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Signature-marks, witnessing, and credit expression in private contracts from Gansu since the Qing Dynasty

***Hongyu Li*[1,*], *Zhizhou Han*[2]**

[1]Rare Books Division, Xi'an Branch, National Archives of Publications and Culture, Xi'an, China
[2]School of Liberal Arts, Northwest University, Xi'an, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 1137744055@qq.com

Abstract. Drawing on Gansu contract documents from the Qing Dynasty onward collected and compiled by this research group, this paper examines parties' modes of confirmation, witness participation, and written articulation of credit and liability by analyzing signature-marks on contracts, deed colophons, official and private seals, and postscripts appended to original deeds. The study finds that signature-marks on Gansu contracts take forms including bird-figure marks, symbols, written characters, and their combinations. Among them, composite character-based marks containing moral phrases such as *haoxin* (good intention), *gongzheng* (impartiality), *ping liangxin* (acting according to conscience), and *gongzhengwusi* (impartial and selfless) embed moral vocabulary into signing marks. Designations such as *liyueren* (contract-maker), *zaizhongren* (present middleman), *zhongjianren* (witness-middleman), *fangqinren* (clan-kin witness), and *shuyueren* (deed scribe) reflect the different roles of individuals involved in formulating and validating contracts. Supplementary notations for re-appreciation fees on land pawns, grain-tax payments and receipts, debt-repayment addenda, and inter-deed margin inscriptions for split duplicate contracts turn original deeds into verifiable, amendable, and reusable evidentiary instruments. Analyzing continuously reused contracts such as B2913 and B4262 shows that signing and witnessing were not confined to the moment of contract formation; new rounds of these practices could occur when transactional relations were adjusted. Credit expression in Gansu folk contracts combines moral utterances such as "acting according to conscience" with tangible practices: affixing signature-marks, identifying middlemen, documenting payments and receipts, and preserving duplicate contracts. These sources illuminate the historical practice in folk transactions whereby moral assertions operated alongside written liability confirmation.

Keywords: Gansu contract documents, signature-marks, witness-middlemen, credit expression, folk transactions

1. Introduction

Folk contracts dating to and after the Qing Dynasty survive in substantial numbers and are preserved from transactions such as land sales, pawnships, loans, land tenancy, property division, and adoption. Their content covers not only transaction objects, prices, and time limits but also the rationale for concluding contracts, intermediary middlemen, attitudes of contracting parties and clan kin, names of deed scribes, together with

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signatures, signature-marks, and appended seals. These elements together constitute the written procedures by which folk transactions were authenticated and preserved. If research focuses exclusively on land, grain, and property addressed in contracts while overlooking end-of-deed signature-marks and subsequent textual revisions, it becomes difficult to explain how private deeds functioned as mutually recognizable evidentiary instruments for different stakeholders.

Signature-marks deserve particular scholarly attention. Folk contract signature-marks could employ simple symbols such as "+", "×", "○", bird-figure marks, single characters, or multi-character composite graphs. Distinctive examples include marks directly encoding phrases such as *haoxin* (good intention), *gongzheng* (impartiality), and *ping liangxin* (acting according to conscience). Unlike conventional formulaic phrases such as "*konghouwuping, liyuecunzhao* (lest there be no evidence hereafter, this deed is made for record)", these marks are personal emblems placed within the signature block of the contracting and participating parties. Their graphic forms, inscribed words, and physical placement reflect both local scribal customs and the modes by which signatories acknowledged contractual terms.

Scholarly precedents offer valuable foundations for investigating signing, witnessing, and document preservation. Liu Yonghua and Wen Haibo [1] explored the origins, typologies, and legal effects of signature-marks across the Ming-Qing periods. Yang Guozhen [2] examined Ming-Qing property-right relations via land deeds. Feng Xuewei [3] investigated techniques and real-world practices of deed forgery, anti-forgery, and authentication. Qu Jian [4] demonstrated how the materiality and physical assembly of deeds advance understanding of their practical usage. Gansu regional contracts preserve an exceptionally rich corpus of signature-mark forms, alongside multiple examples of original deeds annotated in successive years with payment and re-appreciation entries. These primary materials enable empirical inquiry into the above-mentioned themes.

