

Scribbles on the Verso of Manuscripts Written by Lay Students in Dunhuang

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The vast corpus of Dunhuang manuscripts includes a series of items with what we may call ‘educational texts’ (*mengshu* 蒙書), which comprise a body of written works used in pre-modern China as material for elementary education. Some of these were designed to teach students a set of basic characters, while others conveyed a didactic message, typically through recounting stories of exemplary figures from the Confucian tradition. By copying these texts, on the one hand, students practiced their literacy skills and, on the other hand, internalized the moral guidelines acclaimed in the literary tradition. The surviving manuscripts, however, also demonstrate that students copied not only educational texts in a strict sense but also works such as the *Xiaojing* 孝經 and parts of the *Lunyu* 論語. Even though these texts would normally be categorized as Confucian classics, their surviving copies in most cases were written by students as part of their curriculum. In addition, students also seemed to have copied texts with religious content, most significantly the Buddhist narratives called ‘transformation texts’ (*bianwen* 變文).¹ Added together, the body of texts produced by students in a school setting is considerable, amounting to hundreds of manuscripts.

In addition to the above types of texts that can be identified as having been part of school exercise, manuscripts produced by students often contain fragments of pragmatic texts related to the social and economic life of the Dunhuang region. Some of these texts are copied out in their complete length but in the majority of cases we find only bits and pieces, sometimes merely a few words long. The same types of texts are also attested among the Dunhuang manuscripts as original documents produced and used by the local population as part of their everyday life, and are thus today invaluable for the study of

¹See Mair 1981.

the social and economic history of the region. Distinguishing the copies made by students is in most cases relatively straightforward, although there are also cases where the distinction is not immediately apparent. One of the common traits of such document fragments is that they often survive on manuscripts that contain texts produced by students, which by default signifies a connection with an educational environment.

This paper examines the phenomenon of the co-occurrence of educational texts and fragments of documents of social and economic content on the same physical manuscript and attempts to document some of the patterns discernible in this phenomenon. One of the aims of this exercise is to see whether we can identify additional manuscripts produced in an educational setting, which in turn would have obvious implications for determining the function of those manuscripts. One of the arguments advanced here is that students were responsible for the production of many more manuscripts than usually recognized. Again, this forces us to re-examine the newly identified manuscripts and consider whether their content can be taken at face value. On the most basic level, expanding the inventory of manuscripts known to have been created by students makes us reconsider the concept of educational texts by showing that in addition to looking at them as a specific genre, it is just as important to take into consideration their function and use. The Dunhuang manuscripts convincingly demonstrate that there is a discrepancy between texts that have been used as writing exercise and those composed specifically for this purpose.

1. The *Xiaojing* Manuscripts

The Dunhuang library cave yielded a sizeable body of *mengshu*, that is, texts specifically educational or didactic in their design, such as primers and other similar works used for teaching literacy skills. These have been collected and studied by Zheng Acai 鄭阿財 who grouped them into the categories of (i) texts teaching literacy skills 識字類蒙書; (ii) texts teaching factual information 知識類蒙書; and (iii) texts teaching moral conduct 德行類蒙書.² Generally speaking, he approached the surviving material from the point of view textual history, pointing out discrepancies between parallel versions and with their transmitted

²Zheng 2002.

editions. My focus, however, is not on the texts but on the people who created and used the manuscripts, as well as the conditions and circumstances behind their production.

A group of Dunhuang manuscripts can be directly linked with a school environment by colophons written by students who identified themselves as *xuelang* 學郎, *xueshilang* 學士郎 or *xuesheng* 學生. Scholars of Dunhuang studies took notice of these manuscripts early on and since then several studies have been devoted to the topic.³ Dozens of such manuscripts have been identified and the dated ones suggest that most of them were written during the hundred fifty years between about 850 and 1000, which in Dunhuang corresponds to the Guiyijun 歸義軍 period. Typically, the students belonged to monasteries in Dunhuang and produced the manuscripts as part of their school work. Despite the monastic setting, they often copied secular texts of the Confucian tradition, showing that in their case the monasteries merely functioned as places of learning and there was no effort to engage them in specifically religious education or to prepare them for ordination.⁴

Although the number of manuscripts with students' colophons is limited, we can find further examples of manuscripts copied by students by looking for copies of texts commonly copied by students, even if those do not have students' colophons. Some of these might have been produced for other reasons under different conditions but there are also many that share a number of traits with the *xuelang* manuscripts. One of the common texts copied by students is the *Xiaojing* 孝經, which is known to have been used in an educational setting throughout the medieval period. The text is particularly suitable for educational purposes as it combines the benefits of having a relatively limited scope of commonly used characters and, at the same time, propagates the value of filial piety, one of the fundamental virtues in traditional education. In addition, it is relatively short, making it an ideal material for copying. More than thirty manuscripts of the *Xiaojing* are known from Dunhuang, including both annotated (e.g. P.3274, P.3378, P.3382, P.3816) and unannotated (e.g. P.3369, P.4897, S.3993, S.5821) versions.⁵ Some of them are complete, others fragmentary but presumably once

³E.g. Ogawa 1973a and 1973b; Li 1987; Itō 2008.

⁴For a study Confucian-style education in Buddhist monasteries, see Zürcher 1989 and Galambos 2015b.

⁵A collection of facsimile reproductions of the *Xiaojing* manuscripts from Dunhuang is found

complete. Although it is clear that not all of these manuscripts were produced in a school environment, some bear colophons attesting to having been copied by students, thereby giving evidence of the common use of this text as material for writing exercise.

Most of the surviving Dunhuang copies of the *Xiaojing* do not have students' colophons, which in principle makes their connection with students less explicit. Yet if we compare the manuscripts with those copied by students, in many cases we find similarities that cannot be coincidental. Hence, in many cases the manuscripts look physically similar to the ones written by students, especially in terms of their handwriting, layout and paper quality. Besides, quite often the verso of manuscripts, or at times the margin, includes fragmentary texts and scribbles which are of similar type. The analysis of these scribbles reveals a pattern that can be utilized to identify additional manuscripts copied by students.

