

Development of Movable Type Printing in Vietnam under the Lê Dynasty: A Study of the Comparative History between Vietnam and Japan¹⁾

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It is widely accepted that movable type was first invented in the eleventh century under the Sung dynasty in China. It made considerable advances in the thirteenth century during the Mongol period and it spread to East and West. It flourished in Korea in particular since the fifteenth century under the Yi dynasty, and it was later introduced into Japan towards the end of the sixteenth century.

If we take a bird's-eye view of the whole history of the development of printing in the countries in Asia as well as in Europe, we notice that block printing appeared first, followed by movable type printing in later years. But in spite of this general tendency, if we confine ourselves to a specific period in a specific country, this order is sometimes reversed. In the case of Japan, movable type printing started in the 1590s utilizing Korean copper type, and thereafter type-face printing of different kinds developed quickly and thus book printing became a sort of business. However, this prosperity of type printing continued for only a period of half a century, until the end of the 1640s, and it was replaced again by block printing which has had a long tradition in Japan. The reason for this change was mainly economical, because if the public demand for books is increased and the same text is to be printed many times, it is cheaper to make solid engraved blocks and preserve them for repeated use than to compose frequently movable types which are not so enduring. In this process of the resurgence of block printing in Japan, engravers sometimes used as block copy to be traced the folios of previous type printed editions. They opened two pages of folio, made them flat and pasted them on the surface of the block for cutting. The result was a complete reproduction of the former edition, including even mistakes and irregularities. This method is called in Japanese *kabuse-bori* or covered engraving, and there are still some examples extant.²⁾

Now let us turn to Vietnam. Tracing the records found in the official history, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書, we are informed that since the early eleventh century, the Vietnamese government imported several times Buddhist

tripitaka from China, but when we come down to the Lê dynasty, the interest moved from Buddhism to Confucianism, and such books as commentaries on the Four Books and the texts of Five Canons were published. However, all these recorded publications are governmental works and nothing is mentioned about private publications, nor about movable type printing. Therefore, if we want to study type printing, we have to make recourse to the printed books still extant as research materials. Regarding the period of the Nguyễn dynasty, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, numerous books are available, but if we trace back to the Lê dynasty the existing materials become extremely scarce. In this paper I can take up only two books: the *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* 傳奇漫錄 (The vast collection of marvelous stories) and the *Quốc triều hình luật* 國朝刑律 (the Code of the Lê Dynasty).

Truyện kỳ mạn lục was published repeatedly in the eighteenth century. According to the detailed study of Kawamoto Kuniye, which was carried out in Japan and Vietnam, four different editions are known to us: those carrying the dates of 1712, 1714, 1763 and 1774.³⁾ Out of the four, three later editions are block printed. The earliest one with the printed date of the eighth year of Vĩnh thịnh 永盛 (1712) is now preserved in the Tōyō Bunko in Tokyo, and is explained in the catalogue as a “book printed by movable wooden type.”⁴⁾ If we go through the pages of this book consisting of four volumes we notice everywhere the irregular location of the printed characters, sometimes giving us the impression of curves in vertical lines. Such an irregular position of characters never appears in ordinary wood block printing. This seems to be the reason why this book was listed in the catalogue as type printed. But when I studied this text in detail, I became convinced that it is a block print. There are several reasons: the unbroken orderly shapes of corners of surrounding double lines, the nonexistence of scattered appearance of distinguished dark characters, and in particular the existence of a white line going through plural characters, which means a trace of a crack on the block (see p. 6, fig. 1). This situation never happens in type printing.⁵⁾ Now if this book is block printed, we can infer that the irregular position of characters was produced by the covered engraving, *kabuse-bori*, which used as block copy to be traced the folios of a previous type printed edition or editions. This means that we can presuppose the existence of at least one type printed edition of *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* before 1712. One type edition at least before 1712 and four block editions between 1712 and 1774 prove the wide circulation of the text among the public. This preexistence of type print before block print reminds us of the same situation in Japan. As it is printed on the title page of the 1712 edition, and as discussed by Kawamoto, all these editions were printed by private persons or local groups. The government was not engaged directly in the publication of literature, dramas or novels; the same situation was found in Japan before and in the early years of movable type printing.