This paper addresses three interlocking sets of questions. First, what expressive characteristics do diverse signature-marks exhibit within contractual signing, especially how morally-inflected character-marks merge personal emblems with credit discourse? Second, in what capacities did contract-makers, witness-middlemen, clan-kin witnesses, and deed scribes appear in documentary records, and how did they jointly validate transactions? Third, how were contracts continuously deployed amid transaction revisions, redemptions, and re-appreciation payments, and what roles did signature-marks and marginal addenda perform? The "credit expression" analyzed in this article refers to observable commitments, acknowledgments, and liability guarantees conveyed through specific textual phrases, signature-marks, witnessing, and written documentation, rather than psychological assessments of the actual trustworthiness of historical individuals.

2. Research materials and analytical methods

2.1. Material scope and contract typologies

The primary corpus consists of 6,910 Gansu contract documents collected and sorted by this research group. The chronological span extends from the 48th year of the Wanli reign-period of the Ming Dynasty (1620) to 1966, encompassing Qing-era, Republican-era, and post-1949 deeds. Chronologically, Qing-dynasty documents constitute the main body, supplemented by a small number of Ming and modern records. Geographically, most materials originate from southeastern Gansu; further evidence derives from Hexi, central Gansu, and Gannan. Thematically, the corpus includes sales, pawnships, leases, loans, land-tax transfer deeds, donations, property partitions, testaments, adoptions, and written agreements.

In this paper, documents from Gansu are indicated by compilation numbers established by the research group. The prefix letter B designates the Gansu region, and subsequent numerals represent sequential

compilation numbers. For instance, B2913 denotes the 2,913th contract-document for Gansu compiled by the research group. When citing documents, this paper additionally notes reign-year dates, stakeholders, and transaction contents so that successive addenda within a single numbered source can be distinguished.

This study does not undertake aggregate statistical counting of signature-mark prevalence across all 6,910 documents. Instead, it focuses on typical specimens with legible graphic forms, transcriptions, dating information, and secure positional context. Signature-mark evidence covers bird-figure marks, symbolic marks, single-character marks, two-to-four-character composite marks, and mixed graphic-character marks. Evidence related to participant validation includes contract main texts, colophons for contracting parties and witnesses, scribe attributions, and other witness symbols. Traces of continued deed usage consist of pawn-land re-appreciation annotations, payment-receipt addenda, repayment notes, deed-tail additions, and split-copy contractual margin inscriptions. Different categories of evidence correspond respectively to questions of form, social roles, and temporal dimensions; this study avoids directly equating the visual shape of a signature-mark with the entirety of a given transaction.

2.2. Analytical methods and deed interpretation

For signature-marks, this study first classifies surviving examples as bird-figure, symbolic, character-based, or composite forms. This study then interprets denotable inscribed words to identify functions such as "physical presence", "witnessing", "impartiality", and "acting according to conscience". Where character-marks employ variant graphs, phonetic substitutions, or combined-graph writing, graphic form and transcribed reading must be evaluated conjointly.

For example, in *pingliangxin* (abide by conscience), the character *ping* (flat) can be understood as a homophone for *ping* (rely on). However, the specific graphic form of the combined text, which relies on homophony, cannot be fully conveyed by transliterating the characters into ordinary pinyin.

Regarding contractual participants, this study analyzes denominations including *liyueren* (contract-maker), *zaizhongren* (present middleman), *zhongjianren* (witness-middleman), *jianren* (witness), *fangqinren* (clan-kin witness), and *shuyueren* (deed scribe), together with their positional placement in colophons. These labels are not lumped together as undifferentiated social roles. For documents containing later addenda, this study traces signatures and marginal notes from successive years to observe how old deeds accommodated new economic arrangements.

