

HISTORY



The Tibetans in the Ordos and North China Considerations on the Role of the Tibetan Empire in World History

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Current opinion among most orientalists with regard to the Tibetan Empire is dominated by the notion that while Tibetan culture was strongly influenced by neighboring civilizations—Indian, Chinese, Iranian, and Central Asian—the Tibetan expansion did not have any lasting effect upon the history of Asia. Thus the idea that Tibetan history is irrelevant for world history—an idea with different origins, to be sure—continues to be reinforced, even by Tibetologists. On the other hand, most historians of Tibet, Mongolia, and the Manchus, as well as a few Sinologists, agree that a thin veneer of later Tibetan Buddhist culture came to be spread across northeastern Eurasia beginning in the Mongol Empire period, and expanded again in the Manchu period. The present paper is an attempt to revise the above conclusions in the light of recent research.

After the outbreak of the An Lu-shan Rebellion in T'ang China in 755 A.D., the Tibetans took advantage of the resulting Chinese military weakness to recapture a vast stretch of Tibetan territory that had been occupied by the T'ang during the preceding two or three decades.¹ They did not stop at their old borders, however, but—perhaps seeking revenge—pressed on deeper into China, where they captured the capital, Ch'ang-an, in December of 763.² It is not often appreciated that the eastern border of the Tibetan Empire then stayed fixed for a century at a point only a short distance to the west of the Chinese capital. This was the cause of constant worry to the T'ang, since the Tibetans could and often did threaten the capital more or less at will. More important than this, however, is the fact that at the same time Tibet also controlled a vast territory further to the north and northwest of Ch'ang-an, the borderlands between the northern steppes and the traditional Chinese realm south of the Great Wall. This Tibetan military domination of the southern Ordos and neighboring regions of northwest China during the late eighth and early ninth centuries seem to have had a long-lasting effect on the history of East Asia.

The Tibetan capture of Liang *chou* in 764,³ and the consequent T'ang loss of Ho-hsi *tao* to Tibet meant that the direct routes from China to Central Asia (and, thus, the Western world) were all in Tibetan hands until nearly the end of the T'ang dynasty. Japanese historians have long ago noted the significance of this fact. In an article published in 1956, K. Nagasawa argues that this event was a major turning-point for the history of East-West trade because, he says, the Tibetans held onto Liang *chou* long after the rest of their Empire had broken up, and furthermore the Tanguts inherited the same area of control from the Tibetans, and kept it even longer.⁴ Tibetan control of the area meant—according to Nagasawa—that the bulk of T'ang China's silk exports had to go west via the so-called "Uighur route": from North China via the Ordos or T'ai-yüan (in Ho-tung, present-day Shansi) to Chung Shou-hsiang *ch'eng* (the "Middle City for Receiving Submission"), which was located just north of the great bend of the Yellow River. From there the route passed northward to the Uighur capital on the Orkhon, and thence westward to the Arab caliphate.⁵ Although Nagasawa's interpretation is basically correct, the story is somewhat more complicated, and his conclusions should be modified. In addition, while the debilitating effect on Tibet of the protracted warfare with the Uighurs and Chinese has been duly noted by nearly all writers on the subject, the effect of the same warfare on the Uighurs has received little attention. The Tibetan Empire's movement northward from Ho-hsi into territory once under the influence of (or actually controlled by) the Turks—the area from Hami to the Ordos—on the one hand had a great impact on the fate of the Uighur Empire, and on the other helped lay the foundations for the Tangut Empire. The eventual results of these changes were indeed of fundamental importance for later East Asian history.

The Tibetan expansion into the Ordos region seems originally to have been merely an extension of campaigns into the area about Ch'ang-an and into Kansu, along the Silk Road into Central Asia.⁶ Through constant use of the Yellow River routes, the Tibetans ended up in an excellent position to raid the prefectures along the Great Wall, both north and south of it. They did so regularly: south from 763 on,⁷ and north from 778 onward.⁸ Most of the raids included large contingents of Tanguts, T'u-yü-hun, and others along with the Tibetans.⁹ Although the Chinese had settled some Tanguts and T'u-yü-hun in Kuan-wei and across the Wall in the southern Ordos—in order to keep them away from their former Tibetan overlords¹⁰—the Tibetan army apparently brought new contingents of these peoples with them from northeastern Tibet. After the Chinese refused to honor the T'ang's part of the bilateral agreement of 783-784 concerning payment to Tibet for military assistance against the rebel Chu Tz'u and his Uighur allies (which Tibetan assistance was decisive in the rebels' defeat),¹¹ the Tibetan army of 'Zan Rgyal-btsan again entered to attack the prefectures to the near northwest of the capital district.¹² When this

