

# Taboo Characters in Buddhist Manuscripts from Dunhuang

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Altering, omitting or substituting characters that occur in personal names of rulers of the reigning dynasty was an ongoing tradition in dynastic China. <sup>①</sup> Today, modern researchers use these taboo characters for dating manuscripts, and whenever such a case is encountered, the document is generally assumed to date to the period between the reign of the ruler whose name is tabooed and the end of the same dynasty. Similarly, the lack of the observance of an imperial name taboo can be interpreted as evidence that the manuscript was written before the reign of that emperor, or during a different dynasty. Although we know that the Dunhuang manuscripts on the whole originate from the period between late fourth and early eleventh centuries, their overall majority is undated and taboo characters, at least in theory, provide a convenient way of establishing a more precise time range for them.

At the same time, dating texts and manuscripts based on taboo

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<sup>①</sup> I would like to thank the participants of the conference for their numerous comments and suggestions. Among these, special thanks to Prof. Rong Xinjiang 荣新江 (Beijing University), Shi Rui 史睿 (National Library of China) and Prof. Stephen Teiser (Princeton University). I am also grateful to Matthias Richter (University of Colorado, Boulder) for his insights regarding the taboo characters in the Mawangdui manuscripts.

characters is far from being an exact science. There are at times inconsistencies even within a single manuscript, suggesting that medieval scribes did not always and fully adhere to these rules. ① This paper is a preliminary attempt to assess the strictness of the practice of name taboos in Buddhist manuscripts, which are acknowledged in modern scholarship as generally not following the taboo convention. My objective is to see how reliable taboo characters are for the purpose of dating manuscripts and whether we can detect additional patterns in their use. In doing this, instead of formulating rules about the theoretical framework of the taboo system, I try to detect patterns of usage which reflect how the system was applied in reality.

### 1. The dating of Dunhuang manuscripts

Modern scholars estimate the time range for the Dunhuang manuscripts on the basis of earliest and latest dated colophons, and today it is generally understood that the corpus consists of documents written approximately during the six centuries between 400 – 1000 AD. According to Fujieda only about one thousand manuscripts from the Dunhuang corpus carry a colophon with a date, thus the overall majority of the forty some thousand manuscripts contain no direct indication of when they were written. ② Yet the date is undoubtedly one of the most important characteristics of a manuscript, or any other historical object, and consequently the periodization of the corpus has been a priority in

① I am using the word “scribe” here to indicate not only professionals whose vocation was to write but anyone who stood behind the creation of physical copies of manuscripts. The Chinese equivalent would be *shuxiezhè* 书写者, meaning “the person who writes”, but the English word “writer” obviously has a strong connotation of being the author of the text, whereas this was certainly not always the case with medieval Chinese manuscripts. A proper technical term would be, following the example of the European tradition, the Latin *scriptor* (or French *scripteur*), although it has not gained much currency in Sinological discourse.

② Fujieda 1973: 121 and Fujieda 1969: 17.

Dunhuang studies since the discovery of the cave library.

We should also note that even the dates found in colophons can be problematic. Beside the obvious problems of colophons added by twentieth-century forgers with the aim of increasing the value of existing manuscripts, there are also cases when the same manuscript bears multiple dates, or dates consisting of impossible combinations of reign titles, *ganzhi* 干支 cycle and dynasty name. Manuscript P. 3502, for example, records several letter models on the verso and three of these bear the dates Dazhong 大中 6 (852), Dazhong 16 (862) and Dazhong 18 (864), respectively. Yet the Dazhong reign (847 – 859) only lasted 13 years and thus the last two dates are invalid. With this in mind, the credibility of the first date, although theoretically possible, is obviously also suspect. Such cases are far from being rare or exceptional and although some cases can be rationalized on an individual basis, there is no acceptable explanation for the phenomenon in general. Yet the fact that multiple and problematic dates are viewed with suspicion also casts the shadow of doubt on those ones that comply with our understanding of the proper format of medieval dates.

