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## The Tang as a Tuoba Dynasty

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# The Tang as a Tuoba Dynasty

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## ABSTRACT

By examining the record of a local anti-Tibetan rebellion in document scroll S.1438 from the Dunhuang “library cave,” this discussion demonstrates that the nomadic Tuoba origin of the Tang royal house was known not only to the ancient Turkic people, as shown by their name for the Tang, Tabγač, but also to the Tang subjects themselves. In addition to substantiating Paul Pelliot’s old assertion that the Old Turkic name Tabγač came from the name Tuoba, this work argues that the Tang dynasty was in many aspects indeed the continuation of its Tuoba predecessors.

## THE TIBETAN OVERLORDS AND THE ETHNIC CHINESE POPULATION IN DUNHUANG

In his ground-breaking study of the Council of Lhasa, the debate held from 792 to 794 at the Samye Monastery in Tibet between the Indian Buddhist author Kamalaśīla and the Chinese monk Moheyan 摩訶衍 from Dunhuang 敦煌 (with a largely predetermined outcome),<sup>1</sup> Paul Demiéville extensively surveyed various contemporary documents and manuscripts, especially those uncovered in the famous

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<sup>1</sup> Demiéville, *Le Concile de Lhasa. Une controverse sur le quietisme entre bouddhistes de l'Inde et de la Chine au VIIIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale de France, 1952). The Chinese name Moheyan is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *mahāyāna*.

library cave at Dunhuang. This survey provides a general overview of the relationship between the ethnic Chinese population and the Tibetan overlords, who had conquered vast territories along the ancient Silk Road including Dunhuang. The palpably fierce antagonism of the former Tang subjects—driven by their attachment to their language, clothing, and other cultural elements, to say nothing of their resentment of economic exploitation and political oppression—toward the new Tibetan overlords impressed Demiéville so much that he highlighted this observation in his introduction to the study (p. viii), comparing it to the modern Chinese nationalist fervor demonstrated during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). According to several more recent authors, even the religion of Buddhism, which the Tibetan conquerors presumably shared with Dunhuang’s Chinese-speaking majority, had contributed to this antagonism, as evidenced by the construction of Dunhuang’s famous Cave 148, now identified as part of the natives’ epic efforts to resist the Tibetan invasion.<sup>2</sup>

Some historical background should be given first. After the outbreak of the An-Shi Rebellion 安史之亂 (755–763), the Tang central government was forced to cede control of almost all its former territories in the northwest to a rapidly expanding Tibetan empire. Denis Twitchett, following Chinese sources, attributed this development to the withdrawal of Tang garrisons from the northwest to defend the Tang capital against the rebel troops.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the prefecture of Shazhou 沙州, with Dunhuang as the prefectural seat, was among the last parts of the former Tang territories to fall. Valerie Hansen in her recent history of the Silk Road blamed the fall of Dunhuang on the Tang court’s failure to pay Tibetans the promised “large payments” for the latter’s help in suppressing rebels.<sup>4</sup> However, her repeated allusions to the Tang emperor’s promise of payment after An Lushan first started his rebellion in 755 can hardly stand, because the fall of Dunhuang occurred nearly a quarter century after the Tang’s painful and costly pacification of the An-Shi Rebellion. Her more specific statement (p. 180)

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<sup>2</sup> Yu Xin 余欣, *Shendao renxin: Tang–Song zhiji Dunhuang minsheng zongjiao shehui shi yanjiu* 神道人心: 唐宋之際敦煌民生宗教社會史研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 152–153.

<sup>3</sup> Twitchett, “Introduction,” in D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 3: Sui and T’ang China* 589–906, Part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1–47, 17 and 36.

<sup>4</sup> Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 180, 184–185.

In that year (786), the Tibetans helped the Tang dynasty to suppress a rebellion, but, when the Tang failed to make the promised payment, the Tibetans conquered Dunhuang.

is not quite correct either. First, the implied rebellion could only be what was known as the "Mutiny at Jingyuan 涇原兵變," led by the once powerful warlord Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742–784). Then, the compensation that Tang Emperor Dezong 德宗 (Li Kuo 李适, reign 779–805) had promised the Tibetans in this regard was not "large payments" but instead handing over a swath of territories. As a successful expanding power, the Tibetans were sophisticated strategists and knew helping the Tang government, by far their primary adversary, would not be in their best interest. That rebellion was in fact suppressed two years earlier in 784, when the mutiny leader was intercepted and killed by Tang loyalists on his way to seek refuge with the Tibetans,<sup>5</sup> revealing how much "help" the Tibetans had actually provided to earn the promised compensation, an argument in fact raised by Emperor Dezong's most trusted minister, Li Mi 李泌 (722–789).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Tang emperor paid Tibetan leaders ten thousand bolts of silk instead of the promised territories, giving the latter a pretext for a large-scale offensive two years later.<sup>7</sup>

An important aspect of Dunhuang's fate was that the region had been cut off from the Tang central government and completely surrounded by Tibetan-controlled territories for several decades, after the outbreak of the An-Shi Rebellion. The lack of communication and contact with the Tang court for such a long duration has helped make the exact date of the city's final fall a long-running debate, though more authors now date it to the year 786.<sup>8</sup> This belated outcome indicates that Dunhuang was where the advancing Tibetan forces faced the toughest and longest resistance to their conquest, with multiple sources stating that the local Tang authority, though completely isolated and with few

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<sup>5</sup> Sima Guang 司馬光 et al., *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956, hereafter *ZZTJ*), 231.7447.

<sup>6</sup> *ZZTJ* 231.7442.

<sup>7</sup> Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 et al., *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 216b.6094.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Chen Guocan 陳國燦, "Tangchao Tufan xianluo Shazhou cheng de shijian wenti 唐朝吐蕃陷落沙州城的時間問題," *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, 1985, no. 1, 1–7, and Hansen 2012, 280 note 36.

resources, was able to fend off Tibetan encroachment for more than a decade, a feat unthinkable without the solid loyalty and support of the local population.

As Demiéville has stressed, the Chinese-speaking majority at Dunhuang demonstrated particularly strong identification with the Tang imperial house. This identification is not only mentioned in official sources but also shown in popular literature, first in the following lyric poem (P.3128 of the Pelliot Collection):<sup>9</sup>

Tune: “The Bodhisattva Foreigner”

Dunhuang has produced legendary generals since ancient times

Winning the admiration of frontier tribes from afar.

Having shown their unwavering loyalty, looking towards the dragon court<sup>10</sup>

They were inducted to the imperial Hall of Heroes early on.

Now we are resentfully cut off by the Tibetans

Blocking the conveyance of our deep affections (for our monarch).

Sooner or later the wolf-like Tibetans will be annihilated

So we can pay our tribute to His Majesty together.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> While all documents from the Dunhuang “library cave” cited in this study are now directly available at the International Dunhuang Programme website (<https://idp.bl.uk/>), including the image here (Figure 1), an early transcription of this lyric poem can be found in Wang Chongmin 王重民, comp., *Dunhuang quzici ji* 敦煌曲子詞集 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1950), 3. All translations are by the present author, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>10</sup> Here one may have an allusion to the deeds of the famous Han 漢 dynasty ambassador Su Wu 蘇武 (? – 60 BCE) to the Xiongnu 匈奴 (Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962], 54.2459–69), especially the Han ambassadorial scepter 漢節 that Su Wu always kept during his nineteen years as a prisoner of the Xiongnu. In this case, 龍庭 may stand for the annual grand assembly place of Xiongnu noblemen (Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965], 23.851).

