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Shao-yun Yang
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Introduction

In recent decades, the Tang dynasty (618–907) has acquired a reputation as the most "cosmopolitan" period in Chinese history – a period, we are told, when the Chinese people built an immense empire that connected East and West via the Silk Road, welcomed visitors and immigrants from around the world, and enthusiastically integrated other cultures into their own. Numerous accounts of Tang history also claim that this cosmopolitan openness faded after the An Lushan Rebellion of 755–63, to be replaced by ethnocentric or xenophobic hostility toward all things foreign. This interpretation of the late Tang can be traced back as far as Arthur F. Wright's (1913–76) studies in the 1950s on the history of Chinese Buddhism. Here, for example, is a passage from a paper that Wright delivered to a conference of Sinologists in Paris in 1956 and subsequently published in the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 1957: "After the An Lushan rebellion, T'ang self-confidence and governmental effectiveness were not fully restored. The cosmopolitanism of the great days of T'ang slowly gave way, under the influence of barbarian attack and internal decay, to a cultural defensiveness which occasionally broke out into xenophobia."[1]

Wright used the cosmopolitanism-to-xenophobia narrative to explain what he saw as a growing rejection of Buddhism (a religion introduced from India) by the late Tang elite. This interpretation was subsequently popularized in the 1960s and 1970s by other influential Western Sinologists, including Edward H. Schafer, Jacques Gernet, and John K. Fairbank, and became entrenched in English-language treatments of Tang history.[2] In the Sinophone world, a similar grand narrative has become common and can be traced to articles published by the Taiwan-based historian Fu Lo-ch'eng (Fu Lecheng, 1922–84) in 1962 and 1972.[3]

In this Element, I would like to present a more nuanced and empirically grounded revisionist interpretation of the late Tang empire's foreign relations. What follows is technically a sequel to the Element *Early Tang China and the World, 618–750 CE*, in which I traced the Tang empire's rise and expansion into Inner Asia and the Korean peninsula in the seventh century, followed by its struggles to hold its new frontiers against the Tibetan empire, the Korean kingdom of Silla, and revolts by the Turkic and Khitan peoples. But the approach that I take here also exists in a state of both tension and complementarity with a larger message that I sought to convey in *Early Tang China and the World*: namely, that we need to think more critically about the fabled

[1] Wright, "Buddhism and Chinese Culture," 37.
[2] For details, see Yang, "Tang 'Cosmopolitanism.'"
[3] These are reprinted in Fu, *Han Tang shilun ji*, 209–26, 339–82.

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cosmopolitanism of the early Tang and recognize that it was never as free of imperialist violence and ethnocentric attitudes as the popular image would have us believe. Despite modern historians' tendency to interpret the Tang as an early model or epitome for the mode of economic and cultural globalization that has so shaped their lives, it was not in fact a champion of open, unrestricted interaction and commerce with foreign countries. But if the early Tang was not as unequivocally open to the world as has often been claimed, neither was the late Tang significantly more antagonistic toward foreign peoples and cultures than the early Tang had been. In other words, modern historiography has exaggerated both early Tang cosmopolitanism and late Tang xenophobia to an extent unsupported by the historical evidence; there was neither a golden age of openness, nor a precipitous descent into anti-foreign isolationism. An informed exploration of Tang cultural history has to start with challenging both of these myths, not just one of the two.

This Element is organized into thematic sections, but along roughly chronological lines. The first two sections concern the professionalization of the Tang frontier armies and the geopolitical background to the well-known but much misunderstood Battle of Talas, in which the armies of the Tang empire and the Islamic caliphate clashed for the only time in history. The subsequent two sections consider the causes and consequences of the An Lushan Rebellion, with an emphasis on debunking the notion of a xenophobic turn in late Tang society. Section 5 argues, too, that a brief period of persecution of Buddhism and three other "foreign" religions by the imperial state in the 840s should be understood primarily in terms of Buddhist–Daoist rivalry, rather than xenophobia. Section 6 takes up the subject of the Tang empire's role in the formation of a distinct "Sinographic" cultural sphere in East Asia, as well as the question of why that sphere did not extend further north, south, or west. The Conclusion explains how the Tang empire finally collapsed and what effect this event had on the peoples on its frontier periphery.

