Terms of Friendship: Bylaws for Associations of Buddhist Laywomen in Medieval China

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What do we owe our friends? How are close relationships outside the family formed, and by what principles? Where are the bonds of friendship situated among other social ties like neighborhood, profession, nation, or religious community? What are the historiographical challenges to understanding values, conventions, and intimacies in the past? Such questions are a natural starting point for an essay inspired by my amazing friend, Albert Hoffstädt. He is one subject—the sub-text, really—of this piece. The other, ostensive subject is a signed, handwritten Chinese document containing articles of incorporation for a congregation of Buddhist women in the tenth century. Contemplating the one helps me appreciate the other.

The manuscript (British Library shelfmark Or. 8210/Stein 527, hereafter S 527; see Figure 13.1) is one of the more than sixty thousand documents that, after serving a useful purpose, were holed up in a shrine room in the Mogao Caves in the northwestern town of Dunhuang (Gansu province) in the early eleventh century. The manuscript is nearly unique in combining in one polished document a constitution for a women's lay Buddhist association with the names and actual signatures of the members. Like other bylaws, the charter celebrates general principles. It references the philosophical underpinnings of the group and explains its main purpose, which was to provide mutual aid during funerals and annual religious festivals. The document stipulates the women's duties, stating how much vegetable oil, grain, prepared food and liquor, and what religious objects they were required to contribute. The rules for the society also define penalties for disrupting the peace: those who contravene the regulations must provide a banquet for all, and those desiring to leave the community must not only fête the group but also submit to corporal punishment.

In its original setting the document did more than simply talk about the incorporation of a new social group. Through its performative or juridical features, it also brought a new community into being. The list of members' names near the end of the document asserts a hierarchy. It is ranked from most important (senior nun and organizer, officer, secretary, and elder) to least important

(women marked only by their names—some legally entitled to bear surnames, others not). Beneath fourteen of the fifteen names, each woman has written her own personal sign indicating assent to the charter. The signatures, probably made with a fingernail dipped in ink, vary in design and complexity. Some consist of a single, short line. Others are crossed lines, circles, a circle with a cross inside, or other representational markings. I intentionally refer to them as signatures despite the fact that the women were likely illiterate—otherwise, they would have written their names as words, rather than signs bearing no conventional relationship to their names. But, like writing one's name by hand, the signatures show that each member attempted to distinguish herself from her sisters by drawing a different design. By affixing a personalized token on the constitution, each woman was endorsing the sorority, its rules, and her membership in it.

Background

Two areas of inquiry need to be introduced to help make sense of the material at the heart of this essay. Beyond its intrinsic interest, the formation of religious congregations composed of Buddhist laywomen sheds light on broader trends in the history of Buddhism and Chinese society during the middle ages. A related field of research is Dunhuang studies, which combines the study of the words of the text with consideration of the material features of manuscripts.

Why are lay Buddhist societies important? They are significant in the first place because their form of sociological organization—a voluntary sodality that meets occasionally and whose members understand themselves to be obligated to the association—is relatively uncommon in premodern China. Over the *longue durée*, as many grand treatments have remarked, the two dominant social groupings in China have been the family and the state, and their guiding values (filial piety and loyalty, respectively) have been amply theorized. In this context, clubs of highly-committed members and forms of religiosity based on conscious choice are somewhat rare.

The type of religious identity easily recognizable to moderns, whether the pious believer or the scholar who is suspicious by profession, was not very common in ancient and medieval China. Instead, most activities for worshipping spirits, calming the dead, healing the sick, or securing good fortune were carried out in the home or marketplace, at state-sanctioned altars, or in temples commemorating local cults. This is not to say that exclusive devotion or

FIGURE 13.1 959 *Bylaws*, S 527, © The British Library Board, Or. 8210/S. 527

full-time religious life was impossible—simply that these more strenuous modalities of being religious were more marginal.¹

Considered from this sweeping perspective, Buddhist lay congregations are significant because they are one of the earliest forms of self-selecting, mildly

¹ Ritual specialists and shamans were, on and off, employed by the state. The ideal regimens of hermits and transcendents were vaunted in popular mythology and elite poetry. Dioceses of Daoist followers cultivated deliverance. And Buddhist monastics took vows of celibacy and were supposed to live together scrupulously in monasteries segregated by gender.

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 是者社人名目誦實如後

社官眉切德姓

社長侯留子

社老女子

社人張家富子

obligated groups engaging in shared religious activities. In this respect, they presage later developments in China such as Buddhist sectarian groups, Protestant and Catholic communities, and secret societies.

