

# Sogdian Translators in Tang China: An Issue of Loyalty

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## 要旨

言語は、人間の交流には不可欠である。多言語的で多文化的なコンテキストにおける言語の社会的機能は、翻訳を通じて高められる。翻訳は、異なる言語を話す人々によって表明される考えのあいだを架橋し、人々の聞いてもらえる権利や知らされる権利を保障することによって社会的正義を促す。しかし、異なる言語を話す人々のあいだで社会的正義を促進するという翻訳の建設的な役割は、翻訳者が信用できるという仮定に基づいて主張されている。だが、翻訳が私的な目的のために役立つよう操作されることで、正義は損なわれうる。本論は、唐（618–907）とトルコ語を話すウイグル人（744–839）との交渉におけるソグディア人翻訳者の翻訳が偏っているという主張について考察する。この考察は、翻訳者の誠実さが国家間政治において問われていたことを示す公的な史料に基づいてなされる。ソグディア人翻訳者に対する唐の朝廷の増大する疑念は、彼らとウイグル人との民族的かつ経済的な関係に向けられていた。しかし、これは正当であったのだろうか、あるいはこれらの非中国人翻訳者たちは、根拠のない非難に基づいて不当に扱われたのだろうか。本論は、晩唐の政治における翻訳依頼者と翻訳者双方から「正義」を検証する。

**Keywords :** Translation in Medieval China, Translator's manipulation, Translators' ethics, Sogdian; Translation patron

## Introduction

This article presents a tricky historical scenario in ninth-century Tang China during which the interpreters' ethnic or national affiliation, not their interpreting competence or performance, became the source of suspicion on the part of the translation patron. The irony here is: who was being wronged and who was being victimized in this context, the interpreters or the patron of the interpreting services? It presents a challenge in academic inquiry about this case that hinged on interpreters' loyalty. The difficulty lies in the fact that we only have access to the voice of the Tang imperial court from its standard archival record. We have no means of accessing the story either from the perspective of the Sogdian 粟特 interpreters or the Uighürs. These two parties are in effect silent, if not deprived of a chance to speak up, in the imperial Chinese archive. Unfortunately such information as we have is all that is left to us in the current investigation. Apparently, its

limitation, as a primary archive pertinent to ancient interpreting activities, is that the record was politically embedded and embellished purely from the perspective of the Chinese ruling clique. As Eva Hung, one recent advocate for the historical study of translation in China, cautions

The Chinese languages boast substantial and continuous historical records covering over two millennia... This continuity and the substantial records they offer, however, do not necessarily make the task of the translation historian an easy one. Since the historical records which have come down to us were compiled or written according to the perceptions and priorities of the establishment, the mainstream, and special interest groups, activities considered unimportant by the authorities and these groups received little attention from historians and intellectuals. (Hung 2005: 71)

Following Hung's observation, it seems that the defense statement of the Sogdian interpreters in our present inquiry must not have been sufficiently important to warrant due attention from the chroniclers when they compiled China's dealing with the Uighürs and the Kirghiz via the mediation of these non-Chinese interpreters. In this connection, it is inevitable that imperial records regarding what the people surrounding these events said and did might very well have been blemished, distorted, or largely ignored one way or another in order to serve the interest of the ruling clique. With this possible limitation considered, this article examines events in Tang China's standard record that document the ruling clique's suspicion of non-Chinese interpreters in the imperial court in its dealings with foreign peoples from the Mongolian steppes.

This article is structured into four sections: first, an introduction to the cosmopolitan mindset of Tang China; second, a discussion of Sogdian translators; third, a gist account of the political tension among China, the Uighürs, and the Kirghiz; and finally, the examination of two archival pieces of evidence which point to late Tang China's suspicion of the integrity of the Sogdian translators in the central government.

### **Cosmopolitan Mindsets of Tang China**

Soon after the establishment of the Tang empire, emperor Taizong (r. 627—650) was honored by foreign rulers in Central Asia, East Asia, and countries along the China frontier as the 'Heavenly khan'. As such, the Tang emperor commanded his government to protect and acculturate these tributary or satellite states in a Confucian fatherly or brotherly manner.

