

Sogdian Translators in Tang China: An Issue of Loyalty

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Abstract

Language is essential in human interactions. Its social function in multilingual and multicultural contexts is largely facilitated through translation. Translation bridges ideas expressed by people speaking different languages and it enhances social justice by securing people's rights to be heard and informed. The constructive role of translation in promoting social justice among people speaking different languages, however, is predicated on the assumption that translators are trustworthy. Yet translation can be manipulated to serve personal goals in such a way that justice can be compromised. In this presentation, I will talk about claims of biased translations by Sogdian translators in Tang China's (618–907) dealings with Turkic-speaking Uighurs (744–839), based on standard archival evidence in which translators' integrity was questioned in inter-state politics. China's growing suspicion of the integrity of Sogdian translators in the Tang court was fixated on their ethnic and business affiliation with the Uighurs; but was it justifiable, or were these non-Chinese translators wronged based on groundless accusations? This presentation will examine "justice" from both sides: the translation patron and the translators in late Tang China politics.

Key Words: Translation in Medieval China; Manipulation; Translators' Integrity, Sogdian Translators.

Introduction

This article presents a tricky historical scenario in 9th-century Tang China in which the interpreters' ethnic or national affiliation, not their interpreting competence or performance, became the source of suspicion on the part of the patron. The irony here was: who is being wronged and who is being victimized in this context, the interpreters or the patron of the interpreting services? This article will be divided into four sections: first, an introduction to the cosmopolitan mindset of Tang China; second, a discussion of Sogdian translators; third, a highlight of the political tension among China, the Uighurs, and the Kirghizes; and finally, the examination of two archival evidence that points to late Tang China's suspicion of the integrity of Sogdian translators in the central government.

Cosmopolitan Mindset of Tang China

Soon after the establishment of the Tang Empire, Emperor Taizong (reigned during AD 627–650) was honored by foreign rulers in Central Asia, East Asia and countries along the China frontier as the “Heavenly khan”, because of its remarkable military victories in these areas. As such, the Tang emperor commanded his government to protect and acculturate these tributary or satellite states in a Confucian fatherly or brotherly manner.

Apparently, the stable and settled lifestyle of China was tempting to the nomadic “westerners”, and in response to the friendly and liberal approach of Tang China to non-Chinese, a large number of non-Chinese settled in the Chinese territory. The capital at the time, Changan, had almost two million taxable residents (Schafer 1963:5-7) who were primarily men from the Northern and Western tribes, such as Turks, Uighurs, Kirghizes, Khitans, Tibetans, Tocharians, and Sogdians. With millions of foreigners coming in and out, or even settling in China, the linguistic burden from cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interaction therefore gave rise to a greater use of interpreting services and a greater demand for translators at the time.

Sogdian translators in medieval China and central Asia

Sogdian language was the commercial lingua franca from the 6th century through the 10th centuries in central Asia. This language was spoken by different Sogdian communities scattered around Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent. Their language skills made them the convenient mediating agent on trades along the Silk Road between different peoples. In fact, many Sogdian merchants acted also as translators, and their significance in the commercial activities in Turkistan, the intersection between Central Asia and western China, could not be exaggerated. They were often not only commercial translators, but also agents representing the interests of other nationals. After the Anlushan Rebellion in 755 AD, the Uighurs were favored and won a great deal of privileges from the Tang court, many of these opportunistic Sogdian translators chose to work for the Uighurs and acted as agents for these Uighurs to negotiate with the Tang court.

