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A Study of Dunhuang Manuscript S.2614V,  
*Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother*  
*from the Underworld:*

Revisions and Textual Transmission

by  
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A Study of Dunhuang Manuscript S.2614V,  
*Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld:*  
Revisions and Textual Transmission\*

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\*In 2014, I had the opportunity to examine manuscript S.2614 at the British Library. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone at that institution.

## ABSTRACT

The *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* (*Mulian bianwen* 目連變文) narrates the story of the Buddhist disciple Maudgalyāyana (Mulian 目連) rescuing his mother, who had fallen into hell. This tale, revealed through the Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscripts, is a work of Chinese popular literature from the tenth century, with multiple extant manuscripts. This paper aims to elucidate how the story of Maudgalyāyana was received during that period by analyzing one such manuscript, S.2614V. Specifically, it focuses on three aspects: (1) revisions to the manuscript's content, particularly through the pasting of a new sheet; (2) changes in manuscript ownership; and (3) the relationship between the text and the picture storytelling performance tradition. My discussion of these aspects is based on insights from directly examining the manuscript. The study not only provides a fresh understanding of the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* and Dunhuang manuscripts but also is significant in that it sheds light on textual transmission through a specific tenth-century manuscript.

**Keywords:** Dunhuang manuscripts, S.2614V, *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* (*Mulian bianwen*), tenth century, manuscripts, textual transmission

## INTRODUCTION

Dunhuang 敦煌, located in northwest China, flourished as a critical junction on the Silk Road and has a rich history as a Buddhist city. In 1900, approximately sixty thousand documents were discovered there. These documents originated from Buddhist temple archives and primarily consist of Chinese manuscripts written in the ninth and tenth centuries. Among them are eleven manuscripts that depict the story of the Buddha's disciple Maudgalyāyana (Mulian 目連) rescuing his mother, who had fallen into hell.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the British Library holds S.2614V, titled *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld, One Scroll, with Preface* (*Da Muqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen yi juan bing xu* 大目乾連冥間救母變文一卷並序; S.2614 is the manuscript number, and V stands for verso). The manuscript is well preserved, and its content is coherent, which has led it to be seen as essential for understanding the content of the *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana*.<sup>2</sup> However, certain issues in this manuscript remain unexplored by previous scholars. Based on insights gained through manuscript analysis, this paper aims to clarify the revisions, manuscript transmission, and literary characteristics of S.2614V.

S.2614V is a scroll measuring 26.5 cm in height and 6.13 m in length. It contains 421 lines. According to the colophon, the manuscript was copied by Xue Anjun 薛安俊 on the sixteenth day of the fourth month in the year 921. Of its nineteen sheets, only the ninth sheet was replaced later. Through

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<sup>1</sup> The manuscript numbers are as follows: S.2614V, S.3704, P.2319, P.3107, P.3485, P.4044, P.4988V + 羽 19V, BD00876V, BD04085 + BD03789, Shi Guofeng 石谷風藏 Collection 69 + 70 + 71, 羽 71.

<sup>2</sup> S.2614V has been considered the central manuscript for transcriptions of the *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana*. Wang Zhongmin 王重民 et al., *Dunhuang bianwenji* 敦煌變文集 (Dunhuang *Bianwen* Collections) (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1957); Pan Chonggui, *Dunhuang bianwenji xinshu* 敦煌變文集新書 (A New Collection of Dunhuang *Bianwen*) (Taipei: Zhongguo Wenhua Daxue Zhongwen Yanjiusuo Dunhuangxue Yanjiuhui, 1983); Xiang Chu 項楚, *Dunhuang bianwen xuanzhu* 敦煌變文選注 (Selected and Annotated Dunhuang Transformation Texts) (Chengdu: Bashu Shushe, 1990; revised edition, Zhonghua Shuju, 2006); Huang Zheng 黃徵 and Zhang Yongquan 張涌泉, eds., *Dunhuang bianwen jiaozhu* 敦煌變文校注 (Dunhuang Transformation Texts Collated and Annotated) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997); Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 et al., *Dunhuang bianwen jiangjingwen yinyuan ji jiao* 敦煌變文講經文因緣輯校 (Collected Collations of the Transformation Texts, Sūtra Lecture Texts, and Nidānas from Dunhuang) (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1998).

manuscript analysis, it became clear that the text had been rewritten during this replacement. This paper first elucidates the nature of these textual revisions. Second, it examines the changes in manuscript ownership through the style of the colophon and how the paper was cut. Third, it explores the relationship between the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* and visual art, considering the literary characteristics of S.2614V. These discussions are significant for understanding, through primary sources from the period, how manuscripts facilitated textual transmission in China over a thousand years ago.

Before proceeding to more concrete discussions, this paper will provide a concise summary of foundational information about the Dunhuang manuscripts and the *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana*, situating this study within the broader context of research on Chinese classical texts.