Naturally, beside accepting information recorded in dated colophons at face value there are also other ways of dating manuscripts. It is only to be expected that manuscript production standards and scribal habits changed over time and with a large corpus such as the one from Dunhuang it is possible to develop basic typologies based on their physical appearance. Thus an experienced person can tell the general age of a manuscript based on the quality and color of its paper, the size of paper sheets, the layout of the text (e.g. margins, line width), calligraphic style, etc. At the same time, the low precision of this approach severely limits its use in historical analyses. More accurate results can be arrived at through locating information that can be linked to specific moments in time, such as names and events. Another useful

possibility is linking manuscripts through handwriting, general format or content with ones that can be securely dated through other methods.

On the level of orthography, there are some character forms that can be connected with specific time periods, although this is generally limited to several highly conspicuous cases. The most conspicuous of these is the set of new character forms introduced during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian 武则天 (r. 690–705) on the basis of religious and cosmological considerations, which are known in secondary literature as *Wu Zhou xinzi* 武周新字 (new characters of Empress Wu of the Zhou dynasty). Thus the character 照 (radiance) appearing in her personal name became written as 𪛗, a semantic compound character consisting of the combination of the characters 明 (bright) and 空 (sky). Other forms included the characters 人 (man) written as 𠂇 (一 + 生: one life), 地 (Earth) written as 𡵓 (山 + 水 + 土: mountains, waters and soil), 国 (country) written as 囡 (八方 + 口: the eight cardinal directions enclosed within the domain). According to the Ming dynasty dictionary *Zhengzizong* 正字通, the Empress changed this latter character because the original form 国 depicted the component 或 inside a frame indicating the domain, and this was thought inauspicious on account of being reminiscent — both phonetically and graphically — of the word *huo* 惑 (delusion). Accordingly, she replaced the inside component with her own name 武 (martial) to make an I-am-the-state sort of statement, but she was advised again that this way she was effectively incarcerating herself. This is how eventually the form 囡 came into being. Since Empress Wu characters have been revoked with the end of her reign in 705, they provide a convenient way to date manuscripts. ① One should keep in mind, however, that in reality

① The characters were introduced during Empress Wu's fifteen-year reign at different times and this permits an even more accurate dating of manuscripts and inscriptions (see Shi 2002). For the analysis of Empress Wu characters in Dunhuang manuscripts, see Drège 1984.

these characters did not disappear completely and occasionally appear in later manuscripts or inscriptions. ①

Beside Empress Wu characters, there are other orthographic peculiarities that can be linked with particular time periods. Of these, because of their immediate connection with specific rulers, and thus precise moments in history, taboo characters present an important category and have been used for dating texts and documents in traditional Chinese philology.

## 2. The system of imperial name taboos

Because of its significance for dating texts, the study of taboo characters has a rich tradition in China. ② This tradition has been primarily applied to printed material, which have been much more numerous during the past centuries than manuscripts. The discovery of large collections of manuscripts during the twentieth century (e.g. Dunhuang, Turfan, Khara-khoto) offer sufficient source material for the examination of the taboo system in handwritten writings. This provides an interesting angle for studying this phenomenon on a corpus of first-hand material.

The increasing availability of high quality photographs of the manuscripts, both in print and online, largely facilitate research. ③ The significance of looking at the photographs or originals is especially

① Apparently, Empress Wu characters also continued to be used in epigraphic sources in Yunnan centuries after her reign. See Zhang 1992. In Japan, they are still used in specific cases (e.g. Honkokuji 本國寺, named after Tokugawa Mitsukuni 德川光圀), which obviously cannot be attributed to trying to uphold an obsolete custom which is no longer in effect even in its place of origin. On the spread of Empress Wu characters in Japan, see Kuranaka 1986.

② See, for example, Chen 1962, Wang Yankun 1997, Wang Jian 2002, Wang Xinhua 2007.

③ High resolution images of the Pelliot collection are available at the Gallica site of the BnF (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>) and those of the Stein collection, at the IDP website (<http://idp.bl.uk>).

obvious for characters with non-standard orthography, such as taboo characters with missing strokes. Yet even when looking at the originals, there are often problems with determining what constitutes a taboo character. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish a case of taboo from local calligraphic habits or the handwriting of a particular scribe. For example, in manuscript P. 2090, a copy of part of the *Lotus sutra* dated to 663, the character 世 sometimes lacks a short horizontal line (see Figure 1).

