣次韻, followed by the first five four-character segments of the main text. The text then ends abruptly in mid-sentence, revealing that the copying was interrupted or

31 Kitsudō 2012 (forthcoming, p. 13 in the unpublished manuscript). At this point there is not enough direct evidence to positively identify a Uighur hand in this manuscript but the similarity with Khitan and Uighur peculiarities certainly indicates a non-Chinese element in it.

32 Just to be exact, even the correction mark appears in the wrong place. Instead of putting it between the characters 氏 and 郭, the corrector inserted it after the character 郭, which would indicate that it is the characters 郭 and 永 that need to be reversed.

33 Russell-Smith 2005, p. 124 and p. 236.

34 Giès 1995–6, vol. I, p. 348.

35 There are examples of Chinese written from left to right from the oracle-bone inscriptions through Zhou bronze inscriptions and much later. Even from the dynastic period there are such examples but these do not seem to be connected with the cases I am describing here, which all come from a particular time and place. For a somewhat puzzling attempt to link the examples from Dunhuang with other cases in Chinese history, see Yang 2001.

simply abandoned. These one and a half lines appear at the far left of the verso, at the place that normally would be the end of the scroll. The lines are, however, written from left to right, showing that this side of the paper should be seen as the beginning. It is also worth noting that the character 侍 ('to serve') in the word *shilang* 侍郎 ('attendant') is written as 待 (*dai* 'to wait, expect'), which is a somewhat surprising mistake in the first line of a teaching manual. The *Xin Pusa jing* on the verso, written in the same hand, demonstrates that this manuscript was written by someone fairly familiar with writing Chinese characters – therefore the mistake at the beginning of the *Qianziwen* is not an indication of his incompetence but simply a copying error. Yet the fact that the *Qianziwen* runs from left to write suggests a non-Chinese influence. We cannot tell whether the copyist stopped mid-sentence because he realised that he was writing in the wrong direction or for any other reason. It is, of course, also possible that he began copying a version that was already written from left to right, although this is not likely because no such copies survived in the Dunhuang corpus.

Another case is manuscript Or.8210/S.274 (Figure 1), which is pasted together from two separate pieces. The first piece, on whitish paper, is a lay society circular (*shesi zhuan tie* 社司轉帖) announcing a meeting and putting forward penalties for delay and nonattendance. The nine lines of the text are written entirely from left to right, in a crude calligraphy and frequent violation of basic orthography. For example, the character 日 ('day') is consistently written as 目 ('eye'). At the end of the circular, the date is given in a format in which the first character is impossible to recognise: 犬子年. Giles reads this first character in his catalogue as "the year of the dog" 犬子年, which would have been a highly atypical way of writing a date, even if written by a non-Chinese person.³⁶ It is perhaps more likely that the date should be read as the year *wuzi* 戊子年, which would mean 868 or 928. In either case, the crude calligraphy, the orthographic problems and the left-to-right direction of the text suggest that this circular may have been written by a non-Chinese person.

There are a number of similar society circulars in the Dunhuang corpus and many of them are written from left to right. Two of them are found on the recto of manuscript Or.8210/S.329, which contains an array of texts, some of which read in a left-to-right direction. There are also at least three dates recorded on this side of the manuscript: 857, 892 and 893.³⁷ To cite another example, fragment Or.8210/S.6104 also contains a society circular written from left to right in a bad hand but without mistakes.³⁸

³⁶ Giles 1957, p. 259.

³⁷ Li Jun (2009) points out that this manuscript contains a reference to Zhang Huaiding 張淮鼎, who was Governor of Dunhuang between 890–92.

³⁸ Manuscript Pelliot tibétain 1102 is a society circular in Chinese which on the verso has a Tibetan list of goods contributed by members. Takata Tokio (2000, p. 63) regards this a supplementary evidence for the use of Tibetan in Tibeto-Chinese communities. We should note that this circular is written in an accomplished hand and without the Tibetan writing on the verso we would probably not associate it with Tibetophone population.