## ISSUES IN DUNHUANG MANUSCRIPT RESEARCH

The Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered in 1900 by Wang Yuanlu 王圓籙 in the Mogao Caves (Mogaoku 莫高窟) of Dunhuang. Although these manuscripts remained in Dunhuang for a while, they began circulating internationally after British-Hungarian explorer Marc Aurel Stein acquired some in 1907, followed by the French sinologist Paul Pelliot in 1908. As a result, many manuscripts were transferred to Britain and France. In 1909, Chinese scholars and government officials began efforts to preserve the Dunhuang manuscripts within China. However, many still found their way to Russia, Japan, and other countries, leading to their global dispersion.<sup>3</sup> Over time, catalogs, microfilms, and facsimile publications were produced, gradually advancing research.<sup>4</sup> In 1994, numerous institutions housing

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<sup>3</sup> Currently, more than seventeen thousand items are housed in the British Library, over eight thousand in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, more than sixteen thousand in the National Library of China, and approximately twenty thousand in the Saint Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. These four institutions are considered the world's leading repositories of Dunhuang manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup> Representative studies on the history of this research include: Umemura Hiroshi 梅村坦, "Tonkō tanken kenkyūshi" 敦煌探検研究史 (The History of Dunhuang Expeditions and Research), in Enoki Kazuo 榎一雄, ed., *Tonkō no shizen to genjō* 敦煌の自然と現状 (Dunhuang's Natural Environment and Present Condition), Kōza Tonkō 講座敦煌 1 (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1980), pp. 183–241; Guo Feng 郭鋒, "Dunhuang hanwen wenxian" 敦煌漢文文獻 (Dunhuang Chinese Textual

Dunhuang manuscripts, led by the British Library, collaboratively launched the International Dunhuang Project (IDP). By the twenty-first century, high-resolution images of the manuscripts had started to be made publicly accessible online, establishing an indispensable database for Dunhuang studies today.<sup>5</sup> Despite these advancements, research on the manuscripts themselves has yet to become widely established in academia. Since most Chinese classical texts have been preserved through printed editions, the field of printed text research has developed to a high level. However, the scarcity of surviving manuscripts and the rarity of large-scale manuscript discoveries—such as the Dunhuang manuscripts—have rendered manuscript research uncommon. The Dunhuang manuscript researcher Zhang Yongquan 張涌泉 emphasized the importance of manuscript research in the book *Dunhuang xieben wenxue* 敦煌写本文献学 (Dunhuang Manuscript Philology [Lanzhou: Gansu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2013]). While this assertion is significant, it also underscores that manuscript research has not yet been fully established as an academic discipline. The challenges in Dunhuang studies lie not only in the global dispersion of the manuscripts but also in the fact that most are manuscripts rather than printed texts, leaving foundational research still lacking. This is why S.2614V continues to require fundamental manuscript research.

The S.2614 manuscript initially featured a roster of monks from Dunhuang temples on the recto

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Sources), in Song Jiayu 宋家鈺 and Liu Zhong 劉忠, eds., *Yingguo shoucang Dunhuang han zang wenxian yanjiu: Jinian Dunhuang wenxian faxian yibai zhounian* 英國收藏敦煌漢藏文獻研究—紀念敦煌文獻發現一百周年 (Research on Chinese and Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts in the British Collection: Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Discovery of the Dunhuang Manuscripts) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 41–67; Takata Tokio 高田時雄, ed., *Sōsōki no Tonkōgaku: Ra-Ō ryō sensei tōto go shūnen kinen Nicchū kyōdō wākushoppu no kiroku* 草創期の敦煌學: 羅・王兩先生東渡 90 周年記念日中共同ワークショップの記録 (The Early Period of Dunhuang Studies: Proceedings of the Japan-China Joint Workshop Commemorating the Ninetieth Anniversary of Professors Luo and Wang's Journey to the East) (Tokyo: Chisen Shoin, 2002); Takata Tokio 高田時雄, “Tonkō shahon o motomete: Nihonjin gakusha no Yōroppa hōshokō” 敦煌写本を求めて——日本人学者のヨーロッパ訪書行 (In Search of Dunhuang Manuscripts: Japanese Researchers in Europe), *Bukkyō geijutsu* 佛教藝術 (Buddhist Art) 271 (Tokyo, 2003), pp. 21–32; Liu Jinbao 刘进宝, *Dunhuangxue tonglun* 敦煌学通论 (General Introduction to Dunhuang Studies) (Lanzhou: Gansu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2002; revised edition, 2019); Rong Xinjian 榮新江, *Dunhuangxue shiba jiang* 敦煌学十八讲 (Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang) (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> <https://idp.bl.uk/> (last accessed December 16, 2024).

side, written around 900.<sup>6</sup> The *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* on the verso was later copied by Xue Anjun on the sixteenth day of the fourth month of 921, after the roster was no longer needed. *Bianwen* 變文, or “transformation text,” refers to a genre of literary texts derived from the performance art of performers who sang and narrated stories while displaying pictures to an audience.<sup>7</sup> This performance art was known as *zhuanbian* 轉變, and references to it appear in sources from the mid-eighth to the tenth century. In a previous study, I collected all extant materials concerning *zhuanbian* and analyzed their characteristics, clarifying that the *zhuan* 轉 in *zhuanbian* shares the same meaning as *zhuan* 轉, “to sing,” while *bian* 變 refers to paintings or illustrated scrolls. In other words, *zhuanbian* means “to sing pictures depicted in illustrated scrolls.” *Zhuanbian* was often performed by women of low social status and consisted of alternating between singing and speaking. The images in illustrated scrolls were likely shown to the audience during the singing portions.<sup>8</sup> That *bianwen* inherited the

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6 Fujieda Akira 藤枝晃, “Tonkō no sōni seki” 敦煌の僧尼籍 (The Buddhist Monastic Registry of Dunhuang), *Tōhō gakuho* 東方學報 (Journal of Oriental Studies) 29 (Kyoto, 1959), pp. 285–338; Chen Dawei 陳大為, *Tang houqi Wudai Song chu Dunhuang seng si yanjiu* 唐後期五代宋初敦煌僧寺研究 (A Study of Dunhuang Monasteries from the Late Tang to Early Song) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2014), pp. 187–238.

