

# The Tomb of the Sogdian Master Shi: Insights into the Life of a *Sabao*

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The most interesting evidence of the presence of Sogdians in China thus far is the tomb of Master Shi (Sogdian name Wirkak) which was found in 2003 in Xi'an, in an area where other such tombs have been excavated, in what may have been a cemetery for high-ranking Sogdians who lived in Chang'an during the Northern Zhou dynasty (557–581 CE) (Xi'anishi 2005; see also Wang 2008). Besides being so important as a source of information concerning the Sogdians in China, the tomb also provides new information concerning the office of *sabao* 薩保 or merchant chief, the head of the Sogdian communities in China. I recently published (Dien 2003) an article which included an interpretation of scenes of the life of the deceased, Master Shi (494–579). In the same issue of that journal the French scholars Frantz Grenet and Pénélope Riboud also published their analysis of these scenes (Grenet and Riboud 2003). I wish in the following to point out why I disagree with their interpretation and to add some comments on the question of the *sabao*.

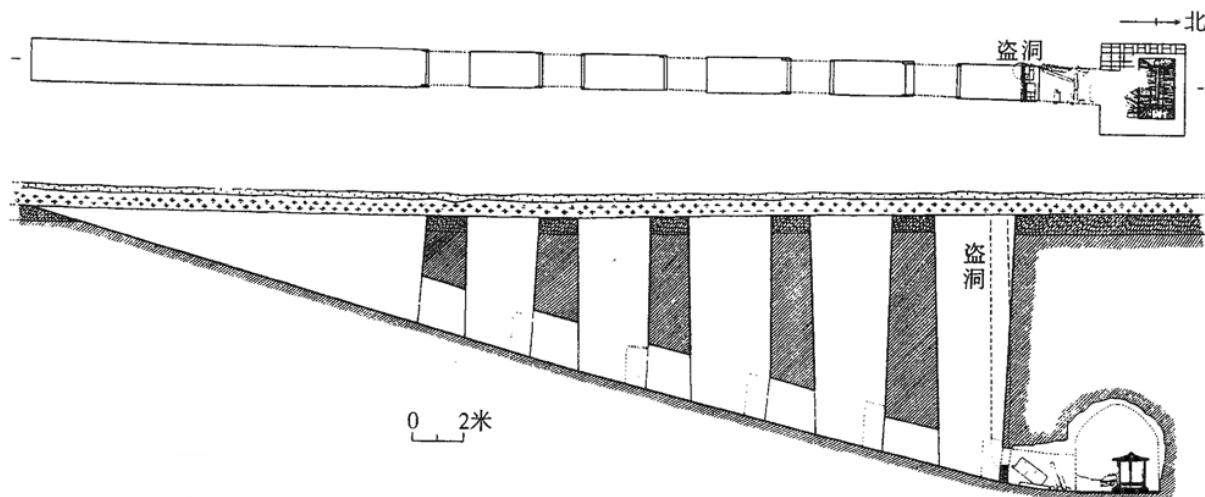
The tomb had been robbed in the past, and only a few items remained of whatever grave goods had been deposited in it. The robbers had disturbed the contents such that some bones were found scattered about, those of a

male and a female. There is also mention in the report of animal bones but nothing more was said on that topic.

The total length of the tomb was 47.26 m, and it was made up of a long ramped passageway, with five air shafts along its length, an entry way that had been blocked up with bricks and a stone door, that then led into the tomb chamber itself, 3.7 x 3.5 m [Fig. 1]. The walls of the passageway, entry and chamber had been covered with a thin layer of white plaster on which murals of some sort had been painted but nothing of this survived. The chamber contained a stone vault, the *shitang* 石堂 or 'stone hall' as it was called, 2.5 x 1.55 m, that was covered with reliefs to which paint and gold foil had been added [Fig. 2, facing page] (Rong 2005a; Yang 2005; Yang 2003).

