

A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture

Edited by

Antje Richter



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She Association Circulars from Dunhuang*

Imre Galambos

The discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts in a sealed off cave at the beginning of the twentieth century provided scholars with an unprecedented amount of first-hand material for the study of China's past. Although the overall majority of the manuscripts were copies of Buddhist scriptures, the library cave also yielded a significant number of other types of texts, including a sizeable body of administrative and economic documents, which have become a major source for the study of social and financial conditions during the Tang-Song period. Among these documents are numerous texts related to local *she* 社 associations commonly referred to by modern researchers today as *sheyi wenshu* 社邑文書, or *she* association documents. Among these texts is a subgroup of documents called *shesi zhuanjie* 社司轉帖, or *she* association circulars. The term *shesi zhuanjie* generally appears at the beginning of the circulars and thus seems to represent their contemporary designation.

The circulars represent a utilitarian genre of letters which were written to and circulated among members of *she* associations, informing them about the place and time of an upcoming meeting, the agenda, the contributions they were supposed to bring with them, and the penalties for late arrival or non-attendance. The text of these circulars was relatively stable and most examples follow the same formulaic wording; divergences are minor and in many cases only the names, times and locations vary. The circulars date from the ninth to tenth centuries and mostly appear on coarse paper, often on the verso of other texts. Their other interesting feature is that many of them are written in an untrained hand, with clumsy calligraphy and copious mistakes. In several cases the vertical lines are read in reversed direction, going from left to right. Taken by themselves, cases of such reversed writing may be considered insignificant, but the presence of an entire group of such examples from the mid-

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ninth to the end of the tenth centuries in the Dunhuang corpus implies that we are dealing with a pattern that may be traced back to specific circumstances.

There is evidence that some of the surviving circulars represent the actual letters used to inform members of the *she*, and as such they are contemporary witnesses to this highly restricted domain of epistolary culture. They were worded by the management of the *she* and then passed around among the members, presumably through personal contact. In this sense they were never “mailed” but may have been delivered through messengers. The circular that made a full round was eventually returned to the management and the fact that some of them came down to us suggests that even though they had served their purpose of calling the members together for a meeting, they were preserved or filed. Many of the extant examples of these circulars are, however, fragmentary or appear in conjunction with texts commonly used by students to learn to write, which indicates that these were not original exemplars of actual circulars but copies used to practice writing. The inclusion of these circulars in the range of texts used for the acquisition of literacy illustrates how epistolary texts could be used in a completely different setting long after they had served their primary purpose of delivering a message to its recipients. In fact, their ultimate survival was most likely the result of this secondary function, and many similar documents and letters that were not “recycled” in such a way perished.

1 *She* Associations in Dunhuang

Although *she* associations were known in other parts of China in different times in history, the related documents that appear among the Dunhuang manuscripts date to a specific period, i.e. 850–1000, and are quite uniform and formulaic across different associations, which sets them apart from other associations in China’s past.¹ Even documents and circulars written decades apart essentially maintain the same wording, pointing to a common origin and a shared tradition. Accordingly, based on the dozens of *she*-related documents that survived in Dunhuang, we can reconstruct the main characteristics of these associations. The manuscripts tell us that *she* associations in Dunhuang were governed by the Three Officers (*sanguan* 三官), who comprised the President

1 For a careful study of the *she* as village associations in South China during the pre-modern period, see McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China*.

(*shezhang* 社長), the Manager (*sheguan* 社官) and the Secretary (*lushi* 錄事). In some cases an officer bearing the title Elder (*shelao* 社老) is also identified. As far as we know, the *she* in Dunhuang did not have names. Even if they had a charter that laid down the rules and principles of association, and thus made the *she* function as a legal entity, they seemed to have no names to distinguish them from other *she*. The circulars dispatched by the management were only sent to members of that particular *she* and thus there was no need to specify which association was meant—perhaps it was the list of recipients that identified the *she*. Instead, the circulars from Dunhuang often indicate the type of people who joined into a *she* (e.g. irrigation channel managers) and thus distinguish the different types of associations. When a *she* needed to be identified unambiguously, it could be referred to by naming one of its officers. For example, manuscript Dx.2149 contains the list of people owing firewood, and the list includes “Eighty-two people of the *she* of Gao Zhu’er” 高住兒社八十二人, where Gao Zhu’er is presumably the President (*shezhang*) or one of the other officers.

In principle, circulars had a list of names at the end and members appended a mark below their name to indicate that they had received and read the notice. In reality, however, most of the surviving circulars do not have name lists, most likely because they are not originals but copies made for the sake of practicing writing. Still, many of these copies also include a list of members and thus can help us understand the demographics behind the associations. They show, for example, that *she* associations in Dunhuang consisted of ordinary people, rather than high-ranking officials. We can also see that in Dunhuang the *she* consisted of urban residents who lived within the city limits, rather than in the villages around it. It is possible that the *she* were formed by people living in proximity of one another, and thus in some cases the *she* may have functioned as a sort of neighborhood union. While a large number of circulars and other *she*-related documents survive, these are minimal when compared to the total population of Dunhuang at the time, especially if we consider that the documents stretch over a period of at least five generations. Obviously, the fact that the majority of local population does not appear in these documents does not prove that they were not involved in *she* associations. It is probable that the majority of the documents were simply lost, and that only a fraction of them came to be preserved for reasons that are most likely external to the documents themselves, such as the practice of copying them as a writing exercise or that they could be used as scrap paper for conserving manuscript scrolls. But it is hard to say what portion of the population participated in *she* associations and how common they were. What is clear, however, is that in most cases the

associations comprised male members from among the general population, that is, ordinary people.²

Occasionally we find monastic names among the members but in general the associations consisted of secular residents. In rare cases all members of a *she* are clergy. For example, the list of names at the end of an association circular in manuscript Or.8210/S.5139 includes names of Buddhist monks with titles such as *sengzheng* 僧政, *falü* 法律, *dusi falü* 都司法律, *laosu* 老宿, *shangzuo* 上座, *duli* 闍梨, *sizhu* 寺主 and *chanshi* 禪師.³ Because the list enumerates the top clergy in Dunhuang, these individuals obviously belonged to different monasteries and were not the type of ordinary residents we see in most circulars. In addition, a small number of documents relate to female associations and—beside the list of members—this is usually also specified in the title. For example, the bylaws of an association in manuscript Or.8210/S.527 begin with the following words:

On the 3rd day of the 1st month of the 6th (*jiwei*) year of the Xiande reign (959), our women's association, on the occasion of the coming of the new year, in an expression of each member's good will, hereby re-establish the [association's] bylaws.