Let us move on to the next study material of movable type: two texts A

and B of the code of the Lê dynasty, *Quốc triều hình luật*.⁶⁾ Although they are both block printed texts, we shall be able to use them for the study of type printing. Text A, which is now widely used by scholars, carries the date of 28th year of Cảnh-hu'ng 景興 or 1767; while text B, which was in the collection of the late Emile Gaspardone, is undated but it contains fewer mistakes and is regarded to be older than A. The whole A text retains uniformity in the form of printed characters and surrounding frame lines showing that all folios were printed by wooden blocks engraved as one serial. But the B text is not so uniform as the A text, proving that its folios were printed by old and new blocks engraved on different dates. However, the basic features of A and B are exactly the same: the number of folios, the division of chapters, and the construction of pages, with each one containing 10 lines of 18 characters. As this is the case, we have to admit that wood blocks of the Lê code were engraved repeatedly, always retaining the same basic features of the text.

Now if we compare A and B folio by folio, we find two notable features. One is about the form of han-shin, or the vertical narrow space to be folded found in the middle of each folio, and the other is about the similarity of the irregular location of characters found on the corresponding pages of both A and B. As to the shape of the han-shin we can distinguish 23 different forms in A and 14 forms in B (see fig. 3, A₁ B₁). It was a tradition that when the wood blocks of a book were newly engraved as a serial work, the forms of han-shin and the surrounding border line retained the same style. In the case of A, the single border line of the folios is identical throughout the text, with one exception, while 23 different forms appear in the han-shin. In order to explain this irregularity, we can perhaps infer that when A was ordered to be printed, folios of different editions carrying different shapes of the han-shin were used directly as models, or indirectly by way of the former edition or editions in which different forms of the han-shin were already used. Probably while the general frame of the outline was required to be uniform, the form of the han-shin was not strictly ordered and controlled. But this does not necessarily mean that there existed 23 different editions before A. Perhaps there remained room for choice among the engravers as to the form of the han-shin even if they were given former examples for printing. Judging from the numerous wrong shapes of the printed characters some engravers are regarded to have been illiterate. It is unlikely that they themselves produced new forms of han-shin, but it is probable that they simplified or distorted the given examples. The existence of 14 different forms of han-shin in the B text is not produced in the same situation. However, we can believe that in this case also editors or engravers had some room of choice as to the form of the han-shin.

It is most likely that the numerous forms of han-shin of A and B were derived from a small number of the original forms used in the previous editions. If we rearrange the han-shins of A and B according to the similarity of

forms, together with the forms of surrounding frame, and then try to retrace the possible derivation process from the limited number of original forms, we can reduce the original number of forms to two or possibly four in text A, and to three or possibly four in text B. As there exists one form common to A and B, we can count four different original forms at least in A and B together (see p. 9 fig. 3, A₂ B₂ C). If this argument of mine is acceptable, we can assume the preexistence of at least four different editions before A and B were engraved.

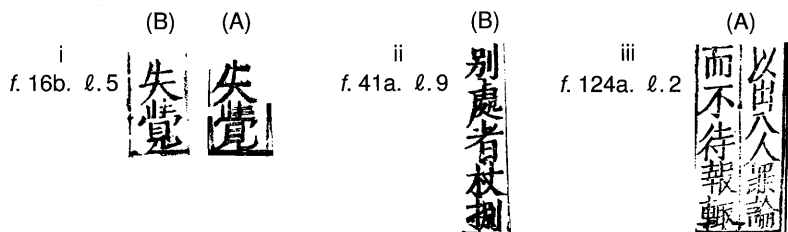
Let us move on to the second notable feature of the A and B comparison (see p. 10 fig. 4, p. 11 fig. 5). Throughout all parts of A and B editions, very frequently we find the irregular location of characters which creates the impression of a curve in the vertical line of characters or an uneven space between characters. As pointed out before, this sort of repeated irregularity never happens in block printing. As A and B are unmistakably wood block publications, we have to presuppose the existence of type printed folios before the engraving of their blocks, as well as the imitation thereof by the engravers. It is to be noted that the same irregularities appear in the corresponding pages of A and B exactly in the same location of the same lines. These similarities could only happen by the direct covered engraving (*kabuse-bori*) of both A and B, using model folios which carried the same irregularities. Moreover these irregularities appear irrespective of any form of the han-shin or of the frame line, meaning that all previous editions used for the engraving of A and B carried the same kind of irregularities, which are characteristic of type printing. As mentioned before, we admit the preexistence of at least four previous editions to A and B, and now we believe that they all carried the same characteristics of one particular form of type printing. This could only be possible either because they all followed the pattern of one preexisting typeface printed edition, or because the pattern of the typeface printed edition of one of them was followed by the others. At any rate, we have to admit that there existed at least four preceding different editions of similar pattern, after the original typeface printed edition, and that they were all block printed. If there was a typeface printed edition among them, the continuity of the same irregularity might have been lost. We understand that in the case of A and B, as well, typeface printing preceded block printing. The situation is the same for the *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* and above mentioned case of Japan.

