New incarnations of old texts: Traces of a move to a new book form in medieval Chinese manuscripts

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Abstract: The Dunhuang manuscripts represent the richest collection of medieval Chinese manuscripts that survives today. Although the form of earlier manuscripts in the collection is usually in the scroll, those from the ninth-tenth centuries also commonly feature a variety of other book forms. These new forms are believed to be the result of Tibetan and Central Asian influences and their spread can be attributed to the intensification of contacts between Chinese and other cultures in the Dunhuang region. Rather than analyzing the characteristics of such book forms, this paper attempts to look at cases when manuscripts contain traces of the physical form of earlier copies of the text, thereby evidencing the shift to a new book form. Such cases typically occur when the copyist made a kind of mistake that was in some way indicative of the form of the manuscript from which he was copying, or when a structured text (e.g. the verses of a gāthā in a Buddhist sūtra) was presented in an anomalous and inconsistent manner, revealing the difficulties the copyist encountered while trying to fit the regular layout of the text to a new book form. Other conspicuous cases are when orthographic peculiarities that can be tied to a specific time period (e.g. imperial taboo characters, Empress Wu characters) appear on manuscripts the physical form of which evidences a much later date. The examples presented here generally corroborate our understanding of the history of the Chinese book, including a strong Central Asian influence during the ninth-tenth centuries. The argument is that appreciating the materiality of manuscripts helps us to understand their social function in contemporary society.

Keywords: Chinese manuscripts, Dunhuang, book form, history of the book, Central Asia

Although the Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered over a century ago, difficulties with accessing the manuscripts scattered around the world has been a limiting factor for those working on the material.¹ Initial studies tended to concentrate on individu-

¹ I am grateful to my colleagues Sam van Schaik, Peter Kornicki, Costantino Morettì and Gábor Kósa for their valuable suggestions and insights at various stages of this study. All images are reproduced with kind permission of (c) The British Library.
al texts rather than addressing the social function of those or interpreting the entire collection as a single body of textual material. As microfilms and facsimile publications gradually became available from the 1960s onward, scholars were able not only to read the texts but also see the physical form in which they were written. With time, the quality of publications significantly improved and by now the majority of the corpus is accessible either online or as good quality facsimile reproductions, enabling researchers to study the texts in their primary form. As a result, there has been a growing awareness of the significance of the materiality of manuscripts, and there has been a shift from looking at texts devoid of physical form towards relying on the physical attributes of manuscripts as a means of gaining insights into how they were produced and what purpose they served in contemporary society.

Apart from administrative and economical documents, most of the texts in the Dunhuang corpus comprise copies of existing texts, such as Buddhist or Daoist scriptures, Confucian classics, primers, collections of poems or works of popular literature. Thus the majority of manuscripts were created by copying texts from earlier manuscripts, which in most cases themselves had been copied from yet earlier copies. At the same time, it is obvious that even though from our modern point of view this process suggests an interest in preserving texts for future generations, the concept of textual transmission is largely a retrospective construct based on texts that survived to our days, rather than the social circumstances responsible for the production of manuscript copies.\(^2\) The distinction is important because the latter approach puts the people and their contemporary actions into the focus of enquiry as opposed to seeing texts in abstract textual space largely disassociated from social concerns. In this shift, the physicality of texts naturally gains significance, since manuscripts often preserve traces of how they were created and used.

The physical features of a manuscript can often provide additional information that is not available in the text itself. These features can at times help us with dating the manuscript or interpreting its social background. Yet it is not always clear whether these paratextual elements reflect the situation of the manuscript at hand or they had been copied over from an earlier manuscript along with the text. Typical examples of

\(^2\) This does not contradict the fact that Buddhist sūtras were often copied for the sake of gaining merit, rather than for the purpose of reading the texts.
such cases are the taboo characters that may or may not indicate the date of the actual manuscript. Similar cases are the Empress Wu characters which are historically tied to the fifteen-year reign of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (690–705), yet they occasionally also appear in later material. This paper looks at cases when manuscripts contain traces of the physical form of earlier copies, either in the form of mistakes that can be linked with an earlier form, or as an inconsistent layout that indicates a shift to a new one. In either case, the word ‘traces’ means that there is something irregular about the manuscript and it deviates from what we would consider usual or ordinary. I am primarily interested in book forms, that is, whether we can learn something about the form from which the text was copied to the existing manuscript. Rather than trying to compile an exhausting list of all possibilities, my aim is rather to show a few representative examples to initiate further research into this topic.