Usually in China the epitaph, if there is one, is on a stone slab that stands alone, but in this case it was incised on the lintel above the door of this stone vault. Additionally, it was a bilingual one, in Chinese and in Sogdian, the only one in Sogdian thus far known [Fig. 3, facing page] (Sun 2005; Yoshida 2005). The Chinese text, less well-preserved than the Sogdian, says that the deceased was surnamed Shi 史, that he held the title of *sabao* of Liangzhou 涼州 of the Zhou dynasty, that is, of the Northern Zhou,

Fig. 1. Tomb of Master Shi.  
After: Wenwu 2005/3, p. 5, Fig. 3.



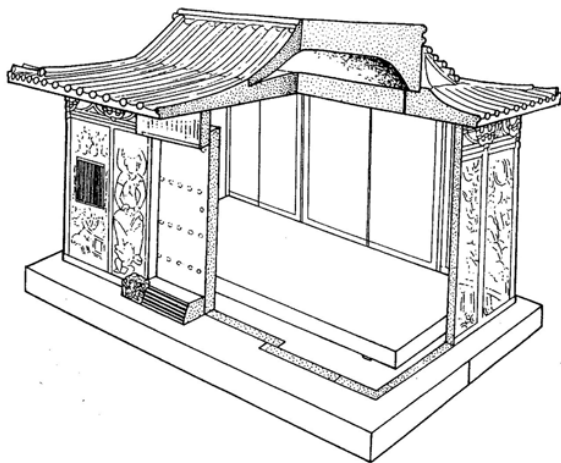


Fig. 2. Stone sarcophagus in Master Shi's tomb.  
After: Wenwu 2005/3, p. 20, Fig. 11.

that he was a man of the state of Shi (that is, Kesh, the modern Shahr-i Sabz in Uzbekistan), and that he had lived in the Western Regions but had moved to Chang'an. His grandfather, Ashipantuo 阿史盤陀, had been a sabao in his native land, his father's name was Anujia 阿奴伽, but no office is listed for him. Master Jun (whose Chinese name is not legible and so in

Chinese publications he goes by his surname with the honorific *jun* or 'master' by which he is termed in the epitaph) early in the Datong reign (535–551) was appointed as chief of the judicial department of the sabao bureau (*panshicao zhu* 判事曹主), then in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of the same reign (539) he was made sabao of Liangzhou. He died in 579 at the age of 85. His wife, née Kang (= Samarkand origin) died a month later. The tomb was built by their three sons, and the interment took place the next year. The Sogdian contains basically the same information.

There is much to be said about the religious aspects of the scenes on the vault, but I want to turn to life on earth: at least as depicted here, the topics include receptions and banquets at home often with music, scenes of hunting, processions, and caravans.

There is much variety in the reliefs found in the various Sogdian tombs of this period thus far found in China, such that one may

Fig. 3. Sogdian-Chinese bilingual epitaph. After: Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens (Hamburg), 183-184 (2008), p. 127, Fig. 4.