1 The Transformation of the Tang Frontier Military

By the beginning of the eighth century, the Chinese empire had recovered its Anxi (Pacifying the West) Protectorate in the Tarim Basin from the Tibetans, while abandoning its conquests in Korea and Liaodong and ceding hegemony over the Mongolian steppe to the resurgent Eastern Türks. The chronically fractious tribes of the Western Türks, too, had broken free of Chinese suzerainty (which had been exercised through unpopular client khagans) and transferred their loyalty to the new Türgesh khaganate.[4] These geopolitical developments took place during the rule of the only female emperor in Chinese history, Wu

[4] For details on these events, see Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, Section 5.

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Zhao (r. 690–705[5]), who had begun her political career as consort of the third Tang emperor Gaozong (Li Zhi, r. 649–83[6]) and gone on to found her own dynasty, the Zhou. In 705, Wu – formerly invincible in court politics but now ailing at the age of eighty-one – was forced into retirement by a palace coup that restored the Tang to power for another two centuries. She died, of natural causes, later that year.

The restored Tang dynasty soon sought to regain Its former dominance in the western Turkic lands of Central Asia. In 708, an attempt at allying with the Tibetans to destroy the Türgesh backfired spectacularly, as the Türgesh khagan *Saqal (Suoge) learned of the plan and preemptively invaded the Tarim Basin, capturing the Anxi Protectorate's headquarters at Kucha.[7] Saqal pulled out after the Tang court appeased him by recognizing him as khagan of the Western Türks, but he was later attacked, captured, and killed by the Eastern Türks in 710–2. In the ensuing chaos, the Tang client khagan Ashina Xian captured the Türgesh capital Suyab and gained the submission of some of the Western Türk tribes. But Türgesh fortunes revived under the charismatic *Suluk (Sulu, r. 716–38), who retook Suyab from Ashina Xian and secured Tang recognition as a khagan in 719. Tang relations with Suluk remained volatile thereafter, as he cultivated an alliance with the Tibetans and periodically attacked the Four Garrisons of the Anxi Protectorate.[8]

During the first half of the eighth century, the Tang responded to this challenging geopolitical environment by gradually developing a new and more effective (if expensive) approach to frontier defense. Previously, ad hoc expeditionary armies had been assembled out of a mixture of prefectural garrisons, regimental headquarters (*zhechong fu* or *fubing*, essentially a hereditary military reserve force), new conscripts, and contingents levied from *jimi* ("bridled") polities. The new defense system divided the frontiers into permanent centralized commands, each responsible for defending an entire

[5] Wu's original given name is unknown; after becoming emperor, she adopted the name Zhao, written with a newly created character. She was given various posthumous titles, including Great Sagely Empress Zetian; Chinese historians generally call her Wu Zetian.

[6] Tang emperors are typically known by their posthumous ancestral temple names (e.g., Gaozong); the main exception was Wu Zhao, who was not posthumously recognized as a legitimate emperor and thus did not receive a temple name. 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.

[7] Conjectural reconstructions of non-Sinitic ethnonyms, names, and titles in this Element are marked with an asterisk on first appearance. Modern Mandarin readings of the transliterations are provided in parentheses.

[8] Suyab was officially one of the Four Garrisons from 692 to 719, replacing Agni (Yanqi), even though the Türgesh captured Suyab in 703. In 719, the Tang finally acknowledged Suyab's loss by reverting to the original list of Four Garrisons: *Shulik (Shule, Kashgar), Khotan, Kucha, and Agni. See Shang, "Tang Suiye yu Anxi sizhen."