Thanks to the close study of stone and paper artifacts by historians over the past century, we now have a more detailed and colorful picture of how Buddhist congregations worked. Most were headed by or organized around a senior monastic figure, a nun for women's groups or a monk for men's. Their organizational structure included several officers, selected by the membership, who administered the group's decisions and rules and kept a ledger of

donations. The societies varied in size from a maximum of sixty to one or two handfuls of members. Larger associations seem to have been common in the late-fifth through mid-seventh centuries, judging by stela inscriptions and statuary dedications for pious societies (“districts of righteousness,” *yǐyì* 義邑) from north China.² In the northwest (Dunhuang in Gansu and Turfan in Xinjiang), by contrast, Buddhist fellowships (*she* 社 or *sheyi* 社邑) were usually smaller, especially during the period of independent rule at Dunhuang, 848–1036, when the area was administered by the Zhang 張 and Cao 曹 families, who nominally reported to the central Chinese state but who exercised considerable autonomy and engaged in diplomatic relations with a variety of states.³

Judging by the Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts, members of Buddhist associations paid dues or were required to make regular donations. They mobilized resources to undertake a wide range of good works. Perhaps their heaviest responsibility involved mortuary ritual: providing food for banquets and wailing or performing other acts of mourning at the funeral of society members or their families. They also pooled donations for other merit-making ventures, including commissioning the copying of sutras, fabricating statues, and

2 Important studies of lay societies in the North through the mid-seventh century include: Hao Chunwen 郝春文, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu* 中古時期社邑研究 (2006; rev. ed. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), esp. 7–151; Hou Xudong 侯旭東, *Wu-liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang: yi zaoxiang ji wei zhongxin de kaocha* 五六世紀北方民眾佛教信仰：以造像記為中心的考察 (1998; rev. ed. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2015), esp. 102–284.

3 Important studies of lay societies between 400 and 1000 at Dunhuang include: Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), 290–95; idem, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 281–94; Chikusa Masaaki 竺沙雅章, “Tonkō shutsudo sha monjo no kenkyū” 敦煌出土社文書の研究, 1964, reprinted in Chikusa, *Chūgoku bukkyō shakaishi kenkyū* 中國佛教社會史研究, rev. ed. (Kyoto: Dōhōsha shuppan, 2002), 477–560; Imre Galambos, “She Association Circulars from Dunhuang,” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 853–77; Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995), 259–77; Hao, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu*, 155–385; Meng Xianshi 孟憲實, *Dunhuang minjian jieshe yanjiu* 敦煌民間結社研究 (Beijing: Beijiing daxue chubanshe, 2009); Naba Toshisada 那波利貞, “Tōdai no shayū ni tsukite” 唐代の社邑に就きて, 1938; and “Bukkyō shinkō ni motozokite soshiki seraretaru chūban-Tō Godai jidai no shayū ni tsukite” 佛教信仰に基きて組織せられたる中晩唐五代時代の社邑に就きて, 1939; both reprinted in Naba, *Tōdai shakai bunkashi kenkyū* 唐代社會文化史研究 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1974), 459–673; Yu Xin 余欣, “Cong wenxianxue dao lishixue: you shetiao wenshu toushi Tang-Song funū jieshe” 從文獻學到歷史學：由社條文書透視唐宋婦女結社, in *Bowang Mingsha: Zhonggu xieben yanjiu yu xiandai Zhongguo xueshushi zhi huitong* 博望鳴沙：中古寫本研究與現代中國學術史之會通 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 288–306.

building temples. Some joint projects were seasonal in nature: celebration of the monthly vegetarian feast days (numbering two, eight, or ten), provisions for the spring and autumn sacrifices, underwriting the Lantern Festival at the beginning of the year (fifteenth day of the first month), and making offerings on the Ghost Festival six months after that. Other *mitzvot* included distributing a “righteous collection” (*yiju* 義聚) for members in need.

Having summarized the historical, sociological, and religious significance of lay Buddhist associations, it is also worthwhile introducing recent scholarship on the textual and material evidence. The essential data comprise 422 manuscripts from Dunhuang and Turfan, mostly produced in the ninth and tenth centuries, that contain documents related to the workings of lay societies.⁴

There are, roughly speaking, five basic types of composition. The first genre is the one I focus on in this study, *Articles of Incorporation* or *Bylaws* (usually: *shetiao* 社條). These founding documents exist in two forms. One is a generic version listing only general principles and organizational structure, which modern scholarship refers to as literary models or formularies (Ch.: *wenyang* 文樣, Ja.: *bunpan* 文範), which I will call *Draft Bylaws*. The second form is a more formal document drawn up for a specific occasion, listing members’ names and often including their signatures, which I will call *Bylaws* (from a specific year).