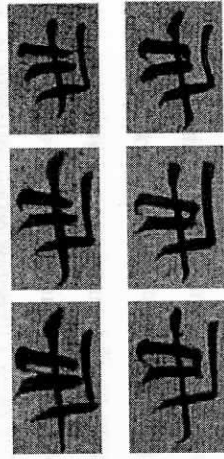


Figure 1. Examples of the character 世 in P. 2090, with an without the short horizontal stroke.

The first three images (in row 1) show versions of the character without the horizontal line, whereas the second three (in row 2) do not seem to have this feature. Of course, the line in question is not a stroke *per se*, as it is usually written as an extension of one of the two parallel vertical strokes.<sup>①</sup> In this manuscript, the omission of the short horizontal stroke is most likely part of the handwriting peculiarities of the scribe and should not be counted as cases of taboo. But the example illustrates that the differences are not always obvious, which adds an additional layer of difficulty to the analysis.

① In the modern orthography, this line is an extension of the first of the two vertical strokes, bending to the right. In the manuscript here, it is usually written as part of the second vertical stroke, bending to the left. Sometimes, however, it seems to have been written as a separate stroke.

Our general understanding is that taboo characters appear in place of the names of emperors of the reigning dynasty, or sometimes of other members of the imperial family. As the dynasty continues, with each new ruler the list of tabooed names increases, until a new dynasty comes along and annuls the entire system, beginning to accumulate its own forbidden characters. With the establishment of a new dynasty all former taboos become void and the writing system is effectively restored to its taboo-less state. The basic idea behind using this system for dating purposes is that a tabooed character indicates that the manuscript was written during or later than the reign of the emperor whose name is tabooed. In contrast with this, if a character appears in its ordinary form, it is an indication that the text in question was written before the emperor's coming to power. Of course, this assumption works only within a single dynasty, as the system is restarted with the advent of a new ruling lineage.

Better known early examples of taboo characters include the change of the character 邦 in pre-Qin philosophical literature to 國, as a way of avoiding to write the personal name of Gaozu 高祖, i. e. Liu Bang 刘邦, the first Han emperor. Newly excavated manuscripts attest to the existence of such conventions, revealing, for instance, that during the Warring States period the word which appears in transmitted literature as *guojia* 国家 (the state) was generally written as *bangjia* 邦家. A well-known case involving the character 邦 for dating manuscripts is the two copies of the *Laozi* 老子 found at Mawangdui. The first copy, called *Laozi A* 老子甲本, uses the character 邦, and many modern scholars believe that this is an indication that it was written before the reign of Liu Bang (206 – 194 BC). The second copy, *Laozi B* 老子乙本, replaces this character with 國 but elsewhere uses the character 盈, which was the personal name of Emperor Hui 惠帝, i. e. Liu Ying 刘盈, the second



emperor of the Han. This is often taken as a sign that *Laozi B* was written before the reign of Emperor Hui (195 BC) but after Gaozu's ascension to the throne (206 BC), in other words, during the reign of Gaozu (206 – 195 BC).<sup>①</sup>

There are, however, problems with this conveniently clear-cut way of dating the two *Laozi* manuscripts because we do not actually know what the taboo requirements were and how strictly they were enforced. Thus there are other possible explanations to the orthographic conditions presented in the manuscripts. As an example of the possible scenarios, Michael Friedrich argues that the name taboo in some cases were deliberately violated in order to convey political criticism.<sup>②</sup> Similar problems arise when we look at the Qin dynasty slips from Shuihudi 睡虎地 which seem to repeatedly violate a number of Qin taboos. The character 正, for example, which is understood to have been tabooed on account of being homophonous with the personal name of the First Emperor (i. e. Zheng 政), appears regularly in its ordinary form.<sup>③</sup> These examples demonstrate that our knowledge of the use of imperial taboos is still rudimentary and that archaeological discoveries may force us to re-evaluate our current understandings.

