



CROSSROADS — HISTORY OF INTERACTIONS ACROSS THE SILK ROUTES

# Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity

*China and the Parthians, Sasanians, and Arabs  
in the First Millennium*

Jeffrey Kotyk



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# Crossroads – History of Interactions across the Silk Routes

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## Foreword

Chinese, Iranian, and Arabic studies should theoretically benefit each other, and this is what any competent mind working on late antiquity and medieval subjects, particularly when the “Silk Road” is strictly involved, should expect. But apart from a very few specialists who have taken the risks to march into these adventurous areas, the necessary skills—or network of skills—necessary for such a multicultural journey are not as common as we might and should expect. In this regard, even if the aims of individual specialists might differ, it is increasingly necessary for us to consider interconnected worlds in order to better comprehend intellectual and historical phenomena that have marked the history of different centers of cultural and economic influence in the past.

The present study builds on a remote precedent, at least for some points of inspiration, which was the epoch-making *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to The History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products*, written by Berthold Laufer (Chicago 1919). This work focused on the pre-Islamic Iranian influence in China. The present study tries to include additional points of view and follows other lines of investigation. In this respect, Jeffrey Kotyk, with his deep competences in Chinese and Japanese studies—which could have otherwise restricted his interests to a unilateral (Sinocentric) approach—has shown a rare intellectual ability in focusing firstly on the spread of the Indian Buddhist tradition in Iran, and then to follow its transmission from Iranian Central Asia to China without neglecting the long history of the intercultural relations between Parthia, Persia, and China with diachronic and synchronic sensibilities. At the same time, he has been able to trace developments in the opposite direction, critically evaluating the Chinese comprehension and interpretation of their neighbors in the West.

In particular, the concern of the author for astral matters (astronomy, astrology, calendrical problems, and astral lore) will guide the readers to some very intriguing subjects, which will show the influences of an unpredictable (and in some cases unexpected) dialogue among different actors, such as Indians, Iranians, Arabs, and Chinese. Furthermore, the study of the interaction emerging from such a melting-pot generated by so many different ethno-religious communities has inevitably required very scrupulous and prudent treatments of the complex phenomena at hand. Kotyk has shown the intricate relations among Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Taoists. Popular and aristocratic social mechanisms have been observed, with scrupulous care for the diplomatic dimension and its consequences on the history of the Irano-Chinese and Arabo-Chinese relations in late antiquity.



The attention shown to the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and the impacts of the Islamic wave in Central Asia and western China is another merit of this study, which covers the historical phase until the end of the 1st millennium CE. This study follows the continuous trends of evolution in both Irano-Chinese and Arabo-Chinese relations, which could not be interrupted and left to another book. The study offers a historical evaluation of subjects that do not necessarily fall within a single domain of historical studies (e.g., Sinology, early Islam, and Sasanian history), but there is still a need to treat all of them together based on the available data in a way that satisfies the needs of disparate fields. In this regard, I must insist on the fact that the writing of this book was not so simple, given the very different methodologies and historical traditions under consideration, to say nothing of the language and philological barriers that would normally direct scholars away from such complex research.

The investigations of this book have taken into consideration many relevant aspects concerning economic and material exchanges between China and its western neighbors. Trade and international markets are discussed from various angles. The detailed material dimension of this discussion does not take away from other topics in the book.

We should further note that the bibliography collects a large number of original studies in Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, which normally do not consistently appear in Western scholarship. This is a great merit of the work and constitutes strong evidence of excellence.

I am certain that this book will open up new problems and facilitate fresh discussions. It should provoke further investigations. In this sense, this study offers a new brick in an intellectual bridge that might foster a new history of Eastern/Western Central Asiatic relations during such a difficult historical phase of world history, full of critical and dramatic events. This is a history that attempts to be something other than just the influence of the West on the East (or the East on the West), but rather something that tries to focus on shared global experiences of major changes in world history.

March 19th, 2024  
Antonio C.D. Panaino  
Ravenna/Bologna

## Preface

This monograph is the fruit of the project “Sino-Iranica: Investigating Relations Between Medieval China and Sasanian Iran” that formally commenced in July 2022. The preliminary research started in 2018, when I began collaborating on the topic with Antonio Panaino, an eminent scholar of Iranology at the University of Bologna. In 2017, Antonio acted as a member of my dissertation committee at Leiden University. While writing my dissertation, I came across his excellent studies on the sciences of ancient Iran, which were related to my work on astrology in China. We subsequently invited him to evaluate my doctoral dissertation. He kindly accepted, offering valuable assistance and pointers. My project was hosted at the University of Bologna’s Dipartimento di Beni Culturali (DBC) in Ravenna, Italy. This project received two years of funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, through a Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement (No. 101018750). I am thankful to the EU Commission and the administration of the University of Bologna for facilitating this funding.

I have utilized a number of resources for digitized Chinese texts, especially CBETA, SAT, SAT Taishōzō Image DB, Kanripo, CTEXT, and WikiSource, but in most instances I have checked these against the printed editions or digital facsimiles. I also wish to acknowledge my use of the image database of the project, “Visualization and Material Cultures of the Heavens,” hosted at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. For Chinese Buddhist figures, I utilized the Buddhist Studies Person Authority Databases (人名規範檢索). I have consulted the digitized Japanese encyclopedias on Kotobank (<https://kotobank.jp/>). A number of handwritten manuscripts from the National Diet Library of Japan available in digital format have proven valuable. Part of the research for this book was carried out at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in November 2022, and again in November 2023. I utilized the library resources at Columbia University in New York City in January 2023, when I was kindly hosted by Michael Como and Bernard Faure. I utilized the collection of the Asian Reading Room at the Library of Congress in Washington DC in March 2023. Over the years, and for the present project, I have used the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, edited by Charles Muller.

I would like to extend my thanks to the colleagues who encouraged me to write this book, especially Antonio Panaino, Or Porath, Alessia Zubani, Francesco Calzolaio, Jonathan Silk, Jinhua Chen, Martina Palladino, Paolo Ognibene, Floriana Marra, and Cody Bahir. I have received comments and

pointers from many scholars, which I deeply appreciate. Jayarava Attwood offered helpful comments, all of which I appreciate. I must thank Kristen de Joseph for copyediting the book.

The Chinese names and words in this book follow standard pinyin. The reconstructions of Middle Chinese words and names follow the system of Pulleyblank (1991b). For the romanization of Sasanian names, I have tried to follow those used in Shahbazi (2005) in *Encyclopedia Iranica*. The citations of secondary sources otherwise leave all names unmodified. The Arabic words are generally transliterated using Brill's system, unless a given term is commonly known in current English. The Sanskrit terms follow the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST).

All faults and errors in this study are my own. I take full responsibility for everything in this book.—Jeffrey Kotyk 康傑夫 (b. 1985)

“Nam studere servire Deo est.”—*Picatrix*

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# Introduction

China and Iran have long enjoyed cultural and economic relations throughout history, yet the significance of West Asian polities—not only Parthia and Sasanian Iran, but also the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates—to Chinese history of the first millennium is not well recognized today in the academic and public spheres. The relationship between India and China, especially through the intermediary of Buddhism, is much better acknowledged and appreciated in scholarly and popular conceptions of Chinese relations with foreign cultures in premodern times. Central Asia polities and peoples, such as the Sogdians and Khotanese, for example, also receive attention from Sinologists, but Iran as a cultural sphere and economic counterpart also had a role to play in the evolution of China. In reconstructing late Sasanian history, Iranologists have long benefited from Chinese records of deposed Sasanian royals fleeing to China, but my readings of modern Iranological scholarship have led me to believe that the contemporary Chinese sources and the unique Chinese reception of Iranian cultural phenomena remain understudied. Classical Chinese sources, as well as scholarship in modern East Asian languages, such as Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, could richly contribute to the field of Iranology. The Chinese side of late antiquity has much to tell us about Iran.<sup>1</sup>

The present study of Sino-Iranian relations is not without its scholarly foundations. Chinese court historians of past eras collated and surveyed primary historical sources, whether for state histories or encyclopedias, and these form the basis of much of our research. Some premodern Chinese Buddhist historians also compiled histories that are useful for our purposes. Modern scholars

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1 For my purposes I define “late antiquity” as spanning from the Parthian to Early Islamic eras, which are generally contemporaneous with the period from the Han to the Tang dynasty in China: generally speaking, the first millennium CE. The models of periodization (ancient, late antique, early medieval, etc.) differ across disciplines and languages. Modern East Asian scholarship does not necessarily define periods in the same way that European or American scholarship would. East Asian authors often frame periods along dynastic lines: for example, “Northern Wei” or “Late Tang,” though words like “ancient” are also used. Western Sinology does not have a fixed system of periodization, apart from naming dynasties, which follows modern Chinese and Japanese conventions. The Tang period (618–907) can be positioned as a shift from ancient to medieval, but this reflects an arbitrary, Eurocentric way of framing history. This book is written with Classicists and Iranologists in mind, so I have simply utilized the framework of “late antiquity” with the first millennium in mind, while simultaneously referring to the Chinese dynasties.

have subsequently dealt with various aspects of Sino-Iranian relations. Many authors have contributed to our understanding of “Sino-Iranica” in the areas of diplomacy, cultural contacts, material culture, language, and religion, but as a subfield of Asian Studies, “Sino-Iranica” has seldom been treated as a single sphere of dedicated study after the time of Berthold Laufer (1874–1934). It was Laufer who coined the term Sino-Iranica, effectively creating an original subfield.

In 1919, Laufer in published the pioneering study on Sino-Iranian relations. He famously titled his work *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products*. This is a foundational monograph, and its worth was recognized immediately after it went to press. Hopkins (1920: 653–654), for instance, wrote that “Dr. Laufer does cover a great deal of ground in fact, the greater part of the continent of Asia, and who knows where he will stop!” Laufer examined not only botanical matters, but also delved into the primary sources in Chinese that discuss Iranian culture: for example, he examined the titles of officers and members of the royalty. Laufer studied a diverse range of primary sources available to him. His work firmly established the notion of long-distance cultural and material links within the study of Sinology, which emphasizes the historical influence of West Asia on East Asia. Recently, Ephraim Nissan has further emphasized these links, assembling a volume of collected papers celebrating Laufer’s monograph, titled *For the Centennial of Berthold Laufer’s Classic Sino-Iranica (1919): Sino-Iranica’s Centennial. Between East and West Exchanges of Material and Ideational Culture*. Nissan’s (2020: 13–86) overview of Laufer’s influence reveals the deep impact that Laufer made on later scholarship. The present book is certainly indebted to Laufer, and it is my hope that we can build upon his foundational scholarship a century after his monograph was published.

Two contemporaries of Laufer, Édouard Chavannes and Paul Pelliot, published an innovative and influential study, “Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine,” in the *Journal Asiatique* between 1911 and 1913. This extensive study on Manichaeism in China delves into a number of other problems in Sino-Iranian relations, such as lexical issues and the transcription of Iranian vocabulary into Chinese. Their study demonstrates the utility of using dynastic histories, encyclopedias, and other compendia. Pelliot also wrote extensively on the so-called Nestorian stele of 781. His notes were edited by the eminent Sinologist Antonino Forte in a 1996 book titled *L’Inscription Nestorienne De Si-Ngan-Fou*. Forte expands upon Pelliot’s notes, and in the same volume offers a philologically rigorous and hitherto unmatched study of the Chinese primary sources related to the history of the Church of the East during the Tang period.

Other valuable early studies of “Nestorianism” (a problematic term, since the Church did not refer to itself like this) in China include those by Saeki, who published *The Nestorian Monument in China* in 1916, followed by *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* in 1937 (second edition printed in 1951). Papers in Japanese by Haneda Tōru, collected in 1958, also offer valuable observations and remarks. Research has been ongoing in East Asia. Zeng Yangqing (2005), for example, has published a valuable study in Chinese on all the extant Chinese Christian texts of the Tang period. In 2006, another Christian stele with inscriptions was unearthed in Luoyang. In 2009, Tang Li published a preliminary study of the stele with a translation, in an important volume of collected papers by several scholars, titled *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*. The subject of Chinese Christianity was revisited in some recent monographs. In 2018, Todd R. Godwin published *Persian Christians at the Chinese Court: The Xi’an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East*. In 2022, Matteo Nicolini-Zani published *The Luminous Way to the East: Texts and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China*. Recently, I have also touched on the subject of the Magi in Chinese sources (Kotyk 2023c). There are still other studies on Christianity in Tang China. This subfield is certainly evolving. The focus of the present book will be on highlighting Christianity and its significance as an intermediary in Sino-Iranian relations.

Sino-Iranian relations in late antiquity are mostly documented in diverse Chinese sources. There are scattered references to China in the extant corpus of Middle Persian and Syriac texts, but these are very limited in content. In 1983, Paolo Daffinà published an extensive study on the Chinese accounts of Sasanian Iran in a paper titled “La Persia Sassanide secondo le fonti cinesi.” This study has remained underappreciated since it was published. Samuel Lieu has written broadly on Manichaeism. He has also put together an excellent study on the diplomatic situation between China, Byzantium, and Persia in the period leading up to the Islamic conquests (Lieu 2000). Taking Daffinà and Lieu together, we get a good overview of the international exchanges and complex realities of the Sasanian period from a contemporary Chinese perspective. Studies by Rong Xinjiang are also quite valuable in approaching Sino-Iranian relations. A number of his studies have been translated into English: for example, Rong’s *The Silk Road and Cultural Exchanges Between East and West* (2023) touches on late Sasanian history as it is recorded in Chinese sources, especially in the article “Persian and Chinese: The Integration of Two Cultures in the Tang Dynasty.”

Encyclopedia Iranica—originally in print, but now available and updated regularly online (<https://www.iranicaonline.org/>)—is a repository of



information about Iran. When I cite this resource, the date associated with the author is taken from the “last updated” record given on the website, rather than the dates of the printed articles. Among the many articles I reference from there, there are several by the eminent Sinologist Edwin Pulleyblank, who has discussed Parthia and Persia in Chinese sources. In 1980, The Japanese Iranologist, Itō Gikyō, wrote a book titled *Perushia bunka toraikō* ペルシア文化渡来考 (*On the Arrival of Persian Culture*), in which he discusses the eastward spread of Persian culture, particularly in the areas of art, as well as astrology, but further proposes that Zoroastrians had also come to Japan in antiquity. Two of his papers (1979, 1986) suggest that Zoroastrians, fleeing the collapse of the Sasanian empire, had somehow landed in Japan. He interprets some obscure words and persons in early Japanese history and literature as being Iranian in origin. Although present day scholars do not accept his interpretations, his work does point to other more demonstrable elements of the Iranian cultural sphere that were brought to East Asia.

Studies on Zoroastrianism in East Asia are substantial, but the available primary sources are limited. I am unaware of any Zoroastrian texts in Middle Chinese, whereas we do have extant Christian and Manichaean works in Chinese. In 2015, Aoki Takeshi contributed an overview, “Zoroastrianism in the Far East,” to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. This is an accessible overview. It offers a good starting point, but one might find much more detailed research in Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. There are also documents related to Zoroastrianism, either directly or indirectly, among those rediscovered at Dunhuang in northwest China. Kanda (1939) studied one of the poems written at the Zoroastrian temple there sometime in the ninth or tenth century. Ogawa (1966) extended this study further, surveying the ritual schedules and other data (documents related to finance and logistics) connected with the Zoroastrians at Dunhuang. In China, one of the pioneering modern scholars was Chen Yuan, who in 1922 published a study on the introduction of Zoroastrianism into China. There have been a number of monographs and many papers in Mandarin on Zoroastrianism in China (*Xianjiao* 祆教) since then: for instance, Lin Wushu (2005) is quite useful. I also consulted Zhang Xiaogui (2005, 2011, 2020, 2021). Also important is the perception of Zoroastrianism in Buddhism (a topic for which the Chinese Buddhist canon is quite valuable), which has been taken up by Silk (2008) and Deeg (2022). There are also many studies on Chinese Manichaeism. One of the most prominent authors in the West is Lieu. In 1985, Peter Bryder also published a study, *The Chinese Transformation of Manichaeism*, which looks specifically at how the religion was adapted by missionaries in China. Bryder also examined the transcriptions of Iranian words in Chinese Manichaean texts, but some of

these could be reconsidered. Our understanding of Manichaeism in China is also evolving due in part to the rediscovery of manuscripts, such as those found in Xiapu 霞浦 in Fujian, which have been studied in detail by Zhang Xiaogui (2016) and Gábor Kósa (2020). My concern in the present book is to link what we know about Iranian religions in China to modern Iranological scholarship, and also to highlight the adaptation and integration of these religions into the local environments in the context of wider Sino-Iranian relations.

The history of astrology in China is another topic to which the present book will direct some attention. The presence of Sogdian loanwords for the planets in Tang Chinese texts was already pointed out over a century ago by Chavannes and Pelliot, but this was not in a study of astrology. Research on the practice of Buddhist astrology in China and Japan has been taken up by Yano Michio. Further research on the topic has been carried out by Niu Weixing and Bill Mak. In the past, I have also attempted to identify what is Indian and what is Iranian (or Indo-Iranian) in the relevant texts, magical practices, and iconographies.<sup>2</sup> To this end, I have found it beneficial to carry out a comparative approach to Hellenistic and Islamic models of astrology. In this monograph, I aim to discuss some of the problems regarding Sino-Iranian connections in premodern astrology and astronomy, especially because the practice of astrology extended into religious domains. Astral magic, in which people petitioned or venerated the planets, was brought to China initially from Indian traditions, but material from West Asia was evidently also adapted and used. This is an important but largely overlooked element in the story of Sino-Iranian relations in late antiquity.

The material and commercial exchanges between Iran and China are of particular interest to the study of Sino-Iranian relations, but this subject requires caution. For over a century, Laufer's book has been indispensable for understanding how some botanical items and aromatics, for example, went from Iran to China. Building on his work, I think we can revise a few of his conclusions, but also extend the discussion to a number of new areas, such as metals and *materia medica*. Since Laufer's time, there have been scholars who attribute a great many things to "Persia" based on an uncritical interpretation of the toponym *Bosi* 波斯. Many have imagined *Bosi* as categorically referring to Persians even after the demise of the Sasanians. The image presented is one of Sasanian and post-Sasanian Persians being the major maritime trading power between the Persian Gulf and South China during the Tang dynasty.

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2 My PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 2017) is titled, "Buddhist Astrology and Astral Magic in the Tang Dynasty." Part of the dissertation explores the Iranian elements in East Asian astrology and the related Buddhist practices.

Laufer already cautioned us about this, but the insistence on reading *Bosi* as “Persia” in all cases persists, so I also present a fresh body of evidence to argue that *Bosi* in the context of maritime contacts ought to have been a polity or ethnonym—likely Barus—in Sumatra.

The early history of Islam and the conquest of Persia by the Arabs is an especially challenging subject, based on the fact that contemporary witnesses of those events, recorded in languages such as Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, offer a strikingly different depiction from what is related in later orthodox Islamic histories. The same observation can be made in relation to Chinese sources from the Tang period. There are contentious debates among Arabists over how to treat the early history of Islam: some use the traditional Islamic texts as historically objective accounts, while others take a very critical approach, examining contemporary eyewitness reports together with numismatic evidence in order to reconstruct that critical period in history without so much reliance on religious histories. In this respect, two leading scholars include Fred Donner and Robert Hoyland. Neither work with the original Chinese sources directly, but Hoyland’s famous book, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, cites translations from the Chinese accounts of the Arabs in the seventh to ninth century. More work has been done on these sources in Japanese and Chinese. One notable author is Tazaka Kōdō (1964), who has given an extensive overview, in Japanese, of the Chinese materials that relate to Islam, but evaluates them based on whether they conform to orthodox Islamic history. Discrepancies in the Chinese accounts are read simply as errors. Zhang Xinglang (1888–1951), whose works on China’s relations with foreign polities were recompiled in 2018, dealt with Sino-Arab relations and his interpretations of the primary sources are likewise valuable. Leslie (1986) also provides some valuable translations in a monograph titled *Islam in Traditional China: A Short History to 1800*. Building on these works, the lacuna that I aim to address is that of connecting such diverse Chinese sources to the wider discussion of how others saw the rise of the Arabs and Islam. We can also use these sources to describe how the Sasanians collapsed, at least according to the Chinese tradition of history writing. To this end, I have found it necessary to translate the sources as I read them, rather than relying on the translations of others.

The present monograph builds upon this past scholarship and attempts to offer a dedicated study on Sino-Iranian relations, and what they meant to China and by extension the rest of East Asia. Laufer has already demonstrated that Iran and West Asia as a cultural and linguistic area exercised a significant influence over Chinese material culture, though his lessons are not always so well heeded in Sinology today. “Silk Road” studies of the last century have tended to

focus on India and Central Asia as the sources of foreign cultural elements in East Asia, with less attention paid to West Asia. Trade between West and East Asia is also arguably neglected. Rezakhani (2010: 420) has pertinently argued that “the concept of a continuous, purpose-driven road or even ‘routes’ is counterproductive in the study of world history but also that it has no basis in historical reality or records.” In the modern conceptualization of the Silk Road, Rezakhani (2010: 422) also points out “the thousands of kilometers separating the shores of the Mediterranean from Bukhara and Samarkand are conveniently neglected.” In this book, I aim to focus on relations between China and these neglected regions. I will argue that the trade connections between West and East Asia are important to consider in terms of geopolitical developments during late antiquity. For example, how did trade with China, famous for its silk exports, affect relations with Byzantium and Iran? How were imports from Iran—such as gemstones, textiles, and metals—incorporated into the Chinese economy, and what did people do with them? Did unique imports from Iran have any role in material religious practices in China?

This book, I wish to emphasize, is a general study, not an exhaustive survey of every item of evidence and point of contention in the secondary literature. Such an undertaking would require multiple volumes. Instead, my aim in this book is to tell the history of Sino-Iranian relations in the first millennium in terms of diplomacy, culture, religion, commerce, and material exchanges. I aim to offer a readable guidebook with both Sinologists and Iranologists in mind. We should acknowledge the reality that West and East Asia did, in fact, share significant connections in late antiquity. These relations are also inevitably reflected in Chinese texts, from which we can gain an understanding of emic views: for instance, what did Parthia mean to the Chinese? What kind of realm was Persia to literati, and how did such views differ from those of Daoist and Buddhist authors? How did the Chinese first perceive the Arabs after they had conquered the Sasanians? We must also recognize that there are a number of challenges in reconstructing the history of Sino-Iranian relations. The nomenclature in Chinese, for example, can be confusing or ambiguous at times. The identities of persons and some trade goods also require detailed discussions, since modern dictionaries are not necessarily authoritative or conclusive. In the spirit of Laufer’s methodology, we must critically examine all primary sources and often make an argument about the identity of a person or item based on etymologies and other elements.

Only in recent years have we come to enjoy access to an enormous corpus of digitized Chinese texts, including the Buddhist and Daoist canons, and the availability of works is growing with the evolution of optical character recognition (OCR) technology. This offers a great advantage to Sinologists, who can

cross reference and examine texts on a scale unthinkable only a few years ago. Whether it be Buddhist texts or Daoist alchemical treatises, we can instantly read how people used things that were initially associated with Iran in varying ways. There were also, of course, the religions of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity, as well as a small number of Jews, in China. The extent to which they interacted with Chinese religions is an intriguing question, especially in the case of Buddhism, which inherits from India negative perceptions of Zoroastrianism. We also have at least one account of a Buddhist monk and Christian cleric collaborating on a project. My background in East Asian religions has benefited me in this regard, so I would like to not only show what Iran meant for East Asian religions at an emic level, but also to illustrate the utility of using the Buddhist and Daoist canons to better flesh out Sino-Iranian relations, even when, in some cases, such relations were fantastical and imagined.

At the same time, I aim to show that East Asian sources can not only tell us about how people of the region viewed Iran and the early caliphates, but also that sources in Classical Chinese can offer objective historical facts that historians ought to consider when reconstructing West Asian history. One of my main propositions in this book is that Chinese sources related to Sino-Iranian and also Sino-Arabian relations ought *not* to remain limited to Sinology, but that historians of wider global history ought to consider these sources in their own right, to better understand Iran and Arabia in late antiquity. China was a literate observer with recorded histories. The Chinese witnessed the Parthians, Sasanians, and early caliphates, albeit from afar. The Chinese court also consistently interacted with representatives of all these cultures. We are indebted to historians of the past, such as Al-Ṭabarī (839–923), for reconstructing Sasanian history, but I would suggest that Chinese histories might also furnish some objective data on Persia. For instance, the commonly accepted history of the final Sasanian kings is at odds with what we read in the Chinese histories. This is a problem that must be at least recognized and addressed.

Although the conceptions of West, East, and South Asia are practical, we must not remain too attached to such notions. Moriyasu (2007) makes a point that Tang China ought *not* to be limited to a conception of an “empire” in “East Asia”—which in itself is a modern geographical conception—but rather that it ought to be considered on the eastern side of Eurasia, in which, as a country and cultural sphere, it interacted with the wider continent as a whole, while furthermore holding a significant position in the global political order. Iranology tends to focus more on Sasanian relations with Rome-Byzantium as the “other superpower,” without proper consideration of how the Sasanians approached the Chinese on their eastern frontier. Similarly, Sinologists arguably overlook the significance of Iran to China. My approach in this study is

to consider Asia as a whole in as much as possible. Indian cultures, of course, must also be included in this discussion.

This book cites reconstructed pronunciations of Chinese characters. These are given in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The reconstructed Middle Chinese readings are those of Pulleyblank (1991b), the Later Han, of Schuessler (2007). The database of Chinese characters on Wiktionary apparently includes Pulleyblank's reconstructions among several other systems by different scholars, although these are not always input correctly, much to my dismay after having consulted the database. Pulleyblank's system distinguishes Early Middle Chinese (EMC) and Late Middle Chinese (LMC), which Wiktionary does not distinguish. I have therefore relied on the printed edition of Pulleyblank's book. My only modification to Pulleyblank's readings is that I use <sup>˥</sup> for the rising tone and <sup>˨˩</sup> for the departing tone in Late Middle Chinese, as the notational symbols used in Pulleyblank's book are not in Unicode (see Pulleyblank 1991b: 8). These reconstructions are important because the modern pronunciation and pinyin spelling of Mandarin Chinese significantly differ from how Middle Chinese was spoken. These reconstructions are tentative, but they are nevertheless essential when deciphering foreign names and words in Chinese transcription.

# China and Parthia

## 1 Parthia in Chinese Sources

The journey of the Chinese diplomat Zhang Qian 張騫 (d. 114 BCE) marks the commencement of formal relations between the Chinese court and countries to the distant west.<sup>1</sup> The documented and extant records of contact between Parthia and China date to the early extant histories of China following its unification. The first of the dynastic histories of China, the *Shi ji* 史記 (*Record of the Grand Historian*), compiled and edited by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c.145 BCE–c.86 BCE), contains some details about a country called Anxi 安息 (*an-siək*); this is a transcription of Aršak. Aršak is the name of the founder of the Arsacid dynasty (the Parthians), which existed from c.250 BCE to 226 CE, but subsequent rulers also referred to themselves by this name, much like “Caesar” in Rome.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Chinese used this ethnonym likely reflects an initial interaction in which “Aršak” was understood as the name of a kingdom by the Chinese. In this case, it is eponymous in character, rather than being an autonym. The Parthians or others might have referred to the country as something akin to “the realm of Aršak”: the Chinese thereafter adopted this name, comparable to Greek Ἀρσάκιδης or Latin Arsacides. The autonym of the Parthians, however, was not “Aršak.” As an ethnic group, they were already known as *Parθava* in Old Persian, and other nations used phonetically similar denominations, such as Elamite *par-tu-ma*, Akkadian *pa-ar-tu-ú*, and Greek

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- 1 Zhang Qian was sent westward by Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) around the year 139 BCE. He was charged with securing an alliance with the Yuezhi 月氏 against the Xiongnu 匈奴, a nomadic people who harassed the Chinese border. Zhang Qian was held captive for around ten years, returning to China in 126 BCE. See the encyclopedic data on <https://kotobank.jp/>.
  - 2 Shayegan (2011: 43) explains, “The Babylonian cuneiform tablets show that the standard formula for the Arsacid kings consisted of the dynastic name ‘Aršak’ followed by the title *šarru* ‘king’: *Aršakâ šarru* ‘Aršak king.” For the phonetic reconstruction of Later Han pronunciations, see Schuessler (2007). See also Pulleyblank (1962a: 77; 1962b: 221). Although Anxi denoted Parthia throughout the Han period (250 BCE–226 CE), the same word is used in later times, even when Parthian authority had been replaced by the Sasanians. Saitō (1998) demonstrates that *Anxi* came to denote Bukhara starting from around the mid-sixth century. Later, in another study, Saitō (2007) shows that from the first to third century, the Chinese surname An 安 was adopted by certain peoples in China who originated from the Parthian empire. Later, Sogdians from Bukhara also began using this surname in a Chinese context. See also the discussion in Coloru et al. (2016a: 56).

Παρθία (Kent 1953: 196). Schmitt (2014: 228) notes that the name is ultimately unclear.

The initial early Chinese overview of Parthia is brief, but we can imagine that more detailed surveys and records existed, although these were never incorporated into the official histories. The function of Chinese histories was to document China. Foreign affairs were therefore treated only as a secondary subject. We read the following in the *Shi ji*:

[The country of] Aršak is thousands of miles to the west of the Great Yuezhi. The commoners are attached to the land. They till the fields, and their fields produce grains and grape wine. Their cities are like those of the Dayuan [Ferghana]. They are settled in hundreds of small and large cities. Their land stretches for thousands of miles, and it is the largest of countries. There is a market on the Gui River [Oxus]. Common merchants hire wagons and boats, from which they go to bordering countries, some for thousands of miles. They use silver for coinage. Their coinage includes the face of the king. When the king dies, they immediately reissue the coins, and have the likeness of the king's face on them. They write on hide horizontally.

安息在大月氏西可數千里。其俗土著，耕田，田稻麥，蒲陶酒。城邑如大宛，其屬小大數百城，地方數千里，最為大國。臨媯水有市，民商賈用車及船，行旁國或數千里。以銀為錢，錢如其王面。王死輒更錢，效王面焉。畫革旁行以為書記。<sup>3</sup>

Parthia was already a significant power with subordinate states under its dominion. The broader importance of China having a powerful potential ally on the opposite side of the world—together with whom they might contain the Xiongnu—would have been apparent to leaders. In this period, China also came into formal contact with a number of other polities for the first time in its history. The history mentions a polity called Tiaozhi 條枝/條支, with whom Parthia had relations, but this was also a vassal state under the Parthians.

Tiaozhi is thousands of miles to the west of Aršak, bordering the Western Sea. It is hot and humid. They till fields and have paddies. There are great birds, whose eggs are like jars. There are very many people, and everywhere there are minor lords, but Aršak has subjugated them. They are

<sup>3</sup> *Shi ji* 123.3162. Cf. the translation in Nienhauser et al. (2019: 68). Cf. the translation in Coloru et al. (2016a: 54).



considered a foreign country. The country is adept in illusory arts. In Aršak, it is long rumored that in Tiaozhi there is [the fabled] Ruo River and Queen Mother of the West, but nobody has ever seen these.

條枝在安息西數千里，臨西海，暑溼。耕田，田稻。有大鳥，卵如甕。人眾甚多，往往有小君長，而安息役屬之。以為外國。國善眩。安息長老傳聞條枝有弱水西王母，而未嘗見。<sup>4</sup>

Tiaozhi is placed significantly to the west of Parthia and bordering a great sea, which ought to refer to the Mediterranean Sea. The great bird mentioned here is likely the Arabian ostrich, which is now extinct. This is another clue regarding the location connected with this toponym. Tiaozhi appears across older Chinese sources and generally refers to the broad area of Syria and Iraq, but the denoted region appears to have changed over the centuries. There are various theories regarding the origin of this name. Chavannes has proposed that “Le *T'iao-tche* me paraît correspondre au royaume arabe de Characène qui fut fondé entre 130 et 127 av J.C. dans la Mésène, aux bouches du Tigre.”<sup>5</sup> Graf (1996: 203), in contrast, has proposed that Tiaozhi “is simply an attempt to transcribe the word ‘Tigris.’” He points out that the latter character was pronounced *ga* in the Han period and therefore could be “the Chinese transcription for the Persian form of the name for Tigris.” Hill (2003) understands Tiaozhi as “Characene and Susiana.”<sup>6</sup> Leslie and Gardiner (1996: 260) hold that initially Tiaozhi referred to the Seleucid Empire, but by the Later Han period it ought

4 *Shi ji* 123:3163–3164. Cf. the translation in Nienhauser et al. (2019: 69). Cf. the translation in Coloru et al. (2016a: 54). *Changlao* 長老 often denotes “elder,” but in this case the binomial seems to have the sense of “a long time.” We must otherwise read this as “an elder of Parthia,” which seems less suitable to me. This is clearly the Chinese myth projected into West Asia, since the Queen Mother of the West is a Chinese divinity. We might wonder whether someone saw a statue in Mesopotamia that displayed some of the zoomorphic features associated with the deity, such as the tail of a panther and tiger’s teeth.

5 Chavannes (1907: 176, fn. 3) continues as follows: “La Mésène est appelée Dest Misan dans un fragment d’Ibn Kotaïbon, et Amrou, cité par Assemani, appelle simplement Desht le pays de Desht Misan; ce nom de ‘Desht’ n’est autre que le mot persan desht qui signifie ‘la plaine’; peut-être est-ce ce mot qui se cache sous la transcription chinoise *T'iao-tche*.”

6 On Tiaozhi, Hill (2003) writes, “It was first mentioned in the *Shiji* and again in the *Hanshu* where it presumably referred to the Seleucid territories in the lower Tigris-Euphrates region. I tend to agree, on the whole with Chavannes’ notes on the identification of this kingdom, although I would extend it to include Susa and the surrounding region.” Based on data given by Pliny the Elder, Hill concludes, “I have only tentatively identified Tiaozhi as Characene and Susiana. Whoever was actually ruling the region at the time, it clearly referred to the region about the mouth of the Tigris River, at the head of the Persian Gulf.” See the discussion of the identification problems by Hill in the same study.

no longer be identified as such, given that the Seleucids had long perished. By that time, it was Characene upon the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates. Yu (2013: 86) has proposed that Tiaozhi refers to Seleucid Syria. In the case of the above citation, Tiaozhi indeed appears to be referring to Seleucid Syria; if so, then the Chinese must have known something about the Seleucids, at least in their late stage, but only based on hearsay.

Information about the earlier history of the region—such as the conquests of Alexander, the rise and fall of the Achaemenids, or the origins of the Parthians—is not recorded in ancient Chinese sources, but it is conceivable that such information would have been communicated to the Chinese court or its representatives. None of this, however, was recorded in the Chinese histories, so we are left only to speculate. We also do *not* read of Babylon or Pharaonic Egypt. We know that Parthian diplomats did, in fact, visit China, as we read in the following account:

In the beginning, the envoy of the Han went to Aršak. The king of Aršak ordered that 20,000 cavalrymen be dispatched to meet them at the eastern border. Their eastern border is thousands of miles from the royal capital. Along the way there, one passes tens of cities, with rather large populations in them. When the envoy of the Han returned, [Aršak] sent an envoy to accompany the envoy of the Han to come witness the grandeur of the [realm of the] Han. They offered as tribute to the Han the egg of a great bird, and a man adept in illusions from Lixuan.

初，漢使至安息，安息王令將二萬騎迎於東界。東界去王都數千里。行比至，過數十城，人民相屬甚多。漢使還而後發使隨漢使來觀漢廣大。以大鳥卵及黎軒善眩人獻于漢。<sup>7</sup>

That the Arsacid king would welcome the envoy with such a grand reception, and also send back in return an envoy of his own to China, reflects a deep interest in China on the part of the Parthians, who had certainly known of

7 *Shi ji* 123.3172–3173. Cf. the translation in Nienhauser et al. (2019: 83). Coloru et al. (2016a: 55). Yu (2013: 5, 21–22), citing Shiratori Kurakichi 白鳥庫吉 (1865–1942), identifies Lixuan 黎軒 as Ptolemaic Egypt, stating that the Chinese name is a contracted phonetic transliteration of Alexandria. Nienhauser et al. (2019: 83), in contrast, states that this “is Alexandria the Eschate, ‘Alexandria the Furthest,’ founded by Alexander the Great in 329 BC at the south-western end of the Fergana Valley on the southern bank of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) river in modern Tajikistan.” Fujita (1928: 47–53) suggests that the Chinese term refers to “Rhagä, Rhages” in the eastern part of ancient Media, but this toponym was mistakenly understood by Chinese historians as a separate state.

the Chinese and their products, such as silks, but had never made formal contact with them. This exchange of envoys marked the beginning of official Sino-Iranian relations. The Parthian side would have certainly gathered data of their own, but none of this survives. In fact, the majority of knowledge of Sino-Iranian relations for the first thousand years is based on Chinese sources. If not for these, we would know little to nothing of the diplomatic links between China and Iran.

Some additional information concerning Sino-Parthian relations is related in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (the history of the Later Han dynasty), dating to the fifth century CE.

In year 1 of Zhanghe [87 CE] under Emperor Zhang [r. 75–88], they sent an envoy to offer lions and bubals as tribute. A bubal is like a great deer in form, but without horns. In year 9 of Yongyuan [97 CE] under Emperor He [88–105], the Protector General Ban Chao sent Gan Ying as an envoy to Daqin [Rome]. Arriving in Tiaozi he came to a great sea that he sought to cross, but at the western frontier of Aršak, a ship captain said to Ying, “The sea is vast and those traversing it back and forth can cross in three months if they meet with a favorable wind, whereas if met with a slow wind, it could even take two years, so every man going to sea carries provisions for three years. Being at sea often makes men think of their lands sentimentally. There shall be many who perish.” Ying, having heard this, then halted. In year 13 [101], the Aršak king Pacorus again sent lions and a great bird of Tiaozi as tribute. At the time they called it an Aršak bird.

章帝章和元年，遣使獻師子，符拔。符拔形似麟而無角。和帝永元九年，都護班超遣甘英使大秦。抵條支，臨大海欲度，而安息西界船人謂英曰：「海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齋三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。」英聞之乃止。十三年，安息王滿屈，復獻師子及條支大鳥，時謂之安息雀。<sup>8</sup>

The Parthian king named above, 滿屈 (*man<sup>B</sup>k<sup>h</sup>ut* in the Late Han)—as pointed out by Pulleyblank (1989b)—ought to correspond to Pacorus II (r. 78–105 CE).

<sup>8</sup> *Hou Han shu* 88.2918. For translations of official Chinese titles, see Hucker (1985). I clarified the meaning of part of the Chinese text with an unpublished translated excerpt by Matthew C.H. Lam. See also the translation by John E. Hill (2003), published online: [https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou\\_han\\_shu.html](https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html) (accessed 08 March 2023). Cf. the translation in Coloru et al. (2016a: 56).

Pacorus ought to correspond to Bagpuhr in Middle Iranian. The fact that this royal figure appears in a datable Chinese record helps to confirm the dating of his reign, if only as a contemporary, albeit distant, witness.<sup>9</sup>

The *fuba* 符拔 (*buo bat* in the reconstructed pronunciation of the Late Han) is identified as a “bupal antelope” by Pulleyblank (1989b).<sup>10</sup> Hill (2003) identifies this as a “Persian gazelle.” Stone reliefs depicting royal figures slaughtering lions are extant from the late Arsacid period, and the killing of lions was connected with enthronement in the Sasanian period (Tanabe 1990; 1994). Lions and antelopes also appear on Sasanian vessels, on which the king is depicted hunting these beasts (Chegini and Nikitin 1996: 71). We might assume that the Parthian king sent these beasts as a new form of game, which the Chinese throne would have appreciated, particularly if the kings of Parthia associated lions and antelopes the royal hunts. This would have been regarded as a suitable gift from one monarch to another, but the gesture moreover implies a respectful relationship, if not one of equality between rulers.

## 2 Rome and Sino-Parthian Relations

The geopolitical relevance of China in antiquity, particularly as an exporter of silk, has long been a topic of interest to Western classicists. Henry Yule (1866: xlv–xlvi) already points out the significance of the Parthians as an intermediary of the silk trade between Rome and China. The Romans also had a significant role to play in Sino-Iranian relations during the Han period, both directly and indirectly. The Chinese might even have met Romans in battle on one occasion, but this never shaped diplomatic connections or colored the Chinese perception of Rome in any clear way. Dubs (1940) has famously argued that in 36 BCE, Chinese forces fought with Roman legionaries based on a description of enemy troops in the *Han shu*: “More than a hundred troops lined up before the gate in fish-scale formation.” 步兵百餘人夾門魚鱗陳。<sup>11</sup> This “fish-scale formation” reads like the *testudo* formation. Dubs suggests that these were some of the lost legionaries of Crassus, who had been captured by Parthian forces in 54 BCE, and were ultimately moved to Sogdiana, where they worked as mercenaries.

9 See discussion of this Iranian name in other sources in Rapp (2016: 262). See reign dates of Iranian rulers in Daryaei (2012: 391). For some details on Pacorus II and his lineage, see Potts (1988: 150). Chen (2022: 475).

10 We might compare the cognate in Greek: βούβαλος. Pronunciation of the Late Han is given in Schuessler (2007).

11 *Han shu* 70.3013.

The Han originally referred to the Romans as Daqin 大秦 (“Great Qin”), which could also be translated as the “Great Chinese”—odd as it might sound, this peculiar name is explained in the history of the Latter Han: “Their people are all tall and upright, like those of the Middle Country [China], hence they are called the Great Qin.” 其人民皆長大平正，有類中國，故謂之大秦。<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the court of the Han dynasty had a favorable impression of the Romans, either through having met a few, or—perhaps more likely—to a large extent through hearsay. Rome had sought access to China, but Parthia desired to remain the commercial intermediary for Chinese textiles. We also read the following about Rome:

They use gold and silver for coinage. Ten silver coins are worth one gold coin. They carry out trade at sea with Aršak and India, for which there are ten-fold profits. Their people are honest, and there are no two prices at the market. Grains and food are generally inexpensive, and they have an abundance for their national expenses. When envoys from neighboring countries arrive at the borderland, they ride relay horses to the royal capital. Upon arriving, they are provided with gold coins. Their king frequently sought to dispatch envoys to the Han, but Aršak sought to trade Chinese silks with the Han, and so blocked [Roman access to China] and they could not reach there. In year 9 of Yanxi [166] under Emperor Huan [r. 146–168], the king of Daqin, \*Antoninus, sent an envoy to go around [Parthia] and come from Rinan [at the southern frontier of China]. They offered ivory, rhinoceros horn, and sea turtle shell, and thus commenced our first contact with them. What they offered as tribute included nothing precious. Doubts were cast upon what they gave, for which they were criticized.

以金銀為錢，銀錢十當金錢一。與安息天竺交市於海中，利有十倍。其人質直，市無二價。穀食常賤，國用富饒。鄰國使到其界首者，乘驛詣王都。至則給以金錢。其王常欲通使於漢，而安息欲以漢繒彩與之交市，故遮闔不得自達。至桓帝延熹九年，大秦王安敦遣使自日南徼外。獻象牙，犀角，玳瑁，始乃一通焉。其所表貢，並無珍異。疑傳者過焉。<sup>13</sup>

12 *Hou Han shu* 88.2919. In later centuries, as we will see below, Daqin as a toponym could refer to the Levant and more broadly to Christendom from the eighth century on.

13 *Hou Han shu* 88.2919–2920. Cf. the translation by Hill (2003); Hirth (1885: 45).

This mission, apparently sent directly by Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180), occurred toward the end of the war between the Romans and Parthians between 161 and 166, a fact that has already been noted long ago by Hirth (1885: 173–178), but he thought that the Roman mission was a private expedition. We can imagine the Romans recognizing the opportunity to establish contact with the Chinese for trade purposes, especially since Roman forces were already in Mesopotamia and therefore already halfway to China. Some members of the Chinese court were doubtful about the envoy, although the content of these doubts is not specified, apart from the observation that the gifts they offered were not sufficiently valuable. If the Romans had in fact sent an envoy to China (presumably from a Roman position in Mesopotamia or nearby), it would have indeed been reasonable at the time to have them travel via a maritime route through India and then onward to southern China to avoid transiting through hostile territories. The gifts they offered would have presumably been sourced from Mesopotamia or India, rather than from Rome directly. Lieu (2000: 47) remarks, “There is no Roman account of the sending of such a mission so it could have been a case of enterprising merchants giving diplomatic cover to their business.” In any case, even if Aurelius himself never dispatched this envoy, someone, at the very least, presented themselves in the name of the Roman emperor before the Chinese throne, although I tend to think that the Roman mission was official. From the Chinese side, the Han court may have sent a mission to Rome. The Latin historian Florus (II.XXXIIII) reports that the Seres (Chinese) and Indians sent gifts to Augustus.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* xxxiv, 145) also mentions a supreme grade of iron “made by the Seres,” although whether this refers to China is uncertain.<sup>15</sup>

Owing to its export of textiles, China was a significant trade partner for Parthia and later the Sasanians. The profit accrued from acting as an intermediary between China and Rome alone would have been immense. For this reason, Parthia sought to protect its own interests and block direct Roman access to the Chinese market. Although it is impractical to estimate how much, we can imagine that the Parthians would have directed at least some of the revenues generated from the silk trade and other commodities to domestic defense and warfare. In this way, China functioned as an integral element of the wider global market and must be understood within an interlinked whole, rather than treating it as a remote entity far beyond the Hindu Kush in the east. This fact is only further demonstrated in later centuries by the presence

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14 See the translation in Forster (1929: 348–351). See also Yule (1866: xlii).

15 See source text on Perseus Project (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>). Lieu (2000: 47).

of numerous Sasanian silver coins discovered in China.<sup>16</sup> The economic ties between China and Iran arguably formed a foundation for many of the developments that unfolded over the subsequent centuries, whether religious or political.

### 3 Chinese Religion and Parthia

In addition to economic and diplomatic connections, there also existed some religious ties between Parthia (or, more specifically, territories controlled by Parthia) and China. Earlier still, there may have been Iranian influences on Buddhism in India—a topic explored by Attwood (2012)—which would have been transmitted into Chinese Buddhism in turn, but Buddhists were unaware of this probable influence shaping the evolution of their religion from centuries past. Based on Chinese sources, we can only speak to a limited extent about the Chinese understanding of religion in Parthia, and the little we can say is chiefly related to Buddhists coming from Parthian territories. A century ago, Hori (1918: 510) pointed out a total of five Iranian translators of Buddhist texts in China. There is an absence of references to anything we could confidently identify as Mazdean in Chinese sources that are contemporaneous with the Parthian period, but this fact is due to the proximity of Buddhist institutions in the eastern regions of the Parthian empire to China, as well as the proselytization by Buddhist monks from Parthian territories in China. Although Buddhism was only a minority religion in the Parthian realm, having diffused particularly into Central Asian regions, as discussed by Daffinà (1975), we must recognize the significance of “Parthian Buddhism” to early Chinese Buddhism. More recently, Coloru et al. (2016b: 62) also importantly remark, “Interestingly, the first translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese were not Indian monks, but Parthians.”

One of the earliest documented translators of Buddhist literature into Chinese is An Shigao 安世高 from Parthia. Zürcher (2013: 357–358) argues that the advent of the “Buddhist Church” (i.e., organized monasticism) commences from An Shigao’s arrival in the city of Luoyang in 148 CE. His appearance in China is certainly recollected as the starting point for Chinese Buddhism, not only by Buddhists, but also by secular historians today—which in itself is significant—because the initial source of Buddhism in China would then have

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16 Already some decades ago, Hsia (1974) documented more than one thousand Sasanian coins unearthed in China, whose dates commence from Šāpur II (310–379). I am unaware of Parthian coins in China.

been Parthia, not India. Pulleyblank (1989), however, points out that “there is little reliable information about him, though he is mentioned in some early colophons and prefaces.” Pulleyblank further notes that the earliest available biographical details of An Shigao are furnished by the monk Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518), who lists An Shigao as the first entry in his biographies of prominent Buddhist figures in Chinese history. We cannot confidently corroborate this account of An Shigao with alternative sources; moreover, the authenticity of records concerning him significantly postdate his death. These records constitute hagiographical literature, so we are left speaking about a quasi-historical figure. In my estimation, An Shigao was likely a historical figure, but the life details recorded in his biography are often difficult to accept at face value.

In any case, “An Shigao” would have been an adopted name in Chinese. “An” as a surname in this context is apparently derived from the name Aršak in Chinese (*Anxi* 安息), just as some figures from India had the surname Zhu 竺, which is derived from one name for India in Chinese (*Tianzhu* 天竺).<sup>17</sup> Sengyou, however, gives the full name An Qing Shigao 安清世高. The characters Qing 清 (“purity”) and Shigao 世高 (“eminent of the world”) are perhaps semantic translations of An Shigao’s birth name, but it is unknown what that name was. Sengyou states that An Shigao was a prince, being the son of the principal wife of the king of Parthia. An Shigao was to inherit the throne, but after finishing mourning, he delegated responsibility to an uncle and renounced domestic life to become a monk. The account reads as follows:

Following the passing of the king, he was to inherit the position of state, whereupon he thought deeply of suffering and emptiness, seeking to distance himself from the accoutrements of high office. When the mourning concluded, he passed the state to an uncle, to renounce the home life and cultivate the path [of Buddhism]. He became learned in the canon, with particular expertise in the study of Abhidharma. He recited and followed meditation scriptures [*dhyāna-sūtras*] down to the utmost detail. Thereafter, he ventured forth abroad to spread the teachings through various countries. He first arrived in China in the early period of Emperor Huan of the Han [r. 146–168]. Shigao was intelligent and keen in his faculties. He could learn something just by hearing it once, and not long afterward, he became conversant in Chinese. He thus taught the sūtras, and changed from *Hu* (a western foreigner) into Chinese.

17 Saitō (2018) discusses in detail the fact that not everyone with the surname Zhu in ancient China was connected with India. Some persons from China and Southeast Asia also had this surname.



後王薨將嗣國位，乃深惟苦空，厭離名器。行服既畢。遂讓國與叔，出家修道。博綜經藏，尤精阿毘曇學。諷持禪經，略盡其妙。既而遊方弘化，遍歷諸國。以漢桓帝之初，始到中夏。世高才悟幾敏，一聞能達，至止未久，即通習華語。於是宣釋眾經，改胡為漢。<sup>18</sup>

The credibility of this account, while not entirely unbelievable, requires careful consideration. Pulleyblank has already expressed skepticism about the available biographical data on An Shigao. Can we realistically imagine a scenario in which the crown prince of Parthia would have had access to Buddhist learning and teachings in the capital? Were Buddhist texts or oral instructions even available at the time in Parthian, Persian, Greek, or another language of the court?

Another question to ask is who An Shigao's father was. The extant records of the Parthian line list Khosrow I (109–129), Vologases III (105–147 CE), and Mithradates IV (129–140 CE), but these figures cannot be linked to the above Chinese account.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, we must wonder whether An Shigao, after having renounced the throne, moved to a remote region, such as Gāndhāra, to learn technical subjects. For example, where did he learn Abhidharma (the scholastic exegesis of Buddhist scriptures) and the relevant languages and scripts (such as Gāndhārī Prakrit, which Pulleyblank notes was the likely source language of An Shigao's translations)? It would be more realistic to suggest that An Shigao, in fact, was not a prince of the royal family in the Parthian capital, but rather was born under a vassal king of the Parthians.<sup>20</sup> The stories in Sengyou's biography concerning An Shigao are, in any case, fanciful, indicating that creative license was certainly exercised. Another issue is the absence of contemporary evidence. Zürcher (2007: 30) has cautioned that “our knowledge about the flourishing Buddhist community at the capital in the second half of the second century is extremely one-sided: secular history does not even mention its existence.” We therefore need to remain reserved when speaking about An Shigao as a representative of Parthia, much less a Parthian prince who

18 The text in Chinese is titled *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集 (*Record Collection on the Translation of the Tripitaka*). T 2145, 55: 95a15–21.

19 For a list of rulers of Iran, see the appendix of “Ruling Dynasties of Iran” in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* (Daryae 2012: 391).

20 Coloru et al. (2016b: 62) make this observation, pointing out that his surname An “is proof in Chinese eyes of his relationship to Parthia, *Anxi* 安息, or at least to an Arcacid family of princes from the borderlands of Parthia and India, since Buddhism had not reached the area of Marv at the time of An Shigao.”

renounced and became a monk. Buddhist hagiographies might be *based on* true stories, but they are not necessarily authentic records.<sup>21</sup>

Chinese Buddhist history mentions other early figures from Parthia. In a Buddhist bibliography compiled in 598, Fei Zhangfang 費長房 records that the *śramaṇa* Tandi 曇諦 (\*Dharmasatya) of Parthia arrived in Luoyang in 254 (approximately thirty years after the end of the Parthian dynasty). The following appended note reads, “He was proficient in the study of the Vinaya. The assembly at Baima si [White Horse Monastery] asked him to translate.” 妙善律學，於白馬寺眾請譯出。His translation was the “\**Dharmaguptaka-karmavācānā* in one fascicle.” 曇無德羯磨一卷.<sup>22</sup> That this specific monastic code was translated would indicate that the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya was observed in some territories under Parthian control, interestingly despite the fact that, as Heirman (2002: 396) notes, “the Dharmaguptaka School lost most of its influence very soon after the expansion of Indian Buddhism.” On the basis of Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, it is clear that the Dharmaguptakas were prominent particularly in Afghanistan (Salomon 1997: 354). This sheds some light on the probable monastic lineages of some monks identified with Parthia.

Other figures include the *upāsaka* (Buddhist layman) An Xuan 安玄, who arrived in Luoyang with merchants in the later years of Emperor Ling 靈帝 (r. 168–189) and translated texts with the Chinese monk Fotiao 佛調 (d.u.).<sup>23</sup> The collection of Buddhist biographies compiled by Huijiao 慧皎 in 519 (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, the *Biographies of Eminent Monks*) offers a few more comments, stating that An Xuan “orally translated the Sanskrit” (*kouyi fanwen* 口譯梵文) while Fotiao served as an amanuensis.<sup>24</sup> Whether this was really Sanskrit or perhaps another Indic language, such as Gāndhārī, is unclear. Later, there was also An Faqin 安法欽 (d.u.), who translated in Luoyang during the Taikang 太康 reign-era (280–289).<sup>25</sup>

21 In some cases, it is possible to compare and contrast multiple state and Buddhist sources in Chinese to get an idea of how different authors or communities viewed a Buddhist figure. I have utilized this method in the past (see Kotyk 2018b; 2019). State records of monks, when they do exist, are often less fantastical than Buddhist accounts, but caution has to be exercised in all instances. There are insufficient sources concerning the early Buddhist community in China to attempt such a comparative exercise for figures such as An Shigao.

22 The brief biographical data is from the *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀 (*Account of the Triple Gem Through the Ages*). See *T* 2034, 49: 56c6–7. This translation is preserved in the Taishō canon as *Jiemo* 羯磨 (*T*1433).

23 *T* 2034, 49: 53c1–6. Coloru et al. (2016b: 62).

24 *T* 2059, 50: 324b25–c7.

25 *T* 2034, 49: 65a19–20.

Based on the above examples, we might infer that these Buddhists were Parthian subjects, but were not necessarily *ethnically* Parthian. Nevertheless, these early missionaries of Buddhism in China were clearly connected with the “country of Aršak” by Chinese authors. From their perspective, there were, in fact, Buddhism and authoritative teachers in Parthia. The Buddhist teachers from these regions presumably also identified themselves with Aršak. In this sense, the Parthian crown conceivably supported Buddhism. It is not unreasonable to imagine Buddhists under Parthian dominion regarding their king as a supporter of the Buddhadharmā. This arrangement would have benefited both the crown and the sangha. There were already precedents for this in neighboring regions in India, starting from as early as Aśoka in the third century BCE.

Moreover, there is also indirect linguistic evidence indicating a Buddhist presence within the Eastern Parthian world. Sims-Williams (1983: 132) explains, “The Parthian language is attested in inscriptions of the Arsacid and Sassanian periods and in Manichaean texts from Central Asia. While the inscriptions, which reflect the language of the Parthian court, show hardly a trace of Indian influence, the Manichaean manuscripts contain at least 35 words of Indian origin, many of them being specifically Buddhist terms.” He also notes that “the Parthian state bordered on the Kushan empire, where Buddhist influence was strong. There will thus have been ample opportunity during the Arsacid period for the infiltration of Buddhism into the eastern part of the Parthian empire, and for the adoption of Indian vocabulary into the Parthian spoken there.” Based on the above facts, we can infer that a Buddhist community of a certain size, in fact, prospered under Parthian rule.

Despite the attested relationship between Parthia and Buddhism during the Han dynasty, some Indian sources in Chinese translation do not recognize Parthia as a Buddhist realm, as they call “Aršak” a borderland, i.e., a place without the Buddhadharmā, the teachings of the Buddha. For instance, the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Skt. \**Mahāprajñāpāramitātopadeśa*)—an extensive commentary on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, a work attributed to the eminent Indian author Nāgārjuna (third century CE), and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什; 344–413)—reads, “For those born in the borderlands of Aršak and so forth, they have human forms, yet they remain ignorant and cannot be educated and transformed [via the Buddhadharmā].” 如安息國諸邊地生者，皆是人身，愚不可教化。<sup>26</sup> The Chinese translation of the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā* (*Shi zhu piposha lun* 十住毘婆沙論)—another work attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva—offers the

26 T 1509, 25: 705a22–23.

following comment: “Or they kill for merit, or because they wish to release them from suffering, like in the Western Countries such as Aršak and so forth.” 或以為福德故，或欲使度苦故而殺，如西方安息國等。<sup>27</sup> The religious sanction of slaughter in ancient Iran is certainly attested from both insider and outsider perspectives. For example, the Avestan word *xrafstra-* means wild “animal” or “predator,” whereas in the plural it refers to the demonic enemies of religion.<sup>28</sup> The historian Herodotus (1.140) observed in the fifth century BCE that “the Magians kill with their own hands every creature, save only dogs and men; they kill all alike, ants and snakes, creeping and flying things, and take much pride therein.”<sup>29</sup> The Buddhist statement above only offers additional confirmation of the practice of animal sacrifice in Parthian times from an Indian source; more relevant to our present discussion is how it illustrates that Indian authors did not associate Parthia with Buddhism, whereas Chinese Buddhists interestingly have records of important monks arriving from Parthia.<sup>30</sup> I believe this difference is best explained by the fact that Buddhists fell under the domination of Parthia in the east, but the Parthians themselves and the majority of the inhabitants under their rule were never Buddhist, even if a Buddhist community thrived in their far eastern territories.

Additionally, there are Indian stories in Chinese translation that depict Parthia in a kind of brutish caricature. These stories are not only valuable in the Chinese context; they also inform us about how Indian Buddhists in antiquity perceived Parthia. In a narrative concerning the Indian king Kaniška, translated into Chinese during the fifth century, the following event is related:

At that time, the king of Aršak was wicked by nature and led four armies in attacking Kaniška. Kaniška was also formidable and flanked them in battle with blades raised high. King Kaniška subsequently snatched victory, slaughtering altogether nine hundred million men of Aršak. He then asked his minister, “Now, can this transgression be extinguished?”

27 *T* 1521, 26: 97b18–22.

28 See notes in Bartholomae (1979: 538). Note that this is a reprint of a volume from 1904.

29 Translation by Godley (1920: 179–181). See Frye (1984: 81). See also Herodotus on the Perseus Project (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>). See alternate translation in Vasuni (2007: 41).

30 The above-cited line is important as it demonstrates that foreigners were aware of sacrifices in Iran. For studies on sacrifice in the Avestas and Zoroastrianism, see Benveniste (1964), Jong (2002), and Panaino (1986, 2005, 2020).

時安息王性甚頑暴，將統四兵伐罽呢吒，罽呢吒王亦即嚴誠，兩陣交戰，刀劍繼起。罽呢吒王尋便獲勝，殺安息人凡有九億。問群臣曰：「今我此罪可得滅不？」<sup>31</sup>

Deeg (2012: 361–362) importantly points out that this “reads like a reminiscence of the remorse of Aśoka over the cruelties of the Kaliṅga,” but our present interest is the fact that the king of Arśak is framed as violent by nature. This is certainly not a historical account of a battle that actually occurred, but the characterization of the Parthian king as a wicked adversary is telling of how Buddhists viewed Parthia. In other instances, the Parthians are framed as destroyers of Buddhism, which is curious, as we know that Buddhism existed and flourished in their eastern borderlands. Buddhists there were evidently not exterminated or forced to flee elsewhere. For example, the *\*Aśokarājavadāna* (*Ayu Wang zhuan* 阿育王傳), the chronicle of King Aśoka, relates that the western king, named *\*Pahlava*, led an army of one hundred thousand to destroy monasteries and stūpas, and to kill Buddhist monks. This king stood alongside two other “wicked kings”: those of the Śāka and Yavana.<sup>32</sup> Whether Chinese Buddhists understood the connection between Pahlava and Arśak is uncertain, but there was likely a perception that the kingdoms to the west of India were generally violent and destructive, unlike the virtuous Buddhist kings of India.<sup>33</sup> This is in stark contrast to the Chinese state descriptions of Parthia, in which we find a neutral description, as well as the records of cordial relations with China.

Chinese Buddhists, however, might not have regarded Parthia as irremediable, since there is at least one recorded tale in which Parthians encounter the Buddhadharma, thanks to the benevolence of the buddha Amitābha, who presides over the “Pure Land” of Sukhāvati, a paradisaical realm into which beings

31 *T* 2058, 50: 316b16–19. The Chinese text is titled *Fu fazang yinyuan zhuan* 付法藏因緣傳 (*Account of the Causes and Conditions in which the Canon of Dharma was Transmitted*).

32 “In the future world, there will be three wicked kings who appear: the first will be called Śāka, the second will be called Yavana, and the third will be called Pahlava. They will assault the common people, and destroy the Buddhadharma. [...] In the west, there will be a king called *\*Pahlava*, who will also lead a retinue of 100,000, and also destroy stūpas and monasteries, slaughtering practitioners of the path [i.e., Buddhists].” 未來之世當有三惡王出：一名釋拘，二名閻無那，三名鉢羅擾。害百姓破壞佛法。[...] 西方有王名曰鉢牢，亦將十萬眷屬，亦壞破塔寺殺諸道人。 *T* 2042, 50: 126c1–6. The Chinese translation is attributed to An Faqin 安法欽 in 306.

33 The word “Pahlava” was already discussed by prominent scholars in the nineteenth century. Bühler (1886: cxv) writes, “Pahlava and its Iranian prototype Pahlav are, according to the concurrent testimony of the most distinguished Orientalists, corruptions of Parthava, and the indigenous name of the Parthians.”

who chant the name of Amitābha are reborn. This particular story is cited in a later compilation of Buddhist stories of miracles and auspicious encounters, collected by Feizhou 非濁 (d. 1063), and titled *Sanbao ganying yaolie lu* 三寶感應要略錄 (*Summary Record of Spiritual Experiences with the Triple Gem*). Here we find a story about Parthia, excerpted from a certain “account of foreign countries” (*Waiguo ji* 外國記) that dates to the seventh century at the latest.<sup>34</sup> It is worth translating the entire story, which reads as follows:

The people of the country of Arśak do not know the Buddhadharmā, for they live in a borderland, and are rustic and foolish by nature. At one time, there was a parrot. It was gold and bluish white in color. It was eloquent and capable of human speech. It was beloved by the king, ministers, and commoners. It was plump, [but] weak in vitality. Someone asked, “What do you take for food?” It said, “I have heard Amitābha Buddha chants as a type of food, his body plump and vitality strong. If you wish to nourish me, you might chant the name of the Buddha.” People hastened to chant, and the bird gradually soared into the sky and returned to the ground. The bird said, “Do you all wish to see the rich and fertile land?” They replied, “We wish to see it.” The bird said, “If you wish to see it, you should ride on my feathers.” The people rode upon his wings, but his vitality was still somewhat weak. The bird encouraged them to chant the name of the Buddha, and then he soared into the sky, leaving in the westward direction. The king and ministers exclaimed, “This was Amitābha Buddha, transformed into the body of a bird, to bring in [and save] those rustics of the border region—how could it not be a manifested form [for the sake of] rebirth [in the Western Pure Land]?” They then built a monastery at that location, and called it the Temple of the Parrot. On each day of fasting, they attain the *samādhi* of chanting the name of the Buddha. Thereafter, while few people of the country of Arśak knew of the Buddhadharmā, those reborn in the Pure Land now are numerous.

安息國人不識佛法，居邊地鄙質愚氣。時有鸚鵡鳥。其色黃金青白，文飾能作人語。王臣人民共愛。身肥氣力弱。有人問曰：「汝以何物為食？」曰：「我聞阿彌陀佛唱以為食，身肥力強。若欲養我，可唱佛名。」諸人競唱，鳥漸飛騰空中還住地。鳥曰「汝等欲見豐饒土不？」答：「欲見之。」鳥曰：「若欲見當乘我羽。」諸人乘其羽翼，力猶少弱。鳥勸令念佛，即飛騰虛空中，指西方而去。王臣歎異曰：「此是阿彌陀佛，化作

34 The *Waiguo ji* is earlier cited in the *Zhujing yaoji* 諸經要集 (*Essentials of the Sūtras*), compiled by Daoshi 道世 (d. 683) in 659. *T* 2123, 54: 76a15.

鳥身，引攝邊鄙，豈非現身往生？」即於彼地立精舍，號鸚鵡寺。每齋日修念佛三昧。以其已來安息國人少識佛法，往生淨土者蓋多矣。」<sup>35</sup>

It is uncertain whether this is a Chinese composition or something introduced from abroad, but in any case, it does demonstrate a belief that Amitābha, a prominent buddha in the Mahāyāna cosmos, operated even in borderlands among those oblivious to the true Dharma. His compassion naturally extended to the “country of Aršak,” in which the classic tactic of *upāya* (skillful means) could be exercised for the benefit of those ignorant of the Buddha’s teachings (e.g., benevolently manipulating people into practicing Buddhism for their own good). Some of the populace, otherwise unaware of the path to liberation, were effectively tricked into chanting the name of the Buddha, thereby obtaining a way forward into the Pure Land in the West. Buddhists in China conceivably felt special sympathy for this case, since it demonstrated that if some Parthians could be saved, then Buddhist devotees in China also would have this opportunity all the more so, especially considering their own status in a borderland to the east of India.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the above tale was not directed toward Iranians, but it was rather meant for Chinese readers.

The disappearance of Buddhism from Parthia (again, ostensibly from the eastern regions) in Chinese records is easily explained by the termination of said empire in the early third century, but there was another significant development in Iranian religions that must be acknowledged. As Boyce (1986) notes, the Arsacids carried on the Achaemenian tolerance for non-Iranian religions, but the situation changed in the subsequent Sasanian period. The rise of the Sasanian realm in the year 224 evidently led to a diminished Buddhist presence in Iran. Buddhists existed as a recognizable community within Iran during the third century CE, but as Yamauchi (1998: 88) discusses, the early church of the Sasanians centralized the fire temples and encouraged Zoroastrianism. In an inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, the prominent cleric Kerdīr, who served seven Sasanian kings, announced the annihilation of non-Zoroastrians, including the *šmny*, i.e., *śramaṇas* (Buddhists), alongside Jews and Christians.<sup>37</sup>

35 T 2084, 51: 831c9–22.

36 For an extensive discussion of the Chinese conception of a Buddhist borderland, and their own process of transforming themselves from a borderland into a proper Buddhist realm, see Sen (2006).

37 Widengren (1961: 130). BeDuhn (2020: 4), citing MacKenzie (1989: 58) and adding the Pahlavi words in parentheses alongside the English translation, provides the following excerpt: “And from province to province, place to place, throughout the empire the rites of Ohrmezd and the gods became more important and the Mazdayasnian religion (*dyn*) and magians were greatly honoured in the empire and great satisfaction befell the gods

Whether this was a royal act or simply a hyperbolic statement by a Zoroastrian priest is uncertain, but as Gignoux (1989: 691–692) explains, there are five reliefs in which this magus is represented. This only demonstrates the significance and authority of Kerdīr.<sup>38</sup> Buddhists, in any case, suffered destruction at the hands of the early Sasanians, although not to the point of total eradication. Emmerick (1983: 956) explains that “the Sasanians overran most of Afghanistan during the 3rd century, but although the Buddhists were persecuted and many of their sanctuaries were fired, they clearly survived to a much later period.”

We should also observe that references to Parthia exist also in the Daoist canon, in which the country can function as a mythical land. For the Daoists, Parthia was arguably even more of a fantastical realm than it was for the Buddhists, simply because Daoism never had a historical link to Iran. One Daoist narrative even relates that Laozi, the mythical founder of Daoism, left China for the West to edify the foreign tribes. Laozi’s itinerary is said to have included Rome (Daqin) and Parthia by cart.<sup>39</sup> Daoist clergy are unlikely to have ever actually ventured to either Rome or Iran, but they would have read about these distant nations. Daoist authors could easily imagine the superior philosophy of Laozi being transmitted westward to foreign peoples, not unlike how the foreign faith of Buddhism had been introduced from abroad, which in turn extensively supplanted indigenous religious traditions.

From the above discussion it is clear that “Parthia” functioned in several roles in China. Diplomats and then historians treated it as a major polity to the West. Buddhist history relates how several prominent translators arrived in China from Parthia, although whether these figures were ethnically Parthian is debatable. I believe that they were from territories under the dominion of the Parthians. At the same time, for Buddhists in China, Parthia, or sometimes the more nebulous “Pahlava” to the west of India, could also represent a brutish and even “anti-Buddhist” society. The negative caricature of Parthia in Buddhism predictably carried over to the Sasanian period, which we will

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and water and fire and beneficent creatures, and great blows and torment befell while Ahreman and the demons and the heresy (*qyš*) of Ahreman and the demons departed and was routed from the empire. And Jews (*yhwdy*) and Buddhists (*šmny*) and Hindus (*blmny*) and Nazarenes (*nčly*) and Christians (*klystyd'n*) and Baptists (*mktky*) and Manichaeans (*zndyky*) were smitten in the empire, and idols were destroyed and the abodes of the demons disrupted and made into thrones and seats of the gods.” MacKenzie (1989: 64) notes the following: “*šmny*, via Sogdian, from Sanskrit *śramaṇa* ‘monk.’”

38 See also the extensive overview of Kerdīr by Skjærvø (2012).

39 This story is found in the *Sandong zhunang* 三洞珠囊 (DZ 1162, 25: 355c), whose extant recension appears to date to the Tang period, although the relevant material could date to a few centuries earlier. See Hu (1995: 233).



discuss in the following chapter. Still, tales were told of how at least one buddha manifested in Parthia to save the sentient beings born in that borderland, which otherwise was hopeless with respect to accessing the Dharma of the Buddha. In reality, Chinese Buddhists could only imagine what this “country of Aršak” ought to be like, since none of them had ever traveled there. The same was true for the Daoist community.

## Sino-Iranian Relations in the Sasanian Period

Modern scholarship on Sasanian Iran tends to focus on its relationship with Byzantium, framing this as a complex interaction between two competing world powers in late antiquity, but this model overlooks the fact that the Persians also frequently interacted with China for diplomatic and commercial purposes. This solid connection resulted in the Chinese taking Persia seriously as a major power in the West. The Chinese also documented the culture, religion, commodities, and governance of their counterpart. Similarly, as Agostini (2019: 456, fn. 17) observes, “China was well known during the Sasanian period.” Here I want to explore the Chinese perspective on Sasanian Iran, and focus on unpacking a number of complex issues related to the relevant primary sources.<sup>1</sup>

### 1 The Ethnonym of Persia in Chinese

Sasanian Persia was generally called *Bosi* 波斯 in Chinese (*pa siǎ/si* in Early Middle Chinese as reconstructed by Pulleyblank). This word, I think, is an abbreviation of *Bolasi* 波刺斯 (EMC: *pa lat siǎ/si*) or *Boluosi* 波羅斯 (EMC: *pa la siǎ/si*).<sup>2</sup> These two three-character readings are attested in the *Shijiafang zhi* 釋迦方志 (*Chronicle on the Spread of Buddhism*) of 650 by the monk Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), who summarized a few sources available to him.<sup>3</sup> Pelliot has explained that Chinese *Bosi* is a “transcription du nom de la Perse en usage en Chine depuis le milieu du cinquième siècle de notre ère.”<sup>4</sup> The three-character readings appear to derive from the Middle Persian *pārsī(g)*, or more likely Sanskrit *pārasa/pārasī(ka)*, i.e., “Fars” or Persian/Persia, although other renderings are also found, as we will see below; nonetheless, contemporary Chinese sources do not explicitly describe the issues behind the variable names.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 These primary sources have been cited in past scholarship, although not comprehensively. Tashakori (1974) in an excellent MA thesis discussed pre-Islamic Iran in Chinese dynastic histories. Today we have the advantage of the digitized corpus of premodern Chinese texts, which continues to grow. In addition, we have access to digitized Buddhist and Daoist works.
  - 2 See the reconstructed readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 181, 203, 291).
  - 3 *T* 2088, 51: 953c11–12, 968b21, 968b14.
  - 4 See Pelliot’s work reproduced by Forte, ed. (1996b: 206).
  - 5 For Pahlavi (Middle Persian), see MacKenzie (1986: 65).

Haw, however, suggests that Chinese *Bosi* is ultimately derived from Sogdian *βayīšt*.<sup>6</sup> I disagree, because one of the three-character readings is found on a scroll titled “Illustration of Tributary Offerings” (*Zhigong tu* 職貢圖) by Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508–554), which dates between 526 and 539, during the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557). One reproduction of the original dates to 1077 and is kept at the National Museum of China.<sup>7</sup> The text on the scroll cites a certain text attributed to Shi Dao’an 釋道安 (312/314–385). We read the following:

The *Chronicle of the Countries of the Western Regions* by Shi Dao’an: west of Gandhavatī, there is the country of Aršak in the Western Sea. South of Gandhavatī is the country of *Poluotuo* (Pāradān?). West of the country of *Puluotuo* is the country of *Poluosi*.

釋道安《西域諸國志》捷陀越西，西海中有安息國。捷陀越南波羅陁國。波羅陁國西有波羅斯。<sup>8</sup>

If this citation of Dao’an is authentic (and I believe it is), then it would be one of the oldest datable references to Persia in Chinese, which in this context is located west of what appears to be Pāradān in Balochistan.<sup>9</sup> This rendering of what is normally “Gandhavatī” ought to correspond to Gāndhāra. That this data stems from a Buddhist source would strongly point to an Indic word underlying the transcription, hence we would imagine that *pārasa/pārasī(ka)*, or something comparable, had been transcribed into Chinese. The three-character toponym was then abbreviated into two characters, as was often done with names in Chinese.

The same scroll includes a depiction of a bearded Persian envoy in a jacket and cap. The inscription alongside the illustration explains that the country is called “‘Persia’ because they are the descendants of King Prasenajit. The offspring of Prince Jeta took the father’s given name for their clan name, and thus the country was so named.”波斯蓋波斯匿王之後也。王子祇陀之子孫，以王父字爲氏，因爲國稱。This misunderstanding appears to have stemmed from

6 See the forthcoming article by Haw, “The Chinese Term *Bosi* 波斯,” which the author kindly shared with me.

7 A photographic reproduction of the scroll is available on Wikimedia Commons.

8 See also reproduced text and discussion in Yu (2003: 58–59).

9 Tandon (2012) places Pāradān on the eastern side of Balochistan. Dao’an’s work is also cited by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 527) in the *Shui jing zhu* 水經注 (*Commentary on the Classic of Waterways*), which offers some geographical data on foreign lands. The citation is identical to one line of the scroll: “West of Gandhavatī, there is the country of Aršak in the Western Sea.”捷陀越西，西海中有安息國 (*Shui jing zhu* [SKQS], 2.3b).

the fact that the Indian name Prasenajit was originally transcribed as *Bosini* 波斯匿 in Chinese Buddhist literature, although this interpretation may also derive from an originally Indian interpretation; e.g., compare Skt. *Pārasa* and Prasenajit.<sup>10</sup> Uchida (1971: 259) suggests that this particular Chinese interpretation of the Persians having descended from Prasenajit is somehow connected with the Greek myth tracing the ancestry of the Persians back to Perseus, but, according to Uchida, the Chinese then connected with to the familiar Buddhist figure. I find this difficult to accept, because we would have to identify from whom the Greek myth would have been received. The extant evidence does not support this interpretation.

“Persia” appears in later Sanskrit-Chinese dictionaries from the Tang period, which reflects the fact that Persia was known also to Sanskrit authors. The *Fanyu zaming* 梵語雜名 (*Miscellaneous Sanskrit Words*), compiled by a monk from Kucha who resided in China, named Liyan 禮言, gives *Pāraśi* in Siddham script. We might compare Sanskrit *Pārasa* and *Pārasī*, or modern Gujarati *Pārsī*.<sup>11</sup>

An emic explanation of *Bosi* from a Chinese perspective is given in the *Wei shu* 魏書 (*Book of Wei*), one of the dynastic histories of China, which was compiled in 554 by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572). Here we read, “The king is sur-named *Bo*; he is named *Si*.” 其王姓波氏名斯。<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, this is a Chinese interpretation of a two-character name, in which one would expect the first character to be the surname, which is then followed by the given name of the individual. Uchida (1971: 259) alternatively suggests that *Bosi* in the Chinese context corresponds to Pērōz, the Sasanian king who reigned between 459 and 484, when early Sino-Sasanian contacts were forming. This name was interpreted by the Chinese as a surname, in which case the Sasanian country was known to the Chinese literally as the “country of Pērōz.” This is not unlike how Parthia was known as the “country of Aršak” in Chinese. Names like Pērōz, *pārsī*, *pārasa*, etc., would have sounded similar to Chinese scribes, especially if we consider that the intermediaries between China and Persia might

10 Pashazanous (2021) argues that the Jeta (Qituo 祇隨) mentioned in the inscription ought to refer to Kōsrow I, but this is problematic because the context is clearly Buddhist. It is a misunderstanding of the origin of the name Persia. For the Chinese transcription of the Indian name, see Hirakawa (1997: 893). In any case, I am unable to evaluate this article as it is in Farsi, apart from the abstract, and I cannot read Farsi.

11 *T* 2135, 54: 1236a10. The date of this text is unknown, but it appears to be mid to late Tang (eighth to ninth centuries). The Japanese monk Ennin 圓仁 (794–864) carried a copy of it in 838 when he returned from China. See Ennin’s catalog of items: *T* 2165, 55: 1075b18. See the relevant comments in Moriyasu (2007: 534–535).

12 *Wei shu*, 102.2271.

have been people from states such as Khotan or Kucha. In light of the variant readings and transcriptions of the Sanskrit, however, I am inclined to simply translate *Bosi* as “Persia” for the sake of clarity. “Persia” in this context refers to Sasanian Iran.

One critical, albeit often confusing element, of which we must remain constantly aware, is that another polity in Tang-period Chinese literature was commonly called *Bosi* (with the same characters) starting around the early eighth to ninth centuries. This country or region was located in Southeast Asia. Zhou Qufei 周去非 (1135–1189), a later author who digested earlier sources, writes that “on the southwest sea is the country of *Bosi*.” 西南海上波斯國. He also remarks that they have no city walls in this country.<sup>13</sup> This is clearly not Persia, because the southwest sea indicates a region to the southwest of Guangzhou, the southernmost Chinese region. Long ago, Laufer (1919: 468–472) had already insisted on distinguishing these two countries, while noting that Sinologists of his time often conflated the two. It is not always explicitly clear to which polity the word refers after the seventh century, which was when the Sasanian state was vanquished. Chinese authors of the past also did not precisely distinguish the two, but in the decades after the demise of the Sasanian empire, *Bosi* generally refers to a people in Southeast Asia unrelated to the Persians (see Chapter 7 for an extended discussion of this problem and its implications for our understanding of Southeast Asian history), although there were still ethnic Persians in China. Laufer has also noted, “Even the mere fact of the duplicity of the name Po-se [*Bosi*] never seems to have dawned upon the minds of Chinese writers; at least, I have as yet failed to trace any text insisting on the existence of or contrasting the two Po-se.” Fortunately, sources that predate the end of the Sasanian state (mid-seventh century) refer to Persia. The ambiguity is more of an issue for sources from the mid-Tang onward. I have also observed in my readings that official state histories, even from the tenth to eleventh centuries, generally (but not always) refer to Persia when using the word *Bosi*.

Some scholars categorically read *Bosi* as “Persia” or “Persians” in all instances, even when a reference to a Southeast Asian locale would be more reasonable. Nevertheless, we can still find some references to “Persia” in later sources, though we must handle these carefully. Schafer (1951: 403), for example, writes, “As late as 984, men from ‘Persia’ came to the Chinese capital in the company of a party of Uighurs.” The source he cites, the dynastic history of the Song, literally reads, “Uyghurs of the Western Province and Persian heterodox

13 See his descriptive geography, the *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (*Representative Answers on [Countries] Beyond the Passes*), 3.6. Here I have consulted a woodblock print published in 1773. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Sin 524-B ALT SIN).

came to offer tribute.” 西州回鶻與波斯外道來貢。<sup>14</sup> This irregular expression of “Persian heterodox” is presumably a reference to Manichaeans, not to ethnic Persians. There are further details regarding this encounter during the Yongxi 雍熙 (984–987) era in another fascicle of the Song history. Here we read that the “Brahmin monk” Yongshi 永世, and a “Persian heterodox” named Aliyan 阿里烟 arrived in the capital. The text records the following statement:

Aliyan himself said that his country's king is titled the “black-clad one,” surnamed Zhang, and named Limo [LMC: *li mut*].<sup>15</sup> He wears fine brocades for clothing. Whenever he goes hunting, it is for three or two days before returning to the capital. He entrusts nine great ministers to govern the country's affairs. There are no cash sales, for they trade with various items. Eastward from that country going six months one arrives at the Brahmins.

阿里烟自云：本國王號黑衣，姓張，名哩沒。用錦綵為衣。每遊獵，三二日一還國。署大臣九人治國事。無錢貨，以雜物貿易。其國東行經六月至婆羅門。<sup>16</sup>

Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) has drawn attention to this account, pointing out that the “black-clad one” is a reference to the Abbasid Caliphate (Julien 1864: 175–177). The reference to an absence of cash sales, we might conjecture, was a miscommunication regarding Islamic prohibitions against usury (*ribā*). In any case, the meaning of “Persian heterodox” is not explicitly clear based on this data alone, but in this context, it appears to denote a religious group, rather than an ethnic identity.

## 2 Early Descriptions of Persia

The most substantial Chinese source on pre-Islamic Persia is found in the accounts of countries in the Western Regions in the aforementioned *Wei shu* of 554. There is no discussion of the ethnogenesis of Persia in the *Wei shu* or other dynastic histories. It would have been apparent to the Chinese of the fifth and

<sup>14</sup> *Song shi*, 4.72. My translation.

<sup>15</sup> I assume that *li* 哩 can be phonetically read as *li* 里. See reconstructed LMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 188, 218).

<sup>16</sup> *Song shi*, 490.14105–14106. My translation. This account is also given in a slightly different version in the *Taizong Huangdi shilu can* 太宗皇帝實錄 (*True Record of Emperor Taizong*; 30.1a–b) by Qian Ruoshui 錢若水 (960–1003).

sixth centuries that in the preceding centuries, and in particular during the Han dynasty, there had been no recorded official contact with a country called “Persia.” It was only some centuries later that the Chinese contacted them. Some authors instead viewed the Persian royalty as descendants of Prasenajit, in which case they would have been imagined as having an origin in India. The Chinese did not regard Persia as any type of successor to the Parthians. The Sasanians themselves similarly did not conceive of themselves as “successors” to the Parthians either. Persian diplomats presumably did not identify their country as a successor state (although we have no explicit records of what they said to the Chinese court on this matter). Still, we might imagine what was said reflected the Sasanian propaganda reproduced in later sources. Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, writes that Ardašīr (r. 224–240), the founder of the Sasanian kingdom, “wished to recover the royal power (or: the kingdom) for its rightful holders and for those who had held it continuously in the previous time of his predecessors and forefather, before the ‘Party Kings,’ and [wished] to gather it together again under one head and one monarch.”<sup>17</sup> Bosworth (1999: 3, fn. 6) notes that this reflects Sasanian imperial propaganda in which they were the heirs of the pre-Arsacid rulers. The Chinese view differed from this: they understood the Persians as geographically and perhaps politically connected with Tiaozhi, which during the Han dynasty was known as a vassal of the Arsacids (as explained in Chapter 2, Tiaozhi appears to have referred to the Tigris River or Seleucid Syria in that period). We read the following in the *Wei shu*:

The country of Persia: the capital is the city of Suli, located to the west of Niumi. In ancient times it was the country of Tiaozhi. It is 24,228 *li* from our capital. Their city is 10 *li* across, with more than 100,000 households. A river crosses through the city and flows southward. The lands are flat.

波斯國，都宿利城，在忸密西，古條支國也。去代二萬四千二百二十八里。城方十里，戶十餘萬，河經其城中南流。土地平正。<sup>18</sup>

Persia was equated with the same Tiaozhi that in the early Han period primarily referred to Seleucia, but in this case, Tiaozhi geographically designates the region of Iraq. The “city of Suli” (*Suli* 宿利; EMC: *suwk li<sup>H</sup>*) is a phonetic transcription of a foreign name, with the Chinese word for city (*-cheng* 城)

<sup>17</sup> See the translation in Bosworth (1999: 3).

<sup>18</sup> *Wei shu* 102.2270.

attached as a suffix.<sup>19</sup> Feng (1982: 89) gives “Suristan” as a reconstruction. Lieu (2000: 51) understands the line differently, interpreting it to mean “the capital of Persia was Su-li (i.e. Seleucia) and was situated west of Merv.” The Chinese, to my mind, perhaps transcribes *šahr[-estān]* from Middle Persian or a related language. MacKenzie (1986: 79) defines *šahrestān* as “province; capital, city.” This toponym is possibly—albeit not with certainty—related to “Asuristan,” which is an earlier Persian name for Babylonia dating to the Parthians.<sup>20</sup> Feng also points to the travelogue of the Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), who traveled to India between c.629 and 645. Xuanzang also recorded some data about Persia that we will discuss in detail below. Xuanzang identifies the capital of Persia as *Su la sa tang na* 蘇刺薩儻那 (EMC: *sɔ lat sat tʰaŋ'naʰ*). This appears to be a transcription of *Surasthāna* (perhaps through a Sanskrit intermediary) or *Āsōristān*, the Sasanian province of Babylonia.<sup>21</sup> The *Wei shu* locates the Persian capital west of Niumi 忸密 (EMC: *nruwk mit*).<sup>22</sup> Saitō (1998: 165–166) notes that this corresponds to Nūmijkat, which is another name for Bukhara, and that this specific instance is an early Chinese reference to Bukhara. This connection was earlier pointed out by Markwart (1938: 161–164), who showed that Bukhara had many names, such as “Namiġkat” in Arabic.

The *Wei shu* does not specify the name of the river flowing through the Persian capital, but we can look to a later source for additional information, namely the *Sui shu* 隋書 (*History of the Sui Dynasty*), which was compiled by Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) in 636 with additional material added in 656. The *Sui shu* reads, “The country of Persia: the capital is west of the Dahe River, [and the capital is named] the city of Sulin.” 波斯國，都達曷水之西，

19 See the reconstructed EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 188, 295).

20 Frye (2002: 76) notes, “Before the coming of the Romans into the Near East, probably under the early Parthians, the term Asuristan, Beth Aramaye in Aramaic, had been coined for old Babylonia, sometimes including northern Iraq, and at times not. [...] The plain of ancient Nineveh was called Beth Nuhadra, but it is unknown whether it, as well as other regions, had independent rulers or were Parthian provinces. The name Assyria, in the form Asuristan, was shifted to ancient Babylonia, probably by the Parthians, and this continued under the Sasanians.”

