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# Dunhuang Manuscript Studies and Ancient Chinese Manuscript Studies

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## Abstract

Through the course of human civilization, textual transmission has progressed through four distinct phases: inscription, manuscript production, print technology, and digitization. Each medium represents a paradigmatic shift, fundamentally altering multiple dimensions of textual engagement, particularly reading practices. The early twentieth century witnessed the excavation of diverse ancient manuscripts in China, notably those from Dunhuang, Turpan, and Khara-khoto, yielding invaluable primary sources for investigating ancient Chinese history and society. The past century has seen remarkable scholarly advancement not only in manuscript preservation and analysis but also in the theoretical understanding of manuscript characteristics, culminating in the establishment of “Chinese manuscript studies” as a distinct field. While this discipline encompasses multiple research trajectories, its primary focus transcends individual manuscript analysis to illuminate broader manuscript characteristics, thereby facilitating both accurate interpretation and methodologically sound utilization of ancient manuscripts.

## Keywords

Dunhuang manuscript studies – ancient Chinese manuscript studies – Chinese documentary studies

The 1900 discovery of more than 60,000 manuscripts in the Dunhuang Library Cave (*Cangjindong* 藏經洞) yielded an unprecedented corpus of historical materials, including substantial uncorrupted primary sources from China's Middle Period (roughly from the 3rd to the 10th century). Throughout the past century, scholars both in and out of China have achieved significant breakthroughs in historical research utilizing these manuscripts, fundamentally revolutionizing numerous aspects of established scholarly understanding. Dunhuang Studies, now recognized as an international discipline, continues to maintain historical research as its methodological cornerstone. Contemporary research conditions have evolved considerably since the early twentieth century: facsimile editions of Dunhuang manuscripts from diverse collections have been systematically published; multiple critical editions of historically significant documents have been compiled with detailed annotations; and the implementation of digital technologies and computational methodologies has substantially enhanced research capabilities. These methodological advancements have catalyzed unprecedented progress in the study of Dunhuang historical manuscripts, with scholarship from the past two decades surpassing the cumulative achievements of the previous ninety years in quantitative scope, analytical depth, and theoretical breadth.

However, this rapid advancement has generated challenges, particularly the emergence of redundant research topics and derivative scholarship, while early-career scholars increasingly encounter difficulties in identifying novel research trajectories. In response to these challenges, scholars have begun theoretical investigations into future research directions. The field's continued development necessarily encompasses both the intensification of established research paradigms and the exploration of emerging domains of inquiry. In both contexts, advancing the study of Dunhuang historical manuscripts fundamentally requires contextualizing these materials within comprehensive historical frameworks for sophisticated analysis.

## 1 Dunhuang Manuscript Studies

The transmission of knowledge and information in human civilization has undergone a fundamental transformation from oral to textual modes of communication. While written texts persist as the primary medium of knowledge transmission in contemporary society, the historical development of

textual communication can be delineated into four distinct phases: inscription, manuscript production, print technology, and digital text.<sup>1</sup> In China, the manuscript-dominated era extended from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) through the pre-Song era, succeeded by the print-dominated era from the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the present. Although digital textuality has emerged as a significant medium in recent decades, its potential to supersede print culture remains a matter of scholarly inquiry. The Dunhuang corpus, while containing a limited number of printed texts and rubbings (*taben* 拓本), consists predominantly of manuscripts characteristic of the manuscript-dominated era.

Manuscript, print, and digital textual cultures exhibit distinct epistemological and material characteristics. While the contemporary transition between print and digital cultures facilitates direct comparative analysis, the historical transition from manuscript to print culture, occurring over a millennium ago, presents significant hermeneutical challenges. Despite the persistence of manuscript practices in contemporary society, the dominance of print culture has obscured many nuanced distinctions between manuscript and print modes of textual production and transmission.

The early twentieth century witnessed the excavation of numerous ancient manuscripts of diverse materiality, including the Dunhuang corpus, providing unprecedented primary sources for investigating ancient Chinese history and society. The subsequent century of scholarship has yielded not only substantial achievements in manuscript preservation and analysis but also increasingly sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding manuscript characteristics.

Within the field of Dunhuang Studies, scholars have produced particularly extensive and methodologically sophisticated research on manuscript characteristics. A significant methodological breakthrough occurred in the late 1970s with the publication of Pan Chonggui's 潘重規 seminal work, *Dunhuang suzi pu* 敦煌俗字譜 (Shimen tushu gongsi, 1978), which established the first systematic framework for analyzing manuscript characteristics through graphological variation. This pioneering study catalyzed a series of significant scholarly contributions in the field: Jin Ronghua's 金榮華 comprehensive *Dunhuang suzi suoyin* 敦煌俗字索引 (Shimen tushu gongsi, 1980), Zhang Yongquan's 張湧泉 theoretical works *Hanyu suzi yanjiu* 漢語俗字研究 (Yuelu shushe, 1995; revised and expanded edition, Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010) and

1 Zhang Yongquan 張湧泉, in his seminal work *Dunhuang xieben wenxianxue* 敦煌寫本文獻學 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013), 5–7, proposes a tripartite periodization of inscription, manuscript, and print, analyzing their respective characteristics. The present study builds upon this framework while incorporating the digital paradigm.