1. From scroll to scroll

In the process of copying, in most cases the new reproduces not only the text itself but also its physical form. This is especially apparent in the case of Buddhist sūtras where the line length in standard scrolls was set at seventeen characters per line. This tradition goes back to before the Sui-Tang period, even though this rule was not always strictly adhered to. Thus the number of characters per line in the earliest known dated Buddhist manuscript written in Chinese, an incomplete copy of the Zhufo yaoji jing 祖佛要集經 (T810) dated to AD 296, varies between sixteen and eighteen characters. The silk scroll of the Jinguangming jing 金光明經 (T663) from AD 471, the oldest dated manuscript at the Pelliot collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Pelliot chinois 4506), consistently has nineteen characters per line. But the paper copy of the Za Apitan xin jing 雜阿毗昙心經 dated to AD 479 from the Stein collection at the

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3. Already in 1924 Paul Demiéville (1924: 15) commented that by the Tang period seventeen characters constituted a standard for writing sūtras.

4. This manuscript was found in 1908 in Toyoq near Turfan by the second Ötani expedition. Following the publication of good quality photographs in the illustrated catalogue of the Ötani collection in 1915 (Kagawa 1915), the manuscript became lost and its whereabouts are still unknown. Recently Mitani Mazumi (2006) identified fragments in the collection of the Lushun Museum which once belonged to the same manuscript, and also reconstructed the layout of the original manuscript, including its line length.

5. For an analysis of this manuscript, see Jao 1981.
British Library (Or.8210/S.996) is already using the seventeen-character norm, even though this is not adhered to strictly. The number of characters in a Buddhist sūtra is mentioned in manuscript Or.8210/S.2180, which contains a Buddhist text called *Xianzai shifang qianwubai foming bing zafo tonghao*. 現在十方千五百佛名並雜佛同號：

此稱揚諸佛功德經兩卷成合五十五紙半，紙有二十五行，行有十七字。

This copy of the *Chongyang zhufo congde jing* consists of two *juan* on a total of fifty-five and a half sheets of paper. Each sheet has twenty-five lines and each line has seventeen characters.

The text of the *Xianzai shifang qianwubai foming bing zafo tonghao* was probably written sometime around sixth century, thus even though this statement does not prove that seventeen characters per line was a general norm, it certainly corroborates the codicological features of pre-Tang manuscripts in the Dunhuang corpus.

Later scrolls, especially those executed with greater attention to the aesthetic appeal of the final artifact, and which were included in official libraries, tended to be more consistent in observing line length, which gradually settled at seventeen characters per line. Thus Zhiyuan 智圓 (976–1022) of the Song dynasty mentions in a postface to the *Diamond sūtra* that when the ‘old masters’ (gude 古德) copied sūtras, they wrote twenty-five lines per sheet and seventeen characters per line. The *Yunlu manchao* 雲麓漫鈔 by Zhao Yanwei 趙彥衛 (fl. 1195) records the same numbers:

釋氏寫經一行，以十七字為準，故國朝試童行誦經，計其紙數，以十七字為行，二十五行為紙。

In copying Buddhist sūtras, seventeen characters per line is the norm. This is why when the government tests Buddhist postulants on reciting sūtras, they count the number of paper sheets, in which each line has seventeen characters and each sheet consists of twenty-five lines.

