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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Regulations of the Sutra Transcription Office: System Design and Actual Operation of Sutra Transcription in Dunhuang Temples

Abstract The bulk of the Dunhuang Library Cave documents consists of Chinese Buddhist documents, and the majority of these Chinese Buddhist documents were produced through sutra transcription projects organized by temples and other institutions during the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods. By examining the various stages of sutra transcription, such as sutra transcription records, rejected drafts, and entry into circulation, it is possible to roughly reconstruct the design of the sutra transcription system at that time, as well as how this system actually operated. The system featured a clear division of labor and evolved into a fairly sophisticated, assembly-line workflow. In the course of its operation, it also involved multifaceted interactions and tensions among organizers, scribes, inspectors, and mounters. Close scrutiny of a large number of Buddhist sutra manuscripts enables a relatively thorough understanding of these historical details, thereby deepening our overall comprehension of the Dunhuang Library Cave documents.

Keywords Dunhuang; sutra manuscripts; sutra transcription system; rejected drafts

The bulk of the Dunhuang Library Cave documents consists of Chinese Buddhist documents, and the majority of these Chinese Buddhist documents were produced through sutra transcription projects organized by temples and other institutions during the Tubo 吐蕃 and Guiyi Army 归义军 periods. It can be said that without understanding these sutra manuscripts and the transcription projects that produced them, our comprehension of the Dunhuang Library Cave documents will remain fundamentally incomplete.

Producing sutra manuscripts involves a complex procedure encompassing more than 20 steps, including the selection of master copies, the preparation of paper and ink, the setting of transcription regulations, the scribe's transcription, the establishment of inspection criteria, and the implementation of inspection methods. A problem at any one step could trigger a chain reaction. To ensure the orderly progress of sutra transcription activities, a corresponding

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institutional system, i.e., the sutra transcription system, was developed. Scholars have already explored this corpus of sutra manuscripts from the perspective of transcription organization. In particular, the research of Fujieda Akira, Zhang Yanqing 张延清, Zhao Qingshan 赵青山, and others has traced the general procedure of sutra transcription activities and basically clarified the history of sutra transcription during the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods, a history that lasted nearly two hundred years and involved a great many participants (Fujieda 1961; Zhang 2010a; 2016; Zhao 2011; 2019a). Nevertheless, many key details concerning this topic, such as the rationale behind the design of the sutra transcription system, still warrant further exploration and supplementation. More importantly, there are considerable discrepancies between the design of the system and how it actually operated. Distinguishing the design of the system from its actual operation is essential for deepening understanding of every stage of the sutra transcription process. Furthermore, previous research has relied heavily on sutra transcription records and the rejection notes written on rejected drafts 兑废稿. While these materials can outline the framework of the sutra transcription system, they seldom record most of the procedural steps listed above. As a result, the descriptions of many details of the sutra transcription system in earlier studies are often very vague or even specious. To form a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the sutra transcription system, we must thoroughly study the sutra manuscripts that were produced under it. Previous research has rarely conducted in-depth studies on the sutra manuscripts themselves, attending instead mainly to their value as cultural relics and as documents. However, I argue that sutra manuscripts are the direct products of the sutra transcription system and represent the combined outcome of the activities of all participants in the entire process, including organizers, sutra paper craftsmen, scribes, inspectors, mounters, and others. Therefore, if we set sutra manuscripts aside, we can never arrive at a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of either the sutra transcription system or its actual operation.

Apart from the Dunhuang Library Cave, institutions such as the Shosoin in Japan also preserve a large number of Buddhist sutra manuscripts from the eighth to the 13th centuries. Given that Japanese Buddhism at this time was fundamentally rooted in China, Dunhuang sutra manuscripts and ancient Japanese sutra manuscripts, especially those from the Nara period, can serve as mutual references. In addition, the Shosoin preserves a great many records of organized sutra transcription activities. Although the Dunhuang Library Cave also holds some similar records, they cannot compare with the Shosoin materials in either quantity or content. Drawing on these materials, Japanese scholars have been able to reconstruct the sutra transcription procedure and even the daily lives of the personnel involved in the sutra transcription office in a very complete manner.[1] That said, the sutra manuscripts of the Nara period were primarily produced under the sponsorship of the court, whereas those of the Tubo

[1] The body of research on the old Buddhist manuscripts in Japan is extremely rich, with some important studies directly relevant to the research topic of this article (Kurihara 1988; Lowe 2019, 232–248; Miyazaki 2011, 9–46; Sakaehara 2000; 2003; Yamashita 1999).

and Guiyi Army periods preserved at Dunhuang were mainly the results of the transcription projects organized by local institutions. The two differ markedly in both scale and quality, and these differences are reflected in various ways throughout the transcription procedure. We therefore cannot simply apply the conclusions drawn from research on ancient Japanese sutra transcription to the understanding of Dunhuang sutra transcription. More importantly, research on ancient Japanese sutra transcription has concentrated largely on using the administrative documents of the transcription organization to provide general descriptions of the procedure, without using the sutra manuscripts themselves to explore such historical details as the everyday interactions and tensions among the various participants in the sutra transcription office.

Based on a comprehensive examination of Dunhuang sutra transcription records, rejected drafts, Buddhist texts, and other materials, this article aims to delineate the design of the Dunhuang sutra transcription system, present the actual operation of this system, and compare it with sutra transcription in ancient Japan. The goal is to flesh out existing research and, it is hoped, to encourage scholarly attention to and study of the sutra manuscripts themselves.

1 Preparatory Work for Sutra Transcription

The preparatory work before sutra transcription mainly includes the selection of master copies, the preparation of paper, brushes, and ink, the selection of the venue for sutra transcription, and the selection of scribes. Regarding the selection of scribes, Zhao Qingshan and others have already conducted excellent research, so this article will not reiterate it but will focus on examining the first four steps.

1.1 Preparation of Master Copies

There are not many materials concerning the master copies used for sutra transcription, so the discussion here can only be brief.

Within the sutra transcription procedure, the master copy was the text on which both scribes and inspectors had to rely. S. 376, “Letter from a Minister of State to Vinaya Master Deng, Dated the 24th Day of the First Lunar Month of Unspecified Year” 某年正月廿四日尚书与邓法律书, shows that a Minister of State 尚书 once requested that Vinaya Master 法律 Deng 邓 use his “old text as a master copy for me, so that I may properly transcribe a new copy,” on the grounds that “if it is not transcribed and circulated in accord with the correct method, in the future it will surely not conform to the Buddhist dharma.” The Minister of State here was most likely a Guiyi Army Commander 归义军节度使; when transcribing Buddhist texts, he wanted to use Vinaya Master Deng’s sutra manuscript as his master copy to ensure that what he copied was “in accord with the correct method” 如法. The basis for such conformity was, of course, the master copy.

Judging from the regular procedure, the organizers would presumably have first selected an

ideal master copy, which in turn would have required a detailed collation of the relevant texts. Transmitted documents also contain many records of monks being organized to collate master copies before sutra transcription. For example, the *Continuation of Lives of Eminent Monks* 续高僧传 records that in the early Tang Dynasty (618–907), Deye Temple and Yanxing Temple transcribed the "sutras for the living" 现在藏经 for Empress Zhangsun 长孙皇后. To ensure the accuracy of the transcribed texts, the monk Xuanwan 玄琬 of Puguang Temple, together with a number of exegetical śramanas 义学沙门, "collated and corrected them" (Daoxuan 2014, 862–863). Among the Dunhuang Buddhist texts, there are quite a few that have been "collated character for character" 比字校定, yet it is very difficult to link them to any specific transcription project.

Generally speaking, a master copy was supposed to be error-free. However, some master copies did indeed contain errors, and because the organizers required scribes to copy strictly according to the master copy (a point to be discussed in detail below), some scribes and inspectors would mechanically perpetuate these errors. For example, on sheet 5 of BD13919 *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* (*Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*) 大般若经, fascicle 69, there were originally 28 ruling lines 界栏, but the scribe copied only 27 lines, leaving the last line blank. At first glance, this might appear to be the scribe's own omission. However, we find that the corresponding sheet in BD13918 (also fascicle 69 of the same sutra) exhibits the same pattern. Therefore, this was not a problem caused by a single scribe but should be attributed to the master copy on which they both relied. Another example is that both BD6150 and S. 749 are copies of fascicle 580 of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*; the former consists of one sheet, the latter of 16 sheets, and the former corresponds to sheet eight of the latter. It is noteworthy that both sheets have blank columns at the end, and in the blank spaces on each, there are notes written in a different hand: "The sutra master copy has three lines" and "Three lines left over on this sheet: future inquirers, take note." However, the former actually has two blank columns, while the latter has three. "The sutra master copy has three lines," means that the master copy had three blank columns, a form that matches S. 749. BD6150 is a rejected draft, and that is the reason it was rejected. Because this sheet had only two blank columns, it did not conform to the standard and had to be rejected. The master copy on which BD6150 was based and S. 749 both had three blank columns, and judging from the content of sheets eight and nine of S. 749, there is no missing text before or after the blank columns. This unusual transcription pattern can clearly only be ascribed to the master copy they followed. The annotator of BD6150 was evidently aware of the situation of the master copy, whereas the note on S. 749, "Three lines left over on this sheet: future inquirers, take note," shows that the annotator no longer knew the reason.[2]

[2] The Shosoin documents contain some materials concerning the preparation of master copies for transcription by the sutra transcription office. Scholarly discussion of master copies has been limited to these materials, and all such discussion has assumed that the master copies were completely correct; no attempt has yet been made to draw upon the sutra manuscripts themselves to investigate whether master copies contained errors.

1.2 Preparation of Paper

Before each instance of sutra transcription, the organizers would stipulate in advance the specifications of the paper. In the case of Dunhuang sutra manuscripts, the most common format 行款 (meaning the specification of the number of lines and number of characters in each line) was a sheet measuring 46–50 cm in length and 25–30 cm in width. Naturally, there would be some variation from sheet to sheet, but such differences were largely caused by the papermakers (i.e., paper craftsmen) and were difficult for the organizers to control. For the organizers, the most crucial task was to determine the number of ruling lines per sheet. Those who prepared the ruling lines were known in Dunhuang as personnel responsible for ruling the sheets 栏解 (S. 4211, Дx. 1301).[3] Most commonly, each sheet was ruled into 28 columns. Although there were some exceptions, their total number is relatively small.

