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# LITERARY DEBTS IN TANG CHINA

## On the Exchange of Money, Merit, and Meter

THOMAS J. MAZANEC\*

*This article describes three concepts of debt that were prominent in the literary world of Tang China – money, merit, and meter – and makes a case for their fungibility in certain contexts. The relationship between the three was more than just metaphoric – all were forms of currency with exchange value within their own spheres. In some cases, debts of money, merit, and meter could be repaid not just in kind, but also with one of the other forms of currency. An understanding of these interconnected systems leads to a deeper understanding of one aspect of Chinese literary history – namely, the importance of Buddhism in the Tang literary world – and prompts questions that shed new light on its dynamics.*

KEYWORDS: *Tang poetry, debt, Buddhism, merit, money, meter*

### ABBREVIATIONS

- QTS      *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩. 1960. Compiled by Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 (1645–1719) *et al.* Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- QTSBB    *Quan Tang shi bubian* 全唐詩補編. Compiled by Chen Shangjun 陳尚君. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992.
- QTW      *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文. 1983. Compiled by Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818) *et al.* Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- T         *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 1924–1935. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 *et al.* Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai.

“Money is a kind of poetry.”  
—Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*

But so is poetry a kind of money, or at least a currency of exchange. Although modern American poetry, like other forms of art, may desire to transcend the dirty world of economics,<sup>1</sup> it is in fact tangled up in it. Beyond the mere fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Gioia 1983, p. 148: “American poetry has defined business precisely by excluding it. Business does not exist in the world of poetry [...] It is the world from which poetry is trying to escape.”

its producers (poets) must somehow find money or patronage to survive, poetry is also a kind of money because it is a form of cultural capital, lending prestige to its producers and consumers.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is subject to the laws of cultural capitalism, and, even in its very claim to escape the relentless commodification of modern capitalism, it remains part of that market, collected in magazines and books which are sold at specific prices. That poetry is closely linked to money should come as no surprise to a twenty-first century reader.

Religious merit, too, is a kind of currency. Purgatory, as conceived by the Christians of medieval Europe, led to a penitential system involving the production and exchange of the merit produced by good works. This system of indulgences, which may be analyzed from an economic perspective, was one of the chief reasons cited by Martin Luther for his break with the Church.<sup>3</sup> Buddhism, too, set up similar – if less centralized – systems of merit.<sup>4</sup> As Matthew Kapstein has observed,

Buddhist ethical order, with its emphasis on scrupulous attention to merits and demerits (the former often quantified precisely in terms of donations of cash and kind to the monasteries), tended to favor the rationalization of human activity in terms that were congenial to commercial interests.<sup>5</sup>

The production, destruction, distribution, and transference of merit was at the heart of traditional Buddhist practice.

The corollary of currency is a lack of it, and beyond that, owing it – debt. Debt is the focus of this essay. In the following pages, I will describe three kinds of debt that would have been prominent in the life of a late Tang poet: money, merit, and meter. In particular, I will focus on the use of the financial term *zhai* 債 (debt) in the literary and religious discourses of the time, going into greatest detail about poetry debt (*shizhai* 詩債). These three were not the only forms of debt in the medieval Chinese world, but they were the most explicit in their adoption of such language.<sup>6</sup> After describing the forms of debt, I will make a case for their fungibility in certain contexts. That is, I will argue that debts of money, merit, and meter could in some cases be repaid not just in kind, but also with one of the other forms of currency. This suggests that it is best not to think of these terms in a binary, metaphorical relationship – that monetary debt is real debt, while merit and meter use the word “debt” metaphorically. Rather, debts of merit and meter were just as real as those of money, with the same compulsion for repayment. An understanding of these interconnected systems will lead to a deeper understanding of one aspect of Chinese literary history – namely, the importance of Buddhism in the Tang – and will prompt us to ask new kinds of questions that may put it in a new light.

I would like to stress that I am not arguing that poetry and religious merit were themselves the same as money. They were not, like money, used as standards of

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Ekelund *et al.* 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Benavides 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Kapstein 2006, pp. 88–89.

<sup>6</sup> The debt to one’s parents, for example, was normally described without the explicitly financial term, but rather as an obligation to “repay their gracious favor” (*bao en* 報恩). For more on these debts, especially to one’s mother, see Cole 1998, pp. 150–152.

exchange, and their value was heavily dependent on context: Poetry mainly had exchange value within certain elite social and political relationships, and merit within ritual contexts that not everyone viewed in the same way.<sup>7</sup> I am also not arguing that money acted as a metaphor for poetry and religious merit in Tang China, unless we recognize that all thought is metaphorical,<sup>8</sup> and that money itself only works by the power of metaphor – after all, trusting that one thing reliably stands in for another (such as an object for purchasing power) is precisely how metaphor works.<sup>9</sup> What I do assert in the following pages is that money, merit, and meter constitute three separate systems of exchange, each with its own logic and structures of debt. Only occasionally did these systems overlap, conceptually and practically, but when they did, they provide us with new ways to understand social exchange in Tang China.

## MONEY

According to classical theorists of money and the economy, money has three main uses: 1) as a means of exchange, 2) as a measure of value, and 3) as a store of value. Relatedly, money has three basic functions: 1) to pay off past debts, 2) to purchase goods and services in the present, and 3) to accumulate an investment for the future.<sup>10</sup> That is, even though money may be used as an intermediary for bartering, this is not its only use. It is itself a marker of value and a way of preserving capital for a later time.

Money took many forms throughout Chinese history. In the Tang, the period with which we are concerned, money included mainly copper coins (*qian* 錢) – which could be strung together into “strings of cash” (*guan* 貫) – and bolts of silk, though gold, silver, privately cast coins, grain, and commodities were not unknown as means of exchange. There was no clear hierarchy among these different forms of money, as each would have been preferable on different occasions.<sup>11</sup> Coin money was subject to fluctuation, as inflation skyrocketed after the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) and the government subsequently produced fewer coins (see Figure 1).<sup>12</sup>

Relatedly, credit institutions became common from the markets of the capital Chang’an 長安 to the monasteries of the Silk Road town Dunhuang 敦煌. Provincial governors issued paper credit certificates called “flying money” (*fei qian* 飛錢), and smaller institutions issued deposit certificates and promissory notes.<sup>13</sup> Debts were incurred by all kinds of people, including farmers, peasants, monks, and literati.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, money’s exchange value also depends on context. One land’s standard currency has a very different value outside of its place of origin.

<sup>8</sup> Lakoff – Johnson 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Cribb 2005, pp. 423–426.