<sup>11</sup> In Dunhuang at the time, the word 早晚 may simply have meant “when.” Then the last part would be an interrogative sentence. See Jiang Lihong 蔣禮鴻, *Dunhuang bianwen ziyi tongshi* 敦煌變文字義通釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji

曲子菩薩蠻

燉煌古往出神將, 感得諸蕃遙欽仰. 効節望龍庭, 麟臺早有名.  
只恨隔蕃部, 情懇難申吐. 早晚滅狼蕃, 一齊拜聖顏.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1. P.3218 Tune: "The Bodhisattva Foreigner"

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chubanshe, 1997), 367–369.

<sup>12</sup> There is this rather pedantic rule that the Chinese character *fan* 蕃, when referring to 吐蕃, "Tibet, Tibetans," should be pronounced *bo*. But here we see that the Chinese-speaking locals who interacted with Tibetans directly kept the character rhyming with the character *yan* 顏. I therefore transcribe the Chinese name 吐蕃 as "Tufan" instead of "Tubo."

The above folk ballad has been generally dated to the period of Dunhuang's long siege by Tibetan forces. Then the decades of Tibetan rule ended, and we read the following segment of the *Zhang Huaishen Transformation Text* 張淮深變文 (P.3451 of the Pelliot Collection),<sup>13</sup> describing the visit of an official delegate from the Tang court to Dunhuang, circa 867–872:<sup>14</sup>

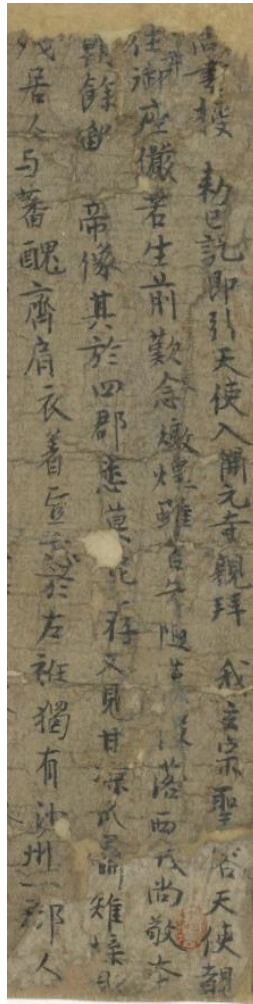


Figure 2. P.3451 segment of *Zhang Huaishen Transformation Text*

13 For an annotated transcription of this transformation text, see Huang Zheng 黃征 and Zhang Yongquan 張涌泉, ed. and annot., *Dunhuang bianwen jiaozhu* 敦煌變文校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 191–199.

14 Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, *Guiyijun shi yanjiu: Tang–Song shidai Dunhuang lishi kaosuo* 歸義軍史研究: 唐宋時代敦煌歷史考索 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), 83.



Having humbly accepted the imperial edict, our minister [i.e., Zhang Huaishen 張淮深, 833–890, the local warlord who had been given an honorable appointment as minister of revenue 戶部尚書 by the Tang court] led the celestial envoys into the Kaiyuan Monastery to pay personal homage to the sacred statue of Emperor Xuanzong [Li Longji 李隆基, reign 712–756]. The celestial envoys saw that the old imperial image still looked lifelike. They marveled that despite having been cut off from China proper for a century and having fallen to the western barbarians, Dunhuang remains faithful to our dynasty and has treasured the imperial statue to this day. The same is nowhere to be found in the other four prefectures [in the Gansu Corridor].

尚書授勅已訖，即引天使入開元寺，親拜我玄宗聖容。天使觀往年御座，儼若生前，歎念燉煌雖百年阻漠，沒落西戎，尚敬本朝，餘留帝像。其於(餘)四郡，悉莫能存。

Moreover, there were three inscriptions erected by a noted Li 李 family, of Dunhuang. The first, originally located in Cave 332 and dated in the Shengli 聖曆 era (698–700) of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天, only identified the family as being from Longxi 隴西. The other two inscriptions were carved on the same stele in Cave 148 at different times. The earlier one, dated 776, made the direct claim that the family descended from the same forefather as the Tang imperial house, and the third one, dated 894, bore an official recognition of the family as belonging to the imperial clan 唐宗子.<sup>15</sup> Let us recall that the construction of Cave 148 took place when Dunhuang was facing the gravest threat of Tibetan military conquest. The family's claim of belonging to the Tang imperial clan can therefore naturally be interpreted as intended to raise the family's status and appeal among the local population in its defense against the Tibetan onslaught.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gong Weizhang 公維章, *Niepan, Jingtu de diantang – Dunhuang Maogaoku di 148 ku yanjiu* 涅槃，淨土的殿堂 -- 敦煌莫高窟第 148 窟研究 (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2004), Appendix 244–256.

<sup>16</sup> Gong Weizhang 2004, 40–41.

## A BLOODY ANTI-TIBETAN REBELLION

We move on to S.1438 of the Stein collection of Dunhuang documents in the British Library. This is a long scroll of Chinese texts from the period when the region was under Tibetan rule. Its verso contains a collection of dozens of model letters known as *shuyi* 書儀, running a total of 177 columns of handwritten texts.<sup>17</sup> Many of the pieces are actual letters, presented as models after anonymizing their sender and recipient. The most significant are seventeen letters and memorials sent by a local official well versed in the Chinese language to a high-level Tibetan minister. Demiéville was likely the first scholar to translate and study these communications. They reveal a violent anti-Tibetan revolt in the Dunhuang region,<sup>18</sup> the subject of many follow-up studies.<sup>19</sup> Demiéville identified the author as a governor, possibly a *dudu* 都督, an assumption we shall follow.<sup>20</sup>

My primary attention is given to the eighth letter, more specifically, the following texts of columns 70–78:

Only this prefecture of Shazhou has repeatedly resisted the transformative initiatives of the [Tibetan] king. The war had barely ended, and the people and officials had calmed down a little. Responsibilities have been assigned to various offices to take care (of the population). In less than two years, normal life has come back to everyone. However, a

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<sup>17</sup> The images of this scroll at the International Dunhuang Programme website do not number the columns. For the column numbers of cited texts, one may use Shi Weixiang 史葦湘, “Tufan wangchao guanxia Shazhou qianhou – Dunhuang yishu S.1438 bei shuyi canjuan de yanjiu 吐蕃王朝管轄沙州前后 – 敦煌遺書 S.1438 背書儀殘卷的研究,” *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究, 1983, 131–141, or Tang Gen’ou 唐耕耦 and Lu Hongji 陸宏基, comp., *Dunhuang shehui jingji wenxian zhenji shilu* 敦煌社會經濟文獻真跡釋錄, vols. 1–5 (Beijing: various publishers, 1986 – 1990; hereafter *DH*), 5: 314–325.