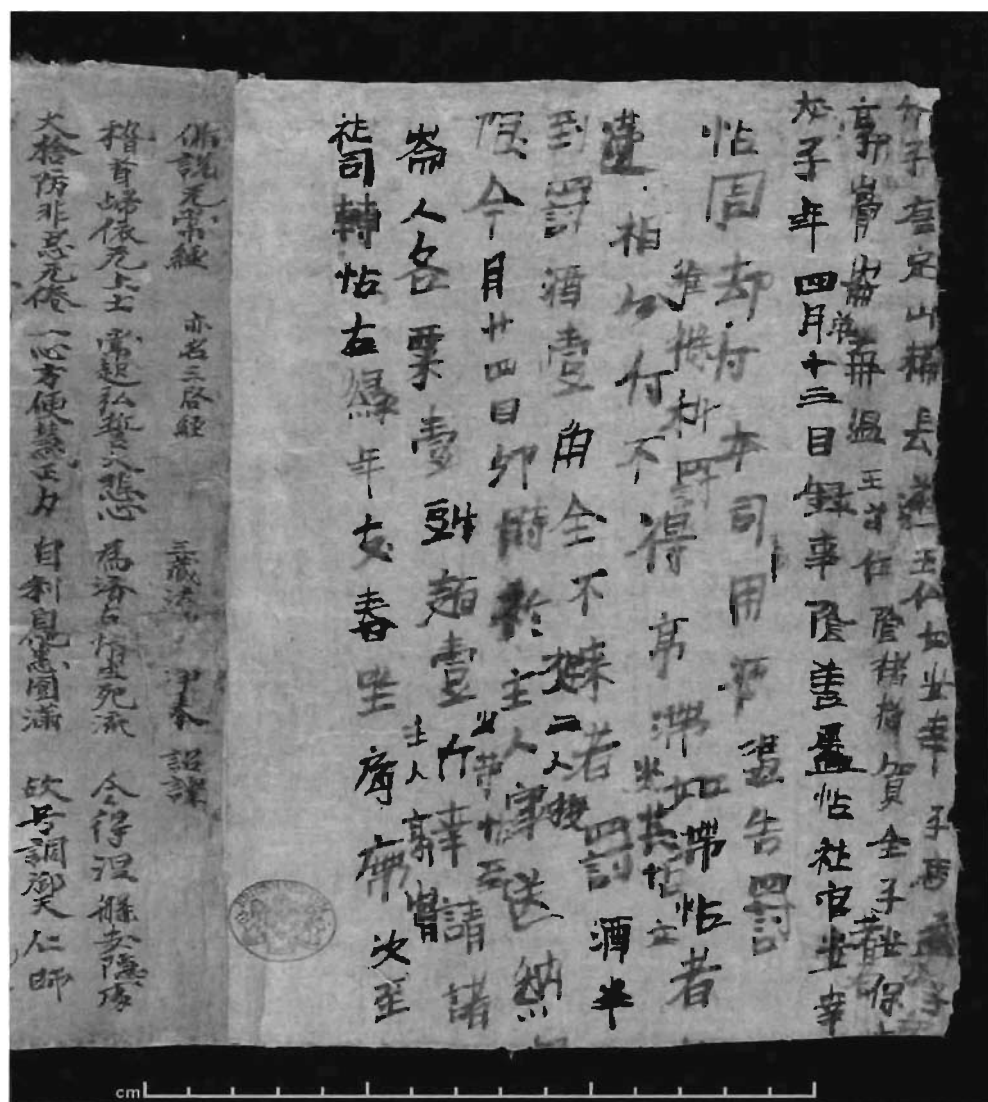


Figure 1: A society circular on manuscript Or.8210/S.274. Copyright The British Library.

Naturally, there are also other types of texts that occasionally appear in a left-to-right direction. The most common ones are contracts and other writings related to mundane interactions in society (e.g. Or.8210/S.5509V, Or.8210/S.6614V, Or.8210/S.2174, Pelliot chinois 3094V). Yet there are also colophons to Buddhist texts which, unlike the main text, are written in a left-to-right direction. In manuscript Or.8210/S.1907 a colophon at the end of a portion of the *Foshuo fumu enzhong jing* 佛說父母恩重經 (T85.2887) records:

開軍(運)三年丁未歲十二月廿七日，報恩寺僧海詮，發心念誦父母恩重經一卷，上寶(報)四種恩……

“On the 27th day of the 12th moon of the *dingwei* year, the 3rd of Kaiyun (946), Haiquan, a priest of the Baoen Monastery, with pious intent recited the *Fumu enzhong jing* in 1 roll, firstly, in order to requite the four kinds of bounty...”³⁹