This embracing and yet fundamentally hierarchical mentality of Tang China encouraged international integration and exchanges that took place on a scale unrivaled by any imperial periods in China's history. Most notably, it was the stable and settled lifestyle of China which especially appealed to the nomadic or semi-nomadic 'westerners'. In response to the liberal approach of Tang China to foreign peoples, a large number of foreigners moved to settle in the Chinese territory. The

capital at the time, Chang'an, had almost two million taxable residents (Schafer 1963:5-7) who were primarily men from the northern and western peoples, such as the Turks, Uighürs, Kirghiz, Khitans, Tibetans, Tocharians, and Sogdians. With millions of foreigners coming in and out therefore, or even residing in China, the linguistic burden in terms of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interaction 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**

The Sogdian language, of ancient Iranian origin, was commonly recognized as the commercial lingua franca from the sixth through to the tenth century in central Asia. This language, belonging to the Indo-European language family, was spoken by different Sogdian communities scattered around Bactria, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent. As a result of their ethnographic histories of living with and exposure to different peoples in central Asia and their political histories of having been ruled by various empires, such as the Hephthalites (also known as the White Huns in European histories) in the fifth century, the Türks in the sixth century, and the Arabs from the seventh century onwards, Sogdians typically grew up speaking at least the Sogdian language, the Türkic language, and Chinese. Their multilingual skills easily made them convenient mediating agents in trading along the Silk Road between different peoples. In fact, many Sogdian merchants also acted as translators, and their significance in the commercial activities in Turkistan, the intersection between Central Asia and western China, cannot be overstated. In Tang China, these Sogdians were often not simply only commercial translators, but also agents representing the interests of other nationals in the negotiation of trading and political rights. For instance, after the Anlushan Rebellion in 755 AD, the Uighürs were favored and won a great deal of privileges from the Tang court. At this time, many of these opportunistic Sogdian translators chose to work for the Uighürs and acted as agents for these Uighürs to negotiate with the Tang court.

A good majority of the Sogdian people having been exposed to the Chinese culture had even acquired Chinese names. One of the typical Chinese family names for Sogdians originated from Tashkent was 'Shi 石'. Many of them thrived in medieval times as language mediators for traveling envoys and traders. A small number of them were even recruited by the Chinese imperial court as translation officials to resolve communication problems with foreign envoys. The Tang Chinese observed the sharpness and alacrity of Sogdian merchants, and a cultural custom about this merchant race was documented in the *Xintangshu* as follows:

Mothers give their infants sugar to eat and put paste on the palms of their hands in the hope that 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. (*Xintangshu*, Judith Lerner's translation [2001:222-3])

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 there in medieval times. The multi-lingual talent of the Sogdians was most typically demonstrated in Tang China when they were commonly recruited as translation officials and played pivotal roles in late Tang's dealings with both the Uighürs and the Kirghiz around the mid-ninth century (Drompp 2005). These Sogdian translators were particularly useful in the diplomatic mediation between China and states from north or central Asia. In the Tang practice, for instance, officials from other departments would be dispatched to these diplomatic 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 the much-coveted geographical and strategic information which it desperately valued.

However, since the Chinese at this time were not usually 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 sizeable presence of 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 (in an official capacity), if not for the visiting envoys (free-lanced, on need-basis).

### **Political Tension between Late Tang China and the Uighürs**

In 742, the Türkish empire on the Mongolian steppe collapsed and was succeeded in 744 by the Uighürs. The newly emerged Uighür empire befriended China by assisting to end an internal rebellion in China which badly undermined the strength of Tang China. From then on up to the collapse of the Uighür empire in 843, imperial Chinese favor in the form of huge sums of money, massive amounts of silk textiles, and three princesses were bestowed on the Uighürs, over a century, as a sign of both gratitude and indebtedness. However, by the 830s, the Uighür empire had been severely weakened by the twin forces of political factionalism and internal revolt, and it was eventually replaced by the Kirghiz in 839. Although the empire was undermined, some isolated Uighür nobles and generals were scattered around the Chinese northern border in retreat. For the Tang court, the Uighür presence was a stress factor. Consequently, diplomatic letters were frequently exchanged between China and the Uighür chief with the intent of easing border tension. The Kirghiz displacement of the steppe supremacy of the Uighürs happened to be a welcome move for China. With the Kirghiz having been so proactive in eradicating the remaining Uighürs, China was freed from their endless extortion and intimidation.

Usually Chinese officials or generals would be dispatched to deliver letters to the foreign states for the Chinese court. It was never clear why Shi Jiezhi 石誠直, as we shall see in the first evidence below, a Sogdian resident in the capital, volunteered to be the go-between to carry the following letter for China to the Uighür camp. The fact that the Tang court was initially fine with this contingent measure to have a Sogdian, not a Chinese official, from nowhere, to shoulder such an important envoy mission is even more perplexing. One probable explanation is that Tang China was short of Türkic-speaking translators who would want to take up this daring task. Whatever the truth is, the inclusion of Shi Jiezhi as an intermediary between China and the Uighürs reflected China's acute need for Türkic translators in these encounters. The following letter, written in classical Chinese, reiterated China's material provisions to the diasporic Uighürs and condemned the Uighür qaghan's reckless move of encroaching the frontier.