*Dunhuang suzi yanjiu* 敦煌俗字研究 (Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), and Huang Zheng's 黃徵 authoritative *Dunhuang suzi dian* 敦煌俗字典 (Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005). While these scholarly works have made substantial contributions to understanding the paleographic and graphological characteristics of Dunhuang manuscripts, their examination of variant characters represents only one aspect of manuscript studies, thus precluding their classification as comprehensive manuscript studies methodology.

The publication of Lin Congming's 林聰明 *Dunhuang wenshu xue* 敦煌文書學 (Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1991) marked the first systematic, methodological investigation of Dunhuang manuscript characteristics. This foundational work was followed by Zhang Yongquan's *Dunhuang xieben wenxianxue* 敦煌寫本文獻學 (Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013; expanded edition, Shangwu yinshuguan, 2024), which presents a comprehensive synthesis of manuscript studies. While these seminal works employ distinct analytical frameworks, both constitute systematic examinations of Dunhuang manuscript characteristics that warrant classification as discrete disciplines, distinguished principally by their core theoretical terminology: "documentary studies" (*wenshu xue* 文書學) versus "manuscript literary studies" (*xieben wenxianxue* 寫本文獻學).

Despite this terminological differentiation, these works demonstrate substantial methodological convergence in their research scope. Lin's conceptualization of "Dunhuang documents" encompasses the entire corpus of Dunhuang textual materials, including manuscripts, printed texts, and rubbings. In a dedicated methodological discussion titled "Dunhuang wenshu zongming de shangque" 敦煌文書總名的商榷, he advances the argument for "Dunhuang documents" as a comprehensive classificatory designation. While Zhang's "Dunhuang manuscript" concept excludes printed texts and rubbings, this distinction affects an insignificant portion of the corpus—merely several dozen items among more than 60,000 extant materials.

Although Zhang does not explicitly engage with Lin's "documentary studies" framework, his adoption of "manuscript studies" terminology reflects an important methodological consideration: the predominance of Buddhist scriptures in the Dunhuang corpus, supplemented by substantial collections of Daoist and Confucian classics, renders the term "documents" (*wenshu* 文書) insufficient. The emergence of "manuscript studies" appears to draw theoretical inspiration from traditional bibliographic studies (*banben xue* 版本學), suggesting an intentional disciplinary differentiation from print-focused textual scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 has proposed

2 Zhang Yongquan, *Dunhuang xieben wenxianxue*, 22.

“manuscript studies” (*xieben xue* 寫本學) as a distinct conceptual framework.<sup>3</sup> Each of these three terminological approaches—documentary studies, manuscript studies, and manuscript literary studies—presents distinct theoretical justifications within the broader field of Dunhuang studies.

Although “documentary studies” establishes its own theoretical framework and methodological parameters for conceptualizing “documents,” this approach presents significant epistemological limitations. The term “documents,” whether in its contemporary application or its Tang-Song period conceptualization, proves inadequate for encompassing the comprehensive scope of the Dunhuang textual corpus. Consequently, the deployment of “Dunhuang documentary studies” as a classificatory framework for scholarship primarily concerned with Dunhuang manuscripts risks methodological reductionism. Furthermore, this terminological choice introduces potential theoretical ambiguity through its overlap with the “Dunhuang documentary studies” sub-discipline within “ancient Chinese documentary studies” (*Zhongguo gu wenshu xue* 中國古文書學), a distinction that warrants subsequent examination.

While “Dunhuang manuscript studies” offers enhanced methodological precision compared to “documentary studies,” its theoretical orientation suggests a predominant focus on textual analysis. This emphasis is evidenced in Zhang’s work, which primarily examines the textual and philological characteristics of Dunhuang manuscripts. However, comprehensive manuscript research necessitates consideration of both textual-philological features and material-codicological aspects. The latter encompasses physical characteristics (*zhiliao* 質料) and codicological elements that transcend the theoretical parameters of manuscript studies.

In this context, Rong Xinjiang’s proposed framework of “Dunhuang manuscript studies” (*Dunhuang xieben xue* 敦煌寫本學) emerges as methodologically more comprehensive, encompassing both the textual-analytical and material-codicological dimensions of manuscript research.

## 2 Ancient Chinese Manuscript Studies and Ancient Chinese Documentary Studies

Dunhuang manuscript studies constitutes a dual methodological framework, functioning simultaneously as an integral component of Dunhuang studies<sup>4</sup>

3 Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, *Dunhuang xue shiba jiang* 敦煌學十八講 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2001), 340–52.

4 For a comprehensive discussion of Dunhuang studies, see the Hao Chunwen 郝春文, “Lun Dunhuang xue” 論敦煌學, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, February 17, 2011.

and as a foundational element within the broader discipline of ancient Chinese manuscript studies (*Zhongguo gudai xieben xue* 中國古代寫本學).