The making of paper and ruling lines was entirely done by hand. According to my preliminary statistics, although the width of the ruling lines on a single sheet was relatively consistent, it was by no means identical, and the line width often varied between different sheets of the same fascicle. Moreover, on many sheets the ruling lines did not fully connect to the top and bottom margins, indicating that the ruling lines were produced by craftsmen relying on experience rather than with a fixed-width tool of mature design (or if such a tool existed, it would have served only as a reference aid).[4] Therefore, despite the clear requirements set by the organizers, defective finished products were unavoidable. For example, BD 286 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 18) remains 21 sheets, virtually all of which have 28 lines per sheet,[5] and a length of 46.3 cm. Sheets 11 and 12, although of the same length as the others, have only 27 lines; this was clearly an error by the person responsible for ruling. Such mistakes could even have an impact on standardized sutra transcription. For instance, S. 1107, *Rejected Drafts of the Aparimitāyur-Nāma Mahāyāna-Sūtra* (*Rejected Drafts of the Sutra of Limitless Life*) 无量寿宗要经（兑废稿）, has 29 lines on one sheet, which was also a problem caused by the person responsible for ruling. Judging solely from the transcribed sutra texts, there is no major error, and the reason the sheet was rejected by the inspector was likely related to the flaw in the sheet's ruling line specifications.

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[3] The person who ruled lines for court-sponsored sutra transcription in Nara-period Japan was probably a mounter (Kurihara 1988, 238–240).

[4] Regarding the tools used to rule lines, Nakamura Yūzō believes they were ink pots (Nakamura 1970); Kurihara Haruo holds that a rod-like object resembling a stick for bookkeeping was used as a ruler (Kurihara 1988, 239–240); Fang Guangchang 方广锠 proposes that it was a brush-rest 笔船 (Fang 2021).

[5] In the medieval period, sutra transcription projects undertaken for different purposes often used paper with different formats, but within a single transcription project, the paper specifications were uniform. For example, the sutra manuscripts under Empress Wu Zetian's reign 武后抄经 unearthed at Dunhuang all have 31 lines per sheet, whereas the sutra manuscripts from the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods at Dunhuang basically all have 28 lines per sheet. The situation in Nara-period Japan differed in this respect. For instance, for the *Gogatsu tsuitachi–kyō (May 1st Sutras)* 五月一日経 manuscripts sponsored by Empress Kōmyō, although the format was consistent within a single fascicle, it varied from fascicle to fascicle: Some sheets have 25 lines (e.g., fascicles 1 and 2 of the *Kuśalamūla-Saṃgraha [Flower Hand Sutra]* 华手经 held at the Nara National Museum), while others have 24 lines (e.g., the second part of the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodana [Eliminating Ajātaś atru's Remorse]* 阿阇世王经 held at the Nara National Museum).

On the verso of P. 4525 (2)–3, fascicle 6 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Saṃyuktāgama* (*Rejected Drafts of the Linked Discourses*) 杂阿含经（兑废稿）, there is a seven-syllable poem 七言诗: "The paper-beating master raises his mallet high; his misdeed of botching two sheets earns a grumbling cry. Within the lines there is a □□ to remove; may you never get yellow water to swill and sigh" 打纸阿师木槌高，唯哝恶忝二张叶。行内有一□□兑，不得黄水口嘈嗷. The last three characters of the third line have been heavily blotted out with dark ink, yet the seventh character can still be faintly discerned as "*dui*" 兑 (to remove, or discard). Although several parts of the poem remain unclear, its general sense can still be discerned. The phrase "唯哝恶忝二张叶" seems to refer to something done by the paper-beating master to two sheets as a "misdeed." Moreover, some irregularity "within the lines" caused the text painstakingly transcribed by the scribe to be treated as dui. The final phrase, "不得黄水口嘈嗷," was probably a curse directed at the paper-beating master.

In addition to the specific format specifications, the organizers would also require the relevant personnel (very likely the paper craftsmen)[6] to bond the loose sheets into scrolls in advance. Based on close observation of the ancient Buddhist manuscripts in Japan, Kurihara Haruo long ago has noted that the ruling lines of top and bottom margins on these sheets are almost never interrupted at the joins, and consequently argued that before transcription began, the sheets were first bonded together by a mounter and then the lines were ruled (Kurihara 1988, 234–237). The bonding of sheets is referred to in Shosoin documents as "joining" 继, and the ruling of lines as "bounding" 界. Through meticulous observation of many Dunhuang long-scroll sutra manuscripts, Zhang Changbin 张长彬 likewise notes that "the border lines of the scrolls run through continuously from end to end, with no misalignment between sheets," and on this basis concluded that the sutras were "first assembled by bonding the sheets into long scrolls, then the lines were ruled, and only then was the sutra transcribed" (Zhang 2017, 128).

So, how many sheets were bonded together in advance? And on what basis was this number determined? Documents from the Nara-period sutra transcription office show that for the sutra transcription organized by Empress Kōmyō and others in Japan, 20 sheets of paper were uniformly bonded together in advance, regardless of the number of sheets that a particular scroll would actually require (Kurihara 1988, 236–237). The situation at Dunhuang was probably similar. For example, S. 449, fascicle 301 of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, transcribed by An Wende 安文德, is extant in 16 sheets, and the text transcribed on sheet 16 is precisely the end of the fascicle. Sheet 13 has an obvious error: Its last four lines were left blank, which indicates that it was discarded by the scribe An Wende himself. Sheet 14 is a supplementary transcription of the content of sheet 13. According to my observation, at the joins of the 16 sheets, the ruling lines at both the top and bottom margins were ruled in a single continuous stroke, which shows that all these sheets had been bonded together from the very beginning. This

[6] Shosoin documents show that the sutra transcription office did not produce paper; the paper it required was all supplied by external sources, and the person responsible for bonding the sheets was the mounter.

implies that when the sheets for this scroll were bonded, at least one extra sheet had been prepared in addition to the number normally required for a standard copy of the scroll.

The scholars' observations concerning the ruling lines are of great importance for our understanding of both the preparations for sutra transcription and the work that followed. However, it is regrettable that neither Kurihara, Zhang Changbin, nor others have explained why this was done. In fact, this practice was not confined to the Nara period or to the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods, nor was it limited to Japan and Dunhuang. Judging from the sutra manuscripts sponsored by Juqu Mengxun 沮渠蒙逊 (e.g., Nakamura Fusetsu 9, fascicle 1 of the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-Sūtra* [*Sutra of the Bodhisattva-Piṭaka, Spoken by the Buddha*] 佛说菩萨藏经, transcribed in 457) during the Northern Liang (397–439), by Yuan Rong 元荣 during the Northern Wei (386–534) (e.g., S. 1547, fascicle 14 of the *Tattvasiddhi-Śāstra* [*The Treatise that Accomplishes Reality*] 成实论, transcribed in 512), and under Empress Wu Zetian's reign during the Tang Dynasty, which have been unearthed at Dunhuang and Turpan, the border lines of top and bottom margins on adjacent sheets of these manuscripts are for the most part neatly uniform and perfectly aligned as well. Therefore, this tradition took shape very early and appeared widely in many places (Wu 2022). Its emergence may have been the result of the combined effect of multiple factors, but the most important impetus likely came from the organizers. In my observation, doing so offered at least three practical advantages:

First, assigning specialized personnel to specialized tasks ensured that the sequence of the sutra sheets would not be disordered. From the distribution of paper to the transcription of the sutras, then to proofreading, and finally to mounting, the completed scrolls would pass through many hands and places. In an era when page numbers were not used, if the sheets were loose, they could become disordered at any stage; and once disordered, restoring their correct sequence would undoubtedly cause considerable inconvenience. Compared with loose sheets, bonding them into a scroll from the very beginning minimized this risk as much as possible. Moreover, based on observations of some rejected drafts from Dunhuang, it can also be found that the organizers of sutra transcription likely also prohibited scribes from detaching scrolls on their own, even if a sheet had already been rejected. Taking S. 449 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 301), copied by An Wende, as an example. This document has 16 extant sheets. An error occurs on sheet 13. After line 4, 17 characters are missing. An Wende realized the error only after finishing line 24. Thereafter, he left lines 25–28 on sheet 13 blank, and on sheet 14 he transcribed the correct content of sheet 13 from the beginning. Thus the content transcribed on these two consecutive sheets is actually the same, except that one has an obvious error and the other does not. This case further demonstrates that when An Wende was transcribing and submitting the scroll, all sheets had already been bonded into a scroll. In addition, it shows that when a rejected draft occurred, An Wende himself did not take the initiative to remove that sheet but maintained the original sequence of sheets. This is certainly not an isolated case; similar examples include S. 6601 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 70), Φ. 13 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 419),

Φ. 42 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 444), and S. 749 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 580). In fact, not only were scribes not allowed to alter the original sheet sequence on their own, but even the inspectors, who wielded considerable authority, could not casually detach erroneous sheets. All they could do was confirm the error and issue instructions for subsequent work (that is, mark the character "*dui*" 兑, etc.) (Wu 2024). The personnel specifically responsible for correcting erroneous sheets were the mounters. For instance, fascicle 48 of the *Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya* (*Vinaya in Ten Recitations*) 十诵律 consists of 20 sheets. The first five lines of sheet 8 contain the correct sutra text, but for some unknown reason, lines 6–23 were transcribed from the text that belongs to sheet 21, i.e., the end of the scroll. The scribe recopied the correct content of sheet 8 on sheet 9. This does not mean that he rejected sheet 8, because judging from the sutra text, line 6 of sheet 8 directly continues the last line of sheet 20. The inspector obviously noticed this error, but he did not demand that the entire sheet 8 be rejected. Instead, he placed a small vertical mark at the top margin of both line 1 and line 5 of sheet 8, and wrote between the marks: "Reject five lines / What follows the five lines is the end [of the scroll] / After mounting, please repair and correct it." "Reject five lines" clearly refers to lines 1–5; "What follows the five lines is the end [of the scroll]" indicates that the content of lines 6–23 should continue from sheet 20 and serves as the final sheet; "After mounting, please repair and correct it" means that the relevant personnel in charge should correct this error after the mounting work is completed. As for how to correct it, it is not explicitly stated here, but it should mean removing lines 1–5 and joining the remaining part to sheet 20. Thus, from the perspective of procedural design, specialized personnel performed specialized tasks, each fulfilling their own duties, forming a fairly clear assembly-line operation. This undoubtedly reduced much unnecessary trouble and waste and increased the efficiency of sutra transcription.