<sup>10</sup> Von Glahn 1996, pp. 16–23; Graeber 2011, pp. 22–23. Paul Einzig defines money differently, identifying eight important aspects: 1) utility, 2) portability, 3) indestructibility, 4) homogeneity, 5) divisibility, 6) stability of value, 7) cognizability, and 8) liquidity (Einzig 1949; quoted in Wang 2013, p. 166).

<sup>11</sup> Hansen – Wang 2013, p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Carter 1976; Peng Xinwei 1994, pp. 286–304; Twitchett 1970, p. 78; Xu Chang 2013, pp. 240–243.

<sup>13</sup> Twitchett 1970, pp. 72–73.

## Value of copper coins in the Tang dynasty

Strings per picul of rice

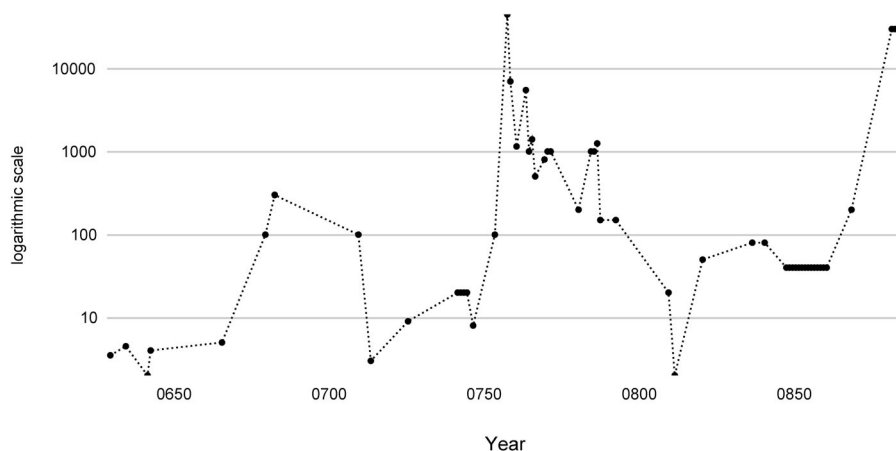


FIGURE 1: The value of copper coins in the Tang dynasty, as measured by the price of one picul (*dou* 斗) of rice in strings of cash. The spikes in the 760s and 880s are a result of the An Lushan and Huang Chao rebellions, and the decrease in the first half of the ninth century is a result of the central government policies related to coin circulation. Other variations are mainly due to harvest quality and natural disasters. Data come from the averages of the ranges given in Carter 1976, pp. 328–329, excluding millet. Data are incomplete, and prices varied by region and season, but general trends are consistent across regions. Created with Google Sheets.

Those who failed to repay their debts were subject to punishment by the state, which could include beatings, prison time, or indentured servitude.<sup>14</sup> Excavated evidence from Turfan shows that private individuals drew up standard contracts over loans and used whatever legal methods they could to sue debtors who failed to pay them back.<sup>15</sup> Evidence from Dunhuang manuscripts suggests that contracts became more sophisticated and standardized throughout the Tang, and, by the tenth century, would go so far as to explicitly list interest rates.<sup>16</sup>

Debts were also an inextricable part of the world of letters. Libraries, paper, and writing brushes required money, as did food, clothing, and shelter for students, teachers, scribes, and scholars. Li Jinxiu estimates that the central government of the Tang spent around 504,300 strings of cash on education, or roughly 2.24% of its budget.<sup>17</sup> The urban elites who wrote literature commonly went into debt to afford such essentials. The examination system often required more capital than a young scholar had on hand. Materials, teachers, self-promotion, bribes – all of these required money.<sup>18</sup> One official source describes how “after the selection of officials, all [of the candidates] incurred debts, and when it came time to fulfill them, they

<sup>14</sup> *Tanglü shuyi jianjie*, pp. 1802–1812; Trombert 1995, pp. 158–159.

<sup>15</sup> Hansen 1995, pp. 33–46.

<sup>16</sup> Trombert 1995, pp. 138–144.

<sup>17</sup> Li Jinxiu 1995, pp. 1135–1140.

<sup>18</sup> Moore 2004, pp. 248–251.

avariciously sought funds – there are none who do not follow this practice.”<sup>19</sup> Interest rates on loans, both public and private, were very high, leading to many defaults. The creditors could track down repayment from a debtor’s family members, guarantor, or (should the guarantor die or flee) a substitute guarantor.<sup>20</sup> Monetary debt was certainly a presence in the lives of many poets.

Even if money was not a common topic in Tang poems, it was not completely forbidden either. The well-known case of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), who wrote obsessively about his finances in his later verse, is just the most extreme example.<sup>21</sup> Poems about precious objects, a subgenre which emerged in the fifth century and retained an appeal for many poets, frequently described the objects’ monetary value. Many of these descriptions were stylized and hyperbolic, but they nevertheless attest to the presence of money in the lives of poets. Lu Lun 盧綸 (d. 799?) wrote of a Buddhist temple as having spent ten thousand catties (*wan jin* 萬金) on the carving of a chime stone, Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (812–870) of a foreign incense stick costing the same amount, and the Buddhist poet-monk Qiji 齊己 (864–937?) of an equally highly-valued inkstone.<sup>22</sup> Liu Jian 劉兼 (10th c.) valued a single morsel of sea perch – one small enough to be picked up with chopsticks – at the same amount, since it represented the carefree lifestyle he cultivated away from the worries of court.<sup>23</sup> Others, such as Liu Hun 柳渾 (716–789) and Zhang Youxin 張又新 (early 9th c.), claimed that a single peony was worth more than such a price.<sup>24</sup> A glance from an especially prized entertainment girl, according to early ninth-century poet Bao Rong 鮑溶, could also cost as much as ten thousand catties, though that is nowhere near the ten million catties a fine woman of Xiangyang 襄陽 (in modern Hubei) was worth, according to the slightly younger Shi Jianwu 施肩吾 (*jinshi* 820).<sup>25</sup> We cannot, of course, take these references to be the actual prices of these things. “Thousand” (*qian* 千) and “ten thousand” (*wan* 萬) could both simply mean “a large number,” and poets may have chosen one or the other for metrical requirements (*qian* is level tone, *wan* is oblique). Nevertheless, they demonstrate that the topic of monetary value was not entirely taboo in Tang verse.

Such prices may have been the polite hyperbole of poets praising friends’ and benefactors’ valued goods, but others were more precise in their accountings. Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) lamented the inflated cost of rice in the capital during a famine in 764.<sup>26</sup> Yang Ning 楊凝 (d. 803) once sent a teasing poem to a friend about the prices of good alcohol in different places. He wrote that his friend could afford better booze since he had moved back to the Xiang 湘 region (modern Hunan) from the remote, southwestern town of Pingle 平樂 (modern Guangxi), implying that their drinks were cheaper because there were no shipping costs.<sup>27</sup> In a poem

<sup>19</sup> *Xuan ren guan cheng hou, jie yu chengzhong ju zhai; dao ren tian huan, zhi qi tan qiu, wang bu you ci* 選人官成後，皆于城中舉債；到任填還，致其貪求，罔不由此。 *Tang huiyao*, 91.1668.