21 Feng (1982: 89). Xuanzang’s travelogue is titled *Da Tang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 (*Great Tang Record of the Western Regions*). T 2087, 51: 938a10–11. Cf. Li (1996: 308). Monier-Williams’s *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899: 1235), however, interestingly does not define *surasthāna* as a toponym, but rather states it is “a place or abode of a god, a temple.” See also Haw (forthcoming) for some comments. See Widengren (2011) for details on *Āsōristān*.

22 *Wei shu* 102.2270. See the reconstructed EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 181, 213, 221, 227, 271, 294, 302).



蘇蘭城.<sup>23</sup> This “Dahe” (EMC: *dat yat*) ought to correspond to the Tigris River.<sup>24</sup> Feng (1982: 89) curiously identifies this as a transcription of *Dakrat*, which he states is Middle Persian, but the name should be *Diglit* or *Arvand*, the former distantly related to Akkadian *Diglat/Idiglat* (Sumerian *Idigna*). This, in turn, became *Tigrā-* in Old Persian. The transcription in Chinese could also possibly be from Syriac *‘Diqlat*.<sup>25</sup> Based on the data given in the above sources, the Persian capital of the Chinese sources refers to Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris River. Moreover, the description of the land as flat rules out the mountainous regions of Eastern Iran.

The distance of 24,228 *li* between the Chinese capital and Persia is a precise distance, rather than a general estimate.<sup>26</sup> How this number was reached is uncertain to me; we might suspect that it was converted from a foreign source. The definition of the *li* 里 (“mile”) varied over time. 24,228 *li* would convert to approximately 10,553.71 km during the period in question.<sup>27</sup> This is an overestimated distance based on modern calculations.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is certain that the Chinese understood Persia as occupying the area of what we would call

23 *Sui shu* 83.1856. *Sulin* 蘇蘭 in EMC is reconstructed as *so lin<sup>h</sup>* (Pulleyblank 1991b: 195, 294).

24 See the Middle Chinese readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 69, 123).

25 For Syriac, see Payne et al. (1879: 939); for Persian and data on the Tigris, see Potts (2006).

26 I initially wondered if this value could have been somehow derived from Ptolemy. Attempting to find a parallel with distances based on Ptolemy’s *Geography*, however, proved fruitless. Ptolemy (7.5) was certainly aware of China and the Tarim Basin: “The part of the world [contained] in our *oikoumenē* is bounded to the east by the unknown land that is situated next to the eastern peoples of Great Asia, [namely] the Sinai and the people in *Sērikē*.” See the translation in Berggren and Jones (2000: 108), as well as translations of excerpts by Yule (1866: cxlvi-cliii).

27 In the traditional Chinese system of measurements, 1 *li* constitutes 1,800 *chi* 尺. 1 *chi* during the Wei period was 24.2 cm. 1 *li* would therefore have equaled approximately 0.4356 km during the period in question. See the values and conversions for traditional Chinese measurements in Togawa et al. (2011: 1742).

28 Distances between China and foreign countries were presumably measured in large part by counting the number of days required to travel between different points, but this value is unusually precise. The Chinese worldview during this period, and until early modern times, saw the world as flat, which meant that it was impossible to employ concepts such as terrestrial latitude to accurately measure exact distances between positions. Cullen (1980: 42) observes that “Chinese astronomers, many of them brilliant men by any standards, continued to think in flat-earth terms until the seventeenth century.” Using Google Earth, a theoretical overland route between modern Xi’an to Baghdad is approximately 6,344 km. The recorded distance was considerably overestimated, but this was inevitable, given the absence of spherical-earth cosmology among Chinese astronomers and geographers in this period. The *Wei shu* (102.2275) also states that Byzantium (Daqin 大秦) is 10,000 *li* (4,356 km) across the sea from Tiaozhi (this referring to Seleucia-Ctesiphon), and 39,400 *li* (17,162 km) from the Chinese capital.

Mesopotamia, and to the west of that across a sea was Byzantium. The “great sea” is not defined; this “sea” ought to refer to the Mediterranean. The distances between countries are overstated, but their placement in terms of directions is generally accurate.

A map known from the Tang period provided the approximate positions of countries in West Asia, but the history of this document in its numerous recensions is quite complex, and it can only be tentatively used as evidence. Moriyasu (2007: 516–532) draws attention to the existence of this bilingual Sino-Tibetan world map, which originally was presumably brought to Japan during the ninth century by one of several Japanese monks who had visited China and returned. Teramoto (1931: 80) first announced the existence of this map. He proposed that the original document had been brought to Japan by the Japanese monk Enchin 圓珍 (814–891), who returned in 858. Nakamura (1947: 19–22) has also discussed the complex history of the document in detail.<sup>29</sup> Mibu (1963) worked on the map further, proposing a tentative connection with the Japanese monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835), who returned from China in 806. The map in question is part of a document titled “World of the Lotus Dais Repository” (*Lianhua taizang shijie* 蓮花臺藏世界), which includes Chinese explanations, a *dhāraṇī* in Tibetan script (or a corrupted form thereof, having been miscopied several times by scribes unfamiliar with Tibetan), and a map of the known world. This was clearly a Buddhist document, and not something issued by either the Chinese or Tibetan court. Schwartzberg (1994: 642), in contrast, states, “The map does not, for example, have any apparent religious purpose. Although two of the cities named in India are important in the early history of Buddhism, the most obvious candidate for inclusion, Bodh Gaya, seems not to be noted.” This statement appears to overlook the Buddhist character of the document. Also, a map of the world showing countries and not cities would need not show Bodhgaya, but only Middle India (and, in fact, we see Middle India on the map).

Based on the aforementioned studies, we know that during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), in 1194, a monk from the monastery Onjōji 園城寺, named Zengaku 禪覺 (d. 1214), produced a copy of this document and its map, although this version was destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. However, at least two copies of Zengaku’s version of the map had been made. One complicating factor is that the scribes who reproduced the map in medieval Japan did not understand the Tibetan script, so inevitably the Tibetan labels were corrupted, although not entirely. Some Japanese monks understood Siddham for

29 Schwartzberg (1994: 642–646), in a study of maps of Tibet, has also made comments based on Nakamura’s study.

Sanskrit. Although Siddham is similar, it is certainly not the Tibetan script. The Chinese labels were, it seems, mostly reproduced consistently. The circumstances of this map are not ideal, but it is still worth considering it as at least one rare type of material for understanding how the Chinese and neighboring Tibetans viewed world geography, especially considering that Persia is also indicated on the map. Teramoto provides a clear sketch of the copy of the map in his possession, which I have adapted and translated (fig. 1).

I have mostly translated the labels—though I must emphasize these are tentative—according to Moriyasu’s interpretation, with reference also to Teramoto’s explanations. Of particular interest to the present discussion is the presence of Persia on the map. Teramoto (1931: 685) deciphered the distorted Tibetan label as “Pa-sin-go,” which ought to correspond to the Chinese *Bosi guo* 波斯國 (“country of Persia”). The creator of the original map collated available geographical data, evidently from chronologically disparate sources, a fact indicated by the simultaneous presence of Persia alongside the Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, and Tājiks (Arabs). This feature is unsurprising, considering that the

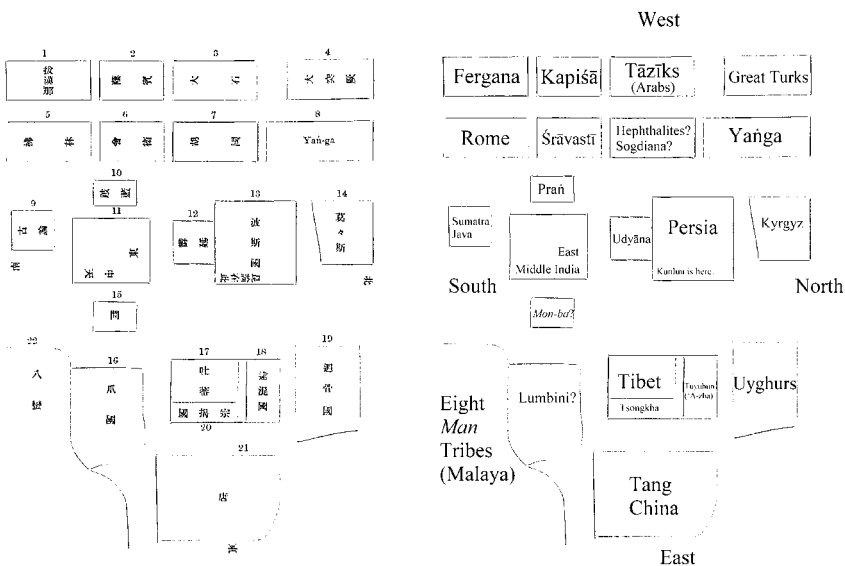


FIGURE 1 Sino-Tibetan map

ADAPTED AND TRANSLATED FROM TERAMOTO (1931: 76)

Note: My translations of some of the labels are tentative. A few remain altogether uncertain. The country listed as #16 in Teramoto’s sketch appears to be a scribal error for *ni* 倪, in which case, this could be a reference to *Linni* 臨倪, i.e., Lumbini. Given that the map was created for Buddhist purposes, it would make sense to include Lumbini, where the Buddha was born. See the reference to Lumbini as *Linni guo* 臨倪國 in the *Tong dian* (198.10a).

original creator of the map was ostensibly a Buddhist monk, not a geographer employed by the state. Still, for the creator of the map, who might have been Tibetan or even Khotanese (or perhaps multicultural), the geographical area of what constituted Persia was still known. Moriyasu (2007: 523–526), however, suggests that “Persia” here is anomalous, based on the fact that the Persian state had already been eliminated by the mid-seventh century; he therefore suggests that “Persia” could denote either the exiled court in Tokharistan or the Nestorian Christian community there. I tend to think, however, that the creator of the map—again, most likely a monk, and not a professional geographer—simply drew the world as it was then understood, using disparate resources and common knowledge. Persia as a toponym was presumably still known, even by the common people at the time, even if the Sasanians had long been destroyed. It seems reasonable to me that the Tibetans and Chinese in late antiquity generally understood Persia in this position in the world: west of Tibet, north of India, south of the steppe peoples, and originally to the east of the Arabs. The precise locations of the realms to the west of Persia were ambiguous, in particular Rome. People only possessed a broad sense of the countries in the far western regions of the world, not unlike how Ptolemy had only limited knowledge of the geography of China, yet still knew its location relative to other lands.

Looking at the world from the perspective of the Iranians, some ideas have been presented regarding their understandings of China. Over a century ago, Modi (1905: 241) wrote, “The Farvardin Yasht refers to China, and it speaks of it, as Sâini, a name resembling Sin or Sinae, referred to by Prof. Douglas as an old name of China.” Whether this is a credible interpretation would depend on the extant text considerably postdating the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BCE), from which “China” and related names were derived. Modi’s proposal is problematic simply for this reason. In any case, Sasanian administrative geography certainly included China, which in Persia was called Čīn or Čīnestān. The *Bundahišn* includes two references: “Mount Syāhōmand and Mount Wafrōmand are in Kāwul and in those districts which have grown from them, up to the region of Čīn (9.25).” “Mount Asprōz is above Čīnestān (9.38).”<sup>30</sup> “China” in this framework perhaps denotes the Chinese sphere of influence which extended through the Tarim Basin over to the Hindu Kush. Khotan and neighboring states might have been subsumed under the Chinese domain in this view.

30 See the tables and translations in Cereti (2004: 19–21; 28); see also the comments in Modi (1905: 247–248). Agostini and Thrope (2020: 59–60) translate these lines as follows: “Mount Gyāhōmand and Mount Wafrōmand are in Kāwul and in those districts that rose from them, as far as China. [...] Mount Asprōz is above China.”

Returning to the *Wei shu*, we read a number of facts about Sasanian Persia, some of which are *not* known from Greek and Arabic sources. This account of Persia is therefore valuable as the testimony of a contemporary, external observer. Here I will translate and analyze this account while explaining the significance of the stated facts to our understanding of the Sasanians. Although the description as a whole is only a summary consisting of a few pages at most, it was likely collated from much longer materials in the possession of court scholars; these texts, however, are not extant. The Chinese had their own tradition of what we would call ethnography, but often we are left with only excerpts of otherwise lost (and often uncited) works. The summaries of foreign lands and their peoples that were included in the dynastic histories by their compilers were of secondary importance to the project of an official history. Diplomatic records, foreign informants, and various other documents, such as travelogues, were the main sources of information that historians could utilize.

The description in the *Wei shu* covers basic details such as the landscape, agriculture, and livestock, but also a curious creature—evidently an Arabian ostrich—that the Chinese found fascinating, as was also the case in the aforementioned account of Parthia during the Han period. We read the following about Persia:

The climate is arid, [but] households store their own ice. Their lands have many deserts, [but] they direct water into irrigation. Their cereals and animals and so forth are somewhat the same as those of China, just that they do not have rice and millets. The land produces prized horses, great donkeys, and camels. Often there are those [camels] that go for seven hundred miles in a day. Wealthy households possess up to thousands of head [of camel]. They also produce white elephants, lions, and the eggs of a great bird. There are birds shaped like a camel, and while it has two wings to fly, it cannot go high. They eat vegetation and meat. They can also consume fire.

氣候暑熱，家自藏冰。地多沙磧，引水溉灌。其五穀及鳥獸等與中夏略同，唯無稻及黍稷。土出名馬，大驢及駝。往往有日行七百里者。富室至有數千頭。又出白象，師子，大鳥卵。有鳥形如橐駝，有兩翼飛而不能高，食草與肉，亦能噉火。<sup>31</sup>

The area described here is clearly that of Western Iran. The apparent absence of rice confirms what has already been stated by scholars of Iranology, namely

<sup>31</sup> *Wei shu*, 102.2271.

that rice was “a ‘relative new-comer’ not widely grown before the Islamic period.”<sup>32</sup> The relevant Chinese statements, already discussed by Laufer, do not negate the possibility that rice was, in fact, available and consumed. There is an attested Pahlavi word for rice, *brinj* (MacKenzie 1986: 19).<sup>33</sup> However, as far as Chinese observers knew, Persia was not known for its production of rice, nor the types of millet commonly consumed in China at the time.

There is also a detailed account of Persia in the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*Old Book of the Tang*), which is the first of two dynastic histories of the Tang dynasty. It was compiled in 945 by Liu Xu 劉昫 (887–946).<sup>34</sup> A revised history of the Tang was put together by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061) in the year 1060. This is the *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (*New Book of Tang*). The corresponding section on Persia in the first Tang history reads as follows:

The climate is hot. Their lands are expansive and flat. They understand tilling and seeding. They have a lot of livestock and herd animals. They have a bird shaped like a camel. It cannot fly high. It eats vegetation and meat. It even eats dogs and can seize sheep. The locals consider it an extreme menace. They also have many white horses, and swift hounds. Some on hot days will go for 700 miles. The swift hounds are now what we call Persian hounds. They produce mules, great donkeys, lions, and white elephants.

氣候暑熱。土地寬平。知耕種，多畜牧，有鳥形如橐駝，飛不能高，食草及肉，亦能噉犬攫羊，土人極以為患。又多白馬，駿犬，或赤日行七百裏者。駿犬今所謂波斯犬也。出驢及大驢，獅子，白象。<sup>35</sup>

These accounts are similar, but the discrepancy between them is odd. The two accounts perhaps derived their information from similar sources, but reformulated the lines differently. Scribal errors might have also occurred. In any

32 See the discussion of rice in Encyclopedia Iranica by Bazin et al. (1989).

33 Pahlavi is a Middle Persian language. Moyné (1974: 27) explains, “The term *Pahlavi*, originally meaning ‘Parthian,’ was applied to the Middle Persian language of the Sasanian era (AD 226–651) after the language had gone through a considerable evolution on its way to the so-called New Persian. By this time the term *Pahlavi* had attained the significance of ‘heroic’ and was applied to anything reminiscent of the Persian past glory, including the official language of the Sasanian empire. The origins of Middle Persian, however, go back to about 300 BC, or about five and a quarter centuries before Ardashir founded the dynasty.”

34 See the French translation of the section on Persia in the *Jiu Tang shu* in Chavannes (1903: 170–174).

35 Cf. the translation in Kotyk (2022b: 135). *Jiu Tang shu* 198.5312.

case, we can see from these two excerpts that Persia was known for camels, ostriches, and hounds, as well as donkeys, lions, and white elephants. The mention of lions and horses certainly makes sense, but elephants were not raised in Iran. Chinese observers perhaps saw elephants in the possession of the Sasanian court and army, and then assumed that they were originally raised in Iran. Charles (1998) explains that “until the advent of Islam in the 7th century, the Sasanian army in the field was regularly accompanied by elephants, although the preceding Parthian dynasty did not appear to deploy elephants in warfare.” He further remarks, “These animals were procured from their Indian allies, since breeding elephants within Persia seems to have been difficult. In the anonymous 12th-century Persian chronicle *Mojmal al-tawāreḵ wa’l-qeşaş*, an Indian elephant born in Persia among the allegedly 900-strong elephant corps of Kōsrow II (r. 591–628) is considered a miracle.” A Chinese diplomat observing potentially hundreds of elephants conceivably would have concluded that they were domestically raised.

The Tang history mentions what were prized hounds, that the Chinese specifically called “Persian hounds” (*Bosi quan* 波斯犬). This was perhaps a colloquial name, since a search of the digitized corpus of Classical Chinese does not yield many results.<sup>36</sup> In 1701, Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634–1711) stated that these “Persian hounds” were “the type of ‘Peach Blossom Hound’ of Song Emperor Taizong [r. 976–997].” 宋太宗桃花犬之屬也。Wang also states this type of dog is similar in form to a sable (*zidiao* 紫貂).<sup>37</sup> The description in the Tang history seems to denote a robust and agile type of dog, but the type of canine in question is uncertain. In any case, as is well known, dogs (Pahlavi *sag*) were prized pets in Persia, and some specific variety of canine from Persia was known to the Chinese during the Tang period.<sup>38</sup> Islamic Persia, in contrast, came to regard dogs as unclean animals (Omidšalar et al. 2011). The Chinese sources do not indicate the religious significance of dogs to Zoroastrians.

The account of Persia in the *Wei shu* describes the royal and common clothing there:

The king is surnamed *Bo*, and he is named *Si*. He sits upon a seat of a golden ram, wearing a crown of golden flowers, with an embroidered gown and woven cloak, ornamented with pearls and precious things.

36 Zhang (2021: 43–44) notes the minor discrepancies between different Chinese descriptions of dogs in Persia, which seem to derive from the same source, but the wordings differ (*shan quan* 善犬 vs. *liang quan* 良犬).

37 *Chibei outhan* 池北偶談 (*Chance Conversations at the North of the Pond*) (SKQS), 22.11b.

38 For the Pahlavi term, see MacKenzie (1986: 73).

The common man trims his hair and wears a white leather cap and jacket whose sides are kept closed but which opens from below. They also have turbans and cloaks with the edges woven shut. Ladies wear large jackets and cloaks. Their hair is curled in the front and draped down in the back. They ornament themselves with gold, silver, and flowers, and moreover they string together multicolored beads and hang them from the shoulders.

其王姓波氏名斯。坐金羊牀，戴金花冠，衣錦袍，織成帔，飾以真珠寶物。其俗丈夫剪髮，戴白皮帽，貫頭衫兩廂近下開之，亦有巾帔緣以織成。婦女服大衫披大帔，其髮前為髻後披之。飾以金銀花，仍貫五色珠落之於膊。<sup>39</sup>

There is nothing unexpected from this description. The type of common tunic or jacket described here seems to be reflected in the depiction of the Persian envoy in the aforementioned “Illustration of Tributary Offerings” from the sixth century.

The description of royalty in the *Wei shu* is particularly interesting, since it relates a royal custom concerning a prince's succession to the throne that is otherwise not explicitly described in non-Chinese sources.

The king possesses more than ten separate small camps within the country, which are like the imperial villas of China. He travels to them annually starting in the fourth month, and then returns in the tenth month.<sup>40</sup> After the king's accession, he makes a selection from among his sons. A confidant secretly writes the name and seals it in a repository. None of the sons or great ministers know who it is. Following the king's death, they open the document and examine it. He who was named in the sealed document is raised as the king. The other sons depart separately to take command of borderlands, as the brothers are not to see each other again.

王於其國內別有小牙十餘所，猶中國之離宮也，每年四月出遊處之，十月乃還。王即位以後擇諸子。內賢者密書其名封之於庫，諸子及大臣皆莫之知也。王死衆乃發書視之，其封內有名者即立以為王，餘子出各就邊任，兄弟更不相見也。<sup>41</sup>

39 *Wei shu*, 102.2271.

40 These months ostensibly refer to Chinese lunar months. See the discussion of the Persian calendar in this chapter below.

41 *Wei shu*, 102.2271.



This description is also echoed in the Tang history, although some details change. Again, we are left wondering about the primary sources from which this information was copied, but these remain uncertain. There is an interesting discrepancy, however, particularly regarding the throne of the king:

Their king resides in two cities. He also possesses more than ten great cities; they are like the imperial villas in China. When their king first ascends to the throne, he secretly selects a son who may succeed him. He writes his name before sealing and storing it away. After the king dies, the great ministers and sons of the king open the seal and inspect [the document] together. They elevate the name written therein as sovereign. The king wears a crown of golden flowers. He sits upon a lion throne. His garb is a brocade gown bedecked with neck ornaments.

其王居有二城，復有大城十餘，猶中國之離宮。其王初嗣位，便密選子才堪承統者，書其名字，封而藏之。王死後，大臣與王之群子共發封而視之，奉所書名者為主焉。其王冠金花冠，坐獅子牀，服錦袍加以瓔珞。<sup>42</sup>

The Tang history states that the king sits upon a “lion throne” (*shizi chuang* 獅子牀), whereas the *Wei shu* states he sits upon a “golden ram throne” (*jinyang chuang* 金羊牀). As Harper (1979: 51) has explored in a seminal article on artistic representations of Sasanian thrones, lion legs are visible in depictions of altars on Sasanian coins, which Harper interprets to be “a complete throne and a fire altar combined to form a single image.” Lions and other bestial features, such as winged horses, are found in Sasanian art and other items, such as silver plates. As shown by Herzfeld (2020: 14), in one instance, Kōsrow I sits upon a throne carried by winged horses. The mention of a golden throne parallels what we read in the *Chronology of Ancient Nations* by Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), who relates that Pērōz went to a fire temple in order to lift a drought, and there he sat upon a seat of gold, which was said to have been like a throne albeit smaller. Al-Bīrūnī then remarks, “It was a custom for a famous fire-temple to have a golden (seat) for the purpose that the king should sit upon it when he came to the temple.”<sup>43</sup> The above facts would indicate that Chinese observers actually went to Persia and observed royal practices and regalia, but some information might have also been relayed through intermediaries. The texts are not explicitly clear about the informants.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the translation in Kotyk (2022b: 134–135); *Jiu Tang shu* 198.5311.

<sup>43</sup> See the translation in Sachau (1879: 215), and comments in Harper (1979: 63).

The practice of writing the name of the king's successor, mentioned in the Chinese testimony, appears to be connected with the attested custom of designating the heir in the presence of eminent members of the court. Tafazzoli and Rajabzadeh (2011) explain that "the successor to the throne was customarily designated in the presence of the chief secretary and the chief mowbad (*Šāh-nāma*). When a careful investigation was required the king would appoint one reliable man from among his *dabīrs*, one from among the clergy, and one from among his attendants for the purpose." On the Chinese account, Lieu (2000: 52) importantly observes "the similarity of this to Procopius' account of how Kawad was succeeded by Khusrau Anushirwan in 531. The latter was named in a document which was opened after the death of Kawad by Mebodes before the assembled Persian nobles. Khusrau was duly proclaimed King of Kings instead of the unpopular Caoses who, as the eldest son, justifiably thought that he had the stronger claim to the throne."

Royal and bureaucratic offices are also described in the *Wei shu*, but the transcriptions appear to mix Sogdian and Pahlavi. Laufer (1919: 529–534) has already drawn attention to these titles; my interpretation only expands upon his conclusions. The excerpt from the *Wei shu* reads as follows:

The people call the king *ʔšyδ* (*axšēδ*), the consort *bāmbišn*, and the sons of the king *šāh*. The great ministries include the \**magudan*, who is in charge of the domestic judiciary. The *naxwāragān* is in charge of the treasury and lifting of prohibitions. The *dibīr* is in charge of documents and various responsibilities. Next there is the *argbed*, who is in charge of the king's internal affairs. The *spāhbeds* are in charge of the soldiers and cavalry of the four quarters. Below them are the subsidiary offices under which duties are delegated.

國人號王曰：醫噴，妃曰：防步率，王之諸子曰：殺野。大官有摸胡壇，掌國內獄訟。泥忽汗，掌庫藏開禁。地卑掌文書及衆務。次有過羅訶地，掌王之內事。薛波勃，掌四方兵馬。其下皆有屬官，分統其事。<sup>44</sup>

These descriptions of offices constitute a valuable external witness to the Sasanian state, but some questions arise when comparing what we know of this topic from other sources. Panaino has explained to me that the regal title of *yi zan* 醫噴 (EMC: *?i tsan<sup>h</sup>*) seems to correspond to Sogdian *ʔšyδ* = *axšēδ*,

44 *Wei shu*, 102.2271. Cf. the translation by Shi (2021: 145).

i.e. “king, commander.”<sup>45</sup> This word has other attested variants. He also states, “This is connected with Avestan *xšaēta-*, ‘brilliant, splendid,’ said of Yima and of the Sun. The link with Old Persian *xšayaθiya-* is a matter of debate.”<sup>46</sup>

The title of a “consort” (*fei* 妃) in Chinese is *fang bu shuai* 防步率 (EMC: *buay* *bʰ swiʰ*).<sup>47</sup> This is a transcription of Pahlavi *bāmbišn*, which specifically denotes a princess or queen, whereas the Chinese term can denote both royal concubines and wives. A prince is called *sha ye* 殺野 (EMC: *šait jia*).<sup>48</sup> This is clearly Pahlavi *šāh*, which normally means king. Laufer remarks, “According to Sasanian custom, the sons of kings ruled provinces as ‘kings.’” On this point, Panaino offers the following observation: “It is peculiar the fact that the sons of the king were called *šāh*, like the Persian king. But perhaps this means that while the king was a *šāhān āh*, they were simply *šāh!*”<sup>49</sup> The official offices listed here are straightforward and reveal that the Chinese had some amount of detailed knowledge of the Sasanian state apparatus. Again, this excerpt summarizes what was likely to have been far lengthier documentation available to court scholars. This data also confirms known details about the Sasanian state, although some of the transcriptions are somewhat unclear. The chief of the domestic judiciary is titled *mo hu tan* 摸胡壇 (EMC: *mʷ ɣʷ dan*).<sup>50</sup> Laufer reconstructs this as *magudan* or *magutan*. This is evidently connected with the Magi, and this is one of the earliest known references to them in Chinese. Laufer (1919: 531–532) remarks, “The ending *dan* reminds one of such formations as *herbedān* (‘judge’) and *mobeḏān mōbeḏ* (‘chief of the Magi).” He also importantly instructs us to “compare the Armenian loan-word *movpetan* (also *movpet, mogpet, mog*).”

The word *ni hu han* 泥忽汗 (EMC: *nejʰ xwət ɣanʰ*) is an approximate transcription of *naxwāragān*, which is derived from *naxwār*.<sup>51</sup> Laufer writes that this “is a family-name or title written by the Greek authors *Ναχοραγάν*, *Ναχοεραγάν*, *Σαρναχοραγάνς* (prefixed by the word *sar*, ‘head, upper’).” Gignoux (2004: 41–43) points out that this was an ambiguous title in sources of antiquity. It is regarded as a hereditary title or surname in different sources. The equivalent Persian loanword in Syriac is *nkwrgn*, which is defined as “governor” according

45 See the reconstructed EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 364, 391–392). *Zan* 噴 is not in Pulleyblank’s lexicon, but phonetically comparable characters are read *tsanʰ* and *dzanʰ*.

46 Private communication (19 August 2020). For Sogdian, see Gharib (1995: 29).

47 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 43, 91, 289).

48 Pulleyblank (1991b: 273, 363).

49 Private communication (19 August 2020).

50 Pulleyblank (1991b: 126, 217, 300).

51 Pulleyblank (1991b: 119, 126, 224).

to Ciancaglini (2008: 215). The Chinese description, however, describes a treasurer, which presumably was a position located in the capital.

*Di bei* 地卑 (EMC: *di<sup>H</sup> pjiä*) very clearly represents *dibīr* (scribe or secretary). The Chinese text appropriately states that this position deals with documents.<sup>52</sup> Tashakori (1974: 110) importantly points out that an alternative rendering of this word is attested in the *Zhou shu* 周書 (*Book of the Zhou*), compiled in 636: *di bei bo* 地卑勃 (EMC: *di<sup>H</sup> pjiä bāt*), which transcribes *dibīrbed* (chief scribe).<sup>53</sup> This sort of position was eminent at the Sasanian court. Tafazzoli and Rajabzadeh (2011) explain that “secretaries had the important and delicate duty of handling the royal correspondence and of re-cording the orders, verdicts, speeches, words of counsel, exhortations, harangues, testaments, and other utterances of the king and his high officials.” They also note that “in the inscriptions of the early Sasanian kings and dignitaries a number of *dabīrs* were mentioned as important political figures.”

The title *E luo he di* 遏羅訶地 (EMC: *ʔat la xa di<sup>H</sup>*) is reconstructed as \**argade* by Laufer, who points out that Theophylactus Simocatta discusses eminent families of the Sasanian empire, one of which was Artabides, who were charged with placing the crown upon the head of the king.<sup>54</sup> However, the attested title in Pahlavi is *argbed* from Parthian (*h*)*argbed*, (*h*)*arkpat* (*ʔrkpty*, *hrkpty*), as discussed by Chaumont (2011). The Middle Chinese pronunciation is only an approximation of the Pahlavi. Chaumont remarks that “two possible meanings have been suggested, fortress commander (cf. New Persian *arg*) and chief tax collector or taxation manager; the former seems much more likely.” The Chinese does not furnish any information to resolve this question, as it only remarks that this office “is in charge of the king’s internal affairs.”

Finally, the *xue bo bo* 薛波勃 (EMC: *siat pa bāt*) is a clear transcription of *spāhbed*, i.e., general or chief of an army.<sup>55</sup> Chinese does not necessarily expressly denote the plural or singular, but here it would seem that “four quarters” denotes a quadripartition. The Chinese term for “four quarters” or, more literally, “four directions” (*si fang* 四方) can otherwise mean the four cardinal directions, and which by extension would denote the entire realm, but here the reference appears to be to a reformed command structure. Gyselen (2004) explains the reform as follows:

52 Pulleyblank (1991b: 31, 76).

53 *Zhou shu*, 50.919. Pulleyblank (1991b: 40) reconstructs *bo* 勃 as *bāt*.

54 Pulleyblank (1991b: 76, 87, 122, 203).

55 Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 351).

Among the most remarkable aspects of the early sixth century military reform, our literary sources mention the abolition of a single command of the army and its replacement by four generals, each in charge of a *kust*, that is, a region corresponding to a cardinal point, best translated as ‘side.’

The Chinese account is a valuable and datable eyewitness to this command structure, since it would presumably relate to data gathered by a Chinese author sometime after 455, when the first Sasanian envoy is documented, and 554. Gnoli (1985: 266) offers some reserved comments about this purported quadripartition, as follows:

The quadripartition of the empire, which is well documented in Arabic, i.e. tertiary, sources and also present, as we shall see, in secondary sources, was actually promulgated by Xusrō I [531–579] and remained in force for a comparatively short period. In all probability it was then swept aside or nullified by the political and military upheavals during the reigns of the last Sassanian rulers.

Setting aside the debate regarding this, the Chinese source at the least attests to a current understanding at some point in history, in which a *spāhbed*, in fact, was responsible for one of the four regions. This system was presumably initiated sometime between 531 and 554. In this way, we can at least point to the Chinese source as another witness to this debated element of Sasanian history. However, few details about the Sasanian military are given. The Wei history goes on to state that “their army possesses armor, lances, round shields, swords, crossbows, bows, and arrows. At war they ride atop columns of elephants, with hundreds of men following them.” 兵有甲稍圓排劍弩弓箭，戰兼乘象，百人隨之。<sup>56</sup> This is describing an army formation in which elephants would walk ahead of columns of soldiers.

The penal code and model of justice of Iran are outlined in the *Wei shu*. This account and that found in the Tang history constitute a unique and valuable description of Sasanian civil law (Pahlavi *dādestān*), some details of which are not found in other sources of antiquity.

Regarding their penal code, for serious crimes, they suspend [men] from poles and kill them by shooting them [with arrows]. Next is imprisonment in a dungeon. When a new king arises, he releases them. Minor crimes result in amputation of the nose or foot, or they may have their

<sup>56</sup> *Wei shu*, 102.2271.

beard cut or the hair along their temples cut to half; and they attach a plaque around the neck, which is considered shameful. Those who commit armed robbery are incarcerated for life.<sup>57</sup> In the case of adultery with a nobleman's wife, the man is exiled, while they cut off the ears and nose of the lady. The payment of taxes is issued in silver coins based on the region.

其刑法，重罪懸諸竿上射殺之。次則繫獄。新王立乃釋之。輕罪則劓刑，若髡或剪半鬢，及繫牌於項以為恥辱。犯彊盜者繫之終身。姦貴人妻者，男子流，婦人割其耳鼻。賦稅則準地輸銀錢。<sup>58</sup>

Chinese sources do not discuss canon law (*dād*) or traditional orthodox law (*kardag*).<sup>59</sup> Concrete details regarding the canonical law and theology of Zoroastrianism are absent in the extant Chinese sources. The information provided nonetheless offers a contemporary, albeit brief, outline of punishments. We might suspect that far more detailed reports and descriptions about Sasanian law existed in China, but historians could only summarize this data in a short format. The function of dynastic histories was to provide information on the previously ruling regime, the family, and details related to their governance, rather than ethnography. We must nevertheless recognize that the above description differs from *The Book of a Thousand Judgments* (*Mātakdān ī Hazār Dātastān*) by Farraxmart, Son of Vahrām, which was composed c.620. This is a collection of Sasanian legal cases. For instance, although the Chinese speaks of exile and disfigurement for adulterers, the Pahlavi text at hand states, "For adultery with another man's wife the fine is 300 *saters*."<sup>60</sup> This discrepancy conceivably might stem from different time periods, since the Chinese description would have reflected the late fifth or early sixth century.

The fact that the Chinese possessed some detailed information on Sasanian law only highlights how significant the relations between the two countries were. China viewed Persia as a sufficiently important neighbor to record such information. The strength and power of Persia by the sixth century would have already become clear to the Chinese, and it would have been understood that the world was ruled by multiple centers of power. In this way, it was only natural, if not necessary, to gather detailed intelligence on other nations, but there

57 One might initially read 繫之終 as "have [the plaque] attached for life," but the Tang history clarifies that this refers to incarceration for life (see below).

58 *Wei shu*, 102.2271.

59 See the definitions in Shaki (2011).

60 See the Pahlavi text and translation in Perikhanian (1997: 180–181). See the introduction to this volume for details on date and authorship. See also the study by Macuch (1981).

was another reason: the convention of extraterritoriality, i.e., that foreign persons would be judged and punished based upon the law of their original country, for example as described in article 48 of the Tang law code, which is a topic we will revisit in detail in Chapter 5.

The history of the Tang offers some further data on Persian law, some details of which are intriguing and need to be carefully explained. The relevant extract reads as follows:

Legal judgments are not bound by letter. They are verbally decided at court. It is only during the king's enthronement when he can release those prisoners with unlimited sentences. For the crime of rebellion, they heat an iron in the divine fire [of Ohrmazd] and cauterize the tongue. If the sore becomes white, they are considered just. If the sore becomes black, they are considered guilty. Their punishments include severing of hands, amputating feet, scalping the head and attaching a metal collar, and amputating the nose. For minor crimes they shave off the beard, or they attach a plaque around the neck to mark them. After a month they are released. For armed robbery, the guilty are placed in a dungeon and do not come out, even when very old. Minor theft is punished with a fine of silver coins.

斷獄不為文書約束，口決於庭。其繫囚無年限，唯王者代立則釋之。其叛逆之罪，就火祆燒鐵，灼其舌，瘡白者為理直，瘡黑者為有罪。其刑有斷手，刖足，髡鉗，劓刑。輕罪剪鬚，或繫牌於項以志之，經時月而釋焉。其強盜一入獄，至老更不出。小盜罰以銀錢。<sup>61</sup>

It is noteworthy that judgments were not bound by letter, but rather they were orally decided at court, because this stands in contrast to the survey of the Sasanian judicial system by Shaki (2012), in which it is said that judgments and records of the court were, in fact, written down. The Chinese might reflect an observer's point of view in which pronouncements were read aloud, or conversely perhaps the Sasanian justice system operated differently at the time when the Chinese account was recorded.

The practice of cauterizing the tongue with an iron that had been heated in the sacred fire, used to determine whether a rebel was just or not, was evidently connected with the process of ordeals. These are well attested in the extant literature. Shaki explains, "There were essentially two modes of ordeal: the cold (*war ī sard*), such as drinking sulphurous water (*sōgand xwardan*, by extension

61 Cf. the translation in Kotyk (2022b: 134–135); *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5312.

‘swear on oath’), and the warm (*war ī garmōg*), such as passing through fire, as in the case of the legendary hero Siyāvūš related in the Šāh-nāmā, or submitting to the ordeal by molten brass, as experienced by Ādurbād ī Māraspandān.” Exposing the tongue to a hot iron was imaginably inspired by similar ideas. The coloration of the resulting sore—black or white—evokes ideas of darkness versus light, falsity versus truth, hence this act is certainly coherent with Zoroastrian notions of dualism, and good vs. evil. A piece of iron exposed to the sacred fire of Ohrmazd would become a suitable instrument with which to test whether the rebel was just in their act against the throne. The significance of iron is also coherent with Zoroastrian theology. Zoroastrian eschatology speaks of a river of molten metal purifying hell in the future. Molten metal, more than fire itself, is thought to be impermeable to impurities and contamination.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Zoroastrian cosmology views the sky, which itself is divine, as “a body of beaming steel.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, a pure substance that is further sanctified in the divine fire could be reasonably used in the ordeal to determine the justness of a cause. Zhang (2011: 111) also points out the inextricably religious element of this act of cauterization, but further importantly notes that the *Manusmṛti* (8.114–116) refers to the act of grasping onto fire when judging a man: the fire, it is believed, should not burn the innocent. The use of fire to gauge a man’s virtue can clearly be traced back to an earlier ancient heritage.

The *Wei shu* is one of the earlier extant Chinese sources that specifically mentions the religious customs of Zoroastrians. Some Indian Buddhist works in Chinese translation from around the same period briefly repeat a few Indian ideas about Persians that relate to Zoroastrianism (see Chapter 4 below), but these are just stereotypes.

There is no apparent Chinese word *phonetically* representing “Mazdean” or “Zoroastrian,” although Zoroastrianism as an identifiable institution certainly existed in China, especially after the seventh century, as we will see later. The *Wei shu* gives the following description:

They commonly worship a fire god and a sky god. Their letters are different from [those of] the books of the *Hu*.<sup>64</sup> Many of them take their elder and younger sisters as wives and concubines. In other unions they do not even distinguish between those noble and lowborn. They are

62 This element of Zoroastrian eschatology is discussed at length in a monograph by Panaino (2021a).

63 See the translation and discussion in Panaino (2019: 39–40).

64 This is ostensibly referring to Sogdians and other Iranian peoples.



indeed regarded as the most grotesque among the foreign tribes. Girls from among the commoners, aged ten and above, who possess [fair] appearances, are raised by the king and gifted to those men possessing merit. When someone dies, the corpse is often abandoned on the mountains. Mourning clothes are worn for a month. Outside the city are people who live separately. They know only of matters related to mourning and burial. They are called unclean people. They distinguish themselves by ringing a bell when entering the city.

俗事火神天神。文字與胡書異。多以姊妹為妻妾，自餘婚合亦不擇尊卑，諸夷之中最為醜穢矣。百姓女年十歲以上有姿貌者，王收養之，有功勲人即以分賜。死者多棄屍於山，一月著服。城外有人別居，唯知喪葬之事，號為不淨人，若入城市搖鈴自別。<sup>65</sup>

The simultaneous mention of a fire god (*huo shen* 火神) and a sky god (*tian shen* 天神) seems to imply that the Chinese understood that the Persians worshiped two gods: one of fire and one of the sky. The latter perhaps is related to worship of the Sun. This sort of description of the Zoroastrian pantheon was actually not unprecedented in antiquity. We can find similar statements in Christian writings: the martyrdom story of Adiabene, for example, states that those who persecuted the Christians in the fourth century said to the judges of the trials, “The Christians destroy our doctrine and teach people to serve only one god, not to pray to the sun, not to worship fire [...]”<sup>66</sup> The parallel between this and the Chinese account might lead us to wonder whether the Chinese had actually recorded a non-Zoroastrian interpretation of Mazdean divinities—perhaps Manichaean or Christian. A learned Zoroastrian would not have framed their religion in this manner. The absence of a reference to Ohrmazd in the Chinese text under consideration suggests that the informant behind this information was not a Zoroastrian. One complicating factor in this observation, however, is that the Tang history offers a similar but still different description:

People commonly worship the various gods of the sky, earth, sun, moon, water, and fire. Among the *Hu* peoples of the Western Regions, those who worship the fire-sky god all visit Persia to receive teachings from there. When worshipping their gods, they use musk fragrance mixed with

65 *Wei shu*, 102.2271–2272.

66 See the translation and discussion in Wiesehöfer (2001: 156).

sappanwood, and paint their beards with it.<sup>67</sup> They mark their forehead as well as their ears and nose. They use [these markings] as a form of respect. When prostrating they must keep their thighs together. Their script is the same as that of the *Hu* peoples [of Central Asia].

俗事天地日月水火諸神，西域諸胡，事火祆者，皆詣波斯受法焉。其事神，以麝香和蘇，塗鬚，點額及於耳鼻，用以為敬，拜必交股。文字同於諸胡。<sup>68</sup>

Here we read of multiple gods, which appears to be an expanded definition on what was earlier written, but we have to recognize a special term: *huo xian* 火祆, which is a unique binomial comprised of the character “fire” and then an alternative character for “sky” (*tian* 天), but with an appended radical to distinguish it from the regular sense of “sky” (禛 + 天; MC: *hen*). This character does not represent a transcription of any obvious loanwords.

The Zoroastrian customs of consanguineous marriage (*xwēdōdah*) and exposure were astonishing to the Chinese. Wiesehöfer (2010: 119) notes that these marriage customs were deemed meritorious according to Zoroastrian theologians; for the Chinese, however, such customs were abominable, although Chinese authors likely only possessed a limited understanding of Persian marriage customs. Macuch (2010) remarks that “one of the confusing and at the same time unique and most intriguing aspects of Zoroastrian society in the pre-Islamic period in Iran is the complete lack of regulation forbidding marriages between close relations, especially members of the nuclear family, mother and son, father and daughter, brother and sister.” Although the impression of Chinese authors would have been that of incestuous sexual relations, Macuch emphasizes that *xwēdōdah* “translated correctly as ‘next-of-kin marriage,’ does *not* exclusively denote incest, but expressly includes it in a larger scale of endogamic alliances.” She emphasizes the legal aspect of these marriages within Sasanian law, and argues that “one important aspect of encouraging endogamy seems to have been the wish to keep the property of the family intact,” although this reason alone does not explain the necessity for unions within the nuclear family, as cousins would have satisfied this concern. Sasanian law also prescribed various types of marriage, which in some cases

67 Read *su* 蘇 as *sufang* 蘇枋 (*sappanwood*, *Caesalpinia sappan*), based on the line below in the Chinese (*su fang* 蘇方). This is a plant of Southeast Asia, not Western Iran, so it was either imported or the Chinese author misidentified the substance.

68 Cf. translation in Kotyk (2022b: 134–135). *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5311. Note that the *Wei shu* instead reads, “Their letters are different from [those of] the books of the *Hu*.”

could be limited in time, from one to ten years. Consanguineous marriage on a temporary basis might have fulfilled religious obligations while preserving family property. Other complex legal constructions also allowed for auxiliary unions to provide heirs for a deceased man with no sons, in which family designations (brother, son, etc.) functioned as legal categories that did not necessitate biological relationships, as explained by Macuch. These legal and religious complexities were perhaps unknown to Chinese authors. The result was a categorical painting of Persian unions as grotesque incest. As we will see in Chapter 4, similar criticism against Zoroastrian marital practices is found in Chinese Buddhist works.

### 3 The Persian Calendar

One important feature of the account of Persia in the *Wei shu* is the few lines that describe the Persian calendar.<sup>69</sup> We read the following:

[The Persians] commence their year from the sixth lunar month. They place particular importance on 7/7 and 12/1. On those days, the commoners and superiors invite one another and organize festivities, which are extremely merry. Also, annually on 1/20, everyone offers sacrifices for their ancestral dead.

以六月為歲首，尤重七月七日，十二月一日，其日人庶以上各相命召，設會作樂，以極歡娛。又每年正月二十日，各祭其先死者。<sup>70</sup>

This description of the Persian calendar is quite brief, but still significant. We can draw a number of comparisons between this Chinese account and the greatly detailed description of the Persian calendar by Al-Bīrūnī, which in turn will confirm the accuracy of some of his remarks, even if the Chinese source predates him by approximately five centuries.

First, the Chinese author converted the Persian months into Chinese months. These would have been only approximations. They are not precise conversions. For instance, 1/20 (day twenty of the first lunar month in the Chinese calendar) *approximately* corresponds to day twenty of Ābān. Ābān is

69 For a full discussion of this matter, see Kotyk (2022b).

70 *Wei shu*, 102.2272. See the translation in Kotyk (2022b: 212). Here the calendar dates are translated into the format of lunar month/day.

the eighth month in the Persian reckoning. The Persian year was similar to the Chinese year in some, but not all, respects. De Blois (1996: 39) explains that “the Persian year has exactly 365 days, distributed among twelve months of 30 days each plus five special monthless days.” The five “monthless days” constitute five extra days or *epagomenæ* as Panaino (2013: 959) points out. The Chinese year, in a similar way, incorporates twelve months of thirty days each, but this results in 360 days. No such *epagomenæ* are added in the Chinese system. Intercalary months, instead, are inserted in the Chinese calendar: regular intercalary months compensate for the difference resulting from the synodic month (29.53 days) and tropical year (365.24 days). The basic similarities between the Persian and Chinese systems led the Chinese in this instance to view their months as functional equivalents. The first month of the year in the Persian system is connected with the sixth month of the Chinese system. The correspondences between these two systems align as follows:

TABLE 1 Conversion of Persian months to Chinese months<sup>a</sup>

Persian month names	Chinese lunar months
1. Frawardīn	6
2. Ardwaḥišt	7
3. Hordād	8 (Autumn equinox)
4. Tīr	9
5. Amurdād	10
6. Šahrevar	11 (Winter solstice)
7. Mihr	12
8. Ābān	1
9. Ādur	2 (Vernal equinox)
10. Day	3
11. Wahman	4
12. Spandarmad	5 (Summer solstice)

a See the table of Persian months throughout different time periods in Panaino (2011: 160). Table adapted from Kotyk (2022b: 213). Note that Chinese months are enumerated without any names assigned to them.

The Persians commence their year from the sixth month according to the Chinese description. The sixth month generally corresponds to July-August in the Gregorian calendar. This connects with some remarks by Al-Bīrūnī, who wrote at length on the Persian calendar as it was known in his time:

They have adopted the time of the summer-solstice as the beginning of the year for this reason in particular, that the two solstitial-points are easier to be ascertained by the help of instruments and by observation than the equinoctial points, for the former are the beginning of the advance of the sun towards one of the two poles of the universe and of his turning away from the same pole. [...] This day, I mean Naurôz, has receded from its original proper place, so that in our time it coincides with the sun's entering the sign of Aries, which is the beginning of spring.<sup>71</sup>

We might initially expect that the Chinese description of the Persian calendar, whose data ought to have been current sometime between 455 and 554, would define the beginning of the Persian year from the summer solstice. The summer solstice does not technically fall on the sixth lunar month in the Chinese calendar. This discrepancy might be explained by the absence of a precise formula for converting calendrical dates. The *Wei shu* offers several fascicles of information on contemporary astronomy and calendrical science, which are separate from the fascicles dealing with foreign states. We can see the list of the twenty-four solar terms (*er shi si qi* 二十四氣) in the section on calendrical science. These are translated as “seasonal markers,” each of which totals fifteen days. The solstices and equinoxes are included in this system, which are listed as follows:

TABLE 2 Solstices and equinoxes in the *Wei shu*<sup>a</sup>

Chinese solar terms	Chinese lunar months
Winter solstice ( <i>dong zhi</i> 冬至)	11
Vernal equinox ( <i>chun fen</i> 春分)	2
Summer solstice ( <i>xia zhi</i> 夏至)	5
Autumn equinox ( <i>qiu fen</i> 秋分)	8

a *Wei shu*, 107a.2666. Table adapted from Kotyk (2022b: 215).

According to the above Chinese data, the Persian year would have commenced only in the lunar month after the summer solstice (i.e., the summer solstice is in month five, whereas the Persian year starts from month six). Daffinà (1983: 164) explains that *nowrôz* (the Persian New Year) was first set in autumn, but later came to coincide with the spring equinox. The Chinese material,

<sup>71</sup> See the translation in Sachau (1879: 201).

however, does not show any awareness of this. Daffinà also points to the possibility that the Zoroastrian community in China may have followed a different holiday calendar, but there is no available evidence to substantiate this speculation. The beginning of the Persian year, as described in the Chinese source, is more likely connected with a specific Sasanian calendar reform, as explained by de Blois (1996: 39): “According to the back-projected Yazdgirdi calendar, 1 Āḡar coincides with the vernal equinox in the first decade of the sixth century, and this must be the approximate date of what we can now call the Sasanian calendar reform.” Panaino (2010: 7), however, importantly points out that “Al-Bīrūnī, in his later masterpiece, the *Qānūn al-Mas‘ūdī*, apparently corrected his previous statements (and this is the third main source) affirming that the last Sasanian intercalation was made during the kingdom of Pērōz (459–484), thus not in that of Yazdgird I.”<sup>72</sup> The second Chinese lunar month, within which the vernal equinox falls, appears to align with Ādur. This fact would help to validate some later statements about the Persian calendar by Abu’l Ḥasan Kūšyār (c.971–1029). He states that the Sun entered the zodiac sign of Aries in the month of Ādur (the Sun’s entry into the tropical zodiac sign of Aries aligns with the vernal equinox) during the reign of Xusraw I (531–578).<sup>73</sup> The data from the Chinese sources does not offer additional clarity on when precisely the Sasanian calendrical reform occurred. This reformed model, in any case, can be at least confirmed to have occurred before the year 554. The Chinese court conceivably came to understand the Persian calendar not only for the sake of ethnography, but also for diplomatic purposes. They would have

72 See also Panaino (2014: 12).

73 See details in Panaino (2013: 963–964), Panaino (2014: 9). The months that are aligned with the seasons in chapter 25 of the *Bundahišn* (circa tenth century) stem from a later model, in which the beginning of the year was fixed to the vernal equinox. The text reads, “From Midsummer, which is on the day of Xwar of the intercalary month of Tīr, to Midwinter, which is on the day of Wahram of the intercalary month of Day, the day decreases and the night increases.” For the translation of the *Bundahišn*, see Agostini and Thrope (2020: 127). See also de Blois (1996: 44), who remarks that these “intercalary months” (*wihēzagīg*) were not the conventional months of Zoroastrianism, but instead they are the “months whose position in the tropical year is fixed through intercalation.” The summer solstice in this model falls in “intercalary Tīr,” the fourth month, hence the vernal equinox would fall in “intercalary Frawardīn,” the first month. This is entirely different from the Chinese description of the Persian year, which places the Persian New Year one month *after* the summer solstice. MacKenzie (1971: 90–92) defines *wihēz(ag)* as “movement, progression,” whereas *wihēzagīg* means “movable; intercalary (year).” This ought to correspond to the tropical, rather than sidereal, zodiac. The Sanskrit term for the tropical zodiac is similar from a semantic point of view: *sāyana* (“movable”), whereas the sidereal is fixed (*nirayana*). See Monier-Williams (1899: 1207, 553); Henning (2007: 219–220); Kotyk (2018c: 160).

benefited from having an accurate way of converting dates when translating official correspondences.

We should also note here a relevant connection with an item in the art record. Grenet (2018: 247–248) explains that “in about 660, and indeed not very far from Balkh, a king of Samarkand, Varkhuman, commissioned (or at least inspired) a cycle of paintings known in scholarly literature as the ‘Ambassadors’ Painting,’ on display in the Samarkand Museum. The main subject is the reception of delegations from various peoples of Asia at Nowruz (the Zoroastrian New Year).” The Chinese Dragonboat Festival is also depicted.<sup>74</sup> Grenet further notes “that this iconographic program was structured by a calendar synchronism that occurred in 660 and again (though not so perfectly) in 663: in those years the sixth day of Nowruz according to the Sogdian calendar, the summer solstice, and the Chinese festival of the dragon boats all fell on the same day.” Al-Bīrūnī writes that “there was no difference between them [the Sogdians] and the Persians regarding the beginning of the year and the beginnings of some of the months [...]”<sup>75</sup> Based on this and the data surveyed above, we can infer that the Sogdian and wider Iranian world knew how to convert between their own calendars and the Chinese system.

The *Wei shu* explains that “on 1/20, everyone offers sacrifices for their ancestral dead.” The first lunar month in China corresponds to the Persian month of Ābān. Al-Bīrūnī describes the sacrifices offered to the dead during the month of Ābān:

The last five days of this month, the first of which is Ashtādh, are called Farwardajān. During this time people put food in the halls of the dead and drink on the roofs of the houses, believing that the spirits of their dead during these days come out from the places of their reward or their punishment, that they go to the dishes laid out for them, imbibe their strength and suck their taste. They fumigate their houses with juniper that the dead may enjoy its smell. The spirits of the pious men dwell among their families, children, and relations, and occupy themselves with their affairs, although invisible to them.

The Chinese documentation does not delve into details, such as the length of the festival, only stating that sacrifices are offered to the deceased. The festival is said to occur on 1/20, which leaves ten days before the end of the month. This corresponds to the explanation of Al-Bīrūnī, as follows:

74 See also the remarks on this image by Compareti and Cristoforetti (2007: 21–23).

75 Sachau 1879: 220.

Regarding these days there has been among Persians a controversy. According to some they are the last five days of the month *Âbân*, according to others they are the *Andergâh*, i.e., the five *Epagomenae* which are added between *Âbân* and *Andergâh-Mâh*. When the controversy and dispute increased, they adopted all (ten) days in order to establish the matter on a firm basis, as this is one of the chief institutes of their religion, and because they wished to be careful, since they were unable to ascertain the real facts of the case.<sup>76</sup>

The *Wei shu* also records that “they place particular importance on 7/7 and 12/1.” The Chinese dates of 7/7 and 12/1 would respectively correspond to *Ardwahišt* and *Mihr*. *Al-Bîrûnî* does not refer to a festival in *Ardwahišt*, but he mentions a certain feast on the third day of the month. The months of *Amurdâd* and *Šahrevar*, however, included feasts on the seventh day of each month respectively, according to *Al-Bîrûnî*. The tenth lunar month in China corresponds to *Amurdâd*. It is possible that *qi* 七 (seven) was a scribal error for *shi* 十 (ten).<sup>77</sup>

*Al-Bîrûnî* further explains that in *Mihr-Mâh* “on the 1st of it, or *Hurmuzd-Rôz*, falls the Second Autumn, a feast for the common people, agreeably with what has been before mentioned.”<sup>78</sup> This ought to correspond to 12/1 in the Chinese account, according to which “the commoners and superiors invite one another and organize festivities, which are extremely merry.”

The few lines in the *Wei* history concerning the Persian calendar are a noteworthy witness to some of the festival dates that are also discussed later by *Al-Bîrûnî*. The value of *Al-Bîrûnî*’s writings is only strengthened when we compare his work with what we read in the Chinese record. The Chinese source, too, is also validated through this type of comparative approach, which in turn highlights the importance of reading the primary sources in China that deal with Persia.

#### 4 The Persian Language in China

The *Tang* history states that the Persian language is the same as the various *Hu* idioms, which in this context presumably includes *Sogdian* and related

76 Sachau (1879: 210); Boyce (1982).

77 Compareti and Cristoforetti (2007: 67) present a different interpretation. They write, “The average date for the 7th day of the 7th Chinese month is August 9–10th. The texts could be recording either the *Yazdgardî Nawrûz* or a popular Summer’s New Year.”

78 See the translation in Sachau (1879: 206–207).



languages. There were Persian speakers in China even in the late decades of the Tang. This fact is attested by an inscription. In 1955, an epitaph was discovered in Xi'an (formerly Chang'an), on which Chinese and Pahlavi were inscribed. The inscription recalls a woman of twenty-six years, who died in 874. Various theories have proposed that she was Zoroastrian, the descendant of Zoroastrians, or that she was part of the merchant diaspora who came to China via the southern sea route. In any case, the Chinese inscription only mentions her name, husband, and time of death. The Pahlavi inscription gives the Persian and Arabic dates, while also evoking Ohrmazd, but interestingly we also read *sāl 15 ī hamē-pērōzgar xwadāy bagpuhr* ("year 15 of the always-victorious prince [of Heaven], the Xiantong [emperor]"). The word *xwadāy* is apparently a transcription of the Chinese reign era, *xiantong* 咸通 (LMC: *xhjam thewŋ*), hence the fifteenth year of this reign era.<sup>79</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Zoroastrians and ethnic Persians in China would have maintained literacy in Persian, but how much knowledge of the language did the Chinese possess? The study of Sanskrit in China and the wider East Asian world occurred at varying levels, from elementary understanding of scripts to full fluency, as I have discussed in the past (Kotyk 2021b), but what of Iranian languages? We can observe that at least some Chinese writers had some knowledge of Persian, based on a few titles of interest that are known only because they appear in a bibliography of Chinese works in Japan. The *Nihonkoku genzai sho mokuroku* 日本國見在書目錄 (*Catalog of Books Present in Japan*), compiled in c. 891 by Fujiwara no Sukeyo 藤原佐世 (847–898) lists three titles of interest:

- |     |         |  |
|-----|---------|--|
| [1] | 翻胡語七卷   | <i>Translating the Language of the Hu</i> , seven fascicles. |
| [2] | 波斯國字樣一卷 | <i>Script Forms of the Country of Persia</i> , one fascicle. |
| [3] | 突厥語一卷   | <i>Language of the Turks</i> , one fascicle.                 |

Here, *Hu* (胡, Jpn. *Ko*) in this period generally denotes people of Central and Western Asia (whereas people from the southern regions might have been called *Man* 蠻). Modern translations often render both these terms as

79 For an exhaustive discussion of the inscription and its historical background, as well as a translation of the Chinese and Pahlavi into Japanese, see Yoshida (2020). Ferrand (1924: 243) points out that Arabic texts from the ninth century designate the Chinese emperor as *baḡpūr*. The term was used by both Persians and Arabs. See the Late Middle Chinese readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 309, 335).

“barbarian,” although this is an imprecise convention that fails to capture their nuances. As Moriyasu (2007: 532–535) discusses, the Chinese used the term *Hu* when translating what was for them *sulī* in Siddham (Sanskrit or, in some cases, pseudo-Sanskrit). This term is comparable to Sanskrit *śūlika* and Khotanese *sūli*. These derive etymologically from *suṃḍik*, a word that denotes a Sogdian. The Sogdians are distinguished from Persians, Indians, Tocharians, Turks, and neighboring ethnicities in Sanskrit-Chinese dictionaries. Based on this, the first title (*Translating the Language of the Hu*) was likely a lengthy guide to the Sogdian language. In earlier times, however, the referent of *Hu* differed. Boucher (2000: 23) states, “*Hu* appears to have been used with the technical sense of *kharoṣṭhī* script in records on Indian source texts underlying early Chinese translations.”<sup>80</sup>

Moriyasu (2007: 532) points out these titles, suggesting that Sogdian, Turkish, and Persian were useful languages for international travel in the Tang period. The *Nihonkoku genzai sho mokuroku* states that the first title was held at Reizen-in 冷然院, later called Reizen-in 冷泉院, the residence of the retired emperor of Japan, first built in the ninth century. Although the book on translating the language of the *Hu* (Sogdian) was kept at the estate of such a prestigious figure, it is uncertain whether anyone studied this work in Japan in any detail. Sugimoto (1995: 241), conversely, suggests that Japanese aristocrats came into contact with foreign words, not only Sanskrit, but also Sogdian and Persian, and that there was definitely a utility to such guides for deciphering unfamiliar scripts. He points out that Sogdian and Persian, for example, are found written on a piece of fragrant wood that dates back to the Nara period (eighth century), now held at the Tokyo National Museum (item N-113). I agree with this interpretation, and would extend it back to China, where people would have certainly enjoyed deciphering inscriptions in foreign languages. The language guide in seven fascicles, however, points to a more serious study than the mere decipherment of words. There were certainly at least some local scholars who studied languages like Sogdian and Persian.

We know that these books had been brought over from the mainland, but I am unable to find references to them in contemporary Chinese catalogs and works. We know that manuals of foreign languages such as Persian, Sogdian, and Turkish certainly were circulated, albeit in a limited way. The study of Sanskrit in China is better documented due to the Buddhist interest

80 Boucher also remarks, “Second, *hu*, when referring to scripts, languages, and texts, is not used in any overtly derogatory manner—neither by the critics of Buddhism nor by Buddhist exegetes themselves.” This is an important point, since translating *hu* as “barbarian” fails to account for this positive nuance.

in the language, but even in this context, we observe only minimal systematic study of Sanskrit grammar in the premodern period. Instead, monks generally learned the Siddham script and studied word lists. The one extant Sanskrit declension table from Tang China is full of spelling errors. Apart from those who went to India, very few Chinese monks could capably read and translate Sanskrit (Kotyk 2021b). Although some clerics attached to Zoroastrian and Manichaean temples would have certainly read Persian, whether any systematic study of the language was consistently carried out in those institutions in China over time is uncertain. We do know, however, that there were speakers of multiple languages. The famous rebel, An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757), for example, is said to have “understood six foreign languages, and acted as a middleman at market” (解六蕃語，為互市牙郎) according to his biography in the Tang history. He was half-Sogdian and half-Turkish, so conceivably he might have spoken Persian, too, but whether this meant literacy and scholastic fluency is uncertain.<sup>81</sup>

We also have to wonder whether some Chinese scholars outside these communities ever gained literacy in Persian, particularly at the state level. According to the early biography of the monk Xuanzang, in 629, prior to his departure overland to India, he had spent some time “widely familiarizing himself with foreign lands, and extensively studying scripts and languages” (廣就諸蕃遍學書語).<sup>82</sup> Although the languages he studied are left unspecified, we can imagine there was at least some access to languages such as Sogdian and Persian, which would have been useful in Central Asia. Nevertheless, even if the study of some foreign languages was possible, we must recognize that although China had its own internal system of analyzing phonetics and semantics, it was unlike the grammatical traditions of Sanskrit and Greek. Native Chinese lexicography in antiquity did not have specific classifications for nouns, adjectives, and verbs, even if some Buddhist traditions had an awareness of these concepts. The Chinese language itself is not inflected like Sanskrit, for example, although some Chinese Buddhist authors such as Fazang 法藏 (643–712) described how declensions work in Sanskrit, including the concept of gender (masculine, feminine, and neuter) and number (singular, dual, and plural). Fazang writes, “There are altogether seventy-two

81 *Jiu Tang shu*, 200a.5367. See Lieu (2000: 60) for a discussion.

82 This is mentioned in Daoxuan’s biography of Xuanzang from 646–649. See the translation in Kotyk (2019a: 529), and the reproduction of the manuscript text critically edited by Yoshimura (2013: 192). The modern Taishō edition of Daoxuan’s biographies dates to a later period. In this case, the line is identical to that of the Kōshōji 興聖寺 manuscript, which was copied during the Heian period (784–1185), but whose original recension apparently dates to 648. See Kotyk (2019a: 520). Cf. *T* 2060, 50: 447b23–24.

voices [case declensions]. One can understand them accordingly with reference to the rules. However, here [in China] we mostly do not have this model.” 總有七十二種聲，以目諸法，可以准知，然此方多無此例。<sup>83</sup> The inapplicability of these inflected grammatical structures in Chinese meant that the grammarian tradition of Sanskrit only had a limited impact in China, even though the Buddhist presence was immense, and generated deep interest in Indian Buddhist philosophy. We can therefore imagine that a Chinese scholar of the time when studying Persian would likewise have faced a considerable, albeit not totally insurmountable, challenge. To complicate matters, there was no Iranian tradition of grammar. Moyné (1974: 27) remarks, “Unlike the Indians and Greeks, the Iranian people did not produce grammarians of their own language; the few grammars written by Persian scholars during the early period of Arab dominance were in Arabic and on the Arabic language.” Nevertheless, we do find the aforementioned bilingual Chinese-Pahlavi funerary inscription from 874, as well the Syriac inscription accompanying the Chinese inscription on the Christian stele of 781 (see below), so clearly some communities did use these languages from West Asia, but in these cases, they were small minorities, not the prominent intellectuals of the country.

Although we know that the aforementioned book on the Persian script was available in Japan in the ninth century, it does not appear that there was any major project in China to translate any literature from the Persian language under the sponsorship of the court, which stands in contrast to the state-sponsored translations of vast Sanskrit works. In addition to the challenges in terms of grammar, there was no compelling reason—religious or cultural—for intellectuals to acquire Persian or study its literature in the Tang period. Similarly, although a Chinese work on the Turkish language also existed in Japan, it was only one fascicle, so it could not have been a comprehensive grammar. We can only speculate as to what it contained; perhaps it was a word list, not unlike the numerous Sanskrit-Chinese dictionaries of the Tang period, in which we find semantic definitions, but no explanations of grammar.

## 5 Diplomacy between Sasanian Iran and China

The detailed data on Persia in China is explained in part by the rich diplomatic relations that existed between the two polities. The extant Persian sources do not delve into this relationship, but Chinese histories offer recorded dates of

83 Fazang's work is titled *Huayan jing tanxuan ji* 華嚴經探玄記 (*Commentary on the Avatamsaka-sūtra*). T 1733, 35: 149b14–16. See the translation in Kotyk (2021b: 246–247).

formal envoys. Rong Xinjiang (2015a: 61–80), following earlier scholars, places the first substantial diplomatic contact in the year 455, during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). This was during the reign of Yazdgerd II (r. 438–457).<sup>84</sup> This marked the first of many exchanges that continued through the following Chinese dynasties—the Sui and Tang—until the very end of the Sasanians. As we will see, China had a role in housing some of the exiled Persian royalty while watching the demise of the Sasanian empire from afar.

Sino-Sasanian diplomatic exchanges are important for historians since they demonstrate that, for the Persians, the world order was not strictly bipolar, in the sense of Rome versus Ctesiphon; rather, it would have been clear that China to the east was yet another world power. China and Persia were never rivals. Their mutual relations appear to have been consistently cordial. The tone of the relationship is—at one point in time at least—indicated by an important letter that was sent to the Chinese court from the Sasanian king Kawād I (r. 488–531) sometime during the Shengui 神龜 period (518–520). Only a fragment of the Persian letter is preserved. It reads as follows:

The Son of Heaven of the great country was born of Heaven. It is hoped that the place from which the Sun rises is always of the Son of Heaven in Han. The king of the country of Persia, Kawād, sends his myriad salutations.

大國天子，天之所生。願日出處常為漢中天子。波斯國王居和多，千萬敬拜。<sup>85</sup>

I sense that the wording in this fragment is a bit awkward. For example, the repeated use of *tianzi* 天子 (“Son of Heaven”) in this way would be inelegant according to the literary conventions of Middle Chinese. The expression 漢中天子 (“Son of Heaven in Han”) is also irregular; a native Chinese writer

84 The *Wei shu* (5.115) records that in year 1 of Taian 太安, Persia sent an envoy to the Chinese court. See reign dates of Iranian kings in Daryaee (2012: 392).

85 *Wei shu* 102.2272. The name *Juheduo* 居和多 is reconstructed in EMC as *kiə ywa ta* (Pulleyblank 1991a: 85, 122, 162). Chinese characters are often employed phonetically to transcribe foreign names, but the individual semantic meanings of each character (“abide-peace-plenty”) hint at a respectful gesture toward the Persian monarch in this specific instance. This excerpt was from the letter sent from the Persian throne to the Chinese emperor. The translators involved evidently exercised caution. Lieu (2000: 52) reads this line differently. His translation reads, “The Son of Heaven of the great nation, born of heaven. I wish on the place where the sun rises that the Son of Heaven of the Han (i.e., China) will reign forever. K’u-wo-to (i.e. Kawad) pays obeisance a thousand and ten thousand times.”

would not have written in this manner. This leads me to imagine that the Chinese text was an approximate translation from Persian, which would make sense in this context, rather than having been an original composition in Chinese.

We should observe that the place of sunrise for the Persians would be to their east, viz. China, so identifying themselves to the Chinese as the place of the rising Sun would make no sense. The referent in the line “the Son of Heaven of the great country was born of Heaven” is not explicitly clear: is it referring to the Chinese or Persian ruler? If the latter, then the Persian king was avoiding any self-deprecating position by establishing himself as an equal to the Chinese throne. The Chinese monarch is explicitly designated as the “Son of Heaven in Han.” The notion of being “born of Heaven” (but not in Heaven) avoids any sense of explicit deification, a point that confirms an observation by Panaino (2007: 154), namely that “the Persian kings did not consider themselves as ‘gods,’ nor assumed to be *stricto sensu* as real *yazad(ān)* [divinities], but they appear to be human beings sharing divine prerogatives with respect to the other common men.” The Persians do not appear to have considered the Chinese emperors as gods either, but this would have been natural, given that a “Son of Heaven” in China was considered a flesh-and-blood man who held the Mandate of Heaven.

The use of solar imagery is notable, because we observe the same type of language in diplomatic correspondences between the Sasanians and the Romans, although the Sasanians identified *themselves* with the rising Sun when communicating with the Romans. For instance, a fragment of a letter to Justinian (r. 527–565) from Kawād (Malalas 18.44) reads, “Kawād king of kings, of the rising sun, to Flavius Justinian Caesar, of the setting moon.”<sup>86</sup> On this line, Panaino (2007: 157–158) highlights the following important point:

In this framework it is clear that the Sasanian king was linking his person and his kingdom to the Sun, *xwarxšēd*, (Av. *hūuara.xšaēta-*), but in attributing a direct connection between the Moon and the Byzantine empire, he did not intend to offend him anyway. In fact, also the “moon,” a masculine stem in Avestan, was considered a very important divine being, essential for the fight against the demons, in particular during the night.

86 See comments and translation by Maksymiuk (2018: 600). Note also Lieu (2000: 52–53), who suggests that “the greeting formula could well have been a reworded version of a standard Sassanian epistolary greeting as attested in Šāpur II’s letter to Constantius II which, in the Latin translation of Ammianus Marcellinus, reads: ‘Rex regum Sapor, particeps siderum, frater Solis et Lunae, Constantio Caesari fratri meo salutem plurimam dico.’”

This point raises an important question, namely how the Sasanians would have conceived of China on the global level of power, in which Rome and Persia were figuratively regarded as the “two eyes of the world,” i.e., as *the* two centers of power. Modern scholars have grappled with the nature of Romano-Sasanian relations, especially with regard to how they postured themselves relative to one another, but the world at the time was actually not bipolar in terms of power dynamics; rather, it was geopolitically *multipolar*. The Persians clearly understood this reality, hence the cordial salutation sent to their powerful eastern neighbor. The Chinese constituted a *third* power in the world. The Persians clearly afforded them a grand level of respect in diplomacy, especially if we interpret this designation of China as the land of the rising Sun as significant, since they otherwise reserved this epithet for speaking of themselves relative to the Romans. Solar imagery in the Zoroastrian context could also be used in association with the “benevolent eye” (i.e., the vision of righteous and wise royalty).<sup>87</sup> The Persians in this instance perhaps meant to figuratively associate the Chinese ruler with noble kingship. The use of solar symbolism in this context was a consciously crafted pleasantry in writing, but one that also incorporated the Chinese conception of the ruler as the Son of Heaven, a Chinese epithet for the ruler. Persian letters of a diplomatic character in other instances also could draw upon a stock of elements, a practice observed in letters between them and the Byzantines during the late Sasanian period.<sup>88</sup>

Relations between China and Persia were substantial, especially after their respective spheres of influence came to border one another, a point that has been highlighted in the past.<sup>89</sup> The *Wei shu* has records of diplomatic missions from Persia coming to China in the years 455, 461, 466, 468, 507, 517, 518, 521, and 522.<sup>90</sup> There are records of Chinese diplomats who went to Persia toward the later years of the Sasanians. Emperor Yang of the Sui (r. 604–617), for instance, sent Li Yu 李昱, the “Commandant of Fleet-as-Clouds Cavalry,” as an envoy to Persia. Persia reciprocated with a mission of their own to accompany

87 For relevant discussion of the symbolism between the Sun and the eye in Zoroastrianism, see Panaino (2021b).

88 Piras (2021: 185) in his study of royal letters between Persia and Byzantium in the late Sasanian period states that “religious conceptions, dualistic contrasts, and identity symbols taken from mytho-historical traditions could be molded to meet the particular needs of story-telling, persuasive and vindictive discourse with political arms, or efforts to achieve consensus or to endorse one side against another.”

89 Ecsedy (1977) has already drawn attention to the importance of early Persian envoys to China in the fifth to sixth centuries. Paolo (1983) discusses the accounts of Sasanian Persia in Chinese sources in further detail.

90 *Wei shu* 5.115, 120; 6.126, 128; 7a.142; 8.205; 9.225, 228, 232, 233.

his return. They likely returned in 616. This was contemporaneous with the reign of Xusraw II (r. 590–628 CE).<sup>91</sup>

## 6 The Demise of the Sasanian State and the Persian Diaspora

The turbulent final years of the Sasanians are documented, albeit briefly, in Chinese sources.<sup>92</sup> The Chinese records, limited as they are, at least contribute to our understanding of Sasanian history, a topic that is beset with several challenges. Wood (2016: 407) observes that “there are no contemporary internal narrative sources for late Sasanian history. Though seals, coins, and field archaeology have much to contribute, the core narrative for Sasanian history is drawn from a cluster of medieval texts that purport to describe the history of the Iranian world between the third and seventh centuries.” Yet, sources can be contradictory, and the Chinese testimony only adds further material to complicate matters. The Tang history reads as follows:

In the late years of the Daye reign era [605–618] of the Sui, the Western Turk Yabgu Qaghan repeatedly assaulted the country. The king of Persia, Xusraw, was killed by the Western Turks. His son Šīrōy was enthroned. The Yabgu divided his commanders to govern the country, and Persia was completely subjugated to the Yabgu. When the Yabgu Qaghan died, those who had been ordered to administer seized their own authority over Persia, and were no longer subject to the Western Turks. Šīrōy died after one year having been enthroned, and the daughter of Xusraw was made queen. The Turks killed her too. Šīrōy’s son, \*Artaxes then fled to Rome [i.e., Syria]. At the time, the people of the country welcomed him and then enthroned him. This was \*Ardašīr. He passed away after two years on the throne. His elder brother’s son, Yazdegerd, was enthroned.

隋大業末，西突厥葉護可汗頻擊破其國。波斯王庫薩和為西突厥所殺，其子施利立。葉護因分其部帥，監統其國，波斯竟臣於葉護。及葉護可汗死，其所令監統者因自擅於波斯，不復役屬於西突厥。施利立一

91 The dispatch of this envoy is reported in the *Sui shu* (83.1857). The *Cefu yuangui* (SKQS, 970.3b) reports that in 616, a Persian envoy arrived in China. See the table of Sasanian kings in Wiesehöfer (2010: 151–152). Daryaee (2012: 392) alternatively gives “Khosrow II (Aparviz) (591–628 CE).”

92 For a useful survey of the last Sasanians in China, see the article in *Encyclopedia Iranica* by Compareti (2009).



年卒，乃立庫薩和之女為王，突厥又殺之。施利之子單羯方奔拂菻。於是國人迎而立之。是為尹恆支，在位二年而卒。兄子伊嗣候立。<sup>93</sup>

The name of Šīrōy's son, Ardašīr, is initially given as *Danjie* 單羯 (LMC: *tan kiat*), which does not appear to reflect anything from Persian, but it does resemble the Greek rendering, Artaxes. The *Chronographæion Syntomon*, a Byzantine chronicle of rulers from the mid-ninth century has a line in the list of Persian kings that reads, "Siroes cum Artaxe filio" (Σηρόης σὺν Ἀρταξί υἱῷ αὐτοῦ), i.e., Šīrōy and his son Ardašīr.<sup>94</sup> The following line confirms that this is Ardašīr, but the Chinese *Yinhengzhi* 尹恆支 (LMC: *jyn<sup>†</sup> xhǎǎh t̄si*) is corrupted. The new Tang history instead gives *Yidazhi* 伊怛支 (LMC: *?ji tat t̄si*), which better reflects the name Ardašīr.<sup>95</sup> Whether this *Danjie* (Artaxes) stems from Greek is unlikely, given the absence of Greek in Tang China (unless a Byzantine or Christian informant somehow assisted), but Syriac is certainly plausible. This information regarding the final Persian monarchs perhaps was made available through translations of foreign literature, but this is only my own speculation at present. Still, the presence of a multilingual church in China from 635, as we will explore in Chapter 5, helps to explain how such information might have been conveyed into Chinese.

The most striking feature of the above account is that it entirely differs from the narrative accepted by historians today. Wood (2016: 409), for example, explains that "Khusrau's forces occupied large tracts of the Levant for almost two decades, until his armies were defeated in a surprise attack by the new emperor Heraclius, while the shah himself was disposed of in a palace coup." This is related in detail by Al-Ṭabarī (Bosworth 1999: 381–395). Theophanes writes that in 625, Heraclius invaded Persia together with the Turks, but the Turks withdrew due to the weather and Persian assaults.<sup>96</sup> The Chinese account, in contrast, expressly states that Xusraw was killed by the Western Turks, with Šīrōy coming to the throne under their domination. The daughter

93 *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5312. See the French translation in Chavannes (1903: 171–172), and the alternate translation in Lieu (2000: 54). For LMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 70, 154). Godwin (2018: 78) translates this section of the history, but the translation is loose and inaccurate. I read *xiong zi* 兄子 as "elder brother's son." Daryaei (2012: 392) understands "Yazdgerd III (632–651 CE)" to have been the grandson of "Khosrow II (Aparviz) (591–628 CE)."

94 See the Greek typeset in Schoene (1875: Appendix IV, 96); also the Latin in Maio (1825: 34). See also the following helpful webpage: <http://www.attalus.org/translate/syntomon.html> (accessed 02 February 2023).

95 *Xin Tang shu*, 221b.6258. For the LMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 69, 124, 365, 373, 404). Chavannes (1903: 171, fn. 4).

96 See the translation in Mango et al. (1997: 448).

of Xusraw, who ought to be Bōrān (she is not named anywhere in the Chinese sources), was strangled according to the *Anonymous Guidi*, and the *Nestorian Chronicle of Se'ert*.<sup>97</sup> Our reconstruction of the reign of Boran is currently based on a diverse range of sources that are at odds with the Chinese account.<sup>98</sup> The Chinese narrative states that the Turks killed her, although the name “Bōrān” is not given. In the Chinese, Šīrōy’s son, Ardašīr, is also said to have fled, apparently from the Turks, to Rome (presumably Byzantine territories in Syria), and then ruled for two years, but this is not related by Al-Ṭabarī, although he does relate a similar reign period of “one year and six months.”<sup>99</sup>

The Chinese account would mean that it was neither a coup nor conflict with Byzantium that weakened Persia prior to the Arab invasions, but rather it was conflict with the Turks that ultimately led to the crippled state of the empire. Daffinà (1983: 131–139) surveys this account from the Chinese history, but does not explain the anomaly. Lieu (2000: 55) interprets the Chinese account to be an erroneous and confused retelling of events, as follows:

Despite the major confusions in *dramatis personae*, the main event it tries to describe—namely the invasion of Iran by the Turks leading to the revolt of Bahram Chobin against Hormizd IV and the subsequent flight of Khusrau II (Parwiz) to the Roman empire via Circesium where he was well received by Maurice who aided him to regain his throne—is readily recognizable. The Chinese compiler appears to have conflated the account of the revolt of Bahram with the events after the death of Khusrau Parwiz, with the victorious Arabs confused with the defeated Turks.

It is unknown from where the Chinese received their information, but it was clearly different from the sources used by Al-Ṭabarī and other authors. Modern historians have generally used Al-Ṭabarī and Greek authors to reconstruct late Sasanian history. Whether the Chinese account is objectively truer than what Al-Ṭabarī relates is unclear, but if it is true that the Sasanians had already suffered severe defeats at the hands of the Turks around 618, then it was primarily these events, rather than internal aristocratic conflicts, that rendered Persia unable to resist the later Arab incursions. Al-Ṭabarī draws upon Christian histories of the late Sasanian kings. These histories were sympathetic to Christian

97 See the notes by Bosworth (1999: 405, fn. 999) in the translation of Al-Ṭabarī. See also the article by Chaumont (1989).

98 For a detailed discussion of Boran, see Panaino (2006).

99 See the translation by Bosworth (1999: 401).

interests.<sup>100</sup> Reading Al-Ṭabarī's history, I am left thinking that the detailed narratives and dialogues represent something like a speculative romance *based on* a true story, but highly embellished out of concern for Christian interests, such as the theft and return of the True Cross of Jerusalem. The Chinese account, on the other hand, is brief but straightforward. The subjugation of Persia is also emphasized in the Tang history's section on the Turks. This is not a small detail of history. Harmatta (1969: 404), following Chavannes (1903: 24, 52), mentions it, using it to support the emergence of the Kārkoṭa in Kashmir in 626. The Tang history expressly relates that Persia was subjugated by Tong Yabgu Qaghan 統葉護可汗 (r. 617–628):

Tong Yabgu Qaghan was brave and possessed strategy, and was skilled at war, and thus to the north he flanked the Tölös, to the west he bordered Persia, and to the south he was connected to Jibin, all of whom were subordinate to him.

統葉護可汗，勇而有謀，善攻戰，遂北並鐵勒，西拒波斯，南接罽賓，悉歸之。<sup>101</sup>

The Tang history speaks of a great massing of men, and that the Turks dispatched governors (*tudun* 吐屯, Tudun) to supervise taxation.<sup>102</sup> The Chinese histories indicate that the occupation of Persia was brief. The date of Xusraw's death is conventionally given as 628 (Daryaee 2012: 392). The Tang history states, "The king of Persia, Xusraw, was killed by the Western Turks." According to the Chinese sources, Yabgu Qaghan is then said to have died around 627 or 628, after which time the appointed chiefs are said to have broken off to operate independently. Šīrōy died after one year, but the daughter of Xusraw (whom we can assume was Bōrān) was made queen, only to be killed by the Turks. Ardašīr fled to Roman territories, but returned to Persia and was thereafter crowned. Yazdegerd succeeded him two years later. In this narrative, the

100 Wood (2016: 422) states, "Sasanian history represented a means for Christians to organise their own understanding of the world using an indigenous medium—the history of the shahs—to contextualise themselves and their own past into the empire's history and its contemporary life. Later Arabic sources, especially al-Ṭabarī's history, allow us to see the outlines of this act of adaptation, through which Christians sought their own positions in the Sasanian world, both at the court of Khusrau II and in the post-Sasanian memory of these same events."

101 *Jiu Tang shu* 194b.5181. Cf. the French translation in citing Chavannes (1903: 24). For a discussion of this leader, see Dobrovits (2003).

102 *Jiu Tang shu* 194b.5181. For these reign dates, see Xiong (2017: 606). Cf. the French translation in Harmatta (1982: 173).

Chinese sources depict the chaos of Sasanian succession as a result of domination by the Turks, rather than internal conflicts at court. The Persian royalty named are familiar from West Asian sources and Sasanian coins, but it is remarkable how the Chinese account differs strikingly from what we know as established history based on authors such as Al-Ṭabarī and others. The anomalous quality of Chinese histories in relation to accepted historical narratives also extends to early Islam and the Arabs, a topic to which we will turn in Chapter 8 below.

State histories in China often simply reuse and reassemble records from earlier sources; they also shed light on other countries, and offer information that is not otherwise available in any other language, so there could, in fact, be some historical truth underlying the information regarding Persia. Modern historians accept the Chinese account of the exiled Pērōz and his movements between China and Central Asia. This raises the question of whether we should be so quick to dismiss the Chinese record of the late Sasanian kings as entirely erroneous when it contradicts the commonly accepted history in the present academy.

Another fact to consider in evaluating the objective historicity of the Chinese account at hand is a silver medallion that was issued for Tong Yabgu Qaghan. Harmatta (1982) has examined this item in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (N<sup>o</sup> 1974.442, coll. Marc Le Berre).<sup>103</sup> The obverse shows a beardless man without a mustache, and whose hairstyle also differs from those of the Sasanian and Hephthalite rulers. The reverse of the medallion shows two men tending to a fire, which in the Sasanian tradition was the typical depiction of the Zoroastrian cult of fire, but the altar of fire rises from the flaming hair of a head, which Harmatta links to Śiva as he was depicted on Kuṣāṇo-Sasanid coins. The pair tending to the fire, one bearded and the other beardless, perhaps represent two groups, again suggested by Harmatta, namely the Zoroastrian and Śaivite populations. Later, Harmatta and Litvinsky (1996: 362) propose the following reason for the production of the medallion:

The definitive annexation of Tokharistan and Gandhara to the Western Türk Empire was to take place some years later, in c. 625, when Sasanian Iran became involved in the war against Byzantium that ultimately led to its eclipse. The Western Türk army of T'ung Yabghukaghan advanced to the River Indus, took possession of the most important cities and replaced the Hephthalite dynasties with Türk rulers. This event was

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103 I have attempted to locate this item in the currently available catalog of the Cabinet des Médailles, but I was unable to find it.

commemorated by a medal minted probably by Tardushad, the new Türk ruler of Tokharistan, in honour of T'ung Yabghu *kaghan*, with the legend *GDH 'pzw't' yyp MLK' 'n MLK'* (The glory increased, Ĵeb (= Yabghu) King of Kings!).