7 Victor H. Mair, *Tang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

8 Takai Ryū, “A Study of Li Yuan’s ‘Zhuanbian Ren,’” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 292 (2020), pp. 1–18. My view regarding the origins of *zhuanbian* and *bianwen* is as follows. The theory that they originated from the popularization of Buddhism in China has been widely accepted among scholars. This is based on *zhuanbian* having been a form of popular entertainment and *bianwen* a type of vernacular literature, as well as that both drew on Buddhist narratives. However, this view does not withstand close scrutiny. To begin with, there are no records of Buddhist illustrated storytelling involving alternating singing and narration prior to the mid-eighth century, when *zhuanbian* first emerged. Therefore, there is no logical explanation as to why the popularization of Buddhism would have given rise to *zhuanbian*. Furthermore, the popularization of Buddhism does not explain why *zhuanbian* particularly flourished in Shu 蜀. On the other hand, illustrated storytelling and prosimetric narration (alternating verse and prose) had long existed in India and the Western Regions. Given that Shu maintained close connections with both India and the Western Regions, it is more appropriate to consider the origins of *zhuanbian* and *bianwen* to lie outside of China. I elaborate on this view in my *Tonkō kōshō-tai bunken kenkyū: Shahon jidai no bungaku to bukkō* 敦煌講唱體文獻研究—寫本時代の文學と佛教— (A Study of Dunhuang Prosimetric Literature: Manuscript-Era Literature and Buddhism) (Kyoto: Hōyū Shoten, 2022), pp. 15–28. For a detailed discussion of illustrated storytelling across Asia, see Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis* (Honolulu:



characteristics of *zhuanbian* is evident in three key features: the use of colloquial vocabulary, a prosimetric style alternating between verse and prose, and the inclusion of the picture storytelling expression "Look ... what might this scene show?" (*kan... chu, ruhe* 看.....處，若何).<sup>9</sup> S.2614V contains all three of these features, and another characteristic is found in its title. The head title of the manuscript reads *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld, One Scroll, With Preface* (*Da Muqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen yi juan bing xu* 大目乾連冥間救母變文一卷並序). Originally, the title also included the characters *bing tu* 並圖, or "with pictures," but these two characters were erased. This indicates that while the manuscript was intended to be accompanied by illustrations, no pictures were ultimately included. The end title reads *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana, One Scroll* (*Da Muqianlian bianwen yi juan* 大目乾連變文一卷), an abbreviated form of the head title.

#### SUMMARY OF THE *TRANSFORMATION TEXT ON MAUDGALYĀYANA*

Maudgalyāyana was a devoted Buddhist who practiced filial piety toward his parents. After their death, he became a monk and diligently pursued the Buddhist path. Using his supranormal powers, he ascended to the heavens and met his father. However, he discovered that his mother, due to her misdeeds during her lifetime, was suffering in hell. Maudgalyāyana traversed through various hells and finally encountered his mother in the lowest level, the Avīci Hell, but he struggled to rescue her. The Buddha told him that donating food and drink to the clergy on the fifteenth day of the seventh month would save his mother. Following this guidance, Maudgalyāyana successfully rescued his mother from hell. Subsequently, after reciting Mahāyāna sutras for seven days and nights in repentance, his mother was reborn as a human and ascended to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Celestials.

Based on the above understanding, I will next examine the first characteristic revealed through my manuscript analysis—the textual revision of S.2614V.

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University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> See note 7.

## THE REPLACEMENT SHEET AND CONTENT REVISIONS OF S.2614V

The ninth of the S.2614V's nineteen sheets, covering lines 183 to 188 of the total 421 lines, is different from the other sheets. The passage describes Maudgalyāyana's journey through hell in search of his mother. When he meets the warden of the Copper Pillar and Iron Bed Hell (*tongzhu tiechuang diyu* 銅柱鐵床地獄), he learns that his mother is no longer there and has moved to the Avīci Hell.

While it has long been known that the ninth sheet is a replacement,<sup>10</sup> the reason why only this sheet was replaced has not been previously examined. Two possible explanations come to mind: the manuscript was damaged and subsequently repaired, or the original text was intentionally rewritten. My investigation reveals that the latter theory is correct. The clue lies on the right edge of the tenth sheet, which was placed beneath the replacement ninth sheet. Below is an illustration showing the area where the ninth and tenth sheets are glued together.

