cities.[190] A famous inscription in a mosque in Xi'an (formerly Chang'an), supposedly composed by the Tang minister Wang Hong (d. 752) in 742, is generally also rejected by modern scholars as a Ming-era forgery, though Chinese historians remain reluctant to rule out the existence of a Muslim community in Tang Chang'an due to the idea's importance to the historical memory of the Sinitic Muslim (Hui) population.[191]

Judaism was similarly unfamiliar to the Tang elite. The existence of a Jewish community in late Tang Guangzhou appears to be corroborated by the ninth-century Abbasid geographer Ibn Khurradādhbih (ca. 820–912), who claimed that Jewish maritime merchants sailed from the Red Sea to India and China, returning with musk, camphor, cinnamon, and other such products purchased from the Chinese.[192] There is manuscript evidence of Persian-speaking Jewish merchants in the Khotan area by the late eighth century, and a copy of a Hebrew prayer (perhaps used as a protective talisman) was found in the Dunhuang library cave.[193] But whether Jews lived in any city of the late Tang heartland remains in doubt. The famous community of Jews in Kaifeng is generally believed to have settled there in the Song dynasty, not the Tang; a recent study argues that its actual beginnings should be dated even later, to the Ming (1368–1644).[194]

6 Tang China and the Making of the Sinographic Sphere

In 799, Jiannan provincial governor Wei Gao (745–805) began a program of educating young men from the Nanzhao aristocracy in the schools of the provincial capital, Chengdu, with the provincial government covering all expenses involved (e.g., meals and lodging). Each class of Nanzhao students would graduate upon mastering Sinographic literacy and mathematics, to be replaced by a new cohort.[195] The program of educational diplomacy continued for more than fifty years and was a variation on the Tang court's longstanding policy of allowing elite men from tributary states to enroll in the Imperial

[190] Steinhardt, *China's Early Mosques*, 8–9, 34; Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China*, 19–20.

[191] See, for example, Lin, "Yuanmao suishi, wenwei shizhen."

[192] Silverstein, "From Markets to Marvels." Silverstein argues that Jewish merchants stopped sailing to China for good after the massacre in Guangzhou. Arabic sources suggest that Muslim merchants also avoided Guangzhou and relocated their operations to Southeast Asia for about a century after the massacre: Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China*, 51–65.

[193] For discussion and translation of the relevant documents, see Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 302, 325, 357–59, 381–82.

[194] Yu, "Revising the Date of Jewish Arrival in Kaifeng."

[195] The sources disagree on whether Wei Gao did this on his own initiative or at the insistence of the king of Nanzhao. *ZZTJ* 249.8078; *XTS* 222a.6276; Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 101–102.

College in Chang'an. Wei Gao simply based it in Chengdu due to the large amount of autonomy that the Tang court gave him over the administration of Sichuan and relations with Nanzhao during his twenty-year term as governor (785–805).[196]

Around the year 821, the Tang empire officially opened the most prestigious *jinshi* (presented scholar) category of its civil service examinations to candidates from foreign countries, who would be known as "guest candidates" (*bingong*). Guest candidates had to take the standard *jinshi* examination, consisting of poetry composition, tests on passages from the Confucian classics, and policy essays. But whereas the *jinshi* typically had a very low pass quota of 1–2 percent for Chinese candidates, foreign candidates had their own quota which, due to their small numbers, effectively made their chances of passing much better. Most guest candidates attempted the examinations after years of study at the Imperial College in Chang'an. Men from the Manchurian state of Bohai (including a chief minister of that kingdom) and an Arab immigrant are known to have passed, but Silla men, who made up the majority of foreign students at the Imperial College, naturally produced the largest number of guest candidates.[197] Silla had created its own civil service examination system in 788, modeled after that of the Tang, but the kingdom's bone rank system of aristocratic castes continued to reserve all high ministerial posts for men of the true-bone caste. This may have motivated ambitious men of the next highest caste, known as head rank six, to pursue the more prestigious path of examination success in the Tang, which might result in a higher position in Silla or even a post in the Tang bureaucracy. By the end of the Tang dynasty, at least fifty-eight guest candidates from Silla had passed the *jinshi*, of whom the best known is Choe Chiwon (857–d. after 908). In 869 Choe's father (a man of head rank six status) sent him to the Tang to study in the Imperial College at the age of twelve, reportedly threatening to disown him if he did not pass the *jinshi* within ten years. Choe earned his *jinshi* degree within five years and spent the next decade as a minor official of the collapsing Tang empire before returning to serve his home country. Back in Silla, his lack of true-bone status still prevented him from realizing his political ambitions. Choe finally retired to a life of reclusion while Silla itself collapsed in a period of rebellion and civil war (889–936), out of which would emerge the slightly more meritocratic state of Goryeo (Koryŏ).[198]

[196] It was Wei whose diplomatic efforts had won Nanzhao back from the Tibetan fold in 787–94.
[197] Dang, *Tang yu Xinluo*, 49–60; Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians*, 59–62. As of 837, there were 216 students from Silla in Chang'an: *THY* 36.668. On Bohai and its relations with the Tang, see Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, Section 5.
[198] Oh, "Two Shilla Intellectuals in Tang."

