Early in 1919, when making a preliminary survey of the Stein Collection of Chinese manuscripts in the British Museum, I came across a small booklet consisting of nine leaves, and measuring 14.5 × 10.5 cm., which Sir Aurel Stein’s native assistant had labelled "Book of Plays in one volume". I soon saw that the contents did not correspond to this hastily written description, and on copying out the whole text, found it to be a poem. The MS. comprised a total of 153 lines, but was incomplete, beginning and ending in the middle of a line. No title remained, but the use of the word 女 instead of the personal pronoun showed that the narrator was a woman. It described the sack of the Western capital, Ch’ang-an, by the rebel forces under 黃巢 Huang Ch’ao in the winter of 880–881.

This was interesting enough; but a few months later I found another MS. of the same poem, this time in the form of a roll, of which the opening portion was torn away, but which on the other hand contained the rest of the poem right down to the end, 198 lines in all. Moreover, this new MS. gave the title 秦婦吟一卷 "The Lament of the Lady of Ch’in, in one roll", and also bore the following dated colophon: 貞明五年己卯歳四月十
"Copying completed by An Yu-shêng, student at the Chin-kuang-ming Monastery in the prefecture of Tunhuang on the 11th day of the 4th moon of the chi-mao year, the 5th of Chêng-ming [13th May, 919]." After the colophon, the scribe, apparently smarting under a sense of injustice, breaks into verse on his own account:

Now I have made this copy fair,
Five pecks of good wheat should be mine;
But wheat’s so dear that in despair
I must my secret hopes resign.

The rest of this interesting effusion is torn off.

Both of these manuscripts, especially the latter, are rather carelessly written; but in this respect they are eclipsed by yet a third MS., which came to light very soon after. This, like the first, is also in the form of a booklet, but slightly larger. The handwriting, though generally legible, is quite appalling in its slovenliness: it would seem to have been painfully copied out as an exercise by a very young novice at some temple. With all its imperfections, however, it is more nearly complete than either of the previous copies, containing as it does all the verses (except three or four accidentally omitted) that are given in both of them put together, with the addition of two extra lines at the beginning.

Comparing these three MSS., which I will call A, B, and C respectively, I should be inclined to say, on grounds both of paper and handwriting, that A was written about the same date as B, that is, early in the 10th century. C is written on paper of coarser

1) These are my conjectures for 来 and 堃(?) respectively. 代 may possibly be an abbreviated form of 價, or it may represent a local word tai meaning “price.”