<sup>20</sup> Peng Xinwei 1994, p. 321.

<sup>21</sup> Yang Xiaoshan 2000.

<sup>22</sup> *QTS* 277.3149, 583.6755, 845.9560.

<sup>23</sup> *QTS* 766.8688.

<sup>24</sup> *QTS* 196.2014, 479.5452.

<sup>25</sup> *QTS* 485.5515, 494.5601.

<sup>26</sup> *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu*, p. 4023; *QTS* 222.2353; Owen 2016, 16.11 (vol. 4, pp. 272–273).

<sup>27</sup> *QTS* 290.3302.

on leisurely reading, Liu Jia 劉駕 (b. 822) estimated that it would cost ten thousand catties to buy his own grove and one thousand to fix up a pond and cottage.<sup>28</sup> Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), a close associate of Bai Juyi, wrote of how the senior military advisor Yan Shou 嚴綬 (746–822) gifted him 390,000 cash to spend on medicine – a sum that, as Yuan’s self-annotation tells us, is equivalent to “the great majority of my annual income” (*suiru zhi daliu* 歲入之大率).<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere he narrated the process of calculating the cost of bamboo in some detail:

Ten-plus fibres in one stalk,	一束十餘莖
A hundred-plus stalks for a thousand cash.	千錢百餘束
He’s gotten over a hundred thousand cash,	得錢盈千百
But only a peck- or a bushel-full of grain.	得粟盈斗斛
When he gets back, he won’t buy food:	歸來不買食
Father and son will split a half-grain bowl.	父子分半菽
What’s the point of him holding the cash?	持此欲何爲
His annual due to the officials is near.	官家歲輸促 <sup>30</sup>

In this excerpt from a longer poem, Yuan describes the situation of a poor bamboo seller. Despite the large amount of money that the peasant makes from selling his bamboo, he cannot afford a lavish meal. Instead he must split with a family member a bowl of grains mixed with vegetables. Later in the poem, Yuan contrasts this with his own situation, in which, despite being a low-level official (*yuan* 掾), he can eat meat in a large hall and even share some with the servants. In his attention to social inequality, Yuan Zhen takes careful note of the money a peasant earns from his trade, even putting some basic arithmetic into his verse. Money found its way into Tang poetry, though not as one of its most prominent themes. Poets self-consciously wrote of their earnings and debts.

## POETRY DEBT

Monetary debt was not the only kind pervading the literary world. Poetry debt, too, was significant. Social encounters provided the occasion of much of the poetry produced during the Tang dynasty, and the expectation of poetic exchange created the possibilities of debts.<sup>31</sup> To reciprocate a gift was a serious duty, and as authoritative a text as the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) said that failure to do so went against propriety.<sup>32</sup> In the Tang, poetic exchanges fell under this same system. Perhaps the most direct example of poetry debt comes from the title of a poem written by Han Wo 韓偓 (844–923):

<sup>28</sup> *QTS* 585.6775.

<sup>29</sup> *QTS* 402.4496.

<sup>30</sup> *QTS* 398.4464. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>31</sup> On friendship and poetic exchange, see Shields 2015, pp. 132–199. On the literary communities that may be reconstructed from poetry exchange records, see Jia Jinhua 2015 and Mazanec 2018.

<sup>32</sup> “Quli” 曲禮, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, p. 2665.

Respectfully Matching Secretary Sun Zhao of Xiazhou's "Encircled at Jingnan, Sent to Various Court Officials, Two Stanzas"; At the Time, Attendant Li Xun, Remonstrator Yan Gui, Imperial Diarist Li Yinheng, and Director Li Ran Had All Written Matching Continuations; Long Have I Had This Debt, But Now, Arriving in Hunan, I Have the Leisure to Reciprocate.<sup>33</sup>

The title tells of a certain secretary named Sun Zhao who wrote a pair of poems while under siege and sent them to officials whom he hoped would respond. Most of the people responded quickly; only Han Wo delayed. For Han, his lack of a response becomes a debt, and he anxiously seeks to pay it off. In this case, the very act of sending a poem to someone makes that person indebted to the original poet (especially if the original poet was a social superior). This debt must be repaid in kind, by writing another poem.

The basic idea behind poetry debt is not revolutionary. The French sociologist Marcel Mauss made similar observations about gift-giving almost a hundred years ago in his "Essai sur le don" (1925). The striking part is that the metaphor is explicit, that it is literally called a debt, a *zhai* 債, the exact same word used for financial debt in remonstrations to the emperor about the state economy. Han Wo's example was not unique. In the extant corpora of Tang poetry, we find the technical term *shizhai* 詩債 (poetry debt) used nine times. The verbs used with it are also explicitly economic: poetry debts can be "borne" (*fu* 負), "repaid" (*chang* 償), "paid back" (*chou* 酬), "returned" (*huan* 還), "fulfilled" (*tianhuan* 填還), "provided for" (*gong* 供), "relieved" (*zhou* 調), or "exacted" (*zheng* 徵). These terms established in the Tang continued to be used throughout the subsequent Song dynasty (960–1276): *shizhai* appears 112 times in Song writings included in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書.<sup>34</sup> There is no need to pull a creative, deconstructive reading of these texts to find a commercial undercurrent to medieval poetry: it is all there, right on the surface, in the clearest language possible.

The first extant record of the term "poetry debt" comes from the mid-Tang. A poem by Bai Juyi written at Luoyang in the late 830s contains the couplet, "Long have you seen me as a drunken madman, / Many times have I borne a poetry debt to you" (顧我酒狂久, 負君詩債多).<sup>35</sup> To this he appends an explanatory note: "Shen had at various times gifted me a dozen or so poems. Being often drunk in the spring, I never paid him back, so now I say this" (沈前後惠詩十餘首, 春來多醉, 竟未酬荅, 今故云爾). To be in debt indicates an imbalance, creates a situation of inequality in which the creditor has power over the debtor. This, in turn, requires rationalization. Here, Bai Juyi excuses himself, both in the poem and in the note, by talking about his drinking. In doing so, he places himself in a long line of drunkard poets, from Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427) to Li Bai 李白 (701–762). This connection between poetry and drinking was so well established that twenty-two poems from the Tang casually

<sup>33</sup> 奉和峽州孫舍人肇荊南重圍中寄諸朝士二篇, 時李常侍洵、嚴諫議龜、李起居殷衡、李郎中冉, 皆有繼和, 余久有是債, 今至湖南方暇牽課。QTS 680.7791.