The number of existing documents is uneven across different eras and regions. Therefore, the focus of the examples selected here is to illustrate the relationship between visible behaviors and document forms, rather than inferring the occurrence frequency across all regions based on a small number of samples. Regarding the variations in signatures, the number of supplements, or the nature of amounts within individual documents, this article presents them as originally transcribed, without fabricating personal relationships or transactional plots due to the needs of the text.

3. From personal emblems to documented acts of signing

3.1. Co-existing forms of signature-marks

Signature-marks comprise pictorial, symbolic, character-based, and composite varieties. Bird-figure marks occur in B1085 (1861), B869 (1874), B1077 (1877), B2529 (1881), B1586 (1895), B1054 (1896), B1081 (1931), B997 (1942). Symbolic marks include "+", "×", "丿", "○", "⊕", e.g., "+" in B5535 (1727), "×" in B378 (1949), "丿" in B853 (1915), "○" in B799 (1851), "⊕" in B813 (1904). These specimens are deployed

not to calculate statistical frequencies but to demonstrate that a single contractual practice embraced multiple modes of personal validation.

Importantly, there exists no simple one-to-one correlation between mark complexity, deed validity, signatory social standing, or literacy. A simple "+" may be easier to copy than an elaborate bird-figure mark, yet its susceptibility to forgery cannot be assessed without inspecting the concrete document and local signing conventions. Elaborate composite signature-marks likewise furnish no definitive proof of higher literacy among signatories. The evidentiary weight of a signature-mark derives not merely from its visual shape but also from its colophon location, associated personal or role labels, contemporaneous witnesses, and long-term preservation conditions of the deed.

3.2. Character-based signature-marks: moral phrases in the signature block

Character-based signature-marks constitute the most analytically noteworthy category. Single-character examples include *zai* (present, B172, 1764), *zheng* (testify, B2499, 1932), *ya* (to mark-sign, B1643, 1927). Two-character composite-marks encompass *haoxin* (good intention, B851, 1814), *pingxin* (even-minded, B1165, 1846), *gongzheng* (impartial, B677, 1856), *tuixin* (heart-to-heart, B1178, 1877), *qingxin* (pure-minded, B1360, 1880), *cixin* (kindness, B1575, 1901), *zhongzheng* (middle-witness, B1824, 1919), *cunzheng* (uphold impartiality, B1805, 1927). These are not plain text phrases within the main deed but compact composite graphs occupying signature positions in colophons.

Two semantic groups can be distinguished. Terms such as *zai* (present) and *zhongzheng* (middle-witness) primarily denote physical presence and witnessing, corresponding to the procedural dimension of signing. By contrast, phrases such as *haoxin*, *gongzheng*, *pingxin*, *qingxin* import evaluations of personal character and procedural fairness directly into the signature block. Within one graphic mark, "how one signs" merges with "on what normative attitude one signs". This is a feature observable from both literal content and physical layout. Nevertheless, the presence of morally-laden wording in a signature-mark cannot serve as proof of actual ethical conduct during the transaction, nor should such phrases be treated as statistical evidence of contract-fulfilment rates.

Table 1. Representative morally-inflected character-based signature-marks in Gansu contract documents

Type	Transcription	Document No.	Year
Two-character mark	*haoxin* (good intention)	B851	1814
Two-character mark	*gongzheng* (impartiality)	B677	1856
Two-character mark	*zhongzheng* (middle-witness)	B1824	1919
Three-character mark	*pingliangxin* (abide by conscience)	B139	1898
Three-character mark	*pinghaoxin* (abide by good intention)	B1047	1901
Three-character mark	*gongpingxin* (fair-minded)	B388	1949
Four-character mark	*pinghaoliangxin* (out of goodwill)	B91	1803
Four-character mark	*gongzhengwusi* (impartial and selfless)	B1584	1899
Four-character mark	*jixiangruyi* (auspicious fulfilment)	B2503	1917

Note: Graphic transcriptions and document numbers derive from original contract materials compiled by the research group. The character ping (flat) can be understood as a homophone for ping (rely on), following local scribal conventions.