With regard to their technical implementation, substitutions functioned in a number of different ways. In the early part of dynastic history, the characters were avoided completely and, instead, synonymous words were used (e. g. 邦→国, 恒→常, 民→人, 世→代).

① See the introduction to the volume *Maixiangdai Han mu boshu* 马王堆汉墓帛书 (Guojia wenwu ju guwenxian yanjiushi 1980), Vol. 1: 1; also, Henricks 1979: 167, n. 3.

② Friedrich 1996. Matthias Richter, on the other hand, is of the opinion that manuscript A is probably older than manuscript B (personal communication, December 2011).

③ On this problem, see Beck 1987. With regard to using taboo characters to date Qin and Han slips, Lai Guolong 来国龙 (2006) draws attention to the significance of determining the official or private nature of the documents.

Beginning with the Tang dynasty, in addition to this technique, which continued to be used until modern times, a new method was introduced, consisting of the modification of existing characters but leaving the original word (and presumably its pronunciation) intact. The modification generally included omitting a stroke, an alteration which would not interfere with the recognition of the character (e. g. 民→𡵓, 民, 𡵓; 世→𡵓). This was no doubt a superior way of maintaining the integrity of texts, an issue not inconsequential in a culture which relied so heavily on the power of the written word transmitted for many centuries. The technique of altering characters by omitting a stroke at times also worked for characters which included the tabooed character only as a component. Thus a stroke or two could be omitted from the component 民 in the characters 愍, 泯, and 縻 or the component 世 in the characters 泄, 叶, and 懌. In addition, the component 世 in the characters 叶, and 懌 could also be substituted with 云, producing a vulgar form (*suzi* 俗字) but effectively conforming to the taboo. There are also cases when a component was tabooed in a vulgar form, e. g. manuscript S. 388, a collection of smaller dictionary-type works and character lists, records the vulgar form of the character 农 written as a combination of the components 田+民 (see Figure 2).<sup>①</sup> In this, the component 民 below appears in a tabooed form, with a missing stroke. We often see examples of different orthographic forms of the same character within the same manuscript, showing that the techniques of character substitution and stroke omission could be used interchangeably, without the desire of being consistent in their

① This section of the manuscript collects vulgar *huiyi* 会意 forms which are, unlike their standard *xingsheng* 形声 form, composed of two or more semantic components, the meaning of which refers to the meaning of the whole character. On *huiyi*-type vulgar forms, see Galambos 2011.



Figure 2. A section of manuscript S. 388, showing the character 喪 in its standard (above, in large script) and vulgar (below, in small script) forms.

We can see from contemporary inscriptions and manuscripts that this edict, if there indeed was an edict like this, was not fully observed, and taboo characters continued to be used after 660. It would be an interesting study to examine whether the edict had any effect and the ratio of tabooed characters decreased in the following years.<sup>②</sup>

Despite the scarcity of reliable contemporary documentation on the application of the taboo system, we now fortunately have enough firsthand manuscript and epigraphic material that can be tested against our existing assumptions. Therefore, instead of trying to interpret the bits

application.

The use of taboo characters was not unproblematic even for contemporaries and with the addition of ever new characters, especially frequently used ones, was gradually obstructing the reliability of texts.<sup>①</sup> The Song dynasty encyclopedia *Cefu yuangui* 册府元龟, for example, records that in 660 Emperor Gaozong 高宗 issued an edict in which he expressed his worries that many mistakes introduced in the text of the Six Classics and the Nine Schools by omitting strokes or replacing characters, and decreed that from there on taboo characters were not to be observed.

of references that occur in traditional literature, it is better to use manuscripts and inscriptions to see how this phenomenon worked in real life. What is important for this type of method is to detect patterns, rather than to formulate rules. In a way, this approach works even without knowing the exact principles of the system, or how it was understood by those who used it. As it is the case with prescriptive measures introduced from above, the system of imperial taboos was probably quite different in theory and practice.

