Fernand Braudel began his most influential work: “I have passionately loved the Mediterranean.”¹ I have always liked that phrase; as for me, I have passionately loved Amdo and the Qinghai-Gansu borderlands, the far northeastern stretches of the Tibetan Plateau. It is here that the great Tibetan massif slams into the Loess Plateau of northern China, where lush alpine grasslands give way to barren foothills, and where the Yellow River first becomes yellow, as it debouches into the arid hill land just west of Lanzhou. And it is also here that Tibetan herders, Hui and Salar merchants, Han farmers, and Monguor shamans have lived, fought, and eked out a tenuous existence in the valleys that cut through the craggy mountains. The history of both this region and these people, as told by imperial Chinese chroniclers and current scholars, is one of bloodshed and rebellion. Tang-dynasty frontier poet Wang Changling, for instance, evokes these themes in his “Ballad Beneath the Pass”:

> I let my horse drink as we cross the autumn water,  
> The river is cold and the wind pierces like a knife.  
> On the flat, sandy desert the sun has yet to dip below the horizon,  
> Through the gloom I see Lintao.  
> In days past, battles were fought along these frontier walls,  
> All speak of how noble the warriors’ spirit.  
> Stretching back to time immemorial, yellow dust has covered this land,  
> And white bones lie scattered in the weeds.²

I think, however, that this emphasis on the region’s violent character mistakes the extraordinary for the quotidian. Between battles, the cumulative effect of a series of far more mundane happenings—a land sale here, a marriage there—proved just as fundamental.

Fundamental, yes, but difficult to hear; the faint voice of the illiterate peasant nearly drowned out by the din of official histories. That voice still echoes though, in part because these mundane happenings were anything but mundane to the individuals involved. Indeed, land and inheritance and marriage were so important to a peasant family’s survival that they drew up contracts detailing nearly every transaction. Thousands of these documents, tucked away in attics and stuffed in lockers, made it through the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Over the past couple years, I have traveled through this region, visited its flea markets, and collected these contracts, hoping that the remarkably unremarkable lives of the frontier’s peasants and peddlers are not forgotten.

Lives like that of Xin Deyuanzi. On July 1, 1928, Xin and fellow villager Zhao Funong sat down with relatives and neighbors to finalize a rather important agreement. Xin was so poor, we learn, that he had trouble finding a wife; Zhao, meanwhile, had a daughter and had contacted three village notables to serve as matchmakers and find him a


² Jin Xingyao commentary, Tangshi sanbai shou xinzhu (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 43.
son-in-law. According to the stipulations agreed upon and written in the contract, Xin would marry Zhao’s daughter and enter the Zhao home, caring for his bride’s elderly parents till their death. Such marriage forms remind us of the multiple survival strategies of China’s rural poor, revealing that the Confucian virilocal orthodoxy, while dominant, was far from hegemonic.

Zhao and Xin probably never thought of this, though, as they watched scribe Wang Dexian complete the last few lines of the agreement. Once finished, Wang passed the document around, and all involved parties marked their names with an “X,” all, that is, except for the poor groom. For his mark, Xin had dipped his thumb in ink and then pressed it to the paper. The first time I noticed this thumbprint I stared at it for a long time, the swirling lines of the friction ridges seeming to pulsate—I felt as if personally witnessing the signing, a singular moment of no significance in the grand course of history but seminally important, no doubt, to Xin. As both Zhao and Xin needed proof of the agreement, a second, identical contract was drawn up and everyone, once again, made their mark. Wang then gathered up the copies and folded both documents down the middle. Placing them side-by-side, he wrote: “A contract, two copies, may it endure as long as the universe.” Each piece of paper, then, had half of this saying and, like a tally, would be comprehensible only when the two sides were brought together.

