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◇ Note 2

Reusing Sheets of Tibetan *Śatasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* in Dunhuang¹

Kazushi Iwao

1. Introduction

It is commonly known that the Tibetan authority in Dunhuang (786-848), on behalf of the Tibetan emperor, established a scriptorium to copy various Buddhist texts, written in both Tibetan and Chinese. The best known examples are the *Aparimitāyur-nāma sūtra* and the *Śatasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā sūtra* (the latter shall henceforth be referred to as *SP*). While the former was reproduced on roll-type sheets, the latter was copied onto large *pothi*-type sheets of 20 cm × 70 cm. These *sūtras* were reproduced so extensively that they now comprise a large part of the Tibetan Dunhuang documents. Previous studies have made it abundantly clear that these *sūtras* were reproduced under the reign of Khri-gtsug-lde-brtsan during the first half of the 9th century.

It is worth noting that the *pothi* sheets onto which *SPs* were copied were also widely reused among Dunhuang manuscripts. Each case also sufficiently reflects the manners in which paper was used in Dunhuang between the 9th and 11th centuries. They may also indicate the reason these sheets were preserved by Chinese inhabitants up until the close of what is now called Cave No. 17 in Dunhuang, during the beginning of the 11th century.

To throw light on the various aspects of the writing culture and the use of paper in Dunhuang between the 9th and 11th centuries, this study investigates the instances in which the copied *SP sūtras* were reused. By doing so, this study also seeks to ascertain the reasons behind the preservation of large quantities of sheets containing the *SP sūtras*.

¹ This is an excerpt and a partly updated version of Iwao 2014 (in Japanese).

2. The Recycling of Sūtra Sheets

When Dunhuang achieved independence from the Tibetan empire in 848, the reproduction of the sūtras was abruptly stopped, but there remained many blank and used sheets. Some of the used sheets were edited, while some others were not. The *pothi* sheets were carefully prepared by pasting two thin sheets together to increase the quality of the paper; this is believed to have been a reason for the reuse of the sheets. Blank sheets were used to copy other texts, such as P.t.1289, a text concerning sacrifices during a ritual, and P.t.1290, which catalogues the ancient Tibetan principalities. Large sheets were cut based on the proposed use. To better understand the use of paper in Dunhuang, let us consider the case of P.t.218, which is a small *pothi* style sheet of 10 × 33 cm. Each P.t.218 sheet has a small semicircular hall at the center and a line, which is either drawn along the hall or at the top or the bottom of the sheet. It is apparently one-fourth the size of the *SP* sheets (Plate 1).

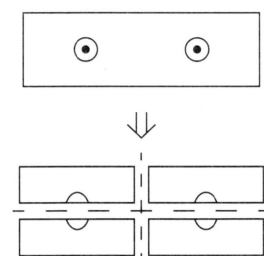


Plate 1

Apart from being reused as a writing medium, these sheets were also used to mend the rolled-up sections of the *SP* sheets. This method of mending rolled-up sheets is believed to have originated in the Tibetan plateau or Eastern Amdo.² It is possible to trace the efforts directed toward preserving the sheet as the original paper of the scroll is thin and fragile. Typically, a single layer of the *SP* sheet is patched onto the damaged part; sometimes entire sheets are patched this way. The patching paper is typically pasted on the rear end, while the text is rewritten on the front. The first sheet of the scroll is sometimes replaced with an unused *SP* sheet, onto which the text is copied again.

Therefore, the *SP* sheets are known to have been reused for at least two purposes: as a writing medium and as a repair material.

3. Reuse of the Sheet and Cave No.17

The above-mentioned examples show that the *SP* sheets were reused in different manners. In other words, these sheets were very useful to the inhabitants of Dunhuang. That the quality of paper produced in Dunhuang declined under the regime of Guiyijun 歸義軍 also explains the use of *SP* sheets; the latter, moreover, were of extremely high quality. When the Cave No.17 was discovered in the beginning of the 20th century, more than 13,900 sheets were found,³ but it is to be noted that not a single *SP* sheet remained intact; they were fragmented and disordered.⁴ This might imply that the purpose of storing the *SP* sheets was not to preserve the sūtra texts, but merely to create a stock of paper. Inhabitants of Dunhuang preserved and used these sheets to write on and preserve sheets

² For the unique characteristics of the roll-type *SP*, see Iwao 2013.

³ According to van Schaik (2002: 25), more than 3,800 sheets are preserved in Bibliothèque nationale de France, and more than 10,000 sheets are preserved in China. 125 sheets are also preserved in the British Library. Therefore, there are more than 13,900 sheets preserved in total.

⁴ See Lalou 1954.

of paper, and some of these preserved sheets are believed to have been brought to the cave, which was sealed for reasons that are still unknown.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author points out two aspects of this analysis. First, the *SP* sheets were reused for at least two purposes: as a writing medium and as repair material. Second, the inhabitants of Dunhuang chose to preserve these materials for a long time even after the conclusion of the copying project. These materials were consequently stored in the Cave No.17.

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