move was blunted, he turned northward to begin a campaign of conquest in the southern Ordos. On or about December 10, 786, Yen *chou* was taken and garrisoned;¹³ by December 26 of the same year, Hsia *chou*, Lin *chou*, and Yin *chou* were likewise taken.¹⁴ The T'ang was duly alarmed; when Śaṅ Rgyal-btsan suggested a peace treaty, the Chinese snapped at the chance. By the summer of 787, everything was set for a treaty to be signed at P'ing-liang. But the Tibetans then turned the tables on the Chinese on July 8, 787, by capturing and carrying off a great number of the T'ang generals and other attendants sent to the intended treaty-signing ceremonies.¹⁵ Immediately afterward, his goal largely accomplished, Śaṅ Rgyal-btsan ordered the Ordos fortresses destroyed and the garrisons withdrawn.¹⁶ So ended the first period of Tibetan forays into the Ordos proper.

The next stage followed almost without a pause. During the Tibetan-Uighur war over T'ang-held Beshbaliq (Pei-t'ing, near present-day Urumchi) the Uighurs attacked and defeated the Tibetans at Ling *chou* (present-day Ninghsia).¹⁷ After the Uighurs captured (not, as often stated, "recaptured") Beshbaliq from Tibet in 792, they pressed the Tibetans southwards, capturing from them Qocho (Kao-ch'ang or Hsi *chou*, in the Turfan Depression) in the same year.¹⁸ The Tibetans, who apparently still held Hami (I *chou*), counterattacked—recapturing Liang *chou* and eventually pushing the Uighurs back to Qocho in the West. Tibet also sent armies again into the Ordos region. Although in 808 the Uighurs were able to take Liang *chou* and possibly hold it for a short time,¹⁹ the Tibetans responded in the following year by sending 50,000 cavalry to attack a Uighur embassy on its return home from China, somewhere beyond P'i-t'i Spring (located north of Hsi Shou-hsiang *ch'eng*, the "Western City for Receiving Submission").²⁰ Tibetan pressure on the Uighurs' most critical lifeline was such that in 816 a Tibetan raid is said to have reached a point only two days' journey from the Uighur capital, Ordubaliq (now known as Karabalgasun).²¹ Tibet kept up the pressure, to the point where the Uighurs felt the need to boast to the Chinese in 821 that not only would they be able to protect the T'ai-ho Princess on her way to the Uighur capital in Mongolia, but they would even send out 10,000 cavalry via Beshbaliq and 10,000 via *An-hsi*, to push the Tibetans back.²² In fact, however, the Uighurs sent at most 3,000 men to the Chinese border near Feng *chou*, and there is no record of any actual Uighur move against the Tibetans at this time. Moreover, it was undoubtedly only due to the conclusion of the Sino-Tibetan peace treaty of 821-822, and the Sino-Uighur and Tibetan-Uighur accords of the same year, that the Tibetans did not continue their raids in the Ordos region.²³ It is clear from these events that Tibetan influence then extended across the southern Ordos and the neighboring area south of the Great Wall, southwestward throughout the whole of Kansu and Ho-hsi, and westward as far as Hami and Qocho. With the conclusion of the new treaty,

the Tibetan military presence was theoretically restricted to the parts of that territory which were under actual Tibetan administration in 821. Finally, between 849 and 863 most of the Tibetan-ruled areas outside present-day ethnic Tibet were lost.²⁴

The most important immediate effect of the nearly century-long Tibetan presence in the Ordos and North China was the movement of a great number of people from areas further west or south into the borderlands of the northern steppe. Some of these people had fled from Tibetan control and had been moved by the T'ang in order to keep them away from Tibet. Such were most of the T'u-yü-hun and Tanguts, moved in the seventh century,²⁵ and the Sha-t'o Turks, moved in the early ninth century.²⁶ The Sha-t'o and T'u-yü-hun were soon moved across the Yellow River to the East into what is now Shansi and Hopei,²⁷ where they were eventually to become power brokers in Chinese dynastic politics, to help set geopolitical patterns followed by a long succession of northern Chinese dynasties. The Tanguts, however, unlike the T'u-yü-hun and (ultimately) the Sha-t'o, seem normally to have retained a close working relationship with the Tibetan Empire during its period of domination over them, and many Tanguts, remnants of the Tibetan armies, were apparently more recent arrivals from their homeland in the northeastern marches of Tibet. Together with some Tibetans who stayed behind, they continued to be active as rebels, bandits, or raiders of one kind or another, long after the conclusion of the international peace of 821-822 and the cessation of imperial Tibetan military activities in the area. The Tanguts' power grew proportionately as that of the T'ang declined, so that by the end of the latter dynasty they were for all practical purposes independent. The Tangut Empire established in the eleventh century—with a Chinese-style dynasty later known as Hsi-hsia—was territorially more or less a reincarnation of the former Tibetan zone of influence there. The Tangut Empire lasted until its conquest by the Mongols in the early thirteenth century.