### 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: 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: 253)

Since China at this point was weak in national strength, it was not too eager to trigger wars. Asking the Uighürs to stay away from the Chinese border was a mild request actually. Shi Jiezhi was a multilingual Sogdian of ancient Iranian descent, who had been living in Chang'an among the Uighür population, possibly with close ties to the Uighürs. It was he who approached and

convinced the Tang court that he would be prepared to volunteer as an envoy to the Uighür chief. The letter suggests that the court relied on this Türkic-speaking Sogdian to discuss matters with the Uighür chief beyond what was written down. Their potential exchanges, after Shi Jiezhi's oral translation of the letter, were implied in the textual reference, "The Qaghan himself should judge [the current situation] by questioning [Shi Jiezhi]".

### **China's Dilemma in the Deployment of a Sogdian Envoy**

It did not take long for Tang China to feel uncomfortable about the contingent appointment of Shi Jiezhi as an envoy to present the letter to the Uighür chief. Soon after Shi Jiezhi's departure, chief minister Li Deyu submitted a memorial,<sup>1)</sup> ironically, expressing his concerns about Shi Jiezhi's loyalty as a China envoy, considering Shi's ethnicity and personal ties with the Uighürs. Li Deyu had only recently been informed that Shi Jiezhi's initiation as the envoy was, in fact, part of his scheme to flee China, since he used to represent the Uighür interest as an agent. It seems reasonable to suggest that the Sogdians, having been associated with the Uighürs commercially and politically, had good reason to feel motivated to leave China, based on their sensitive identity in the mid-ninth century. Li Deyu's memorial was indeed representative of the Tang court's general concern about the destructive consequences of trusting Shi Jiezhi at all with the task. Specifically, the court started to lose faith in anything good coming out of Shi Jiezhi's envoy mission and questioned whether this Sogdian envoy would possibly defame China or not. According to Li Deyu's memorial, the Tang court had come to the realization that deploying Shi Jiezhi had perhaps been a bad or mistaken move. This is a typical concern when regarding the trustworthiness of any interpreter one hires, especially for mediating exchanges in situations of conflict. In reviewing the historical interpreting events in the European setting, Margareta Bowen and her colleagues highlight the issue of interpreters' loyalty and cite cases from archives regarding possible "breaches of etiquette or even ethics" (1995: 273). After all, interpreters are viewed as those individuals sitting on both sides of the fence given their bilingual and bicultural competence. It is therefore legitimate for the interpreting patron to cast doubt on the interpreter's integrity, primarily because of the nature of the interpreting task, and not automatically on his or her personal ethics.

In the passage of evidence 1, Shi Jiezhi is praised for his political insight, courage, and brevity. However, the Tang court's rhetoric in Li Deyu's memorial about this forthcoming envoy switches adversely when Shi Jiezhi's agenda is placed under scrutiny. This abrupt change of feeling about this go-between reflects late Tang's suspicion and unease over Sogdian translators commonly employed in the court of Tang China who were somewhat professionally affiliated with the Uighürs. The Sogdian envoy's allegiance was suddenly being held in doubt precisely because he, like most of his fellow nationals, had previously worked for the Uighürs in China. To be fair however, this special envoy was never found to have betrayed China according to its archival records. In theory, the accusation made against Shi Jiezhi in the chief minister's memorial to the

emperor remains unsubstantiated, since no evidence was ever put forth to back the claim. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the voice of the ruling clique was heard, yet the defense of the accused is muted. We are presented merely with one side of the story about the interpreter's disloyalty.

### The Arrival of the Kirghiz Envoys

When the Kirghiz envoys arrived at the Tang court in 843 AD, emperor Wuzong asked the translator affiliated to the Court of Diplomatic Receptions (thereafter, the Court) 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。(Xintangshu, 217: 6150)

During the middle of the Huichang reign period, a Kirghiz envoy was killed [by a Uighür 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 according to imperial protocol in front of the envoy from Parhae.<sup>12</sup> The emperor was delighted that the Kirghiz envoys had come a long way from their remote country to pay him tribute. 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 was 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. (Lung's translation, 2009: 208)

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 it were the case that the subject of discussion in these diplomatic interviews had been entirely confined to foreign landscapes and customs, then I do not think Tang China would have been too concerned about the Sogdian translators divulging information to the Uighürs. However, the more important issue in the Sino-Kirghiz interview was mostly focused on the military strategy to be used to get rid of the remaining Uighürs lurking in the northern border.

### Evidence 2

China's growing suspicion of the integrity of the 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 the Sogdian translators recruited by China, namely, Shi Foqing 石佛慶 and others (*Quantangwen*, 705: 8009).