The second genre of writing used by associations is the most numerous among surviving manuscripts, the *Association Circular* (*shesi zhuanie* 社司轉帖). These are relatively short announcements of the group’s meetings, usually written on leftover pieces of paper. They state the purpose, date, and time of the gathering, stipulate if any dues need to be paid, and specify penalties for tardiness or absence. As their title implies, these notifications were circulated among all the members, and many examples contain members’ names as well as a check-mark or the word “notified” (*zhi* 知) scribbled by each member, indicating s/he received the memo and passed it on. A third genre consists of ritual documents, *Association Liturgies* (*shewen* 社文), to be read aloud or followed during events sponsored by the fellowship, including monthly feasts, memorial services, and other merit-making events. The fourth genre is usually titled *Association Account* (*sheli* 社歷), a ledger of the goods donated by each member. Sometimes these tallies record the items that were loaned out and

4 The authoritative compilation by Ning Ke 寧可 and Hao Chunwen 郝春文, eds., *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao* 敦煌社邑文書輯校 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1997), includes 345 documents; Hao’s authoritative updating (Hao, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu*, 2019) adds another seventy-seven; Takata Tokio 高田時雄, “Zangwen sheyi wenshu ersanzhong” 藏文社邑文書二三種, *Dunhuang Tulufan yanjiu* 敦煌吐魯番研究 3 (1998), 183–90, includes three Tibetan language documents, two of which are bylaws.

later returned to the society's coffers. The fifth genre, *Association Report* (*she-zhuang* 社狀 or *shedie* 社牒), also drawn up by the group's officers, documented petitions from applicants as well as resignations. Still more evidence about Buddhist lay congregations can be gleaned from votive inscriptions recording sponsorship of sūtras, statues, or temples by the group.

Four bylaws for women's congregations survive among medieval manuscripts. The earliest is a Turfan document dating from 658 or before, which I will refer to as *658 Bylaws*.⁵ It includes names and signatures of twenty-six "grandmas" (*apo* 阿婆), and hence was likely used as a formal founding document. The next is a draft of bylaws from Dunhuang dated 876 or 936, containing articles (but no names) for a group of thirteen women from Bowang 博望 district of Dunhuang who joined together to celebrate the Lantern Festival at the Mogao Caves (*936 Draft Bylaws*; see Figure 13.2).⁶ The third of the bylaws is studied in this article. It is dated 959 and, judging from the listing of names and affixing of signatures, as well as its larger, more formal handwriting, it was also a ceremonial instrument (*959 Bylaws*).⁷ The fourth probably dates from 968. It contains articles of incorporation as well as a list of the twelve members from the Jing 旌 district⁸ of Dunhuang, but no signatures (*968 Bylaws*).⁹

These four documents bear obvious affinities in physical form. They are all handwritten documents taking up one or two sheets of paper. The three that are for actual events (not the draft), containing the names of members, have writing that is relatively large (characters greater than 1 cm square), formal, and stylized consistently within each document.¹⁰ The writing style, plus the

5 *658 Bylaws*, 67 TAM 74; critical edition in Guojia wenwu ju guwenxian yanjiushi 國家文物局古文獻研究室, Xinjiang Weiwu'er zizhiqu bowuguan 新疆維吾爾自治區博物館, Wuhan daxue lishixi 武漢大學歷史系, eds., *Tulufan chutu wenshu* 吐魯番出土文書 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985), 6:160–63; and Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 60–63.

6 *936 Draft Bylaws*, BD 14682; critical edition in Fang Guangchang 方廣錫, ed., *Guojia tushuguan cang Dunhuang yishu* 國家圖書館藏敦煌遺書, 146 vols. (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2005–2012), s.v. BD 14682; and Hao, *Zhongguo shiqi sheyi yanjiu*, 315–16. The sexagenary dating is ambiguous, and Fang dates it to the ninth–tenth century, so my English title (*936 Draft Bylaws*) is a guess.

7 *959 Bylaws*, S 527; critical edition in Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 23–27.

8 Following Wang Zhongmin 王重民, *Dunhuang yishu zongmu suoyin* 敦煌遺書總目索引 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983) in reading Jing 旌; Naba, *Tōdai shakai bunkashi kenkyū*, 504, reads Gu 雇.

9 *968 Bylaws*, P 3489; critical edition in Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 27–29.

10 A complete study of paleography and alternate character forms is beyond the scope of this paper. A preliminary listing of the non-standard, stylized characters in the *959 Bylaws* (S 527) would include: 條, 蓋, 朋, 社, 危, 扶, 與, 相, 濟, 凶, 麵, 一, 粟, 用, 揔, 膩, 後, 錄, 印, 延, 吳, 段, 流.

affixing of individual signatures on two of the documents, suggest that these three manuscripts were likely used and signed during a public ceremony marking the founding of the sisterhood. By contrast, the 936 *Draft Bylaws* are written out on a smaller sheet of paper twice as tall (26.5 cm) as it is wide (13.5 cm). Its handwriting is messy and fast. Its function as a rough draft is buttressed by the fact that more than twenty percent of its characters (38 out of 174) have been blotted out or corrected.