Second, it facilitated the inspectors' collation of the sutra text. Since they used the master copy as a reference, bonded scrolls of sutra manuscripts were generally not prone to disorder in sheet sequence, which made it convenient for them to directly check the sutra manuscripts against the sutra in the master copy. This point will be elaborated upon below.

Third, it made it easier for the organizers to keep a relatively accurate account of paper consumption. Paper was a comparatively precious commodity in medieval Dunhuang, and for the organizers, who were often temples, the paper used for sutra transcription was inscribed with Buddhist sutras. Therefore, even the waste paper generated during the transcription process was considered highly sacred and could not be casually discarded. Ensuring the optimal utilization and preservation of all paper for sutra transcription, including those rejected sheets, was a detail that the organizers of sutra transcription had to take into account. By bonding the sheets into scrolls in advance according to the standard amount of paper required for a scroll, the overall scale of paper consumption could be roughly determined. At the same time, this practice also ensured that even when waste sheets were produced, the scribes could not casually cut or tear the paper apart. At the end of P. 2947, there are 19 blank lines, and a scribe of that time lamented that these blank lines could not be used, deeming

it a great waste, but he could not cut them off and take them away. Left with no alternative, he wrote a five-syllable poem 五言诗 in the blank lines: "After the writing there is leftover paper, which cannot be torn off and taken away. Although I have little literary talent, just trying to compose a five-syllable poem" 书后有残纸,不可列将归。虽然无手笔,且做五言诗. The subsequent repair and correction of the scrolls took place at a location designated by the organizers (namely, the "Sutra Rejected Office" 兑经所), where the sheets that had been detached could also be properly disposed of under the direct supervision of the organizers. At the end of BD7711, fascicle 516, the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, appears the following note: "Please place this sheet in the place for old sutras. I hereby report this for fear of incurring an offense." Of course, some rejected drafts were indeed later reused, but their proportion is very low. According to the author's statistics, among over one thousand rejected drafts, fewer than two hundred were ever reused, and these were primarily used by persons involved in the sutra transcription for writing practice.

The practice of bonding loose sheets into scrolls in advance influenced both the way of preparing the ruling lines, and the method of bonding the sheets, whereby the preceding sheet on the right was overlain on the following sheet on the left. Precisely for this reason, nearly all single-sheet rejected drafts bear traces of paste on the right side of the recto and the right side of the verso (i.e., the verso corresponding to the left side of the recto).[7] The primary reason for this was to facilitate the ruling of lines (especially the border lines of top and bottom margins). When the craftsmen ruled the lines from right to left, he would not be obstructed when transitioning from one sheet to the next by the problem of the front being lower and the back higher, and could complete the ruling line in a single continuous stroke.

The distribution of the standard scrolls on which the sutra transcription was based and the distribution of the paper were probably part of the same step, because the paper for sutra transcription was bonded into scrolls precisely according to these standard scrolls. It would seem more reasonable to keep them together with the standard scrolls.[8] Of course, this

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[7] Zhang Changbin also notices that "traces of paste invariably appear at both ends of rejected sutra sheets," and thus believes that "the replacement of erroneous sheets was done by completely detaching a faulty sheet from the scroll and replacing it with a correctly written one" (Zhang 2017, 129). However, his wording is not entirely accurate, and the latter inference is also incorrect, as the scribes could not detach the rejected sheet on his own.

[8] On the basis that P. 3240 contains both a "Record of Sutra Distribution of the 21st Day of the Sixth Lunar Month of the *Renyin* Year" 壬寅年六月二十一日配经历 and a "Record of Paper Distribution of the 16th Day of the Seventh Lunar Month of the *Renyin* Year" 壬寅年七月十六日付纸历, Zhang Changbin holds that the "Record of Sutra Distribution" 配经历 and the "Record of Paper Distribution" 付纸历 were kept separately (Zhang 2017, 128). In my view, this may not have been the case. First, the "Record of Sutra Distribution" records the number of sheets for each fascicle of every scripture; if it were simply a matter of distributing sutra, there would be no need to record the number of sheets. Moreover, the "Record of Sutra Distribution" records that An Shizi 安实子 received the 10th fascicle of the *Mahīśāsaka-Vinaya* (*Vinaya of the Five Categories*) 五分律, which was "24 sheets [add one sheet], 二十四纸添一张, and that Deng Bunu 邓不奴 received the 10th fascicle of the first bundle of the *Prakaraṇāryavācā-śāstra* (*Treatise of Acclamation of the Sagely Teaching*) 显扬论, which was "16 sheets, add one sheet" 十六纸, 添一张. The "add one sheet" certainly cannot mean that an extra sheet was added to the standard copy during the sutra distribution; it can only be because a new sheet was added after an error occurred. Thus, the "Record of Sutra Distribution" is still, in essence, a "Record of Paper Distribution."

particular question is not of great importance. What matters is: were the scrolls assigned to the scribes distributed all at once, or in batches? This very question bears on our understanding of how scribes stored the standard sutra manuscripts and the paper for sutra transcription.[9] However, I have yet to find direct evidence to discuss this question, and it can only be left for future research.

1.3 Preparation of Brushes and Ink

We now turn to the brushes and ink employed in sutra transcription. Here again, direct evidence is scarce, and the issue can only be approached through indirect sources. P. 2912, "The List of Donations in the Scripture Copied by Kang Xiuhua" 康秀华写经施入疏, records that Kang Xiuhua 康秀华 requested Zhang Jinxuan 张金炫 to organize a group of scribes to transcribe a copy of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. Property including silver plates and lead-white pigment 胡粉, was to serve as "payment for sutra transcription," and the document further states that "the paper, ink, and brushes were to be supplied by themselves." However, it is difficult to determine whether this provision refers to Zhang Jinxuan or to Kang Xiuhua; in either case, it almost certainly did not refer to the scribes themselves. Some temple records of income and expenditure likewise state that when others were commissioned to transcribe, the temple purchased writing materials including paper and brushes at its own expense. For example, P. 2040V, "Draft Record of Income and Expenditure of Jingtu Temple during the Later Jin" 后晋时期净土寺诸色入破历算会稿, records: "A bolt of cloth was given to a man named Baozhen 保真 as payment for his manufacture of brushes by hands." Similarly, P. 4697, "Record of Income and Expenditure for Millet and Wine in the *Xinchou* Year" 辛丑年粟酒破用历, notes: "Half a jar of wine was provided to host the craftsmen who had finished manufacturing the brushes, as a celebratory meal marking the completion of the work." In both cases, the manufacture of brushes was

[9] Although some Dunhuang documents contain "Records of Paper Distribution" that record the issuance of paper, they are for the most part summary records and are unable to reflect all the details of the distribution process. For example, P. 3240 contains the "Record of Sutra Distribution of the 21st Day of the Sixth Lunar Month of the *Renyin* Year" and "Record of Paper Distribution of the 16th Day of the Seventh Lunar Month of the *Renyin* Year." If one looks only at the titles of the manuscript, one might easily assume that they are records of paper distributed on those two days. However, the "21st day of the sixth lunar month" and "16th day of the seventh lunar month" are very likely only the dates on which the amounts of distributed paper were tallied. For instance, the entry for the 16th day of the seventh month records that Yaya 押牙 (a military administrative office) Song 宋 received paper to transcribe the *Bodhisattva-Bhūmi* (*Resources for Bodhisattvas*) 菩萨地持经, noting: "The sixth, 22 sheets, add three sheets." The phrase "add three sheets" occupies its own separate space, indicating that the "addition of sheets" had already been completed at the time of recording. But considering that "add three sheets" refers to the likelihood that three rejected sheets had appeared in that scroll and needed to be recopied on a new sheet, this means that Yaya Song had already completed transcribing at least the sixth fascicle at the time of the record. Yet on that single day, it would have been absolutely impossible for Yaya Song to have completed transcribing the first six fascicles (totaling 160 sheets). Similar cases can be observed for Vinaya Master Kong 孔 of Qianyuan Temple, Vinaya Master Pu□普□, Vinaya Master Hui'er 会儿, and many others. This shows that what is recorded in this item can only be a summary of paper usage tallied after a period of time.

evidently organized by the temple. S. 3595V preserves Zhang Enhui's 张恩会 handwriting practice, together with a miscellaneous poem containing the line, "Today I obtained a brush." Judging from the tone of the poem, the brush was probably not something that he had purchased himself.[10]

1.4 Selection of the Venue for Sutra Transcription

In principle, the organizers appear to have required scribes to carry out their work at a common location. In the previously cited P. 2947, the place mentioned in the phrase "After the writing there is leftover paper, which cannot be torn off and taken away" clearly refers to the scribe's own residence, thereby implying the existence of a fixed sutra transcription office to which it stood in contrast. The verso of Yu 羽 707R–3, fascicle 10 of the *Rejected Draft of the Ekottara Āgama* (*Rejected Draft of the Numbered Discourses*) 增壹阿含经（兑废稿）, bears the following note: "Disciple Dong Yanchang 董延长, Yaya 押衙 of the Guiyi Army Commander, Scribe in the Clerks Office 知案司书手, Grand Master of the Palace with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon 银青光禄大夫, and Acting Adviser to the Heir Apparent 太子宾客, came to this temple to transcribe the sutras. If anyone sees this later, please do not take offense." This indicates that Dong Yanchang transcribed sutras within a temple. Similarly, on the verso of BD9677, fascicle 40 of the *Rejected Draft of the Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-Sūtra* (*Rejected Draft of the Scripture on the Correct Dharma of the Foundation of Mindfulness*) 正法念处经（兑废稿）, are notes such as "I have recently come to this cloister and chanced upon the spot where my predecessor worked. I have indeed toiled and rendered meritorious service (through sutra transcription). I humbly apologize for any offense" and "Yaya Han Yuanqing 韩愿清 arrived at the monastery of Samgha Administrator 僧政 Ma 马," suggesting that Yaya Han Yuanqing likewise undertook sutra transcription at a monastic establishment. S. 8714 bears the heading "Register of Exchanging Paper for Sutra Transcription at the Cave" 窟上书经兑纸名目, recording the rejection of paper of individuals including "Yaya Cao 曹, Yaya Yin 阴, as well as Deng Bunu." This document indicates that the sutra transcription was conducted collectively within a cave complex. Further evidence comes from Дx. 1301, "Register of Personnel at the Sutra Transcription Office" 抄经所人数录, which records a total of 39 personnel responsible for different aspects of the transcription operation at the sutra transcription office, including "three food preparers." The ratio of food preparers to all other personnel is thus approximately 1∶12. For comparison, in the military organization of the Tang Dynasty, a company 队 normally consisted of 50 men under five squad

[10] Documents from the sutra transcription office preserved in the Shosoin in Japan show that items including brushes, ink, inkstones, shiki (式, meaning a sheet of paper beneath the scroll under the section being copied to protect it), shiki (敷, also pronounced shiki but with the logograph, meaning a ruling sheet) and clean garments were all uniformly provided by the sutra transcription office, and that all these items had to be returned after the conclusion of the entire sutra transcription.

leaders 火长 who were responsible for cooking and meal preparation, yielding a ratio of approximately 1:9 (Li 1937, 56–57). The similarity between these proportions suggests that the three food preparers listed in 丑x. 1301 were very likely responsible for preparing meals for the entire staff of the sutra transcription office. The fact that the sutra transcription office provided centralized meals further demonstrates that its personnel had to work at a fixed location.