It is widely believed that the Japanese Abe no Nakamaro (698–770) passed the *jinshi* in 727, long before the guest candidate category existed. However, Murakami Tetsumi points out that there is no reliable evidence that Nakamaro ever took the Tang examinations.[199] Nonetheless, the clearly gifted Nakamaro, who went by the name Chao Heng in China, did spend ten years studying in the Imperial College. He was then appointed to posts in the civil bureaucracy rather than the military – a distinction shared by few other foreigners at the time – and befriended numerous prominent men of letters in Chang'an, including poets Wang Wei (ca. 699–761) and Li Bai (or Li Bo, 701–62).[200] In 733, he requested permission to return to Japan, only to be turned down by Xuanzong. Kibi no Makibi (695–775), who arrived in China with Nakamaro in 717, did obtain permission to return in 735 and quickly became highly influential at the Japanese court thanks to the knowledge of the Confucian classics, Chinese history, and Tang law that he had acquired in Chang'an.[201] One could argue that Makibi was luckier in being less impressive than Nakamaro. Twenty years later, in 752, Nakamaro finally obtained Xuanzong's approval to depart with a returning tribute mission led by Fujiwara no Kiyokawa (b. 706) and Kibi no Makibi. Unfortunately, he boarded Kiyokawa's ship, which was blown off course to north Vietnam. The mission's three other ships did manage to reach Japan: The Chinese monk Jianzhen was on one of them, while Makibi was on another.[202] Nakamaro and Kiyokawa returned to Chang'an in 755, only to flee from An Lushan's rebels with Xuanzong's court in 756. Abandoning all hope of going home in the ensuing turmoil, Nakamaro served in various posts, including protector-general of Annan (north Vietnam), before dying in retirement in Chang'an. Kiyokawa, too, remained in China permanently and served in the Tang government, even marrying a Chinese woman and having a daughter.[203]

No Japanese man is known to have become a *jinshi* guest candidate in the ninth century. The main reason may have been that by the early ninth century, simply joining a tribute mission to China and returning alive was enough to earn a Japanese official a generous promotion in rank at the Heian court.[204] The added investment of spending many years studying for the examinations in Chang'an may not have seemed worthwhile to an ambitious young aristocrat,

[199] Murakami, "Abei Zhongmalü yu Tangdai shiren," 91. [200] Ibid., 90–96.

[201] Another member of the 717 Japanese student cohort, known to the Chinese as Jing Zhencheng (699–734), died in Chang'an in the year of Makibi's return to Japan; his epitaph was unearthed in 2004. On Makibi and Jing Zhencheng, see Wang, "Jing Zhencheng yu Abei Zhongmalü, Jibei Zhenbei," 60–65.

[202] On Jianzhen, see Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, Section 7.

[203] His daughter left for Japan with a returning Japanese tribute mission in 778, and barely survived the passage when a storm broke the ship in half. *Shoku nihongi* 続日本紀, Chapter 35.

[204] Wang, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals*, 60–65.

given that social connections in Heian, often secured through marriage, were more important to his prospects of advancement. In addition, the prestige of examination success waned in Japan over the course of the ninth century, as the five highest court ranks were monopolized by a small core of aristocratic families (not unlike Silla's bone rank system). For appointments to high office, noble birth came to take precedence over non-hereditary measures of merit such as classical learning and administrative ability, causing Japan's own versions of the examination system and Imperial College to decline into irrelevance.[205] Having no need to prove their qualifications for government service, most Japanese aristocrats took no interest in classical learning and focused on displays of literary refinement, often through allusions to or imitations of Tang poetry. Copies of the Chinese literary anthologies relevant to such arts could now be obtained via trade, without braving the dangers of a tribute mission. The most notable instance of this was the work of the prolific poet Bai Juyi (or Bo Juyi, 772–846), which attained instant popularity in Japan upon being introduced and remained popular for at least three centuries.[206]

The Bai Juyi mania in Japan was facilitated by the expansion of East Asian maritime trade during the early ninth century, largely carried by Silla ships and facilitated by the emergence of Silla merchant communities along the Shandong and Huainan coasts.[207] Yuan Zhen's (779–831) preface to the 824 edition of Bai Juyi's collected works, the *Changqing-era Collection of Mr. Bai's Works* (*Baishi Changqing ji*), claims that Bai's poems had already become highly popular in Silla, leading to a poetry-buying spree among Silla merchants. Japan's first encounter with Bai Juyi's poetry came through an anthology of his and Yuan Zhen's poetry that arrived on a merchant ship in 838, probably crewed by Silla Koreans. The Japanese monk Egaku (fl. 835–64) gained access to an expanded edition of Bai Juyi's works held at the Nanchan Temple in Suzhou, Jiangsu in 844 and brought a copy of it back to Japan in 846–7, presumably also on a Silla ship.[208] Japanese tribute missions stopped traveling to China after 839, as the Japanese court lost interest in participating in the Chinese tributary system. Ennin was thus one of the last Japanese monks to travel to China with a tribute mission. But other Japanese monks continued to make the journey on Korean and Chinese merchant vessels: For example, Egaku traveled to China two more times in the 850s. Monks and merchants thus became the main agents of Sino-Japanese interaction and remained so until the thirteenth century.[209]

[205] McMullen, *The Worship of Confucius in Japan*, 64–67.
[206] Smits, "Reading the New Ballads."
[207] The significance of these communities was first raised by Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels*, 274–94.
[208] Smits, "Reading the New Ballads," 169–70; Chen, "Hui'e dongchuan 'Baishi wenji.'"
[209] Li, "Shi zhi shisan shiji Zhong-Ri jiaoliu."