There are also similarities in organization, terminology, and phrasing among these four sorority articles of incorporation as well as among other association bylaws written at Dunhuang. One of the other bylaws (*Undated Draft Bylaws*)¹¹—one of three drafts of bylaws that are part of a miscellany of ritual texts, contracts, phrasebooks, hymns, and lyrics—contains wording particularly close to that of our main text (959 *Bylaws*). Written in what is likely two or more hands, the miscellany was probably used as a model or guide by local monks or lay students in composing formal documents.

Text, Translation, Commentary of the 959 *Bylaws*

My edition and translation of the text are based on my inspection of the original at the British Library in March 2019 and comparison with several scholarly editions of the text.¹² I also base some of my editorial choices on the similar text, *Undated Draft Bylaws*.

The text begins:

In the sixth year of the Xiande era, on the third day of the first month of the *jiwei* year [February 13, 959], for this dawning of the new year, each member of the women's association expresses good intentions and reestablishes the bylaws.

11 *Undated Draft Bylaws*, S 6537v, 6; critical edition in Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 55–58.

12 The most important editions of the text are: Chikusa, “Tonkō shutsudo sha monjo no kenkyū,” 503–4, who collates S 529 in relation to S 5637v, 6; Yamamoto Tatsuro, Dohi Yoshikazu, and Ishida Yusaku, eds., *Tun-huang and Turfan Documents Concerning Social and Economic History*, vol. 4: *She Associations and Related Documents*, part A: *Introduction and Texts* (Tokyo: Tōyō bunkō, 1989), 9–10; and Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 23–27. My earlier translation of the text in Hao Chunwen, *Dunhuang Manuscripts: An Introduction to Texts from the Silk Road*, trans. Stephen F. Teiser (Los Angeles: Portico Press, 2020), 138–40, needs significant correction, offered here; it was completed before I inspected the original document in person and studied the subject further.

FIGURE 13.2 936 Draft Bylaws, BD 14682, courtesy of Beijing tushuguan chubanshe

顯德六年己未歲正月三日，女人社因滋[茲]¹³新歲初來，各發好意，再立條件。

The first section of the 959 *Bylaws* does more than simply date the organization's founding and introduce the material. In addition, the opening words are metapragmatic in the sense that the members talk about what they are doing: coming together and reaffirming the terms of their bond. This illocutionary section is entirely lacking in the *Undated Draft Bylaws*, in keeping with the use of the draft text in composing a document rather than enacting the rules. The

13 Emending 滋 to 茲, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

opening of the 959 *Bylaws* also makes the quasi-juridical announcement that the women have gathered out of good will and not through coercion. This democratic strain is even more explicit in the corresponding passage of the 968 *Bylaws*, which states that the women “sit in a circle and discuss the establishment of the bylaws, fixing them through deliberation of the association.”¹⁴

Next, the 959 *Bylaws* shift into a higher literary register, utilizing introductory expressions and loose parallel prose, to explain the fellowship’s philosophy. The text states:

Now, we know:

With utmost sincerity we establish an association, with bylaws and protocols.

As for our community’s principles:

Parents give us life, and friends sustain our resolve.

When we encounter danger, we support each other; when we have problems, we help each other.

In dealing with friends, our word is our bond; once we form relations with friends, our plain words follow each other.

We treat our elders as older sisters; we treat our juniors as younger sisters; we use deferential words and let elders rise first.

After establishing the bylaws, we swear to mountains and rivers, we will never go against them.

盖聞：至城[誠]¹⁵立社，有條有格。夫邑儀[義]¹⁶者：父母生其身，朋友長其值[志]¹⁷。遇危則相扶，難則相救。與朋友交，言如信；結交朋友，世語相續。大者若姊，小者若妹；讓語先登。立條件與[以]¹⁸後，山河爲誓，中[終]¹⁹不相違。

This second section lays out the principles of communal life. It considers relations among club members to be nearly as important as the bond between parent and child: parents bestow life, and friends are necessary in order to

14 968 *Bylaws*, P 3489: 圍座[坐]商億[議]立條，合社商量爲定. Similarly, the 936 *Bylaws*, BD 14682, say that “the group sits and discusses” 眾坐商儀[議].

