

Yang Liangyao's Mission of 785 to the Caliph of Baghdād: Evidence of an Early Sino-Arabic Power Alliance?

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Introduction

The primary focus of this article is the information inscribed on the tomb stele (*shendao zhi bei* 神道之碑) of a Chinese eunuch, a certain Yang Liangyao 楊良瑤 (736–806). This stele was originally discovered by the Chinese archaeologist and historian Zhang Shimin 張世民 in Shaanxi Province, close to present-day Xi'an 西安 (in the village of Xiaohuyang 小戶楊 in Yunyang 雲陽 county of the district of Jingyang 涇陽 near Xianyang 咸陽, see map 2).¹ It is reportedly 189.5 cm high and 93.5 cm wide, the upper part introducing the stele in seal characters is 85.5 cm high (see illustration below). A “*shendao bei*” is normally placed in the path leading to or directly in front of the tomb. Yang Liangyao's tomb itself, which could provide us with additional information including his tomb inscription (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘), has not yet been excavated.

The text of the stele with the self-designation as “Tomb-passage Stele Inscription of the Former Official Yang of the Tang(-Dynasty)” (“Tang gu Yang fujun shendao zhi bei” 唐故楊府君神道之碑) first appeared in the “Local Chronicle of Jingyang District” (*Jingyang xianzhi* 涇陽縣志) in 2001.² In 2005, Zhang Shimin released a version of the inscription based on his analysis of the original text. Subsequently, Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 of Peking University has critically analysed the inscription using rubbings, and in 2011 and 2012 has

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1. The stele can be found in the museum of Jingyang. Rong Xinjiang kindly provided me with copies, photos, and a rubbing of the stele made by Zhang Jianlin 張建林 (the then Vice-director of the Archaeological Institute of Shaanxi Province). I also received a copy of Zhang Shimin's latest article (2013) in which he not only published a rubbing of the stele, but also a careful transcription of the text. I would like to thank both of my colleagues for allowing me to use the photos, the rubbing, and the transcription for this project. During a research expedition that took me to Xi'an in August 2015, Zhang Shimin informed me that local authorities have already applied for funds to locate and unearth Yang Liangyao's tomb. So we can only hope that further information on the life and personality of Yang Liangyao may be available in the near future and that grave robbery will not upset these plans.

2. He Ping 2001.

proposed several corrections and additions after taking the military and political situation of the Tang Dynasty into account.³

It goes without saying that the present analysis could hardly have been published in its present form without the thorough foundation work done by Rong Xinjiang and Zhang Shimin. In this article I intend to complement preliminary work done on Yang's mission by framing it within a much broader political-economic context than so far done. By comparing the contents of the stele with information provided in other sources we can consequently draw more detailed conclusions on the factors that may have prompted the trip described in it and, above all, the reasons why it has not been entered into other historical records. In particular, we want to address the question of why mention of such an important diplomatic mission is neither mentioned in any other sources, and the question of why it has never been brought up in academic discourse, questions that have not even been advanced by either Zhang Shimin or Rong Xinjiang. We will also discuss questions connected with the possible identity of Yang Liangyao, something so far neglected in research. Although a clear indication that this trip even took place at all is absent in both Chinese and Middle Eastern historiography, there is no plausible reason to automatically rule out the possibility that the mission was carried out, or to assume that somebody might have faked such a story on an epigraphic document like this funerary stone stele.⁴ Historical circumstances and a comparison with information mentioned in other sources at least suggest that the mission was sent, perhaps even successfully, and that there are also quite a few good reasons as to why the mission and information pertaining to Yang Liangyao himself were not included in the official accounts. We will present a detailed analysis of those parts of the stele that are of interest and relevance to our context and provide a transcription, a complete translation and photos of the stele in the appendix.

The inscription text will be comparatively analysed against the background of the political landscape under the Chinese Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 780–805), and more specifically against the background of the court's politics in the face of Tibetan aggression. In this context, this article goes not only beyond the research provided by Rong Xinjiang and Zhang Shimin, but also beyond my own first study on this topic published in German in 2014, before Rong Xinjiang's recent book chapter appeared.⁵ The stele records the biography of Yang and claims that he was sent as an envoy to the

3. Zhang Shimin 2005: 4–5. In 2011, Rong Xinjiang proposed further corrections in his talk at the international conference, “Land and Maritime Communication and World Civilizations”, at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangdong (Rong Xinjiang 2011). His original paper has meanwhile been published in English in 2015 as “New Evidence on the History of Sino-Arabic Relations: A Study of Yang Liangyao's Embassy to the Abbasid Caliphate”, in Victor Mair & Liam Kelley's *Imperial China and its Southern Neighbours* (Rong Xinjiang 2015).