The corpus of ancient Chinese manuscripts extends significantly beyond the Dunhuang collection, encompassing diverse material artifacts discovered throughout China's geographical expanse. These materials include pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) through Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Jin (265–420) period texts inscribed on bamboo and wooden slips (*jiandu* 簡牘) and silk textiles (*juanbo* 絹帛), the Turpan manuscript corpus (*Tulufan wenshu* 吐魯番文書), and the Khara-khoto documents (*Heishuicheng wenshu* 黑水城文書). This expansive textual landscape suggests the potential for extending Dunhuang manuscript studies' theoretical frameworks toward a more comprehensive "ancient Chinese manuscript studies." Notable scholars, including Rong Xinjiang, Zheng Acai 鄭阿財, and Fang Guangchang 方廣錫, have advocated for the establishment of "manuscript studies" as a discrete field of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> While Rong and Fang concentrated their analytical focus primarily on the Dunhuang corpus, Zheng advanced a more expansive definition, conceptualizing manuscript studies as the systematic study of scroll-format manuscripts (*juanzhou* 卷軸) from the third through tenth centuries<sup>6</sup> thereby transcending the geographical and temporal constraints of the Dunhuang materials. Within this theoretical context, the term "manuscript studies" should be more precisely understood as "ancient Chinese manuscript studies."

Any comprehensive examination of ancient Chinese manuscript studies necessarily encompasses its methodological intersection with ancient Chinese documentary studies. The formal conceptualization of this field emerged in July 2012, when Huang Zhengjian 黃正建 proposed its establishment as a discrete academic discipline.<sup>7</sup> This theoretical framework gained further institutional recognition on October 29 of the same year, when *Wenhui bao* 文匯報 published in its "Sixiang renwen" 思想·人文 section a significant methodological discourse titled "Zhongguo gu wenshu xue de chuangli: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo bitan" 中國古文書學的創立—中國社會科學院歷史研究所筆談. This seminal publication delineated four primary categories of

5 Rong Xinjiang, *Dunhuang xue shiba jiang*, 340; Zheng Acai 鄭阿財, "Lun Dunhuang suzi yu xieben xue zhi guanxi" 論敦煌俗字與寫本學之關係, *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究, no. 6 (2006): 162–67; Fang Guangchang 方廣錫, *Suiyuan zuoqu zhidao xingzhi: Fang Guangchang xuba zawen ji* 隨緣做去 直道行之一方廣錫序跋雜文集 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2011), 145–46.

6 See Zheng Acai, "Lun Dunhuang suzi yu xieben xue zhi guanxi," 162–67.

7 Huang Zhengjian 黃正建, "Zhongguo gu wenshu xue: chaoyue duandai wenshu yanjiu" 中國古文書學：超越斷代文書研究, *Zhongguo shehui kexue bao* 中國社會科學報, July 25, 2012.

documents warranting inclusion within the field's scope: pre-Qin documents, Dunhuang-Turpan documents, Khara-khoto documents, and Ming-Qing period administrative and private documents.

Of particular methodological significance was the contribution by Huang Zhengjian and Chen Liping 陳麗萍, "*Dunhuang Tulufan wenshu yu Zhongguo gu wenshu xue*" 敦煌吐魯番文書與中國古文書學, which established precise parameters for the inclusion of Dunhuang-Turpan materials within the disciplinary framework. Their methodology notably diverges from Lin Congming's more expansive conceptualization of "Dunhuang documents" by explicitly excluding manuscript copies of classical texts from consideration. This narrower methodological focus was consistently maintained across discussions of other historical periods.

The manuscript collections from Dunhuang, Turpan, and Khara-khoto fundamentally comprise two distinct categories: documents (*wenshu* 文書) in the restricted sense and classical texts (*dianji* 典籍). This taxonomical distinction illuminates both the convergences and divergences between ancient Chinese documentary studies and ancient Chinese manuscript studies. Specifically, while ancient Chinese manuscript studies encompasses the full spectrum of manuscript materials, ancient Chinese documentary studies restricts its analytical scope exclusively to materials classified within the narrower category of "documents."

The theoretical foundations of ancient Chinese documentary studies emerged through intellectual engagement with Japanese ancient documentary studies (*komonjogaku* 古文書學), which itself developed from European diplomatic studies.<sup>8</sup> The European tradition, however, exhibits considerable methodological heterogeneity, with various scholarly works extending their analytical parameters beyond strictly documentary materials. This conceptual diversity manifests particularly clearly through an examination of terminological variations in English-language lexicography.