A good majority of the Sogdian people by the Chinese surname of “Shi” was originated from Tashkent of Iranian ethnicity. They thrived in medieval times as language mediators for traveling envoys and traders. Some of them were even recruited by the Chinese

imperial court as translation officials to resolve communication problems with foreign envoys. As a result of its multilingual and multiethnic background, people raised in this area were mostly competent in several languages, and that made it possible for them to take up the roles as guides and translators for merchants and officials traveling through this country en route to other places. The Tang Chinese observed the sharpness and alacrity of Sogdian merchants and translators, and a cultural custom about this merchant race was documented in *Xintangshu* as follows:

Mothers give their infants sugar to eat and put paste on the palms of their hands in the hope tht when they are grown, they will talk sweetly and that precious objects will stick [to their hands]. These people are skillful merchants; when a boy reaches the age of five he is put to studying books; when he begins to understand them, he is sent to study commerce. They excel at commerce and love profits; from the time a man is twenty, he goes to neighboring kingdoms; wherever one can make money, they have gone. (*XTS, Judith Lerner's translation [2001;222-223]*)

Their roles as trading and linguistic agents were so widely recognized among peoples crisscrossing Central Asia and China that the Sogdian language practically became the commercial lingua franca in Central Asia and western China in medieval times. The multi-lingual talent of Sogdians was most typically demonstrated in Tang China when they were hired as translation officials and had played pivotal role in late Tang's dealings with both the Uighurs and the Kirghzes around the mid-9th century (Drompp 2005). These Sogdian translators were particularly useful in the diplomatic mediation between China and states from North or Central Asia.

In Tang practice, officials from other departments would be deliberately dispatched to these interviews to collect first-hand information of importance to their specific operations. The opportunity to interview envoys from exotic countries enabled the Chinese government to collect much-coveted geographical and strategic information.

But since the Chinese back then were not keen on learning foreign languages, China relied heavily on the use of Sogdian translators in its court to fulfill this diplomatic mediating function so frequently called for in Tang times. In fact, the presence of sizeable foreigners in Tang times, many of them already settled for generations and probably Sinicized to various extents, no doubt provided a stable pool of translators for the government, if not for the visiting envoys.

Political Tension between Late Tang China and the Uighurs

The Turkish empire on the Mongolian steppe collapsed in 742, and was succeeded by the Uighurs in 744. The newly emerged Uighur empire befriended China by assisting to end an internal rebellion in China that badly undermined the strength of Tang China. From then on up to the collapse of the Uighur empire in 843, imperial Chinese favor in the form of huge sum of money, huge amount of silk, and three princesses were bestowed to the Uighurs as a sign of both gratitude and indebtedness over a century. However, by the 830s, the Uighur empire had been severely weakened by the twin forces of political

factionalism and internal revolt, and it was eventually replaced by the Kirghizes in 839. Although the empire was undermined, some isolated Uighur nobles and generals were scattered around the Chinese northern border for retreat. The Uighur presence was stressful for the Tang court. Diplomatic correspondence was frequently exchanged between China and the Uighur chief with the intent to ease the border tension. The Kirghiz blow over the steppe supremacy of the Uighurs happened to be a welcome move for China. With the Kirghizes having been so proactive in eradicating the remaining Uighurs, China was freed from their endless extortion and regular intimidation.

Usually Chinese officials or generals would be dispatched to deliver letters to the foreign states for the Chinese court. The reason why Shi Jiezhi, as we shall see in the first evidence, a Sogdian resident in the Chinese capital volunteered to be the go-between to carry the following letter for the Tang court to the Uighur camp in the northern Chinese border was never entirely clear. The fact that the Tang court was fine with this contingent measure to have a Sogdian from nowhere to shoulder such an important mission as an envoy is even more peculiar. One probable explanation is that Tang China was short of Turkic speaking translators who would want to take up this dangerous task. The inclusion of Shi Jiezhi as a mediator between China and the Uighur spoke of the acute need for Turkic translators in these diplomatic encounters. The content of the following letter, written in Chinese, reiterated China's generous material provisions to the diasporic Uighurs, before cuttingly criticizing the Uighur khan's erratic movements. It ended by expressing hopes that the border tension can be resolved peacefully.