15 Emending 城 to 誠, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

16 Emending 儀 to 義, following *Undated Draft Bylaws* (S 6537v, 6), and Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

17 Emending 值 to 志, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

18 Emending 與後 to 以後, following 936 *Draft Bylaws* (BD 14682), and Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

19 Emending 中 to 終, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 22.

nurture it. Drawing on the conceptual vocabulary of Chinese moral reflection, the 959 *Bylaws* model the relation between friends on the relation between siblings. In all dyadic relationships, there is a senior and a junior partner, while at the same time, values such as trust apply equally to both parties. The *Undated Draft Bylaws* assume a male norm, referring to elder and younger brothers.²⁰ The wording of the 959 *Bylaws* (for a women's association) alters the passage to account for gender (elder and younger sisters), but otherwise abbreviates and follows the *Undated Draft Bylaws*. The end of the section cloaks the principles with supernatural force, alluding to the members taking an oath to terrestrial gods.

The third section in the 959 *Bylaws* contains the articles outlining members' responsibilities for different events. The first major provision concerns sickness or death of a member. The document reads:

Article: Within the association, we honor inauspiciousness and pursue auspiciousness. On the announcement that one of our associates has suffered harm, then it is dealt with through the provisions of the association. Each person is to provide one vat of oil, one catty of white flour, and one peck of millet. Then they should make haste, bringing help by preparing food and wine. If the member herself has died, she can look to the entire association, cloaked in white and dragging along, bringing offerings according to the same precedent as before. If they encounter the deceased member's master and do not observe proper intimacy and propriety, this will not be deemed an offense.

一，社內榮兇逐吉。親痛之名，便於社格，人各油壹合，白麪壹斤，粟壹斛，便須驅驅濟造食飯及酒者。若本身死亡者，仰眾社蓋白耽拽，便送贈例，同前一般。其主人看待，不諫厚薄輕重，亦無罰責。

Providing mutual assistance for funerals and memorial rites was likely the most important function of Buddhist lay associations. The provisioning of the living on occasions of death appears to have been undertaken within the home, involving kin and members of the lay society. The phases of mortuary ritual carried out elsewhere—whether deathbed rituals, graveside ceremonies, or memorial rites enlisting the intercession of the Saṅgha—entailed other costs, drew on different personnel, and were conducted in other locations.²¹

20 *Undated Draft Bylaws* (S 6537v, 6): 大者如兄，少者若弟[弟].

21 See Hao Chunwen 郝春文, *Tanghouqi Wudai Songchu Dunhuang sengni de shehui shenghuo* 唐后期五代宋初敦煌僧尼的社会生活 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue

Judging from the contributions stipulated in the lay society's bylaws, perhaps the heaviest burden was to provide a feast, including food and liquor, for the mourners. No respectable family could avoid this expense. Prudent management of finances and emotions also required that members be prepared to help out at each other's funerals. This article of the document details the duties owed when one's sisters passed away, including ritualized weeping and the donning of mourning clothes. This suggests that in this situation, the members would be acting like affinal kin, so the rules also enjoin the male head of the household (in theory, the deceased woman's husband) to excuse any breach of family mourning custom.

The third section of the manuscript continues with another article outlining the duties of the congregation during Buddhist celebrations of the new year. The text says:

Article: Within the association, on the first day of building merit of the first month, each person is taxed one peck of millet, a small cup of lamp oil, castings of stūpas, and stamped images. First, this repays the kindness and munificence bestowed by rulers. Second, it is to make merit for our parents.

一，社內正月建福一日，人各稅粟壹斛，燈油壹盞，脫塔印砂。一則報 君王恩泰，二乃以[與]²²父母作福。

These and similar regulations provide rich details about the celebration of seasonal festivals at Dunhuang. This women's lay society was particularly energetic at the beginning of the year, during the first few days of the first month. The rules direct members to provide grain, oil, and small devotional objects, all serving as material support for the group's public activities. Grain was presumably used to prepare food for banquets. The lamp oil kept lanterns burning. Such illumination celebrations were held particularly at the end of winter, including the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month, as well as at the beginning of spring, around the full moon of the first month, on the fourteenth, fifteenth,

chubanshe, 1998), 240–368; Hao, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu*, 220–37; Koichi Shinohara, “The Moment of Death in Daoxuan's Vinaya Commentary,” in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline Ilyse Stone (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2007), 105–33; Stephen F. Teiser, “*The Scripture on the Ten Kings*” and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval China (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1994), 20–30; Zhanru 湛如, *Dunhuang fojiao liyi zhidu yanjiu* 敦煌佛教律儀制度研究, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 266–347.