The term "diplomatic," conventionally rendered in Chinese as *guwenshu xue* 古文書學, receives notably divergent treatments across major lexicographical works. The *Xin Yinghan cidian* 新英漢詞典 (Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2013, 4th revised edition) defines it specifically as "ancient documentary studies," while the *Yuandong Yinghan da cidian* 遠東英漢大詞典 (Yuandong tushu gongsi, 1997) characterizes it more broadly as "a discipline examining ancient textual materials." The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 2004) provides a more comprehensive

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8 Ibid.

definition—"of or related to the study of the form of ancient writing"—suggesting an analytical framework encompassing all forms of ancient handwritten texts. The authoritative *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 1991) aligns the term with "paleographic," thereby encompassing both documentary studies and paleography within its semantic field.

Japanese documentary studies, while intellectually indebted to European diplomatic studies, established more precisely defined parameters, focusing specifically on documents in their restricted sense. The field's initial methodology stipulated three essential criteria for classification as a historical document: clear identification of sender, recipient, and subject matter. Subsequent theoretical developments expanded this framework to encompass texts that, while lacking explicit epistolary elements, documented relationships of authority or obligation between parties. Some scholars further advocated incorporating ancient accounting records and ledgers within the discipline's purview.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Japanese documentary studies maintained significantly narrower methodological parameters than its European antecedent, adhering to a more strictly documentary focus.

Huang Zhengjian's methodological framework for ancient Chinese documentary studies demonstrates considerably broader analytical parameters than its Japanese counterpart, encompassing diverse documentary genres: administrative documents (*xingzheng wenshu* 行政文書), juridical documents (*falü wenshu* 法律文書), population registers (*hukou zhang* 戶口賬), land cadastres (*tianmu zhang* 田畝賬), corvée service registers (*chai ke bu* 差科簿), burial inventories (*qiance* 遣策), and grave goods register (*yiwu shu* 衣物疏).<sup>10</sup> While this expansive conceptualization presents a methodologically viable research paradigm supported by coherent theoretical foundations, it necessitates careful consideration. The manuscript components defined within ancient Chinese documentary studies simultaneously manifest characteristics of both documentary and manuscript traditions, suggesting a complex interpretative framework.<sup>11</sup>

9 Dajin Tou 大津透 [Ohtsu Toru], "Ribei gudai guwenshu xue yanjiu de jinzhān jī keti" 日本古代古文書學研究的進展及課題, in *2014 nian Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan guoxue yanjiu luntan Zhongguo gu wenshu xue guoji xueshu yantaohui ziliao huibian* 2014年中國社會科學院國學研究論壇中國古文書學國際學術研討會資料匯編, 285–89.

10 Huang Zhengjian, "Zhongguo gu wenshu xue: chaoyue duandai wenshu yanjiu," July 25, 2012.

11 Based on the definition of "ancient documents" established in the aforementioned works—"Zhongguo gu wenshu xue: chaoyue duandai wenshu yanjiu" and "Zhongguo gu wenshu xue de chuangli: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo bitan"—the



Moreover, the quantitative scope of ancient manuscripts substantially exceeds that of documentary manuscripts, comprising an estimated several hundred thousand items and spanning from the Spring and Autumn period through the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties—effectively encompassing the entirety of pre-modern Chinese history. This comprehensive temporal and material scope positions ancient Chinese manuscript studies as a discipline of broader scholarly significance, within which ancient Chinese documentary studies constitutes a crucial but subsidiary component. Furthermore, the interpretative challenges presented by documentary manuscripts frequently necessitate comparative analysis with other manuscript typologies for adequate resolution. This methodological imperative likely accounts for both the definitional fluidity characteristic of European diplomatic studies and the progressive expansion of Japanese documentary studies' analytical scope. Nevertheless, the scholarly advances achieved within ancient Chinese documentary studies continue to make substantial contributions to the theoretical development of ancient Chinese manuscript studies.

### 3 Definition, Research Objects, Periodization, and Research Content of Ancient Chinese Manuscript Studies

Ancient Chinese manuscript studies constitutes a systematic scholarly inquiry into handwritten textual artifacts across Chinese historical periods. The discipline's analytical scope encompasses manuscript materials from the pre-Qin through Ming-Qing eras, specifically comprising: manuscripts on bamboo and wooden slips and silk textiles dating from the pre-Qin through Han-Jin periods; the manuscript corpora of Dunhuang, Turpan, and Khara-khoto; the Xu Weili 徐謂禮 (fl. 1237–1253) documentary collection from the Song dynasty; contractual documents (*qiye wenshu* 契約文書) from the Song through Yuan (1206–1368) era forward; Ming-Qing archival materials; and additional manuscript specimens from various historical periods.

It is methodologically imperative to distinguish manuscript studies' theoretical approach from that of other disciplines which primarily utilize manuscripts as source materials for historical, sociological, or juridical analysis. Manuscript studies' analytical framework specifically addresses fundamental questions

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predominant portion of materials examined within ancient Chinese documentary studies comprises manuscripts, with only a minor component consisting of non-manuscript materials such as classical texts, printed documents, and inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels.

and methodological issues concerning four primary domains: material aspects of manuscript production, writing implements and technologies, scribal practices and agency, and the interrelation between physical manuscript forms and textual content.

