

Organization of the Chinese inhabitants in Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang

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Dunhuang and other towns along the Gansu Corridor were under Tibetan domination from the last quarter of the 8th century to the first half of the 9th century for about 60 years. Many Tibetan and Chinese documents redacted during that period were preserved at Qianfodong, and were transmitted to the present. Thanks to these documents, the information concerning the Tibetan rule over Dunhuang and the surrounding area is much more abundant than the material concerning Tibet properly. It is therefore essential to take into account the data attested in this “marginal area” in order to fully understand the history of the Tibetan Empire. Besides, the researches on the Tibetan rule over Dunhuang are comparatively less advanced than those on Tibet.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the organization of local Chinese inhabitants in Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang. Since Akira Fujieda in 1961 presented the basic structure of Tibetan domination system in Dunhuang, his theory has been more or less accepted by scholars. Today, that is 40 years later, we now have accumulated knowledge about the society, advanced in reading Old Tibetan language, and an increasing amount of documents are available. We are thus in a position to restructure the basic framework of Akira Fujieda’s theory.

To begin with, I would like to focus on “xingren-buluo”, one of the thousand districts set up in Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang. It has been believed that “xingren-buluo” was the Chinese translation of Tibetan “nyan rna’i sde” and that the district served for recruiting “messengers”. According to Fujieda, it was one of the “g-yung gi sde” or “civil districts”. However, through examining the relevant documents both Tibetan and Chinese, I have reached the following tentative conclusions.

1. The terms “nyan rna’i sde” and “xingren-buluo” are not equivalent. Fujieda suggested that they are the same because “nyan rna” meaning “messenger” is equal to “xingren” meaning “passenger.” But “nyan rna’i sde” only appears in a Tibetan document from Miran, and the context clearly indicates that the persons in case were not “messenger.” On the other hand the expression “xingren-buluo” appears only in Dunhuang documents where however its function is not specified.

2. The Chinese “xingren-buluo” might correspond to Tibetan “rgod kyi sde” meaning “military thousand-district”. This finds support in one Chinese document where the term “xingren-buluo” is used as a common noun meaning “military thousand-district” in general, not as a proper noun referring to any particular district. The term “xingren san buluo”, “three districts of xingren” in Dx. 1462 clearly refers to the three military thousand

districts in Dunhuang, namely, “stong sar kyi sde”, “rgod sar kyi sde” and “snying tsoms kyi sde”.

3. As to “g-yung gi sde” designating a “civil district” in Dunhuang. As it is known, the Tibetan people were divided into “rgod” and “g-yung” in the social system of the Old Tibetan Empire. Since there existed “rgod kyi sde” in Dunhuang, there must have been “g-yung gi sde” as well. However, the term “g-yung gi sde” has not been found in Old Tibetan documents. On the other hand, one may notice that in Tibetan documents “rgod kyi sde” appears together with “dar pa’i sde” in a pair and in Chinese documents “xingren-buluo” appears with “simian-buluo” in a parallel way. On its part, “simian-buluo” has been rightly identified to be the Chinese translation of “dar pa’i sde”, a civil district. Dar pa’i sde or simian-buluo forms a pair with rgod kyi sde or xingren-buluo “military districts” and possibly mean “civil districts” in general. We may then infer that dar pa’i sde was used in Dunhuang as a substitute for g-yung gi sde.

Finally, I will discuss the organization of Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang and its historical change. The reason why they did not use the term g-yung gi sde is perhaps connected with the form of organization of g-yung gi sde and the change occurred in the organization. The question will be considered in comparison with what we find in other Central Asian area under Tibetan domination.