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**Manuscripts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*
from Dunhuang: preliminary arrangement
according to its scroll division**

Abstract. The paper considers one of the methods of manuscript classification applied to the Chinese translation of *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* from Dunhuang. Given the fact that the beginnings and endings of some scrolls of its different versions do not correspond, researchers identify several types of scroll division (*fen juan* 分卷). This paper attempts to reconstruct one of these types based on *Daboniepanjing chao* 大般涅槃經鈔 (“Digests of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*”) manuscripts from Dunhuang.

Key words: Chinese Buddhism, Dunhuang, manuscripts, *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, scroll division, digests of sūtras, 北敦 6363, 北敦 3386, 北敦 2838

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (*Daboniepanjing* 大般涅槃經, hereinafter — MPNMS) is believed to have been written around the 2nd or 3rd c. AD. The full Sanskrit version of the MPNMS has not remained intact. The MPNMS was an important scripture among the Buddha-nature corpus of texts since it was the first of this kind to reach China, and it played a significant role in the dissemination of the Buddha-nature doctrine.

There are two full versions of the sūtra, known as Northern (*beiben* 北本) and Southern (*nanben* 南本), both of which are found in Dunhuang cave library.

The Northern version¹ is a translation of Dharmakṣema (*Tanwuchen* 曇無讖, 385–433) made between AD 421 and 430.² It consisted of 40 volumes (*juan* 卷) and was completed in two stages: first, a text of 10 volumes was translated, which corresponded to approximately six volumes of an earlier translation by Buddhahadra in terms of volume and content; second, the translation of the remaining 30 volumes was completed. The text of the

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¹ T. 374.

² CHEN JINHUA 2004, 215–263.

MPNMS is heterogeneous. The researchers believe that its second part was written later. The first 10 volumes are sometimes called “the core portion” (*qianfen* 前分).

The Southern version³ was made, based on the “Northern” one, in AD 436 by Huiyan 慧嚴 (363–443), Huiguan 慧觀 (375?–445?) and others. The text was split into chapters in the same way as in the Buddhahadra (*Fotuobatuolu* 佛陀跋陀羅, 359–429) and Faxian 法顯 (337–422) six-volume translation with some minor stylistic changes. The translation consisted of 36 volumes, mainly due to the greater amount of text in each scroll rather than abridgements.

Preliminary figures indicate that the total number of MPNMS manuscript fragments from Dunhuang is over 3,000 items. The archive of the National Library of China possesses the largest number of fragments and full scrolls of the sūtra (over 700 items). The vast majority of Dunhuang copies of the sūtra contain the text of its Northern version. However, sometimes, with a small fragment, we cannot establish with certainty which of the two versions it belongs to. It is also impossible to work out even the approximate number of copies solely on the basis of these data, since the manuscripts are represented both by full scrolls and fragments of different size, some very small indeed. We can get more accurate information by putting the fragments together, but many of them do not fit together precisely, so sometimes we can only make assumptions that they belong to one and the same copy on the basis of the handwriting, paper etc. We face the same problems when attempting to correlate the various volumes of the sūtra. Apart from differences in paper, handwriting, sheet size, etc., the sūtra copies are also distinguished by differing scroll divisions (*fenjuan* 分卷). In other words, while the overall number of volumes is the same (40), the beginning and end of some scrolls do not match those in other copies.

The present paper attempts to classify the surviving copies of the Northern version by scroll division type. Obviously, we can only classify those manuscripts that have either the beginning or the end, or full scrolls. For that purpose we need to reconstruct the possible types of scroll division, a task which is made possible thanks to a number of Dunhuang manuscripts.

Among them is a series of documents containing a list of MPNMS volumes with indication of their beginnings (*tou* 頭) and ends (*wei* 尾). We believe that these documents served as a check list for the monks who copied the sūtra to help them in the standardization of the text.⁴ These are the fol-

³ T. 375.