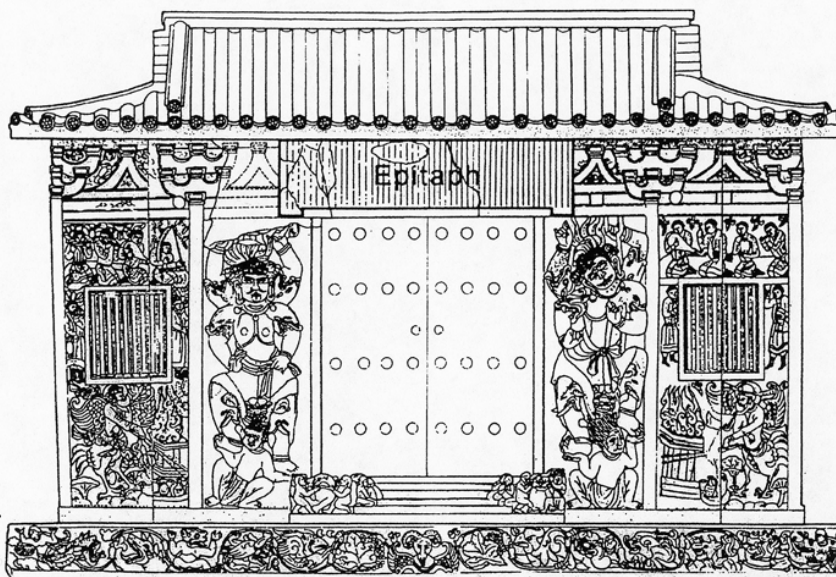
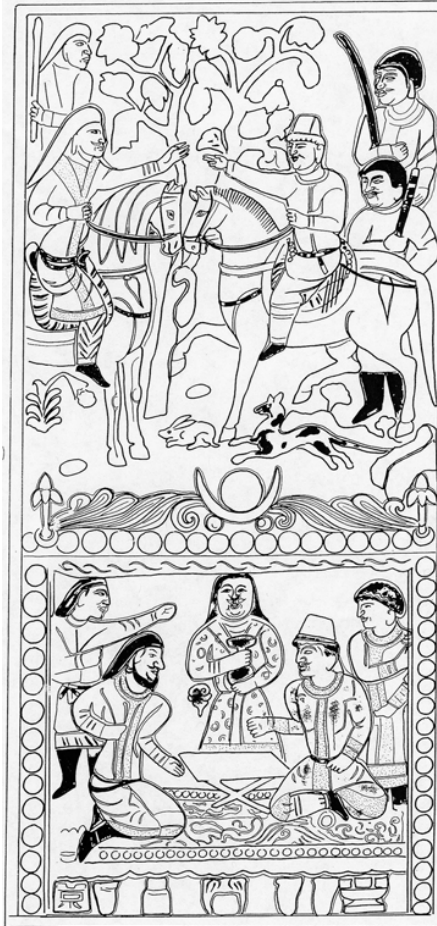


Fig. 4. Meeting of An Jia and a Turk. After: Xi'an Bei Zhou An Jia Mu (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2003), Fig. 24d.

argue that these have an autobiographical element. That may explain why Turks, with whom the Sogdians had close relations in their commercial dealings, appear in some of these tombs. The tomb of An Jia 安伽, a sabao who also died in 579, was near to that of Master Shi. A central panel at the back of the coffin couch from An Jia's tomb features a meeting between An Jia and a Turkish leader, both on horseback, accompanied by aides, and we see them below in discussion [Fig. 4] (Shaanxisheng 2003; 2000). As An Jia was a sabao, or head of a Sogdian community composed primarily of merchants, these contacts may have been in line with his official duties, or they may relate to his personal dealings. If we knew more about his life, we might be able to construct a vita as depicted in the panels from his tomb.

The French scholars Frantz Grenet and P  n  lope Riboud have attempted to do exactly that with the panels from the vault of Master Shi. In what they call a continuous narrative



they trace the life of Master Shi [Fig. 5].

- At 'a' they believe Master Shi as a youth and his father came by horse to call on a couple wearing crowns that indicate they are regal. Note the child that is being held on the lap. I will have more to say about that.