The item also shows unique symbols of rulership. Panaino (2007: 165–166) observes that this coin presents “seven or five (the rim is damaged) lunar crescents plus the symbols of the star, probably representing the seven parts of the world, according to an old Indo-Iranian pattern.” These features of the medallion were all statements and symbols of universal rulership, and the fact that the coin was issued for the Qaghan is telling, although such propaganda does not necessitate that he, in fact, held supreme authority. The veracity of the Chinese account of the brief Turkish subjugation of the Persians, however, ought to be weighed alongside this medallion. Harmatta (1982: 179) also cites another piece of evidence in which the Sasanian king was framed as a vassal king by the Western Turks:

Ces mêmes idées se manifestent aussi dans la lettre qui fut adressée, selon le récit de Moses Kalankatvac'i (250,19–21), par le Šad, fils du qayan turc occidental qui arrivait à l'aide de l'empereur byzantin Héraclius, au roi sasanide Xusrō II. Dans cette lettre, le Šad appelle son cousin le « Roi du Nord », c.-à-d. Ton Ĵebü qayan, « le maître de tout l'univers, roi de toi (c.-à-d. de Xusrō II) et de tous les rois ». On peut observer ici, presque en même temps ou à la rigueur un ou deux ans après que la médaille fut émise, dans la partie la plus occidentale de l'Empire des Turcs Occidentaux, la manifestation de la même idéologie royale qui place Ton Ĵebü qayan bien au-dessus du souverain sasanide puisqu'il regarde ce dernier comme un roi vassal du qayan turc.

The above data, taken together, indicates that the Western Turks, at least briefly, held a dominant position over Persia. The statement in the Chinese history that the Western Turks killed Xusraw is therefore not implausible, even if it is at odds with reports from elsewhere in the world. Theophanes, for example, relates that Širōy in 625 initiated a plot “when informed that Chosroes was intending to crown Merdasan” and consorted with the Byzantine emperor. Shiroe released Roman prisoners at the command of the emperor, and subsequently “attacked his parricide father Chosroes. The latter tried to escape, but failed and was captured.” In this narrative, Xusraw is killed and a peace agreement is made, which is followed by the release of imprisoned Christians, as well as the return of the cross from Jerusalem. Theophanes also writes that

in 627, Heraclius is said to have been “informed that Siroes, the emperor of the Persians, had died and that Adeser, his son, had succeeded to the empire of Persia. After the latter had ruled for seven months, Sarbarazas rose up against him and, having smitten him, ruled over Persia for two months. But the Persians killed him and appointed queen the daughter of Chosroes, Borane, who ruled the Persian kingdom for seven months. She was succeeded by Hormisdas, who was driven out by the Saracens, and so the kingdom of Persia has remained under Arab sway to the present time.”<sup>104</sup> The Chinese account is similar in that it mentions Širōy dying after one year and the daughter of Xusraw being made queen, but in the Chinese narrative it is the Turks who killed her. Such discrepancies between our witnesses from late antiquity are noteworthy and highlight the reality that our understanding of history might be significantly challenged if we take Chinese accounts into consideration.

The Tang history offers the following information regarding the final demise of the Sasanian royal house:

In year 21 [of reign-era Zhenguan, i.e., 647], Yazdegerd sent an animal as tribute, called an \*ichneumon (mongoose). It was shaped like a rat, but dark in color. Its body length was eight or nine inches. It can enter holes and grab rats. Yazdegerd was cowardly, and being pressed by commanders, he thus fled to Tukhāra, but did not arrive, for he was killed by troops of the Tazīks [Arabs]. His son, Pērōz, also sought shelter in Tukhāra. Yabghu granted him pardon.

二十一年，伊嗣候遣使獻一獸，名活褥蛇，形類鼠而色青，身長八九寸，能入穴取鼠。伊嗣候懦弱，為大首領所逐，遂奔吐火羅未至，亦為大食兵所殺。其子名卑路斯，又投吐火羅，葉護獲免。<sup>105</sup>

Although it would initially seem odd for the Sasanian court to send a mongoose to the Chinese court, this would have been a polite diplomatic gesture following the longstanding custom of offering exotic animals.<sup>106</sup>

104 See the translation in Mango et al. (1997: 454–455, 459).

105 *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5312. This last statement is ambiguous, since it implies that Pērōz was somehow guilty of something, but received a pardon, yet it is not explained for what.

106 Lieu (2000: 55) understands this creature “as a snake trained to ferret rats from their hiding-places.” Godwin (2018: 79) translates it as a “lively rat snake.” Godwin also reads *ba jiu* 八九 (“eight, nine”) as “89,” but this in an anachronistic way of reading numerals in Chinese. In modern times the numerals as Chinese characters can function in the same way as Arabic numerals, but this was not so before the nineteenth century. Ptak (2013: 91) notes the variant *huonoushe* 活褥蛇 (LMC: *xhūat nəw’ shūa*). I believe the first two

The Chinese accounts of Yazdegerd are anomalous, but despite its importance has not generally been considered by historians when reconstructing Sasanian history today. For example, another source, the *Cefu yuangui*, reproducing court records, offers similar information:

In the fifth lunar month of year 5 [of reign era Yonghui 永徽, 22 May–19 June, 654], the Tāzīks deployed troops to attack Persia and Maimargh, and both were destroyed. The Persian king Yazdegerd was killed by Tāzīk troops. The son of Yazdegerd, Pērōz, fled to Tukhāra. A dispatched envoy came, reporting the difficulty in proceeding, for the road was far, and they were unable to save them. Shortly thereafter, the Tāzīk troops retreated, and Tukhāra dispatched troops to escort him [Pērōz] before returning.

五年五月，大食引兵擊波斯及米國，皆破之。波斯五伊嗣侯為大食兵所殺。伊嗣侯之子卑路期走投吐火羅。遣使來告難上以路遠，不能救之。尋而大食兵退，吐火羅遣兵援立之而還。<sup>107</sup>

This account differs from what is generally reconstructed in modern Iranology. Shahbazi (2005) states, “The Arabs subjugated local lords by force or treaty and succeeded in destroying the Persian empire by 650. Yazdegerd was betrayed by Māhōy Suri of Marv and murdered in a mill, in which he had been taking refuge.” The Chinese records, in contrast, only state that Yazdegerd was killed by Arab troops following his flight.

Details in Chinese concerning the ultimate demise and dispersal of the Sasanian royal house offer valuable material for reconstructing the fate of Pērōz. In addition to the dynastic histories, there is a compendium from shortly after the Tang period, titled *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (*Institutional History of the Tang*), which was compiled in 961 by Wang Pu 王溥 (922–982). The brief record of the end of the Sasanian royals, which is worth citing in full below, is invaluable since it describes their desperate situation and eventual exile following the conquests by the Arabs.

In year 21 of Zhenguan [647], their king, Yazdegerd, sent an envoy to pay tribute at our court. In year 1 of Longshuo [661], the country’s king, Pērōz, communicated via an envoy, that they were being constantly invaded

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characters are a transcription of ἰχθυόμων or more likely its cognate in another language. The last character, “snake,” functions semantically, perhaps because the animal resembled a snake in their eyes. For the LMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 135, 227, 278).

107 *Cefu yuangui* (SKQS), 995.16b. Read *wu* 五 (“five”) as *wang* 王 (“king”).

and assaulted by the Tāzīks [Arabs]. He requested troops to save and support them. By imperial order, having been dispatched to Nanyou in Longzhou, Wang Mingyuan was ordered to act as an envoy to the Western Regions and set up provinces and counties, at which time the lands were arranged, and the city of Jiling [Zarang] was designated as the Persian Area Command.<sup>108</sup> Pērōz was granted the title of Area Commander. Afterward, there were frequent envoys sent to pay tribute from there. During the years of Xianheng [670–674], Pērōz himself came to court to pay tribute. [The emperor] Gaozong was especially favorable toward him, granting him the rank of General of the Right Militant Guard.<sup>109</sup> In year 3 of Yifeng [678], Vice Director of the Ministry of Personnel, Pei Xingjian [619–682], was ordered to take troops and restore Pērōz to the country of Persia. Xingjian arrived at Suiye [Suyab] in Anxi, but then returned, because the route was [too] remote. Pērōz returned alone, but could not enter his country, as it was gradually being invaded by the Tāzīks.<sup>110</sup> He was a guest in Tukhāra for more than twenty years. The thousands of people of his tribe later gradually dispersed. In year 2 of Jinglong [708], he came to court, and was granted the title of General of the Left Awesome Guard. Not long after, he passed away from illness. His country was finally destroyed, but the tribe remained.<sup>111</sup> From year 10 of Kaiyuan [722] to year 6 of Tianbao [747], there were a total of ten envoys sent to offer tribute and give local items. In the fourth lunar month in the summer [of 747], they sent an envoy and offered an agate couch.<sup>112</sup> In year 9 [750], they gave an embroidered mat of asbestos, an embroidered mat of long

108 Feng (1982: 107–108) identifies Jiling as Zarang in Sistan. Rezakhani (2017: 183) suggests that “Pērōz was taking advantage of the weakened Western Turk control south of the Hindu Kush to claim the kingship of a greatly reduced ‘Persian Empire.’”

109 Hucker (1985: 574) explains that the Militant Guard (*wu wei* 武衛) was comprised of two units of the army, each designated as either Left or Right. The Militant General (*wu wei jiangjun* 武衛將軍) in the Tang period was “leader of either the Left or the Right Militant Guard.”

110 Williams (2018: 769, fn. 33) identifies this toponym as Suyab. He explains, “Now called Ak-Beshim, a city on the Silk Road fifty kilometers east of modern Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.”

111 Read *xi* 西 (“west”) as *er* 而 (“but”).

112 This line is problematic. The year is not given, but I assume it corresponds to year 6 of Tianbao. The fourth lunar month is still spring, as the summer solstice generally commences from the fifth lunar month. The fourth lunar month of 747 would correspond to 14 May to 12 June. See the conversion tool Academia Sinica (<https://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw/>). Accessed 20 July 2022.



wool, and flawless pearls. In the ninth lunar month in year 6 of Dali [771], they sent an envoy to give pearls and other items.

貞觀二十一年，其王伊嗣候遣使朝貢。龍朔元年，其國王卑路斯使奏，頻被大食侵擾，請兵救援之。詔遣隴州南由令王名遠充使西域，分置州縣，因列其地，疾陵城為波斯都督府。授卑路斯為都督。是後數遣使貢獻焉。咸亨中，卑路斯自來朝貢。高宗甚加恩賜，拜右武衛將軍。儀鳳三年，令吏部侍郎裴行儉將兵，冊送卑路斯還波斯國。行儉以路遠，至安西碎葉而還。卑路斯獨返，不得入其國，漸為大食所侵。客於吐火羅二十餘年。部落數千人，後漸離散。至景龍二年來朝，拜為左威將軍。無何病卒。其國遂滅西部眾猶存。自開元十年至天寶六載，凡十遣使朝貢獻方物。夏四月，遣使獻瑪瑙床。九載，獻火毛繡舞筵，長毛繡舞筵，無孔真珠。至大歷六年九月，遣使獻真珠等。<sup>113</sup>

Pērōz is said to have had a son, Narsieh (Ninieshi 泥涅師) according to the new Tang history. According to this version of events, the Chinese assumed guardianship over Narsieh after Pērōz died in the Xianheng 咸亨 years (670–674). The following is recorded in the new Tang history:

His son Narsieh was held in custody. In year 1 of Tiaolu [679], it was ordered that Pei Xingjian take troops and escort him back, with the intent to restore the king to his country. Xingjian returned [to China], having arrived at Suiye in Anxi, because the road was [too] remote. Narsieh spent twenty years in Tukhāra, and his tribe dispersed over time. In the early Jinglong period [707–710], he again came to our court, and was bestowed the rank of General of the Left Awesome Guard. He died of illness.

其子泥涅師為質。調露元年，詔裴行儉將兵護還，將復王其國。以道遠至安西碎葉行儉還。泥涅師因客吐火羅二十年，部落益離散。景龍初復來朝，授左威衛將軍，病死。<sup>114</sup>

The details and chronology overlap with those offered for Pērōz. It is difficult to determine whether editorial errors occurred in the compiling of these histories.<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, although the Persians requested aid from China in

113 *Tang huiyao*, 100.3–4. Cf. *Tang huiyao* (SKQS), 100.4a–5a.

114 *Xing Tang shu*, 221b.6259.

115 See also Rong (2023: 98–99). His study switches between the different Tang histories, but does not point out this anomaly. The *Tang huiyao* (99.18) mentions a Sogdian being enfeoffed by the Chinese court sometime after 696: “Later, his son Ninieshishi was enfeoffed. During the Shenlong period [705–707], Ninieshishi died.” 又冊立其子泥涅師

661 in response to the devastating incursions by the Arabs, the Arabs had already sent their first envoy to China in the year 651.<sup>116</sup> The contents of the meetings with the Arabs are not explained in detail anywhere, but the Chinese later were at least willing to support the restoration of Pērōz to the throne, although this ultimately proved futile. This would indicate that the Chinese were not sympathetic to the Arabs. The Chinese instead favored the Persian claim to sovereignty. Eventually the Chinese accepted the reality that the Persians had been vanquished, and no restoration could be expected. Based on the Chinese sources, the circumstances of the Persians were especially dire between 654 and 678, to say nothing of the weakening of Persia in earlier decades at the hands of the Western Turks. It became clear to the Chinese court after 687 that dislodging the Arabs from the Persian territories was not feasible.

Envoys from the exiled communities of Persians continued to arrive after the demise of the Sasanian state. As late as 771, an identifiable community of Persians still apparently sent tribute to the Chinese court. These exchanges were framed as official diplomatic contacts between China and the Persians, although it was clearly recognized that Persia as a country had ceased to exist. The location of these exiled Persians is not stated, but we can imagine they were dispersed in different locations. Agostini and Stark (2016) have suggested that members of the deposed Sasanian court remained in the area of the southern Hindu Kush until at least the mid-eighth century. The Chinese histories indeed indicate that diaspora communities that self-identified as Persian survived for some generations.

The collapse of the Sasanian empire resulted in the inevitable flight of nobles and commoners to remote lands. Lieu (2000: 58) remarks that “their subsequent careers in China are not unlike those of the Czarist exiles in China after the Russian Revolution.” Some Iranian families found themselves taking up officer positions in China. Others went into varying trades and occupations, a topic to which Schafer (1951) has devoted a study. The flight of Persians, however, has led to some fanciful theories. The Iranologist Itō Gikyō (1979), for example, proposed that Zoroastrians arrived in Japan in the mid-seventh century. On the basis of this purported presence of Zoroastrian nobility at the Yamato (Japanese) court, Itō (1986) then claimed that Persian words were transliterated into *man'yōgana* (a Japanese model of phonetically representing Japanese syllables using Chinese characters) in two separate poems in the *Man'yōshū* 萬葉集 (*Collection of Ten-Thousand Leaves*), a compilation of

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師。神龍中泥涅師師卒。The names in Chinese are similar and the dates of death are also close (this may be coincidental).

116 *Cefu yuangui* 970.16b. See Chapter 8 below for the details on Arab envoys.

Japanese poems from the late Nara period (710–784). Itō's theory, however, has never been widely accepted.

The conquests of the Arabs eventually led to the gradual disappearance of other cultures that had previously enjoyed rich relations with the Sasanians, in particular the Sogdians. Shenkar (2022: 113–114) argues that “in addition to the effects of the prolonged and intense warfare, one of the main reasons for the disappearance of the Sogdian civilization was the dismantling of the Sogdian self-governing civic communities by the Arabs.” As Shenkar further notes, Islamization and colonization by Arabs led to the end of the Sogdian civilization. The cultural landscape of central Eurasia was significantly transformed as a result of Islam, yet some Sasanian and Sogdian diaspora survived in China. Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism also found a relatively stable sanctuary in China for approximately three centuries following the end of the Sasanians. We will discuss their histories below.

# Chinese Buddhists and Persia

## 1 Chinese Buddhist Histories and Ethnography

In addition to the stories and biographies discussed in Chapter 2, there is ample further material about Iran in the Chinese Buddhist canon, but not all of it has been appreciated in modern scholarship. The Buddhist material ought to be treated separately from the textual material produced by the state, since there arguably existed two different traditions of history writing and ethnography in late antiquity and throughout the medieval period in China. Buddhists could consult some histories compiled by the court, such as dynastic histories, but the breadth of what was available was limited. Historians of the court, in contrast, only seldom seriously consulted Buddhist texts that discuss foreign peoples. With a few exceptions, we seldom observe an awareness expressed of Buddhist travelogues and other works that would have been of practical value to state scholars.<sup>1</sup> Here I aim to treat the Chinese Buddhist encounter with Persia. The Chinese Buddhist views on Persia and Persian religion were predominately shaped by what were originally prejudices and stereotypes absorbed from Indian Buddhism.

## 2 Iran in Chinese Buddhist Texts

Chinese Buddhists were exposed to Iran—or perhaps we might better say, an ambiguous image of a heterodox kingdom far to the west beyond India—through translated literature. This commenced relatively early on in the history of the sangha in China. Travelogues by monks also informed and enriched the Chinese imagination of Persia in particular.<sup>2</sup> The basic images of Parthia and Persia were categorically negative in Chinese Buddhism, in large part because of the Indian Buddhist condemnation of Zoroastrian customs and values. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone in the Chinese sangha

1 I have discussed in detail the institutional gap between Buddhist and state authors in the Chinese writing of history and ethnography (Kotyk 2019; 2020b).

2 To identify some references to Persia, whose name is rendered in various ways in Chinese Buddhist sources, I have consulted the book *Fojiao shidi kaolun* 佛教史地考論 (*On the History of Geography of Buddhism*), written by the monk Yin Shun 印順 in 1947. The book is digitized on the CBETA platform (CBETA 2022.Q1, Y22, no. 22, p. 285a11–13).

understood the Sasanians as successors to the Parthians, but they were both considered barbarous and moreover typically non-Buddhist nations to the west of India. Although in this context we can speak about “Iran” in an etic sense, the Buddhists themselves did not have this exact concept in mind—rather, they had a conception of barbarians (*mleccha* in Sanskrit) to the west who were known by different names.

One early reference to Iran is found in one of the Āgamas, which are compilations of Buddhist *sūtras* that are comparable to the Pali Nikāyas (often mistakenly called the scriptures of “Early Buddhism”). Four Āgamas were translated into Chinese in the late fourth to fifth centuries. These represent formulations of Buddhism as an organized religion in the early centuries of the Common Era, rather than constituting any sort of objective record of a historical Buddha.<sup>3</sup> The extant literature would indicate that Buddhists in India were apparently aware of the Parthians to some extent, but I have not seen references to the preceding dynasty, the Achaemenids of Persia, which is another point to consider when discussing the probable periods that the texts reflect.

The *Samyuktāgama* (*Za Ahan jing* 雜阿含經), *sūtra* #640, features the Buddha speaking to the four Mahārājās. These are the gods who each protect one of the four respective continents surrounding Mt. Sumeru. We read of events that will occur a thousand years after the passing of the Buddha, during which time the world will be in chaos. The Buddha then proceeds to state the following:

At that time, there will be the Śaka King, Yavana King, Pahlava King, and Tuṣāra King. The cranium bone of the Buddha, the Buddha’s tooth, and the Buddha’s bowl will be located in the east. In the West there will be a king, named Pahlava, possessing hundreds of thousands of retainers; he will destroy *stūpas* and monasteries, and slaughter *bhikṣus* (monks).

3 The extant Buddhist scriptures we have in any language are all relatively late. Qualifying any of them as representative of an “Early Buddhism” is highly problematic. Schopen (1997: 25) explains, “We know too that the earliest source we have in an Indian language other than Pāli—and this, according to Norman, is a translation—appears to be the *Gāndhārī Dharmapada*, the manuscript of which may date to the second century CE.” Falk and Karashima (2012) have discussed a fragment of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in Gāndhārī that dates to the second half of the first century CE. As Drewes (2017) points out, we cannot scientifically discuss the life and teachings of the Buddha. We simply have no documentary or archaeological evidence from an era that one might attempt to connect with a “historical Buddha.” Everything we have available to reconstruct such a historical figure postdates his purported lifetime by several centuries.

時，有釋迦王，耶槃那王，鉢羅婆王，兜沙羅王，眾多眷屬。如來頂骨，佛牙，佛鉢安置東方。西方有王，名鉢羅婆，百千眷屬，破壞塔寺，殺害比丘。

The Chinese word 鉢羅婆 (EMC: *pat la ba*) appears to be a transcription of *pahlava* from Sanskrit or a related language, which in turn is connected with Old Persian *Parθava*.<sup>4</sup> Monier-Williams (1899: 612) defines *pahlava* as “of a people (the Parthians or Persians).” This is related to Middle Persian *pahlawīg*, “Parthian; Pahlavi” (MacKenzie 1986: 64). The Pahlava as a people in the *Mahābhārata* (6, 20, 13.2) are similarly grouped with other peoples in a military formation, namely the Śaka, Kirāta, and Yavana.<sup>5</sup> The *Manusmṛti* (10.44) also groups the Pahlava with several *mleccha* nations, a list that also includes the Śaka and Yavana.<sup>6</sup> Whether “Pahlava” in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* referred to the Parthians or Persians is uncertain. The Chinese translation of the *Samyuktāgama* is credited to the monk Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatuo 求那跋陀; 394–468) between the years 435 and 443, but the content of the original text in India might not have been so much earlier. The Buddhists in India could have had either Parthians or Persians in mind (or the two might have been simply conflated). Both these people in a general sense were regarded as “barbarians” to the west by both Buddhists and Brahmins. The negative image of them made it easy to prophetically cast their king in the role of one of the villainous monarchs who would seek to destroy Buddhism in a distant future. The nations of the West were categorically framed as wicked.

We have more definitive references to Persia in Chinese Buddhism from the early sixth century. There are extant records of Chinese monks transiting through the borderlands of Persia. The monk Huisheng 惠生 (fl. sixth cent.), together with Songyun 宋雲 (fl. sixth cent.) from Dunhuang, journeyed to the polities to the west of the Indus River, where the Buddhadharma was studied. These countries would have been located on the frontier of the Sasanian realm, but the party also traveled briefly through Persian territory, as recorded in their travelogue.<sup>7</sup> This travelogue mentions Persia being to the west of the

4 For the EMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 203, 241). Note that the EMC readings reflect a somewhat later stage of linguistic evolution than when the *Samyuktāgama* was translated in the fifth century, but the difference would not have been so significant.

5 śakaiḥ kirātaiḥ yavanaiḥ pahlavaiśca sārthaṃ camūm uttarato 'bhipāti || Text from the Digital Corpus of Sanskrit (<http://www.sanskrit-linguistics.org/dcs/>).

6 paunḍrakāś caudradraṇḍiḍāḥ kāmbojā yavanāḥ śakāḥ | pāradapahlavāś cīnāḥ kirātā daradāḥ khaśāḥ || Text from the Digital Corpus of Sanskrit (<http://www.sanskrit-linguistics.org/dcs/>).

7 See Daffinà (1963) for an extensive discussion of Huisheng's journey. The travelogue of Huisheng is preserved in the Taishō canon as *Bei Wei Seng Huisheng shi xiyu ji* 北魏僧惠

Hephthalites (*Yeda* 嚙噠). The account states that “more than forty countries all offer tribute to the Hephthalites, for they are supreme in power.” 四十餘國，皆來朝貢，最為強大。<sup>8</sup> Huisheng and his party then briefly passed through some eastern territories of the Persian empire:

In the eleventh lunar month [of the year 519], we entered the country of Persia. The terrain is quite narrow. One transits through [Persia] in seven months. The people live in mountain valleys. The light reflecting off the snow is brilliant as the Sun.

十一月，入波斯國，境土甚狹，七月行過。人居山谷，雪光耀日。<sup>9</sup>

Content from the travel account is also reproduced in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*), written by Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之 (d.u.) in 547. Here we find further details regarding Persia:

In the early part of the eleventh lunar month, we entered the country of Persia. The terrain is quite narrow. One transits through it in seven days. The people live in the mountains. Commerce is quite bustling. Their customs are vulgar. They do not pay respects when they see the king. When the king comes and goes, he has a number of retainers. The country has a body of water. In ancient days, it was quite shallow. Later, a mountain collapsed and it split, creating two ponds. Venomous dragons live in them. There are many disasters and strange occurrences. There are torrential rains in summer, and in the winter snow amasses. A traveler will often face difficulties due to these [conditions]. The snow has a brilliant glare, and when reflected in a person's eyes forces them to close their eyes, as they become dazed and blinded. They will recover after making offerings to the dragon king.

十一月初，入波斯國，境土甚狹，七日行過。人民山居。資業窮煎。風俗凶慢。見王無禮。國王出入從者數人。其國有水，昔日甚淺，後山崩截流，變為二池。毒龍居之。多有災異。夏喜暴雨，冬則積雪。行人由之

生使西域記 (T 2086). Daffinà (1963: 251–252) amends *qi yue* 七月 (“seven months”) to *qi ri* 七日 (“seven days”): “... in sette giorni si attraversa.” One could read this as referring to the span of the Persian realm, e.g., “One transits through [the whole length of Persia] in seven months.” The reading of “seven days” is also valid, as shown below.

8 T 2086, 51: 867a10. For a recent discussion on the Hephthalites and their relation to the Sasanians, see Rezakhani (2017: 125–146).

9 T 2086, 51: 867a12–14.

多致難艱。雪有白光，照耀人眼令人閉目茫然無見。祭祀龍王，然後平復。<sup>10</sup>

We might assume that the “dragon king” (*long wang* 龍王) would refer to a *nāga-rāja* (king of the serpent spirits) in an Indian environment, but Persia also had dragon lore. Lieu (2000: 50) observes that the pair of travelers did not venture into Persia proper, but the party appear to have ventured only through Eastern Iran. The “dragon” in question brings to mind *azdahāg* (“a legendary ‘dragon’ king, Dahāg”) in Pahlavi (MacKenzie 1986: 16). Skjærvø et al. (2011) explain that “the Zoroastrian dragons, materially huge monsters with ravenous appetites for men and horses, have been given their place in the Mazdayasnian view of the world, in which all monsters are the creations of evil and thus antagonists of the true, Mazdayasnian religion.”

Another interesting fact is that we see the earliest known reference to a monk named Bodhidharma (Putidamo 菩提達磨) in the *Luoyang qielan ji*, who is later designated a patriarch of the Chan school (Zen in Japan). This work expressly states that Bodhidharma was from Persia: “At the time, there was a *śramaṇa*, Bodhidharma, who was a *Hu* of the country of Persia.” 時有西域沙門菩提達磨者，波斯國胡人也。He is quoted as saying that he himself was one hundred and fifty years old, so we are left to speculate whether this was a truly historical figure.<sup>11</sup> The monk Daoxuan, however, in his collection of biographies of eminent monks from around 645 writes that “Bodhidharma was of the Brahmin caste from South India.” 菩提達摩南天竺婆羅門種。<sup>12</sup> The modern typeset edition of this text can be compared to handwritten manuscripts preserved in Japan. For instance, one scroll, whose copying was completed on 24 January 1164, also states that Bodhidharma was a Brahmin from South India.<sup>13</sup> The extant textual material indeed indicates that within the course of one century Bodhidharma went from being a Persian to a South Indian in the Buddhist hagiographical literature. McRae (2003: 24–28) points out how the evolution of Bodhidharma’s hagiography reflects a process in which the man’s form was progressively modified and idealized. He argues that “the image of Bodhidharma

10 T 2092, 51: 1019c7–13.

11 T 2092, 51: 1000b19–22. Cf. translation by Wang (1984: 20). Wang’s translation reads “a native of Persia,” but there is no sense of “native” in the source text.

12 Daoxuan’s work is titled *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Extended Biographies of Eminent Monks*). T 2060, 50: 551b27.

13 Fascicle 16 of the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* is preserved as a single scroll in the Kokubungaku Kenkyū Shiryōkan 国文学研究資料館 (99–51) in Japan. DOI 10.20730/200014716. We must be aware that Daoxuan’s work was expanded and modified after 645. See Ibuki (1990) for a detailed discussion.



that has been transmitted to us is the result of a long hagiographical process, and it is not ‘biographical’ in some sense of a more-or-less ‘accurate’ depiction of the man’s life.” Jorgensen (2005: 110) also draws attention to Bodhidharma as a Persian and describes him as “merely a cipher, inserted to give evidence of the sanctity of a monastery statue and to attest to the international aesthetic superiority of Yung-ning Monastery, the symbol of the Northern Wei Dynasty.” Nomura (2020) in a dedicated study of this problem, explores the transition of Bodhidharma from a Persian figure to a South Indian Brahmin, arguing based on close philological comparisons of the biographical materials that Daoxuan exercised the conscious decision to reidentify Bodhidharma as an Indian. I agree with this conclusion, but I would add that I believe that the underlying reason stemmed from negative associations of Persia with sinful behaviors (especially incest and slaughter of creatures), which we will discuss in detail below. It would not have been appropriate for an eminent and influential Buddhist figure to have come from a country of “barbarians” (*mlecchas*). Yet I would also argue that it is actually not unreasonable to assume that a monk from a Buddhist country under Sasanian domination might, in reality, have come to China, not unlike those monks who hailed from Parthian territories in earlier centuries; nonetheless, the absence of further evidence does not allow us to make any definitive statements about the true origins of Bodhidharma, assuming he actually existed as a flesh-and-blood person.

This leads us to the important question of whether there were Buddhists in Persia. Buddhists were already a recognized community even in the early decades of the Sasanian period, a fact that is not generally discussed in wider Buddhist Studies today. The third-century Zoroastrian cleric Kerdīr, in his famous inscription, mentions “*śramaṇas*” (*šmny*), which is a reference to Buddhism, as one of several other religions over which Zoroastrianism had triumphed.<sup>14</sup> Still, we need to remain cautious about the extent to which Buddhism spread westward through Iran. The observation of Emmerick (1983: 957) remains applicable even today:

How far west Buddhism spread in Iran we do not know. On the basis of archaeology it seems possible to infer that it never flourished west of the line joining Balkh to Qandahār, the so-called “Foucher line.” The Russian discovery of a Buddhist stūpa at Gyaur Kala near Bairam ‘Alī more than four hundred kilometres west of Balkh in the Marv oasis is hardly

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14 See discussion of inscription in Frenschkowski (2015: 471).

sufficient evidence to induce us to consider that Buddhism was ever very prominent further west.<sup>15</sup>

Although Buddhism was likely only a small minority religion in the western half of the Sasanian realm, there were indirect and direct connections between Buddhism and Zoroastrianism in Eastern Iran. Scott (1990), for instance, demonstrates that Sogdian and Khotanese (i.e., Eastern Iranian) Buddhists carefully avoided using the Indic term *deva-*, given its phonetic resemblance to the evil *daēva-* in Avestan literature.<sup>16</sup> Sasanian motifs are also apparent in the Buddhist art of Central Asia. Buddhists were cautious regarding Zoroastrian sensibilities, but they also had no issues with incorporating some of the royal Persian imagery into their own art. Buddhists also encountered Zoroastrian deities and treated them in the same manner as traditional Indic deities such as Indra and Brahma: powerful figures, but ultimately still bound to *saṃsāra* and lacking the wisdom of a buddha.

Looking at the Persians themselves, there was certainly an awareness of Buddhism at the highest level of society. The Sasanian court also recognized the utility of the religion for politics and diplomacy. The Sasanians possessed Buddhist relics. For example, they sent an envoy to the Liang 梁 court and offered a tooth of the Buddha in the year 530 (中大通二年遣使獻佛牙).<sup>17</sup> This event is significant, because it indicates that the Persians knew of the widespread belief in Buddhism in China. Middle Persian literature—at least in one instance from a somewhat later time—confirms this fact; the brief mention of China in the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* relates that “they worship Buddha (*but*), and when they die, they are damned.”<sup>18</sup>

15 See also the article on Buddhism in pre-Islamic times in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (Emmerick 2000). Emmerick remarks, “After Zoroastrianism had become the official religion of the Sasanians in a.d. 224, other religions, including *šamans* and *brahmans* (i.e., Buddhists and Hindus) were not tolerated, as we know from the inscriptions of the priest Kartīr. Consequently it is only to be expected that the main expansion of Buddhism should have been eastward rather than westward.”

16 For further discussion on the etymologies of related terms, and details on the scholarship on the matter, see Scharfe (2016).

17 This event is recorded in the dynastic history of the Liang, titled *Liang shu* 梁書 (*History of the Liang*), which was compiled by Yao Silian 姚思廉 in 636 (or 629). *Liang shu*, 54.815.

18 See the translation and discussion in Agostini (2019: 456–457). The dating of this passage is uncertain.

### 3 Xuanzang's Travelogue and Translations

We have evidence of a Buddhist sangha in Persia, albeit small in scale, from the reliable Chinese informant Xuanzang, the famous Chinese pilgrim who traveled to India and back in the seventh century. His travelogue, which technically was edited or even altogether compiled by his colleague Bianji 辯機 (d. 649), offers data on many countries, including Persia. Hori (1918: 509) has already pointed out the significance of this a century ago. Deeg (2022) has recently explored in detail the entirety of the account by Xuanzang. Xuanzang traveled to India between 629 and 645, although he did not actually go to Persia (even if he had so desired, it was in a state of war and societal collapse). His travelogue offers a brief account of Persia, in which he makes the following significant statement:

There are two or three *saṃghārāmas* with several hundred monks. They all study the Hīnayāna teachings, and the Dharma of the Sarvāstivāda. The bowl of Śākyamuni Buddha is in the royal palace here.

伽藍二三，僧徒數百。並學小乘教，說一切有部法。釋迦佛鉢在此王宮。<sup>19</sup>

This statement is presumably based on hearsay or reports, since Xuanzang himself does not appear to have traveled to Persia.<sup>20</sup> The Indian sangha would have maintained some level of communication with the Buddhists in Persia because of the link to Sarvāstivāda. Sarvāstivāda was a major tradition in India, but it is now extinct. The mention of the Buddha's bowl is the second

19 *T* 2087, 51: 938a19–20. Cf. Li (1996: 308–309).

20 We should bear in mind the challenges of using Xuanzang's travelogue, and those of other East Asian travelers, as objective witnesses. It is not always clear whether the places they write about were actually locations they ever visited. The credibility of these sources must be scrutinized. Deeg (2007: 36–37) importantly points out that “without using a methodology and hermeneutic framework of contextualizing the pilgrim records with e.g. the narratives and legends found in Buddhist literature preserved in the various ‘classical’ Buddhist languages, comparing their relation to the findings of archaeology and history of arts, etc. it is certainly impossible to draw final conclusions about the credibility of the records—whether their facts and their information are to be taken as witnesses of objective historicity, as regional traditions or as texts moulded after certain patterns of inner-Buddhist or intercultural Chinese *topoi*.” Deeg also points out the tendency of many current scholars who uncritically cite quite aged translations of Xuanzang and others, without any comment on the accuracy of the translations, or the potential problems of using such sources.

example in the Chinese sources in which the Persians are said to possess a relic of the Buddha (recall from above that a tooth of the Buddha was offered to the Chinese in 530). Elsewhere in Xuanzang's travelogue, he provides an account of Gāndhāra, where he states the following concerning the bowl:

There is an old foundation to the northeast within the royal palace. It was the ornamented platform for the Buddha's bowl long ago. After the *nirvāṇa* of the Tathāgata, the bowl ended up in this country. Over a number of centuries, it was venerated and given offerings. It was moved around different countries, and is now in Persia.

王城內東北有一故基。昔佛鉢之寶臺也。如來涅槃之後，鉢流此國。經數百年式遵供養。流轉諸國，在波刺斯。<sup>21</sup>

The reason for the bowl's removal to Persia is left unstated, but perhaps it was carried off as war booty, just as the Persians were said to have seized the True Cross from Jerusalem around 610 before returning it in 628 (Shahbazi 1990).<sup>22</sup> The date of the bowl's removal to Persia is unclear, but the Chinese monk Faxian 法顯 (338–423), who traveled to India and back between 399 and 413, reported that the Buddha's bowl was in Puruṣapura, which was four days south from Gāndhāra.<sup>23</sup> Other Chinese records, which are less credible than travelogues, but still informative, also mention the bowl in other locations (there might have been more than one), as pointed out by Zürcher (2013: 214); for instance, the famous translator of Buddhist literature, Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什; 344–413), is said to have paid his respects before the Buddha's bowl at Kashgar (*Shale* 沙勒) when he was twelve years old.<sup>24</sup> The chronology of the movement of the bowl (or bowls) would be difficult to trace out, but if we take Faxian's observation as credible, then the Buddha's bowl (or one version of it) was acquired by the Sasanians at some point in time after Faxian's journey.<sup>25</sup>

21 *T* 2087, 51: 932b16. Cf. Li (1996: 59–60).

22 See also mention of the Cross in the history of Al-Ṭabarī (Bosworth 1999: 318). Bosworth writes, "The capture of Jerusalem probably took place in June 614. [...] The True Cross was certainly carried off by the victors, not to be restored until 629."

23 Deeg (2022: 122). This is recorded in Faxian's travelogue, the *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 (*Account of the Eminent Monk Faxian*). *T* 2085, 51: 858b11–c4.

24 These details are reported in the aforementioned *Gaoseng zhuan* by Huijiao in 519. *T* 2059, 50: 330b25–28.

25 The proliferation of relics of the Buddha is a topic unto itself. We have reports of a bowl in one location, but we do not know whether the references in all instances indicate the same item. Similarly, today, there are various "Buddha teeth" which are regarded as authentic relics, and worshipped in different countries.

Interestingly, Faxian also mentions other relics in a nearby locale, Nagarahāra (*Najie* 那竭). He mentions a silhouette of the Buddha, a tooth of the Buddha, and a cranium bone.<sup>26</sup> This might have been the source of the aforementioned tooth that the Persians offered the Chinese.

Returning to Xuanzang's account, he provides a number of details about Persia that are similar to those surveyed above. Some peculiarities in his account must be analyzed.

The country of Persia is several tens of thousands of *li* ["miles"] in circumference. The great capital city of the country is \*Surasthāna, which is more than forty *li* in circumference. The rivers and lands are numerous, and the climate also differs, but it is generally warm. They irrigate the fields. The households are prosperous. They produce gold, brass, *sphaṭika*, quartz, rare treasures, and odd gems.<sup>27</sup> Their craftsmen weave various types of great brocades, fine hemp cloth, and wool carpets. They have many fine horses and camels. They use large silver coins for currency. The nature of the people is violent and their customs are without propriety. Their script and language are different from other countries. There are no scholars or artists, while there are many craftsmen. Their products are valued by their neighbors. Their marriage practices are muddled. They mostly abandon corpses. Their stature is great, and they trim their hair to expose the head. They wear leathers or dress in brocades and wools. They have household and levy taxes, at four silver coins per person. There are very many temples to gods, for they are devotees of the heterodox path of the \**dēn i bay* ["religion of the Lord"], which they venerate.

波刺斯國，周數萬里。國大都城號蘇刺薩儻那，周四十餘里。川土既多，氣序亦異，大抵溫也。引水為田，人戶富饒。出金，鑰石，頗胝，水精，奇珍異寶。工織大錦細褐毼毼之類。多善馬，橐駝。貨用大銀錢。人性躁暴，俗無禮義。文字語言異於諸國。無學藝，多工技，凡諸造作，隣境所重。婚姻雜亂，死多棄屍。其形偉大，齊髮露頭，衣

26 T 2085, 51: 858c4–5.

27 "Brass" translates *tou shi* 鑰石. This Chinese term translates *rīti* (yellow or pale brass) and *kācaka* (glass, stone) in Sanskrit (Hirakawa 1997: 192). See also Monier-Williams (1899: 268, 881). Needham (1974: 202) mentions Xuanzang's mentions of brass in India. *Sphaṭika* (a Sanskrit term transliterated into Chinese) is often translated as crystal, but the following substance in this list is also a type of crystal. There was a difference drawn between colored crystals and transparent quartz. Monier-Williams (1899: 1269) gives crystal, quartz, alum, and camphor for *sphaṭika*. Li (1996: 308) translates the Chinese as quartz. See the extensive discussion of brass in Chapter 7 below.

皮褐，服錦氎。戶課賦稅，人四銀錢。天祠甚多，提那跋外道之徒，為所宗也。<sup>28</sup>

Xuanzang's source of information about Persia was evidently not Persian. He calls the Persian capital what we might reconstruct as *Surasthāna*, which is perhaps from Sanskrit (we do not see anything like Ctesiphon).<sup>29</sup> This word is comparable to Pahlavi *šahrestān* as "province; capital, city." Alternatively, we might link this transcription to *Āsōristān*, the Sasanian province of Babylonia.<sup>30</sup> The reference to "muddled marriage practices" would not have been how Zoroastrians themselves would have described their customs. Such a statement is based on prejudiced views of non-Zoroastrians.

The "heterodox path" named at the end of the above passage is curious, as this word appears only in Xuanzang's travelogue: *ti na ba* 提那跋 (EMC: *dejna<sup>H</sup> bat*) is reconstructed as "Dinapati" by Li (1996: 308).<sup>31</sup> Zoroastrians worshiped Ohrmazd, not a deity called Dinapati, but this is an intriguing interpretation. Monier-Williams (1899: 478) defines *dinapati* as "day-lord," or "the sun." In this instance, we would have an Indian informant via Xuanzang identifying the god of the Persians with the Sun. This is not necessarily inexplicable if we consider the relevant terms in some Iranian languages. For the Khotanese Sakas, the name of the Sun was *urmazde*.<sup>32</sup>

Deeg (2022: 122–123), however, objects to the reconstruction of the Chinese as representing "Dinapati." Following Marquart, Sundermann, and Mikkelsen, he argues that the Chinese does not represent Dinapati, based on Xuanzang's more precise way of transcribing Sanskrit into Chinese, and the fact that Dinapati is rarely attested in extant Sanskrit literature. This *tinaba*, instead, represents Parthian *dēnāβar*, or rather Sogdian *dēnāβar* (*dyn'br*), derived from *dyn/dēn*, 'religion,' with the literary meaning of 'holder, bearer of the *dēn*,' i.e. the Manichaean electus." This is a reasonable interpretation, but we must bear in mind that although the travelogue is credited to Xuanzang, it was edited and compiled by the monk Bianji into its final form based on the material provided by Xuanzang. We might imagine that they also utilized documents and books available in the capital. One of the earliest extant biographies of

28 *T* 2087, 51: 938a10–19. Cf. the translation in Li (1996: 308).

29 See the reconstructed toponyms in Feng (1982: 89). Cf. Li (1996: 308).

30 Definition of the Pahlavi term from MacKenzie (1986: 79). Monier-Williams (1899: 1235) does not define *surasthāna* as a toponym, but rather states it is "a place or abode of a god, a temple." On *Āsōristān*, see Widengren (2011).

31 For the EMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 27, 221, 304).

32 Consider also *ormozd* in the extant Iranian dialects of Munjī and Yidga. See Boyce (1984) for details.

Xuanzang—which was written by Daoxuan between 646 and 649 while Xuanzang was still alive—states explicitly that Xuanzang “also produced an account of the Western Regions in twelve fascicles. The *śramaṇa* Bianji personally received the historical facts [concerning Xuanzang’s travels] and assembled them in a chronological order.” 又出西域傳一十二卷，沙門辯機親受時事連紕前後.<sup>33</sup> Any anomalous transcriptions might be explained by the editorial process; for example, older source materials might have been consulted.

There is another possible interpretation that is warranted because I think that the travelogue ought to be referring to Zoroastrianism. We would thus expect a term corresponding to something in Pahlavi. The Chinese transcription *dej na<sup>H</sup> bat* could correspond to *dēn i bay* (“religion of the Lord”), i.e., a reference to Zoroastrianism.<sup>34</sup> Skjærvø (2011: 12) explains that Pahlavi *bay* stems from Old Persian *baga*, which in the *Young Avesta* likely meant a distributor or “apportioner,” but Pahlavi *bay* is employed as a title meaning “Lord, Majesty (of kings).”<sup>35</sup> This observation is also confirmed by Panaino (2009: 209), who argues that “*bay*, when referring to a king, does not emphasize his *divine nature*, but represents only an honorific expression, like ‘Majesty,’ ‘Lord,’ so continuing the early meaning of the Ir. root \**bag-* ‘to distribute.’”

The word *dej na<sup>H</sup> bat* could also possibly be a corrupted transcription of *dēn i ohrmazd* (“the religion of Ohrmazd”). An erroneous transcription would not be unexpected, since Chinese scribes often wrote down the Sanskrit and other foreign languages they heard using Chinese characters as phonetic representations of sounds they often misheard. In the case of Sanskrit, this led to highly irregular declension tables and misspelled words even when Siddham script was used alongside the Chinese.<sup>36</sup>

The phrase *dēn i ohrmazd* is found in the *Dēnkard* (7.8.50): *be amāwandīh pērōzgarīh banded ō ān ī ōy dēn ī ohrmazd* [...] (“He will tie strength [and]

33 See the reproduction of the manuscript text critically edited by Yoshimura (2013: 210).

34 I must thank Antonio Panaino for pointing out this possibility to me in person during one of our extended conversations in Ravenna.

35 See also Bailey et al. (2011): “*Baga-* is attested in early and late Iranian with two meanings (1) agent noun ‘distributor,’ glossed by Parsi Sanskrit *vibhaktar-* and (2) noun of action and result ‘portion.’ ... In the later Zoroastrian books Pahlavi and Pazand *baga-* became *bay* (*bk’*, *by’*, Pāzand *bay*) and occurs associated with *yazata-* in the phrase *yazdān bayān* ‘gods’ (*bk’n*, *by’n*).”

36 Few in China—apart from figures such as Xuanzang who had ventured to India—had access to the necessary resources (grammar, instruction, etc.) to systematically study Sanskrit. Even when this was possible, it was not necessarily available to subsequent generations. Xuanzang’s direct disciples may have had a degree of access to Sanskrit studies, but this does not mean that their later students had the same level of learning. See the study on Sanskrit in East Asia by Kotyk (2021b).

victory to that which is his, [namely] Ohrmazd's religion").<sup>37</sup> *Dēn i ohrmazd* denotes only Zoroastrianism. It would be odd for Persia to be primarily associated with Manichaeism in this context, since Xuanzang mentions the Persians' "disorderly" marriage practices and disposal of corpses, which were Zoroastrian in character. It makes more sense for the travelogue to refer exclusively to Zoroastrianism.

Xuanzang's mention of a poll tax of four silver coins per person is noteworthy, as this number is actually one of the attested rates that were established in the sixth century. Goodblatt (1979: 239) observes that "Tabari reports that Khusro [531–579] divided the population liable to the poll tax into four brackets, each paying a different rate. The rates were 4, 6, 8, and 12 dirhams a year. By 'dirham' Tabari apparently refers to the Sasanian silver drachm." Xuanzang, or the team that compiled his travelogue for publication, certainly had access to accurate information about Persia. Similar information is given in the history of the Sui dynasty of 636, which was compiled only several years prior to Xuanzang's return in 645: "Those above the age of three years pay a poll tax of four coins." 人年三歲已上出口錢四文。<sup>38</sup>

Xuanzang returned to China in 645 and carried out extensive translations of Buddhist literature from Sanskrit. His translations were widely read and studied, also in Korea and Japan. We can find references to Persia in Xuanzang's translation of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, a major Buddhist treatise on Dharma, metaphysics, and cosmography, written by Vasubandhu sometime between the third and fifth century.<sup>39</sup> Although an earlier translation of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* was carried out by Paramārtha (Chn. Zhendi 真諦; 499–569), Xuanzang translated the same treatise between 651 and 654.<sup>40</sup> As discussed by Silk (2008), the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* mentions Persian customs as examples of transgressive behaviors that Buddhists ought to recognize as erroneous. We read the following in Xuanzang's translation of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*:

"Arising from ignorance," for example, in the [heterodox] temples, [based on] this *Dharma*, they consciously carry out slaughter. Also, the kings on the basis of worldly law, execute their enemies, and eliminate thugs, believing that carrying out slaughter achieves great merit. Also, the

37 See the Pahlavi and the English translation in Zeini (2020: 117).

38 *Sui shu*, 83.1856. Deeg (2022: 121, fn. 23) also points out this fact, following the annotations of Ji Xianlin 季羨林 et al.

39 On this topic, see the pertinent discussion by Scott (1990: 65–67).

40 The translation by Paramārtha is titled *Apidamo jushe shilun* 阿毘達磨俱舍釋論 (T 1559). See details on this text in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism.



Persians state that when one's father and mother are elderly and ill, it would bring supreme merit if they exempt them from discomfort and suffering at the end of their lives. Also, the heterodox path states that one who slaughters snakes, scorpions, hornets, and so forth—those that are toxic to people—brings supreme merit.

從癡起者，如有祠中謂是法心起殺加行。又諸王等依世法律，誅戮怨敵，除剪凶徒，謂成大福起殺加行。又波刺私作如是說，父母老病，若令命終得免困苦便生勝福。又諸外道有作是言，蛇蠍蜂等，為人毒害，若能殺者便生勝福。<sup>41</sup>

Vasubandhu was clearly referring to Zoroastrians in this context. Jong (2015a: 445) writes that euthanasia of the elderly and ill among Iranian peoples (Persians, Bactrians, Caspians, Hyrcanians, Scythians and Sogdians) is attested by ancient authors. For example, as Jong notes, Agathias (c.532–582) in *Historiae* (2.23) explains that the enfeebled men on active duty are abandoned to wild animals to be devoured. Agathias also writes about the Persian “festival of slaying the evil ones,” in which “they kill huge numbers of reptiles and other wild creatures and denizens of the desert and present them to the Magi as a proof of their devotion. They imagine that in this way they are rendering an agreeable service to the good divinity and that they are thwarting and injuring Ahriman.”<sup>42</sup> The slaughter of wild animals is well attested in Zoroastrian sources. The Zoroastrian religion gave free license to destroy what were deemed to be demonic creatures. The world was believed to be inhabited by many of them in physical forms.<sup>43</sup> This religious practice of culling unlimited numbers of “toxic creatures” would have been downright horrifying to Buddhists, who believed that killing under most circumstances creates negative (unwholesome) *karma*, the result (*phalam*) of which is suffering in this and future lives. These Zoroastrian customs were deemed disagreeable, yet remarkable, by both Greek and Indian writers.

Vasubandhu explicitly mentions the Persians in another instance: “Arising from ignorance, for example, like the Persians, who praise carrying out impure acts with one's mother and so forth.” 從癡生者，如波刺私讚於母等行非

41 *T* 1558, 29: 85b21–26.

42 For these comments by Agathias on euthanasia and the slaughter of baneful creatures, see the translation in Frendo (1975: 56–59).

43 The Avestan word *xrafstra* means wild animal or predator, whereas in the plural it refers to the demonic enemies of religion (Bartholomae 1979 [1904]: 538). For a study of Iranian demonology, see Christensen (1941).

梵行.<sup>44</sup> Agathias made a similar observation about the Persians with regard to incest—or, rather, what he would have understood to be incest.<sup>45</sup> He writes, “Not only do the present-day Persians think nothing of having intercourse with their sisters and nieces, but fathers lie with their own daughters and, horror of horrors, oh! the unnaturalness of it, sons with their mothers.”<sup>46</sup> As Silk (2008) has demonstrated, Indian Buddhist literature does, in fact, contain references to incestuous acts among a specific community of foreigners. Some of the relevant texts were translated into Chinese, such as the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra* by Kātyāyanīputra (c.2nd cent. CE), a voluminous treatise of two hundred fascicles that was translated by Xuanzang between the years 656 and 659. We read the following:

In the West there are *mleccha* (barbarians) called Maga who produce such views as these, and establish such theories: there is absolutely no sin in behaving lustily with one’s mother, daughter, elder or younger sister, daughter-in-law or the like. Why? All women-kind are like ripe fruit, like prepared food and drink, a road, a bridge, a boat, a bathing spot, a mortar and so on. It is the custom that beings use these in common, and therefore there is no sin in behaving lustily towards them.

又此西方有蔑戾車名曰目迦，起如是見，立如是論：母女姊妹及兒妻等，於彼行欲悉無有罪。所以者何，一切母邑，皆如熟果，已辦飲食道路橋船階梯白等。法爾有情共所受用，是故於彼行欲無罪。<sup>47</sup>

Although Persians are not explicitly mentioned here, we can reasonably assume that Chinese readers would have made the connection between “the West” (i.e., to the west of India) and the Persians. Alternatively, the conception

44 *T* 1558, 29: 85c14–15. Although not regarded as Persian or Parthian, the Śākya in Buddhist literature were known for sibling marriage. Attwood (2012: 48) observes that “in the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* the king banishes his elder brothers from his kingdom and they make their home on the slopes of the Himalayas. But they can find no one suitable to marry, so they take their own sisters as wives, and these incestuous relationships give rise to the Śākya. And it is this sibling marriage that Witzel identifies as an Iranian trait.”

45 We should again recall Macuch (2010), who emphasizes that in Sasanian family law, marriage within the nuclear family unit could be temporary and symbolic in practice as a means of preventing the dispersal of family wealth, in which case such marriage conventions should be understood as endogamic in character.

46 *T* 1558, 29: 85c14–15.

47 *T* 1545, 27: 606a16–21. English translation by Silk (2008: 438–439). Note that the Chinese *jieti* 階梯 normally denotes a ladder or steps. See discussion by Silk (2008: 439, fn. 11).

might have been more of a nebulous notion of barbarians, as a whole, located to the west of India.

In defining the word *mleccha* from Sanskrit, this word in the East Asian understanding was primarily oriented toward people to the west of India. The Silla (Korean) scholar Dullyun 遁倫 (d.u.) wrote a commentary on the *Yogācārabhūmi* in Chinese (*Yugaron gi* 瑜伽論記) based on the material by Kuiji 窺基 (632–682), who was one of Xuanzang's disciples. Dullyun presents the following explanation based on what Kuiji wrote:

Based on what is explained regarding the customs of the West, only the five regions of India are the Middle Country, whereas the rest are borderlands. It is only in Middle India where the Buddhadharma was transmitted, and it is called the Middle Country, while the rest are called borderlands. Jing Gong further states that *mleccha* means enjoyment of filth, [as in the case of] the Turks and forth.

依西方俗間所說，唯五印度名為中國，餘皆邊地。佛法所傳，唯中印度，名為中國，餘名邊地。景公復云：蔑戾車者，名樂垢穢，突厥等。<sup>48</sup>

The *mleccha* of the West were distinguished from the *dasyu* (Chn. *daxu* 達須) of the East. Dullyun, citing Shentai 神泰 (a disciple of Xuanzang), writes the following:

Outside the four regions of India [which are not Middle India], when the Buddha was present in the world, there was no buddha or four assemblies [of Buddhist practitioners], nor was there renunciation or itinerancy, but there was discernment, as in the country of Tang and so forth, which are called the countries of the *dasyu*.

四天竺外，佛在世時，無佛四衆，出世遊行，然有識別，如唐國等，名達須國。<sup>49</sup>

In this sense, China and by extension vassal states such as Silla were regarded as less handicapped with regard to personal conduct and morality than the

48 T 1828, 42: 426b5–8. This citation digests what Kuiji wrote, but Kuiji does not mention Turks in the extant version. This might have been added by Dullyun or, alternatively, the extant text of Kuiji dropped the reference. See *Yuqieshi dilun lüe zuan* 瑜伽師地論略纂 (*Abridged Compilation on the Yogācārabhūmi*); T 1829, 43: 106a4–10.

49 T 1828, 42: 426b3–4.

irremediable *mleccha*. Such ethnic categorization as this allowed those in China to explain why Buddhadharma and a superior mode of morality had been able to spread eastward, but not so far westward. In this way, the word *mleccha* denoted persons unacquainted with the Buddhadharma primarily in the West, which would have included the Persians and Turks. The citation of Shentai also expressly states that “the *Yi*, *Di*, *Rong*, and *Qiang* are called *mleccha*.” 夷狄戎羌名蔑戾車.<sup>50</sup> These were names of the ancient non-Chinese tribes. In this way, authors in China tried to position themselves as people of a borderland, but with ripe potential for the Buddha’s teachings, whereas the traditional foreign tribes (according to a Chinese perspectives) were *mleccha* and therefore unable to receive the Buddhadharma.<sup>51</sup> This categorization of ethnicities apparently forgot about the early Buddhist missionaries to China from Parthia.

Returning to the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*, this treatise also discusses the practice of euthanasia for which the Persians were also known:

Also, to the west of here there are *mlecchas*, called Maga. They have such views as these and raise arguments like this: when one’s father or mother is decrepit in old age and they face obstinate illnesses, one would gain merit, and it would be without transgression, to kill them. Why would this be so? Those who are decrepit in old age have faulty faculties, and are unable to drink and eat. They shall gain superior new faculties if they die, and drink fresh warm milk. They will be subjected to much distress if they face an obstinate disease. They would be liberated [from such distress] if they die, hence it is without transgression to kill them. These sorts of acts of killing are said to arise from ignorance, and they lead to wicked slander [toward those who disagree] as a result of their confusion regarding the fruits [*phalam*] of karma.

又此西方有蔑戾車，名曰目迦。起如是見，立如是論。父母衰老及遭痼疾，若能殺者得福無罪。所以者何？夫衰老者諸根朽敗，不能飲食。若死更得新勝諸根，飲新煖乳。若遭痼疾多受苦惱，死便解脫，故殺無罪。如是等殺名從癡生，以迷業果起邪謗故。<sup>52</sup>

50 T 1828, 42: 426b5.

51 This leads to an interesting question of how writers from Korea and Japan at the time would have framed themselves in such a Buddhist hierarchy of ethnic groups. They were not Chinese, but Buddhists in Korea and Japan would not have wanted to identify themselves as *mleccha*.

52 T 1545, 27: 605c16–22.

These purported customs of incest and euthanasia among people in the West effectively functioned as recurring tropes within Abhidharma, which in turn passed into the Chinese Buddhist worldview. In this way, Persia and the surrounding cultures as a collective group of *mleccha* functioned as a kind of caricature of what a Buddhist ought *not* to be, but at the same time, these views stemmed from an ethnocentric and prejudiced view that was apparently common in the Buddhist sangha in India. It was believed by many that not only must a buddha be born in Middle India, but he also must be of the proper caste. This is explicitly stated in the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*: “It is known that a buddha ought to appear in the world in India on the continent of Jambūdīpa, and not a borderland among the *dasyu* and *mleccha*.” 即知於瞻部洲中印度佛應出世，非邊地達絮蔑戾車中。 The text also states, “It is known that a buddha ought to appear in the world within the castes of either the *kṣatriya* or *brāhmaṇa*.” 即知或刹帝利或婆羅門種姓中佛應出世.<sup>53</sup> The absence of the *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya* castes precluded the possibility that any buddha could be born in the West (or the East for that matter). This belief only affirmed a prejudiced view that held that nations outside the Brahmanical caste system would never be a suitable environment in which the Buddhadharmā could emerge. The true religion, in other words, had to emerge (or re-emerge) in India. This conception of caste, rooted in a specific geographical locale, was shared by the Brahmanical tradition, and Buddhists were certainly influenced by it. Bronkhorst (2016: 124) observes that the *mleccha* “are often referred to in the most disagreeable terms. The *Mahābhārata*, for example, states: ‘The Mlecchas are the dirt of mankind.’ For good measure the same passage adds that the Bāhlikas, i.e. the inhabitants of Bactria, are the dirt of the earth.”

Although the extant literary record indeed speaks ill of the *mlecchas*, in real life, the situation between India and Persia was presumably far more complex in terms of diplomacy, culture, and commerce. Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, writes that Bahrām v (421–438) received a dowry including the port of Daibul on the Indus Delta, as well as the surrounding lands of Makrān and Sind, when he married an Indian princess.<sup>54</sup> Intercultural marriages at the highest level of society were evidently possible even in the face of prejudiced views toward Persia and vice-versa. Buddhist authors might have had a lot of negative things to say about Persians, but whether this stopped families from arranging marriages or trading with Persians is another matter. Further, as Scott (1990:

53 T 1545, 27: 893b9–12.

54 See the translation in Bosworth (1999: 102). See also Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 43).

65–67) points out, Buddhists, particularly in Central Asia, such as at Balkh and Bamiyan, were content to incorporate Sasanian regalia and other imagery into their own Buddhist artwork.

#### 4 Mahāyāna Texts and Iran

Some Mahāyāna authors expressed a different orientation toward the *mlecchas*, displaying more sympathy toward members of heterodox paths and foreign peoples. The *Ratnamegha-sūtra* (*Baoyun jing* 寶雲經) proclaims the following concerning the ideal bodhisattva:

It is akin to the merchant master who saves the lives of people when leading them out of a wasteland. The bodhisattvas are also like this, as they lead the heterodox, Pahlava, Nirgrantha, and others out of the wasteland of *saṃsāra*, saving their lives.

譬如商主能將諸人出於曠野令濟身命。菩薩亦復如是，令諸外道，鉢羅婆，殖尼乾陀等，於生死曠野將導使出，濟其軀命。<sup>55</sup>

This demonstrates the belief that the evangelization and conversion of non-Buddhists, including the Pahlava, is possible. In fact, contrary to the belief expressed in the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-sāstra*, some Mahāyāna thinkers believed that buddhas manifest all over the world, including in Persia. In the *Candragarbhā-parivarta* (*Yuezang fen* 月藏分), translated into Chinese by Narendrayaśas (490–589) in 566, we read that the Buddha manifested many buddhas across the world and “twenty buddhas manifested in the country of Persia.” 波斯國二十佛現. Other countries outside India, such as Khotan, Kucha, and China, are mentioned, so this was a worldwide event and not limited to Persia. The other countries saw relatively many more buddhas: Khotan received 180, Kucha received 99, and China received 255.<sup>56</sup> We might suspect that the more overtly Buddhist countries received more buddhas than Persia, but Persia was still not bereft of buddhas. The Pahlavas and Persians—in the eyes of some members of the Mahāyāna at least—were certainly not completely irredeemable, but it was still necessary to convert them to the Mahāyāna Buddhist path. Bodhisattvas basically do not give up on anyone.

55 *T* 658, 16: 229b26–28.

56 *T* 397, 13: 374a2–b7.

Still, even if it was believed that unseen buddhas and bodhisattvas are present in every part of the world where sentient beings suffer, it was considered unfortunate to be born outside the core cultures rooted in the Buddhadharmā. The *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra* (*Da baoji jing* 大寶積經) proclaims that those who slander the Buddhadharmā will be reborn in the realms of hell, the animals, and Yama, or they will be reborn among those with wrong views in the borderlands and among *mleccha*.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, being reborn in hell is comparable to being reborn among barbarians, since there is little hope for salvation; on the contrary, someone born among barbarians is likely to create enormous negative karma as a result of following wrong views regarding cause and effect (e.g., slaughtering people and animals with the thought that it is meritorious). Eventual salvation, in this view, generally requires being reborn in a suitable culture. This Buddhist belief effectively created a xenophobic view toward *mleccha*, who were generally associated with the countries to the west. This view passed into the Chinese sangha, who tried to position themselves as part of a culture that could eventually be edified and transformed through the Buddhadharmā. Chinese Buddhists, especially during the Tang period, managed to do this, even to the point of creating sacred pilgrimage sites that were known to Indians and Tibetans, a phenomenon that has been discussed by Sen (2006).

Zoroastrians presumably had no interest in how Buddhists conceived of Iran. We do not have anything to suggest that they took the notions of *mleccha* and Buddhist borderlands into consideration. The Zoroastrians formally regarded Buddhism as demonic. As Agostini (2019: 455) points out, in Sasanian times, the Persians tied Buddhism closely to India. He points to the *Bundahišn* (27: 43), which reads, “Buddha (*but*) is the demon whom the Indians worship and his spirit dwells in those idols because they worshipped Būdāsf (i.e. bodhisattva).” It seems doubtful that there were ever meaningful religious dialogues between any Magi and Buddhist monks.

We should pause here and reflect on the fact that the outline above is admittedly synthetic and not necessarily reflective of what Chinese Buddhists would have known about Iran through translations of Indian literature. This recalls something that Schopen (1991: 3) has noted regarding “canonical” Indian Buddhist literature, namely that “this material records what a small atypical part of the Buddhist community wanted that community to believe or practice.” Whether the typical monastic or layperson in India knew or cared much about Iranians as described in Buddhist literature is uncertain. Similarly, whether even erudite scholar-monks in China knew all the aforementioned

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57 *T* 310, 11: 274c2–4.

references is doubtful. I have been able to pull together all these citations with the use of a fully digitized canon, whereas even in the Tang capital, a monk might not have had access to all these sources in one place. In reality, the picture constructed from the above discussion is based on primary sources, but it is modern and produced using recent technology. Chinese Buddhists in Chang'an might not have known much more about Zoroastrians in Iran than Zoroastrians in Ctesiphon knew about Buddhists in China. Even so, this sort of investigation of the primary sources is still useful, in my mind, because it gives us piecemeal samples of what some Indian and Chinese authors thought about Iran. We can also see what sort of ideas general Chinese readers would have been exposed to, even if only in passing.

## 5 Other East Asian Buddhist Materials

Chinese Buddhist references to Persia continue to appear even after the demise of the Sasanians in the mid-seventh century. For instance, in 691, the monk Yijing 義淨 (635–713), remarked that Persia, among some other peoples, such as the Turks and Tibetans, “basically do not have Buddhadharma.” 元無佛法.<sup>58</sup> Hyecho 慧超 (b. 704), a monk from Silla (Korea), who wrote in Chinese (the lingua franca of East Asia), traveled to India and other regions before returning to China sometime around 727.<sup>59</sup> His travelogue is titled *Wang Ocheonchukguk jeon* 往五天竺國傳 (*Memoir of a Pilgrimage to the Five Indian Kingdoms*). He notes the following:

Further, traveling one month west from the country of Tukhāra, one arrives in the country of Persia. Here the king formerly governed the Tāzīks [Arabs]. The Tāzīks were a house of camel herders of the Persian king. They later rebelled and killed the king, establishing themselves as sovereign. Now this country has been swallowed up by the Tāzīks.

又從吐火羅國西行一月，至波斯國。此王先管大窠，大窠是波斯王放駝戶，於後叛便殺彼王，自立為主。然今此國，却被大窠所吞。<sup>60</sup>

58 This is found Yijing's travelogue and account of foreign countries (*Nanhai jigui naifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳). *T* 2125, 54: 214b15–17. Read *Bocisi* 波刺斯 as *Bolasi* 波刺斯. In Yijing's time, Persia as a nation was still recognized, even if it had been conquered.

59 An exhaustive commentary on this text with maps and facsimiles of a manuscript copy from Dunhuang can be found in Kuwayama (1998).

60 *T* 2089, 51: 978a27–b1. Read *fang* 放 (“to release”) as *mu* 牧 (“to shepherd”). Cf. Finch et al. (2012: 145–146).



Hyecho also states, “In the country of Persia, they also take their mothers as wives.” 波斯國亦納母為妻.<sup>61</sup> This is a recurring remark in other Chinese sources, as we explored in Chapter 3. The practice of consanguineous marriage was presumably commonly known among Hyecho’s informants; it was already quite ancient in the general region that Hyecho traversed, especially in Bactria.<sup>62</sup>

Hyecho was well aware of the demise of the Persians. Chinese Buddhist works from after his time, like state sources, gradually ceased referring to Persia, but earlier mentions of Persia in scriptures, canonical treatises, and travelogues remained in the religious lore of Buddhists. There are further scattered references—albeit minor ones—to Persia in Buddhist literature in Chinese translation. The *Candragarbha-parivarta* relates that the Buddha spoke to the divinity King Brahma and assigned Persia, among other countries, to the *nakṣatras* (lunar mansions) Pūrvaphālgunī (*zhang* 張) and Uttaraphālgunī (*yi* 翼).<sup>63</sup> This systematic assignment of divisions of the ecliptic is similar to the model observed in Hellenistic astrology, such as in Claudius Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* (2.3) from the second century CE. Ptolemy states that “Parthia, Media, and Persia are more closely familiar to Taurus and Venus.”<sup>64</sup> Although these two systems do not appear directly connected, the basic idea is similar. It is possible that the Indian model was inspired by the Hellenistic one.

We should finally note that scholars in the past have proposed that some elements within Buddhism were inspired by Iranian religions, the results of which would have been reproduced within Chinese Buddhism. This topic particularly concerns Maitreya, the future buddha, and the Buddha Amitābha, who presides over the paradisaical realm of Sukhāvātī in the western direction. Much attention has been paid to this matter, although no consensus has ever been reached. On this matter, Scott (1990: 67) has prudently remarked that “one can point to similarities between particular traditions, and one can provide the historical and geographical situation for such a transfer to take place. But at the end of the day one is still left with suggestive similarities than absolute proof.” Yoshioka (1959) argues that there are parallels between the lore of Akṣobhya Buddha (*Achu Fo* 阿閼佛), who presides over a realm called Abhirata in the eastern direction, and Zoroastrianism, but he does not consider possible explanations based on Vedic influences or an Indo-European

61 *T* 2089, 51: 978b29–c1.

62 Herrenschildt (1994: 115) observes, “Quinte Curce rapporte que le satrape de Bactriane au temps de Darius III, Sisimithrès, avait donné deux fils « à sa propre mère, car en ce pays les mères ont le droit de s’unir charnellement avec leur fils ».”

63 *T* 397, 13: 372a18–23.

64 See the translation in Robbins (1940: 141).

heritage. Attwood (2012) has also pointed to probable Iranian influences in early Buddhist thought and burial culture. Translations of the related texts were made into Chinese.

## 6 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has demonstrated the value of non-European and non-Islamic perspectives on Iran in late antiquity. Chinese Buddhist sources are a valuable—albeit underappreciated—voice on Zoroastrianism in particular. We can gather some valuable data from Chinese Buddhist writings that has otherwise been overlooked by modern scholars, who tend to focus on what authors in Greek and Arabic wrote about Iran and Zoroastrianism in particular. We know that a small community of Buddhists, in fact, existed in Sasanian territories from the third century until the end of the dynasty in the seventh.

There are religious sentiments expressed in Buddhist writings that display variable attitudes toward Iran by different authors in different time periods. In some cases, Parthians and Persians are positioned as caricatures who represent what Buddhists ought not to do, such as engage in killing and incest while mistakenly believing that such acts are meritorious. These became stereotypes, but nonetheless stem from the documented practices of Zoroastrians.

On the other hand, Mahāyāna writings are more sympathetic to the *mleccha* in the West. Some Mahāyāna authors believed that buddhas operate in Persia. This would be in line with the Mahāyāna ideal of the universal liberation of all sentient beings. Bodhisattvas, motivated by compassion, are pleased to appear in all lands in order to benefit *all* beings. It would have been contrary to such ideas if Persia, for all its faults, was ignored by bodhisattvas and buddhas.

## Iranian Religions in China—Adaptation and Integration

What we, in the modern day, would identify as “religions” in China were—and still are—generally denominated as “teachings” (*jiao* 教), such as *Fo jiao* 佛教 (“Teachings of the Buddha”), or in some instances as *dao* 道 (“Way”), e.g., *Fo dao* 佛道 (“Way of the Buddha”). Although Middle Chinese lacked a word for “religion” as a unique category separate from “science” or “philosophy,” at the level of the state, different teachings were still distinguished, and identified as separate institutions.<sup>1</sup> Some writers in China lumped foreign (especially non-Buddhist) religions together, and did not distinguish them as separate organizations or traditions; however, as we will see below, the state did in fact differentiate them out of legal necessity.

Iranian culture also had an analogous concept for “religion,” especially in the sense that a belief system could exceed ethnic and linguistic boundaries and assume a transcultural identity. BeDuhn (2015: 247), for example, suggests that “Mani and his early successors in third-century Iran produced such a concept, within which they included such recognizable entities as Christianity, Mazdayasnianism, Buddhism and Jainism, as well as their own Manichaean community.” Rezanian (2020) argues that the word that would be equivalent to “religion” in Iran was *dēn*, which was used in Mani’s lifetime. Moreover, the famous third-century inscription of the Zoroastrian cleric Kerdīr, at Ka’ba-ye Zardošt, lists faiths including, for example, the Jews (*yhwdy*), Buddhists (*šmny*), Brahmins (*blmny*), Christians (*klstydn*), and Manichaeans (*zndyky*).<sup>2</sup> The fact that Buddhism and Brahmanism (“Hinduism”) are separated is significant, since this distinction points to a recognition that Buddhists and Brahmins (“Hindus”) also were identified as strictly separate from each other, and did

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- 1 See Campany (2003) for a discussion of how religion as a concept was formulated in pre-modern China. The modern Chinese language has a word for “religion” that corresponds to the modern European concept, but Campany (2003: 289, fn. 6) explains that “W.E. Soothill noted as early as 1919 that the modern Chinese term *zongjiao* [宗教] was a borrowing from Japanese and that the term had been coined recently in Japanese to translate the Western ‘religion.’”
  - 2 See the discussion in Chaumont (1960). See also Widengren (1961: 130); MacKenzie (1989: 58); BeDuhn (2020: 4); Frenschkowski (2015: 471).

not belong to any sort of nebulous pan-Indian faith.<sup>3</sup> Whether it was a *dēn* or a *jiao*, both Iran and China recognized and separated traditions that we would qualify as “religions” in our contemporary nomenclature.

Rather than offer an exhaustive survey of the extant literature and artifacts, which alone would require a volume unto itself, the primary question I want to pose in this chapter concerns the level of influence that Iranian religions had in China. Further, how did the Chinese view these religions? How did Iranian religions adapt to China? How did they interact with the other predominant “foreign” religion, Buddhism, which had already been well established for several centuries? In this chapter, we will explore the interface between the religions of Iranian heritage and Chinese society to illustrate their significance and, moreover, to demonstrate the fact that they were localized and integrated into their host society. I aim to show that not only did Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity influence the religious landscape of China, but that some “occult lore” also filtered into Buddhism and Daoism, as is only beginning to be recognized in modern scholarship.

## 1 The Establishment of Iranian Religions in Tang China

One fact we should immediately recognize is that the *formal* establishment of Zoroastrianism and Christianity as institutions in China over the course of a few decades occurred as the Sasanian empire was under great internal and external strain. As discussed by Lin (2005: 269), a significant number of Zoroastrians, especially clerics, who migrated to China in the seventh century were political refugees forced to move. Their emigration to China was not necessarily voluntary. Zoroastrianism in various forms in China is apparent well before the seventh century, but this does not necessarily imply that a formal institution had been established in China. Aoki (2015: 150) states that “the early 4th century is generally regarded as the most reliable date” for the arrival of Zoroastrianism in China, emphasizing the Sogdian connection. Iranian elements of a religious character are certainly apparent in the archaeological record. The tomb of Wirkak in Chang’an from 579, as Vaissière (2006) explains, “provides us with the oldest depiction of the Zoroastrian Činwad bridge, as

3 BeDuhn (2015: 252) also makes this observation: “It was well-known among Hellenic and Iranian observers that Indian culture possessed two distinct and rival paradigms of religio-philosophical authority: The Brāhmanas and the Śramanas.” The inscription includes comments that seem to imply that violent persecution had occurred, but Shenkar (2015: 482) suggests that “‘striking down’ various religious communities probably reflects Kartir’s triumphs in theological disputes rather than violent persecutions.”

well as with perhaps the very first testimony of Manichaeism in China in a syncretic form.”<sup>4</sup> Sogdians, as explained by Grenet (2007), brought a diversity of religious traditions to China. Depictions of Zoroastrian priests are apparent on three tombs of Sogdians or Central Asians in China, such as that of Wirkak. I believe that it is reasonable to assume that a small number of Magi did, in fact, operate in China before the Tang period, exclusively catering to the Iranian communities there, but Bryder (1985: 28) expresses skepticism toward this, suggesting that “not before the Tang [is] there any solid evidence of the existence of Iranian religion in China.”

Although the proselytization of Christianity would have certainly been on the agenda after it arrived in China, we still need to ask whether there was also a pressing need to exit Iran due to the volatile circumstances of the late Sasanian period. In any case, the Christians and Zoroastrians, and later the Manichaeans, made concerted efforts at adaptation and localization with varying degrees of success. As we will explore, clerics from these institutions also interacted with Buddhists and Daoists, exercising influence over the evolution of Chinese religions during the Tang period.

There are only scattered resources when reconstructing the history of Zoroastrianism in China, but there is enough to gain a basic idea of how the tradition was introduced to China. Du You, writing in the year 801, records that “in year 4 of Wude [621], a shrine and office for Zoroastrianism were established. There are often many groups of *Hu* who offer worship, partaking of the fire, and offering prayers. In year 2 of Zhenguan [628], the Persian Temple was established.” 武德四年置祆祠及官。常有羣胡奉事取火呪詛。貞觀二年置波斯寺。<sup>5</sup> The period of these events in China was contemporaneous with the Turkish subjugation of Persia and the regicide of Sasanian royals as recorded in Chinese histories, as discussed above in Chapter 3.

The historian Zanning 贊寧 (920–1001), a Buddhist monk, compiled a history of institutional Buddhism in China, titled *Da Song seng shilüe* 大宋僧史略 (*Abridged History of the Monkhood in the Great Song*) in the year 999. He briefly discusses foreign, non-Buddhist religions, although he does not directly cite his sources. The following details regarding Zoroastrianism are offered:

The teachings of the Fire God arose in the great country of Persia. [Someone] was titled Zoroaster. There was a disciple who was named

4 For further discussion of the Indo-Iranian elements in the depictions on the tomb, see Rose (2021).

5 *Tong dian* (SKQS), 45.14a–b; Zhang (2020: 104). The “Persian temple” mentioned here might refer to the Christian church, which also originated in Persia. See below.

Xuanzhen. He learned the teachings of the master, and lived in the country of Persia, where the situation had been like a fiery mountain for a long time, and he later brought the faith to China. In year 5 of reign era Zhenguan [631], there was a Magus, He Lu, who transmitted the teachings. He brought the Zoroastrian teachings to the court and presented them to the throne.

火祆火煙切教法本起大波斯國。號蘇魯支。有弟子名玄真，習師之法，居波斯國，大總長如火山，後行化於中國。貞觀五年，有傳法穆護何祿，將祆教詣闕聞奏。<sup>6</sup>

It is uncertain from where this text was excerpted; nevertheless, it does demonstrate that there were accounts of Zoroastrianism beyond what is outlined in the dynastic histories and other extant state sources. The name Xuanzhen 玄真 (“Profound Reality/Truth”), apparently understood as a disciple of Zoroaster, is Chinese. The name would *not* have been unusual for a Buddhist or Daoist cleric.<sup>7</sup> This would indicate that Xuanzhen adopted this name, or was given it, in order to integrate into Chinese society. He left Persia for China due to the volatility and dangers in Persia. We might assume that this was during the final decades of the Sasanian dynasty sometime before 631. Again, according to the Chinese histories, sometime toward 618, the Turks subjugated Persia briefly and executed some members of the royalty, and the Arabs are said to have revolted against the Persians around the year 617 (see Chapter 8 below). These are the sort of circumstances in Persia that were recorded in Chinese sources. In this context, the Zoroastrian cleric moving to China was effectively escaping turmoil. Another figure, a Magus called He Lu in Chinese, later officially presented the Zoroastrian teachings at court in 631. Interestingly, only a few years later, the first official Christian mission to China arrived.

Some details regarding the first documented Christian mission are found on the Christian stele erected in 781 by the cleric Adam (named Jingjing 景淨 in Chinese). This inscription itself is titled *Daqin Jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑 (*Stele for the Spread of the Luminous Faith of Byzantium into China*). This inscription, which was extensively studied by Pelliot, records that in the year 635 (year 9 of reign era Zhenguan 貞觀), a cleric named Aluoben 阿羅本 (alternatively written as 阿羅本) brought scriptures to the Chinese capital, Chang’an. Yoshida (2022: 597) reads this name as a

<sup>6</sup> T 2126, 54: 253b21–24. Cf. the translation in Deeg (2022: 126).

<sup>7</sup> There was, for example, a female Daoist cleric in the ninth century also named Li Xuanzhen 李玄真 (Hu 1995: 106).

transcription of Syriac “*rabban* ‘our master.’” Takahashi (2018: 630) notes another suggestion: Persian Ardābān.

As Nicolini-Zani (2022: 68–70) points out, although it is probable that earlier Christians lived in China, the mission of Aluoben (who was a missionary and not a diplomat) was the first formal presentation of the faith in China.<sup>8</sup> An imperial decree thereafter sanctioned the introduction of this new faith within the Chinese realm during the autumn of 638.<sup>9</sup> There are no diplomatic records of which I am aware that would indicate that this mission was attached to a formal envoy. Adam writes that Aluoben hailed from Daqin (Byzantium or the Levant in this case), but this was because, by the year 781, the Chinese Christians had ceased referring to Persia. The Christian clerics were originally known as “Persian monks” (*Bosi seng* 波斯僧) and, as Jiang (1994: 57–59) notes, document S. 1366 from Dunhuang indicates that “Persian monks” were allotted a ration of noodles and oil. The term was clearly a part of common parlance even in later times.<sup>10</sup> Aluoben was originally a Christian cleric from Persia; he presumably was also an official representative of the Persian Christian church, which was a separate entity from the Byzantine Church.<sup>11</sup> Whether he came directly from Persia is uncertain. There were, for example, Christian presences in India, Myanmar, and Malaya.<sup>12</sup> Still, it is highly probable that Aluoben was aware of (or had directly experienced) the rapidly deteriorating situation in Iran.

In any case, there was an impulse to move missionary activities into China, sparked by the disastrous situation in Iran. Nicolini-Zani (2022: 9) observes that “the Islamic conquest of Persia certainly contributed to a further acceleration of the diaspora toward Central Asia, India, and East Asia.” Indeed, contemporary

8 Saeki (1951: 86) claims that in 578 “already a great Nestorian family of Mar Sargis immigrated from the Western Lands” to China, but his dating is erroneous.

9 See the detailed notes by Pelliot in Forte (1996b: 221–229). Nicolini-Zani (2022: 69–73) discusses the legendary stories of Christians, such as Saint Thomas of India, who brought the faith to China. The Chinese sources do not lend any sort of evidence to support the historicity of such stories. See also Takahashi (2018: 626), who notes the following: “Although it is possible that individual Christians travelling along the Silk Road reached China before the seventh century, there is little historical evidence to support the tradition reported by ‘Abdīshō’ (*Nomocanon*, 304a) which credits the Church of the East catholicos Aḥā 1 (410–414) and Shīlā (503–523) with the erection of a metropolitan see for China.”

10 On this nomenclature, see Forte (1996b: 356–358).

11 Thompson (2009: 267–268) emphasizes this point, stating that “Alopen was a representative of the large Church of the East, which had formally declared its independence from Antioch and the western church at a council in 424.”

12 Colless (1969: 20–26) explains that Catholicos Ishoyahb III (647 or 650–657/8) defines “India” as a territory stretching from Persia to the Malay peninsula. There were clergy of the church throughout this area.

Christian voices also recollect these events. In 633/634, Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem, mentions the Saracens “who, on account of our sins, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity.”<sup>13</sup> Aluoben’s mission, like those of the Zoroastrian clerics, occurred during a period of great stress in West Asia. Proselytization might not have been the primary objective at first, although the church had certainly expanded eastward in earlier years. Although Aluoben was not received as a representative of Persia according to the Chinese sources, it is conceivable that he had been sent by the Sasanian throne. Wiesehöfer (2010: 132) remarks that the Sasanians “used Christian dignitaries as ambassadors and advisers.”<sup>14</sup> Thompson (2009), following remarks by Forte, proposed that a Christian community already existed in China prior to Aluoben’s arrival, suggesting that Christians from Persia had already migrated eastwards, into the cosmopolitan regions of Central and Inner Asia, to escape hardship and persecution decades before 635. At the same time, resident Christians in China might have requested a leader such as Aluoben to come and offer formal leadership to the community, such as the administration of sacraments. Thompson (2009: 273) points out that “a similar request had come a century earlier from the Hephthalites according to the *History of Mar Aba*. In 549, they requested the Nestorian patriarch to appoint a bishop specifically to serve their country. And while we do not have record of a request being made, Ishoyahb II, the Persian patriarch from 628–643, is known to have dispatched the first metropolitan to India on a similar mission of organization and consolidation.” This is a reasonable theory, and I am inclined to accept it, although the Chinese sources express no awareness of Christianity before 635.<sup>15</sup>

The early decades in which Zoroastrianism and Christianity took root in China were contemporaneous with the conquests of Iran and the exile of some of their royalty to China. Reports would have filtered in over the years alongside refugees and firsthand witnesses. The Persian diaspora in China would have faced the stark reality that there was to be no returning home, especially after the flight of their king, Pērōz. Yet, even if it seemed as if the apocalypse had commenced for Zoroastrians and Christians in Iran, their coreligionists

13 Quoted and translated in Hoyland (1997: 69).

14 For a study on diplomacy carried out by the Syriac hierarchy as an intermediary between Byzantium and Persia, see Sako (1986).

15 In a recent article, Thompson (2022) evaluates the popular proposal by Wang Weifan 汪维藩 (d. 2015) that Thomas the Apostle had founded a church in China during the first century CE. Similar theories had already been proposed by the Jesuits, but the various attempts to argue for such an early Christian presence in China are problematic, as Thompson illustrates in his article.



in China found themselves in a stable and increasingly prosperous country, and moreover one that was relatively tolerant of and receptive to foreigners. Adaptation to Chinese linguistic and cultural norms (i.e., “Sinification”) became necessary not only in order to survive and prosper in China, but children born and raised in such an environment did not exist in a linguistic or cultural bubble. They had to adapt to the host culture.

Even if the Chinese state classified Iranian religions as foreign, at the level of common life, the children of Iranians in China would have been bilingual (or multilingual) and culturally fluent in different environments. Some of the cultural norms of their ancestors that were at odds with Chinese expectations would have inevitably led to tensions and even ridicule, so adaptation was necessary. In this respect, a pertinent phenomenon from an earlier era (third to sixth centuries) is the depictions on Sogdian tombs in China (or otherwise belonging to Central Asian peoples): the wife is always depicted as a Chinese lady accompanying her husband in a Chinese pavilion, as discussed by Grenet (2007: 464), who describes this as a “kind of double Sogdian/Chinese social identity.” This would have been the norm for Iranians who were born and raised in China.

Such persons also would not have been overwhelmingly immersed in an atmosphere of apocalypticism among their Chinese peers; it would have been simply awkward in China to propose that the end of the world was imminent. A cleric in a temple or church might imaginably have proposed that the end was near, but outside in the bustling markets of the capital, money was being made and the majority of the population was not so pessimistic. Dynasties could rise and fall in China, but daily life, as well as religious and economic activities, carried on without the sort of drastic changes experienced in West Asia during the seventh century. Further, for Christians, the interest in proselytization would have been consistently upheld even in the face of disaster. In Matthew (28:19–20), we should recall, Jesus famously tells his eleven disciples to convert people of all nations and to baptize them, for Jesus would be with them until the end of the world. This sort of mindset would have encouraged building the Church in China even if the circumstances seemed dire.

## 2 Zoroastrianism: Adaptation and Integration

As a starting point in this discussion on integration, we might ask whether the Zoroastrian diaspora in China continued the practice of consanguineous marriage. The first generation of immigrants would have already been born

into such arrangements, but their host culture not only frowned upon incest, but also restricted it by law. There would have been some legal ambiguity with regard to this matter because it involved foreigners. Choo (2009: 32) has studied the articles regarding incest and explains that “article 6 of Tang Code defines incest as any sexual conduct between relatives within five degrees of consanguinity. The article also extends the definition of incest to include any sexual contact between a man and any sexual partners of his own father and paternal grandfather. Articles 411 to 416 of the Tang Code are all devoted to incest.”

Whether these laws would have been applicable to foreigners in China, such as Persians, is an interesting question, since one article of Tang law states that those persons not under the jurisdiction of Chinese law are to be judged based on the law of their homeland. The Tang law code, which was based on the codes of earlier dynasties, explicitly defines extraterritoriality.<sup>16</sup> Article 48 of the code states that those persons not under the jurisdiction—or more literally the “edification”—of the Chinese state (*hua wai ren* 化外人) must be judged according to the laws of their respective original cultures. The commentary explains this law as follows:

“Those persons not under our jurisdiction” is in reference to the countries of foreign peoples, that have separately established rulers and lords, each having their own customs and different law codes. If they are compatriots who commit a crime together, then it is necessary to consult the regulations of their original country and judge them based on the laws of their culture. If the persons who commit a crime together are different—for example, if persons from Goryeo and Baekje commit a crime together—then for all parties use the national law [of the Tang] to determine the type of punishment.