The presence of the Tibetan Empire (and later the Tangut Empire) in the lands bordering northwestern China had several far-reaching consequences. One of these was the redirection of international trade: caravans to or from China were forced either to go through Tibetan territory or to go around by a very circuitous route through Uighur Mongolia, and so westward.²⁸ (Seaborne commerce was not affected at all, except to be encouraged.) Another, perhaps more dramatic, effect of Tibet's movement northward was its impact on the Uighur Empire. Tibet's military presence in Ho-hsi and the neighboring regions helped to separate Mongolia from Jungaria; thus, with simultaneous Tibetan pressure on both the southern Mongolian steppe and the more fertile and prosperous western part of their empire, the Uighurs ended up divided, apparently keeping the bulk of their forces in the West. The Tibetan raids into Mongolia were thus designed to divide, or at any rate had the effect

of dividing, the Uighur Empire into two separate halves. The eastern part, with the capital, Ordubaliq, was eventually weakened to the extent that it was easily crushed by the Kirghiz in 840.²⁹ The destruction of Uighur rule in Mongolia meant the nearly total elimination of Western religious pressure, in the form of Manicheism, on Eastern Eurasia. The remaining followers of Manicheism, and the numerically weak Nestorian adherents, ultimately disappeared in the face of another world religion, South Asian in origin, namely Tibetan Buddhism.

Of all the effects of the Tibetan expansion, the most long-lasting was not primarily political, but rather cultural in nature. The late Tibetan Empire, its successor states in Liang *chou* and Siling (Hsi-ning), and finally the Tangut Empire, were all strongly Buddhist states, powerful enough to resist the encroachment of Islam. They allowed Buddhist clerics to pass through and cross-fertilize, for example between Tibet and the Buddhist centers on Wu-t'ai Shan.³⁰ Tibetan Buddhist activity in the colonial areas just outside Amdo continued uninterrupted after the breakup of the empire. There was quite a lot of Tibetan Buddhist activity in Sha *chou* (Tun-huang) even after the Chinese recapture of the city in 848;³¹ Tibetan monks were to be found in the armies of the two feuding ministers Blon Guñ-bzer and Zañ Pi-pi, at the same time.³² In addition, it is well known that the refugee monks from Central Tibet, including eventually Lhaluñ Dpalgyi Rdorje, the assassin of Glan Darma, settled in Amdo after attempting to preach to the Uighurs (presumably those in Kan *chou*); this presupposes no open hostility to Buddhism in the area. The Tibetan successor-states in Liang *chou* and neighboring areas were pro-Buddhist. When the Tanguts finally occupied this region they simply continued to support an already long-established Buddhist church. Furthermore, Tibetan monks were quite active at the court of the Sung dynasty in China, where they assisted in the translation of several important Buddhist texts into Chinese. When the Mongols finally supplanted the Tanguts, they did not disturb the existing Buddhist establishment; on the contrary, they supported it as strongly as their predecessors had. A crucial fact of Tibetan-Mongol relations, one generally overlooked, is that Khubilai, the Mongol Great Khan and founder of the Yüan dynasty in China, was raised by a Tangut nursemaid³³ and grew up in Tangut at the court of his influential cousin Ködän. There he met 'Phagspa Lama, and the Tibetan-Mongol cultural alliance was soon firmly in place. It is clear that the Mongol ruling class (at least) wholeheartedly accepted Tibetan Buddhism by the end of the thirteenth century.³⁴

Tibetan culture thus was enabled to expand uninterruptedly northeastwards during the Tangut period and on through the Mongol and Manchu periods, with the eventual result that the dominant high culture of northeastern Eurasia, including (besides Tibet, Mongolia, Manchuria and parts of Siberia, and the southeasternmost corner of Europe) also parts of Northwest China

(mainly in Kansu) was Tibetan Buddhist culture, not Chinese culture. It is no accident that foreign accounts of eastern Eurasia written in the nineteenth century liked to refer to Tibetan as the “Latin” of what they called “High Asia”—meaning the vast area dominated by Tibetan Buddhist culture. Chinese and its attendant literary culture was, like Hindustani in India, the province of native scholars, with very few exceptions, whereas Tibetan was the common language of scholars from Tibet, Mongolia, Siberia, Manchuria, and China. One could hardly imagine this happening if the late Tibetan Empire, its successor states, and then the Tangut Empire—the latter a multinational state including Tibetans as one of its most important components—had not maintained a strong Buddhist bulwark against the powerful forces of Islamic expansion that were then eliminating Buddhism from East Turkistan.

