



Title	Passports to the Other World : Transformations of Religious Beliefs among the Chinese in Turfan (Fourth to Eighth Centuries)
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Citation	Turfan revisited : the first century of research into the arts and cultures of the Silk Road. 2004, p. 19-21
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/88467
rights	
Note	

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Passports to the Other World: Transformations of Religious Beliefs among the Chinese in Turfan (Fourth to Eighth Centuries)

Masaharu ARAKAWA

Of the documents in Chinese excavated in Turfan, the majority were unearthed north of Qara-khoja in the extensive Astana cemetery. This cemetery was built up over a long period from the third to the eighth centuries, and the documents in Chinese unearthed there likewise extend mainly over the fourth to the eighth centuries. They may indeed be said to be a time capsule crammed with source material relevant to the era before the Western Uighur period.

Among the documents, it is notable that some were buried to serve as some kind of passport to the other world. These documents were buried in very close proximity to the remains of the deceased. For instance, some were found folded and placed on the chest of the deceased.

Judging from this fact, it appears that these buried documents were an important object, indispensable for the deceased's journey to the other world. Thus, some part of the view of the other world cherished by the people of the time would seem to be strongly and directly expressed by these documents attached to the dead. Along with other buried documents, such as land purchase deeds (*maidì quan* 買地券 contracts for grave plots), they provide valuable material to give us an understanding of the view of the other world held by the ancient Chinese.

Firstly, on examination of these buried documents, they may be placed chronologically into the following three periods, according to their subject matter:

The chronological table of the Turfan Chinese documents serving as passports to the other world

Period I	Gaochang 高昌 commandery period (4 th ~5 th centuries) “statements of personal grave goods” (<i>suizang yiwu shu</i> 隨葬衣物疏) without Buddhist influence (the view of the other world is based only on traditional Chinese beliefs)
Period II	The Period of the Qu 麴 clan Gaochang Kingdom (6 th ~7 th centuries) “statements of personal grave goods” with Buddhist influence (the view of the other world is a mixture of Buddhism and traditional Chinese beliefs)
Period III	Xizhou 西州 period (mid-7 th ~mid-8 th centuries) “statements of merit” (<i>gongde shu</i> 功德疏) with the whole Buddhist influence (the view of the other world with a request for rebirth in Jingtu 淨土 “the Pure land”)

These documents of both the first and second periods are known as “statements of personal grave goods” (*suizang yiwu shu* 隨葬衣物疏). They may be termed lists of funeral goods, mainly clothes and personal items, with formulas attached. These attached formulas contain a request for the other world.

While the first and second periods had similar “statements of personal grave goods”, however, it may be recognized that their attached formulas were different.

The attached formulas in the “statements of personal grave goods” belonging to the first period have the following content:

[Period I]

- (1) (75 TKM 96:17, *Documents I*, p. 28, line 8–11)

“In the 7th year of the Zhenxing 真興 period (425), on the 24th day of the sixth month, Wei Yirong 隗儀容, the wife of Song Pan 宋陸, registered in Yanshou-li 延壽里 of the Gaochang prefecture, [met with an untimely death]. The clothes and personal items accompanying the body of the deceased have been carefully noted. Right of possession over them cannot to be claimed by another person. []. Kindly do not detain the deceased at any checkpoint or river crossing to the other world. Make haste to follow this request as one obeys the regulations (established by an emperor)!”

- (2) (63 TAM 1:11, *Documents I*, p. 5, line 10–13)

“In the 14th year of the Jianchu 建初 period (418), on the 29th day of the eighth month, the wife of Han Qu 韓渠, registered in Xiaojing-li 孝敬里, Tu-xiang 都鄉 of the Gaochang prefecture in the Gaochang commandery, [met with an untimely death]. The clothes and miscellaneous goods accompanying the body of the deceased are as given above. The witnesses are, on the left, Green Dragon, and on the right, White Tiger. The scribes are, to the front, Red Bird, and to the rear, Imaginary animal. []. Make haste to carry the matter through as one obeys the regulations (established by an emperor)!”

These formulas, frequently supplemented by phrases to the effect of “May the deceased reach the other world without incident” or “May the possessions of the deceased not be appropriated by another person,” became passes to the other world.

As seen here, the attached formulas to “statements of personal grave goods” belonging to the first period, simply assert the right of possession of deceased persons to the things they have with them and, therefore, the right to free passage.