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16 The Tang legal codes were compiled in 624 based on several centuries of earlier codes and legal precedents. An official commentary was added in 653 and the resulting work was the *Tang lü shuyi* 唐律疏議 (*Commentary on Tang Law Codes*); the received text dates to 737. Barbieri-Low and Yates (2015: 233) observe that “a close analysis reveals that the Han and Qin laws were clearly ancestral to the Tang laws, both in their general principles and in dozens of concrete instances, despite the intervening nine centuries.” The Tang code was immediately preceded by an earlier code, from 564, under the Northern Zhou dynasty (557–581), which in turn was based on the laws of the Western Jin (268). See also Gernet (1996: 244–245).

「化外人」，謂蕃夷之國，別立君長者，各有風俗，制法不同。其有同類自相犯者，須問本國之制，依其俗法斷之。異類相犯者，若高麗之與百濟相犯之類，皆以國家法律，論定刑名。<sup>17</sup>

Persian expatriates in China would in theory have been subject to the laws of their homeland, as was also the case for those from the Korean kingdoms of Goryeo and Baekje. From a strictly legal perspective, foreigners of the same nation who had married their kin would not have been subject to Chinese marriage laws. Those from Sasanian territories would *not* technically have violated any law of Persia in this regard, thus, in China, they would likewise have been exempt from the national laws prohibiting incest. That being said, we can imagine that those from the second and third generations were raised in the host culture and pressured to conform to local norms, especially bilingual Zoroastrians in China, who simultaneously received an education in Chinese. Although numerous Chinese sources mention consanguinity in Persia, I am unaware of any source that mentions Persians living in China continuing this practice, even if they were afforded legal protection.<sup>18</sup> Still, Aoki (2015: 153) suggests that “the fact that Zoroastrians performed no forms of asceticism in contrast to the Nestorians and Manichaeans spurred the impression of ‘lewd’ and ‘amorous’ behavior on the part of the Zoroastrians. This image contributed to the association in Chinese folk literature of Zoroastrianism with adultery.”

The Zoroastrian practice of exposing corpses was, it would appear, also discontinued in Tang China. We have already seen above that this Persian practice had been mentioned by Chinese authors, but the common customs of Persia did not necessarily carry over into China. Chinese Buddhists were aware that exposure was one type of funerary practice in India, since Xuanzang explains that in India corpses could be cremated, set adrift in water, or left exposed in the forest to be devoured by beasts. Buddhists in China, however, did not practice exposure of corpses.<sup>19</sup> The traditional Chinese custom was one of burials and tombs, and Buddhists favored cremation. Abandoning corpses to wildlife would not have been acceptable to any segment of Chinese society. At least one major item of evidence indicates that Persians in China adopted

17 *Tang lü shuyi*, 6.98. I also consulted the digital edition on Wikisource, in which I was able to quickly search for keywords, but preference is given to the printed edition. Schafer (1951: 407, fn. 33) refers to these unique regulations for foreigners in Tang law.

18 Lieu (2000: 59) suggests that the bilingual inscription from ninth-century Chang'an refers to a “wife” in Chinese and a “sister” in Middle Persian, but looking at the translation by Yoshida (2020), I do not see this.

19 *T* 2087, 51: 877c26–28.

the custom of tombs: namely, the aforementioned tomb with a bilingual Pahlavi-Chinese inscription from 874 (Yoshida 2020). It is evident that the Zoroastrian community in China had no qualms about burials, but they also had localized their funerary procedures by creating bilingual inscriptions, which furthermore acknowledged the suzerainty of the Chinese throne.

The Magi and Zoroastrian elites who lived in China, whether they were Persian, Sogdian, or from another background, found themselves in a non-Mazdean country. The erstwhile religio-political ideology of Sasanian Iran was effectively rendered irrelevant in this new environment. In China, the clergy were not in a position to advocate, let alone defend, the matrimonial models of their predecessors. The Zoroastrian community held no political authority in China; they could not match Buddhism or Daoism in terms of soft political power or cultural influence among the elites. Buddhists, including non-Chinese monks, could attain power and high status at court, whereas the same cannot be said for Zoroastrian clerics. It is uncertain whether there was any attempt to strictly preserve the ecclesiastical model of Iran, with its orthodox clergy, in China, but extant records indicate that Zoroastrians assimilated into Chinese society, and their “Fire God” simply became another divinity within the larger Chinese pantheon. We also have records of a hereditary priesthood, as we will shortly see, but this is not evidence of a well ordered seminary on the scale of what the Buddhist sangha maintained.

On the basis of documents preserved in the northwestern oasis city of Dunhuang, Ogawa (1966: 31–32) observes that the Zoroastrian temple there during the late Tang and subsequent decades (ninth and tenth centuries) was quite active. Zhang (2020: 103), based on the available data, argues that Zoroastrians in China built their temples based on construction models in Central Asia and Persia. The temple was part of the wider religious landscape, and it was treated as an important venue by the local Han Chinese. Although everyone at the time was aware that Zoroastrianism had been imported from the Western Regions, the Chinese also evidently participated in the activities of the temple. Aoki (2015: 148) states that the Tang “prohibited Chinese people from professing Zoroastrianism, so it remained primarily a foreign religion for foreign people.” I disagree with this assessment based on the available evidence, which indicates that Zoroastrianism—or more specifically, a localized (“Sinicized”) form of it—significantly divorced from what existed in Sasanian Iran, was, in fact, accessible to Han Chinese, even if in theory they were not free to ordain within the tradition or *officially* participate in it. Zoroastrian temples were not closed to the public; they were known for performances by illusionists or magicians. Already a century ago, Fujita (1928: 57) drew attention to this fact and referred to the *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載 (*Comprehensive Accounts of*

*the Court and Countryside*) by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658–730), in which we read the following:

In the Lide ward of the Henan district, as well as the western ward of the Southern Market, there are Zoroastrian temples of the *Hu* people. The *Hu* merchants annually pray for fortune. They cook pork and mutton, [play] lutes, drums, and flutes, and engage in drunken singing and dance. After offering libations to the god, they recruit one of the *Hu* to function as the master [of ceremonies] for the Zoroastrian deity. The onlookers offer up cash and it is handed over. The master takes a straight single-edged blade, pristine as frost or snow, against which a hair blown across it would not pass [without being cut apart], and then he proceeds to pierce his stomach with the blade. The edge protrudes out of the back and then while his guts are still bleeding out in a terrible way, in the time it takes to eat something, he sprays water and recites an incantation over it, and he is restored like before. This is an illusionary technique of the Western Regions.

河南府立德坊，及南市西坊，皆有胡祆神廟。每歲商胡祈福，烹豬羊琵琶鼓笛酣歌醉舞。酌神之後，募一胡為祆主。看者施錢並與之。其祆主取一橫刀，利同霜雪，吹毛不過，以刀刺腹，刃出於背，仍亂擾腸肚流血，食頃噴水呪之平復如故。此西域之幻法也。<sup>20</sup>

If we assume that this account reflects a historical reality, and I assume that it does, then Han Chinese appear to have had access to these venues, at least as observers. In the above passage, *yao* 祆 (“evil spirit”) ought to be read as a scribal error for *xian* 祆, the typical designation for Zoroastrianism, considering the reference to the *Hu* peoples, the typical designation for Western foreigners. These were not Daoist or Buddhist temples. The offering of mutton and wine was a part of Avestan rituals, such as we see in the *Tištār Yašt* (verse 58): “Let the Aryan peoples bring libations unto him ... let the Aryan peoples prepare (lit cook) a sheep for him ...”<sup>21</sup> Music accompanied the evidently festive occasion. Music was also certainly a component of Chinese state rites, but those were supposed to be solemn in character. The Chinese word that I translate as “incantation” (*zhou* 呪) in a Buddhist context refers to *mantras* or *dhāraṇīs*, but here it would presumably denote something Mazdean (*aḫsōn* or *nērang* in Pahlavi). Omidsalar (2011) explains that “a great many charms, spells, and

20 *Chaoye qianzai* (SKQS), 3.9b.

21 See the translation in Panaino (1990: 81).

magical incantations were used in ancient Persia.” We do not possess any Chinese descriptions or transcriptions of such spells, but clearly these grand events attracted wider attention, even if locals might not have understood their context. Zhang Zhuo also offered the following account of a temple in a different locale:

At the Zoroastrian temple in Liangzhou, on days of prayer, the master [of ceremonies] for the Zoroastrian deity takes an iron nail and nails it into his forehead straight through to his armpit, before he heads outside. Going west, his body is light, as if he were flying and could go hundreds of miles in a moment. He dances to a song in front of the Zoroastrian deity, before going back to the earlier Zoroastrian [temple] site, where he removes the nail without any injury. After ten days, he is restored like before. Nobody knows how this is possible.

凉州祆神祠，至祈禱日，祆主以鐵釘，從額上釘之直洞腋下即出門。身輕若飛，須臾數百里至西。祆神前舞一曲，即却至舊祆所乃拔釘，無所損卧。十餘日平復如故。莫知其所以然也。<sup>22</sup>

This type of ritual would have been irregular within an “orthodox” Zoroastrian context. The use of a statue is also implied here, rather than a sacred fire. Frachtenberg (1918) emphasized the Zoroastrian hatred and fear of witchcraft on the basis of a number of textual sources that explicitly condemn such practices. This self-mutilation and apparent act of sorcery would have been unorthodox, if not forbidden and abominable, according to Zoroastrian scriptures. We ought to recognize, however, that Zoroastrianism in China was likely quite diverse, as the participants and priests alike came from different ethnic heritages. The Sasanian royalty in exile conceivably followed a different creed and practice than those coreligionists who had come to China as merchants from Sogdiana and elsewhere. There potentially also could have been substantial divergences between the temples in different cities, especially if no uniform code of ecclesiastical procedures was produced and enforced. It is also conceivable that public festivals were carried out for a different audience than private worship was.

There was at least some knowledge of the activities in Zoroastrian temples. In 801, Du You, for example, records that “*Xian* is a god of the Western Regions, and he is called *Maheśvara* in the Buddhist *sūtras*.” 祆者西域國天神，佛經所謂摩醯首羅也。 He also states that at the Zoroastrian temple “there are

<sup>22</sup> *Chaoye qianzai* (SKQS), 3.10a.

often many groups of *Hu* who offer worship, partaking of the fire, and offering prayers.” 有羣胡奉事取火呪詛.<sup>23</sup> The sacred fire was apparently accessible to the congregation and, it seems, also to Chinese observers (one might otherwise expect them to have been blocked from ever directly seeing the fire). From the perspective of a Chinese onlooker, the sacred fire of a Zoroastrian temple would have been comparable to the *homa* of Brahmins. It was therefore easy to assume that the Zoroastrian divinity was comparable or even identical to Maheśvara. Further, the expression “partaking of the fire” (*qu huo* 取火) is odd. It could mean that devotees ignited some kindling of their own at the sacred fire for use at home. In that case, the public had direct access to the fire, not just as observers.

The term *zhouzu* 呪詛, which I loosely translate as “prayer,” is a binomial comprised of two concepts: incantation and curse. The image suggested by the term is one of foreigners worshipping around a fire while chanting in a foreign language, all of which would have been quite alien and intriguing to most locals in China, although it was also a point of fascination for some authors. The chanting of Zoroastrians was also notable for Muslims, a point that was also indirectly taken up by Du Huan 杜環 (fl. 751–762), who was captured in 751 at the Battle of Talas, and then spent a number of years in Iraq and elsewhere, until he could return to China in 762.<sup>24</sup> His travelogue refers to the “Law of the *Xunxun*” (尋尋法). Du Huan states that “the *Xunxun* are the most terrible among the foreign tribes for clan endogamy. They do not speak while eating.” 其尋尋烝報於諸夷狄中最甚。當食不語。<sup>25</sup> This is clearly a reference to Zoroastrians, but what exactly does *xunxun* (MC: *zim zim*) denote? Chen (2012: 208) explains that “the Arab author Abu-l Hassan al-Mas‘udi had reported that a vulgar name, not for Zoroastrians but rather for their sacred book the *Avesta* (*Bestah*), was *zemzemeh*.” The word *zemzemeh* implies incoherent muttering, in which case the term is a pejorative.

Returning to the abovementioned event involving a nail being pressed into a man, this might be interpreted as an act of spirit possession, but one that was welded for a desired aim within a ritual. Although nowhere is it expressly

23 *Tong dian*, 45.14a. Read *yao* 袄 as *xian* 袂.

24 Du Huan wrote a travelogue, known as the *Jingxing ji* 經行記 (*Record of Passages and Travels*). In 762, he returned to China aboard a merchant vessel. Only some quotations from his work were preserved by Du You—who was related to Du Huan—in the *Tong dian*. The significance of Du Huan’s travelogue has long been recognized. For a translation and study of the text, see Akin (1999). Liu (2007) offers a detailed discussion of the Central Asian polities as outlined by Du Huan.

25 *Tong dian* (SKQS), 193.14b–15a. The Chinese term *zhengbao* 烝報 is complex, but it refers to marrying a departed father’s concubine, or to a younger brother wedding his departed elder brother’s wife. This sort of arrangement is best translated as clan endogamy. For a discussion of the Chinese term (*zhengbao hun* 烝報婚), see Baidu Encyclopedia.

stated, we might suspect that some type of *jinn* lore was connected with this ritual. The use of iron nails (*tie ding* 鐵釘) is indicative of a possible connection with the *jinn*. Omidsalar (2012) states, “The *jinn* are especially afraid of iron, and anyone who manages to insert an iron needle in their bodies or clothes, gains control of them because their great fear of iron prevents them from pulling the needle out of their persons or attire.” Henniger (2004: 19, fn. 92) explains that Arabs believed that while *jinn* could harm people, one could still ward them off, for instance “iron is a defence against demons; even a needle can be sufficient.”

There is other, arguably stronger, evidence of *jinn* lore in China and even its incorporation into Chinese Buddhism within an esoteric context. In a previous study (Kotyk 2022a: 458), I discussed an irregular text of Chinese origin preserved in Japan, titled *Qiyao xingchen bie xingfa* 七曜星辰別行法 (*Special Practices for the Seven Planets and Stars*). This illustrated text is attributed to revelations received by the famous court astronomer and monk Yixing 一行 (673–727), but, in reality, it postdates his death by at least a century (Kotyk: 2018b: 23–27). The text provides instructions on how to banish spirits (*gui* 鬼) who cause specific diseases on specific days. Although the illustrations of the spirits are heavily Sinicized—for instance, some wear Chinese garments, the bestial figures with animal heads and bird legs are suggestive of something extraneous to Chinese religions. The activities of these spirits are closely connected with the lunar mansions. The text explains the following:

The seven planets govern the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The twenty-eight lunar mansions govern the spirit kings who cause diseases. One must first recall the seven planetary weekdays, and then recite a supplication: today is the day of *Myś* [the Sun] etc.; among the twenty-eight lunar mansions, it corresponds to the asterism Jiao [equated to Indian lunar mansion called Citrā], etc. On the corresponding day, quickly bind the spirit. It must always be during the corresponding day in order to make the healing work, otherwise it cannot work if the timing is off. Then take iron nails, top to bottom, and nail the hands and feet [of the illustration of the spirit].

七曜即管二十八宿。二十八宿即管諸行病鬼王。先須記得七曜日，即呪願曰：今日是密日等，二十八宿當角星等。直日火急為△乙收禁其鬼。皆須限當日令差，如違時不可。即以鐵釘上下釘其手足。<sup>26</sup>

26 T 1309, 21: 452c18–22. The characters △乙 are unclear in meaning and are perhaps a shorthand abbreviation of a word. The modern typeset edition of this text is included in the Taishō canon, but we also have the earlier woodblock print, which is included in



The twenty-eight lunar “mansions” (or “stations”) have a complex history in China. Independent of foreign influence, the Chinese developed an indigenous model of dividing the celestial equator into twenty-eight divisions that apparently were connected with the orbit of the Moon, but later the Indian *nakṣatras* (likewise translated as “lunar mansions,” following the Latin) also became known in China. The Chinese just used their own model of lunar mansions as a functional equivalent for the *nakṣatras*; this was also the case, it would seem, when lunar mansions were translated from any other language. Models of lunar mansions also existed in Iranian and Islamic systems of astrology. In the present case, the material was adapted from a foreign source, just like the concept of the seven-day week.<sup>27</sup> *Mi ri* 密日 literally reads as “the day of *Myš-*,” in which *Myš-* is the Sogdian word for the Sun (the EMC reading of the first character is *mjit*).<sup>28</sup> This is another element in the text indicative of foreign influence. The practice of using iron nails to bind these spirits cannot be traced back to any obvious native Chinese concept, but these spirits could conceivably have some connection with *jinn* lore. Similarly, the above-cited story of a priest having iron nails pounded into him, and thereafter apparently having the ability to move quickly at an unnatural pace, points to something extraneous to both Buddhism and Daoism in my opinion. Based on the fact that Iranian religious culture flourished in Tang China, it is not unreasonable to assume also the translation of some *jinn* lore that had filtered into esoteric practices.

Zoroastrian temples and their priests survived into later ages. Rong (2009: 194) draws attention to the *Mozhuang man lu* 墨莊漫錄 (*Free Writing of the Ink Estate*) by Zhang Bangji 張邦基 (fl. c.1131), in which we read the following:

At the northern wall of the eastern capital there is a Zoroastrian temple. The Zoroastrian god originated from the Western Regions, as it is a god of the *Hu*. The Magi entered together China with the Romans [Christians]. It is their custom to make sacrifices to a Fire God. The people of the capital treat this quite seriously, as they fear its spiritual power. The custodian

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the *Himitsu giki Junwa roku* 祕密儀軌享和錄, printed in 1800–1802. Main Library, Kyoto University (/16/17/2; 135925; ID RB00015429). See additional discussion in Kotyk (2022a).

27 See my comments on this matter in Kotyk (2018a: 51–53; 2023a).

28 The words *myhr* or *myš-* (Sun) are the Sogdian candidates from which the Chinese is transcribed. The character 密 in Sino-Japanese is pronounced *mitsu*, from Early Middle Chinese *mjit*, thus *myš-* is the better candidate. See the dictionary data in Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst (2012: 118–119). Yano (2013: 110) gives *myr* as the corresponding Sogdian word, but Panaino has pointed out to me in person that *myš-* is more reasonable. Cf. Mid. Persian *mīhr* in MacKenzie (1986: 56); Durkin-Meisterernst (2004: 235).

of rites at the temple is surnamed Shi and named Shishuang. He himself says that his household had been doing the rites for multiple generations. He keeps the official documents received from past generations. [...] From the Tang, the Zoroastrian god has received sacrifices in Bian [Kaifeng], and the rites are still passed on intergenerationally. The post has lasted over two hundred years. This is quite extraordinary.

東京城北有祆廟。呼煙切祆神本出西域，蓋胡神也。與大秦穆護同入中國。俗以火神祠之。京師人畏其威靈甚重之。其廟祝姓史名世爽。自云家世爲祝累代矣。藏先世補受之牒 … 自唐以來祆神已祀於汴矣，而其祝乃能世繼。其躋踰二百年，斯亦異矣。<sup>29</sup>

Zhang Bangji noted that an early document for wishing the temple well (which would appear to have been issued by the local authorities) was dated to 862 (year 3 of Xiantong 咸通). The temple itself was presumably built sometime shortly before this date. It would indicate that Zoroastrians, in fact, had migrated eastward in China, and did not remain settled strictly in Chang'an or Luoyang. This particular temple maintained a hereditary lineage of priests, which might have been the norm for Zoroastrians in China. Zhang Xiaogui (2005) looks at this record, and points out that the authority to appoint Zoroastrian priests in China was transferred to local governments in the late Tang, which shows that the office had increasingly lost its original religious significance, and that Zoroastrianism had been absorbed into the Chinese system of rituals under state supervision.

Another resource for reconstructing some basic understanding of Chinese knowledge of Zoroastrianism is a recently discovered Manichaean manuscript from the remains of the Manichaean temple of Xiapu 霞浦 in Fujian, in which we find a direct reference to Zoroaster. Zhang (2016) surveys this document and explains that it is 82 pages, 665 lines, and approximately 8,400 words.<sup>30</sup> He notes that dating the text is challenging, but it is likely no earlier than the Ming period, yet ought to have been compiled in the early Qing (seventeenth century). The text, however, incorporates material from much earlier. In one instance, Zoroaster (Suluzhi 蘇路支) is listed among five “buddhas,” which also include Nārāyaṇa (who is misidentified with the god Viṣṇu), Mani, Śākyamuni, and Jesus.<sup>31</sup> In another instance, Zoroaster is said to have “taught the Dharma

29 *Mozhuang man lu* (SKQS), 4.1b–2a.

30 On this topic, see also the detailed study of Kósa (2020).

31 “Nārāyaṇa” was significant in Manichean lore as the founder of the “Brahmanic religion” in India. This concept is reflected in the Chinese Manichaean texts from Xiapu. The

in Persia, due to great causes and conditions, and he liberated countless people.” 以大因緣故，說法在波斯，度人無數。Jesus, in contrast, descended into Rome. Nārāyaṇa appeared in the country of the Brahmins. Mani is designated as “the final envoy of light” (最後光明使). Zhang (2016) points to the inspiration behind these ideas, namely the *Šābuhragān*, written by Mani, and quoted by Al-Ṭabarī:

Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger, called Buddha, to India, in another by Zarādusht to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age through me, Mani, messenger of the God of truth of Babylonia.<sup>32</sup>

Zhang importantly notes that the statements about Zoroaster in the document reflect that there was at least some knowledge of him in Chinese in the past. We can certainly speculate that a certain amount of information about Zoroastrianism was made available into Chinese, although none of it is extant, unlike the few texts we have from Manichaeism and Christianity. In the case of the Manichaean reference to Zoroaster, however, this was an established part of internal history within the Manichaean community, so this alone does not necessitate that further information about the figure was furnished in Chinese.

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succession of prophets was originally comprised only of Zarathustra, Śākyamuni Buddha, Jesus, and Mani, as stated in the *Šābuhragān*. Some figures were added at a later date. The concept of “Five Buddhas” was integrated into Manichean propheticology. Nārāyaṇa was listed as one of these “buddhas” (in this context, a messenger of the light, not a Buddhist conception of a buddha). See the detailed study by BeDuhn (2022). See the relevant parts of the Coptic Kephalaia, translated by Gardner (1995: 18). BeDuhn, responding to Kósa in particular, argues that the interpretation of Nārāyaṇa as an epithet of Viṣṇu—as it is often construed, based on the Chinese Buddhist understanding of Nārāyaṇa—is incorrect. BeDuhn (2022: 21) states, “As one of these messengers and as an author of texts (e.g., the one attributed to him in the Chinese Hymnscroll), this figure should be a historical or legendary religious ‘founder’ as are the other four. In fact, such a figure named Nārāyaṇa, not the god Viṣṇu, does exist in the Hindu tradition. Nārāyaṇa is the name of the *ṛṣi* identified as the composer of the *Puruṣasūkta*, perhaps one of the most well-known and often quoted hymns of the Ṛgveda (10.90). This figure meets all the requirements of a messenger of God in the Manichaean system: he is a human sage figure, positioned at the fountainhead of a major religious tradition, and renowned to the point of veneration by that tradition.” BeDuhn notes that this development occurred after the life of Mani, since Nārāyaṇa is not mentioned by Mani as one of the members of the prophetic lineage that preceded him.

32 See the translation in Sachau (1879: 190).

### 3 The Frontier and Zoroastrianism

In addition to the texts surveyed above, we can recover some details about the daily activities of the Zoroastrian temple at Dunhuang and elsewhere through documents and fragments that were preserved there and then rediscovered in the early twentieth century. These documents generally date to the ninth and tenth centuries. They are moreover valuable because they provide a more personal and on-the-ground perspective, rather than having been written by extraneous observers. Ogawa (1966) has already drawn attention to these documents, pointing out their key importance for our understanding of popular Zoroastrianism in China. The first item discussed by Ogawa is P. 2748. The verso of this scroll includes a total of twenty poems. Kanda (1939: 177–179) had previously studied these in detail and noted that the authorship was entirely uncertain, but based on the content of one poem, the author had migrated to Dunhuang some two decades prior. Kanda dates the poems to the late Tang or Five Dynasties periods (ninth to mid-tenth century). The work of interest is titled, “Poem on the Zoroastrians of Ancheng” (*Ancheng Xian yong* 安城祆詠). It reads as follows:

The day in Ancheng, made of earth and timber,	板築安城日
The divine shrine makes it prosperous here.	神祠與此興
The whole province prays for bountiful blessings,	一州祈景祚
While the masses look up for an auspicious sign.	萬類仰休徵
There is no shortage of offerings for the rite.	蘋藻來無乏
Should the spirits be reliable,	精靈若有憑
Further look to the site of the sacrifice for rain,	更看雩祭處
From morning to evening, the wine as if it were on a rope. <sup>33</sup>	朝夕酒如繩

The offering of wine would have been appropriate within a Zoroastrian context. The poet who wrote these lines also seems to have participated in the drinking. Offerings of wine before the sacred fire are well attested in Sasanian Iran ever since its beginning in the third century, in which it was offered together with bread and meat (Gignoux 1999: 42). Wine offerings were a regular occurrence at Dunhuang. Kanda (1939: 179–180) points out another record from Dunhuang (P. 2629) recounting that “on the tenth day, at the Zoroastrian [temple] on the east side of the city, two jars of wine were offered to the deity.” 十日城東祆賽

33 The idea here seems to be that wine was so freely available that it was like you could just pull a rope and receive it as if it were coming out of a well.

神酒兩瓮。This ought to date to the late ninth or early tenth century.<sup>34</sup> We see a specific recurring term: *saixian* 賽祆 (“sacrifice to the Zoroastrian god”).

Ogawa (1966: 25–27) also points out a relevant accounting entry in P. 2569, dating to 887 (year 3 of Guangqi 光啓), in which we find reference to the seasonal provisioning of wine to the Zoroastrian temple: “For the summer season, expend four jars of wine for the libations of the Zoroastrian [deity].” 夏季賽祆用酒肆瓮。It was not only alcohol that was offered; a separate bureaucratic ledger (P. 4640 verso) from 899 to 901 records several instances of paper being gifted. For example, on 3 September 899 (lunar 7/25), “The Zhi [family] offered thirty sheets of drawing paper to the Zoroastrian [temple].” 支賽祆畫紙叁拾張。Grenet and Zhang (1996: 182) note that many of the listed offerings called for thirty sheets of paper and suggest that this relates to “all thirty deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon who are invoked together at the time of the Āfrīnagān, the ceremony which most likely corresponds to the *saixian*. This number of thirty comprised the twenty-seven deities individually worshipped on calendar days (one of which is precisely the Dēn), plus three additional ones: Hōm, Dahman Āfrīn, and Burz.”

Ogawa further points out that the timing of these offerings (first, fourth, seventh, and tenth lunar months) is suggestive of an established schedule in which the gifted items were furnished on a seasonal basis. Moreover, the fact that paper was provided at the very least informs us that the temple made use of it, which denotes literacy, unless the paper was used only for illustrations. Another ledger (S. 1366) mentions lamp oil, cereal flour, and sausages being provided to the temple.

Although we can imagine that the activities at the Zoroastrian temple in the capital, Chang’an, might have been comparable to those in Dunhuang, the temple in the latter had certainly been localized and become part of the common religious landscape. The locals and bureaucracy treated it like any of the other religious facilities in the area, not unlike the Zoroastrian temple in Kaifeng. We can imagine that the Zoroastrian clerics and buildings in Chang’an would also have catered to high-ranking aristocrats and nobles from the Persian diaspora and even the exiled royalty. From the seventh to the ninth century, there were at least some Magi active in Chang’an, although we do not know whether they formally trained disciples in the same way that they would have done in Persia.<sup>35</sup>

34 Kanda (1939: 180) gives *yu* 雨 (“rain”), but looking at the original manuscript, I read this character as *liang* 兩 (“two”).

35 The great persecution of Buddhism and other “foreign” religions in 845 included the Magi in Chang’an. See the discussion below.

There appears to have been some interreligious tension, although not necessarily violent, at Dunhuang. We can also observe some amount of tension between Zoroastrians and Buddhists. As Jiang (1994: 57–58) points out, S. 6551 from Dunhuang, which is a compilation of notes on the *Amitābha-sūtra*, makes the following remarks:

With regard to refuge in the Buddha, in which buddha do we take refuge? It is not the buddha of Mani, nor the buddha of Persia; it is also not the buddha of the Fire God; it is the pure *dharmakāya* [dharma body], the complete *sambhogakāya* [enjoyment body], and Śākyamuni Buddha of the trillions of *nirmāṇa-kāyas* [emanation bodies]. [...] Like the ninety-six types of heterodox paths that exist in the western realm of India, here there are the ranks of the weeping gods of Persia, Mani, and the Fire God [Zoroastrianism].

歸佛者，皈依何佛？且不是磨尼佛，又不是波斯佛，亦不是火祆佛，乃是清淨法身，圓滿報身，千百億化身釋迦牟尼佛 … 且如西天有九十六種外道，此間則有波斯，摩尼，火祆，哭神之輩。<sup>36</sup>

Here the “buddhas” of Mani, Persia, and the Fire God are either a colloquial way of referring to the gods of Manichaeism, Christianity, and Zoroastrian respectively, or the idea itself was borrowed from Chinese Manichaeism, in which “buddha” was used in the loose sense of a prophet or sage. In this context, the Buddhist position holds that those who have taken refuge in the Buddha—i.e., formal members of Buddhism—should cease making offerings to the heterodox gods. The fact that this has to be explicitly stated means that plenty of Buddhists were likely visiting the temples of other religions and participating in their activities, much to the displeasure of some Buddhist clergy. This would mean that locals who might not have been strictly Zoroastrian also had the freedom to visit and worship at the Zoroastrian temple. It was a public facility in practice.

As a final thought about Zoroastrianism in China, we can observe that despite the apocalypticism of Zoroastrian literature in the Islamic period, the Zoroastrians in China, even after the final demise of the Sasanian state, continued to live their lives and operate their temples well into the Song period. There is little evidence through which to explore how they conceptualized themselves on the cosmic timeline of Creation, in which a final battle between Ohrmazd and Ahreman was imminent. The community was confident enough

<sup>36</sup> See the digitized manuscript on the International Dunhuang Project. Cf. Jiang (1994: 57).

in the future to continue propagating their religion and ordaining clerics over the course of the Tang period, and even somewhat into the Song at least as family lineages. Zoroastrians escaping the territories of the defeated Sasanians and moving to China found themselves in a relatively stable, prosperous, and orderly society, as opposed to their counterparts in Persia, who were conquered and subjugated. If the Zoroastrian community in China, on the whole, truly felt the end was near, they might not have been able to organize themselves as well as they did. We can imagine that Zoroastrians arriving in China as first-generation immigrants in the mid-seventh century might have actually experienced a sense of optimism at the sight of their fellows operating freely in major Chinese cities, especially Chang'an, albeit without the royal sanction and prestige that they had enjoyed in Persia.

#### 4 Iranian Religions in Tang China: Adaptation and Integration

Christianity in Tang China is better documented than Zoroastrianism. Some Christian texts in Chinese are extant, in addition to two stele inscriptions. The oft-called "Nestorian stele" of 781, which was rediscovered in 1625, has been a valuable source on the history of early Christianity in China. The second known stele, which dates to 814, was erected in Luoyang, and was recently rediscovered in 2006.<sup>37</sup> As noted above, the first official Christian mission arrived in China in 635, led by Aluoben. A postscript to what is often translated as the *Diptych* (*Zunjing* 尊經, "Scriptures of the Venerated"), states the following:

In year 9 of Zhenguan [635], under Tang Emperor Taizong, the Great Venerable monk of the Western Regions, Aluoben, arrived in China, and he addressed the throne in his native tongue. Fang Xuanling and Wei Zhang spoke as translators.

唐太宗皇帝貞觀九年，西域太德僧阿羅本屆于中夏，並奏上本音，房玄齡魏徵宣譯奏言。<sup>38</sup>

37 It has two inscriptions: *Daqin Jingjiao xuanyuan zhiben jing* 大秦景教宣元至本經 and *Jingchuangji* 經幢記. The bottom half is missing, but the extant inscription offers a theological discourse, as well as information about the congregation who erected the stele. The inscription demonstrates that Christians were active in Luoyang. Sogdian Christian clergymen also served the community. For studies on the Luoyang inscription, see Moribe (2012); Tang (2009).

38 *T* 2143, 54: 1288c22–23.

Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648) and Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) were eminent statesmen. The meeting with Aluoben was treated as a serious affair by the court. The stele inscription of 781 states that in the autumn of 638, Aluoben brought scriptures and images to the capital and explained their meaning. It was decided that the doctrines were profound and beneficial to the realm. The court therefore permitted the proselytization of the faith, as well as the construction of a church in the capital, at which twenty-one monks were ordained.<sup>39</sup> As to Aluoben's spoken language, Standaert (2001: 19) states that “in the two capitals Chang'an and Luoyang, these two high court officials could only have known one foreign language, Sogdian, often considered to be the *lingua franca* of Central Asia.” Aluoben, however, is said to have been Persian. The language he spoke is uncertain, although it conceivably was Persian. Aluoben presumably arrived by land. The overland route into China from the Tarim Basin was a major access point, but the maritime route also was available. In 792/793, Patriarch Timothy I (780–823) referred to China as a state under the Patriarchal Throne, but also stated that “many monks cross the seas to India and to China with only a staff and a scrip.”<sup>40</sup> This is not an unrealistic statement, given that Buddhist monks also traveled between India and China by sea. It has also been proposed that Aluoben may have accompanied a documented Sogdian envoy in 635, which would have arrived over land.<sup>41</sup>

Christianity as a minority religion in Iran was often persecuted under the Sasanians, but there was still Christian support for the throne. Yamauchi (1998: 98) points out that “the church itself by the mid-sixth century officially supported the shah.” Chinese sources initially understood Christianity as *the* Persian religion, whereas Zoroastrianism was more closely tied to the ambiguous *Hu* ethnicity, which could include people from Byzantium, Persia, Sogdiana, and any number of other cultures and regions. In this sense, the Chinese initially perceived Christianity to have originated in Persia. The association with Persia ended after about a century, following the demise of the Sasanians. The “Persian temples” were renamed “Daqin” (i.e., Roman) temples. These developments are related by records reproduced by Wang Pu in 961. As Forte (1996b: 353–355) has explained, Wang Pu explicitly refers to Aluoben as a “Persian monk,” which reflects the original designation of the cleric. Wang Pu also records an official edict from 745 (lunar month 9 of year 4 of reign era Tianbao 天寶四載九月) that reads as follows:

39 *T* 2144, 54: 1289b9–15.

40 See the summary and translation by Colless (1969: 20).

41 Standaert (2001: 20); Forte (1996b: 360–363).



The scriptures and teachings of Persia came from Daqin [Rome]. Following their transmission and study, they were long circulated in China. The temples were thus named as such [viz., Persian temples] when they were first built, but with the wish to instruct people, and out of necessity to fix the origin [of the institution], the Persian temples of the two capitals should be renamed as Daqin temples. Those located in the various prefectures and counties will also accordingly follow suit.

波斯經教，出自大秦。傳習而來，久行中國。爰初建寺，因以為名，將欲示人，必修其本，其兩京波斯寺，宜改為大秦寺。天下諸府郡置者，亦準此。<sup>42</sup>

The impetus for this change of names might not have been simply because the Persian state was defunct; there could have been an external directive to rename the churches in China. Only a few months before the edict was issued in the ninth lunar month (30 September–29 October), there was an envoy recorded as having arrived in the fifth lunar month (5 June–3 July) from a certain “country of Tāzīk *cia<sup>H</sup> ma.*” 大食舍麼國。<sup>43</sup> The Chinese appears to render something like *šām*, in which case this ought to refer to Syria or Damascus. Although no further details are known about this envoy, they could have conceivably included members of a Christian delegation. At this point in history, it would have made sense to realign the church in China with Syria, but the situation at the time was complex. The envoy would have been sent from Syria during the Third Fitna (744–750), during which time the region of Syria was a major center of events and conflicts. It is also unique that this *šām* is understood as a country of the Tāzīks, rather than just being *the* Tāzīk country. We might imagine different claimants to the caliphate communicating with the Chinese court.

In any case, shortly afterward, the church in China became associated with Daqin. “Daqin” to the Christians did not necessarily refer to Byzantium, strictly speaking, but rather to the Levant. The stele inscription of 781 reads, “The angel proclaimed good tidings. The Virgin gave birth to the Sage. In Daqin, a luminous asterism indicated a portent. The Persian(s) witnessed the brilliance and came to pay tribute.” 神天宣慶，室女誕聖，於大秦景宿告祥，波斯觀耀以來貢。<sup>44</sup> In this way, the church effectively became associated with the area in

42 *Tang huiyao*, 49.10–11. See the alternate English translation by Forte and his detailed discussion on this edict (Forte 1996b: 353–356).

43 Cefu yuangui (SKQS), 971.17b. For the EMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 217, 279).

44 *T* 2144, 54: 1289a19–20.

which Bethlehem is located, instead of Persia. As Deeg notes, there were likely other considerations at the time that related to the negative associations with Persia. The use of “Daqin” in lieu of “Bosi”

reflected a coherent community of Christians, disregarding their linguistic, regional or cultural origin or affiliation such as Persian, Sogdian, Bactrian, etc., clearly demarcated Christianity from the Manichaeans. Daqin also enabled Christians to distance themselves from the pejorative notions that were connected to the name Bosi as reflected in Buddhist and historiographical sources; these notions included Persians to be violent, materialistic and without etiquette (*li* 禮) as well as to be committed to deviant practices such as abandoning the bodies of their dead and engaging in incestuous marriage (Deeg 2020).

At this stage, the Chinese Church referred to itself as the “Teachings of Light” (*Jingjiao* 景教), which at the time stood alongside the “Teachings of the Dao” (*Daojiao* 道教), “Teachings of the Buddha” (*Fojiao* 佛教), and “Teachings of Mani” (*Monijiao* 摩尼教). The name “Teachings of Light” can be interpreted in another sense: Lieu suggests a connection with the Middle Persian *tarsāg* (“God fearer”), denoting a sense of “religion of fear/awe.”<sup>45</sup>

It would appear that by the mid-eighth century, there was a tendency to refer to the religion with reference to Daqin not only formally at the state level, but also colloquially. Du Huan, a war captive who was brought to Iraq after 751, wrote that “the *Hu* [peoples] are one race. Their laws are numerous. There is the Law of the Tāzīks. There is the Law of Daqin. There is the Law of the *zemzemeh*.” 胡則一種，法有數般，有大食法，有大秦法，有尋尋法。<sup>46</sup> These refer to Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism respectively (there is no mention of Judaism). Du Huan did not use the earlier designation of *Bosijiao* 波斯教 (“Persian teachings”) to refer to Christianity. There was clearly a shift in vocabulary usage around 745, at least among aristocrats.

One important fragmentary Chinese Christian text is what is often translated as the “Jesus-Messiah Sutra” (*Xuting Mishisuo jing* 序聽迷詩所經), which outlines the life and works of Jesus, including the virgin birth, baptism by John, miracles, arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. General Christian precepts for daily life are also given. Saeki (1951: 113–117) suggests that this document was written by Aluoben between 635 and 638 with the intention of presenting it to Emperor Taizong, in order to provide a summary and outline of the faith.

45 See Takahashi (2018: 625); Lieu (2013).

46 *Tong dian* (SKQS), 198.14b.

I agree that this is the most reasonable explanation of the origin of the text. This work is, as far as I am aware, the earliest extant Chinese text to give transcriptions of Syriac vocabulary in Chinese. It also includes important toponyms.<sup>47</sup> These transcriptions of Syriac into Chinese are discussed in detail by Takahashi (2009, 2014). The text also introduces, probably for the first time in Chinese, the original land of Christ:

This Divinely Honored One [i.e., God] is in Heaven, universally presiding over Heaven and Earth. When Išō' [Jesus] was born, the Mšīḥā [Messiah] was present in the world, and there appeared brilliant fruits in Heaven and on Earth. A new star was recognized in the sky above. The star was great like a wagon wheel. For a time, it illuminated all around a pure place of the Divinely Honored One. The Mšīḥā was born in the city of Ōrišlem [Jerusalem] in the country of Fulin [Rome]. At the age of five, after one year, he spoke and taught the Law, doing good for sentient beings. After twelve years, he went searching in a pure place called Yōrdnān [Jordan]. At the age of twenty, he was baptized by Yōḥannān [John].

此天尊在於天上，普署天地。當產移鼠，迷師訶所在世間，居見明果在於天地。辛星居知在於天上，星大如車輪，明淨所天尊處一爾前後。生於拂林園烏梨師殿城中，當生彌師訶。五時經一年後，語話說法，向眾生作好。年過十二求於淨處名述難。字即向若昏人湯谷。<sup>48</sup>

These toponyms are some of the earliest references to the Levant in Chinese. The Chinese had some knowledge of the geography of Mesopotamia in earlier centuries, but from the mid-seventh century we see increasing awareness of the Eastern Mediterranean area, in part due to missionaries.

There were a number of challenges in conveying Christianity in the new Chinese medium. The grammar and vocabulary usage of the text is irregular, and clearly it was put together by non-native speakers, who grappled with introducing some Christian ideas into Chinese for the first time. For example,

47 The stele of 781 includes a Syriac transcription, so the language was presumably used for liturgical purposes in the Chinese church.

48 *T* 2142, 54: 1287c11–17. Syriac vocabulary (transliterated into Chinese) adapted from Takahashi (2009, 2014). Read *yuan* 園 (“garden”) as *guo* 國 (“country”). Translation excerpted with minor edits from Kotyk (2022c: 130–131). *Fulin* 拂林 in Middle Chinese is reconstructed by Schuessler (2007: 241, 358) as *pʰjuət ljəm*. Cf. Persian *Hrōm* for “Rome” (MacKenzie 1986: 44). Forte (1996: 387) explains, “Normally Purim > Frūm = Rūm, Rome, i.e. the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire.” Yu Taishan (2013: 181) also notes that *Fulin* is generally understood as a reference to Byzantium.

the concept of “God” is translated using the binomial *Tian zun* 天尊, which Tam (2019: 5) defines as “that which is the highest” and “that which is supremely honored.” This Chinese term, however, was originally Buddhist, being a translation of *deva* or *bhagavat* (Hirakawa 1997: 335), the latter an epithet of the Buddha. The Christian sense might be read as “Lord of Heaven” as Saeki (1951: 167) takes it, but the term was originally appropriated from Buddhist literature.

Another obvious Buddhist term is *fo* 佛, which typically denotes a buddha or the Buddha. For instance, God is likened to a wind that permeates the world. We then read the following (translated literally):

In Heaven are all the *buddhas*. As this wind flows throughout the world, there is no place where the flow of the wind does not reach. The Lord of Heaven [God] is constantly in a place of stillness and joy. There is no place where the results of acts do not reach.

在天皆諸佛。為此風流轉世間，風流無處不到。天尊常在靜度快樂之處。果報無處不到。<sup>49</sup>

The “buddhas” are distinguished from the “Lord of Heaven” (God). These “buddhas” appear to denote angels, but this is an entirely irregular use of the Chinese term. I imagine that the idea they had in mind stemmed from a loose understanding of Mahāyāna. Buddhas, like Śākyamuni in our present age, or Amitābha in the realm of Sukhāvātī, are “emanation bodies” (Sanskrit *nirmāṇa-kāya*) of a higher transcendental body (*dharmakāya*). They naturally manifest in response to the suffering of beings. This leads to the question of whether they possess free will or act automatically as “emanations,” unlike ordinary sentient beings, who conceptualize themselves and others as separate while engaging in calculated decisions. Although this is certainly different from the concept of angels in the Bible, we can reasonably see how “buddhas” could be used as a term in the complete absence of Abrahamic religious terminology in Chinese at this point in history.

The term *guobao* 果報 (a typical Chinese translation of Sanskrit *vipāka*) normally refers to the fruits of karma, i.e., the results of acts, which in a Buddhist context would be the circumstances that stem from our conscious decisions. Here the term was reappropriated to mean the acts of God that reach everywhere. These odd elements only highlight the challenge of translating a new

49 *T* 2142, 54: 1286b13–15. Saeki (1951: 126) mistranslates this as follows: “But there is not a single consequence of (human actions) that will not be known to Him.” There is no verb for “know” in the Chinese text.

theological framework into Chinese using established religious terminology from a different religion. It is reasonable to assume, as Saeki (1951: 148) has done, that a Chinese Buddhist monk assisted in the writing of the text. The fact that Buddhist terms were used shows that the early Christian mission was intent on conveying their message, one way or another, in order to get a foot in the country. Aluoben was required to offer a survey of his faith to the throne. There was an immediacy underlying the whole situation, which also explains why it was only about three years between his arrival and the presentation of the faith to the emperor. There was little time to mull over vocabulary and invent a new lexicon to clearly distinguish Christian theological concepts from Buddhist ideas.

The Christians in China certainly made an effort to explain some of the fundamental theological arguments of their faith. A better example of this is the *Yishen lun* 一神論, (*Discourse on the Single God*), which is partially extant.<sup>50</sup> Tam notes that the text states that 641 years had elapsed since the birth of the Messiah, which led scholars to generally date the work to 641, but this ought to be reconsidered. Tam (2019: 6), following the advice of Takahashi (2018: 629–630), explains “that Syriac authors often gave different dates for the birth of Jesus, and Bishop Īshō’dād of Merv (mid-9th Century), in eastern Persia, placed Jesus’ birth date in 6 BC (or 307 A.Gr.). If the author of *Discourse* followed Īshō’dād in this regard, this would mean that the document could have been composed in 636/7 AD.” The *Discourse*, therefore, was most likely part of the package of texts translated or composed by Aluoben or his team.

The three extant sections cover parables, monotheism, and charity, with the latter summarizing quotations from the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus (Matthew 6 and 7). As the title suggests, the doctrine of monotheism was proposed, but never acquired currency in China. Although the classical concepts of “Heaven” (*Tian* 天) or the “Supreme God” (*Shangdi* 上帝) could be likened to monotheism conceptually—in that these concepts assume an unrivaled divine intelligence or God—the sort of systematic theology underlying monotheism was never adopted by the mainstream in China. Instead, there were a multitude of gods and goddesses (i.e., Chinese polytheism) whose positions in the divine hierarchy were not rigidly fixed in Confucian and Daoist frameworks. Buddhists also had their own diverse pantheon without a Creator god.

The *Discourse* explicitly outlines expectations for the faithful and sets them apart from sinners. The text states that those who “serve the Sun, Moon, or stars, or pray to the Fire God” (承事日月星宿，火神禮拜) will go to a fiery hell

50 Reproduced as typeset text in Saeki (1951: 30–70).

and permanently reside there.<sup>51</sup> This is presumably a reference to astrologers (or perhaps a reference to Amos 5:26) and Zoroastrians.<sup>52</sup> The old prejudices against the heterodox were carried over and at least translated, although whether such sentiments and proscriptions mattered much in China is a question worth asking, especially since Christians were such a tiny minority.

This leads us back to Adam, the author of the stele inscription of 781. According to the inscription, Adam's formal title in Syriac was "Adam, priest and charespiscopus and papas of China" (Hunter 2009: 73). The Chinese prose is quite refined and literary in character, a fact that only demonstrates that the monument was catered to the tastes of the local literati. There are no illustrations, apart from the crucifix at the top. The intended audience was clearly not illiterate commoners. Although Adam was in such a prestigious position, he was willing and able to work with Buddhists on the translation of Buddhist literature, as pointed out by Bai (2023: 44). A bibliography of Buddhist works by the monk Yuanzhao 圓照 (d.u.), compiled in the year 800, includes a biography of the eminent Kashmiri monk Prajña (*Bore* 般若). In 782, Prajña arrived in the capital after a voyage to Guangzhou; later, in 786, he visited with his countrymen. Luo Haoxin 羅好心 (d.u.), a commander in the imperial army, was the son of his maternal uncle. He requested that Prajña translate Buddhist scriptures. Adam somehow became involved in this. The biography explains the following:

And so, together with the Persian monk, Jingjing (Adam), of the Daqin Temple, they translated the \*[*Mahāyāna-naya*-]ṣaṭ-pāramitā-sūtra into seven fascicles, based on a Sogdian(?) edition. At the time—because Prajña did not understand Sogdian, nor was he yet able to comprehend Chinese, while Adam did not understand Sanskrit, nor did he know the teachings of Śākyamuni—although they were said to have translated it, they never managed to get even half a pearl [i.e., the result was poor]. They misappropriated empty words and it was not beneficial. They issued a letter to the throne, hoping they could circulate the text. His Highness, being wise and learned, venerated the scriptures of Śākyamuni. Upon investigating what had been translated, the reasoning was found to be unclear and the vocabulary off. And thus, the *saṃghārāma* of the Śākya clan [the Buddhist monastery] and the Daqin monastery [Christian church] were

51 See the Chinese text reproduced in Saeki (1951: 68).

52 Amos (5:26) specifically condemns the worship of stars: "Yet you will carry away Sukuth, your king, and Kaiwan, your star-image, your gods that you have made for yourselves." Translation from New American Bible, Revised Edition (2011: 1022).

to keep their residences separate, and their practices entirely apart. Adam should transmit the teachings of the Messiah [Christ]. The *śramaṇas* and *śākyaputras* [Buddhist monks] shall propagate Buddhist scriptures, so as to keep the doctrines separate and the communities from excessive intermingling; for right and wrong are to be distinguished, like the Jing and Wei rivers flowing separately.

乃與大秦寺波斯僧景淨，依胡本六波羅蜜經譯成七卷。時為般若不閑胡語，復未解唐言，景淨不識梵文，復未明釋教，雖稱傳譯，未獲半珠。圖竊虛名，匪為福利。錄表聞奏意望流行。聖上濬哲文明，允恭釋典。察其所譯，理昧詞疎。且夫釋氏伽藍，大秦僧寺，居止既別，行法全乖。景淨應傳彌尸訶教，沙門釋子弘闡佛經，欲使教法區分，人無濫涉，正邪異類，涇渭殊流。<sup>53</sup>

This sort of interaction between different religious communities was normal in Tang China, even if the authorities nominally kept them separate. In this instance, it would appear that Prajña's cousin, named Haoxin in Chinese, was eager to arrange a translation of a Buddhist scripture. The original text perhaps was an edition in Sogdian (or perhaps another Central Asian-language, i.e., *hu ben* 胡本), rather than Sanskrit. Prajña was at a loss; he also did not understand Chinese. Adam neither read Sanskrit nor understood Buddhist doctrines, but nevertheless the pair attempted to translate the *sūtra*. The reason that Adam was privately called to translate was because he was a known translator, and was evidently multilingual, but also quite erudite in writing Chinese. The postscript note in the aforementioned *Diptych* states, "Later, the Venerable Monk Jingjing of our faith translated thirty fascicles of the above items. A great many others remain in folios and have yet to be translated." 後召本教大德僧景淨，譯得已上卅部卷，餘大數具在貝皮夾，猶未翻譯。<sup>54</sup> The titles on the list include recognizable biblical texts, from both the Old and New Testament, such as the "Scripture of Moses" (*Moushi Fawang jing* 牟世法王經, literally "Scripture of Dharma King Moses"), and "Scripture of Paul" (*Baolu Fawang jing* 寶路法王經), as pointed out by Zeng (2005: 128). It would appear that the books of the Bible were translated as individual texts over time. Interestingly, this would have also introduced references to ancient Babylon and Pharaonic Egypt to Chinese readers, likely for the first time, although the relevant passages

53 *T* 2157, 55: 892a4–16.

54 *T* 2143, 54: 1288c23–25. Takahashi (2018: 633) suggests that the Buddhist title of *da de* 大德 ("Greatly Virtuous," Venerable) might have been held as equivalent to "bishop" or "metropolitan."

are not extant. Further, at the time, there would have been some discussion of Judaism in Chinese due to the translation of the Old Testament, but nothing is extant.

As the head of the church in China, Adam might have had a symbolically significant position, but we have to consider that he was the leader of a small number of Christians. There are only a few dozen names of clerics listed on the stele of 781—this in a city whose population was around one million in the Tang period.<sup>55</sup> He was, in reality, the leader of a very small religious minority, one with likely few converts from the Han Chinese population (Deeg 2020). Rather than read into this some kind of covert intent for Adam to proselytize among Buddhists, we might just assume that he was financially compensated or otherwise socially rewarded for his translation work, or that he sought attention from the court. The court did not make this request of him; but rather, the translation team requested royal endorsement only after the translation had been completed. The result was a failure, but nevertheless, this record highlights the fact that Christians and Buddhists interacted in at least one collaborative project, if only informally. Bai (2023: 61) further observes, “From a broader perspective, the textual association between Jingjing and Prajña suggests that there may have existed more intellectual and linguistic interaction between Buddhism and Jingjiao in the Tang dynasty.”

The Christian church in China was not isolated from West Asia in Adam’s time, which might lead us to initially suspect that strict adherence to a group identity and orthodoxy would have been expected in China. For instance, Hunter (2009: 83) notes that the Syriac inscriptions on the stele “show the heart of the Church of the East to be ‘Persian,’ not only in the link that was maintained with the Patriarch in Mesopotamia, but also via the hierarchal organization and importation of titles that were integral to Syriac Christianity.” Yet figures like Adam mastered Classical Chinese and inevitably incorporated terms and concepts from Chinese literature, as is evident from the extant Christian texts. Although distinct religious identities existed in Tang China, literati of different philosophical persuasions could still sit at the same table. If we take Buddhism as a potential guide, dogmatism and strict adherence to precepts were not the norm. A similar assumption might be made about Christians. The ability to impress others with fine writing, maintain etiquette based on Chinese norms derived from long-established tradition, and provide useful services were arguably more beneficial than outward adherence to religious orthodoxy.

In the case of Christianity, the interaction between different religions was not unilateral, in the sense that Christians also influenced Daoism to some

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55 The figure of one million in the Tang period is cited by Fu and Cao (2019: 175).



extent, or at least the case for this has been made. Saeki (1951: 400–407) has discussed Lü Yan 呂壘, whose birth he dates to 742/755 (although 796 is more commonly cited today). Lü Yan was credited with the founding of a new Daoist sect. He is also credited with various miracles, not unlike those of Christ, such as “turning water into wine” (化水為酒), the inspiration for which we can imagine was Christian, even if these miracles were attributed postmortem. The incantations in the *Lüzu quanshu* 呂祖全書, compiled in 1744 by Liu Tishu 劉體恕 (d.u.), includes elements that Saeki has reconstructed as Syriac. For example, *yisuohe* 唵娑訶 (EMC: *ji sa xa*) appears to correspond to *Īšō* (Jesus), rather than reflecting Sanskrit *svāhā*, as one would expect with phonetically transcribed lines of mantras.<sup>56</sup> The use of such incantations could demonstrate that Lü Yan or his lineage was influenced by Christianity; alternatively, it has been proposed that some covert Christians operated under the guise of Daoism, but more study on this is required.<sup>57</sup> Manichaean texts in Chinese also transcribed diverse Iranian words. Bryder (1985: 47), for example, has argued that “the Manichaean apostle or angel is in Parthian called *fryštq* [*frēštāq*], which in Chinese is rendered 佛夷瑟.”

Although we know that some books of the Old Testament had been translated into Chinese by the late eighth century, little is known about the Jews. I am unaware of primary sources in Chinese that specifically identify Jews in the Tang period. Jews were certainly a recognized community in Sasanian Iran, as discussed at length by Widengren (1961). Evidence indicates that at least some Persian Jews lived in China or nearby regions during the Tang period. As pointed out by Wei (1999: 17–19), an important Judaeo-Persian letter (Or. 8212/166 Recto) was uncovered from Dandan Uiliq. The letter is in Persian, but written in Hebrew letters. Margoliouth (1903), following Stein’s acquisition of the document, argued that the letter ought to date to the beginning of the eighth century, c.718 CE; Utas (1968: 124) objected, arguing for a date around the second half of the eighth century. The letter’s author, a Persian Jew who appears to have originated in Tabaristan, complains about purchasing lean and worthless sheep. More interesting to our discussion is the mention of a Rabbi on line 16.<sup>58</sup> This is a firm item of physical evidence to validate that Jews were at least living near China. Wei proposes that “we can see that quite a few

56 For the EMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 122, 297, 365).

57 See the discussion in Zeng (2005: 35–38).

58 See the transcription in Utas (1968: 124). In the notes, Utas (133) observes that this is the “only clearly Hebrew element in the fragment.”

Jews had come to China by Tang times.” I think, however, we ought to exercise caution about the number of individuals, since there is no awareness of Jews as a community in Tang China. Another important piece of evidence is references to Jews in China recorded in Arabic sources. Wong and Yasharpour (2011: 3) note this important detail, and also point out that “Abu-Zaid’s mention of a massacre of Muslims, Christians and Jews in Canton in 878/9 confirms the presence of Jews in China at that time.” One item to which Hunter (2022: 255) has recently drawn attention is a paper fragment from Turfan (SyrHT 94 [tiib50 = 168]) in which a dialogue between a Christian and Jew is recorded. Hunter clarifies, however, that the contents “do not minute an actual discussion between a Christian and Jew that might have taken place at Turfan or elsewhere.” The document is instead a pedagogical text. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate in Turfan at least an awareness of Jews. By extension, we can reasonably assume that Christian clerics in China were also familiar with Judaism, even if they never dialogued with Jews on theological matters. Zoroastrians and Manichaeans also would have been aware of Judaism.

Manichaeism officially arrived in China some decades after Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Its integration into Chinese society and adoption of what was already familiar religious vocabulary built on earlier centuries of developments, primarily by the Buddhist sangha. Lieu (1987: 339) makes the following relevant comparison:

The Chinese Manichaean translators were among the beneficiaries of the cultural bridge-building which had already been achieved by their Buddhist counterparts, in the same way that Manichaean missionaries in Upper Egypt would have undoubtedly benefited from Christian missionaries who had helped to develop Coptic into a major language of Eastern Christianity.

In China, Manichaeism came into conflict with Buddhism from the beginning, a fact well remembered even in later centuries. The oft-cited record of the introduction of Manichaeism is found in a Chinese Buddhist history, the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 (*Chronicle of the Buddha and Patriarchs*), written by Zhipan 志磐 (1220–1275) in 1269. The details he provides show that authors were sometimes prone to conflating together the Western religions and their associated geographies, a tendency that appears to have stretched back long before the thirteenth century. Zhipan records that “in year 1 of Yanzai [694] [...] a man of the country of Persia, *aftāḍān* (a man of the country of Daqin in the Western Sea), brought the false teachings of the *Scripture of Two Principles* to our court.”

延載元年 … 波斯國人拂多誕西海大秦國人持《二宗經》偽教來朝。<sup>59</sup> Yoshida (2022: 596) reads *fuduodan* 拂多誕 as *aftādān* (“bishop”) in this line. This is a title, not a personal name. The inserted note, presumably by Zhipan, mistakenly equates Persia with Rome, likely due to the confusion stemming from the renaming of the Christian churches from “Persian” to “Roman” in the histories. The *Scripture of Two Principles* has been identified as Mani’s *Šābuhragān*. The translated text was widely read for several centuries.<sup>60</sup> The Manichaean church in China made a dedicated effort to translate their texts and root themselves in different regions across China. Zhipan describes their spread as follows:

During the time of Taizong [r. 626–649], the Persian Magi introduced the teachings of the Fire God [Zoroastrianism]. For the first time, a Daqin [Roman] temple was built.<sup>61</sup> During the time of Empress Wu [r. 690–705], the Persian *aftādān* introduced the *Scripture of Two Principles*. After this, during the Dali era [766–779], in the provinces of Jing, Yang, Hong, and Yue, each had a Manichaean temple built. This was a teaching of Māra and wicked Dharma, and the foolish folk were easily stained by it gradually. Their Dharma spread around the world because, time and again, the ruler, ministers, and [other] eminent people of the time could not separate the wicked from the righteous and distinguish their differences.

太宗時，波斯穆護進火祆教。敕建大秦寺。武后時，波斯拂多誕進《二宗經》。厥後大歷間，荊揚洪越等州各建摩尼寺。此魔教邪法，愚民易於漸染。由屢朝君臣，當世名德，不能簡邪正以別同異故，其法行於世。<sup>62</sup>

This record highlights that Manichaeans spread to outlying areas across China, rather than clustering in the capital. Zhipan offered harsh criticism of Manichaeism, but we should bear in mind that such sentiments are a retrospective point of view from a Buddhist author. Mikkelsen (2022: 321) cites additional information from a later author, fleshing out what occurred during the Tang period:

59 *T* 2035, 49: 369c29–370a2. Cf. the translation in Jülch (2021: 116); also, Cf. the translation in Bryder (1985: 1).

60 On this text, see Lieu (1998: 148); Yoshida (2022: 596).

61 The use of the verb *jiu* 救 (“to save”) here is irregular. I suspect that a scribal error occurred, perhaps of *chu* 初 (“first”). See the edict of 745 above.

62 *T* 2035, 49: 370a3–8. Cf. the translation in Jülch (2021: 116–117).

According to the *Minshu* 閩書 (*History of Min*) by the Ming official He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠 (1558–1632) from Jinjiang 晉江, Fujian, a Manichaeian *mushe* 慕闍 (Sogd. *mōžāk*) “teacher” had propagated the religion in China during the reign of Xuanzong’s grandfather Gaozong 高宗 (r. 650–683), and one of his disciples, a Persian *fuduodan* 拂多誕 (Pa. *haptādān*, Sogd. *aftādān*) “bishop” named Mihr-Ohrmazd (Mi-Wumosi 密烏沒斯) had introduced the religion to the court of Empress Wu 武則天 (r. 690–705), Xuanzong’s grandmother, in Shendu 神都, the “divine capital” Luoyang. The Buddhist monks at Wu’s court had been “jealous” and had “slandered” the bishop and “fought with him” (群僧妒譖, 互相擊難), but the Empress had been “pleased with his words and retained him to explain his scriptures” (則天悅其說, 留使課經).<sup>63</sup>

Empress Wu, whom Chinese state states hold to have been a usurper of the Tang throne, was receptive to Manichaeism, but she was also favorable toward Buddhism, a religion that was often challenged by nativist Confucian and Daoist authors. Religion was a useful element in her attempt at securing legitimacy and power, but the spread of Manichaeism ultimately was hindered. Zhipan records that “in year 20 of Kaiyuan [732], under [Emperor] Xuanzong, it was decreed that Mani was basically heretical, making false claims of Buddhism. No punishments are necessary, as it is a teaching of the Western *Hu* masters, and their devotees are free to practice.” 玄宗開元二十年, 勅末尼本是邪見, 妄稱佛教。既為西胡師法, 其徒自行, 不須科罰。<sup>64</sup> Mikkelsen (2022: 322–323) points out that ahead of this decision, Xuanzong had already ordered a Manichaeian bishop to write up a summary of his religion at the scholarly college of the court (the *Jixian yuan* 集賢院, “College of Assembled Men of Wisdom”). The emperor’s decision was based on a significant body of information, namely the *Moni guangfo jiaofa yilüe* 摩尼光佛教法儀略 (*Compendium of the Teachings of Mani the Buddha of Light*).<sup>65</sup> Xuanzong’s decision to not pursue any purges of the religion was connected with the Tang law code, which, as discussed above, provides for extraterritoriality. Those people of non-Han Chinese backgrounds residing in China were judged according to the laws of their homeland, unless they committed a crime with another person from a different background. This afforded religious freedom to ethnic minorities by

63 Bryder (1985: 3) also mentions the *Min shu* and addresses the Iranian vocabulary.

64 Zhipan records this. See *T* 2035, 49: 474c15–17. See Mikkelsen (2022) for details on this edict as it is recorded in other sources. Cf. the alternate translation in Bryder (1985: 4).

65 S. 3969, P. 3884. For an earlier study, see Haloun and Henning (1952). See the study of the transcriptions of Iranian vocabulary in this text in Bryder (1985).

extension. Buddhists likely had simply petitioned the emperor—Xuanzong himself being a supporter of the sangha—to make a move against perceived “heretics” who misappropriated the “Buddha” for their own purposes.<sup>66</sup> It would not have positively served diplomatic or domestic purposes to persecute Manichaeans, which is why no full purge was ordered at the time, but only a symbolic gesture in practice. Mikkelsen (2022: 320) notes that Xuanzong’s decree of 732 “restricted the practice of the religion to people from Central Asia and banned all practice and propagation of the religion among all other people in his empire.” Whether this stopped common people from involving themselves in the religion to varying degrees is an interesting question. The restriction would have meant that Han Chinese could not become official clerics. Still, if the comments in the above-cited S. 6551 are a guide, we can infer that many Chinese still participated in Manichaean activities based on the admonitions of the Buddhist author, who states that Buddhists should take refuge in the buddha Śākyamuni, and not the “buddhas” of Mani, Persia (Christianity), and Zoroastrianism.

The Manichaeans in China, regardless of their initial association with Persia, were later tied to the Uyghurs as their benefactors. Zhipan records that in 771, “the Uyghurs requested that in the provinces of Jing, Yang, Hong, and Yue that Great Cloud Luminous Temples be built. The devotees were white-clad and white-capped.” 回紇請於荊揚洪越等州置大雲光明寺。其徒白衣白冠。<sup>67</sup> Despite some initial unease with the religion, we can observe at least one instance in which the court was more tolerant toward the Manichaeans, who in one major documented case served the realm for religious purposes. One court record states that “in the fourth lunar month of year 15 of Zhenyuan [799], Manichaean priests were called to pray for rain after an extended drought.” 貞元十五年四月，以久旱令摩尼師祈雨。<sup>68</sup>

The foreign religions in China—including Buddhism—eventually found themselves facing persecution under Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840–846), who, encouraged by the Daoist cleric Zhao Guizhen 趙歸真 (d. 846), initiated a purge. One important eyewitness to this was the Japanese monk Ennin, who traveled around China from 838 to 847. His travelogue, the *Nittō guhō junrei kōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記 (*Record of Travel to the Tang in Search of the Dharma*), is an important eyewitness account of late Tang China, including the great

66 Earlier Christian texts in Chinese similarly use Buddhist vocabulary for their own purposes, but later texts, such as the stele of 781, cease this practice in favor of much more literary or metaphysical terms derived from non-Buddhist sources. Buddhists would have been equally unsettled about Christians using Buddhist vocabulary.

67 *T* 2035, 49: 378c25–29.

68 *Tang huiyao*, 49.11.

persecution of foreign religions during the Huichang era. Ennin records the following incident in the year 843:

In the middle of the fourth lunar month, it was officially decreed that now the Manichaeian priests are to be killed throughout the realm. Those who shaved their hair off, put on *kāṣāyas* (Buddhist robes), and looked like *śramaṇas* were still killed. The Manichaeian priests are revered by the Uyghurs.

四月中旬，勅下，今煞天下摩尼師。剃髮令著袈裟作沙門形而煞之。摩尼師即迴鶻所崇重也。<sup>69</sup>

Ennin also associated Manichaeism with the Uyghurs, which demonstrates that in East Asia, the religion was no longer connected with Persia by the mid-ninth century. There was a major political reason for this, stretching back several decades. Since Chavannes and Pelliot, modern scholarship has held that the Uyghurs had assisted in the liberation of Luoyang from rebels in 762/763 during the An Lushan rebellion, when they encountered and took back with them four Manichaeian clerics, one of them called Ruixi 睿息. Soon after, the khaghan of the Uyghurs declared Manichaeism the official religion of his people, which only encouraged the Chinese to permit Manichaeism within their borders. The date of conversion, however, is debated, as Moriyasu (2015: 319–322) discussed. Bryder further explains that the Uyghurs sought Chinese wives from the royal family, leading to problematic relations. The Uyghur empire was dispersed by the Kirghiz in 840, and one of the two surviving groups was destroyed by the Chinese in 843.<sup>70</sup> Bryder also explains that “the religious consequences followed immediately. All Manichaeian temples were closed. Public holocausts with the burning of Manichaeian books and images took place and one document states that 70 or 72 nuns were killed in the capital.”<sup>71</sup>

Ennin himself lived through the assault on Buddhism, being forced to dress in lay clothes and then flee back to Japan. The persecution by Wuzong extended to Christians and Zoroastrians. In the year 845, an imperial edict went out stating that “it is ordered that more than 3,000 Romans and Magi

69 B 18, no. 95: 95b4–5. (CBETA). See also study and translation of Ennin’s travelogue by Reischauer (1955).

70 On the study of Manichaeism among the Uyghurs, Moriyasu (2015: 316) importantly notes that “most of the materials on the history of Manichaeism during the time of the East Uighur empire are Chinese sources,” but explains that other materials are extant in Middle Iranian and Old Uighur. See Moriyasu’s study for details.

71 See discussion by Bryder (1985: 5–9).

Zoroastrians be returned to lay life, and they are not to immerse themselves in Chinese ways.” 勒大秦穆護祆三千餘人還俗，不雜中華之風。<sup>72</sup> The fact that comingling was to cease only indicates that the Christians and Magi were, in fact, interacting with the Han Chinese and involving them in “foreign ways,” which the emperor loathed, given his “ethno-nationalist” stance. This attack was not the absolute end of these religions in China, since they certainly survived and even thrived in other regions, such as Dunhuang and Kaifeng (and Fujian, in the case of a minority of Manichaeans), but in the capital region they were severely damaged. Bryder (1985: 10) notes that after 843, Fujian was “one of the new Manichaean centers” and “as Manichaeism was prohibited in China after 843 it was only natural that there should exist sites where the persecution might be less severe than in the two capitals.” Muslims and Jews were not mentioned in the edict by Wuzong, nor did Ennin or any other contemporary at the time in China mention them.

We have seen in this chapter that “Iranian religions”—and Christianity in this context ought to be identified as Iranian, given its initial emic label as the “Persian teachings” of “Persian monks”—*formally* established themselves as recognized religions under state supervision in seventh-century China. The movement of Zoroastrianism and Christianity to China, as Lin has proposed, ought to be considered in relation to the volatile circumstances in Iran during the last decades of the Sasanian period. They were as much refugees as they were missionaries (assuming proselytization was ever truly on their agenda).

Despite the circumstances following the collapse of the Sasanian empire, Zoroastrians and Christians arriving in China found themselves in a relatively stable and prosperous country, in which they enjoyed protections and dignity, and perhaps also some amount of curiosity from the locals, who were long familiar with foreign Buddhist monks. Manichaeism arrived some decades later, but it was placed under a level of scrutiny unlike the other two because of the Manichaean appropriation of the Buddha for their own purposes, which sparked protest by the sangha. Manichaeism was, in theory, restricted to foreigners, although in practice anyone could have acquired their texts. The Persian heritage of Manichaeism faded into the past, as was also the case for the Christians. The Christians became realigned conceptually with a loose notion of “Rome,” while the Uyghurs became the benefactors of Manichaeism. It was understood that Zoroastrianism originated in Persia, but my impression is that throughout the Tang, it was more closely associated with the ambiguous *Hu* identity, which generally denoted a Caucasian phenotype.

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72 *Jiu Tang shu*, 18a.606.

One last observation to make from the above survey is the absence of any explicit reference to the Iranian religions having interacted with Islam. The emergence and growth of Islam was a significant force in shaping the religions and cultures of West Asia, but none of these influences filtered into China in any obvious way during the Tang period. China was exposed to Islam as early as 651, but this interaction and the relevant documentation require an entire chapter to properly address (see Chapter 8 below).



# Astrology and Astral Magic

## 1 Astrology and Divination in China

Even in remote antiquity, China already had its own system of celestial omenology, in which the movements of the planets and apparent anomalies, such as comets and irregular planetary movements, were interpreted as signaling developments on earth (political upheavals, wars, and natural disasters). This was not unlike Mesopotamian omenology, but the Chinese model and knowledge of the planets originally emerged independently of Mesopotamian influence, although in the past some scholars have insisted that Chinese astronomy was somehow influenced by Babylonian systems.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism as the first foreign religion was introduced into China between the first to second century CE, but Buddhism also functioned as a vessel for diverse cultural lore. One of the less appreciated elements of this transmission is Indian astrology, which itself had a long evolution that is reflected over centuries of Buddhist scriptures and treatises. There was also consistent foreign influence on Indian ideas of divination, which in turn ended up in Buddhist literature, some of which was translated into Chinese. Pingree (1997: 32–33) has argued that the “influence of Babylonian astronomy on Indian thought is already perceptible in Sanskrit texts of the first half of the last millennium BC.” The Pali Buddhist canon reveals some of these influences. Pingree observes that in the *Brahmajālasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, it is related that the Buddha criticized those *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* who do certain things unrelated to preaching, in order to obtain offerings of food. These include sacrifices, rituals, and divination. Pingree has remarked that “almost every type of omen mentioned by the Buddha is found in both the earlier cuneiform literature

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1 For instance, the Assyriologist Bezold argued in 1919 that Babylonian influences are present in early Chinese astronomical texts that discuss lunar mansions, a point that was uncritically taken up in later scholarship by Joseph Needham and Edward Schafer. Pankenier (2014) has addressed this issue, pointing out that Bezold based his work on translated texts. Pankenier further demonstrates that the model of Chinese “lunar mansions” emerged independently of Mesopotamian or Indian influences. The nomenclature and translations of the Chinese term *xīu* 宿 are complicated. Many scholars translate this as “lunar mansion” based on the concept in Latin, which in turn came from Islamicate astrology. The Indian *nakṣatras* are similarly translated as “lunar mansions.” Whether the Chinese system was originally lunar in orientation remains a disputed issue. See Cullen (2011) for a critical discussion. For a discussion of the *nakṣatras* in relation to Chinese astronomy, see Kotyk (2023a).

and in the later Sanskrit texts; and the terrestrial omens are numerated in an order—houses, ghosts, snakes, poisons, scorpions, mice, vultures, crows, and quadrupeds—that corresponds almost completely with the order of the Tablets of Šumma ālu.” There is also reference in the *sutta* (scripture) to divination based on the Moon, Sun, stars, and meteor showers.<sup>2</sup>

The first known substantial content related to Indian astrology in Chinese is found in the two translations of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*. The second translation, retitled as the *Mātaṅga-sūtra* in Chinese, has a large amount of extended content relative to the earlier work.<sup>3</sup> The initial story speaks of the Buddha’s disciple being seduced by a low-caste girl through an act of magic, but the Buddha dispels the spell through the recitation of a mantra. The rest of the text is a divination manual, which was apparently appended to the *sūtra* to supply such information to the Buddhist community. The astrological content deals with the twenty-eight *nakṣatras* (“lunar mansions”). Although the astrological content is Indian, the *Mātaṅga-sūtra* also explains some astronomical concepts, such as gnomonic measurements. Shinzō (1989: 417–418) has calculated these to a latitude of 43°N. This number would suggest an observational position somewhere in Central Asia, such as Samarkand, rather than anywhere in India. The Tibetan translation of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* gives a calculated average latitude of 27.5°N, otherwise corrected to 26.5°N, if a scribal error is considered. This, in turn, would place the observer within the vicinity of Magadha in India. Chapter 7 of the *Mātaṅga-sūtra* furthermore describes the division of daytime into fifteen units of time (*muhūrtas*). Each of these is defined by the length of a shadow cast by a man on day 1 of lunar month 2. We read, “At noon the shadow is of equal length to the man.” 於日正中影共人等. Zenba has proposed a latitude of approximately 39°N. Based on the numbers proposed by Shinzō and Zenba, it would appear that the *Mātaṅga-sūtra* in Chinese translation was based on a recension of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* that had been revised somewhere in Central Asia to account for a higher

2 See the parallel content in the Chinese translation of the *Dirghāgama* (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經). This was translated into Chinese in 413. *T* 1, 1: 84b18–c9. See Kotyk (2018c) for further discussion of Indian Buddhism and its belief in astrology.

3 The first version was translated by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) as the *Shetoujian Taizi er shiba xiu jing* 舍頭諫太子二十八宿經 (*Sūtra of Prince Śārdūlakarṇa and the Twenty-Eight Nakṣatras*). The translated is dated to between 307–313. The other version is the *Mātaṅga-sūtra* (*Modengjia jing* 摩登伽經) (*T* 1300). The translators to whom it is credited are Zhu Lüyan 竺律炎 (d.u.) and Zhi Qian 支謙 (fl. 223–253), and the translation is dated to 230, but it is more reasonable to assume that, based on the prose, grammar, and vocabulary, the translation was substantially later. I have proposed Guṇabhadra (Qinabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅; 394–468) in the Liu-Song period (420–479) as the likely translator. See also Kotyk (2018c: 151–154).

latitude. The date of composition of the *Mātāṅga-sūtra* conceivably would have been sometime between the third and fifth centuries (setting aside the traditionally attributed translators), which would have been contemporaneous with the Parthian and Sasanian periods. There is nothing explicitly Iranian about the text, but the revised recension might have been reworked in the hands of Buddhists in Eastern Iranian lands.

## 2 Buddhist Astrology

Further astrological lore, such as the zodiac signs, was first known in China through Mahāyāna Buddhist literature in the sixth century, although it does not appear that such knowledge had an immediately practical application for the Buddhist community or anyone else in China.<sup>4</sup> The advent of Mantrayāna (Vajrayāna, “Esoteric Buddhism”) during the seventh century and its subsequent transmission to China in the early eighth century brought with it the necessity for astrology, not for the casting of horoscopes, but for the timing of rituals. The Indian monk Śubhakarasiṃha (Chn. Shanwuwei 善無畏; 637–735) and his colleague, the monk Yixing, translated the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi* in 724. The text is framed as a *sūtra* that teaches a rapid method of attaining unexcelled perfect enlightenment within a single lifetime, but this is taught by a transcendental buddha, Mahāvairocana, rather than the flesh-and-blood Śākyamuni Buddha. The text calls for rituals to be carried out, but these must be executed only when it is astrologically auspicious. Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing subsequently wrote a commentary on the text sometime between 724 and 727. Here we find a general overview of astrology as Śubhakarasiṃha would have understood it, but they defer to the “Indian calendar” without offering any substantial explanation. The need for an accessible overview of Indian astrology in Chinese became an increasingly pressing issue as the practice of Mantrayāna grew within the Chinese sangha, for whom the Sanskrit language was generally inaccessible.<sup>5</sup> At the time, there was already at least one astronomer of Iranian heritage operating at the court. Chavannes and Pelliot observe that in 719, the Yabghu of Tukhāra “présenter à l’empereur une requête pour lui offrir un grand *mou-chö* [*mushe* 慕闍, i.e., *mōzak*], homme versé dans l’astronomie; cet homme [, disait-il,] est d’une sagesse très profonde; il n’est aucune question à

4 For details on the early introduction of Indian astrology, and elements thereof, in China, see Mak (2015a, 2015b).

5 For a translation and discussion of astrology in the Chinese commentary on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, see Kotyk (2018d).

laquelle il ne sache répondre.” This *mōzak* “désignait de hauts dignitaires de la hiérarchie manichéenne.”<sup>6</sup> Mikkelsen (2022: 321) highlights the significance of this encounter and suggests that Xuanzong, a benefactor of scholarship, likely embraced this astronomer. It does not appear, however, that Yixing, who was also a court astronomer, was influenced by this event; nevertheless, the event does illustrate that the Chinese court was receptive to astronomers affiliated with Manichaeism.<sup>7</sup>

Yixing died prematurely in 727, but the monk Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空; 705–774) moved toward addressing the lack of an authoritative astrological manual. From disparate sources, he assembled a manual of simplified astrology designed to work with the Chinese calendar, its abbreviated title being *Xiuyao jing* 宿曜經 (*Sūtra of Lunar Stations and Planets*). The first version was completed in 759, but a revision was undertaken in 764.<sup>8</sup> Amoghavajra attributed this manual to the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, a major Mahāyāna figure, even though some of the content is blatantly non-Buddhist, such as calls for warfare or the production of liquor when the Moon transits certain *nakṣatras*.<sup>9</sup> What interests us at present is the listing of the days of the week in Sogdian and Persian. In a colloquial tone, the *Xiuyao jing* explains, “If you forget [the day of the week], just ask a *Hu* [Sogdian], Persian, or someone from the five regions of India, as they always know.” 忽記不得，但當問胡及波斯并五天竺人，臆知。<sup>10</sup> This reflects the fact that at the time the seven-day week was largely unknown in China, but communities of non-Han Chinese people, especially Iranians

6 Chavannes and Pelliot (1913: 152–153, 196 fn. 1). See also Bryder (1985: 2) and Lieu (1992: 364).

7 Yixing was both a court astronomer and eminent Buddhist monk. He reformed the state calendar and made innovations in Chinese astronomy. Some of his ideas were inspired by Indian models, but there is nothing in the extant material that would indicate Iranian influences in his work. See Kotyk (2022d) for an extended discussion on Yixing’s work in astronomy.

8 The title in the twentieth-century Japanese Taishō canon reads as *Sūtra on Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva and the Sages’ Teaching on Auspicious and Inauspicious Times, Good and Evil Constellations and Planets* (*Wenshushili Pusa ji zhuxian suoshuo jixong shiri shan’e xiuyao jing* 文殊師利菩薩及諸仙所說吉凶時日善惡宿曜經). Yano (2013: 226–264) has demonstrated that the text in the Taishō canon (*T* 1299) is substantially different from that of the manuscripts preserved in Japan. These Japanese lines of textual transmission reach back to monks of the ninth century. They returned with copies of the *Xiuyao jing*, which were subsequently recopied. The Japanese recensions, Yano argues, are most likely closest to the original version of the text.

9 For a discussion of the patently non-Buddhist elements in the *Xiuyao jing* and the permissibility of practicing astrology within Buddhism in China, see Kotyk (2017c).

10 *Sukyō-kyō shukusatsu*, vol. 2, 22. Here I cite the first typeset edition of the Japanese recension of the *Xiuyao jing*.

and Indians, observed the custom and would certainly have known the day of the week if asked. Lore about each of the days of the week is given. For example, Monday is described as follows:

“Moon essence” is called Great Yin. The *Hu* [Sogdians] call it *M’x*, the Persians call it *dō šambat*, and the Indians call it *Soma*. On Monday one should create merit. Attainments will definitely be gained. [...] Those born on this day will have much wisdom and skill, be beautiful in appearance, enjoy fortune, relish charity, and execute filial piety. If this day falls on the fifth day of the fifth month, the year will have much plague and sorrow, and much frost and cold. There will be many deaths from plague if the Sun eclipses and the earth moves on [this] day.

月精名太陰。胡名莫，波斯名婁禍森勿，天竺名蘇摩。大陰直日，宜造功德，必得成就。…此日生人者，多智策，美貌，樂福好布，施孝順。若五月五日，得此曜者，其年多疾疫愁，多霜冷。若日蝕地動，多疫死。<sup>11</sup>

Amoghavajra, it appears, reassembled lore from different sources. Whether the bulk of the foreign material in this instance was adapted from Indian or Iranian sources is uncertain, but the reference to Sogdian and Persian words suggests that Amoghavajra adapted at least some material that had been translated from Iranian sources. The days of the week in different languages are given in table 6.1.

We should observe that the Persian names are not those of the planets, but rather are an enumeration of the days of the week. For instance, *Luohuosenwu* 婁禍森勿 (EMC: *ləw ɣwa’ šim mut*) for *dō šambat* is not Persian *Māh* for the Moon, but it means the second day of the week. The word *šambat* transcribed as *senwu* 森勿 (EMC: *šim mut*) is also seen on the aforementioned Christian stele of 781 in Chang’an. The date of the inscription includes the term *Yao senwu* 耀森文 (EMC: *jiaw<sup>h</sup> šim mun*), which roughly represents the Middle Persian *ēw šambat*, denoting Sunday.<sup>12</sup> Lieu (2020: 71–72) offers a detailed explanation of the etymology of this word:

This term which is also known in Chinese as *Yāosēnwù* 曜森勿 is commonly explained by editors as “*Yak-sam-bah*, a Persian word for the Seventh Day.” It occurs in Manichaean texts in Parthian and the entry in the relevant volume of the Dictionary of Manichaean Texts reads:

11 *Sukuyō-kyō shukusatsu*, vol. 1, 30–31.

12 *T* 2144, 54: 1290a22–23. See Takahashi (2014: 338); Yano (2013: 110).

TABLE 3 Planet weekday names in the *Xiyao jing*<sup>a</sup>

Planet	Chinese	Sogdian	Persian	Sanskrit
Sun	太陽	蜜 <i>mjit</i> ( <i>mys-/myhr</i> )	曜森勿 <i>jiaw<sup>h</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>ēw šambat</i> )	阿儻底耶 <i>ʔa ni<sup>ʔ</sup> tej<sup>ʔ</sup> jia</i> ( <i>āditya</i> )
Moon	太陰	漠 <i>mak</i> ( <i>m'x</i> )	婁禍森勿 <i>lāw ywa<sup>ʔ</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>dō šambat</i> )	蘇摩 <i>sō ma</i> ( <i>soma</i> )
Mars	熒惑	雲漢 <i>wun xan<sup>h</sup></i> ( <i>wnx<sup>h</sup>n</i> )	勢森勿 <i>ciaj<sup>H</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>sē šambat</i> )	盎誡囉迦 <i>ʔaŋ<sup>h</sup> ŋa la kia</i> ( <i>aṅgāraka</i> )
Mercury	辰星	啣 <i>dēt</i> ( <i>tyr</i> )	掣森勿 <i>te<sup>h</sup>iat/te<sup>h</sup>iaj<sup>h</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>čahār šambat</i> )	部陀 <i>bō<sup>h</sup> da</i> ( <i>budha</i> )
Jupiter	歲星	鶻鳩勿 <i>yuat kuw mut</i> ( <i>wrmzt</i> )	本森勿 <i>pən<sup>ʔ</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>paŋ šambat</i> )	勿哩訶娑跋底 <i>mut li xa sa pa<sup>ʔ</sup> tej<sup>ʔ</sup></i> ( <i>bṛhaspati</i> )
Venus	太白	那歇 <i>na<sup>H</sup> kiat</i> ( <i>n<sup>ʔ</sup>xyδ</i> )	數森勿 <i>suā<sup>h</sup> šim mut</i> ( <i>šaš šambat</i> )	戍羯羅 <i>swit kiat la</i> ( <i>śukra</i> )
Saturn	鎮星	枳澆 <i>teiā<sup>ʔ</sup>/kjiā<sup>ʔ</sup>ywan<sup>ʔ</sup></i> ( <i>kyw<sup>ʔ</sup>n</i> )	翕森勿 <i>xip šim mut</i> ( <i>haft šambat</i> )	賒乃以室折羅 <i>cia naj<sup>ʔ</sup> ji<sup>ʔ</sup> cit teiat la</i> ( <i>śanaīścāra</i> )

a This table is adapted from Yano (2013: 110). See the dictionary data on Manichaean Sogdian in Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst (2012). See *Sukuyō-kyō shukusatsu*, vol. 2, 22–23. T 1299, 21: 398b5–18. The EMC readings (Pulleyblank 1991b) are given under the words that are transcriptions of non-Chinese words.

ʔwšmbt Pa /ēwšambat/ n.pr. ‘Sunday.’ [...] the *šambat* part of the term has Judaeo-Christian origins as it is derived from the word for Sabbath and ʔwšmbt in Middle Iranian would have meant something like “one (after) the Sabbath,” hence the seventh day or Sunday. The word was phonetically transcribed into Chinese by the priests who erected the Monument because it is a *terminus technicus* of the Church of the East in Central Asia and has no real equivalent in Chinese.