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6 Since the beginning of the manuscript did not survive, the title quoted here is that appearing at the end of the manuscript, which is often not the proper title of a text but an abbreviated or popularized version of it.

7 The date of the *Xianzai shifang qianwubai foming bing zafo tonghao* is based on Yamaguchi 2008: 100–108, which places its composition to the late Northern Wei (386–535) through the beginning of the Sui (581–618).

8 Quoted in the *Guolignuo xindiao Dazang jiaozheng bielu* 高麗國新雕大藏經校正別錄 (T1402, 38:527b).

9 Zhao 1996: 49.
Besides representing a codicological tradition, this fixed length also had the benefit of being able to function as a technical device that ensured that texts were copied faithfully, as the first and last characters of a line had to match in both the source and target manuscripts. Scrolls were glued together from rectangular paper sheets into a longer strip of writing surface. Before writing on them, the scroll was often ruled with diluted ink lines that delineated the top and bottom margins and set the boundaries of the lines in advance. Each paper sheet would have from twenty-seven to twenty-nine vertical lines. Since the ruling marked the boundary of each line, the copyist did not have to worry about line spacing or the straightness of lines. Apart from the top and bottom margins, however, there was no horizontal ruling which would have aligned the characters horizontally by locking their exact position. As a result, character spacing—and sometimes size—was determined while copying, and less experienced copyists sometimes ran into problems towards the end of the line. If a few characters before the end of the line the copyist realized that he had too much space left, he would stretch the remaining characters to fill the space; if, on the contrary, he noticed that he ran out of space, he would try to squeeze the last characters into the remaining space. As a result, the spacing towards the end of the line was different from the rest of the line. And while this was less than ideal aesthetically, it clearly mattered less than the compulsion to abide by the seventeen characters per line norm, which would have obviously also been characteristic of the source manuscript. Thus whenever we see such examples of jammed or stretched line endings in a seventeen characters per line scroll, it is very likely that the manuscript from which the copy was made was also in scroll format.

For example, Fig. 1 shows a section from the lower part of manuscript Or.8210/ S.2, an undated copy of the *Foshuo guanding suiyuan wangsheng shifang jingtu jing* 佛說灌頂隨願往生十方淨土經 (T1331), where character spacing varies towards the end of the lines, depending on whether the copyist was running out of space or text. Obviously, the copyist would not have counted the characters in each line but tried to

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10 As shown above, several sources claim that the number of lines per sheet was twenty-five but in Tang and later Buddhist sūtras from Dunhuang twenty-seven to twenty-nine lines were much more common.

11 Unlike in manuscripts, stone or brick inscriptions could sometimes use a combination of vertical and horizontal gridlines, dividing the writing surface into evenly spaced squares which would also align the characters horizontally.
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Fig. 1. Section from Or.8210/S.2, showing the different character spacing at the bottom margin.

Fig. 2. Manuscript Or.8210/S.12, showing the omission and subsequent insertion of sixteen characters.
match the characters at the end and beginning of lines with those in the source manuscript. In the example shown here, we can see that the spacing at the end of lines 1 and 3 is much denser than in the other lines, demonstrating the copyist’s attempt to finish the line with the same character as in the manuscript he was copying from.

Another scenario where we can be sure that a scroll was copied from a scroll is when a line is left out by accident. This type of mistake is well attested both in Chinese printed culture and in manuscript studies in the West. Often the omission is triggered by the presence of the same word in adjacent lines and in such cases the scribe accidentally jumps to the next line thinking that he is returning to the one before. If we see that in a scroll a whole line is omitted, it is likely that the source manuscript from which the copy was made was also a scroll. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.12 is a copy of *juan* 2 of the *Weimojiejing* 維摩詰經, in which the length of lines varies between sixteen and eighteen characters. About half-way through the scroll the copyist omitted sixteen characters and added these subsequently on the lower margin and between the lines (Fig. 2). It is easy to see that the mistake occurred because both the missing line and the following one begin with the words “the power of merit” (*gongde zhi li* 功德之力 and *gongde li* 功德力), which triggered the eye-skip. But this also tells us that the source manuscript was a scroll where the missing sixteen characters constituted a full line.