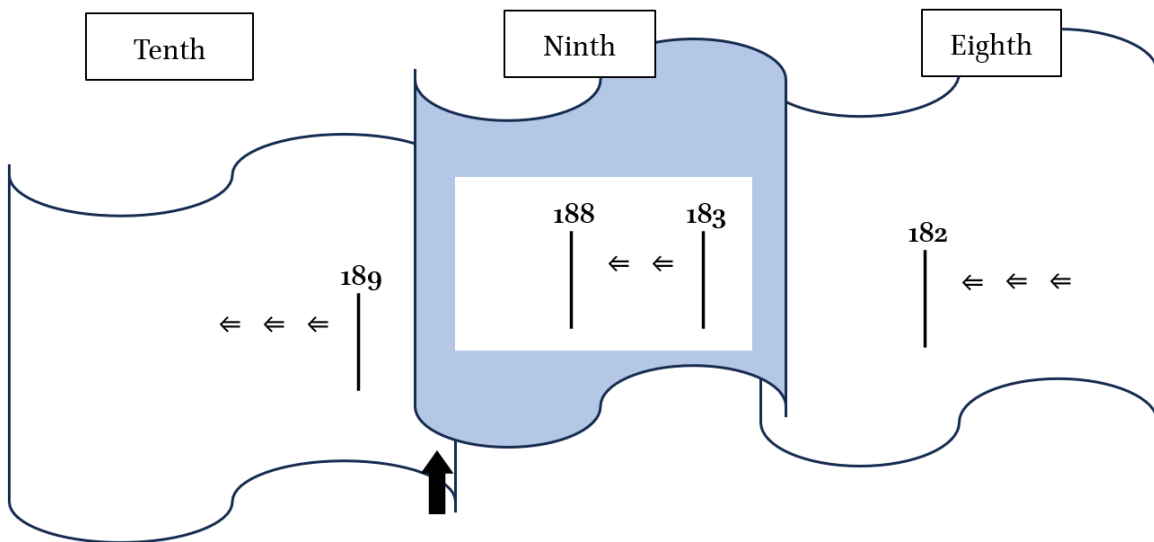


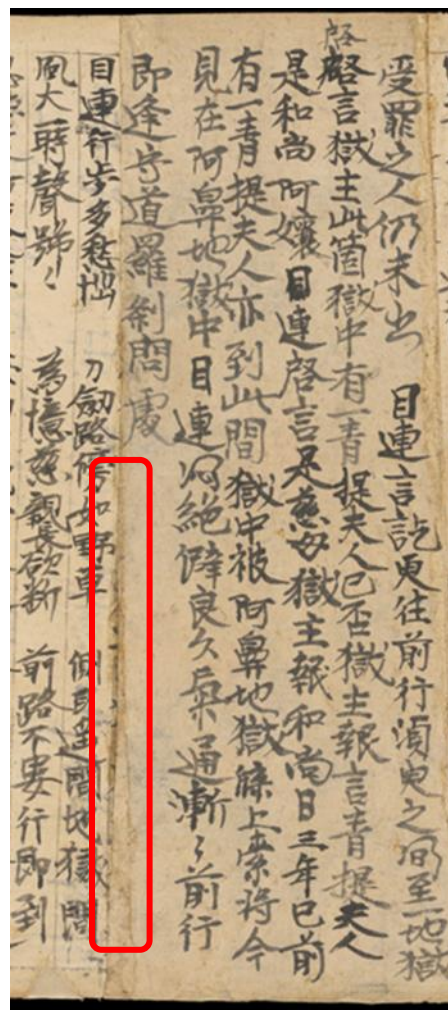
Figure 1. The replacement ninth sheet. S.2614V

Upon opening the manuscript, three characters—“𠂇,” “𠂈,” and “𠂉”—can be discerned on the right edge of the tenth sheet that lies beneath the left edge of the ninth sheet. Each represents the left half of a Chinese character, indicating that these characters were cut off when the ninth sheet was newly

<sup>10</sup> See note 6, Fujieda article.

affixed. Below is a transcription and photograph of this section, with the location of the three characters enclosed in square brackets. A translation of the passage is also provided.

Tenth Sheet		Ninth Sheet	
L.	189	L.	183
目連行步多愁惱，刀劍路傍如野草。側耳遙聞地獄間，		受罪之人仍未出。目連言訖，更往前行。須臾之間，至一地獄。	
L.	188	L.	184
即逢守道羅刹問處：		啓言獄主：「此箇獄中，有一青提夫人已否？」獄主報言：「青提夫人	
L.	187	L.	185
見在阿鼻地獄中。」目連悶絕，僻「地」 <sup>11</sup> ，良久氣通，漸漸前行，		是和尚阿孃？」目連啓言：「是慈母。」獄主報和尚曰：「三年已前，	
L.	186	有一青提夫人，亦到此間獄中，被阿鼻地獄牒上索將，今	
..... 糸偏			



**Figure 2.** Images and transcriptions of the ninth sheet and top of the tenth sheet.

S.2614V. Source: British Library <https://idp.bl.uk/collection/>

D1DAE8ED601D445BBFFDBDEFD27EBD4E/

?return=%2Fcollection%2F%3Fterm%3DS.2614

<sup>11</sup> The character for “地” is missing here, so I have added it, based on other *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* manuscripts (P. 2319, 羽 71), which retain the same text.

## TRANSLATION

Those being punished will still not be released [from hell].”