This vocabulary attracted the attention of scholars a century ago, starting with Müller (1907); comments by Chavannes and Pelliot (1913: 174–176) later followed. Yoshida (2017: 159–161) has revisited the matter, arguing that the “Persian” qualifier in the Chinese text denotes Christianity specifically, rather than the Persian language. As we have explored above, the Christian church was originally called the “Persian teachings” when it entered China. He argues that the “Persian names” are transliterations of Christian Sogdian. The word for Monday, for example, has an initial consonant \*l-, which corresponds to the fricative  $\delta$  in the Sogdian “(‘)δw’ ~ (‘)δw [(ə)δwā ~ (ə)δū].” The second character represents “wa,” giving (ə)δwā. Some of the other names, however, are less certain. Yoshida suggests that Amoghavajra heard these days of the week from Sogdian Christians. Alternatively, I believe, Amoghavajra or perhaps his team as a whole, might also have simply had an existing bilingual word list available and referred to this.

In any case, the fact that multiple languages are cited for the purposes of determining the day of the week highlights the multicultural adoption of the seven-day week by late antiquity. The concept of the seven-day week—in which each hour and day are ruled by a planet—had originated in Alexandria, and then spread over the centuries (Yano 2003: 383). The fact that two Iranian languages are given also indicates a significant amount of interaction between Han Chinese and Iranians at the time. The seven-day week was effectively a pan-religious timekeeping system rooted in hemerology (the art of selecting auspicious days for specific activities). The Chinese had their own native model of reckoning time, and the seven-day week never displaced it for timekeeping purposes, but the appeal of the week for fortune telling was certainly strong in China.

Amoghavajra drew upon sources that were not translations of Indian texts. The Chinese transliterations of Iranian words were, it appears, generally standardized, so the nomenclature was likely to have already become part of the common parlance over time. This is a notable difference from the earlier generation, when Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing relied primarily on Indian materials with some references to indigenous Chinese concepts.

Regarding the Christian stele of 781, it mentions the bearers of gifts to Christ, so we might wonder whether they were treated as astrologers, or if anything hints at this, given the fact that the Magi are often associated with astrology in the West. The relevant line on the stele reads, “The Persian(s) witnessed the brilliance and came to pay tribute.” 波斯觀耀以來貢。<sup>13</sup> Persians (assuming the plural; the Chinese does not indicate number) offer gifts, but there is nothing

13 T 2144, 54: 1289a19–20. See the translation in Kotyk (2022c: 131).

to denote them as astrologers, or as having any sort of direct connection with astrology. The other extant Christian texts from the Tang period do not directly link the Persians or Magi with astrology. Lieu (1992: 232), however, suggests that in China the “the Persians gained a reputation as conjurers and astrologers *extraordinaires*.” My survey of astrological literature and accounts of Persia in Chinese sources does not support this view. The Magi, when named in Chinese sources, are also not connected with astrology or divination.<sup>14</sup> There is no reason to expect this either. Grenet (2018: 236) explains that “astrology is never listed among lawful priestly occupations, a fact that runs contrary to the high esteem that Zoroaster and the Magi (Zoroastrian priests) enjoyed, qua astrologers, in Greco-Roman literature.”

### 3 Indo-Iranian Elements in Tang Astrology

This is not to say that there was no significant Iranian contribution to Chinese astrology. On the contrary, in fact, the early materials of Chinese horoscopy point to a substantial input from Iranian astrology toward the late eighth century, but we cannot strictly associate it with any single religion. The key extant text in this regard is titled *Qiyao rangzai jue* 七曜攘災決 (*Secrets of Seven-Planet Apotropaism*), which was compiled sometime between 785 and 867, but only preserved in Japan.<sup>15</sup> The text was clearly pieced together from diverse sources, both domestic and foreign. The attributed compiler is a certain “Brahmin monk of the country of Western India, Jinjuzha” (西天竺國婆羅門僧金俱吒) whose identity is uncertain. The ephemerides in the text use the typical Chinese sidereal positioning system based on the domestic twenty-eight stations. This is a relatively robust astrology manual that provides the basic materials for casting a crude horoscope (a chart indicating the positions of the planets at a given time, especially the birth time of a person), but it also offers some magical spells and lore connected with the planets. We also observe the

14 The stele inscription mentions Persians coming to Christ, but not Magi. In my estimation, the Christian authors explicitly avoided using the word Magi, even though it was available in Chinese, to prevent misunderstandings, since a Zoroastrian community existed in the same city. The Chinese also associated Magi with Zoroastrianism. Seeing Magi appear in a Christian context would have led to potential misunderstandings. For a detailed discussion of the Persians in this context, see Kotyk (2022c).

15 The Iranian elements in this text have already been noted by Chavannes and Pelliot (1913: 167–168). I discuss this text in detail in Kotyk (2017b).



first attested use of Babylonian goal-years in Chinese in the text. These numbers are ultimately traced to a West Asian origin.<sup>16</sup>

One explicitly Iranian feature is the mention of the planets as the *navagraha*, using their Sogdian names, in a technique called “annual profections of the *navagraha*” (*jiuzhi zhi xingnian fa* 九執至行年法). The nine planets in this system each rule over a year of life before the cycle repeats (e.g., Rāhu will rule over the first year, followed by Saturn). The ordering runs as follows:

1. *rāhu*, inauspicious (masculine) 一羅睺凶男
2. *kyw'n*, inauspicious (earth [Saturn]) 二鷄暖凶土
3. *tyr*, auspicious (water [Mercury]) 三嚙吉水
4. *n'xyδ*, auspicious (metal [Venus]) 四那頡吉金
5. *mys-*, auspicious (Sun) 五蜜吉日
6. *wmx'n*, greatly inauspicious (fire [Mars]) 六雲漢大凶火
7. *ketu*, inauspicious (feminine) 七計都凶女
8. *m'x*, auspicious (Moon) 八莫吉月
9. *wrmzt*, auspicious (wood [Jupiter]) 九溫沒斯吉木<sup>17</sup>

The model of nine planets is certainly Indian in origin, but in this case, the planets are denominated using their Sogdian names in transcribed Chinese, a point that suggests this technique came to China through a Sogdian source. Dividing the planets into inauspicious vs. auspicious (malefics and benefics) like this is standard in Hellenistic and Indian systems of astrology. The text at hand assigns flavors to the planets, which we can link to Western Eurasian sources, such as the *Picatrix*, the thirteenth-century Latin translation of the Arabic *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*. The parallels can be displayed as follows:

TABLE 4 Planets and flavor associations<sup>a</sup>

Planet	<i>Secrets of Seven-Planet Apotropaism</i>	<i>Picatrix (Saporibus)</i>
Saturn	Salty, bitter, sour (鹹苦酸)	Unpleasant ( <i>malorum</i> )
Jupiter	Fragrant, pleasant (香羔)	Sweet ( <i>dulcia</i> )
Mars	Hot flavor, spicy (熱味辛)	Hot, dry, bitter ( <i>calidum, siccum, amarum</i> )

16 Yano (1986: 29); Kotyk (2017b: 45–46). Goal-years are recurring planetary periodicities (i.e., cycles of movement). The cycle will repeat itself, so an ephemeris only needs to include specific periods. Evans (1998: 315) explains that “all the known goal-year texts are from the Seleucid period. Among the oldest is a text for 81 S.E. (231/230 BC).”

17 *T* 1308, 21: 427c7–13. See the Sogdian names of planets in Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst (2012).

TABLE 4 Planets and flavor associations (*cont.*)

Planet	<i>Secrets of Seven-Planet Apotropaism</i>	<i>Picatrix (Saporibus)</i>
Venus	Hot, astringent, vinegar (熱澁醋)	All sweet things ( <i>omnia dulcia</i> )
Mercury	Vinegar, bitter (醋苦)	Sharp ( <i>acrem</i> )

a *T* 1308, 21:427c26–428a3; *Picatrix*, 91–95. See the translation by Greer and Warnock (2010: 133–137). This table is adapted from Kotyk (2019b: 43). Read *gao* 羔 (“lamb”) as *mei* 美 (“pleasant”).

The one anomalous item in the Chinese is Venus, for which we would expect sweet things like honey, but I suspect that a scribal error occurred, in which the flavors for Mars and Mercury were mistakenly merged. In any case, the parallels between the Chinese and Latin are striking, but this points to a common heritage of the astrological lore. The parallels become even more apparent when we look at the relevant iconography.

#### 4 Astrological Iconography

The *Qiyao rangzai jue* includes two sets of iconographies for the planets, neither of which resemble the Indian forms seen in the Buddhist *mandalas*, but in this case, they are only textually described and not illustrated in the extant copies.<sup>18</sup> The first set is to be drawn when carrying out apotropaic practices to ward off the ill effects of the planets. The Sun has “a form like a man, but with a human body and a head resembling that of a lion’s.” He wears “heavenly robes, while holding a jeweled vase, black in color.” 形如人而似獅子頭人身，著天衣，手持寶瓶而黑色。<sup>19</sup> The Moon has “a form like a heavenly lady, wearing a bluish heavenly garment, and holding a jeweled sword.” 形如天女，著青天衣，持寶劍。<sup>20</sup> Jupiter has “a form like a man, with a human body and a dragon’s head, wearing a heavenly garment, colored following the four seasons.”<sup>21</sup> 形如人，人身龍頭，著天衣，隨四季色。 Mars has “a form like an elephant, black in color, screeching greatly at the sky.” 形如象黑色，向天大呼。<sup>22</sup> Saturn “has

18 For a lengthy study on these iconographies, see Kotyk (2017a). For a study on these icons as they relate to Japanese materials, see Takeda (1995).

19 *T* 1308, 21: 426c11–12.

20 *T* 1308, 21: 426c20–21.

21 *T* 1308, 21: 426c29–427a1. The meaning of “colored following the four seasons” is uncertain.

22 *T* 1308, 21: 427a11–12.

a form like a Brahmin, riding a black ox.” 形如婆羅門，騎黑沙牛。<sup>23</sup> Venus has “a form like a heavenly lady, her hand holding a seal, riding a white bird.” 形如天女，手持印，騎白鷄。<sup>24</sup> Mercury has “a form like a black snake, having four legs, and eating a crab.” 形如黑蛇，有四足而食蟹。<sup>25</sup>

This set of icons is challenging to explain. Mercury as a four-legged black snake might be explained partly with reference to native Chinese lore mixed with zodiacal concepts, but this is not necessarily a convincing solution. For example, Mercury is associated with black, and the animal presiding over the earthly branch *si* 巳, which corresponds to Virgo (one of the domiciles of Mercury), is the snake. If we interpret the crab as being related to Cancer, then we might speculate that the overlapping Chaldean decan and Egyptian term assigned to Mercury could be related; this is strained, however, because the other icons cannot be explained along such lines. Mars as a black elephant, for example, would not correspond to either Chinese or zodiacal lore. The lion-headed figure could tentatively be connected with Leo, the domicile of the Sun, but then how do we interpret Saturn as a Brahmin on a black ox? There is a precedent for Saturn on a black ox in Indian sources. One text surveyed by Pingree, the *Lagnacandrikā*—an astrological text written by Kāśinātha in northern India during the first half of the sixteenth century, but presumably drawing upon earlier materials—shows Saturn as a dark man atop a black bull or ox. Pingree (1989: 13) notes that this was not the famous white-humped bull Nandī, the typical mount of Śiva, nor could it be the buffalo of Yama.

The second set of icons in the *Qiyao rangzai jue* is easier to explain, not only because these figures conform to astrological lore attested in West Asian sources, but also due to the fact that similar icons were used in the Islamic world, such as those seen in the various illustrated recensions of the famous *Wonders of Creation* by Al-Qazwīnī (1203–1283).<sup>26</sup> The descriptions in the *Qiyao rangzai jue* read as follows: “Venus: the deity is a lady, wearing a yellow garment, her head capped with a bird-hat; she plucks a lute in hand.” 金，其神是女人，著黃衣，頭戴鷄冠，手彈琵琶。<sup>27</sup> “Jupiter: the deity is like an old man, wearing a bluish robe, and sporting a swine-hat; he is stately in

23 *T* 1308, 21: 427a22.

24 *T* 1308, 21: 427b4–5.

25 *T* 1308, 21: 427b13–14.

26 Typically, in Islamicate depictions of the planets, Mercury is a scribe writing on parchment or a scroll; Venus is a musician with a lute (not necessarily female); Mars is a red warrior; Jupiter is a judge; and Saturn is a dark, often scantily clothed, old man (grey hair) with a pickaxe or similar tool in hand. See Carboni (1996: 6).

27 *T* 1308, 21: 449a3.

appearance.” 木，其神如老人，著青衣帶猪冠，容貌儼然。<sup>28</sup> “Mercury: the deity is a lady, wearing a bluish garment, sporting a monkey-hat; in her hand she holds a scroll.” 水，其神女人，著青衣，帶獲冠，手執文卷。<sup>29</sup> “The deity [of Mars] is to be made of copper, teeth red in color, an appearance sporting a donkey-hat of a furious color [red], and wearing a leopard-skin skirt. He has four arms: one hand holds a bow, one hand holds an arrow, and one hand holds a blade.” 其神作銅，牙赤色，貌帶噴色驢冠，著豹皮裙。四臂：一手執弓，一手執箭，一手執刀。<sup>30</sup> “Saturn, the deity resembles a Brahmin, colored black, sporting an ox-hat on his head; in one hand a staff, one hand pointing forward, and his back seems slightly crooked.” 土，其神似婆羅門，色黑，頭帶牛冠，一手柱杖，一手指前，微似曲腰。<sup>31</sup>

The Sun and the Moon are not described in this set. Venus and Saturn are like those in the earlier set, but in these instances, the animal associations are supposed to be illustrated as hats. Saturn as a Brahmin with a crooked back and a staff is comparable to the Greco-Egyptian depictions of Kronos as the reaper of grains, although the staff in his hand replaces the sickle.<sup>32</sup> “Brahmin” denoted a bearded foreigner in Indian attire to most Chinese and later Japanese artists. In some Tangut depictions of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, Saturn as a Brahmin is depicted as a Caucasian man with red hair.<sup>33</sup> The famous painting of “Tejaprabhā Buddha and the Five Planets” in the British Museum, in contrast, depicts Saturn as South Asian in appearance.<sup>34</sup> Mercury as a scribe is a familiar motif in the wider Eurasian context, such as Greek Hermes, Mesopotamian Nabû, and Iranian Tīr, but in the Chinese context, the figure is generally depicted as a woman. We have one fragmentary astrology manual, dating to around the ninth or tenth century, and rediscovered at Dunhuang (Pelliot chinois 3081), that uses the transcribed name of Tīr and connects Mercury with young women and scribes. This figure presumably derived from an Iranian source, although the depiction of a feminine Mercury

28 T 1308, 21: 449a12.

29 Read *huo* 獲 (“catch”) as *hou* 猴 (“monkey”). T 1308, 21: 449a18.

30 T 1308, 21: 449a24–26.

31 T 1308, 21: 449b1–2. Cf. my earlier translations in Kotyk (2017b: 49–51).

32 I first made the connection between this icon of Saturn and Greco-Egyptian depictions of Kronos in Kotyk (2017b: 52).

33 State Hermitage Museum, “Buddha Teja-Prabha Surrounded with Planet Deities” (XX-2430).

34 The artist of the painting is Zhang Huaixing 張淮興 (d.u.). The painting is dated to year 4 of the reign era Qianning 乾寧 (897). Stein no. Ch.liv.007, British Museum 1919.0101.0.31. Note that “Tejaprabhā” is a reconstructed Sanskrit name used by modern scholars, but it is not attested in any known primary sources. See the discussion of this figure in Kotyk (2019e).

is attested only in East Asia from the eighth or ninth century. I suspect what happened is that somewhere in the translation process, the Mercurial associations with “youths” or “virgins” became an image of a young woman.<sup>35</sup> Venus as a lute player is also seen in diverse Islamic contexts. Jupiter in East Asia often holds a plate of flowers, which presumably ties in with the astrological association between Jupiter and bounty.

The animal associations might initially appear to stem from Chinese lore, but the donkey would be an anomaly because it is not a member of the twelve animals (the so-called “Chinese zodiac”). The monkey is associated with the earthly branch *shen* 申 in Chinese lore, which is equated to Gemini. Gemini is the domicile of Mercury in astrology. Similar parallels can be drawn with the animal caps of Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, but Mars is anomalous. Another factor to consider is that there are magical spells for the planets, but Sogdian loanwords are used, and the magical lore itself makes more sense if we read it as something translated from abroad, rather than a system based on native Chinese concepts. For example, the *Qiyao rangzai jue* explains ways to ward off the ill effects of individual planets. Regarding Mars, we read, “For his offerings, at early morning on the day of *wnx'n* [Mars], burn clove, red sandalwood, and stacte incense; enjoy the consumption of hot flavors and spicy things.” 其供養，取雲漢日平旦時，燒丁香，紫檀香，蘇合香。好食熱味及辛膩之物。<sup>36</sup>

The reason that early morning on a Tuesday (the “Day of Mars”) is used is that this is the planetary hour of Mars (e.g., the hour at sunrise for each day of the week is ruled by the planet corresponding to that weekday according to the original Greco-Egyptian system), although the Chinese text does not define planetary hours. The *Picatrix* assigns red sandalwood (*santalum rubeum*) to Mars.<sup>37</sup> Further, the famous occultist, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), writes, “Martis, omne odoriferum lignum, sandalorum, cupressi, balsami, & ligni aloës.”<sup>38</sup> The connection between sandalwood and Mars stems from a common heritage. The same observation holds for the lore of the other planets, especially Saturn, as we will see below. This leads me to believe that the

35 In the line on Mercury in Pelliot chinois 3081, we read 少女等生, which we can interpret as “youths such as maidens, etc.” The character *deng* 等 (equivalent to “etc.”) would indicate the abbreviation of a longer list of nouns. Mercury is associated with youths, whereas Saturn is associated with elders, but in this case, Mercury became categorically associated with maidens (unmarried virgin girls). The iconography in East Asia came to reflect this association. See Kotyk (2017a: 79).

36 *T* 1308, 21: 449a28–29.

37 *Picatrix*, 92–93.

38 See chapter XLIV, *De Occulta Philosophia* (published in 1533), LII. Eric Purdue kindly pointed out to me the connection with Agrippa's work (private communication 16 April 2019).

specific animal associations with the planets in the Chinese tradition likely also have a foreign origin, even if they are potentially explicable (although not entirely) based on indigenous lore.<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, it is possible that Chinese lore entered Sogdian sources, which were then retransmitted back to China.

The icons of the planets described above are not visually represented in the extant recensions of the *Qiyao rangzai jue*, but they are illustrated in the *Kuyō hiryaku* 九曜秘曆 (*Secret Calendar of the Nine Planets*). This manuscript describes the *navagraha* and outlines information primarily about the features of the seven-day week (e.g., what to do or not do on each day), but it also gives mantras for each of the planets and a few spells connected with them. We also see the Sogdian, Persian, and Sanskrit names of the planets in transcription, as Matsumoto (2007) has highlighted. Whether the text was originally a Japanese or Chinese composition is uncertain, but I tend to think it is Chinese, because there are no elements of grammar or vocabulary that would indicate a Japanese hand.<sup>40</sup> The composition of the text appears to date to the ninth or tenth century. The illustrations include two sets: the anthropomorphic icons, and the rarer set, which includes zoomorphic figures.<sup>41</sup>

The anthropomorphic figures are depicted in Chinese garments apart from Saturn, who is a Brahmin, or at least how one was imagined in East Asia. Rāhu and Ketu are demonic in appearance. The illustrations and the accompanying inscriptions are an amalgamation of Chinese, Indian, and Iranian elements. They follow the ordering of the seven-day week, with the first figure being the Sun. The mantra given is for Sūrya, the Indian solar god, but the names of the other planets are also given in Sogdian and Persian based on Amoghavajra's *Xūyao jing*. The solar deity in the *Kuyō hiryaku* holds a lotus, which is a typical feature of Sūrya, but he wears long-flowing Chinese robes (*hanfu* 漢服). The elongated earlobes, however, are a characteristically Indian feature. The

39 See the extended discussion of these spells and astrological lore in Kotyk (2021c).

40 The written lingua franca of East Asia until modernity was Classical Chinese. Some Japanese authors, such as Kūkai in the ninth century, basically wrote Chinese like native speakers, but many others wrote in irregular albeit readable Chinese. See my comments in Kotyk (2023d: 237).

41 One of the best-preserved versions of the text is held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (item# 1975.268.4) in New York City. The scribe, Sōkan 宗觀 (1125), copied the text and illustration in year 2 of Tenji 天治 (1125), but this was based on an earlier version from year 3 of Tengyō 天慶 (940). See also the manuscript of the *Kuyō hiryaku* by Genpō 賢寶 (1333–1398) in the ARC Collection, Ritsumeikan University. The images reproduced as appended plates in Matsumoto (2007). See also the typeset edition in the Taishō canon (TZ, vol. 7, 769–773). See the discussions in Nakano (1969); Manabe (1982); Takeda (1995); Matsumoto (2007); and Kotyk (2017a, 2023d).

headdress is adorned with a dragon, bird, and some kind of equine or bovine.<sup>42</sup> We would normally expect the bird to be the three-legged black crow (*sanzu wu* 三足烏) in a strictly Chinese context, but this one rather resembles a phoenix, which would conversely connect with a myth of Western Eurasia. The lunar deity also has the bird and dragon, but the figure appears to be feminine, in which case this would be a Chinese adaptation, as the Moon (*Taiyin*



FIGURE 2 Sun in *Kuyō hiryaku*. Sōkan (1125), Japan  
 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. 1975.268.4. THE HARRY G.C. PACKARD COLLECTION OF ASIAN ART, GIFT OF HARRY G.C. PACKARD, AND PURCHASE, FLETCHER, ROGERS, HARRIS BRISBANE DICK, AND LOUIS V. BELL FUNDS, JOSEPH PULITZER BEQUEST, AND THE ANNENBERG FUND INC. GIFT, 1975. PUBLIC DOMAIN



FIGURE 3 Moon in *Kuyō hiryaku*. Sōkan (1125), Japan  
 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. 1975.268.4. PUBLIC DOMAIN

42 If this were a horse or another quadruped, it could represent one of the animals (deer, horse, or elk) associated with the earthly-branch of *wu* 午, which represents noon in Chinese chronology.

太陰, “Great Yin”) is understood as *yin* 陰 and feminine in character (rather than *yang* 陽 or masculine) in Chinese lore.

The most reasonable explanation of the dragon is the typical sprawling serpent across the sky, whose head and tail are symbolically connected with the ascending and descending lunar nodes (the nodes in specific configurations result in eclipses of the Sun and Moon). This specific dragon is *not* an indigenous feature of Chinese cosmographic lore. The *Bundahišn*, the “Primal Creation,” a Zoroastrian cosmogony of the early Islamic period, describes this dragon, with its head and tail, as part of the *thema mundi*, the horoscope of the world (MacKenzie 1964: 515–516). The motif of the dragon and bull is strikingly apparent in the illustrations of Rāhu and Ketu in the *Kuyō hiryaku*, in which Rāhu is mounted atop a bull, and Ketu atop a dragon. The human figures, presented in demonic forms, are Indian in appearance. They both hold up discs of the Sun and the Moon. Rāhu grasps a vajra in one of his right hands. This would be a typical item in illustrations related to Vajrayāna (Tantric Buddhism). The significance of the boy or man held in one of his left hands is unclear to me. Ketu shows his fangs and is adorned with a garland of skulls. The serpents wrapped around the arms is a unique feature that is not apparent in the earlier depictions and descriptions of Ketu in Chinese sources. Rāhu as a Vedic deity is not associated with serpents. Ketu originally referred to comets and *ketu* itself in Sanskrit can mean banner or signal.<sup>43</sup> The *Śāntyadihyāya* of the *Śivadharmaśāstra*—which would date to the seventh or eighth century when Ketu was being incorporated into the Indian system of the planets—reads as follows:

Shaped like smoke, the planet Ketu, stationed in the northeastern direction, highly frightening with eyes that are round and very extensive—may he, having the colour of straw smoke, removing injury from the planets, with terrible fangs and gaping mouth, bring about victory for me!<sup>44</sup>

In the *Kuyō hiryaku*, Ketu also grasps a goat in one of his right hands. We also see a man, almost nude, held in one of his left hands. Little information about the pair is given in the text, apart from mantras and the assertion that they are invisible planets. The *Kuyō hiryaku* itself is more a guide to the seven-day

43 Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing in their commentary on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi* define Ketu as “banner,” which by extension refers to comets. See the translation in Kotyk (2018d: 17).

44 See the translation of the Sanskrit by Bisschop (2018: 168).





FIGURE 4 Rāhu in *Kuyō hiryaku*. Sōkan (1125), Japan  
 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. 1975.268.4. PUBLIC DOMAIN



FIGURE 5 Ketu, Sun, Moon, and Jupiter (right to left) in *Kuyō hiryaku*. Sōkan (1125), Japan  
 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. 1975.268.4. PUBLIC DOMAIN

week, hence Rāhu and Ketu are not directly relevant, although they still must be acknowledged if the *navagraha* are discussed as a group.

Rāhu atop a bull, with a vajra, and solar and lunar discs, is similar to a votive panel from Dandan Uiliq, now at the British Museum (1907,1111.71), that is identified as “Śiva in his Mahesvara [*sic*] aspect, with a female head on his right side and his aghora (fierce) aspect on the left side.” The latter figure is seated atop two white bulls. On the reverse of the panel is “another four-armed male deity seated cross-legged on a cushion. The man shows strong Iranian influence.” The museum catalog states, “He possibly represents the God of Silk.” The icon of Rāhu in the *Kuyō hiryaku* conceivably could have a connection to the deity identified as Śiva (or Rudra) on the panel.

Al-Bīrūnī, cites a text titled *Viṣṇu-dharma* and assigns Gaṇapati as the dominant of “the Head” (i.e., Rāhu). Gaṇapati is another name for Gaṇeśa,



FIGURE 6 Votive panel from Dandan-Uiliq  
1907,1111.71 © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM. CREATIVE  
COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-SHAREALIKE 4.0  
INTERNATIONAL (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

who is the creator and remover of obstacles.<sup>45</sup> This does not provide a solution, but Rudra is the dominant (ruler) of the *nakṣatra* Ārdrā according to Al-Bīrūnī's source.<sup>46</sup> A separate authoritative source, the *Nakṣatralpa* (1.4.3) of the *Atharvavedaparīśiṣṭā* gives Rudra as the ruler of Ārdrā. Ārdrā falls in the zodiac sign of Gemini. The Head of the Dragon in the *Bundahišn* is positioned in Gemini. It would therefore make sense in this framework why Rudra would be connected with Rāhu via the *nakṣatra* of Ārdrā (although it makes one suspect that the *Bundahišn* borrowed from Indian material).<sup>47</sup> We should also then look to the *nakṣatra* opposite to Ārdrā, which would be Mūla. The *Nakṣatralpa* assigns the deity Nirṛti to Mūla.<sup>48</sup> Monier-Williams (1899: 554) defines Nirṛti as "the goddess of death and corruption," but he also notes "N. of a Rudra."<sup>49</sup>

Amoghavajra makes identical connections between Ārdrā and Rudra, and Mūla and Nirṛti.<sup>50</sup> We can also look further at the iconographical record in East Asia to better understand how the icons of Rāhu and Ketu are connected with specific *nakṣatras*. One Chinese text preserved in Japan, titled *Goma rodan yō* 護摩爐壇樣 (*Model for the Homa Altar*) in Japanese, includes illustrations of the planets and *nakṣatras* in anthropomorphic forms. The depictions represent the various Vedic deities who individually rule over them.<sup>51</sup> Among the representations, it is only Ārdrā (*Shen xiu* 參宿) and Mūla (*Wei xiu* 尾宿) who hold up the Sun and Moon. Ārdrā has the features of Rudra, such as the bull, hence we can infer that Mūla, depicted as a warrior, ought to correspond to Nirṛti in this context.

45 These two depictions of Rāhu and Ketu show similarities with the wrathful form of the major Tantric deity, Mahākāla (Chn. *Daheitian* 大黑天), but in some instances Mahākāla holds up a flayed elephant skin, which is presumably an allusion to Vināyaka/Gaṇapati (later known as Gaṇeśā), who is held to be a creator of obstacles. See Somekawa (2013: 238–239). The icons of Rāhu and Ketu in this instance might have a connection with Mahākāla, but exactly how remains uncertain to me.

46 See the translation in Sachau (1888: vol. 2, 121).

47 Ārdrā is also connected with Rudra in modern Indian astrology. I must thank Garima Garg (18 Feb 2023) for pointing out the modern connection, which no doubt has its roots in antiquity.

48 See the Sanskrit text of the *Nakṣatralpa* of the *Atharvavedaparīśiṣṭā* in Bolling and Negelein (1909: 3–4).

49 Note the *Śivadharmaśāstra*, which reads, "In the direction of Nirṛti (southwest) is the famous town called Kṣṇā." Translation by Bisschop (2018: 162).

50 See details concerning *Xiuyao jing* in Yano (2013: 69, 89–100).

51 This title also appears in the list of texts brought by the Japanese monk Jōgyō 常曉 (d. 867) to Japan in the year 839. *T* 2163, 55: 1071a5. This text was originally produced in China. It appears to have been pieced together from disparate sources. The deities in this text are discussed in Kotyč (2019c).



FIGURE 7 Ārdrā (Shen xiu 參宿) in *Goma rodan yō*  
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It would make sense to align Ketu or the Tail with Mūla, since, as Monier-Williams (1899: 826) defines it, the word itself denotes “a root (of any plant or tree; but also fig. the foot or lowest part or bottom of anything).” This appears to be connected with the Milky Way. Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing assign Rāhu to the southwest and Ketu to the northeast in their commentary on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi*.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Ketu is “stationed in the northeastern

52 The commentary states, “Place the planets as the retainers of the solar deity: Aṅgāraka [Mars] in the west, Śukra [Venus] in the east, Budha [Mercury] in the south, Bṛhaspati [Jupiter] in the north, Śanaīścara [Saturn] in the southeast, Rāhu in the southwest, Kampa [god of earthquakes] in the northwest, and Ketu in the northeast.” 日天眷屬布



FIGURE 8 Mūla (Wei xiu 尾宿) in *Goma rodan yō*  
 TZ VOL. 7: 941. SAT TAISHŌZŌ IMAGE DB. CREATIVE COMMONS  
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direction” according to the *Śivadharmasāstra*.<sup>53</sup> The *Bundahišn*, however, differs in that the Head is positioned in the southeast, while the Tail is positioned in the northwest. Despite this reversal, the pair is still in proximity to the Ascendant and Descendant in both models.

諸執曜：壺伽在西，輪伽在東，勃陀在南，勿落薩鉢底在北，沒備沒遮在東南，羅睺在西南，劍婆在西北，計都在東北。T 1796, 39: 634b20–23. The commentary also states that Ketu is a comet, but in this instance of assigning the *grahas* to directions, the implication is that Ketu is directly opposite Rāhu, and therefore Ketu ought to be the descending node. Śubhakarasiṃha might not have been aware of this fact.

53 Translation by Bisschop (2018: 168).

The symbolism of the bull in relation to Ārdrā and Mūla leads to a pertinent question about *gōzhir* in relation to the Indian model. The term *gōzhir* is quite old, as MacKenzie (2012) discusses, being a “Middle Persian development of an old Iranian compound adjective \**gau-čīθra-*, recorded in the Younger Avesta (Yašt 7, passim; Y. 1.11; 16.4; Vd. 21.9), in the form *gaočīθra-*, as an epithet of the moon, ‘bearing the seed, having the origin of cattle’ (or, ‘the ox’).” The redeployment of this concept in the Head (*gōzihr sar*) and Tail (*gōzihr dumb*) could only have occurred after the adoption of astrology from abroad, which happened primarily during the Sasanian period. It therefore seems plausible that an Iranian concept was simply superimposed on the Indian system, but the dragon imagery certainly has a much older precedent. As MacKenzie (2012) explains, “This Dragon was first conceived by the Chaldeans as having been created before the constellations and the planets, and watching over the universe with its head towards the sunrise and its tail to the sunset.”<sup>54</sup>

The iconography and lore related to Rāhu and Ketu are quite complex, and the imagery and relation to West Asia extend beyond what we have surveyed so far. For instance, one text preserved in the Daoist canon, titled *Chengxing lingtai miyao jing* 秤星靈臺秘要經 (*Scripture on the Essentials on the Compass Spiritual Platform*)—a guide to apotropaic spells for the planets, dating to the tenth century—explains a technique for allaying the baneful influence of Rāhu and Ketu. It states, “Craft a bracelet from the iron [used by] a butcher, like a snake with its mouth swallowing the tail 以屠宰煞鐵打作釧如蛇形以口銜尾.”<sup>55</sup> This symbol is the ouroboros, but it is not common in Chinese religious literature; we can infer that the symbol, like Rāhu and Ketu, was also imported from a foreign source. The fact that this was available in Chinese only hints at the diverse range of lore from abroad that was made available through astrology and astral magic.

Moving on, the *Kuyō hiryaku* also gives illustrations of the other planets. Venus is a female musician, Mercury is a female scribe, Mars is a four-armed warrior, and Jupiter holds a plate of flowers. Saturn is depicted in a half-clad bearded form, holding a staff and what appears to be a censer. In addition to details about the auspicious and taboo actions for Saturday, there is an apotropaic ritual for Saturn. The subheading of the ritual includes Kēwān (*Jihuan* 鷄緩), the Iranian name for Saturn. Chinese and Japanese astrologers and Buddhists in the ninth to tenth centuries appear to have normally used this or

54 See also MacKenzie (1964: 525), who points out that The Head and Tail have their astrological exaltations in 3° Gemini and 3° Sagittarius (the Moon being 3° Taurus) according to later Islamicate astrology.

55 *DZ* 289, 5: 30C12–13; Kotytk (2017a: 59–60; 2021c: 94).

the Chinese designations for Saturn, rather than the Sanskrit name Śanaīścara. The initial line of the ritual for Saturn reads, “An iron body, colored like ochre, an ox-hat. He makes people ill with many worries. He makes people isolated and dispersed [from one another], and sorrowful, unable to get away from those feelings. He makes people destitute.” 鐵身，色似赭，牛冠。令人病患多憂。令人孤栖破散，悲不離其心。令人貧賤。 The Saturnine themes of melancholy, isolation, and destitution are features of astrology from abroad, rather than being domestic lore from China. The *Picatrix* (III.VII; 112) also speaks similarly regarding Saturn: that “if you find yourself in contemplation and sorrow, or in melancholy or grave illness [...]” (et si in cogitationibus et doloribus fueris positus aut melancolia vel infirmitate gravatus ...), then you may petition Saturn, as these experiences fall under his domain.<sup>56</sup>

The association between Saturn and iron is seen in other sources. The aforementioned Daoist text dealing with astral magic instructs the practitioner to “cast, using plow iron, one true image of Saturn.” 宜以犁具鑄鐵鑄作一土星真形.<sup>57</sup> The *Picatrix* (III.I: 91) also states that Saturn rules over laborers who work the land and plow (laborare terram, arare). Saturn’s metals include lead, iron, and all black and fetid metals (et ex metallis plumbum, ferrum et omnia nigra et fetida). The connections between these sources point to a common heritage underlying the lore in both West and East Asia.<sup>58</sup> The *Picatrix* is a translation of Arabic materials, but we can infer that the Chinese material was translated and/or adapted from Sogdian or Persian works, based on the transcribed names for the planets and the general astral lore. I think that ultimately this type of astral magic originated in Sasanian Iran, but the problem is that in the absence of evidence, we can only speculate. There are no *uncontested* examples of the planets depicted in the extant Sasanian art, a fact that several art historians have emphasized to me in person.<sup>59</sup> This presumably is the result of the planets being regarded as evil in Zoroastrianism. For example, Panaino (2015: 248–249) explains, “The planetary demons were called *parīgān* (i.e., *pairikās*), and they were considered responsible for any negative influence on the sublunar world.”

This general set of icons (Saturn as Brahmin, Venus as a lute player, Mercury as a female scribe, etc.) became the most common across East Asia, even though other illustrations were available. Interestingly, some of these icons came to be used in at least one version of the *Garbhakośa-maṇḍala* (Chn. *Taizang*

56 English translation by Greer and Warnock (2010: 155).

57 *DZ* 289, 5: 30C2–10.

58 See the relevant comments on Saturnine lore in East Asia in Kotyk (2023d: 243–245).

59 On these matters, see Kotyk (2017a: 56–58; 2017b: 48–55; 2021c: 95–97).

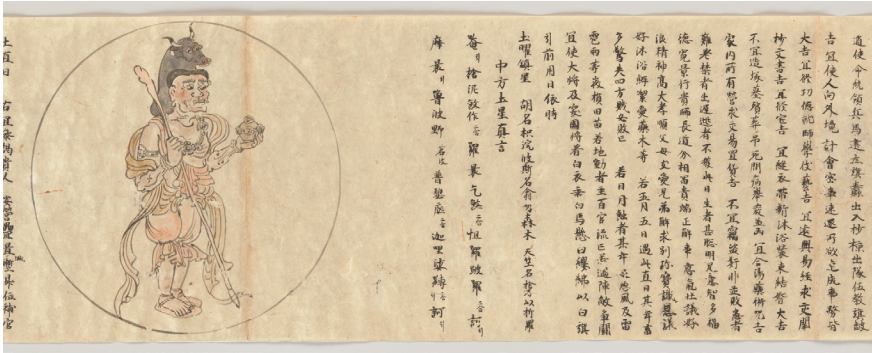


FIGURE 9 Saturn in *Kuyō hiryaku*. Sōkan (1125), Japan  
1975.268.4. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. PUBLIC DOMAIN

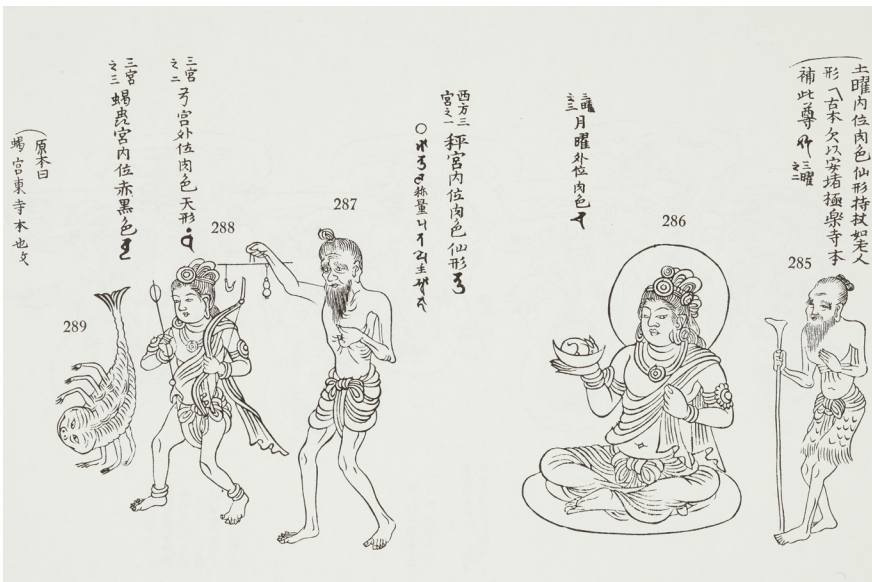


FIGURE 10 Icons of the *Garbhakośa-maṇḍala* (Jpn. *Taizō mandara* 胎藏曼荼羅).  
Right to left: Saturn, Moon, Libra, Sagittarius, Scorpio  
TZ VOL. 1: 783. SAT TAISHŌZŌ IMAGE DB. CREATIVE COMMONS  
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*mantuluo* 胎藏曼荼羅; Jpn. *Taizō mandara*), the *maṇḍala* connected with the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, which was translated by Yixing and Śubhakarasiṃha in 724. The extant forms of this *maṇḍala* were preserved in Japan. The material available from Japan is traced back to China. The conventional *maṇḍala* (*Genzu mandara* 現圖曼荼羅) of the Shingon school displays Saturn and Libra



(the zodiac sign in which Saturn has his astrological exaltation) both as old men with hunched backs. Saturn, in a loincloth, holds a staff, while Libra is the same old man, but holding up a scale.<sup>60</sup> These are unlike the Indian forms seen in other icons (e.g., in fig. 10, the Moon appears more typically Indian).

## 5 The Eight, Nine, and Eleven Planets

Chinese horoscopy, which emerges in the late eighth century, came to generally use a system of eleven planets, although a system of nine planets was also used by some astrologers. Jao (1984) has discussed this matter in detail. Daoists used eleven planets, whereas Buddhists during the Tang used the nine-planet model (*navagraha*). In the Chinese nine-planet system, Ketu was reassigned the function of the lunar apogee, whereas normally in Indian astrology, Ketu is the descending node of the Moon.<sup>61</sup> The set of eleven planets includes the seven visible planets, the Sun, and the Moon, plus Ziqi 紫氣 and Yuebei 月孛 (or Yuebo 月勃). Regarding the exact astronomical function of these, we can turn to authoritative authors of later centuries, who clearly define them. The polymath Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031–1095) in his *Mengxi bitan* 夢溪筆談 (*Dream Pool Essays*), writes about the use of the lunar nodes in the prediction of eclipses. He specifically identifies the nodes as a “method of Western India” (*Xitian fa* 西天法).<sup>62</sup> Later, Xing Yunlu 邢雲路 (b. 1549), in his treatise, *Gujin lili kao* 古今律曆考 (*Analysis of Tune and Calendrical Science*), connects all four of the pseudo-planets with “Astronomical Scriptures of the Western Regions” (*Xiyu xingjing* 西域星經).<sup>63</sup> We read the following:

60 For an encyclopedic overview of the two major *maṇḍalas* in East Asia, see Somekawa (2013).

61 Yano (1986: 31–33) first noted that Ketu in the Buddhist context was assigned the function of the lunar apogee. Although Ketu originally referred to comets, at some point in India the Rāhu-Ketu pair was fixed as the nodes. Hartner (1938: 132) states, “It is hard to tell when and where this promotion to planetary rank took place. I am inclined to believe that, although a certain tendency seems to have existed in later Hellenistic astrology, the idea was fully developed only in India. There, in the sixth century AD, Varāhamihira, in his *Brhatsamhitā* (5, 1 ff.), discusses the Rāhu-Ketu myth in connection with the nodes of the Moon and the scientific theory of the eclipses; and the nine planets (*navagraha*), including Rāhu and Ketu in parity with the orthodox seven, appear in very early sculptures.”

62 *Mengxi bitan*, 7.1; 60–61.

63 The term “pseudo-planet” was originally coined by Hartner (1938) to describe Rāhu and Ketu.

Astrologers call Yuebei, Ziqi, Rāhu, and Ketu the Four Remainders. Ketu is produced from the Celestial Tail. Rāhu is produced from the Celestial Head. Yuebei is produced from the Moon. Ziqi is produced from intercalation. The orbits of the Sun and Moon are like two interconnected rings. One point is called the Celestial Head. One point is called the Celestial Tail. The Celestial Tail is Ketu. The Celestial Head is Rāhu. The speed of the Moon's movement has constant parameters: the slow point [along the lunar orbit] is Yuebei. Ziqi is produced from intercalation. There are ten intercalary months in a twenty-eight-year period, [during which time] Ziqi makes one orbit [around the ecliptic]. Ziqi and Yuebei both have their parameters. They lack any luminous forms. Hence, together with Ketu and Rāhu, they are called the Four Remainders. Now in China everyone uses them.

月孛，紫炁，羅喉，計都，星家謂之四餘。計生於天尾，羅生於天首，孛生於月，炁生於閏。蓋日月行道如兩環相交，一處曰天首，一處曰天尾。天尾為計，天首為羅。月之行遲速有常度，遲之處即孛也。炁生於閏，二十八年十閏而炁行一周。炁孛皆有度數。無光象故與計羅同謂之四餘。今中國皆用之。<sup>64</sup>

In these contexts, Rāhu and Ketu are the ascending and descending nodes of the Moon respectively. Yuebei is “the slow point” of the lunar orbit, which refers to the lunar apogee. The word “Yuebei” 月孛 ought to be interpreted as the “Moon's elevation,” in the sense that at the apogee the Moon is smallest and less luminous, just as a source of light would be at an elevated height from the observer.<sup>65</sup> Ziqi, which literally reads as “purple” or “dark” mist, is a mystery. It is treated like a planet, but it has no astronomical function like the other three. If we assume  $360^\circ$ , rather than the Chinese parameter of  $365.25$  *du* 度 (degrees), we can gain a working model based on whole numbers, in which Ziqi progresses  $1^\circ$  every 28 days. There are 10 intercalary months in 28 years. An intercalary month is observed after Ziqi has progressed  $36^\circ$  (every 2.8 years).<sup>66</sup>

64 *Gujin li li kao* 28.15a–15b. The idea of “remainders” stems from the notion that they have no actual elemental essence, but instead only possess residual forms, unlike the main planets, which possess full essences (e.g., Jupiter is the element of wood, Mars is that of fire, etc.).

65 The second character, *bei* 孛, can also be read as “comet,” which has led some premodern authors to misread this as a unique comet. See discussion in Kotyk (2018a: 75–78).

66  $28 \text{ years} \times 360 \text{ days} = 10,080 \text{ days}$ .  $10,080 \text{ days} / 360 \text{ (degrees)} = 28 \text{ days}$ . Every 28 days Ziqi progresses 1 degree as  $28 \text{ days} = 1 \text{ degree}$ .  $10,080 / 10 \text{ (times for intercalary months)} = 1008 \text{ days}$ .  $1008 \text{ days} / 28 \text{ days} (= 1 \text{ degree each}) = 36 \text{ degrees}$ . Every 36 degrees (2.8 years) an intercalary

The movement of Ziqi would be easy enough to track over time. The source of this reckoning, however, is uncertain. This is not the Metonic cycle (7 intercalary months in a 19-year period), nor is it the Chinese system of intercalation. The etymology of Ziqi in Chinese is also mysterious. I tend to think that it could be a semantic translation of something foreign, especially since the word itself is not connected with lunation or intercalary months in any earlier Chinese context. The twelfth Hebrew month is called Adar; the intercalary month is called Ve Adar (“And Adar”). The term “Adar” is an Akkadian loanword (Addaru or Adaru). One interpretation of this by modern scholarship is that of “the dark or clouded month,” derived from the Akkadian *adāru*, meaning to be dark. Ziqi in Chinese semantically means something like “dark vapors” or “purple mist,” and it is similarly connected with intercalary months. I must admit, however, that this is only my speculative attempt at a solution.<sup>67</sup>

The reason that Shen Kuo associated the lunar nodes specifically with Western India is due to the fact that the system of eleven planets originated from there, according to the available records in the medieval period. Although we might initially suppose that this was a reasonable assumption, the scenario was a lot more complex. The historian Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381), in his *Luming bian* 祿命辯 (*Discussion on Fate Calculation*) provides the following account:

Early in the Zhenyuan reign era [785–805] of the Tang, Li Biqian first calculated the ephemerides for the eleven stars. Bao Gai and Cao Shiwei both studied these [ephemerides]. Shiwei also drafted *Ephemerides for the Two Hidden Planets: Rāhu and Ketu*; it starts from the first year of reign era Yuanhe [806].

唐貞元初，李弼乾始推十一星行歷，鮑該，曹士蒞，皆業之。士蒞又作《羅計二隱曜立成曆》，起元和元年。<sup>68</sup>

Li Biqian, whose name could also be rendered Li Miqian 李彌乾, is credited with introducing the eleven planets as a set, although the *navagraha* were at least known earlier. In fact, the lunar apogee is described in the *Jiuzhi li* 九執曆 (*Calendar of the Nine Planets*), which was translated and adapted into Chinese in the year 718 by a member of the Gautama family, Siddhārtha or

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month is inserted.  $360 \text{ degrees} / 36 \text{ degrees} = 10$  positions to insert intercalary months. See Kotyk (2017b: 47, fn. 107).

67 See the etymology of Adar in Klein (1987: 8). See the discussion on Ziqi in Kotyk (2018a: 78–79).

68 Read *ye* 業 as *xue* 學. *Luming bian*, 151. See also the discussion in Jao (1984: 577–578).

Siddha (Qutan Xida 瞿曇悉達; d.u.). This is a manual of Indian mathematical astronomy. The title of this treatise is tentatively reconstructed into Sanskrit as \**Navagraha-karaṇa*.<sup>69</sup> Here the lunar apogee is rendered as “high moon” (*gao yue* 高月) in Chinese translation, reflecting *candra-ucca* (“apex of the Moon”) in Sanskrit (Yabuuchi 1989: 12). The *Navagraha-karaṇa* never was widely studied in China or Japan. Although it was the first example of the lunar apogee in Chinese astronomy, it is technically unrelated to Yuebei in the set of eleven planets.<sup>70</sup>

It was Li Miqian who is formally credited with introducing the eleven planets. Little is known about him, apart from that he was an astrologer. The new Tang history credits him with bringing to China what appears to have been a text related to the first-century astrologer Dorotheus of Sidon, titled *Duli yusi jing* 都利聿斯經. Mak (2014) has drawn parallels between the fragments of the text—plus a later versified version—and the works of Dorotheus and Ptolemy. Mak demonstrates that the content was more similar to that of Dorotheus. I have shown strong parallels between the doctrines of Dorotheus (at least as his work is preserved in Arabic translation) and horoscopic texts in Chinese from the late Tang (Kotyk 2018a).

The new Tang history states, “In the Zhenyuan period, the \*Dorothean diviner Li Miqian transmitted [the text] from Western India. There was someone [named] Qu Gong who translated the text.” 貞元中，都利術士李彌乾傳自西天竺，有璩公者譯其文。<sup>71</sup> This raises significant questions. First, there are no known translations of Dorotheus into Indian languages, and Dorothean doctrines are not apparent in Sanskrit astrology, but Li Miqian is said to have come from Western India. We nevertheless have a record of a Middle Persian translation of Dorotheus having been carried out. The *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, a bibliography compiled by Ibn al-Nadīm (c.987–988), states that Šāpur I (r. 239–270) ordered the translation of the works of Hellenistic astrologers Dorotheus and Ptolemy into Persian.<sup>72</sup> “Li Miqian,” if this were an Indian name in Chinese, would be irregular. Mak (2014: 121) tentatively suggests that Miqian was *Micā*,

69 Yabuuchi (1989: 3) gives this reconstructed title. He states that “it is not a comprehensive work belonging to the *Siddhānta* type but merely a work that may be classified as one of the *Karaṇas* outlining the calculation method.” See the recent discussion and partial translation in Mak (2023).

70 Niu (2020: 350, 354) shows that Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101) was aware that every month the Moon transits the fastest point along its orbit for three degrees. This is, in effect, a reference to the lunar perigee, but the perigee and apogee were not formulated in the same way that we see during the Tang period.

71 *Xin Tang shu*, 59.1548. Cf. Mak (2014: 106).

72 See the translation in Dodge (1970: vol. 2, 575).

while the translator Qu Gong (“Mister Qu”) was [Lū]qā. During the same decades, there was a court astronomer in China, Li Su 李素 (743–817), who is identified as Persian (“a Persian of the Western Countries” 西國波斯人) in his funerary inscription. Li Su was the nephew of the king of Persia, which presumably would refer to deposed royalty. Although Li Su spent his earlier life in Guangzhou, during the Dali 大曆 era (766–779), he went to the capital to serve at the Bureau of Astronomy.<sup>73</sup> As Rong (2001: 255–257) has pointed out, Li Su’s courtesy name of Wen Zhen 文貞 appears on the Christian stele of 781, with the Syriac name Lūqā. As Mak has pointed out, it is reasonable to link these figures, because Li Su would have been the logical figure to translate a major astrological treatise into Chinese, especially if we assume that he was multilingual. There remains the question of why Li Miqian is said to have come from Western India. The most probable scenario is that he was ethnically Iranian and was a member of the post-Sasanian diaspora in Western India, such as Balochistan, or he was part of the church there. If Li Miqian was a Christian cleric, then we can imagine him having lived in a Christian community in India before going to China, where the church was relatively prosperous under the leadership of Adam at the time.

The origin of the eleven planets remains a mystery. The lunar apogee, for instance, was known to Greek astrologers, but it was not treated as a planet.<sup>74</sup> The number eleven brings to mind Genesis 37:9, in which there is mention of “eleven stars,” but this passage refers to the Sun and the Moon, and the eleven stars (whereas in the Chinese model, the Sun and the Moon are counted as part of the eleven). Similarly, the Qur’ān (12:4) mentions eleven stars, plus the Sun and Moon. Neither of these would explain “eleven planets.” There is a parallel to the “eleven planets” in Zoroastrianism, which Panaino (2020b: 372) pointed out, as follows:

73 His tombstone was uncovered in Xi’an in 1980; see the report in Guo (1981). The funerary inscription of Li Su is included in the typeset *Quan Tang wen buyi* 全唐文補遺, vol. 3, 179–180, titled *Da Tang gu longxi jun Li Gong muzhi ming* 大唐故隴西郡李公墓誌銘 (*Funerary Inscription of Mister Li of Longxi County of the Great Tang*).

74 Greenbaum and Jones (2017), examining a Greek horoscope (P.Berl. 9825), write, “A puzzling item in the horoscope is the longitude given for the ‘latitude (πλάτος) of the Moon,’ Capricorn 18° 3’. Obviously, this is not a latitude at all, nor does it have any recognizable relation to the Moon’s argument of latitude (167° 20’ from the northern limit according to the *Almagest*) or the nodes. We suspect that it represents the longitude of the apogee in an eccentric lunar model.”

I must observe that if we try to find a parallel with the eleven Chinese planets, we can find it—as far as I know—only within Pahlavi Zoroastrian astrological literature. There, despite the fact that this fitting evidence is frequently overlapped, we have not only the “Head” (*sar*) and the “Tail” (*dumb*) of the heavenly Dragon (in correspondence of the standard image of the Hellenistic Ἀναβιβάζοντες [Anabibázontes]), but also a “black Mihr” (*Mihr ī tamīg*) or a “black Sun” (Miθra being associated with the Sun) and a “black Moon” (*Māh ī tamīg*) as separate entities.

The *Bundahišn* (v, 4) speaks of a “dark Sun” and a “dark Moon” opposing the Sun and Moon respectively, but their astronomical functions are unclear. The number, however, still adds up to eleven. The problem is that in Chinese astrology, neither Yuebei nor Ziqi have these connotations as a negative and “dark” Sun or Moon. Ziqi, for example, is a benefic, and not demonic. Wan Mingyong 萬民英 (1521–1603), who compiled sources on astrology stretching back to the Tang, produced a voluminous work titled *Xingxue dacheng* 星學大成 (*Great Compendium on Star Studies*). He writes, “Ziqi is the most benefic of the stars.” 紫炁衆星中最善. Ziqi is also a “remainder of Jupiter” (木之餘), according to him.<sup>75</sup> Yuebei is a “remainder of Mercury” (水之餘). Yuebei is generally malefic, even when conjunct with the two benefics (Jupiter and Venus). Wan Mingyong states, “[Yue]bei and Jupiter in the same sign [signifies] suitability for office, but not talents or arts, a short life, and someone contrarian.” 亭木同宮，宜官不宜才藝，夭壽，為悖逆之徒. He also states, “[Yue]bei and Venus in the same sign makes one not good in actions, as also so with wives. Men will be sorcerers. Women will be sorceresses.” 亭金同宮為行不良，妻亦然。男為巫，女為覲。<sup>76</sup> These significations are unique to historical horoscopy, since they do not appear outside East Asia. This astrological lore was presumably part of the material brought by Li Miqian around the year 800. Although we can point to concepts such as “eleven stars” and “eleven planets” in other contexts, there are no direct parallels in the astrological literatures of other cultures. Nevertheless, Ziqi and Yuebei were foreign in origin. Their use as pseudo-planets followed the examples of Rāhu and Ketu. Niu Weixing (2010), in contrast to my position, argues that the formative period of the concept of eleven planets can be traced back to the Five Dynasties and Northern Song period (tenth century), observing that in the Song period, these eleven planets appear as a group in Daoist texts. Their images were also painted in both Buddhist and Daoist temples.

75 *Xingxue dacheng* (SKQS), 19.29b–32a.

76 *Xingxue dacheng* (SKQS), 20.1b, 20.18a–b.

He suggests that the concept stemmed from native Chinese astrologers, who built on the Indian concept of nine planets. The mathematical parameters of Yuebei and Ziqi, as well as the historical accounts and relevant iconography, however, appear to point to a foreign origin.<sup>77</sup>

One other body of evidence we can turn to when considering the pseudo-planets in China is their iconography. Ziqi is generally just depicted in Chinese court robes without any distinct features. Some original drawings of Ziqi and Yuebei are seen in a Japanese copy of a Chinese document, *Kuyōtō zuzō* 九曜等圖像 (*Navagraha Images*), which was kept at Tōji in Kyoto. The facsimile edition in the Taishō canon is a copy from 1164 (see figures below).<sup>78</sup> More clues about the origin of Yuebei are found in the relevant iconography and lore of the figure. The Daoist canon contains a text titled *Yuanhuang Yuebei* 元皇月孛祕法 (*Secret Practice of the Primordial Lord Yuebei*) within the voluminous *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 collection. Hu (1995: 416–417) dates this compilation approximately to the late Yuan or early Ming period (fourteenth century). The text on Yuebei is a magical text and hence an icon is described as follows:

Surnamed Zhu [Vermillion] with the honorific title of Guang [Luminous]. In the form of a celestial human, their hair is let down over their naked body. Their mass of black hair covers their navel. Red sandals. Their left hand holds the head of a drought demon. Their right hand holds a blade. They ride a jade dragon. In their modified form, [they display] a blue face with long fangs, a crimson garment, and a blade, while driving a bear.

姓朱諱光，天人相，披髮裸體，黑雲掩臍，紅履鞋，左手提旱魃頭，右手杖劍，騎玉龍。變相青面獠牙，緋衣，杖劍，駕熊。<sup>79</sup>

Such imagery as this, especially the nudity, would be irregular in a native Chinese context. One might initially suspect an origin in Tantric Buddhism, but I have argued that “a strong case can be made that this is a form of the Iranian Āl or Semitic Lilith, a demon common throughout the Near East, associated with illness, and the deaths of mothers and infants” (Kotyk 2017a: 60–64). The name Āl is said to derive from Iranian *āl* “red.” This Āl corresponds to Turkic Al-bastı and Semitic Lilith (Šāmlū and Russell 2011). There was an earlier predecessor deity in Mesopotamia. Montgomery (1913: 74, 158) states,

77 See the comments in Kotyk (2019d: 7–11).

78 Although *navagraha* or “nine planets” ought to denote nine in number, the word *jiuyao* (九曜, Jpn. *kuyō*) came to just refer to “the planets” in general.

79 *DZ* 1220, 30: 335c. Kotyk (2017a: 62).

“The genus appears in the Babylonian incantations, as masculine and feminine, *lilu* and *lilit*, along with an *ardat lili*.” He also remarks, “Nakedness and disheveled hair are standing descriptions of the Lilith, witch, etc.” Yuebei in either the feminine half-nude form or the less common green, masculine one, appears in Tangut Khara Koto from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. These appear to reproduce earlier Chinese models, which, I believe, were adapted from foreign sources in turn.<sup>80</sup>

The planets as a group were treated as deities. The Chinese pantheon expanded to accommodate them. The seven-day week was the initial motivating element underlying their incorporation into Chinese religious culture. First it was Buddhism that facilitated this, but Daoism also embraced horoscopy and the model of the eleven planets. Rāhu and Ketu were barely known outside Buddhist literature until the translation of horoscopy into Chinese around the year 800. One of the key agents of this transmission, Li Miqian, is credited with also introducing Ziqi and Yuebei, who in turn were treated as deities as much as they were astrological features in a birth chart.

There is also one irregular model of the planets as a set of eight in Buddhism, but it did not become mainstream. The enumeration of the planets as eight, in which Rāhu is included, while Ketu is excluded, is attested from the late Gupta period (fifth to sixth century). Pingree (1989: 6) notes that reliefs depicting the eight planets were found above doorways, the earliest specimen coming from Mathurā. Some years later, Ketu was incorporated, and the *navagraha* became established as the standard set. There are references to “eight planets” in Chinese Buddhist sources, such as the *Sūryagarbha-parivarta*, but in this instance, there is a clear anomaly. We read the following:

Also, of the great asterisms there are eight. They are Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus, Mercury, the Sun, the Moon, and \*Ke[tu]-Rāhu. Also, of the minor asterisms, there are twenty-eight. They are those lunar stations from Kṛttikā to Bharanī.

又大星宿其數有八。所謂歲星，熒惑，鎮星，太白，辰星，日，月，荷羅睺星。又小星宿有二十八。所謂從昴至胃諸宿是也。<sup>81</sup>

The first irregularity is that the planets from Jupiter to Mercury follow the Chinese cycle of five elements (Jupiter is Wood, Mars is Fire, Saturn is Earth,

80 See the examples at the State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg. Item# XX-2424, XX-2450 & XX-2454.

81 *T* 397, 13: 282a24–26.



Venus is Metal, and Mercury is Water). Mak (2015a: 11) pertinently points out that this fact raises “some doubt as to the source of the material.” The other irregularity is the exact meaning of *heluohou* 荷羅睺. The latter two characters (EMC: *la γəw*) are clearly Rāhu, but the first character *he* 荷 (MC: *ya*) is unusual.<sup>82</sup> I suspect it denotes Ke[tu], although the second syllable has been dropped. We would expect Rāhu and Ketu to be counted as separate *grahas*, but in this instance, they apparently are counted as one. We would not expect this, but the text might reflect a phase in which Ketu was in the process of being incorporated among the others.

The more prominent example of eight planets, and one that I believe reflects an Iranian influence, is observed in the *Śūramgama-sūtra*.<sup>83</sup> The translation of this text is attributed to a certain \*Pramiti (Bolamidi 般刺蜜諦) in 705, but modern scholars generally hold that the text is apocryphal.<sup>84</sup> Benn (2008: 57) notes that “because of conflicting evidence regarding its provenance, and because the text seems to owe so much to other sources, modern scholars have concluded that the *Śūramgama-sūtra* is an apocryphal sutra that was fabricated in China at the beginning of the eighth century.”

Ānanda! This Sahā World [i.e., our world] has eighty-four thousand ominous malefic-stars. The twenty-eight great malefic-stars act as top chiefs. Furthermore, there are eight great malefic-stars that act as their chiefs. When they appear in the world in various forms, they create various disasters and anomalies for beings. The ground of this *mantra* completely eliminates them. The consecrated ground of twelve *yojanas* will make it so that the evil portents will never enter.

阿難！是娑婆界有八萬四千災變惡星，二十八大大惡星而為上首。復有八大惡星以為其主，作種種形出現世時，能生眾生種種災異。有此呪地悉皆銷滅。十二由旬成結界地，諸惡災祥永不能入。<sup>85</sup>

82 For the EMC readings, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 122, 203).

83 On 14 October 2023, at Harvard University, I discussed the planets in the *Śūramgama-sūtra* and my proposal of a Manichaeian influence, in a talk titled, “How Many Planets Were There? The Five, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Eleven Planets in China.” I benefited from the opportunity of this conference (“China Westward: Reimagining the Interwoven Material and Cultural Histories of China, Central Asia, and the Himalayas”). I would like to thank Mark Wu, Leonard W.J. van der Kuijp, and Eugene Y. Wang for their invitation to attend.

84 This dating is based on the colophon of the text: “year 1 of Shenlong of the Great Tang” 大唐神龍元年 (*T* 945, 19: 106b6).

85 *T* 945, 19: 137c14–19.

The total categorization of the planets and *nakṣatras* as malefic would be alien not only to Indian astrology, but also to Buddhist concepts of the stars, which are held as guardians in some contexts (Kotyk 2018c: 151). The theological position that all stars are evil initially reminded me of the Gnostic position. For, example, according to pseudo-Hippolytus, one Gnostic sect called the Peratae believed that “the stars are the gods of destruction, which impose upon existent things the necessity of alterable generation.”<sup>86</sup> A Gnostic influence on Chinese Buddhism would be difficult to demonstrate, even with the Christian presence in China from 635, but a Zoroastrian or Manichaean influence would be more realistic. The Zoroastrians, however, demonized only the planets, but not the fixed stars. Regarding the planets, Panaino (2015: 249) explains that “their demonization cannot be separated from the fact that the planetary orbit assumes in certain phases a retrograde movement, so appearing to be irregular.” In contrast to this, “the fixed stars became a manifestation of cosmic order (*aṣa-*), while that of the falling stars, unpredictable and disordered, was considered as a demoniac example of cosmic disorder (*druj-*) and, thus, connected with famine and climatic cataclysms.” The notion of fixed stars in the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra* would be incompatible with Zoroastrianism.

A Manichaean influence is more reasonable to assume in this context, since they demonized both the planets and the zodiac signs. One Coptic source, titled “Concerning the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac and the Five Stars,” is a discourse attributed to Mani. Gardner and Lieu (2004: 205–208) explain that “Mani is asked to explain the distribution of the twelve signs of the zodiac and the planetary stars. Since he subscribes to the astral fatalism found throughout gnostic and esoteric systems in late antiquity, he identifies them as evil rulers from the worlds of darkness.” The twenty-eight *nakṣatras* and eight planets are Indian ideas, but the categorical demonization of all of them would be very atypical of Indian material, yet I believe that this system could have been easily reworked by Manichaeans. The Manichaean community had already established itself prior to the appearance of the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra*, so their influence on this one minor element of the text would not have been impossible. The authors might have simply uncritically adapted what sounded like orthodox Indian ideas about the stars in their own Buddhist work.

My theory is only strengthened by the commentary on the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra* by Zixuan 子璿 (965–1038), who defines the “eight great malefic-stars” as follows:

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86 See the discussion by Narbonne (2011: 109).

The eight great malefic-stars are Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Saturn, Rāhu, Ketu, and Comet[s]. Although there are benefic asterisms, they become disastrous when anomalies occur.<sup>87</sup> The place that has this *mantra* will be unaffected by disasters.

八大惡星者謂：金木水火土羅計彗。雖有善宿，變即成災。有此呪處災不能作。<sup>88</sup>

What is immediately notable here is the absence of the Sun and the Moon. Why would they be excluded? The aforementioned Coptic Manichaean source states that “the sun and the moon are from out of the greatness, not belonging to the stars and the signs of the zodiac.”<sup>89</sup> The exclusion of the Sun and the Moon from an otherwise evil grouping of all stars points to Mani and nobody else. Zixuan presumably extracted his definition from an earlier source available to him. I cannot think of any reason why he would have excluded the Sun and the Moon, based on Buddhist or Chinese astral lores.

•••

The above discussion has attempted to highlight the Iranian elements in the introduction of foreign astrology in China during the Tang dynasty. There was a significant amount of Indian astrology brought to China; however, given the Sogdian loanwords, plus the astrological lore and iconography with many similarities to what we see in West Asia, we might characterize much of the foreign astrology from abroad as “Indo-Iranian” in character, since it truly was an amalgamation of disparate elements. Nonetheless, horoscopy based on a mostly Hellenistic system is also attested, which again was likely translated from Persian. I would argue that foreign astrology flourished initially due to Buddhism, but in later generations, there was clearly a large appetite for such knowledge among everyone, including Daoists. As discussed in Chapter 6, it appears the *jinn* lore and Syriac hymns were incorporated into some Chinese religious practices; thus, a package of astrological techniques and magic received the same sort of interest that was also expressed in foreign religious

87 The phrase 變即成災 (“they become disastrous when anomalies occur”) is unclear. This perhaps means that the benevolent planets and stars spell disaster when anomalies occur, such as planetary orbits falling out of order or meteorite showers.

88 *T* 1799, 39: 921b4–6. The title of the commentary in Chinese is *Shoulengyen yishu zhu jing* 首楞嚴義疏注經.

89 See the full translation in Gardner and Lieu (2004: 205–208).



FIGURE 11 Ziqi in *Kuyōtō zuzō*

TZ VOL. 7: 747. SAT TAISHŌZŌ IMAGE DB. CREATIVE COMMONS  
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and esoteric practices. In the end, astrology in China—heavily influenced and shaped by Iranian sources—evolved in its own unique ways, but the original foreign influences are undeniable and stand to tell us about the parent traditions from abroad.



FIGURE 12 Yuebei in *Kuyōtō zuzō*

TZ VOL. 7: 742. SAT TAISHŌZŌ IMAGE DB. CREATIVE COMMONS  
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## Material and Commercial Cultures

Material exchanges between Persia and China were highly significant, which helps to explain the cordial relations and diplomatic ties between these two countries, such as we have discussed above. Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 29) remarked that “the Sasanians played an important role in the trade of Asia. The ‘Silk Route’ from China to the Mediterranean Sea passed through Sasanian territory and the Sasanians thus controlled one of the most lucrative trade routes in Asia.” Exchanges between Persia and China appear to have flourished starting in the fifth century, based on the fact that formal diplomatic channels opened around this time, whereas in earlier times, political instability prevented this from occurring in any earnest way.

Even after the collapse of the Sasanian empire, technology transfers continued from West to East Asia. We have a record of such an event. In the year 714, the “Maritime Trade Commissioner (*shibo shi* 市舶使), the Commander of the Right Guard, Zhou Qingli, and the Persian monk Gabriel greatly produced strange instruments and odd contraptions.” 市舶使右衛威中郎將周慶立波斯僧及烈等，廣造奇器異巧。<sup>1</sup> Although we do not have any further information on what was crafted, it appears to have been mechanical devices of some sort. This “Persian monk” most certainly was a Christian clergyman. Persians as an identifiable ethnicity also continued to live in China. One such figure even famously went as far as Japan. Japanese histories record the arrival of a certain Li Miyi 李密翳 (Jpn. Ri Mitsuei) in 736, although nothing is known of him apart from that he accompanied the vice envoy Nakatomi no Nashiro 中臣名代 (d. 745) of the Japanese mission returning from China.<sup>2</sup>

There are quantities of Sasanian coins in China. Regarding this fact, Skaff (1988: 80–82) points out that “more than eighty percent of the Sasanian specie found in central China was minted during the reign of Pērōz (459–484).” We might wonder if this was related to the significant merchant activities between Persia and China, but as Skaff notes, Pērōz had to send tribute to the Hephthalites, who in turn may have used Sasanian coins to purchase goods from China. In any case, the Chinese began to import a number of things

1 This is recorded in the *Cefu yuangui*, 546.3a. See Rong (2015b: 250–251), who notes this event. The translation here is mine. 及烈 appears to reflect “Gabriel” (Takahashi 2018: 633).

2 He is mentioned by name as a Persian in the *Shoku Nihon gi* 續日本紀. See Yano (2012: 131). Wong (2018: 110) describes him as a Persian physician.

from Persia from early on. For example, Laing (1991: 111) mentions that “three Sasanian glass bowls have been retrieved from Chinese graves of the Western Jin period (AD 265–316).” This precedes regular diplomatic ties between China and Sasanian Iran, but luxury products such as glassware would have certainly found ready buyers in China. Items such as dishware and textiles from other parts of West Asia, such as Byzantium, are also found in China in the early centuries of the Common Era. For instance, a platter, perhaps from a Byzantine factory, but additionally inscribed in Bactria, was brought to the province of Gansu in the fourth or fifth century (Laing 1995: 10).

## 1 Trade Commodities

The *Wei shu* lists the trade commodities attested from sixth-century Persia. In *A History of Persia*, Sykes (1951: 447–448) already briefly highlights its significance to the historians of Iran. This list is important because it attests to the specific goods that the Chinese identified as having a Sasanian origin, which stands in contrast to later times, in which it becomes less clear whether products attributed to “Persia” truly originated from there. Some of these products were unlikely to have been Iranian in origin, but as Wang (1958: 127) points out, “the lists merely show that the Persians had already begun to be the middlemen of Central Asia (to as far as China) where the products of the countries of the Arabian Sea were concerned.” He also emphasizes that the extant histories indicate that these products were imported to China via an overland route, in contrast to a maritime route. Tibbetts (1957: 8), in contrast, argues that some of these products were from “Indo-China” (Southeast Asia) and transported to China via a sea route, but I believe that Wang is correct in asserting that none of these were exclusive to Southeast Asia, since all of them could be found in Iran and the neighboring countries. However, as we will explore below, the situation concerning products that are often attributed to “Persia” became ambiguous during the Tang period, especially after the seventh century, because the toponym *Bosi* came to refer to a people in Sumatra. I want to attempt to firmly distinguish between these two, but also acknowledge that the materials at hand present a great number of challenges. Our understanding of Persians and Southeast Asian history—both political and economic—is heavily dependent on how we read the Chinese sources.

The list of commodities in the *Wei shu* includes metals, precious stones, minerals, textiles, aromatics, spices, and consumables. As we will explore in this chapter, the exact identification of some of these items is challenging, since the relevant entries in modern dictionaries are far from conclusive, exhaustive,

or even reliable. Moreover, a term can refer to different things across time. Building on the methodology of Laufer, I also utilize a diverse range of sources, including Chinese *materia medica*, as well as the Buddhist and Daoist canons, but also less appreciated Japanese sources. Japanese sources constitute another range of voices from the medieval period that ought to be considered, since they often provide the indigenous Japanese words alongside the Chinese terms. As I will explain, there are also extant physical samples from centuries past preserved in Japan, that can be presented as valuable evidence.

TABLE 5 List of Persian commodities in the *Wei shu*<sup>a</sup>

Item (Chinese)	Proposed identification
金	gold
銀	silver
鍮石	brass
珊瑚	coral/stalagmites and stalactites
琥珀	amber
車渠	emerald
馬腦	agate
多大真珠	numerous large pearls
頗黎	colored crystals
瑠璃	blue glassware/lapis lazuli
水精	colorless quartz
瑟瑟	sapphire
金剛	diamond
火齊	mica/cornelian (?)
鑛鐵	crucible steel
銅	copper
錫	tin
朱砂	cinnabar
水銀	mercury
綾錦	damasks
疊氍	brocades (Pahlavi * <i>dēbāg</i> )
氍毹	cloth mats
氍毹	carpets
赤麋皮	red deer-skins
薰陸	frankincense

a *Wei shu*, 102.2270–2271.



TABLE 5 List of Persian commodities in the *Wei shu* (cont.)

Item (Chinese)	Proposed identification
鬱金	saffron
蘇合	stacte (oil of myrrh)
青木	costus (Skt. * <i>kuṣṭha</i> )
胡椒	black pepper
葷撥	long pepper
石蜜	toffee
千年棗	dates
香附子	sedge
訶犁勒	myrobalans (Pahlavi <i>halīlag</i> )
無食子	gallnuts
鹽綠	verdigris/copper ore (?)
雌黃	orpiment

## 2 Metals, Minerals, and Gems

Harrison (1968: 489) observes that “tales from *The Arabian Nights*, told by such accomplished, and it seemed, reliable narrators as Sinbad the Sailor, implanted the idea in many a boyish mind that Iran was a realm with fabulously rich mines.” This same notion is seen in Chinese sources with regard to Persia: that they produced abundant precious metals and gems. Gold (*jin* 金) and silver (*yin* 銀) are at the top of the list of commodities from Persia. Gold sources are found in Persia. The history behind this stretches back at least to the late fourth millennium BCE. Gold coins were minted by the Sasanians; their gold dinar (*dēnār*) weighed 7 to 7.4 grams, although the primary currency was the silver *drahm*.<sup>3</sup> Bacharach and Gordus (1972) have analyzed over 325 Sasanian silver coins from different eras and noted that “few coins have a degree of fineness below 85% silver and, in fact, most contain more than 90%.” The purity and general reliability of this coinage would have been evident to the Chinese and neighboring peoples. Skaff (1988: 67–68) observes that “Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins constitute the majority of specie relevant to international trade that has been discovered at Turfan.” Skaff also notes that “the

3 For an overview of gold in Iran, see Ross and Allan (2012). For coins in Persia, see Album et al. (1992). For silver and its production in Persia, see Spink (2015).

most common Sasanian coin—the type most usually found in China—was the silver *drachm*.” He supposes that Iranian coins were carried eastward because of the fineness of their silver content. The Chinese sources do not mention whether the gold and silver from Persia were imported as ingots or crafted items, but Sasanian coins in China are well documented, so this was perhaps the primary form in which precious metals arrived from Iran. This connection likely commences from the fourth century. Several decades ago, Hsia (1974) categorized over one thousand coins from Sasanian Iran found in China. The dates of the coins start from the reign of Šāpur II (310–379).

We might speculate that Iran was a major supplier of silver to China, based on the fact that the widespread use of silver comes relatively late in Chinese history. Golas (1999: 132–134) pertinently remarks, “To judge by the distribution of artefacts recovered by archaeologists, silver does not appear to have become available in any significant amounts until the Han period.” He also observes, “Throughout Chinese history, silver seems to have been relatively scarce compared to gold.” Moreover, as he notes, only in the eighth to ninth century did silver likely enjoy wider use than gold in China. In earlier centuries, Sasanian silver coins would have conceivably been especially appreciated, given the relative scarcity of the metal in China.

The item *toushi* 鍮石 (“*tou* stone”) in the *Wei shu* refers to brass (an alloy of copper and zinc), as Laufer (1919: 512) explains, and most modern dictionaries also give this identification, but the history of this word requires an extensive discussion. The Classical Chinese word for brass is a binomial, comprised of two characters. This differs from the native and base metals, which are expressed as single characters: for instance, gold (*jin* 金), silver (*yin* 銀), copper (*tong* 銅), tin (*xi* 錫), and lead (*qian* 鉛) are all written as single characters. The word for brass itself does not appear to be very old, perhaps dating only to the fourth century CE or perhaps somewhat earlier. One early appearance is in the *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (*Account of Forgotten Tales*) by the fourth-century figure Wang Jia 王嘉 (d. 390), in which he describes the embankment of a bathing pool being constructed of this material and *wufu* 砮珞, the latter apparently being a kind of stone resembling jade. The image in any case is presumably one of a bathing pool made of fine jade and brass, which would have been an extravagant luxury at the time.<sup>4</sup> An even earlier dating of brass in China was proposed by Needham (1974: 199), who states, “To put the matter in a nutshell, brass was known, we believe, in China from the –3rd century onwards and more and more frequently used after the +2nd.”

4 *Shiyi ji*, 9.10b. Naruse (2007: 62) points out this early appearance of *toushi*, which he identifies as brass. See also the translation and discussion in Needham (1974: 202).

Lin (1999: 65) importantly notes the existence of a Chinese document from Turfan from 481 CE that lists brass among other items such as carpets and Persian textiles. There are also some extant brass objects in China that are of foreign origin. Among the numerous tombs excavated at Yingpan 營盤 in Xinjiang in 1995, some bracelets and rings were discovered, whose zinc content measured more than 20%. The site has been dated to the mid- to late Han dynasty (Wang and Rao 2009: 104).

Brass production in India is traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Biswas (1993: 310–11) has argued that “the earliest artifact noted so far containing an appreciable amount of zinc anywhere in the world is from India. Lothal (2200–1500 BC) showed one highly oxidized antiquity (No. 4189), which assayed: 70.7% copper, 6.04% zinc, 0.9% Fe and 6.04% acid soluble component (probably carbonate, a product of atmospheric corrosion).” Biswas shows that later brass objects from Taxila (4th to 2nd century BCE) contain higher zinc percentages, which points to the evolution of Indian metallurgy. Biswas argues that Indian metallurgists were also able to isolate the metal zinc before oxidization occurred.<sup>5</sup> There are also some examples of brass items from ancient China. Wang and Rao (2009: 103–104) in their study on Chinese brass note that in 1957, two metallic cones connected with the Longshan Culture (Longshan Wenhua 龍山文化, 3000–1900 BCE) were discovered. They contain 23.2% zinc. Later, in the 1970s, some metal tubes and copper sheets were discovered at Jiangzhai in Lintong, Shaanxi (陝西臨潼姜寨). Researchers analyzed the tubes, which contain 32% zinc. The origin of this brass—whether it was imported or domestically produced—remains uncertain, but it would appear that even if it had been domestically produced, the technology was not maintained into later centuries. As we will see, in China, brass was known as a foreign alloy in the first millennium CE.

The first character in the binomial for brass, *tou* 銅 is indicated to be a metal with the metal radical 金. The phonetic element is 俞. The early Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (*Explaining Writing and Explicating Characters*), which was compiled by Xu Shen 許慎 (d. c.147) either in the first or second century CE, does not include this character, but it does list a

5 In a later study, Biswas (2006: 162) explains, “The earliest use of zinc ore in the ancient world, both in India as well as outside, was to make cementation brass by reducing the ore in situ in presence of copper powder which absorbed a part of the generated zinc vapour (b.p.913°C) to produce brass (zinc content not exceeding 28 p.c.). The ores used were the sulphide, sphalerite and the carbonate, calamine. Zinc vapour was quickly oxidized to zinc oxide, known as *pompholyx* and *spodos* in Europe and *tūtīyā* in Persia, and this was also used a source material for producing cementation brass. Only Indians succeeded in recovering zinc as a metal by condensing the vapour in reducing atmosphere before it could be oxidized.”

character *dou* 鍤 (or *dou* 鍹). This character, however, is defined as “a wine vessel” 酒器也.<sup>6</sup> The second character in the binomial, *shi* 石, simply means stone, but in this instance, we can surmise that it ought to denote the mineral traditionally called calamine (zinc ore) in English. An alternative, but less attested form of the binomial is *tou + shi* 鍤石, in which the metal radical is appended to the second character, presumably to denote that the mineral component is somehow metallic in nature. As to the origin of the word, the first character is perhaps adapted from a foreign word, which was already noticed in the past (Lin 1999: 66–67). The Early Middle Chinese pronunciation was something like *tʰəw*.<sup>7</sup> This brings to mind the English word “tutty” (zinc oxide), which, in turn, is traced back to Persian *tūtīyā’*. Steingass (2000: 333) connected this Persian word with Sanskrit *tuttha*, which can be read as copper sulfate. Falk (1991: 112–113), however, points out that

in India the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, a medical text from the first half of the first millennium AD, lists *tuttha* together with metals at least twice. So, since *tuttha* denotes the same objects (except for the urchins) in early historical India as *tūtīyā’* does in Persian, and since the Ain-i-Akbārī names a well-known mine of zinc oxide, where *tūtīyā’* was found, we should expect *tuttha* to be zinc oxide.

Falk argues that the Kauṭīliya *Arthaśāstra* is the oldest dated (or approximately dated) work that gives *tuttha* as the Indian equivalent term of the Iranian *tūtīyā’*, which means that in India, zinc oxide was well known already in the Maurya era (c.323–185 BCE). The zinc mines of Rajasthan, as he notes, were already in operation by that time. The Chinese word conceivably could have been derived from *tuttha* or a closely related cognate term in another language. If this is so, then the name of a mineral was applied to the alloy. We might suspect that the original word for brass in Chinese was *toushi tong* 鍤石銅 (“*tuttha* stone + copper”), but the tendency to use binomials in Middle Chinese led to the third character being dropped.

Brass more commonly appears in extant Chinese Buddhist literature from the early fifth century. This is when we see what appears to be a three-character word denoting brass. The word appears once in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama*, which was translated from an Indic language, although this was not Pali. There is a parallel in Pali, however, in the *Samyuttanikāya* (3.11, Dutiyavagga, *Sattajaṭilasutta*). The line in Chinese reads 猶如鍤石銅塗以真金色, which we

6 *Shuowen jiezi* (SKQS), 14.2a. See also the lexical data on [zdic.net](http://zdic.net).

7 See the EMC reading in Pulleyblank (1991b: 311).

can literally translate, “Like brass, gilded with a color of true gold.”<sup>8</sup> The parallel line in Pali reads, “[...] like a portion of copper coated in gold” (*lohaḍḍhamāsova suvaṇṇachanno*).<sup>9</sup> The word *loha*, the “red metal,” according to Rhys Davids and Stede (2015: 589), might refer to “copper, brass or bronze. It is often used as a general term & the individual application is not always sharply defined.” A more definite term for brass in Pali is *kaṃsa*, as in *kaṃsa-kūṭa-*, meaning one who cheats by substituting brass for gold, according to Edgerton (1953: 175). Rhys Davids and Stede (2015: 173) read this term as bronze and comment that “it is doubtful whether brass was known in the Ganges valley when the earlier books were composed.” The Pali-Japanese dictionary of Murakami and Oikawa (2009: 1654) reads *loha* as copper.

Whether Buddhist translators in China clearly understood the differences between brass, bronze, and copper is a challenging (and perhaps unrewarding) question, but the Chinese line at least can be read with the sense of “metal which can be gilded (or painted) with gold, such as brass,” and consequently this might be mistaken as gold, just as a person’s outward behavior might display brilliant virtue, whereas internally they are base and evil. The Chinese translation team in the fifth century apparently understood brass to be a metal that could be deceptively gilded, or otherwise painted, with the true color of gold. The natural golden color of brass would lend itself to being passed off as solid gold to those unfamiliar with the metal. In addition, according to the Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit dictionary of Hirakawa (1997: 1192), Chinese Buddhist literature uses this term to translate *rīti/rītī* (yellow or pale brass) and *kācaka* (glass, stone, alkaline ashes) from Sanskrit.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese Buddhist

8 *T* 99, 2: 306a16.

9 See the database of Pali texts with parallel Chinese at <https://suttacentral.net/>. The English translation by Bhikkhu Sujato reads, “[...] like a copper halfpenny coated with gold.” However, whether a coin is truly denoted here might be challenged, since this reading assumes that *aḍḍha* in “*loha-(a)ḍḍha-māso (i)va*” refers to a small coin. I must thank Jayarava Attwood for comments on this matter (23 December 2022). The Chinese line does not refer to coinage, which is instructive. We need to still recognize, however, that copper coins are certainly attested in India from at least the second century BCE, and silver “cup-shaped” punch-marked coins date to c.400 BCE. On Indian coinage, see Cribb (2003).

10 Biswas (1993: 316) explains the Sanskrit terminology as follows: “The technical term *ārakūṭa* for brass persisted through centuries and we find this mentioned in the 4th century AD Jaina text *Āṅgavijja* (as *hāarakūḍa*) and also in the *Amarakośa* (450 AD). A more popular name for brass in ancient India has been *rīti* or *rītikā*, which also meant calx of brass. The word was probably derived from *harita* or yellow, which had been a synonym for gold in the Vedic literature. The word was chosen on account of the yellow colour of gold-like brass.”

translation of the *Mahāvīyūtpatti* uses the term to translate *kācakaḥ*.<sup>11</sup> A similar form, *toushi* 鑰鈇, translates *kāṃsika* (*kāṃsikā*).<sup>12</sup> Hirakawa appears to have derived this last correspondence from the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經; Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*) as it was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 406.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese line 或以七寶成鑰石赤白銅 translates “ye sapta-ratnā-maya tatra ke-cid ye tāmrikā vā tatha kāṃsikā vā [2.84].” The word *chibai tong* 赤白銅 (“pinkish copper” or “red and white coppers”) corresponds to *tāmrikā* (“made of copper”). The word *toushi* should correspond to *kāṃsikā*. Edgerton’s (1953: 175) dictionary of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit offers a clear definition: “*kāṃsika*, adj. (from *kāṃsa* or *kaṃsa*, qq.v., plus *ika*), made of brass.” We can compare Sanskrit *kāṃsya*.<sup>14</sup> Ueki (2020: 314–315) also defines *tāmrikā* and *kāṃsikā* like this.