⁴ FANG Guangchang 1997, vol. 1, 13.

lowing manuscripts: P.3150, P.5047 (held in the National Library of France), S.1361 (held in the British Library), 北 6612v (held in the National Library of China) and Φ-271 (held in the IOM, RAS). Their contents were deciphered and published by Fang Guangchang,⁵ so I am not going to include that process in the present paper. The data provided by the manuscripts show four possible types of scroll division. Jing Shengxuan made up a classification table, in which the sūtra manuscripts were sorted by these types of division.⁶ His research has shown that a considerable portion of the manuscripts do not accord with any of “check lists” in the five aforementioned manuscripts. We should also note that none of these types of division represented by the Dunhuang lists of MPNMS accord with the Taishō Tripitaka version. Do such manuscripts represent a new type of division, or they are just variations of the existing ones? To clarify this issue, I decided to analyze a number of manuscripts labelled and catalogue as *Daboniepanjing chao* 大般涅槃經鈔 or *Daboniepanjing yiyao* 大般涅槃經義要 (“Digests of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra”).

The published catalogues of Dunhuang collections contain over twenty manuscripts that have been given these labels by modern catalogue compilers. Most of them date from approximately 7th–8th cc. AD. They consist of MPNMS fragments arranged in an order that differs from the canonical version.

Amongst these documents three typologically different kinds of texts are found — a) wasted pages (marked with *dui* 兌 “deleted”) conglutinated together; b) random writings; c) well-organized sūtra extracts (*yiyao* 義要).

Making digests of sūtras was quite common in medieval China. Nevertheless, bibliographers tended to regard such texts negatively, and digests were placed in the category of apocryphal texts and dubious sūtras. Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518) expressed concerns that two such texts, which he dated as being from the reign of Emperor Wu of Southern Qi (483–493), while not fake and promoting the teaching, might at some point in the future be mistaken for the original.⁷

For our purposes we consider the following manuscripts: 北敦 6363 (北 6604), 北敦 3386 (北 6610) and 北敦 2838 (北 6607) from the collection of the National Library of China. All three take the form of a digest made up of quotations from the “core portion” of the “Northern” version of the sūtra

⁵ FANG Guangchang 1997, 377–401; JING Shengxuan 2009, 303–316.

⁶ JING Shengxuan 2009, 317–332.

⁷ KUO Liying 2000, 683–684; T. 2145, p. 39b4–7

(1–10 vols.) that were carefully copied in the order of the canonical version, divided by titles with the volume numbers and have been dated to around 7th–8th cc.

The colophon of some lost MPNMS manuscript dated the equivalent of AD 721 reads: (開元九年臘月十三日馬奉錄於此經中略取要義) On the 13th day of the 12th month of 9th year of Kaiyuan reign, Ma Fenglu slightly extracted the essentials from this sūtra.⁸

Of course, we cannot therefore conclude that three manuscripts in the Beijing collection are the “essentials” made by a certain Ma Fenglu in 721, nor indeed can we judge the authenticity of that colophon. Moreover, in the various digests the quotes from the MPNMS are not always identical, but generally include the same fragments with few differences. However, the date of this colophon is in line with the estimated dating of these manuscripts, which might also prove that the making of such digests of the sūtra was practiced in the 7th–8th cc.

The following *table* presents a comparison of the technical characteristics of these three manuscripts:

	北敦 6363	北敦 3386	北敦 2838
condition	beginning mutilated	beginning mutilated	beginning and end both mutilated
content	Preface (mtd); MPNMS quotations (vols. 1–10)	MPNMS quotations (vols. 4–10)	MPNMS quotations (vols. 3–6)
titles	each vol., except the first (卷第二, 卷第三 etc.)	each vol. (卷第五, 卷第六 etc.)	vols. 4, 5. The title of vol. 6 is omitted (卷第四, 卷第五)
dating	7th–8th cc., Tang. dynasty	7th–8th cc., Tang. dynasty	7th–8th cc., Tang. dynasty.
script	<i>kaishu</i>	<i>kaishu</i>	<i>kaishu</i>
length	3.4+1245 cm	1061 cm	5.5+260 cm
width	26 cm	25.5 cm	28.1 cm
length of a single sheet	45.5–46.2 cm	40 cm	36.5–37 cm