The incorporation of bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts into the analytical framework of ancient Chinese manuscript studies warrants methodological clarification. Zheng Acai posits that “within the Sinitic cultural sphere, all handwritten textual productions are classified as either *xieben* 寫本 or *chaoben* 抄本 (manuscripts or transcribed texts).”<sup>12</sup> According to this taxonomical framework, bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts should unequivocally fall within the disciplinary parameters of ancient Chinese manuscript studies. However, Zheng’s concurrent proposition of a “manuscript period characterized by paper scrolls” appears to create a methodological exclusion of bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts<sup>13</sup>—a position reflected in previous scholarship, where these materials have been largely omitted from manuscript studies inquiry.

The term *xieben*, in its etymological sense, denotes texts produced through brush application or manual inscription, thereby distinguished from both antecedent epigraphic texts (such as oracle bone and bronze inscriptions) and subsequent printed materials. Given that bamboo, wooden, and silk texts were produced through brush application and manual inscription, their classification as manuscripts is methodologically sound. Their sole differentiation from paper manuscripts lies in material substrate rather than in the fundamental characteristics of brush utilization and manual production. Moreover, the alternative classification of these materials within the epigraphic category presents even greater theoretical inconsistencies.

Therefore, the most methodologically rigorous approach involves the inclusion of bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts within manuscript studies’ scope, while implementing a periodization based on material substrates: the bamboo-wooden-silk manuscript period and the paper manuscript period. This framework facilitates a tripartite periodization of ancient Chinese manuscripts:

1. The first period (Spring and Autumn period through Eastern Han) represents the era of bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts, following the epigraphic age.
2. The second period (Eastern Han through Song) constitutes the paper manuscript era, marking the field’s apex.

12 Zheng Acai, “Lun Dunhuang suzi yu xieben xue zhi guanxi,” 162–67.

13 Ibid., 162–67.

3. The third period (Song through Qing) represents a transitional phase where printed texts achieved predominance while manuscripts maintained concurrent existence—characterized as either the manuscript phase of print culture or the post-manuscript era.

With regard to the methodological parameters of ancient Chinese manuscript studies, the following delineation draws primarily upon the substantial corpus of scholarship developed within Dunhuang textual studies:

1. Examination of manuscript studies theory, encompassing epistemological frameworks, analytical objects, and methodological paradigms.
2. Taxonomical analysis: systematic investigation of manuscript categorization, provenance determination, and quantitative distribution patterns.
3. Material substrate analysis: investigation of writing materials and their production, including: manufacturing protocols for bamboo and wooden slips; material acquisition and processing methodologies; paper production parameters: raw material sourcing, manufacturing localities, physical characteristics, decorative elements, and artisanal practices; dimensional standardization of paper substrates; diachronic variations in writing materials; and contemporary physicochemical analysis of extant bamboo, wooden, silk, and paper manuscripts. These analytical approaches facilitate both chronological determination and authentication procedures.
4. Writing implement studies: comprehensive examination of: morphological characteristics, production centers, and temporal variations of brush typologies; material composition, fabrication protocols, and dissemination patterns of hard-pointed writing implements; ink materials: derivation, application methodologies, taxonomic variations, and evolutionary development; and systematic collection and authentication of extant writing implements across historical periods
5. Scribal analysis: investigation of manuscript copyists (*chaoxiezhe* 抄寫者), whose role as primary producers of manuscripts proves fundamental to understanding both the nature and function of manuscript materials—a critical focus within manuscript studies inquiry.
6. Provenance studies: analysis of manuscript origins, specifically examining production localities and the geographic, individual, or institutional affiliations of users or issuing authorities. While many extant manuscripts derive from archaeological contexts, their origins frequently transcend excavation localities, rendering provenance analysis crucial for determining manuscript characteristics.
7. Codicological morphology: systematic examination of manuscript physical manifestations, encompassing productions of bamboo and wooden

slips, silk substrates, and paper materials. For paper manuscripts specifically, analysis extends to binding typologies: scroll format (*juanzhou zhuang* 卷軸裝), Brāhma (or Indian-style) board format (*fanjia zhuang* 梵夾裝), concertina style of binding (*jingzhe zhuang* 經折裝), whirlwind binding (*xuanfeng zhuang* 旋風裝), butterfly binding (*hudie zhuang* 蝴蝶裝), wrapped-back binding (*baobei zhuang* 包背裝), and thread-bound codex (*xianzhuang cezi* 線裝冊子).