When Maudgalyāyana finished speaking, he continued forward. Before long, he arrived at a hell. He said to the warden, “Is there a Lady Nīladhi in this hell?”

The warden said, “Is Lady Nīladhi your mother, venerable monk?”

Maudgalyāyana said, “She is my dear mother.”

“Three years ago,” the warden said to the venerable monk, “a Lady Nīladhi came to this hell, but a summons arrived from the Avīci Hell. She is now in the Avīci Hell.”

Overcome with grief, Maudgalyāyana collapsed to the ground. He revives and slowly goes forward. This is the place where he encounters a road-guarding *rākṣasa* and questions him.

Maudgalyāyana walked with much sorrow and distress.

Blades and swords lined the roadside like wild grass.

Straining his ears, he listened for the sounds of the hells,

## THE TEXT OF THE NINTH SHEET BEFORE REPLACEMENT

As shown in the transcription, beneath the character “𠂇,” there is another character, which is then followed by the characters “𠂇” and “𠂇.” Below the character “𠂇,” there is space for only three or four more characters before line 189 on the tenth sheet: “Maudgalyāyana walked with much sorrow and distress.” (*Mulian xingbu duo chou nao* 目連行步多愁惱). This means the three discovered characters were originally part of the passage immediately preceding line 189 on the tenth sheet before the ninth sheet was replaced. This discovery raises an issue. In the currently visible, newly replaced ninth sheet, the passage immediately preceding the tenth sheet’s line 189 reads: “This is the place where he encounters a road-guarding *rākṣasa* and questions him” (*Ji feng shoudao luocha wen chu* 即逢守道羅刹問處). However, there are no characters corresponding to “𠂇,” “𠂇,” or “𠂇.” This indicates that the passage preceding the tenth sheet’s line 189 differed before and after replacing the ninth sheet.

So, what was originally written? The answer lies in line 187: "in the Avīci Hell.' Overcome with grief, Maudgalyāyana collapsed to the ground" (獄中目連悶絕僻地). This passage includes the exact characters identified through manuscript analysis: "𠂔" corresponds to the left part of "獄," "𠂔" corresponds to the left part of "絕," and "𠂔" corresponds to the left part of "僻." Additionally, the findings align with the fact that there were several characters written below "獄," that "絕" and "僻" were written consecutively, and that no more than three or four characters followed "僻." In other words, before the ninth sheet was replaced, the passage preceding the tenth sheet's line 189 was actually what is now line 187 of the ninth sheet: "(She is now) in the Avīci Hell.' Overcome with grief, Maudgalyāyana collapsed to the ground" (獄中目連悶絕僻地).

This discovery leads to another insight: the passage currently written on lines 187–188 of the ninth sheet—"He revives and slowly goes forward. This is the place where he encounters a road-guarding *rākṣasa* and questions him." (*Liangjiu qi tong, jianjian qianxing, ji feng shoudao luocha wen chu* 良久氣通，漸漸前行，即逢守道羅刹問處)—was not present before the replacement of the ninth sheet. It was newly added during the replacement. A key feature of this passage is the final character, "處," a stock phrase originating from illustrated storytelling traditions. It creates the impression that the storyteller sang the following verse.<sup>12</sup> The fact that this characteristic *bianwen* expression was added during the manuscript replacement suggests that *bianwen* picture storytelling expressions were considered particularly important at the time.

This is the first major discovery from my manuscript analysis. The next section will examine the ownership history of the manuscript by focusing on the colophon and the method by which the manuscript was cut.

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<sup>12</sup> See note 7.

## THE OWNER OF THE MANUSCRIPT

Information regarding the ownership of S.2614V is preserved in its colophon, which reads as follows:

S.2614V, line 421

Written on the sixteenth day of the fourth month in the seventh year of the Zhenming 貞明 reign (921), the eighteenth year of the sixty-year cycle, by Xue Anjun, student of the Pure Land Monastery. Zhang Baoda's 張保達 document.

貞明柒年辛巳歲四月十六日淨土寺學郎薛安俊寫。張保達文書。

Xue Anjun recorded the date of transcription along with his status and name at the end of the manuscript. Following this, he noted that the document belonged to Zhang Baoda.

The first point of consideration regarding this colophon is the date of writing: the sixteenth day of the fourth month. In India, the three-month period from then until the fifteenth day of the seventh month corresponds to the rainy season, during which Buddhist monks could not leave their monasteries for alms rounds. Instead, they lived together in monastic retreat for intensive practice, a custom known as *varṣā*. This tradition was transmitted to China despite the differing climate. The *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* centers on Maudgalyāyana rescuing his mother with the assistance of many monks on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, coinciding with the conclusion of *varṣā*. Given this close connection between the text and *varṣā*, it is unlikely to be a mere coincidence that Xue Anjun completed the transcription on the sixteenth day of the fourth month.