Judging from the more or less disordered printing style, the various forms of han-shin and the existence of numerous mistakes, it is difficult to regard A and B as a governmental publication. The A text which was formerly in the collection of E. Gaspardone is preserved bound together with a collection of texts called *Bách gia công án tập* 百家公案集 which contain models of legal writing and the governmental proclamation on social norms. Probably A and B is a kind of text widely circulated and used by literate people such as the notables of villages. We have to remember also that the legal system of the Lê dynasty

was characterised by the development of stipulations concerning law suits initiated by the people, as it is recorded in the *Khám tụng điều lệ* 勸訟條例. It is likely that there existed a wide demand for the publication of the Lê code, and that it was printed repeatedly to meet the needs of the public. The repeated publication of *Truyền kỳ mạn lục* and *Quốc triều hình luật* depended upon the extensive development of literary knowledge in this period of the Lê dynasty.

Notes

- 1) The main part of this text was presented by the author at the 33rd International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS) held in Toronto in August 1990. The proceedings as such of the Congress including this article was not published, but it was included in the *Contacts between Cultures, Eastern Asia: History and Social Sciences*, Volume 4. Edited by Bernard Hung-Kay Luk, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, 1992. pp. 285-288. Through kind offices of Mr. Hiroshi Yanase of the Toho Gakkai and Professor Julia Ching, the organizer of the Congress, the author received quite recently in August 1999, the information of the existence of this publication and a copy thereof. This edition of 1992 does not include any figures nor explanatory notes. While the present new edition of 1999 carries many figures and notes concerning the printing techniques. Moreover, the author's new interpretation of decoration types of the middle of the folios (han-shin) is also explained in connection with editions of *Quốc triều hình luật*. Taken as a whole, this present new edition is to be called newly illustrated, revised and enlarged edition of the paper read at the Congress of 1990 in Toronto.
- 2) Kawase Kazuma, *Nihon Shoshigaku no Kenkyu* (in Japanese), 1971, pp. 1826-1827.
- 3) Kawamoto Kunie, On the Demotic characters in the Note of "Truyền Kỳ Mạn Lục" published in 1714. (2), (3) (in Japanese). *Reports of Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies*, No. 16, 1984, pp. 85-92; No. 17, 1985, pp. 75-80.
- 4) *Tōyō Bunko shozō Chōsen-bon Bunrui Mokuroku, fu, Annan bon Mokuroku*, 1939, p. 99, X 65. But the most recent catalogue of Vietnamese Books in the Tōyō Bunko published in 1999 (p. 39) treats this edition of 1712 as printed book (han-pōn 版本) and not as a movable type. This new catalogue was compiled by the Late Goto Kimpei.
- 5) There are also other points to be examined as to the existence of movable type printing (see figures of this page.). Adjoining but irregular location of two or more printed Chinese characters sometimes denies the use of movable types. If there is no room to draw a straight horizontal line between the two characters (i, ii), or different number of characters is counted in the same length of space (iii), this argument is usually acceptable.



- 6) Yamamoto Tatsuro, Printed Texts and Manuscript Copies of the *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* (in Japanese), *Southeast Asia History and Culture*, 13, 1984, pp. 59-80. Texts A and B were called in this article of 1984 as GA and GB. G indicates that these texts belonged to the former collection of E. Gaspardone.