<sup>18</sup> Demiéville 1952, 254–274.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Jiang Boqin 姜伯勤, “Tang Dunhuang ‘shuyi’ xieben zhong suojian de Shazhou Yuguan yihu qiye 唐敦煌‘書儀’寫本中所見的沙州玉關驛戶起義,” *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢, 1981 no. 1, 157–170, and Shi Weixiang 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Lu Li 陸離, “Dunhuang xieben S.1438 bei shuyi canjuan yu Tufan zhanling Shazhou de jige wenti 敦煌寫本 S.1438 背書儀殘卷與吐蕃占領沙州的幾個問題,” *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 2010, no. 1, 87–100, further identifies this governor as Suo Yun 索允, a somewhat speculative conclusion.

certain Fan Zhongguo and others plotted last year to flee to Hanhai. I informed your Ministry then, resulting in these conspirators being exiled to Jiuquan. Yet utterly unexpectedly they hatched a new plot a thousand *li* away, (rushed back) and scaled the double city walls at night as if flying down from the sky to massacre Tibetan officials. They set up a postal household worker, Xing Xing, as leader, pretending to be a Tuoba royal prince, in order to force people (to join) and to magnify their military strength.

唯此沙州, 屢犯王化, 干戈纒弭, 人吏少寧. 列職分官, 務?撫養. 未經兩稔, 咸荷再蘇. 汜忠國等, 去年興心, 擬逃翰海, 遠申相府, 罰配酒泉. 豈期千里為謀, 重城夜越, 有同天落, 戕煞蕃官. 偽立驛戶邢興, 揚言拓拔(a homophonic variant of 拓跋)王子, 迫脅人庶, 張皇兵威.

While more details of this rebellion were provided in the following (the ninth, tenth, and eleventh) letters (columns 80–102), the texts above already allude to a revolt against the Tibetan rule by Tang loyalists, suggested especially by the conspirators’ plan a year earlier of fleeing to Hanhai. That place name, as Demiéville speculated, could only mean the Hanhai Garrison 翰海軍, the Tang military establishment located at Tingzhou 庭州 (Bechbaliq or Beshbalik, near Turfan), which did not fall to Tibetan control until 790.<sup>21</sup> Given that the above revolt took place within the first two years of the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang, as Jiang Boqin has noted,<sup>22</sup> Tingzhou was then the closest place to Shazhou that still swore allegiance to the Tang emperor. The exile of the conspirators to Jiuquan, hundreds of miles east of Dunhuang, certainly contained the intention of making it more difficult for their original plan of defecting to Tang emperor’s remaining base west of Shazhou. Though the letters attributed the revolt to a cabal of only six or seven outlaws, who later confessed that their sole intention was “killing Tibetan officials 謀煞蕃官” (the eleventh letter, column 101), the victims included even the top Tibetan governor (*jie’er* 節兒 or *rtse-rje*) and his staff stationed in Dunhuang, with their office

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<sup>21</sup> Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 13.370; *Xin Tang shu* 6.197.

<sup>22</sup> Jiang Boqin 1981, 160.

burned down as well (the eleventh letter, columns 96–97). As Demiéville has noted,<sup>23</sup> this event well matched a Tibetan document studied by F. W. Thomas, especially the following segment as translated by Thomas:<sup>24</sup>

The Btsan-po having taken possession of the fort of Śa-cu (i.e., Shazhou) along with the subjects, the Chinese, in rivalry for dominion, having killed the best of the Tibetan subjects, appointed ... as To-dog chief ruler.

One therefore wonders how many locals had answered the call by a “Tuoba royal prince” to become “forced participants 脅從之類” (the ninth letter, column 81) in producing such a macabre mess.

Indeed, in my view the most interesting point of the letters is the assertion that the rebels called their leader a Tuoba royal prince 拓跋王子 to attract more participants for their cause. To my knowledge, starting with Demiéville, all authors writing about this anti-Tibetan revolt have taken this characterization literally. Therefore, all have been forced to map this title onto the ethnic groups whose members were still carrying the name Tuoba at the time— primarily the Tangut 党項 and similar Qiang 羌 groups, plus, though less likely, the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾.

Such an interpretation would first lead to direct contradiction with the strong ethno-political nature of the anti-Tibetan rebellion. By the time of Dunhuang’s fall to the Tibetans, all these ethnic groups who had not yet Sinicized had already become the allies and even vanguards of the Tibetans’ repeated military campaigns against the Tang. In his detailed study of the *mthong-khyab*/*tongjia* 通頰 tribe, which seemed to have come out of this tradition, Rong Xinjiang has well summarized this fact with multiple stories.<sup>25</sup> According to the Dangxiang (Tangut) chapter of *Xin Tang shu* (221a.6216), the

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<sup>23</sup> Demiéville 1952, 277 note 1.

<sup>24</sup> F. W. Thomas, “Tibetan Documents concerning Chinese Turkestan II—The Sa-cu Region,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1927, 807–844, p. 815; later as *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents concerning Chinese Turkestan, Part II: Documents*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1951), 47, edited slightly for clarity.

<sup>25</sup> Rong Xinjiang, “*mthong-khyab* or *tongjia*: A Tribe in the Sino-Tibetan Frontiers in the Seventh to Tenth Centuries,” *Monumenta Serica* 39 (1990–1991): 247–299, 293–94.

use of these ethnic groups as vanguard in Tibetan military expansions started after the Longshuo 龍朔 period (661–663). Then in 751, in their deepest penetration of the Tang realm, culminating in the sacking of the Tang capital Chang'an,

The Tibetans, commanding more than twenty-thousand troops of Tuyuhun, Dangxiang (Tanguts), Di and Qiang, extended over dozens of miles; from Sizhuyuan they crossed the Wei river, and following the mountains they came to the east.

吐蕃帥吐谷渾, 党項, 氐, 羌二十餘萬眾, 彌漫數十里, 已自司竹園渡渭, 循山而東.<sup>26</sup>

Then two years later in 753,

[Pugu] Huai'en being dissatisfied, led astray the caitiffs (the Tibetans) and together with the Uighurs, the Dangxiang Qiang, the Hun and the Nula, he invaded the border regions. The Tibetan chieftains Shang Jiexi, Zanmo, Shang Xidongzan, and others, together with two hundred thousand troops, reached Liquan and Fengtian. ...Thereupon, the [Tang] capital declared martial law.

懷恩不得志, 導虜與回紇, 党項羌, 渾, 奴刺犯邊. 吐蕃大酋尚結息, 贊摩, 尚悉東贊等眾二十萬至醴泉, 奉天, ...於是京師戒嚴.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ZZTJ* 223.7150.

<sup>27</sup> *Xin Tang shu* 216a.6088.