8. Textual configuration and paleographic analysis: investigation of textual organizational structures, copying conventions, transcriptional methodologies, and notational systems. Textual configuration encompasses standardized formatting protocols, particularly evident in official and private documentary productions where predetermined ruling (*jielan* 界欄) often preceded transcription, while secondary copies might exhibit format modifications. Scribal interventions for error correction followed contemporary conventional methodologies, frequently employing specialized correction markers. Additionally, manuscripts preserve contemporaneous metalinguistic notation systems, including abbreviation indicators (*shengdai fuhao* 省代符號), character reduplication markers (*zhongwen fuhao* 重文符號), punctuation systems (*judou hao* 句讀號), hierarchical demarcation (*cengci hao* 層次號), and collation signifiers (*kanyan fuhao* 勘驗符號). These configurational elements reflect institutional practices and sociocultural conventions, providing critical parameters for both textual interpretation and authentication determination.
9. Paleographic evolution and graphemic analysis: systematic investigation of script typologies and their diachronic development. Extant manuscripts demonstrate multiple script categories: seal script (*zhuan shu* 篆書), clerical script (*lishu* 隸書), running script (*xingshu* 行書), regular script (*kaishu* 楷書), and cursive script (*caoshu* 草書), each emerging from distinct historical contexts. This paleographic analysis holds significance for both calligraphic historiography and manuscript chronological determination. Significant graphemic phenomena are additionally observed within the manuscript corpus, including the interchangeable usage of visually similar characters and extensive homophonic substitution patterns exceeding conventional borrowed character (*jiajie* 假借) parameters. Analysis of these phenomena provides essential insights for accurate textual interpretation.
10. Vernacular lexicological analysis: systematic investigation of colloquial lexemes (*suyu ci* 俗語詞) preserved within ancient manuscripts, particularly those of non-elite provenance, which contain extensive vernacular

terminology absent from printed textual traditions. The examination of these documented colloquialisms serves dual scholarly purposes: facilitating precise manuscript interpretation while simultaneously providing novel source materials for diachronic linguistic investigation.

11. Non-standard orthographic variants: critical analysis of popular character variants (*suzi* 俗字)—defined as non-standard graphemic forms that circulated predominantly within non-elite contexts throughout Chinese orthographic history, existing in parallel with standard character forms. The predominantly popular circulation patterns of ancient manuscripts have resulted in the preservation of substantial corpora of period-specific character variants. These variants, which demonstrate significant divergence from standardized forms, present considerable methodological challenges for manuscript interpretation and utilization. The systematic documentation and analysis of these variants serves both practical paleographic purposes—facilitating accurate character identification—and theoretical objectives in illuminating Chinese orthographic evolution.
12. Textual variance analysis: examination of variant readings (*yiwén* 異文) in ancient manuscripts, specifically those textual divergences arising from multiple scribal transmissions of identical content. While the print era generates variants through editorial processes, manuscript variants demonstrate particularly high frequency and diversity due to varying levels of scribal expertise. The investigation of these variants contributes both to accurate textual interpretation and to the rectification of errors in transmitted traditions. The phenomenon of manuscript variants further intersects with processes of oral-textual transmission and re-textualization. Given the restricted literacy rates in pre-modern contexts, certain textual traditions were preserved through oral transmission mechanisms. When such orally transmitted content underwent subsequent retextualization after extended periods, the resultant texts frequently exhibited substantial divergences from initial versions. The Dunhuang manuscript corpus of the *Tanjing* 壇經 provides a paradigmatic example: certain manuscript versions display significant variations from both other manuscripts and received traditions, potentially indicating retextualization following extended oral transmission phases.
13. Authentication apparatus analysis: critical examination of authenticating elements in manuscripts, encompassing seals (*yinji* 印記), signatures (*qianya* 簽押), and scroll-joint authentication markers (*kuanfeng* 款縫). Manuscripts of administrative or practical significance, particularly official and private documentary materials, frequently incorporate institutional or private seals and/or authorized signatures. In scroll-format

manuscripts—typically constructed through the joining of multiple sheets—authentication markers appear at sheet junctions (*qifeng chu* 騎縫處), a practice designated as *kuanfeng*. This authentication methodology, prevalent in official communications, administrative registers, fiscal accounts, and private contractual documents, functions as a safeguard against physical or textual manipulation. Analysis of these authentication mechanisms facilitates comprehensive understanding of manuscript content, nature, and chronological positioning.

14. Colophonic studies: systematic investigation of manuscript colophons (*tiji* 題記)—paratextual annotations supplementing the primary text, contributed by scribes, commissioners, or subsequent custodians. Contemporary colophons typically document production parameters including scribal or commissioning agency, temporal and spatial coordinates, and functional objectives, while later colophons frequently address matters of provenance and scholarly significance. The fundamental importance of colophons for manuscript contextualization necessitates their inclusion within manuscript studies.
15. Successive modification analysis: examination of secondary textual interventions (*erci jiagong* 二次加工) and multiple processing phases (*duoci jiagong* 多次加工) in manuscripts. These modifications demonstrate complex patterns of intervention within extant manuscripts, including: scribal emendations to original text; reader or user annotative practices; and subsequent ownership modifications, encompassing both textual alterations and supplementary content insertion in available spaces. These interventions typically employ vermilion ink (*zhubi* 朱筆), though black ink (*mobi* 墨筆) and blue ink (*lanshu* 藍書) variants exist. The analysis of these successive modifications illuminates patterns of manuscript utilization, functional characteristics, ownership transmission, and circulation history.
16. Textual collation and attribution studies: systematic examination of manuscript content collation, nomenclature, chronology, and typological classification. The existence of multiple manuscript witnesses for certain texts, sometimes complemented by received traditions, necessitates rigorous collation methodologies. The predominantly archaeological provenance of extant manuscripts, frequently resulting in fragmentary preservation with loss of titles, chronological indicators, and typological markers, requires systematic protocols for attribute determination during manuscript processing.
17. Recto-verso relationship analysis: investigation of manuscript surface relationships, particularly pertinent to scroll-format paper manuscripts