There was a distinct awareness of brass in the Tang period. Huilin’s 慧琳 (737–820) dictionary of Buddhist terms from 807 specifically distinguishes red copper (*tong* 銅) and pewter (*la* 鑞), the latter being an alloy of tin and lead, as separate metals from brass.<sup>15</sup> Later, Dai Dong 戴侗 (1200–1285), a scholar of the Song period, specifically explains that “brass is produced from smelting copper with hydrozincite [or calamine].” 以盧甘石鍊銅成鑰。<sup>16</sup> This specific awareness of zinc ore, however, is not evident in Huilin’s dictionary. In fact, the proposed words that ought to correspond to “zinc” in Chinese during the first millennium are contested.<sup>17</sup> The dictionary, citing the earlier (now lost) dictionary *Pi Cang* 埤蒼, credited to Zhang Yi 張揖 during the Wei period, reads, “In the Western Countries they smelt various mineral ingredients with copper

11 See the Thesaurus Literaturae Buddhicae database at Bibliotheca Polyglotta.

12 For the Sanskrit definitions, see Monier-Williams (1899: 268, 881, 1324). Liyan’s Chinese-Sanskrit lexicon from the Tang period gives *riti*. *T* 2135, 54: 1231b5. Compare Tibetan *rag*. Lin (1999: 66–67) shows the parallels in various Iranian and Indian languages.

13 Needham (1974: 202) has also made some observations about brass in this text.

14 For the Sanskrit text, see Wogihara and Tsuchida (1958: 48). See also the digitized Sanskrit text on Bibliotheca Polyglotta, which digitizes Vaidya (1960: 35,1). *T* 262, 9: 8c28. When consulting Sanskrit dictionaries, I have made use of the Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries.

15 *T* 2128, 54: 932a15. See Huilin’s *Yiqie jingyin yi* 一切經音義 (*Pronunciations and Definitions of All the Sūtras*) from 807. This was based on an earlier dictionary of Buddhist terms by Xuanying 玄應 (fl. seventh century).

16 *Liu Shu gu* 六書故 (*SKQS*), 4.6a. Mastutomi and Yamasaki (1953: 34) argue that *lugan-shi* 爐甘石 should be read as hydrozincite. They state, “The opinion adopted by several authors in China and Japan that smithsonite or smithsonite containing dolomite is the modern term for Lu-kan-shih was found to be erroneous.” Chinese dictionaries often translate the term as calamine.

17 See Zhou (2016: 1–7) for a summary of the debates regarding the proposed identifications of zinc in China.

together to make this.” 西國以銅鐵雜藥合為之.<sup>18</sup> Although *yao* 藥 would normally be translated as “medicine,” in this case it would refer to a mineral ingredient, but Huilin and his source do not appear to have understood what this mineral was. Based on this, we can speculate that brass was not originally produced domestically, but the Chinese understood it to be an alloy produced in foreign lands.

On this point, we can cite some data from Japan. The Nara National Museum together with the Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property analyzed the metallic composition of a number of ritual implements connected with Mikkyō (“Esoteric Buddhism”). The data tables from this research, presented in Naitō (2015: 13), reveal that the analyzed items from the Tang period contain no zinc (this extends to Japanese items manufactured in the same period). The items from the Song-Yuan (twelfth to fourteenth centuries), in contrast, all contain zinc. This fact could suggest that this brass was domestically produced in China only well after the Tang period, yet there are still brass objects from first-millennium East Asia. One of the oldest extant brass items in Japan is cataloged as a “censer in the shape of a magpie tail” (*Jyakubi gatae gorō* 鵲尾形柄香炉). This item is kept at the Tōkyō National Museum. It is part of the collection from the temple Hōryūji 法隆寺, which is traditionally said to have been founded by Shōtoku Taishi 聖德太子 in 607. The catalogue identifies the object as either being from Korea during the Three Kingdoms Period (350–668) or Japan during the Asuka Period (592–710). The name of a monk from Goguryeo (a kingdom in Korea), Eji 慧慈 (a tutor of Prince Shōtoku, whose dates are typically given as 574–622), is seen on the bottom of the handle. The item was presumably fashioned in Korea or Japan, but the source of the brass itself is uncertain.<sup>19</sup> Brass objects also appear in Japanese records from the eighth century, although whether brass was produced locally there is uncertain (Naruse 2007: 72–73). We can also look at items stored at Shōsō-in 正倉院 (“repository”) in Nara, Japan, which was founded sometime around 756 to 759. Many of the items stored there have been preserved until the present day. Naruse (2007: 76) has analyzed some of the brass items in the repository, including censers and caskets that most likely originated in Tang China. The Cu–Zn (Copper to Zinc) composition ranged from 65:35 to 90:10, with some instances of other metallic elements, such as Pb (lead).

18 *T* 2128, 54: 877b16–17. Read *tie* 鐵 (“iron”) as *lian* 鍊 (“to smelt”).

19 Tokyo National Museum (N-280). Integrated Collections Database of the National Museums, Japan. [https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection\\_items/tnm/N-280](https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/N-280). Accessed 05 September 2023.

Local production of brass would require knowledge of zinc, but again, this is a debated matter. Needham (1974: 214) states that “we can be sure of the existence and use of isolated zinc metal from +900 onwards.” Liu (1991) argues that Chinese knowledge of zinc is traceable to the third to seventh century CE, based on a citation of the lost *Baozang lun* 寶藏論 (*Treatise of the Gem Repository*), which itself dates to somewhere between the third to early seventh century.<sup>20</sup> Zinc was called *wo qian* 倭鉛, which, I think, ought to be translated as “dwarf lead” rather than “Japanese lead” (Needham calls it “weak lead”).<sup>21</sup> Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611–1671) was aware that this material could be alloyed with copper. He writes, “Copper has a bright reddish color; add dwarf lead and calamine ore, and it is completely yellow.” 銅有白赤，加倭鉛與盧甘石者皆黃。<sup>22</sup> This is clearly in reference to the production of brass. If Liu’s argument is correct, and zinc was already known in China in late antiquity, at least to some metalworkers, then such knowledge also appears around the same time that brass was introduced from abroad. Naruse (2007: 62–63), on the other hand, argues that zinc extraction was not understood in China until the sixteenth or seventeenth century. This argument can be corroborated with period sources. In the *Tiangong kaiwu* 天工開物 (*Exploitation of Heaven’s Works*), Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587–1666) explains that the name “dwarf lead” is not very ancient, and it was a recent ore in his time. He explains that it is called “dwarf lead” because it is firm, whereas lead by contrast is soft.<sup>23</sup>

Another entry on brass in the dictionary of Huilin reads, “A type of metal, essentially from copper, and next to gold [in value]. The best is similar to gold. It is sourced from foreign countries.” 金之類也，精於銅，次於金。上好者與金相類，出外國也。<sup>24</sup> Another entry, again citing Zhang Yi’s dictionary, has an extended explanation, but some of the wording is ambiguous:

Brass resembles gold, but despite the similarity, it is not gold. In the countries of the western tribes, it is made from smelting minerals with copper. There are two types of brass, which are unequal in their qualities. That of

20 This treatise likely dates to the Sui period, but only fragments of it remain in the form of citations. Qing Xiazi 青霞子, the author, also known as Su Yuanming 蘇元明, was a hermit on Mt. Luofu 羅浮山 during the Tang, Jin, or Sui period. See Hu (1995: 106). Zheng et al. (2018: 561). Needham (1974: 213) is also aware of this treatise, but dates it to 918 CE.

21 See the discussion of the nomenclature related to zinc in China in Chen (2018: 332, 405), in which it is pointed out that another word for zinc was *bai qian* 白鉛 (“white lead”). See also Needham (1974: 213–214) for relevant comments.

22 *Li xiaoshi* 理小識 (*Minor Knowledge of Principles*) (SKQS), 7.6a.

23 See *Tiangong kaiwu*, 3.13; and the accompanying illustration. See also the concise but useful article on Baidu: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/倭鉛> (accessed 15 July 2023).

24 *T* 2128, 54: 399b21.



poor quality is checked [to determine] whether it is white, and it is called ashen brass. That of good quality is checked [to determine] whether it is yellow, and it is called golden brass. It is also called golden brass [*sic*]. It is also called true brass. In vernacular language it is called *bubo* [*brinj?*] gold.

鑰石似金，似而非金，西戎蕃國藥鍊銅所成。有二種鑰石，善惡不等。惡者按白，名為灰折。善者按黃，名為金折，亦名為金折，亦名真鑰。俗云不博金是也。<sup>25</sup>

Ordinary brass is an alloy of copper and zinc, but it is possible to alter its composition for specific purposes. For example, brass could be made harder by adding tin, or alternatively, some amount of lead makes the brass more malleable and easier to handle for casting. This affects the color of the brass, as Benjamin (1888: 61) long ago observed in an outline of traditional brass production from his era: “Brass becomes a little whiter for the tin, and redder for the lead.” Lin (1999: 71) interprets the above difference in brass as reflecting the different types used by alchemists in China. I am inclined to think, however, that the difference in color reflects the additives to the alloy. In any case, we can see from the above passage that there was an awareness of different grades of brass.

The word *bubo* 不博 in the above citation is semantically meaningless (“not abundant”), but the dictionary marks this as a vernacular expression. We ought to treat this as a transcription of a foreign word, especially since brass was well known to be foreign in origin. The reconstructed Early Middle Chinese pronunciation, based on Pulleyblank’s system, is *pət pak*.<sup>26</sup> This could be a garbled transcription of Middle Persian *brinj* or something related.<sup>27</sup> We know that the Sasanians skillfully crafted items made from brass, such as a mace in the form

25 *T* 2128, 54: 710a24–b1. The meaning of *zhe* 折 in this context is uncertain, but I read it as a scribal error for *tou* 鑰. I would interpret the initial character as “to judge,” in which case it is abnormally functioning as a suffix. This could be read as a direct semantic translation of something: more literally, the poor quality brass is called “judged as ash” (as it would be white in color), and the good quality is called “judged as gold” (as it would be yellow in color), but this makes no sense based on the Chinese alone. The text appears to be corrupted. Hin Tak (10 August 2023) notes that 金折 might transcribe *kāmsikā*. The Cantonese reading of the two characters is *gam<sup>1</sup> zit<sup>3</sup>*. Whether 灰折 would also transcribe something is uncertain. Reading *zhe* 折 as *jin* 鉞 does not appear to be a solution.

26 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 41–43).

27 For the Middle Persian, see MacKenzie (1986: 20).

of three conjoined bull heads, which is dated broadly to the third to seventh centuries, and currently in the possession of the British Museum.<sup>28</sup>

We should note that *toushi* is not always interpreted as brass by modern scholars. Song (2001: 13) interprets the term as a transcription of *tutiyā* from Persian, and understands this to be either zinc sulfate ( $ZnSO_4$ ) or zinc carbonate ( $ZnCO_3$ ).<sup>29</sup> I disagree with this reading since, as discussed above, the word clearly refers to a metal resembling gold. However, a similar way of reading the word is attested in past centuries, owing in part to the second character in the binomial, *shi* 石 (also written as *shi* 鈳, with the radical for metal on the left). This ought to denote a mineral or stone-like appearance, rather than a metallic form. It was already suggested at least as early as the Ming dynasty that calamine brass was not “authentic,” a statement that seems to indicate that a natural or non-synthetic metal or mineral ought to have existed. The seventeenth-century author Fang Yizhi, citing a number of earlier sources, writes that “*tou* is the essence of natural copper, but that which is smelted with calamine is false *tou*.” 鑰乃自然銅之精者也，而盧甘石所煮鍊者乃假鑰也。<sup>30</sup> Fang Yizhi appears to have read the work of Cheng Dachang 程大昌 (1123–1195). Cheng wrote a piece of prose discussing what precisely the “yellow silver” consisted of when Emperor Taizong of the Tang offered a belt of yellow silver (*huangyin dai* 黃銀帶) to the statesman Fang Xuanling during the early to mid-seventh century. It is worth translating a long excerpt, since Cheng also expressed some noteworthy doubts:

Regarding Tang Taizong bestowing unto Fang Xuanling a belt of yellow silver, he was about to give it to Du Ruhui [585–630], but Ruhui was not present. The emperor said, “It is commonly said of yellow silver that spirits are afraid of it. Change it for a belt of gold and dispatch Xuanling to his house.” Now, he did not send the yellow silver, but instead he sent a belt of gold; so, the belt that was instead bestowed was certainly without a doubt made of gold! However, the belt that was earlier to be bestowed

28 See British Museum (129396). The catalog of the museum explains that “X-ray fluorescence by Dr M. Hughes in the British Museum Research Laboratory indicates that the head of the present mace was cast from brass: 74.1% copper, 19.9% zinc, 3.8% lead, 1.6% iron, 0.6% tin.” [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1938-1110-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1938-1110-1) (accessed 14 July 2023).

29 Various online sources uncritically translate the term as chalcopyrite. This would reflect descriptions of *toushi* as being similar to gold in appearance, since chalcopyrite is often a golden yellow. Chalcopyrite in Sanskrit is *tāpya* (Joshi 1997: 269), but the etymology of the Chinese word cannot be easily linked to this Sanskrit term.

30 *Tongya* 通雅 (SKQS), 48.3b. See some relevant comments in Needham (1974: 200).

was called yellow silver. What exactly was it? There exists in the realm brass (*toushi*), which in essence is actually copper, but the color is like gold, and it is especially matte. What Taizong called yellow silver was probably brass, in which case *tou* is a metal, but *shi* [stone] is appended as a character, so is that not always naturally produced? There is also that produced from the smelting of calamine, so two things together have this name applied to them. The *Shuowen* [dictionary from the Han period] has no *tou* character. How could it be that the [dictionaries] *Yu pian*, *Tang yun*, and *Ji yun* all have this [character]? In the Han they did not yet know of smelting copper with stone, thus they did not append *shi* to the name.

唐太宗賜房玄齡黃銀帶，欲及杜如晦而如晦已不在。帝曰：「世傳黃銀，鬼神畏之，更取金帶，遣玄齡送其家。」夫不賜黃銀而別賜金帶，則改賜之帶必為黃金無疑矣。然則先賜之帶命為黃銀者，果何物也？世有鑰石者，質實為銅而色如黃金，特差淡耳。則太宗之謂黃銀者，其殆鑰石也，已鑰金屬也。而附石為字者，為其不皆天然自生？亦有用盧甘石煑鍊而成者，故兼舉兩物而合為之名也。《說文》無鑰字。《玉篇》《唐韻》《集韻》遂皆有之豈前乎？漢者未知以石煑銅，故其名不附石也。<sup>31</sup>

This explanation touches on the problem that one of the earliest Chinese dictionaries did not have the word for brass, yet later sources do in fact list it. Cheng, however, seems to have believed that brass could be found in a natural rather than manufactured state, but brass is a synthetic alloy. Cheng might not have accurately understood this. One of the rhyme dictionaries he cites, the *Ji yun* 集韻 (*Collected Rhymes*) of 1037, compiled by Ding Du 丁度 (990–1053), even expressly states that “for brass, smelt copper with mineral compounds.” 鑰鈛以石藥治銅.<sup>32</sup> One of the sources consulted by Cheng was the *Yuanhe junxian zhi* 元和郡縣志 (*Account of Counties and Prefectures of the Yuanhe Period*) of 813 by Li Jifu 李吉甫 (758–814), in which we see reference to a “Pit of Yellow Silver” (*huangyin keng* 黃銀坑) some 140 *li* east of the prefecture of Changyang 昌陽縣, in modern Shandong. The following account therein appears to have given him the impression that what he assumed was brass or “yellow silver” existed in a natural form that could be melted and cast without any adulterations:

31 *Yan fanlu* 演繁露 (SKQS), 7.1a–b. Read *qian* 前 as *ran* 然. Cf. the translation and comments in Needham (1974: 203–207).

32 *Ji yun* (SKQS), 10.24b.

In year 18 of Kaihuang [598] of the Sui, the Prefect of Muzhou, Xin Gongyi, smelted and casted here to acquire yellow silver, which was offered to the throne.

隋開皇十八年，牟州刺史辛公義，於此坑冶鑄得黃銀獻之。<sup>33</sup>

If we were to presume that “yellow silver” in fact refers to brass, then this would be an early reference to brass production in China. However, “yellow silver” might have simply been electrum (an alloy of silver and gold), so Cheng’s speculation cannot be taken as factual.<sup>34</sup>

Cinnabar (*zhusha* 朱砂) and mercury (*shuiyin* 水銀) were known to have been produced in Persia. Cinnabar (the English word incidentally derives from Old Persian *si[n]kabru-*) had been used in Persia for coloring long before the Sasanian period, as was also done in China, but in China it was also famously used in alchemy.<sup>35</sup> Mercury gilding was used for Sasanian silverware, although in earlier periods, the technique differed.<sup>36</sup> Jett (1992: 59–60) observes, “A Parthian silver bowl in the collection of the British Museum, London, was found to have been gilded with leaf and without the use of mercury. The use of amalgam gilding on Sasanian silver is confirmed by numerous examples.” He also remarks, “By early in the Sasanian period the use of amalgam gilding had clearly become the dominant gilding technique.” Lins and Oddy (1975) have analyzed a number of items in the British Museum using spectrographs and concluded that mercury gilding was known in China in the third century BCE, but the technique was only introduced in Sasanian Iran in the early third century CE, when it suddenly became widespread. It is likely that the technique for mercury gilding was transmitted westward from China (gilding was called *jindu* 金鍍 in Chinese). It need not have been a gradual process, either,

33 *Yuanhe junxian zhi* (SKQS), 13.11b.

34 Conversely, Needham (1974: 207) insists that “the burden of evidence is then that *huang yin*, ‘yellow silver,’ was very often if not always brass, probably containing some Ni or As, though the term may well have been used on occasion for copper or its alloys surface-altered by mercury or arsenic, as also (mostly in late times) for ‘debased’ gold and silver alloys like electrum.” I believe that “yellow silver” is electrum, not brass, given that the word for brass in Chinese was already well established by this period.

35 Mackenzie (2021) explains, “OPers. *si(n)kabru-* (NPers. *šangarf*, Arabic *zenjafr*), a red mineral, appeared in Greek much modified as *kinnábari*, whence Lat. *cinnabaris* ‘cinnabar.’” The wall paintings in the Shahur palace of Artaxerxes II had cinnabar for coloring (Boucharlat 2009).

36 There were different techniques of gilding in antiquity, such as foil gilding, gold leaf, diffusion bonding, and fire gilding. China appears to have been the first culture to develop the last of these, which uses mercury, in the third century BCE. See Oddy (1991).

since a single skilled artist or metalworker would have been enough to teach the technique to local artists.

There are other precious objects listed, but providing an exact identification of each is a challenging task, largely because our sources from antiquity are either vague in their descriptions, or because the referent of a word changed over time. To complicate matters further, as we will see, although Buddhist texts might provide the Sanskrit name of a stone, there is not necessarily a consensus among Indologists as to what that stone was.

One item on the list in the *Wei shu* includes what ought to be coral (*shanhu* 珊瑚; cf. Sino-Japanese *sango*). The etymology of the Chinese word, which dates to the Han period, is not entirely certain, but based on a proposal by Chmielewski, which was supported by Pulleyblank (1983: 77), we might link the word to a form of Iranian *sang* (“stone, rock”). This differed from Pahlavi *wassad* or Sanskrit *pravāḍa*.<sup>37</sup> Coral was especially valued by Buddhists, as scriptures refer to it as a kind of canonical treasure, but it also had a place in Chinese medicine. In the *Haiyao bencao* 海藥本草 (*Materia Medica of Medicines from Overseas*), Li Xun 李珣 (c.855–c.930) writes that coral “treats illnesses such as stagnant blood and epilepsy.” 主消宿血風癩等疾.<sup>38</sup>

I believe that coral might have been conflated in some instances with stalagmites or stalactites in earlier times, which helps to explain the proposed Iranian etymology of the Chinese word. The word, alternatively, might have originally referred to stalagmites or stalactites before it was applied to specimens of coral. My reason for suspecting this is that some sources identify mountains as being a source of “coral.” The *Shuowen jiezi* of the Han dynasty reads, “It is red in color, and produced in the sea, or produced in the mountains.” 色赤，生於海或生於山.<sup>39</sup> Coral is certainly not found in mountains, but stalagmites or stalactites would be something visually comparable. Huilin’s dictionary from the Tang offers further details:

The *Han shu* states that the country of Jibin produces the treasure of *sang*. Its color is red and lustrous. It appears in the great sea or is produced in major mountains. It resembles a tree in having branches, but without leaves. It can be as tall as a foot or more in terms of size.

37 For a discussion of coral in early Islamic sources, with reference to the earlier Persian precedents, see Alam (2011).

38 *Haiyao bencao*, 13.

39 *Shuowen jiezi* (SKQS), 1.5a.

漢書云：罽賓國出珊瑚寶，其色紅赤而瑩徹。生於大海或出名山。似樹有枝而無其葉。大者可高尺餘。<sup>40</sup>

During the Tang, Jibin 罽賓 would have referred to Kapiśā, but in earlier times it referred to the wider regions of Kashmir and Gāndhāra.<sup>41</sup> In either case, coral was certainly not imported from that general inland region. Although true coral could have been brought from the Persian Gulf, we can only speculate about what was brought from the mountains of Central Asia. I would suggest that this was perhaps stalagmites and stalactites.

Amber (*hupo* 琥珀; cf. Sino-Japanese *kohaku*) was imported from Persia. The Chinese word itself is a loanword from an earlier period. It is comparable to Pahlavi *kah-rubāy*. The original form of the word was *hupo* 虎魄. Schuessler (2007: 282) reconstructs the pronunciation of this term in the Later Han as *xuo<sup>B</sup> p<sup>H</sup>ek*, stating that it is a “loan word from a western or southern Asiatic \**χarupah* ‘amber.’”<sup>42</sup> Amber appears among the products of the country of Jibin, as explained in the first history of the Han dynasty.<sup>43</sup> Traditional descriptions in Chinese confirm that this was, in fact, amber, although in one instance it was believed that amber was fossilized fungus. There is a quotation from the *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (*Record of Myriad Things*) by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300), that reads, “Pine resin enters the earth and in a thousand years it becomes fungus [under the roots of the pine tree]. The fungus in a thousand years becomes amber. One name is red pearl.” 松脂入地千年化為茯苓，茯苓千年化為虎魄，一名紅珠。<sup>44</sup> This is most certainly referring to amber.

The item *chequ* 車渠 (Later Han: *t<sup>s</sup>Ha gia/gya*) in ancient Chinese would refer to a chariot wheel, but in this case, it refers to a stone (also written 碑磬, with the stone radical on the left in both instances).<sup>45</sup> This stone was known to be sourced from Persia, but Chinese sources display ambiguity regarding what it was, although today the word refers to the pearls of tridacna clams. This was not the referent, however, in earlier times. Early definitions clearly describe this as a precious stone, not a mollusk. The *Guangya* 廣雅 (*Expanded Erya*), an encyclopedia by Zhang Yi 張揖 from c.230, lists *chequ* among other stones that

40 T 2128, 54: 316a8–9.

41 See the discussion of Jibin and its shifting identities in Chinese in Enomoto (1994).

42 Schuessler cites Boodberg (1937: 349), who first made this suggestion.

43 *Han shu*, 96a.3885. See discussion in Pulleyblank (1983).

44 This citation is preserved in the commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* by the monk Kuiji 窺基 (632–682), titled *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanzan* 妙法蓮華經玄贊 (*Profound Praise of the Lotus Sūtra*). For the citation therein, see T 1723, 34: 772c22–24.

45 See the Later Han readings in Schuessler (2007: 182, 324, 435).

are collectively said to be “stones second to jade.” 石之次玉.<sup>46</sup> Huilin in the Tang writes, “It is a gemstone, being a vibrant bright color, second to white jade.” 石寶也，鮮白色，次於白玉。<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, in contrast, he defines the same term as “the name of a gem in Sanskrit, being a spotted [or striped] jade.” 梵語寶名也，文玉也。<sup>48</sup>

One clue to identifying the stone is found in the transcriptions of Sanskrit terms in Buddhist contexts. The monk Kuiji writes, “In Sanskrit it is called *musāragalva*, being a color between green-blue and white.” 車栗梵云牟娑落揭婆，青白間色。<sup>49</sup> This alone does not provide an identity of the stone, but we can examine how the Sanskrit term is understood. Monier-Williams (1899: 824, 793–794, 351) defines *musāragalva* as “a kind of coral.” A separate term, *masāragalvarkamaya*, however, is ambiguously defined as “consisting of emerald (sapphire) and crystal.” *Masāra* is “a sapphire or an emerald,” while *galv* (*galvarka*) is “crystal.” Edgerton (1953: 436) has discussed the variable definitions of *musāragalva* in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (BHS) and noted that “in recent years most interpreters of BHS have left the exact mg. undetermined; it usually occurs in rigmarole lists of various gems.” He also notes, “Pali *masāra-galla*, usually said to mean cat’s eye, but Burnouf found a Pali Lex. source identifying it with *pavāla*, coral (Lotus 319 f.) and hence adopted this mg. for BHS.” Some further clarity regarding these terms was offered later by Biswas (1997: 242) based on other available Indic literature:

The Mahābhārata (12.46.33) has used another name for emerald, and that is *masāragalu*, *masāra* or *masāraka*. Monier-Williams explains in his Sanskrit dictionary that Egypt was named as *Miśar* or *Misar* in Sanskrit, and *galu* means a gem. Therefore *masāragalu* may be interpreted as the gem from Egypt, and that it is consistent with the etymological origin of *marakatā* as suggested, for the first time, by us. The 4th century A.D. Prakṛt text *Aṅgavijjā* (58.20) mentions *veruliya*, *maragata* as well as *masārakalla*, meaning beryl and emerald.

46 *Guangya* (SKQS), 9.8b.

47 *T* 2128, 54: 392a4.

48 *T* 2128, 54: 502b15–16. Read *wen* 文 as *banwen* 斑文.

49 *T* 1723, 34: 685b1–2. The meaning of *qing* 青 in the color spectrum has changed over the centuries. I feel that “green-blue” is a sufficient—for the Tang period or somewhat earlier, although not entirely accurate—translation, whereas in earlier centuries it can refer to dark shades.

There are alternative explanations for the etymology of the Sanskrit words for “emerald” that suggest no direct connection with *Misar* as Egypt. Wojtilla (1973: 217) gives the following interpretation:

*Marakata* ‘emerald’ is a very valuable precious stone. The name is connected with the Greek *σμάραγδος* and *μάραγδος*. The Akkad form of the word is also known: *barraqtu* and its Hebraic form *bareqet*. Both are based on the common Semitic stem b-r-g, ‘to shine, to sparkle.’ The Greek word is the adoption of the Semitic; and according to Mayrhofer, Indians took over the Greek variety. The Persian *sumurrud* and the Old-Russian *marokat* are the derivatives of the same word.

Based on the above data, I think that emerald is the referent of *chequ*, as a stone imported from Persia, but the etymology of the Chinese word itself is unclear to me. We cannot connect it with any Indian or Iranian words; for example, “emerald” in Pahlavi is *uzumburd* (MacKenzie 1986: 85), Sogdian is *mryt* (Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst 2012: 114).

Toward or after the late Tang, *chequ* came to be the Chinese term for tri-dacna clams and pearls because the semantic meaning of the word “chariot wheel” was evidently applied to the shape of the shell. This is clear from the writings of the monk Zhiyuan 智圓 (976–1022), in which he offers the following in a commentary on the *Amitābha-sūtra*:

*Chequ* in Sanskrit is called *musāragalva*. This is said to be a gem of a greenish-blue white color. The *Great Transmission on the Book of Documents* states, “A great shell like the wheel [*qu*] of a great chariot.” Wheel denotes the wheel frame of a chariot.

車渠梵云牟娑洛揭拉婆，此云青白色寶。《尚書大傳》曰：「大貝如大車之渠」。渠謂車輞。<sup>50</sup>

In the twelfth century, Zhou Qufei was aware of the difference between the precious stone and the mollusk. He writes, “In the South Seas there is a type of mussel called *chequ*, which is shaped like great clams. They grow to about three feet, while some grow only to under one foot, but only the large ones are prized.” 南海有蚌屬曰碑磔，形如大蚌，盈三尺許，亦有盈一尺以下者，惟其大者為貴。He also remarks, “The *chequ* mentioned in Buddhist books is a jade. Might we not presume that what is produced in the South Seas gets its

50 T1760, 37: 354c3–5.



name from that?” 佛書所謂碾磑者玉也。南海所產得，非竊取其名耶。<sup>51</sup> In this way, the foreign mollusk was called *chequ* as it resembled the wheel frame of a chariot, but originally, *chequ* was a gemstone, and is commonly mentioned in Buddhist literature (although Buddhists themselves never had a definitive idea of what it was). The Chinese word presumably was a transcription of a foreign word, although it is unclear which. Based on the above data, I am inclined to think that it was emeralds that were attributed to Persia.

Another stone, *manao* 馬腦—literally, “horse brains” in Chinese (generally written as 瑪瑙)—was imported from Persia. The dictionary *Guang ya* includes *manao* 碼瑙 among the “stones second to jade,” so this stone was certainly known in the Han period.<sup>52</sup> In a preface to a poem, Cao Pi 曹丕, Emperor Wen of the Wei 魏文帝 (r. 220–226), wrote that “*manao* is a type of jade that is sourced from the Western Regions. There is a resemblance to the brains of horses in the intertwining of the veins [of the stone], so the local people named it after this.” 馬腦玉屬也，出自西域。文理交錯有似馬腦，故其方人因以名之。<sup>53</sup>

Modern Japanese and Chinese dictionaries generally define this stone as agate (and agate is called as such in both languages today), but when we consult Sanskrit dictionaries, this identification becomes problematic. In the *Sukhāvātīyūha-sūtra*, the corresponding Sanskrit word is *aśma-garbha* (Inagaki 1984: 321). Kuiji writes, “In Sanskrit it is called *aśma-garbha*. This means ‘mallet-repository,’ or some say ‘womb repository,’ because it is solid. The appearance is like that of horse brains, hence it uses the characters for ‘horse’ and ‘brains.’” 梵云遏濕摩揭婆，此云杵藏，或言胎藏者，堅實故也。色如馬腦，故從彼名作馬腦字。<sup>54</sup> The Sanskrit word *aśma-garbha* can indeed be literally translated as “mallet” and “repository,” although more reasonable would be “repository of stone.” The Sanskrit word has no sense of “horse” unless *aśma* is misread as *aśva*, which conceivably could be the reason for this curious Chinese word.

The problem is that modern Sanskrit dictionaries identify *aśma-garbha* as “an emerald” (Monier-Williams 1899: 114). Edgerton (1953: 81) also translates this as emerald and suggests “popular etym. based on [*aśma-*] *marakata*?” Monier-Williams (1899: 789) defines *marakata* as “emerald” and compares Greek *σμάραγδος* and Latin *smaragdus* as cognates. Modern Hindi for emerald is *markat*, and Sogdian is *mryt*. Whether *aśma-garbha* really was an emerald

51 *Lingwai daida*, 7.8b.

52 *Guang ya* (SKQS), 9.8b.

53 See citation in *Taiping yulan* (SKQS), 358.6b.

54 *T* 1723, 34: 685b2–4.

would be perplexing based on the Chinese descriptions; Kuiji, for example, writes, “*Manao* has many colors. Some are pure white, others pure greenish-blue yellow, others [still] a mix of various colors.” 馬腦有多色，或純白，或純青黃，或眾色間。<sup>55</sup> This would more reasonably describe the diverse colors of agate, but not emerald. Moreover, if we identify *aśma-garbha* as a “repository of stone,” then a hollow agate geode is a more reasonable interpretation than an emerald.

The list has “numerous large pearls” 多大真珠 sourced from Persia. These were likely to have ultimately been brought from the Persian Gulf. Potts (2009) remarks, “Certainly pearls are associated in many sources with the Persian Gulf, most commonly with Bahrain (e.g. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 3.146). During the Sasanian period, pearls were highly prized by Sasanian rulers.” Pearling was apparently carried out on the Iranian coast from the early Sasanian period (Carter 2005: 167). The demand for pearls in China was not limited to fashion, since pearls were an important material element in Buddhism. For instance, the *Lotus Sūtra* lists pearl as one of the seven treasures, from which *stūpas* are constructed.<sup>56</sup> Another important scripture of the early Buddhist tradition of Vidyādharaṇīka (later called Mantrayāna or Vajrayāna, or “Esoteric Buddhism” in modern parlance), the *Tuoluoni ji jing* 陀羅尼集經 (*Collection of Dhāraṇī Collection*, Skt. \**Dhāraṇīsamuccaya-sūtra*), which was translated by Atikūṭa (Adijuduo 阿地瞿多) in 654, describes the features of an image of the feminine representation of Mahāprajñāpāramitā (“Great Perfection of Wisdom”). The description has “precious earrings of pearls attached to her ears.” 其耳中著真珠寶璫。<sup>57</sup> Pearls would have been sourced from the Indian Ocean by Buddhists in India, but fine pearls from Persia would have certainly found ready buyers in China, especially those seeking to create exquisite images and monuments (or even miniatures) based on scriptural prescriptions, for which great religious merit (i.e., “good karma”) was gained.

This same text of Atikūṭa explicitly calls for a small quantity of “Persian *liuli*” 波斯琉璃. The Chinese word *liuli* is a loanword. As Laufer and Nichols (1917: 138–139) have explained, “The glassy paste for the production of ceramic glazes was called *liu-li* 琉璃 (in the Han Annals 流離) or *p’i-liu-li*, derived from Prākṛit *veluriya*, Mahārāshṭrī *verulia* (Sanskrit *vaidūrya*).” Strictly speaking, however, this originally referred to a glaze, rather than glass vessels. Laufer and Nichols also remark that “no vessels of any sort were imported, but only pasty masses of various tinges which could be applied to pottery bodies. That *liu-li*

55 T 1723, 34: 726c4–5.

56 T 262, 9: 21b20–21.

57 T 901, 18: 805b11.

has nothing to do with the production of glass, simply results from the fact that only as late as the fifth century AD did the Chinese learn from foreigners how to make glass.”

The term *liuli* in Chinese Buddhist literature normally translates *vaiḍūrya*, a Sanskrit term that is difficult to translate.<sup>58</sup> Monier-Williams (1899: 1021) defines *vaiḍūrya* as “cat’s-eye gem (ifc. ‘a jewel,’ = ‘anything excellent of its kind’),” but this is not helpful in the Chinese context. In the Indological context, Wojtilla (1973: 218) translates *vaiḍūrya* as lapis lazuli. The Pahlavi word for lapis lazuli is an unrelated *kāskēn* (MacKenzie 1986: 50). Scholars often translate the Chinese term *liuli* as lapis lazuli or beryl, but it could also refer to manmade blue glass (Tarocco 2021: 247). Modern Chinese and Japanese dictionaries also recognize this word as an archaic word for glass. Birnbaum (1989: 65–66) notes that in the art record, *liuli* is depicted as dark blue, such as in the specimens from Dunhuang, where we also see the Buddha holding a *vaiḍūrya* bowl. He states, “It is known from these paintings that the early T’ang [Tang] Tun-huang [Dunhuang] painters considered glass or crystal to be a substance quite different from lapis lazuli.” Chinese Buddhist dictionaries, as he notes, refer to lapis lazuli, although a fake version of it was common in China. Genuine lapis lazuli was apparently difficult to find in China.<sup>59</sup> The stone was primarily sourced from Central Asia. Karampelas et al. (2020: 17) note that “the most famous mines of lapis lazuli are in Sar-e-Sang, Badakshan, today Afghanistan.” As they note, these mines have been in continual operation for six millennia.

“Persian *liuli*” certainly refers to glass, since another scripture—the Chinese translation of the *Amoghapāśa-kalparāja*, completed by Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流志; d. 727) in 709—states that a mixture of ingredients is “to be piled upon a vessel of Persian *liuli*” (盛置波斯琉璃器) in a certain healing rite for the eyes.<sup>60</sup> This is certainly referring to glassware, if it is a vessel. “Persian blue glass,” if we translate the term like this, was something recognizable to Chinese readers during the eras of Atikūṭa and Bodhiruci in the seventh and eighth centuries. The expression might have even been a colloquial way of distinguishing

58 See the Chinese translation of the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, in which *liuli* translates *vaiḍūrya*. See the Chinese-Sanskrit index in Inagaki (1984: 320).

59 An entry on *liuli* in Huilin’s dictionary from the ninth century states the following: “It is a bluish-colored gem. There is the fake and the genuine. The genuine is difficult to get, for it comes from foreign countries. The fake is from this country, where it is made from smelted stone and then dyed with colors.” 青色寶也，有假有真。真者難得出外國，假者即此國鍊石作之，染為五色也。T 2128, 54: 418c4.

60 T 1092, 20: 376c23. The Chinese title is *Bukong juansuo shenbian zhenyan jing* 不空罽索神變真言經 (*Infallible Lasso’s Mantra and Supernatural Transformations: King of Ritual Manuals*). See the entry in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism.

glass from the stone lapis lazuli. This makes sense, considering the production of glass in Persia, some of which evidently found its way to China. Kröger (2012) remarks that Sasanian glassware “often had a light green or greenish color with a somewhat yellow tinge; colorless glass was rare. Red, buff, and a brownish tinge also occur.” This was thus the referent that the Chinese had in mind when discussing *liuli* as being imported from Persia.

The related item on the list in the *Wei shu* is *boli* 頗梨, whose cognate in Pahlavi is *bēlūr* (crystal), which is also derived from Sanskrit *vaiḍūrya*.<sup>61</sup> Summarizing the discussion of his time on this matter, Needham (1962: 106) notes the word for glass in Mongol and Central Asian languages: *bolor*, which Pelliot believed to come from Turco-Persian *bilūr*. This, in turn, “certainly descended from *vaiḍūrya* through a Prakrit intermediary *verūlya*.” Despite this etymology, Chinese lexicographers in antiquity linked this term to Sanskrit *sphaṭika*, which is a generic term for crystals.<sup>62</sup> Huilin’s dictionary, for example, gives the “proper pronunciation” of 頗胝迦 *p<sup>h</sup>wa tji kia* (*sphaṭika*), stating, “This is water jade; it is shaped like quartz. Some [specimens] are red, some are white. The *Great Treatise* states, ‘Crystal (*boli*) pearls form from ice after a thousand years.’ The veracity of this is uncertain.” 此云水玉，狀似水精，有赤有白。大論云：「過千年冰化為頗梨珠」。未詳虛實也。<sup>63</sup> The word *boli* as an imported stone from Persia appears to refer to crystal, but this ought to be different from another item on the *Wei shu*’s list, *shui jing* 水精 (“essence of water”). Fortunately, Huilin’s dictionary again offers clarification regarding how the Chinese distinguished these stones. In an entry on *sphaṭika* (頗胝迦), we read the following:

61 See Musche and Kröger (2011). They also remark, “Arabic *ballūr* or *bellowr* was probably borrowed from Persian and passed into Western languages as beryl.”

62 See also the Chinese translation of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra*, in which *boli* translates *sphaṭika*. See Chinese-Sanskrit index in Inagaki (1984: 318).

63 *T* 2128, 54: 436c9. This *Great Treatise* refers to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, which was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in the early fifth century. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* reads, “It is like how wish-fulfilling pearls come from the relics of the Buddha. When the Dharma has completely disappeared, the relics all become wish-fulfilling pearls. It is like how ice after a thousand years transforms into crystal pearls.” 如意珠出自佛舍利。若法沒盡時，諸舍利皆變為如意珠。譬如過千歲冰，化為頗梨珠 (*T* 1509, 25: 134a21–23). The theory that crystals were formed from ice was present in medieval Europe as well. Bunn (1964: 2) remarks, “In the Middle Ages it was thought that these crystals were a permanent form of ice, hardened by the intense cold of the mountains; hence the name ‘crystal,’ or clear ice.” This conception ultimately stems from the Greek κρύσταλλος (“clear ice”). We might speculate that the idea proposed in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* ought to be traced back to Greek influence.

The old translation states that this is “essence of water,” [but] this explanation is wrong. Although it resembles the essence of water, it is distinguished by four colors: purple, white, red, and green. The brilliant and transparent gems are the best. The red and green are the most precious. The purple and white are the next best.

古譯云是水精，此說非也。雖類水精，乃有紫白紅碧四色差別，瑩淨透明寶中最上。紅碧最珍，紫白其次。<sup>64</sup>

The “essence of water” is likely colorless quartz, whereas *sphaṭika* (equated to *boli* in Chinese) would be colored crystals of various types. The purple variety, for example, might refer to amethyst.

One of the obscure stones from Persia mentioned in the *Wei shu* is called *sese* 瑟瑟 (EMC: *ṣit ṣit*), but it is generally left undefined in most modern academic resources.<sup>65</sup> The stone became important in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, especially in descriptions of deities, but it appears that Buddhists did not know what exactly this stone is. The modern dictionary of Buddhist terms by Nakamura (1975: 590) states that the seat of the tantric deity Acala Vidyārāja (Ch. Budong Mingwang 不動明王; Jpn. Fudō Myōō) is made of this stone, but Nakamura does not identify it. The comprehensive encyclopedia of *maṇḍalas* in East Asia by Somekawa (2013: 92–93) also states that Acala sits upon a seat of this stone (Jpn. *setsusestu za* 瑟瑟座). Acala appears in the *Garbhakośa-maṇḍala* (Jpn. *Taizō mandara*), which is the *maṇḍala* of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi*. The important Chinese commentary on this scripture, which was composed by the monk Yixing on the basis of an oral explanation by the Indian monk Śubhakarasiṃha at some point between 724 and 727, only states that Acala is to be painted “seated atop a stone.” 坐於石上。<sup>66</sup> Despite this lack of clarity, depictions of Acala preserved in Japan that were brought over from China generally show him sitting upon a greenish- or bluish-colored stone.<sup>67</sup> Daoist sources that deal with alchemy and gemology offer further

64 T 2128, 54: 330b6–7.

65 For the EMC reading, see Pulleyblank (1991b: 273). The original meaning of the character, as noted by Pulleyblank, is a “stringed musical instrument like a zither.” This is clearly unrelated to the stone.

66 T 1796, 39: 633b7–8.

67 See the images in the SAT Taishōzō Image DB. There are paintings from around the late Tang period that show precious stones, but these are not labeled with the names of the stones. One noteworthy painting from Mogao Cave 17 at the British Museum (1919,0101,0.123) shows Vajrapāṇi ornamented with some colored stones, which we can guess are a sapphire (blue), emerald (green), and ruby (red).

clues. For example, one important source in this regard is the *Long hu huan-dan jue* 龍虎還丹訣 (*Secrets of the Reduced Elixir of the Dragon-Tiger*), which is a record of explanations by Jin Lingzi 金陵子 (d.u.) from the Tang period.<sup>68</sup>

Chalcanthite [literally, “stone bile”] is produced in the mountain valleys of Puzhou. It is shaped like the head of a snapped comb. It is a shallow jade color like *sese*. It is genuine if it turns white in color when burning it.

石膽生蒲州山谷。狀似折篋頭。如瑟瑟淺碧色。燒之變白色者是眞。<sup>69</sup>

The *sese* therefore ought to be bluish in color, and visually similar to chalcanthite. Shi (2021: 45) claims that this *sese* is a “gemstone similar to emerald or turquoise. Introduced to China in the Wei dynasty from the Western Regions, it originated from some old Middle Persian word sounding like ‘*sirsir*.’” No further details about this proposed etymology are given. The Middle Chinese reading of 瑟 is *šit*, which one could only vaguely connect with Pahlavi *sabz* (“green”). A cognate from Sanskrit or a related language is more probable; for example, *šiti* denoting “black, dark-blue” and by extension, *šiti-ratna*, denoting “‘blue-gem,’ a sapphire” (Monier-Williams 1899: 1071). Wojtilla (1973: 217) states that one of the names of sapphire in the *Arthaśāstra* is “*śūtavṛṣṭi* (cold rain).” The word *šiti-ratna* likely corresponds *seshi* 瑟石 (*se* + “stone”), which is an alternative word for the *sese* stone.

In light of the above data, we might argue that *sese* originally denoted sapphires, which were originally connected with Persia, although over time the term appears to have more generally referred to a color than to the stone itself. Some recent research on premodern Chinese lapidaries (Lu et al. 2014) also concludes that the *sese* gemstone in question ought to correspond to sapphire. The etymology of the Chinese term, however, remains ambiguous, and connecting it with an Iranian origin is difficult, especially considering that corundum gems (rubies and sapphires) were largely sourced from Sri Lanka in premodern times.<sup>70</sup> For example, “sapphire” in Sogdian is *indrmyr*, a transcription of Sanskrit *indranīla* (Gharib 2004: 38).<sup>71</sup> Sapphire in Syriac

68 Hu (1995: 367) assigns this text to the Tang period.

69 *DZ* 934, 19: 116a17–18. For the identification of *shidan* 石膽 as chalcanthite, see the translation of *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 in Unschuld (2021a: 645).

70 Karamelas et al. (2020: 13) explain that “rubies and sapphires are coloured gem varieties of the mineral corundum. [...] The oldest historical corundum gems originated from alluvial deposits in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), which is still considered to be one of the main producers.”

71 Sapphire is *šap'wltay* in Armenian (Bedrossian 1879: 546).

is *pyrwzg*, probably from Middle Persian \**pērōzag*, which in turn became *pūrōza* (a turquoise) in New Persian (Ciancaglini 2008: 233). In any case, the Persians were the intermediary hands through which some of these gems came to China.

Diamonds (*jingang* 金剛, 金鋼) were also connected with Persia, but the word in Chinese is a semantic translation of Sanskrit *vajra*, a fact that illustrates how the stone was originally regarded as foreign. A domestic name did not initially exist for it. Diamonds held religious significance for Buddhists, but this was more figurative or symbolic, rather than having any practical application in rituals. Diamonds were not appreciated for cosmetic purposes in China, but rather, they served a more practical function. Golas (1999: 183) observes that “the diamond was never used as a gemstone by the Chinese but rather as the hardest abrasive they knew.” These facts are attested in Chinese literature. There is an entry on diamonds in the encyclopedic *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (*Readings of the Taiping Era*), compiled between 977 and 983 by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996), in which informative lines from a number of sources are cited. It is said that “in year 3 of Xianheng [672], [the city of] Dunhuang sent diamonds. They did not melt after being repeatedly submersed in liquid gold. They can cut jade and are sourced from India.” 咸亨三年燉煌上送金鋼，生金中百淘不消。可以切玉，出天竺。 This highlights the utility of diamonds: jade was valuable and ornamental, and one could cut it with ease using a diamond, but the diamond was a foreign stone. A citation of the *Xuan zhong ji* 玄中記 (“Accounts from Within the Mysteries”), credited to Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), reads, “Diamonds are sourced from the countries of India and Daqin [Rome]. One name for it is the blade that cuts jade, for it cuts jade like an iron blade cutting wood.” 金鋼出天竺大秦國，一名削玉刀，削玉如鐵刀削木。 The *Nanzhou yiwu zhi* 南州異物志 (*Account of Oddities in the Southern Provinces*) from the third century, is also cited: “The diamond is a stone, shaped like a pearl, and incomparably firm and sharp. Foreigners like to set it in rings and wear it to ward off evil.” 金鋼石也，其狀如珠，堅利無匹。外國人好以飾玦環，服之能辟惡毒.<sup>72</sup> Diamonds were clearly not ornamental for the Chinese, but they were still quite useful. Sasanians also wore rings set with precious stones, and some instances of diamonds are attested (Ogden 2018: 48).

Another stone on the *Wei shu*'s list is *huoji* 火齊, which can be equated with a stone called *meigui* 玫瑰.<sup>73</sup> The latter appears to have been a type of fine rose-colored jade in antiquity, but whether this was the same type of stone as an imported item is uncertain, if not unlikely. It has often been held that *huoji*

72 *Taiping yulan* (SKQS), 813.8b.

73 See the entry on this stone in *Taiping yulan* (SKQS), 809.1b–2a.

refers to mica (Needham 1962: 116). The entry on Middle India (i.e., the general region of modern Bihar) in the *Liang shu* of 636 mentions the stone:

*Huoji* is shaped like mica, with a color like purplish gold, and it has a luster. It is thin like the wings of a cicada when separated, but together it overlaps like yarn.

火齊狀如雲母，色如紫金，有光耀。別之則薄如蟬翼，積之則如紗縠之重沓也。<sup>74</sup>

This could refer to any number of minerals characterized by crystalline cleavage. Any confident identification based on this alone is challenging. Chinese sources also speak of *huoji zhu* 火齊珠; this fiery stone in a pearl-like form, which would not have been as thin as the wings of a cicada. Carnelian is one possibility, but the term likely denoted different stones depending on the context. This outcome was inevitable given the absence of any scientific system of identification, especially for stones uncommon in the domestic landscape. In any case, mica and carnelian are certainly known from Iranian sources. For instance, mining was extensively carried out in Iran, and bountiful reserves of mica are proven by modern surveys (Qorbani and Kani 2005). The British Museum (1870,1210.3) possesses a Sogdian seal of carnelian with a double portrait and inscription from between 300 and 350 CE.

A particular type of iron (or, more precisely, a type of steel) was attributed to Persia. Persia was known in China for its production of fine iron, a fact that reflects a geological reality in Iran.<sup>75</sup> Metalworking was a fully developed trade in Persia and the populace also had access to iron.<sup>76</sup> The type of iron mentioned in the *Wei shu* is important in the history of Chinese metallurgy. Laufer (1919: 515) has suggested that this type of iron from Persia “clearly refers to a steel like that of Damascus.” His argument is based on descriptions of it in other Chinese sources, such as the *Gegu yaolun* 格古要論 (*The Essential*

74 *Liang shu*, 54:797–798.

75 Harrison (1968: 496) states that “iron ore deposits have been observed in many parts of the country, most of them between the southern slopes of the Alburz system and the Volcanic belt, especially somewhat north-east of the limits of the Volcanic belt.”

76 The word for iron in Pahlavi is *āhan*, while the profession of a blacksmith is *āhangar*. There was also the *āhan-paykar* (metal caster of iron), *čēlāngar* (crafter of small ironware), and *pōlāwad-paykar* (metalworker of steel). See MacKenzie (1986: 6, 69). Pigott (2011) observes that “certain indications suggest that iron had become readily available to various levels of society.”



*Criteria of Antiques*) by Cao Zhao 曹昭, but this text dates to 1387.<sup>77</sup> We cannot extrapolate the descriptions therein to what is mentioned in the fourth to fifth centuries. Shi (2021: 45) translates the word as “patterned iron alloy,” but this is unclear and unexplained. The character *bin* 鑛 (EMC: *pjin*) is a transcribed loanword, but whether it was Indian or Iranian in origin is uncertain.<sup>78</sup> Laufer points out that the first occurrence of this word is in the Chinese description of Sasanian Persia, but this does not necessitate that the term was Iranian. Laufer, however, explains this word “is connected with Iranian \**spaina*, Pamir languages *spin*, Afghan *ōspīna* or *ōspana*, Ossetic *āfsān*.” Shi (2021: 45) suggests “Proto-Iranian *spaina* and Pamir *spin*” as possible candidates. The former is far too early to be a realistic possibility, since the Chinese word appears relatively late in antiquity. Wagner (2008: 270) remarks that “there is a chance that *bin tie* transcribes a Persian or Arabic word meaning ‘Indian steel.’” He also notes that “both *bin tie* and *piṇḍa*, could be transcriptions, in one of the region’s languages, or a form like *hindia*. Or *hindia* could be a transcription of *piṇḍa*.”

We can look at instances in which Buddhists in China used this term in translation and identify the corresponding Indic source word. The Kuchean monk Liyan lists the following relevant metals with their respective names in Chinese and Siddham:

<i>jin tie</i>	金鐵	<i>l<sup>H</sup>ya<sup>H</sup></i>	路賀	<i>roha</i>	[Skt. <i>loha</i> ]
<i>tie</i>	鐵	<i>?a jia' sa</i>	阿野娑	<i>ayasa</i>	[Skt. <i>ayas</i> ]
<i>bin tie</i>	寶鐵	<i>pji' nrai</i>	比拏	<i>piṇa</i>	[Skt. <i>piṇḍa</i> ] <sup>79</sup>

The third type of metal listed here is evidently a cognate of the Chinese term. Monier-Williams (1899: 85, 625) lists words such as *piṇḍa* (iron, steel), *ayahpiṇḍa* (a mass of iron), and *piṇḍāyasa* (steel) in Sanskrit. We might suspect that the word *piṇḍa* could have come into Sanskrit from an Iranian source, based on the fact that we can point to Scythian \**οσπιυ-* in Old Iranian, and then also to Khotanese *hīśśana*, Chorasmian *spny*, and Sogdian *spn'yn'y*.<sup>80</sup>

Laufer’s conclusion that *bin* in Chinese is first derived from an Iranian source is more probable in my estimation, especially since, as he has observed, the word only appears from the sixth century in connection with Sasanian Persia. The metal *bin tie* appears in Buddhist texts starting from the Tang

77 See the translation of the relevant passage in Wagner (2008: 271).

78 Pulleyblank (1991b: 38) gives this EMC reading. He translates it as “wrought iron.”

79 *T* 2135, 54: 1231b6–8. EMC readings from Pulleyblank (1991b).

80 See the detailed discussion of the etymology of “iron” in Iranian languages in Buyaner (2020: 52).

period at the earliest. In later times, however, this type of metal was produced in other locales and the Chinese term came to denote fine steel.<sup>81</sup> In the Tang period, Huilin provides definitions of key vocabulary from various Indic texts in Chinese translation. The following item is given under the heading for the *Susiddhi-kara* (*Suxidi jing* 蘇悉地經), a major text of the Mantrayāna tradition (i.e., “Tantric Buddhism”):

*Bin tie* [...] It is sourced from foreign countries such as Jibin and others. This is an alloy of irons, some of it is extremely fine, being the best type of iron.

鑛鐵 … 出罽賓等外國。以諸鐵和合，或極精利，鐵中之上者是也。<sup>82</sup>

Jibin (rendered as Jibin 罽賓 in the above passage) ought to refer to the country of Kapiśā or Kashmir.<sup>83</sup> The pronunciation of the second character in the binomial (*bin*) perhaps led Huilin to suspect the metal was named after this country. The dynastic history of the Sui dynasty from 636 reports that in the country of Zabula/Jaguda (*Zao guo* 漕國), which was the referent of Jibin in the Han period according to the author (漕國在葱嶺之北，漢時罽賓國也), they produce metals such as *bin tie*.<sup>84</sup> The earlier *Wei shu* (102.2277) describes Jibin, but does not mention any form of iron being produced there (only gold, silver, copper, and tin are listed).

The identification of *bin tie* is a complex issue, but in a detailed study, Qian (2007) convincingly argues that it refers to crucible steel. However, the Pahlavi word for steel, *pōlāwad*, is not apparent in any Chinese source. Qian's proposal, however, can nonetheless be corroborated by research on Sasanian metallurgy, which in fact shows that the Persians utilized the technology to produce and work crucible steel. Lang, Craddock, and Simpson (1998) have examined a Sasanian sword in the British Museum that dates to the sixth or seventh century. They conclude that “the sword (WA 135747) was fabricated from crucible steel.” The production of crucible steel is traced back to India earlier on. Huilin's definition of *bin tie*, “being an alloy of irons,” appears to refer to the co-fusion type of crucible steel. Co-fusion is “where cast and wrought iron were melted together in the appropriate quantities needed to produce a steel with the required intermediate carbon content” (Lang et al. 1998: 12).

81 For extensive details, see Qian (2007).

82 *T* 2128, 54: 543b7. Qian (2007: 167–168).

83 See the discussion of Jibin and its shifting identities in Chinese in Enomoto (1994).

84 *Sui shu*, 83.1857. See the discussion of this toponym in Feng (1982: 37).

The famous polymath, Al-Birūnī (973–1048), also refers to the co-fusion method of producing crucible steel:

Either the *narm-āhan* and its water [molten iron] melt equally in the crucible and unite so that one cannot distinguish the one from the other, in which case it is good for files and the like [...] Or alternatively, the melting qualities of what is in the crucible vary, so that the two do not mix completely but on the contrary are separate in their parts from one another, and each part of their two colours is seen individually.<sup>85</sup>

The process of co-fusion was certainly known to the Chinese in earlier times, since at least the Han period. Wagner (2008: 264–265) notes, “The co-fusion of cast and wrought iron is of course a Chinese innovation—it was practised in China long before cast iron was known anywhere else. In later times various co-fusion techniques were used widely in Central Asia and to some extent in India, Africa, and Europe.” Wagner also points to the archaeological evidence from Merv, where a steelmaking workshop, dating between the ninth and tenth centuries, was discovered, along with four furnaces and some fragments of crucibles. The Chinese had their own domestic steel, but *bin tie* as something imported from Persia and South Asia was something different still. For at least some observers in China, it was appreciated as the “finest type of iron” (though we would call it “steel”). This confirms the significance of Sasanian metalworking, but also that the production methods of metals differed between China and Iran (as well as India).

Beyond the *Wei shu*'s list, other metals and minerals were imported from or connected with Persia, although in other instances the attribution must be handled with extreme care. One of these is explicitly Iranian in origin, based solely on the name: *mituoseng* 密陀僧 (EMC: *mit da səŋ*), which is litharge or dross of lead (lead oxide).<sup>86</sup> The Chinese name phonetically corresponds to *murdār-sa(n)g* (“dead stone”) in Middle Persian, as was already pointed out by Laufer (1919: 508). Litharge in the Syriac language is also an Iranian loanword: “*mrdk*’, *mwrdk*’, *mrdśng* ‘litharge, lead protoxide,’ MPers. *mord(e)-sang*” (Ciancaglini 2006). This material is mentioned in Tang-era *materia medica*, such as the *Xinxiu bencao* 新修本草 (*Revised Pharmacopeia*), compiled by Su

85 See the translated text by Allan (1979: 75). Lang et al. (1998: 13) indicate that “water” appears to denote molten metal.

86 EMC readings from Pulleyblank (1991b: 213, 272, 314).

Jing 蘇敬 (599–674) in 659, as pointed out by Song (2001: 15).<sup>87</sup> There we read that litharge, which is expressly stated to come from Persia, can be used to treat persistent diarrhea, hemorrhoids, scars from lacerations, and scars on the face. It can also be mixed into skin cream and applied on the face. Based on the fact that a Middle Persian name is given to litharge in Chinese, it is plausible, if not likely, that some medical applications were also borrowed from West Asian sources. The medieval Syriac *Book of Medicines* (*Spar-Sammānê*), translated into English by Budge (1913: 511), prescribes lead dross in a remedy “for the anus that protrudeth and for the boils in it.” This is comparable to the Chinese text in which we see hemorrhoids mentioned (Kotyk 2023b: 97). The relevant entry on litharge in a major *materia medica* text in the Daoist canon of the fifteenth century digests a number of earlier sources, and there we again read that it can be used to treat a variety of conditions, such as hemorrhoids, dysentery, and skin lesions.<sup>88</sup> These applications certainly carried over into later centuries. Golas (1999: 108) also observes that “the lead oxide litharge was an important component of paints and varnishes, and was also used in external medicines, as was lead carbonate (cerussite).”

The fact that a loanword was used shows that litharge was initially understood in the Chinese language as something foreign, and certainly not domestically produced. If litharge was, in fact, already being produced in China, a native word for it ought to have existed, but this is not the case. This leads me to wonder whether some form of the technology of cupellation, from which litharge is produced as a byproduct, was also introduced from abroad, presumably from an Iranian source. Cupellation is a process by which silver and gold are separated from mixtures with other metals, especially lead, using a furnace and hot blasts of air. This process is attested much earlier from the third millennium BCE, in Asia Minor, where it was particularly used to refine silver from galena (Enghag 2008: 128). Cupellation, as Forbes (1964: 172–173) has noted, is “probably the oldest and most efficient way of separating the precious metals from baser ones.” The process of cupellation is outlined by Su Song 蘇頌 (1020–1101), a relatively late witness in China, as follows:

87 I have consulted a handwritten copy from 1889 in the National Diet Library of Japan (特1-3021). <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2557930>. See also the digitized text on CTEXT.

88 *Tujing yanyi bencao* 圖經衍義本草 (*Illustrated Explanative Materia Medica*), included in the Daoist canon, whose form in this instance was finalized in the Ming period. See relevant entry in full: *DZ* 763, 17: 315a14–315c8. For details on this text and its complex history of composition, see Hu (1995: 350).

Nowadays, [litharge] is found in the refinery sites of silver and copper in Lingnan and Minzhong. This is the sediment from silver and lead. At first, when the ore is collected, silver and copper are mixed together, so it is first smelted together with lead. The silver then comes out with the lead. Next, the leaves of trees from the mountains are burned to ash. The ground is opened to make a furnace, which is filled up with the ash. They call it a pool of ashes. The silver and lead are placed on the ashes, and fire is applied in order to calcine [the mixture]. The lead seeps into the ashes below, while the silver remains on top of the ashes. The fire is extinguished, and the silver is removed after cooling for a little while. The pool of ashes reacts to the *qi* of the lead and silver, which accumulates after some time, and this substance [litharge] is formed. It is not necessarily coming from the *Hu* peoples.

今嶺南閩中，銀銅冶處有之。是銀鉛脚。其初采礦時，銀銅相雜，先以鉛同煎鍊，銀隨鉛出。又采山木葉燒灰，開地作爐，填灰其中，謂之灰池。置銀鉛於灰上，更加火鍛。鉛滲灰下，銀住灰上。罷火候冷出銀。其灰池感鉛銀氣，積久成此物。未必自胡中來也。<sup>89</sup>

The process outlined here is not unlike what is recorded in nineteenth-century sources that describe traditional pre-industrial cupellation.<sup>90</sup> The question remains as to when exactly cupellation was first carried out in China. The historical record and evidence do not directly indicate that cupellation was widely understood in China during antiquity. Golas (1999: 132) remarks, “At the present state of our knowledge and given the paucity of evidence, we can at best guess that cupellation made a rather late appearance in China some time just before the Warring States period (–6th to –3rd centuries).” He also notes that

89 My translation is adapted from Unschuld (2021a: 295) with edits. See also the source Chinese text therein. Su Song is quoted in the *Bencao gangmu* (SKQS, 28.26b). Unschuld translates the last line as follows: “It is not necessary to import it from Hu zhong.” I disagree with this reading. The idea in the text is that although litharge was known to have been produced by Western peoples, in his time, cupellation and the resulting litharge were known in Southern China. This means that it was not necessarily always coming from the Western Regions. See the remarks in Golas (1999: 132–133).

90 See Cooley (1869: 154): “The process of cupellation is based on the fact that lead is rapidly oxidized by air at high temperature, while silver is not. The alloy, placed in a shallow, porous vessel of bone-earth, called a cupel, is melted in a furnace, and its surrounding surface is at the same time exposed to a current of hot air. The lead is changed to an oxide; the melted oxide is partly absorbed by the cupel, while another part runs off into other vessels. The silver is not affected by the air, and when the lead has passed away, the precious metal still remains in the cupel.”

“silver does not appear to have become available in any significant amounts until the Han period.” Again, if litharge had been domestically produced in China at such an early stage, we are left to wonder why a Middle Persian loanword, which appears only from the sixth or seventh century, was used.

Daoist alchemical texts offer further information linking lead with Persia. A key text in this regard is the *Yin Zhenjun jinshi wuxiang lei* 陰真君金石五相類 (*Five Categories of Metals and Stones by True Lord Yin*). This title appears to be from the Tang period, although it is attributed to Yin Changsheng 陰長生 (titled “True Lord Yin,” Yin Zhenjun 陰真君) from the Han period.<sup>91</sup> The author of this work states that different types of lead byproducts are produced in China: “The lead of Jiazhou and the earth of different provinces are refined into powder. It is roasted into massicot; it also becomes litharge; it also becomes lead powder.” 嘉州鉛及雜州土鍊成爲粉；燒成黃丹，亦成蜜陀僧，亦成胡粉。<sup>92</sup> Throughout the treatise, the author discusses the inherently different properties of metals originating in different places. They state, “Although there is a ‘blossom’ from the lead of China, it is light and it cannot attain pure form; it is different from the ‘lead of the shifting sands’ in the Western Countries.” 漢國鉛雖有華，輕不得純體，不同西國流沙鉛。 This appears to be a reference to cupellation. The author believed that the extracted “blossom” (precious metals, i.e., silver and gold) from lead sourced in China was inferior to that of the Western Regions. Lead ores can significantly differ in their silver and gold content. Craddock (1995: 213) explains, “The gold content of silver from the argentiferous lead ores depends on the particular ore. Silver from the oxidised ores and jarosites can contain several per cent, but the gold content of silver from the primary galena is much lower, typically in the range from 0.01 per cent to 0.1 per cent.” The “lead of the shifting sands” (*liusha qian* 流沙鉛) does not actually appear to denote a technically definable type of lead ore, but rather, it is a figurative designation for lead sourced from the Western Regions. The Chinese typically associated the Western Regions with the deserts of the Tarim Basin and beyond. The treatise identifies this “lead of the shifting sands” as “Persian lead” (*Bosi qian* 波斯鉛).<sup>93</sup> We read that “Persian lead, if together with mercury in a raging fire, smelts like a golden color; if it does not reach a golden color, then it must be smelted repeatedly to gain the

91 Hu (1995: 361–362).

92 DZ 900, 19: 99a20–b1. Golas (1999: 56) states that argentiferous lead occurs in the Mesozoic basin of Sichuan. Jiazhou was located in that vicinity.

93 DZ 900, 19: 100b9–13. See the discussion of this topic in Kotyk (2023b).

golden color.” 波斯鉛如著水銀於猛火中，鍊如金色；若未至金色，須百鍊取金色。<sup>94</sup> This line appears to refer to the production of lead amalgam.

There is some truth behind the observation that domestic and Persian varieties of lead were significantly different. In a mineralogical survey of Iran, Harrison (1968: 506) points to one source of ore in which “the lead is argentiferous, some of it containing about 100 oz of silver to the ton of lead concentrate.” Forbes (1964: 212) remarks that “Afghanistan and the regions to the north of the Oxus contain many deposits of lead-ores which like those in Persia are always argentiferous.” This quality of imported lead from abroad would have been immediately apparent to Chinese metallurgists and alchemists, especially as lead became increasingly important from the Tang period onward. Golas (1999: 109) states a key fact in this regard:

Since most of the silver in China was obtained from argentiferous galena, lead must have become widely available in China from the Thang [Tang] period on, when silver came to play a very important role as a medium of exchange in the Chinese economy. The close association of silver and lead was a most convenient coincidence since lead was needed in the cupellation process for refining gold and silver.

The type of lead originally called “Persian lead” was presumably first imported from Persia, but later, the designation might have come to refer just to a specific grade of the metal. In the sixteenth century, Li Shizhen, citing the aforementioned *Baozang lun* from antiquity, records that “there are several types of lead. Persian lead is firm and white. It is foremost in the world.” 鉛有數種，波斯鉛堅白，為天下第一。<sup>95</sup> In my study of the material connected with silver, lead, and cupellation in China, the connections with Persia, either obvious or inferred, are noticeable. If cupellation, which allowed for large-scale production of silver, had in fact been transmitted from Iran in the sixth or seventh century, then Iranian influence in China facilitated, at least in part, the “silver boom” of the Tang period. Lead was inextricably linked to silver production.<sup>96</sup>

Litharge as a medicinal ingredient was taken to Japan. The ancient record of medicines (*yakuchō* 藥帳) at Shōsō-in in Nara that had been offered to the image of Vairocana Buddha at the grand temple of Tōdai-ji records a number

94 *DZ* 900, 19: 99a6–7.

95 See the source text in Unschuld (2021a: 262–263). See also Needham (1974: 213–214), Kotyk (2023b: 99).

96 Forbes (1964: 194) explains, “Natural silver was collected from the earliest times in different regions but its role in metallurgy remained insignificant until men learned to produce silver from lead and lead-ores.”

of items, one of which is several pounds of what in Sino-Japanese reading is *mitsudasō* 蜜陀僧 (*murdār-sang*), although the original physical substance is not extant in the facility (Masutomi 1957: 17). Yoneda (2015: 302–303) points out the use of litharge as a firming agent in oil paintings in Japan (these are called *mitsuda e* 密陀絵 in modern terminology, but this word is not attested in antiquity).<sup>97</sup> This technique was brought over from China, and was used in Japan in the Nara and early Heian periods (eighth to eleventh centuries). The Chinese, in turn, perhaps learned this from Persia, based on the fact that litharge was sourced from there, but also because oil paintings that used litharge appear from the mid-seventh century at Bamiyan.<sup>98</sup> Based on archaeological evidence uncovered from the Asuka Workshop Ruins (*Asukaikae kōbō iseki* 飛鳥池工房遺跡), litharge was produced in Japan using cupellation for silver refining from the latter half of the seventh century.<sup>99</sup> The knowhow to do this, like many technologies and sciences, likely came from the mainland.

As a side note, in the mid-twentieth century, Hanbury (1861: 113) included oxide of lead (litharge) in his study of minerals in contemporary Chinese *ateria medica* under the ancient Chinese designation, so this was produced locally under the same name until modern times.

Moving on, Chinese alchemy often required the use of diverse minerals and metals imported from abroad. As Chen (2022: 481) points out, “In the pursuit of longevity, medieval alchemists and experts in the Daoist arts looked to Western merchants dealing in drugs from Western regions.” Indeed, we can see *possible* references to Persia as a source for several substances in a text preserved in the Daoist canon, titled *Jinshi bu wujiu shu jue* 金石簿五九數訣 (*Record of Metals and Minerals: Secrets Numbering Forty-Five*). The author is unknown. Daoist texts are often difficult to date, but Hu (1995: 362) suggests that this text ought to have been written during the Tang dynasty, since the date of 664 is mentioned in the work. The text is a small guide to evaluating the quality of metals and minerals. The first line reads, “Those who study the Way

97 See the various entries on *mitsuda e* 密陀絵 at kotobank.jp.

98 See the detailed analysis of paints and pigments at Bamiyan by Taniguchi (2012). In the English abstract of their study, Taniguchi explains, “The presence of some metal leafs with yellowed varnish, as well as the usage of artificial pigments such as lead white and minium, suggest links with the ‘mecca’ technique of medieval Mediterranean art and the ‘mitsuda-e’ technique of Shōsōin, which shall be addressed upon reviewing wider cultural interactions between the East and West in the 7th century AD.”

99 The discovery of evidence of cupellation was reported in the Japanese media in 2007. “Nana seiki kōhan ni gin seiren/Ishmi no genryū, Asuka ni?” 7世紀後半に銀精錬／石見の源流、飛鳥に？. *Shikoku Shumbun* 四国新聞. 28 June 2007. [https://www.shikoku-np.co.jp/national/culture\\_entertainment/20070628000436](https://www.shikoku-np.co.jp/national/culture_entertainment/20070628000436) (accessed 12 November 2023).



and seek to pursue the elixir treasure first must understand metals and minerals, determine their forms, and know their qualities.” 夫學道欲求丹竇先須識金石，定其形質，知美惡所處法。<sup>100</sup> One item is ligniform asbestos:

“Unburning wood” is sourced from the country of *Bosi*. It is the root of silverstone and formed like rotten wood. One can burn it for a while without it incinerating, and there will be no ash. It is bluish in color, and it resembles wood. It can bind mercury. The rest from which it comes cannot be used. That of *Bosi* is best.

不灰木，出波斯國。是銀石之根，形如爛木。久燒無變燒而無灰。色青似木。能制水銀。餘所出處不堪所用。波斯者爲上。<sup>101</sup>

Laufer (1915: 327) observes that “asbestos was well known to the Arabs and Persians, and was much employed by them.” The inscription on the Christian stele of 781 in Chang’an also mentions that in “Rome” (Byzantium), the realm produces a “cloth washed in fire” (*huohuan bu* 火浣布). Pelliot explains, “Il s’agit naturellement de l’amiante, qui n’a été connue en Chine que sous les Han.”<sup>102</sup> One can certainly point to examples of asbestos coming from the West. In the case of the Daoist text at hand, however, whether *Bosi* is referring to Persia is uncertain.

This point leads us to a significant problem regarding attributions to *Bosi* following the mid-seventh century, when Persia as a state ceased to exist. *Bosi* is mentioned throughout the text at hand, but it is also mentioned alongside a country named *Linyi* 林邑, which was a separate polity in the vicinity of what is now Vietnam.<sup>103</sup> The entry regarding sulfur crystals (*shi liuhuang* 石硫黃) in the same text reads, “Sourced from Jingnan [in China]. That from Linyi is called ‘Kunlun Yellow.’ The best is luminous like glassware. The country of *Bosi* also has a special product that can be used.” 出荆南。林邑者名崑崙黃，光如瑠璃者上。波斯國亦堪所事用特生。<sup>104</sup> Chen (2022: 485–489) lists asbestos and sulfur ore as items of Persian *materia medica* in China, but the *Bosi* of this text more likely signifies a country in Southeast Asia, and not Sasanian Persia, in light of

100 DZ 932, 19: 102b5–6.

101 DZ 932, 19: 104b4–7. For the translations of the minerals, see the list of English-Chinese mineral names in “Vocabulary of Mineralogical Terms Occurring in the Manual of P.V.J.D. Dana” in Xiang and Zhang (1896: appendix, 1–19 [2–37]); Chen (2022: 485–489). Judging from the color mentioned here, the author perhaps had crocidolite in mind.

102 T 2144, 54: 1289b20. See Pelliot in Forte (1996b: 248).

103 See the notes on the founding of this polity in Kuwata (1954: 13–16).

104 DZ 932, 19: 102b18–c1.

the date (post-664) and the simultaneous reference to a polity in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the reference to *Kunlun* 崑崙 (EMC: *kwən lwən*) also points to Southeast Asia, as this may be a transcription of the Malay word *gunung* (“mountain”), but this is uncertain.<sup>105</sup> In the late seventh century, the monk Yijing writes, “As the people of Ku-lun were the first to come to Jiao-zhou and Guang-zhou, these places were generally called the country of Kun-lun. In this country of Kun-lun, the people have curly hair and black bodies.” 良為掘倫，初至交廣，遂使總喚崑崙國焉。唯此崑崙，頭捲體黑。<sup>106</sup> This is clearly a country to the south of China. Another important point of evidence that places *Kunlun* to the south of China is found in Liyan’s Chinese-Sanskrit dictionary of the Tang period, in which *Kunlun* 崑崙 corresponds to Sanskrit *Jipāttala*.<sup>107</sup> Sylvain Lévi (1931) reads this as a corruption of Sanskrit *Dvīpāntara*, a broad term denoting the many islands of the Malay Archipelago.<sup>108</sup> *Linyi* and *Kunlun* were in Southeast Asia in this context, so based on this, why would *Bosi* refer to Persia? Asbestos textiles are attested from antiquity in Southeast Asia, and maritime trade between there and China conveyed these products (Cameron et al. 2015). This problem of the identity of *Bosi* leads to a critical problem that must be discussed, the implications of which shape our understanding of Southeast Asian economic history.

### 3 Persians and Arabs in Southeast Asia and Southern China

The fact that trade occurred between China and a country called *Bosi*, which was apparently located somewhere in Southeast Asia problematizes the historical model in which it is believed that Sasanian merchants regularly frequented China via maritime routes, and that they had settled in ports in southern China. Colless (1969: 14–15), citing Schafer, understood that the Chinese monk Yijing traveled “from Canton to Srivijaya with a Persian shipmaster” in 671. The primary source in which this account is related, however, reads *Bosi bozhu* 波斯船主.<sup>109</sup> Reading *Bosi* as “Persian” in instances such as this has given the widely accepted impression that a significant Persian presence existed in

105 I must thank Chia Siang Kim for pointing this out (15 September 2022). See also Zhen (2014: 151). See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 178, 202).

106 *T* 2125, 54: 205b17–19. Translation by Li (2000: 13).

107 *T* 2135, 54: 1236a18.

108 See also the relevant remarks on the Indian and Chinese terms by Braddell (1937: 69–70).

109 See *Datang xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan* 大唐西域求法高僧傳 (*Great Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks who Traveled to the Western Regions Seeking the Dharma*); *T* 2066, 51: 7c15–17. The year actually corresponds to 672 (year 3 of Xianheng 咸亨).

southern China already in the seventh century, or even somewhat earlier. This had led to confusing statements in scholarly literature. For instance, although Wang (1958: 103; 124–127) has also interpreted this line as referring to a Persian vessel, he notes that it is exceptional. Wang then argues against Persian maritime trade with China before the seventh century. As Laufer (1919: 470) emphasized a century ago, we need to ask whether this actually denoted a “Malayan *Bosi*”; in fact, Laufer argued that *Yijing* sailed with a Malayan captain, not a Persian one.

Some recent scholars have contested Laufer’s assertion. George (2015: 582, fn. 3) states, “Laufer has argued that the term *bosi* could sometimes refer to the Malay peninsula [...] Later writers, however, agree not to regard this ambiguity as relevant to the Tang period, when the term normally designates Iran.” Such a dismissal, I think, fails to account for a lot of data from the Tang period, and shortly thereafter, indicating that *Bosi* was a country, region, and/or people located somewhere in the Malay Archipelago. Moreover, I think it is unreasonable to assume that Chinese sources postdating the Tang cannot be considered relevant to the Tang period. The politics and cultures of Southeast Asia experienced a continuity regardless of the dynastic changes in China.

Modern Chinese dictionaries even make a distinction between the two different *Bosi*. The voluminous twentieth-century *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 (*Great Dictionary of Chinese*) defines the word *Bosi* as follows: 1. Iran; 2. Samudera in Sumatra; 3. precious gems; 4. foreign gem merchants; and 5. long-bearded men.<sup>110</sup> There indeed was a *Bosi* in the South Seas from the Tang period onward, but why would this refer to Persians? A pertinent expression is even found in a later Chinese Chan (Zen) text that records the sayings of monk Mian 密菴 (1118–1186): “The nostrils of the *Bosi* of the South Seas are large.” 南海波斯鼻孔大.<sup>111</sup> The assumption that this ought to denote Persians would necessitate that Persians were actually present in the seas to the south of China, and that they were, in fact, still identified as Persians from Iran even after the end of the Sasanians in the mid-seventh century.

I want to demonstrate here that uncritically translating *Bosi* as “Persian” in all contexts for texts dating after the mid-seventh century can easily lead to mistranslations and then, in turn, to speculations about a significant Persian presence in southern China, but this problem has been ongoing for decades. Even among those scholars who recognize that a *Bosi* existed in the South Seas during the Tang period, there are differing interpretations regarding who these

110 I have consulted the digitized version of *Hanyu dacidian* using the software Lingoos.

111 *Mian Heshang yulu* 密菴和尚語錄 (*Recorded Sayings of Monk Mian*), edited by Chongyue 崇岳 and Liaowu 了悟 in c.1188. T1999, 47: 969b6.

people were. Wolters (1960: 324–325) summarizes the theories proposed in his time as follows:

Several theories have been offered to explain the use of the same name in two separate geographical contexts. It could indicate the existence of early Persian colonies in northern Sumatra; it could have been an early transliteration of ‘Pasai’ in northern Sumatra or of some place in or near Burma; finally, it could merely be a reference to Persian middlemen who handled South East Asian goods and brought them on to China.

The interpretation of *Bosi* is critical, since our understanding of early Southeast Asian history is significantly altered by whether we accept that Persians were a significant trading or cultural entity in the region in the latter half of the first millennium CE. Wolters (1960: 346) believes that “Sumatran Malays, operating from a number of harbour states and collectively dubbed ‘*Po-ssū*’ or ‘Persian,’ were middlemen in Persian goods.”

I do *not* find this theory convincing, and I am inclined to agree with Laufer’s original idea that *Bosi* in the Southern Sea was altogether separate—culturally, socially, and geographically—from Persia. This is not to deny that Persians traveled and lived in Southeast Asia, and even southern China from a certain point in history, but this fact, I think, does not necessitate that *Bosi* in the Southern Sea should denote Persia or Persians, even though Chinese writers in the Tang conflated the two separate peoples. The identification of the toponym underlying the *Bosi* in the Southern Seas is challenging, but I believe that we can find a realistic solution.

First, *Bosi* denotes a people different from the Persians. This fact is even interestingly reflected in Sino-Japanese literature. The hagiography of the Chinese monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763), known as Ganjin in Japanese, was compiled in 779 by Ōfumi no Mifune 淡海三船 (722–785), also known as Mahito Genkai 真人元開. There, we read that when Jianzhen went to Guangzhou in southern China, “in the river there were ships of the *Poluomen* [\*Brāhmaṇa], *Bosi*, and *Kunlun*. Uncertain was their number. They all carried fragrant medicines and precious treasures amassed like mountains.” 江中有婆羅門，波斯，崑崙等船，不知其數。並載香藥珍寶積載如山。<sup>112</sup> Schottenhammer (2016: 142) explains that “the biographical account of Jianzhen’s expedition also records that the port of Guangzhou was full of ships with traders of Indian, Malay, Sri Lankan, Iranian, and Arab origins, and their goods of spices, medicine, and

<sup>112</sup> See *Tō Daiwajō tō seiden* 唐大和上東征傳 (*Biography of the Eastward Journey of the Great Tang Monk*). T 2089, 51: 991c6–15.

other treasures were piled like mountains.” Chen (2022: 476) also insists that in Guangzhou “were anchored countless boats trading with India, Persia and southeast Asia.”

Would *Bosi* realistically denote Iranians in this context (and, moreover, does *Poluomen* really denote India)? Laufer (1919: 469–470) places the ambiguous country called *Poluomen* (“Brāmaṇa”) on the border of Burma, and likewise, *Bosi* could be placed adjacent to it, according to his interpretation. This would categorically mean that *Bosi* in this context was *not* Persia, especially if we consider that in the eighth century, Persia no longer existed for practical purposes in the eyes of the Chinese, even if Persians were still resident in China as an identifiable community. Laufer bases his position on data provided by a work titled *Man shu* 蠻書, which translates as *Book of the Man Peoples*, written by Fan Chuo 樊綽 (fl. 9th cent.) around the year 860–873.<sup>113</sup> There, *Bosi* is positioned relative to the country of *Piao* 驃 (EMC: *bjiauw<sup>H</sup>*), which is generally assumed to refer to Pyu (a country that existed in what is now modern Myanmar and Yunnan).<sup>114</sup>

The country of Pyu is located seventy-five days away to the south of the city of Yongchang in *Man*. [...] [This country] borders *Bosi* and *Poluomen* (Brāhmaṇa). Westward the city of \*Śāri is twenty days away. Based on the Buddhist scriptures, Śāri is in Middle India. Nearby is Sand Mountain, on which neither grass nor trees grows. The *Classic of the Ganges* states that having passed Sand Mountain, it is the country of Pyu. I suspect it is Eastern India.

113 On Fan Chuo, see Zheng et al. (2018: 124). Classical Chinese has several words that are uncritically translated into English as “barbarian” (*man* 蠻, *yi* 夷, *hu* 胡, etc.) in general, but this is problematic, since it fails to account for nuances of usage. “Barbarian” as a noun or adjective in English has a pejorative sense, but Chinese writers did not express any universal contempt for all foreign peoples. See discussion by Boucher (2000).

114 This link between the *Piao* in Chinese and Pyu is not universally accepted. Aung-Thwin (2012: 63) points out that “the Old Burmese term ‘Pyu’ appears in Old Burmese inscriptions not only much later (the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries AD) but not necessarily in reference ‘ethno-linguisticity’ but to individuals distinguished by occupation, gender and location. In other words there is nothing in the early Chinese texts and the later Burmese evidence to suggest a historical or etymological link between the two terms.” This is correct insofar as the term is a Chinese exonym for people who did not refer to themselves as such, but Jao (1974) provides a far more extensive analysis of the Chinese names in diverse sources. See the EMC reading in Pulleyblank (1991b: 239).

驃國在蠻永昌城南七十五日程 … 與波斯及婆羅門鄰接。西去舍利城二十日程。據佛經，舍利城中天竺國也。近城有沙山，不生草木，恒河經云沙山中過然則驃國，疑東天竺也。<sup>115</sup>

This excerpt contains some ambiguities, but the country of Pyu in Myanmar, south of Yunnan, could not border Persia.<sup>116</sup> Persia would have bordered Western India, and not the eastern regions. Another important line by Fan Chuo, to which Laufer draws attention, mentions traders from *Bosi* comingling with other persons in a region somewhere again in the vicinity of Yunnan and Myanmar:

Further to the southeast one arrives at the Great Silver Cave. Further south, there is a place of commercial exchange among the various races of *Puluomen* (Brāhmaṇa), *Bosi*, \*Java, *Boni* [Borneo?], and *Kunlun*.

又東南至大銀孔，又南有婆羅門，波斯，闍婆，勃泥，崑崙數種外通交易之處。<sup>117</sup>

Although one might misread this as Brahmins (i.e., Indians) and Persians engaging in trade in Southeast Asia, these are actually just regions located in that area. *Puluomen* 婆羅門 would normally be a transcription of Brāhmaṇa

115 *Man shu* (SKQS), 10.1b–2a.

116 The account of Pyu in the history of the Tang (*Jiu Tang shu*, 197.5285–5286) places Pyu to the south of Nanzhao 南詔 (a vassal state of the Tang in the area of modern Yunnan), and explains something about a city of Pyu (ostensibly the capital): “The city of Luo is constructed of brickwork, being 160 *li* in circumference. The banks of the moat are also constructed of bricks. It is traditionally said that this is the city of Śāriputra. Within the city, the residents comprise tens of thousands of households. There are more than a hundred Buddhist monasteries.” 其羅城構以磚甃，周一百六十里，濠岸亦構磚。相傳本是舍利佛城。城內有居人數萬家。佛寺百餘區。The toponym *Shelifo* 舍利佛 would normally be a phonetic transcription of “Śāriputra” (it ought to be *Shelifu* 舍利弗), a name of the one the Buddha’s prominent disciples; conversely, if the city of Śrāvastī was intended, then one would expect *Shewei cheng* 舍衛城 (the conventional way to transcribe Śrāvastī in Chinese Buddhism), rather than *Sheli cheng* 舍利城. See entry on Pyu in Wade (2014: 20). We should also expect that a journey from what is now Myanmar to Middle India would have required more than twenty days at the time. A similar line is found in the *Taiping yulan* (SKQS 789.4b): “[This country] borders *Bosi* and *Puluomen*. Westward the city of \*Śāri[putra] is sixty days away. I suspect this is Eastern India.” 與波斯及婆羅門接界，西去舍利城六十日程，疑此是東天竺也。This *Henghe jing* 恒河經 (“Classic of the Ganges”) is an intriguing title, but no further information is known about it. It appears to have been a travelogue or geographical text in Chinese concerning India.

117 *Man shu* (SKQS), 6.5a–5b.

from Sanskrit (i.e., “Brahmins”), but here it is clearly the name of a country or region. In the seventh century, Xuanzang already stated that India was comprised of castes, with the Brahmins being the noblest, and as Brahmins are without borders, India as a whole could also be called the country of Brahmins.<sup>118</sup> However, the country bordering Pyu, and whose traders assembled among the others at this “Great Silver Cave” (ostensibly a silver mine, as suggested by Laufer), were likely in the vicinity of Assam and the Himalayas.