今汝暫寄軍中、遠離
辭以雖功各之會自
膝下大孟于云事立焉但
太守身夸大券餌之投自取懸魚
下穹官厚爵讓他少
跪受教娘且浮勝謂
之印王昌齡閑惡詩
春日疑教上翠
嬌覓其侯 衣還鄉之
婦言也
日卿衣錦還鄉朕無
又未頁且事亦同

Truyện kỳ mạn lục (Tōyō Bunko, X65) vol. 4, fol. 1B

閣獸也戶官
林之政令者時帝
于西階之下曲禮
階密
可廢也胡生曰夫
王誅紂伐奄
衆而遠之蒐苗
昔於農隙以講武
苗秋治兵以狝冬
蒐也呂尚隱於渭
之曰所獲非
耀戎卒於是有于
示胡人於是有長
備行幸有喬揚因
之所也成帝行幸
亡工

Truyện kỳ mạn lục vol. 3, fol. 42A

Fig. 1 Trace of cracks, Truyện kỳ mạn lục 傳奇漫錄

f. 30a

A

對籍塚自遲
 司失賞罰錢
 擅追勾訟者
 錢壹百貫家
 赴本鎮州縣
 還民宗室貳
 騷擾者別論
 內屬縣場掠
 壹分還之
 蠻獠自占所

f. 97a

A

鑄銅錢者不分
 知情減貳寺路
 徒論賞通告捕
 造金銀及金銀
 八官
 校上送死軍人
 有規財者以流
 以貶罷論餘條
 民故自傷殘以
 論減若閔軍時