In conclusion, the Tibetan Empire’s expansion into the Ordos and north-western Chinese borderlands was merely the beginning of a much greater Tibetan Buddhist cultural empire that continued to spread from Tibet, eventually to dominate nearly the whole of northeastern Asia well into the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. The details of this struggle, and of the topic of the present paper, are properly the subject of a thorough book-length monograph. Here, primary-source reference will be made only to *Ssuma Kuang, Tzu chih t’ung chien*, 10 Vols. (Peking, 1956; repr. Taipei, 1979), abbreviated *TCTC*: the single most important source for T’ang-Inner Asian history, though the least utilized. The first T’ang armies in Tibet’s northeast fell in the twelfth month of 756; see *TCTC*, 219:7011. For citations of other sources, and a more detailed historical narrative (which omits most of the material on the present subject) see my forthcoming book, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, forthcoming), henceforth abbreviated *TECA*.

2. This followed the Tibetan capture of the whole of Ho-hsi and Lung-yu in the summer of that year (*TCTC*, 223:7146-7147) and the surrender of a Chinese official who helped lead the Tibetan army of over 200,000 soldiers (including T’u-yü-hun, Tanguts, and others) to the capital (*TCTC*, 223:7150-7157).

3. Li Chi-fu, *Yüan-ho chün hsien t’u chih* (Taipei, 1973) 40:2v (p.557); Liu Hsü, *Chiu T’ang shu* [henceforth, *CTS*], 16 Vols. (Peking, 1975) 196a:5239; Sung Ch’i and Ou-yang Hsiu, *Hsin T’ang shu*, 20 Vols. (Peking, 1975) 216a:6088.

4. See Katsutoshi Nagasawa, “Toban no Kasei shinshutsu to Tô-Zai Kôtsû,” *Shikan*, 46 (1956) 71-81. A number of articles in Japanese would appear (from the titles given in the bibliographies I have consulted) to be directly relevant to this question, as well as to the other problems I treat in this article. However, they have remained inaccessible to me.

5. Nagasawa, 1956:73 et seq.

6. In fact, it is likely that the Tanguts—intentionally or otherwise—prepared the way for the Tibetan advance by their raids, mainly in 760 and 761, into the very areas that the Tibetans occupied. See *TCTC*, 220:7060, 7066; 221:7093, 7096, 7097, 7100; 222:7105, 7113, 7114, 7119, 7122, and 7126.