Fan Chuo mentions a “Minor Brāhmaṇa” (*Xiao Puoluomen* 小婆羅門), bordering Pyu and located a journey of seventy-four days to the north of Yongchang (this position would be relative to the south of Tibet and the far southwest of Sichuan). Fan Chuo also mentions they “customarily do not eat beef.” 俗不食牛肉. This presumably indicates a Brahmanical (i.e., Hindu) heritage.<sup>119</sup> At least two Chinese sources also mention a *Daqin Poluomen* 大秦婆羅門, which Jao (1974: 568–569) understands to be “Mahā Cīna Brahman.” He points to a fragmentary Indic work, the *Ṣaṭpañcāśaddeśavibhāga*, and cites Sircar (1971: 103–104), whose research has shown that Cīna-deśa was geographically positioned to the southeast of Mānaseśa. Sircar states, “The country to the south-east of the Mān-sarovar is Tibet which appears to be indicated by the name Cīna in the verse.” The text also refers separately to a Mahā-Cīna, which extended from Kailāsa-giri (Mount Kailāsa) and from the origin of the Sarayū all the way to Moṅga (Mongolia); this refers to China. Clearly, Fan Chuo was referring to the “Cīna” that was not his native country. We have to be aware of the differences in the nomenclature in this context: Cīna in Sanskrit could refer to China, but the Cīna as a *mleccha* people, different from the Chinese, are known in much older Indic literature, such as the *Manusmṛiti* (10.44.1–2), in which they are mentioned alongside the Pahlava, Yavana, and others.<sup>120</sup> The revised history of the Tang from the year 1060 places this ambiguous “Mahā-Cīna Brāhmaṇa” 1000 *li* west of what appears to be the Chindwin River, after which one crosses over a great peak; 3,000 *li* further west one reaches Kamarupa (*Gemolu* 箇沒盧) in Eastern India.<sup>121</sup> Based on this Chinese geography from the Tang period, Luce (1985: 69) has suggested that the location of this “Brāhmaṇa” country was either Singkaling Hkamti or the Hukong Valley in northern Myanmar.

118 *T* 2087, 51: 875b24–26.

119 *Man shu* (SQKS), 10.3a.

120 paundrakāś caudradraviḍāḥ kāmbojā yavanāḥ śakāḥ | pāradapahlavās cīnāḥ kirātā daradāḥ khasāḥ || (see the digitized text in the DCs—Digital Corpus of Sanskrit).

121 See some further details in Fang (1987: 600).

The country of *Bosi* was situated relative to this country, as well as Pyu in Myanmar. As the *Bosi* were a seafaring people, they were certainly located on a coast somewhere. Indeed, as Laufer pointed out long ago, we ought to look to Malaya as the location of these people, but Sumatra is the stronger possibility. Alternatively, *Bosi* as a people might have straddled multiple regions in the area of the Malay Archipelago. A later source, the *Song shi* (*History of the Song*)—the dynastic history of the Song dynasty (960–1279) that was completed in 1345—gives some useful geographical data in an overview of the country of Zhenla 真臘 in the Mekong area. The entry states the following: “Its vassal states include *Zhenlifu* in the southwest edge; it connects at the southeast with the edge of *Bosi*, and at the southwest to the border of *Dengliumei*.” 其屬邑有真里富，在西南隅，東南接波斯蘭，西南與登流眉為鄰。<sup>122</sup> This would presumably place *Bosi* somewhere in Malaya.

If we accept that the *Bosi*, who were seafarers in the Southern Sea, refers to a Malay or closely related people, and not Persians, the model in which Persians were apparently highly active during the Tang period in southern China, and responsible for the shipment of numerous commodities via sea routes, can be dismantled. Schottenhammer (2016: 140) acknowledges that “although the expression *Bosi* may sometimes refer to Malay people, it is clear that originally people from the Sasanian dynasty were meant when speaking of individuals from the Persian Gulf area.” This is true, but Schottenhammer also states, “After the downfall of the Sasanian dynasty, we should understand the term *Bosi* as designating a probably mainly Persian-speaking diaspora of people from the Persian Gulf area (and perhaps neighboring regions) who traded on ships crewed by people of a diverse range of ethnicities and religions and with communities spread all over the Indian Ocean region.” This is not an unpalatable explanation. One can point to a contemporary voice from East Asia to support this model: for instance, the aforementioned Silla (Korean) monk, Hyecho, who spent the years 724 to 727 abroad during his journey to India, mentions that Persia had been swallowed up by the Tāzīks (Arabs). He is clearly referring to Persia, but he continues his description of Persia as follows:

They frequently sail the West Sea. They enter the South Sea, heading to Sri Lanka to acquire various treasures. The country is therefore said to produce treasures. They also head to the country of Kunlun to acquire gold. They also sail to the land of China, all the way to Guangzhou, where

<sup>122</sup> *Song shi*, 489.14087. The Zhonghua Shuju edition reads *lan* 蘭 as part of the name of the state (*Bosilan*), but I read this as *lan* 闌, which means edge, flank, perimeter, or to be cut off in this context.



they acquire all manner of silk textiles. The land produces fine brocades. The people of the country love taking lives. They worship Heaven and are unaware of the Buddhadharma.

常於西海汎舶，入南海，向師子國取諸寶物。所以彼國云出寶物。亦向崑崙國取金，亦汎舶漢地，直至廣州，取綾絹絲綿之類。土地出好細疊。國人愛殺生。事天不識佛法。<sup>123</sup>

If we recognize that *Bosi* was a polity in Southeast Asia that engaged in trade with southern China, then it would appear that Hyecho conflated this *Bosi* and the Iranian *Bosi*. He traveled by sea to India, and although some believe that he also traveled as far as Iraq, his comments about regions to the west seem to be more hearsay than a reflection of a travelogue. More realistically, Hyecho stayed in India, but did not himself travel to the caliphate. He might have actually met *Bosi* people during his trip. This is highly significant, since it demonstrates that authors at the time assumed that those merchants arriving from the south were one and the same as the Persians (who by then as a country had long fallen to the Arabs), no doubt due to the confusing identical name in Chinese. Colless (1969: 15), citing Schafer, understood Hyecho's statements as reflecting a historical reality that Persians sailed to China, whereas I think that Hyecho simply conflated the two cultures. I think that it was the *Bosi* of Southeast Asia who were known to the Chinese as a people of seafarers, not the Persians.

Determining the exact identity of the *Bosi* of Southeast Asia is a challenge, but Chia Siang Kim, a private scholar in Kuala Lumpur, has kindly pointed out to me that this could refer to Barus on Sumatra based on a phonetic similarity.<sup>124</sup> This suggestion led me to the rich study on Barus by Drakard (1989), who points out many interesting facts based on Chinese and Arabic sources, pointing out that there was, in fact, a country in Sumatra known to the Chinese as *Polu* 婆露 (EMC: *ba lʰ*), among other names. This country was known by the Arabs as *Bālūs*. Drakard draws attention to the monk Yijing, who in his account of the Southern Seas from 691 records the names of Buddhist realms, the first of which starting from the west is *Polushi* 婆魯師 (EMC: *ba lʰ' si*).<sup>125</sup> In this context, Barus is a wider region and not strictly the modern town of the same name. Even earlier, Ptolemy also described the sea route from the South of India or Sri Lanka to Sumatra. One of the sightings was Barusai. Using

123 *T* 2089, 51: 978a27–b8. Cf. the translation by Finch et al. (2012: 145–146).

124 Private communication (15 September 2022).

125 *T* 2125, 54: 205b12–13.

Ptolemy's coordinates, Gerini (1897) identifies this as the "Pulo Nias group, and Pulo Batu; or else the opposite coast of Sumatra at Barus."<sup>126</sup>

Most importantly to our present discussion, there is a phonetic similarity between this and how "Persia" was transcribed into Chinese. As we have explored above, Xuanzang transcribes "Persia" from Sanskrit *Pārasī* as *Bolasi* 波刺私 (EMC: *pa lat si*).<sup>127</sup> It is easy to imagine that the names of these two separate peoples were conflated, especially with the abbreviated *Bosi* 波斯 (EMC: *pa siä/si*), which was shortened from *Boluosi* 波羅斯 (EMC: *pa la siä/si*) or something very similar. The latter word for Persia dates to the fourth century, but it was evidently abbreviated relatively soon, perhaps due to the Chinese tendency to use binomials comprised of two characters.<sup>128</sup> Huilin's dictionary also defines Xuanzang's transcription of *Pārasī* as "*Bosi*, otherwise called the country of *Bosi*, located on the Western Sea." 波斯, 或云波斯國名也, 臨近西海.<sup>129</sup>

Further useful data is furnished by the new history of the Tang, which states that the country of Śrīvijaya (Chn. *Shilifoshi* 室利佛逝) was divided into two parts: the western half (corresponding to western Sumatra) was called \*Langabalus (Chn. *Langpolusi* 郎婆露斯, EMC: *lay ba l<sup>h</sup> siä/si*).<sup>130</sup> Again, we can see how Barus/Balus could have been shortened to *Bosi* in Chinese and then easily conflated with Persia. In other words, words like *Pārasī* and *Barus(at)* sounded largely identical to Chinese speakers.

In light of these facts, in my opinion, Barus is the optimal candidate for the puzzling seafaring *Bosi*, who were located somewhere in relation to Pyu in Myanmar, but who also, according to Chinese sources, interacted with persons from the general area of Southeast Asia. If *Bosi* in the context of Chinese maritime trade did, in fact, refer to Barus, then we have to reconsider studies that assign to a Persian origin any number of imported items. It is far more realistic, in my mind, to attribute the maritime trade between China and Southeast Asia during the Tang dynasty to Barus and other countries in the area.

126 See Table VII in Gerini (1897).

127 *T* 1558, 29: 85b23 & 85c14.

128 This name for Persia is given in the aforementioned "Illustration of Tributary Offerings" by Xiao Yi from c.526–539, which is discussed in Chapter 3. We will recall that the content was adapted from the work of Shi Dao'an (fourth century).

129 *T* 2128, 766c2–3.

130 *Xin Tang shu*, 222b.6305. As Schoff (1922: 365) explains, Baros, the port of the Bataks on the western coast of Sumatra, "recalls the name Langabalus, or Langabaros, an old name for the Nicobar Islands." See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 181, 183, 200, 203, 241, 281, 291).

This model challenges the recent study of Chen Ming, who attempts to document the transmission of Persian medicine to China, but there are significant problems with this. For example, Chen (2022: 477) uncritically assigns to a Persian origin any number of items in Chinese pharmacopeia, overlooking the influences of peoples from Southeast Asian polities. One of these substances is “benzoin (*Anxi xiang* 安息香 lit. ‘Parthian aromatic,’ *Styrax tonkinensis* (Pierre) Craib ex Hart).” Why would a type of tree resin, native to the area of the Gulf of Tonkin (*tonkinensis*), be sourced from Persia? Moreover, why would the Chinese call this “Parthian”? In contrast, Wolters (1960: 336) states, “The only South East Asian resin later called *An-hsi* by the Chinese was *Styrax benzoin*. The name of ‘Parthian perfume’ was therefore deliberately transferred at some time to this resin of a tree which grows in northern Sumatra, in the hills behind Palembang, and occasionally in the extreme west of Java; with other species from Laos it has supplied the world with benjamin gum.” One can easily misread the name of the aromatic, and conclude that it must possess some inherent connection with Iran. The word *anxi xiang* is comprised of two elements: *anxi* and *xiang*. The latter means “aromatic” and is the typical word for incense, but one can misread the former element as the ancient rendering of “Aršak,” i.e., Parthia, but, as we have already documented above, the name came to denote Bukhara, especially after the demise of the Parthians in the third century CE. Moreover, this type of incense only became current in China from the fifth or sixth century at the earliest, first in Buddhist literature, and there the word is used semantically, meaning “to placate.”<sup>131</sup> The dynastic history of the Jin, the *Jin shu* 晉書 of 648, includes a hagiography of the Buddhist monk Fo Tucheng 佛圖澄 (233–349). There we read that he was able to restore the supply of water from a spring by burning this type of incense while reciting incantations, through which he commanded a dragon (*nāga*) to fetch the water.<sup>132</sup> Yamada (1974: 132–133) notes this reference to the aromatic, suggesting that this type of incense would have been extremely rare. If the account were historically true, then this would be the case, but I would not accept this story as objectively historical, since it is hagiographical in character. In 519, the monk Huijiao also recorded this story about Fo Tucheng, and it is from this century that this type of incense became more widely mentioned in Chinese Buddhist literature, especially as specific types of aromatics were prescribed for use in rituals.<sup>133</sup> The chronology of its use in China leads me to doubt that it originally had any connection with Parthia or Persia. The economic data of

131 Some of these facts are discussed in Kotyk (2020c).

132 *Jin shu*, 95.2486.

133 *T* 2059, 50: 384a1–12.

foreign countries in the history of the Sui dynasty (581–617) states that Kucha and Zabula produced *anxi xiang*. Persia is also said to produce several aromatics, but not this one.<sup>134</sup> Haw (2019: 91–92), however, reads the above story and states, “It therefore seems that *Anxi xiang* was known in China during the lifetimes of Shi Le and Fotucheng, that is, in about 300 CE. This suggests that it might well have first become known to the Chinese as an export from the Parthian Empire, and was so named as a result.” I think this conclusion is problematic for the simple fact that the story is clearly fantastical. It is more reasonable to assume that this story was made up by religious devotees. Moreover, assuming that the story dates to the lifetime of Fo Tucheng is risky, since it first appears much later in the extant canon. The history of Chinese Buddhism in the early centuries (first to early fifth century) is beset with many problems, particularly the absence of contemporary voices. The Parthian empire had also ceased to exist by 224 CE, even before Fo Tucheng had been born. Moreover, the prose in my view does not read like Buddhist Chinese of the time of Fo Tucheng. I suspect that it is a much later composition, or otherwise a reformulation of earlier material.

The identity of *anxi xiang* in the original Indian context might be determined based on what the attested corresponding Sanskrit or Indic term was. We discover that it was not any form of styrax. One Buddhist work on *dhāraṇīs*, which appears to date to the eighth or ninth century, gives *jujuluo* 婁具羅 (EMC: *guǎ’ guǎ’ la*) as the Indic name for *anxi xiang*.<sup>135</sup> This clearly corresponds to *guggulu* or *guggula* in Sanskrit.<sup>136</sup> Haw (2019: 89), however, expresses some doubts about this connection, stating, “It seems to me to be best to set aside the uncertain identification of *Anxi xiang* with *guggulu*, especially as it is not clear what *guggulu* really was.” I do not think that this is a reasonable dismissal, because *guggulu* does appear in Chinese Buddhist literature, and presumably foreign monks and merchants in China at least knew what this substance was. Monier-Williams (1899: 356) identifies *guggulu* as “bdellium or the exudation of *Amyris Agallochum* (a fragrant gum resin, used as a perfume and medication).” During the British Raj, George Watt (1889a: 426), in his voluminous encyclopedia of products of India, understood bdellium as “a myrrh-like resin, of which there are three kinds.” These include *Balsamodendron Mukul*, *B. Roxburghii*, and *B. pubescens*. Watt further explains that “*Mukul* or *Gugul*

134 *Sui shu*, 83.1852 & 1857. See also Yamada (1976: 132).

135 The text is titled *Da foding guangju tuoluoni jing* 大佛頂廣聚陀羅尼經 (*Extensive Dhāraṇīs of the Great Buddha Uṣṇīṣa*). See *T* 946, 19: 173a25. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 165, 203).

136 Pelliot (1912: 480); Yamada (1976: 134); Laufer (1919: 467).

(Indian Bdellium) from Coromandel is the produce of *Boswellia glabra*, and that from the Western Himalaya is the produce of *Boswellia serrata*.” Although this description from the nineteenth century is not authoritative for the exact identification of something used at least a millennium earlier, it still is a reasonable first step, especially considering the paucity of evidence. The point I want to emphasize here, however, is that none of the above data actually links *anxi xiang* with Persia or Parthia.

As Laufer and other scholars have noted, *anxi xiang* came to denote another resin, which has often been cited as an example of a connection with Persia. Li Xun, who is thought to have been part of the Persian diaspora in China (which is yet another complicating factor in this discussion), offers the following entry on *anxi xiang*:

According to the *Chronicle of Guangzhou*, “It is produced in the country of *Bosi* in the South Seas. It is resin from a tree, and has a form like the gum from a peach tree. It is harvested during the autumn months.” Another prescription states, “When a lady encounters a spirit in dreams at night, combine the ‘fetid yellow’ into a ball and fumigate the vaginal cavity, and this [condition] will be permanently halted.” This also treats nocturnal emission in males and warm kidneys, and it dispels bad *qi*.

謹按《廣州記》云：生南海波斯國。樹中脂也，狀若桃膠，以秋月採之。又方云：婦人夜夢鬼交，以臭黃合為丸，燒薰丹穴，永斷。又主男子遺精，暖腎，闢惡氣。<sup>137</sup>

This description refers to a region to the south, not west, of China; this cannot be Persia or even a vector for trade with the Persian Gulf. Yamada (1976: 131) and also Laufer (1919: 464–465) have identified this resin in question as *Styrax benzoin*; Yamada makes note of the Sumatran and Thai species. The variety of *styrax* in the Levant and Middle East was originally *Styrax officinalis*. Based on this model, it is difficult to accept that *anxi xiang*, which was either *guggulu* or *benzoin*, was introduced into China via Persian medicine. Haw (2019), however, points to the description of the “*anxi xiang* tree” given by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (d. 863), and argues that *Liquidambar orientalis* Mill., which now grows primarily in Turkey, is the most likely tree to which the Chinese term would correspond. His proposed identification, however, is premised on his assumption that *anxi xiang* “most probably originally reached China from the Parthian Empire.” However, this is problematic, since the purported connection between

<sup>137</sup> *Haiyao bencao*, 42. See the discussion and translation in Kotyk (2020c: 520).

this aromatic and Parthia is weak. We might instead infer that Duan Chengshi was reproducing foreign medical documentation that had been earlier translated into Chinese, since this tree was never apparently transplanted to China. Knowledge of plants grown in western Asia was available in the Tang period, but descriptions of them in Chinese presumably stemmed from foreign texts and oral explanations, rather than firsthand knowledge by local growers and apothecaries. In this way, we end up with a complicated situation in which one text is describing a tree from a remote land, but the aromatic called *anxi xiang* could refer to one of a few different resins over several centuries.

Chen (2022: 478) also identifies Borneo camphor wood (*longnao xiangshu* 龍腦香樹) as a Persian medical product. Why would Persian medicine be the medium through which the Chinese got hold of something originating in Southeast Asia? Even if the argument is that camphor was a part of Persian medicine (but based on what evidence?), I cannot see how Persians can be held responsible for introducing such knowledge to China when botany and primary sources in Chinese would indicate a Southeast Asian origin (and, moreover, we have no Middle Persian sources with which to directly corroborate any claims about Persian medicine and China). Heng (2015: 216–218) explains some relevant facts as follows:

Camphor was an important Southeast Asian aromatic that was imported into China from the Tang period onwards. Camphor products were derived from two main plant sources. *Dryobalanpos aromatic*, or Barus camphor, found in Sumatra, Borneo, and on the Malay Peninsula in Tregganu, Pahang, Johor, and Selangor, was traded as a resin and often compared to frankincense, a resinous aromatic from the Middle East. The other is *Blumea balsamifera*, which was traded to and within China in the form of oil and powder, and is from Nepal, Island Southeast Asia, and the Philippines. While the former was confined to the Malay Peninsula, the Malacca Straits region, and Borneo, the latter could be found in not just the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, but also in the subtropical regions of coastal China, including Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan Island.

Heng also remarks, “Up until the eleventh century, Barus camphor was the type of camphor that was shipped to China. It first entered China during the Sui Dynasty (589–618), when the resin was presented as tribute to the Sui court.” Regarding camphor in medical literature, Heng states, “The widespread use of camphor appears to have begun only in the late eleventh century. Medical guidebooks published from the late eleventh century onwards recommend

camphor as an ingredient for a greater number of uses.” These facts are certainly related in the primary sources. Around the early tenth century, Li Xun, citing sources available to him, explains that camphor (*longnao* 龍腦, literally “dragon brains” in Chinese) “is produced in the country of *Lü* in the Western Sea. This is the resin from the *Bolü* tree.” 生西海律國，是波律樹中脂也。The country in question ought to correspond to *Bolü* 波律 (EMC: *pa lwit*), which in turn reflects the other names surveyed above for what I propose is “Barus.”<sup>138</sup> Li Xun also states, “Also, during the time of Tang Taizong [r. 626–649], the country of *Lü* in the Western Sea offered camphor incense as tribute. We know where it comes from due to this.” 又唐太宗時，西海律國貢龍腦香，是知彼處出耳。<sup>139</sup> An earlier source, the dynastic history of the Liang dynasty (502–557) compiled in 636, states that the country of Langkasuka (*Langyaxiu* 狼牙脩), which is said to have been similar to Funan 扶南 (Mekong Delta) in terms of climate and products, produces many aromatics, such as *Polü xiang* 婆律香.<sup>140</sup> This could be translated as the “incense of Barus.” Pelliot (1912: 474) has already identified this *Polü* as Barus in Sumatra, which was celebrated for camphor.

The reason why camphor might be mistakenly connected with Persia stems from certain remarks like those of Duan Chengshi. He records the following:

Toward the end of the Tianbao reign era [742–756], the Southlands offered as tribute [pieces of] camphor shaped like cicadas and silkworms. A *Bosi* said, “These are had from the knots of old camphor trees.” The royal residence called it auspicious camphor [literally, “auspicious dragon brains”].

天寶末，交趾貢龍腦，如蟬蠶形。波斯言：老龍腦樹節方有，禁中呼為瑞龍腦。<sup>141</sup>

If we read *Bosi* as “Persian,” then the figure in the account was an Iranian acting as an informant for a product originating from lands to the south, but it would make more sense to read *Bosi* as Barus. It should be someone from the south, i.e., Sumatra or Malaya, who informs the Chinese court about a product originating in the Malay Archipelago. Whether this is an objectively historical account is less important, since the key is to determine the intended referent

138 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 205).

139 *Haoyao bencao*, 42.

140 *Liang shu*, 54.795.

141 His work is titled *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 (*Miscellany of the Youyang Mountain*). See *Youyang zazu* (SKQS), 1.3a.

of *Bosi*. Duan Chengshi elsewhere writes that camphor “is sourced from the country of *Poli*. The *Poli* call it \**kapur barus*. It also is sourced from the country of *Bosi*.” 龍腦香樹，出婆利國，婆利呼為固不婆律，亦出波斯國。<sup>142</sup> Hirth and Rockwell (1911: 194) read *Poli* 婆利 (EMC: *ba li<sup>H</sup>*) as Perak, although one would expect a consonantal ending in the Middle Chinese reading of the second character.<sup>143</sup> Pelliot (1912: 474–475) reviews Hirth and Rockhill’s work, suggesting the reading *karpūrarasa* instead. He recognizes that this was likely a word from a Malay language. Laufer (1919: 479) suggests Bali. In any case, both of these parties understand that this *gubu* 固不 ought to correspond to *kapur*, the Malay word for camphor, which is incidentally also the etymological origin of the term in many European languages. Laufer suggests “*kāpor-bārus*” as a reconstruction, which I agree with, and he also critically remarks that “Hirth is not justified in here rendering Po-se by Persia and commenting that camphor was brought to China by Persian ships.” All these facts considered, there is absolutely no need to read *Bosi* as Persia, and then to imagine Persians shipping the product to China, although this model persists in some present day scholarship.

In other instances, however, it is clear that *Bosi* denotes Persia when a source country is given alongside a specific item. For instance, the *Taiping guang ji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Chronicle of the Taiping Era*), compiled between 977 and 978, but based on much earlier material, provides the following information concerning jasmine (*yeximi* 野悉密; EMC: *ji’a’ sit mit*).<sup>144</sup> This is clearly cognate with Pahalvi *yāsaman*, Arabic *yāsamīn*, and Sogdian *c’smn*.<sup>145</sup>

Jasmine is sourced from the country of Rome [Syria], and it is also sourced from *Bosi* (Persia). It sprouts seven or eight feet, with its flowers like that of the plum tree. It remains lush throughout the four seasons. The flowers produce five [petals], white in color, but no fruits are borne. When it blossoms, the whole field becomes fragrant. It is similar to the *lindera* of the southern regions. People of the Western Regions frequently pick the flowers and press them into oil. They dab [on themselves] the fragrant ointment.

142 *Youang zazu* (SKQS), 17.16b.

143 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 40, 188).

144 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 213, 330, 363).

145 See also Song (2001: 38).



野悉密出佛林國，亦出波斯國。苗長七八尺，葉似梅。四時敷榮。其花五出，白色，不結子。花開時，遍野皆香。與嶺南詹糖相類。西域人常彩其花，壓以為油，塗其香滑。<sup>146</sup>

In this case, the reference is clearly to Persia. The transcription of the word in Chinese is likely directly derived from Persian or a similar cognate.<sup>147</sup> Santos (2010) demonstrates that Persian and Syriac sources were utilized in the pharmacological section in Duan Chengshi's work. Authors did not distinguish between two different countries named *Bosi* and, in their minds, they were apparently one and the same. This would have especially been the case for writers in cities in the north of China, who had never been to the south or interacted with merchants from the South Seas.

If *Bosi* is read as Barus in the context of the Southern Seas, then we need to reread an important event recorded in the Chinese histories. Schottenhammer (2016: 162), citing the two histories of the Tang, mentions "a raid on Guangzhou by Iranians (*Bosi*) and Arabs (*Dashi*) in 758: they 'looted the storehouses, burned residential homes, and then sailed away on the sea.'"<sup>148</sup> George (2015: 595) similarly argues that "the explicit mention of both *dashi* and *bosi* points to a range of West Asians, possibly Arab and Iranian. The text implies that they had grown numerous enough, by that time, to openly defy Chinese authorities." Earlier, Schafer (1951: 407) wrote that "the island of Hainan, just off the coast of Kuangtung, maintained a large colony of Persians in the eighth century. These were, it would appear, chiefly the crews and passengers of Persian vessels that fell into the hands of Feng Jo-fang, a local chieftain with a taste for piracy. This island was probably the source of the Persian raid which devastated Canton in 758." Lieu (2000: 56–57) argues that this expedition of Arabs "in Persian ships" was a way to emphasize their victory after the defeat of the Chinese at the Battle of Talas in 751.

Yet, what reason would Iranians or Persians have for raiding Guangzhou, so far from the Persian Gulf, in 758? A raid certainly took place based on the Chinese record, but reading *Bosi* as "Iranian" assumes that post-Sasanian Persians had some base of operations not so far away, or that alongside Arabs, they sailed all the way to southern China just to raid Guangzhou once and then leave.

<sup>146</sup> *Taiping guangji*, 409.2a.

<sup>147</sup> Alternatively written as *yeximi* 野悉蜜; a more common transcription is *yeximing* 耶悉茗.

<sup>148</sup> As cited in Schottenhammer (2016: 162, fn. 110). See *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.513; *Xin Tang shu*, 6.161.

What about the purported Arab involvement in this incident? This reading assumes that *Dashi* 大食 (EMC: *da'/daj<sup>h</sup>zik*) reflects the ethnonym Tāzīk.<sup>149</sup> Although this reading is possible in other contexts, since it is the ethnonym for the Arabs in Middle Chinese (as we will discuss in Chapter 8), this same word also confusingly refers to a separate country in Southeast Asia. Feng (1982: 91) explains the different countries denoted by this word, and points out that the toponym of “Tumasik” (Temasek) is attested in Malay, which corresponds to the area of modern Singapore and Johore. He also points to a pertinent reference in a description of the location of Java, recorded in the history of the Song, which I translate as follows:

The country of Java is located in the Southern Seas. Eastward of the country, one reaches the sea in a month. Going to sea for half a month, one reaches the country of Kunlun. Westward one reaches the sea in forty-five days, while southward, one reaches the sea in three days. Going to sea for five days, one reaches the country of *Dashi*.

闍婆國在南海中。其國東至海一月。汎海半月至崑崙國。西至海四十五日，南至海三日。汎海五日至大食國。<sup>150</sup>

In this case, the country in question is clearly not referring to the “Tāzīks” (Arabia), but rather, it is a toponym for a country somewhere in relative proximity to Java by sea. “Temasek” is certainly a reasonable candidate, although the Chinese transcription is perhaps an earlier form of the name, as it is attested in later Javanese sources. Miksic (2013: 183) explains as follows:

Two ancient Javanese texts mention *Temasik* very briefly. The name *Temasik* is Malay, rather than Javanese. This word perhaps is derived from *tasik*, “lake” or “sea”; here it may signify the “place surrounded by the sea.” The *Nagarakrtagama/Desawarnana*, composed in 1365, contain a list of vassals of the Kingdom of Majapahit. The name *Temasik* appears among them.

*Temasik* is a more reasonable interpretation than “Arab” (*Tāzīk*) in the present context, in my view, because it is unrealistic to assume that Arabs and subjugated Persians carried out an organized raid against one of the most populated and probably heavily defended Chinese positions on the southern Chinese

149 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 69, 283).

150 *Song shi*, 489.14091.

coast. The logistics of such an undertaking for the early Abbasids, presumably launched from the Persian Gulf or Indian Ocean, would have been enormous, with no promise of any gains. One might imagine renegades or pirates being involved, but attacking a major Chinese port would have required an armada and large landing force competent in basic siege warfare (or at least able to scale walls), even if the local garrison was weakened during the An Lushan rebellion (755–763). Chaffee (2018: 37) suggests that shipwrecked merchants, West Asians who had found themselves in Hainan, were responsible, as they were “living outside of the normal bounds of Tang-Abbasid trade,” and therefore this “makes them the likely candidates for those who undertook the pirate-like raid of Guangzhou.” The raid was brutal enough to force the prefect (*ci shi* 刺史), Wei Lijian 韋利見 (d.u.), to abandon the city and flee.<sup>151</sup> The attack on Guangzhou was not insignificant. How could a depleted band of shipwrecked merchants cause the local government to abandon the city? This sort of imagined scenario is highly unlikely in my opinion.

Another reason to reject Arab involvement in the raid on Guangzhou is based on the fact that the then recently founded Abbasid Caliphate had sent an envoy to the Chinese court only a few months prior. The new Tang history records that the raid on Guangzhou occurred on 30 October, 758 (乾元元年九月癸巳).<sup>152</sup> Court records state that earlier, on 11 June, 758 (乾元元年五月壬申), an envoy of the “black-clad Tāziks” (*Heiyi Dashi* 黑衣大食), i.e., the Abbasids, came to court.<sup>153</sup> The proposal that “Arabs and Persians” raided Guangzhou would not make sense if we assume that this Arab envoy came on friendly terms. Moreover, the logistics of planning such a raid (and there was only one raid, not several, as we otherwise would expect), and the long-distance communications required between all the parties involved (the diplomatic envoys, admirals at sea, and so forth) could not have been carried out in only a few months. Again, it is more reasonable to interpret this raid as having been carried out by persons from Temasik and Barus and/or nearby regions. We must recognize, however, that the misreading in which Tāzik and Temasik are not distinguished is also present in the primary sources. Court historians in China did not differentiate between the two, and for an author some centuries later, they were one and the same. This is why the raid on Guangzhou is also

151 Wei Lijian and his flight are recorded in *Jiu Tang shu*, 10.253. For translations and explanations of Chinese ranks, see Hucker (1985: 559).

152 *Xin Tang shu*, 6.161.

153 The Abbasid envoy arrived at the same time as the Uyghurs. There was a dispute over who would go through the gate, so the organizers had them enter the eastern and western gates separately. See *Jiu Tang shu*, 195.5200; *Cefu yuangui* (*SKQS*), 971.23b–24a.

mentioned in the section of the Tang history that discusses Sasanian Persia.<sup>154</sup> Also, on this point, the *Dashi* 大石 (a variation of the more conventional *Dashi* 大食) in Jianzhen/Ganjin's hagiography, which is usually translated as "Arabs," needs to be reconsidered.<sup>155</sup>

We must note that many scholars understand that a significant presence of traders from the Persian Gulf operated in southern China. George (2015: 579), for instance, asserts the "growth of direct sea trade driven by merchants from the Arab-Persian Gulf serving the markets of Iraq, who settled in substantial numbers on the South China coast." In the face of this interpretation of the data, we also must still ask about the extent to which Persian and Arab seafarers visited China. For example, did Sasanians ever arrive in China by sea? This is an intriguing question that scholars have grappled with for several decades, even outside of Sinology. For instance, Tibbetts (1957: 6) states that "in Sassanid times the Persians had used the sea route to India, and according to the Chinese had even reached China." No evidence, however, is provided in support of this statement. Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 44) point out that Persian merchants were active in Ceylon in the early sixth century, according to the Greek geographer and traveler Cosmas. In his book, Cosmas writes that Christians, including a church with a Presbyter appointed in Persia, were present in Ceylon (Taprobane). He states that the island receives silk and other commodities from Tzinista (China). Based on this, we can assume that Persians and perhaps even some Chinese merchants interacted in Ceylon, especially given the fact that a Chinese monk could travel there by sea, but this does not require that Sasanian ships sailed all the way to China.<sup>156</sup> Colless (1969: 14) argues that Persian merchants in fact traveled beyond India and Ceylon during the early years of the Islamic domination of Iran, but cautions against making any claims about Persian ships in China during Sasanian times.

Some Persians and Arabs certainly sailed to China long after the Sasanian period. As Ferrand (1924: 243) discusses in his survey of Persian elements in Arab nautical texts, "Dès le IX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'empereur de Chine est désigné dans les textes arabes sous le non de *baǧpūr*." This term is derived from Pahlavi, evidently as a translated equivalent of Chinese *Tianzi* 天子 ("Son of Heaven"), although this does not necessitate *robust* maritime links. More pertinent is Tibbetts (1957: 9) who—following Ferrand and his explanation of Arabic topographical terms of Persian origin in Southeast and East Asia—argues that "the

154 *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5313.

155 *T* 2089, 51: 991c14–17.

156 See the translation of the Greek in McCrindle (1897: 365–367). See also Deeg (2010: 154–157), who points to the monk Faxian's journey through Sri Lanka and eastward by sea.

first merchants of the Near East to visit these areas were Persian speaking.” However, these developments apparently occurred from the eighth to ninth centuries. It is difficult to argue that a significant Sasanian presence operated in the Malay Archipelago, much less South China, in the sixth and seventh centuries, especially if we position the ambiguous *Bosi* seafarers in Sumatra and the vicinity thereof.

There is, of course, some evidence that Persians and also Arabs were sailing to China after the mid-Tang period. In the year 916, Abū Zayd of Sirāf mentions how the rebel Huang Chao 黃巢 (835–884) sacked Guangzhou between 878 and 879. He explains, “And men experienced in their affairs have mentioned that he killed 120,000 Moslems, Jews, Christians and Magians who lived in this city and became merchants in it, apart from those killed among the Chinese inhabitants.”<sup>157</sup> Setting aside whether this is an accurate number, this testimony assumes a significant presence of foreigners—Arab and Iranian—in Guangzhou in the ninth century.

Another important element in this discussion is the famous shipwreck off the coast of Belitung Island in Indonesia, which was discovered initially by fishermen in 1998. The ship is nowadays frequently said to have been from Arabia in popular discourse, but an examination of the critical scientific literature from the time of the discovery shows that the timber composition points more toward an Indian construction. Flecker (2001: 345–348) states, “The Belitung wreck has the potential to demonstrate that Arabs or Indians traded directly with China as early as the ninth century AD. A key factor must be whether or not the ship herself was of Arab or Indian origin.” He clarifies that “an Arab or Indian origin for the hull therefore seems highly likely, although the picture is again rendered uncertain by the lack of contemporaneous archaeological evidence.” One of the species of timber possibly used in the construction would have originated from a tree indigenous solely to Africa, but the identification of the badly deteriorated wood recovered from the seafloor was nonetheless inconclusive, leading to uncertainty regarding the origin of the ship: “Apart from *Afzelia*, which is not a positive identification, all other genus and species occur in India.” Still, given that Indian timber was used in the construction of Arab vessels, an Arab construction is also still plausible. Yajima (1965), citing the geographical data of Jia Dan 賈耽 (730–805) preserved in the Tang histories, also points out that toponyms on the route to the Persian Gulf appear to be Persian, which is another factor to consider.

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157 See the translation in Levy (1955: 117). See also Schottenhammer (2016: 135–136); Schafer (1951: 407); Nicolini-Zani (2022: 78–79).

Although it is true maritime traffic between the Persian Gulf and Southern China increased in the post-Sasanian period, these facts do not necessitate that *Bosi* and *Dashi* should always correspond to “Persia” and “Tāzīk” respectively in the context of the Southern Seas, especially when more plausible alternatives are available. The consensus by which Arab and Persian merchants were the primary intermediaries between West and East Asia, even for products from Southeast Asia, diminishes or even unjustly ignores the clearly significant role that peoples of the Malay Archipelago played in late antiquity, especially in connection with southern China. This is not to deny that persons from West Asia did, in fact, operate and also settle in southern China after the Sasanian period, but we have to recognize that the ethnonyms and toponyms in Chinese often overlap and can easily lead to misidentifications.

Having clarified the importance of toponyms in the present context and the related problems, we can return to the commodities that are attributed to Persia in the *Wei shu*.

#### 4 Textiles

In late antiquity, large volumes of Chinese silks were famously traded westward to India and beyond to Iran. The historian Procopius (1.20) records a story in which Justinian (r. 527–565) proposed to the Ethiopians that they purchase silk from India and then resell it to the Romans. The Romans otherwise were left to buy the product from the Persians out of necessity, an arrangement that only profited their rival. This proved to be an unviable solution since “it was impossible for the Aethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in, (since they inhabit the adjoining country), and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes.”<sup>158</sup>

This story, which presumably possesses some degree of historicity, underscores the significance of Chinese silk as a commodity to Persian merchants, who themselves had monopolized the market in western Asia, so far as the popular Roman perception was concerned. The large scale of the silk trade, in which the Persians acted as a major intermediary, arguably explains the cordial diplomatic contacts between Persia and China. These transactions of silk and any number of other commodities would have generated significant revenues that in part supported the Sasanian state apparatus, including the military.

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<sup>158</sup> See the translation in Dewing (1961: 193). See also Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 44); Lieu (2000: 48). Rezakhani (2010: 431) draws attention to this account.

It was therefore essential to keep such commodities flowing and to capitalize on their trade.

Conversely, the Persians exported some textiles to China, which were common enough on the Chinese market to warrant using loanwords to denote them. Modern conceptions of the “Silk Road” often overlook that the Chinese also imported textiles from West Asia, but clearly consumers in East Asia appreciated them. These textiles included damasks (*lingjin* 綾錦). Another item was *diehe* 疊氍 (EMC: *dep* \**yat*), which appears to be related to *dēbāg* (brocades) in Middle Persian (compare Farsi *dēbā*).<sup>159</sup> The fact that a loanword was used for Iranian brocades, rather than using an equivalent Chinese term, suggests that they were sufficiently different in style and composition from domestic varieties in China to warrant this.

The item *qushu* 氍毹 (EMC: \**guǎ cuǎ*) is a woolen or linen mat or cloth for sitting.<sup>160</sup> Huilin’s dictionary states, “It is a word from foreigners, now a woolen cloth. Some texts have ‘ground cloth’ for it.” 蕃人語也，即今之毛布，有文為地衣是。<sup>161</sup> Elsewhere in the dictionary we read, “Wool woven into cloth like hemp, to roll out as a mattress. It comes from the country of Jibin.” 織毛為布如麻，以敷牀褥，出罽賓國。<sup>162</sup> Jibin here would refer to the region stretching from Kashmir to Afghanistan, which would have included Eastern Iran. The etymology of the word is ambiguous, although it is certainly foreign, as was already known in antiquity. Shi (2020: 45) suggests this is “probably related to the Gandhari *koj’ava*, it was first introduced from the Western Regions to China in the Wei Dynasty.” Xu (2005: 548) proposes Gandhari *kosava* as a candidate. This led me to Bailey (1946: 793), who translates *kośava* as “woolen cover.” Zhang (2015: 27) summarizes the candidates as follows: “The terms *jì* 罽, *qūshū* 氍毹, and *kè* 絨 could come from any one of the following: Sanskrit *kocava*, *kocavaka*, and *kaukapaka*, Pali *kojava*, Old Persian *gaud*, Niya Kharoṣṭhi *kojava*, Khotanese *gahāvara*, *gaihe*, etc., and Sogdian *gaudana*.” Another reading found in a Sanskrit-Chinese lexicon attributed to the monk Yijing in the Tang, is “*varṇakamvala* 鞞拏劍摩攞.”<sup>163</sup>

*Tadeng* 氍毹 (EMC: \**dap tən*) “are mostly knotted-pile carpets with the possibility of being flat textile as well” (Zhang 2015: 27). The Chinese word is

159 See the discussion by Laufer (1919: 489). See the EMC reading in Pulleyblank (1991b: 79). Pulleyblank’s book does not give a reconstruction of the second character.

160 Pulleyblank (1991b: 260, 286) does not give these readings, but see similar characters.

161 *T* 2128, 54: 716b18.

162 *T* 2128, 54: 720c21–22.

163 The text is titled *Fanyu qianzi wen* 梵語千字文 (*One Thousand Words in Sanskrit*). See *T* 2133B, 54: 1208a11.

easily comparable to Pahlavi “*tadan, tan-*” (“spin, thread”).<sup>164</sup> Laufer (1919: 493) argues that “the term, in fact, represents a transcription that corresponds to a Middle-Persian word connected with the root  $\sqrt{t\bar{a}b}$  (“to spin”).” One of the earliest references to this is in the later history of the Han dynasty, in the section on India (in this case, northern India), in which we read “to the west they are in contact with Daqin [Rome], and there are precious objects from Daqin. They also have fine clothes and good carpets.” 西與大秦通，有大秦珍物。又有細布好氍毹。<sup>165</sup> This statement implies that goods from Rome (and ostensibly Parthia) also came through northern India. Whether the carpets in question were initially imported from abroad is unclear, but in any case, the item whose name has an Iranian etymology is credited to India, so we might (as with many other commodities) assume an origin in the general area of northwest India and Eastern Iran.

Interestingly, Iranian loanwords for textiles became so common that whatever exoticism they once may have had was forgotten, and they could be freely combined with native vocabulary. For example, as Huilin’s dictionary shows, *tan* 毯 (MC: *tʰam*), which refers to a woven cushion, could be designated as a unique “yellow cushion” (*huang tan* 黃毯), that is said to be “made of finely woven wool and sourced from Tibet.” 織毛為之，出吐蕃。<sup>166</sup> The historical record also includes other mentions of textiles that were either from or associated with Persia. For instance, in the year 520, “Persian brocades” (*Bosi jin* 波斯錦) were offered as tribute to the Liang court by the Hephthalites (Laufer 1919: 488).

Red deer skins (*chi zhang pi* 赤麀皮) were also known from Persia. This ought to refer to the hides of *Cervus elaphus maral*, the red deer (*gawazn*) of Iran.<sup>167</sup> The *Wei shu* does not explain how these deerskins were used, but interestingly there is a reference to them in a Buddhist ritual manual credited to the monk Amoghavajra in the mid-eighth century: “In the Western Regions, some sit having placed felts and flowers on red deer skins.” 西方或以赤麀皮中安氍毹花而坐。<sup>168</sup> The above data indicates that soft seats of various types from Persia were favored by the Chinese and therefore imported.

164 See the definition of the Pahlavi term in MacKenzie (1986: 81). Pulleyblank (1991b: 74, 299) does not give these readings in EMC, but see similar characters in his book.

165 *Hou Han shu*, 88.2921.

166 *T* 2128, 54: 402c22; Pulleyblank (1991b: 301).

167 *Zhang* 麀 is a variant of *zhang* 獐, which in Chinese can refer to a type of hornless deer. For information on red deer in Iran, see Firouz (2005).

168 See *Yizi dinglun wang yuqie guanxing yigui* 一字頂輪王瑜伽觀行儀軌 (*Ritual Manual on the One-Syllable Wheel-Turning King Yoga Practice*). *T* 955, 19: 314c18–19.



## 5 Aromatics

There are four specific types of aromatics said to have been imported from Persia. The first is *xunlu* 薰陸 (LH: *hun liuk*).<sup>169</sup> This phonetically resembles, but is certainly not identical with, Pahlavi *kundur* (frankincense), especially considering the difference in consonant endings. This is comparable to the Sanskrit *kundururu* and *kunduruka*, which Monier-Williams (1899: 291) identifies as “*Boswellia thurifera*, the resin of that plant (*Olibanum*).” Boodberg (1937: 349) suggests that the Chinese term is an early loanword from Sanskrit. Pelliot (1912: 477), however, states, “Pour moi, *hiun-lou* est indigène, ou dérive d’un original jusqu’ici inconnu, qui ne doit pas être *kundur*.” Pelliot was still aware of the Turkish word, such as *günlük*. We can also additionally point to Armenian *kndruk* (“*weihrauch*, incense”).<sup>170</sup> I am inclined to believe that the Chinese term is a loanword, probably from an Iranian language, even if the first character can semantically mean “to fumigate” and would make sense within an indigenous context (the second character less so). Haw (2019: 85) proposes a similar solution, although he does not link the word to Iranian languages. He states, “My suggestion is that this term is a hybrid transcription, that is, a Chinese transcription of a foreign word in which the characters have been chosen for their meaning as well as for their sound.” Later, this type of incense became equated with *ru xiang* 乳香 (“milky incense”), otherwise labeled *rutou xiang* 乳頭香 (“nipple incense”), ostensibly because the physical appearance of the resin resembles breast milk or a nipple depending on the coloration, although these terms could not have uniformly applied to the same resin, since they were sourced from different foreign countries over time. With regard to *ru xiang*, Laufer (1919: 470, fn. 3) already noted that it was “not necessarily from *Boswellia*, nor identical with frankincense.” Li Xun in the late Tang also had separate entries for these two in his book. Regarding the *rutou xiang*, he cites the *Chronicle of Guangzhou*: “Produced in the South Seas, it is the sap of the pine tree of *Bosi*. That which is purple-red like cherry is top grade.” 生南海, 是波斯松樹脂也。紫赤如櫻桃者為上。<sup>171</sup> In this case, the resins are clearly different, since frankincense is white. Based on the above data, the aromatic *xunlu*, apparently a cognate with an Iranian term, ought to have been frankincense when it was originally imported from Persian territories or, we might

169 For the Later Han readings, see Schuessler (2007: 365, 548).

170 See the entry in Hübschmann (1897: 172). See also the discussion of Iranian influences in the Armenian language by Schmitt and Bailey (2011): “*kndrouk* ‘incense’ (NPers. *kondor*, OInd. *kunduruka*-).”

171 *Haiyao bencao*, 33.

imagine, nearby regions, such as South Arabia. Curiously, the resin stored under this Chinese name at Shōsō-in in Japan is not true frankincense (retinite), but instead it was identified as tacamahac (Jpn. *kodōritsu* 胡同律), a discrepancy that might have arisen as a result of mislabeling any number of centuries ago (Asahina 1955: 368–370). Alternatively, we might suspect that exact identification and labeling of what were extremely rare and exotic aromatics proved challenging. Yoneda (2015: 115) suggests that this is the solidified resin of *Pistacia khinjuk*, although no explanation is given.

The next aromatic on the list is *yujin* 鬱金 (Later Han: ?*ut kim*), also written as *yujin* 鬱金 (compare Sino-Japanese *ukon*).<sup>172</sup> This ought to refer to saffron (*Crocus sativus*) in the present context, but we cannot confidently determine this as having always been the case. The Chinese word is comparable, but certainly does not exactly correspond to, Pahlavi *kurkum* and its derivative in Armenian, *k'rk'um*, or Sanskrit *kuṅkuma*.<sup>173</sup> The translation of the *Sūtra of Golden Light* (*Jin guangming zuisheng wang jing* 金光明最勝王經), which was carried out by Yijing in 703, provides glosses for aromatics and gives *gongjume* 恭矩麼 (EMC: *kuawŋ kuǎ' ma*); this is a transcription of *kuṅkuma*.<sup>174</sup> The original language from which the Chinese term itself was derived is uncertain, but it appears in some of the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist literature in the first few centuries of the Common Era. The source was presumably a Prakrit of northwest India. The Chinese word is a binomial of two characters, *yu* 鬱 (“fragrant grass”) and *jin* 金 (“gold”), which might initially indicate that it is an indigenous word, but the latter would come first if it were a modifier.

In any case, the Chinese understood that saffron could be sourced from Persia in the sixth century, although we cannot confidently say that authors accurately knew what was truly saffron, since it was not domestically cultivated.<sup>175</sup> Later sources associate saffron with the ambiguous country called “Jibin” in Chinese, which was Kapiśā or a neighboring region such as Kashmir depending on the source and time period. Either one of these was situated between the former eastern frontier of Persia and Western India. In the eighth century,

172 For the Later Han readings, see Schuessler (2007: 315, 592).

173 For Armenian, see Hübschmann (1897: 320). See also the relevant entries in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/>).

174 *T* 665, 16: 435a4. See fn. 13 for variant characters: initial *cha* 茶 vs. *gong* 恭. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 108, 164, 217).

175 Dai et al. (2021: 230) state, “Researchers hold contradictory opinions on when and how saffron was introduced to China. It is widely accepted that saffron was introduced to China through the Silk Road.” They suggest that the dissemination of Buddhism was accompanied by the introduction of saffron to China, but I am skeptical whether Buddhism was primarily or even partially responsible for this, given that the plant was valuable as a rare commodity.

the Korean monk Hyecho also writes that aromatics such as saffron are produced in the country of Jibin.<sup>176</sup> It appears that inaccurate information about it inevitably circulated, which we might imagine was due to it being a foreign plant that was not cultivated in China. In 807, Huilin provided the following comments on “saffron”:

This is the name of a tree. It is sourced from the country of Jibin. The flowers are yellow in color. They take the flowers and arrange them in one place and dry them, before pressing out the juice to mix with things into a fragrance. The remnants of the flowers still possess an aroma. There is also a use as fragrant flowers.

此是樹名，出罽賓國。其花黃色。取花安置一處待爛，壓取汁以物和之為香。花粕猶有香氣。亦用為香花也。<sup>177</sup>

The Chinese imported processed saffron, but not the plant itself. Saffron flowers do not come from a tree, but authors likely had no visual reference. Parts of the saffron flower common today are pale yellow, but not the petals, which are light violet or purplish, although dried saffron gives a yellow color to water (a sight often seen even today in Tibetan Buddhist temples).

We might wonder if the description here is conflated with safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*), whose flower heads can be prominently yellow, but this is uncertain. As Dash (1976: 63) discusses, *Bhāvaprakāsa* describes saffron grown in Kashmir, Balkh, and Persia. He explains that the type from Persia is slightly pale yellow in color. A Tibetan source also speaks of saffron from Kashmir being exceedingly yellow. The Chinese description perhaps reflects these varieties.

The processing described in Chinese is similar to what was described in the mid-twentieth century in Kashmir, which was carried out by hand: “In Kashmir, the stigmas, picked from the flowers and dried, are orange red and constitute the first grade ‘Shahi’ saffron. The flowers are dried in the sun three to five days, then lightly beaten with sticks and passed through coarse sieves.”<sup>178</sup> It would appear that, at least in some instances, the Chinese had access to true saffron as an aromatic and knew something about how it was produced, but the ambiguities outlined above lead me to wonder if something like safflower was

176 *T* 2089, 51: 977c22–28. Finch et al. (2012: 137, fn. 169) translate the term as tumeric. See also their translation of the relevant passages.

177 *T* 2128, 54: 766a14.

178 For a brief overview of saffron, see Madan et al. (1966).

conflated with saffron at times, much as it is also the case today. One complicating factor in this discussion is that turmeric, which could be grown domestically, came to be designated with the same Chinese term, and illustrations of the plant from after the Tang period clearly show turmeric and not saffron. In this instance an existing term was reapplied to a different plant, but clearly the original referent was saffron.<sup>179</sup>

The next item on the list is *suhe* 蘇合 (Later Han: *sa gəp*).<sup>180</sup> The identification of this has perplexed scholars, as this can refer to different things across time, like many of the other aromatics. Laufer (1919: 456–460) has proposed that it referred to storax, and that the Chinese word itself is a loanword. Chen (2022: 476) similarly defines this as “storax or oriental sweetgum.” I do not, however, think this is the case in all instances. The item in question was certainly an aromatic of some sort, but the Chinese term *suhe* actually refers to different things depending on the context. The later history of the Han is an early witness to this substance and is informative: the substance in question is described in the section on Rome, in which we read that “they gather various aromatics together and boil their juices to make *suhe*.” 合會諸香，煎其汁以為蘇合。<sup>181</sup> In this instance, it is a composite substance, and could refer to perfumes, in which case the term might be interpreted semantically as a binomial: *su* 蘇 (flowering herbs) and *he* 合 (combined). Perfumers in Roman territories were certainly quite active, and perfumes have a long history of production and consumption in antiquity, as has been documented by Brun (2000). It is reasonable that we might even read *suhe* as “perfume” in the *Wei shu*, given that perfume (Pahlavi *bōyēnīdan*) was a part of Sasanian culture, but this would only be a speculative guess.<sup>182</sup>

The exact identification of *suhe* is complicated by the fact that we have Buddhist definitions that would suggest a fragrant grass or plant of some sort, rather than a perfume or tree resin. The aforementioned Buddhist ritual manual of the eighth or ninth century gives *duolusejia* 咄嚕瑟迦 as the Sanskrit equivalent for the Chinese term, which ought to correspond to *turuṣka*.<sup>183</sup> Monier-Williams (1899: 451) defines this as “olibanum,” which is another word for frankincense, but the same word can refer to Turks. This identification with olibanum is not necessarily conclusive, since we can point to other evidence that would indicate *turuṣka* was also understood as a kind of fragrant grass or

179 See *Tujing yanyi bencao*: DZ 763, 17: 448a–c.

180 For the Later Han readings, see Schuessler (2007: 274, 482).

181 *Hou Han shu*, 88.2919.

182 See Pahlavi term in MacKenzie (1986: 19).

183 T 946, 19: 173a24–25. Read *kou* 口 as *lu* 嚕.

herb. An eighth-century Chinese commentary to the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi* by Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing understands *turuṣka* as a kind of grass or plant (*cao* 草) as follows: “The *turuṣka* grass is an alfalfa aromatic from the West. It is somewhat different from the alfalfa-aromatic here [in China].” 妬路婆草是西方苜蓿香，與此間苜蓿香稍異也。<sup>184</sup> A separate recension of the commentary, which was apparently revised sometime after 727, when Yixing prematurely passed away, adds another line: “The sandalwood, costus, and saffron all exist here [in China]. The alfalfa-aromatic in Sanskrit is *spr[kkā]*.” 其旃檀青木鬱金，皆此方所有。苜蓿香者，梵名薩跋唎。<sup>185</sup> Yijing’s translation of the *Sūtra of Golden Light* gives the Sanskrit word *sprkkā* (塞畢力迦) for the Chinese term *muxu xiang* 苜蓿香 (literally, “alfalfa aromatic”). The Chinese term is clearly comprised of the word for alfalfa (lucerne), *muxu* 苜蓿, which itself is a loanword from the Iranian Ferganian language (Laufer proposes *\*buksuk*, *\*buxsux* as reconstructions) stretching back to the Han period, and the suffix *xiang* 香 (“aromatic”), resulting in a loose translation of an imported item, which was evidently something resembling alfalfa.<sup>186</sup>

In light of these facts, *suhe* might be interpreted as a kind of herb or fragrant grass. We might further check how Japanese *materia medica* understood this term, since their tradition, which was based on Chinese medicine, also often provided the indigenous Japanese words alongside the Chinese terms for what Japanese apothecaries thought were equivalents. The *Honzō wamyō* 本草和名 (*Japanese Words for Materia Medica*), the oldest extant Japanese pharmacopeia, compiled by Fukane Sukehito 深根輔仁 around 918, gives *kawamidori* 加波美止利, which corresponds to *Agastache rugosa*, a member of the mint family.<sup>187</sup> The early Japanese tradition of medicine, at least in this instance, understood Chinese *suhe* also as a plant and not a composite perfume or aromatic oil, despite the confusing definition given in much earlier Chinese history.

If *suhe* is understood as a fragrant plant, then we might wonder what exactly was imported from Persia, since this substance is listed among other aromatics in the *Wei shu*. If not a perfume or aromatic oil, then it might have been

184 *T* 1796, 39: 658b19–20. Read *po* 婆 as *suo* 娑. See *Dingfubao* 丁福保 dictionary (digitized edition, unpaginated).

185 *X* 438, 23: 356a20–21. Monier-Williams (1899: 1268) defines *sprkkā* as *Trigonella Corniculata* (fenugreek). Laufer (1919: 446–447) offers remarks on fenugreek, but he does not connect this with *sprkkā*.

186 See the discussion in Laufer (1919: 208–219). The Pahlavi term for alfalfa is *aspast* (MacKenzie 1986: 12).

187 *Honzō wamyō*, 1.55. See the encyclopedias at kotobank.jp.

mint or something comparable. It is unlikely to have been alfalfa imported as feed for horses, since it would have been uneconomical to transport it over the continent just for this purpose, especially when the plant already was common in China.

One possible identification of *suhe* in the *Wei shu*, in my present analysis, is that it is a loanword from an Iranian language. The seventh-century *Xinxiu bencao* includes a brief article describing *suhe*, but this appears to be neither a perfume nor fragrant grass, but rather some kind of heavy resin. The appended note reads as follows: “This aromatic comes from the Western Regions and Kunlun. It is red in color and heavy like a stone. That which is white when burned to ash is good.” 此香從西域及昆崙來。赤色，重如石。燒之灰白者好。 It is not realistic to attempt an identification based on this passage alone, but this is clearly not any type of herb. Interestingly, we might detect an Iranian connection in this entry. The text also states the following:

A popular tradition says that it is lion excrement. The foreign countries call it *pət niǎ*. Now, all of it comes from the Western Regions. It is difficult to distinguish the real stuff. It is also no longer used in medicine. It is just mixed into good incense.

俗傳云是師子矢。外國說不尠。今皆從西域來，真者難別。亦不復入藥。唯供合好香耳。<sup>188</sup>

*Suhe* in Early Middle Chinese was pronounced as something approximating *ɬɔ ɣəp* (compare Sino-Japanese *sogō*), which would have sounded like Sogdian *šrwy* or Pahlavi *šagr* (“lion”) to the Chinese.<sup>189</sup> Given the reddish or otherwise brownish color of the substance, it is easy to imagine why it was called “lion shit.” The characters *bu er* 不尔 in Early Middle Chinese were *pət niǎ*, which is loosely comparable to Sogdian *bwd* (“incense”) and Pahlavi *bōy* (“scent”).<sup>190</sup> The word for “excrement” in Sogdian is *βᾱpy*, but the Chinese does not represent this.

Based on this analysis, *suhe* in this instance functions as a loanword from an Iranian language, and its meaning has changed since the period of the

188 I have consulted a handwritten manuscript in the National Diet Library from 1889 (特1-3021). *Xinxiu bencao*, 12.19. Read *shi* 矢 (“arrow”) as *shi* 屎 (“excrement”) based on an alternative manuscript cited in CTEXT.

189 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 123, 294).

190 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 43, 88).

Han dynasty, although the exact identification remains uncertain. Song (2001: 18), citing the pharmacopeia of Ibn al-Bayṭār (1197–1248), who himself cited Dioscorides, identifies *suhe* as a supple form of myrrh. This would be stacte (στακτή), i.e., generally understood as “oil of myrrh.” Stacte was described by Theophrastus, Dioscorides, and Pliny. The fresh gum resin of myrrh could be pressed and further processed with oils, resulting in a fragrant aromatic (Lucas 1937: 29–31).

Confusingly, Japanese *materia medica* understood the Chinese term to refer to a type of domestic mint. This exercise only proves that when translating these types of terms from Chinese texts, the referent can differ depending on the time and place. As to what *suhe* referred to as a Persian import, I am left thinking, following Song, that stacte is the most likely identification. The fact that stacte was treated with oil (and perhaps other aromatics) meant that it would have been heavier than a simple resin.

The fourth and final aromatic on the list is *qingmu* 青木 (“blue/dark wood”). Yijing’s translation of the *Sūtra of Golden Light* gives the gloss *jusecha* 矩瑟佗 (EMC: *kuǎ’ šit \*tʰraɪʰ*) for this substance.<sup>191</sup> This appears to represent Sanskrit *kuṣṭha*, which Monier-Williams (1899: 297) identifies as “*Costus speciosus* or *arabicus*.” *Costus* is *kust* in Pahlavi, but assigning an exact species to the Chinese term is impossible.<sup>192</sup> Asahina’s (1955: 339–344) survey of the eighth-century specimens stored at Shōsō-in indicates that this was “*Saussurea lappa* C.B. Clarke,” or otherwise an aromatic derived from *Inula helenium* Linne, but the situation at Shōsō-in is complicated by the fact that mistaken labeling has occurred in the past, leading to inconclusive results about some of the extant specimens.<sup>193</sup> Laufer (1919: 462–463) also pertinently remarks, “The Chinese term, indeed, has no botanical value, being merely a commercial label covering different roots from most diverse regions.” Chen (2022: 476), in contrast, identifies this item from Persia as “slender Dutchman’s pipe root or *Aristolochia debilis* Siebold & Zucc.” This might be the plant to which the Chinese name corresponds in modern traditional Chinese medicine, but this does not tell us what the original plant was in Iran or Tang China.

191 T 665, 16: 435a8. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 47, 164, 273). The character *cha* 佗 is not given in Pulleyblank’s book, so this is a tentative reconstruction.

192 MacKenzie (1986: 52).

193 The 1955 survey suggests a portion of either *Peucedanum japonicum* (*bōki* 防葵) or *Stellera* (*rōdoku* 狼毒) was labeled as ginseng (*ninjin* 人參), while another portion was labeled *shōmōkkō* 青木香.

## 6 Consumables

The first consumable on the list is *hujiao* 胡椒, which in Buddhist literature typically translates Indic *marica*, i.e., black pepper (*Piper nigrum*).<sup>194</sup> Laufer (1919: 374) observes that “Ibn Haukal says that pepper, sandal, and various kinds of drugs, were shipped from Sīrāf in Persia to all quarters of the world. Black pepper must have been introduced into Persia from India, which is the home of the shrub.” Indeed, as he notes, the history of the Later Han states that this was a product of India.<sup>195</sup> If black pepper was first transported overland to China, then Persian or perhaps Eastern Iranian merchants (i.e., merchants in the east under Sasanian dominion) evidently had a role to play in this for a time, although they were likely just one of numerous peoples who capitalized on the international trade of pepper. The export of pepper to the West is well known, but the Chinese and Japanese also consumed it. Peppercorns were preserved at Shōsō-in (Asahina 1955: 133–136), which only illustrates the extent to which pepper was traded eastward even after it arrived in China.

During the period of the late Tang, Li Xun, citing the lost *Nanzhou ji* 南州記 (*Record of Nanzhou*) by Xu Biao 徐表 (d.u.), stated that the spice arrives from the Southern Seas.<sup>196</sup> Maritime merchants came to transport pepper to China, but whether it was Persians responsible for this is uncertain based on what we know about other seafarers, as outlined above. In the ninth century, Duan Chengshi did not associate black pepper with Persia, but rather states, “It is sourced from the country of Magadha, where it is called *marica*.” 胡椒出摩伽陀國呼為味履支。<sup>197</sup>

Black pepper was used in a variety of medical applications in China. Ri Huazi 日華子 in the Tang, for example, wrote that it “neutralizes all the toxins in fish, meat, turtles, and mushrooms.” 殺一切魚肉鱉蕈毒。<sup>198</sup> This use of pepper was widely recognized in other cultures. Clarke (1994: 57) remarks, “The original value of pepper was its ability to make decomposing meat taste palatable when there were no preservation methods. Pepper also has some inherent characteristics that preserve meat from decomposition.” Whether pepper was

194 See Hirakawa (1997: 964). This Sanskrit reading is given by Yijing in the Tang. *T* 2133B, 54: 1204a6.

195 *Hou Han shu*, 88.2921. Modern scientific surveys, such as Khare (2008: 492), also confirm that black pepper is native to the Indo-Malaysian region.

196 *Haiyao bencao*, 48. Zheng et al. (2018: 340) explain that this is a lost book, either from the Tang or pre-Tang periods, that dealt with plants and products available in Guangzhou and the surrounding areas.

197 *Youyang zazu* (*SKQS*), 17.19a.

198 See the citation in *DZ* 763, 17: 598a6–8. See also Asahina (1955: 133).



used more as a medicine than as a condiment in China in antiquity is uncertain, but I am inclined to think that it was more medicinal. The one instance of pepper in the Sino-Japanese *Wamyō ruiju shō* 倭名類聚鈔, a dictionary by Minamoto no Shitagō 源順 (911–983) dating between 931 and 938, has a “pepper pill” (*koshō gan* 胡椒丸).<sup>199</sup> The accompanying note reads, “Remedies cold *qi* in the chest.” 治胸中冷氣.<sup>200</sup> Japanese culinary and medicinal practices in this period often followed the Chinese, so this specific application of pepper is instructive: it is medicinal and not culinary.

The next item on the list is *bibo* 葷撥 (EMC: *pjit pa<sup>h</sup>*).<sup>201</sup> The Chinese word is also written *bibo* 畢撥, among other variations. This is phonetically related to the Sanskrit *pippalī* (Piper longum), but the Chinese is not a faithful transcription of the Sanskrit. One Sanskrit reading in Siddham, *pīpṛ*, is attested in a Buddhist lexicon in China, but this could be a scribal error, as is often the case in these materials.<sup>202</sup> We can compare Armenian *pṭpīt* and Persian *felfel* (Hübschmann 1897: 231). The original referent of this term was presumably Piper longum, but later the word itself likely referred to something else. Li Xun’s work also appears to distinguish two types. The relevant entry falls under *biba* 葷茛:

According to the *Account of Nanzhou* by Xu Biao, it is originally sourced from the Southern Seas. It is as long as one finger, with the reddish dark-colored being best. There is also *biba*, which is short and black, and whose flavor is intolerable. The flavor of that imported by ship is spicy and warm.

謹按徐表《南州記》，本出南海。長一指，赤褐色為上。復有葷拔，短小黑，味不堪。船上者味辛溫。<sup>203</sup>

199 The title can also be written as *Wamyō ruiju shō* 和名類聚抄, among other variations. There are different recensions of this text in either ten or twenty fascicles (*maki* 卷). Extensive work on documenting and analyzing the extant manuscripts has been carried out. It is difficult to determine which of the two recensions is older. See (Lin 2002: 17); Miyazawa (2010).

200 *Wamyō ruiju shō*, 12.7. Here I cite the twenty-fascicle edition. See also the following digitized format: [https://www2.ninjal.ac.jp/textdb\\_dataset/kwrs/](https://www2.ninjal.ac.jp/textdb_dataset/kwrs/) (accessed 11 January 2023).

201 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 34, 40).

202 *T* 2135, 54: 1238a20.

203 *Haiyao bencao*, 22.

Li Xun appears to be drawing a distinction between two words, both of which curiously transcribe a word like *pippalī*.<sup>204</sup> In any case, the product imported from the Southern Seas might not have been Piper longum, since Javanese long pepper (*Piper retrofractum*) is visually similar, but still different. Samples of long pepper preserved at Shōsō-in were determined to be Indian in origin, based on botanical analysis (Asahina 1955: 129–132). Whether this type was more common than the other is uncertain. Huilin's dictionary from 807 also offers a noteworthy definition, as follows:

Foreign word. It is a name of a medicine in the Western Countries. Originally sourced from the countries of *Bosi* and *Poluomen*. It is shaped like mulberry, slender and long, with an extremely spicy flavor.

蕃語，西國藥名也。本出波斯及婆羅門國。形如桑椹，緊細且長，味極辛辣。<sup>205</sup>

We might initially read *Bosi* and *Poluomen* as Persia and India respectively, but as we have explored above, this is problematic, since these names also applied to peoples in Southeast Asia after the seventh century.

Long pepper, like black pepper, was also used in Chinese medicine, a fact that again leads me to suspect that any spice trade from Persian territories was likely more motivated by an interest in medicine than by acquiring condiments for cuisine. Li Shizhen records the following account of a treatment for Emperor Taizong:

The *True Record of Taizong of the Tang* states that during the Zhenguan reign era (627–649), his eminence did not recover from dysentery for a long time. He took the medicines of eminent physicians, but to no effect, and so he ordered that someone be sought from elsewhere. A mystic healer provided a remedy of yellow cow's milk boiled with long pepper. The emperor took it and it was effective. Liu Yuxi also records this event.

《唐太宗實錄》云：貞觀中，上以氣痢久未痊，服名醫藥不應，因詔訪求其方，有術士進黃牛乳煎葦茛方，御用有效。劉禹錫亦記其事。<sup>206</sup>

204 The initial word cited by Li Xun is *biba* 葦茛. This form is more common in Chinese Buddhist texts.

205 *T* 2128, 54: 710c8.

206 *Bencao gangmu* (SKQS), 041.46b. See the translation Kotyk (2021a). Cf. the translation in Unschuld (2022b: 572).

The separate account on milk products explains that “the remedy uses half a *jin* (330.4 grams) of cow’s milk and three long peppercorns, which are boiled together until reduced to half quantity. It is then consumed on an empty stomach.” 其方用牛乳半觔，葦菱三錢，同煎減半，空腹頓服。<sup>207</sup> This recipe, like long pepper, was certainly foreign in origin. The *Cikitsāṃgraha* of Cakradatta, an Indian work, states, “The paste of *pippalī* or *marica* taken with milk removes dysentery, even chronic, in three days.”<sup>208</sup> Although it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese recipe was adapted from an Āyurvedic source or Indian physician, we must recognize that the Syriac *Book of Medicines* also has a number of prescriptions in which long pepper is used, which means that physicians in West Asia also utilized it. Any medicinal substance imported from Persia presumably also brought with it some knowledge about its applications.

*Shimi* 石蜜 (literally, “rock honey”) is also on the list of imports from Persia. This was a kind of confection produced with dairy and sugarcane juice that we might loosely translate as “toffee.” Song (2001: 20–21) points out that Su Jing wrote that “that brought by the Western tribes is superb.” 西戎來者佳。Another work, the *Shiliao bencao* 食療本草 (*Dietetic Materia Medica*), which is based on an original work by Meng Shen 孟詵 (621–713) and then expanded by Zhang Ding 張鼎 (d.u.), makes an important observation with regard to Persia.<sup>209</sup> A length of the text was preserved as a handwritten document in Dunhuang (Or. 8210/S. 76 Recto, R. 1 medical text), in which the following explanation is given:

That of Persia is good. Pour a bit into the eyes to remove warm mucus and clear the eyes. That of the Shu and river (Sichuan) areas is second [to the Persian]. Nowadays, in Eastern Wu they also have it, but it is incomparable to the Persian. These are all made by boiling sugarcane juice with cow’s milk. Having been boiled, it is finally pulverized in a mortar.

波斯者良。注少許於目中，除去熱膜明目。蜀川者為次。今東吳亦有，並不如波斯。此皆是煎甘蔗汁及牛乳汁，煎則細白耳。<sup>210</sup>

207 *Bencao gangmu* (SKQS), 117.6a. See the translation Kotyk (2021a). Cf. the translation in Unschuld (2021b: 514–515).

208 *Cikitsāṃgraha*, 61 (see this English translation and parallel Sanskrit source text). For a discussion of dairy and this connection with long pepper, see Kotyk (2021a).

209 See the bibliographical and biographical details in Zheng et al. (2018: 327).

210 See the scanned document (Or. 8210/S. 76 Recto) at the International Dunhuang Project (<http://idp.bl.uk/>). Cf. also the digitized text on CTEXT, and the typeset edition in Fan (1931: 59).

It is noteworthy that the Indian type of toffee is not cited here, since the Chinese term was originally found in various types of Buddhist literature, such as in the monastic codes (Vinaya). An extant Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit glossary from the Tang period gives *śarkarā* for this type of confectionary. Sanskrit *śarkarā* is cognate with Middle Persian *šakar*.<sup>211</sup> This illustrates the Indian connection with sugar production in Iran, but the Chinese term *shimi* likely referred to different types of sugary confections over time, and not strictly to the kind described above, which was made with milk. Laufer (1919: 376) suggests that one of the earliest references to this product is seen in the *Nanfang caomu zhuang* 南方草木狀 (*Report on the Flora of the Southern Regions*) by Ji Han 嵇含 (263–306), finished in 304. The relevant line reads as follows:

Pressing out the juice and drying it over several days, it forms into a soft form that dissipates when placed in the mouth. The people call it rock honey [toffee].

榨取其汁，曝數日成飴，入口消釋。彼人謂之石蜜。<sup>212</sup>

Ma (1978), however, argues that the text is a forgery, created between the years 1108 and 1194. This attribution by Laufer is therefore problematic. Laufer remarks that “sugar-cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) is a typically Indian or rather Southeast-Asiatic, and merely a secondary Iranian cultivation.” He nonetheless points out, however, that the history of the Sui dynasty attributes “toffee” to Sasanian Persia. Buddhists in China would have conceivably associated toffee with India, and not necessarily Persia, but the wider market in the seventh century still appears to have connected toffee with Persia. We can perhaps interpret this with reference to sugar production in Persia. Floor (2009) explains that “in pre-Islamic Persia, sugar cane was grown in Makran, Khuzestan (literally ‘land of the sugar cane’), Balkh and Mesopotamia, where it continued to be grown during the Islamic period.” There was perhaps some amount of sugar imported from Persia to China, but the above-cited quote shows that from at least the seventh century, toffee was also produced domestically in Sichuan and eastern China, but it was not regarded as good as that from Persia.

Dates as fruits of the date palm were known to be produced in Sasanian Iran, but in later times other varieties are also mentioned. Laufer (1919: 385) suggests

<sup>211</sup> See *Tang Fan liangyu shuangdui ji* 唐梵兩語雙對集 (*Collection of Bilingual Chinese-Sanskrit Terms*). T 2136, 54: 1243b2–3.

<sup>212</sup> *Nanfang caomu zhuang* (SKQS), 1.4a.

that the peculiar name for the fruit, *qiannian zao* 千年棗 (“thousand-year date”) stems from the longevity of the date palm itself, based on the interpretation of Li Shizhen in the sixteenth century, who cited many earlier texts.<sup>213</sup> In a study on dates in Iran, Degener (2005: 31) points out that in Zoroastrian symbolism, trees such as evergreens (cypress, myrtle, and pine) were venerated as symbols of immortality. We might suspect that the Chinese name could be a semantic rendering based on a name or concept transmitted from Persia. The “thousand-year date” appears as a lexical item in the *Wei shu*, and then shortly after between 587 and 591, in a translation by Jñānagupta (Shenajueduo 闍那崛多; 523–600), that lists a “tree of the thousand-year date” (*qiannian zao shu* 千年棗樹), among several other plants, although interestingly the others are mostly phonetically transcribed into Chinese from Sanskrit.<sup>214</sup> This would suggest that the translation team was familiar enough with the plant to use the Chinese name, whereas the other trees from India had no corresponding names in Chinese. We might infer from this fact that the import and consumption of dates became common by the late sixth century in China. Readers were expected to already recognize dates and the associated tree.

Later, the Chinese translation of the *\*Mūlasarvāstivāda-ekaśatakarman* (*Genben shuo yiqieyou bu baiyi jiemo* 根本說一切有部百一羯磨; *One Hundred and One Procedures of the Mūlasarvāstivāda School*), completed by Yijing in 703, defined medicinal substances that a monk or nun may take when necessary. One of these is the “juice of the *kharjūra*” (*heshuluo jiang* 渴樹羅漿). Monier-Williams (1899: 337) defines *kharjūra* as “the wild date tree,” and more specifically as *Phoenix sylvestris*, which is different from the *Phoenix dactylifera*.<sup>215</sup> The subcommentary in the Chinese text, presumably added by Yijing, offers further guidance on this type of fruit:

It is shaped like a small date, being astringent and also sweet. It comes from the country of *Bosi* (Barus). The Chinese side also has them. Its

213 Although this interpretation is not necessarily incorrect, we must also note the existence of the *qiansui lei* 千歲蘘, the “thousand-year bramble” or creeping grape (*Vitis flexuosa*), which is indigenous to China. The names of these two fruits could be related, but this is uncertain to me.

214 The *sūtra* is titled *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 (Skt. *\*Buddha-carita-saṃgrāha*). T 190, 3: 675b14.

215 Rhouma et al. (2009: 356) observe “that *Phoenix sylvestris* (sugar date palm or toddy palm) still occurs in the wild throughout northern India; its sap is used to produce a crude sugar. *Phoenix dactylifera* most likely grew wild as a natural hybrid of *P. sylvestris* in the Indus Valley, where it was appreciated as a wild fruit and probably cultivated as early as the sixth millennium BC; there have been finds of date palm seeds in association with human settlement from 5000 BC onwards.”

flavor is somewhat different. The tree grows on its own and is shaped like a palm. The fruits are numerous. When they were brought to Panyu, people called them *Bosi* dates. The flavor is quite similar to that of dried persimmons.

形如小棗，澁而且甜。出波斯國。中方亦有，其味稍殊。其樹獨生狀椶櫚。其果多有。將至番禺時人名為波斯棗。其味頗與乾柿相似。<sup>216</sup>

Yijing's information offers an explanation for the different name—that people in the south called the product “*Bosi* dates.” He had spent a number of years in India, but it is unlikely that *kharjūra* in India was an imported product from Persia when the domestic variety was accessible and growing in the wild. Yijing here is directing his comments to Chinese readers, and informing them about how to access a type of date that was similar to the *kharjūra*. Yijing's comment here reveals that there was a type of date palm that was also available in China, such as in Panyu in the southern area of Guangzhou, although he thought the flavors differed somewhat. Although it is initially tempting to think that *Bosi* ought to refer to Persia here, I think in this context it refers to Barus. To read this as “Persia” would mean that Persian date palms had been transplanted into Southern China by Persians by the year 703, but it is difficult to justify such a proposed historical scenario, considering our discussion above.

The date palm was observed in southern China again in the late Tang. The account of southern coastal China by Liu Xun 劉恂 (fl. 888–904) mentions a number of plants that Liu Xun observed as interesting for various reasons.<sup>217</sup> He writes, “*Bosi* dates: I saw the tree within the outer walls of Guangzhou.” 波斯棗：廣州郭內見其樹。<sup>218</sup> Liu Xun goes on to compare the differences between these dates and the domestic variety. It is implied that the foreign date palm had been transplanted to southern China in recent memory, but whether this referred to something brought from Persia is unclear. Dates and date palms could have been brought along the sea route from any number of other countries, such as those in Southeast Asia, which had more definitive links with China via the maritime route. We do not know who transplanted the date palms. Persians in China had their own word for dates,

<sup>216</sup> T 1453, 24: 478a19–21. Cf. the alternate translation in Chen (2022: 478).

<sup>217</sup> The title of this work in Chinese is *Lingbiao lu yi* 嶺表錄異 (*Record of Curios in the Lingnan Region*). See Zheng et al. (2018: 301) for an entry on Liu Xun. They note that the monk Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001) states that Liu Xun “during the court of Tang Zhaozong [r. 888–904], was dispatched to Guangzhou as Adjutant.” 劉恂唐昭宗朝出為廣州司馬。 This is recorded in the *Sunpu* 筍譜 (1.37).

<sup>218</sup> *Lingbiao lu yi* (SKQS), 2.5b–6a. Cf. Laufer (1919: 386–387).

and in this context we again see a conflation between the two different *Bosi*. Duan Chengshi, in the ninth century, writes that “the *Bosi* date is sourced from the country of *Bosi*. In the country of *Bosi* they call it *k<sup>H</sup>wat maŋ*.” 波斯棗出波斯國，波斯國呼為窟莽。<sup>219</sup> Laufer notes this is a phonetic transcription of the Middle Persian word for date, *xormā*, and further points out that the Chinese transcription could alternatively be read as *humang* 鶻莽 (EMC: *ɣuət maŋ*).<sup>220</sup> Duan Chengshi, like Hyecho, assumed that the *Bosi* of the Southern Sea and *Bosi* as Persia were one and the same, even well into the ninth century, when Persia as a country had long ceased to exist. Alternatively, it might have been that foreign dates of all varieties were originally associated with Persia, and hence the name stuck even after the end of Persia, much like how “Sichuan pepper” in modern English does not necessitate that it all comes from Sichuan.

It does not appear that the Indian *kharjūra* and Persian *xormā* were differentiated by Buddhists in China, although Chinese *materia medica* more accurately catalogued different types of palms and their fruits in detail. Around the turn of the tenth century, Li Xun, citing Liu Xun, observed the distinctions between the different palms: the sugar palm (*guanglangzi* 桄榔子) was noted to be slightly different, in terms of trunk and bark, from the date and betel palms (*binlang* 檳榔), respectively.<sup>221</sup>

Dates also appear in Daoist literature of the Tang period, where in at least one case they are interestingly associated with Parthia, which by this time was a fantastical realm of the distant past. We can observe this in one story in the *Yongcheng jixian lu* 壙城集仙錄 (*Record of the Assembled Immortals of Yongcheng*) by Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933), which is a collection of accounts of female Daoist adepts.<sup>222</sup> There we read the following:

An Qi himself said, “Long ago I ventured to the edge of the Western Sea to the country of Aršak with a maiden. We ate dates and they were particularly fine. The dates here would never be as good. Long have I remembered these dates, for it has been two thousand years.” The lady said, “Long ago together with the lord it was not enough to eat one. How could the small dates here be comparable!”

219 *Youyang zazu* (SKQS), 17.18a.

220 See also Shi (2021: 57); Pulleyblank (1991b: 127, 175, 208); Song (2001: 31–32).

221 *Haiyao bencao*, 50. The full original text is not extant, but it is extensively cited in later texts, from which modern editions have been compiled.

222 *Yongcheng* 壙城 is the mythical residence of the Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wangmu* 西王母). For details, see Hu (1995: 420).

安期自說：「昔與女郎遊於安息國西海際，食棗異美，此間棗永不及也。憶此未久，已二千年矣。」夫人云：「吾昔與君共食一枚乃不盡。此間小棗那可相比耶！」<sup>223</sup>

In this context, Parthia serves as a mythical country far to the west that, in the Daoist imagination, must have existed even two thousand years before the event described in the story at hand (An Qi, or An Qisheng 安期生, is said to have lived during the Qin-Han period, so in this story, Parthia exists around 2000 BCE!).<sup>224</sup> In this way, dates as an exotic delicacy could be used in religious Daoist literature as a way of highlighting the delights of what was believed to be a land in the vicinity of where the Queen Mother of the West resides. In other words, items from West Asia could be exotified in Daoism, much in the same way that Indian products served a similar function in a Chinese Buddhist context.

The next item on the list is *xiang fuzi* 香附子. Laufer (1919: 379) is unable to give a definition of this. Chinese-Sanskrit lexicons give *musta* or *mustaka* as the corresponding Sanskrit term for the Chinese.<sup>225</sup> Monier-Williams (1899: 824) suggests that this is probably the root of *Cyperus rotundus*, i.e., a type of sedge known also as nutgrass in English. The same Chinese term appears commonly in Chinese medical prescriptions, but it also appears throughout Buddhist literature in translation, so it was also significant in the Indian context.

The item *helile* 訶梨勒 (EMC: *xa li lak*) is another consumable. One Chinese-Sanskrit lexicon gives an irregular reading of *hlatake*. This ought to correspond to Sanskrit *haritakī*.<sup>226</sup> According to Monier-Williams (1899: 1292), this is “the yellow Myrobalan tree, *Terminalia Chebula* (28 synonyms and seven varieties are enumerated; the fruit is used for dyeing yellow and as a laxative).” This plant was Indian in origin, but the name is attested in Middle Persian: “*halīlag* NPers. *halīla*” (Hummel 2012). The Chinese transcription more closely reflects the Persian than the Sanskrit.

This plant was used in the cuisine of Sasanian times in jams (*ambag*), as noted by Dupree (2011) in a survey of the foods in the *Husraw ud Rēdag*.

223 DZ 777, 18: 183a5–8. Read *wei* 未 as *zao* 棗.

224 It is interesting to consider that Parthia would have been regarded as entirely beyond the range of the Chinese sphere, even after it ceased to exist. Parthia was a genuinely distant “other” on the far side of the world. Coloru et al. (2016a: 53) observe that “the geographically distant Parthia and its people were thought of as distant foreigners, beyond the realm of direct Chinese influence.”

225 T 665, 16: 435a3. T 2135, 54: 1238a21.

226 T 2135, 54: 1238a14. See also T 2136, 54: 1243a26. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 122, 184, 186).



Laufer (1919: 378) points to the New Persian *halīla-i kabūli*, which would indicate one source having been Kabul. This fact and the other data surveyed above might suggest that in many cases the Chinese were receiving products from Eastern Iran in general, rather than far more distant regions, such as Ctesiphon and Western Iran. Laufer, as well as also Chen (2022: 481), point to the existence of a popular beverage in the Tang period called the “juice of the three myrobalans” (*sanle jiang* 三勒漿), which appears to correspond to the Sanskrit *triphalā* (“three fruits”). This was an alcoholic beverage produced from *harītakī*, *vibhītaka*, and *āmalaḱī*.<sup>227</sup> The production of this is interestingly attributed to *Bosī*, which could, in fact, be Persia here. An unidentified flower (*hua* 花), called *tuode* 陀得 (MC: *da tək*), was brought to China by people of the Western Countries (not the Southern Seas), and used in brewing this type of beverage (西國胡人將來，胡人采此花以釀酒，呼為三勒漿), according to Li Shizhen’s work.<sup>228</sup> We might hazard a guess and read *tuo* 陀 as its variant *zhi/yi* 阨, in which case we get *driǎ’ tək* or *\*jiǎ’ tək*.<sup>229</sup> This resembles *gētīk*, a kind of fragrant rose in Middle Persian; a similar rose, *gol-e giti* is described in the nineteenth century by Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan E’temād-al-Salṭāna: “A comely rose, the good-quality variety of which used to be brought from Baṣra, and whose musk- and amber-scented petals are placed in clothes to perfume them.”<sup>230</sup> If the flower is in fact Persian in origin, then the drink—which was made of the three myrobalans and was itself originally Indian—was additionally flavored, presumably with a type of rose, and was then enjoyed in China.

Myrobalan was transplanted into southern China at some point around the Tang period. Su Song is quoted, “*Harītakī* grows in Jiao[zhou] and Aizhou [Northern Vietnam and Yunnan]. Now it is everywhere in Lingnan [Southern Coastal China], and it flourishes most in Guangzhou.” 訶梨勒生交愛州。今嶺南皆有，而廣州最盛。<sup>231</sup> Imports from abroad perhaps were conceivably reduced as domestic production increased, but in earlier times, *harītakī* evidently was brought from Sasanian territories.

Only one specimen (2.8 grams) of this plant was preserved Shōsō-in, but testing could not be carried out on this small sample, although it was noted that the fruit more closely resembled *Terminalia bellerica* Roxburgh according to Asahina (1955: 227).

227 These three appear in sequence in a Chinese-Sanskrit lexicon (*Fanyu zaming*) as *hlatake*, *bīvetaka*, and *amalaka*. *T* 2135, 54: 1238a14–16.

228 *Bencao gangmu* (SKQS), 57.22a; Unschuld (2022a: 558).

229 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 74, 314, 409).

230 See the detailed discussion of flowers by A’lam (2012), from whom this translation is cited.

231 *DZ* 763, 17: 590c14–591a1.

