

Correction Marks in the Dunhuang Manuscripts

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With their span of six hundred some years, the Dunhuang manuscripts are a valuable witness of the process of textual transmission in medieval China. Beside looking at this process from the perspective of texts and their many versions or editions, the examination of less deliberate scribal habits in manuscripts can also be meaningful. In this paper I look at the way medieval scribes corrected mistakes and show that although we have practically no evidence that the notation used for this purpose would have been part of an official teaching curriculum, it nevertheless remained surprisingly consistent over the centuries. This diachronic stability of the notation system reveals the direct continuity of the scribal tradition, which is at times less evident in the transmission of texts.

Claims put forward in modern scholarship regarding the multitude of mistakes in Chinese texts and manuscripts are at times problematic. In practice, this attitude often proves to be a convenient way of manipulating texts in order to make them fit better our own understanding of what they should have said. Yet the Dunhuang manuscripts also contain many mistakes which were corrected, either by the scribe while writing or by an editor during a subsequent proofreading. These were undoubtedly mistakes recognized as such by contemporary people, who also took the time to correct them using a consistent system of notation. There are several excellent studies on the practice of textual editing and collation, which also talk about the types of mistakes found in texts.¹ However, these studies mostly deal with printed texts where the mistakes of one generation are identified by later scholars in order to restore an assumed original or uncorrupted version, in order to arrive at a more faithful edition. In manuscripts,

¹ In English, see Susan Cherniack's (1994) influential study which concentrates on printed works and includes an appendix with the main types of mistakes occurring in textual transmission. She also lists the most important Chinese works on the subject.

however, we can witness the mistakes that have been identified and corrected during the act of copying, or shortly after that. These corrections show the process of textual transmission in action, as it happened in real life on the level of individual copies.

The Dunhuang corpus comprises tens of thousands of texts with a rich variety of content. In order to avoid the unnecessary “noise” caused by the diversity of the material, I shall mainly use for my examination copies of Buddhist texts, only occasionally citing examples from Daoist or literary works. These texts for the most part consist of multiple copies of well-known texts, thus they represent an ideal material for the study of palaeographic matters without the need to address problems of textual criticism. By limiting the scope of study to such material we are able to observe these patterns in a relatively homogenous environment. The examples listed here are not so much about the types of mistakes made in medieval China but rather the ways of correcting those. Thus I am not interested in the psycho-linguistic aspects of contemporary literacy but rather in the ways of dealing with mistakes within the scribal tradition. An immediate difficulty in identifying corrections arises from the fact that we can only recognize examples where the intervention is still visible today, whereas we know that in some cases scribes and editors attempted to conceal the traces of subsequent editing. As a result, some of the corrections inevitably escape our attention and we only find traces of more obvious cases.

Most of the manuscripts are copies of pre-existing versions of the same texts, and this is especially true for Buddhist sūtras. The copyists of sūtra scrolls were trying to preserve the integrity of the text by producing a nearly identical copy to the original which they used as their source text. Unlike in philological scholarship, this original in most cases was not an abstract entity that had to be reconstructed but an actual manuscript that lay in front of them.² No textual decisions had to be made, there was no ambiguity regarding the identity of a character or how it should be written; in general, the mistakes were scribal errors committed during the process of copying. This, however, does not mean that mistakes are rare on manuscripts. On the contrary, they are quite frequent and only very few complete manuscripts are void of them. Even sūtras commissioned by the court, which were copied with utmost care in the most meticulous handwriting, have mistakes and corrections.

² We should also note that in a number of cases manuscript copies were made from printed works and, less frequently, from inscriptions (e.g. Galambos 2009). These copies would from there on be transmitted as part of the manuscript tradition.

Of the fragmentary references to the notation of corrections in traditional sources, the description of Chen Kui 陳騭 (1128–1203) should be singled out as one of the more complete ones. He explains several techniques as part of the editing (*jiaochou* 校讎) process as follows:

諸字有誤者，以雌黃塗訖，別書。或多字，以雌黃圈之；少者，于字側添入；或字側不容注者，即用朱圈，仍於本行上下空紙上標寫。倒置，於兩字間書一字。

When errors occur in characters, paint them out with *cihuang* and then write the new text over them. If there are interpolated characters, mark them with a circle of orpiment; if there are missing ones, insert them by the side of the text. Or if there is not enough space for comments by the side of the text, then use a vermillion circle and write your note on the empty margins at the top or bottom of that line. When two characters are reversed, write the character 乙 between them.³

All of these techniques were used in medieval manuscript culture, although there are also other types not mentioned here. An earlier source describing some correction methods is the *Mengqi bitan* 夢溪筆談 by the renown Northern Song scholar and scientist Shen Gua 沈括 (1031–1095):