4. Early September 2015, I discussed this issue again personally with Rong Xinjiang in Beijing. We are both convinced that it is in fact very implausible that the stele has been faked. If it was successful or not is yet another question that will also be discussed below.

5. Angela Schottenhammer 2014; Rong Xinjiang 2015. I would also like to stress that I have since then been in continuous contact with both Rong Xinjiang and Zhang Shimin. It is clear that it was Rong Xinjiang who first advanced the idea that the aim of Yang Liangyao's mission may have been to request Arab military assistance against the Tibetans. Although I particularly seek to focus on hitherto neglected aspects of this mission, there is of course some overlapping with Rong Xinjiang's book chapter.

‘Abbāsids (*Heiyi dashi* 黑衣大食; lit. “Black-dressed⁶ Tajik” [sometimes also written Tājik or Tadhik], a transliteration from the Persian word “Tāzīk”, that was originally applied to Iranians in contrast to the Turks, but later came to mean “Arabs” in general) by Emperor Dezong in 785. It seems that the mission was intended to ask the Arabs for military support against the Tibetans. Yang Liangyao is said to have left Canton, travelled by sea into the Persian Gulf and returned to China after successfully completing his mission – this is at least the account the stele records. In order to examine and verify historical events, circumstances and developments recorded in the stele and related to it, I will consequently analyse also details not directly linked to this mission. They provide insights into contemporary Tang politics and tell us more about the whole historical context involved and the possibility that this mission really took place.

Early Chinese Crossing the Indian Ocean

In 2008 Zhang Guangda 張廣達, in his work on “Text, images and cultural exchange” (*Wenben, tuxiang yu wenhua jiaoliu* 文本, 圖像與文化交流), wrote:

在唐代，確曾橫渡印度洋且有姓名可考的中國人有二人。一為達奚宏通，一為杜環。

In the Tang period there were in fact already Chinese who crossed the Indian Ocean. The names of two of these men are known to us: one was Daxi Hongtong, the other Du Huan.⁷

Both individuals mentioned by Zhang Guangda wrote about their travels across the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately, not a single sentence from the travel report of Daxi Hongtong 達奚宏通 has survived.⁸ Nevertheless the *Zhongxing guange shumu* 中興館閣書目, a catalogue of the palace library of the Southern Song finished in 1186, tells us about the author and the creation of his text:

西南諸蕃行記一卷，唐上元中唐州刺史達奚宏通撰，宏通以大理司直使海外，自赤土至虔那，凡經三十六國，略載其事。

Daxi Hongtong, the Regional Inspector of Tangzhou (in present-day Henan), wrote a text entitled *Report on a Trip to all Foreign Countries in the Southwest* during the Shangyuan era (760–762) of the Tang period. He travelled as Representative of the

6. The colour of the uniforms and the flag of the ‘Abbāsīd rulers was black while the Umayyad colour was white.

7. Zhang Guangda 2008: 144.

8. Daxi Hongtong’s travel report (or Daxi Tong 達奚通 alternatively in *Songshi* 157.5154, Daxi Hong 達奚洪) was catalogued under many names in the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties. *Zhufan xingji* 諸蕃行記 (*Chongwen zongmu* 崇文總目 2.91); *Hainan zhufan xingji* 海南諸蕃行記 (*Xin Tangshu* 58.1508; *Tongzhi* 66.783; *Yuhai* 16.6b; *Guoshi jingji zhi* 3.110); *Xinan zhufan xingji* 西南蕃行記 (*Zhongxing guange shumu* 中興館閣書目, in *Yuhai* 16.6b shortly named 書目); *Xinan haifan xingji* 西南海蕃行記 (*Songshi* 157.5152); *Haiwai sanshiliu guo ji* 海外三十六國記 (*Songshi* 157.5154). The 1594 *Guoshi jingji zhi* 國史經籍志, Jiao Hong’s 焦竑 (1541–1620) catalogue of the royal library of the Ming contains the most recent reference to the now lost book.