1.1. Manuscript S.728

To look at a concrete example, consider manuscript S.728 from the Stein collection at the British Library, a scroll with a nearly complete copy of the *Xiaojing* written in a relatively good hand. After the end of the main text we find the following colophon:

丙申年五月四日靈圖寺沙彌彌德榮寫過 後輩弟子梁子松

更子年二月十五日靈圖寺李郎李再昌已 (記)⁶

梁子松

On the fourth day of the fifth month of the *bingshen* year, copied over by Derong, śrāmaṇera at the Lingtu monastery younger

in Chen 1977. Since then, most of the items have become available in good quality digital form on the web site of the International Dunhuang Project (<http://idp.bl.uk>) based at the British Library and through Gallica (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>), the digital library site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. See also Hayashi 1976 and, for an overview in a Western language, Drège 2004: 39-43.

⁶One of the characteristic features of students' colophons is that in many—although not all—cases the character 學 ('to study, imitate') is written in its non-standard form as 孛, a sysemantic combination of the components 文 ('text, character') and 子 ('child, offspring'). The transcriptions in this paper reproduce the forms seen in the manuscripts, whether written as 學 or 孛.

disciple Liang Zisong

On the fifteenth day of the second month of the *gengzi* year,
recorded by Li Zaichang, student at the Lingtu monastery

Although theoretically there are a few options for the actual date of the *bingshen* and *gengzi* years, they most likely refer to 936 and 940. They are four years apart, which means that the second line of the colophon may have been added long after the Buddhist novice—named here using a monastic name—copied the *Xiaojing*. The younger disciple Liang Zisong, however, has a secular name and there is no indication regarding his role in the creation of the scroll.⁷ Similarly vague is the role of Li Zaichang—explicitly identified as a student (*xuelang* 學郎)—in the second line of the colophon, ostensibly added four years later.⁸ This line is concluded with the character 巳, which can only make sense if we take it to stand for the verb *ji* 記/紀 (‘to record’).⁹ Finally, in a new line, at the lower left corner of the scroll, we find the name Li Zaisong repeated by itself, once again without any indication to this person’s contribution to the creation of the manuscript. In this way the colophon itself is a composite piece of text parts of which may have been written years apart. We may presume that this mirrors the composition of the entire scroll, the two sides of which contain a number of texts and scribbles we should not readily assume to have been written at the same time.

⁷Itō Mieko 伊藤美重子 (2008: 46) follows Ishihama Juntarō 石濱純太郎 (Hayashi 1976, 37) in reading the last character in the name (*song* 松) as the verb *jiao* 校 (‘to edit, proofread’), no doubt in an attempt to make sense of the note. But as we will see below, the name Liang Zisong appears on the verso of the manuscript, proving that the last character is in fact part of the given name.

⁸Ishihama (Hayashi 1976, 37), Mair (1981: 46) and Drège (2014: 41) read the name as Li Erchang 李爾昌, although Mair indicates his uncertainty regarding the second character by adding a question mark after it. Others (e.g. Ikeda 1990: 477; Itō 2008: 46) read it correctly as Li Zaichang 李再昌. Among the Dunhuang manuscripts, the character 爾 most often appears in its non-standard form as 尔 (Huang 2005:103), whereas the character 再 is commonly written in a way very similar to that in our colophon (Huang 2005: 532). In addition, the personal name Zaichang is attested—with other surnames or by itself—in other manuscripts from Dunhuang (e.g. S.2894, S.8426).

⁹In the Dunhuang manuscripts there is often no distinction between 巳, 已 and 己, whether they stand by themselves or as components in other characters. It is clear that in this case, although the character is written as 巳, it is in fact 己, standing for the word usually written as 記.

The verso of the scroll bears a number of short bits of text, which appear to be random scribbles without any particular order. The random and disconnected nature of these textual fragments is further demonstrated by the fact that some of them appear upside down in relation to others. Some consist of merely a few characters that are hard to interpret without context. Thus the first bit of text on the verso of the scroll is the following fragment:

五月五日天中節 一切惡

On the fifth day of the fifth month, during the Tianzhong Festival,
[may] all bad...

Although the line ends mid-sentence, it can be recognized as the beginning of an incantation known from transmitted sources and from several Dunhuang manuscripts. Among the latter is manuscript S.799 with the *Guwen Shangshu* 古文尚書, the verso of which has a complete version of the incantation, wishing that all bad things would be extinguished on the day of the festival. But on the verso of our *Xiaojing* manuscript, even this short incantation is left unfinished, as if it was written merely for the sake of trying out one's pen.

Among the separate blocks of text on the verso of the manuscripts, there are also bits related to the other side, such as a few phrases from the main text of the *Xiaojing* and the names Li Zaichang and Liang Zisong. In fact, while Liang Zisong appears in the colophon following the *Xiaojing* as a 'younger disciple' 後輩弟子, here he is identified as 'the student Liang Zisong' 孥郎梁子松. Another bit of text says *fengchi xiuzao dawang* 奉敕修造大王,¹⁰ in which the term *dawang* 大王 ('great king') probably refers to Cao Yijin 曹議金 (r. 914-935), the first ruler of Dunhuang from the Cao family.¹¹ This side of the scroll also contains a four-line poem about a student involved in copying didactic texts as a form of exercise (Fig. 1). The poem reads as follows:

¹⁰The character 造 is unclear in the manuscript, which is why Hao Chunwen 郝春文 (1993: 77) initially transcribed the line as 奉敕修□大王. In my own transcription I follow the later reading in Hao and Shi 2003: 238, which is a plausible conjecture if one examines the original manuscript.

¹¹Hao Chunwen (1993: 77) points out, quoting Rong Xinjiang's 榮新江 study of the appellations of the military commissioners 節度使 of Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period (Rong 1990), that the term *dawang* was first used in Dunhuang from 931 in reference to Cao Yijin. He continued to be referred as the *dawang* even after his death (935) until 964. This time frame fits perfectly well with the dates 936 and 940 given in the colophon following the *Xiaojing* on the recto of this scroll.