論譯語人狀

右，緣石佛慶等皆是回紇種類，必與本國有情，紇夏斯專使到京後，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 Uighür 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 Uighürs, but will secretly report what has been said immediately to the [other] Uighürs 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 Uighürs, 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 Türkic translators with no ethnic affinity to the Uighürs to interpret for the upcoming interviews with the Kirghiz envoys. Li Deyu indicated to the emperor that he suspected that the Sogdian translators might censor information that was harmful to the Uighürs and divulge military intelligence to the Uighürs. This passage is extremely informative regarding China's critical need for Türkic-speaking translators of no ethnic or national affiliation with the Uighürs. Strictly speaking, the Sogdian translators working for the Tang court were not ethnic Uighürs; they were of ancient Iranian ethnicity, not born or raised on the Mongolian steppes. However, given the history of these translators having been hired to represent the Uighür's interests, some of them might have been naturalized Uighürs. And there is, in fact, evidence suggesting that some Sogdian people in China actually claimed to be Uighürs just to take advantage of the privileges bestowed on the Uighürs at the time (Cheng 1994). That may be why Li Deyu, like many others, would have had the mistaken impression that these Sogdian translators were of the same race as that of the Uighürs.

China's confusion over their ethnic differences was also the source of its suspicion. Would these Sogdian translators translate in favor of the Uighürs and disclose sensitive information to the Uighürs because of their presumed ethnic or professional bonding? There was, of course, no way of verifying if these Sogdian translators had indeed betrayed China's interest, but the existence of this

possibility was unnerving to late Tang considering its diminishing national strength. Therefore, in order to protect its interests, the Chinese court decided to approach frontier military commanders for Türkic-speaking talent who were not ethnically affiliated to the Uighürs. The Chinese court appeared to be quite desperate; it relied on the judgment of its military officials to identify bilingual experts and to have them dispatched to the capital immediately. In addition, the court was specific about asking for two men from the frontier who could understand and translate Türkic. This plan was meant to enable the two translators to verify each other's rendition at the time of interviews with the Kirghiz. It was hoped that no falsification or information censor would take place at the expense of China's interest. This suggests how insecure China was during the late Tang era, which was such a stark contrast to the liberal and embracing mindset of early Tang with regard to the presence of foreign residents in China.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The two pieces of evidence dealt with here reflect Tang China's suspicion of translators' professional integrity in diplomatic mediation. Li Deyu's memorial, in particular, made an assertion about the probable bias of the Sogdian translators in favor of the Uighürs. However, these were at best groundless accusations since no archival evidence to date points to any unethical or disloyal act in their interpretation during the Kirghiz interview. It is true that Shi Jiezhi was nowhere to be found after being dispatched with a letter to the Uighür chief. It was certainly a mission unaccomplished but we cannot be sure whether he volunteered to be China's envoy merely as an excuse to leave China or not. We do not know what actually happened to him either. Did he reach the Uighür camp and deliver the letter for China or did he simply disappear as a fugitive? In all fairness, no available evidence, in fact, suggests that Shi Jiezhi betrayed China or substantially compromised China's interest.

After the disappearance of Shi Jiezhi, Shi Foqing and the others were extremely unfortunate to have been named and suspected, in Li Deyu's memorial, of potentially withholding and divulging information for the benefit of the Uighürs. For Tang China—when the tension with the Uighürs was mounting—their fear was due to the dread of being misled or betrayed by the Sogdian interpreters who might choose to change sides and be sympathetic to the Uighürs instead. The Sogdian interpreters serving China who had had direct verbal contact with China's enemy had now become the enemy, simply because of their potential duplicity and linguistic fraternity with the Uighürs (Cronin 2002). But no archival evidence has pointed to any violation of interpreters' ethics. Is it possible that these bicultural and bilingual Sogdian mediators might have been framed and taken as scapegoats in inter-state politics simply because of the duplicity of the duplicitous nature of their work? Is it fair for translators to be victimized or apportioned blame just because they are culturally and linguistically privileged to be informed about two sides of a national conflict? In short, they were blamed or suspected primarily because they had the capacity and knowledge to

betray China by distorting or censoring information.

Whether Tang China liked it or not, it seemed that the deployment of these non-Chinese translators was the only solution to bridging communication with the Türkic-speaking Uighurs and Kirghiz at the time, because medieval Chinese speakers were not very interested in learning foreign languages. Unlike the Chinese in Tang times, the Sogdians were raised as multilinguals, 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. Yet, to the Sogdian translators working for the Chinese court, the mission was fraught with danger, since they might so easily be the target of attack if anything went wrong. In the words 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 situations of conflict.

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### Notes

- 1) A memorial is used in Sinology writing to denote the written message submitted by officials to the emperor in imperial China. It is equivalent to the modern usage of memorandum.

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Sogdian Translators in Tang China (LUNG)

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