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CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS XIII. EASTERN IRANIAN MIGRATIONS TO CHINA

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Communities of Sogdian and Bactrian immigrants settled in many cities of Northern China in pre-Islamic times.

There are two different stages in the history of Eastern Iranian migrations to China: the first, still extremely obscure, is dominated by Bactrian immigrants, coming from Bactriana and the Kushan empire, and the second, from the fourth to the ninth century CE is dominated by Sogdians.

Kushan traders and ambassadors to China. It has long been known that Chinese diplomacy towards the nomads in the second century BCE was instrumental in creating in Central Asia and further west in Parthia a market for Han products, especially for silk. Chinese embassies traveled with thousands of bolts of silk but at very irregular intervals. The merchants in northwestern India and eastern Iran were quick to appreciate the potential for this exchange and followed the steps of the Chinese ambassadors back to China. It seems that some of the ambassadors or traders and their families

settled in China, especially in Gansu. This was the very origin of the first Iranian-speaking communities in China. The Chinese texts mention communities of traders from Eastern Iran and Northern India that had settled near the main markets at the Capital. We know very little about these communities, but we do know that later, in 227 CE in Liangzhou (Gansu), the main trading communities of the town were Sogdian and Bactrian. The Buddhist sources, describing the lives of the first translators of the Buddhist canon in China mention Iranian and Indian monks and translators who had settled along the main cities on the Silk Road. For instance Zhu Fahu (Dharmarakṣa), one of the main translators at the end of the third century CE was from a Bactrian family settled for generations in Dunhuang (Zürcher, 1972, pp. 65-70). Part of the vocabulary of trade in Sogdian was borrowed from Bactrian; a Sogdian trader in Gansu at the beginning of the fourth century was married to a Bactrian woman; and Bactrian traders were present there before the great upheavals of the fourth century CE (Sims-Williams, 1983, 1996).

Sogdian communities. Whatever might have been the importance of the Bactrian settlements in China, they were superseded by Sogdian settlements after the fourth century CE. Following closely the Bactrians, their southern neighbors, the Sogdians came to China with the first testimonies dating from 29 and 11 BCE. They might have been the apprentices of the wealthier Kushan/Bactrian traders (de la Vaissière, 2005a, ch. 3).

The next step in the history of the Sogdians in China is provided by the Sogdian Ancient Letters of 313. One letter describes a Sogdian network active from the Chinese main cities to Samarqand. The letter confirms the existence of communities of Sogdian traders with their families, numbering perhaps a few hundred. This network, appeared to be securely established in Gansu and was still there a century later; but in Inner China it was by then on the verge of extinction because of civil war.

The fifth and sixth centuries were certainly the hey-day of Sogdian emigration to China. After the destruction of the Inner China network in the fourth century, a new network of Sogdian communities was created there. Many Sui and Tang texts or funerary epitaphs of Sogdian families describe how their great grandfather came to China during the Wei as caravaneer. These families established themselves first in Gansu, the next generation moved into the main Chinese towns, and some Sogdians managed to reach the court. For instance, the biography of An Tugen in the *Bei shi* (ch. 92, p. 3047) describes how An Tugen's great grandfather came from Sogdiana to the Wei dynasty

and established himself in Jiuquan (the western end of Gansu). Later on, in the middle of the sixth century, An Tugen rose from the position of merchant to that of the Grand Minister of the Northern Qi. For three centuries, the Sogdians were present in all the oasis on the route to the west as well as in all the main towns of Northern China (Rong, 2000).

Organization of the communities. The title of the heads of the Sogdian communities in China, Sabao, proves that the communities were deeply rooted in the caravan trade. This title is a transcription of the Sogdian word sartapao, itself a Sogdian transcription of the Indian sārthavāha, chief-caravaneer, through a Bactrian intermediary (Sims-Williams, 1983). In India the sārthavāha was not only the chief-caravaneer but also the head of the traders' guild. The heads of the Sogdian communities in China bore the titles of "chief caravaneer." We can see in the textual and epigraphic sources many such Sabao installed in China. Most of the main towns of Northern China in the sixth and seventh centuries had their Sogdian community headed by a Sabao, who received the rank of a mandarin in the official hierarchy, at least from the Northern Qi to the Sui.

The seventh century saw an evolution in the official position of the Sogdian communities. It seems that the Tang transformed quite independent and autonomous Sogdian communities loosely integrated in the mandarin hierarchy into more controlled "submitted counties" without a Sogdian hierarchy. The Sabaos disappeared from the epigraphic and textual sources after the middle of the seventh century (de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004, pp. 944-49). But this period, up to the middle of the eighth century, was certainly the climax of Iranian influence on Chinese society. If the communities were suppressed, the families and individuals who were before inclined to stay within the Sogdian communities now were integrated more thoroughly into Chinese society. We can see people with typical Sogdian surnames, such as Kang, becoming involved in all the fields of Tang social life.

Many of them must have been merchants: around the main markets of the capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang, Sogdian temples, Sogdian taverns, and Sogdian shops flourished. They sold to the Tang elite the kind of western goods that were then in fashion (Schafer 1963). It was a well-attested policy of the Tang to establish groups of Sogdian traders in order to lower prices in a town. It was not just merchants, but soldiers, monks, and high or low officials who were of Sogdian descent. For instance, the *Xin Tang shu* describes the family of An Chongzhang, Minister of War from 767 to 777. His ancestors were Sabao in

Gansu for three generations. From the fourth generation, a member of the family, An Xinggui, distinguished himself and raised the status of the family and from then on the family belonged to the administration: An Chongzhang was the leading member of the seventh generation.