Supreme Court by sea from Chitu⁹ to Qianna,¹⁰ visiting a total of 36 countries. [His book] recorded a summary of what occurred.¹¹

Du Huan's 杜環 travel report is also incomplete. He travelled by sea from the "Country of Tajik" (Dashi 大食, i.e. the 'Abbāsid Empire or Caliphate) back to Canton – the same starting and ending points of Yang Liangyao's voyage. As such, Du Huan's travel report could have acted as a sort of travel guide for Yang Liangyao.

Fortunately, Du Huan's uncle, Du You 杜佑 (735–812), quoted various passages in his historical encyclopaedia *Tongdian* 通典 ("Comprehensive Institutions"). In particular, chapter 193 ("Bianfang dian" 邊防典 [Institutions of Border Defence]) contains passages about China's relations with western lands.¹² In 751, Du Huan was "captured" by Arabian soldiers during the battle at Talas (north of Samarkand) and was taken to the capital of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate, al-Kūfah (= Kufa, in present-day Iraq, circa 160 km south of Baghdād). From there, he travelled further to Damascus and a number of other Arabian cities. After returning to Canton on a merchant vessel, he recorded his experiences in a work entitled *Jingxing ji* 經行記 ("Records of [my] Travels").¹³ Near the end of the Qing dynasty, Chen Yunrong 陳運溶 (1858–1918) undertook the task of reconstructing *Jingxing ji* to its original form and it is upon this work that modern editions of the text are based on.¹⁴

Du Huan's exceedingly positive description of the "Lands of the Tājik", coupled with the opportunities that he was granted during his travels, indicate that he was no traditional prisoner of war. It is unlikely that Du Huan visited all of the countries and regions he wrote about personally. Some information was probably based on hearsay, as he describes various areas only briefly and superficially. It is unlikely that he saw Baghdād with his own eyes; as the city was re-founded as the capital only in 762 by Abū Ja'far 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775 [136–158 AH]), the second caliph of the 'Abbāsid Empire. At that time, Du Huan was already on his way back to China.¹⁵ His report includes, for example, a quite detailed description of every-day life in contemporary al-Kūfah¹⁶ but provides little insight into direct diplomatic relations with China. What we do know is that in addition to ceremonies and banquets, the exchanging of gifts was very important. Du Huan mentions beautiful glassware and, indeed, antique Islamic

9. Chitu 赤土 was a country located on the East coast of the Malay Peninsula. During the Sui Dynasty, the country frequently sent diplomatic missions to China (Wheatley 1957).

10. Qianna 虔那 is likely to refer to Kana (near Al Jazir in Amman in the south of the Arabian Peninsula). It appears to be the final destination of Daxi Hongtong's voyage.

11. As quoted in *Yuhai* 16.6b. There is no information on the territories between Chitu and Qianna. See Chen Jiarong 1987: "Tangdai de Guangzhou tonghai yidao" 唐代的廣州通海夷道 (/blog/?p=665).

12. Du Huan's report is absent from all book catalogues from the Tang, Song, and Ming Dynasties. All subsequent citations appear to be drawn from the *Tongdian* 通典 by Du You 杜佑 (735–812), with a critical commentary by Wang Wenjin 王文錦 *et al.* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988). It is unclear whether the complete report was ever circulated in large numbers. Not a single book catalogue from the Tang Dynasty indicates that Du Huan's report found its way to the Royal Library.

13. See *Wenxian tongkao* 336.2636.

14. The edition appeared in 1911 as *Lushan jingshe congshu* 麓山精舍叢書 in Chen Yunrong's new editions of works on regions outside of China, "Gu haiguo yishu chao" 古海國遺書鈔.