孝郎大歌（哥）張富千 一下趁到孝經邊
太公家教多不殘 獮羅兒 [□] 實鄉（相）偏
The lay student, big brother Zhang Fuqian,
All of a sudden goes rushing off to the *Xiaojing*,
His *Taigong jiajiao* is not at all defective,
[... ?].¹²

The last line of the poem only has six characters and is clearly missing a syllable, although the rhyme works well. Therefore we may assume that somewhere in this line (possibly after 兒) a character went missing, which is why I put a missing space in the transcription space in brackets.¹³ The name Zhang Fuqian does not occur anywhere else in the manuscript and may in fact not be the name of any specific person. Instead, considering the meaning of the personal name Fuqian ('rich thousand'), it may be a 'speaking name' that refers to students from wealthy families studying at monasteries in Dunhuang. The Zhang clan was certainly among the most influential families in the region, even after the Cao dynasty took over the ruling of Dunhuang. Even though this is merely a hypothesis, it is not impossible that the poem would refer to such students in general or perhaps someone in particular without 'spelling out' his real name.¹⁴

Without trying to interpret and account for each and every bit of text on the verso of this scroll, I would instead like to focus on the literary titles that appear on this side in a seemingly arbitrary randomness. An inventory of these titles is as follows:

1. *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun* 大乘百法明門論
2. *Xiaojing* 孝經

¹²Translation is based on Mair 1981: 46, although the transcription follows that in Xu 2000: 855. The last line is defective and difficult to interpret, which is why I leave it untranslated.

¹³Because the name Li Zaichang appears after (i.e. to the left of) this poem, Xu Jun 徐俊 (2000: 85) considers him the author of the poem. Yet the name Li Zaichang is possibly written in a different hand and is added at an angle, that is, it may not be directly connected with the poem.

¹⁴Having said that, the personal name Fuqian occasionally occurs in other Dunhuang manuscripts as part of actual names, e.g. Ma Fuqian 馬富千 (P.2944), Linghu Fuqian 令狐富千 (P.2953).

3. *Taigong* 太公
4. *Taigong jiajiao yi juan* 太公家教一卷
5. *shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖
6. *Xiaojing yi juan bing xu* 孝經一卷竝序
7. *shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖

The titles listed here occur in this order but not consecutively, as there are other bits of texts between them. Moreover, as already mentioned earlier, some of them are upside down in relation to others. Therefore, the titles do not appear on the scroll as a list but are scattered disorderly. The *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun* (T1614.31) is Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602 - 664) translation of a *Yogācāra* text called *Mahāyāna śatadharmā-prakāśamukha śāstra* and is the only Buddhist text mentioned in the manuscript. After that comes the title of the *Xiaojing* which is repeated later with the addition of its volume (one *juan* 卷) and the note that it carries a preface. Another title is that of the *Taigong jiajiao*, which is an educational text used in a similar context to the *Xiaojing*. While it is thus not surprising to see this title in a manuscript created by students, there is no sign of the text itself here. Yet the title appears twice, once as a two-character abbreviation just long enough to identify the work. In addition, the titles of *Xiaojing* and *Taigong jiajiao* also appear in the student's poem described above.

The third title that occurs on the verso of the scroll is a so-called *shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖, that is, a lay association circular. Such circulars were commonly issued by the management of lay associations (*she* 社) as a means of informing members of an upcoming meeting. They would typically relate the time and place of the meeting, the agenda, the contributions expected from the participants, as well as the fines imposed on those who came late or remained absent from the meeting. Over a hundred such circulars survive among the Dunhuang manuscripts and they provide valuable data for the study of lay associations in the region during the ninth-tenth centuries.¹⁵ They have been studied extensively by social histo-

¹⁵Strictly speaking, *shesi zhuantie* is not a title per se but the heading of the circulars in which *shesi* means 'the office of the association' and *zhuantie*, usually written distinctly apart from the previous phrase, means 'circular'.

rians and published together in edited form.¹⁶ Early on, researchers recognized that some of the circulars we see in manuscripts are not originals but copies probably made by students for the sake of exercise. It also became clear that these copies had to be differentiated from original documents which were first-hand witnesses of the activities of such associations and the involvement of their members. Still, the copies themselves are also of value, partly because they were undoubtedly made from originals and thus record information that is authentic and not available elsewhere. Moreover, they can help to date manuscripts, as the students' copies were probably made not much later than the time of the originals and thus, if dated, can help to approximate the date of the manuscript where they appear.

There are at least two instances of the heading *shesi zhuan tie* on the verso of our scroll.¹⁷ One of them is at the end of the scroll that corresponds to the beginning of the *Xiaojing* on the other side.¹⁸ To the right of this heading is the word you 右 ('right') which is normally the beginning of the main text of the circulars, yet here it stands by itself, showing that the copying was stopped after the first word. The other instance of *shesi zhuan tie* is further towards the centre of the scroll, similarly written apart from the other bits of text. In this case the main text of the circular goes on for a full two lines before stopping on the third. It is left unfinished, similar to the many other scribbles on the verso of the scroll. An interesting fact about these two fragments of circulars is that in both cases they read in vertical columns going from left to right, rather than right to left, as Chinese is normally written. Although in the first instance we only have a single word from the main text, it is positioned to the right of the heading and is therefore sufficient to show that the text was about to be copied in a left-to-right direction. In the second instance we have enough text to see that the text indeed reads from left to right, in an opposite direction to normal. Paradoxically, the very first word of the main text of the circular is *you* 右 ('right'), which in this context functions in the sense of 'aformentioned,' referring to the office of the

¹⁶E.g. Yamamoto et al. 1989; Ning and Hao 1997. Other book-length studies include Hao 2006 and Meng 2009; for an overview of the circulars in English, see Galambos 2015a.

¹⁷Traces of the character 社 seem to be present in two more instances on the scroll but these are too faint to warrant a confident reading.

¹⁸Because some bits of text on the verso are written upside down, there are no objective criteria to determine how this side of the manuscript should be aligned and which side should be taken as the beginning. This is the reason why I specify the end of the verso in relation to the recto.

lay association (*shesi* 社司) that appears in the heading. This usage would work perfectly well if the text was written in a normal (i.e. right to left) direction but in our case the heading is to the left of the main text and the word *you* 右 ('right') loses its reference.

1.2. Manuscripts S.707 and P.3698

Let us examine manuscript S.707, another *Xiaojing* scroll from the British Library with a missing beginning but complete end, written in an inferior hand. The colophon at the end of the scroll is as follows:

同光三年乙酉歲十一月八日三界寺學仕郎郎君曹元深寫記

Record of copying done on the eighth day of the eleventh month of the third year of the Tongguang reign (925), an *yiyou year*, by the young lord Cao Yuanshen, lay student at the Sanjie monastery.