館閣新書淨本有誤書處，以雌黃塗之，嘗校改字之法。刮洗則傷紙，紙貼之又易脫，粉塗則字不沒，塗數遍方能漫滅，唯雌黃一漫則滅，仍久而不脫。

Whenever clean copies of new books in the libraries and offices had errors, they were painted over with *cihuang*, which has been the traditional method of correcting characters. Scraping or washing the characters off would damage the paper; pasting paper over them would allow the paper detach easily; applying powder over them would not make them disappear and it would take several layers to make them fully fade away. Only *cihuang* is capable of making them fade away at once, and yet stay on for a long time without falling off.

Although Shen Gua explains that the application of *cihuang* is the best way for correcting character errors, he also lists a number of other – less ideal – methods which were undoubtedly in use as well. All of the techniques mentioned here are intended to make the mistake disappear completely, while more visible interventions, such as crossing out a character or inserting omitted ones on the side, are not mentioned at all. Obviously,

³ Chen Kui 陳騭, *Nan Song guange lu* 南宋館閣錄 “Jiaochou shi” 校讎式.

correction techniques also depended on the environment, the necessity for producing a clean and aesthetically immaculate copy.

Among the material found in the Dunhuang cave library, the manuscripts striving for such a high degree of visual integrity are sūtras commissioned by the Tang court. At the end of such scrolls, we always find a colophon listing the name of the proofreaders and supervisors. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.84 is a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* dated to 671. It lists all those involved in creating the scroll, including three persons who proofread (*chujiao* 初校, *zaijiao* 再校 and *sanjiao* 三校) the manuscript, the first of whom is the scribe who copied the sūtra, and four different higher monks from another monastery who carefully perused (*xiang-yue* 詳閱) the finished product.⁴ Less formal manuscripts allowed more intrusive types of corrections, some of which suggest that the text was created for personal use.

Since the tens of thousands of Dunhuang manuscripts display an extraordinary variety of scribal notation, a full list of these would fill volumes. In this place I will concentrate on the common and typical examples and identify the following main types of mistakes and corrections.⁵

1. Omitted Characters

When an accidental omission of a character is noticed either by the scribe during the process of writing or by a proof reader later on, the mistake is corrected by one of the following methods.

1.1. Inserting the Omitted Character Inline

The easiest method of correcting an omission is to squeeze in the omitted character between the preceding and following ones. Due to the limitations

⁴ This manuscript is a set of three *Lotus Sūtra* scrolls all copied in the same year, partially involving the same people. For a full translation of one of their colophons, see Giles 1935: 14–15.

⁵ Some of these types of correction listed here are also described by other authors (e.g. Kósa, Moretti, Anderl) in this volume, although mostly with regard to particular manuscripts. Many of them are also mentioned in Lin Congming 1991: 245–269 and papers on the punctuation used in Dunhuang manuscripts, e.g. Li Zhengyu 1988, Galambos (forthcoming).

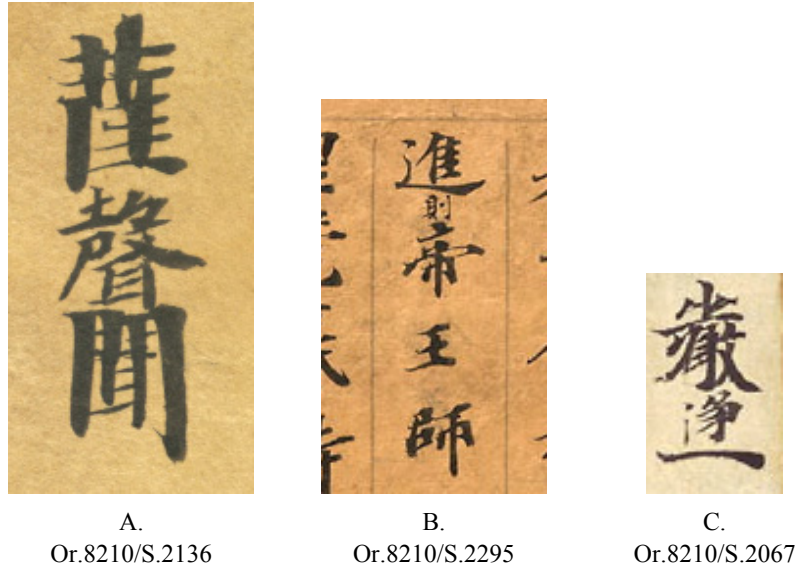


Figure 1: Insertion of characters in smaller script between full-sized characters.