For the organizers, concentrating the scribes at a single location offered the following advantages:

First, it helped ensure that scribes devoted effective time to sutra transcription. In an environment without the organizers' supervision, scribes could be disturbed by many factors, and the effective time they invested in transcription would likely be reduced.

Second, the many steps involved, including the distribution of scrolls and paper, the inspection of sutra manuscripts, the rejection of erroneous sheets, and the reissuing of new paper, could all be completed within a relatively enclosed environment, which was conducive to improving the operational efficiency of the transcription procedure. If the locations for transcribing, inspection, and other tasks were scattered, the time spent traveling back and forth between them would be rather long.

Third, it facilitated the organizers' direct monitoring of the scribes' activities. With the scribes gathered in one place, all their activities were brought under the effective supervision of the organizers, which could reduce actions by the scribes that did not conform to the regulations. For instance, this was likely the reason why, as reflected in the previously cited P. 2947, the scribe did not dare to tear off and take home the "leftover paper after the writing," thus ensuring the effective recovery of rejected sheets.

However, for certain special individuals or under special circumstances, the organizers also permitted scribes to take the scrolls elsewhere for transcription. For example, S. 4447, "Collation Record of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* of a Certain Temple" 某寺《大般若经》点勘录 notes that fascicle 1 of bundle 11 and fascicle 7 of bundle 20 had been "taken away by the Vice Director 仆射 to be transcribed." The Vice Director here was the Guiyi Army Commander, and he took the sutra away to transcribe it, obviously not confining himself to the fixed venue for sutra transcription. P. 3010 also records: "On the 17th day of the fifth lunar month of the *wuzi* 戊子 year, six bundles of the *Dharmaguptaka-Vinaya* (*Vinaya of the Four Categories*) 四分律, together with the brocade covers in which they were kept, were borrowed from Sanjie Temple and taken away for transcription." This likewise shows that the scribe borrowed the relevant scriptures and then took them away to transcribe. In addition, when the scale of a transcription project was too large for a single venue to accommodate all the scribes, some may also have been permitted to take the scrolls elsewhere for transcription. Compared with centralized transcription, such an arrangement afforded scribes greater flexibility in managing their own time. But for the organizers, the disadvantages of this method were equally apparent, since it was far more difficult to monitor either the scribes'

effective working time or their compliance with established transcription procedures.[11]

2 Transcription Regulations and Inspection Criteria

Once the master copies, paper, ink, brushes, and other materials had been distributed, the actual work of sutra transcription could begin. The following discussion focuses on regulations of transcription, inspection criteria, and the corrective or concealing measures adopted by scribes when errors occurred.

2.1 Regulations of Transcription

The previously cited S. 376, "Letter from a Minister of State to Vinaya Master Deng, Dated the 24th Day of the First Lunar Month of Unspecified Year," shows that in contemporary understanding, sutra transcription had to be "in accord with the correct method," governed by a clear set of regulations of transcription. These regulations were presumably those that the organizers of sutra transcription had set forth for the scribes. Ideally, the organizers would have expected each sutra manuscript to be textually accurate, neatly formatted, clean in appearance, and even calligraphically elegant. Yet in practice, such expectations were overly idealized. It is therefore likely that the organizers also adopted another set of requirements that were more practical and attainable.

For instance, with regard to character accuracy, there exist among the Dunhuang documents several manuscripts of the "Record of Sutra Collation and Character Proofreading" 勘经校字录 (e.g., S. 4117, Dunbo 敦博 81, and S. 11527, etc.), which compile lists of miswritten characters 别字 found in the sutra manuscripts by different scribes. This indicates that the organizers likely had explicitly required inspectors to check for miswritten characters in the scrolls. Such a requirement, however, was evidently too demanding and could not possibly be met by all inspectors and scribes. We find that virtually all scrolls contain clerical errors, which suggests that explicit requirements akin to those reflected in S. 4117 were probably quite rare. It is precisely for this reason that the "Record of Sutra Collation and Character Proofreading" among the Dunhuang manuscripts is also very limited in number. It is also for this reason that when a miswritten character did appear during transcription, scribes could

[11] Documents from the Nara-period sutra transcription office preserved in the Shosoin show that the court-sponsored sutra transcription organized by Empress Kōmyō and others established a dedicated compound for the sutra transcription office, setting up a transcription hall, a scribes' quarters, a dining hall, a bathhouse, and a whole series of facilities. Once sutra transcription began, all personnel participating in it were permitted to move about only within the compound; if they needed to go out on business, they were required to request leave from the sutra transcription office (Fukuyama 1982; Sakaehara 2021; 2022; Yamamoto 2002). However, most of the court scribes in Japan were professionals, so they could work permanently in one place. In contrast, in the Tang Dynasty, sutra transcription projects such as the one under Empress Wu Zetian often mobilized official scribes from the Chancellery 门下省, the Palace Library 秘书省, the Advancement of Literature 弘文馆 and others. Likewise, during the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods, the sutra transcription projects organized by Dunhuang temples also frequently employed local government officials such as the Yaya. For these scribes, sutra transcription was only a temporary assignment, and hence they could not be stationed in one place for a long time.

resort to various countermeasures. For example, they could simply ignore it (though it is also possible they were unaware of it, which is a circumstance that is difficult to distinguish in the manuscripts); they could scrape it off; or they could use correction marks such as the "deletion dot" 卜煞 and the "inversion mark" 倒乙 (Wu 2025a).

Let us now turn to the requirements concerning format. Format encompasses both the layout of the line-and-column and the overall arrangement of the sheet. In terms of line-and-column, from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589) onward, Chinese sutra transcription gradually developed the standard format of 17 characters per line, a convention that was clearly inherited and widely adopted at Dunhuang as well (Zhao 2019a, 164–184; 2019b). However, as the author has pointed out in another study on the sutra manuscripts under Empress Wu Zetian's reign, ensuring that every line contains exactly 17 characters was very difficult to achieve, "because this required the scribe to sustain a high degree of concentration in order to ensure both the accuracy of each character and the layout. Under conditions of prolonged, intensive transcription, this was obviously very challenging. Even court scribes serving imperial projects frequently made unexpected mistakes" (Wu 2025a). In the case of the Dunhuang sutra manuscripts, the overwhelming majority of manuscripts contain a few lines with more or fewer than 17 characters. Yet when a line deviated from the 17-character standard, it typically contained either 18 or 16 characters, and if a line had 18 characters, the scribe would generally compensate by writing one fewer character (i.e., 16) in the following line or a few lines later, so that an average of 17 characters per line was roughly maintained.[12] In other words, the organizers likely had explicitly required scribes to adhere to the prescribed format as closely as possible, to the extent that some presumably less experienced scribes would mechanically enforce the 17-character rule during transcription without regard for the overall harmony of the layout. This led to cases where the upper part of a sheet was very compactly written while the lower part was very loosely spaced, as seen, for instance, in S. 7199 (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra* [*Lotus Sutra*] 法华经, fascicle 7). However, in actual practice, the organizers would not discard an entire sutra sheet simply because a single line did not have exactly 17 characters.

Compared with the requirements governing individual characters and lines, the standards for the overall layout of each sheet were considerably more stringent. This was reflected in the rule that the line breaks marking textual divisions and the total number of lines per sheet were required to correspond strictly to those of the standard copy, that is, the master copy for transcribing. Textual divisions reflected the segmentation of the sutra text according to its meaning. Although different interpreters might divide the same text differently, for the scribes the authority of the master copy's textual divisions was indisputable. Any divergence from

[12] Japanese scholar Yōko Watanabe has discovered that in the court-sponsored sutra transcription organized during the Nara period, transcribers used a shiki marked with 18 ruling lines to mark the spacing of characters in each line. When in use, the shiki would be placed to the left of the line being transcribed. However, judging from the ancient Japanese sutra manuscripts, the use of shiki did not entirely eliminate the phenomenon of lines containing fewer than or more than 17 characters (Watanabe 2011).