⁸ The colophon was published by IKEDA On 1990, 292

	北敦 6363	北敦 3386	北敦 2838
top margin	no data	~2.8 cm	~2.8 cm
bottom margin	no data	~3.4 cm	varies
width of frame	no data	~1.85 cm	varies
characters per line	no data	17	17
lines per sheet	~28	23	22–24
lines (total)	no data	605	167

These characteristics can help us to reconstruct the presumed type of scroll division in the core sūtra part of the original text that served as a source. For example, in the 北敦 6363 manuscript the last quotation from the first volume ends with 却坐一面⁹, while the text after the second volume title 卷第二 begins with 爾時娑羅¹⁰ which might not accord with the division common for all extant versions of this volume. In all known versions the second volume starts with 爾時會中¹¹. The vast majority of copies of the first and the second sūtra volumes share this common division. The only exception is the S.3707 (MPNMS vol. 1), which ends with 皆亦如是¹². The second volume of this set ought therefore to begin with 爾時會中¹³, so the S.3707 list should belong to the same divisional type as the master copy that served as a source for 北敦 6363.

The data obtained are best presented as a table. I have used alphabetical labels to identify the types of division given in the aforementioned “check lists”: a. 北 6612v, also S.1361 and Φ-271, b. 北 6612v, c. P.3150, d. P.5047. The type of division reconstructed from the “Digests of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra” is shown here as (e). The cells with shelfmarks contain the ending of the last quotation of the volume and the beginning of the next one. The (e) type is highlighted in grey and in cases where it accords with other types the corresponding cells are also highlighted in grey.

⁹ T., vol. 12, p. 366a16.

¹⁰ T., vol. 12, p. 371b12.

¹¹ T., vol. 12, p. 371c14.

¹² T., vol. 12, p. 371b11.

¹³ T., vol. 12, p. 371b12.

vol. number	type of division	beginning line (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)	type of division	concluding title (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)
1	<i>Taishō</i>	365c06	<i>Taishō</i>	371c08
	a	365c06	a	371c08
	b		b	
	c		c	
	d ¹⁴		d	
	e	365c06	e	371b11
	北敦 6363	365c07	北敦 6363	366a16~371b12
2	<i>Taishō</i>	371c08	<i>Taishō</i>	379a06
	a	371c08	a	379a06
	b		b	
	c		c	
	d		d	
	e	371b12?	e	379a06
	北敦 6363	366a16~371b12	北敦 6363	377b22~379c14
3	<i>Taishō</i>	379a13	<i>Taishō</i>	385b06
	a	379a13	a, e	384c25
	b		b	385b13
	c		c	
	d		d	
	e?	379a13?	3.5?	?
			3.6?	?
	北敦 6363	377b22~379c14	北敦 6363	384c25
	北敦 2838	?	北敦 2838	384c25~c27

¹⁴ The characteristics of divisional type (d) are known only for volumes 19–29 because the document P.5047 is damaged. Since our table gives data for volumes 1–10 only, its cells have intentionally been left blank.