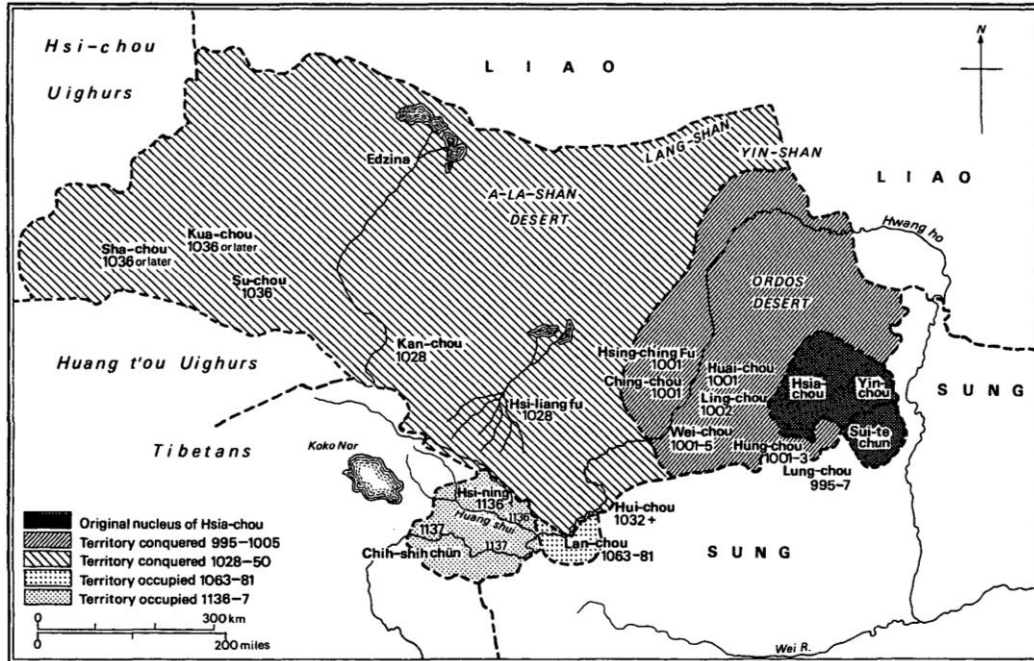


Figure 3. The growth of the Western Xia State founded by the Tangut Tuoba clan<sup>28</sup>

In fact, here the quick-learning Tibetans were simply playing the same classical geostrategy that the Tuoba father-in-law Zhangsun Sheng 長孫晟 (552–609) of the future Tang Emperor Taizong 太宗 (Li Shimin 李世民, reign 626–649) had advised the Sui Emperor Wendi 文帝 (Yang Jian 楊堅, reign 581–604) in dealing with the first Turk kaghanate: dividing the strong and uniting the weak 離強而合弱.<sup>29</sup> With such fresh memories, how much appeal to fellow Chinese-speakers could the Tang loyalists in Dunhuang expect by setting up a “royal prince” from these Tibetan allies as a leader of an anti-Tibetan rebellion? The Chinese idiom “seeking fish from a tree 緣木求魚” would be an apt answer.

The second problem is the space-time angle. A “royal prince 王子” had to come from a polity that had a kingly chieftain at a minimum. This has probably led Jiang Boqin in a dictionary entry to refer to earlier Hexi Xianbei 河西鮮卑 tribes, particularly the Tufa 秃髮 clan.<sup>30</sup> Aside from the fact that the

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Dannel, “The Hsi Hsia,” in D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 6: *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 154–214, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al., *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 51.1331.

<sup>30</sup> Jiang, “Yuguan yihu qiyi 玉關驛戶起義,” in Ji Xianlin 季羨林, ed., *Dunhuang xue dacidian* 敦煌學大辭典 (Shanghai:

name Tufa was not quite the same as Tuoba 拓跋, these kinglets ceased to exist centuries ago, with the Western Qin 西秦 (385–431) being the last of these mini states.

This brings us to the Tangut Tuoba clan, which would rise to form the great state of Western Xia 西夏 (1038–1227). While Rolf Stein has conducted an extensive survey on the geography and origin of the Tangut state and kings,<sup>31</sup> the map (Figure 3) taken from *The Cambridge History of China* shows that it would take at least another two centuries for this Tuoba clan's kingly power to be felt in the Shazhou region.

The upshot is that, none of the ethnic groups that may figure, however farfetched, as a contemporary "Tuoba royal prince," could produce the anti-Tibetan *and* pro-Tang appeal that the rebels needed for getting followers 迫脅人庶 among the Chinese speaking majority in Dunhuang.

#### "TUOBA ROYAL PRINCE" SHOULD SIMPLY READ TANG ROYAL PRINCE

Given the historical environment in Dunhuang in these early days of Tibetan rule, the simplest interpretation of this puzzling "Tuoba royal prince" ringleader that the anti-Tibetan Tang loyalists set up to attract popular support and magnify their military strength is that it was a euphemism adopted by the letter's author, a presumed local governor, for a "Tang royal prince 唐家王子."

There is firstly the Chinese majority's persisting ethno-political identification with the Tang court as presented earlier, giving a presumed Tang royal prince unmatched appeal to rouse the newly conquered local population. That there already were local Li family members claiming descent from the same imperial forefather certainly provided more persuasion in this regard to boot.

As to why the governor put in this euphemism instead of a straightforward "Tang royal prince," there are multiple possibilities. Foremost were apparent political factors. As many readers of these letters have observed, this governor had to be a so-called *poluoguan* 破落官, "official with a ruined fortune," a term for a former Tang official retained by Tibetan conquerors as a collaborator. Helping the new Tibetan masters to rule his Chinese-speaking compatriots who still strongly identified with the

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Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1998), 376–377.

<sup>31</sup> Stein, "Mi-nag et Si-hia, géographie historique et légendes ancestrales," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 44 (1951): 223–265.

Tang court was certainly a very difficult and even dangerous job. Or as Demiéville described it (p. 275), the governor was placed in “une position fort critique, suspect qu’il devait être à la fois à ses maîtres tibétains et aux patriotes chinois.” In fact, the fourth letter (columns 35–45) was the turncoat governor’s request to the Tibetan court to be allowed to become a Buddhist monk, to get out of his unenviable official duties as soon as possible. The Tibetologist H. E. Richardson thinks even monkhood would not remove the suspicion of disloyalty to the Tibetan court as “the Chinese community (under the Tibetan rule) were obviously a potential fifth column.”<sup>32</sup> Such misgivings also help us understand why the outcome of the Council of Lhasa was somehow predestined, even though the monk Moheyan, representing the Chinese Buddhism School in this historical religious debate, was reported to have helped in suppressing the anti-Tibetan revolt in Dunhuang under current study (columns 77–78).

Nevertheless, the governor in question would seem to have more trouble with the local Chinese-speaking community. Multiple letters of the same collection reveal that he played a dishonorable—or even hateful in the eyes of Tang loyalists—role in suppressing the anti-Tibetan rebellion. In particular, he was responsible for capturing the rebels by chicanery 設詐擒獲 (column 98). He reported that the lead conspirators were later put to death and the “coerced accomplices” sent to the prefecture of Guazhou in shackles and chains 勃逆之人, 已聞伏法; 脅從之類, 錮送瓜州 (column 81).<sup>33</sup> Imagine the reactions of local Chinese to reading the blunt news that a Tang royal prince 唐家王子, pretended or not, was among those caught by the turncoat governor then turned over to Tibetan executioners. That the governor himself had a precarious existence in Dunhuang is amply shown by his submitting yet another application for becoming a Buddhist monk, in which he mentioned that his only son in Dunhuang had been murdered 愚子枉被謀害 (column 25).

The letters we have are not the originals. They were copied by either the author himself or someone sufficiently close to him to have access to these confidential and personal communications. An indication that the author or copier may have struggled with the very mention of the “Tuoba royal prince,” if not some second thoughts, is that here the critical name Tuoba was in fact reversed to *batuo*

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<sup>32</sup> Richardson, “An Early Judicial Document from Tibet,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series 1 (1991): 383–388, 385.