The plausibility of this interpretation is further supported by the manuscript's length. S.2614V consists of 421 lines, with approximately twenty characters per line. This volume of text is beyond what a single person could write in one day. It is extremely unlikely that Xue Anjun happened to finish writing on the sixteenth day of the fourth month. Rather, he probably had largely completed the manuscript by the day before, leaving only the final sheet, a few lines, or even a single character to be written the next day. Historically, there are cases in which the text was copied as an act of prayer to avoid falling into

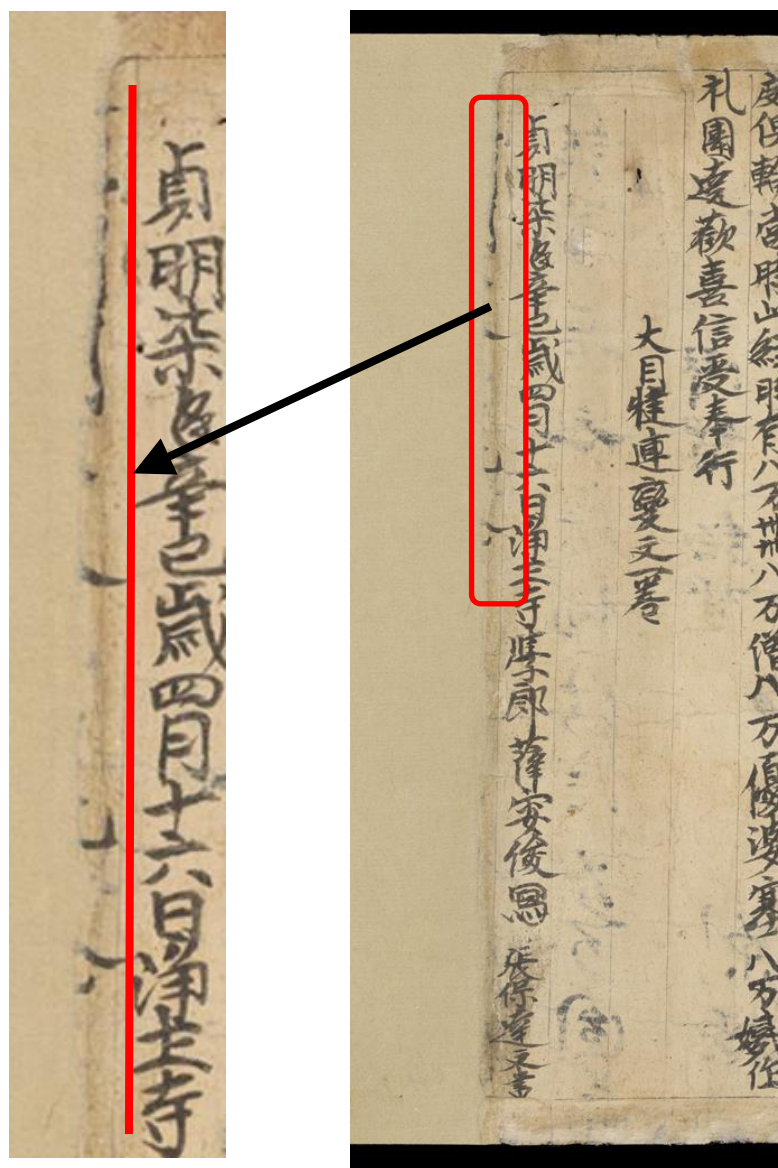
hell.<sup>13</sup> It may have also been associated with funeral rites.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Xue Anjun transcribed the text on the sixteenth day of the fourth month suggests that year's *varṣā* may have been related to the death of someone related to the manuscript's owner.

So who was the actual owner of this manuscript? According to the colophon, it was Zhang Baoda. However, physical evidence in the manuscript does not entirely support this conclusion. It is likely that Xue Anjun originally copied the text for someone other than Zhang Baoda and it later came into Zhang Baoda's possession. The key to this hypothesis lies in the cut edge of the manuscript following the colophon (see Figure 3).

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<sup>13</sup> The colophon of BD00876V states: “On the fifth day of the intercalary sixth month in the second year of the Taiping xingguo 太平興國 reign (977), the fourteenth year of the sixty-year cycle, the scholar-official Yang Yuanshou 楊願受 of the Manifest Virtue Temple, alone contemplating deeply, made a vow to create blessings by copying this scroll of *Transformation on Maudgalyāyana*. He is determined to, in the future, together with Śākyamuni Buddha, be reborn a buddha once he encounters Maitreya. Any sentient beings who later give rise to a believing heart-mind and similarly transcribe the *Transformation on Maudgalyāyana* will similarly possess the power of this vow and avoid falling into the three [negative] destinies.”

<sup>14</sup> Arami Hiroshi 荒見泰史, “Tonkō bunken ni mirareru ‘Mokuren henbun’ no shinshiryō: Pekin 8719-gō bunsho ni tsuite” 敦煌文献に見られる『目連変文』の新資料——北京 8719 号文書について (New Materials on the *Transformation on Maudgalyāyana* in Dunhuang Manuscripts: On Peking Manuscript 8719), *Tōhō shūkyō* 東方宗教 (Journal of Eastern Religions) 103 (Kyoto), pp. 61–77.