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region (e.g., the Gansu Corridor, the Tarim Basin, or the Sichuan Basin) and headed by a military commissioner (*jiedushi*).[9] Each command had a large standing army of professional soldiers who were typically paid in grain and silk collected as tax from both their frontier region and the interior provinces. With an advantage over the old expeditionary armies in cohesion and familiarity with local terrain, the frontier armies were oriented toward deterring and repelling enemy raids. But they might also engage in punitive expeditions at the military commissioner's discretion, for which they could be supplemented by short-term peasant conscripts if necessary. These expeditions could be aimed at major adversaries like the Tibetans or Türgesh, but they were more often aimed at rebellious *jimi* client polities (e.g., those of the Khitans). While the frontiers had stabilized since 699, the Tang did continue to create *jimi* polities where possible and had accumulated some 800 by 742, more than twice the total of 331 regular prefectures.[10]

By 742, there were a total of ten regional commands, with close to half a million troops in all. The majority of the officers and soldiers were Chinese men from a peasant or convict background, but in the northern and northwestern commands, they also included significant numbers of immigrants from the Inner Asian frontier and the *jimi* polities, including Khitans, *Margat (Mohe/Malgal),[11] *Tegreg (Tiele),[12] and Eastern Türks. Many were drawn by the promise of good pay in resources that they would otherwise have to raid for; others came to the Tang as refugees from war and unrest in Inner Asia, and found (somewhat ironically) that there was a good market for warriors on the Chinese side of the frontier; yet others were originally captives who had been taken into the empire against their will. In a relatively meritocratic military culture, immigrant professionals who had mastered the key skills of mounted archery and tactical maneuver could rise to the top through ability and ambition, regardless of their ethnicity or country of origin. As of 750, the military

[9] For a visual overview of the frontier regions, see Yang, *Frontiers of the Tang and Song Empires*, Maps 6a–6i, at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0cf798878745406fa5719b97ccfc5454#ref-n-Ar2rKw. For more on the transformation of the Tang military system, see Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 189–92, 205–13. On *jimi* polities, see Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, Section 3.

[10] *ZZTJ* 215.6847; *XTS* 43b.1120.

[11] My use of *margat* as the original form of the ethnonym follows Christopher Atwood. The Sinographic transcription of the ethnonym is read as *mohe* in modern Mandarin and *malgal* in modern Korean. It would have been *matgat* in the Middle Chinese of Tang times.

[12] I have followed the most commonly accepted reconstruction of the original Turkic form of the ethnonym rendered in medieval Chinese sources as 鐵勒 or 敕勒 (read in modern Mandarin as *tiele* and *chile*). However, Chen Ken has recently made a strong case, using epigraphic evidence, that the original written form in Chinese was 鐵勤 or 敕勤 (*tieqin* and *chiqin* in Mandarin), and that the Turkic form should thus be *Terigin*. This position may, in time, become widely accepted in the field. Chen, “Chile yu Tiele.”

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commissioner for the Anxi Protectorate was Gao Xianzhi (Kor. Go Seonji, d. 756), a descendant of Goguryeo aristocrats resettled on the northwestern frontier after the Tang conquest of their kingdom in 668.[13] Gao commanded the Anxi army in a famous battle with Abbasid Muslim forces in 751, the subject of Section 2. His counterpart on the Qinghai frontier, *Qoshu (Geshu) Han (d. 757), was the son of a Türgesh noble who had served as deputy protector-general of Anxi and married a Khotanese princess. Two Turco-Sogdian cousins, An Sishun (ca. 690–756) and An Lushan (703–57), served as military commissioners for the Ordos and Hebei frontiers respectively and carried on a feud of sorts with Qoshu Han.[14] It was An Lushan whose rebellion against the imperial court in 755 (the subject of Section 3) put an end to a fifty-year period of stability on the frontiers and is often seen as a turning point in Tang history.

2 The Battle of Talas (751 CE)

In 741, a letter from the Sogdian king of Chach (Tashkent) arrived at the court of Emperor Xuanzong (Li Longji, r. 713–56). In stilted Chinese, obviously translated from the Sogdian language, it read:

> Your slave has been loyal to the [Tang] state for a thousand generations, just like the Türgesh khagans in the days when they were loyal and their tribes peaceful and stable. Later, when they betrayed the Celestial Khagan, fire broke out beneath their feet. Now the Türks [again] belong to the Celestial Khagan.[15] The only threat in the west is the Arabs, and they are no stronger than the Türks. I prostrate myself and beg for your heavenly grace: do not abandon the Türk tribes; attack and break the Arabs. Then all countries will naturally return to peace and stability.[16]