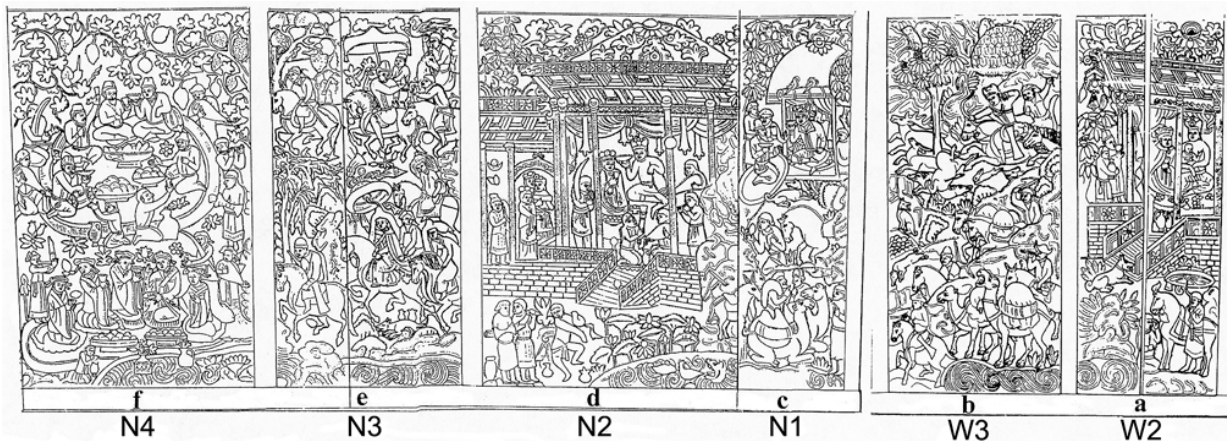
- In 'b' the ruler hunts as a caravan moves at the bottom of the panel. Of interest is the man using a telescope to look out for bandits that may be lurking about.

- In 'c' the caravan now rests by a river as the Sogdians, presumably still Master Shi and his father, visit yet another ruler sitting in his yurt.

- In 'd' the regal couple (the ruler's crown is the same as in the first scene, though the queen's is different) have a grand reception, with music and dance. Here we see no evidence of Master Shi, but there are three ladies in the wings who seem to be bringing presents.

- In 'e' we no longer see the foliage typical of the previous scenes, as Master Shi, now grown, rides with his wife, both shielded by umbrellas. Master Shi exchanges a gesture of blessing with one of the riders. Grenet and Riboud ask if this is the marriage that is mentioned in the epitaph.

Fig. 5. Scenes from the stone sarcophagus. After: Grenet and Riboud 2003, p. 135, Fig. 1 (drawing by François Ory).



- Finally, in 'f' one sees a party, with five men at the top, sitting on a carpet, and exchanging toasts. Musicians and servants with large dishes of food surround them. Below, five women also sit on a rug and drink.

In the interpretation of Grenet and Riboud, Master Shi followed the family tradition and travelled in several countries, trading in both the cities and the steppe, and came to marry and was appointed sabao in Guzang, or Liangzhou as in the Chinese epitaph. The party scene, they believe, is perhaps a celebration at Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, for Master Shi is now a high dignitary and needs not travel any more, he can just sit back and enjoy the good life. This is rather ingenious and may well be accurate, though there is no way to say for certain, and other narratives may be possible. For example, why is the central panel ('d') without evidence of Master Shi?

In their article, Grenet and Riboud (2003, pp. 136-140) make much of the crowns shown in these scenes, where they are identified as being worn by the rulers of the Hephthalite state whom Master Shi would have visited in his journeys. The Hephthalites had established a state in the Oxus watershed in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, and had expanded their rule over Sogdia, Afghanistan, and on into northern India. They were driven from power by a joint attack of the Turks and Byzantium in 560-63 (Enoki 1959; Tremblay 2001, App. D, pp. 183-188; Litvinsky 1996).

One problem with this dependence on the crown for the interpretation is that there are no depictions of Hephthalite crowned figures. It does resemble that of Peroz, the Sasanian king who ruled 457 to 484 and came to be a tributary of the Hephthalites until he turned on them but lost his life as a result. The crown in Master Shi's tomb closely resembles that on a massive issue of coins by Peroz in 476-477 when he was paying tribute to the Hephthalites, as well as on some other coins of the post-Hephthalite period. Grenet and Riboud's hypothesis is that the style was set by the Hephthalites themselves, though there is no direct evidence. Frankly I think this is a stretch, but it is necessary if the scenes with crowned figures are to be seen as Master Shi's visits to the Hephthalite court. We should remember though that Peroz's coins which could have served as a model in Master Shi's tomb were available in large numbers

in China: in an article published in 1972, as many as 122 of his coins were reported found in China, demonstrating their relative plenitude (Xia 1972).