vol. number	type of division	beginning line (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)	type of division	concluding title (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)
4	<i>Taishō</i>	385b13	<i>Taishō</i>	390b08
	a, e	384c27	a, e1	390b13
	b	385b13	b	
	c		c	
	d	?	d	
	?	?	e2?	391b05
	?	?	?	391b29
	北敦 6363	384c25	北敦 363	395b29~c17
			北敦 3386	389b9~395b27
	北敦 2838	384c25~c27	北敦 2838	391a10~391b6
5	<i>Taishō</i>	390b15	<i>Taishō</i>	396c11
	a, e1	390b15	a	396c10
	b		b	
	c		c	
	d		d	
	e2?	391b06(?)	e	398a12
	?	391c03(?)		
	北敦 6363	395b29~c17	北敦 6363	398a12~398b12
	北敦 3386	389b9~395b27	北敦 3386	397b27~398b12
	北敦 2838	391a10~391b6	北敦 2838	?
6	<i>Taishō</i>	396c18	<i>Taishō</i>	402c11
	a	396c18	a	402c10
	b		b	
	c		c	404a29
	d		d	

vol. number	type of division	beginning line (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)	type of division	concluding title (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)
	e	398a13	e	404a29
	(?)Дx-3369	396c06	(?)Дx-3369	?
	北敦 6363	398a12~398b13	北敦 6363	403a14~406b03
	北敦 3386	397b27~398b13	北敦 3386	403a14~406b03
7	<i>Taishō</i>	402c18	<i>Taishō</i>	408c23
	a	402c18	a	411a06
	b		b	408c22
	c	404b01	c	
	d		d	
	e	404b01	e	411a06
	?	?	?	411b16(?)
	北敦 6363	403a14~406b03	北敦 6363	410b29~411b25
	北敦 3386	403a14~406b03	北敦 3386	410b29~411b25
8	<i>Taishō</i>	409a15	<i>Taishō</i>	409a15
	a	411a07	a	417b13
	b	409a19	b	416a10
	c		c	417b13
	d		d	
	e	411a07	e?	417c01
	P.2342	411b17	?	?
	北敦 6363	410b29~411b25	北敦 6363	417a29~417c01
	北敦 3386	410b29~411b25	北敦 3386	417a29~417c01
9	<i>Taishō</i>	416a18	<i>Taishō</i>	422b27
	a	417b14	a	422b27
	b	416a18	b	

vol. number	type of division	beginning line (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)	type of division	concluding title (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)
	c	417b14	c	
	d		d	
	e	417c01	e	422b27
	北敦 6363	417a29~417c01	北敦 6363	422b12~423a4
	北敦 3386	417a29~417c01	北敦 3386	422b12~423a4
10	<i>Taishō</i>	422c06	<i>Taishō</i>	428b13
	a		a	
	b		b	
	c		c	
	d		d	
	e	422c06	e	
	?		?	432a06
	北敦 6363	422b12~423a4	北敦 6363	428b12~
	北敦 3386	422b12~423a4	北敦 3386	428b12~

The data obtained make it possible to classify the sheets according to their types of scroll division. The following table has been borrowed from the work of Jing Shengxuan and updated with the newly data. Where possible, the shelfmark is accompanied by an approximate dating. The shelfmarks are given in Chinese characters (for Chinese collections). The manuscripts from the National Library of China have two sorts: old (北) and new (北敦), apart from newly catalogued items for which only the new type is used.

type of division	beginning or/and ending line (according to <i>Taishō</i> , vol. 12)	shelfmarks of manuscripts from Dunhuang
<i>juan</i> 1		
(e)	如是~如是 (365c06~371b11)	S.3707 (~500)