Three-character marks amplify this pattern: *zhongzhengxin* (impartial mind, B1570, 1838), *pingliangxin* (abide by conscience; *ping* (flat) can be understood as a homophone for *ping* (rely on), B139, 1898),

pinghaoxin (abide by good intention, B1047, 1901; B328, 1919; B315, 1947), *cunhaoxin* (preserve good intention, B1210, 1909), *gongpingxin* (fair-minded, B388, 1949). In *pingliangxin*, the character *ping* (flat) serves as a homophone for *ping* (rely on), combining homophonic and moral expression within a single mark. Multiple specimens of *pinghaoxin* show divergent composite-graph forms, demonstrating that identical semantic content does not entail identical graphic realization.

Four-character examples reveal that signature-mark vocabulary can encode both norms of fairness-conscience and auspicious wishes. *Pinghaoliangxin* (out of goodwill, B91, 1803) *and gongzhengwusi* (impartial and selfless, B1584, 1899; B2335, 1961) articulate norms of good faith and equity; *jixiangruyi* (auspicious fulfilment, B2503, 1917) conveys benedictory sentiment. Lumping all four-character marks indiscriminately under "credit consciousness" would efface these material-textual distinctions. Accordingly, the term "morally-inflected signature-marks" in this article applies only to specimens whose explicit semantics reference impartiality, conscience, or good-will, rather than to every character-based signature-mark (Table 1).

3.3. Composite marks: pictorial, symbolic and character-based elements

Personalized signature-marks frequently incorporate shared moral vocabulary. B2530 (1882): Song Wanzai employed a bird-figure combined with *haoxin*; B1079 (1890): bird-figure plus *ping haoxin*; B2260 (1936): bird-figure plus *pingzhong* (through a mediator); B635 (1946): bird-figure plus *liangxin*; B1013 (1947): bird-figure plus zhong (faithfulness). Additional hybrid examples: B1434 (1828): symbol "+" combined with *xin* (mind-conscience); B1600 (1937): *zhong* combined with "○"; B388 (1949): *gongpingxin* combined with "○".

These cases support a limited but concrete observation: signatories were not forced to choose exclusively between "individualized graphic emblems" and "publicly legible moral vocabulary". Both dimensions could be compressed within one signature-mark. In bird-figure plus *haoxin* composites, the pictorial component increases individual recognizability, while the character component renders a moral stance legible to others. Such dual construction notwithstanding, surviving materials furnish no evidence about real-world anti-forgery effectiveness, nor how contemporaries precisely deciphered each mark.

Unlike studies confined to calligraphic creativity, socio-historical analysis emphasizes that these composite marks were embedded within concrete contractual signing events. They constitute performative acts whereby individuals placed an attributable marker on a written agreement. Potential audiences included the counter-party, on-site witnesses, family members, or subsequent deed-holders. This interpretive stance does not presuppose universal normative consensus among historical actors; it merely acknowledges that inscribed characters could be read and interpreted by third parties.

4. Witness-mediation and written allocation of liability

4.1. Role differentiation: contract-maker—present middleman—deed scribe

Contract validation extended beyond the two immediate transactional parties. Land-sale deeds normally specify intermediary middlemen who brokered the deal, together with price negotiations, property boundaries, and liability for future disputes. Adoption and inheritance deeds commonly record attitudes of clan-kin, household members, matchmakers, and witness-middlemen. Colophonal signatures and signature-marks therefore both validate individual assent and fix diverse participant roles within a single evidentiary document. Labels such as *zhongren* (present middleman), *zhongjianren*, *jianren* (witness), *fangqin* (clan-kin witness), and *shuyue* (deed scribe) carry distinct semantic ranges and practical functions and cannot be conflated as representing identical witness liability merely because they appear side-by-side.

