
Among the Dunhuang sources concerned with economic activities, those dealing with loans account for a major share. In particular, the 124 loan contracts that Éric Trombert has assiduously collected from eighth, ninth, and tenth century sources constitute the largest single category of Dunhuang contracts for these critical centuries of social and economic change. What most readily strikes a reader about these documents is the continuity of their form, language, and contents. Despite their span of three centuries, they deal repeatedly with the same few products of grain and textiles, and concern only local, often rural people in an area known then primarily for its caravan trade. In fact, the people and activities recorded in these documents generally lived alongside, but apart from, the commercial world that brought some prosperity to the famous oasis of Dunhuang during these centuries.

If the seemingly unpromising focus of these historical sources was not enough to discourage scholarly efforts at historical reconstruction, then recall the other difficulties facing scholars of Dunhuang materials. They must hunt down documents scattered about the globe in the hands of various individuals, libraries, and institutes which set quite different conditions for research. They must read numerous studies notable often for their technical expertise in the recondite craft of diplomatics. They must heed high professional standards and follow traditional scholarly practices which often do not encourage the formation of broad conclusions out of usually a mere handful of relevant documents. They often have sources concerned primarily with Buddhist institutions and practices which might well differ from their more common lay counterparts. Not surprisingly, they frequently end up wondering exactly what their research tells them of the rest of China.

That Éric Trombert has nonetheless written a highly informed and important account on loans in Dunhuang marks his study as one of the most important works on medieval China of the past decade or two in any language. Having taken time to think and write carefully about these matters, he draws on a wide variety of sources from Dunhuang, Turfan, and elsewhere to make his con-

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clusions seem both obvious and unassuming. Yet, the import of his work, often alert to wide-ranging issues and themes of Chinese social and economic history, should be of concern to anyone interested in the history of Chinese Buddhism, agriculture, textiles, taxes, law, commerce, travel, concepts of wealth, social organization, and, of course, debt. Whoever thinks that 124 loan contracts from the eighth to tenth century have little to teach us about Dunhuang or China should read this book carefully and be ready to change his or her mind.

Of these 124 loan contracts, all but three date from the ninth and tenth centuries. Trombert starts by addressing their limitations as historical sources and by mentioning his ways of limiting, if not overcoming, these difficulties. He then starts his analysis of them with a useful account of their principal sections and places them in the long-term development of the history of this contract form. Beginning in the fourth century and increasingly from the seventh century, Chinese and others who made these contracts abandoned the hitherto standard form of Chinese language contract. The “commonly shared contract” form (hetong qi 合同契) had owed its popularity to its provision of identical copies of the contract to two parties. Their “common identity,” or legal validity, was proveable by matching parts of certain Chinese characters (usually hetong for “commonly shared”) that were written half along the border of one copy and half along the adjoining border of the other copy. Only when placed side by side were these characters readable, thus providing one more feature to assure their legitimacy. In place of this contract form, for purchase, mortgage, the pledging of real estate as surety, and especially for loans there appeared the single copy contract (the change came later for tenancy contracts). As this new type of contract tended to present only one—usually the inferior—party as the sole party responsible for initiating the contract, it was written largely with the creditor in mind, even though it tended not to mention him by name.

Trombert describes this change as the culmination of a long evolution from pre-Tang days in central Asia and, perhaps, in central China as well. In Turfan in the sixth and very early seventh century the only signatories to loan contracts were the scribe, the principal witness, and a group of other witnesses. In the early Tang—that is, post-640 in Dunhuang and Turfan—the body of a contract names both the creditor and debtor, while its