type of division	beginning or/and ending line (according Taishō, vol. 12)	shelfmarks of manuscripts from Dunhuang
(a) (b) (c) (d)	?~灑地 (?~371c08)	S.1317, 甘圖26, S.3707, 北 6287 (北敦 6298), S.1550, 津藝 200, S.3153, S.6943, 北 6285 (北敦 845) + 北 6289 (北敦 544) + 北 6290 (北敦 686)
<i>juan 2</i>		
(e)	爾時~是法 (371b12(?)~379a05)	北敦 14507 (5–6th cc.)
(a) (b) (c)	爾時~是法 (371c14~379a05)	北敦 14954 (7–8th cc.)
	爾時~? (371c14~?)	北敦 14954 (7–8th cc.)
	?~是法 (?~379a05)	北 6293 (北敦 2322) (6th c.), S.829 (7th c.), 北 6295 (北敦 1997) (5–6th cc.), S.4500 (7–8th cc.), S.6098, 北敦 14507 (5–6th cc.).
<i>juan 3</i>		
(a) (e)	?~色象 (?~384c25)	S.2835 (6th c.), S.2876 (early 6th c.), 北 6299 (北敦 4355) (6th c.), 北敦 14946 (6th c.), 北敦 15323 (8–9th cc.), 北敦 15151 (6th c.)
(b) (c)	?~所覆 (?~385b06)	北敦 15323 (8–9th cc.), 北 6302 (北敦 2370) + 北 6300 (北敦 7654) + 北 6300 (北敦 7654) + 北 6303 (北敦 7516) + 北 6304 (北敦 2726) + 北 6307 (北敦 7462) (5–6th cc.), S.4720, 北 6298 (北敦 1215) (6–8th cc.), S.172 (7th c.), Φ-184 (8–9th cc.), S.6742 (7th c.), 北敦 13842 (8–9th cc.), 北敦 14459 (7–8th cc.)
<i>juan 4</i>		
(e2)	?~墮落(?~391b05)	北 6308 (北敦 6588) (5–6th cc.), 津藝 022 (522), 北 6309 (北敦 7949)(5–6th cc.)
(b) (c) (e1)	佛復~那含 (385b13~390b07)	北敦 13843 (9–10th cc.)

type of division	beginning or/and ending line (according Taishō, vol. 12)	shelfmarks of manuscripts from Dunhuang
(a) (b) (c)	?~那含 (?~390b07)	北 6306 (北敦 1946) (7–8th cc.), 北 6305 (北敦 5261) (8th c.), 北 6311 (北敦 2676) + S. 433 (7–8th cc.), S.2115, 北 6538 (7–8th cc.)
(?)	?~涅槃 (?~391b29)	S.3518 (588)
<i>juan 5</i>		
(e)	?~惡道 (?~398a12)	北 6316 (北敦 1131) (7–8th cc.), 北 6317 (北敦 3405) (5–6th cc.), 北 6319 (北敦 5733) (5–6th cc.), 北 6318 (北敦 1038) (5–6th cc.), 中央圖書館 81
(e1)	爾時~惡道 (390b15~398a12)	北敦 13874 (8–9th cc.), 北敦 13875 (7–8th cc.)
(a) (b) (c)	爾時~正法 (390b15~396c10)	S.1966 (7–9th cc.), 北 6539 (北敦 663) (9–10th cc.), 北 6321 (北敦 2760) (7–9th cc.), S.5384 (7–9th cc.), 北敦 14949 (708)
<i>juan 6</i>		
(e) (c)	爾時~菩薩 (398a13~404a29)	S.2393 (6th c.), 北 6323 (北敦 1470) (7–8th cc.), S.2864 (7th c.), 中央圖書館 73
(a) (b)	善男~經典 (396c14~402c10)	北 6324 (北敦 3173) (8th c.), 北 6325 (北敦 3975) (9–10th cc.), 北敦 13844 (8–9th cc.)
<i>juan 7</i>		
(e)	復次~思議 (404b01~411a06)	北敦 13845 (7–8th cc.), 中書店14 (7th c.)
(a)(e)	?~說已 (?~411a06)	S.67 (6th c.), 北 6327 (北敦 3430 (5–6th cc.), 北 6334 (北敦 1209) (7–8th cc.), 津藝 328, 北敦 14484 (7–8th cc.)
(a)	爾時~說已 (402c18~411a06)	北 6326 (北敦 1358) (6th c.), 北 6326 (北敦 1358) (6th c.)