### 3. The taboo in Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang

Even a cursory look at the Dunhuang manuscripts tells us that the taboos were not rigidly enforced, and there was a great degree of inconsistency in their application. Some of this inconsistency can be attributed to the fact that the manuscripts were written at different points in time, by people of different level of education, belonging to different religious traditions. But equally important is the function of a text, whether it is an administrative document, a collection of poems for personal use, or a commissioned copy of a religious scripture. In view of the above, it is essential to avoid mixing together different types of texts, as this introduces unwanted complexity.<sup>①</sup> For this reason, I chose to look at Buddhist writings, which in reality represent the largest portion of manuscripts in the Dunhuang corpus. Although there are numerous other types of texts, including popular literature, Confucian and Daoist works, contracts and official correspondence, etc., the majority of the manuscripts comprise copies of Buddhist sutras, their commentaries or other related texts. This is especially true for the Stein

① Susan Cherniack, for instance, in her typology of mistakes in textual transmission, lists an array of mistakes "caused by earlier replacements of taboo characters." See Cherniack 1994: 114–115.

② *Cefu yuangui* 3: 11b. For a French translation of the relevant passage, see Soymié 1990: 393–394.

① In Europe, taboo characters in the Dunhuang manuscripts have been studied by Michel Soymié (1990), as part of the cataloguing project at the BnF. In China, an attempt at a comprehensive examination was done by Dou Huaiyong 窦怀永, in a Ph. D. dissertation titled *Dunhuang wenzian bishui yanjiu* 敦煌文献避讳研究 (Dou 2007).

collection at the British Library where the ratio of such material is perceptibly higher than at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

For my analysis here, I chose dated manuscripts belonging to the Buddhist tradition from the first half of the Tang dynasty until the end of the seventh century, i. e. 618–700. The taboo characters for this period come from the personal names of the first five rulers of the Tang: 渊 (618), 世 (626), 民 (626), 治 (649), 显 (684) and 旦 (684). Without trying to be comprehensive and locate all dated manuscripts with Buddhist texts from this period, I introduce here a selected number of items that fall within the above parameters.<sup>①</sup>

S. 3655 is a fragment of the *Lotus sutra* with a colophon dating it to 670. The character 世 occurs twenty-seven times, 民 four times, and 治 once. Yet none of the characters is tabooed. Occasionally, the character 世 seems to be written with a missing stroke but it is rather a matter of handwriting than that of observing a name taboo. S. 84 is a copy of the *Lotus sutra* dated to 671. The colophon includes the standard list of proof-readers, showing that this is an officially commissioned copy. As usual in such cases, it is executed with great care, in beautiful calligraphy. The character 治 occurs three times and the character 世 fifty-eight times, yet they are always written in their standard form.

Other officially commissioned sutras from this period are S. 36 (*Diamond sutra*, dated to 672); S. 312 (*Lotus sutra*, dated to 673); S. 456 (*Lotus sutra*, dated to 674); S. 114 (*Lotus sutra*, dated to 676); S. 1456 (*Lotus sutra*, dated to 676); S. 1048 (*Lotus sutra*, dated to 676); S. 513 (*Diamond sutra*, dated to 676). Although the characters 世, 民 and 治 frequently occur in the texts (especially the character 世,

which is part of the common of the appellation *Shizun* 世尊 used for the Buddha), there is not a single case of observing the taboo. For the sake of comparison, we could look at a non-Buddhist manuscript, S. 3135, which is a copy of the *Taixuanjing* 太玄经 dated to 678. The manuscript has nine instances of the character 治 and twenty-five of the character 世, yet none of these observe the Tang name taboos. Considering that all of these manuscripts come from the six years of 672–678, we are reminded of the edict of Gaozong regarding the abolishing of the custom of name taboos. In addition, we can also attribute the lack of taboo characters to the fact that all of these are officially commissioned sutras.

From the same period comes P. 3278, a nicely executed copy of the *Lotus sutra* completed in 676. According to the catalogue, there are cases when the character 世 is tabooed in the manuscript, yet I was unable to find a single example.<sup>①</sup> Of the sixty-seven instances when the character occurs, there are only two cases which could be suspected to be taboo characters, although in one case we are most likely dealing with a physical damage to the manuscript, and in the other, a particular way of handwriting.