<sup>34</sup> I have calculated the number of uses in Tang poetry by searching *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, available online at the Chinese Text Project (<https://ctext.org/quantangshi>). For the Song, I searched Kanseki Repository (<https://www.kanripo.org/>), filtered by Song dynasty, and eliminated repetitions.

<sup>35</sup> Bai Juyi *ji jianjiao*, 33.2297; QTS 451.5117.



mention the phrase *shijiu*, “buying alcohol on credit” (twenty instances in *QTS*, two in *QTSBB*), often paired with other conventional images of literati leisure culture, such as “watching chess” (*kanqi* 看棋), “singing loudly” (*gaoge* 高歌), and “drawing forth cantillations” (*qian yin* 牽吟).<sup>36</sup> In medieval China, writing poetry and drinking alcohol were two of the most prominent literati activities.

Rhetorical moves similar to Bai Juyi’s may be found in a number of late Tang poems. These two couplets from opposite ends of the ninth century make the same associations between debt, alcohol consumption, and poetic output.

I pick up a brush to return my poetry debts,	把筆還詩債
Grab a zither to provide for my ale funds.	將琴當酒資

Liu Deren 劉得仁 (early 9th c.)<sup>37</sup>

Ale supplies are lacking throughout the summer;	酒材經夏闕
Poetry debts will be exacted in autumn.	詩債待秋徵

Lu Guimeng 陸龜蒙 (d. 881?)<sup>38</sup>

In both instances, the amount of the poetry debt is directly related to the speaker’s supply of alcohol. In the first, the poet stirs to activity to make up for a lack: he wields a brush to produce enough reply poems to dig himself out of debt, and he busks with his zither to get money for ale. In the second poem, the speaker lives uneasily in a space of indebtedness. His ale is all spent after a summer of carousing; he fears a reckoning of poetry accounts in autumn, presumably when he will meet his interlocutor (i.e., his poetry creditor). Both couplets pair the financial burden of heavy drinking with the literary burden of heavy writing.

This association between alcohol, poetry, and debt was so strong that poets occasionally mixed the terms together in other ways.

A mountain monk leaves after we beg each other for new poems;	岳僧互乞新詩去
The barkeep comes repeatedly to exact my old debts.	酒保頻徵舊債來

Han Wo<sup>39</sup>

When the snows are deep, your ale debts increase;	雪深加酒債
With the spring gone, your poem topics decrease.	春盡減詩題

Shangyan 尚顏 (830s? – 920s?)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *QTS* 569.6601, 193.1989, and 749.8535.

<sup>37</sup> *QTS* 545.6303.

<sup>38</sup> *QTS* 622.7162.

<sup>39</sup> *QTS* 680.7792.

<sup>40</sup> *QTS* 848.9599.

In both of these cases, the debts are strictly alcoholic: Either the speaker or the recipient has run up a bar tab that will soon come in for a reckoning. Poetry is made parallel to it. In the first instance, Han Wo creates a similarity between the monk's request for his new poems and the bartender's demand that he settle his account. Shangyan, meanwhile, contrasts his recipient's accumulation of ale debt during the coming winter months with his paucity of poem topics after the end of spring. There was a strong association between poetry, debt, and alcohol in late Tang verse. Writers likely thought of poetry in socio-economic terms as much as literary ones.

Buddhism is also present in these verses. Han Wo's couplet tells us that he is exchanging verses with a monk. In a nice touch, he describes the monk as "begging" for new poems, using the same verb (*qi* 乞) found in the translations of the Buddhist canon for itinerant monks' daily begging for food. And the second couplet quoted is written by a poet-monk, Shangyan, who was once called "the light of Confucians and Buddhists" (*Ru-Shi zhi guang* 儒釋之光). This demonstrates again something about which we will go into more detail later: that the literary economy does not stop at the threshold of the monastery; it runs through the entire literate Chinese world.

This connection is even clearer in one of Bai Juyi's poems on observing Buddhist precepts during a retreat for the *zhai* festival:

"Zhai Precepts"

Whenever I observe *zhai* precepts, I cut myself off from meat and fish  
And slowly realize that laboring in dust and loving in defilement are weightless.  
The six thieves I know assuredly to be without breath or form;<sup>42</sup>  
The three corpses I shall despise for their lack of lovingkindness.<sup>43</sup>  
The alcohol demon is vanquished and must finally die;  
Poetry debts have been fulfilled and shall be leveled.  
With this I now become willing to serve as a disciple:  
My teacher, an Indic adherent, is an ancient master.

齋戒<sup>41</sup>

每因齋戒斷葷腥  
漸覺塵勞染愛輕  
六賊定知無氣色  
三尸應恨少恩情  
酒魔降伏終須盡  
詩債填還亦欲平  
從此始堪爲弟子  
竺乾師是古先生<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> In the early layers of the Buddhist canon, "zhai precepts" (*zhaijie*) translated the Sanskrit term *posadha*, which referred to the monastic practice of fasting after noon. In the Chinese context, it came to mean the practice of vegetarianism (Ciyi 1989, p. 8194). In this context, "zhai precepts" is an abbreviation of "the eight *zhai* precepts" (*baguan zhaijie* 八關齋戒), which refers to eight monastic precepts taken by especially zealous Buddhist lay practitioners six days per month (the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 29th, and 30th). See, e.g., the *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 (\**Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*), trans. Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 343–413), fascicle 30 (T 1509, 25:160a–b). Zhu Jincheng dates this poem to 839, while Bai was living at Luoyang (*Bai Juyi ji jianjiao*, 35.2645).

<sup>42</sup> Six thieves: the six sensory fields (of form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought), so-called because they enable suffering. See the *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra* (*Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經), trans. Dharmakṣema (Tanwuchen 曇無讖, 385–433), fascicle 23 (T 370, 12:501a–b).

<sup>43</sup> Three corpses: Malicious beings which Daoists say dwell in the human body, sometimes translated as "deathbringers." According to the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, "there are three corpses in the body. As for what sort of thing they are, they are real but formless, belonging to the class of souls, the numinous, ghosts, and spirits. They desire to make humans die young" 身中有三尸, 三尸之爲物, 雖無形而實魂靈鬼神之屬也, 欲使人早死 (*Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 6.114). For more on these beings, see Huang 2011, especially pp. 36–37.

<sup>44</sup> *Bai Juyi ji jianjiao*, 35.2645; QTS 458.5201.