Examining the phrases in the attached formulas, it turns out that they quote similar expressions found in passports used in this world. Manifestations of the other world are restricted to such traditional Chinese spirits as the White Tiger and the Red Bird, while any mention of Buddhist concepts is totally lacking.

It is well known that the Chinese in Turfan adopted Buddhism at an early date. In this first period, Chinese Buddhist *sūtras* were found in Turfan, so it is clear that the Chinese in Turfan had already accepted Buddhism. Nevertheless, in the first period, not the slightest Buddhist influence can be perceived in the Turfan Chinese view of the other world.

By contrast, with the onset of the second period in the sixth century, there is a shift to formulas of the following kind:

[Period II]

- (3) (66 TAM 48:2, *Documents I*, p. 334, line 5–11)

[A] In the 36th year of the Yanchang 延昌 period (596), the *bing chen* 丙辰 year, on the 24th day of the third month, Dade 大德, the Buddhist priest, respectfully informs the Great God of the Five Paths (*Wudao dashen* 五道大神): “He (the deceased), the disciple of Buddha, adhered to the five prohibitions of the Buddha and single-mindedly practiced the ten virtues. [Accordingly,] he should have had the good fortune to be granted a long life, at the same time without being made to suffer the troubles of old age. But, Heaven is without pity, and on the 19th day of this month, [He (the deceased), the disciple of Buddha] having suddenly died, set out along the five paths. I demand that there will be no delay and that you will allow him to pass in accordance with his intention!”

[B] Scribe: Zhang Jiangu 張堅固. Witness: Li Dingdu 李定度.

[C] “Should [the disciple of Buddha, the deceased] seek the apex east of the ocean (the furthest point east) or the wall west of the ocean (the furthest point west), he is not to be detained by blocking his way! Make haste to follow Dade’s request as one obeys the regulations (established by an emperor)!”

These formulas can be divided into three parts according to content.

[A] contains the request made by the Buddhist priest to the Great God of the Five Paths to allow the dead to pass to the other world.

[B] contains the names of the scribe who wrote [A], and of the witness for this request.

[C] contains the order from the Great God of the Five Paths.

With the onset of the second period, attached formulas with Buddhist content previously not apparent in the traditional Chinese view of the other world, and referring to self-styled disciples of the Buddha, can be seen. This fact shows that in Turfan, with the coming of the sixth century, Buddhism gradually penetrated the Chinese population. The Great God of the Five Paths, in particular, has up until now been thought of as a Taoist deity, but he is a god introduced into China along with the introduction of Buddhism, a guardian of the entrance to the other world. The adoption of the Great God of the Five Paths into the Taoist immortals occurred from the Tang dynasty onwards.

Nevertheless, despite the new Buddhist influence on the view of the other world, the names of the Taoist style immortals Zhang Jiangu and Li Dingdu also appear. From this fact it may be understood that in the second period, Buddhism and traditional Chinese beliefs were mixed together in the view of the other world.

The third period, that is to say, the period of Tang control from the seventh century onwards, saw the burial of documents totally different from the previous "statements of personal grave goods". The form of "statements of personal grave goods" existing up to that time disappears completely, and in its place a document called the "statement of merit" *gongde shu* 功德疏 (a document recording the degree of virtuous deeds accumulated by the deceased in his (or her) life) is buried¹. Some such statements resemble the following document:

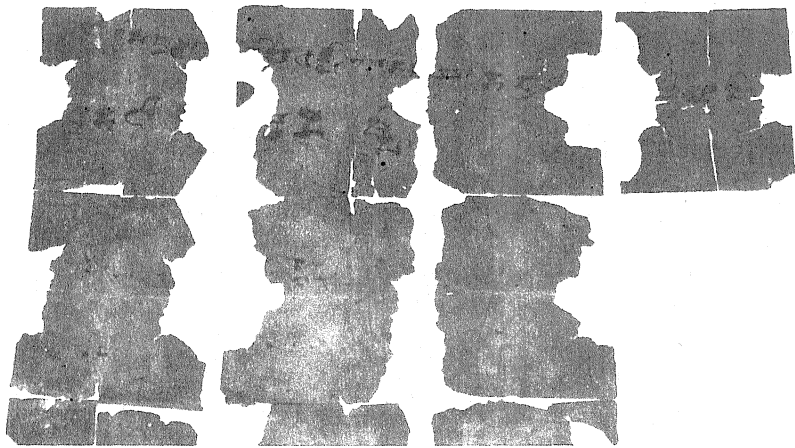
[Period III]