22 Emending 以 to 與, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 24.

and sixteenth days. Often, such celebrations were conducted not in the homes and temples in Dunhuang but out of town, up at the Mogao Caves.²³ The other items mentioned are small clay figurines, produced in molds of stūpas or by impressing stamps onto clay to form Buddha-images (*yinsha fo* 印沙佛).²⁴ Other association documents, including the *Undated Draft Bylaws*, require tithes of oil and flour for celebrating the Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month and the semi-annual fertility sacrifices during spring and autumn.²⁵

Following these events and duties, the *Bylaws*' fourth section lists different forms of bad behavior and the corresponding punishments. The document stipulates:

If within the association someone takes no heed of remonstrance large or small, or breaks protocol and rolls up their sleeves in the position of honor, or does not obey the directives of superiors, then the penalty is to welcome the entire association at her door and provide a banquet of ale and rich food for their consumption. If someone wants to leave the association, each member metes out three whacks of the stick, and afterwards she's penalized by holding a banquet with ale. Absolutely no exceptions.

或有社內不諫大小，無格在席上暄[搢]舉，不聽上人言教者，便仰眾社就門罰醴(酉+貳)[貳]²⁷一筵，眾社破用。若要出社之者各人決杖參棒，後罰醴局席一筵。的無免者。

The type of offenses and the calibration of penalties are consistent with other bylaws from Dunhuang. How does the text imagine friendship? First, the

23 Ning Ke 寧可, "Randeng she" 燃燈社, in *Dunhuangxue dacidian* 敦煌學大辭典, ed. Ji Xianlin 季羨林 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1997), 428a-b; Tan Chanxue 譚蟬雪, *Dunhuang suishi wenhua daolun* 敦煌歲時文化導論 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubangongsi, 1998), 21–25; and idem, *Dunhuang minsu: Silu mingzhu chuan fengqing* 敦煌民俗：絲路明珠傳風情 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 40–60. The 936 *Draft Bylaws* (BD 14682) refer to the festival as "Lighting Lanterns up at the Caves" 上窟燃燈.

24 See Tan, *Dunhuang suishi wenhua daolun*, 26–37; and idem, *Dunhuang minsu*, 47–52.

25 *Undated Draft Bylaws*, S 6537v, 6: 凡有七月十五日造于蘭盤兼及春秋二局...

26 Emending 暄 to 搢, following Huang Zheng 黃徵, *Dunhuang suzidian* 敦煌俗字典 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), 465, s.v. *xuan* 搢, who claims that the flesh radical (肉/月) is used by the writer to emphasize that what is exposed is the arm. Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 24, emend to 暄, presumably following *Undated Draft Bylaws*, S 6537v, 6.

27 Emending (酉+貳) to 貳, following Huang, *Dunhuang suzidian*, 289–90, s.v. *ni* 貳, who points out that the two expressions, *lini* 醴貳 and *nongni* 醴貳, are used frequently in documents from Dunhuang lay associations and are close in meaning.

relationship is defined by rules of etiquette. Breaches include rebuffing admonishment from others, acting in a brutish or proud manner, and ignoring one's lack of seniority within the association. More serious is the attempt to rend the group by trying to withdraw from it. The minimum punishment is providing members with their fill of liquor and food. The specific beverage, *li* 醴, appears to be a dark-colored brew, perhaps best translated as "ale,"²⁸ while the required food is referred to loosely as *ni* 膩, the quality Lin Yutang describes as "oily: (of food) rich and greasy."²⁹ Abandoning the congregation triggers the further pain of undergoing corporal punishment, detailed as three strokes of the stick. Given that other bylaws mandate thirty strokes for lesser infractions, it may be best to regard the specific punishments as aspirational rather than descriptive.³⁰

The fifth section of the 959 *Bylaws* lists the names of all the members, notes the position any of them hold within the administration, and, for all but one of the fifteen members, includes their signatures (which I describe below in brackets). The manuscript reads:

List of Association Members, tallied as follows:

Association Officer, Nun Gongde Jin 功德進 [mark: thick, blotchy stroke tilted left, covering part of the name]

Association Chief, Hou Fuzi 侯富子 [mark: stroke tilted right]

Recording Secretary, Yin Dingmo 印定磨, Woman of the Chai 柴 family [mark: horizontal stroke, faint vertical stroke]

Elder of the Association, Nüzi 女子 [mark: horizontal stroke, vertical stroke]

Association Member, Zhang 張 family Fuzi 富子 [mark: thick strokes resembling capital letter E]

Association Member, Guozi 渦子 [no mark]

Association Member, Li Yande 李延德 [mark: circle with cross in middle]

Association Member, Wu Fuzi 吳富子 [mark: horizontal hooked stroke, vertical stroke]

Association Member, Duanzi 段子 [mark: thick circle]

28 See Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 262, s.v. *li* 醴, "sweet liquor, made with malt and glutinous millet."