The first remarkable thing about this colophon is that it was written by Cao Yuanshen who was to be the ruler of Dunhuang between 939 and 945, that is, 14 years after producing this copy of the *Xiaojing*. This immediately provides some context to the identity and social status of these lay students studying at Buddhist monasteries, suggesting that they may have come from prominent families in Dunhuang. Accordingly, the preservation of their school work as part of the monastic library may be attributed to the monasteries wanting to maintain ties with these families through, among other things, keeping the manuscripts copied by their children as mementos of their relationship.¹⁹ Providing education to sons of the political elite certainly went a long way in ensuring the goodwill of the families in question, especially once the students reached adulthood and took on leading roles in society.

Let us look at the verso of this manuscript and see whether we can detect any patterns. This side (fig. 2) contains bits of scribble-like text similar to those on the verso of S.728, some only a single character in length, others longer. All of them are written in the same hand and they mainly comprise random snippets taken from the colophon on the verso, and a poem about a *langjun* 郎君 ('young

¹⁹I am grateful to Stefano Zacchetti for suggesting this reason for the survival of manuscripts copied by students within the Dunhuang library cave.

lord; young scholar’). This poem is also known from other manuscripts (e.g. S.5711) but here we only see short bits from the beginning; the longest segment is merely its first line: ‘the young scholar must establish himself’ 郎君須立身.²⁰ At the end of these bits we see the note ‘scroll written by the young lord Cao Yuanshen’ 郎君曹元深書卷 and in the next line the name ‘Yuanshen, the young lord’ 元深郎君. In the middle of these bits of texts, there is also the character *xiao* 孝 (‘filial piety’), which here is obviously an abbreviation of the title of the *Xiaojing*. Finally, the last line of text, standing slightly apart from everything else is the heading of a lay association circular (*shesi zhuantie*) immediately followed by the first two characters. Overall, these seemingly random bits of text establish a clear connection with the recto of the scroll which contains the *Xiaojing* copied by the *langjun* Cao Yuanshen. Another similarity with S.728 above is that the verso contains two of the same titles (*Xiaojing* and *shesi zhuantie*).

Yet another example of a *Xiaojing* manuscript by a student is P.3698 from the Pelliot collection in Paris. Although the colophon at the end of the *Xiaojing* is damaged and we cannot see the name of the student, it claims to have been written in a *jihai* 己亥 year, which in this context is probably 939, or more precisely the beginning of 940, if we take into account the fact that it was produced on the twentieth day of the twelfth month 十二月廿 of the lunar calendar. At the beginning of the verso, corresponding to where the *Xiaojing* on the recto ends, we find the words ‘lay student of the Lingtu monastery’ 靈圖寺孝郎 but unfortunately the damage does not allow us to see the name of the student. Nevertheless, judging from the two previous *Xiaojing* scrolls, we can be fairly certain that this bit of text originally comes from the colophon on the recto.

The verso contains quite a few scribbles, and some of these appear upside down in relation to the others, similar to what we saw in scroll S.728. Taking an inventory of the types of texts listed on this side of the scroll, we find the following items:²¹

1. *shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖

²⁰The poem was probably inspired by the involvement of sons of prominent families in copying the *Xiaojing*. Indeed, the poem itself seems to refer to the following line in the text: “Filial piety begins with serving one’s parents, continues with serving one’s ruler and ends with establishing oneself” 夫孝，始於事親，中於事君，終於立身。

²¹Brackets indicate textual fragments from the text of given works, without their actual titles.

2. *shesi zhuan* 社司轉
3. *shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖
4. *shesi* 社司
5. [*Xiaojing* 孝經]
6. *Zazi yi ben* 雜字一本
7. *Xiao* 孝
8. *Xiaojing yi juan* 孝經一卷
9. *Wang Fanzhi yi juan* 王梵之一卷
10. *Xiaojing yi juan* 孝經一卷
11. [*Xiaojing* 孝經]
12. [*shesi zhuantie* 社司轉帖]

Of the numerous instances of *shesi zhuantie*, the first one is the longest, with four lines of texts, written in an opposite-to-normal direction from left to right. There are also several instances of out of context snippets of text from the *Xiaojing*, coming from different chapters of the work and having no discernible relation to each other. The work *Zazi* 雜字 is another primer known from Dunhuang, although in this case we only have the title. Similarly, we have the title *Wang Fanzhi* 王梵之, which unquestionably refers to a collection of poems by Wang Fanzhi 王梵志, with the last character *zhi* 志 substituted with the nearly homophonous *zhi* 之. In sum, the texts referenced on the verso of this scroll are the *Xiaojing*, the *Zazi*, the poems of Wang Fanzhi and lay association circulars. Obviously, these are very similar to those on the verso of the other *Xiaojing* manuscripts discussed above. This means that when taken together, the so-called scribbles on the verso of manuscripts produced by students are not entirely random but exhibit a pattern, which also means that they were produced under similar conditions or are results of a similar type of activity. The relative consistency of the pattern over the course of several decades is yet another indication to the specificity of these conditions and this is why we can expect that taking

the scribbles seriously will lead to additional insights into lay education in Dunhuang. Furthermore, we may also enlarge the pool of manuscripts known to have been produced by students by systematically searching for the same patterns in manuscripts without students' colophons or texts associated with education.

2. Locating Other Manuscripts

We have seen above that the seemingly random scribbles on the verso of the *Xiaojing* manuscripts written by students exhibit certain patterns. Even though individually the scribbles seem arbitrary and disconnected, when examined collectively, they are quite similar in their appearance and content. They usually include content that can be linked with the recto of the manuscript, often with both the main text (i.e. *Xiaojing*) and the student's colophon. They also tend to record titles or short fragments of texts copied by students, even if the texts themselves do not appear in those particular manuscripts. Moreover, we often see short fragments of lay association circulars, sometimes only a couple of characters long. A peculiar characteristic of these circular fragments is that they are at times written from left to right, which is in a direction opposite to the normal way of writing Chinese. Finally, the scribbles are habitually written in an incompetent hand and often have omissions, phonetic substitutions and other mistakes.

Stepping beyond the relatively limited scope of manuscripts with students' colophons, the patterns identified above can be utilized to locate other manuscripts the connection of which with students is not immediately obvious. A complete analysis of all detectable traits on students' manuscripts is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper so I would instead like to focus on one particular element, namely, the common presence of lay association circulars (*shesi zhuan tie*). While it is true that not all relevant manuscripts contain copies or fragments of circulars, many of them do and this phenomenon cannot be coincidental. Indeed, the circulars not only commonly occur on the verso of such manuscripts but in many cases also have similar visual characteristics, such as the occasional left-to-right direction of writing, the brevity of fragments and the decidedly unskilled handwriting. My suggestion is to look for manuscripts with fragments of lay association circulars on their verso, in order to find hitherto unidentified items

produced by students as part of their school work.