While on the surface this appears to be a regular colophon, there are several problems with it. First, the name of the Kaiyun reign (944–46) of the Later Jin 後晉 dynasty is written as Kaijun 開軍, with the second character accidentally omitting the radical 亠. Furthermore, the character 報 in the word *shangbao* 上報 (‘requite something towards someone above oneself’) is written with the nearly homophonous character 寶 (*bao* ‘treasure’). Finally, there is the problem of the 3rd year of Kaiyun (946) not matching the cyclical year *dingwei*, which is either 947 or 948. While these may seem trivial mistakes, the three of them together within such a short colophon is an indication that it was written by someone who was not fully proficient in writing Chinese. As Giles notes in his catalogue, this is a “good manuscript, except colophon, which is poor.”⁴⁰

As we have already seen above, another unusual feature of this colophon is that it is written, in contrast with the text of the sūtra, from left to right. Beside the above comments regarding the competence of its author, we can make an additional observation, namely that it was written by a different person than the rest of the manuscript. This is, of course, also attested by the colophon which specifically states that Haiquan only recited the sūtra. In other words, he used an existing scroll – created at some earlier point in time by someone else – and made a note of reciting it for devotional purposes. This also shows that, despite the fact that Haiquan’s name appears to be that of a Chinese monk, he apparently was not entirely competent when it came to writing Chinese. Not only that, he wrote (at least sometimes, as is the case with this colophon) from left to right, which might be an indication that his primary literacy was in another language.

Another similar case is manuscript Pelliot chinois 3136, a small notebook with three sūtras: the *Fumujing* 父母經 (T85.2887), the *Foshuo boreboluomiduo xin jing* 佛說般若波羅蜜多心經 (T8.251) and the *Foshuo Molizhitian [tuoluoni zhou] jing* 佛說摩利支天[陀羅尼呪]經 (T21.1256). At the end, there is a colour drawing of an official sitting in a pious position, holding a flower, and on the next page another colour picture of a large flower. There is also a two-line colophon, written from left to right, saying, “Offered wholeheartedly as an act of worship by the lay disciple, the *jiedu yaya* Li Shunzi” 清信弟子節度押衙李順子一心供養.⁴¹ If the name does not immediately tell us much about the identity of the person, the clumsy calligraphy, together with the left-to-right direction of writing and the notebook format all indicate a non-Chinese influence. Notice, however, that the colophon does not claim that these texts were copied by Li Shunzi; he is only implied as the person who offers them, in other words he paid for their copying.

Beside the manuscripts, there are also cases of Chinese written from left to right on cave inscriptions and on paintings. A left-to-right inscription dated 865 with the title *Mogaoku ji*

³⁹ Translation from Giles 1957, p. 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ The same name also appears in a colophon in manuscript Or.8210/S.2981, although without the title *jiedu yaya*.

莫高窟記 is found on the surface of the wall of the antechamber of Cave 156, which was created in commemoration of Zhang Yichao's victory over the Tibetans.⁴² A copy of the inscription appears in Pelliot chinois 3720, where it is written in the orthodox right-to-left direction.⁴³ As for paintings, on Stein painting 31 (Ch.lvi.007) in the collection of the British Museum, depicting the Tejaprabha Buddha and the Five Planets, a donor's inscription in the top left corner reads from left to right as follows:

熾盛光佛并五星，神乾寧四年正月八日，弟子張淮興畫表，記

"The Buddha of Blazing Light and the Deities of Five Planets; 8th day of the 1st month of the 4th year of Qianning (897); celebratory record of drawing done by the disciple Zhang Huaixing."

While a left-to-right reading poses no grammatical difficulties, some modern transcribers nevertheless tried to read it in the 'usual', right-to-left direction and produced a different reading.⁴⁴ To cite another example, Stein painting 14 (Ch.liv.006) has three inscriptions, only one of which – the right lower one with a white background – is read from right to left. Although there are numerous examples of such inscriptions on paintings and murals, their arrangement in a pictorial design may not always be a sign of an outside influence, but could also be motivated by issues of symmetry.⁴⁵ Thus we should perhaps treat texts that form part of a picture as separate from purely textual cases.