15. Hirth & Rockhill 1911: 110 (end of footnote 14).

16. *Tongdian* 193.5279 (passage translated into German in Angela Schottenhammer 2014: 11–13).

glassware has been found all over China, not just in Canton but also in the underground palace of the Famen Temple 法門寺 in Chang'an in 1987. The glassware is presumed to have come from Iraq.¹⁷ Other valuables found their way to China during the Tang Dynasty by way of the Persian Gulf, and conversely, many Chinese products made their way to the 'Abbāsīd Empire.¹⁸

Yang Liangyao and his Diplomatic Mission as Recorded on the Tomb Stele

Yang Liangyao's Personal Circumstances

There is no mention of Yang Liangyao in official historical accounts, nor can we find his name in alternative Chinese or Middle Eastern sources. All we know stems from this single stele inscription. Reportedly, his ancestors are descendants from the son of Zhou Xuanwang 周宣王 (r. 827–782 BC), Shangfu 尚父, who was enfeoffed as Duke of Yang (Yanghou 楊侯).¹⁹ His fief was, however, later destroyed by Duke Xian of Jin 晉獻公 (?–651). According to the stele, his ancestors originally were from Hongnong 弘農 (in present-day Henan). The story about his ancestry is, however, most likely a far-fetched analogy and must not necessarily be taken for granted. Frequently, at least until the Tang period, tomb inscriptions tended to trace the genealogy of the deceased to the early Zhou period or even back to the Yellow Emperor in order to emphasize the long history of the deceased's family. Until other sources relating to his personality are discovered – for example evidence within his tomb and perhaps even the tomb inscription – his true identity will remain unclear. Particularly striking in this context is the fact that after the stele's introductory remarks Yang Liangyao is presented to his recent ancestors as “Mr. Yang with the taboo name (*hui* 諱) Liangyao 良瑤 and the courtesy name (*zi* 字) Liangyao 良瑤.” Actually, it is very unusual for individuals to have a courtesy name that matches their first regular or their taboo name. The fact that Yang Liangyao's name remains the same in both cases, could be an indication that his real name could have been being withheld – perhaps to hide his true identity? Could this have to do with the fact that he came from a humble family background? That he simply did not possess a courtesy name? Or that he was a eunuch? Was he perhaps otherwise involved in delicate court or political affairs? Or, was he possibly related to other Tang personalities who carried the surname Yang and were presented as negative examples in later official historiography?

Such moral judgements were commonplace in official history. As Burton Watson once put it: “(t)o make a moral point”,²⁰ that is, to suppress the evil and encourage the good (*cheng e quan shan* 懲惡勸善), was a leading maxim in Chinese historiography. Praise and blame (*baobian* 褒貶), good and bad, supersede true and false as historiographical criteria. This kind of morality could, therefore disparage persons whom the author of an

17. Ma Wenkuan 2006: 1-26.

18. The Belitung shipwreck offers extensively illustrative examples to this point (Krahl *et al.* 2010).

19. It should be mentioned in this context that Zhou Xuanwang fought against the “Western barbarians” and was busy re-establishing royal authority; towards the end of his reign, however, “many lords mostly rebelled against the royal commands”, a situation somewhat comparable to the times of Dezong's rule. See Shaughnessy 1999: 345-347.

20. Watson 1989: 80.

inscription, or of “private historiography”²¹ in general, might, on the contrary, consider as right or good. Official historiography preferred to portray individuals as either good or bad, a fact that is of course not really conducive to the understanding of actual circumstances. Many persons who were later deemed “immoral” were in this context also erased from the official record. Unfortunately, in our case, we do not possess sufficient information to definitively solve the question of why official historiography remained mute about Yang Liangyao. But we can make some cautious guesses.

What, consequently, do we know at this present stage about his personal surroundings? From the stele inscription, we learn that Yang Liangyao’s great-grandfather was a general that counted as one of the “Subjects with first-class merits to the Tang [dynasty]” (*Tang yuan gongchen* 唐元功臣).²² Because he was granted an estate in Yunyang, his family established a permanent residence near the capital. The highest office held by his grandfather, Yang Huaizhen 楊懷貞, was that of a low civil servant in the province.²³ His father, Yang Yanyu 楊彥昱, apparently held no office. This is indicated by a term in the inscription, which labels him only as *chushi* 處士 “private scholar.” Yang Liangyao was his fourth eldest son.²⁴ Interestingly, he was married – namely to a woman, Liu 劉, honoured with the title of a Mistress of the Commandery of Pengcheng 彭城. They had two biological sons and an adopted son. The eldest was named Sheng 昇, the youngest was Cao 操, and the adopted son was Ximin 希旻. It was not until sometime between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-three (between 756 and 758) that Yang Liangyao went to the court of Emperor Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–762) as a eunuch (*neiyang*) and was included into the Inner Court and the intimate confidants of the emperor.