*Wushizi* 無食子 (EMC: *muə zik tsi'*) refers to gallnuts or oak-apples (oak galls), which are growths on oak trees in response to parasites.<sup>232</sup> These formations are rich in tannins. It is uncertain from which word this specific transcription of the word stems. The corresponding term in New Persian is “*māzū* (S. *mājū-phala*), a gall or oak-apple; one particle or ingredient in the composition of ink” (Steingass 2000: 1140). The etymology of the Chinese term is certainly Iranian. Duan Chengshi, citing material from medical literature, writes the following:

Gallnuts are sourced from the country of Persia. In Persia they call it the *ma dzək* tree. [...] The seeds are round like pellets. They are first green and then upon maturing become yellow. They are fully ripe when white insects have eaten through a hole. Those whose skins are without holes are used in medical applications.

無石子出波斯國，波斯呼為摩賊樹。[...] 子圓如彈丸，初青熟乃黃，白蟲食成孔者正熟。皮無孔者入藥用。<sup>233</sup>

Based on the fact that gallnuts were imported from Persia, we can infer that knowledge of their medical properties was also brought to China. For instance, in the Syriac *Book of Medicines*, “oak apples” are used in a concoction that “stimulateth the stomach, and checketh looseness of the bowels” (Budge 1913: 361–362). Li Xun writes that gallnuts “treat intestinal deficiencies and cold dysentery.” 主腸虛冷痢。<sup>234</sup> Similarly, the use of gallnuts in dyes was carried over to China. For example, in Persia, they were used to dye carpets black (Dhamija 1990). Gallnuts were similarly used in China for dying. Dullyun, who appears to be quoting either Xuanzang or Kuiji, records the following:

The Tripiṭaka Master said, “In the Western Countries I saw *akṣa* seeds, which are like here the gallnuts for dying leather boots. In the Western Countries, they squeeze them to get the dye or press them to get the oil. Here there is no name with which to translate them, so *akṣa* [as a transliteration] is kept.”

232 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 325, 283, 420).

233 *Youyang zazu* (SKQS), 17.17a. See Asahina (1955: 208). See the EMC readings (摩賊 *ma dzək*) in Pulleyblank (1991b: 217, 394).

234 *Haiyao bencao*, 48.

三藏云：「西國中見惡叉子，欲似此間染靴無食子也。西國取之將染或押取油。此間無名可翻，故存惡叉。」<sup>235</sup>

This demonstrates that gallnuts, which were imported, were known to be a source of dye for leather.<sup>236</sup> The aforementioned book on *materia medica* in the Daoist canon, citing an earlier work, reads, “People now combine gallnuts with other medicinal substances to dye their beards.” 無食子今人合他藥染髭。<sup>237</sup>

There are extant specimens of gallnuts held in Japan at Shōsō-in. They range in size from 1.7 to 2.5 cm. There are those with insect holes and those without. The latter still have the remains of deceased insects in the cavities (*Cynips gallae-tinctoriae* Olivier). These were determined to be completely identical to those produced in Asia Minor (Asahina 1955: 208–212).<sup>238</sup> It is therefore clear that gallnuts, as the Chinese sources state, were certainly imported from West Asia, and some were even brought as far as Japan.<sup>239</sup>

Unschuld (2021a: 756) identifies *yanlü* 鹽綠 (literally, “salt green”) as “Green salt. Verdigris. Persian zingar. Basic copper acetate.” This binomial is alternatively written *liyan* 綠鹽 (“green salt”). Verdigris (*zangār*) is an attested manufactured compound from copper used in painting in early Islamic times (Allan and Willem 2011). Verdigris was used as a mineral pigment in traditional Persian painting (Schimmel and Soucek 2011).

Li Xun, citing a certain “Record of Old and New” (*Gujin lu* 古今錄), records that “green salt” is “produced on stones in the country of Persia.” 波斯國在石上生。This was used as a topical treatment for eye conditions. He also remarks that “what is brought aboard ships is regarded as ‘stone green’ and it holds color a long time unchanged, whereas that made from copper and vinegar in China cannot be used in medicine. Its color also does not last long.” 舶上將來為之石綠，裝色久而不變，中國以銅錯造者不堪入藥。色亦不久。<sup>240</sup> There is clearly a difference between the two substances mentioned here. One is a natural mineral, perhaps malachite or a copper ore of some sort, while the

235 T 1828, 42: 603b28–c2.

236 Huilin’s dictionary also states that “*akṣa* is the name of a tree. Its form is like that of a gallnut. In that country [of India], they often bundle them together to sell them. It is like an apricot seed here [in China]. Hence the simile is employed.” 惡叉樹名，其形如無食子。彼國多聚以賣之，如此間杏人，故以喻之。T 2128, 54: 631a14. Read *ren* 人 as *zi* 子。

237 DZ 763, 17: 17.597b18.

238 See also the more recent remarks in Yoneda (2015: 157–159).

239 See also the brief comments by Song (2001: 19–20).

240 *Haiyao bencao*, 12.

other is verdigris, which is traditionally prepared with vinegar and copper. Li Shizhen, quoting Su Gong 蘇恭 of the early Tang, records that “green salt is sourced from the country of Yanqi (Karashahr). It is taken from the bottom of submerged stones. Its form is like that of laminal azurite or hollow azurite. It is important as a medicine for the eyes.” 綠鹽出焉耆國。水中石下取之。狀若扁青空青。為眼藥之要。<sup>241</sup> This statement additionally confirms that “green salt” could refer to different materials, although identifying them with confidence is challenging.<sup>242</sup>

The last item on the list of commodities imported from Persia is orpiment (*cihuang* 雌黃), an arsenic sulfide mineral with a characteristic yellow color. Strabo (15.2.14) mentions the presence of orpiment (ἀρσενικόν) in Carmania (Kerman) in Persia (Planhol and Hourcade 2017).<sup>243</sup> Orpiment was used as a pigment in traditional Persian painting (Schimmel and Soucek 2011). The Chinese used orpiment in medical applications, but also as a pigment in painting. Tao Yinju 陶隱居 (also known as Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, 456–536), is quoted saying that orpiment, especially that from Funan and Linyi (polities in Southeast Asia) “is valued by painters” (畫家所重).<sup>244</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the various commodities and trade goods that are found in the earliest extant description of Sasanian Iran, among a few other sources. One important point worth emphasizing is that many of these imports

241 *Bencao gangmu* (SKQS), 34.17a. Yanqi 焉耆 corresponds to Karashahr (Feng 1982: 43). Cf. the translation in Unschuld (2021a: 756–757). See the identifications of stones in Wiseman and Brand (1990). Unschuld translates these as “flat malachite” and “hollow malachite.”

242 In the *materia medica* of the Tang we read, “The [mineral called] ‘green blue’ is laminal azurite. Painters call it ‘stone green,’ whereas the ‘jade-blue’ is ‘white-blue’ and cannot be used in painting.” 綠青即扁青也。畫工呼為石綠，其碧青即白青也，不入畫用。See the commentary on the Tang *materia medica* (*Tang ben zhu* 唐本注) cited in *Tujing yanyi bencao* (DZ 763, 17: 295b11–12). To complicate the identification, one depiction of “hollow azurite” (*kongqing* 空青) shows spikey stones that resemble chalcantithite (see DZ 763, 17: 290a). The translation of these minerals often depends on scholars’ identifications of historical Chinese medicine, but the literatures of late antiquity and the medieval period express varying opinions about the nomenclature, showing a lack of precise identification even in premodern times.

243 See the Greek text at the Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>).

244 See *Tujing yanyi bencao*: DZ 763, 17: 305a5. See the biographical data and other discussion on Tao Hongjing in Unschuld (1986: 28–43).

from Persia were desirable in China for religious functions, especially within Buddhism, but also in Daoist alchemy. Buddhist *sūtras* call for specific stones to ornament *stūpas* or to be offered to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, along with rare aromatics, which for the Chinese would have been largely foreign. In this way, trade with Persia and neighboring regions facilitated the material culture of Buddhism in China and played a role in developing it, even if this was never intentional. Sapphires and frankincense all had to be imported from abroad, for instance, and Persia was evidently a recognized source of these. Chinese Buddhists recognized that some of the materials came not from India directly, but from the nebulous Western Regions, which included Eastern Iran in particular. Daoist alchemical treatises also speak of metals like “Persian lead.” This type is identified as distinct from the domestic varieties. It seems probable that some system of cupellation was transmitted to China in the sixth or seventh century from Iran (or India). In this way, the material culture of Persia exercised an influence over Chinese religions. This fact is not widely recognized in scholarship.

After the demise of the Sasanian empire in the mid-seventh century, trade with the erstwhile Sasanian territories certainly continued, although the puzzling ethnonym *Bosi* came to denote a polity or people most likely rooted in Sumatra, which I argued is Barus. This problem was already recognized by Laufer over a century ago, yet recent scholarship continues to assume that post-Sasanian references to *Bosi* in Chinese sources ought to be to Persians, even when commodities sourced from *Bosi* were coming from Southeast Asia. This problem is only compounded by the reality that authors in the Tang, such as Hyecho, did not evidently distinguish between the two separate polities, but instead conflated them. *Bosi*, as discussed above, likely corresponds to Barus. This situation is only complicated by the reality that in the eighth to ninth centuries, Arab and Persian sailors to some extent sailed all the way to southern China. Nevertheless, when commodities like asbestos or benzoin are attributed to a *Bosi* in the Tang period, it is simply more reasonable to locate this place in Southeast Asia. In earlier periods, *Bosi* clearly refers to the Sasanian empire, and the commodities tied to it can all be explained with reference to attested Sasanian culture and commerce, as demonstrated in this chapter.

This delineation of the Persian *Bosi* from a Sumatran *Bosi* greatly shapes our understanding of Southeast Asian history in antiquity. One model holds that Persian seafarers not only regularly transited through the region, after the Sasanian period, but also transported commodities from both the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asian regions all the way to China. In this framework, any number of items from *materia medica*, much of which was produced in Southeast

Asia, were apparently connected with Persians and Persian medicine. This view, in my opinion, strips away the historical agency and importance of the indigenous peoples of the region. Again, Laufer brought up these problems over a century ago, but modern scholars often still see a strong post-Sasanian Persian presence in what the Chinese called the Southern Seas; nevertheless, I think that we can come to a more realistic and fair interpretation of the data by not uncritically reading *Bosi* as Persia in every instance, especially after the mid-seventh century.

# The Early Accounts of Islam and Arab States in Chinese Sources

## 1 Problems in the Historiography of Early Islam

Scholars continue to grapple with the paucity of internal and extraneous sources connected with the early history of Islam. This has led to extended and heated debates over the last few decades as multiple scholars propose different ways to approach this critical period of history, ranging from the seventh to the early eighth century. Sources stemming from outside Arabic and Islamic texts have been essential to this discussion, but these alone are an insufficient foundation upon which one could attempt to write a convincing history. Robinson (2010: 176) notes this problem, observing that “the sources external to the tradition are in many instances much earlier, but they know so little of what was happening in Arabia and Iraq that they are inadequate for detailed reconstruction.”

In this regard, the Chinese sources are the most remote contemporary voices—both geographically and linguistically—with something to say about early Islam, yet they are arguably less appreciated by modern scholarship than the Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Latin accounts. This chapter is interested in these Chinese accounts, as they are unique in relation to most of the other contemporary voices. They are also necessary in order to gain a picture of how the Sasanians ended and what became of Iran from the Chinese perspective.

Hoyland (2012: 575) remarks that “writings about the Arab conquerors, whether in a positive or negative vein, have to be considered with caution.” Unlike the accounts of the conquered, however, the Chinese accounts come from a country that was neither conquered by the Arabs nor regularly engaged in military conflict with the caliphates. The famous Battle of Talas in 751 did not lead to a perpetual war or hinder further communications between China and the Abbasids. The Chinese never faced any existential threat from the Arabs, who were still recognized as a powerful nation, but they were remote and located beyond the western frontiers of Tibet. The Tibetans were the more immediate threat to China.

We must exercise caution when handling the Chinese sources, but for unique reasons: namely, the geographical, linguistic, and cultural gaps between West and East Asia. The religious concepts and vocabulary of Abrahamic religions,

and even the precise geography of the Middle East and the Levant, were unfamiliar, if not nebulous, to most contemporary Chinese authors. The modern scholarly nomenclature connected with the study of the early Arabic world of the seventh and eighth centuries, which itself is a contentious issue, also simply does not accord well with the vocabulary used in Tang China. As we have explored earlier, making sense of Christian texts in Chinese is challenging.<sup>1</sup> Chinese authors, apart from the very few who might have had contact with Christians, or were Christians themselves, did not know of the Bible or monotheism. The vocabulary of sources from the western side of Eurasia also differs from the Chinese sources: for example, the Chinese sources do not use any comparable word for “Arab” during this period, but instead use the ethnonym *Tāzīk* (an Iranian loanword). Navigating around these linguistic differences while maintaining an analysis coherent to a modern Arabist or Sinologist is challenging; nevertheless, it remains a fact that the Chinese knew something about the Arabs and early Islam, even if these accounts—as we will see—might appear anomalous to Arabists and scholars in related fields.

Documented Sino-Arab contacts appear in the historical record relatively soon after the advent of Islam. The Chinese received envoys from the “*Tāzīks*” starting in the year 651. The Chinese continued to call them this (rather than anything comparable to “Arabs” or “Muslims”) for several centuries. Throughout the Tang period, China hosted Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, and Christians. China also sheltered deposed Sasanian royals. There were indeed many cultural links connecting China with West Asia during this period. The extant primary sources of interest—generally either excerpts from travelogues, or court records reproduced in later compilations—show that the Chinese knew something about the new country that had destroyed the Sasanian empire.

The most striking feature of the Chinese understanding of the “*Tāzīks*” and their religion is that it radically differs from the traditional account of Islam, but interestingly also still retains many elements that would be recognizable to anyone familiar with Islam. Yet, at the same time, some of these elements parallel the contemporary accounts of authors who were extraneous to Muslim communities. This leads to the question of whether the Chinese sources from the Tang period might offer any new insights regarding the early history of Islam and the Arabs within wider scholarly debates today; more importantly,

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1 Donner (2018) has addressed the challenges of the modern nomenclature involving Islam's origins in scholarly literature. Adding to this discussion through reference to Chinese sources requires not only an awareness of how Arabists currently frame important discussions, but also constant attention to faithful translations and interpretations of what the Chinese texts say, even when the content is anomalous from a traditional Islamic perspective.



however, we must recognize that the Chinese material was not as disconnected from the events far to the west as we might initially otherwise assume. The lines of communication were consistently open between West and East Asia during the seventh and eighth centuries.

There are ongoing debates among historians of early Islam, ranging from traditionalists to revisionists. The Chinese sources under investigation could support the general thesis of the revisionist camp, as we will discuss, because the picture they paint generally does not align with the traditional narratives, but this leads to some issues, which I will highlight. The Chinese account describes the rise of the “Tāziks” not as a religious movement, but instead as a rebellion against the Persians, which was initially orchestrated and supported by an unnamed god. This god directed an unnamed camel herder to a cache of weapons. This herder in turn became the first ruler of the Tāziks. The only mention of Muḥammad in the Chinese sources at hand, which appears only in a fragment of a document dated to 801, describes him as a warrior involved in the conquests of Ḥīra and Šām (Damascus), but not as a Prophet. He is also named as a predecessor to the Abbasids. There are many such anomalous features in the sources at hand; these require some explanation. This investigation only seems further warranted when we observe the number of envoys (approximately thirty-seven are recorded, according to modern scholars) from the Arabs who arrived in Tang China from 651 until around 798. There were numerous opportunities for the two cultures to communicate at the state level over at least a century and a half, to say nothing of the fact that merchants were also active. The caliphates in the west, in fact, were not unreachably remote. The Chinese regularly interacted with them during the Tang. The Chinese understanding of the Arabs and Islam, therefore, was not based on mere hearsay and conjecture. Indeed, these high-level diplomatic contacts only emphasize the significance of the Chinese voice when analyzing Chinese material related to early Islam and the caliphates.

The primary objective of this chapter is to examine the Chinese side of this interaction. How did the Chinese understand early Islam and the caliphates during the seventh to ninth centuries? At the same time, I believe it is important to draw parallels with the existing body of historical accounts that touch upon early Islam to demonstrate that the Chinese sources were objectively connected—albeit relatively remotely—to the events that unfolded in West Asia. These materials, I argue, ought to be considered when we address the lack of contemporary sources from the seventh century. Hoyland (2017: 114–115) notes that one proposed solution to the paucity of credible sources on the early history of Islam was to examine non-Muslim sources “to bring out the parallels

and similarities between the reports of Muslim and non-Muslim witnesses,” but he later revisited this approach, “since the two bodies of material are much more intertwined than had previously been thought.” The Chinese sources also ought to be treated with simultaneous reference to Muslim and non-Muslim sources. We must recognize that while the Chinese accounts were extraneous to Islam and the Arabic speaking world, they still shed light on how *others* perceived and described Islam. Historians might uncover new facts through the study of these other perspectives, even when they appear anomalous.

The early accounts of Islam in Chinese are certainly not unknown to modern scholarship, particularly since they form a foundation for discussions of Islamic communities in China in later centuries until the present day. In 1899, Parker published translations of some excerpts from the Chinese. The title of his brief publication, “Chinese Contributions to the Kaaba Question,” is instructive, since he evidently thought that the Chinese texts might offer some solutions. In 1943, Drake published a paper titled “Mohammedanism in the T’ang Dynasty,” in which he discussed some Chinese accounts of early Islam, but this was not exhaustive. In 1986, Leslie provided a number of valuable translations in a monograph, *Islam in Traditional China: A Short History to 1800*. In 1997, Hoyland published a pioneering monograph, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, which collects a number of translations of Chinese primary sources. Later, Park (Hyunhee) (2012) offers translations and comments for some of the accounts. Park (Hyondo) (2019) also cites some of these same accounts in a discussion of Chinese understandings of Muḥammad, but unfortunately, the translations provided are problematic. Japanese scholarship has also touched on these accounts. In 1964, Tazaka in two Japanese-language volumes covered a great quantity of Chinese materials related to Islam, although he generally evaluates the veracity of early Chinese accounts based on whether they conform to orthodox Islamic history. Similarly, work has been done in China. The relevant writings of Zhang (2018) have been compiled and critically edited; these include Chinese texts and documents related to Sino-foreign relations, a section of which covers Sino-Arab connections.

Building on these earlier works, I want to offer my own critical translations and fresh interpretations. This chapter also functions as a necessary conclusion to the history of Sino-Iranian relations based on Chinese sources. One last aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the utility and importance of Chinese histories in the reconstruction of the history of West Asia during late antiquity. The Chinese were witnesses—again, at a remote distance—to the major events of the period, and we ought to consider what they had to say.

## 2 Sino-Arab Contacts

We do not possess original documents related to Sino-Arab contacts in the seventh century. We must instead rely on later sources to reconstruct the interactions between China and the caliphates. Historians of Islam are faced with a similar problem, having to contend with a paucity of sources—particularly in Arabic—from the seventh century. One of the main advantages of the Chinese sources is that they largely reuse text (often verbatim) from earlier materials, such as court records or other documents.

The earliest extant state source in Chinese that discusses the Arabs is the *Tong dian* 通典 (*Comprehensive Chronicle*). It was compiled by Du You 杜佑 (735–812) in the year 801 as an expansion of an earlier *Zheng dian* 政典 (*State Chronicle*) in thirty-five fascicles by Liu Zhi 劉秩 (d.u.) in the mid-eighth century. The *Tong dian* is comprised of a voluminous two hundred fascicles, discussing state history and institutions from ancient times until the year 756.<sup>2</sup> Although it is not a dynastic history, it still provides a rich array of information on the geographies, peoples, and customs of foreign cultures in fifteen fascicles (#185–200). Du You certainly had access to official court records and many of his sources would therefore date back to the events that they describe.

Another important Chinese source from which we can draw is the *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (*Grand Tortoise in the Imperial Treasures of Books*). This is an even larger encyclopedia of politics and history in a total of one thousand fascicles; it was completed in 1013 under the supervision of Wang Qinruo 王欽若 (962–1025) and Yang Yi 楊億 (974–1020). The value of this text for the reconstruction of the history of the Tang dynasty has long been recognized by modern scholars.<sup>3</sup> Two other key sources in Chinese for reconstructing Sino-Arab relations are the dynastic histories of the Tang dynasty. These two projects evidently drew upon the *Tong dian* and other sources.

2 The proposed dates of composition of the *Tong dian* include 794, 801, and 803. Kitagawa (1998: 132) argues that 801 is the most plausible date among these three possibilities. Kitagawa (2010) offers a translation of two epitaphs of Du You. See the chronology of Du You's life in Kitagawa (1998: 141–142). Biographical details on Du You, as well as some information regarding his production of the *Tong dian*, are provided in the *Jiu Tang shu* (147.3978–3983) and *Xin Tang shu* (166.5085–5090).

3 See, for example, Utsunomiya (1936: 136–137). The *Tong dian* and *Cefu yuangui* are reproduced via woodblock print in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library in Four Libraries*), an enormous compendium of texts compiled by the Chinese state between 1773 and 1782. The entire collection has been digitized and is therefore searchable. This is a great convenience to the philologist, but the original editors of this compendium edited or dropped text deemed sensitive; I have therefore checked the citations of the *Siku quanshu* against alternate editions.

Court authors throughout the Tang (618–907) and Song dynasties (960–1279) referred to the Arabs using the loanword *Tāzīk*. This is the heading under which an explanation of the people appears in the *Tong dian*. The section reads (closely translated) as follows:

*Tāzīks*: During the Yonghui era [650–655] of the Great Tang, they sent an envoy to offer tribute at our court. They said that their country is to the west of Persia. It was also said that first there was a man of the *Hu* of Persia.<sup>4</sup> He obtained blades and slaughtered men through some divine assistance, and thus he was accompanied by numerous *Hu*. There were eleven men of the *Hu* that came. The *mo shou* [\**amīr al-mu'minīn*] were invested as kings in succession.<sup>5</sup> After this, the group gradually subjugated [peoples]. They successfully vanquished Persia, and also destroyed the cities of the Romans and Brāhmaṇas.<sup>6</sup> Wherever they faced, they had no enemies. Their army possesses 420,000 troops. It had already existed as a country for thirty-four years. The first king had already died [by the time the first envoy to China had arrived]. The first *mo shou* was subsequently invested. The present king is the third. The king is sur-named *Tāzīk*.

大食：大唐永徽中，遣使朝貢。云其國在波斯之西。或云初有波斯胡人，若有神助得刀殺人，因招附諸胡，有胡人十一來。據次第摩首受化為王。此後衆漸歸附，遂滅波斯，又破拂菻及婆羅門城。所向無敵。兵衆有四十二萬。有國以來三十四年矣。初王已死，次傳第一摩首者，今王即是第三。其王姓大食。<sup>7</sup>

As discussed above, the Chinese word *Hu* 胡 during the Tang was a general reference to persons to the west of China, including Sogdians, Persians,

4 I suspect that a date originally preceded *chu* 初 (“first,” “early”), but it was dropped. See citation below, in which these events are placed in the Daye reign era (605–618). In that case, the line would read, “It was also said that early in the Daye reign era, there was a man of the *Hu* of Persia.”

5 The term *mo shou* 摩首 appears to be a phonetic transcription followed by *shou* 首 as a semantic element (“leader, head”). This appears to be a gloss of *Amīr al-mu'minīn* (“Commander of the Faithful”) into Chinese, based on the fact that the Arabic word in transcription appears elsewhere (see below).

6 Note that this refers to the Eastern Roman territories. Cf. Mid. Persian *Hrōm* for “Rome” (MacKenzie 1986: 44). Forte (1996b: 387) notes, “Normally Purim > Frūm = Rūm, Rome, i.e. the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire.” Kuwayama (1998: 160) points out the cognate in Armenian: “Hrom/Horom.”

7 *Tong dian* (SKQS), 193.28a–b. Cf. *Tong dian* (Shangwu ed.), 193.1044.

sometimes Indians, and evidently also Arabs. The repeated use of the word in this context seems to imply something more specific, since Persians were typically called *Bosi ren* 波斯人 (“man/men of Persia”). My present sense is that *Hu ren* (“man/men of the *Hu*”) likely denotes herders of camels, since in China, many Westerners were typically associated with riding camels. In the eighth century, the monk Hyecho, we will recall from above, wrote, “The Tāzīks were a house of herders of camels of the Persian king. They later rebelled and killed the king, establishing themselves as sovereign.” 大寔是波斯王放駝戶，於後叛便殺彼王，自立為主。<sup>8</sup>

The above account has recognizable elements to anyone familiar with early Islamic history, but there are striking differences. For instance, one might expect twelve followers, rather than eleven. Conrad (2005: 403) notes the significance of the number twelve in Christian and Islamic histories. For instance, “At the First Pledge of al-‘Aqaba twelve accept Islam, and at the Second Pledge of al-‘Aqaba Muḥammad requests the appointment of twelve delegates (*nuqabā*).”<sup>9</sup> The geographical location of the Arabs relative to Persia is also peculiar, since we would expect a southern rather than western position relative to Persia, or Ctesiphon in particular, but the western direction presumably indicates the general region of Syria. A more precise date other than just the Chinese reign era of Yonghui (650–655), which fell under the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–683), is not given, but the *Cefu yuangui* has the following entry in its long lists of diplomatic envoys that arrived in Chin from different countries:

In the eighth month of year 2 [of Yonghui], the country of the Tāzīks first sent an envoy to pay tribute at our court.

二年八月大食國始遣使朝貢。<sup>10</sup>

The Tang history gives the exact day (八月乙丑) that the first envoy of the Tāzīks arrived.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese date converts to 25 August 651.<sup>12</sup> Other peoples also reported encounters with the Tāzīks to the Chinese around this time. The *Tang huiyao*, records communications from Samarkand (Kangguo 康國):

8 *T* 2089, 51: 978a27–b1. Cf. the translation in Finch et al. (2012: 145–146).

9 It is possible that a scribal error occurred in the Chinese, in which *er* 二 (2) was miswritten as *yi* 一 (1), resulting in “eleven” rather than “twelve,” but this is not certain.

10 *Cefu yuangui* (SKQS), 970.16b.

11 *Jiu Tang shu*, 4.69.

12 For date conversions, I have used the Chinese-Western date converted of Academia Sinica (<https://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw/>).

“During the Yonghui period, the country repeatedly dispatched envoys reporting that they were being attacked by the Tāzīks, and that they were forced to levy troops and pay taxes.” 永徽中，其國頻遣使告為大食所攻，兼徵賦稅。<sup>13</sup> This was during the time of the third caliph, ‘Uṭmān ibn ‘Affān, who in modern histories is said to have reigned from 644 to 656,<sup>14</sup> although the Chinese source does not name him.

The genesis of the “Tāzīk” (Arab) state according to the Chinese account, would correspond approximately to the year 617 (651 minus 34 elapsed years). Calculating from the traditional year of birth of Muḥammad in 570, the Prophet would have been about forty-seven years old in 617, a time that predates the *Hijra* to Medina in the year 622, as well as the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya in 628, when Medina was recognized as an independent polity in its own right. The Chinese text does not expressly suggest that thirty-four years represents the years elapsed since the beginning of an epoch, but only that the country had already existed for thirty-four years. The Islamic epoch based on the year of the *Hijra* might not have been formally adopted yet by the year 651, or perhaps it was not explained to the Chinese.<sup>15</sup> The difference of five years between 617 and 622 cannot easily be explained by a discrepancy in the definition of a year in the languages presumably spoken between the two parties in 651.<sup>16</sup>

The most plausible explanation for the significance of 617 is that this was when the Arabs revolted, and the following few generations counted the founding of their new polity from this year. We can draw a parallel between

13 *Tang huiyao*, 99.18.

14 The chronology of the Arab rulers in the *Chronographeion Syntomon* gives the following: Μουάμεθ (9 years), Αβουβάρχαρος (3 years), Ούμαρ (12 years), Ούθμαν (10 years), ἀναρχία και πόλεμος (4 years). See the Greek and Latin in Maio (1825: 34). The years from Muḥammad until the period of “anarchy and battle” is thirty-four years. The Chinese account states that in 651 the Arab state had existed for thirty-four years at that point in history. In this model, the Chinese envoy would have been sent under ‘Uṭmān or shortly after his death in the stated period of anarchy. The count of thirty-four regnal years in both cases is noteworthy.

15 Donner (2018: 8) notes, “Most of the earliest dated documents produced by the conquerors provide no era, just the year, but those few that provide an era give dates in the form of *sanat X sanat qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn*, ‘year X, year of the jurisdiction of the Believers.’” See Shaddel (2018) for a recent discussion on the origins of the *hijrī* era.

16 Assuming that the lingua franca between the Chinese and the first Arab envoy was Persian or Sogdian (it is unlikely that the Chinese court had bilingual Chinese–Arabic speakers available to them), the understanding of a “year” in both languages would not have presented severe difficulties, given that the Chinese possessed an understanding of the Persian calendar. See the details on the Persian calendar in Chinese in Chapter 3 above.

the Chinese sources and the Byzantine–Arab Chronicle of 741, which remarks that the Saracens rebelled against the Romans (rather than the Persians):

In the seventh year of the aforesaid ruler (Heraclius) the Saracens, in rebellion and hostile to [the inhabitants] of the provinces of the Romans, by stealth rather than by open attacks, incite {the neighbouring tribes}. Theodore, brother of the emperor Heraclius, fought many battles against them.<sup>17</sup>

Heraclius reigned from 610 to 641, thus his seventh year would correspond to 616/617. Both in this context and that of the Chinese, the Arabs are understood as rebels, although against whom they rebelled differed. This difference is perhaps explained by the fact that the Byzantines and Persians shared borders, and often claimed the same lands. The fact that we can corroborate the dates in the two very remote sources in this way points to the historicity of the “rebellion” described. We should also recall here that the Tang history, surveyed above, states, “In the late years of the Daye reign era [605–618] of the Sui, the Western Turk Yabgu Qaghan repeatedly assaulted the country. The king of Persia, Xusraw, was killed by the Western Turks.” Based on the Chinese chronology of events, Persia was briefly assaulted and even subjugated to some extent by the Turks, and the Arabs also rebelled against Persia around this time.

The Chinese histories also briefly mention the situation in Byzantium during the period in question. The *Tang huiyao* reports the following about the Romans:

In year 17 of reign era Zhenguan [643], their king, the \*βασιλεύς, dispatched an envoy to offer various items, such as red glassware, verdigris, and essence of gold.<sup>18</sup> Taizong bestowed a seal and his salutations. As the Tāzīks flourished in strength, they gradually encroached upon countries, and sent commanders to attack the [Byzantine] cities, and thus annually [the Byzantines] send gold and silk, and they are subordinate to the Tāzīks.

<sup>17</sup> See Hoyland (1997: 616–617) for this translation of the text from Latin.

<sup>18</sup> The meaning of “essence of gold” 金精 is uncertain. The *Xinxu bencao* (handwritten manuscript, National Diet Library, 特7–25) connects orpiment and realgar to this term, in one instance stating that it is orpiment. This text states, “[Orpiment] is produced in the mountain valleys of Wudu. It is produced in the same mountains as realgar. Mt. Yin there has gold, and when the essence of gold is smoked, it produces orpiment. It is collected whenever.” 生武都山谷，與雄黃同山生。其陰山有金，金精熏則生雌黃。採無時。

貞觀十七年，其王波多力遣使，獻赤玻璃石綠金精等物。太宗降璽書答慰。自大食強盛，漸陵諸國。遣將伐其都，乃歲輸金帛，臣屬大食焉。<sup>19</sup>

The envoy appears to have been referring to the capture of Jerusalem, among other defeats, and the subsequent requirement to pay tribute. The Byzantine envoy would have presumably been sent in an attempt to garner support for assistance, or even a counter attack against the Arabs, although no Chinese response was forthcoming, as was also the case when the Sasanians reported their defeats to the Chinese court.

### 3 The Ethnonym “Tāzīk” in Chinese

The appellation “Tāzīk” is an Iranian loanword in Chinese that entered standard use from the seventh century. This term is even attested in a Chinese Buddhist travelogue that was unconnected with the diplomatic records of the Chinese court. The biographies of monks who traveled to India, compiled by the monk Yijing in 691, include a biography of the Chinese monk Xuanzhao 玄照 (fl. c.627–685), who had taken the Sanskrit name Prakāśamati. Yijing explains that he had met Xuanzhao at the great monastery of Nālanda (in modern Bihar), and that Xuanzhao had sought to return to China, “but the path through Nepal to Tibet was blocked, and the route through Kapiśā had been seized by the Tāzīks and was difficult to cross.” 但以泥波羅道吐蕃擁塞不通，迦畢試途多氏捉而難度。<sup>20</sup> Xuanzhao subsequently died in India, more than sixty years old. This occurred sometime between 675 to 685, when Yijing was at Nālanda. A note appended to Yijing’s text clarifies that *duoshi* 多氏 (EMC: *ta dzi3’/dzi’*) refers to the country of *dashi* 大食 (EMC: *da’/dajh zik*).<sup>21</sup> These two ethnonyms, usually simply translated as “Arabs,” are clearly connected with Persian Tāzīk/Tāzīg, or from a close language or dialect.<sup>22</sup>

The reference to the Tāzīks in the above account appears to be in relation to their occupation of territories to the west of what was then called Middle

19 *Tang huiyao*, 99.23. Shiratori (1969: 175) reads *boduoli* 波多力 as a corruption of Greek βασιλεύς, the title of the Byzantine emperor.

20 *T* 2066, 51: 2a17–18.

21 *T* 2066, 51: 2a21–22; Ferrand (1924: 242). See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 69, 85, 283, 284). See also Adachi (1942a: 10–32).

22 For Pahlavi vocabulary, see MacKenzie (1986: 83). Drake (1943) translates all instances of “Tāzīk” in Chinese sources as Arab(s), which is misleading. We must remain aware that the Chinese texts in this period never use the word “Arab” or anything comparable. On the ethnonym Tajik in its diverse historical contexts, see Perry (2009).



India.<sup>23</sup> Xuanzhao and Yijing appear to have heard the word “Tāzīk” also used in India (compare Sanskrit *Tājika*).<sup>24</sup> This is an important observation, since it likely means that Indians also used a term like “Tāzīk,” rather than “Arabs,” during the seventh century. In this context, it would technically be anachronistic to translate “Tāzīk” as “Arab,” since “Arab” (or anything comparable) is not attested in the contemporary Chinese sources.

The fact that a transcription of an ethnonym from Persian (or an Iranian language) was used requires an explanation, since it points to a potential Iranian intermediary in the translation process into Chinese. Even amid the regular contact with Arabic speaking diplomats, the ethnonym “Tāzīk” remained standard in Chinese throughout the Tang period and even afterward. Why is there no mention of “Arabs” in Chinese during this period? Donner (2015: 138) observes that “there is no inscription, or papyrus document, or coin produced by the conquerors in the seventh century in which they refer to themselves as ‘Arabs.’” The word appears in later chronicles.<sup>25</sup> This might lead us to wonder whether “Tāzīk” was an autonym or exonym within the Chinese context.

It is plausible that the representatives of the caliphs who visited China might, in fact, have called themselves Tāzīks *in translation*. Persian or possibly Sogdian was the most probable lingua franca for communicating with the Chinese at the time. This is a critical question to consider, since the means of communication must be explained to account for possible misunderstandings and mistranslations. It is unlikely that there were staff available at the Chinese court who could read or speak Arabic. Lung (2011: 62) points out that “a typical feature of Tang government translators was that they were mostly non-Chinese in ethnicity, but displayed a good command of spoken Chinese.” We know for a fact that some officials could also handle Persian or at least arrange for it to be translated. The postscript to a Christian hymn that we have discussed above relates that the Persian Christian Aluoben spoke his own language in 635, and that this was translated.<sup>26</sup>

The Chinese account we have cited above states, “The king is surnamed Tāzīk.” This is anomalous, but not necessarily inexplicable. We could imagine that the Chinese side posed the question, “What is the name of your king?”

23 Vaglieri (1977: 79) states, “Two bodies of troops were organized; one of them marched from Khurāsān to the valley of the Indus, and sent a flying column as far as Lahore (44/664).”

24 Monier-Williams (1899: 1328).

25 Elsewhere, Donner similarly remarks, “In the conquerors’ own early inscriptions and other writings from the seventh century, which are in the Arabic language, it is striking that they never refer to themselves in them as ‘Arabs.’” See the discussion in Donner (2018: 13–18).

26 See the postscript in *T* 2143, 54: 1288c22–23.

Somewhere in the translation process, Persian *šāh* (“king”) was mistaken as *šahr* (“land, country”).<sup>27</sup> The Iranian translator then could have responded with “Tāzīk,” either on paper or spoken aloud. In this case, it is clear that “Tāzīk” was technically an exonym, but it appears to have become an autonym when communicating with the Chinese through a second language.

One issue with this conjecture (and I must concede that it is a conjecture) that the Arabs referred to themselves as Tāzīks in China *through translation* is that this phenomenon is not attested elsewhere, so far as I am aware. The papyri of the administration in Egypt from 642 refer to the conquerors as *magarītai/mōagarītai* in Greek. The Syriac cognate is *mhaggrē/mhaggrāyē*. These terms reflect Arabic *muhājir* (*muhājirūn*), meaning those who emigrate.<sup>28</sup> Tāzīk/Tāzīg appears to be related to Syriac *ṭayyāyē*, which is derived from Ṭayyi’, a nomadic tribe that migrated from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Syriac writers used this as a term for camel-herding nomads to the south and east of Mesopotamia and Syria.<sup>29</sup> Although a Syriac church had already formally existed from 638 in China, it is unlikely in my estimation that they would have been summoned to assist in translation for the court, although this is not impossible. In the Chinese context, it seems more reasonable to assume the existence of a Persian or otherwise Iranian intermediary, at least during the seventh and early eighth centuries.

An additional point to consider is that interaction between Arab envoys and the Chinese might have occurred predominately on paper through writing rather than oral communication. There was a practice of “speaking through the brush” (*bi tan* 筆談) in China, in which two parties would write back and forth to one another when they did not possess a common language or mutually intelligible dialect. This was done, for example, when some Japanese monks traveled in China, since they could read and write Chinese, but often did not speak the official language or regional dialects. Visitors from the distant lands of Arabia, Syria, or Iraq would have had to resort largely to writing—conceivably even in a few languages in different scripts—as a means of communicating with the Chinese court, even when presenting themselves in person.

We could conceive of some Arabic speakers eventually learning written Chinese, but only later on, particularly during the Abbasid period. In the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, for example, Ibn al-Nadīm (b. circa 935) offers a description of the Chinese script with an apparent sample of it (the symbols, however, resemble nothing like Chinese characters), and reports that he has seen handheld fans

27 See the vocabulary in MacKenzie (1986: 79).

28 On this terminology, see the discussions in Hoyland (2017: 122–123) and Lindstedt (2015).

29 On Syriac *ṭayyāyē*, see Donner (2018: 15).

on which religious and scientific books were written. He also cites Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī (865–925), who reports that a man from China came and dwelled with him for about a year to learn Arabic, written and spoken, which he mastered in five months.<sup>30</sup> Setting aside whether this is an objectively historical account, it is reasonable to assume that some scholars in the Arabic speaking world might have learned written Chinese to some extent, but I am skeptical that this occurred in the seventh century due to the lack of any records that would indicate this.

#### 4 The Account of the Prophet and Islamic Culture in Chinese Sources

There is no mention of Muḥammad by name in the account of the *Tong dian*. Rather, the figure is said to be a *Hu* of Persia. As we have discussed above, the term *Hu* was a generic Chinese term to describe certain foreign peoples, but the referent changed over the centuries. It originally referred to nomadic peoples in the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), but was then later extended to most peoples to the west of China, such as those in Central Asia, Persia, and beyond.<sup>31</sup> Pulleyblank (1952: 318) observes that this word from the sixth century “becomes specialized to mean the Iranian peoples of Central Asia, or even specifically the Sogdians, as opposed to Turkish- or Mongol-speaking peoples.” In the case of the Arabs, I believe that the term *Hu* was used because of the association with camels and the geographic connections with Persia.

The Chinese account of the Prophet goes on to say that the man went on to acquire weapons and slaughter men with divine assistance. This appears to be an abridgment of a longer narrative, such as what we find reproduced in the *Cefu yuanguī*. The account of the Tāzīks in the *Cefu yuanguī*, which is translated as follows, offers more details and, in my estimation, likely preserves more of the original text of a court record, albeit still abridged. We read the following:

30 See the translation in Dodge (1970: 31–32). Ibn al-Nadīm also reports meeting a Chinese man named Jikī in 967, who related some information about China (Dodge 1970: 839–842). This is outside the Tang period, but it is interesting to consider that similar informants might have been present in the Arabic speaking world during both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. As we will see below, we have the travelogue of one Chinese traveler who visited the general area of Syria in the mid-eighth century.

31 The *Han shu* (*Book of the Han Dynasty*; 49.2285) describes the *Hu ren* 胡人 as a nomadic people, unattached to the land, without cities, who “eat meat and drink yogurt” (食肉飲酪). See Kotyk (2021a). This definition would clearly not apply to Persians, who lived in permanent cities. Again, see Boucher (2000) for further discussion.

The country of the Tāzīks: they are a separate race of Great Persia. During the Daye era [605–618] of the Sui, there was a man of the *Hu* of Persia. He was herding camels in the mountains of \**Qubā' Madīna*, when suddenly a lion leaped up from the ground. Someone said to the man of the *Hu*, “On the west of this mountain are three caves. There are a great many weapons in the caves. You may take them.” Arriving at the caves, inside there were very many blades and spears. On a stone were some words that instructed him to rebel. As a result of this, he gathered together [some people] and went into exile. They crossed the waters of the \**Tigris* and pillaged merchant travelers.<sup>32</sup> Their group gradually increased in number. They successfully cut off and occupied the western border of Persia. [Their leader] established himself as a king. Persia and Rome each dispatched troops to attack them, but instead they were defeated. Their king is surnamed Tāzīk. He is named \**amīr al-mu'minīn*. They came on a tributary mission to our court during the time of Tang Gaozong [the emperor, r. 649–683]. They themselves said that their country had existed for thirty-four years, and that they already had had a succession of three kings.

大食國：大波斯之別種也。隋大業中，有波斯胡人，牧駝於俱紛摩地那之山，忽有獅子從地踊出，人語謂胡人曰：「此山西有三穴，穴中大有兵器，汝可取之。」至穴中有刀及稍甚多。石上有文，教其反叛，於是糾合亡命。渡恒曷水，劫奪商旅。其衆漸盛，遂割據波斯西境。自立為王。波斯拂菻各遣兵討之，反為所敗。其王姓大食，名噉密莫未膩。至唐高宗時來朝貢。自云有國已三十四年，歷三王矣。<sup>33</sup>

The precise source of information regarding the first ruler (who is also presented as a kind of Prophet, or at least a recipient of divine assistance) is not stated in the Chinese sources, but the *Tong dian* seems to imply that it was conveyed by the first Arab envoy in 651. The problem is the use of the expression *huo yun* 或云, which could mean either “someone said” (i.e., the compiler was citing a different source) or “also said” (in which case, the compiler is quoting the envoy of 651). The latter meaning seems to apply in this case. Tazaka (1964: 48–49) suggests that the remarks could have come from an envoy, or otherwise

32 Regarding the Tigris, the word *henghe* 恒曷 is a corruption of *dahe* 達曷, as seen in the *Sui shu*, discussed above.

33 *Cefu yuangui* (SKQS) 956.26a. Cf. Wuxiu tang edn., 956.22 (Keio University #57.1.308).

they were transmitted around the time of the envoy.<sup>34</sup> If this is in fact the case, then this account was relayed to the Chinese only about two decades after the traditionally established death of Muḥammad in 632. Needless to say, this story is unlike anything known elsewhere, and Tazaka points out that it would have been incomprehensible for a Muslim to have communicated it, at least in the preserved form.

This unique story places the figure—who, again, remains unnamed—in Medina. The last three characters of 俱紛摩地那 (EMC: *kuə p<sup>h</sup>un ma di<sup>h</sup> na<sup>h</sup>*) are presumably a transcription of *Madīna*.<sup>35</sup> The translation in Hoyland (1997: 251) reads, “There was a Persian shepherding on the hills of Medina.” This translation does not mention the object of the verb *mu* 牧 (“to herd”), which in this case means to herd camels.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, there is the question of what *kuə p<sup>h</sup>un* 俱紛 would denote. Some translators have ignored this, but Tazaka (1964: 51) and Zhang (2018: 526) suggest that this is a transcription of *Qubā’*, which is located on the outskirts of Medina. Again, this story is anomalous, since we would normally expect the Prophet to first reside in Mecca, but Mecca is not mentioned in the Chinese sources. If this is, in fact, a transcription of *Qubā’ Madīna*, it shows that the author had knowledge of a specific locale in Medina. We would expect only someone relatively familiar with Arabia to know of this location. At the very least, the Chinese account would place the Prophet in the Hejaz region.

Other elements we might otherwise expect are not seen in the Chinese account. For instance, Tesei (2021: 186) states that “we know that at least some members of the community understood Muḥammad’s preaching as referring to an imminent apocalypse.” There is nothing in the Chinese materials to suggest that a belief in the apocalypse accompanied the religion (the same observation holds for Christianity and Zoroastrianism in China). Tazaka (1964: 50–51) and Zhang (2018: 527) both suggest that this account of the Prophet, as a whole, stems from the Persians, who apparently offered an explanation of the rise of the new religion. No strong evidence is given to support this claim, however, apart from the fact that it is anomalous based on the perspective of what would later be orthodox Islam.

The Chinese account is also anomalous if we compare it with other non-Arabic accounts from the seventh century, but the fact remains that the Chinese got this narrative from someone who knew something about Arabia.

34 The word *huo* 或 (EMC: *ɣwək*), in this case, appears to be a variant or error of *you* 又 (EMC: *wuw<sup>h</sup>*, meaning “also”). See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 136, 379).

35 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 76, 94, 162, 217, 221).

36 The character *tuo* 駝 (“hunchback, camel”) is a variant of *tuo* 駝 (“camel”).

For instance, the term *amīr* [al-] *mu'minīn* in a garbled transcription (噉密莫未賦, EMC: *dam' mit mak mujh nri<sup>h</sup>*) is attested from the year 651.<sup>37</sup> At the very least, we can affirm that the Arabs at the time presented to the Chinese their chief as leader of the “Believers,” hence that role was religious in nature; however, the Chinese side does not appear to have understood the meaning of *amīr al-mu'minīn*, since they understood this as the given name of the “king” whose surname was said to be “Tāzīk” (“Tāzīk Amīr al-mu'minīn”). Still, we can observe that the Arab leaders are framed here as kings, including their founding king. The Syriac writers of the seventh century also framed the Arab leaders as kings. Brock (2008: 318) explains that Muḥammad was “described as the first of the Arab kings, and it would be generally true to say that the Syriac sources of this period see the conquests primarily as Arab, and not Muslim.” A similar observation would hold for the Chinese account. The first king of the “Tāzīks” had divine assistance initially, but the subsequent conquests are described as one country defeating the Byzantines and Persians, rather than the triumph of a new religion. The theme of salvation connected with the *futūḥ* (conquests), as seen in later Islamic histories, is not evident in the Chinese descriptions of the Arabs. This point only adds additional material to consider in relation to the ideas of Albrecht Noth (1937–1999), “who revealed the strongly salvation-historical agenda that underlay the later Islamic conquest narratives.”<sup>38</sup>

The divine assistance in the Chinese narrative does not include anything we could regard as monotheistic or connected with salvation. There is no mention of the Qurʾān. The man is simply directed to caves, which are full of weapons, after a lion appears and someone (unnamed) directs him there. Gabriel (Ġibrīl) does not appear, nor any angelic figure for that matter, unless we somehow interpret the lion to indicate such a being, but the Chinese itself does not support this reading. The lion was significant to Persian royalty in that their throne was decorated with lions, a fact that at least some Chinese sources record.<sup>39</sup> The cave in the story might be vaguely compared with the Cave of Hira, where Muḥammad received his revelations. There is also the account of the Cave of Thawr, where Muḥammad and Abū Bakr sought refuge after departing from Mecca. Later, Muḥammad built a mosque in Qubāʾ. Nevertheless, the stories

37 See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 72, 213, 218, 224, 322).

38 See Donner (2015: 136), which alerted me to the role of Noth's scholarship on this topic.

39 The *Jiu Tang shu* (198.5311) states, “Their king is capped with a crown of golden flowers, and sits on a lion couch” 其王冠金花冠，坐獅子牀。However, the *Wei shu* (102.2271) states the king “sits upon a ram couch” 坐金羊牀。This difference could perhaps be explained by a change in the construction of Sasanian thrones over time, or alternatively, the prose might have been modified in transmission.

are completely different. We might also point to the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, an apocryphal work of late antiquity that tells of a cave that is home to Adam and Eve, the ancestors of humanity, after their exile from Eden.<sup>40</sup> A vague typological parallel might be drawn with the Chinese story. For example, the caves furnish what is necessary for the ethnogenesis of the Tāzīks, who are described as originally Persian, but then go on to create a new nation. In both stories, a sacred cave (or caves) serves as a beginning point for a new people. The Chinese story, in any case, is evidently a translation of something from abroad, but its origin is entirely uncertain, and attempting to identify similarities with extraneous tales has proven fruitless thus far.

In the Chinese sources, there is an inscription in the caves in *Qubā' Madīna*. The *Jiu Tang shu* gives a slightly different line from the *Cefu yuangui*:

The country of the Tāzīks was originally located to the west of Persia. During the Daye era [605–618], there was a man of the *Hu* of Persia. He was herding camels in the mountains of *Qubā' Madīna*, when suddenly there was a lion. Someone said to him, “At the west of this mountain are three caves. There are a great many weapons in the caves. You may take them. In all of the caves there are black stones with white writing. Read them and you will become king.” The man of the *Hu* did as he was told, and sure enough, he saw within the caves the stones and very many spears and blades. Above [on the ceiling] were inscriptions, instructing him to rebel.

大食國，本在波斯之西。大業中，有波斯胡人，牧駝於俱紛摩地那之山，忽有獅子，人語謂之曰：「此山西有三穴，穴中大有兵器，汝可取之。穴中並有黑石白文，讀之便作王位。」胡人依言，果見穴中有石及稍刃甚多。上有文，教其反叛。<sup>41</sup>

The narrative here implies that each of the three caves had (*bing you* 並有, “all have”) black stones with white writing. Tazaka (1964: 52) suggests that the white writing ought to correspond to the revelation received by Muḥammad. The man in the story at hand, however, is literate, which is different from the Islamic understanding that Muḥammad was illiterate.<sup>42</sup> This Chinese story

40 See the translation by Budge (1927).

41 *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5315.

42 Günther (2002: 1) explains, “In the Qur’ān the Prophet Muḥammad is identified as *al-nabī al-ummī* (Q.7:157–8). Muslim consensus has come to perceive this epithet for the Prophet of Islam as indicating conclusively that he was Muḥammad, ‘the illiterate Prophet.’ This

might be vaguely connected with the traditional Islamic story of Muḥammad's first revelation from God, which he received in 610. While in a cave, Muḥammad heard a voice that commanded him three times to read. Muḥammad replied that he could not read. The third time, the voice provided a recitation, which is preserved in the Qur'ān (96: 1–5).<sup>43</sup> Although it is interesting that the dates approximately align, the Chinese story is said to occur in Medina, and not Mecca. These caves are additionally significant because this was the source of the black stone (or, in the Chinese account, apparently black *stones*). We find the following line in the *Cefu yuangui*:

The mountain of *Qubā' Madīna* is located west of the country. The south of the country meets a great sea. Their king moved the black stone[s] within the cave[s] and placed it in the country[']s capital].

俱紛摩地那山，在國之西。國南隣於大海。其王移穴中黑石寘之於國。<sup>44</sup>

The Tang history (*Jiu Tang shu*), however, gives a slightly different line. It reads, “The mountain of *Qubā' Madīna* is located southwest of the country. It meets a great sea.” 俱紛摩地那山在國之西南，鄰於大海。<sup>45</sup> We can observe here the different compilers drawing upon the same or similar sources, but editing them. In any case, the reference to the great sea indicates this is indeed the Hejaz region, although the Chinese does not provide any toponyms apart from *Qubā' Madīna*. The Chinese sources explain that the caves in the mountain of *Qubā' Madīna* were located outside the country or capital (of the Tāzīks). Here the locale apparently refers specifically to Medina, not the entire realm of the Arabs. The black stones, according to the Chinese sources, originated in caves outside Medina and then were moved at some point by the king. We might read “country” (*guo* 國) as “capital city” in the lines above, in which case the stones were moved into the city. This is strikingly different from the traditional account of the Black Stone of Mecca, which historically was always said to be a part of the Ka'ba.<sup>46</sup> The Chinese moreover understood the stones as

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relates to the Islamic idea that Muḥammad is the Prophet who communicated God's revelation to humankind completely and authentically.”

43 For a discussion of this revelation in traditional sources, see Saeed (2017: 45–46).

44 *Cefu yuangui* (SKQS) 960.5a. Alternatively, *guo* 國 could be read as the “capital city” of the country. Cf. *guo du* 國都 (“capital of the country”).

45 *Jiu Tang shu*, 198.5315.

46 We might note that the Chinese account implies that three stones altogether were present in three caves. The present Black Stone in Mecca in some instances is counted as three stones and several fragments bound together. See the details in the Encyclopedia



being black with white letters. This brings to mind an Islamic legend that tells that the black stone was originally bestowed unto Adam as a white stone, but became black as a result of absorbing the sins of the pilgrims who came into contact with it.<sup>47</sup> The image of bringing down stones with writing on them from the mountain is also reminiscent of Moses descending from Mount Sinai with the two tablets (Exodus 34: 29–35).

The founding king of the Tāzīks is described as a herder of camels in the Chinese sources. Again, it is interesting that Hyecho, the Korean monk who traveled westward between 724 and 727, made the same statement, as we will recall from earlier.<sup>48</sup> Hyecho's remarks are in reference to the Arab conquest of Persia, but Hyecho records this event as a coup d'état rather than an invasion. Chinese history states that the Persian king (Yazdegerd) was killed by Tāzīk troops, in contrast to the story known today, in which Māhōy Suri of Marv betrayed him (Shahbazi 2005). Hyecho presumably recorded the story he heard while traveling. It is unlikely that he would have read it in a state source, which would have been simply inaccessible to him as a monk. Hyecho's comments likely derive from an account that was similar to what was recorded in the state histories surveyed above. The fact that we have this mention of camel herders in a Buddhist travelogue and state sources would seem to indicate that it was a common story during the seventh and eighth centuries. Tazaka (1964: 48) suggests that Hyecho's account reproduces a Persian perspective, and that the reference to a camel herder indirectly signifies Muḥammad. It is noteworthy, however, that Muḥammad is not explicitly named here.

Moving on, the Chinese text does not explain exactly who crossed the Tigris, whether it was the first ruler or the later community. The Chinese transcription is not that of the Arabic word for the river (Tazaka 1964: 53). This event, in any case, ought to refer to the Arab invasion of Mesopotamia and the conquest of Ctesiphon in 637. In any case, the exile in this context is comparable to the Hijra, but in this instance, the story is framed as an act of rebellion against the Persians originating in Medina (recall that the "Prophet" in the Chinese account is framed as a Persian originally). There is no mention of religious persecution. The Chinese text also reads, "They successfully cut off and occupied the western border of Persia." This presumably refers to the conquest of the Levant between 634 and 638.

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Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Stone-of-Mecca> (accessed 20 January 2024). However, recent photography made available online by the Saudi government (2021) does not seem to indicate this number of fragments.

47 See Donzel (1994: 53–54) for details.

48 An exhaustive commentary on this text with maps and facsimiles of a manuscript copy from Dunhuang is found in Kuwayama (1998).

We do not observe any explicit references to Islam or the Qurʾān, either as semantically or phonetically transliterated terms, in the Chinese sources surveyed here. We only find *amīr al-muʾminīn* as a transcription. There is one mention of the “Law of the Tāzīks” (*Dashi fa* 大食法) in one travelogue from the mid-eighth century, which we will discuss below. The absence of “Islam” and related words in the above-cited Chinese excerpts is not necessarily an anomaly, since, as Donner (2018: 6) notes, “The seventh-century writings produced by the conquerors in Arabic do employ the words *islām* and Muslim, but neither word figures prominently until after the seventh century.” Contemporaries in the seventh-century Syriac world also did not refer to the Qurʾān. Saadi provides the following account and explanation:

The Syriac writers were the first people to report about and eventually engage with the *Mhaggrayê* on religious matters. The earliest Syriac document, dated to 644, reports a religious colloquium between the Emir of the *Mhaggrayê* and the Syrian Patriarch, John of Sedreh. The document refers to *Mhaggrayê* as having accepted the Torah just as the Jews and Samaritans. Moreover, the document refers to some learned Jews who were with the Emir of *Mhaggrayê* and scrutinized the Christians’ quotations of the Scriptures. Although a good portion of the discussion between the Emir of the *Mhaggrayê* is about the scriptures, it never refers to the Qurʾān, a possible indication that the Qurʾān was not yet in circulation.<sup>49</sup>

In light of this, it is possible that the Qurʾān was not yet in wide circulation when the early Arab envoys arrived in China, which explains why the Chinese do not mention the Qurʾān or any sort of holy writings.<sup>50</sup> Donner (2011a) summarizes the main problem at hand, stating that “the Qurʾān, at least from the perspective of Western historians, has yet to be placed convincingly in a secure historical context. There is still no definite consensus on what the text originally was, what its original social setting and role may have been, how and when and where it came together, or even whether the Qurʾān that has existed for at least twelve centuries originated as a unitary document or whether it is,

49 Saadi (2007: 217, 219–220). Saadi explains that *Mhaggrayê* denotes immigrants, i.e., Arab immigrants, in contrast to the Arabs of former times, who usually withdrew to the desert after concluding raids.

50 Wansbrough (1977) suggests that the Qurʾān did not exist in its present form until two or three centuries after Muḥammad. In recent years, radiocarbon dating has placed the earliest manuscripts of the Qurʾān in the seventh century. See the discussion in Marx and Jocham (2019).

rather, a compilation of once separate materials coming, perhaps, from different communities.”

If the Qurʾān and the spread of the faith were critical to the Arabs when they met with the Chinese, we might expect that something of the sort would have been recorded by the Chinese side. In contrast, the Christian mission of 635 produced translations of their literature, and then presented them to the court in 638. Christian scriptures were recognized and acknowledged in China. Christianity was also recognized as a unique religion in China shortly after its arrival, as was also the case of Zoroastrianism in the same years. The Manichaeans also rapidly produced literature on their religion in Chinese, and introduced their faith to the Chinese court. The Tang Chinese sources do not indicate that anyone attempted to introduce or even describe a new religion of the Tāzīks. Interestingly, Saadi (2007: 220) further notes that “there is no clear indication that the Syriac writers recognized or realized the birth of a new religion called Islam, a term that they never employed.” The Chinese sources at hand do not mention “Islam” or even the Prophet by name. Muḥammad is mentioned only in passing in a brief account from 801 by Jia Dan 賈耽 (730–805), the geographer and chief minister (from 793–805), which is reproduced in the *Tang huiyao* and *Jiu Tang shu* (an almost identical account is reproduced in other Chinese sources). In this case, Muḥammad is not associated with any kind of religious movement or prophethood.<sup>51</sup>

One [account] relates that during the Kaihuang era [581–600] of the Sui, there was, among the Tāzīk clans, the *kō liat* [Qurayš?] tribe, who were chiefs through hereditary succession. Within the *kō liat*, there were also two surnames: one was named *bān nej yej cim* [Banū Hāšim]. One was named *bān nej mat ywan<sup>h</sup>* [Banū Marwān]. The *yej cim* later had *ma xa mat* [Muḥammad], who was courageous and quite wise. The masses set him up as leader. He conquered east and west, opening land for 3,000 miles, as well as subduing *yai’ lap* [Ḥīra]. One name is the city of \**ṣaim* [Šām, i.e., Damascus].

51 Jia Dan is said to have inquired about the geographies of foreign lands from visiting envoys from abroad. He was clearly in direct communication with foreign peoples. See the biography of Jia Dan in the *Jiu Tang shu* (138.3782–3787). See Lung (2011: 109–115) for a critical overview of Jia Dan.

一云隋開皇中，大食族中有孤列種代為酋長。孤列種中又有兩姓：一號盆泥奚深，一號盆泥末換。其奚深後有摩訶末者，勇健多智，衆立之為主，東西征伐，開地三千里，兼克夏臘，一名鉗城。<sup>52</sup>

Muḥammad's lineage is described here, but again we see no mention of Mecca. Jia Dan's account is also the only instance, to my knowledge, in which Muḥammad's name appears in Tang China. Muḥammad's death is traditionally held to be 632. Hira surrendered in 633.<sup>53</sup> Damascus was taken around 636.<sup>54</sup> The fact that the Chinese account implies that Muḥammad was involved in these campaigns perhaps points to the Chinese having received a variant record of events. The aforementioned Byzantine–Arab Chronicle of 741 also places Muḥammad's death after the capture of Damascus, but does not specify a year.<sup>55</sup>

One noteworthy feature of the above paragraph is the phrase *kai di* 開地 (“open lands”), which in this context clearly means to conquer, but this use of the Chinese verb is irregular. However, this sense of “open lands” to denote conquest would make sense in Arabic. Donner (2011b: 88) notes that “the campaigns of expansion of the early community are referred to as *futūḥ* (sing. *fath*), commonly translated as ‘conquest.’” He furthermore points out that *fath* in Arabic means “opening” rather than “conquest.” This irregular use of a Chinese verb suggests that a direct translation was carried out, in which case the source of the above information was likely through a written translation.

Another source in Chinese that provides material pertaining to Arab religious culture as the tenth-century Chinese observed it is the *Taiping yulan* by Li Fang. The relevant lines read as follows:

52 *Jiu Tang shu* 198.5316; the translation here is mine. Cf. Hoyland (1997: 252). Feng (1982: 32–33) identifies Xiala 夏臘 as Hira (Hira). Shan 鉗 is clearly Šām (Damascus). One issue here is that *yi ming* 一名 (“one name”) seems irregular, unless it is equating the two cities (that Šām is another name for Hira). I suspect that there was a scribal error, and that originally a different transcription for Šām was given, but this was not recopied. The text in the *Tang huiyao* states that this is excerpted from Jia Dan's *Account of the Four Foreign Tribes* (*Jia Dan Si yi shu* 賈耽四夷述). The full title, given in Jia Dan's biography, is *Gujin junguo xiandao siyi shu* 古今郡國縣道四夷述 (*Account of Ancient and Present Regions, Countries, Counties, Highways, and the Four Foreign Tribes*). This is said to have been compiled in year 17 of Zhenyuan 貞元 (801). See *Jiu Tang shu*, 138.3784. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 110, 122, 131, 181, 193, 217, 218, 223, 234, 275, 280, 329, 334).

53 See Bosworth (2003) for an overview of this city's history.

54 A date of around 636 is given by Robinson (2010: 196). For a discussion of the events involving the fall of Damascus between 634 and 636, see Burns (2019: 124–130).

55 See the translation in Hoyland (1997: 616–617). See also the relevant recent discussion by Shaddel (2022).

During the Longshuo period [661–663], [the Tāzīks] destroyed Persia and Rome, and the country first came to possess grains and flour. They also sent troops southward to invade the Brahmins. They swallowed up the various *Hu* [peoples], having over 400,000 superior soldiers. During the Chang'an period [701–704], [the Tāzīks] dispatched an envoy and offered fine horses. In year 2 of Jingyun 景雲 [711], they again offered their local items. Early in the Kaiyuan period [713–741], they dispatched an envoy who came to our court and they gave horses, as well as their local items, such as a belt with jewels and gold inlays. That envoy had an audience [before the throne]. They just stood upright and did not prostrate. The Judicial Commissioner wanted to remonstrate them. Secretariat Director Zhang Yue addressed the throne, “The Tāzīks have different customs. They have come from afar to admire the righteousness [of his majesty], which cannot be held as a transgression. I request a special dispensation to be granted by the throne.” Again, they dispatched an envoy to our court to pay tribute. They said, “In our country, we prostrate only to God. Even when we meet a king, there is no law for prostrations.” The court ministers repeatedly reproached him. The envoy then offered prostrations according to the Chinese rule, as requested.

龍朔中，滅波斯拂菻，其國始有米麵之屬。又將兵南侵婆羅門。吞併諸胡，勝兵四十餘萬。長安中，遣使獻良馬。景雲二年，又獻方物。開元初，遣使來朝及進馬并寶鈿帶等方物。其使謁見，唯平立不拜。憲司欲糾之。中書令張說奏曰：「大食殊俗。遠來慕義，不可寘罪，上特許之尋。」又遣使朝獻，自云：「在本國唯拜天神。雖見王亦無致拜之法。」所司屢詰責之，其使遂請依漢法致拜。<sup>56</sup>

These envoys were dispatched during the Umayyad period. They were compelled to inform the Chinese court of the Islamic rule that people should only bow before God. Hyecho also makes the same observation in his travelogue: “Among their country’s laws, they have no law for prostration by kneeling [before a superior ranking person].” 國法無有跪拜法也。<sup>57</sup> Hyecho also offers other observations about the customs of the Tāzīks (much like the state sources, he does not mention “Arabs”) from his critical position, clearly being that of a Buddhist:

56 *Taiping yulan* (SKQS), 795.8b. Cf. Bao Chongcheng edn., 795.8. Kuwayama (1998: 161) also points out this incident as it is recorded in the *Jiu Tang shu*.

57 *T* 2089, 51: 978b17. Cf. the translation in Finch et al. (2012: 148).

When eating, they do not ask who is noble or common, but eat from the same platter. They take with their hands, and they also have utensils.<sup>58</sup> The great evil I have seen is that they say immeasurable merit is gained by eating what one has killed with one's own hands.<sup>59</sup> Their people love killing and to worship God. They are unaware of the Buddhadharma.

喫食無問貴賤，與同一盆而食，手把亦匙箸。取見極惡，云自手殺而食，得福無量。國人愛殺事天。不識佛法。<sup>60</sup>

Another author of the Tang period who is critical to the present discussion is the aforementioned Du Huan who traveled to Iraq in the mid-eighth century. Du Huan gives his observations of not only Islam, but also Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Du Huan refers to Christianity as the “Law of the Romans” (*Daqin fa* 大秦法), while Islam is called the “Law of the Tāzīks.” Du Huan clearly identified these two faiths with separate countries, which is instructive in itself, since he does not appear to have imagined either of these religions as being universal in quality; rather, he viewed them as ethnic or national religions. This is also the first instance in which an awareness of a specific religion of the Arabs is expressed in the Chinese sources under investigation, but it is not called Islam. Du Huan gives the following observations:

Judgment in criminal cases is [collectively] shared even among one's younger brothers and kinsmen, although if the transgression is minor, it does not become a burden [on the family members]. They do not eat the meat of pigs, dogs, donkeys, or horses. They do not prostrate before the king nor honor their parents. They do not believe in spirits and gods, for they only worship God. It is their custom to rest every seventh day. They do not go shopping or go out, but just stay in and drink wine, spending the whole day bantering.

58 *Zhi zhu* 匙箸 literally means, “spoons and chopsticks.” Here, however, it means utensils in general.

59 I read *qujian* 取見 (as per Taishō) as *suojian* 所見 based on the handwritten manuscript Pelliot chinois 3532 (Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque nationale de France).

60 *T* 2089, 51: 978b14–17; the translation here is mine. Cf. the translation in Finch et al. (2012: 148).

以弟子親戚而作判典，縱有微過不至相累。不食豬狗驢馬等肉。不拜國王，父母之尊。大\*信鬼神，祀天而已。其俗每七日一假，不買賣不出，納唯飲酒，謔浪終日。<sup>61</sup>

The absence of bowing toward superiors was also noteworthy for Du Huan. He also observes the emphasis on the sole worship of God, which he translates as “Heaven” (*tian* 天). He also observes what we would call the repudiation of polytheism. The worship of images and diverse gods and goddesses was the norm in China, which was completely different from the Islamic world. The reference to the day of rest on every seventh day (Friday) would relate to the rule given in the Qurʾān (62:9). The seven-day week was still largely unknown in Du Huan’s generation in China, apart from foreign residents and a few groups within the Buddhist community.<sup>62</sup> The mention here of alcohol consumption is interesting, because in another citation of Du Huan in the *Tong dian*, he mentions the prohibition of alcohol, while also providing other observations:

One name is *ʔai<sup>h</sup> kuǎ la* [‘Aqula].<sup>63</sup> The Tāzīk king is titled *mǎ<sup>h</sup> mǎn* [(*amīr al-)**muʾminīn*], and [his] capital is here. The gentlemen and ladies are admirable and tall, in clean attire, and elegant in appearance. When a lady leaves the home, she must cover her face. Wealthy and poor alike, they [together] worship God five times in a day. They eat meat and practice fasting.<sup>64</sup> They believe taking life to be meritorious. They wear silver belts and carry silver blades. They abstain from drinking alcohol, and forbid music. When people dispute with one another, it does not come

61 Cf. the English translation by Akin (1999: 95). The two consulted editions of the *Tong dian* both read *da xin* 大信 (“greatly believe in”), but this same line reproduced elsewhere reads *bu xin* 不信 (“do not believe”). *Tong dian* (*SKQS*) 193.15a. Cf. *Tong dian* (Shangwu ed.) 193.1041, and *Tong zhi* 通志 (196.95ab). The *Tong zhi* is an encyclopedia compiled by Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162) in 1161. He drew upon text from the *Tong dian*.

62 Kotyk (2018a: 16–17) notes that the seven-day week only became widely known in Chinese after Amoghavajra compiled an astrology manual titled *Xiuyao jing* 宿曜經 (*Sūtra of Nakṣatras and Planets*) in the year 759, with revisions carried out in 764. This work in part explains the seven-day week. On the significance of this work, see Yano (2013).

63 For *Yajuluo* 亞俱羅 (Middle Chinese: *ʔai<sup>h</sup> kuǎ la*), Feng (1982: 5, 35) gives “Aqula,” a name for Kufa in Syriac, but then elsewhere understands this as “Iraq.” Theophilus of Edessa (695–785), a contemporary of Du Huan, was an astrologer working under the caliphs from the 750s to the 780s. He writes, “[...] ‘Aqula, which is Kufa.” See the translation of Theophilus by Hoyland (2011: 105).

64 Du Huan is comparing the Islamic fast with the Buddhist one. The Buddhist lifestyle in China encouraged or even required vegetarianism. By contrast, the Islamic fast did not, since the slaughtering of livestock for meat is not prohibited. Du Huan was likely surprised to see a spiritual practice of fasting followed by the consumption of meat.

to blows. Also, they have a hall of worship that holds tens of thousands of people. Every seven days the king emerges and worships. He ascends the high seat and speaks the Law to the masses: "Human life is very difficult. The path of God is not easy. Adultery, theft, sly acts, deceptive words, preservation of oneself while putting others in danger, cheating the poor, abusing the lowly: there are no greater sins than any one of these. Anyone who is slaughtered by the enemy in war will certainly attain birth in Heaven. One gains immeasurable merit by killing the enemy." The realm has been converted and they follow him like a stream. The law follows leniency. Burial follows frugality.

一名亞俱羅。其大食王號暮門，都此處。其士女，瓌偉長大，衣裳鮮潔，容止閑麗。女子出門必擁蔽其面。無問貴賤，一日五時禮天。食肉作齋。以殺生為功德。繫銀帶佩銀刀。斷飲酒禁音樂。人相爭者不至毆擊。又有禮堂容數萬人。每七日王出禮拜，登高座為衆說法曰：「人生甚難，天道不易，姦非劫竊，細行謾言，安己危人，欺貧虐賤，有一於此罪莫大焉。凡有征戰為敵所戮，必得生天，殺其敵人獲福無量。」率土稟化，從之如流，法唯從寬，葬唯從儉。<sup>65</sup>

Du Huan appears to have summarized a sermon spoken by the caliph, although it is uncertain whether he understood Arabic or Persian. The last line concerning birth in Heaven for martyrs points to the Qur'an (for example, compare 3:169–172 and 9:111). This Islamic war doctrine was also known to the Byzantines. For example, as Stouraitis (2018: 76) explains, Theophanes the Confessor (died c.818) viewed Islam as a heresy and claimed that Muḥammad "taught his followers that those who kill an enemy or are killed by the enemy go to Heaven." The Chinese also clearly knew about this topic to some extent.

There is nothing particularly anomalous in Du Huan's summary of the sermon if we compare it with the traditional understanding of Islam. Although Du Huan's account from c.751 to 762 describes what we would understand as orthodox Islam, the descriptions of the first king of the Tāzīks in the above-cited Chinese histories, which appear to date to the mid-seventh century, present something only semi-recognizable, yet still quite different from orthodox Islam. It is remarkable that no source from the Tang survives that mentions topics like Mecca, the Qur'an, or the life of the Prophet in an immediately recognizable way. We can assume that Arab envoys might have relayed

65 *Tong dian* (SKQS) 193.29a. The translation here is mine, but I have consulted Akin (1999: 90–91). Cf. *Tong dian* (Shangwu ed.), 193.1044. See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 162, 203, 211, 220, 354).



such information at some point, but this was never entered into the historical records of China, so far as extant sources would indicate.

Tazaka (1964: 58) has argued that there was practically no knowledge of Islam in Tang China, but he appears to have based his conclusion on the fact that the description of the religion of the “Tāzīks” was clearly different from that of orthodox Islam. His analysis did not consider the possibility that the seventh-century religion in question might not have been identical to what came later. This is not necessarily so surprising when we consider the early materials in Syriac, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin sources, which describe a movement different from what would become orthodox Islam.

## 5 The Umayyads and Abbasids in Chinese Sources

The first Arab envoy to the Chinese court was in 651, which would have been during the time of ‘Uṭmān ibn ‘Affān, although his name does not appear anywhere in the Chinese sources. The date of this envoy is significant, since this would have presumably been during the ongoing conquests of the Sasanian territories. The fact that he sent an envoy to the Chinese was in all likelihood intended to obtain some level of mutual understanding between his expanding realm and the major power to the east, which formerly held diplomatic contacts with the Sasanians. The Sino-Arabian contacts during the Tang period appear to run from 651 until around 798. Aside from these formal contacts, we also have some valuable observations from Hyecho, traveling around the years 724 to 727, which was contemporaneous with the Umayyad period. Hyecho offers the following observation about recent events:

Furthermore, from the country of Persia traveling northward ten days, one enters the mountains and arrives in the country of the Tāzīks. Their king does not reside in his own country, but currently resides in the country of Minor Rome [Anatolia], seeking to capture that country. [In] that country, he returned to stay on a mountainous island, a place most sullen, and he does this to acquire that [country].

又從波斯國，北行十日入山至大窳國。彼王住不本國，見向小拂臨國住也，為打得彼國。彼國復居山島，處所極窄，為此就彼。<sup>66</sup>

66 *T* 2089, 51: 978b8–11. The grammar here is somewhat irregular. Compare the translation in Finch et al. (2012: 147–148). They translate *da shi* 大窳 as “Arabia,” but as discussed above, this is problematic. “Arabia” would imply the Ḥiḡāz region. They note that this

This is perhaps in reference to the campaigns against the Byzantines, likely the Siege of Constantinople from 717 to 718.<sup>67</sup> Hyecho also iterates the resistance to invaders displayed by “Great Rome” (Byzantium):

Also, the country of Minor Rome: to the northwest of it alongside the sea is the country of Major Rome. This king's troops and horses are strong and numerous. They are not subordinate to another country. The Tāzīks have repeatedly attacked them unsuccessfully. The invasions of the Turks have also been unsuccessful.

又小拂臨國，傍海西北即是大拂臨國。此王兵馬強多，不屬餘國。大寇數迴討擊不得，突厥侵亦不得。<sup>68</sup>

Evidently, Hyecho did not understand “Minor Rome” (a term perhaps connected with “Asia Minor,” *μικρά Ασία*) to be part of the Byzantine realm, which would make sense given the contemporary Arab occupation of those lands. If a monk from Silla recorded such information while abroad, similar stories likely flowed back to China from other sources over time, although such reports about Byzantium are not found in the state histories and encyclopedias, most likely because such events on the far side of the world were of little direct significance to the Chinese state, even if they had ongoing knowledge of these events.<sup>69</sup>

A few decades after Hyecho's journey, the Chinese court witnessed the transition from the Umayyads to the Abbasids. This is apparent in the histories and extant diplomatic records. The account of the Tāzīks by Jia Dan, reproduced in part in the Tang history (*Jiu Tang shu*), explains the rise of the Abbasids, who in Chinese became known as the “Black-Robed Tāzīks” in contrast to their predecessors, the “White-Robed Tāzīks” (i.e., the Umayyads).

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“Minor Rome” is Anatolia. They also understand this as a record of Hyecho's own travels. We should be aware that Classical Chinese does not require pronouns, nor does it normally indicate perspective (e.g., first, second, and third persons), so it is not expressly clear whether Hyecho is writing that he himself ventured this way. Kuwayama (1998: 161) suggests that “Minor Rome” corresponds to Syria.

67 The Umayyad attempts to capture Constantinople are discussed by Hoyland. See especially Hoyland (2015: 172–178).

68 *T* 2089, 51: 978b17–20. See also Jiang (1994: 22–24). Cf. the translation in Finch et al. (2012: 149).

69 Alternatively, it is possible that parts of Hyecho's travelogue were modified or augmented, in which case it was not Hyecho who recorded these events in the distant West. Nevertheless, it is clear that at least someone writing in Chinese from around his time knew of these matters.

Fourteen generations after Muḥammad, there was Marwān. Marwān killed his elder brother *?ji dzit* [Yazīd] and enthroned himself. He was also cruel and his underlings despised him. There was a man of *mawk ts'ho* [Marv?] of *xo la san* [Khurasan], named *bejŋ' pa yej lim* [Abū Muslim?], who raised loyalist troops. Those who responded were all ordered to wear black robes. In the span of ten months, they amassed tens of thousands and moved westward to [the beat of] drums. They captured Marwān alive and killed him. They then sought out *?a bo la bait* [Abū al-'Abbās] of the Hāšim tribe and enthroned him. Prior to Marwān, [the Tāzīks] were called White-Robed Tāzīks. After Abū al-'Abbās, they changed to the Black-Robed Tāzīks. When Abū al-'Abbās passed away, they enthroned his younger brother, *?a bo kuawŋ p'hut* [Abū Ğāfar?]. At the beginning of the Zhide era [756–758], they dispatched an envoy to our court to pay tribute. Daizong once acted as marshal and also used the troops of that country to take the two capitals [from rebels]. During the Baoying [762–763] and Dali [766–779] eras, they frequently dispatched envoys who came here. When Ğāfar passed away, his son, *mej di<sup>h</sup>* [Mahdī], was enthroned. When Mahdī passed away, his son *muw sej* [Mūsā] was enthroned. When Mūsā passed away, his younger brother, *xa lwən<sup>h</sup>* [Hārūn], was enthroned.

摩訶末後十四代至末換。末換殺其兄伊疾而自立。復殘忍，其下怨之。有呼羅珊木蠡人並波悉林舉義兵。應者悉令著黑衣。旬月間衆盈數萬，鼓行而西。生擒末換殺之。遂求得奚深種阿蒲羅拔立之。末換已前謂之白衣大食，自阿蒲羅拔後改為黑衣大食。阿蒲羅拔卒，立其弟阿蒲恭拂。至德初遣使朝貢。代宗時為元帥亦用其國兵以收兩都。寶應大曆中，頻遣使來。恭拂卒，子迷地立。迷地卒，子牟栖立。牟栖卒，弟訶論立。<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, the Abbasid revolution here is not described as religious in character, but rather, it is portrayed as a rebellion against an unjust ruler. The religious underpinnings mentioned in the traditional accounts of the Abbasids are not alluded to in this account. The Chinese authors continued to refer to the caliphates as the “country of the Tāzīks,” and distinguished between their

<sup>70</sup> *Jiu Tang shu* 198.5316; the translation here is mine. Compare with Hoyland (1997: 252–253). This account of the Abbasids also appears in the *Xin Tang shu* (221b.6263). The content is largely identical, but some of the phrases have been edited and revised in the *Xin Tang shu*, which is a feature of this revised history of the Tang. The account of the *Xin Tang shu* is translated into modern Japanese in Odani and Suganuma (2011: 181–184). See the EMC readings in Pulleyblank (1991b: 23, 27 40, 65, 76, 108, 122, 126, 140, 194, 203, 213, 219, 202, 220, 242, 244, 274, 329, 365).

dynasties based on the colors of their robes, even after numerous direct contacts, and with such detailed information about the succession of caliphs. The ethnonym “Tāzīk” was evidently fixed in the lexicon of Middle Chinese.

The Chinese histories record many envoys arriving, but the Chinese court also dispatched their representatives westward. Some Chinese also went to Iraq, but as George (2015: 612) observes, “The footprint of Chinese people in Iraq, direct or indirect, is ultimately faint: it evokes an anecdotal presence based on individual trajectories, rather than an established and socially structured settlement.” A more certain record is that of Yang Liangyao 楊良瑤 (736–806), who was sent as an envoy to the Abbasid Caliphate between 785 and 808. Rong Xinjiang argues that the envoy was sent to solicit cooperation for a containment strategy against the Tibetans (Rong 2015b: 242–249). As Rong points out, Chinese history records that in the year 786, the Tibetans clashed with the Arabs:

In year 2 of Zhenyuan [786], [the Tāzīks] were formidable enemies of the Tibetans. The greater half of Tibetan troops were defending their western flank against the Tāzīks, thus they seldom harassed our borders, for their strength was insufficient.

貞元二年，與吐蕃為勁敵。蕃兵大半西禦大食，故鮮為邊患，其力不足也。<sup>71</sup>

The diplomatic exchanges were clearly meaningful and significant on a geopolitical level. The Umayyads and Abbasids both sent missions to China. The collapse of the Sasanians in the mid-seventh century disrupted geopolitics and eventually led to the rapid spread of Islam, but Tang Chinese sources do not understand the caliphates as theocratic in orientation. Neither the Umayyads nor the Abbasids are described strictly as missionaries or representatives of a religion, even if their “king” was said to preach before the masses. We saw in Chapter 5 that Christianity was initially associated with Persia, and later the churches were renamed as “Roman,” while Manichaeism became connected with the Uyghurs. Although Du Huan’s description of Islam as the “Law of the Tāzīks” is important, the court histories do not give the impression that the Chinese side viewed the Arabs as especially religious. The recorded ethnogenesis of the Arabs—anomalous as it might be—was seemingly left as an ethnographic fact, but the Chinese histories simply do not frame the caliphates as “Islamic.” The Arab envoys are not on record requesting permission to build a

<sup>71</sup> See *Tang huiyao*, 100.13. Translation mine, but see Rong (2015b: 249).

mosque in China. China simply viewed the caliphates as powerful states to the west and, evidently, they could make mutually beneficial arrangements with them at times. The number of Arab envoys to the Chinese court also indicates that they sought to maintain open lines of communication. The experience of the Chinese was patently different from that of the Byzantines, whose existential conflict with the Arabs was as much theological as it was military.

## 6 The Significance of Chinese Sources

This chapter has documented and explored the diverse Chinese accounts connected in various ways with early Islam, as well as the caliphates, from the seventh to the early ninth century, ranging from dynastic histories and state encyclopedias to travelogues and other texts. The picture that emerges is one of striking anomalies, especially when we compare it with the traditional understanding of early Islam and the Arab states. The ethnogenesis of the “Tāziks” is perhaps the most astonishing (words such as Arab, Muslim, and Islam as transcriptions never appear in the primary sources under investigation), because we can recognize some familiar elements, but no such comparable story is known elsewhere in the world. This story is about a Persian camel herder launching a rebellion from Medina against the Persians after acquiring weapons in caves with divine assistance, and the subsequent expansion of this new state from the year 617. Although we might regard it as apocryphal, the Chinese sources imply that the source of this story was the first envoy from the “Tāziks” in the year 651, but unfortunately, we do not have the verbatim court records to confirm the exact wording of the original communication. Some of the other details in the Chinese records can be compared with other contemporary non-Arabic accounts, which is valuable in itself and might help us to judge the historicity of the events described.

When we look at the Chinese sources from the eighth century, we can see a description of religious culture in line with orthodox Islam. We also observe the transition from the Umayyads to the Abbasids. There is a major difference between the seventh- and eighth-century Chinese records at hand: the former are anomalous when compared to traditional understandings, the latter less so. This could reflect two possibilities. One is that the seventh-century account (again, reproduced in later sources) incorporated mistranslated or apocryphal materials from informants extraneous to the early conquests, whereas the information from the eighth century reflected relatively accurate information relayed by Arab envoys, as well as East Asian informants and others

who had traveled in West Asia (for example, Christians, Manichaeans, and Zoroastrians). Another possibility is that the envoy of 651 actually communicated the “apocryphal” story to the Chinese court, who wrote it down in the official records, and this was reproduced, either in full or in abbreviated form, by later authors. This story could reflect a different stage in the development of what would later be called Islam, but curiously remains completely unattested elsewhere. However, the fact that Chinese records preserve details about cultures that are otherwise unattested elsewhere in the wider historical records of the world is not strange in itself. In many instances, Chinese texts preserve cultural lore otherwise lost to history, as we have discussed above in our outline of the descriptions of Sasanian Iran in Chinese.

Regardless of how we interpret the historicity of the Chinese sources, especially with regard to the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods, we should at the very least recognize that the Chinese authors were remote yet observant witnesses of the events that unfolded far to the west. They were certainly not detached from the upheavals of the seventh and eighth centuries in West Asia. There were peoples from the Levant and Middle East resident in Tang China, including members of the Syriac Church and the Manichaean community, who maintained ecclesiastical links with institutions in West Asia.<sup>72</sup> There were also numerous Arab envoys who arrived at the Chinese court; they communicated directly with the Chinese authorities. Although we must acknowledge the limitations of the Chinese sources, they stand to complement other non-Arabic sources, which are often utilized by historians when attempting to reconstruct the early history of Islam, such as those in Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, and Latin. Ideally, future archaeological or textual discoveries could further inform and clarify the sources at hand.

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72 Syriac writers in the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries documented the rise of the Arabs, and some wrote about their religion (Brock 2008). Whether any such accounts were transmitted to China is entirely unknown, but we can at least acknowledge this possibility, given the presence of the Syriac Church in China until around 845, when the persecution of foreign religions occurred under Emperor Wuzong.



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## Abbreviations

- DZ* *Daozang* 道藏. Beijing: Wenwu Chuban, 1986.
- P.* Pelliot chinois. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Manuscripts digitized on Gallica (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>).
- S.* Stein. International Dunhuang Project (<http://idp.bl.uk/>).
- SKQS* *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書. *Qinding siku quanshu* 欽定四庫全書. Digitized in Kanseki Repository (<http://www.kanripo.org/>).
- T* *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭 et al., eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934. Digitized in CBETA (<https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/>) and SAT Daizōkyō Text Database (<http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php>).
- TZ* *Taishō zuzō* 大正圖像. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Ono Genmyō 小野玄妙, eds. Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan Kabushiki Kaisha, 1932–1934. Digitized in SAT Taishōzō Image DB (<http://dzkings.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SATi/images.php>).
- X* *Xinzuan wan xuzang* 新纂卍續藏. CBETA Online Reader. (<http://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/>).

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What type of exchanges occurred between West and East Asia in the first millennium CE? What sort of connections existed between Persia and China? What did the Chinese know of early Islam? This study offers an overview of the cultural, diplomatic, commercial, and religious relationships that flourished between Iran and China, building on the pioneering work of Berthold Laufer's *Sino-Iranica* (1919) while utilizing a diverse array of Classical Chinese sources to tell the story of Sino-Iran in a fresh light to highlight the significance of trans-cultural networks across Asia in late antiquity.

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