Document B2913 offers a direct illustration. In 1761, Zhang Qin and his son Zhang Xianhu pawned ancestral land holdings to his paternal younger cousin Zhang Lian. The deed states: "*ping zhong yan ding dian jia yin yi liang qi qian er fen* (Price of pawn established through the mediation of middlemen: one tael and seventy-two cents of silver)". The colophon separately lists signature-marks for *liyueren* (contract-maker) Zhang Xianhu, *zaizhongren* (present middleman) Du Shenxiu et al., and *shuyueren* (deed scribe) Du Meilu. The original deed further notes: "*dui zhong dang ri qian di liang jiao, bing wu qian shao* (both payment and land were handed over that day in the presence of the mediator, nothing owing)". This statement links the factual transfer of property and payment to the physical presence of present middlemen. The clause "*kong hou ren xin bu di, li xie dian qi cun zhao* (lest the parties should change their minds hereafter, this pawn deed is drawn up as evidence)" articulates anticipated future dissent as a motivation for producing the written instrument. The colophon entries "*liyueren Zhang Xianhu* +", "*zaizhongren Du Shenxiu* +", "*shuyueren Du Meilu mark"* sequentially distinguish contracting party, present middleman, and scribe. The textual record simultaneously preserves three social positions: transaction principal, intermediary-witness, and document producer. The label *zaizhongren* is not an isolated signature; it coheres with the main-text phrase "*ping zhong yan ding* (agreed upon with the mediator's attestation)", indicating that price negotiation is documented as having occurred with middle-party participation.

From an evidentiary perspective, it can be confirmed that individuals were designated as present middlemen and took part in documentary validation. It cannot be automatically inferred that present middlemen bore identical debt-liability to sellers, nor treat every witness-middleman as an institutional arbiter. Investigating their legal responsibilities would require additional sources: explicit suretyship clauses, indemnity promises, litigation archives, or further deeds from the same persons.

4.2. Divergent functions of clan-kin, matchmakers and deed scribes

Nomenclature within deeds registers intersections between social relations and transactional procedure. Clan-kin and household-member designations refer to kinship ties potentially bearing on property disposal or succession. Matchmakers or land-mediators correspond to the negotiation and formation of the transaction. Deed scribes relate to textual production and writing expertise. Although overlapping personal ties may connect these actors, their functional roles should not be effaced merely because their names co-occur in colophons.

Land-sale deeds frequently contain clauses of the form: "*ri hou you fang qin hu nei you ren yan shuo, yi mian you mai zhu cheng dang* (should clan kin or household members raise objections hereafter, the seller shall bear full responsibility)". Crucially, such text articulates ex-ante assignment of responsibility for potential conflict; it does not prove that actual disputes took place, nor that all clan-kin assented to the deal. In adoption-related deed formats, household-members, matchmakers, and witness-middlemen are listed side-by-side, demonstrating that deed validation procedures were not limited to bilateral agreement between two individuals.

The role of the deed scribe merits particular attention. That scribes physically produced the document does not mean contracting parties remained ignorant of its provisions. Equally, elaborate composite signature-marks do not prove that the signatory personally composed the full deed. Scribe-produced main text and signatory-produced signature-marks need to be analyzed separately in terms of person-hood and literacy. Liu Yonghua's reflections on Qing-dynasty popular literacy offer interpretive caution on this point (Liu) [5]. This paper focuses first on the fact that deed scribes transform oral negotiations into preservable written texts, rather than on unsubstantiated estimates of "popular literacy rates".

4.3. Overlapping modes of validation

Beyond signature-marks, official deeds, official seals, merchant-firm stamps, and personal name-seals constitute supplementary written-validation techniques. In B3210, seals are applied over monetary amounts, margin lines, and dating, recording successive registration and inspection marks from different periods. B2696 shows inspection stamps added to an original Qing-era deed after tax-payment during the Republican period. These materials indicate that post-contract administrative documentation could occur without a simple replacement of private white deeds (unsealed private contracts) by officially sealed deeds.