It should be noted that, during the Tang dynasty, it was completely ordinary for eunuchs of high social status to be married. The practice of adopting sons was also common at the time.²⁵ The influence eunuchs had at the royal court steadily grew throughout this period in Chinese history. This subject was taken up by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) in his *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑:

然則宦官之禍，始於明皇，盛於肅、代，成於德宗，極於昭宗。

Subsequently, all the misery caused by eunuchs arose: this was initiated under Minghuang [i. e. Emperor Xuanzong, r. 712–756], bloomed under Su[zong] and Daizong, was consolidated under De[zong] (780–805) and reached its apex under Zhaozong (890–904).²⁶

21. Herbert Franke once noted that “a suitable definition [of private historiography] might be that the concept of ‘private’ should be measured according to the degree of independence from bureaucracy, particularly from the historical offices in the capital.” Cf. Franke 1961: 115.

22. Rong Xinjiang (2011: 2) specified which merits he had acquired: “His great-grandfather had been a meritorious statesman of the Tang Dynasty, a general of the Imperial Army who helped Emperor Xuanzong (r. 713–756) eliminate the clique of Empress Dowager Wei.” For the types of “meritorious statesmen” (*gongchen*) in the Tang Empire see, Wang Miao, 2012.

23. See the Appendix, below p. 216.

24. See the transcript and translation of the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription in the appendix to this article.

25. See Wang Shoudong 2009: 93.

26. *Zizhi tongjian* 263.1830.

Through marriage and adoption eunuchs sought to increase their own power and cultivate their own quasi bloodlines. This was likely to have been the case with Yang Liangyao, too. Interestingly, according to the stele text, his adopted son became “Director of Supervision for the Entertainment of Guests inside the Palace” (*neishisheng nei yezhe jian* 內侍省內謁者監), and “Representative of the Huaqing Palace” (*Huaqing gong shi* 華清宮使) in Chang’an. This happened to be the favourite palace of Emperor Xuanzong where he amused himself with his concubine, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756), the *femme fatale* of Chinese history. Ximin consequently seems to have been part of these influential eunuch circles. In this context, one cannot yet completely rule out the possibility that Yang Liangyao was in some way related to the influential clan of Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (d. 756) and Yang Guifei,²⁷ with persons who were in one way or another related to those responsible for the An Lushan Rebellion and the decline of the empire. Without further evidence, however, this remains speculation.

Nevertheless, Yang probably simply descended from a family with a very modest and low status. Zhang Shimin recently investigated his personal background in some more detail and suggested that he came from a low family background, with no possibilities of climbing up the official ladder via recommendation, hereditary appointments or similar venues. Still today 90% of the residents in the village close to his tomb carry the surname “楊”. According to our actual knowledge, thus, the probability is very high that Yang Liangyao took the chance to become a eunuch at court as an opportunity to escape from his modest family background and to pursue an official career. For many low class people to select a life as a eunuch was basically the only way to begin an official career.

As noted by Zhang Shimin (2015), the fact that the stele uses quite a few short characters, which resemble modern ones, also springs to mind. For example, “請” is written as “请”, “繼” as “继”, “萬” as “万”, “邇” as “迩”, “爾” as “尔”, “貌” as “兒”, “輔” as “辅”, or “彌” as “弥”. Does this mean that this short style was already in common use during the Tang period, as Zhang Shimin suggests? Or was it perhaps the personal style of the calligrapher, Zhao Liangyi 趙良裔?

As is the case with most other stele inscriptions from the Tang dynasty, the text tends to focus on the individual’s professional career. Clues regarding personal contacts are mentioned only in connection with the burial. The inscription names a total of four individuals, those who were involved in the creation of the stele: Lu Pi 陸邳, Zhao Liangyi 趙良裔, Tang Zhi 湯陟 and Zhu Shiliang 朱士良. At the very end of the inscription we learn that the craftsman who carved the stone was a certain Zhu Shiliang from Wujun 吳郡 (Suzhou), whose name is also found on two other Shaanxi inscription stones (from 811 and 815).²⁸

27. Ximin certainly was too young to be personally involved with Guifei or Guozhong, but his relation whatsoever to their families cannot be ruled out at this stage. The question of whether kinship existed between Yang Liangyao and Yang Guozhong or Yang Zhilian 楊志廉 (745–807), another influential eunuch of that time, is worth examining in another study.