of space, the inserted character is often smaller in size. For example, in manuscript Or.8210/S.2136 (Figure 1A), a fine copy of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* dated to 708, the first character 聲 of the word *shengwen* 聲聞 (*śrāvaka*, disciple) was omitted, and this was corrected by inserting it in a slightly smaller script. When space is limited, the missing character can be very small in size, as it is seen in Or.8210/S.2295 (Figure 1B), a copy of the *Laozi bianhua jing* 老子變化經 from 612, where the character 則 appears as a tiny insertion between 進 and 帝. A similar example is the insertion of the character 淨 between 嚴 and 一 in Or.8210/S.2067 (Figure 1C), to form the phrase “the glorious and pure all...” 嚴淨一切. In this last case it is nearly impossible to detect the insertion without carefully reading the text. Undoubtedly, such miniscule interventions also served an aesthetic purpose as they betray an effort to minimize the disruption of the visual appearance of the manuscript.

1.2. Writing the Omitted Character on the Side

When there is not enough space to insert the character in line, the corrector can write it on the right side of the line, between the characters preceding and following characters. This is by far the most common way of rectifying an omission. For example, in Or.8210/S.83 (Figure 2A) the character

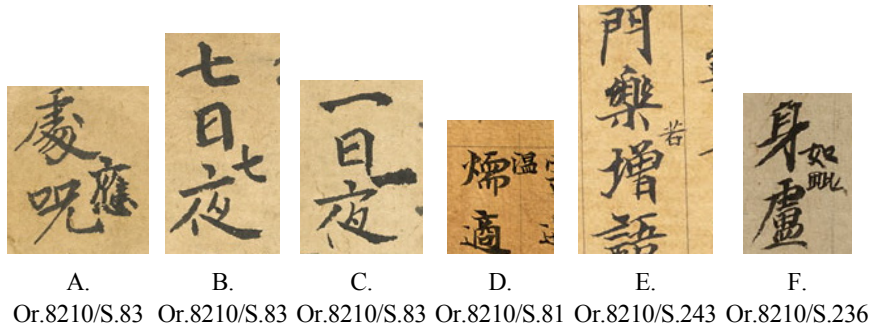
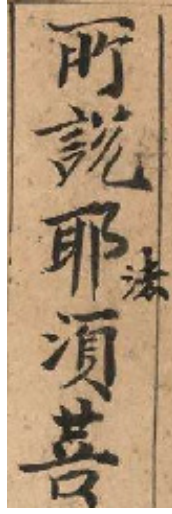


Figure 2: Insertion of omitted characters on the side.

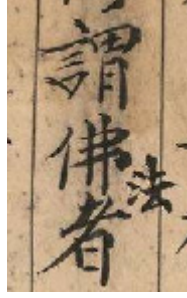
應 is inserted between the characters 處 and 呪. A few lines later in the same manuscript the second 七 is omitted from the phrase “seven days and seven nights” 七日七夜 (Figure 2B). An analogous mistake is made a few lines later when the second 一 is left out from the phrase “one day and one night” 一日一夜 (Figure 2C). In all cases the missing character is appended in smaller script to the right, indicating its location in the text.

In Or.8210/S.81 (Figure 2D), an early copy of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* from 506, the missing character 溫 is inserted to the right of the following character 燐, a variant form of 暖. We can see that the corrector observed the top grid line and refrained from writing the character on the top margin. Once again, we can be certain that this was done for the sake of not disrupting the visual appearance of the manuscript. For the same reason, sometimes the inserted character is written in a very small script, as it is the case in the copy of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* in Or.8210/S.243 (Figure 2E), where the omitted character 若 is inserted between 樂 and 增. Since the character is written on the side, we cannot attribute its size to spatial limitations alone. Finally, the same technique of correction can be applied if more than one character is omitted, as in the case of the late 10th-century manuscript Or.8210/S.236 (Figure 2F) where the characters 如毗 are written in small script on the right, indicating that they were meant to be placed between the characters 身 and 盧.

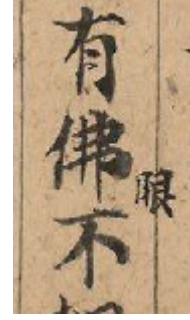
A slight variation to this technique is when sometimes the missing character is inserted not where it was omitted but one character lower, after the following character. From our modern point of view this appears to be imprecise but this use is not exceptional. In manuscript Or.8210/S.5646, a copy of the *Diamond Sūtra* from 969, there are several such examples. The character 法 inserted in the first example (Figure 3A), should actually go not after the character 耶 but before it, being part of the phrase “explaining the dharma” 說法. In the second case (Figure 3B), the char-



A. Or.8210/S.5646



B. Or.8210/S.5646



C. Or.8210/S.5646

Figure 3: Examples of characters inserted a character later in the text.