2. Woodslips to scroll

The earliest Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang date to the late fourth century and—as the manuscripts themselves demonstrate—by this time paper had become the primary medium used for writing. The shift from bamboo and woodslips to paper must have occurred sometime during the previous century or so, even though the invention of paper goes back to at least the first century BC. It is only to be expected then that some of the physical characteristics of paper manuscripts were inherited from bamboo and woodslips. Thus the size of the paper more or less followed the size of Han woodslips; the ruling lines were possibly also done in imitation of bamboo and wooden

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slips. It is even more probable, however, that paper manuscripts inherited the layout of bamboo and wooden slips through the intermediary of silk manuscripts which were used contemporaneously with bamboo and wood, adapting the physical layout of slips to larger sheets of continuous writing surface. Thus it was most likely silk manuscripts that served as the inspiration and immediate model for paper manuscripts.

While the spread of the relatively inexpensive medium of paper undoubtedly brought textual production to an entirely new level and thus a host of new texts was written immediately on paper, there must have also been many existing texts which were copied to paper from silk, bamboo and wood. In fact, the entire philosophical and literary production of early China was transferred from silk, bamboo and wood to the newly introduced paper format, attesting to the overall scale of this process. Yet tangible evidence of this transfer is not that abundant, possibly because relatively few paper manuscripts survive from the period immediately following the transfer and traces of the old medium gradually disappeared as newer paper copies were made from the initial ones. It is only natural that the more generations a text has undergone from the time of being copied onto paper, the fewer traces of its original form there would be. Conversely, we would expect to find more traces in manuscripts that are closer to the medium shift, either in time or number of generations of copies.

For example, an early fragment of the military treatise *Huang shi gong sanlie* 黃石公三略 kept in St. Petersburg (Jx.17449) features between twelve and fourteen characters per line. This fragment has a twenty-four character omission if compared against the Song dynasty *Wujing qishu* 武經七書 edition of the text, and Fujii Noriyuki 藤井律之 has pointed out that this must be the result of the manuscript having been copied from a woodslip, rather than a scroll. The reasoning behind this is that in the early first century AD, when the text is already quoted, the standard size of woodslips was one Han foot (chǐ 尺, 23 cm), which would have held up to thirty characters. Accordingly, the omission of the twenty-four characters was probably the result of a missing slip. Naturally, this observation does not conclusively prove that this particular

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14 This is counting the complete lines without a commentary. Most lines on the surviving fragment also have a double-line commentary in small characters, although this does not physically change the line length.


scroll was copied directly from a bamboo or wooden slip manuscript, as the omission may have theoretically happened earlier during a previous—perhaps much earlier—act of copying, either before or after the text was copied onto paper. Yet, as mentioned above, the further we get away from the shift to a new media, the fewer such traces remain in the manuscripts. In addition, the calligraphy of Đx.17449 also suggests a relatively early date, which puts the manuscript closer in time to the shift to paper. In any case, the missing characters evidence the shift from a previous physical form to a new one.

The transition from wood to paper was not limited to Chinese manuscripts but must have been a common process throughout Central Asia. For example, it is possible that at least parts of the Tibetan manuscripts of the Old Tibetan Annals discovered at Dunhuang were also initially written on wooden slips and were transferred to paper only subsequently. Apart from the fact that in the earlier period Tibetans used wood-slip for writing, this assumption is suggested by the concise nature of these early entries. At the same time, it is important to point out that for an extended period of time paper and wood were also used concurrently, showing that the transition to paper did not happen overnight but was a complex process that lasted centuries.