At this point it would be useful to pay particular attention to the information contained in the Chinese epitaph. The name of the reign title during which Master Shi received his appointment as sabao is missing in the epitaph and so there is a problem in establishing the exact date of that appointment. The appointment was made in the fifth year of a reign title, but the space where the name of the reign title should appear is blank. There are a number of places in the epitaph where it had been damaged and some of the text has been lost. In my aforementioned article I assumed that the graphs for the reign title had been similarly lost. Since reign titles in a narrative are not repeated, and that of *Datong* 大統 (535-556) had already been mentioned in reference to his first appointment to office, that would mean that the blank space would have contained a subsequent reign title that had five or more years in length, and the possible dates would be 565, 570 and 576, meaning Master Shi would have been 71, 76 or 82 years old. However, in July 2009, I had the opportunity of examining the epitaph first-hand, and it is clear that no characters had been written in that space. Whatever the reason that a space was left at that point, the date of the appointment was probably 539, when Master Shi was 45 years of age.

I agree with Grenet and Riboud that there is a biographical narrative here, and if that is the case, then the observation by Yoshida Yutaka, the Japanese scholar, is significant. He has noted that there are several panels in which Master Shi is accompanied by three people who could be his three sons (Yoshida 2005: p. 63).

In my reading of this as a biographical narrative, I follow the panels in the same clockwise manner. In the first panel, 'a' (W2), one finds a couple seated in a dwelling, attendants to the side and a groom and horse below. The couple are shown wearing crowns, but, unlike Grenet and Riboud, I see the crown as a sign of elevated status, not of royalty. When Master Shi and his wife are depicted on their way to Paradise elsewhere on the vault, they are shown wearing those crowns [Fig. 6, next page]. Grenet and Riboud did not mention



Fig. 6. Master Shi and his wife being transported to Paradise. After: Wenwu 2005/3, p. 20, Fig. 27.

this. As mentioned earlier, the style of the crown would have been known at the time from coins such as those of Peroz. The man holds an infant on his lap. I see the crowned couple as a reference to Master Shi's grandfather who had also served as a sabao, and the child then is the grandson, Master Shi. The epitaphs of the Sogdians in China are certain to record whether the deceased or any progenitor held the office of sabao, and the depiction of the sabao as wearing the crown would confirm the importance of the office and the high esteem in which the office was held by the Sogdian community.

The next panel, 'b' (W3), depicts a caravan with Master Shi and his three sons. Above is a scene of hunting both with archery and with

hawks. Master Shi, born in 494, was in his 40's before his first official appointment, and this scene may represent those decades of his life.

In the next scene, 'c' (N1), the caravan has stopped at a river bank. Master Shi holds up a finger as he instructs one of his sons. Above, a crowned man sits in a tent, accompanied by three men while a fourth, bearded, kneels as he and the crowned person in the tent exchange toasts. I take this to represent Master Shi's appointment in 535 as Chief of the Supervising Affairs Section of the Sabao Bureau. The person facing him is bearded and so is not to be confused with Master Shi, who is not shown with a beard elsewhere in these reliefs. Rather, as in the first scene, this may be Master Shi's father. The relatively lowly office would explain the modest size of his dwelling.

Next, in 'd' (N2), we see a crowned couple surrounded by attendants and musicians. The elegant dwelling and host of entertainers may then represent the Master Shi's promotion to be sabao at Liangzhou. The three sons are nowhere to be seen — there are three young women. Perhaps he had three daughters who are not listed in the texts, or these are the wives of his sons.