Examples of personal name-seals include B815 (1940, Liu Xihe seal), B3565 (1930, Zhang Jianzhi seal), B6648 (1940, Yin Yichen seal). In B6648, seal inscriptions assist deciphering cursive hand-written names. Seals and hand-written signatures could both serve identity-validation and later-document-reading purposes, though surviving sources supply no basis for ranking their relative legal priority versus signature-marks.

Consequently, credit expression within folk deeds cannot be reduced to one isolated symbolic device. Signature placement, role-labels, layout, seals, and preservation history together create the ensemble of recognizable clues for third-party assessment. Signature-marks are important but only one component of the validation apparatus.

5. From signing to ongoing use: the temporal dimension of credit expression

5.1. Two rounds of addenda on pawn-deed B2913

Document B2913 exemplifies multi-temporal usage across three chronological layers. The original 1761 deed records pawned land, price, present-middlemen, and scribe. An addendum dated 1772 notes "*fu di jia yin yi liang zheng* (the supplementary land price is one tael of silver in full)", together with new witness-middlemen and note-writer. A further 1777 addendum records additional re-appreciation entries, again with scribe and middleman documentation. Scribal variation between "Du Shenxiu" and "Du Zhenxiu" in the text cannot be resolved as referring definitively to one individual without cross-checking further clan-related manuscripts.

If one reads only the 1761 base deed, it appears to represent a one-off transactional instrument. When the addenda are included, the original deed emerges as a continuing framework for renegotiated economic arrangements. Retaining the same physical sheet integrates old and new stipulations within a single readable object for contemporary stakeholders; for modern researchers, stacked layers of dates, sums, persons, and signature-marks create traceable evidence of transactional change. "Traceable" here describes the informational architecture afforded by the manuscript itself; it does not imply the existence of a modern archival system.

Significantly, witness-mediation was not terminated after initial contracting. Both the 1772 and 1777 supplementary records incorporate fresh witnessing and signing information. This supports the central thesis of this paper: witnessing was not merely a formal step confined to deed-making but could be re-activated as transactional relationships shifted. Nevertheless, extant texts do not furnish sufficient evidence to determine whether these middlemen actively brought about the re-appreciation or could enforce performance.

5.2. Receipt-tracking and responsible parties in continuous-record document B4262

B4262 originates in the 43rd year of Kangxi (1704). Successive addenda from 1705, 1706, and 1707 document grain-tax receipts and disbursements for one household, naming responsible actors such as Tan Qiwen, Tan Qiguang, Tan Qizhao, and Tan Shixian, with annotations including "*qin bi* (written in one's own hand)", "*shou ya* (receipt and mark)", "*shou fu cun zhao* (received and delivered, recorded as evidence)". *The*

1704 entry reads: "shou dao bi jin xiu ming xia yuan e lao liang jiu dou zheng, shou qu ming bai, shou fu cun zhao (received the full nine dou of original standing grain under Bi Jinxiu's name; fully settled, this receipt serves as evidence)". It includes entries such as "jian shu ren yang zhi yu ya (Yang Zhiyu, scribe, mark)", "*shou fu ren tan qi wen* + (Tan Qiwen, recipient-disburser +)", and "*jian ren wang xiang* +, *wang guo xing* + (Witnesses Wang Xiang +, Wang Guoxing +)". Subsequent notations read "*tan qi guang qin bi* (Tan Qiguang, in his own hand)", "*li zhang tan qi zhao qin bi shou ya* (Tan Qizhao, village head, received and marked in his own hand)", and "*tan shi xian qin bi ya* (Tan Shixian, mark in his own hand)". Signatures from different years belong to discrete validation events; different responsible agents can be distinguished on the physical manuscript.

Two key observations arise. First, one physical sheet could accommodate sequential recording, so a single round of signature-marks did not close the document to subsequent receipt events. Second, signature-marks from successive years identify responsible persons, preventing conflation of temporally distinct receipt episodes.