3. Scroll to concertina

In addition to the scroll, which is the typical format for medieval Chinese manuscripts, the Dunhuang manuscripts also contain a number of other book forms, such as concertina, butterfly, whirlwind, booklet and pothī. Fujieda Akira has called these ‘irregular forms’, although in terms of their number they are quite significant in the Dunhuang corpus. It is also likely that these new forms were introduced as a result of a
Central Asian influence in Dunhuang from the second half of the eighth century, when the region was largely separated from China proper and was in very close contacts with its Central Asian neighbors and Tibet. Only two Chinese concertina manuscripts can be dated conclusively, both to the last two decades of the tenth century.²² In addition, Professor Drège points out that 90% of the concertina manuscripts found in Dunhuang bear Tibetan texts which is yet another indication that even the undated manuscripts cannot predate the beginning of the Tibetan period in Dunhuang (i.e. the late eighth century).²³ This, of course, also points to the non-Chinese origin of this form. Because the appearance of these new book forms can be tied to a specific period, it is clear that some of the new manuscripts would have been copied from earlier scrolls, and that this shift was bound to leave traces.

One such case is Pelliot chinois 3760, a miniature concertina manuscript bearing three popular Buddhist scriptures, one of which was Chapter 25 of the Lotus sūtra (Miaoja lianhua jing 妙法蓮華經 T262), which also commonly circulated as a separate sūtra called Guanshiyin jing 觀世音經 or Guanyin jing 觀音經.²⁴ The manuscript is undated but was probably written in the tenth century.²⁵ It is very small (6.50 x 4.80 cm), with pages smaller than the height of a credit card. As a result, each page has only four lines and each line consists of five to seven characters, which is a drastically different layout from the seventeen-character lines of the standard scroll. Part of the text consists of five-character gāthās which usually appear on scrolls in sets of four characters separated by a space, with characters written tightly together; thus each line has four sets of five-character verses, bringing the total to twenty characters per line. Taking a subset of the gāthās as an example, their typical arrangement on a scroll would look as follows:²⁶

弘誓深如海 略劫不思議 侍千億佛 發大清淨願
我為汝略說 聞名及見身 心念不空過 能滅諸有苦

²¹ Fujieda 1966: 24–27. For a detailed description of these formats, see the articles of Jean-Pierre Drège (1979, 1984a, 1996).
²² Drège 1984a: 198.
²³ I bid.: 198–199.
²⁴ For a discussion of this manuscript and the implications of its physical characteristics and orthography, see Galambos 2012: 76–79.
²⁶ The text is displayed here horizontally, even though on the original manuscripts it would appear as vertical lines read from right to left.
假使典害意推落大火坑念彼观音力火坑变成池
或漂流巨海龙鱼诸鬼难念彼观音力波浪不能没

In the miniature concertina Pelliot chinois 3760, however, the same text is arranged into short lines of four to seven characters, depending on the rather haphazard size and spacing of characters:

弘誓深知海止
劫不思议侍多千
億佛大清净
願我为汝略说闻
名及现身心念不
空過能滅諸有苦
假使典害意推
落大火坑
念彼观音力
火坑变成池
或漂流巨海
龙鱼诸鬼难
念彼观音力
波浪不能没

Initially, the section appears as running text with no regard for the inherent five-character units of the gāthās. After several lines, however, the copyist seems to have realized that he could preserve the structure of the verses if he wrote each five-character unit on a separate line. Following this realization, he remained faithful to the newly discovered layout for the rest of the gāthās which continue in the manuscript for eighty more five-character lines. Therefore this manuscript evidences how the layout evolved during the very process of copying, which undoubtedly means that the copying was done from a manuscript—most likely a scroll—where the gāthās were arranged differently.
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4. Scroll to booklet

The booklet is yet another book form that probably spread in Dunhuang, and later in the rest of China, as a result of a Central Asian influence. Once again, this is a form that appeared only towards the end of the Tang dynasty and was also frequently used for non-Chinese manuscripts. For the sake of comparison, we can look at manuscript Or.8210/S.5467 which contains the same Guanyin jing as the miniature concertina discussed above. The gāthās begin on a new line after a large black circle which sets them apart from the rest of the text (Fig. 3).