where initial inscription typically utilized exclusively recto surfaces. Material resource constraints in antiquity frequently precipitated secondary utilization of verso surfaces on discarded manuscripts. The Dunhuang corpus presents particularly complex manifestations of recto-verso relationships, exhibiting potential divergences in content, generic classification, and linguistic features between surfaces. While conventional chronological priority typically favors recto surfaces, which generally demonstrate greater textual coherence compared to characteristically heterogeneous verso content, significant exceptions exist. Cases of scroll reconstitution from multiple discarded manuscripts with unified verso content may subvert traditional chronological indicators, necessitating careful methodological consideration in both content interpretation and temporal determination.

18. Fragmentation and reconstitution analysis: examination of manuscript fragmentation patterns and reconstitution possibilities. Temporal distance combined with archaeological provenance has resulted in extensive manuscript fragmentation—manifesting in bisection or multiple segmentation, frequently accompanied by institutional dispersal of components. While certain fragments permit direct physical reconstitution, others, despite demonstrable original unity, resist immediate physical conjunction. Investigation of these conditions advances understanding of manuscript integrity and original compositional parameters.
19. Authentication methodology: critical examination of manuscript authenticity determination. While ancient manuscripts constitute both research resources and cultural patrimony, contemporary market conditions have facilitated increasing circulation of fabricated specimens. Such forgeries present dual challenges: market disruption and methodological complications for research protocols. Consequently, authentication methodology constitutes a fundamental component of manuscript studies.

In conclusion, manuscript studies transcends individual specimen analysis to address systematic patterns across manuscript corpora and develop methodological frameworks for resolving these analytical challenges.

#### 4 Future Research Prospects in Ancient Chinese Manuscript Studies and Dunhuang Manuscript Studies

The future development of ancient Chinese manuscript studies and Dunhuang manuscript studies necessitates advancement along four primary trajectories.

First, scholarship must prioritize macroscopic and integrative analytical frameworks. Contemporary research has predominantly focused on manuscripts from discrete historical periods or archaeological sites, resulting in significant methodological limitations. Comparative analyses across geographical regions remain underdeveloped, while diachronic examinations spanning multiple periods are particularly scarce. Although substantial scholarship has investigated manuscript provenance and quantitative distribution within specific temporal or spatial parameters, comprehensive analysis transcending these limitations remains a critical desideratum. Future research must transcend traditional periodization and regional demarcations to facilitate systematic comparative analysis of manuscripts across temporal and geographical boundaries. This methodological reorientation would illuminate common characteristics of ancient manuscripts while establishing theoretical foundations for a new discipline that we will call Chinese ancient manuscript studies (*Zhongguo gudai xieben xue gailun* 中國古代寫本學概論).

Second, numerous subdisciplines require substantial theoretical development. While Dunhuang manuscript scholars have engaged with most research domains outlined above, many remain insufficiently theorized, and analysis of manuscripts from other periods and regions demonstrates particular deficiencies. For example, research on manuscript copyists remains preliminary: although Lin Congming initiated investigation of Dunhuang manuscript copyists in his “*Dunhuang wenshu xue*,” systematic examination of copyists across other regions and manuscript typologies awaits development. Similarly, material analysis of manuscripts demonstrates significant limitations—only Japanese and French scholars have conducted preliminary investigations of paper compositions in Dunhuang manuscripts. The implementation of comprehensive physicochemical analysis protocols for ancient manuscript materials—encompassing bamboo and wooden slips, silk textiles, and the Dunhuang corpus—represents a crucial methodological imperative that would provide essential chronological parameters, yet remains unrealized. Furthermore, research on writing implements demonstrates similar constraints: Japanese scholars have conducted limited investigations of brush pens and hard-pointed implements used in Dunhuang manuscript production, while systematic analysis of ink compositions and other writing materials from a manuscript studies perspective remains particularly underdeveloped.

Third, systematic textual analysis must extend beyond the Dunhuang corpus. While scholars of Dunhuang and Turpan manuscripts have established rigorous methodological frameworks in certain domains, these analytical paradigms should inform investigations of manuscripts from other temporal and geographical contexts. For instance, although Dunhuang scholars have



conducted comprehensive analyses of vernacular lexemes and non-standard orthographic variants, systematic examination of these phenomena across other temporal and spatial contexts remains inadequately theorized. Moreover, the field requires specialized studies following the methodological model of Dunhuang manuscript studies, including dedicated analyses of bamboo, wooden, and silk manuscripts, Ming-Qing contractual documents, and Ming-Qing archival materials.

