

## Excerpt

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## Introduction

In April or May 630 CE, numerous foreign rulers came to the court of the Tang emperor, Taizong (Li Shimin,<sup>1</sup> r. 626–49), in the city of Chang’an (Xi’an, Shaanxi), kowtowed in homage, and asked him to accept the title “Celestial Khagan” (*tian kehan*).<sup>2</sup> According to sources written in the ninth and tenth centuries, Taizong responded by asking his assembled ministers, “I am the Son of Heaven of the Great Tang; should I now also play the lesser role of a khagan?” The ministers and foreign rulers greeted this assertion of Chinese superiority with cries of *wansui* (“10,000 years”), effectively “long live the emperor!” Thenceforth, Taizong’s edicts to vassal rulers in “the Western Regions and the far northern wastes” – that is, Central Asia and the Mongolian steppe – were purportedly all signed “the Emperor and Celestial Khagan” (*huangdi tian kehan*). When a foreign ruler or chieftain died, Taizong would issue an edict investing his heir with the legitimate right to rule. “Thus,” the sources claim, “began our dominance over the barbarians of the world’s four quarters.”<sup>3</sup>

“Celestial Khagan” was a hybrid title. The Sinitic *tian* (celestial, heavenly) was probably a translation of *Tengri*, the supreme celestial god of the steppe peoples. It thus carried connotations of sacral kingship similar to a traditional title used by Chinese emperors, “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*). Taizong’s adoption of the Turkic title *khagan* (cognate with the Mongol *khan*) signified an assumption of suzerainty over peoples and states who had, until recently, been vassals to the khagans of the Eastern Türks and Western Türks.<sup>4</sup> It also signaled a sudden rise in the international status of the Tang dynasty, whose founder Gaozu (Li Yuan, r. 618–26) had himself accepted vassalage under the Eastern Türk khagan in exchange for military support during his successful bid to replace the Sui dynasty (581–618). The power vacuum left by the near simultaneous collapse of the Eastern Türk and Western Türk khaganates in 627–30 now presented a window of opportunity for the Tang to project

<sup>1</sup> Tang emperors are typically known by their posthumous ancestral temple names (e.g., Taizong, literally “great ancestor”). I will follow this convention but also supply each emperor’s given name on first mention. Numerous emperors changed their names at least once; I will opt for the name that an emperor used at the time of his death.

<sup>2</sup> The Turkic title *khagan* is also often transliterated as *qaghan* or *qağan*. *Tian kehan* is often translated differently as “Heavenly Khagan.”

<sup>3</sup> *TD* 200.5494; *THY* 73.1312, 100.1796; *ZZTJ* 193.6073. The common source for all extant accounts of this event is most likely the lost *Huiyao* by Su Mian (734–805), which probably did not provide an exact date, leading later accounts to date the event variously to April 20, May 19, and May 20, 630. One of the *Tang huiyao* versions even seems to misdate it to 631.

<sup>4</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 119–22.

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political influence into Mongolia and Central Asia, creating an empire that straddled the East Asian and Inner Asian worlds.<sup>5</sup>

For about half a century, the Tang has acquired a reputation as the most “cosmopolitan” period in Chinese history. Textbook narratives frequently portray the early Tang as a time when territorial expansion and unrestricted long-distance trade imbued Chinese civilization with an open-minded, inclusive “cosmopolitan” ethos that both welcomed and attracted people from every corner of Eurasia. Such narratives tend to glamorize the capital city Chang’an, in particular, as a predecessor to modern global cities: a great cosmopolis and hub of cross-cultural exchange and early globalization, filled with all manner of foreign expatriates, fashions, foodways, religions, entertainments, art forms, and luxury imports.<sup>6</sup> This glamorous image has been heavily influenced by Western liberal ideals and contemporary China’s own self-fashioning efforts, but to what extent is it grounded in historical reality? Any informed answer to that question must first acknowledge that the character of early Tang foreign relations arose in a historical context shaped by multiple factors: the complex legacy of the dynasty’s immediate predecessor, the Sui; the fall of the once-mighty Turkic khaganates; and the rise of the Tibetan empire, which became the Tang’s most formidable enemy. The analysis presented in this Element will use these factors as a framework for explaining both the Tang’s successes at empire-building in 630–68 and its subsequent phase of territorial losses and retrenchment before imperial frontiers stabilized in the period 700–50. The first six sections are structured as a diachronic narrative of the geopolitics of the Sui–Tang transition and the early Tang’s wars in Northeast Asia and Inner Asia. The last two sections turn to southern frontiers, maritime trade, and the wider Buddhist world. The Conclusion will return to the question of cosmopolitanism and explain why idealizing the Tang as exceptionally “cosmopolitan” limits our ability to think both critically and globally about its actions and policies as an empire.