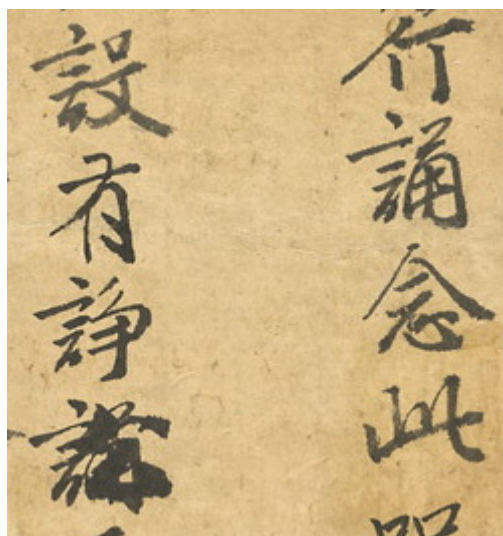
acter 法 comes after 謂. Having said that, the same manuscript usually inserts omitted characters using the “orthodox” method, where they suppose to go. Thus in the third example (Figure 3C), the character 眼 is correctly inserted after 佛, forming the phrase “the Buddha’s eyes” 佛眼. Thus it is not inconceivable that the first two cases of corrections are actually mistakes themselves. More examples are needed to establish the validity of this method.

2. Wrong Characters

Writing the wrong character can happen as a result of a variety of reasons, including graphical or phonetic similarity, influence from context. Such mistakes are typically corrected using one of the following techniques.

2.1. Writing Over the Wrong Character

In Or.8210/S.83 (Figure 4), the copyist originally wrote the word *zheng-song* 諍訟 (“dispute”) as 諍誦, accidentally replacing the character 訟 with the homophonous 誦, which is a more common character and is written



Or.8210/S.83

Figure 4: Correction by writing over the wrong character.

with the same signific. Beside the similar pronunciation, the copyist was obviously also influenced by the character 誦 appearing on the right, in the previous line. Once the wrong character was committed to paper, someone, the copyist or a subsequent corrector, corrected the mistake by writing the character 諍 over it in bold script.⁶

2.2. Scratching Out the Wrong Character

Sometimes the wrong character is smudged and scratched out. Scratching out used to be a common procedure for early Chinese wooden and bamboo slip manuscripts, where the wrong character could be simply shaven off the surface of the wood or bamboo. With paper manuscripts, this was obviously not possible anymore and the scratching produced an unattractive smudging on the writing surface. In his subcommentary to the *Zhouli* 周禮義疏, Jia Gongyan 賈公彥 (fl. 650) wrote about the use of the *xue* 削, a knife designed to scratch off mistaken characters:

⁶ To be exact, only the right side component was written corrected, since the signific 言 on the left is identical in both 諍 and 誦.

古者未有紙筆，則以削刻字。至漢雖有紙筆，仍有書刀，是古之遺法也。

In ancient times before paper and brush appeared, [the book knife] was used for shaving off engraved characters; since the Han paper and brush became accessible but the book knife is still in use as a tradition from the past.”⁷

Despite the origin of this technique, it is likely that in medieval manuscripts most of such corrections were not done with a knife but something softer, perhaps at times with a finger. Regardless of how it was done, it is certain that this was an extremely common way of making corrections. For example, in Or.8210/S.243 (Figure 5A) the characters in the phrase “existence and emptiness” 有空 are clearly a correction of something else. The original characters were smudged and rubbed off and the new ones written over it. We cannot discern the original characters but the correction left obvious traces on the surface of the paper. In the next line of the same manuscript (Figure 5B), the character 無 in the phrase “having form and no form” 有相無相 is once again written over a rubbed off character. We can only see small traces of the original character but based on these it is not impossible that it was the character 增 in the word “designation” 增語 (Skt. *adhivacanāhvaya*), which follows in the text. According to this scenario, the copyist, when writing the words 有相無相增語, skipped over the characters 相無 and instead continued from the second 相. If this was really the case and the erased character was indeed 增, then the mistake was caught and corrected not by a later proof reader but by the copyist himself as soon as he wrote the character 增.

In Or.8210/S.5646 (Figure 5C), a collection of Buddhist sūtras from the late 10th century bound in a notebook format, the character 往 in the phrase “coming and going” 往來 is written over a smudged and erased character which had been there earlier.