it constituted a major error, requiring the entire sheet to be rejected. For instance, BD7400, fascicle 9 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-Sūtra* (*Rejected Drafts of the Sutra of Golden Light*) 金光明最胜王经（兑废稿）, is a single sheet with 28 lines. The scribe failed to begin a new line at the phrase "*ershi*" 尔时, in line 19 where the master copy required a line break. This error was later discovered, and the inspector marked the spot beside "*ershi*" in red ink. In a master copy, some lines might contain only three or four characters, or even a single character; if the scribe had not roughly maintained the balance of 17 characters per line in the preceding lines, errors at these points were very likely to occur. For instance, in BD5631, fascicle 1 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Ratnamegha-Sūtra* (*Rejected Drafts of the Scripture on the Rain of Jewels*) 宝雨经（兑废稿）, there is no error in terms of the sutra text content itself, yet the inspector marked it with the character "*dui*" and rejected it. The reason lies in the fact that line 6 was transcribed with 19 characters, but the last two characters, "*sa deng*" 萨等, should actually have begun a new line; moreover, because what followed belonged to a new paragraph of the sutra text, those two characters needed to occupy a line by themselves. The scribe's failure to begin a new line meant that this sheet used one line fewer than the standard copy, which was a conspicuous and major error. Similarly, in BD6863, fascicle 63 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-Sūtra*, the sheet was rejected due to an improper line break. Line 7 contains the 20-character passage. A comparison with BD5325 and other copies reveals that the three characters "*zheng fa gu*" 正法故 should have occupied a line by themselves, while "*fuci*" 复次 and the following characters should have begun another new line. The scribe's handling caused this sheet to use one line fewer than the standard copy. If such an error by the scribe continued into the transcribing of the subsequent sheets, the inspector would very likely reject all of those sheets as well. BD9869, fascicle 492 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, preserves one sheet in which 51 characters, equivalent to approximately three lines, were omitted after line 22. Judging from the sutra text, lines 23–28 are correct, and it is very possible that the following sheets were also copied consecutively without correcting this error. At the top margin, there is a note by the inspector, Monk Xuan 炫和尚 (i.e., Zhang Jinxuan): "Three lines were omitted. They should be rewritten later. The complete scroll will have nine sheets." "Three lines were omitted" identifies the error, and "they should be rewritten later. The complete scroll will have nine sheets" means that the scribe was required to recopy this sheet and the subsequent sutra text according to the standard copy, and that the recopying would require nine sheets of paper. Based on the amount of text, this sheet and the ones after it should have contained around 3,900 characters, which would indeed have required nine sheets. This shows that even if the subsequent sutra text was free of error, it still had to be recopied because it did not conform to the format of the standard copy.

Precisely because sutra transcription had to conform to format standards, some scribes were very careful to adjust their layout. For example, on sheet 2 of fascicle 264 of BD3416 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*), the distribution of characters in line 13 is quite amply spaced, yet only 16 characters were written, while the following line, line 14, contains only a single

character. This indicates that the scribe did this deliberately, the reason being that in the master copy, line 14 likewise contained only a single character. In short, the scribe had to maintain formal consistency with the master copy. Even if the master copy itself contained some problems, some scribes would mechanically replicate these errors as well. On this point, reference may be made to the cases of fascicle 69 of BD13919 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*) and fascicle 580 of BD6150 (*Rejected Drafts of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*) already cited above.

Regarding the cleanliness in appearance of completed manuscripts, the organizers presumably also had clear stipulations. Obvious tears, conspicuous smudging, or similar defects were evidently unacceptable. On this point, Zhang Yanqing, Zhao Qingshan, and other scholars have already conducted research, so it will not be discussed further here.

When a major error occurred on a given sheet, the scribe was required to discard the sheet either in its entirety or in part. For instances of entire-sheet rejection, see the previously cited case of An Wende and others. As for the latter, fascicle 48 of the *Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya*, is one example; another is BD3423-4, fascicle 2 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra,* which survives in only eight lines of text, all of them gāthās with four phrases per line. In the top margin above lines 2–5 appears a note reading: "Seven lines above/must be/rejected." The reason why it was marked as a rejected draft is that errors do indeed exist in these eight lines. The scribe made an omission or error when transcribing as far as line 6, realized the mistake after completing line 7, and therefore recopied the line that should have preceded line 1 as line 8. Consequently, during the subsequent correction work, lines 1 through 7 needed to be excised. Looking at the overall situation of Dunhuang sutra manuscripts, the vast majority of transcription projects required that an entire sheet be rejected; only in a very few cases was a partial rejection permitted.[13]

When discarding a sheet, whether the scribe was required to note the reason for rejecting on the sheet itself does not seem to have been uniformly regulated. Several hundred rejected drafts bear no marking whatsoever, yet there are also quite a few rejected drafts that do carry a scribe's note explaining the rejection. For example, in BD2294, fascicle 244 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* 大般若经（兑废稿）, line 8 duplicates the scripture text of line 7, and on the top margin of line 8 the character "*sheng*" 剩 is written. The mark means that after this sheet was completed, it was discovered that the standard scroll still had one more line that had not been copied. That is, one line had been "*sheng*." The brushwork of this character shows clear pauses and is consistent with the handwriting of the sutra text. However, it differs markedly from the more rounded "*dui*" written on the top margin of line 2. All of this indicates that it was very likely marked by the scribe.

When the sutra text was completely copied, the scribe had to submit the manuscripts to the

[13] In the court-sponsored sutra transcription of the Nara period in Japan, entire-sheet rejection did occur, but only in cases where a single sheet contained so many errors that they could not be corrected. When an entire line was omitted or additional, even partial trimming of the paper was permitted. This occurred quite often, which seems to be exactly the opposite of the situation in Dunhuang.

organizers, who would then arrange for the inspectors to inspect them. The sutra manuscripts submitted by the same scribe were very likely kept together and affixed with a label. For instance, S. 11367 is a title slip for a bundle of 10 fascicles of the *Saṃyuktābhidharmahṛdaya* (*Heart of Abhidharma with Miscellaneous Additions*) 杂阿毗昙心论 submitted by Vinaya Master Kong of Qianyuan Temple; S. 11371 is a title slip for the *Aggañña Sutta* (*Sutra on the Original Conditions of the World's Creation*) 起世因本经 copied by Monk Administrator Deng 邓僧正 of Yong'an Temple. Furthermore, judging from the rejection note "The sutra master copy has three lines" on BD6150 cited above, both the scribe and the inspector used the same problematic master copy, which may well have been the very same scroll. This suggests that in the design of the system, when the scribe submitted the completed copy, he was also supposed to return the master copy at the same time. If a problem was discovered during inspection, the scribe perhaps had to borrow the master copy again when obtaining new paper to recopy the sutra text.

2.2 Inspection Criteria

The transcription regulations discussed above were not only requirements set for the scribes but very likely also served as the inspection criteria adopted by the inspectors. As for the methods of inspection, there is no record whatsoever in transmitted documents, so they can only be inferred through close observation of the sutra manuscripts themselves.

The ideal form of inspection would have been to "collate character for character," yet such a method was only suitable for sutras intended for personal use (Wu 2021); for the inspection of large-scale sutra transcription projects, it was impractical, because checking every character carefully would have required no less time and effort than transcribing a scroll itself. Documents from the Shosoin sutra transcription office (scriptorium) in Japan indicate that inspectors there might have examined texts character by character, using such methods as marking with white pigment, placing a dot beside incorrect characters, writing the character "*yu*" 余 where characters were missing, and so forth. Moreover, they would record each instance one by one.[14] However, given that the personnel responsible for proofreading in the Japanese imperial scriptorium were all professional inspectors, their attitude toward and methods of proofreading probably differed considerably from those of the proofreaders in Dunhuang.

Based on an analysis of S. 7198, fascicle 80 of the *Rejected Drafts of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, Fang Guangchang has proposed an inspection method based on checking "the first and last characters of each line" (Fang 2000, 66). However, I have previously argued that this method would still have been very inconvenient, because a precondition for adopting it would have been that the first and last characters of every line in the sutra manuscript be exactly

[14] The professional proofreaders in the sutra transcription office of the Nara court in Japan could proofread over one hundred sheets of sutra text per day, while scribes could transcribe about nine sheets per day (Kurihara 1988, 244–246; Sakaehara 1987, 203; Yamashita 2013).

the same as those in the master copy. Yet, as discussed above, it was extremely difficult for the vast majority of scribes to ensure an absolute 17-character count in every single line, and that being the case, checking only the first and last characters of each line would also have been very troublesome. I have therefore argued that rather than "checking the first and last characters of each line," the inspection more likely involved checking "the first and last lines of a sheet" (Wu 2025a). Because this argument was based mainly on the sutra manuscripts under Empress Wu Zetian's reign, there were not many texts available for discussion; it will be supplemented here with evidence from the locally organized sutra transcription in Dunhuang and related sources.

For the inspectors, inspection was conducted on a per-sheet basis. The primary purpose of inspection was to determine a result, that is, whether a sheet needed to be rejected; identifying the exact location of an error was a secondary concern. Some scribes would voluntarily acknowledge the presence of an error and indicate where it lay. For example, in the previously cited BD2294, fascicle 244 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, the scribe himself marked the character "*sheng*." There are also other manuscripts where, even without the scribe's rejection mark, certain errors were nonetheless obvious at a glance. I have found that on such sheets, the position where the inspector wrote the character "*dui*" or similar notations roughly corresponds to the line where the error occurred. For instance, in S. 3880, fascicle 148 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, 18 characters were omitted after line 20, and the scribe subsequently wrote the missing text in small characters between the lines (the handwriting confirms that it was the scribe himself who supplied the missing text). The location of this error was very conspicuous, and so the inspector later wrote the "*dui*" mark on the top margin between lines 20 and 21. Yet apart from such cases, the "*dui*" mark and similar marks on the great majority of rejected drafts are mostly written on the top margin in the area of the first four lines or the last four lines of a sheet, without a necessary correspondence to the actual location of the error. Then under such circumstances, how did the inspector quickly determine whether a sheet contained an error serious enough to warrant its rejection?

When the inspector unfolded a sutra manuscript for inspection, what was actually easiest to check first was whether the appearance was clean and tidy, whether there were any tears, and the like. If there was a problem with the appearance, there was no further need to inspect the other content, that is, the sheet could be rejected on that basis alone. For example, BD3427-5, fascicle 11 of the *Rejected Draft of the Abhidharmavibhāṣa-Śāstra* (*Rejected Draft of the Treatise of the Commentary on the Abhidharma*) 阿毗昙毗婆沙论（兑废稿）, is a complete single sheet with no errors in content, yet it was rejected. The reason lies in the fact that there is a very conspicuous smudge in line 26 of that sheet. BD4926, fascicle 143 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, contains three sheets. Judging from the content, there is likewise no obvious error; the format is complete and the writing is neat. However, the ink used was overly thick, causing excessive blotting across the surface of the paper. The person who rejected it also wrote the reason on the verso: "This sutra was written

with overnight ink, and it bled when mounted." Another example is BD5626, fascicle 1 of the *Rejected Draft of the Ratnamegha-Sūtra* (*Rejected Draft of the Scripture on the Rain of Jewels*). One can see at a glance that there are obvious traces of scraping in lines 22 and 23, which damaged the appearance of paper. Accordingly, the inspector marked the "*dui*" character on the top margin above lines 22–23.