Evidence 1

賜回鶻可汗書 奉宣撰

……初則念其饑歉，給其糒糧；旋則知其破傷，盡還馬價。……又聞所止屢遷。……雖云隨逐水草，動皆逼近城柵。……所以中朝大臣等皆云，回紇近塞，已是違盟……。石誠直久在京城，備知仁心憤惋，發於誠懇，固請自行。嘉其深見事機，所以不能違阻。可汗審自詢問，速擇良圖。(Sep, 842AD) (Fu and Zhou, 2000, pp. 68-9)

English Translation of the Letter:

A Letter Granted to the Uighür Qaghan

...In the beginning, We thought of your hunger and shortages and granted you provisions. ...At the time, We also heard that you frequently had shifted your dwelling place. ...Although you say you follow water and grass, your movements all draw you near to our cities and palisades. ...Thus the central court's great officials and others all say that since the Uighürs have approached the border, they already have shown disregard for our alliance. ...

Shi Jiezhi (*author's emphasis*) has long been at the capital. He fully knows that peoples' hearts are angry and resentful. He has put forth a sincere supplication, strongly requesting to go himself [as an envoy to the Qaghan]. We praise his insight on current exigencies, and cannot oppose [his wish]. The Qaghan himself should judge [the current situation] by questioning [Shi Jiezhi] and quickly choose a good plan. (Drompp's translation, 2005, p. 253)

China was soft in its successive attempts to talk the Uighürs into evacuating from the border. Its tone was largely persuasive, with only a faint taint of military threats. This letter concluded with mention of one Shi Jiezhi 石誠直, a multilingual Sogdian 粟特人 of Iranian descent, whose family was originally from Tashkent of Central Asia. He had been living in Chang'an, Tang China's capital, among the Uighür population, possibly with close ties to the Uighurs. He was well informed on political matters and had convinced the Tang court that he would be an effective envoy to the Uighur chief. The letter indicated that the court relied on this Turkic-speaking Sogdian to discuss matters with the Uighür chief beyond what was written down. Their potential conversations, which might have taken place subsequent to Shi's oral translation of the letter, were stated in the textual reference of "The Qaghan himself should judge [the current situation] by questioning [Shi Jiezhi]" in the letter.

China's dilemma in the deployment of a Sogdian envoy

Although the Tang court trusted Shi Jiezhi with the task of an envoy in delivering the letter to the diasporic Uighür chief, it soon started to suspect his integrity. In less than a week after Shi's departure, Li Deyu submitted a memorial, ironically, expressing his concerns about Shi Jiezhi's loyalty as a China envoy. Apparently, Li was recently informed that Shi Jiezhi's fear, as someone who had been so closely connected to the Uighürs, of possible detention in China had driven him to volunteer this mission, in order to escape Chinese control. Li also had discovered that two of Shi's subordinates had already left China and probably had reached the Uighur camp. Apparently, the Sogdians might have the urge to leave China because of their sensitive identity in the mid-9th century, having been associated with the Uighurs commercially and politically. Li was indeed alarmed of Shi Jiezhi's ultimate agenda. He feared that Shi Jiezhi's envoy mission would not only be futile, but would also defame China, with tales of its ill treatment of the Uighürs and its favor showered to Ormïzt, a defected Uighür noble. This is reminiscent of the concerns of interpreters' integrity put forward by Margareta Bowen et al, such as loyalty and possible "breaches of etiquette or even ethics" (1995, p. 273). In contrast with the above letter in which the courage of Shi Jiezhi was inflated, Shi was now criticized as "only one insignificant leader".

This change of feeling about this go-between, within a short period of time speaks of late Tang's suspicion and uneasy feelings over Sogdian translators commonly employed in the court of Tang China who were somewhat affiliated with the Uighurs. The case of Shi Jiezhi as a marginalized figure in the Sino-Uighür crisis echoes Michael Cronin's observation of interpreters being disadvantaged by power hierarchies. Cronin says

The role of interpreters throughout history has been crucially determined by the prevailing hierarchical constitution of power and their position in it. In this respect, if you or your people are seriously disadvantaged by the hierarchy, the most ethical position can be to be utterly "unfaithful" in interpreting in the name of another fidelity, a fidelity of resistance. This is not a "problem". It is a strategy for survival. (Cronin, 2002, p.394)

The allegiance of Shi Jiezhi was suddenly in question exactly because he had been professionally associated with the Uighürs, a dead enemy of late Tang China. However, Shi Jiezhi was never found to have committed any treacherous deeds in China's archival records. The dramatic change of feelings about this go-between, within a matter of days, was typical of late Tang China's increased suspicion of Sogdian translators in the government.