These cases of cross-cultural exchange show that over the course of the seventh to ninth centuries, diplomatic, educational, commercial, and religious interactions between the Tang and some of its neighbors resulted in a cultural or civilizational sphere defined by an elite culture of reading and composing texts in the Literary Sinitic language (i.e., Classical Chinese), using the non-phonetic Sinographic script. Elite men from different countries within this sphere could communicate through the written word even though they spoke mutually unintelligible languages; Sinographic writing thus served as a kind of "scripta franca." Countries within the sphere also tended to share political ideologies and institutions derived from the Tang imperial model, including state patronage of Buddhism and reverence for the Confucian classics. Here, I will call this ecumene the Sinographic sphere, but scholars have given it various other names including the East Asian cultural sphere, the *kanji* cultural sphere (*kanji* being the Japanese word for Sinographs), the Sinosphere, and the Sinographic cosmopolis.[210] The last of these terms was inspired by Sheldon Pollock's thesis of the "Sanskrit cosmopolis," a large region encompassing numerous states in South and Southeast Asia that, from roughly 300 to 1300, shared an elite political and literary culture shaped by classic texts written and read in the Sanskrit language (e.g., the *Ramayana*), albeit using different Indic writing systems (Figure 6).[211]

The Chinese empires were never a part of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, as literacy in Sanskrit was rare among the Chinese literati elite and even the Chinese Buddhist monastic community. But several centuries' worth of state-sponsored sutra translation projects made it possible for China to become an alternative core in the Buddhist world, one that served as a medium for Buddhism's spread to other Sinographic states in East Asia, where Sanskrit mostly served only as an incomprehensible magical language used in Buddhist *dharanis* and mantras (i.e., incantations). Whereas Buddhist scriptures were translated into Literary Sinitic in large numbers, the converse was not true: Literary Sinitic texts like the Confucian classics and dynastic histories were not widely translated into non-Sinographic writing systems either before or during the Tang period, excepting an abortive effort by emperor Taizong to spread Daoism to India by having the *Laozi Daodejing* translated into Sanskrit.[212] Acquiring Sinographic literacy was thus essential to accessing and mastering the contents of these texts.

The ruling elites of the Korean kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla) became literate in Literary Sinitic in the two to three centuries preceding the Tang, with Chinese immigrants, Buddhist monks, and officials from the former Chinese

[210] King, "Ditching 'Diglossia'"; Denecke and Nguyen, "Shared Literary Heritage in the East Asian Sinographic Sphere."
[211] Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*. [212] Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 40.

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Figure 6 Approximate boundaries of the Sinographic sphere (red), Sanskrit cosmopolis (blue), Turkic world (brown), and Islamic world (green) in 800 CE. Base map from www.worldhistorymaps.info; modified by the author.

colonies in Korea all likely playing a role in this process. The Japanese began acquiring literacy in the fifth century, via influence from Baekje, before seeking Sinitic texts and both classical and Buddhist learning directly from the Sui and Tang. Bohai acquired the foundations of Sinographic literacy from its Goguryeo immigrant population and also sent students to the Imperial College in Chang'an (though in smaller numbers than its rival Silla). Lastly, the Nanzhao royal family first gained literacy from Zheng Hui, a Tang local official captured in 757 and appointed as royal tutor;[213] Wei Gao's educational program then made it available to the kingdom's entire elite in the first half of the ninth century. In each of these cases, the indigenous elites had no system of writing prior to the introduction of the Sinographic system. In the cases of Silla and Japan, Sinographic writing was also adapted to transcribe the indigenous language; in Japan, the *man'yōgana* transcription system evolved into the simpler *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries during the eighth and ninth centuries. A late eighth-century funerary inscription found in Lijiang, Yunnan suggests that the Brahmic Tibetan script was introduced to Nanzhao during its period of Tibetan vassalage (750–94), but, if so, its elite subsequently renounced that influence so fully that it has left no other trace.[214]

It's worth pondering why the Sinographic sphere only expanded into East Asia and Yunnan during the Tang period, despite the military and political influence that the Tang projected into Inner Asia before 755. The main reason seems to be that in Asian states where alphabetic/abjadic or abugidic writing systems (e.g., Sogdian, Arabic, Brahmic, Kharosthi) were already in use or were introduced at around the same time as Sinographic writing, Sinographic literacy generally did not take hold – most likely because it took much more effort to achieve. Those parts of Asia thus remained outside the Sinographic sphere and largely untouched by the influence of Chinese civilization. Indic writing systems were the norm in Tibet and Southeast Asia, except for Chinese-ruled Annan; it was not until the 1300s that Islamization caused a shift to Arabic-derived scripts in the Malay world. From the sixth to tenth centuries, the Eurasian steppe was predominantly Turkic in language and culture, with significant Iranian influences introduced by the Sogdians (e.g., Manichaeism), and its khaganates typically used Sogdian writing or the Sogdian-derived Old Turkic script. Until the ninth century, Central Asia used a variety of Indic and Iranian scripts, with Sogdian serving as a spoken lingua franca.[215] However, the Sogdian language would die out in Islamic Central Asia during the tenth and eleventh centuries because of competition from another Iranian language,

[213] Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 86–87.
[214] Takata, "A Note on the Lijiang Tibetan Inscription."
[215] See Chin, "Colonization, Sinicization, and the Polyscriptic Northwest."

Persian. A Muslim dynasty of Iranian origin, the Samanids, ruled over Khurasan, Sogdiana, and Fergana in the ninth and tenth centuries, and promoted a new courtly culture in which New Persian, written with the Arabic script rather than Pahlavi, served as the language of elite writing.[216] The Samanids fell in the 990s to the Turkic Karakhanids, who had themselves converted to Islam in 934. Under Karakhanid rule, Persian-speaking Muslim Sogdians and Ferganans adopted a new identity as *Tajik*, a Persian term once used to refer primarily to Arab Muslims.[217]