## 1 The Fall of the Sui Dynasty

In 609 CE, the Sui dynasty was at the height of its power. Twenty years earlier, it had conquered its rival in south China, the Chen (557–89), and built the first Chinese empire to encompass both north and south in nearly three centuries.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this Element, I define Central Asia as encompassing the modern states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan, as well as the Chinese-ruled region of Xinjiang. “Inner Asia” includes Central Asia plus Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai (Amdo).

<sup>6</sup> For examples and analysis of the origins of this image of the Tang, see Yang, “Tang ‘Cosmopolitanism.’”

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The second Sui emperor, Yangdi (Yang Guang, r. 604–18), had 46 million registered taxpaying subjects, dispersed across 190 commanderies and 1,255 counties.<sup>7</sup> The Grand Canal project, when completed in 611, would connect the Yellow and Yangzi rivers for the first time in history, allowing rice from the Yangzi delta to be transported north to feed the burgeoning population of the newly built eastern capital at Luoyang, as well as supply imperial armies on campaign.<sup>8</sup> Trade with the city-states of Central Asia was reportedly booming, due partly to generous subsidies that the Sui imperial court had begun offering to merchants from Sogdiana, the leading traders along the routes that historians now call (oversimplistically) the Silk Road.<sup>9</sup>

The Sui empire had also just expanded into the northeastern part of the Tibetan plateau and the eastern fringes of Central Asia through military campaigns against the \*Tuygun (Ch. Tuyuhun)<sup>10</sup> khaganate and the Sogdian-ruled state of Yiwu (Hami/Kumul, Xinjiang), establishing four new commanderies as penal colonies in the Tuygun lands (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> In the summer of 609, Yangdi went on a triumphant tour of his newly conquered territory, where he held a grand banquet for the visiting rulers of more than twenty Central Asian states.

Just five years later, however, the Sui empire was on the brink of collapsing under a wave of armed revolts. The roots of this calamity can be found in Yangdi's decision, made in 610, to pursue the conquest of the Goguryeo (Koguryō, Ch. Gaogouli) kingdom. In the early fourth century, Goguryeo had expanded from the Yalu River basin to conquer the Chinese commandery of Lelang in the Taedong River basin of north Korea. By the fifth century it had grown into a regional military power, dominating southern Manchuria and north

<sup>7</sup> The commanderies (*jun*) had previously been called prefectures (*zhou*) in 583–607. The Tang dynasty reverted to calling them prefectures. The numbers stated here are from *ZZTJ* 181.5645 and *Wei et al., Suishu*, 29.808. Note that the Sui emperors, unlike Tang emperors, are known to historians by their posthumous honorific names rather than temple names. The posthumous honorific *Yangdi* was given by the Tang court and literally means “fiery emperor” but, according to classical naming conventions, carries strong condemnation of him for being self-indulgent, tyrannical, and heedless of ritual propriety.

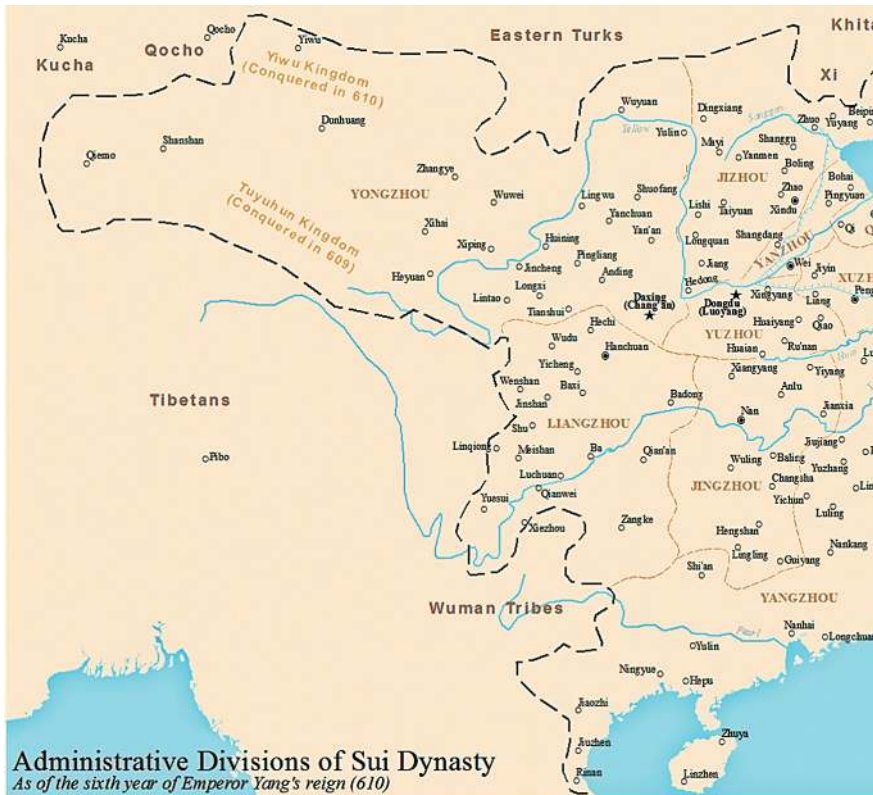
<sup>8</sup> On the Luoyang and Grand Canal projects, see Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 75–93.