<sup>33</sup> For Tibetans’ torturous practice of marching prisoners in shackles, see Demiéville 1952, 195 note 3.



拔拓 with a transposition (乙正) mark added on the side. It should be noted that in a total of 177 columns of handwritten texts, there are only two such corrections, and they are close to each other (columns 72 and 74) as shown in Figure 4.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the name of the lead conspirator, Fan Zhongguo 汜忠國, was repeated elsewhere as Fan Guozhong 汜國忠, but neither name was given a transposition mark, even though one of them must be wrong. So the reversal of the very name Tuoba might not be an innocent random mishap without other implications.

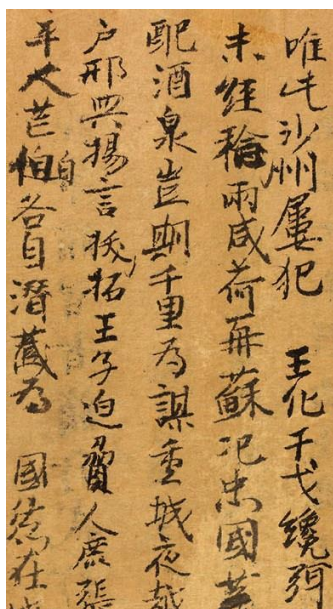


Figure 4. The only two transpose signs in a total of 177 columns of Chinese texts, S.1438 of the Stein collection, verso

While my intention is to demonstrate that it is far from incorrect to name a Tang royal prince 唐家王子 a Tuoba royal prince 拓跋王子, we seem to find a tendency for Chinese under the Tibetan rule to avoid the blunt mention of the rival dynastic name. For instance, in his memorial to the Tibetan Bcan Po, the self-identified “official with a ruined fortune” Wang Xi 王錫 requested that he not be marched in shackles with the Tibetan army to the Han realm 漢界, meaning Tang territories.<sup>35</sup> Another

<sup>34</sup> The only other transpose mark is given just two columns earlier to correct the text 未經稔兩 “not quite two harvests.”

<sup>35</sup> P.3201, see, e.g., *DH* 3: 358.

clear case is the two versions, P.2913 and P.4660,<sup>36</sup> of the same poem praising a certain Buddhist monk surnamed Wu 吳和尚. While both versions may date after the collapse of the Tibetan rule, the one in undated P.4660 apparently contained contents written *under* Tibetan rule, as the Tibetan king was hailed as “the Sacred and Divine bTsan Po 聖神贊普,” and the monk was remembered for having “transmitted and translated Han books 傳譯漢書.” The version identified as P.2913, dated 869, demoted the Tibetan monarch to “the Barbarian king bTsan Po 戎王贊普,” the monk now having “transmitted and translated Tang books 傳譯唐書” instead.

All in all, setting up a leader from a royal bloodline, real or pretended, in causes allegedly for restoring the rightful rule or order was a universal scheme. In China, this had happened repeatedly, from the anti-Qin 秦 uprising nominally headed by a grandson of a king of the Chu 楚 state,<sup>37</sup> to the restoration of the Han 漢 dynasty against the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE – 23 CE), which ended up with several contenders, all claiming to be from the Han royal bloodline. After declaring a new dynasty of Zhou 周, killing and imprisoning Tang royal princes, mostly real and including her own offspring, to prevent them from leading efforts at restoring the Tang became a prominent feature of the reign of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (690–705), with stories no less cruel than the rumored murders in the Tower of London. Fast forward to the Manchu conquest of Ming China, an alleged Zhu the Third Royal (Ming) Prince 朱三太子 became a “public name 公名” in leading numerous anti-Manchu rebellions and plots for nearly a century.<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, we have the Shia imams allegedly descended from the Sassanian Princess Šahrbānu,<sup>39</sup> the Russian rebellion leader Yemelyan Pugachev’s impersonating Peter III Fyodorovich, a grandson of Peter the Great,<sup>40</sup> or the uprisings and invasions by the Stuart pretenders, who did seem to be of genuine royal bloodline, to reclaim the English and Scottish thrones,

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36 See, e.g., *DH* 5: 136 and 162.

37 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 7:300.

38 Meng Sen 孟森, “Ming Liehuang xunguo houji 明烈皇殉國後紀,” in Meng, *Ming–Qing shi lunzhu jikan* 明清史論著集刊, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006): 18–68, 52.

39 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Šahrbānu, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, available online at: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sahrbanu>

40 See, e.g., Philip Longworth, “The Last Great Cossack-Peasant Rising,” *Journal of European Studies* 3 (1973), 1–35.

among many other examples. The Dunhuang uprising for restoring the Tang rule would hardly be an exceptional case.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE TANG ROYAL HOUSE

Now we come to the main thesis of the current study: to contemporaries both in and outside the Chinese-speaking world, the Tang was known as a dynasty founded and ruled largely by the descendants of the Tuoba, the nomadic group that rose in northern China in the late fourth century. It is worthwhile to recall the comments by the historian Hu Sanxing 胡三省 (1230–1302), made on the Tuoba's decisive victory at Canhebei 參合陂 (395) over the Murong 慕容, a rival Xianbei 鮮卑 group, and on its subsequent adoption of imperial protocols (396):<sup>41</sup>

The rise of Tuoba Gui led to the hardening of the North–South partition, which in turn led to the eventual absorption of the South by the North. Alas, from the Sui era onward, 60 to 70 percent of those who were prominent in their times have been descendants of the Tuoba [and related nomadic groups]!

拓跋珪興而南北之形定矣。南北之形既定，卒之南為北所并。嗚呼！自隋以後，名稱揚于時者，代北之子孫十居六七矣。

There was also the brave retort by the early Tang Buddhist monk Falin 法琳 to the imperial family's claim of having descended from Laozi, the legendary founder of Taoism:<sup>42</sup>

According to my knowledge, the Dashe (clan) of the Tuoba is known in Tang language as the Li. From this descended Your Majesty's family.

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<sup>41</sup> ZZTJ108.3429.

<sup>42</sup> *Tang hufa shamen Falin biezhuàn* 唐護法沙門法琳別傳, *Taishō* T2051, 210a.

琳聞: 拓拔達閣唐言李氏. 陛下之李, 斯即其苗.

For both political and cultural legitimacy, the Tang imperial house spared no effort to maintain a Sinitic façade, helped in no small degree by the fact that China enjoyed a near-monopoly on writing in East Asia for centuries. By the time of the Southern Song dynasty, the neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) could only state that the Tang imperial house descended from “Barbarians”<sup>43</sup> without being able to provide specific details.