The copyist clearly struggled with maintaining the visually transparent layout cus-

Fig.3. The beginning of a gāthā section in Or.8210/S.5467

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tomarily used for gāthās on scrolls. Yet he is obviously unable to do this and comes up with several impromptu solutions when running out of space. For example, at the end of the first line, when he ran out of space, he wrote the last character 緣 to the right of the previous one, which is a highly unusual way of solving the problem; on later pages, he used the same solution several times. In the second line he ran out of space again and this time he moved the last character of the five-character unit to the beginning of the new line. He then found a steady rhythm of three five-character units per line and managed to maintain this for several lines but then wrote a looser line with only two such units. From then on, the segmentation looks as follows: 28

如日虚空住 或被惡人逐
墮落金剛山 念彼觀音力 不能損一毛
或值怨賊繞 各執刀加害 念彼觀音
威起慈心 或遭王難苦 臨刑欲
故終 念彼觀音力 刀尋段段壞
或囚禁枷鎖 手足被杻械 念彼觀音
釋然得解脫 呼詛諸毒藥
所欲害身者 念彼觀音力
還著於本人 或遇惡羅刹

The copyist alternated between two and three five-character units per line, at times breaking the units at the end of lines. Later on, he once again managed to maintain a regular pattern but this time this meant two units per line. This inconsistency in following a fixed pattern and the fact that in the end the copyist indeed found a suitable pattern for this form indicate that the source manuscript was in a different form. The assumption that it was specifically a scroll is simply a statistical probability as theoretically it could have also been a booklet or a pothī.

Contrary to the inconsistency seen in the above example, when a booklet is copied from another booklet, we would expect the layout of the gāthās to be fully formed, rather than trying to work it out during the process of copying. An example of such case would be manuscript Or.8210/S.6983, an illustrated copy of the same Guanyin

28 The small character 九 that appears in lines three and five of the transcription as superscript represents cases when the character is written to the right of the previous one in the phrase Guanyin li 視音力 (‘the strength of Avalokiteśvara’), as the copyist ran out of space at the end of the line.
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Fig. 4. The gāthās in the Guanyin jing in manuscript Or.8210/S.6983, showing the line with a missing character.

jing where the gāthās were written evenly with five characters per line (Fig. 4).29 Shortly after the beginning, however, the copyist accidentally omitted the character 答 form the line ji da Wujinyi 偈答無盡意 (‘replied to [Bodhisattva] Akṣayamati in verse’). We can see that he realized his mistake when he was about to write the last character of this line which should have been the fifth but in his case was only the fourth. So he fixed the problem by drastically increasing character spacing and writing the last character at the bottom of the line. The result is that it seems that the fourth character of the line is missing, whereas in reality it is the second character.

5. Scroll to pothī

Pothī is a book form that emulates the shape of palm-leaf manuscripts originally used on the Indian subcontinent, only in Central Asia and China where palm leaves were not available the pages were usually made of paper. Although its use for native Indian texts is widely documented in Buddhist literature using the term fanjia 梵夾 (‘Indian clamped boards’), its application for Chinese manuscripts begins under Tibetan

29 This booklet was part of the ‘debris’ portion of the Stein collection in the British Museum and thus remained uncatalogued until relatively late. It was re-assembled from separate pieces of paper by Eric Grinstead and introduced by Professor Fujieda (1968) as an example to illustrate the characteristics of Tibetan-style hard pen calligraphy among the Dunhuang manuscripts. See also Whitfield 1983: 340.
influence in the late eighth century, following the Tibetan conquest of the region. But while Tibetan, like Indic languages, was written horizontally and thus the reader held the book with its longitudinal axis pointing sideways, Chinese was normally written in vertical columns and hence the leaves were rotated ninety degrees, resulting in a smaller number of long vertical lines. Accordingly, in terms of its size and shape, the pothī was completely different from other book forms used for Chinese manuscripts and the differences in layout often presented a challenge for copyists when copying from a source manuscript that had a different form. Once again, this was most pronounced in the case of gāthās which had a highly consistent layout on scrolls or other types of manuscripts. For example, manuscript Ch 1249 from Turfan, kept at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, is a pothī leaf with a fragment of the Buddhist prayer Dabeiqiang 大悲散 (T2843). The text is arranged on the two sides of the leaf as follows:  