29 Lin Yutang, *Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Chinese Usage/Dangdai Hanyu cidian 當代漢語辭典 (Online Version)* (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Press, 1999), last accessed January 20, 2020, s.v. *ni* 膩.

30 *Undated Draft Bylaws* (S 6537v, 6) decree thirty strokes for not responding to others' reprimands and failing to observe social ranking.

Association Member, Fusheng 富勝 [mark: thick strokes resembling Arabic numeral 2]

Association Member, Yiding 意定 [mark: oval with horizontal stroke inside and open seat underneath]

Association Member, Shanfu 善富 [mark: thick vertical stroke]

Association Member, Shao Aduo 燒阿朵 [mark: horizontal top, short vertical stroke underneath, open circle beneath that]

Association Member, Fulian 富連 [mark: vertical stroke, hooked horizontal stroke]

Association Member, Zhulian 住連 [mark: thick vertical stroke]

社人名目詣實如後：社官尼功德進X，社長侯富子X，錄事印定磨紫家娘X，社老女子X，社人張家富子X，社人渦子，社人李延德X，社人吳富子X，社人段子X，社人富勝X，社人意定X，社人善富X，社人燒阿朵X，社人富連X，社人住連X。

The ordering of the membership list is significant in that it betrays three different hierarchies. It elevates monastics (nuns who have left the family) over lay Buddhists, placing the nun whose Dharma name is Gongde Jin (literally: Advancing Merit) first and affording her the generic title of Association Officer. Another social division separates officers from members, with officers listed first. A third distinction involves age, since a non-office holding woman named Nūzi (literally: girl), presumably the oldest member of the group, is placed at the head of the other non-office-holding laywomen.

This section of the *959 Bylaws* also offers interesting information about naming practices for women in medieval China. Some women are listed according to surname (Hou, Yin, Li, Wu, Shao), some not. Some women are listed according to their family's (that is, in a patrilineal society, their husband's) surname (Chai, Zhang). Others are merely listed by personal name.

As noted in the introduction, I consider the ink markings done by hand (probably with a fingernail) placed after the names to constitute signatures, in Webster's sense of "the name of a person written with [her] own hand to signify that the writing which precedes accords with her wishes or intentions."³¹ Placing the signs after their names demonstrates their assent to the articles and their membership in the group. This fully-executed version of association bylaws thus differs from manuscript charters lacking signatures, including

31 Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, ed. Philip Babcock Gove, et al. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2002), 2116, s.v. signature, def. 2a, modified for gender.

draft versions skipping this section entirely, as well as from formal manuscript copies containing a list of names but no signatures (the 968 *Bylaws*).

In addition to highlighting the women's physical involvement with the group's founding document and their commitment to the association, the markings are also a medium for the women to represent themselves as individuals within the collectivity. Close attention to the signatures shows that they are clearly different from each other (see 959 *Bylaws*, S 527; Figure 13.1). (My rough description of the visual features of the signatures is contained in my translation of the document above.) Judging from the women's written traces, it seems that none of them received an education in writing. Lionel Giles, who played up the charm of this document in his general lecture on Dunhuang materials delivered at the China Society (London) in 1941, could only interpret this as a deficiency: "These are executed in so clumsy a fashion as to leave little doubt that none of them could write."³² To lapse into the vernacular, I can imagine the women responding: "It may be a blob, but it's my blob." That is, with a more instrumental notion of literacy, we can understand that the women in the group took pains to personalize their signatures. They asserted some measure of authority and expressed their individuality through the medium of a fingernail dipped in ink.

Finally, the complex nature of the signing practices in the 959 *Bylaws* is made clearer still by comparison to other association documents bearing signatures. The signatures beside members' names in the 894 *Bylaws*, another working document, demonstrate a greater range of literacies among members. The 894 group consisted of men, some of whom stood higher on the scale of functional literacy. About half the signatories wrote their names, in styles ranging from relatively clear and accurate (the Yanzong 彦宗 of the Recording Secretary, Fan Yanzong 范彦宗) to relatively confused or erroneous (the Shide 仕德 of Gao Shide 高仕德, the Zhang 張 of Zhang Shanyuan 張善緣) (894 *Bylaws*, P 3989; see Figure 13.3). That is, these men consciously represented their names by drawing on their knowledge of the Chinese writing system. The other members merely made a mark, such as Chen Jiangqing 陳江慶, who used a symbol resembling the Arabic numeral 7, and Hun Yingzi 渾盈子, whose mark was in the shape of a cross. These latter signatures are relatively different from each other, but all similar in that they are individualized marks rather than the standard character for their name.

32 Lionel Giles, *Six Centuries at Dunhuang: A Short Account of the Stein Collection of Chinese Mss. in the British Museum* (London: The China Society, 1944), 38.