Because the Tang only sent soldiers, not permanent colonists, to the Tarim and Dzungarian basins between the 640s and 760s, there is no evidence of linguistic change in Central Asia caused by Tang influence. Despite more than a century of continuous Tang military occupation under the Anxi Protectorate (692–ca. 800), the Tarim Basin did not truly become a part of the Sinographic sphere: Khotanese literature, for example, was written in Brahmi script and heavily influenced by Sanskrit Buddhist texts, rather than texts in Literary Sinitic. Sinographic civilization did not spread further west than Gaochang (Turfan), which itself was already part of the Sinographic sphere long before its annexation by the Tang in 640. Gaochang's local elite was descended from Han-era colonists who had displaced the original Tocharian language with Literary Sinitic culture, leading the Sogdians (who also had a large immigrant community there) to give its capital a name that translates as "Chinatown."[218] The Tang garrisons in the Tarim and Dzungarian basins appear to have been fully assimilated into the local populations after the eighth century, leaving no cultural impact. In contrast, the ninth-century Uighur migration to the Tarim Basin caused the permanent displacement of the Tocharian languages of Agni and Kucha by Old Uighur, written in the Sogdian-derived Old Uighur alphabet. The Saka Iranian languages of *Shulik (Shule, Kashgar) and Khotan similarly disappeared under Karakhanid rule in the tenth and eleventh centuries, replaced by Karluk Middle Turkic.[219] Gaochang remained semi-Sinographic into the thirteenth century, but developed a unique mix of Sinitic, Turkic, and Sogdian cultures as the capital of a Uighur state that extended north to Beshbalik and west to Kucha.[220]

[216] Other Turkic dynasties that emerged from the Samanid realm, namely the Ghaznavids and Seljuks, spread the new Persianate elite culture to Afghanistan and Iran, creating a cultural sphere that some scholars now call (with inspiration from Pollock) the Persian cosmopolis. Tor, "The Islamization of Central Asia"; Green, "The Frontiers of the Persianate World."

[217] The Middle Persian form *tāzīk* was the root of *Dashi* (Middle Chinese *Dazhik*), the Tang name for the Arabs.

[218] Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 141.

[219] The Karakhanids are said to have captured Shulik in 934–55 and Khotan in 1006.

[220] On this state, the rulers of which were originally Manichaean but eventually switched to Buddhism, see Kasai, "Uyghur Legitimation and the Role of Buddhism."

The period of Tibetan rule in Gansu (760s–840s) resulted in a multicultural and multilingual environment in which Tibetan officials and troops governed with the assistance of local Chinese and Sogdian elite families, whose members adopted Tibetan names and became fluent in Tibetan. Non-elite Chinese in Dunhuang even learned to use the Tibetan script to write Sinitic, thus avoiding having to master Sinographic literacy.[221] Although irredentists among the Chang'an elite frequently claimed that the Gansu Chinese were struggling to resist cultural Tibetanization while longing for a liberating Tang army, the end of Tibetan rule did not translate into a "re-Sinicization" of the region. As mentioned earlier, Wuzong's court had planned a full reconquest of Gansu and eastern Qinghai after the Tibetan empire's collapse, but the actual reconquest undertaken by his successor in 849 was limited to a narrow strip of territory stretching through Ningxia, Gansu, and Sichuan. The court then got distracted by a Tangut revolt in the Ordos and decided not to expend further resources on the irredentist project, especially after a warlord state founded by the Chinese Zhang family of Dunhuang captured most of the Gansu Corridor and formally submitted to Tang suzerainty.[222] The Tang court dubbed this Chinese-ruled regime the Guiyi ("Return to Allegiance") Command. It remained effectively independent but lost most of its territory to Uighur refugees in the 870s and 880s, though it held on to Dunhuang and the adjacent prefecture of Guazhou until the 1030s. Meanwhile, Qinghai and most of southern Gansu (extending north to Liangzhou) remained divided between Tibetan warlords and bands of Tibetan or Tibetanized former slave-soldiers; descendants of Tang subjects in these areas eventually assimilated to a Tibetan identity.[223] The result of these geopolitical shifts was that the Sinographic sphere had mostly retreated from Gansu by the beginning of the tenth century, except for a small Sinographic but semi-Tibetanized state in Dunhuang-Guazhou, sandwiched between the Uighur states of Gaochang and Ganzhou (Zhangye, Gansu). After the tenth century, Uighur displaced Sinitic, Sogdian, and Tibetan as the primary written and spoken language in even Dunhuang.[224]

The Tang court's half-hearted effort toward reclaiming the lost northwestern frontier may have something to do with the late Tang literati's embrace of the self-comforting position that the empire could still "win" culturally where it had failed to conquer militarily. Naturally, they cited the Sinographic sphere as proof of this. In the mid-ninth century, for example, Sun Qiao (fl. 838–85) composed an essay that interpreted the extension of Literary Sinitic education to

[221] Takata, "Tibetan Dominion over Dunhuang." [222] *ZZTJ* 248.8036–41, 249.8043–49.
[223] Yang, *Frontiers of the Tang and Song Empires*, Map 7, at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0cf798878745406fa5719b97ccfc5454#ref-n-2tAtnW; Yang, "Stubbornly Chinese?"
[224] Takata, "Multilingualism in Tun-huang."

Silla and Nanzhao as evidence of the Tang dynasty's greatness. The essay is notable for its ethnocentric, condescending, and dehumanizing rhetoric regarding the "barbarian" peoples purportedly civilized by Chinese influence:

> To the east of Qi [Shandong], who knows how many thousands of *li* across the great sea, lies the biggest country of the island barbarians, called Silla. To the south of Shu [Sichuan], past Kunming and 7,000 to 8,000 *li* across uncultivated lands, lies the strongest country of the Man barbarians, called Nanzhao. These are both bird-like and beast-like peoples whose unintelligible languages sound like the screeching of shrikes. They dress in animal skins and are violent and fierce. It is difficult to transform their long-entrenched customs.
>
> But since the Tang began ruling the realm [*tianxia*, "All Under Heaven"], the people of these two countries have all put Confucian teachings first and have come to resemble the Chinese [Xia] people in civility and refinement. Among the great clans of Silla, some have even produced men who studied in our superior state and took the civil service examinations, winning fame alongside our ministers' sons. They are using books to a previously unheard-of extent. They were born in distant seas or miasmic wastelands and knew only of archery and horsemanship, of warfare and hunting. What did they know of literary arts and Confucian learning? But now they have changed their bestial hearts and understand ritual etiquette. They have stopped folding their robes to the left and now dress like we do.[225] Is this not due to the far-reaching wind of our emperors' influence?
>
> I have heard that wherever civilizing influence extends, even the trees and rocks and animals know how to turn to its moral charisma. For that reason, auspicious omens will appear, such as men with unusual talents and strange appearances. The two countries [Silla and Nanzhao] are auspicious omens, and such omens never occur singly. There will surely be more of their kind; surely, lands across the eastern sea and peoples that have never submitted will turn to our influence and be transformed![226]