Given Bai Juyi's ongoing interest in Buddhism,<sup>45</sup> it should come as no surprise to find a tension between Buddhist and poetic activities in his poems. Both alcohol and poetry are part of the mundane world which must be cast aside during times of ritual purification. For the *zhai*, lay Buddhist practitioners observed monastic-style precepts on days when ghosts and demons were especially powerful.<sup>46</sup> As part of his preparation for the *zhai*, the speaker asserts that the causes of suffering hold no power over him, be they material (the six fields of sensation, line 3) or immaterial (the three corpses, line 4). Like meat, fish, the senses, and the body's spiritual parasites, poetry and alcohol are potential stumbling blocks for the lay Buddhist. Ale is conceived of as a "demon" – literally, the god of death Mara, who tempted the Buddha to break from concentration while under the Bodhi tree. Poetry debts must be fulfilled before purification, so that the poet's mind is not preoccupied with all the reply poems he has to write. Bai Juyi is also playing with a long-held idea in Buddhism. In the Vinaya, the laws which were supposed to guide the life of the monastery and its monks, the Buddha explicitly forbids debtors from taking precepts.<sup>47</sup> In this way, it is not poetry *per se* that is forbidden as one takes quasi-monastic vows, but rather poetry debt, since it might unsettle the practitioner's mind. Having fulfilled his debts, the speaker is ready to become a disciple (line 7), one worthy of a master who bears all the authority of antiquity (line 8). The financial overtones of the act of writing poetry are explicit, and their relationship to Buddhist practice is direct.

### KARMIC DEBT

This mention of Buddhism brings us to the third type of debt: karmic debt. The idea of karmic consequences was fundamental to Buddhism from the very beginning, a concept shared with other early Indian religious traditions. The idea that actions create effects across lifetimes is simply presupposed by all the earliest Buddhist scriptures.

From here, it is not a far leap to the idea that such actions create debts which must be repaid. A person's misdeeds in previous lives must be punished later. *Jātaka* tales (written in India, but translated and read in China) and descriptions of hells revel in the ironic possibilities opened up by this principle. Gluttons have long, thin necks incapable of swallowing food; home-wreckers are split apart with saws and blades; fraudulent merchants are impaled and hung from weights and measures. Sometimes these texts explicitly use the language of debt, calling it *suzhai* 宿債, or "debt accumulated through one's temporary incarnations." In the *Liudu ji jing* 六度集經 (\**Ṣaṭ-pāramitā-saṃgraha-sūtra*, Collected Six Perfections Sūtra) for example, we learn that thieves will be "reborn as animals who are slaughtered and sold in the

<sup>45</sup> Watson 1988; Luo Liantian 1992.

<sup>46</sup> This is the justification of the *zhai* given in the description in the *Dazhidu lun* mentioned above.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., the *Mahāśasaka-vinaya* (*Mishasaibu hexi wufenlü* 彌沙塞部和醯五分律), translated by Buddhajīva 佛陀什 and Zhu Daosheng 竺道生 in 423–434 (*T* 1421, 22:115a–b). It is important to remember that Vinaya texts represent ideals that were rarely lived up to. Inscriptional evidence reveals that monks often did go into debt (Schopen 2004, pp. 1–18, 122–169; Trombert 1995, pp. 82–84).

marketplace to repay the debts of their previous incarnations” (*wei chusheng tu mai yu shi yi chang suzhai* 爲畜生屠賣于市以償宿債).<sup>48</sup>

In Mahāyāna scriptures, karmic debt is brought up to stress its enormity, and the nearly infinite length of time it would take to pay it off with normal meritorious action. Even with a saint’s forbearance, it is normally thought that multiple incalculable *kalpas* would be necessary to achieve enlightenment. By contrast, devotion to a bodhisattva or a text like the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, Lotus Sūtra) offers a shortcut in which an individual’s debts can be paid off in a single moment. The *Śūramgama sūtra* (*Shoulengyan jing* 首楞嚴經), likely an indigenous Chinese scripture composed in the early eighth century, recommends self-immolation. If you are willing to practice self-immolation, or at least moxibustion, the scripture promises that your “beginningless debts of previous incarnations are paid off in a single moment” (*wushi suzhai yi shi choubi* 無始宿債一時酬畢). If not, you must “go back to being a human to pay off the debts of your previous incarnations even if you have attained non-action” (*zong cheng wuwei bi huan sheng ren chou qi suzhai* 縱成無爲必還生人酬其宿債).<sup>49</sup> That is to say, without this act of devotion, even a sage must wait through a long series of reincarnations before he can finally attain nirvāṇa. The karmic debt is simply too large.

The idea of karmic debt quickly found its way into religious verse. It can be seen in the “Song of the Realization of the Way” (*Zhengdao ge* 證道歌), a heptametric poem introducing the reader to Buddhist practice which became extremely popular in the 830s and later came to be a kind of fundamental primer on Chan 禪. One of its couplets contrasts the difference between an enlightened and unenlightened mind:

When completed, the hindrance of karma is [realized to be] originally empty.	了即業障本來空
When incomplete, one must pay off the debts of previous incarnations.	未了應須償夙債 <sup>50</sup>

This couplet assumes two possible approaches to advancement in the Buddhist soteriological scheme. The first one, which we might deem “conventional,” deems that karmic debt must be repaid with merit accumulated through good actions – sūtra copying, donations to monasteries, etc. The second one, which a sympathetic reader might call “ultimate,” sees such debts and hindrances fall away at a moment of insight. While later Chan teachers stressed the superiority of the second view, it was the first view that was the most widespread and powerful one throughout the medieval Buddhist world. Countless other narratives, prayer texts, and colophons to sūtra copies, from Gandhāra to China to Japan, attest to the importance of using the merit generated from wholesome deeds to repay one’s karmic debts.<sup>51</sup>

Karmic debt was not limited to didactic Buddhist poems. A strikingly similar concept appears in a Daoist priest’s deathbed poem:

<sup>48</sup> T 152, 3:30a.

<sup>49</sup> T 945, 19:132b. For more on self-immolation in medieval Chinese Buddhism, see Benn 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Being a popular, didactic song that underwent many changes in both content and title, it is hard to find a definitive “earliest” edition of this song to cite. This couplet, however, is quoted in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (T 2076, 51:221a). On the song’s problematic textual history, see Jia Jinhua 2006, pp. 91–95.

<sup>51</sup> Kieschnick 2003, pp. 164–176; Lowe 2017, pp. 32–36, 51–53.

“Looking upon Transformation, Shown to My Disciples”

I was originally formless, and have a form temporarily.  
By chance I came to the human world to run about here and there.  
The wheel turns, a burden of debt now comes to an end;  
Scratching my head, unimpeded I return to Highest Clarity.