7. *Ibid.*, 223:7146-7147 et seq.
 8. *Ibid.*, 225-7251 et seq.
 9. The Chinese sources unfortunately only rarely mention the other participants explicitly; see *TCTC*, 223:7150; 232:7496, 7501; 241:7774-7775, 7783-7785.
 10. This is mentioned in, among other places, the gloss to *TCTC*, 220:7060.
 11. *Ibid.*, 231-7442; for details, see the discussion in *TECA*. It is notable that the Uighurs were actually at war with China, or there were very hostile relations between the two nations, quite often during the period of the Uighur Empire's existence, specifically, ca. 745-756, 764-765, 775-787; the Uighurs raided or threatened the border in 796, 813, 822, and 840. It was, nevertheless, deliberate T'ang policy to cultivate the Uighurs, probably because the Turks, unlike the Tibetan Empire, were no real danger to a united China; they were never able to penetrate very far into the country, nor hold any territory; moreover, they were separated from China by the Gobi.
 12. *TCTC*, 232:7470.
 13. *Ibid.*, 232:7474.
 14. *Ibid.*, 232:7475.
 15. *Ibid.*, 232:7486-7487.
 16. *Ibid.*, 232:7889.
 17. *Ibid.*, 233:7524.
 18. See now the article by Tsuguhito Takeuchi, "The Tibetans and Uighurs in Pei-t'ing, Anhsi (Kucha), and Hsi-chou (790-860 A.D.)," *Kinki Daigaku kyōyōbu kenkyū kiyō*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (1986) 51-68.
 19. See *TECA* chapter six, for further details.
 20. *TCTC*, 238:7660, 7666.
 21. *CTS*, 195b:5265. Cf. Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire* (Columbia, 1972) 172 n. 250.
 22. See the discussion in *TECA*, chapter six.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. *TCTC*, 220:7060, gloss.
 26. *Ibid.*, 237:7651-7652.
 27. *Ibid.*, 237:7661.
 28. On international trade during this later period, see the valuable article by Yoshinobu Shiba, "Sung Foreign Trade: Its Scope and Organization," in Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries* (Berkeley, 1983) 89-115. It is important to realize that the fragmented polities of the area encouraged international trade, and made it possible by providing numerous alternative routes. It is notable that one important route for East-West trade passed through the Ch'ing-t'ang kingdom in northeastern Tibet. See Shiba, pp. 100-102.
 29. Internecine conflict within the Uighur Empire was primarily responsible for the collapse. Perhaps the Kirghiz, former allies of Tibet, merely succeeded in taking advantage of a situation created by the Tibetan strategists, who were finally unable to do the job themselves. For subsequent events, particularly the fate of the Uighurs who fled to China, see the unpublished dissertation of Michael Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü as Sources for the History of T'ang-Inner Asian Relations" (Bloomington, Indiana University, 1986).
 30. Already in the early eighth century under Mes Ag-tshoms Tibetan Buddhists are said to have established a connection with the Buddhist centers on Wu-t'ai Shan (Tibetan Ribo rtse lña), a mountain sacred to Mañjuśrī. According to an account in the *Sba bzed* connected to the material on the building of Samye—and therefore, it would seem, basically reliable—Sba Sañ-si visited Wu-t'ai Shan during a trip to China, and when he returned built a small temple, called Nañ Lhakhañ, "Inner Temple," in the imperial palace precinct at Bragmar. The temple was built "in the shape of Wu-t'ai Shan." See C. Beckwith, "The Revolt of 755 in Tibet," *Wiener Studien zur*
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Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 10 (1983) 1-16, p.13. For further discussion of Sañ-śi and his journey, see Jeffrey Broughton, "Early Ch'an Schools in Tibet," in R. Gimello and P. Gregory, ed., *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-yen* (Honolulu, 1983) 1-68, especially pp. 5-7 and notes. In 824, during the reign of Ralpacan, as is well known, Tibet formally requested the T'ang government for a map of the holy mountain; the request was granted. See P. Demiéville, *Le concile de Lhasa* (Paris, 1952) p.188 n.1.

31. See G. Uray, "L'emploi du tibétain dans les chancelleries des états du Kan-sou et de Khotan postérieur a la domination tibétaine" *Journal Asiatique*, 269 (1981) 81-90; and the paper on Tibetan letters from Tun-huang by Takeuchi, forthcoming in the proceedings of the Csoma de Kőrös Symposium held at Visegrád in 1984.

32. See *TECA* for details and references.

33. J. Boyle, *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (New York, 1971) 241.

34. See C. Beckwith, "Tibetan Medicine and Astrology at the Mongol Court," *Journal of the Tibet Society*, Vol. 7 (forthcoming). It should not be overlooked that Tibetan Buddhism had two good chances to be established in the West as well, first through the strong patronage of the Mongol Ilkhans in Persia, and later through the patronage of the Jungars, whose Kalmyck descendants living on the European shores of the Caspian Sea still follow Tibetan Buddhism. The History of Ilkhanid-Tibetan relations—especially the question of the Tibetan *bakhshis* at the Ilkhanid court, and their influence on non-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices—is a potential goldmine. Besides Tibetan material, there is much in Islamic sources, apparently some in Greek, and probably some in various other languages, waiting to be explored.

GLOSSARY

- An-hsi* 安西
An Lu-shan 安祿山
Ch'ang-an 長安
Ch'ing-t'ang 青堂
Chu Tz'u 朱泚
Chung Shou-hsiang ch'eng 中受降城
Ho-hsi tao 河西道
Ho-tung 河東
Hsi chou 西州
Hsi Shou-hsiang ch'eng 西受降城
Hsia chou 夏州
I chou 伊州
Kan chou 甘州
Kao-ch'ang 高昌
Kuan-nei 關內
Liang chou 涼州
Lin chou 麟州
Ling chou 靈州
Lung-yu 隴右
P'i-t'i 鶻鵠
P'ing-liang 平涼
Sha chou 沙州
Sha-t'o 沙陀
T'ai-ho 太和
T'ai-yuan 太原
T'u-yü-hun 吐谷渾
Wu-t'ai Shan 五臺山
Yen chou 鹽州
Yin chou 銀州
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