顯德六年己未歲正月三日，女人社因茲新歲初來，各發好意，再立條件。

According to the list of founding members at the end of the document, the Manager (*sheguan*) was a nun, whereas the rest were secular members, including the President and the Secretary. Interestingly, an Elder is also listed and her name is simply *Nüzi* 女子, that is, Woman.

We assume that the *she* were voluntary organizations yet when a member wanted to join or leave a *she*, he had to submit an application and other members would pass a decision on the matter. For example, manuscript Or.8210/S.5698 contains a memorandum recording someone's request to withdraw from a *she*:

On the 19th day of the 3rd month of the *guiyou* year, three members of the *she*, namely, Luo Shennu and his sons Wenying and Yizi are experiencing difficulties due to poverty in their family. Shennu and his sons, having been unable to make the contributions on several occasions, ear-

2 It is also possible that the male names, at least in some cases, were listed as heads of households and that they thus represent entire households.

3 Hao Chunwen, "Cong chongtu dao jianrong," 13.

nestly requested the Three Officers and the other members to let their names be removed from the charter and relieve them from continuing to be members. The Three Officers brought the matter before the members who decided to relieve Shennu on account of his dreadful poverty. If, following his release, someone dies or is born in the family of Shennu and his sons, this will concern the *she's* members no more.⁴

癸酉年三月十九日，社戶羅神奴及男文英、義子三人，為緣家貧闕乏，種種不員。神奴等三人，數件追逐不得。伏訖（乞）三官眾社賜以條內除名，放免寬閑。其三官知眾社商量，緣是貧窮不濟，放卻神奴。寬免後，若神奴及男三人家內所有死生，不關眾社。

This document is a record of a decision reached by the assembly, relieving Luo Shennu 羅神奴 and his sons from the membership of the association. Apparently, being part of a *she* could mean a significant burden for poorer members and they could fall behind on their membership contributions. It is not impossible that the application for withdrawal documented here was only nominally voluntary and Luo Shennu was forced to request this because of his falling behind with payments, thereby relieving the *she* from further obligations towards him and his family. As an alternative explanation, it is also possible that poverty was merely an excuse and Luo Shennu and his sons simply wanted to leave the *she* because they did not find paying the contributions worth the benefits anymore.

Following the discovery of the Dunhuang manuscripts, scholars early on noticed documents related to *she* as a promising group of material. The first person to study such documents in the French and British collections was the Japanese scholar Naba Toshisada 那波利貞 who published a long article in three installments in 1938.⁵ Later on, in his catalogue of the Chinese manuscripts of the Stein collection, Lionel Giles listed these texts together as “Club rules and circulars” under numbers 7572–624.⁶ Since he arranged his catalogue by manuscripts rather than texts, quite a few *she* association texts were listed under other categories, on the basis of another text on the manuscript. In Russia, Leonid I. Chuguevsky published a number of studies on these documents from the 1970s, primarily based on the Russian collection of Dunhuang

4 I am using my own translation from Rong Xinjiang, *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang*, 298.

5 Naba Toshisada, “Tōdai no shayū ni tsukite,” Parts 1–3 and “Bukkyō shinkō ni motozukite,” Parts 1–2.

6 Giles, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 259–61.

manuscripts.⁷ A major step in organizing and studying these documents was the publication of the Tōyō bunko series titled *Tun-huang and Turfan Documents Concerning Social and Economic History*, Volume IV of which was specifically devoted to “*She* Associations and Related Documents” (hereafter cited as *She associations*).⁸ Each text was presented with a complete transcription, notes, bibliography of secondary literature and—in a separate volume—facsimile reproduction from microfilm. In China, a collection of *she*-related texts was compiled by Ning Ke 寧可 and Hao Chunwen 郝春文 in 1997 with the title *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao* 敦煌社邑文書輯校 (hereafter cited as *Sheyi wenshu*).⁹ This collection, together with the Japanese *She associations*, represent the two main sources for studying documents related to lay associations in Dunhuang. Recently, Hao Chunwen published another related monograph with the title *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu* 中古時期社邑研究, while Meng Xianshi 孟憲實 came out with a book called *Dunhuang minjian jieshe yanjiu* 敦煌民間結社研究.¹⁰

The group of documents related to *she* associations comprises a variety of different types of documents. In *She associations*, Tatsuro Yamamoto and Yoshikazu Dohi organize the surviving material into the following main categories:

- I. *She* association Bylaws
- II. Applications and Notices
- III. Circulars
- IV. Funeral and Festivity Ledgers
- V. Accounting Ledgers
- VI. Miscellaneous *She*-Related Documents
- VII. Prayer Books
- VIII. Documents from Turfan and Kucha

Of these, VIII is in reality not a real document type but a category delineated on the basis of the geographical provenance of documents, which are grouped together because they are not from Dunhuang but other regions in Western

7 Chuguevsky, “Obshchinnye ob'edineniia”; “Nekotorye dannye”; “Mirskie ob'edineniia”; “Tsirkuliarnye predpisaniiia.”

8 Yamamoto, *She Associations*.

9 Ning and Hao, *Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jiaoji*. Subsequently, Hao Chunwen published several articles in which he supplemented this collection with additional material. See Hao Chunwen, “*Dunhuang sheyi wenshu jijiao buyi*” (in three parts).