28. As far as the other two inscriptions are concerned, this is, first, an octagonal Buddhist stone pillar from the year 811. The inscription has the title “Foding zunsheng tuoluoni zhuangming bing xu” 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢銘并序 (“Introduction of the Banner Inscription of Buddhāṣṇīṣavijaya Dhāraṇī-Sūtras”). The pillar was found in the 1980s near Xi’an. Today it is stored in the Shaanxi sheng Shuxue yuan 陝西省書學院 (see Chen Genyuan 2009). The second one is a tomb inscription from Shaanxi, dating to 820, entitled “Gu Qinghe jun Zhang furen muzhi” 故清河郡張夫人墓志 (“Grave Inscription of the Wife of [Mr.] Zhang, the Former Prefect of the Qinghe District”) (*Tangdai muzhi huibian xuji*, 855 *passim*, Yuanhe no. 78.)

The text of the inscription was written by Lu Pi 陸邳; the underlying calligraphy of the main text as well as the seal script heading can be attributed to Zhao Liangyi 趙良裔 and Tang Zhi 湯陟 respectively. The name of the author and the two calligraphers can be found right at the beginning of the inscription, immediately following the name and title of the tomb's owner. All three individuals held lower positions at court but were also "scholars of the Hanlin Academy that were waiting for appointment" (*Hanlin daizhao* 翰林待詔).²⁹

Lu Pi, the author of the inscription is also known for being the calligrapher of two other texts including the 819 "Stele on the Pacification of Huaixi" ("Ping Huaixi bei" 平淮西碑) of the influential official and minister Duan Wenchang 段文昌 (772–835).³⁰ Duan Chengshi 段成式 (c. 803–863), one of Duan Wenchang's sons, was the author of *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 ("Miscellaneous Records from Youyang Mountain [Sichuan]"). Completed shortly before his death, the text was an encyclopaedia that detailed numerous plants, fruits, and other products from "Persia" (*chu Bosi guo* 出波斯國). In his writings, Duan Chengshi discusses the world, which he had read about, heard about, or even seen.

It is striking that – apart from the artisan who carved the inscription – the other three persons involved in the composition and production of the stele text, who may have come from Yang Liangyao's environment,³¹ belonged to the circle of Hanlin scholars, eunuchs, and diplomats. The indirect relation to Duan Chengshi suggests that individuals who were interested in the "Arab world" in the eighth and early ninth century knew each other or at least moved in similar social circles. Duan may have collected part of his information from these people.³² Hanlin academics also played, as will be discussed below, an important role in Yang Liangyao's career.

Yang Liangyao's Official Career

As David McMullen observed, Tang period tomb inscriptions, at least those included in various collections such as *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編, *Tangdai muzhi*

29. See Wang Haibin 2008: 66 *passim*. The Hanlin Academy originated approximately in 738 as the "Office of Academicians Awaiting Orders" and was soon retitled "Hanlin Academicians". It was a group of scholars who prepared formal imperial proclamations, imperial orders, as well as historical and other works, and who, in the 800s, gained governmental importance as palace counsellors.

30. Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) had been previously commissioned by Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820) to prepare a stele inscribed with the title "Stele on the Pacification of Huaixi" ("Ping Huaixi bei" 平淮西碑), but it was destroyed after violent hostility between influential circles. Duan Wenchang was subsequently instructed to draft the text for a new stele with the same title. Lu Pi also implemented Yang Chenghe's 楊承和 823 inscription text with the title "Liang Shouqian gongde ming bing xu" 梁守謙功德銘并序 (Introduction to the "Inscription on the Virtues and Merits of Liang Shouqian"). The text of the inscription entitled "Binguo gong gongde ming bing xu" 邠國公功德銘并序 was included in *Quan Tangwen* 998 [online: zh.wikisource.org/wiki/邠國公功德銘]. An online scan of a rubbing of this inscription, which was produced during Republican times, is provided by the Harvard-Yenching Library (cf. pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/11100171?op=n&n=1&imagesize=1200&jp2Res=.25&index=-1). A certain Qiang Qiong 強瓊 is mentioned as the artisan who carved the inscription.