The Arrival of the Kirghiz Envoys

When Kirghiz envoys arrived at the Tang court in 843 AD, Emperor Wuzong asked the Court translator to interview them about their geography and customs.

會昌中，阿熱以使者見殺，無以通于朝，復遣注吾合素上書言狀。行三歲至京師，武宗大悅，班渤海使者上，以其處窮遠，能脩職貢，詔宰相即鴻臚寺見使者，使譯官考山川國風。有詔以鴻臚所得續著之。(Xin Tangshu, vol. 217: 6150)

During the middle of the Huichang reign period, a Kirghiz envoy was killed [by a Uighur fugitive] on his way to paying tribute to China. Later, Zhu-wu Alp Sol was sent with a letter [from the Kirghiz ruler] to explain the mishap. [Zhu-wu Alp Sol] spent three years on the road before [he] arrived at the Tang capital. At the audience with Emperor Wuzong, he was placed by imperial protocol in front of the envoy from Parhae.¹² The emperor was delighted that the Kirghiz envoys had come a long way from their remote country to pay tribute to him. He then asked the chief minister [Li Deyu] to meet the Kirghiz envoys in the Court and instructed the translation official to inquire about the [Kirghiz] landscapes and customs. It is also an imperial order that an illustrated publication [about the tribute mission of the Kirghiz envoys] should be produced based on the information collected by the Court. (My translation)

The above evidence confirms that a translator was assigned to inquire about the landscapes and customs of the Kirghiz people during the interview in the Court. If the subject of discussion in these diplomatic interviews was entirely confined to foreign landscapes and customs, I do not think Tang China would be too concerned about the Sogdian translators leaking or disclosing information to the Uighurs. However, the more important issue in the Sino-Kirghiz interview was mostly about the military tactic to be used to get rid of the remaining Uighurs in the Chinese northern border.

Evidence 2

China's growing suspicion of the integrity of Sogdian translators was all the more obvious in the following year. In fact, in a memorial concerning translators, Li Deyu expressed his skepticism over the integrity of Sogdian translators, namely, Shi Foqing 石佛慶 and others (*Quantangwen*, chap. 705, p. 8009).

論譯語人狀

右,緣石佛慶等皆是回紇種類,必與本國有情,紇戛斯專使到京後,恐語有不便於回紇者,不為翻譯,兼潛將言語輒報在京回紇。望賜劉沔、忠順詔,各擇解蕃語人不是與回紇親族者,令乘遞赴京,冀得互相參驗,免有欺蔽。未審。
(Feb, 843AD)

A Memorial Concerning Translators

[Translation: Suprunenko, 78-9]

Shi Foqing and the others are all of the Uighur race, so they must have some feeling for their native land. After the Kirghiz special envoy arrives at the capital, I fear that they will not translate [for us] whatever he has to say that is not advantageous to the Uighurs, but will secretly report what has been said immediately to the [other] Uighurs in the capital. **I hope that Liu Mian and [Li] Zhongshun can be instructed to select men who can understand and translate foreign languages, and who are not of the same tribe as the Uighurs, and to send them to the capital with the [next available] courier. I hope that they will be able to consult together and verify [everything] so that we may avoid falsification and concealment.** I do not know if this is permissible or not. (Drompp 2005:292)

The intention of this memorial was to solicit Turkic translators with no ethnic affinity to the Uighurs to interpret for the upcoming interviews with the Kirghiz envoys. Li Deyu indicated to the emperor that he suspected that Sogdian translators might withhold information that was not advantageous to the Uighurs, but would secretly divulge Sino-Kirghiz discussions to the Uighurs. This quotation is extremely informative regarding China's critical need for Turkic-speaking translators of no ethnic or national affiliation with the Uighurs. Strictly speaking, the Sogdian translators working for the Tang court were not ethnic Uighurs; they were of ancient Iranian ethnicity, not people born and raised on the Mongolian steppe. However given the history of these translators working in China for the Uighur's political and commercial interests, it is not impossible that some of them might have been naturalized Uighurs. And there were evidence suggesting that some Sogdian people in China actually claimed to be Uighurs just to take advantage of the privileges bestowed on the Uighurs at the time. That may be why Li Deyu, like many other Chinese in the capital, would have the impression that these Sogdian translators were of the same race as that of the Uighurs.