**Figure 3.** The cut edge of the last sheet of S.2614V. Source: British Library

[https://idp.bl.uk/collection/D1DAE8ED601D445BBFFDBDEFD27EBD4E/  
?return=%2Fcollection%2F%3Fterm%3DS.2614](https://idp.bl.uk/collection/D1DAE8ED601D445BBFFDBDEFD27EBD4E/?return=%2Fcollection%2F%3Fterm%3DS.2614)

The inscription “Zhang Baoda’s document” (*Zhang Baoda wenshu* 張保達文書) is written below Xue Anjun’s name. The issue here is the faint traces of additional characters in the following line. Although these characters are illegible, they are written in the same ink as Xue Anjun’s name, indicating that they were part of the original colophon; if they were unrelated to the colophon, not only would the ink likely be different, but there would also be at least one line of space separating them from the



transcription date and Xue Anjun's name. Such spacing would have served a visual function, making it easier to distinguish different textual components when the manuscript was opened. However, since this was not the case and the ink matches, it is reasonable to conclude that the excised portion was originally part of the colophon.

The next issue concerns the placement of Zhang Baoda's name. As it appears now, it is written directly beneath that of Xue Anjun. However, it normally would have been placed after the colophon, meaning it should have followed the excised portion. At the very least, it is most unnatural for another person's name to be inserted in the middle of a two-or-more-line colophon. Furthermore, compared to Xue Anjun's name, that of Zhang Baoda is clearly smaller, giving the impression that it was squeezed into a small blank space.

These observations suggest that there are issues that cannot be resolved if we interpret this colophon based just on an understanding of the characters. How should we think about them?

I think that the following is likely. Xue Anjun originally copied the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* for someone other than Zhang Baoda and wrote a colophon spanning at least two lines. Later, this manuscript was transferred to Zhang Baoda. At that point, the portion of the colophon following Xue Anjun's name was excised. As seen in the photograph, the second line of the colophon has been completely cut away, rendering it completely unreadable. This suggests that the excised section contained inconvenient content for Zhang Baoda. After this excision, the manuscript was inscribed with a statement identifying Zhang Baoda as the owner. It was written in small characters because there was only room to write in the limited space below Xue Anjun's name.

Supporting evidence for this hypothesis can be found in another manuscript copied by Xue Anjun: *General Exhortation of the Twelve Hours to the Four Orders to Cultivate Themselves in Accordance with the Doctrine* (*Shi'er shi puquan sizhong yijiao xiuxing wen* 十二時普勸四衆依教修行文), designated as P.2054. The colophon of this manuscript reads as follows:

P.2054, Final Two Lines

Copied on the seventeenth day of the fifth month in the second year of the Tongguang 同光 reign (924), the twenty-first year of the sixty-year cycle, by student Xue Anjun.

The faithful disciple Li Jishun 李吉順 especially retained it for recitation.

Encouraging virtue.

同光貳年甲申歲蕤賓之月冀彫二葉學士薛安俊書。

信心弟子李吉順專持念誦。勸善。

This colophon, like that of S.2614V, records the date of transcription as well as Xue Anjun's status and name. The crucial point is that the name of the manuscript's owner, Li Jishun, is explicitly stated in the second line. This provides an important clue for inferring the content of the lost colophon in S.2614V. I hypothesized that the excised colophon of S.2614V contained information inconvenient for Zhang Baoda. Based on the colophon of P.2054, it is reasonable to assume that this omitted text included the name of the manuscript's original owner. Given that S.2614V was later transferred to Zhang Baoda, it is natural that the original owner's name was erased. This suggests that S.2614V was not originally Zhang Baoda's manuscript, nor did Xue Anjun initially copy it for him.

Such changes in ownership indicate not only that S.2614V passed through multiple hands but also that the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* enjoyed significant popularity at the time. This aligns with the fact that numerous manuscripts of this text have survived among the Dunhuang documents.

Thus far, I have examined the textual revisions of S.2614V and the transformation of its colophon and ownership based on a manuscript analysis. Next, I will explore the relationship between the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* and visual art.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TRANSFORMATION TEXT ON MAUDGALYĀYANA AND VISUAL ART

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, traces of characters meaning “with pictures” can be found in the head title of S.2614V. This provides evidence that illustrated manuscripts of *bianwen*, originating from picture storytelling traditions, existed. However, in this manuscript, the phrase was erased, and no illustrations were included. I believe this deletion reflects the circumstances of the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana*'s transmission.

S.2614V was likely copied from an illustrated manuscript. However, in S.2614V, no illustrations were drawn, and the aforementioned characters meaning "with pictures" were removed. Another manuscript of the same text that hints at a relationship with illustrations is BD00876V, copied in 977. Although its title does not include such a phrase, blank spaces are left between passages, suggesting that illustrations were intended to be inserted. However, like S.2614V, this manuscript ultimately remained a text-only document. In tenth-century Dunhuang, manuscripts of, for example, the *Ten Kings Sutra* (*Foshuo shiwang jing* 佛說十王經) were produced, featuring richly colored images alongside the text.<sup>15</sup> Given this, it would not be surprising if numerous illustrated versions of the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* also existed. However, none have survived. This suggests that although some of its versions were associated with visual art, this was not the mainstream form of transmission. Instead, it was primarily circulated as a textual document without illustrations. This was not a unique characteristic of this text alone, as most *bianwen* manuscripts similarly lack illustrations.