Then, 'e' (N3), we see the couple in transit, again with the three sons. The person in the rear is bidding farewell to Master Shi, a topos in the Chinese tradition, where esteemed officials were accompanied for a distance when they departed office. Finally, 'f' (N4) in Chang'an, where Master Shi can spend his retiring years, we see again the three sons, and an elderly guest. Below is his wife presiding over a meal with the three who may be daughters. Both Master Shi and his wife each are hosting a guest.

It may be that a discussion of *sabao*, both the term and the office, may be appropriate here, and help to decide whether my interpretation of the scenes depicted on the 'stone hall' is correct.

As to the word itself and its origin, the discovery of the word *s'rt'p'w* in a Sogdian letter of ca. 314 has stimulated much discussion. Is *s'rt'p'w* a Sogdian word, based upon a Sogdian etymology, or is it based on a Chinese transcription of a Sanskrit word? The Sogdian word, according to Yoshida Yutaka, is a combination *s'rt* from the Skt. *sārtha* and *p'w* from the root of ancient Iranian *\*pāwan-* 'to

protect, protector' (Yoshida 1988).<sup>1</sup> Yoshida, the first to notice the occurrence in the letter, maintains that the Chinese transcriptions *sabao* 薩保, 薩寶 and *safu* 薩甫 (ancient *sat pāu* and *piu*) are derived from the Sogdian *s'rtw'*, as was Uighur *sartpau*, rather than more directly from Sanskrit *sārthavāha*, 'merchant or caravan leader,' because, he believes, the ancient initial *p-* of *p'w* could not render the *v-* of the Sanskrit *sārthavāha*. This ignores examples that I had cited in an earlier article, I-ye-bo (anc. *\*pua*)-lo for Iśvara and Pi (anc. *\*pjie*)-ma-lo-cha for Vimalākṣas, where *v > p* (Dien 1962, p. 343 n. 66). The point here is that the direction of the loan may well have been the reverse, that is, that the Sogdian form was derived from the Chinese which in turn came directly from the Sanskrit or a Prakrit form. Besides the argument from Occam's razor I will cite two points to be considered.

The first is that the various forms of *sabao* were recognized in the Sogdian community as being of Sanskrit origin. In the epitaphs of Sogdians who held this title, quite often (five of twelve) the term is preceded by the word *mahe* 摩訶, for Sanskrit *maha*, 'great' often (four of the five) with *da* 大 'great.' That is, such words for 'great' in Sogdian as *γrf*, *mzyx*, or *wz'rk* were not used (Dien 2006, p 205).

For the second point, there is the Indian connection. I do not want, at this time, to go into detail about the occurrence of *sārthavāha* in Buddhist terminology, as an epithet of the Buddha who leads the believers through the perils of this world to paradise. It would complicate the issue. But it is necessary to mention the possible role of Indian merchants on the Silk Road. The term *sārthavāha* was used as the title of the heads of groups of merchants in India.<sup>2</sup> One finds evidence of the India presence along the Silk Road, especially along the southern route in the Tarim Basin, in the use of Prakrit and the Kharosthī documents (Agrawala 1970, p. 277). At the same time, the term *sārthavāha* as caravan leader occurs in a Brāhmi inscription from Mathura in the Kushan period (Konow and Venkayya 1909-1910, p. 6; Puri 1945, p. 84; Puri 1940, p. 423),<sup>3</sup> and as *sārtwā* (*s'rtw'/srtw'*) in a Sasanian Pahlavi text (Tafazzoli 1974, p. 195). During the period of Kushan influence and even control, the first centuries of this era, the trade routes were well-established (Brough 1965, pp. 586-587), and one would expect that Indian merchants of the

time had established their own colonies, and the heads of these *funduqs* might well have carried the title of *sārthavāha* there as well as in India itself. Since the published Kharosthī material post-dates the period of Kushan eminence and deals almost entirely with internal affairs, there is no corroboration for this,<sup>4</sup> but a recent work by Doug Hitch, focusing on the distribution of languages in the Tarim Basin, also argues for this period of Indian influence (Hitch 2009, pp. 12-37). It would have been at this time that the Chinese became aware of the term *sārthavāha* and have devised their transcription of it. Possibly the earliest textual occurrence of the Chinese transcription, in this case, *sabo* 薩博, is in the account written by Faxian around 400 AD who mentions he had met *sabo* merchants in Ceylon (*Foguoji* 1924-1932/1962, 51.865a; Legge 1965, p. 104).<sup>5</sup> We cannot know if Faxian used the term in reference to Sogdians or if he knew it as a general term for Silk Road merchants.