10 Hao Chunwen, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu*; Meng Xianshi, *Dunhuang minjian jieshe yanjiu*.

China. But the other seven categories show how diverse the surviving collection of *she*-related documents is. In this essay I am interested in III “Circulars,” the most numerous of all the documents in the corpus, which is probably due to the fact that, unlike *she* association bylaws and other documents, they were issued relatively often, every time a meeting was held.¹¹ Circulars are further divided by the editors of *She associations* into the following subcategories:

- a. *She* association circulars
- b. Circulars of kinship and brotherhood associations
- c. Circulars of irrigation channel managers
- d. Circulars of watchmen and soldiers
- e. Circulars of Buddhist temples and clergy
- f. Fragments

Once again, the last item in the list is not an actual document type, thus in reality there are only five types of circulars (a–e). In this essay I will only look at the first group of *she* association circulars, which comprises the majority of all surviving circulars. This allows me to work with a clearly defined corpus that consists of a large group of documents with relatively stable formulaic content.

2 Structure of the Circulars

She association circulars are surprisingly consistent in their format and wording during the period they were in use in Dunhuang. While the earliest unambiguously dated example of such a document is from the 10th year of the Xiantong 咸通 reign (869), there are ones with *ganzhi* 干支 cyclical dates that may go back to the 850s, even though there is unavoidably a certain degree of ambiguity in relying on such dates. In addition, there also seem to be some undated circulars that go back to the Tibetan period, i.e. before 848. The later dates are given almost entirely according to the Earthly Branches (*dizhi* 地支) and thus their dating is also quite problematic.¹² Yet none of the documents

11 In *Sheyi wenshu*, of the 396 *she*-related documents 218 are circulars, including 25 duplicates. Thus there are more circulars than all other *she*-related documents together.

12 Although it is generally assumed that the dates using only the Earthly Branches were specific to the period of Tibetan control over Dunhuang, this is more of an assumption than a firmly established fact. For convincing examples of how these dates may in fact come from after the Tibetan withdrawal, see Zhang Xiuqing, “Tubo dizhi jinian.”

is dated after 992. Therefore, the corpus of *shesi zhuan tie* can be dated to the mid-ninth through the late tenth century, which in Dunhuang chronology means the Guiyijun 歸義軍 (Return to Allegiance Army) period when the region functioned as a *de facto* independent Chinese kingdom ruled by military commissioners (*jiedushi* 節度使) who claimed allegiance to the Tang or later dynasties in Central China.

In order to observe the basic structure of these texts, let us look at the example of manuscript Or.8210/S.1453 held in the British Library. The manuscript is a 5 m long scroll with a complete copy of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Diamond sūtra* (Jingang boreboluomi jing 金剛般若波羅蜜經, To8.235).¹³ The circular is on the verso of the scroll, towards its middle part, on the fifth sheet of paper.¹⁴ Apart from the circular, the verso of this relatively long scroll is largely empty, with only a few one or two-line fragments of texts written in the same hand as the circular. Interestingly, one of the fragments is the first six characters of a circular, possibly copied from the complete one on the same side of this manuscript. The circular is written in a semi-cursive hand, with rather faint ink; it is dated to 886, which is already a generation or so after the end of the Tibetan rule over the region. The text reads as follows:¹⁵

The office of the association: A circular.

The aforementioned [office], on account of the annual meeting and feast of the *she*, requests all members to attend in response to this circular on the 10th day of the present moon and assemble at the gates of the Jiejia Hermitage. Those who do not arrive punctually will be fined one beaker (*jiao*) of wine, and those who do not come at all will be fined half a jar (*weng*). The circular is to be transmitted rapidly from hand to hand to members, and must not be held up or delayed. From any member who delays the circular a fine will be exacted according to the fixed rules of the *she*. When it has completed its round, it should be returned to the office to be used [as evidence for declaring] the fines imposed.

13 Although the beginning of this scroll is torn, the text begins with the first line of the sūtra, which shows that only the title and perhaps the name of the translator is missing.

14 Medieval Chinese scrolls were glued together from rectangular sheets of paper into a long writing surface, which was then rolled up. Typically, in a standard Buddhist sūtra one sheet would hold 27–28 lines of text, with 17 characters per line.

15 The translation is a modified version of that seen in Giles, "Dated Chinese manuscripts in the Stein collection," 1038. The transcription of the Chinese text is based on Yamamoto, *She Associations*, 26.

Dated the 10th day of the 2nd (*bingwu*) year of the Guangqi reign (886).
Secretary Zhang Qi.

Manager of the association:	President of the association:
Liang Zaisheng	Zhang Bianbian
Zhang Quan'er Liang Gougou	Deng Zan[...] Wang Zaisheng
Wang Henu Wang Xiangnu	An Fuzhong Chen Xingsheng

社司 轉帖

右緣年支座社局席，幸請諸公等，帖至，並限今月十日，於節加蘭若門前取(聚)。如右(有)於時不到者，罰酒壹角。全不到者，罰半瓮。其帖速遞相分付，不得停帶(滯)。如帶(滯)帖者，准條科罰。帖周，卻付本司，用告。

光啟二年丙午歲十日，錄(事)張欺。

社官梁再晟	社長張弁々	張犬兒	梁狗々	鄧贊□
王再晟	王和奴	王像奴	安伯(福?)忠	陳興晟

On account of their formulaic nature, this sample circular is fairly representative of the corpus. Using this example as our point of departure, we can outline the structure of such documents the following way:

2.1 *Title Line*

社司 轉帖

The words *shesi* 社司 and *zhuantie* 轉帖 are in most cases written quite a bit apart. This implies that even though modern scholars refer to this type of document as *shesi zhuantie*, and in this they appear to follow contemporary terminology, in reality the two words were not read together but functioned as separate entities. As *shesi* is the association's management or office, the whole title should probably be understood as "From the office of the association: A circular." While the title line often occupies a line by itself, there are many cases when the main text begins on the same line, rather than on a new one, as it is also the case in this particular manuscript.