An example of a manuscript with a lay association circular on the verso is P.3094, a scroll from the Pelliot collection in Paris with an incomplete copy of Tankuang's 曇曠 *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun kaizong yiji* 大乘百法明門論開宗義記, written in a well-practiced semi-cursive hand. The verso of the scroll has the following bits of text:

1. a fragment of unidentified Buddhist sūtra
2. “Liangchao Fu dashi song *Jingangjing xu*” 梁朝傅大士頌金剛經序
3. *shesi zhuan tie* 社司轉帖
4. a contract for hiring labor

The fragment of the Buddhist sūtra does not directly match any text in the Buddhist Canon and is less than half a line long. Similarly, the preface to the *Diamond sūtra* does not go beyond the first line. The lay association circular (*shesi zhuan tie*) consists of two full lines of text but is similarly left unfinished. It is written in a normal (i.e. right to left) direction and in the same clumsy hand as the previous two lines. The contract on the far left side of the verso, however, comprises seven and a half lines of text and appears to be complete. More interestingly, it is written entirely from left to right, in an unskilled hand that is different from everything else on the scroll. Therefore, in some respects we see a pattern similar to that on the *Xiaojing* manuscripts examined above but there are also differences. One of these is that the recto contains not a primer or other secular text but a Buddhist work written in a skilled hand, which makes it less likely that it was written by a student in the early stages of learning.²² Yet the bits of texts on the verso contain items that are reminiscent of the *Xiaojing* manuscripts, including the two lines of a lay association circular. Finally, the fact that the contract is written left to right suggests that this is a copy made by a student who belonged to the same group, whether it defined itself ethnically or socially, as those who wrote the *xuelang* colophons. Therefore, the contract is not an original document but a copy made for the sake of exercise, which shows that students may have also used such kinds of texts—in addition to circulars—as practice material.

²²At the same time, it seems too much of a coincidence that the main text on this scroll is a discussion of the *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun*, a work the title of which appears among the scribbles on the verso of manuscript S.728.

The differences between this scroll and those explicitly ascribed to students prevent us from definitely identifying this manuscript as having been done by a student. The calligraphic skill on the recto indicates that the text may not have been copied by a schoolboy at all. Yet it is also likely that the contents on the verso were indeed done by students, suggesting that they would have gained possession or control of the scroll after its initial production. A diachronic dimension in the use and production of the manuscript points to a more complex scenario than in the case of the *Xiaojing* manuscripts discussed above.

Another manuscript with a lay association circular on the verso is P.2439, a scroll with a nearly complete copy of *juan* 3 of the *Sapoduo bini biposha* 薩婆多毘尼毘婆沙 (T.23.1440). The text is rather long and is consistently written in an even, well-practiced hand. The verso is mostly empty but there is a section covered in text written in a clumsy hand reminiscent of the verso of *xuelang* manuscripts.²³ Based on the handwriting, Victor Mair makes the observation that these lines are ‘clearly the efforts of a beginner.’²⁴ To the right of this section, we have the following note:

此是徐再興自手書記耳 後有人來看莫
 恠也²⁵

A record of writing done personally by Xu Zaixing. If later someone should read this, do not blame me!

The last two characters did not fit in the same line but instead of writing them at the beginning of the next, Xu Zaixing placed them at the bottom, to the right side of the first line. Thus technically this note also reads from left to right, similar to other bits of writing discussed above. The name Xu Zaixing also occurs amidst some scribbles written in an especially inferior hand in manuscript

²³In reality, the digital photographs on the web sites of Gallica and IDP show only this relatively short section of the verso, the brevity of which is in sharp contrast with the length of the recto of the scroll. While we may assume that the undigitized part of the verso contains no additional scribbles and in fact this was the reason for not digitizing it, the omission makes it impossible to tell where the writings on the verso are located within the scroll (i.e. the beginning, the end, or somewhere in the middle). Examining the scroll in person would naturally resolve any such uncertainties.

²⁴Mair 1981: 13

²⁵The graph 恠 at the end of the line is the non-standard form of the character *guai* 怪 (‘to blame; strange’).

Dx00927, a codex-type booklet from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St. Petersburg. In our manuscripts his colophon-like note is followed by a plea not to blame him if one happens to come across the manuscript in the future. This is a formulaic way of apologizing for one's less than perfect handwriting sometimes seen in other manuscripts (e.g. S.5441, P.3351) and therefore should not be interpreted as sign of a personal apprehension on the part of the copyist.

The note of Xu Zaixing about copying out this manuscript appears once again as a line on the left, only without the second part with the plea. Further to the left is a garbled passage from the ballad “Yanzi fu” 燕子賦, written from left to right. To its left are three lines of the lay association circular that drew our attention to this manuscript in the first place. This is also written left to right. Thus we see that this entire block of text is written in the unorthodox left-to-right direction and that we should have begun reading it from the left. Looking at it as a larger block of text running from left to right, we can see that the note at the beginning is in fact a colophon placed, as usual, at the end. Moving left again, we find additional left-to-right lines from the “Yanzi fu” but these are intermixed with right-to-left lines from Buddhist sources, including bits from Chapter 3 of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Lotus sūtra* (T.9.262). An unfinished colophon on the far left says:

乙酉年十月廿日徐再興……

On the twentieth day of the tenth month of an *yiyou* year, Xu Zaixing
[...]

The *yiyou* year in the colophon is probably 925 (less likely 985). Another date that occurs four times out of context in this block is ‘a *jiashen* year’ 甲申年, which would refer to a year earlier, i.e. 924. All in all, it is remarkable how incompetently this section of the scroll is written both in its handwriting and content. More than half of this section is written from left to right, and lines going in both direction are mixed together. The overall jumbled character of these lines is even more surprising when we notice that the paper is properly ruled in order to provide guidance for the writing.