⁷ Tsuen-Hsue Tsien (2011: 65–66) translates the phrase *yi xue ke zi* 以削刻字 as “the book knife was employed for engraving characters” and thus concludes that Jia Gongyan mistakenly believed that the *xue* was used for engraving. Yet since this is an explanation attached to the text of the *Zhouli* and its commentary, which mention the book knife, the phrase in question should be understood as “[the book knife] was used for shaving off engraved characters.” In other words, the subject is omitted because it is already mentioned in the text to which this comment refers to. This reading, while being fully grammatical, completely eliminates the need to Tsien’s claim that Jia Gongyan and others had mistaken assumptions about the use of this tool.



Figure 5: Scratching off mistaken content.

2.3. Crossing Out the Wrong Character

One of the common and most obvious ways of correcting a mistake is to cross out the wrong character and write the correct one beside it. For example, in manuscript Or.8210/S.249(A)R.2 (Figure 6A), the copyist had erroneously written “in one dharma” 於一法 instead of “in eight dharmas” 於八法. To rectify this, the corrector put a circle mark on the character 一 and wrote the small character 八 to the right of it.⁸ In BD02126 (Figure 6B), the character 大 “big” is crossed out and the correct character 不 (“not”) is written on the side in smaller script. The mistake was likely caused by the anticipation of the character 大 from two characters lower. In Or.8210/S.1020 (Figure 6C), only the component 鬼 was crossed out in the lower part of the character 魔 and replaced on the side with the component 毛, effectively changing the whole character to 摩. In Or.8210/S.373 (Figure 6D), a collection of poems, the copyist accidentally wrote the character 崇 instead of the correct 宗, and rectified the problem by

⁸ The reason why a circle mark is used for crossing a character out is that there is no easy way of crossing out the character 一 with another stroke without running the risk of creating confusion.

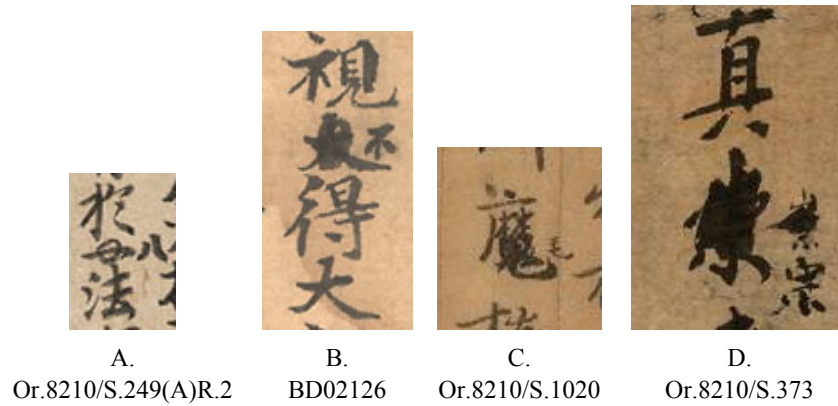


Figure 6: Crossing out mistaken characters.

crossing out 崇, and writing the correct character on the side. Yet even in his correction, he made a mistake and had to correct that once more, eventually writing the right character slightly below.

2.4. Coloring Out the Wrong Character

Similar to our modern correction fluids (e.g. Wite-out), the wrong character could be erased by painting over it with a dye, and the correct character would be written over this. This is the method described in Chen Kui's description above as "when errors occur in characters, paint them out with *cihuang* and then write the new text over them." Shen Gua goes as far as claiming that this is the only truly good technique for corrections.⁹ We can see an example of such a technique in Or.8210/S.2295 (Figure 7A), the *Laozi bianhua jing* from the early 7th century, where the character 胎 is written over a not-too-subtle yellow correction. On the other hand, we should also entertain the possibility that the corrections in many cases are more visible today because over the centuries the dye might have undergone color change or partially came off. In other words, what appears to be an unaesthetic correction today (e.g. Figure 7A) may have been nearly invisible for contemporary users. Yet there are interventions which are

⁹ Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591) in his *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 also mentions the use of *cihuang* for editing books and advises to be cautious with its use without properly comparing different editions: "Before one has seen all books under heaven, one should not carelessly apply *cihuang*" 觀天下書未遍，不得妄下雌黃.



Figure 7: Coloring out mistaken content.

not immediately apparent even today without examining the original manuscript. Such an example is Or.8210/S.5765 (Figure 7B), a fragment of the *Buddhapitakasūtra*, where a long string of characters has been painted over and replaced with new content.