Fortunately, China’s monopoly on writing was not absolute. With the discovery and decipherment of Orkhon inscriptions written in Old Turkic script in Mongolia, we learn that the Tang was called by the ancient Turks as Tabγač. Friedrich Hirth was probably the first scholar to map this Old Turkic name back to Chinese.<sup>44</sup> Hirth’s Chinese solution appeared fairly solid at first glance, as he zeroed in on the Orkhon inscription left by the famous minister Bilgä Tonyukuk of the Second Turk kaghanate, in which the name Tabγač was used repeatedly to refer to Tang China. Hirth has found that an official history of the Tang in fact quoted Tonyukuk, Tunyugu 噶欲谷 in Chinese, directly, calling Tang China Tangjia 唐家 “Tang house, Tang family (late medieval pronunciation *tʃaŋkjā*).”<sup>45</sup> This matched the Old Turkic name Tabγač not only perfectly in semantics but also close enough in phonetics. Hirth further strengthened his solution by finding a Uighur khan who later referred to Tang China as Tangjia too in Chinese sources,<sup>46</sup> and we know that the Uighurs in their writings also called China Tabγač. Alas, this seemingly reasonable Chinese equivalent of Tabγač turned out to be an

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43 Li Jingde 黎靖德, comp., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), vol. 8, 136.3245: 唐源流出於夷狄.

44 Friedrich Hirth, “Nachworte Zur Inschrift Des Tonjukuk,” in Wilhelm Radloff, *Die Altürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Commissionaires de l’Académie imperiale des sciences, 1895), 35.

45 *Jiu Tang shu* 194a.5174: 小殺又欲修築城壁, 造立寺觀. 噶欲谷曰: “不可. 突厥人戶寡少, 不敵唐家百分之一.. ...” Medieval pronunciations of Chinese characters and words cited in this study are based on Edwin Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991).

46 *Jiu Tang shu* 195.5202.

anachronism once it was found that the early seventh-century Byzantine historiographer Theophylactus Simocatta had already used a variant, Ταυγάστ, in an apparently pre-Tang context.<sup>47</sup>

It was Paul Pelliot who ingeniously used the origin of the name Cathay as a "succident" to trace the Turkic name for the Tang to the Chinese name Tuoba, early medieval pronunciation *t<sup>h</sup>akbat*.<sup>48</sup> After more than a century, though the cottage industry of finding alternative interpretations of the Old Turkic name has not disappeared completely,<sup>49</sup> Pelliot's equation is now accepted by most people. Nevertheless, Hirth's earlier study demonstrated that Tang scribes who transmitted the speeches by the Turk and Uighur leaders well understood that the Turkic name, originally transcribing Tuoba, had acquired its new meaning of Tangjia, "Tang house." Pelliot's equation, on the other hand, showed that the Turkic-speaking tribal groups on the Steppe recognized that the rulers of the Tang (and the preceding Sui) were cut from the same cloth as their Tuoba predecessors. In other words, the political and ethnical continuity from the Northern dynasties to the Sui and then the Tang was common knowledge to contemporaries on both sides of the Gobi Desert.

The use of the Old Turkic name Tabyač or its variants to name not just the Tang but China in general has a wide spatiotemporal span, starting with the Byzantine historiographer Simocatta as cited above, and lasting well into the Mongol Conquest.<sup>50</sup> Geographically, as Pelliot has noted, the use was particularly widespread in Central Asia and along the Silk Road, exemplified by Maḥmūd al-Kāšgarī's famous *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Dīwān lugāt at-Turk)*. The memory that the name

47 See, e.g., Peter Boodberg, "Marginalia to *The Histories of The Northern Dynasties*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 3(1938): 223–256.

48 "L'origine du nom de 'Chine,'" *T'oung Pao* 13 (1912), 727–742.

49 See the somewhat outdated survey in Adili 阿地力 and Meng Nan 孟楠, "Bainian lai guanyu 'Taohuashi' wenti yanjiu zongshu 百年來關於·桃花石·問題研究綜述," *Zhongguo shi yanjiu dongtai* 中國史研究動態 2006, no. 2, 10–16. The survey cited Hirth's work apparently without actually reading it, so as to give a later scholar, Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, the credit of first noting the relevant *Jiu Tang shu* passages already used by Hirth to make his case decades earlier.

50 In addition to the famous transcription "Taohuashi 桃花石" recorded by the Taoist delegation headed by Qiu Chuji 丘處機 (1148–1227) visiting Genghis Khan in Central Asia, another form, "Taoguanzhu 條貫主," has been identified in two Song dynasty sources. See Huang Shijian 黃時鑒, "Taoguanzhu kao 條貫主考," in Huang, *Dongxi jiaoliu shi lungao* 東西交流史論稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 34–38.

originated with a nomadic group endured as well, as al-Kāšyārī interpreted Tawγāč as “the name of a tribe of the Turks who settled in those regions.”<sup>51</sup>

The situation therefore was not much different in Dunhuang under Tibetan rule. Even before the large-scale westward movement of the Toquz Oghuz Uighur tribes after their defeat by the Yenisei Kyrgyz in mid-ninth century on the Mongolian Plateau, the Gansu Corridor was already populated by numerous Turkic groups. According to Chinese sources:<sup>52</sup>

In the past when the Tujue leader Mochuo (Kapghan kaghan of the Second Turk kaghanate, reign 691–716)<sup>53</sup> was powerful, he forcefully took over the territories of the Tiele people, forcing the Uighur, the Qibi, the Sijie, and the Hun, these four tribes, to cross the (Gobi) Desert to seek safety in areas along the Ganzhou and Liangzhou region.

初，突厥默啜之疆也，迫奪鐵勒之地。故回紇，契苾，思結，渾四部度磧徙居甘涼之間以避之。

Rong Xinjiang has done an in-depth study of these Turkic groups in the Gansu Corridor.<sup>54</sup> One of his observations is that, because these groups stayed mostly nomadic, they were not counted in regular Tang household and tax surveys that centered primarily on the sedentary population. Rong estimates that during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, these Turkic tribes numbered several tens of thousands (數萬) of people in the Gansu Corridor, representing a major component of the local population.

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<sup>51</sup> Mahmud Kāšyārī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Türk Shiveleri Lügati)*, edited and translated by Robert Dankoff and James Kelly. Part I (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1982), 341.

<sup>52</sup> *ZZTJ* 213.6779.

<sup>53</sup> Denis Sinor, “The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire,” in D. Sinor, ed., *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 285–316, 311.

<sup>54</sup> Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, “Tangdai Hexi diqu Tiele buluo de ruju jiqi xiaowang 唐代河西地區鐵勒部落的入居及其消亡,” in Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, ed., *Zhonghua minzu yanjiu xin tansuo 中華民族研究新探索* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991), 281–304.

Therefore, when the Gansu Corridor fell to the Tibetans, the Turkic-speaking people might have constituted the second most numerous linguistic group after the Chinese-speaking majority. This observation is supported by the Pelliot tibétain 1089 document that contained, among other things, a list of local administrators appointed by the Tibetan court. There was this position *rgya-drugi lo-ca-pa*, translated by Marelle Lalou as “traducteur chinois-turc.”<sup>55</sup> With such a dual Sino-Turkic language environment prevalent, a “Tuoba royal prince” would be the same as a “Tabyač royal prince” as understood by the contemporaries. In other words, by naming the Tang loyalist ringleader a “Tuoba royal prince 拓跋王子,” the turncoat governor would not be misreporting to his Tibetan overlords, yet at the same time without incurring the wrath of the local “fifth column,” in the words of Richardson, by openly admitting betraying a presumed Tang royal prince 唐家王子.