The king made his appeal to Xuanzong at a time when the Sogdian states' long struggle against Arab Muslim domination had been plunged into uncertainty by the collapse of their military ally, the Türgesh khaganate.[17] After khagan Suluk's assassination by one of his lieutenants in 738, civil war had broken out among the Türgesh. This allowed the Tang military commissioner for the Tarim and Dzungarian basins to invade the Türgesh lands in 739, eliminating two of the three warring factions in the process.[18] As the Türgesh khaganate fell into disarray and Tang forces moved in to install a Western Türk aristocrat as

[13] On the Tang conquest of Goguryeo in 668, see Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, Section 4.
[14] I use the term "Turco-Sogdians" to refer to Sogdian families that settled in the Türk khaganates and became culturally Turkicized as a result: see ibid., Section 3.
[15] On the origin of the title Celestial Khagan, see ibid., Introduction.
[16] *THY* 99.1772, with emendations based on *QTW* Chapter 999.
[17] For historical background and analysis of the Arab invasions of Sogdiana, see Haug, *The Eastern Frontier*, 89–92, 115–19, 122–37.
[18] Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 118–20; *ZZTJ* 214.6833–34, 6838.

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"khagan of the ten tribes," the people of Chach apparently hoped that the Tang emperor could be persuaded to replace Suluk as their champion against the Arabs.[19]

The Sogdian king of Ushrusana also sent a letter to Xuanzong in 745. After similarly avowing his family's longstanding loyalty to the Tang, he asked the "Celestial Khagan" to treat Ushrusana as "a small prefecture of the Tang" and to command him, "your slave," to attack the empire's enemies.[20] The enemies of whom the king spoke were almost certainly the Arabs. Indeed, if Xuanzong ever wanted a war with the Umayyad caliphate (Figure 1), 745 would have been a perfect time to pursue it. Not only had Tang influence returned to the western Turkic heartland in the Ili River basin, but the Eastern Türk khaganate had also fallen in 741–5 due to infighting within its ruling elite and a revolt by the Uighur, Karluk (Geluolu), and Basmyl (Baximi) peoples, which received support from the Tang. The Uighurs, after winning a short war with the Basmyls, had founded a new steppe khaganate that pursued friendly relations with the Tang.[21] For the first time in over sixty years, the Tang faced no major threats from the Turkic world on both its northern and western frontiers. It was seemingly well placed to divert military resources toward liberating its vassals in Sogdiana. And though Xuanzong could not have known this, Muslims in Central Asia would soon be in a state of turmoil. The second revolt of Al-Harith ibn Surayj (d. 746), a former ally of Suluk and the king of Chach, broke out in early 746. It was shortly followed by the Abbasid Revolution, which began in Khurasan in 747 and overthrew the Umayyad caliphate in 750.[22] Under such circumstances, the Arabs would have been hard-pressed to hold Sogdiana against a determined assault by Tang troops based in the Tarim Basin. A Tang invasion that threatened Khurasan might even have changed history by preventing or at least delaying the Abbasids from launching their revolt in the first place.

But Xuanzong was unmoved by the Sogdian rulers' appeals to his authority as Celestial Khagan. This was not the first time in his long reign that he had chosen not to intervene in Sogdiana. In 719, the kings of Samarkand and Bukhara had already appealed to him for military aid in a revolt against the

[19] The Tang-installed khagan, Ashina Xin, was murdered in 742 by the Bagha Tarkhan (Mohe Dagan), the same man who assassinated Suluk. Tang forces killed the Bagha Tarkhan in 744 and appointed another Türgesh leader as "khagan of the ten tribes." *ZZTJ* 214.6841, 6843, 215.6854, 6860.

[20] *THY* 98.1754, with emendation based on *CFYG* 977.11312–13. The Tang knew Ushrusana as the kingdom of Cao. Its capital was located near modern Bunjikat, Tajikistan, and is today a major archaeological site.

[21] The Basmyls and Uighurs beheaded the last two Eastern Türk khagans and sent their heads to Xuanzong as a gesture of goodwill. *ZZTJ* 215.6844, 6854–55, 6860, 6863.

[22] See Haug, *The Eastern Frontier*, Chapter 6.

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