3. The Direction of Writing

In the above examples, a feature that occurs repeatedly in manuscripts written by students is the presence of lines of text running in an unorthodox direction from left to right. Although it would be tempting to dismiss these bits of text as inconsequential mistakes, there are dozens or more instances in manuscripts from this period. Especially bits of lay association circulars (*shesi zhuan tie*) are likely to be written in such manner and we can find numerous examples among the copies of circulars that survived in Dunhuang. The verso of manuscript S.865, for instance, has several lay association circular fragments in succession, all of which are written from left to right (Fig. 3).²⁶ To cite another case, the verso of manuscript S.329 features a complete circular written left to right.²⁷ According to my count, there are 9 instances among the 118 circulars transcribed in the Toyo bunko volume dedicated to documents related to lay associations (Yamamoto et al. 1989), amounting to 8% of the corpus.²⁸ It is obvious that what we are dealing with a specific pattern that cannot be coincidental and that these are not random cases of scribal incompetence on the part of students. Although cases of writing in an opposite direction are especially conspicuous among lay association circulars, we occasionally also see the same phenomenon in other texts. For example, manuscript S.2894 with a copy of the *Qianziwen* 千字文 on the recto has a number of seemingly random bits of texts on its verso, including lay association circulars, all of which are written in a normal direction. Yet a two-line student's colophon nearby reads from left to right:

開寶悟（五）年癸酉正月廿日，淨土寺孝士郎辛延晟、曹願長二人等同心一會，更不番（翻）悔記。願長記。

On the twentieth day of the first month of the fifth year of the Kaibao reign (972), a *guiyou* year,²⁹ Xin Yansheng and Cao Yuanchang, two lay students of the Jingtū monastery, made a record of coming together in one mind and accord, never to go back [on this decision].

Recorded by [Cao] Yuanchang.

²⁶Galambos 2015a: 868-869.

²⁷Ibid.: 869-870.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹In reality, the fifth year of Kaibao was not a *guiyou* year, although the sixth year indeed was.

Similar to the bits of texts on the verso of the *Xiaojing* scrolls, this colophon was also written by lay students and exhibits analogous physical characteristics, such as orthographic problems (e.g. 悟 < 五) and a markedly inferior handwriting. The fragments of lay association circulars and the presence of the *Qianziwen* on the recto also suggest that this scroll is part of a similar group of manuscripts. The fact that a bit of text on this scroll (even if not a lay association circular) is written from left to right further strengthens the connection.

Although it is not unusual to see examples of such left-to-right writing in Dunhuang manuscripts produced during the Guiyijun period, the phenomenon is decidedly common in donors' inscriptions on silk paintings from the same period. For example, the lower part of Stein painting 1919,0101,0.19 from the British Museum shows the figure of Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (*Dizang pusa* 地藏菩薩), below whom we see a donor's inscription running from left to right. According to the inscription, the painting was sponsored in the fourth year of the Jianlong 建隆 reign (963) by the 'disciple of pure faith' 清信弟子 Kang Qingnu 康清奴, whose surname betrays him to have been of Sogdian background. A similar left-to-right inscription is seen in the lower part of Stein painting 1919,0101,0.54, which shows the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*Guanshiyin pusa* 觀世音菩薩) on a lotus seat. In this case the donor is identified as Mi Yande 米延德, whose surname is also Sogdian in origin.³⁰ Another depiction of Avalokiteśvara appears in Stein painting 1919,0101,0.14, on which two of the three cartouched inscriptions are written from left to right. Both of these are located on the right side of the bodhisattva figure, and in view of this an argument could be made that the direction of writing is predicated by the position of the inscription and that the lines are moving away from the center towards the edges. Yet this is clearly not the case with the left-to-right inscription seen in the left top corner of Stein painting 1919,0101,0.31 with the figure of the Tejaprabhā Buddha (*Chishengguang fo* 熾盛光佛), dated 894. Therefore, the atypical direction of writing is not a matter of the location of the inscription but a characteristic feature of a specific type of

³⁰Analogous donor's inscription written from left to right are seen on Stein paintings 1919,0101,0.24 and 1919,0101,0.41; both of these are badly damaged but enough text is visible to ascertain the reversed direction of the text. Stein painting 1919,0101,0.11 has numerous left-to-right inscriptions with loose quotes from the *Foshuo Mile xiasheng cheng Fo jing* 佛說彌勒下生成佛經 (T14.454), which are meant to provide context for scenes in the painting. Stein painting 1919,0101,0.12 has similar inscriptions written in both directions.

votive paintings.

Just to mention yet another inscription on a different medium, a text called *Mogao ku ji* 莫高窟記 written in ink in a left-to-right direction was found on the northern wall of the antechamber of Cave 156 in Dunhuang. The text is dated to 865, although it is possible that it was copied onto the wall somewhat later. Unfortunately, the inscription has faded since its discovery and today we can only rely on tracings done in the first half of the twentieth century when it was still visible. A copy of the same text appears on the verso of manuscript P.3720, where it is written in the usual direction, going from right to left.

Whether on paintings or manuscripts, all of the examples of left-to-right writing appear to date from the Guiyijun period, which signals that this particular way of writing can be tied to a specific tradition. Ever since the widespread use of paper and silk as writing surfaces, Chinese was written in vertically columns from right to left.³¹ The appearance of dozens of reversed examples is unquestionably related to a specific social background. Considering that Dunhuang was an oasis town along the Silk Road with a multilingual and multi-cultural population, it is only natural to suppose that the relatively high concentration of cases of such an otherwise uncommon way of writing Chinese was the result of an influence from a non-Chinese scribal tradition.³² With regard to the source of this influence, among the peoples active in this general region it was the Uighurs who wrote in vertical columns running from left to right. But contacts with the Uighurs and the development of a Uighur community in Dunhuang can only be documented from the tenth-eleventh centuries, whereas some of the manuscripts and paintings discussed here date from the second half of the ninth century.

Another group of people known to have produced texts in such direction is the Sogdians who, although usually writing horizontal lines from right to left, sometimes, as Yoshida Yutaka demonstrated, also wrote vertically, in columns

³¹This is generally true of earlier periods as well but since Warring States bamboo slips contain only one line of text each and they are almost never discovered in their original bound form, there is no inherent indication to the direction in which the slips were originally ordered. As we go back further in time, we also find examples of left-to-right writing on bronze inscriptions and, in larger number, on oracle-bone inscriptions.