An interesting case of an “unfinished” correction is seen in Or.8210/S.1 (Figure 7C), a copy of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, where the wrong character had already been eliminated but the new one was never written over it. On this example, only a subtle trace of the first character is visible, which would have become practically untraceable if the correct one was supplied. This also implies that the number of corrections in the manuscripts might be higher than we can see today, as many changes are simply not visible, especially when looking at reproductions. In this particular case, the missing character is 便 (“then, immediately after that”) from the phrase “he then told the venerable Shariputra, saying ...” 便告具壽舍利子言, and the canonical version of the text (T05.220) makes it obvious that a character is indeed missing here. At the same time, traces of the deleted character show that initially it was not 便 but something else, perhaps a character with the 言 signific. This example helps us to



Figure 8: Corrections written on paper slips.

document the process of correction, showing that, at least sometimes, the characters were not corrected one by one but done in batch stages performed on the entire manuscript or a group of manuscripts.¹⁰

2.5. Adding Corrections on Paper Slips

As a means of covering unwanted content, in some cases a strip of paper was pasted over the wrong string of characters, and the new characters were written on this strip. In Or.8210/S.520 (Figure 8A), a bulletin from the 10th century issued by local monasteries, a name was pasted over using a strip of paper with the new name of Tu Daohui 圖道惠 on it. Because the seal of the *Hexi dusengtong yin* 河西都僧統印 (Seal of the Chief Monk of the Hexi Region) was stamped over the original name, the paper strip used for the correction now also covers part of the seal impression. The correction was written on the paper strip after it was glued on the document, as it is evidenced by the fact that the first strokes of the new name

¹⁰ Thus the wrong characters may have been identified in one stage throughout the entire manuscript, then painted over in another stage, then corrected in yet another. Perhaps these stages were even done by different people.

extend outside the paper.¹¹ In manuscript Pelliot chinois 3835 (Figure 8B) bound in a notebook format, a long paper slip with two lines of text was glued to the bottom of the page and folded inside, thus effectively creating a three-dimensional insertion.¹²

3. Flipped Characters

One of the relatively common mistakes we encounter in medieval manuscripts is the reversal of two sequential characters. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.249(A)R.2 (Figure 9A) has the characters 相 and 法 flipped in the phrase 如所相法, erroneously writing 如所法相. To rectify the problem, there is a small check mark between 相 and 法, indicating that they should be reversed. In this particular case, the mistake was obviously caused by the overall frequency of the phrase *faxiang* 法相 (“characteristics of the dharma”) in Buddhist literature. The check mark used here is the most common notation used for correcting flipped characters. In manuscript Or.8210/S.236, to cite another example, the characters in the phrase “Three Treasures” 三寶 were accidentally reversed and then corrected the same way. Less commonly we see the same mark upside down, as in Or.8210/S.2067 (Figure 9B), or appear in the form of the character 乙, as in Or.8210/S.1547 (Figure 9C).¹³ Sometimes these three variant versions of the reversal mark were used within the same manuscript, as it is the case in Or.8210/S.2067.

The position of the reversal mark is also important: it is invariably placed on the right side of the line, between the flipped characters. It should be distinguished from the check mark that is often identical in appearance but appears in the middle of the line, and is part of the notation used for segmenting text. Although used consistently, when the latter appears in manuscripts, it is placed over the first character of a new segment, and thus

¹¹ This way of correction was commonly used in later times for proofreading books before their final printing. The manuscript copy of the *Peiwen yunfu* 佩文韻府 kept at Princeton University Library is believed to be a pre-publication copy used for proofreading, and there are lots of paper strips glued to the pages, both for correcting existing content and inserting missing text.

¹² The image here only shows the place where the paper slip was glued to the bottom of the manuscript. The fold line is along the bottom edge of the original scroll.

¹³ This is mentioned in the description of Chen Kui quoted above: “When two characters are reversed, write the character 乙 between them.”

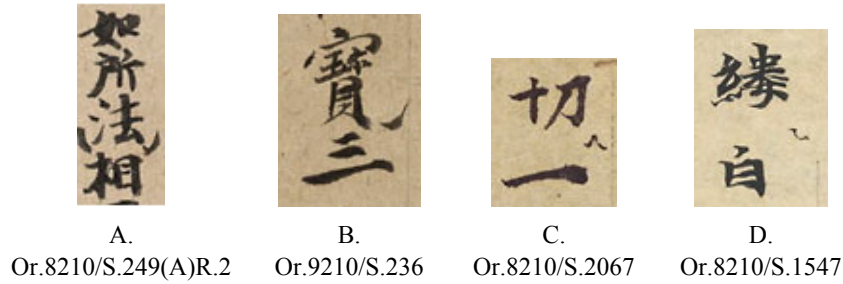


Figure 9: Correcting flipped characters using a check mark.

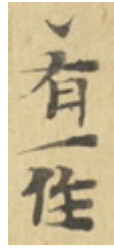
generally corresponds to our modern notion of a new paragraph. In other words, this is a check mark that marks a new paragraph. Examples of this can be seen in manuscript Or.8210/S.797V (Figure 10).