**Recto:**

南無大悲觀世音 願我速得戒足道 南無大悲觀世音 願我速得戒足道

世音 願我速得戒足道 南無大悲觀世音 願我速得戒足道

**Verso:**

我若向刀山 刀山自摧折

若向地獄 地獄自枯渴

若向修羅 悪心自調伏 我若向畜生 自得大智慧

It is evident that the gāthās are segmented using the spaces into smaller units. In the first part the text consists of units of seven characters, and the second half, from the

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30 Although theoretically it would have been possible to maintain the ‘landscape’ orientation by very writing short lines, in choosing the layout for writing Chinese characters, medieval copyists followed both the native Chinese tradition of writing long vertical lines on bamboo and woodslips, and the South-Asian custom of having a smaller number of long lines parallel to the longitudinal axis of the pothī leaves.

31 The text here follows this particular manuscript and thus slightly differs from the text in the Taishō Tripitaka. One of the differences is that the word huotang 鍋湯 (‘caldron of boiling water’) which appears in the first line of the verso is huotang 火湯 (fire and boiling water) in the standard text. Although huo 鍋 is an entering tone word and thus would have not been homophonous with huo 火 in Central China, this manuscript is from Turfan where the two words were apparently similar enough in pronunciation to warrant a substitution.
middle of the fourth line on the recto (我若向刀山), of five characters. While this particular manuscript comes from Turfan, several scroll copies of the Dabei qiqing are also known among the Dunhuang manuscripts (e.g. Or.8210/S.2566, Or.8210/S.4378, Or.8210/S.5598, Pelliot chinois 2105, Pelliot chinois 2197) and in these the gāthās usually do not violate the line breaks but are written in a structurally consistent layout. The fact that the copyist of our pothī was unable to find a suitable layout that matched the physical format of the manuscript suggests that the copy was made from a manuscript that had a different book form. This original form most likely was a scroll (as it is the case with all copies of this text that survive among the Dunhuang manuscripts), where the two parts of the section in question, one consisting of seven-character units and the other of five-character ones, would have been arranged the following way:

南無大悲觀世音 願我速得成足道 南無大悲觀世音
願我早登涅槃山 南無大悲觀世音 願我速會無為舍
南無大悲觀世音 願我早同法性身
我若向刀山 刀山自摧折 我若向餓渴 餓渴自消滅
我若向地獄 地獄自枯渴 我若向餓鬼 餓鬼自飽滿
我若向修羅 意心自調伏 我若向畜生 自得大智慧

In addition to the above cases where omissions and the layout of structured units of text made it possible to determine the physical form of the source manuscript, orthographic features peculiar to specific time periods can also be of help, as many book forms have a temporal dimension. Therefore if the dates suggested by the book form and the orthography do not match then the orthographic idiosyncrasies were probably copied from an earlier manuscript and thus cannot be used for dating the manuscript. Typical cases are manuscripts that contain characters introduced during the fifteen-year reign of Empress Wu Zetian, i.e. 690–705, but are written on forms that were atypical at that time. For example, manuscripts Or.8210/S.5765 and Or.8210/S.5766 have several Empress Wu characters yet they are in a pothī form which appeared in Dunhuang