臨化示弟子  
我本無形暫有形  
偶來人世逐營營  
輪迴債負今還畢  
搔首儻然歸上清。<sup>52</sup>

Chen Guayan 陳寡言 (early 9th c.)

Just as with the Buddhist idea of karma, Chen’s debt weighs him down, keeps him from his goal of ultimate liberation. His current existence is portrayed as the means by which he fulfills this debt. Therefore, he welcomes death, since his payments will finally cease, and he will be able to go back to the heaven of Highest Clarity.

### POETRY DEBT AS KARMIC DEBT

The idea that the world is a kind of debtor’s prison, in which the individual pays for past debts, had an appeal beyond the strictly religious sphere. Bai Juyi, that prolific lay Buddhist poet, once wrote that his poetry created a karmic debt across lifetimes:

I have observed my previous existences amid concentration;  
The debt of my many lives is songs and poems.

我亦定中觀宿命  
多生債負是歌詩。<sup>53</sup>

Bai Juyi claims to have reached one of the higher *dhyānas*, realms of supramundane thought attainable in meditation. He is so far advanced in his practice that he can see his past lives. But, in a curious blend of the Buddhist and the literary, he does not discover that he had, say, resolved to attain buddhahood or performed misdeeds that shape his current life. Instead, he realizes that he has always been what he is now: a poet attempting to work himself out of debt. In this case, his poetry debts seem to have been unpaid when he died in his previous lives and so are carried over into the present. This explains why he has become such a prolific writer: he is fulfilling poetry debts accrued in countless past lives.

Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837–908), another lay Buddhist poet, paints a similar picture of himself in a quatrain on white chrysanthemums.

“Miscellaneous Writings on White Chrysanthemums: 2 of 4”

Screens of cloud on all four sides belt the heavens –  
Having cut off yes and no, I am undetached.  
This life is but a paying off of poetry debts;  
I sleep least when white chrysanthemums bloom.

白菊雜書四首其二  
四面雲屏一帶天  
是非斷得自儻然  
此生只是償詩債  
白菊開時最不眠。<sup>54</sup>

The poem opens with a scene of serene reclusion in which clouds remove the speaker from the outside world, creating a natural meditation chamber. This allows the speaker to turn inward, showing how his mind transcends the simple “yes and no” of everyday consciousness. It concludes with a hint of melancholy, since

<sup>52</sup> QTS 852.9638.

<sup>53</sup> Bai Juyi *ji jianjiao*, 35.2395; QTS 458.5199.

<sup>54</sup> Sikong Biaosheng *shiwen ji jianjiao*, 5.141; QTS 633.7259.

chrysanthemums bloom at the end of summer, just as weather begins to turn cold and the first hints of the coming winter creep forth. The third line is the hinge of the poem, the pivot from serenity to worry. Just as the poet attains insight into the ultimate nature of reality and nearly achieves transcendence, the question of his debts springs up in his mind. Like Bai Juyi, Sikong Tu learns that he has been a poet in his previous lives, and that he is paying for it in the present. In fact, this seems to be the whole of Sikong's karmic debt. He uses the vernacular adverb *zhi* 只 and copula *shi* 是 to underline the point: the one purpose of his present life is to pay off his poetry debt, presumably before attaining enlightenment. Poetry is the one thing keeping him from nirvāṇa.

### MONETARY DEBT AS KARMIC DEBT

Poetry was not the only kind of debt that could follow one into future existences. Manuscript evidence from Dunhuang and other sources has shown us that financial debt could have karmic consequences. A striking example can be found in this colophon from a copy of the *Jinguang zuisheng wang jing* 金光最勝王經 (Sūtra of Golden Light).

Disciple Li Xuan respectfully made one copy of this *Sūtra of Golden Light* in ten fascicles. For all his debts and misdeeds since the year *yichou* (905?), may his enemies and creditors profit from this merit and rapidly experience bodhi. May they resolve their anger and release his bonds, and may the lords of the prefecture also be imbued with this sūtra's good fortune.<sup>55</sup>

The case of Li Xuan 李暉 illustrates the fact that lay Buddhists in the tenth-century Sinosphere believed that an unpaid debt was a kind of sin that would influence future rebirths. His creditors appear to hold some form of control over him beyond death, so Li goes to the great length of copying a rather long sūtra (or having someone copy it for him) as an act of penitence. The fundamental idea here is that the religious merit generated from copying the *Jinguang zuisheng wang jing* can be transferred to his creditors and fulfill his debt.<sup>56</sup> The assumption is that religious merit can be exchanged for real money, a well-established point in the premodern period that continues to have important consequences in Buddhist communities to this day.<sup>57</sup> As different forms of capital, the two are fungible.

That monetary debt could become a kind of karmic debt, repayable with religious merit, was not unique to medieval China or even to Buddhism. In the early Indian legal text *Nāradaśmṛti* (1st – 5th c. CE), we find the following verse about the debts of religious professionals:

<sup>55</sup> 弟子李暉敬寫此金光明經一部十卷。從乙丑年已前所有負債負命，冤家債主願乘茲功德速證菩提，願得解怨釋結，府君等同霑此福。BD 02148; *Guojia tushuguan cang Dunhuang yishu*, 30:134; Gernet 1995, p. 285.

<sup>56</sup> Transfer of merit texts (*huixiangwen* 迴向文) – which describe the ritual formulas used for giving the merit one accrues to someone else (usually one's parents or superiors) – are among the most numerous texts in Dunhuang manuscripts (Teiser 2009 and 2014).

<sup>57</sup> On the premodern period, see Walsh 2010, p. 123; and Adamek 2005, p. 165. On the modern, see Brox – Williams-Oerberg 2016 and Williams-Oerberg 2019.

If an ascetic or a fire-sacrifice priest dies in debt, all of the merit from his austerities and fire sacrifices are credited to his creditors.<sup>58</sup>

Although we might think of religious merit as vague or abstract, in the Indic (and thus Buddhist) religious context it was both concrete and powerful. The merit generated from austerities (*tapas*) could be seized upon an ascetic's death, and all the attendant spiritual power would be transferred to the creditor.

The fungibility of merit and money worked in the other direction as well. A Tang person could also turn their money into merit by sponsoring religious rituals. Sūtra copying, which produced enormous merit for everyone involved, cost money. The margins of Dunhuang manuscripts contain verses written by copyists complaining about their failure to be paid and other stories about people copying sūtras just for payment.<sup>59</sup> Even on its own, money had power in the spiritual bureaucracy that constituted much of the supramundane realm in medieval China. In fact, this higher world had its own currency, separate from our own, but with definite cross-over points, as attested by the many references to paper money used as offerings to the gods from at least the late sixth century onward.<sup>60</sup> A certain Mu Renqian 睦仁蒨 once described this system to his son Wenben 文本, informing him that offerings of paper and gilded tin would turn into silk and gold once they have been burned and translated into the spirit realm.<sup>61</sup> Other narratives provide more details: paper money could be bought at the market, and, at least in June of 746, the exchange rate was one bill of paper money on earth to ten thousand cash in the world of gods and ghosts.<sup>62</sup> The money-for-merit fungibility would reach its fullest expression in the twelfth century and beyond, when practitioners kept records of merit and demerit and conceived of life as being something that could be bought on a loan that would eventually have to be repaid.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the logical foundation for this development had already been laid by the Tang dynasty.