Once the appearance of the sheet had been inspected, the next step was to check whether the sutra text content was consistent with the master copy. The easiest way to compare the sutra manuscript with the master copy was to examine the first and last lines as well as the line breaks marking textual divisions. Line breaks marking textual divisions have already been discussed above; here the focus will be on the method of checking the first and last lines. For example, BD3253, fascicle 1 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, was transcribed with 26 lines, but after line 17, 17 characters were omitted. In other words, one entire line was missing. The inspector needed only to compare line 26 of the sutra manuscript with line 26 of the master copy (i.e., line 3 from the left) to determine whether there was any omission or addition. The inspector wrote the reason for rejection next to line 27, not near line 17: "Missing one line. Reject this sheet. That's all." This precisely shows that the method of inspection he used was checking the first and last lines. Another example is BD2090, fascicle 6 of the *Rejected Draft of the Ratnamegha-Sūtra* (*Rejected Draft of the Sutra of Jewel Cloud*) 宝云经（兑废稿）. It survives on one sheet copied full with 28 lines. After line 5, one line was omitted, yet the inspector wrote the "*dui*" mark between lines 19–20 rather than near line 5. This also suggests that he probably did not pinpoint exactly which line contained the error. In BD665, fascicle 130 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, lines 14–15 and 16–17 are duplicated. The sheet was transcribed full with 28 lines, which meant that it had two lines of sutra text fewer than the standard manuscript. The inspector thus wrote, "Two lines left over. Reject." Here, "left over" refers to the fact that in the standard manuscript, there were still two lines on this sheet that had not been transcribed. The use of this method is also evident in Tubo rejected drafts. For example, Db. t. 438 (*Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* [*Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in 100,000 Lines*] 十万般若波罗蜜多经) bears the note "five extra lines" (Ma 2011, 314). The phrase "... extra lines" here is, in fact, the same as "missing ... lines" and so forth, with reference always being made to the master copy.[15]

After verifying that the first and last lines and the line breaks marking textual divisions were all correct, the inspector would then proceed to inspect the other lines and, at a finer level, the individual characters. As for line-by-line inspection, this has already been pointed out by Fang Guangchang and will not be repeated here. With regard to character-level proofreading, the previously mentioned "Record of Sutra Collation and Character Proofreading" manuscripts (such as S. 4117 and Dunbo 81) are a manifestation of this practice. Some inspectors would

[15] For omission errors, Nara-period Japanese proofreaders would mark them with the character "*yu*." This character is synonymous with "*sheng*," which is commonly seen in Dunhuang sutra manuscripts. Both characters are used in the same way.

even make corrections directly on the manuscript. For example, BD7139, fascicle 38 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, survives in two sheets. On sheet 1, 17 characters were omitted after line 21. Having subsequently realized this error, the scribe then transcribed in the first five lines of sheet 2 the five lines of text on sheet 1 that had been supplemented between the lines and extended to the last line. However, the subsequent inspector may not have understood the scribe's original intention. Examining the inspector's alterations to the first two lines of the second sheet:

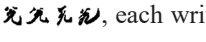
乐若
1. 苦若行色相非行般若波罗蜜多若行受想行
乐苦　　乐苦
2. 识若行受想行识相非行般若波罗蜜多若

The underlined interlinear characters are those supplied by the inspector. The text that the inspector intended to restore is as follows:

1. 苦若行色乐苦相非行般若波罗蜜多若行受想行
2. 识乐苦若行受想行识乐苦相非行般若波罗蜜多若

Why did the inspector supply these characters? In fact, this content is precisely the 41 characters that follow immediately after the first sheet in fascicle 38 of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. Because these 41 characters and the several lines of text following the omission on sheet 1 are too similar in content, the inspector initially failed to realize that the scribe had actually retranscribed sheet 1 from the point of the omission. Only after he had corrected two lines did he discover the problem. He then abandoned further correction and wrote four large characters on that sheet: "Reject. Transcribing from the master copy."

The three methods of inspection—the appearance of the sheet, the format, and the individual characters—demanded vastly different amounts of time and effort and are by no means comparable. In terms of practicality, character-level inspection was the most time-consuming. The very fact that many miswritten characters remain in the sutra manuscripts shows that it was difficult for many inspectors to collate character by character. Checking the appearance of the sheet and the line count was the easiest, yet it was also where scribes were prone to errors, and it should be manageable for an ordinary inspector. However, even so, some inspectors probably did not carry out their duties conscientiously. For instance, the note on Db. T. 405, the *Rejected Draft of the Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, reads: "One extra line. The first and second proofreaders, like two blind men, failed to notice it; the third proofreader marked it with a brush" (Zhang 2010b). The sheet contained a missing line, but neither the first nor the second proofreader was aware of it, which shows that they did not compare the first and last lines of the sheet at all. Perhaps it was precisely as a safeguard against such oversight by inspectors that the Dunhuang sutra transcription establishment

implemented a system of multiple rounds of re-checking. Under this system, even if the first inspector was the one to discover that a sheet should be rejected and marked it with the "*dui*" character, the manuscript would still not be immediately processed; instead, it had to be inspected and confirmed by a second proofreader, a third proofreader, and so forth before any action was taken. This is why on many single-sheet rejected drafts we see multiple "*dui*" marks in different hands. For example, on the single extant sheet of BD4258, fascicle 183 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, there are five "*dui*" marks on the top margin,  , each written differently. This clearly indicates that they were confirmed by multiple inspectors.

Just as with the scribes themselves rejecting sheets, there likewise seems to have been no uniform regulation as to whether the inspector was required to indicate the reason for rejection on the sheet to be rejected. Among the more than one thousand rejected drafts I collected, several hundred bear no note explaining the rejection at all.

Once the inspection of the manuscript was completed, if any sheets needed to be rejected, the organizers would communicate this back to the scribe, who would then be required to recopy the relevant sutra text. Some scribes may not have agreed with the inspector's inspection. For instance, Zhang Yanqing has brought to light that Wang Lule 王禄勒, the scribe of Db. t. 392, a manuscript of the *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, once complained that the inspector was nitpicking (Zhang 2009, 50).

2.3 The Tensions between Scribes and Inspectors

Prolonged sutra transcription placed high demands on both mental concentration and physical stamina. On BD9701, fascicle 562 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, there is a humorous poem written by someone at the time: "Transcribing sutras is by no means light work; fixing one's eyes on the master copy almost causes one to lose sight; the neck is nearly broken from stooping, yet the remuneration amounts to no more than two *dou* 斗 (an ancient unit of capacity) millet" 写经非是作,看本眼睛洛(落)。项骨将欲折,不得二斗粟. If a scribe happened to be in a particularly poor mental state, errors were even more likely to occur. On P. 4525 (2)–14, fascicle 50 of the *Rejected Draft of the Saṃyuktāgama*, there is a prayer recorded by Huiyuan 会员: "Huiyuan's sheet got rejected, because my illness (?) hasn't dispelled yet. Quickly, quickly, begone! No more wrong characters will appear." It seems that Huiyuan had made mistakes during transcribing because he was ill. The rejection of sheets directly affected the scribes' own vital interests. It meant economic penalties (mainly deductions from their remuneration to cover the losses the organizers incurred through the discarded paper), as well as the need to invest even more time and effort into recopying the sutra text. For this reason, when some scribes discovered an error, their first instinct was not to voluntarily discard the sheet, but to correct or even conceal it. Moreover, since many scribes also participated in inspection, they were undoubtedly well aware of inspectors' main concerns. Consequently, many of their measures were intended specifically to counter those

standards.

Corrective measures, such as scraping, the use of orpiment, and the application of correction marks such as the inversion mark, have already been discussed above. However, these measures, especially scraping, had significant drawbacks, because it was often impossible to completely erase all traces of the ink of original characters, leaving the appearance of the sheet rather soiled and messy. For example, S. 4644–10, fascicle 66 of the *Rejected Draft of the Avataṃsaka-Sūtra* (*Rejected Draft of the Flower Garland Sutra*) 华严经（兑废稿）, was rejected precisely for this reason. Scraping also readily tore the paper, causing damage that could not be repaired. For instance, in BD9688, fascicle 94 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, the scribe omitted one line after line 25, but he did not realize the problem until he had finished transcribing line 26. The first corrective measure he adopted was to use a tool to scrape away line 26, but unfortunately, the result of scraping was poor and caused some tears at the scraped area; on the verso of the scroll, we can very clearly see the holes that resulted from the tearing. Had he continued, it would likely have made the error on that sheet even more conspicuous, and so in the end he was forced to abandon the effort.

If corrective measures were mainly aimed at individual erroneous characters, then concealing measures were primarily employed to tamper with the entire line, and above all to ensure that the first and last lines matched those of the master copy. These were precisely the inspection points to which ordinary inspectors paid the most attention. An example in point is BD9825, fascicle 550 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. The relevant original text should read: “In my Buddha-land, there shall be no such wilderness of scorching drought and lack of water. I will employ skillful means to encourage all sentient beings to cultivate superior merits and virtues, and wherever they may dwell, I will ensure that the eight qualities of pure water are fully provided” 我佛土中得无如是一切燋渴乏水旷野。我当方便劝诸有情修胜福业，随所在处皆令具足八功德水. However, on the rejected sheet, after the sixth character of line 15, the scribe duplicated 12 characters starting from the fifth character of line 14: “... such wilderness of scorching drought and lack of water / I will ...” 是一切燋渴乏水旷野我当方. The scribe likely realized the error immediately after finishing the following line, but instead of discarding the sheet, he chose a more concealed method: he skipped the 11 characters that followed, “... superior merits and virtues, and wherever they may dwell / I will ensure that ...” 胜福业随所在处皆令具足, and continued transcribing. In this way, the format of the subsequent lines would not be thrown into disorder, and if the inspector did not inspect every single line, the omission would be very difficult to detect. A similar case is S. 3312, fascicle 526 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. The original text should read: “When a great bodhisattva practices the profound perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), how should he cultivate the six perfections—generosity, morality, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom? And furthermore, how should he cultivate the knowledge of all aspects?” 是菩萨摩诃萨行深般若波罗蜜多，云何摄受布施、净戒、安忍、精进、静虑、般若波罗蜜多？广说乃至云何摄受一切相智？ This rejected draft survives in seven sheets. On the top margin above lines 1–2 of sheet 6, there is a “*dui*” mark. The error is

located in line 12. The content of this line should have been "... meditation, and wisdom? And furthermore, how should he cultivate the knowledge of all aspects" 虑般若波罗蜜多广说乃至云何摄受一切, but the scribe wrote "虑般若蜜多云何摄受布施净戒安忍精进青." The 15 characters after "*lü bore*" 虑般若 were mistakenly transcribed from the last 15 characters of line 11, and the character "*qing*" 青 at the end of this line is, in fact, the left component of the character "*jing*" 静 at the end of line 11. This indicates that the scribe was aware of the problem at least by the time he was transcribing the character "*jing*" 静. Nonetheless, he did not choose to discard this sheet. Instead, he continued transcribing line 13 according to the master copy, and did not supply the missing text caused by the displacement of line 12. The reason for doing so was to try to conceal the error and to ensure that the sequence of the subsequent lines would not be disrupted.[16] However, unfortunately for these scribes, they encountered extremely strict inspectors, and their tricks were ultimately discovered.