In another essay from the 850s, however, Sun Qiao expressed a much less triumphalist perspective on Nanzhao's advancement into the rank of "civilized" states. This piece is framed as an interview with Tian Zaibin, a general with three years' experience as a prefect on the Sichuan frontier. Tian quotes a saying that has become common in Sichuan: "The western barbarians (i.e., Tibetans) we could still take, but the southern barbarians (i.e., Nanzhao) will be the death of us!" He claims that Wei Gao's educational program has ultimately proven ruinous to Sichuan's people, as the experience of studying in Chengdu has given hundreds of Nanzhao aristocrats an intimate knowledge of the province's strategic geography. Nanzhao has already used this knowledge once to raid

[225] Chinese one-piece robes typically folded and fastened on the right, except in the case of robes worn by the dead during funerary rites. In contrast, "barbarian" peoples were believed to fold their robes to the left, the *locus classicus* for this being Confucius's words in *Analects* 14.17.

[226] *QTW* Chapter 794.

and sack Chengdu in 829, taking large amounts of loot and livestock and tens of thousands of Chinese captives. And that is not the end of it, Tian warns: "Ever since then, the Man barbarians have often thought of massacring Shu [Sichuan]. At home, they multiply their livestock and accumulate their grain; on the border, they train their troops and study military tactics."[227]

Tian Zaibin's fears were not unfounded, though Nanzhao was not solely to blame for its tensions with the Tang. In fact, Nanzhao mended fences with the Tang after 829, returning some 4,000 of its Chinese captives, and then turned its attention to invading its southern neighbors, the Pyu states of Burma.[228] But Tang officials in Sichuan eventually grew weary of the costs of the Chengdu educational program and of hosting the increasingly large tribute missions that Nanzhao sent to the Tang court – presumably aimed at receiving more imperial largesse in return.[229] Perhaps, after the sudden collapse of the Tibetan empire in the 840s, good relations with Nanzhao were no longer viewed as a priority worth investing in. In the 850s, new limits were placed on the size of student cohorts and embassies from Nanzhao; King Quanfengyou (r. 823–59) then angrily ended his participation in the educational program, ceased sending tribute to Chang'an, and began raiding the Sichuan frontier again.[230]

Things came to a head in 859 when the new Tang emperor Yizong declined to issue an edict of investiture to Quanfengyou's successor Shilong (r. 859–77), on the grounds that his name violated official taboos on the names of Taizong and Xuanzong. In response, Shilong declared himself an emperor, renamed his state as Dali, and seized the Tang prefecture of Bozhou (Zunyi, Guizhou), effectively challenging the Tang to a showdown.[231] In the ensuing conflict, the last major war that the Tang fought with a foreign power, Dali troops twice captured Hanoi (seat of the Annan protectorate) and repeatedly attacked Chengdu, aided by Man and Lao tribes who resented abuses suffered at the hands of venal Tang frontier administrators.[232] Tang armies in Annan and Sichuan, reinforced by units mobilized from provinces across the empire, managed to avoid permanent territorial losses but never attempted a counteroffensive into Dali territory, perhaps due to lingering memories of the disastrous invasions of Nanzhao more than a century earlier. The Tang–Dali war lasted twenty years (860–80), outlasting the reigns of

[227] *QTW* Chapter 795. On the 829 sack of Chengdu, see also the detailed analysis in Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 105–22.

[228] Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 126–30. [229] *ZZTJ* 249.8078. [230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid. The Tang retook Bozhou in 860 but soon lost it again. The local Yang family, probably of indigenous "Man" origin, seized control of the prefecture in 876 and ruled it as an autonomous state for over seven centuries, until the Ming dynasty annexed it in 1600.

[232] Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 131–53; Yang, *Frontiers of the Tang and Song Empires*, Map 7, at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0cf798878745406fa5719b97ccfc5454#ref-n-2tAtnW.

both Yizong and Shilong, and exacted a huge cost in wealth and manpower on both sides. In 880, after much debate, the Tang court reluctantly agreed to a peace settlement that included significant concessions to Dali: formal diplomatic parity in the form of fictive brotherhood, and marriage between a Tang imperial princess (Yizong's daughter Princess Anhua) and Shilong's successor Longshun (r. 877–97).[233] Some ministers objected vehemently to granting such privileges to a "barbarian" state as small as Dali, insisting that the dynasty's prestige was at stake. But others argued, more persuasively, that with the dynasty now broke and on the verge of internal collapse from the Huang Chao Rebellion, survival outweighed prestige in importance.[234]

The Tang–Dali war shows that while foreign relations within the Sinographic sphere were generally more peaceful in the ninth century than in the seventh, they were not conflict-free. A state's incorporation into the Sinographic sphere did not mean unconditional acceptance of Chinese supremacy at the expense of its own interests, any more than participating in the tributary system served as a guarantee of security from Chinese aggression. As Sinographic states, Nanzhao/Dali, Silla, Bohai, and Japan benefited from using the Chinese textual tradition as a source for models with which to centralize their institutions, systematize their laws, enhance their legitimacy and prestige, and create literate aristocratic cultures. But these states also learned to play the game of geopolitics skillfully to preserve their freedom of action, or simply to survive despite being significantly smaller and weaker than neighboring empires.