<sup>9</sup> On the Sogdian people, see the excellent online exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution, *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, at <https://sogdians.si.edu>. On the origins and flaws of the Silk Road concept, see Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis*, 37–69. Levi critiques some recent treatments of Silk Road history and calls for a less Sinocentric approach that “moves beyond portraying caravan traders as simply mediators in China’s westward trade.”

<sup>10</sup> Many of the non-Sinitic ethnonyms, names, and titles mentioned in this Element are known in the historical record only by Sinitic transliterations. I have provided reconstructions of the original terms where possible, but many are conjectural. Conjectural reconstructions are marked with an asterisk on first appearance. Modern Mandarin readings of the transliterations are provided in parentheses.

<sup>11</sup> Yiwu was also annexed as a commandery in 610. On the earlier history of the Tuygun khaganate, see Pan, “Locating Advantages.”

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**Figure 1** Map of the Sui empire in 610, showing the five new commanderies (Heyuan, Xihai, Shaoyuan, Yulin, and Yuzhou) established between 609–10. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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Korea from its capital in the former Chinese colonial city of Pyongyang. A Sui invasion of Goguryeo in 598, during the reign of Yangdi's father Wendi (Yang Jian, r. 581–604), had failed miserably due to inept planning. But the imperialistic architect of Yangdi's Central Asia policy, Pei Shiju (547–627), convinced him that the reunification of the Chinese world was incomplete without the lost commandery in Korea.<sup>12</sup> Staking his reputation on this project, Yangdi launched three more invasions of Goguryeo, in 612, 613, and 614, and spent each campaign on the front lines, overseeing sieges of the strategically vital Goguryeo fortresses in the Liaodong region.<sup>13</sup>

The first Goguryeo invasion was a debacle for the Sui, with about 300,000 expeditionary troops killed, captured, or missing due to tactical incompetence and inadequate logistics.<sup>14</sup> The second campaign was aborted when a disgruntled Sui general rebelled and besieged Luoyang while Yangdi was at the front.<sup>15</sup> The third ended in a hollow victory: facing a seaborne attack on Pyongyang, the Goguryeo king sued for peace and pledged allegiance to Yangdi, a purely symbolic gesture to play for time. When, in 615, the Sui court summoned the king to pay homage to Yangdi in person, he prudently declined to make the trip to China.

The material and human costs of the Goguryeo war stretched the Sui empire beyond its limits in a way that previous large-scale projects – the new capital and the Grand Canal, for example – had not. For consecutive years, the state relentlessly requisitioned grain from its subjects and drafted peasants to fight in Goguryeo or transport supplies to the front, even while the North China Plain suffered severe spells of flooding, drought, and famine. An ever-growing number of disaffected and destitute imperial subjects in both north and south China chose to resist taxation and the draft. Many turned to banditry or open rebellion; some rebel armies swelled to the hundreds of thousands. Rather than turn his attention to the widening unrest, Yangdi began mobilizing troops for a fourth attack on Goguryeo. He then went on a tour of inspection on the northern frontier, where he planned to meet with the Eastern Türk (Ch. Tujue) khagan \*Sibir (Shibi, r. 609–19).

The Türks were a pastoral nomadic people from the Mongolian steppe who had built a vast empire in Central Asia in the latter half of the sixth century. But civil war in the 580s had split the Türk empire into western and eastern halves, and Wendi's court had intervened to prevent its reunification by backing a pro-Sui

<sup>12</sup> Tang sources refer to Pei Shiju as Pei Ju to observe a taboo on the characters in Taizong's given name, Shimin.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed analysis of these campaigns, see Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 146–56; Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 54–63.

<sup>14</sup> In 641, a Tang envoy to Goguryeo reported encountering communities in which nearly half the men were former Sui soldiers who had married local women after being captured or deserting: *ZZTJ* 196.6169.