Fig. 2 Trace of cracks, *Quốc triều hình luật* 國朝刑律

f. 25a

B

司而改定者答
 誤犯御名廟諱
 文書誤犯者杖
 畫者杖陸拾口
 係故意者以流
 口誤者謂不言
 而誤寫者答伍
 貳資
 朝而謬譏訛者
 差官役者以貶

f. 49b

B

賊人梗阻無軍
 先軍役者以流
 情容縱以貶徒
 人有疾病不駐
 擄獲者以徒流
 福而規財者減
 器械牌笠不依
 茲圖者依事情
 而擅調軍兵集
 官聽速就殿庭

Fig. 2 Trace of cracks, Quốc triều hình luật 國朝刑律

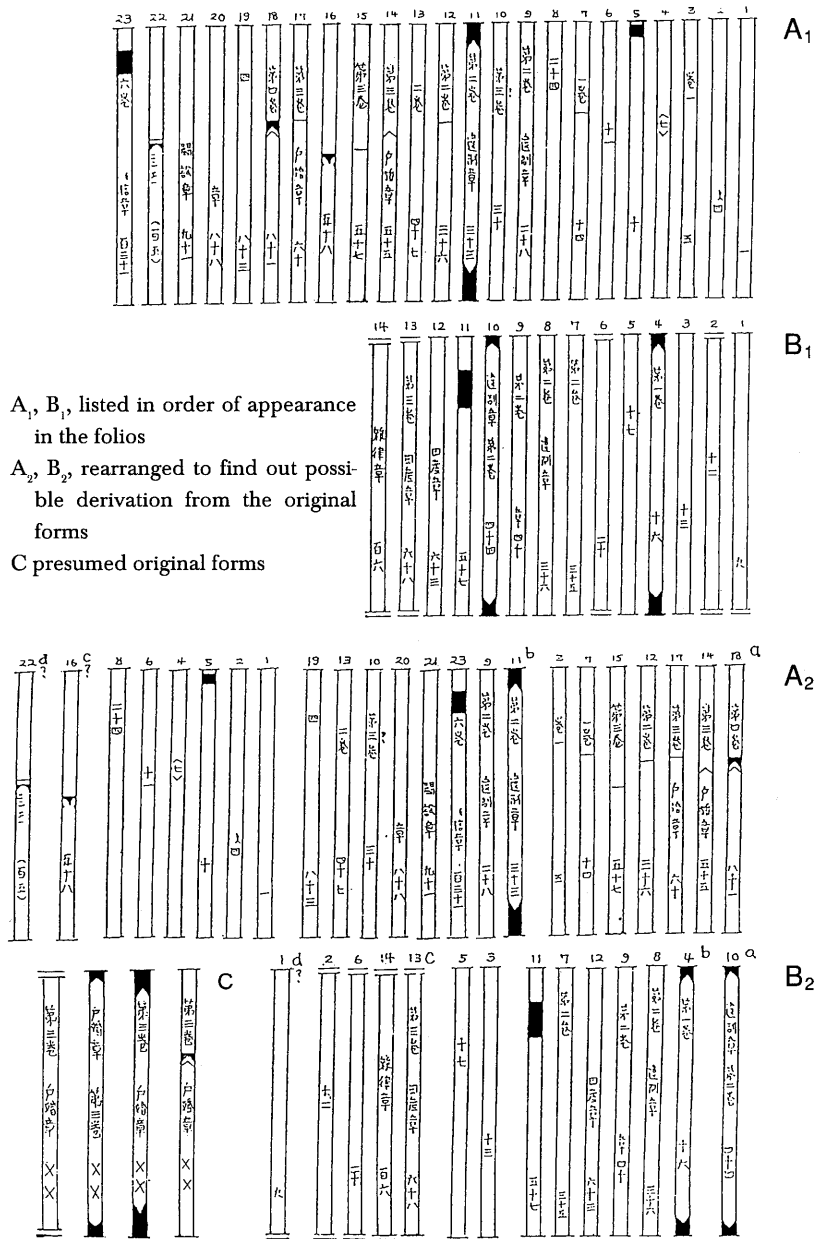


Fig. 3 Types of han-shin found in the editions A and B of the *Quốc triều hình luật*

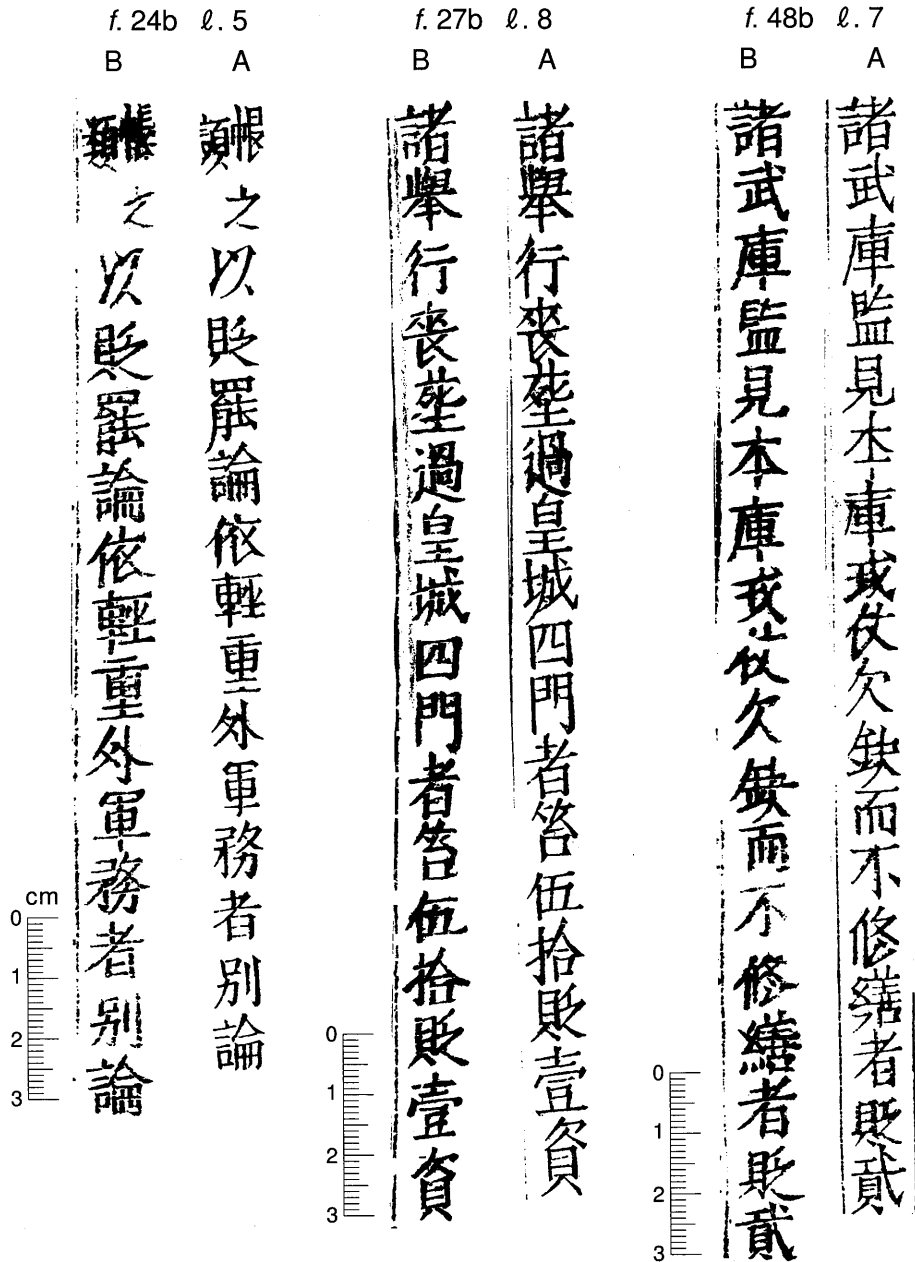


Fig. 4 Similarly irregular location of characters in line (QTHL)