4. Redundant Characters

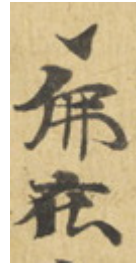
Interpolations and extra characters are another common type of mistakes. For example, Or.8210/S.249(A)R.2 (Figure 11A) has the phrase 何用別餘依 in which the character 餘 is superfluous. The redundant character was subsequently marked with four dots, which indicates that it should be understood as not not being there. The same technique could be used when marking longer strings of text to be deleted, as in Or.8210/S.797V (Figure 11B). Usually three or four dots are placed next to each character but there are cases when only a single dot is used, as it is the case in Or.8210/S.321 (Figure 11C) where characters 城惡 are eliminated.

In rare instances the deletion mark appears in red, as in manuscript Or.8210/S.2067 (Figure 12A), which is certainly the sign of a subsequent proof reader, who checked the manuscript for errors independent of the copyist. Beside the dots, another common mark used for deletion was a cross-like mark, only the horizontal stroke does not extend to the left side of the vertical stroke; in modern Chinese scholarship it is usually referred to as the mark in the form of the character 卜 (*bu*).¹⁴ A use of this mark can

¹⁴ On the use of this mark, see, for example, Zhang Xiaoyan 2003. Interestingly, in Tangut manuscripts from Khara-khoto from the 11th–12th centuries, which use much of the notation from Chinese manuscript culture, this deletion mark typically appears in the form of a full cross, with the horizontal stroke extending to both sides of the vertical one.

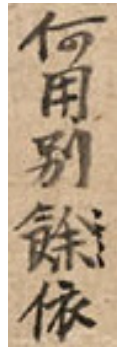


A.
Or.8210/S.797V

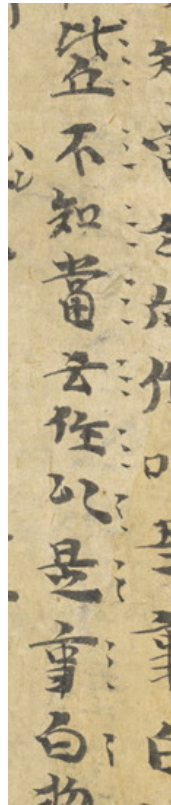


B.
Or.8210/S.797V

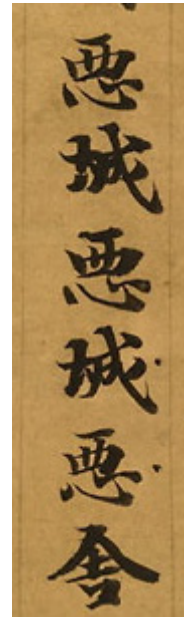
Figure 10: Check marks indicating a “new paragraph.”



A.
Or.8210/S.249(A)R.2



B.
Or.8210/S.797V



C.
Or.8210/S.321

Figure 11: Deletion of redundant characters (1).

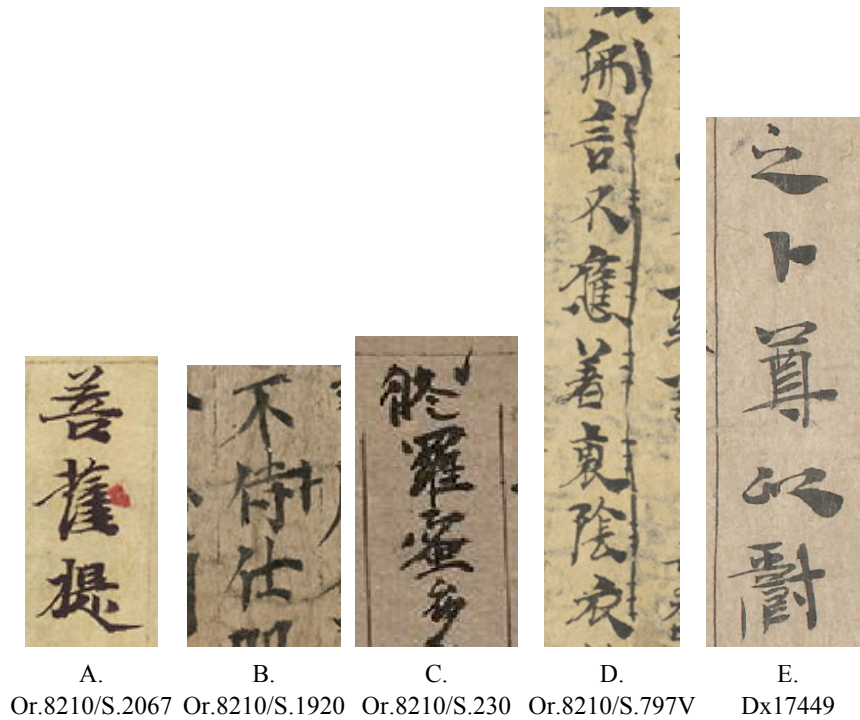


Figure 12: Deletion of redundant characters (2).