The Sogdian presence was known early on these routes as being involved with Buddhism, but by the fourth century their commercial activities began. As Aleksandr Naymark has remarked, 'It looks as if, following the collapse of the Kushan Empire in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Sogdians invaded the trade infrastructure originally created in Southern and Eastern Central Asia by Indian merchants and colonists' (Naymark 2001, pp. 68-69).

Of course, whether the term *sabao/sabo* was based directly on a Sanskrit/Prakrit source or on the Sogdian makes little difference to the role of the *sabao/sabo* in China. It was co-opted by the Chinese bureaucracy to be the title of the community leaders of the Sogdian communities. In reference to the title of *sabao/s'rtw'* as head of Sogdian merchant communities, it is interesting to note a similar pattern among other groups. In my article on the derivation of the term, I mentioned the qadi and sheik among the Arab traders at the coast (Dien 1962, p. 340). At the other end of the Silk Road, at Palmyra in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, one finds the title in Aramaic, the word for caravan being *šyrt* (from the verb *šy* 'to accompany' and the caravan or community leader is *raš šyrt* (head of the caravan) or *reb šyrt* (caravan leader). Interestingly, the Greek term was *synodiarchos*, from *synodia* 'caravan' and *arch(os)* 'chief' or 'head.' A consideration of the nature of the caravan trade makes clear the need for such

community leaders and the role they played in facilitating that trade, settling disputes, offering assistance in case of emergencies, handling money matters involved with differing currencies, and so forth. But in China, where group responsibility has always been a means of social control, the position was made an official one. Thus the sabao was also in charge of the government office that administrated the affairs of that community. Personally engaging in long-distance trade would probably interfere with the duties attached to that office.

To review, I see here a depiction of Master Shi's career with an emphasis on his appointment as sabao. For the first time we have specific dates of appointment, how they were chosen, the age at appointment, and a vivid depiction of the honor in which that position was held. What we need here are some labels to settle the matter, whether my interpretation or that of the French scholars is the better one, but up to now such labels are not forthcoming.

## About the Author

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## Notes

1. Yoshida cites as a parallel the ancient Persian *xšaçaṇpāvan* 'defender of the state.' Note the difference between *-pavan* and *-pau* (*p'w*).

2. Louis Renou, *La civilisation de l'Inde ancienne d'après les textes sanskrit* (Paris, 1981), pp.

143 and 153, as cited in Grenet et al. 1998, p. 98. In the edition available to me (Renou 1959), the pages are 131 and 141. 'Among the corporative bodies, that of the merchants is the most often mentioned, especially in the South, and the *sarthavaha* who headed such bodies was originally the leader of a caravan.'

3. The inscription records a religious donation by a woman who is termed a *sarttavâhinî* (cited by Raschke 1978, p. 811 n. 790).

4. There is mention of the sale of a camel to a *suliga*, that is, a Sogdian (Burrow 1940, #661, p. 137).

5. The translation as Sabaeen is not correct. I do not understand the basis for the distinction between *sabo* and *sabao* made by Rong Xinjiang (2005, and elsewhere). The word *bo* also has the pronunciation *bao*. I believe them to be simply the use of different characters in the transcription of the same Sanskrit word. As for *safu* 薩甫, the suggestion by Antonio Forte (1999, p. 94) that *fu* is an abbreviation of *bo* 博 also provides a solution that erases that anomaly.

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