This case further illustrates that credit expression extends beyond moralizing phrases such as "act according to conscience". Clearly recording receipt-events, naming responsible parties, and repeatedly marking "receipt complete" equally constitute observable practices of liability confirmation. These entries demonstrate what historical actors claimed had been accomplished, rather than furnishing proof of the recipients' inherent trustworthiness.

5.3. Repayment, duplicate-copy contracts and document integrity

B2967 is a 1932 money-loan deed; a repayment record was appended in 1936, composed by a different deed scribe. This makes it possible to observe how loan-repayment facts were retroactively recorded on the original deed (Table 2). The deed records six silver-dollars lent in 1932 and thirteen silver-dollars repaid in 1936. These two figures alone cannot definitively establish the full interest rate, yet they demonstrate that loan-performance information could be inscribed back onto the primary deed.

Document integrity is also bound up with preservation customs. Split-copy deeds with inter-locking margin-inscriptions are exemplified in two contract sets: (1) a two-copy partition-contract of the Zhang clan in Wenxian dated the seventh year of Jiaqing (1802), whose combined margin-characters read *tianli hetong* (Heaven-principle contract); (2) a grain-apportionment contract of Bi Yingkui and others dated the tenth year of Guangxu (1884), whose inter-locking half-inscriptions reconstruct the full title *fenren daliang hetong* (grain-apportionment contract). Such material formatting furnishes cross-verification possibilities for holders of separate copies. The distinction between deeds (*qi yue*) and jointly-held contracts (*he tong*), and the split-copy practice that such contracts embody, have been analyzed for the Ming-Qing Huizhou region by Zhou Shaoquan [6].

Yet the identifying function of the inter-foliated *hetong* (tally-mark) characters does not mean that every contract could be successfully matched at all times. Nor can it be asserted, in the absence of litigious evidence, that such anti-counterfeiting measures actually prevented forgery. Feng Xuewei [3] suggests that anti-counterfeiting techniques in traditional deeds may be understood in terms of risks anticipated by their users. This study contributes evidence of their concrete material forms and potential functions, rather than statistical data on their efficacy.

Table 2. Representative documents bearing evidence of subsequent re-use

Document No.	Initial Year	Observable Subsequent Activity	Relevance to the Paper's Arguments
B2913	1761	Two supplementary records of the redemption payment, dated 1772 and 1777, each with signatures or witness information	Liability records are regenerated as transactional relations change
B4262	1704	Subsequent entries record the recovered payments for 1705, 1706, and 1707	Different handlers left sequential confirmations via their marks
B2967	1932	A repayment is recorded in the 1936 entry, with a different deed scribe	Loan-repayment events are retro-recorded on the original deed
B5057	1945	After the transfer in 1947, an official government-printed deed of sale was attached	Private deeds may connect to the procedural formalities of subsequent deeds

Note: Compiled from numbered deed records; only surviving subsequent entries from the deed sheets are included in Table 2.

6. Discussion: how credit becomes an identifiable practice in deeds

Three interconnected but analytically distinct mechanisms emerge from the source materials.

Marking commitments: signature-marks fix assent within legible positions; character-based signature-marks may embed vocabulary of impartiality, conscience, and good-intention into the very act of signing.

Rendering participant liability visible: contracting parties, middlemen, clan-kin, scribes, and later responsible agents are made textually present via role-labels, names, and signature-marks, so that transactions transcend anonymous bilateral exchange.

Documenting process traces: dates, addenda, re-appreciation entries, receipt-records, and split-copy margin-inscriptions enable old deeds to remain operative amid subsequent events.

All three observations rest upon manuscript evidence and avoid substituting abstract notions of "contractual spirit" for empirical textual analysis.