Contracts like that between Xin and Zhao are not particularly unique; in the late imperial period, especially after the sixteenth century, peasants from Guangdong to Gansu, Shandong to Sichuan wrote down similar agreements. There seems to be a near universality in the form and language of these documents—a kind of legalistic boilerplate—and just enough information to tantalize without ever really satisfying. We never hear from, say, the bride, the young daughter of Zhao Funong, nor do we get any kind of coherent narrative. Contracts, for all of these reasons, have frustrated the social historian. We expect to be able to reconstruct subaltern lives and end up with very little. Analysis is left to the economic and legal historians, those who mine land deeds and business contracts for aggregate quantitative data on prices and property rights—there are numbers but no names, histories but no stories.

My collection is important precisely because its depth, scale, and clear provenance allow us to overcome these limitations. Consisting of 234 contracts, the collection centers on the counties of eastern Qinghai and southwestern Gansu, beginning in the early eighteenth century and ending in 1957. More specifically, it centers on just a
few families and traces decades of land sales, marriages, and household divisions. Since I bought the documents in large stacks, rather than as individual contracts, I have also acquired a few pieces of ephemera such as tax receipts that have been critical in determining provenance.

The first set I purchased includes thirty-seven documents from the Zhao clan of Upper Tent Village (Shang zhangfang cun) in southern Ledu County, Qinghai, the same Zhao family of Funong and his son-in-law, Xin Deyuanzi. A particularly interesting series of agreements comes from 1922, just six years before Xin would join the family, and when the Zhao brothers—Funong, Fukai, and Fuzheng—divided their father’s estate. Here, all the family’s land and buildings are listed, as well as how the family agrees to apportion the holdings.

Another sixty-nine contracts come from Lei-Sheng Family Village (Leishengjia cun) only ten miles down the road from the Zhaos. This particular set primarily consists of land sales involving four generations of Lei brothers. Many are “red,” as opposed to “white,” contracts, meaning they were registered with the county office and, therefore, have government seals. Occasionally these officially-sanctioned documents come with a qiwei, or “contract tail,” a printed sheet detailing the legal stipulations involved in land sales. The Lei-Sheng Family Village collection also has several rare ephemera that provide a fascinating window onto village relations. Members of the powerful Hou family, for example, had often served as scribes for contracts involving the Leis, but I also have a rough draft of a legal plaint from the 1930s filed by the Leis accusing Hou Jincal of hounding a certain Lei Laichengzi to death. Other sets in the collection include ten contracts from the Jing family of Huangzhong County with the most detailed household division I have ever seen—an old, broken wok is part of Jing Yuanbang’s inheritance—and ninety-seven documents from Min County primarily detailing loans of grain. Finally, there are a few dozen miscellaneous contracts whose signatories include Tibetans and Monguors and an early eighteenth-century document about the sale of land.
owing taxes to an important Tibetan Buddhist monastery just northeast of Xining. Few other collections, either archival or published, contain this wealth of material.

And yet, though I am an historian, I find the collection’s value not simply tied to its research potential. I began with a passion for northwest China and antiquarian, not necessarily historical, curiosity. That’s what led me to Xining’s eerily quiet flea market and a small, dark stall called Shiyun Ge (The Pavilion of Stone Melodies), where I found Ma Shengyuan, the shop’s owner, and a pile of old, yellowed papers. I would go on to spend many a Saturday with Ma, sipping tea, reading contracts, and talking about what life might have been like for men such as Xin Deyuanzi. I have passionately loved the Gansu-Qinghai frontier, its mountains and its wastes, its rivers and its valleys, and, most of all, its people. Xin, thumb blackened with ink, had a story to tell and I want to preserve it.

Selected Bibliography

In this selected bibliography, I have tried to choose a range of agreements. I have yet to finish archiving the Min County and Huzhu Collections, and so contracts from these two areas are rather underrepresented. As for the organization, each document has been assigned a collection ID based on its place of origin and a number. Chinese reign dates are followed by the converted Western date in parentheses. Reign dates included here: KX-The Kangxi Emperor; DG-The Daoguang Emperor; XF-The Xianfeng Emperor; TZ-The Tongzhi Emperor; GX-The Guangxu Emperor; MG-The Republic of China.