Several dozen *bianwen* manuscripts exist.<sup>16</sup> Aside from the two *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana* manuscripts mentioned above, only two other manuscripts suggest a connection between transformation texts and illustrations: P.4524, the illustrated scroll of the *Transformation Text on Subjugating Demons* (*Xiangmo bianwen* 降魔變文), and P.5019 + BD11731 + J1x11018, the *Transformation Text on Lady Meng Jiang* (*Meng Jiang nü bianwen* 孟姜女變文). P.4524 is a picture storytelling scroll that combines text and images. The illustrations are on the recto, while the verse is written on the verso. There is no doubt that it was used in actual performances. However, this scroll was originally a purely pictorial roll without text, making it distinct from *bianwen* that record complete narratives. It does not represent a true fusion of literature and visual art.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, P.5019 +

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<sup>15</sup> Representative illustrated *Ten Kings Sutra* manuscripts combining images and sutra text include S.3961, P.2003, and the manuscript held at the Kubosō Memorial Museum of Art.

<sup>16</sup> The classification of *bianwen* manuscripts varies among scholars. In my definition, the primary condition is that the manuscript is explicitly titled *bian* or *bianwen*. Manuscripts or fragments that contain the same content as titled *bianwen* texts, even if untitled, are also included. Texts written in a style that alternates between verse and prose, or that incorporate illustrated storytelling expressions, may also be regarded as such. Refer to my monograph cited in note 8.

<sup>17</sup> Victor H. Mair, "Śāriputra Defeats the Six Heterodox Masters: Oral-Visual Aspects of an Illustrated Transformation Scroll (P. 4524)," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, volume 8, part 2, 1995, pp. 1–52.

BD11731 + J111018, the *Transformation Text on Lady Meng Jiang*, features illustrations on the recto and the written story of Lady Meng Jiang on the verso.<sup>18</sup> However, if the images were intended for performance, their monochrome nature raises questions. A survey of surviving picture storytelling images suggests that black-and-white illustrations were rarely used in actual performances. Additionally, the presence of both prose and verse on the verso presents another issue. Prose was not copied in manuscripts because if a performer were to read from the text, they would typically recite only the verse, freely narrating everything else.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, if this manuscript was meant for individuals to read on their own, it would be problematic for pictures and characters to be separated on the recto and verso. Given these issues, we should be cautious about categorizing this manuscript as a true integration of images and text. Even if we were to do so, it would not overturn the fact that the vast majority of *bianwen* manuscripts were transmitted as text-only documents.

From the above discussion, it can be inferred that S.2614V was transcribed as a textual document, the common form of *bianwen* at the time. During the transcription process, the illustrations present in the original model manuscript were omitted, and the characters meaning “with pictures” were erased. This suggests that S.2614V is a manuscript from immediately after the time text and images began to be separated. It represents a stage in the evolution of *bianwen* as they developed from a form closely tied to picture storytelling into textual documents. While *bianwen* likely had a strong connection to visual art in their early stages, they gradually evolved into a text-based literary genre. S.2614V serves as an example of this transformation, illustrating the process of separating these texts from their pictorial elements.

Of course, our understanding of *bianwen* remains limited by the availability of source materials. *Bianwen*, found only amongst the Dunhuang manuscripts, date primarily to the tenth century, and we

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<sup>18</sup> Liu Bo 劉波 and Lin Shitian 林世田, “Meng Jiangnü bianwen canjuan de zhuihe, jiaolu ji xiangguan wenti yanjiu” 孟姜女變文殘卷的綴合，校錄及相關問題研究 (Reconstruction, Collation, and Related Issues of the Fragmentary Meng Jiangnü Transformation Text), *Wenxian* 文獻 2 (2009) (Beijing), pp. 18–25; Zhang Xinpeng 張新朋, “Meng Jiangnü bianwen, Pomo bian canpian kaobian er ti” 孟姜女變文，破魔變殘片考辯二題 (An Examination of Two Issues Concerning the *Meng Jiangnü Transformation Text* and the Fragmentary *Destruction of Mara Transformation Text*), *Wenxian* 文獻 4 (2010) (Beijing), pp. 21–29.

<sup>19</sup> See note 17.

do not know how they subsequently evolved or eventually disappeared. Their characteristics as a literary form are still being elucidated. Going forward, it will be necessary to continue faithfully decoding manuscripts to further clarify their various features.

## CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the textual revisions and changes in ownership of S.2614V, presenting new insights into the reception and transmission of the *Transformation Text on Maudgalyāyana*. Although S.2614V has drawn the attention of many researchers, unexplored aspects of the manuscript itself remain. As noted in the introduction, this issue is closely tied to the broader history of Chinese classical literature studies.

The Dunhuang manuscripts are invaluable records that provide insight into how textual traditions were transmitted through manuscripts over a thousand years ago. Furthermore, in places where the story of Maudgalyāyana rescuing his mother from hell spread—widely from China to East Asia and Southeast Asia—the custom of honoring ancestral spirits on July 15 (or August 15) persists to this day. As a result, there is a wealth of modern and contemporary sources on the Maudgalyāyana legend, and fieldwork on its current practices is possible. However, sources illustrating how this story was transmitted over a thousand years ago are scarce. By analyzing the transmission of transformation texts through the Dunhuang manuscripts, we can gain a deeper historical understanding of Buddhist cultures across Asia. This study of S.2614V presents small but new insights for this broader scholarly effort.

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