The strength of evidence differs across levels of analysis. The literal occurrence of *haoxin* (good intention) in a signature-mark proves only that this graphic-textual form existed; it may articulate normative stances, yet genuine inner motivation cannot be read off the surface wording. The appearance of a middleman's name confirms a person was assigned witness-intermediary status, but substantial liability in dispute resolution requires independent deed or litigation sources. A written record of secondary payment proves that payment-related events were documented; it does not conclusively establish total performance of obligations. Separating these interpretive layers prevents historians from treating contractual rhetoric as direct evidence for real-world historical conduct.

The rich diversity of signature-marks also warns against evaluating pre-modern signing practices using modern-style individual signature uniqueness as the yardstick. Bird-figure marks, simple cross-symbols, and composite character-graphs could operate side-by-side in historical contexts. Assessing their practical validity requires joint consideration of contemporary interpretive frameworks, physical placement, textual labels, seals, and deed-holding circumstances. Manuscript-recorded kin- and middleman labels further demonstrate that document interpretability was embedded within concrete social relationships rather than functioning as purely de-contextualized legal texts [1, 2].

For regional-historical research, the Gansu corpus provides a north-western Chinese case-study within contract-document scholarship. Its character-based composite signature-marks exhibit distinctive material-textual traits. Nevertheless, in the absence of systematic cross-provincial comparative datasets assembled on identical criteria, this study should refrain from claiming these phenomena are "unique to Gansu" or "most numerous in Gansu". Sampling bias toward documents from southern Gansu also qualifies generalization. This article therefore delivers a document-based behavioral analysis rooted in regional sources rather than broad psychological characterization of Gansu historical populations. Drawing upon Qu Jian's [4] emphasis on the material-culture approach to deed research, this paper notes that it analyzes surviving textual and physical traces preserved in deeds. Signature-mark specimens presented cannot be used to calculate overall signature-mark frequencies across the full corpus; determining which participant a given signature-mark belonged to must rely on full colophon context. Concerning "credit", manuscripts directly manifest moral-normative phrasing, signature-marks by parties and witnesses, plus records of payments and subsequent transfers. These do not permit measurement of historical default rates. Further research could exploit multi-generationally preserved deed collections to compare signature-mark habits and performance-related traces of the same persons across multiple transactions.

7. Conclusion

Signature-marks on Gansu folk contracts are not isolated graphic or textual curiosities. Bird-figure marks, symbolic marks, and composite character-marks are all deployed within the colophonal spaces for contracting and witnessing actors. Among them, character-graphs containing phrases such as *haoxin* (good intention), *gongzheng* (impartiality), *pingliangxin* (abide by conscience), and *gongzhengwusi* (impartial and selfless) allowed historical actors to affix personal emblems while simultaneously inscribing norms of fairness and good-conscience into written contractual validation. Shared moral vocabulary could co-exist alongside individually-varied graphic forms.

Deeds separately record contract-makers, present-middlemen, witness-middlemen, clan-kin witnesses, and deed scribes. Contract-making thus involved more than bilateral promises; it encompassed brokerage, physical witnessing, scribal composition, and pre-assigned liability for potential future dissent. The pawn-deed B2913 preserves original-deed and two successive re-appreciation addenda, each with middleman and scribe information. Receipt-document B4262 records signature-marks of shifting responsible parties across multiple years. These materials show that written validation of economic transactions could be repeated as economic relationships evolved. Split-copy inter-locking margin-inscriptions and official-private seals further multiply cross-checkable evidentiary cues for different holders and successive periods.

Evidence from these manuscripts reveals two interconnected dimensions of folk credit expression. First, moral-normative articulation via phrases such as "*pingliangxin*(abide by conscience)" articulates expected standards of conduct. Second, procedural-evidentiary practices: scribal composition, signature-marking, witnessing, and written documentation of payments and re-appreciation events, which anchor assent and liability to tangible manuscripts. The moral-normative and the procedural-evidentiary dimensions operate together, rendering folk contracts both economic agreements and social-relational written practices. This paper analyzes modes of expression and manuscript usage; it does not treat moral-normative phrases as direct proof of real-world contractual performance.

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