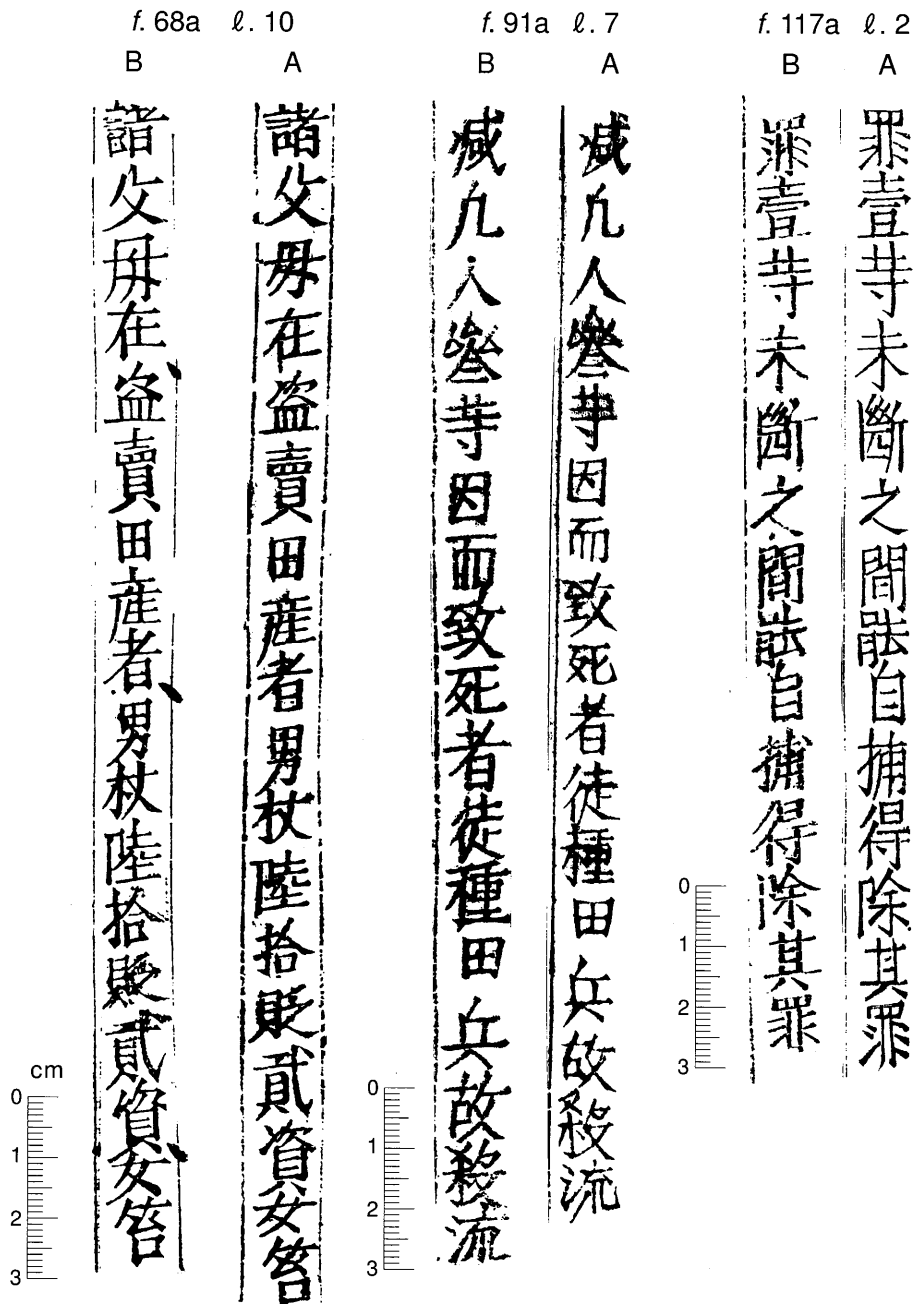


Fig. 5 Similarly irregular location of characters in line (QTHL)