Besides sutras, other Buddhist texts from the first half of Gaozong's reign include P. 2056 (*Apitan piposha lun* 阿毗昙毗婆沙论, dated to 662) and P. 2215 (*Liangchu qingzhong yi* 量处轻重仪, dated to 663), none of which observes the taboo, even though there are quite a few characters that would have fallen under it. But there are also examples where Buddhist manuscripts observe the taboo. P. 3742 is a portion of the *Erjiao lun* 二教论 by the Northern Zhou monk Dao'an 道安. The characters 治, 世, 显, 旦, 渊 and 民 appear in the manuscript in their

<sup>①</sup> Naturally, this is only a very limited analysis of taboo characters in Tang manuscripts, a full-scale study would require much more space and time.

<sup>①</sup> Soymié et al. 1983: 226.



tabooed form, revealing that this scroll was written sometime after 684, the beginning of Ruizong's 睿宗 reign. Since we do not have any Empress Wu characters in the text, it is also likely that the manuscript comes from the period after the Empress's reign (705). This is, of course, only if we assume that the taboo names are consistently applied, which is clearly not the case. For example, the character 治 appears three times in this manuscript, twice as a taboo character, and once in its standard form. The character 民 is tabooed five times and written once in its standard form.

An interesting case is P. 2128, which contains a series of explanations of Buddhist terms. The manuscript includes both Empress Wu characters and Tang imperial taboo forms within the same text, and although it is undated, because of the presence of the Empress Wu character 璽 (璽) it is very likely that it was completed sometime during her reign (690 - 705). The French catalogue claims that the characters 世 and 治 are tabooed, although I have not been able to find such examples. Since Empress Wu technically established her own different dynasty under the name of Zhou 周, if we could verify the existence of taboo characters, we would have an intriguing case of inter-dynastic taboo usage. A similar case is that of P. 2213, an undated manuscript that contains, among others, a text comparing the three religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The text is punctuated with red dots, which is usually a sign of readers' use. This text observes very consistently the taboos for the characters 世, 民 and 治, using the prescribed form for all instances. Yet at the same time the manuscript also contains the form 𠂔 which is an Empress Wu form of the character 正. Thus Tang and Zhou taboo characters co-exist in the same object.

### Conclusions

Taboo characters are universally accepted as one of the most

common methods of dating old manuscripts. At the same time, despite their significance in this respect, we know surprisingly little about how this system functioned in practice. In this paper I concentrated on Buddhist writings, which are generally understood not to observe imperial name taboos. In order to evaluate this claim, I examined a small selection of Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang, dating to the seventh century. While this is only a preliminary survey that cannot aim for being comprehensive, it nevertheless allows us to make some basic observations.

First, the above examples show that not all Buddhist manuscripts and not always disregard the taboo. While sutras, especially officially commissioned ones, appear to contain taboo characters, other types of Buddhist writings often feature such character forms. Thus it is important to differentiate between different types of texts. Even within the category of Buddhist manuscripts there is a wide range of texts belonging to different genres and social functions.

Furthermore, even if a manuscript contains instances of taboo characters, it may simultaneously also feature these same characters written in their standard form. Therefore the use of taboo characters is not consistent. This inconsistency has important implications for dating manuscripts, namely, that the absence of a taboo character cannot be taken with certainty as a sign of not falling within the time period of a particular reign. But the reverse of this situation is true, that is, if a taboo character occurs in a manuscript, it is very likely that the manuscript was written during the time when the given character fell under a taboo restriction, even if there are also cases in the same document when it appears in its standard form. In order to increase the reliability of using taboo characters for dating manuscripts, it would be necessary to analyze a larger corpus of manuscripts and document the



patterns of their distribution statistically, according to reign periods and types of texts.

Manuscripts written during the reign of Wu Zetian can also include Tang taboo characters. Theoretically, this is interesting because Wu Zetian's reign is usually considered as dethronement of the Tang, with a new dynasty (i. e. the Zhou) declared, and thus one would expect the taboo characters to have been abolished. After all, the restoration of the Tang that followed her reign was not apparent while she was on the throne.

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