³²We should also mention that this way of writing is not unique to Dunhuang and that there are also cases among the Turfan manuscripts (Kitsudō 2011). The analysis of these, however, falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

running from left to right.³³ The presence of distinctly Sogdian surnames on some of the paintings and manuscripts mentioned above supports the hypothesis that such a unique way of writing would be the result of a Sogdian influence. While it is possible to argue that these cases were careless blunders made by individuals who were used to writing another language in another script (e.g. Sogdian), this would fail to explain the longer donors' inscriptions on silk paintings. The production of such paintings, including the donors' inscriptions, unquestionably required a considerable amount of effort (and expense) and it is unlikely that in several of them the direction of writing would have been accidentally reversed. Quite the opposite, it would seem that writing in this manner was deliberate and that it was a stylistic feature that may have been used as a way of asserting identity for a specific cultural tradition or group of people.³⁴

Conclusions

It stands to reason that students in medieval Dunhuang copied primers and works of didactic nature. The *Xiaojing*, *Qianziwen*, *Taigong jiajiao* and *Zazi* are all examples of such works and there is little doubt that they have indeed been used in a school setting. They fulfilled their function either by teaching students a basic set of characters or by advocating proper moral conduct. In many cases, these two functions went together and students absorbed the didactic content while acquiring literacy skills. Among the Dunhuang manuscripts there are dozens of examples with texts copied by lay students who studied in local monasteries. Many of these contain seemingly random scribbles and miscellaneous bits of text on their verso, which include titles of educational or other types of works, names and dates from the colophon on the other side, and short fragments of pragmatic texts related to social and economic matters. Even though some of these pragmatic texts have been used by social historians for their content, little attention has been paid to them from the point of view of their visual appearance and their potential connection with the students who produced the manuscripts. The basic assumption advanced here is that even though individually the scribbles on

³³Yoshida 2013. Interestingly, as Yoshida himself notes, the Sogdians in fact may have begun writing vertically as a result of being influenced by the Chinese way of writing.

³⁴In the past (Galambos 2012: 79-84) I myself assumed that such cases were involuntary mistakes but for reasons outlined here this is unlikely to be the case.

the verso appear to be arbitrary and haphazard, when compared with similar fragments in other manuscripts, they reveal certain patterns and connections, which may be able to tell us more about the circumstances under which these manuscripts were produced. Likewise, the patterns we identify on attested students' manuscripts may also help us to discover additional manuscripts which bear no colophons or are in general not recognized as having been produced by students.

Above, we first examined three *Xiaojing* manuscripts (S.728, S.707, P.3698) in order to document their common traits, especially with respect to the disconnected scribbles on their verso. While the arrangement of the separate bits seems to show no apparent logic, their content and appearance exhibits a marked degree of consistency across the three manuscripts. One of the patterns was that part of the scribbles are directly related to the *Xiaojing* on the recto and the colophon following that. Thus the title of *Xiaojing*, either in full or abbreviated form, commonly occurs among the scribbles on the verso, and so do disconnected phrases and fragments from the text itself. Similarly, parts of the colophon—sometimes rephrased—tend to surface on the verso. Yet there are also similar short bits of texts which connect not to the text on the recto (i.e. *Xiaojing*) but to other similar types of texts used by students as writing exercise, such as the *Taigong jiajiao* or *Zazi*, even though these texts themselves do not occur in the manuscript. Presumably the same students also copied these texts, even if, as a general rule, we do not find multiple manuscripts written by the same student. It would seem that the *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun*, the title of which appears among the scribbles on the verso of S.728, was also used in this capacity, even though it is a Buddhist work.

Some of the titles are abbreviated to the extent of having a single character. Although it is tempting to attribute these examples to the general tendency in these scribbles to write unfinished snippets of text, it seems that in each case the fragment is long enough to allow the identification of the work. Accordingly, using *Xiao* 孝 to refer to the *Xiaojing* and *Taigong* 太公 to the *Taigong jiajiao* poses no difficulty in understanding the reference but it is perhaps significant that the title of the latter work does not occur as *Tai* 太, which would invite a higher degree of ambiguity. Perhaps these titles were meaningful and functioned as some sort of notation associated with the schooling process.

Another common characteristic of the three *Xiaojing* manuscripts is the occurrence of fragments of lay association circulars (*shesi zhuanjie*). Sometimes these fragments are several lines long but in most cases they are very short, at times only a couple of characters long. Their arrangement on the manuscripts seems to be completely random but the fact of their presence is relatively consistent. It is common to see several bits of these in the same manuscript, which is yet another sign of them not being there by accident. Characteristically, they are written in an inferior hand, with numerous mistakes and omissions. While they are often understood as writing exercises done by students, many of them are too short for such a purpose and they may have another function or significance here. A striking feature from a codicological point of view is that some of the circulars or their fragments are written from left to right, in an opposite direction to how Chinese is usually written.

Having identified the above patterns in the three *Xiaojing* manuscripts, we checked for examples of lay association circulars on the verso of other manuscripts not explicitly associated with students. The sample manuscripts (P.3094, P.2439) showed a similar pattern on their verso but, in contrast with the *Xiaojing* manuscripts, they had Buddhist texts on their recto, written in a practiced hand. Neither manuscript carried a colophon on the recto, even though P.2439 had one on the verso, claiming that the writing on the scroll was done by a certain Xu Zaixing. Yet the hand in the colophon was vastly inferior to the even and skilled hand on the recto, showing that the two could not have been written by the same person. Consequently, the colophon was either copied from somewhere else or only pertains to the scribbles on the verso, which are indeed written in the same hand. Similarly, the main text on the recto of P.3094 is in a much better hand than the scribbles on the recto, suggesting that the two sides of the scroll were written by different people and that only the verso was the work of someone still in the early stages of education.

Hence these two scrolls point to a somewhat different scenario from that in the three *Xiaojing* manuscripts. In these cases it seems that the students who left scribbles on the verso cannot have been the ones copying the main text on the recto because they did not possess the handwriting skills necessary for that. Yet if they added the scribbles to a scroll copied by someone else, then we still need to explain their connection with the scroll created by someone else. Obviously,

the situation is more complex than what we envisioned initially on the basis of the *Xiaojing* scrolls. In turn, this forces us to go back to the manuscripts with students' colophons and re-evaluate the relationship between the two sides.

Another significant finding is that in both P.3094 and P.2439, among the scribbles on the verso we found examples of text written from left to right. Especially the latter manuscript exhibits a complex and confusing arrangement with inter-mixing lines of text going in both direction. Unusual as they are, the examples of text running in reverse direction are entirely consistent with our initial sample group of the three *Xiaojing* scrolls and other manuscripts produced by students. Considering the location of Dunhuang at the intersection of Central Asian and Chinese cultural spheres, it is probable that this direction of writing derives from a non-Chinese, possibly Sogdian, scribal tradition. Because the same way of writing also occurs in the donors' inscriptions on silk paintings, it may have been a stylistic feature of a specific cultural tradition. As to the identity of this tradition, the surviving colophons and their dates suggest a direct link with the Guiyijun regime and some of its prominent families.