Finally, the discipline necessitates continuous methodological innovation. Given the emergent status of manuscript studies, even the comparatively well-developed field of Dunhuang manuscript studies presents substantial opportunities for theoretical advancement.

A paradigmatic example concerns the phenomenon of graphically proximate characters manifesting identical written forms, which presents persistent challenges for paleographic interpretation. Within the Dunhuang corpus, certain graphically similar characters demonstrate interchangeable manifestations, including: *ce* 策 and *rong* 榮; *shou* 收 and *mu* 牧; *mu* 牧 and *mei* 枚; *xian* 先 and *guang* 光; *ling* 靈 and *xu* 虛; *bei* 北 and *bi* 比; *jing* 莖, *jing* 莖, and *shi* 筮 (alongside *jing* 筮, *wu* 巫, *zhi* 至 and their variants *wei* 誼, *wu* 誼); *jin* 今, *ling* 令, and *he* 合; *mian* 免 and *tu* 兔; *mian* 免 and *dui* 兌; and *di* 弟 and *di* 第. These graphically proximate characters frequently resist differentiation across numerous manuscript exemplars. This phenomenon warrants investigation through three methodological approaches: first, comprehensive documentation of frequently conflated graphemes within the Dunhuang corpus to establish empirical foundations; second, theoretical determination of these variants' linguistic status—whether they constitute orthographic errors, legitimate variant forms, or require alternative classification; and third, development of systematic protocols for their analysis. Current scholarship approaches these phenomena as distinctive textual features, employing contextual analysis for graphemic determination.

A related phenomenon concerns the extensive deployment of homophonous or near-homophonous character substitutions in certain Dunhuang manuscripts. These texts demonstrate graphemic substitution patterns exceeding the conventional scope of borrowed characters in classical texts. While previously attributed to limited scribal literacy, more sophisticated analysis suggests these patterns reflect oral transmission practices among predominantly non-literate audiences, where approximate phonetic correspondence sufficed without requiring precise graphemic accuracy. This phenomenon demands more rigorous theoretical investigation.

In conclusion, manuscript studies centers on the distinctive characteristics of manuscripts, which are fundamentally determined by the individualized

nature of both their utilization and production methodologies. The differentiation between printed texts and manuscripts represents a fundamental dichotomy—mechanical reproduction versus manual inscription.

Manuscript functionality encompasses two primary domains: the fulfillment of individual requirements and the satisfaction of societal demands. Societal demands comprise both mass consumption requirements and the specialized needs of particular communities, all necessitating volume production. In terms of individual requirements, manuscripts demonstrate significant advantages over printed texts, facilitating personalized content selection and reproduction according to individual intellectual interests. While printed texts, despite their complex production protocols and substantial economic investments, may reflect publishers' or patrons' intentions, they cannot accommodate the heterogeneous spectrum of individual requirements. Consequently, printed texts are fundamentally oriented toward satisfying collective societal demands. This suggests that the capacity for individualized fulfillment constitutes a fundamental distinction between manuscripts and printed texts, warranting particular attention within manuscript studies.

Regarding societal demands, printed texts demonstrate clear technological superiority over manuscripts. Although manuscripts produced for volume requirements may contain identical content, their individualized production processes result in significantly higher error probabilities than mechanically reproduced texts. Even repeated copying by a single scribe cannot ensure textual fidelity. This necessitated the establishment of specialized copyists and textual verification specialists in Tang dynasty governmental institutions and Buddhist monasteries, with significant texts requiring multiple verification protocols. The production of texts for mass consumption through individual copying and verification not only consumed substantial human and material resources—as formal texts required complete recopying upon error detection—but also precluded absolute textual accuracy. Moreover, individual scribal variations in calligraphic execution and character variants proved unavoidable in theoretically identical texts. Printed texts, conversely, could ensure accuracy through careful verification of the master copy, entirely circumventing the interpretative impediments inherent in individualized manuscript production processes. This suggests that societal demands, particularly requirements for mass reproduction, served as the primary catalyst for the cultural predominance of printed texts.

In the epoch of print culture, printed texts systematically displaced manuscripts in fulfilling societal requirements for volume production, ultimately achieving predominance as the primary medium for both textual transmission and knowledge dissemination. Nevertheless, manuscripts persisted due

to their capacity to satisfy individualized requirements that printed texts, despite their technological advantages, could not comprehensively address. However, the establishment of print as the dominant medium for textual transmission has fundamentally conditioned modern epistemological frameworks regarding textual comprehension. This print-centric epistemological paradigm, when applied to the analysis of ancient manuscripts, can generate significant hermeneutical distortions and methodological misconceptions.

Therefore, the primary objective of manuscript studies lies in elucidating the distinctive characteristics of manuscript culture, thereby establishing methodological frameworks for enhancing the accurate interpretation and systematic application of ancient manuscript materials.

*Translated by Jenny Lu*