(4) (64 TAM 29:44, *Documents...* III, pp. 334, 338, line 1-2)

"We (the deceased, 阿公 Agong's, family) respectfully inform that the meritorious deeds performed by Agong during his life [], the meritorious deeds performed by Agong since he became ill in the last year are as follows." (omission of the part, containing the meritorious deeds performed by Agong)

(lines 64-67)

"On inquiring into the meritorious deeds performed by Agong 阿公 during life, please check the detailed record. Furthermore, his merit following the time of his death is as previously given minutely. We pray that a prior notification of possession of this account of merit be made. Herewith he requests to be born in Jintu 淨土 (the Pure Land) and not to have a good stroke of fortune in the world of men (this world)".



72 TAM 189:74 (*Documents IV*, p. 117), Period III (5)
(see colour plate 1, p. 435).

On looking at the "statement of merit", while it emphasizes the report of how virtuous deeds were accumulated in the previous life, it is to be understood as a request for rebirth in the Pure Land. In tomb epitaphs from Turfan belonging to the third period, likewise, statements requesting rebirth in the Pure Land make their first appearance². These facts suggest that in the third period, belief in the Pure Land of Buddhism spread rapidly in Turfan. Thus it would seem that the appearance of the "statements of merit" in the third period is intimately related to direct Tang control of Turfan.

Furthermore, in this third period, not only the "statements of merit" in Chinese, but also a document composed in Sanskrit (72 TAM 189:74) was interred with the corpse of a Chinese person who was buried in the Astana tomb No. 189 which is dated to the first half of the 8th century.

This document has previously been regarded as a document in Tibetan, but as a result of investigations I made last year, it is clear that it is in Sanskrit. The transcription was undertaken with the aid of F. ENOMOTO of Osaka University. Its contents are as follows:

[Period III]

(5) (Text) (72 TAM 189:74, *Documents IV*, p. 117)

1 ... namo buddhā[ya na]mo dharmāya nam(aḥ samghā)ya ????

mahā

2 ???...??

() reconstruction

[] partially obliterated letters

.. illegible letters

(Translation)

1 Reverence to the Buddha. Reverence to the *dharmā*. Reverence to the *saṃgha* ??? great

2 ??? ??

Besides, a *mantra* chart with a *Dhāraṇī Sūtra* in Sanskrit has been unearthed from the same tomb of the third period (72 TAM 189:13).

Up to the present buried documents in Sanskrit have been found in only one Chinese tomb. So, it is probable that the buried documents in Sanskrit were not common in Chinese tombs. But, Sanskrit buried documents have never been found in the first and second periods, they suddenly appeared in this third period.

From a general point of view, the Sanskrit documents were made under the impact of a religious culture from the western region, however, the sudden appearance of buried documents in Sanskrit is closely related to the intensification of the acceptance of Buddhism by the Chinese of Turfan in the third period, which was at the time of direct Tang control of Turfan.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Sanskrit documents unearthed at Turfan can only be dated to the seventh century onwards. In Eastern Turkestan, the appearance of the Sanskrit documents in Turfan is later than their appearance in other oases, like Kizil and Karashahr³. We should take this situation into consideration when examining the buried Sanskrit documents of Turfan.

As we have seen, Buddhism gradually penetrated the view of the other world held by the Chinese of Turfan, and it must be recognized that Buddhism gradually spread among the Chinese of Turfan. It is well known that the Chinese started to accept Buddhism early on – in period I – but its spread was gradual.

Certainly, the traditional Chinese view of the other world remained firmly established in the tombs of the Chinese in Turfan through all three periods, so, even in the third period, the traditional Chinese view of the other world is strongly present in the Chinese tombs. However, it is no wonder that the traditional view of the other world coexisted with the completely different view of the other world based on the beliefs of a foreign religion.

The reasons for the gradual penetration of Buddhism and background to this will be discussed on another occasion, but the fact that Chinese Buddhist beliefs in Turfan were always linked to those found at the same time in China (especially north-western and northern China) should by no means be overlooked.