This was also the source of suspicion: would these translators translate in favor of the Uighurs and divulge sensitive information to the Uighurs because of their national or professional affiliation to the Uighurs? There was no way of verifying such unprofessional act, but the existence of this possibility was unnerving to late Tang at its very weak shape in national strength. In order to protect its interest, the Chinese court decided to approach frontier military commanders for Turkic-speaking talent who were not ethnically affiliated to the Uighurs. The Chinese court appeared to be quite desperate: it relied on the judgment of military officials in identifying bilingual experts and to have them dispatched to the capital immediately. Besides, the court was specific in asking for two men from the frontier to be able to understand and translate Turkic, so that at the time of interviews with the Kirghizes, the two translators would be able to verify and

confirm each other's rendition. This way, no falsification and information concealment could take place at the expense of China's interest. This suggests how insecure Tang China was in late Tang era, which was such a stark contrast to the liberal and embracing mindset of early Tang to the presence of non-Chinese residents in China.

Implications and Conclusions

These two pieces of evidence speak of Tang China's suspicion of translators' professional integrity in diplomatic mediation. Li Deyu's memorial, in particular, made an assertion about probable bias of the Sogdian translators in favor of the Uighurs. However, these were at best groundless accusations because no archival evidence to date points to any unethical or disloyal act in their language mediation. It is true that Shi Jiezhi was nowhere to be found after being dispatched with a letter to the Uighur chief in the Chinese border. It was, of course, a mission unaccomplished. We do not know whether he volunteered to be China's envoy merely to have the excuse to leave China. It is also true that Shi Jiezhi's two other followers had secretly left China. We do not know what actually happened to him, and whether he had gone to the Uighur camp or just disappeared. No evidence is available to confirm whether he had delivered the letter for China either. But to be fair, no available evidence, in fact, suggests that Shi Jiezhi had committed any unethical or betraying act at the expense of China's interest.

After the case of Shi Jiezhi having been missing in action, Shi Foqing and the others were extremely unfortunate to have been named and suspected of the potentials to withhold and divulge information to the benefit of the Uighurs in Li Deyu's memorial. For Tang China—when the tension with the Uighurs was mounting—China's fear was resulted from the dread of being misled or betrayed by the Sogdian interpreters who might choose to change sides and be sympathetic to the Uighurs instead. The Sogdian interpreter serving China who has the direct channel to converse with China's enemy has now become the enemy, simply because of his potential duplicity and his linguistic fraternity with the Uighurs. But no archival evidence has pointed to any of their wrong doing. Is it possible that these bicultural and bilingual Sogdian mediators—especially because of their non-Chinese identity and previous connections with the Uighurs—were framed and taken as scapegoats in inter-state politics simply because of the duplicity of their job nature? Is it fair that translators were victimized or portioned with blames just because they are culturally and linguistically privileged to be informed of the two sides of the national conflict? They were blamed or criticized primarily because they had the capacity and knowledge to betray China by distorting or withholding information from China.

Whether Tang China liked it or not, it seemed that the deployment of these non-Chinese translators was the only way out to bridge communication with the Turkic-speaking Uighurs and Kirghizes at the time, because medieval Chinese speakers were not keen on learning Turkic. Unlike the Chinese in Tang times, the Sogdians were raised as multilinguals in their upbringing, being all too ready to work with and for peoples from different language cultures on the Silk Road to make a living at the time. But to the Sogdian translators working for the Chinese court, the mission was fraught with danger, since they might have been the target of blame and suspicion if anything went wrong. In the word of Michael Cronin (2006), it is the interventionist nature of interpreters that

exposes them to the allegation of interpreter bias or manipulative interpreter, especially for interpreting in situation of conflicts.

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