But some scribes were very lucky. In BD3416, fascicle 264 of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, 17 characters were originally missing after line 25 of sheet 8. The scribe had probably already realized this error when he was transcribing line 26. The corrective measure he adopted was to recopy the 17 missing characters on line 27, and then continue transcribing the text of line 28 after that. This meant that although the order of lines 26 and 27 was reversed, the last line could be kept identical to that of the master copy, which helped the scribe evade the inspection. BD1327 (*Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, fascicle 67) remains in one sheet. Judging from the handwriting, it, together with S. 4644–7 (*Rejected Draft of the Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, fascicle 65), S. 4644–8 (*Rejected Draft of the Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, fascicle 64), and S. 4644–10 (*Rejected Draft of the Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, fascicle 66), should all be the work of the same scribe. The latter sheets are all rejected drafts voluntarily discarded by the scribe. However, BD1327 is not one of them. This is because on the right side of its verso there is an impression of a seal in raised script reading "Seal of the Great King" 大王印 (the full seal being "Seal of the Great King of Guazhou and Shazhou Prefectures" 瓜沙州大王印), which indicates that this item had entered circulation. Yet this item also contains an error: 17 characters are missing after line 4. Although small characters were added after line 4 to supply them, the handwriting is notably different from the main text and was likely done by a later reader. Moreover, the present detachment of this item from the original scroll was likewise most likely carried out by the same reader. Did the scribe himself realize the existence of the error? He probably did. We notice that this sheet only has 27 lines, that is, one line fewer than the standard 28 lines seen in S. 4644–10 and the others. Why is this so? It should be attributed to the scribe. He probably discovered the omission when he was transcribing the final lines, but, unwilling to reject the sheet, he cut off the remaining blank line and then bonded the front and back sheets back together. Such an operation can also be

[16] Xu Hao 徐浩 has located other fragmentary sheets of this manuscript (S. 3312 + S. 3342 + S. 1359 + Дх. 1992 + Дх. 2036 + Дх. 1578). According to the results of his reconstruction, it can be seen that the subsequent sheets contain no obvious errors (Xu 2017, 210–213).

observed in the sutra manuscripts under Empress Wu Zetian's reign (Wu 2025a). It is very likely that the inspector only checked the appearance of the sheet and the first and last lines, and did not proceed to a line-by-line inspection, thus allowing this sheet to slip through.

Another example is S. 3711 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 233), where line 13 on sheet 6 is actually a duplication of line 12. Yet, judging from the fact that the scroll retains its protective wrapper and other features, it clearly passed inspection. The scribe had in fact discovered the error, but instead of voluntarily discarding the sheet, he adopted a highly deceptive method of concealment. A close examination reveals that this sheet contains 29 lines of sutra text, whereas all the other sheets have only 28 lines. Why is this so? Through measurement, I found that the last three columns (that is, columns 27, 28, and 29) have a combined width of four cm. By contrast, each of the preceding 20-some columns is approximately 1.5 cm wide, which means three such columns would normally occupy around 4.5 cm. From this perspective, although the last three columns are slightly narrower in format, it may still appear within the range of normal variation. However, it must be noted that the final column of a sheet is usually considerably wider than the columns in the middle of the sheet. For instance, on sheet 7, the inner columns are about 1.6 cm wide, while the final column is about 2.2 cm wide, which is roughly 0.5 cm wider. The final column of sheet 6 should have been similarly broad. Furthermore, among the last three columns of sheet 6, only the right side of column 27 has a ruling line; there is no ruling line between lines 28 and 29. Could this then be an oversight on the part of the person responsible for ruling lines? A careful observation of the characters in line 28 reveals that the middle portion of the writing is somewhat blurred. The reason for this is that scraping had been performed there, and what was scraped away was merely a very narrow line. After scraping, the paper was no longer smooth, so when the brush passed over it, ink bleeding occurred, with some ink seeping into the crevices left by the scraping. The foregoing analysis is sufficient to demonstrate that a line had originally been ruled between the texts of lines 27 and 29, and that the scribe deliberately scraped it away. He did this to ensure that the entire sutra text from the master copy could be completed on this single sheet, and above all to ensure that the text of the last line would be consistent with that of the master copy. For this scribe, the gamble proved rather successful, for at the very least, he managed to escape the inspection of the inspector at the time. Although one can now see that the text of line 13 has been marked with deletion dots, this was clearly the work of a later reader. A scribe who had taken such trouble to conceal an error would never have left such an obvious error mark on this scroll.

The scribe of BD554A (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, fascicle 189) demonstrates yet another method of concealment. This item is the final sheet of a scroll. The end of this sheet has been trimmed into a dovetail shape and bears traces of paste, indicating that it was very likely once attached to a scroll roller; that is to say, this scroll had once entered circulation. However, the first 14 characters of line 23 (which has 17 characters in total) were written on a slip of paper pasted onto the scroll. The ink and handwriting on this slip of paper are consistent with the rest of the sutra text, which shows that the slip was written and pasted on by the scribe

himself. The reason he did so was clearly that the first 14 characters contained an error, and had he resorted to measures such as scraping, it would probably also have resulted in an obvious blemish. In preparing the slip of paper, the scribe took considerable care. First, the width of the slip was closely matched to that of the column where it was placed. Second, the color of the slip was consistent with that of the paper. Both measures were taken to ensure, as far as possible, the correctness of the sutra text content and the neatness of the sheet surface. This effort was not in vain, for in the end, it allowed a sheet that should have been rejected to escape the sharp eyes of the inspector.

3 Invalidation and Mounting of Sutra Transcription Sheets

Sheets containing errors had to be invalidated. Depending on who performed the invalidation and at which stage it occurred, the invalidation of sutra manuscripts can be divided into two modes: voluntary discarding by the scribe during the transcription process, and rejection by the inspector during the inspection stage. Previous scholars have not highlighted this distinction, but in the design of the sutra transcription organization, these two modes were clearly different.

Some clues concerning this point can be found in S. 2449, "Record of Paper Distribution for the *Yogācāra-Bhūmi-Śāstra* (*Treatise on the Stage of Yoga Practice*) and Other Sutras" 《瑜伽论》等配纸历. This item consists of two sheets. The first sheet records the "Record of Paper Distribution for the *Buddhacharita*"《佛本行经》配纸历 (Zhao 2019a, 123), and the second sheet records the "Record of Paper Distribution for the *Yogācāra-Bhūmi-Śāstra* and Other Sutras." Under the names of quite a few scribes, there are records of both "adding paper" 添纸 and "discarding paper" 兑纸. For instance, under the name of Vinaya Master Song 宋 there is an entry: "add two sheets / discard two sheets." Likewise, under the name of Monk Administrator Deng, who was responsible for the first five fascicles of the fourth bundle of the *Buddhacharita* (*Acts of the Buddha*) 佛本行经, there is an entry: "discard one sheet." The character for "discard" was originally written as "add," but was then blotted out and changed to "discard" on its right side. All of this shows that "adding paper" and "discarding paper" were two types of actions with different implications. Then what was the difference between them? If one carefully observes the manuscript, one will notice that the handwriting for "adding paper" and "discarding paper" differs, which implies that they were annotated at different times. Take, for example, Vinaya Master Fan 氾, the scribe for the first bundle of *Yogācāra-Bhūmi-Śāstra* 瑜伽论. Under his name there is the following record: "Vinaya Master Fan / discard two sheets / add three sheets / submitted." A careful examination of the color plate reveals that the ink color and handwriting of "discard two sheets" and "submitted" are similar, while they differ considerably from "add three sheets." At the same time, the ink of the character "sheet" in "add three sheets" overlaps with the character "submitted," so the record of "add three sheets" was made after the records of "discard two sheets" and "submitted." "Submitted" obviously refers to the scribe handing

over the completed manuscript to the inspector for inspection. The addition of paper after this point was very likely because the inspector had discovered errors during inspection and rejected some sheets. Consequently, the scribe had to add more paper and transcribe the relevant content. Since the record of "discarding paper" appears at the same time as or even earlier than the record of "submitted," it suggests that "discarding paper" occurred before "submitted" and thus likely refers to the scribe replacing sheets during transcription. According to the foregoing analysis, such replacement of sheets was the result of the scribe voluntarily discarding a sheet after discovering an error. S. 11529V, "Record of Discarding Paper in Sutra Transcription" 抄经兑纸历, records the discarding of paper by 19 individuals, such as "Fan Yanxing 泛彦兴, discards one sheet, and again one, and again one, and again one, and again one." The term "discard" here should likewise refer to what took place during the transcription process.

The two modes of invalidation coexisted, with each corresponding to a different way of handling errors. Moreover, the organizers appeared to have been more inclined to encourage scribes to voluntarily discard sheets. We can observe that among the more than one thousand Chinese rejected drafts of sutra manuscripts, nearly nine hundred have blank columns at the end of the scroll; that is to say, the majority of scribes chose to voluntarily discard their own erroneous sheets. The emergence of this phenomenon can of course be attributed in part to the scribes' own conscientiousness. On BD9701, fascicle 562 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, there is a doggerel poem by a scribe: "Transcribing the sutras diligently and meticulously, so that these precious sutras may be handed down for countless generations. By frequently transcribing sutras, one can cultivate blessings and merits. When one finally closes one's eyes and passes away, one will surely be reborn in the Heavenly realms and enjoy the fruits of wholesome deeds" 努力精心写,金经万代传。不时金(经)生福,闭眼得生天. Although this may have been a spiritual exhortation emanating from the organizers, it undoubtedly did have some effect. Nevertheless, what drove the scribes to voluntarily acknowledge their errors was probably a certain system of rewards and penalties at work. It may be that the penalty for voluntarily discarding a sheet was lighter than that for being found to have made an error by the inspector and having to transcribe the text thereafter.[17] Whatever the specific mechanism behind this may have been, in terms of its practical effect, encouraging scribes to voluntarily discard erroneous sheets effectively made the scribe serve in the role of the first inspector. At the same time, it also reduced the risk that an inspector's perfunctory inspection of a scroll would allow a substandard sutra manuscript to enter circulation.