Notes

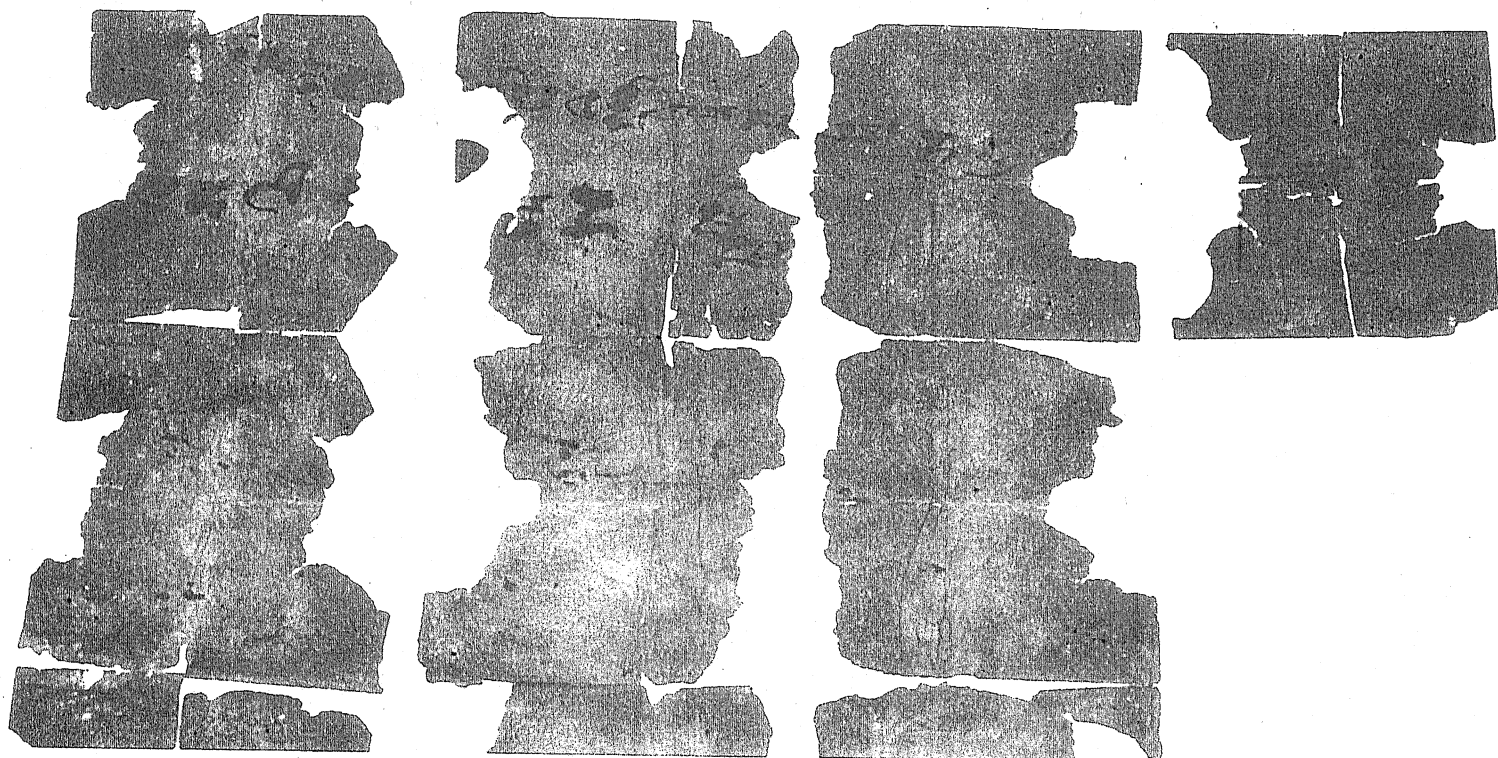
¹ WANG Su 王素: "Pureland Belief among the Common People of Xi Prefecture as Seen in the Gongde Documents from Turfan (*Tulufan chutu Gongdeshu suojian Xizhou shumin de Jingtū xinyang* 吐魯番出土《功德疏》所見西州庶民的淨土信仰)." *Tang Yanjiu* 唐研究 (*Journal of Tang Studies*). 1 (1995), 11–35.

² M. ARAKAWA 荒川正晴: "On the Newly Discovered Tomb Epitaphs from the Cemetery of Yarkhoto." *Silk Roadology* 10 (2000), 160–170.

³ L. SANDER: *Paläographisches zu den Sanskrithandschriften der Berliner Turfansammlung*. Wiesbaden 1968, 23–24.

Abbreviation

Documents I-IV: TANG Zhangru 唐長孺 (ed.): *Tulufan chutu wenshu* 吐魯番出土文書. Vol. I-IV, Beijing 1992–1996.



Pl. 1: 72 TAM 189:74 (*Documents* IV, p. 117), Period III (5)
(see ARAKAWA, p. 20).