## MONETARY DEBT AS POETRY DEBT

Not just merit, but poetry too could be exchanged for money. Though rarely mentioned by Tang poets, it was surely a reality. First, there is the obvious fact that many literati made their living by writing, be that as hired scribes or as part of their official duties.<sup>64</sup> Grave and stele inscriptions, requiring an elegant brush, could become a lucrative source of money for a skilled writer.<sup>65</sup> There are more than a few places in

<sup>58</sup> *Tapasvī cāgnihotrī ca ṛṇavān mriyate yadi /tapaś caivāgnihotraṃ ca sarvaṃ tad dhaninām dhanam //*. Lariviere 1989, vol. 1, p. 57; vol. 2, p. 30; Chatterjee 1971, p. 86; Schopen 2004, p. 123. The *Nāradasmṛti* elsewhere explains that one can obtain wealth from the practice of austerities (presumably a wealth of merit), and that this is one of the seven kinds of “white” (blameless) wealth (Lariviere 1989, vol. 1, p. 71; vol. 2, p. 43).

<sup>59</sup> Kieschnick 2003, p. 184; Xiang Chu 2001, pp. 209–210.

<sup>60</sup> Hou Ching-lang 1975, pp. 5–15.

<sup>61</sup> *Tai ping guangji*, 297.2365.

<sup>62</sup> *Tai ping guangji*, 310.2454, 100.671–672.

<sup>63</sup> Brokaw 1991; Hou Ching-lang 1975, p. 130; Soymié 1966, p. 71; Seidel 1978, p. 430.

<sup>64</sup> The majority of poets (and other literati) served as government officials for some period of time. As such, they would have been paid fixed monthly wages in cash – at least, from the Kaiyuan era (713–742) on. See Peng Xinwei 1994, p. 246.

<sup>65</sup> Ditter 2014; Tackett 2014, pp. 19–21.

the official histories describing the fortunes accumulated by Tang poets.<sup>66</sup> Poets could appeal to the precedent of Kan Ze 闕澤 (d. 243), who grew up in a poor agrarian family and worked as a hired scribe to help them out. He later became one of the top officials in Wu during the Three Kingdoms period, first as Imperial Secretary, then as tutor to the heir apparent.<sup>67</sup> In this way, there was a respectable history to making one's living through writing.

Later poets made use of this history, sometimes directly stating their money-making goals. Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (836–910), in a poem written after he failed the imperial exams in 893, refers to a successful friend as a latter-day Kan Ze.<sup>68</sup> Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn 崔致遠 (857–929?), a Silla poet educated in Tang China, wrote of his desire “to make poetry the capital that would sustain me” (*shipian wei yang xing zhi zi* 詩篇為養性之資). Wen Tingyun and others “made their writings commodities” (*yi wen wei huo* 以文為貨), selling them to desperate examination candidates who either used them as models or passed them off as their own.<sup>69</sup> Even a poet with high official connections such as Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852) could adopt an almost boastful tone as he described how, “writing for hire, I have paid back ten thousand debts” (*yong shu chou wan zhai* 庸書疇萬債).<sup>70</sup> This line comes from a poem written to his brother-in-law Pei Chou 裴儔 (early–mid 9th c.) in 850, who served in the high office of Chief Minister in the Court of Judicial Review (rank 3b). The openness with which Du Mu describes this employment to a high-ranking relative implies that the exchange of meter for money was widespread, even respectable.

Second, we can also find provocative anecdotes, such as one about the poet-monk Kepeng 可朋 (early 10th c.), which suggest that poets could use their verses to pay off monetary debts.

Kepeng was from Danleng [in modern Sichuan]. In his youth, he was a literary friend of Lu Yanrang. He had over 1,000 poems, called *Jadestack Collection* [...]. His fondness for drink impoverished him to the point that he could not fulfill his drinking debts, so he relieved them with poetry. Kepeng called himself “the Drunken Shavepate.”<sup>71</sup>

This anecdote is almost certainly legendary. The irony is just too good: a monk becomes a besotted poet, drinks himself into debt, and then pays off those debts with his poems.<sup>72</sup> But the very fact that such a story was possible, that it made sense to Song dynasty readers who were much closer to Tang literary culture than

<sup>66</sup> Ditter 2014, pp. 21–23.

<sup>67</sup> *Sanguo zhi*, 53.1249–1250.

<sup>68</sup> QTS 698.8039.

<sup>69</sup> QTW 10856b; *Tang zhiyan*, 11.121; Nugent 2010, pp. 214–221.

<sup>70</sup> *Du Mu xinian jiaozhu*, pp. 1148–1152; QTS 524.5991. A variant in the Wenjinge 文津閣 edition of Du Mu's works gives “debts of temporary incarnations” (*suzhai* 宿債) for “ten thousand debts” (*wanzhai* 萬債), which would place it in the category of merit-meter exchange.

<sup>71</sup> 可朋，丹稜人。少與延讓為風雅之友，有詩千餘篇，號玉壘集...其好飲酒，貧無以償酒債，以詩贖之。可朋自號醉髡。 *Tangshi jishi jiaojian*, 74.1949.

<sup>72</sup> In fact, this story goes against prevailing Song stereotypes of poet-monks being boring and out of touch, writing poetry that has an “aura of vegetables” (*caiqi* 菜氣, on which see Protass 2021). If we can peg Kepeng to a type here, it is more like the wild calligrapher-monk (*shuseng* 書僧) modeled after Huaisu 懷素 (737–800?).



we, is very suggestive. At the very least, it tells us that later literary communities assumed that poetry could literally be traded for money in the early tenth century. Monetary debt, like Bai Juyi's karmic debt, could be translated into poetry debt.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERARY HISTORY

By way of summarizing, we can depict the types of debt a Tang poet would have encountered as a triangle of relations (see [Figure 2](#)). The three forms of currency form the three corners, poles along which the concepts we covered may cluster. Poetry debt and karmic debt are both located close to the corners because they are mainly self-contained systems: Poetry debt is normally associated with other poetry debt, and can be repaid with more poems. Likewise with karma and its fruits. Ale debt is a kind of monetary debt, but being strongly associated with poetry in literary discourse, it is a little bit closer to the “meter” corner. The three types of fungibility I highlighted earlier are placed in the middle of their respective sides. Whether it be Bai Juyi thinking of himself as paying off previous lives' poetry debt, Li Xuan transferring his merit to his creditors, or Kepeng writing poems to dig himself out of financial debt, each are best considered as in-between spaces, sites of fungibility.