Archaeological discoveries. New archaeological discoveries from Northern and Northwestern China have greatly enhanced our knowledge on the Sogdian communities there. The trade links with Central Asia provided the communities from the fifth to the eighth centuries with waves of new immigrants. One specific example of these links is from a discovery on the main stage of the route, Turfan (see TURFAN EXPEDITIONS), in Xinjiang. Many Chinese documents were used there to cut paper clothing for the dead who were buried in the Astana cemetery between 500 and 778; 27,000 fragments have been discovered. On the whole, more than 800 Sogdians, but only 10 Bactrians, are mentioned in this corpus of texts, most of them from the lower or middle class. Many of them were peasants or artisans, and some Sogdian districts were known near Turfan and Dunhuang (de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004, pp. 937-44; Hansen, 2005; Skaff, 2005). We have a list of taxes paid on caravan trade in the Gaochang kingdom (Turfan) in the 620s. The text is not complete but gives a fairly good idea of the identity of the main traders in Turfan: out of 35 commercial operations in this text, 29 involved a Sogdian trader. In 13 instances both the seller and the buyer were Sogdians.

Further East, Guyuan in the Chinese province of Ningxia (Southern Ordos) provides a very good example of a Sogdian family integrated into the officialdom. Six graves of one family have been excavated there (Luo Feng, 1996). According to its name, the family should have originated from the town of Keš (now Sharisabz, in Uzbekistan), and the texts of the funerary epitaphs describe how the family migrated from the western countries. While the ancestors were caravaneers, a member of the fourth generation, Shi Shewu (d. 610), became a military officer of the Sui, and through him the family became integrated into the Chinese society. Some of his sons and grandsons became soldiers, translators, or breeders of horses for the army (on the Sogdians in the Ordos see Pulleyblank, 1952; de la Vaissière, 2005a, pp. 210-215). We know also by name many other members of the family. Some of these names are simply transcriptions of Sogdian names. After seven generations in China, some of the members of the families still married in the Sogdian milieu.

In the main towns of Northern China, many graves of Sabao have been discovered (Marshak, 2002; Lerner, 2005). These rich and powerful Sogdians

had some wealthy funerary beds carved for them; celebrating both their Sogdian culture and their integration into Chinese society. Once made of stone, the Chinese funerary beds were well suited to Zoroastrian purposes since the body was isolated from earth and water.

For instance the tomb of Yu Hong, who died in 593 at the age of fifty-eight, contained a funerary bed in the shape of a Chinese house, adorned by fifty-three carved panels of marble, originally painted and gilded. Yu Hong had traveled extensively, acting as an ambassador to various peoples in Central Asia. Then he served the Northern Qi and Zhou, and the Sui. He became Sabao in 580. We know this because the funerary epitaphs of Yu Hong and his wife were discovered in the tomb. We see on the panels Yu Hong hunting with nomads on horses, but also hunting on an Indian elephant or banqueting with his wife. Zoroastrian symbols are clearly displayed: two priests half-bird, half-human wearing the traditional padam and Mithra and his sacrificial horse facing each other on each side of the entry (Marshak, 2002; Lerner, 2005). The tomb of Wirkak, with its bilingual epitaph in Chinese and Sogdian, discovered in Xi'an (ancient Chang'an) and dated 579 (Yang, 2005; Yoshida, 2005) provides us with the oldest depiction of the Zoroastrian Činwad bridge (Grenet, Riboud, Yang, 2004), as well as with perhaps the very first testimony of Manichaeism in China in a syncretic form (de la Vaissière, 2005b). The Sogdian communities in China were mostly Zoroastrian and the Chinese descriptions of the Sabao dwell on their religious duties (Pelliot, 1903). But Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity were also present, at least from the sixth century onwards (on Iranian religions in China see Leslie, 1981; Waley, 1956; Zhang, 2000).

End of the Eastern Iranian communities in China. The rebellion of An Lushan was a major stage in the process of sinicization. An Lushan's (q.v.) rebellion in 755 nearly destroyed the Tang dynasty and put an end to one of China's Golden Ages. Many texts described it as a Sogdian rebellion and described how many Sogdian traders supported An Lushan. Some new discoveries prove that this idea was not due to a xenophobic bias in the Chinese descriptions of the revolt but rather something claimed by the rebels themselves (de la Vaissière, 2005a, pp. 217-20). The Sogdian milieu was torn apart by the rebellion, many Sogdians in China siding with the Tang. But from then on the Sogdians in China began to conceal their foreign origins. Perhaps the clearest example is An Chongzhang, the Minister of War. In 756 he asked for the authorization to change his family name, "being ashamed to bear the same name" as An Lushan. He became Li Baoyu, with the change enforced retroactively: his

ancestors' family name was also changed (Forte 1995, pp. 24-7). There are many other examples of this kind of social camouflaging. To the degree that we can follow the destiny of some Sogdian families in Northern China up to the ninth century, we see that by then their great days belonged to the past. The pace of sinicization grew faster for security reasons, while the international trade, with its new waves of immigrants was totally disrupted in the second half of the eighth century and reborn only on a very low scale, if at all, during the ninth century. In Dunhuang and Turfan the Sogdian communities survived up to the tenth century (Zheng, 2005; de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004, pp. 965-68; recent bibliography of Turfan studies in Durkin-Meisterernst et al., 2004). The Persian traders, arriving by sea in the main harbors of Southern China, became the main traders of the age. This was the end of almost one millennium of an Eastern Iranian presence in China.

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