2.2 *Announcement of the Meeting*

右緣年支座社局席，幸請諸公等。帖至，並限今月十日，於節加蘭若門前取。

Written in a formulaic form, this part can be broken down further as follows:

- i. Announcement of the meeting and its agenda
- ii. Invitation to attend
- iii. Date and time
- iv. Place

Although the announcement of the meeting and the agenda invariably come first, the invitation and the time and place of the meeting does not always follow one another in the same sequence. In most cases the body of the circular begin with the phrase *you yuan* 右緣, in which the word *you* (aforementioned < right, above) refers to office of the *she* mentioned just before, whereas *yuan* (reason) introduces the reason why the meeting was called together. As to the reason why the meetings were called together, the most common agenda in the circulars are the organization of the spring and autumn banquets, the celebration of Buddhist festivals or the arrangement of funerary donations. There are also cases when the proposed agenda is the “discussion of a trivial matter” 少事商量,¹⁶ which of course does not tell us what the meeting was about, although it is likely that members knew why they were being called together.¹⁷ Members were also commonly expected to bring contributions to the meeting, although our sample circular does not request this.

In many cases the hour of the meeting is also specified. When this is not stated, as in this particular manuscript (Or.8210/S.1453), we have to assume that the meeting was held each time at a pre-determined time. The circular always announced a meeting held in the same month. In some cases the meeting was to be held on the same day as the date of the circular (e.g. Or.8210/S.1453, Pelliot chinois 5003). But there are also cases when the meeting is held a day or two, or even a week, after the date of the circular. Thus a circular on manuscript Or.8210/S.5631, written on the 14th day of the 1st month, calls the meeting for the 20th of the same month, and the six days between the two represent an entirely reasonable period of notice. Nevertheless, we may assume that the circular made its round among the *she* members relatively quickly, perhaps

16 Meng Xianshi counts fifteen circulars with this particular agenda. See “Lun Dunhuang minjian jieshe,” 74.

17 There is no evidence of the degree of extra-textual communication between members but since they lived in the vicinity of each other, and at times even belonged to the same family, it is probable that most of the communication happened verbally and through more ephemeral forms of writing. The surviving circulars and memoranda are merely administrative records the association had to preserve.

within a single day, which was probably also facilitated by the fact that people of the same association either lived or worked in proximity to one another.

Members were usually asked to convene in front of a temple's entrance, outside of a city gate (e.g. *Dongmen wai* 東門外), by a bridge, or at the home of a host (*zhuren* 主人). In cases when they did not meet at someone's home, we have to assume that they only gathered at the specified location and then went together to the place where the meeting was actually held. Late arrivals would have doubtless also known where to go, even if this was not stated in the text of the circular.

2.3 *Stipulations for Late Arrival or Non-Attendance*

如右於時不到者，罰酒壹角。全不到者，罰半瓮。

Late arrival and non-attendance were always separated and the fines were also different. Thus those who came late (*yu shi budao zhe* 於時不到者) had to pay significantly less than those who did not come at all (*quan budao zhe* 全不到者). Another common variation of the first part of this formula is “to seize the last two persons who arrive late” 捉二人後到 and fine them for a *jiao* of wine.¹⁸ These stipulations appear to be necessary if we consider that most of the meetings were held at 5–7 am, and in at least one case, at 3–5 am (Or.8210/S.1159). The fines seem to be relatively minor in comparison with those at times imposed in circulars of irrigation channel managers, where late attendance could result in several strokes of the cane, and non-attendance in even heavier punishment. For example, in a circular dated to 984 (Pelliot chinois 5032), we read:

Those who come late will be fined with seven strokes of the cane, those who are absent through the entire meeting, will be punished even heavier. 如有後到，決杖七下；全段不來，重有責罰。

According to a model association bylaws (Or.8210/S.5629), caning was also instituted for disobeying the Three Officers of the *she*:

From now on, if a member of the association does not obey the stipulations of the Three Officers, he will be fined seventeen painful strokes with the cane.

¹⁸ This variation was also extremely common. See, e.g., manuscripts Pelliot chinois 2680 and 5032.

自後若社人不聽三官條式者，痛杖十七。

The severity of fines do not seem to have a correlation with the agenda of the meeting but are based on the type of association. Presumably it was a matter of violating the association's rules rather than how much damage or inconvenience late arrival or inattendance would cause.

2.4 *Request to Distribute and Return the Circular*

其帖速遞相分付，不得停滯。如滯帖者，准條科罰。帖周，卻付本司。用告。

As far as we can determine, circulars were issued as single copies, which were requested to be transmitted speedily among the members. Thus there appears to have been no channel of transmission other than personal contact between members. Once again, a penalty was stipulated if someone failed to pass on the circular and held on to it (*tingzhi* 停滯). Such persons, if there were any, were to be fined in accordance with the regulations of the *she*. One circular (Or.8210/S.705) uses the phrase *ni tie* 匿帖 (to conceal the circular) instead of *zhi tie* 滯帖 (to detain the circular), which shows that such cases were also known to have happened.¹⁹

Once the circular has been read by all members on the list and thus completed its round (*tie zhou* 帖周), it was requested to be returned to the association's office (*si* 司) that issued it. The phrase *yong gao* 用告 at the end of our sample is an abbreviation of the more common phrase *yong ping gao fa* 用憑告罰, which means that the office will use the returned circular—in the translation of Giles—"as evidence for declaring the fines imposed."

2.5 *Date and Signature*

光啟二年丙午歲十日，錄事張欺。

The circular was drafted by the Secretary of the association—in this case a person called Zhang Qi 張欺—and it is his name that appears at the end of the circular. He was one of the Three Officers along with the President and the Manager. In rare cases, the circular was signed by the Manager or the President instead of the Secretary. Sometimes after the name of the Secretary we also find the verb *tie* 帖, which in this place signifies that the circular was drafted

19 Meng Xianshi, "Lun Dunhuang minjian jieshe," 79.

and circulated by the Secretary. In terms of its format, the date and signature are similar to ordinary colophons seen on manuscripts from Dunhuang, as they appear on a separate line, indented. Moreover, as colophons habitually do, this distinct part of the circular contains the date and signature of the person responsible for creating the main text. Occasionally, if there is enough space in the last line, the date and signature may be written on the same line.