When looking at manuscript examples of Chinese written from left to right together, a surprising pattern that emerges is that they all date from about 850 to the end of the tenth century, which more or less matches the time frame of the Guiyijun period in Dunhuang. At this time, the most apparent non-Chinese presence in Dunhuang would have been that of the Tibetans. Yet a direct Tibetan influence in this respect is unlikely because Tibetan writing is horizontal. Moreover, Tibetans had already been in the region for several decades and it is precisely from this point in time when we would expect their influence to slacken. Although culturally they remained an important factor during the Guiyijun period, we cannot see how their loss of political control over the region would have triggered an increased influence on Chinese manuscript culture. A Uighur influence is likely with regard to the direction of writing, although, especially in view of later and more obvious cases from the Turfan region, the second half of the ninth century seems too early for this in Dunhuang.⁴⁶ Should a more careful analysis of these manuscripts prove that they were indeed written by Uighurs, we may have to reconsider the time frame of Uighur presence in

42 The inscription, still visible a few decades ago, can no longer be seen.

43 On the connection of the inscription with its manuscript copy, see Galambos 2009.

44 Wang 2001 (p. 21), for example, reads the lines in reverse order, and using an accordingly adjusted segmentation, as 弟子張淮興畫表慶神，乾寧四年正月八日，熾盛光佛并五星. An even more surprising reading is found in Ma & Meng 2010 (p. 10), where the second line is read first, then the first one and finally the third: 乾寧四年正月八日熾盛光佛并五星，弟子張淮興畫表慶；in the meantime, however, the character 神 is omitted.

45 I am grateful to Professor Takata Tokio for alerting me to this point.

46 Moriyasu Takao points out that a local Uighur community existed in Dunhuang from at least the beginning of the eleventh century (Moriyasu 2000, pp. 33–4). Naturally, interactions with neighbouring Uighur kingdoms at Turfan and Ganzhou are also attested much earlier. For example, Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 provides a chronological list of documents related to the interaction between Shazhou and the Xizhou Uighurs, in which the earliest documents date to the 920s (Rong 1991, p. 584).

Shazhou. Another possible source of influence is Khotan, since some reversed manuscripts and inscriptions are evidently associated with Khotan. In view of the above, at this point it would be too early to make a firm statement with regard to the exact source behind this phenomenon and it is likely that there is more than one explanation.

Conclusion

As a major stop along the trade routes connecting China with the West, Dunhuang on the northwestern periphery of the Chinese cultural sphere of influence has always been a meeting point of different peoples and languages, even though the local population remained principally Chinese. In 786 the commandery was severed from the Tang empire, existing first as a Tibetan colony and then from the mid-ninth century as an independent domain ruled by military governors. Although during this time the majority of the population remained Chinese, contemporary sources show a significant increase in Tibetan and, somewhat later, Uighur influence. In addition, connections with Khotan gradually grew more important.

Paradoxically, the largest corpus of extant Chinese manuscripts comes from this multilingual and multiethnic community, which raises the question of how Chinese they really are. We have seen in the examples above that starting from the mid-ninth century, i.e. the beginning of the Guiyijun period, we begin to have numerous manuscripts that exhibit signs of having been written by people whose native language – and literacy – was not Chinese. This chapter only looks at some of the most obvious ‘symptoms’ of this: clumsy characters, flawed orthography and a reversed (i.e. left to right) direction of writing. While in some cases it is arguable that manuscripts with any of these features could have been produced by Chinese people with a low degree of literacy, or children who had not yet acquired sufficient skills, the coexistence of these features within the same document, combined with the type of paper and Central Asian bookbinding formats, points to their non-Chinese background. In addition, rather than being exceptions or solitary cases, these manuscripts as a group exhibit a distinct pattern that can be tied to a specific period with a clear starting and ending date (i.e. Guiyijun period).

In this place I only looked at a small number of such manuscripts. Rather than putting forward a strong argument in favour of particular ethnic groups being responsible for these documents, my aim is to draw attention to codicological features that can be associated with non-Chinese influences. No doubt a comprehensive analysis of the available material would tell us not only whether the assumptions voiced here are valid but also – if this is truly the case – who created these manuscripts.

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