be seen in manuscript Or.8210/S.1920 (Figure 12B). In addition, the check mark could also be used to indicate deletion, as in the case of Or.8210/S.230 (Figure 12C) where the character 修 is deleted from the top of the line. As a final example, in Or.8210/S.797V (Figure 12D) we can see a case where a correction is annulled. After eight characters were marked using three-dot deletion marks, the corrector realized that he made a mistake in deleting these characters and crossed out his own corrections.

Another interesting phenomenon is shown manuscript Dx17449 (Figure 12E), a pre-Sui copy of the *Huang shi gong sanlie* 黄石公三略, where we see the character 卜 used for deletion being incorporated into the main text. The copyist who was responsible for this manuscript obviously did not understand the meaning of the 卜 deletion mark which was placed next to the redundant character 之. As a result, he copied both 之 and 卜 as part of the main text, thus adding two unnecessary characters and creating the phrase 之卜尊以爵 which is not part of the text.¹⁵

¹⁵ This phenomenon is pointed out in Fujii 2011: 124.

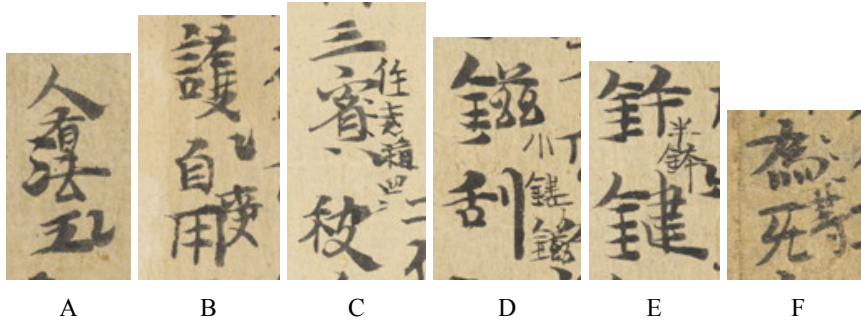


Figure 13: Correction marks used in combination in manuscript Or.8210/S.797V.

5. Combination of Marks

The above examples demonstrate the main categories of correction marks used for basic types of mistakes. Since we can compare the manuscript with canonical versions of the same Buddhist texts, it is relatively easy to determine the function of individual marks, even if one sees them the first time. Yet there are cases where some of these marks are used in combination, creating complex configurations that are at times hard to interpret. For example, in manuscript Or.8210/S.797V, we can find numerous cases of such composite scenarios. In example A, we see how the original string 人法五 is converted into the correct 人有五法 (“there are five ways of ... for a person”) by inserting a the character 有 after 人 and reversing 法五. The rest of the examples in Figure 13 all show similar combinations of different types of corrections from the same manuscript. It is evident that in such cases it was important to be clear about the functionality of the notation, otherwise it would not have been possible to read the text correctly.

Conclusions

Medieval manuscript culture in China used a highly developed notational system for correcting mistakes. This system has been remarkably consistent through the centuries and part of it continued to be used well beyond the time frame of the Dunhuang manuscripts. In fact, some of them are still in use today, even if handwritten texts are rapidly losing their domi-

nance in society. This diachronic consistency has two major implications. First, in general there are only several types of scribal mistakes and thus a relatively small set of marks was sufficient to address these. Therefore, while we may instinctively regard mistakes as random or arbitrary deviations from a pattern, i.e. the contemporary norm or standard of writing, in reality these errors themselves exhibit a pattern and thus can be classified into a limited number of well-defined categories. Second, the consistency of notation over the course of several centuries demonstrates the continuity of scribal tradition. To some extent the use of writing already implies such a continuity, since literacy is passed down from one generation to another without interruption, yet scribal notations provide a much more direct evidence for this. The marks used for corrections were not learnt from books but were acquired through gaining an apprenticeship from older scribes. Finally, we should note that mistakes in medieval manuscripts are far from being rare. Practically every longer scroll has corrections, even court-commissioned sūtras where the quality of paper, calligraphic skills, and the overall aesthetic appeal of the manuscript were manifestly important. This reveals that in contemporary society the mistakes were accepted as an integral part of texts, as long as they were corrected.

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