Although in this case the date uses a reign mark and can thus be dated reliably, the majority of the dates in *she* association circulars employ the *ganzhi* system, which makes exact dating impossible because each combination can designate a range of years, sixty years apart from one another. For example, the recto of manuscript Or.8210/S.6461 contains fragments of circulars and the date 18th day of the *jiaxu* year 甲戌年十八日. Beside the fact that no month is indicated, the year *jiaxu*, within the general time period in question, can be 854, 914, or 974. Without further evidence there is no way of knowing which of these options was the actual year when this particular circular was written. In some cases, however, a dated document can help to date another document that shares the same handwriting or names of members. One such example is manuscript Pelliot chinois 3372 written in the year of *renshen* 壬申, which could signify 852, 912, or 972. Elsewhere on the same manuscript there is also a reference to a *guiyou* 癸酉 year, which is the following year (i.e. 853, 913, or 973). But some of the names from the list at the end of the circular, such as Fan Zaichang 汜再昌, Song Youchang 宋友長, Liang Yanhui 梁延會, An Chouzi 安醜子, appear in a circular on manuscript Or.8210/S.2894, which is also dated to a *renshen* year.²⁰ While this does not help with narrowing down the time when the actual meeting took place, an additional colophon on the side, apparently written in the same hand, contains the date “28th day of the 1st month of the 5th (*guiyou*) year of the Kaibao reign” 開寶五年癸酉正月廿八日, which corresponds to 972.²¹ Although the 5th year of Kaibao was not a *guiyou* but a *renshen* year, as the *guiyou* year came a year later, the use of the reign period helps us to ascertain the date for the *renshen* year in Pelliot chinois 3372 as 972 by linking the two manuscripts on the basis of names that appear in both.

20 In Or.8210/S.2894 the name An Chouzi 安醜子 is written as 安丑子 but considering that there are other people that appear in both manuscripts, we can be fairly certain that this is the same person.

21 Obviously, the phrase *wu nian* 五年 is a mistake for *wu nian* 五年 (5th year). Similar trivial mistakes in writing dates were not uncommon in documents of this period.

2.6 *List of Members*

The main text of the circular is usually followed by a list of members who were supposed to read it and come to the meeting. The list typically begins with the *sheguan*, the Manager of the association in charge of daily administration. In some circulars the character *zhi* 知 is written next to most of the names, indicating that the person acknowledged reading the notice before passing it on. Those names in the same list that are not acknowledged in this manner apparently mean members who have not received the circular. In a circular in manuscript Pelliot chinois 5003, twelve names are marked with *zhi* 知, and three with *bu zhi* 不知, which suggests that both *zhi* and *bu zhi* were not added by the members themselves, who obviously could not have signed off the circular as “not notified” if they have not seen it. Instead, the acknowledgments of receipt or non-receipt was probably added by someone involved in the delivery of the circular, which is further supported by the fact that the ones on manuscript Pelliot chinois 5003 all appear in the same type of ink which is consistently fainter than the main text of the circular, and were possibly also written by one hand.

On some membership lists we also see other marks besides the words *zhi* or *bu zhi*. A circular dated to 967 (Or.8210/S.5632), for example, has a long list of names and the majority of the names are marked with a circle, a black dot, a right-angled hook at the top right corner of the name, or a combination of these. Ning Ke and Hao Chunwen speculate that the black dot was placed by the members as acknowledgment of notification, whereas the circles were drawn by the management to mark whether the person came to the meeting and made a contribution.²² Yet most of the black dots seem to have been erased and then replaced with a circle, which is an indication that the status of some members was updated at some point, and thus they do not mark acknowledgment of notification but something that happened at the meeting (e.g. timely arrival or contribution). Most extant examples of *she* association circulars from Dunhuang, however, are not marked as having been received, which suggests that they may be copies rather than original documents. We should also point out that the list of members is often missing from the end of circulars, even in cases when there is clearly no physical damage to the manuscript. Once again, this points to them being copies of originals that did not survive.

The above items represent the basic structure which *she* association circulars follow. There are occasional differences in the sequence of sections or subsections but other than that, the wording and format are remarkably stable. In fact, the formulaic text of the circulars was so obvious to all members that

²² *Sheyi wenshu*, 104.

the message did not seem to suffer even when characters were omitted and some sentences were thereby rendered largely ungrammatical. This, in turn, is not a trivial point because *she*-related documents abound in omissions and orthographic mistakes.

3 Material Aspects of the Manuscripts and Their Implications

A number of scholars have used Dunhuang *she* association circulars for the study of particular aspects of medieval Chinese life, including the formation of lay associations, clan history, popular festivals, local geography, or even food. Nevertheless, in almost all cases they looked at them purely as texts, largely ignoring their physical appearance and codicological characteristics. In a way this is the negative side effect of having convenient punctuated transcriptions at one's disposal; while such pre-digested anthologies may provide an easy access for a much wider readership, they often also obscure some peculiarities that would be immediately apparent when consulting the original manuscripts or high quality photographs.²³ An examination of the codicological features of the circulars indeed reveals a number of interesting patterns which taken together cannot be considered random.

One of the interesting patterns is that there is a large number of fragmentary circulars, many of which consist of only one or two lines, or even a few characters, often written one after another on the same manuscript. It seems as if someone began writing them and stopped after a few characters, only to begin writing again a bit further down. Because such mini-fragments cannot be considered actual examples of circulars, they are generally not included in the transcribed editions.²⁴ Yet their relatively high frequency among the Dunhuang material certainly warrants a closer look. They are obviously too short to have been sent out to notify members. In most cases they appear on the verso of short Buddhist texts or copies of the *Xiaojing* 孝經, which is yet another indication that they never functioned as separate documents. Early on, scholars have realized that these, and some of the complete ones written in a markedly incompetent calligraphy, were merely writing exercises. In other words, these were never meant to be circulars that could be dispatched

23 Even though *She Associations* provides black and white photographs of the manuscripts in addition to the transcriptions, these are collected in a separate volume and are not always consulted by readers.