- Nanzhao first protected its sovereignty by playing the Tang and Tibetan empires against each other. After the Tibetan empire's collapse removed the danger of being attacked by both powers at once, the kings of Nanzhao soon began constructing their own imperial polity (Dali) using a combination of Sinitic, Esoteric Buddhist, and Southeast Asian political cultures.[235]
- While paying tribute to the Tang, Bohai and Japan developed a close diplomatic and trading relationship in which Bohai's king accepted vassalage to the Japanese emperor, allowing Japan to construct a miniature tributary system of its own.[236]

[233] Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 153–58. Princess Anhua's marriage to Longshun was disrupted by Huang Chao's capture of Chang'an in early 881 and the Tang court's flight to Sichuan, leading to some confusion over whether it ever took place at all (e.g., Backus argues, based on the *Xin Tangshu*, that it did not). Recent research shows, however, that it's likely the princess did finally arrive in Nanzhao: Du, "Tang Anhua zhang gongzhu."

[234] *ZZTJ* 253.8204, 8227–28.

[235] Bryson, "Tsenpo Chung, Yunnan Wang, Mahārāja"; Daniels, "Nanzhao as a Southeast Asian kingdom."

[236] On Bohai–Japan relations, with an emphasis on the importance of Literary Sinitic poetry in their diplomatic interactions, see Morley, "Poetry and Diplomacy in Early Heian Japan."

- After driving the Tang out of the Korean peninsula, Silla reverted to cultivating strong tributary relations with the Chinese court to strengthen the royal house's authority over the true-bone nobles and to offset the Bohai–Japan alliance. Silla subtly resisted Japan's attempts at treating it as a vassal rather than an equal, while maintaining a northern buffer zone to avoid direct conflict with both Bohai and the Tang.[237]

Acknowledging the agency and legitimate interests of these minor states would allow us to write a less Sinocentric narrative of East Asia's history in this period, one that doesn't treat Tang hegemony as normative or narrate its diminution in the eighth and ninth centuries as a sad tale of imperial decline.

Conclusion: The Fall of the Tang in East Asian History

In the last thirty years of its history, the Tang empire was rocked by a massive peasant rebellion and then disintegrated into a patchwork of warlord states. Historians continue to investigate the causes of this collapse. Song dynasty historians tended to argue that the costs of the war with Dali had bled the imperial treasury dry and overburdened the populace with heavy taxes, driving the peasants to breaking point in a repeat of the Sui dynasty's fall.[238] Both Song and modern historians have also blamed Emperor Xizong (Li Xuan, r. 873–88), who ascended the throne aged eleven and neglected to deal with his empire's escalating crisis while indulging his interests and talents in horse archery, swordsmanship, mathematics, music, kickball, cockfighting, gambling, and especially polo (he reportedly boasted that if the examinations were based on polo, he would take first place).[239] Less often recognized is the responsibility borne by Xizong's father Yizong, whose extravagant spending and negligence sowed the seeds for the empire's rapid decline after his death. Even at the height of the Dali war in 869–70, and with a rebellion raging in the Jiangsu region, Yizong spent huge amounts of the imperial state's wealth on a wedding for his favorite daughter, followed by an equally extravagant funeral when she died a year later. He also lavished donations on the Buddhist *sangha*, including the Famen Temple, while indulging in banqueting and delegating policymaking to ministers known to be extremely corrupt.[240] The record of Yizong's reign shows that the biggest problem facing the Tang court at this time was not a lack of

[237] Choi, "Silla's Perception of the International World Order"; Kim, "A Buffer Zone for Peace."
[238] *XTS* 222b.6292, 6295, 222c.6332–33. [239] *ZZTJ* 253.8221.
[240] *ZZTJ* 251.8139, 8150, 252.8161–62, 8165. Yizong's extravagance can still be glimpsed from the exquisite gold and silver objects that he gifted to the Famen Temple in 873; these were rediscovered in the temple's crypt in 1987.

resources, but rather sheer waste and mismanagement of the still-plentiful resources it had at its disposal.

By the time Xizong's reign began, the North China Plain had suffered years of drought and famine in succession.[241] One of Xizong's ministers persuaded him to exempt the affected regions from taxation, but local authorities apparently ignored the order and continued pressing the peasants mercilessly for taxes. Without adequate relief efforts by the state, starving peasants formed bands of refugees and took to banditry to survive. Local officials covered up the magnitude of the rural distress to protect themselves from blame, so the imperial court did not effectively mobilize either famine relief or military suppression until the bandit groups had grown into large rebel armies.[242] These armies were led by Wang Xianzhi (d. 878) and Huang Chao (835–84), whose families had previously prospered by trafficking salt outside the state monopoly. Although Tang armies defeated and killed Wang Xianzhi in 878, years of wasteful spending, drought, locust plagues, and warfare against both the rebels and Dali had by then drained the government of all its reserves. As tax collection was no longer feasible in many parts of the empire, the state was forced to borrow cash and grain from merchants and rich landlords and sell political sinecures to pay its officials and troops.[243] In 878–81, Huang Chao led his army on a rampage through south China and then, when the court refused his demand to be made a provincial governor, marched north and captured both Luoyang and Chang'an from underprepared and demoralized imperial troops (Figure 7). Xizong escaped to Sichuan, but most of the imperial clan, as well as hundreds of court officials and their families, were trapped in Chang'an and slaughtered by vengeful rebels who blamed them for the peasantry's misery.[244]

Huang Chao founded his own imperial dynasty in Chang'an but was driven out, hunted down, and killed by the Shatuo Türks in 883 – once again, Turkic cavalry had come to the Tang's rescue.[245] Xizong returned to his desolate capital, much as Suzong had done in 757; but this time, the damage done to

[241] Historians and paleoclimatologists are still debating whether these were part of a global phase of climate change that also caused the collapse of the Uighur khaganate, Silla, and the Classic Maya civilization. See Fan, "Climatic Change and Dynastic Cycles in Chinese History"; Anderson, *The East Asian World-System*, 129, 134–35. Anderson's book is an original, ambitious effort at identifying cyclical patterns in East Asian and world history and relating them to climatic change and world-systems theory. But his treatment of the Tang period is significantly weakened by reliance on dated and inaccurate secondary sources. To his credit, however, he heeds Fan's caution regarding climatic determinism in interpreting the fall of the Tang.