type of division	beginning or/and ending line (according Taishō, vol. 12)	shelfmarks of manuscripts from Dunhuang
(b) (c)	?~思議 (?~408c22)	S.6573
<i>juan 8</i>		
(?) (e)?	善男~涅槃 (411a07~417c01)	S.883, 北 6542 (北敦 89), Φ-82, 北 6330 (北敦 1983), P.2205, S.4876, 散 68, 北敦 14464, 北敦 14550, 中央圖書館 82, Φ-82 (7-9th cc.), 北敦 1983 (7-8th cc.), S.4876, 北敦 14464 (7-8th cc.), 北敦 14550 (7-8th cc.), S.883 (7th c.), 北 6542 (北敦 89) (7-9th cc.)
(a)	善男~滅沒 (411a07~417b13)	北敦 13846 (8-9th cc.)
(a)(c)	?~滅沒(?~417b13)	S.6942 (7th c.)
(b)	?~等鳥 (?~416a10)	S.130, Φ-74 (7-9th cc.), 北 6333 (北敦 3653) (7-8th cc.)
<i>juan 9</i>		
(e)	迦葉~不久 (417c01~422b27)	S.93 (7th c.), 北 6543 (北敦 3714) (6-7th cc.), 上博 4 (7-8th cc.), 上博 4 (7-8th cc.), 上博 61 (7-8th cc.), 北 6335 (北敦 2136), 北敦 13847 (8th c.)
(b)	復次~不久 (416a18~422b27)	S.4788, S.6510 (6th c.)
<i>juan 10</i>		
the scroll division is the same for all manuscripts		

Different versions of MPNMS manuscripts were circulating in Dunhuang during the entire period spanned by the Dunhuang manuscripts collection. For its core portion there are versions with at least four different scroll divisions ((a), (b), (c), and (e) versions). The (e) type copies were circulating

from the 5th c. till 10th c. or later, but the majority date from the 5th–6th cc., with some (considerably fewer less) from the 7th–8th cc. By contrast, manuscripts belonging to the (b) type were copied mostly in later centuries (8th–10th cc.). The “Essence of MPNMS” manuscripts were copied from the (e) version. The scheme of its division is presented below.

1. from 如是 to 如是 (365c06–371b11)
2. from 爾時 to 是法 (371b12–379a06?)
3. from 佛復 to 色像 (379a13?–384c25)
4. from 爾時 to 那含 (384c27–390b07) (e1) / from 爾時 to 墮落 (384c25–391b05) (e2)¹⁵
5. from 爾時 to 惡道 (390b15–398a12) (e1) / from 迦葉 to 惡道 (391b06–398a12) (e2)
6. from 爾時 to 菩薩 (398a13–404a29)
7. from 複次 to 說已 (404b01–411a06)
8. from 善男 to 涅槃 (411a07–417c01) / from 善男 to 滅沒 (411a07–417b13?)
9. from 善男 to 不久 (417c01–422b27) / from 複次 to 不久 (417b14?–422b27)
10. from 爾時 to 病人 (422c06–428b13)

From this preliminary classification, we can only know that all types of division were probably in use in all periods when the Dunhuang cave library was accumulating its stocks (5th to 10th cc.). That means that these different types were not standardized from the very beginning of sūtra circulation until the library was sealed up in the first part of 11th c. The modest attempts to standardize the copying process that were made by unknown scribes did not change the overall situation. Moreover, the division into volumes of xylographic editions of Chinese Tripiṭakas produced in the following centuries is not uniform either and might be compared with manuscript from Dunhuang. From time to time the copyists tended to deal quite freely with texts, randomly splitting them in order, for example, to save paper. Further investigation will allow us to produce a more detailed reconstruction of the history of the MPNMS text.

¹⁵ We can see that there seems to be some variations of the “e” version, so we have marked the master copy of 北敦 2838 as “e2” type.

Abbreviations

MPNMS: Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra

T.: Taishō Buddhist Canon

mtd: mutilated

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