24 Pelliot chinois 3319V, e.g., has three fragments but only one of them, the longest, is recorded in Yamamoto, *She Associations* (p. 57).

to members of a *she* but were simply copies created for the sake of practice. This understanding is corroborated by the fact that many such examples, fragmentary or not, appear on the verso of *Xiaojing* manuscripts. Once again, these circulars are often written in a very crude hand, which is in sharp contrast with the beautiful calligraphy seen, for example, on Tang dynasty official communications. Needless to say, if we assume that these unfinished scribbles represent writing exercises, we should also allow that some of the larger fragments or even complete copies were also written for the sake of exercise, rather than being original documents that were circulated among members of a *she*.

So who were these students who learned to write by copying the circulars? Were they children or adults? Where did they study? Fortunately, there are a number of colophons that survive at the end of texts copied for the sake of practice. Although these colophons never appear to accompany copies of circulars, in many cases the handwriting of the colophon and the text it follows matches that used to write the circular on the same manuscript. The colophons tell us that the students were referring to themselves as *xuelang* 學郎 or *xueshilang* 學士郎 (with the middle *shi* written with a variety of homophonous characters), which reveals that they were all male students. Often they include the name of a monastery, indicating that their education was within the confines of that monastery.²⁵ Yet their names are always secular. Accordingly, they were male secular students studying in a monastery in Dunhuang. Unfortunately, we learn nothing about the age and thus the question of whether they were children or adolescents remains open. Similarly, we do not know why they would use circulars as practice material; perhaps the answer to this question will become clear once we learn more about the social background of education.

An even more striking pattern among the available circulars is that quite a few of them are written in a reversed direction, that is, in vertical columns going from left to right. While there are some cases in Chinese history when an inscription on bronze or stone is also written in this direction, these cases are extremely rare and are hundreds of years apart. As a general principle, the Chinese script, when used for writing running text rather than being part of a decorative design, always reads from left to right. In contrast with this rule, there are several dozens of texts from Dunhuang and Turfan where we see a right-to-left reading. For example, the verso of manuscript Or.8210/S.865

25 For the colophons written by the *xuelang*, see Li Zhengyu, “Dunhuang *xuelang* tiji jizhu”; Itō Mieko, “Tonkō no tsūzokushi ‘gakurōshi’ ni tsuite” and *Tonkō monjo ni miru gakkō kyōiku*.

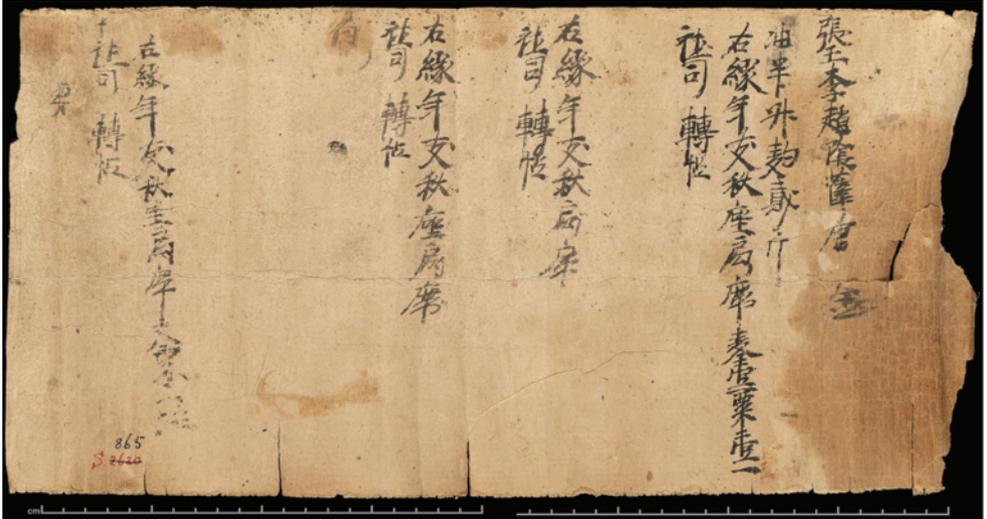


FIGURE 23.1 *Manuscript Or.8210/S.865v with four unfinished fragments of circulars written from left to right.*

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(fig. 23.1) contains four unfinished fragments of *she* association circulars, all running from left to right. Interestingly, the first word of the body of these texts is *you* 右 (*right*) which is equivalent to the word “above” in English, referring to something stated before, in this case to the title, i.e. that the management has issued a notice. And while this makes perfect sense when the lines are read in the normal way from right to left, it completely loses its locative function as the referent is no longer on the right. Thus we have a mismatch between what the text says and how it is presented visually.

Apart from the shorter fragments, there are also a number of larger ones or even complete circulars written in this anomalous direction. Of the 118 so-called “*she* association circulars” listed in *She associations*, at least 9 are written from left to right.²⁶ It is difficult to give an exact count because some of the texts are extremely fragmentary or nearly invisible in the reproductions. The punctuated transcriptions in *She associations* do not say anything about the direction of the text, as all of the examples are typeset in the standard right-to-left direction. Thus one has to rely on the images, which, having been

26 These are the following manuscripts: Or.8210/S.329V (2 examples), Or.8210/S.6104, Or.8210/S.274, Or.8210/S.6614V, Or.8210/S.6461V, Or.8210/S.1386V, Pelliot chinois 3698V and 2439V.

made from microfilms, are not always clear. Yet even these 9 examples make up nearly 8% of the total number in the anthology, which is a surprisingly high proportion, especially if we consider that left-to-right writing was almost non-existent in the Chinese tradition. There are only a few dozen examples of left-to-right writings among the tens of thousands of Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang, which would be an insignificant proportion in such a large corpus; yet all of these examples are dated to the period of 850–1000 and the fact that 8% of the circulars are written in this way cannot be a random coincidence. Moreover, many of the manuscripts contain writings in mixed directions, showing that even if a person wrote a circular from left to right on one or two occasions, he did not always write that way. For example, the verso of manuscript Or.8210/S.329 (fig. 23.2) contains three texts titled *shesi zhuantie*, one of them following the conventional form, whereas the other two run in the reverse direction.