The potential implications for understanding Chinese literary history are significant. Elsewhere, I have systematically analyzed late Tang exchange poetry to demonstrate the centrality of Buddhist monks to the literary networks of this period. That is, by systematically cataloguing verses written between poets and using the algorithms of network science, I have shown that Buddhist poet-monks often serve as “brokers” connecting disparate groups of poets and argued that the main reasons for this was the relative mobility of monks at the time.<sup>73</sup> It was common for monks to travel among various temples as part of their training, where they might meet with local literati who would stop by a short while. This mobility was then amplified by the instability of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The collapse of the Tang and rise of regional kingdoms led to the mass migration of cultural and religious elites.

The research I have presented in the preceding pages provides another, complementary reason for the centrality of monks in these literary networks. If poetry was a form of currency, then the writing of a poem for a monk or a temple could be considered an act of *dāna* (meritorious donation). This would create an incentive for poets to exchange more poems with monks and thus reinforce the tendency of poet-monks to act as brokers in the networks of literary exchange. When a literatus wrote a poem for a monk or inscribed one on the wall of the temple, it was an act of charitable giving. Poems on monks and temples add prestige to the place, draw in literary and religious pilgrims. In exchange, the poet would receive religious merit, which could be used to ensure a better rebirth for himself or his family members – or perhaps to pay off his drinking tab.

Beyond the question of Buddhist verse, there are other consequences of the fungibility of money, merit, and meter. Pushing poetry's exchange logic to its extreme could lead to new research questions about its use and value in the Tang. For

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<sup>73</sup> Mazanec 2018.

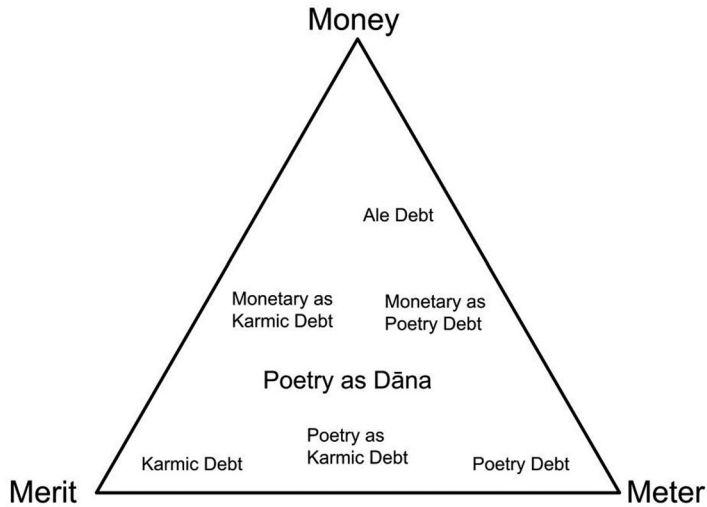


FIGURE 2: The interrelations of money, merit, and meter. The conception of poetry as a meritorious donation (*dāna*) helps tie together the various forms of debt and exchange in the late medieval period.

example, we could ask about the relative value of poems, such as whether two (or three or ten) inferior compositions of a minor figure like Liu Jia would be equal to a single masterpiece written by Du Fu. Poetry may have been subject to devaluation as the result of inflation, which would explain why some decried the increasing numbers of verses produced.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, the scarcity of poems from the pre-An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) period may have increased their value, and could be seen as one of the reasons why poetry from this era became enshrined as the pinnacle of the form in later generations.

Continuing this kind of economic thinking, we may hypothesize that poems and poetry debts could accumulate interest. Han Wo, in the first example given above, explained his poetry debt at great length because he took too long to repay it – perhaps this delay meant that he had to repay it with a superior poem or with greater numbers of poems. We could also see the high value that Tang writers placed on the masterworks of earlier generations as being related to the interest these poems accrued. Value compounded over generations of reading, reciting, studying, and commenting on works like the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu), and the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature). Canonization would then only increase investment, leading the stock of these works to soar astronomically.<sup>75</sup> It is also possible to extend this idea of accrued interest to rethink the concept of “antiquity” (*gu* 古), so central to Mid-

<sup>74</sup> The classic lament of the overabundance of writing can be found in Li Shan’s 李善 sixth-century preface to the *Wenxuan* 文選 (*Wenxuan Li zhu yi shu*, p. 24; Knechtges 1982, p. 87), but such complaints thrived in the late Tang (see Mazanec 2017, pp. 141–142, on laments over the massive amounts of Buddhist verse written at the time).

<sup>75</sup> On the ways that the attention of professional readers generates interest and leads to a work’s canonization, see Lefevre 1992.

and Late Tang literary thought, in these terms. It is not that the writings of the ancients were objectively superior to those of recent times; it was that they had either survived and accrued interest, or else failed and were lost. Contemporaneous writings that were called *gu* reproduced the aura that surrounded this compounded interest.

Such speculations on the meanings and uses of Tang poetry are far removed from the usual concerns of critics, such as imagery, allusion, metaphor, memory, and discursive power. But despite the admitted weirdness of reading poetry in these terms, it does take their role in exchange seriously, recognizing that poems were valued for their social as well as their aesthetic qualities. The types of literary, religious, and monetary debts described here may be found, at least implicitly, in many other cultures and eras as well. In Tang China, however, such language was explicit. Their relationship was not identical or metaphorical, but complementary and occasionally even fungible. Monks and poets, as much as merchants and treasurers, were the creators of wealth.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

### 中國唐代的「文人之債」——金錢、功德和詩歌的流通交換

本文描述和介紹了唐代中國文壇最引人注目的三種「債務」——金錢、功德和詩歌之「債」，並用案例分析體現了它們在特定文本中的相互替代性。這三種「文人之債」的關係並不僅僅在於功德和詩歌之債是金錢之債的隱喻，而在於它們都於特定領域起到了一種具有交換價值的流通物的作用。在一些案例中，金錢、功德或詩歌的債務並不需要用同樣的方式償還，而是可以用另外兩種流通物還清。理解這些相互關聯的流通交換系統可以讓我們更深刻地理解中國文學史的一個重要方面——佛教在唐代文壇舉足輕重的地位，並且促使我們對它們的相互作用提出更多具有開拓意義的問題。

關鍵詞 唐詩、債務、佛教、功德、金錢、詩債

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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