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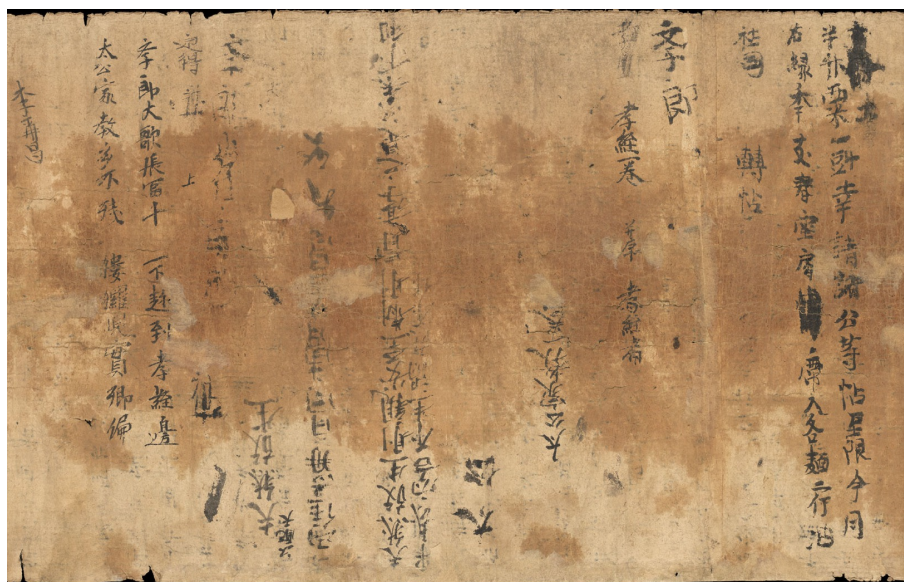


Fig. 1 Verso of manuscript S.728. On the left hand side we see the four-line poem and the name Li Zaichang, whereas the upside-down text on the right mostly contains fragments from the *Xiaojing*. (©The British Library Or.8210/S.728)

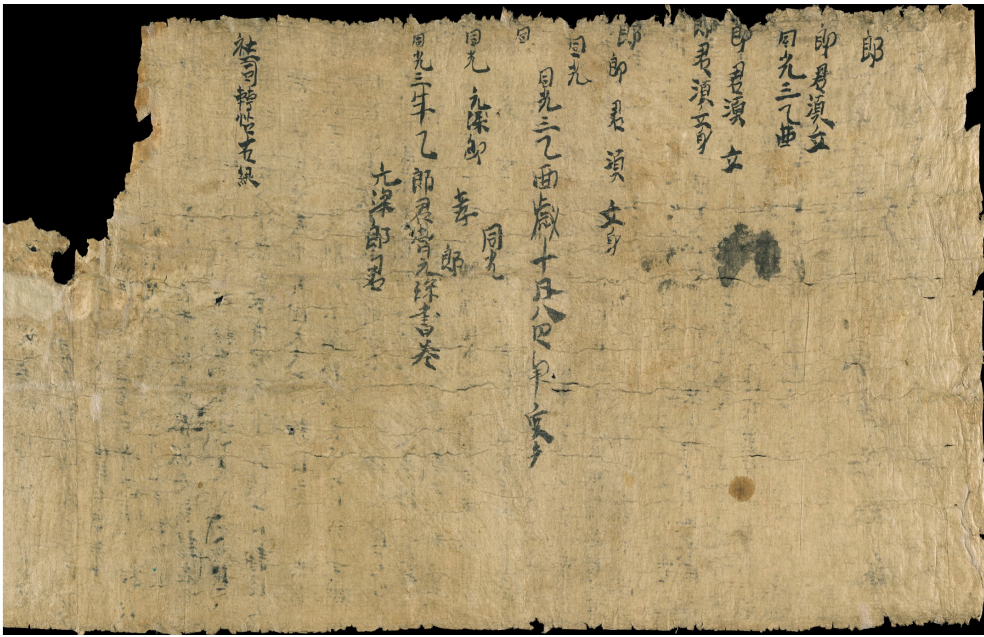


Fig. 2 Section of the verso of manuscript S.707. (©The British Library Or.8210/S.707)

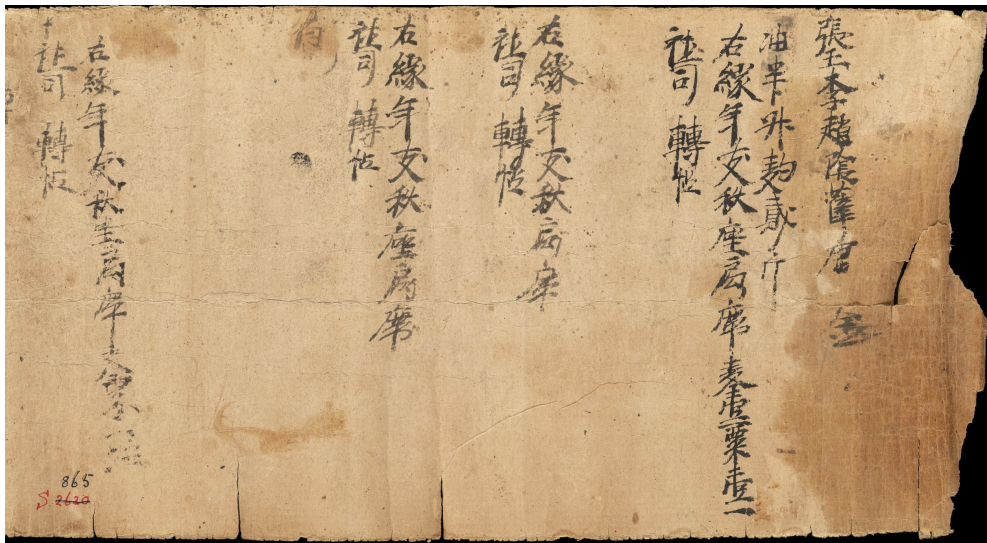


Fig. 3 Verso of manuscript S.865 with multiple examples of left-to-right circulars. (©The British Library Or.8210/S.865)

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