We should also mention that not only *she* association circulars could be written from left to right. There are also quite a few other texts, including colophons, contracts, or in one case even a fragment of the *Qianziwen* 千字文.²⁷ Some of these manuscripts are dated and the dates run from the middle of the ninth to the end of the tenth century. These one and a half centuries in Dunhuang represented the Guiyijun period that began with the end of the Tibetan rule in 848. That dozens of examples of left to right writings emerge during this period but none before is a pattern that could clearly not be considered random. Instead, it had to be a manifestation of a changed social reality that began with the end of the Tibetan period.²⁸

The rarity of such reversed direction in the Chinese tradition points to a foreign influence.²⁹ During the Tang and Five Dynasties period, Dunhuang was a cosmopolitan city connecting China with Central Asia. Not only large numbers of foreign merchants, pilgrims and envoys passed through here as part of their journey along the Silk Road but many non-Chinese ethnicities lived in town on a permanent basis. This multilingual local culture is amply reflected

27 This fragment consists of one and a half lines on the verso of manuscript Or.8210/S.4747.

28 An interesting example of a Tibetan influence in a *she* association circular is manuscript Pelliot tibétain 1102, which is written in Chinese but has a list of goods contributed by the members on the verso, written in Tibetan. Takata Tokio has shown that the Tibetan text must have been written after the meeting took place and that it details the contributions of people, most of whom are also named in the Chinese circular. He dates this circular to the Tibetan period, i.e. prior to 848. See Gaotian Shixiong, “Zangwen sheyi wenshu.”

29 On such foreign influences, see Galambos, “Non-Chinese Influences in Medieval Chinese Manuscript Culture.”

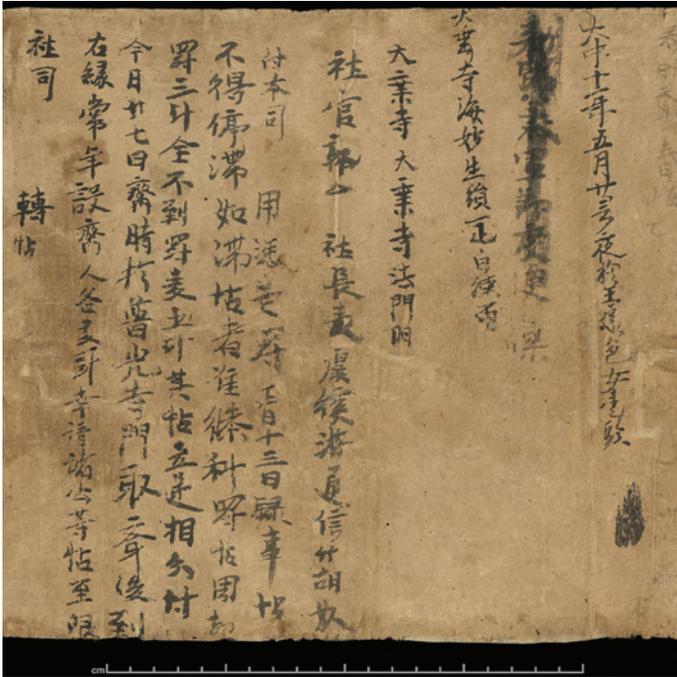


FIGURE 23.2 *Manuscript Or.8210/S.329v with a circular running from left to right.*
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in the Dunhuang manuscripts which comprised material written in a dozen and a half languages and scripts. In many cases manuscripts contain multilingual texts, attesting to the close interaction of various cultures and languages.³⁰ Chinese and Tibetan manuscripts were the most numerous but there was also a significant body of texts and documents in Khotanese, Uighur, Sogdian, Sanskrit and other scripts. Of these, Uighur was written in vertical lines from left to right. Another possibility was the Sogdian script from which the Uighur script evolved—this could also be written in vertical columns from left to right, in addition to right to left horizontal lines. In fact, as Prof. Yutaka Yoshida demonstrated recently, this was done more commonly than hitherto assumed.³¹

Fortunately, the *she* association circulars commonly have a list of members at the end and an examination of the names gives us a clue as to the potential

30 On the multilingual nature of Dunhuang society, see Takata, “Multilingualism in Tun-huang.”

31 Yutaka Yoshida, “When Did Sogdians Begin to Write Vertically?”

source of influence here. For example, Pelliot chinois 3319V has the following list of names at the end of a circular:

石定信 右全 石丑子 石定奴 福延 福全 保昌 張丑子 李千子 李定信

Of these, Shi 石 is one of the common Sogdian surnames used in China. Of the so-called Nine Zhaowu Clans 昭武九姓 of Sogdian origin, Kang 康, Shi 史, An 安, Cao 曹, Shi 石, Mi 米 and He 何 are well attested among the Dunhuang manuscripts, including *she* association circulars. In the above example, of the ten people listed, the three with the surname Shi 石 are certainly Sogdian, plus probably the second person in whose surname the character 右 is most likely a crudely written 石. Thus of the ten names in this list at least four appear to be Sogdian, which is a relatively high percentage of non-Chinese members in contrast with the general population of Dunhuang.³²

Although modern scholars generally rely on surnames to establish the Sogdian identity of people mentioned in the manuscripts, there are also individuals with authentic Chinese surnames whose personal names match those that appear together with Sogdian surnames.³³ In the above example (Pelliot chinois 3319V), the given names Dingxin 定信 and Chouzi 丑子 appear both after the Sogdian surname Shi and the Chinese surnames Zhang 張 and Li 李, which cannot be explained in such a small group of people as a coincidence. Perhaps these members all belonged to the same extended family with both Chinese and Sogdian ties.