<sup>15</sup> This general, Yang Xuangan, soon went down in defeat after failing to take Luoyang.

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contender for leadership of the Eastern Türks. That contender was Sibir's father \*Kirmin Khagan (Qimin, r. 599–609).<sup>16</sup> Now, Sibir ruled his khaganate not from the steppe but from a Chinese-style walled city at Dalicheng (also known as Dingxiang; modern Horinger county, Inner Mongolia), south of the Gobi Desert, that the Sui had built as a capital for Kirmin in 599. Kirmin had relied heavily on Sui military support to achieve victory over more powerful rivals. As a result, he was an unfailingly loyal, even obsequious, vassal to Wendi and Yangdi, dressing in Chinese-style robes and addressing them as “Sage [*shengren*] Bayan [Turkic for “rich,” Ch. *moyuan*] Khagan of the Great Sui.” Like Taizong's later “Celestial Khagan,” this bilingual title was a fusion of Sinitic and Turkic ideals of kingship.<sup>17</sup>

After Kirmin's death, the Sui court had come to distrust the prouder Sibir and taken steps to undermine his growing military strength – by assassinating his most trusted advisor, for example. Now, a resentful Sibir plotted an attack on Yangdi as his traveling court approached Dalicheng, though it's unclear whether he was intending to kill or capture Yangdi. The plot was leaked to Yangdi by Sibir's wife, the Sui imperial clanswoman Princess Yicheng (fl. 599–630), giving him enough time to take refuge in the walled capital of Yanmen commandery (modern Dai county, Shanxi), where Sibir's Türks besieged him for a month. The crisis ended when Sui reinforcements arrived and Sibir retreated. The Eastern Türks, realizing that the Sui army was weakened and distracted by the Goguryeo war and local revolts, began raiding and pillaging the northern Shanxi frontier soon afterwards.

A shaken Yangdi returned to Luoyang and continued planning his next Goguryeo invasion, only to drop the idea suddenly in 616 and take his court on an extended pleasure trip down the Grand Canal to Jiangdu (Yangzhou, Jiangsu) as his empire collapsed around him. Tang sources on these events are evidently biased, but Yangdi's violent reactions to generals and courtiers who protested this bizarre excursion are (if true) indicative of a slide into mental instability. In April 618, cut off from and in denial about the turmoil engulfing north China, he was assassinated in Jiangdu by members of his own imperial guard. The assassins installed one of Yangdi's nephews, Yang Hao, as the new emperor, but real power lay in the hands of their ringleader Yuwen Huaji.

By this time, the renegade Sui general Li Yuan (566–635) had captured the western capital Chang'an and installed Yangdi's twelve-year-old grandson Yang You as a puppet emperor, while unilaterally “promoting” Yangdi to Retired Emperor (*taishang huang*). In June, after receiving news of Yangdi's assassination, Li Yuan deposed Yang You and proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty, the

<sup>16</sup> This ruler is often identified, most likely erroneously, with the “Yami Khagan” mentioned in an early eighth-century Old Turkic inscription.

<sup>17</sup> As Jonathan Skaff has rightly pointed out, Taizong's title was not as unprecedented as is often assumed. Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 117–18.



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Tang.<sup>18</sup> Days later, Sui loyalist officials in Luoyang responded to the same news by enthroning another of Yangdi's grandsons, Yang Tong. Meanwhile, the strongest rebel leader in north China, Li Mi (582–619), maneuvered to take Luoyang, with the intent of proclaiming himself an emperor upon doing so. Yuwen Huaji, too, marched north with Yang Hao's court, aiming to seize Luoyang. In a series of twists and turns, Li Mi joined forces with the Luoyang court to fend off Huaji but was then defeated by the loyalists and forced to flee to Chang'an and surrender to the Tang.<sup>19</sup> Huaji deposed and murdered Yang Hao in late 618, then proclaimed himself emperor, but he was besieged, captured, and killed by the rebel leader Dou Jiande (573–621) in early 619.

## 2 The Tang Dynasty and the Fall of the Eastern Türk Khaganate

In May 619 the leading Sui loyalist general in Luoyang, Wang Shichong (567–621), deposed Yang Tong and founded his own dynasty.<sup>20</sup> This was not the end of the Sui loyalist cause, as Dou Jiande (who now claimed imperial status as well) soon handed the surviving members of Yang Hao's court, including Yangdi's empress and infant grandson Yang Zhengdao (618–53), over to the new Eastern Türk khagan, \*Chöra (Chuluo, r. 619–20), a younger brother of Sibir. Jiande did so on the request of Princess Yicheng, who had married the new khagan upon Sibir's death in accordance with the traditional steppe practice of levirate. Yicheng's role in this story deserves more recognition than is found in typical Chinese narratives of the Sui–Tang transition, in which the Tang are the heroes while the Türks and their allies are the villains. Married off to Kirmin Khagan in 599 to strengthen his allegiance to the Sui, she went on to serve successively as a wife to three of his sons, continuously acting to protect her dynasty's interests and, eventually, pursue its restoration to power with Eastern Türk help.