[242] *ZZTJ* 251.8144–45, 8168–69, 8174, 8180.

[243] *ZZTJ* 253.8203.

[244] On the fall of Chang'an and ensuing violence against the capital elite, see Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 189–200.

[245] In fact, the Shatuo leader Li Keyong (856–908) had himself only recently been in open revolt against the Tang court but seized this chance to get back in the dynasty's good graces.

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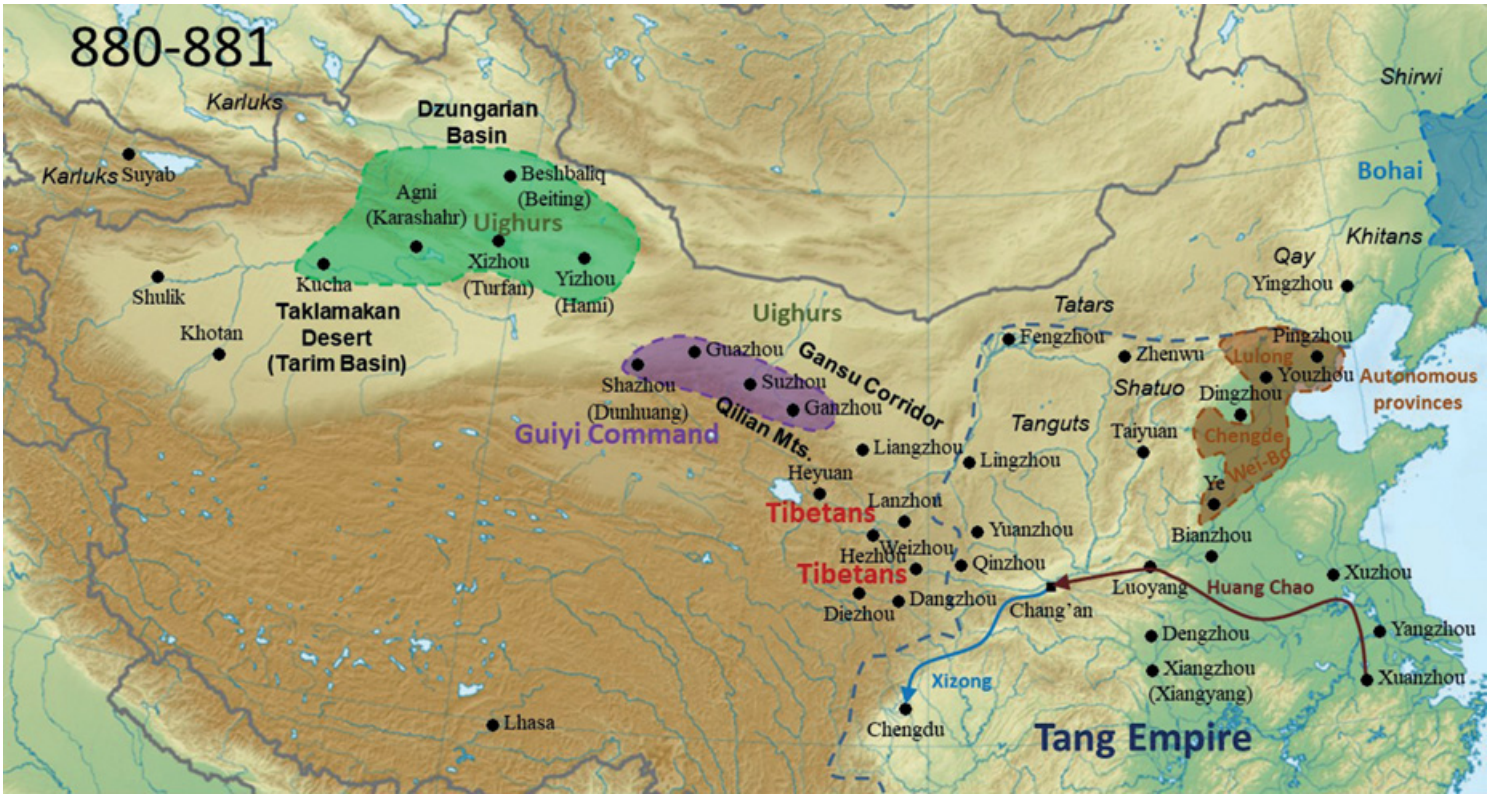

Figure 7 Map of Huang Chao's advance on Luoyang and Chang'an in 880–81

the imperial court's authority was irreversible. For the next two decades, the increasingly dysfunctional and factionalized court failed to restore order to an empire divided between many warlords, most of them rogue provincial governors or former rebels. Most regions of both north and south China were devastated by warlord conflicts, even if they had previously been spared the rebels' depredations.[246]