FIGURE 13.3 894 *Bylaws*, P 3989, La Bibliothèque nationale de France

The manuscript concludes with a sixth section stressing the finality of the rules, considered not only as normative content but also as a material, written document. The text states:

All the preceding items of bylaws have been laid out, one by one with care and precision. They are like water and fish [flowing by]: no one could have cause to dispute them, nor can anyone renounce their vows. Mountains and streams are our witness, and sun and moon certify their guarantee. To guard against dishonesty, we transcribe these bylaws to serve later as a record.

右通前件條流，一一丁寧。如水如魚，不得道說事[是]³³非，更不捨³⁴願者。山河爲誓，日月證知。恐人無信，故勒此條，用後記耳。

Like some modern constitutions, the 957 *Bylaws* include a section concerning revision. In this case, however, amendments are prohibited: once laid down,

33 Emending 事 to 是, following Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 25.

34 Reading 捨 in original, close to attested variant in P 2305 cited in Huang, *Dunhuang suzidian*, 356, s.v. 捨; Yamamoto, et al., *Tun-huang and Turfan Documents*, vol. 4, part A, p. 10, and Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao*, 25, read 於, the latter emending to 如; Chikusa, “Tonkō shutsudo sha monjo no kenkyū,” 504, reads 改.

the principles can neither be revised nor revoked. The corresponding section in the *936 Draft Bylaws* phrases the sentiment in a simple rhyming couplet: “The sun may set and the moon may rise, / but these words we’ll never revise.”³⁵ The bylaws further invoke the forces of nature to authenticate the verbal commitment and to guarantee punishment.³⁶ The text ends by reinforcing that the act of writing down the regulations—putting them into material form—is essential to the governance of the group. The *Undated Draft Bylaws* make the analogy to political procedure even more explicit: “Our association has strict regulations; officials have governmental statutes.”³⁷

Conclusion

The themes of friendship, family, and government, as well as the bonds of sentiment and morality appear throughout these documents from medieval Dunhuang. How unique are these concerns, and to what might they be compared? Some continuities are clear. I hope to have shown, in the first place, that the bifurcating language of modern analysis cannot be indiscriminately applied to the materials. That is, the medieval sources do not distinguish between the values of Confucianism, Buddhism, and folk religion, nor do they separate the secular and the sacred. As Jacques Gernet has argued, “Every association had a dual objective: to ensure, on the one hand, the performance of religious acts that were expected to benefit the association as a whole, or even a village community, and, on the other, to maintain the continuity of family cults.”³⁸ Beyond this caution, the historical situation is hard to assess because of the nature of the evidence. Looking to the period’s social and political situation, judgments based on diachronic variation are difficult because the uneven distribution and chance survival of documents from Dunhuang and Turfan do not permit fine-grained differentiation.³⁹ Unlike our knowledge of ancient and medieval European discourse on relations between equals, the affective depths of medieval

35 *936 Draft Bylaws*, BD 14682: 日往月來 / 此言不改。

36 The *Undated Draft Bylaws* go even further, promising that anyone who does not preserve their commitment will be punished by “passing through three lifetimes without glimpsing the face of the Buddha” (6357v, 6): 三世莫見佛面。

37 The *Undated Draft Bylaws*, S 6357v, 6: 社有嚴條，官有政格。

38 Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995), 269.

39 See Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2015), 48–60, who notes (p. 50), “friendship in China remained under-theorized as a social relation and little discussed throughout the medieval era.”

Chinese associations remain largely unfathomable.⁴⁰ In the end, it may be impossible to ferret out distinct valences related to gender, although these were surely important forces at the time. As Deng Xiaonan concluded about one of the medieval bylaws for Buddhist women's associations from Turfan:

Such religious and mutual-aid organizations among the people undoubtedly provided a legitimate opportunity for “grandmas” [*apo* 阿婆] and “moms” [*zhumu* 諸母] [Tang-dynasty terms used in Turfan documents for adult women's groups] to leave the confines of home and join in organized activities. The motives for such congregations are undoubtedly multiple: religious belief certainly played a role, as did female solidarity and shared class interests.⁴¹

Other facets of amity and obligation remain beyond our grasp. Despite the limitations of the evidence and the fallibility of our knowledge, the documents of women's lay associations from Dunhuang, much like Albert Hoffstädt's enlivening and unwavering support for his colleagues, inspire us to think about the joys and duties of friendship.

40 Cf. David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997).

41 Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南, “Liu zhi ba shiji de Tulufan funü: tebie shi tamen zai jiating yiwai de huodong” 六至八世紀的吐魯番婦女：特別是她們在家庭以外的活動, *Dunhuang Tulufan yanjiu* 敦煌吐魯番研究 4 (1999): 232.