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RECENT DISCOVERY OF EARLIEST MOVABLE-TYPE PRINTING IN CHINA: AN EVALUATION

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During the last quarter of a century, numerous old and rare printings were found in China and elsewhere providing new information and artifacts not known before for our study. But none of these is as important as the one discovered in the southeastern part of China which is said to have been printed with movable type at the turn of the twelfth century. If this is proved to be true, it would be the earliest typography extant and the most valuable specimen in the history of printing.

In 1965 a fragment of the Buddhist sutra, Foshuo guan wuliang shoufo jing 《佛说观无量寿佛経》 was found in the White Elephant Pagoda in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province (see Fig. 1). A preliminary report in 1987 says the text with some 166 characters remaining represents one-tenth of the sutra and is arranged in about 12 lines continuously in spiral form. The characters are in the Song style, small and irregular, uneven in strokes, closely connected to each other, sometimes missing from the text, and especially one character, se 色, is misplaced in a wrong position. Based on these special features and on dated documents from the same site, it was preliminarily concluded in the report that this sutra was printed with movable type at about 1103 A.D.1

One opinion, however, argues about the conclusion on two major grounds: 1) Intrusion of certain strokes from one character into another or, in several cases, two characters closely connected together could not happen in movable type setting. 2) The character se 色 placed sidewise was intentional for showing direction of turn of the spiral line and was not set by mistake.2

From my observation of this sutra from the color plate in the published report and from the enlarged photographs supplied by the Wenzhou Municipal Museum and the Commission for Cultural Relics Preservation of Wenzhou City, the following reasons might be given for assuming this sutra was printed with movable type.3

First, the linkage of strokes between characters or their being joined into one when close together is perhaps a feature of early movable type. Had they been carved on a block, the transcribed characters on the carefully prepared manuscript would have to fit into their ruled squares with spaces between, which would make it impossible for two characters to be linked like one, even though the strokes may occasionally but not often be outside the square. For movable type in the early days, the characters could very likely be made according to the number of strokes in each so that the size of individual characters varied more or less with the numbers of strokes without leaving any space on the type face, thus differing from later type in uniform size.

Second, the missing characters and frequent errors are also more common in movable type than in block printing, as its text has to be proofread several times before the carved block is used for impression. The circular format of the sutra, which is the Buddhist tradition, is usually arranged orderly and neatly in block printing, as shown in several Sanskrit dharani of the Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song found recently in China. The characters and lines of this sutra, however, are very casual, informal, and irregular,
showing that the types might have been placed directly in the forme and not prewritten or well planned on the manuscript as in the case of block printing.

Lastly, the sidewise placing of the character se at the tip of one line (see enlarged portion in Fig. 1) does not seem to indicate the direction of the turn, since in two other turns in the lines, the preceding character is not stood on its side and the turn is indicated by one or more circles at the tip (see third line from the right in Fig. 1). Also, the Sanskrit letters in the circular arrangement of the dharani mentioned above all stand upright, not sidewise. Unless other samples are found in such spiral form that characters at the tips of curves are there to point out the direction, the sidewise position of a character in this sutra is an important evidence of the misplacement of movable type.

Notes:


Fig. 1. A Buddhist sutra of ca. 1103, supposed to be printed with movable type, was discovered in Southeastern China in 1965. The enlarged portion is taken from second line on the upper left of the text.