In 903, the warlord Zhu Wen (852–912) seized control over the court of Emperor Zhaozong (Li Ye, r. 888–904). Zhu had Zhaozong murdered a year later and replaced with an eleven-year-old prince. In 907 Zhu, having tired of ruling through a puppet, usurped the throne and founded the Liang dynasty (907–23). The Shatuo, identifying as both loyalists and heirs to the defunct Tang, built a strong rival state in Shanxi and conquered the Liang in 923. From then until 951, three short-lived Shatuo military dynasties (known to historians as Later Tang, Later Jin, and Later Han) successively ruled north China. South China remained divided between other warlord regimes and would not be reunified with the north until the 970s. Reunification took place under the ethnically Chinese Song dynasty, founded by a military family that achieved a lasting restoration of stable, centralized civil governance; the most historically significant innovation in this regard was an expanded and more meritocratic examination system that replaced older patron-client networks and gave southern literati families greater access to political office.[247] Also built into the Song political system were institutional norms favoring the educated literati and preventing military men from holding political power. Perhaps due in part to this systemic disempowerment of both Chinese and Inner Asian military families, the Shatuo were the last Turkic military elite to play a significant role in Chinese political history.[248] In contrast, the westward migration of numerous Turkic-speaking steppe peoples and the employment of many Turks as elite slave-soldiers in the Abbasid realm gave them influence in the politics of the Islamic world for centuries to come, culminating in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.

The decline and fall of the Tang created political opportunities for other peoples on the empire's periphery who had previously lived in the shadow of Chinese domination. Dali, having fulfilled its ambition of becoming a bona fide imperial state, went through its own period of political turmoil in the early

[246] Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 200–30.

[247] The classic study of the Song civil service examinations is Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*.

[248] The Shatuo appear to have assimilated relatively quickly into the Chinese population during the early Song period, though this process is unfortunately entirely invisible in the extant sources.

900s but reemerged under the capable management of the Duan family, who would rule Yunnan as emperors from 937 to 1253.[249] The province of Annan broke away from the Chinese warlord state in Guangdong during the 930s and, after a period of division known as the Twelve Warlords (944–68), was united into an enduring independent polity.[250] This Đại Việt state eventually expanded southward into the lands of the Austronesian-speaking Cham people (Champa) and laid the foundations for a Vietnamese national identity. For leading troops against Huang Chao after the fall of Chang'an, a Tangut family was rewarded with hereditary governorship of the Ordos region and used this as a basis to build the Xia state in the tenth century. Xia (also known as Xi Xia or Western Xia) successfully resisted incorporation by the Song and conquered the Gansu Corridor and parts of eastern Qinghai, ruling over a polyglot population of Tanguts, Uighurs, Tibetans, and Chinese. But the biggest success story was that of the Khitans, who united their tribes into a powerful empire (the Liao) that conquered Bohai (926), annexed the northernmost prefectures in Hebei and Shanxi (936–8), briefly occupied the North China Plain (947), gained overlordship over Goryeo (993), and finally achieved formal diplomatic parity with the Song dynasty (1005), under peace terms that included generous annual subsidies of silk and silver from the Song.[251] Although the Khitans did not fully incorporate the Mongolian steppe into their imperial state, they asserted suzerainty over its tribes via demands for tribute and periodic punitive expeditions, which are believed to have driven yet more Turkic tribes westward into Central Asia and contributed to Mongolia becoming primarily Mongolic-speaking.[252] The role formerly played by the Tang, of an empire straddling East Asia and Inner Asia, was therefore now played by the Liao and not the Song.

Dali, Đại Việt, Xia, and Liao all had Sinographic elites, though the Khitan and Tangut elites also created new writing systems for their own languages, loosely modeled on Sinographic writing.[253] All four states adopted bureaucratic institutions adapted from the Tang model. All four had elites as fervently Buddhist as the Tang elite had been, although Dali and Xia (being contiguous with both the Sinitic and Tibetan worlds) displayed a preference for Esoteric

[249] Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom*, 160–64. [250] See Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*.

[251] Recent scholarship on the Xia and Liao is extensive, but I especially recommend two articles on their imperial ideologies: Solonin, "The Formation of Tangut Ideology"; Xue, "Age of Emperors." For digital maps of the Song-Liao and Song-Xia borders, see Yang, *Frontiers of the Tang and Song Empires*, Map 10 and Map 11, at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0cf798878745406fa5719b97ccfc5454#ref-n-pZ6zFE and https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0cf798878745406fa5719b97ccfc5454#ref-n-bYPaUu.

[252] Biran, "Unearthing the Liao Dynasty's Relations with the Muslim World," 226–27.

[253] The literate elites of Dali and Đại Việt transcribed their language using Sinographs but also created numerous new Sinographs for this purpose.

Buddhism with roots in both Tang and Tibetan traditions.[254] Together with the Song, Goryeo, and Japan, these states formed an enlarged Sinographic sphere characterized by the geopolitical and cultural legacy of the Tang empire. The Khitan Liao fell to its eastern vassals, the Jurchen people, in the 1120s, but the Jurchens (descendants of the Amur River Margat) were themselves able to build a Sinographic empire at an accelerated pace by employing former Liao officials and adopting Liao institutions. They then swiftly overpowered the Song dynasty and conquered north China, fusing Manchuria and the Sinitic heartland into a single empire for the first time in history. Meanwhile, a faction of the Khitan elite evaded the Jurchen conquest by migrating to Central Asia, where they gained suzerainty over the Karakhanids and established a new empire in an unprecedented merging of the Sinographic and Turco-Islamic worlds.[255] Those worlds would merge on a much larger scale in the thirteenth century under the Mongol empire, which straddled Inner Asia and East Asia to an extent that neither the Tang nor the Liao could have thought possible. Nevertheless, the multilingual and polycentric but culturally interconnected East Asian region that the Mongols encountered and invaded was both a product of the Tang empire's efforts at drawing surrounding polities into its orbit, and a testimony to some of those polities' subsequent success in making their own history as imperial states.

[254] Sørensen, "Esoteric Buddhism in the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms"; Dunnell, "Esoteric Buddhism under the Xixia."
[255] Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai*.