Princess Yicheng almost certainly had much to do with Chöra Khagan's decision in early 620 to establish two-year-old Yang Zhengdao as King of Sui. Chöra gave the boy-king a rudimentary Chinese-style bureaucracy, presumably staffed by former Sui officials, and nominal authority over some 10,000 Chinese refugees who had fled to the Türks. This was not the Eastern Türks' first involvement with the civil wars in China. In 617, Sibir Khagan had already appointed numerous major rebel warlords in north China, including Dou Jiande and Li Mi, as vassal khagans.<sup>21</sup> These warlords accepted their

<sup>18</sup> Li Yuan was not the first rebel leader to claim the imperial title, just the first who did so while controlling one of the imperial capitals.

<sup>19</sup> Li Mi later attempted a revolt against Gaozu but was ambushed and killed by Tang forces.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Shichong's grandfather is said to have been an immigrant from Central Asia, but Shichong himself was eloquent in both written and spoken Sinitic.

<sup>21</sup> Drompp, "Chinese 'Qaghans.'"

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Turkic titles with the hope of receiving military support and protection from the Eastern Türks, whose powerful cavalry forces allowed them to play kingmaker much as the Sui had once done when the Türks were divided. Each Chinese vassal was expected to demonstrate his loyalty to the Eastern Türk khagan by sending him tribute (e.g., silk) regularly, failing which his territory might be targeted for a pillaging raid.

Li Yuan (Gaozu), too, is known to have made some kind of agreement with Sibir in exchange for a contingent of Türk cavalry to aid him in taking Chang'an. In addition, he promised the Türks all the gold, jade, and silk in Chang'an as a reward. Though the sources do not state whether Gaozu was appointed a khagan and are deliberately ambiguous as to whether Sibir was his ally or his overlord, they leave no doubt as to his efforts in 617–8 to ingratiate himself with Sibir via repeated offerings of tribute, including a courtesan (female musical entertainer, *nüji*) or troupe of courtesans.<sup>22</sup> In 619, however, a Tang tribute envoy received word while en route to Dalicheng that Sibir had died, and Gaozu ordered him to abort the mission. Only when Chöra Khagan threatened a raid did the mission resume. Gaozu later declared three days of official mourning for Sibir and sent 30,000 bolts of silk as tribute. It seems clear that Gaozu already intended to break free of Eastern Türk domination when the opportunity presented itself. But he would have to bide his time, as he was still fighting rival warlords on multiple fronts and could not risk a simultaneous conflict with the Türks.

In late 620, the Tang court learned that Chöra Khagan was planning to capture the city of Bingzhou (Taiyuan, Shanxi) and make it a new capital for Yang Zhengdao's Sui court. When Gaozu sent an ambassador to dissuade Chöra from attacking, the khagan was unmoved but suddenly became ill and died. The Türks, suspecting that the envoy Zheng Yuanshu (d. 646) had poisoned him, detained him as a prisoner. Chöra's younger brother replaced him as \*Illig (Xieli) Khagan (r. 620–30) and married Princess Yicheng, who soon began pressuring Illig to make war on the Tang and restore the Sui.<sup>23</sup> Relations

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Skaff interprets the courtesan or courtesans given as tribute in 618 as a case of marriage diplomacy, possibly involving one of Gaozu's daughters, and suggests that it was part of an alliance agreement made in 617: Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 195, 211. I do not think the evidence supports this reading. Several primary sources quote Taizong himself acknowledging, in 630, that Gaozu was once a vassal to the Türk khagan. But in works published from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Taiwan-based historian Li Shu-t'ung (Li Shutong) questioned the reliability of these accounts and argued that Gaozu was never a Türk vassal. For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Chu, *Sui Tang zhengzhi*, 45–96. I agree with Chu that an objective and contextual reading of the evidence better supports the position that Gaozu did accept Türk suzerainty for expedient reasons in 617.

<sup>23</sup> In this Element, I have opted to follow the most common Turkic reconstruction of *Xieli*, but Christopher Atwood (following Paul Pelliot) has proposed *Il* or *El* as an alternative. See Atwood, "Some Early Inner Asian Terms," 51–52.