Confirming the sheets that scribes had voluntarily discarded was, of course, a task that fell

[17] The "Regulations on the Methods of Sutra Transcription, Remuneration for Collators, Correction, and Mounting" promulgated in Tenpyō–shōhō (751) (HI, UT 1982, 487–489) only stipulated different penalties for scribes' errors of varying severity, such as omission, e.g., a deduction of five *mon* for omitting five characters on one sheet (five *mon* being the remuneration for transcribing one sheet). It did not differentiate between errors voluntarily admitted by the scribes and errors discovered by the inspector during inspection.

to the inspectors; yet compared with the work of picking out those sheets that had not been voluntarily discarded, this task was clearly far less difficult. Moreover, such confirmation may not even have been a core duty of the inspectors, for there are still several hundred rejected drafts that bear no marks for invalidation whatsoever. This indicates that these sheets could apparently enter the invalidation procedure without having been confirmed by an inspector.

After the inspectors had finished inspecting the sutra manuscripts, someone (perhaps the inspector himself) would write a label indicating the names of the scribe and the inspector. For example, S. 8701 appears to be a long strip that was cut from a sutra sheet, bearing the note "Sijia 寺加 / inspected by Qin 勤," which identifies the scribe as Sijia (i.e., Zhang Sijia 张寺加) and the inspector as Qin (i.e., Song Zhengqin 宋正勤). Therefore, this slip of paper would originally have been placed together with Sijia's sutra manuscripts. Another example is S. 6028, which also contains 14 such inspector slips for sutra manuscripts. On the right side of the verso of these slips, there are traces of paste, indicating that they were originally pasted onto the sutra wrapper on that side.

Throughout the entire inspection process, the inspectors did not personally handle the problematic sheets; they merely confirmed the errors and issued instructions for the subsequent work. The person specifically responsible for detaching the erroneous sheets was the mounter. On S. 5286, fascicle 446 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, there is a rejection note that reads, "This sheet has to be removed; when mounting, please take note," which clearly specifies how the mounter was to deal with the erroneous text. However, some mounters were also negligent. Thus, as frequently mentioned above, in the scrolls transcribed by An Wende and others, some sheets that had already been marked with "*dui*" and other such marks were not actually removed.

The rejected sheets that were detached by the mounters were also referred to as "rejected sutra" 兑经 or "detached rejected sutra" 兑落经. Judging from the rejected Tubo sutra manuscripts from Dunhuang, there were also persons who would recheck the rejected sutra sheets. For example, GL・t. 326, *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, was initially judged to be a rejected sutra, and the scribe had already been made to retranscribe it. Yet afterwards, someone re-examined this sheet and annotated the result of the re-inspection: "This sheet did not exhibit two irregularities, yet it was treated as a rejected sheet. I have already taken charge of the replacement; it must not be altered without authorization" (Ma 2011, 147). This clearly shows disagreement with the earlier inspector's handling. Re-examining the rejected sutra sheets both protects the interests of the scribes and places the inspectors under supervision. If an inspector's mistake was discovered, that inspector would presumably also face punishment. This was especially true if a sheet that was originally error-free had been judged as a rejected sheet. After all, it was his misjudgment that had caused a waste of paper and of the scribe's effort and time.

Those "detached rejected sutra" sheets may initially have been kept together with the scrolls transcribed by the scribes, to be used for a final accounting. Because the detached

sheets were mostly single leaves, they could sometimes be misplaced, so that a rejected sheet that actually belonged to one scribe ended up among the scrolls of another. Should this occur, it would directly affect the final calculation of the two scribes' remuneration. Some scribes, if they realized that the count of their rejected paper was incorrect, would go to the organizers to have it verified and the error corrected. P. 4525–14, fascicle 26 of the *Rejected Draft of the Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, bears a note reading: "This is Quanzi's 全子 rejected paper, not Shengqing's 胜清 rejected paper." This very likely indicates that Quanzi's rejected paper had initially been counted as that of the scribe Shengqing, resulting in Shengqing having an excessive amount deducted from his remuneration.

Once the accounting was completed, the detached rejected sutra sheets that had been stripped off were often wrapped up together. The wrappers used to bundle the rejected sutra sheets were often made from whatever materials were at hand, including the rejected sutra sheets themselves. For example, BD6940, fascicle 46 of the *Madhyama Āgama* (*Middle-Length Discourses*) 中阿含经, is marked as a rejected sutra. It consists of a single sheet. On its top margin appears a note: "This sheet contains detached rejected sutra sheets from various sections and bundles, all lacking the beginning and the end." It clearly shows that the detached rejected sutra sheets were used as wrappers. The sheets detached from the same bundle or even the same section of the sutra were collected and stored together. Take, for example, BD4119A, fascicle 243 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* and BD4119B, fascicle 478 of the *Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. The two are joined together, and BD4119A bears offset ink impressions from BD4119B. This indicates that the two had been stored pressed together from a relatively early period. Furthermore, sutras with short and concise scale would be stored together with rejected sutra sheets from other scrolls. For example, BD8375 (*Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-Sūtra*, fascicle 5) is a single sheet, and on its verso appears a note: "Bundles of the *Scripture of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* 观音经 and others." This is precisely such a case.

It is worth noting that on a large number of rejected drafts, the characters such as "*dui*" survive only in their lower halves, as seen in BD9775 and other items. Why is this so? I speculate that the scrolls submitted by the scribes were "untrimmed copies," with the height of each sheet likely varying considerably. For this reason, the mounter would also perform a final "trimming" of the scroll. During this stage, the rejected sheets had not yet been detached, so the characters such as "*dui*" on the top margin were trimmed away by half.[18]

In addition, mounting likely also involved adding the protective wrapper, the end panel, the scroll roller, and other components. This point requires no elaboration here.

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[18] Recently, in the course of studying the rejected drafts of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, Xu Hao discovers multiple cases of rejected drafts belonging to original scrolls. Through comparison, he observes that the rejected sheets were considerably taller than the sheets in the original scroll. He thus arrives at the conclusion that "in the mounting process, there was a step of trimming the upper and lower margins to make them even," which is consistent with the speculation in this article (Xu 2023, 151). As for ancient Japanese sutra manuscripts, this trimming of sheets to an even size may have been done earlier, at the stage when the mounter bonded the sheets (Kurihara 1988, 235).

4 Conclusion

Drawing on the sutra manuscripts, rejected drafts, and related sutra transcription records from the Tubo and Guiyi Army periods, this article offers a preliminary survey of the system design and actual operation of public sutra transcription during this period, with particular attention to the sutra transcription office organized by temples. The sutra transcription system of this period exhibited the following principal characteristics:

First, the system demonstrated a striking continuity with the earlier tradition. Through centuries of sutra transcription practice beginning in the Wei (220–265), Jin (265–420) and Northern and Southern Dynasties, particularly in the context of large-scale public sutra transcription projects organized by temples and government authorities, a whole set of highly mature and sophisticated systems had taken shape. Notably, the Dunhuang sutra transcription system shows a striking continuity with the systems evident in the sutra transcription projects under Juqu Mengxun and Empress Wu Zetian. This is reflected in the preparation of ruling lines, the bonding of sheets, and the methods of inspecting (including the sequence of inspection from sheet surface to lines and characters, and the system of multiple rounds of inspection). Moreover, this system, originally developed for the production of Chinese Buddhist manuscripts, appears to have influenced the Tubo sutra transcription activities carried out at Dunhuang as well. We can therefore observe that Tubo sutra manuscripts adopted similar methods of inspection.

Second, the system was marked by a highly developed division of labor that created an assembly-line operation. From initiating projects, to selecting master copies, to organizing paper craftsmen to produce paper and craftsmen to rule the lines, to scribes transcribing the sutras, inspectors inspecting them, and mounters detaching sheets and mounting the scrolls, every step had dedicated personnel. All these stages were closely linked. Should a problem arise at any one stage, it would trigger a chain reaction in the subsequent stages.

Although various problems inevitably occurred in the implementation of each stage of this system, it undoubtedly played a crucial institutional role in ensuring that sutra transcription proceeded in an orderly and smooth manner. Without taking this system into account, our understanding of many Dunhuang documents could well become distorted. A case in point is the character "*dui*" that appears on a large number of rejected drafts. Because there is no documentary record of its meaning, various interpretations persist to this day, such as the "exchange" theory (Fang 1991; Schneider 2000), the "examination" theory (Giles 1957, 1), and the "removing" theory.[19] More recently, on the basis of a critique of these various theories, Liu Dan 刘丹 has newly proposed the "Tibetan character " theory and the like (Liu 2021, 82–94). All of these theories are derived primarily from attempts to interpret and classify the notes accompanying rejected drafts. Yet none succeeds in accounting satisfactorily for every occurrence of "*dui*" in Dunhuang documents. In fact, it is essential for

[19] The "removing" theory appears in the colophon by Zhang Zongxiang 张宗祥 on Zhedun 浙敦 183 (*Rejected Draft of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra,* fascicle 559) (Huang & Zhang 2012, 590–591).

us to recognize that "*dui*" is a product of the sutra transcription system. To accurately grasp its meaning, we must first situate it within the developmental history of the sutra transcription system and the design of the entire procedure. Only on this basis is it possible for us to examine how this sutra transcription discourse was applied in specific sutra transcription and in other transcription contexts outside of the sutra transcription system itself (Wu 2024, 103–110).[20]

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[20] This article also refers to the *Sutra Copying: A Codicological Study of Dunhuang Buddhist Manuscripts* 抄经：敦煌佛教文献的写本学研究 (Wu 2025b, 59–81).

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