#### METATHESIS IN MEDIEVAL CHINA

Given the name Tuoba’s early medieval pronunciation *tʰakbat*, Pelliot’s equation is essentially based on a metathesis of the two medial consonants. A major reason why modern Chinese authors have been active in finding alternatives to Pelliot’s equation is their difficulty in accepting this fairly common linguistic phenomenon, especially that across languages. For example, few would question that the Old Tibetan word *drugu* was the name for Turk (Türük in Orkhun Turkic), the same way many Chinese authors question the Tabyač for Tuoba/*tʰakbat* equation. To help overcome this linguistic bias and to uphold Pelliot’s equation, Liu Yingsheng 劉迎勝 in a recent study<sup>56</sup> first shows metathesis to be a very common phenomenon in Altaic languages, then compiles an exhaustive list of all words with a medial velar-labial or labial-velar consonant cluster in *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish* by Sir Gerard Clauson.<sup>57</sup> That list shows the ratio of these two groups of medial consonant clusters to be nearly 1:4, with the labial-velar combination dominating. Liu therefore infers that this was

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55 Marelle Lalou, “Revendications des fonctionnaires du grand Tibet au VIIIe siècle,” *Journal asiatique* 243(1955), 171–212, 182.

56 Liu, “Tuoba yu Taohuashi (Taoguanzhu) liangming guanxi xintan 拓跋與桃花石(條貫主)兩名關係新探,” *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 西北民族研究, 2022 no. 3, 22–46.

57 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

what happened when Tuoba *tʰakbat* became Tabyač in ancient Turkic tongues with the medial -kb-velar-labial cluster changed to a labial-velar cluster -by-.

This particular type of metathesis of consonant clusters might be unlikely within the largely monosyllabic Chinese language, but metathesis was far from unknown in medieval China. In fact a special form of metathesis called *fanyu* 反語, “reverse-talk,” was very much in vogue once the *fanqie* 反切 pronunciation method, based on the decomposition of each Chinese character into an initial consonant and a final came into wide use. In modern standard Chinese, the *fanyu* in the most common case of a binome word could be simply characterized as the interchange of the two final vowels with their respective tones (plus possible nasal endings) while keeping the two original initial consonants. In medieval time, things might have been a bit more complex as it could involve optional medial semivowels and optional coda plosives.<sup>58</sup> The *fanyu* metathesis was very popular for revealing prophecies and playing jokes or riddles. The following story from the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577) is an example:<sup>59</sup>

Someone passed by the home of Lu Sidao (535–586)<sup>60</sup> and saw a *hu* person (mostly referring to a Sogdian at the time) visiting Lu. When asked about the visitor’s identity, Lu answered: “he’s just a clansman of mine named Hao.” The *fanyu* word of (the name) Lu Hao was *laohu* (“an old *hu*”).

有過盧黃門思道者，見一胡人在座。問此何等，答曰：“從兄浩。”反語盧浩尚為老胡。

It is worthwhile to note that the *fanyu* metathesis was common knowledge among the mainstream Confucian literati during the Tang. This led to the following royal embarrassment. On the

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<sup>58</sup> The latter are still kept in several southern dialects, such as Cantonese and Hokkien.

<sup>59</sup> Liu Su 劉餗, *Sui–Tang jiahua* 隋唐嘉話 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 3.55.

<sup>60</sup> Here *huangmen* 黃門 was the short for *huangmen shilang* 黃門侍郎, “the Gentleman Attendant at the Palace Gate,” a position that Lu Sidao held in the Northern Qi dynasty.



twenty-second day of the fourth lunar month in the third year of Yifeng 儀鳳 (May 19, 678), under Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (Li Zhi 李治, reign 649–683), the court formally proclaimed the new reign title Tongqian 通乾, “unimpeded heaven,” starting the next Chinese year. But days before the Chinese New Year, the court had to issue an urgent imperial edict cancelling this new reign title “because its *fanyu* has bad meanings 以反語不善故也。”<sup>61</sup> Several centuries later, the Yuan dynasty historian Hu Sanxing had to spell out that “the *fanyu* of Tongqian is *tianqiong* (‘celestial poverty’) 通乾反語為天窮。”<sup>62</sup> Hu’s belated clarification reflected the fact that among the Confucian literati the *fanyu* metathesis fell out of fashion soon after the Tang dynasty. As a result, the first modern study of this ancient subject by Liu Pansui 劉盼遂 finds nothing to examine post-Song dynasty.<sup>63</sup> To this day, *fanyu* remains only as a technique for constructing argots among the lower classes, especially those on the margins of society.<sup>64</sup> The loss of this intellectual tradition among the Confucian literati was so complete that the reign title Qianlong 乾隆, “celestial prosperity,” of the longest living *and* reigning Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (Hongli 弘曆, formal reign 1735–1796)<sup>65</sup> of the Qing dynasty had the bad-meaning *fanyu* metathesis *qionglian* 窮連, “poverty nonstop,”<sup>66</sup> too. But nobody seemed to have raised the issue in the full sixty years of its circulation.

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61 *Jiu Tang shu*, 5, 103–104.

62 *ZZTJ* 202.6388. Rigorously, in the *Guangyun* 廣韻 (promulgated 1008) system, 乾 belongs to the 仙韻 rhyming group and 天 belongs to the 先韻 rhyming group (see, e.g., Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, *Ciyuan* 辭源 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1987), 116 and 683). But by the high Tang time, the two groups were already hard to distinguish.

63 “Liuchao Tangdai fanyu kao 六朝唐代反語考,” in *Liu Pansui wenji* 劉盼遂文集 (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2002), 551–561.

64 See, e.g., Zhao Yuanren 趙元任, “Fanqieyu bazhong 反切語八種,” in *Zhao Yuanren yuyanxue lunwen ji* 趙元任語言學論文集 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2002), 362–404.

65 Even though he abdicated after a reign of sixty years, one year short of that his grandfather Emperor Shengzu 聖祖 (Xuanye 玄燁, reign title Kangxi 康熙, 1661–1722), in 1796, it was open knowledge that the “retired emperor” never really stopped reigning until his death in 1799.

66 In the *Guangyun* system, 乾 and 窮 both have the 群母 initial consonant, while 隆 and 連 both have the 來母 initial consonant; 隆 and 窮 both belong to the 東韻 rhyming group, while 乾 and 連 both belong to the 仙韻 rhyming group. See, e.g., *Ciyuan*, 116, 2330, 3057, and 3291.

The contrast in their respective fate between the two reign titles above with equally bad *fanyu* metathesis is just one example that the cultural environment of the cosmopolitan Tang was very different from that of more recent Chinese history. In addition to the vogue of *fanyu* metathesis and the widespread rudimentary knowledge of Iranian languages, there were other indications that the Tang elite were well aware of sub-syllable phonetic elements or phonemes. For instance, Tang Buddhist sources not only chose an “entering tone” character to transcribe a single foreign consonant because these characters had the shortest vowel length, as Edwin Pulleyblank has shown,<sup>67</sup> they also marked Chinese transcriptions of foreign consonant clusters by such notes as *erhe* 二合, “two (sounds) together,” and *sanhe* 三合, “three (sounds) together.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, since the introduction of Buddhism, the learning of Sanskrit and other Indian languages was actively promoted by a significant number of highly educated Chinese Buddhists including dedicated laymen, a movement that reached its climax during the high Tang era, a rare intellectual scene never to be repeated in pre-modern China.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike the Southern Song neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi, the Tang elite knew full well the origin of the Tang imperial house.<sup>70</sup> And unlike modern Chinese scholars who would go on a wild goose chase for an alternative interpretation,<sup>71</sup> Tang scribes had no difficulty in understanding the Turkic name Tabγač as Tuoba, then turning it into Tangjia, “Tang family,” as Hirth has concluded, tracking down those sources. This was also why that turncoat governor in Dunhuang would use “Tuoba royal prince”

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67 Pulleyblank, The Chinese Name for the Turks,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 85(1965), 121–125.