32 The only exception from this seems to be Or.8210/S.5598 where the second part of the text does not conform to the physical layout of the manuscript.
33 In his study of Empress Wu characters in Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts, Drège (1984b: 349–351) lists quite a few manuscripts that contain Empress Wu characters yet can be dated to ninth-tenth centuries. To cite another example, Zhang 1992 shows how the character 国 (used in lieu of the character 國) continued to be used in the Yunnan region for centuries.
only towards the end of the eighth century when the Tibetans took control of the city. By the time the pothī is used for Chinese texts, the Empress Wu characters had been abolished for two-three generations, which makes it unlikely that a copyist would have continued to use these characters because of the power of habit. Therefore the Empress Wu characters in these two manuscripts must have been copied from earlier manuscripts which ultimately go back to the book form typical during the late seventh and early eighth century, that is, the scroll.34

Finally, there are also examples when a manuscript written in one form is physically converted into another one, thereby changing its book form. Thus a scroll may be rearranged into a concertina form, or disheveled pieces of a booklet may be glued together with other fragments to create a longer scroll. An example of a composite scroll is Pelliot chinois 3720 which had been glued together from smaller fragments of pre-existing manuscripts bearing dates that ranged from 851 to 938.35 Although many of the texts brought together are related to the eminent local monk Hongbian 洪辯 (d. 868), the anthology also includes texts that cannot readily be linked with him; thus the exact thematic nature of this anthology is yet to be explained. Another example of a converted book form is Or.8210/S.5603, which is a concertina manuscript with a Chinese and Tibetan commentary of the Laṅkāvatāra sūtra. As Susan Whitfield points out, this manuscript can also be seen as a scroll folded into a concertina form.36 At the same time, the concertina pages each have a hole, as if the manuscript had been glued together from separate pothī pages.37 Although the Chinese and Tibetan text on the leaves is written in parallel lines, because of the different orientation of these scripts, the manuscript has to be rotated 90 degrees when the reader wants to switch between languages.

Similar cases of re-arranging the physical form of existing manuscripts are by no means rare among the surviving corpus of manuscripts, although they generally do not

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34 Drége (1984: 350) dates these two manuscripts to the tenth century, which means that they were written at least two centuries after the end of the reign of Empress Wu.
35 For a detailed analysis of this manuscript and the significance of its composite nature, see Galambos forthcoming.
37 I am grateful to Sam van Schaik for pointing out to me that the pothī-style holes in the manuscript may have had a purely symbolic function, signifying a sacred Buddhist text, inherited from the palm-leaf form in which such holes—and a binding string—were really necessary.
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 involv e an act of copying beyond a single colophon or fragmentary note.

6. Conclusions

Following the emergence of Buddhist manuscript culture in China, Buddhist sūtras developed a range of relatively consistent layout features, and the fact that these remained in use for extended periods of time attests to their vitality and significance. Apart from theoretical justifications, on the technical level some of these features served as a means to protect the integrity of the text during the process of copying because adherence to the visual arrangement of the text also ensured that the text itself was copied faithfully. But when the text was transferred to a new book form, the original layout was often lost and this may have compromised the integrity of the text itself. Cases where such problems occurred produced manuscripts that contain traces of earlier incarnations of the text. Such cases show that the shift to new book forms was far from automatic and it involved a number of adjustments, especially when copying texts with a structured layout. Indeed, it would often take several copies to come up with the right layout that was suitable for the new form.

The examples presented in this paper demonstrate that traces of earlier physical instantiations of a text may survive in later manuscripts. On the most basic level, by detecting these traces we are able to map the various incarnations of a text and document its path through time. This also means that such cases help us to understand the history of the Chinese book and to reconstruct the chronology of book forms.38 More importantly, however, they can shed light on the process of how texts were re-appropriated by new people for new purposes who made copies from existing manuscripts and used these under new social circumstances. Among other things, a shift to a new book form also indicates a social change, as in most cases it can be tied to a specific time period and is the result of external influences. This, in turn, signals the appearance of new social circumstances which in northwestern China often involved a multiethnic and multicultural element. The awareness of the physical features of manuscripts enables us to reconstruct some of the social contexts in which these manuscripts were used in

38 This significance of learning about different book forms has also been pointed out by Professor Drège (1996: 164).
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