SXZF - Upper & Lower Tent Villages (上下帳房村) Collection

sxzf#1.a. “Taking on a Son-in-law [招赘].” Contract between Zhao Funong and Xin Deyuanzi. MG17-5-14 (1928-7-1).

sxzf#3. “Sale of Mountain Land.” Contract between Li Dianfa (and son, Cunwazi) and Xiong Dezao. GX1-2-12 (1875-3-19).

sxzf#5. “Conditional Sale [典] of Irrigated Land.” Contract between Zhao Yongguan and Zhao Fuwei. GX32-1-17 (1906-2-10).

sxzf#9. “Subsidy Agreement for Military Service.” Contract between Zhao Fukai, Zhao Fuzhen, Zhao Shengxiang, and Zhao Shengjie. MG-33-4-10 (1944-5-2).


sxzf#17. “Household Division.” Contract between brothers Zhao Fukai, Zhao Fuzheng, and Zhao Funong. MG11-9-28 (1922-11-16).


sxzf#29. “Loan of Money.” Contract between Ma Cun’er and Zhao Fukai. MG16-2-9
LSJ – Lei-Sheng Family Village (雷盛家村) Collection


lsj#7. “Sale of Irrigated Land.” Contract between brothers Hou Shengqi and Hou Shengwu and Lei Chengxian. GX7-10-13 (1881-12-4).

lsj#9. “Conditional Sale of Irrigated Land.” Contract between Shen Youlu and Lei Chengxian. GX6-3-8 (1880-4-16).


lsj#17. “Sale of Guard Tower and Foundation.” Contract between Sheng Feiwen and Lei Chengxian. TZ13-3-2 (1874-4-17).


lsj#2.7. “Sale of Mountain Land.” Contract between five Zeng brothers (Qirong, Qigui, Qifu, Qihua, and Qiyuan) and Lei Conghu. MG12-11-5 (1923-12-12).


lsj#2.22. “Sale of Irrigation Ditch.” Contract between Lei Zhiyuan and Lei Conghu. MG24-3-25 (1935-4-27).

lsj#2.33. “Petition.” Counter-plaint filed by Lei Congyin, Lei Yingyi, Lei Yingchun, Lei Yingjie, and Lei Wangsheng stating they have been falsely accused and leveling accusations against Hou Jincai. Date Unknown [Most likely 1930s].

JJ – Jingjia Village (井家村) Collection

jj#1. “Household Division.” Contract between brothers Jing Yuanbang and Jing Shoubang. MG2-12-15 (1914-1-10).
jj#5. “Sale of Threshing Ground.” Contract between Jing Yuanbang and Jing Shoubang. MG4-2-17 (1915-4-1).

jj#6. “Division of Trees.” Contract between brothers Jing Jiqing, Jing Puqing, Jing Lianqing, Jing Weiqing, and Jing Heqing. 1955-3-12.


jj#9. “Agreement to Live Separately.” Contract between son Jing Yingchengzi and father. MG13-6-26 (1924-7-27).

MX – Min County (岷縣) Collection

mx#6. “Loan of Grain.” Contract between Zhao Wenniu and a certain Mr. Ren. DG21-4-1 (1841-5-21).


mx#15. “Religious Incantation.” Prayer or incantation calling on the various gods of Chinese folk religion. [Date unknown].


HZ – Huzhu County (互助縣) Collection


M - Miscellaneous

m#1. “Sale of Incense Fields.” Contract between Lan Bashibao and Lan Enjiata’er and involving payments to Huayan, or Chözang, Monastery. KX4?-5-3 (original damaged, mostly likely between 1701 and 1710).

m#6. “Sale of Irrigated Land.” Contract between Lan Deji and village headman Lan Derong. TZ7-4-4 (1868-4-26).

m#1.1. “Conditional Sale of Building and Shop.” Contract between Wu Yuefeng and
Deyangkui [possibly a business]. MG36-3-11 (1947-5-1).