68 See, e.g., Huilin 慧琳, *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義, *Taishō* T.2128, passim.

69 He Fangyao 何方耀, “Han–Tang Zhongguo Fomen de ‘biandi yishi’ yu Fanyu xuexi rechao 漢唐中國佛門的‘邊地意識’與梵語學習熱潮,” *Chinese Culture Quarterly* 九州學林, 2005 winter issue, 134–158.

70 For instance, the high Tang historian and genealogy expert Liu Fang 柳芳 openly classified many leading families closely associated with the Tang imperial house as being of *luxing* 虜姓, “Barbarian clans,” with a Steppe 代北 origin, albeit the term *lu*, a derogatory name for the Xianbei often translated into English as “caitiff,” had gained some grudging respectability at the time thanks to centuries of the Tuoba’s dominance in China. See *Xin Tang shu* 199.5678.

71 For example, the ancient Tujue/Turk specialist Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉 has proposed such fanciful Chinese originals as Taiyue 太岳, Taowu 耨杓, and Jiaohuo 焦穫. See Cen, “Taohuashi zhi xinshi 桃花石之新釋,” in his *Tujue jishi* 突厥集史, Vol. 2, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958, 1146–1059.

as a euphemism for "Tang royal prince" as argued above, particularly in a milieu permeated with the Turkic name Tabγač.

#### THE TANG AS A TUOBA DYNASTY

The existence of the long-forgotten Xianbei, Tuoba in particular, ancestry of the Tang ruling house and other leading families was finally broken open by several leading Chinese historians in the Republican era early last century. In the relatively relaxed cultural and academic environment of the 1980s, non-Sinitic sources and perspectives were promoted by some Chinese historians, especially for studying the periods of nomadic domination.<sup>72</sup> However, the subject now stands the risk of becoming taboo again in China. The notion that the Tang in many aspects was the continuation of the Tuoba is being criticized as likely a foreign-hatched plot to undermine Chinese nationalism, in not only popular Internet forums but also ideology-tainted scholarly publications.<sup>73</sup>

The political and cultural bias caused by native sources in polities established or dominated by non-natives is in fact a general phenomenon not limited to China. In his treatise on the Turco-Persian Ghaznavid sultanate in the eastern Iranian world, David Morgan has wondered why "there seems to have been little that was identifiably Turkish about which their empire was run, or indeed about the culture they patronized." Morgan attributes this bias to the simple reason that "our sources were written by Persian contemporaries, who might have been unlikely to lay much stress on the non-Persian ... elements that may have been present."<sup>74</sup>

In China, this bias was further exacerbated by what I have termed the "literati prism" of written sources.<sup>75</sup> This has a particularly distorting effect for times when the Confucian elite lost socio-political

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72 Chen Shih-jen 陳識仁, "Shuide lishi – Shiliuguo Beichao shixueshi yanjiu huigu yu taolun 誰的歷史--十六國北朝史學史研究回顧與討論," 九州學林 *Chinese Culture Quarterly*, 2007 summer issue, 160–199, 170–172.

73 See, e.g., Zhong Han 鍾焯, "Tangchao xi Tuoba guojia lun' mingti bianxi – yi zhonggu minzu shi shang 'Yinshan guizhong' wenti de jiantao wei qierudian '唐朝系拓跋國家論'命題辨析--以中古民族史上'陰山貴種'問題的檢討為切入點," *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊, 2021, no. 7, 38–61.

74 Morgan, *Medieval Persia: 1040–1797* (London: Longman, 1988), 22.

75 Chen, "Godly Worm' and the 'Literati Prism' of Chinese Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 139 (2019):

domination. The Tuoba polities and its Sui and Tang successors were such periods. This “literati prism” even covers religions that were nominally outside the purview of the Confucian elite. For instance, without the lucky discovery of the library cave at Dunhuang, nobody today would ever know the existence of *bianwen*, “transformation texts,” which have played a critical role in medieval popular Buddhism.

Another example of the Tang as a Tuoba dynasty was the continuation of the heavy influence of the pre-Islamic Iranian-speaking world, especially what Victor Mair and I have termed the “Iranization of Chinese nomenclature.”<sup>76</sup> Here the effect of the “literati prism” shows up again in the case that the wide-spread onomastic use of the character *hu* 胡, “barbarian,” in its transliterated Iranian sense of “good, goodness,” a legacy shared by a Tuoba royal prince and a Tang royal prince, among many others, was nowhere recorded in Chinese written sources.<sup>77</sup>

There were certainly many changes, both natural and innovative, in centuries from the rise of the Tuoba in northern China to the Tang. But the legacy of the Tuoba shows up in quite a few of them if viewed outside the “literati prism.” The most important was the civil service examination inaugurated in the Sui then perfected during the Tang. This new institution would forever change the composition of the Chinese elite. It was apparently motivated, in part at least, by the distrust and suspicion of the old Sinitic aristocracy that the Tuoba and their descendants always harbored. Small wonder that after watching newly minted civil service examination graduates 進士 coming out of government edifice, the Tang Emperor Taizong reportedly exclaimed with satisfaction: “Now all talents in the world have fallen into my schemes 天下英雄入吾彀中矣!”<sup>78</sup>

I conclude this essay with yet another important illustration of the Tang as a Tuoba dynasty: the establishment of the celebration of one’s birthday in China, though a full exposition of the subject cannot be entertained here. It is relatively well-known that birthday celebration was not a Sinitic

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417–431.

<sup>76</sup> Chen and Mair, “A ‘Black Cult’ in Early Medieval China: Iranian-Zoroastrian Influence in the Northern Dynasties,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 27 (2017): 201–224.

<sup>77</sup> Chen, “On the Goodness Brought by the Ugly Barbarians: A Case Study of the Iranization of Chinese Nomenclature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 143 (2023): 331–349.

<sup>78</sup> Wang Dingbao 王定保, *Tang zhiyan* 唐摭言 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 1.2.

tradition.<sup>79</sup> But it is probably not as well-known that after its introduction, the practice was long regarded as an un-Confucian, unfilial act. While scholars have usually noted that birthday celebration started with the Tang emperors' designating their birthdays as national holidays, the practice in fact started with the Tuoba monarchs.<sup>80</sup> All in all, this tradition, now an entrenched social institution in China, goes back to its origin in the ancient Near East via Iranian-speaking intermediaries.

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79 See, e.g., Qian Daxin 錢大昕, *Shijiazhai yangxinlu* 十駕齋養新錄 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1983), 19.453.

80 Zanning 贊寧, *Da-Song seng shilue* 大宋僧史略, *Taishō* T.2126, 2.247c, and Zipan 志磐, *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, *Taishō* T.2035, 38.354a.

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