In many cases we see Sogdians among the officers of *she* associations. Thus one of the several circulars in manuscript Or.8210/S.2894, the Manager (*sheguan*) has the surname Cao 曹 and the President (*shezhang*), the surname An 安, both of Sogdian descent.³⁴ The list of members contains several more persons with Sogdian surnames: An Chouzi 安丑子, Cao Xingding 曹興定, Cao Yuanying 曹願盈, and An Yanzi 安延子. In addition, the meeting con-

32 On the question of Sogdians in Dunhuang during the 9th and 10th centuries, see de La Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*; Rong Xinjiang, “Dunhuang Guiyijun Cao shi tongzhizhe”; Zheng Binglin, “Wan Tang Wudai Dunhuang diqu”; Lu Qingfu and Zheng Binglin, “Tang mo Wudai Dunhuang de she yu Suteran juluo.”

33 For a fascinating discussion of foreign names in Chinese, including those of Iranian origin, see Sanping Chen, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages*, 112–18.

34 Yet another example on the same manuscript is a circular actually written from left to right, where one of the officers is identified as Manager An 安社官.

vened in this document was to be held in the “tavern of the Cao family” 曹家酒店, a reference to a Sogdian-run establishment.³⁵

Thus Sogdians often appear among the members of *she* associations in Dunhuang, along with Chinese members. In view of this, the left to right direction of writing that we see in the circulars from about 850 onward may be attributed to the influence of the Sogdian script which was also known to have been written in this manner. In fact, this codicological feature is yet another independent proof to the presence and influence of Sogdians in Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period.³⁶ At the same time, most researchers in this context have emphasized the sinicization of the original Sogdians and preferred to talk about their “descendants” (*Sute houyi* 粟特後裔), claiming that in many aspects by the late Tang these people had become largely indistinguishable from the Chinese population.³⁷ The circulars described in this essay, however, show that this sinicization may not have been as thorough as we normally assume and that some of these individuals may have also been literate in both Sogdian and Chinese. Their literacy in Chinese also meant that they could participate in Chinese manuscript culture and, among other things, employ traditional epistolary genres, including the association circulars.



The Dunhuang manuscripts, especially the documents related to economic and social history of the region, provide first-hand evidence of life and society in medieval China, much of which is not found in traditional sources. At the same time, the entire material comes from the northwestern periphery of the Chinese political and cultural sphere, where interaction with other peoples created a unique cosmopolitan environment both culturally and linguistically. Thus the material is unavoidably skewed and cannot be fully representative of Central China. Yet in many areas the lack of information in transmitted sources forces us to rely on these manuscripts when we attempt to reconstruct contemporary society. Within this body of first-hand material, the association circulars form a unique group of documents that shed light on the

35 For a discussion of other Sogdian localities in Dunhuang, see Zheng Binglin, “Wan Tang Wudai Dunhuang diqu de huxing jumin yu juluo.”

36 Back in 1965, when Ikeda On described the Sogdian settlements in the Dunhuang region, he believed that the descendants of the original settlers disappeared by the 8th c. See his “Hasseiki chūyō no okeru.”

37 See, e.g., Rong Xinjiang, “Dunhuang Guiyijun Cao shi tongzhizhe.”

details of *she* associations in Dunhuang during the mid-ninth through the late tenth centuries.

The circulars are very stable in terms of their form and content, and only the key data (e.g. names, the date, place and agenda of the meeting) varies. Consequently, they can be identified as a specific epistolary genre which had the pragmatic purpose of notifying members of an upcoming meeting. Whether they were sent by a designated messenger or passed along from one member to the other by the members themselves, they clearly had both a sender (i.e. the office) and recipients (i.e. the members). Although there was more than one recipient, the circulars were delivered to each recipient along with the message. In fact, the list of names at the end of a Dunhuang circular might be considered as one of the earliest surviving examples of an actual address, even if it only includes the recipients' names. Whether the circular was delivered by a messenger or the members, everyone involved obviously knew the next recipient's location and the name in itself would have functioned as the address.

This brings up the question of how the circular was delivered. The clause warning against the detainment of the circular (*zhi tie*) suggests a scenario according to which members would have kept the circular for a limited amount of time before passing it on to others, perhaps by walking to the home of the next person on the list and handing the document over to him. But the *zhi* and *bu zhi* notes on Pelliot chinois 5003, written by someone other than the notified members may very well point to the involvement of a messenger who carried the circular from one recipient to another. Whether he would leave the circular with each member for some time and come back in a couple of hours to carry it to the next person on the list, or just showed it to members and pushed on immediately, is impossible to know. But if the circular was circulated by the association's messenger, we may wonder whether it was seen at all by the recipients, since the messenger could have just as easily told them the limited amount of information contained therein orally. The fact that the acknowledgment of receipt is marked as *zhi* (notified) and *bu zhi* (not notified), rather than using a verb associated with reading or receiving a physical document—e.g. *du* 讀 (read), *shou* 受 (received)—may be an indication that the recipients did not always read the actual text of the circular but were notified by the messenger verbally. This, in turn, brings up the question whether we can assume that all *she* members were fully literate simply on the grounds that they are identified as recipients of a document.

An argument against treating the circulars as letters could be made in view of the existence of the multitude of copies used as writing exercises, since these were obviously neither written with the aim of delivering a message

to a recipient, nor ever sent out. In this sense, they simply functioned as yet another text used by school children to improve their literacy skills. Yet it is clear that even these copies were made from actual circulars that had been used in real life. Rather than being letter models (*shuyi* 書儀), which were also commonly copied in Dunhuang, the copies of circulars always contain actual data, such as the date, place and agenda of the meeting, and at times even the names of members and officials. Thus they are not model circulars but copies of actual documents that had once been written at a particular occasion and had presumably been delivered. It is highly unlikely that the students would have made up the elaborate list of names and other particulars of the circular for the sake of practicing how to write. Quite to the contrary, even the most crudely written circulars that survive among the Dunhuang manuscript appear to be copies of original letters sent out to members of a local *she*. Naturally, this is in line with how epistolary materials were used in the past and accounts at least partially for their survival.

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