31. As a rule, the inscription was composed by a man who did not belong to the immediate family circle (if the family of the deceased could afford it) but preferably by a renowned literatus or literatus-official. But we do, of course, also possess examples where a close relative of the family of the deceased composed the tomb inscription, such as in the example of Wang Chuzhi 王處直 (863–923); cf. Schottenhammer 2009.

32. Laufer (1919: 423) refers to Paul Pelliot, who meant that Duan Chengshi had taken his information about foreign plants from Chen Zangqi's 陳藏器 (681–757) *Bencao shiyi* 本草拾遺 (739). In reality, however, according to Laufer, Duan probably wrote independently.

huibian xuji 唐代墓誌彙編續集 or *Qian Tang zhizhai cangzhi* 千唐誌齋藏誌, as a rule, “refer at best obliquely to major political events or to social or military problems” and only rarely “include anecdotal material and personal statements.”³³ Mostly, they are “extremely formalized” and chiefly concentrate on the official career of the deceased and to “benefactions or service to the clan”, that means to “noteworthy actions within clan relationship. As in the official biographies, material which is of great interest is deliberately omitted if it does not conform with the ideal scholar bureaucrat”.³⁴ We do unfortunately not (yet) know which details may be recorded on Yang Liangyao's tomb inscription (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) and if, perhaps in order to justify his activities and the erection of his tomb in the presence of the already deceased community of ancestors – especially when a family came from a very low and modest background – the “*muzhiming*” also enters into details of his political career. The openly accessible stone stele at least does include some details on political events and military affairs – even delicate ones. But it is not the entire inscription that is of interest to our purpose. We would, therefore, subsequently like to analyse only the most important and relevant parts of the inscription and then place it into their historical context, discussing in detail the contemporary political and military circumstances. An *in toto* translation of the stele is provided in the appendix.

Yang Liangyao's Career before 785

At the age of around twenty (756 or 757), Yang Liangyao became a eunuch (*neiyang* 內養, “for the regulation of inner affairs”) and entered a career at the imperial palace.³⁵ Over the course of the next twenty years, he gradually advanced up the hierarchy of palace officials: he was the overseer of a portion of the females in the palace; later he became the head of the guards at the palace gates.³⁶ Even at this time he was repeatedly involved as a mediator to negotiate with rebels. It is likely that the skills shown here were what predestined him for a senior position in future diplomatic missions.

So he was sent as “(Commissioner) for the announcement (of imperial decrees) and the appeasement (of the population)” (*xuanwei* 宣慰) to Annan 安南 (Jiaozhi 交趾, present-day Hanoi, Vietnam), a task which he apparently devoted himself to with great success. In 774, his next mission took him to Canton, where he was to defuse a dangerous crisis. He apparently succeeded:

He was commissioned to go to Guangzhou. When rebel troops slaughtered the generals and bandits incapacitated the imperial army, Geshu Huang 哥舒晃³⁷ – with his audacious ambitions – wanted to secure an imperial rank, threatened Yang with a sword and demanded a corresponding official letter. The emperor heard of the proud and unyielding behaviour of the Lord [Yang], whose will and ambitions were not to break. After the matter was resolved, [Yang] returned to the palace and was highly praised for his behaviour. In the 12th year (777) he was promoted to the position of Director of the Palace Guards.³⁸

33. McMullen 1989: 24.

34. Twitchett 1961: 111-112.

35. See the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

36. See the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

37. See the Appendix, below p. 216.

38. See the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

In the fourth month of 783, an uprising broke out in Chang'an among soldiers from Jingyuan County 涇原. The soldiers, equipped for a fight against the rebels, were upset about not having received adequate rewards for their services. Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742–784) had usurped the throne from Emperor Dezong who sought refuge 80 km northwest of Chang'an in the town of Fengtian 奉天 (near Qianxian 乾縣), a story that is also briefly recorded in our stele.³⁹ Desperate and in an effort to quell the uprising, the emperor sent a delegation, which included the Director of the Imperial Palace Library (*mishu jian* 秘書監), Cui Hanheng 崔漢衡 (?–795), and Yang Liangyao, to Tibet in an attempt to bring the rebellion under control by asking the Tibetans for military support.⁴⁰ In payment, the emperor promised to hand over the regions Anxi 安西 and Beiting 北庭 to the Tibetans. This action proved to save the Tang dynasty from disaster. The inscription offers details about the mission itself and provides valuable insight into Yang's involvement in this diplomatic affair:

At the beginning of the Xingyuan era the heavens had yet to remove all of the disasters that transpired; snakes and boars ran crisscrossing around.⁴¹ The Emperor was anxiously concerned with his people and the Minister had not yet decided on a strategy. Mr. [Yang] was moved to tears of gratitude and offered himself as an envoy to the Western Barbarians (i.e. the Tibetans). He requested military assistance from the Tibetans and returned, whereupon the latter ultimately blocked the advancing rebel forces. Their army destroyed the bandit groups of Wugong and opened up access to Zhouzhi. They stormed after them like winds and clouds and continued to increase in numbers. Through mountains and rivers they showed them the way to prevent them from becoming surrounded. In the Xingyuan era, he made (this location) his provisional capital and secured himself by the merit of taking the bridge on the Wei-(River). The restoration of the empire to its previous state is all thanks to the efforts of our Lord [Yang] and his request for military support. In the second month of the same year [784] he was appointed Executive Assistant to the Inner Palace Service (*neishi sheng jishi*) and in the sixth month he received the additional title of Steward for the Closing of the Court. These exemplary rapid promotions were the rewards for his efforts.⁴²

Many Tang courtiers, however, objected to the proposed cession of territory, whereupon the court sent ten thousand bolts of silk as reward instead.⁴³ This, however, constituted a breach of Dezong's original promise, the consequence of which led again to escalated tensions with Tibet after the second month of 786. The emperor even had to dispatch a general as his envoy to try to resume negotiations, after the Tibetans besieged Fengxiang 鳳翔 with 20,000 soldiers. Against this background, the mission of Yang Liangyao to the 'Abbāsids was, thus, probably part of an alternative, second tactic, to enlist foreign, that is, Arab help to contain the Tibetans (see detail below). This would absolutely fit into the

39. "Yang gong shendao bei" inscription: 泊建中末遇鸞與順動，隨駕奉天，勤勞匪躬，始終一致。

40. Cui Hanheng and other senior officials were later even captured by the Tibetans. See Wang Zhenping (2013), 180–181, for a description of the circumstances.

41. The expression *sheshi* 蛇豕, stands symbolically for persons who intend to murder others in most cruel manners. See the Appendix, below p. 216.

42. See the "Yang gong shendao bei" inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

43. Wang Zhenping (2013), 178–179; *Xin Tangshu* 216b.6094.

foreign policy strategy of Dezong, which later received bitter criticism by Song scholars, who considered him “cowardly and fatuous”, having “caused endless troubles for China”.⁴⁴

The Mission of 785 to the Court of the Caliph of Baghdād

As we will discuss in more detail below, some sources strongly indicate that Emperor Dezong's close advisor, Li Mi 李泌 (722–789), was planning to establish an alliance with the Uighurs, the kingdom of Nanzhao 南詔, a Tibeto-Burman confederation of tribes in what is now Yunnan, India, and the Arabs “as the most powerful country in the Western regions with a territory reaching from the Pamir to the Western Sea, thus covering half of the known world” in order to contain the Tibetans (臣願陛下北和回紇。南通雲南。西結大食天竺。如此則吐蕃自困。馬亦易致矣。... 大食在西域最強,自蔥嶺盡西海,地幾半天下).⁴⁵ It is consequently of great interest what the stele has to tell us:

At the beginning of [the reign period] Zhenyuan [785-804], after the disaster caused by bandits was removed, peace ruled again everywhere under Heaven. Waves no longer rose on the four seas and envoys arrived from afar [literally “nine(fold) interpreters”] to be received in audiences. Earlier, if one had sent a mission to a remote country, [such as under] the Western Han (206 BC to 9 AD), it was difficult to come to an agreement. Today, the Emperor immediately thought of the right person to communicate with other countries. After the talent and skills [of different people] were compared, it was clear that none other than Lord [Yang] was qualified. In the fourth month of the first year [of the reign period] Zhenyuan [i.e. 785] he was awarded the purple fish bag and commenced the duties of a government envoy to the ‘Abbāsīd Empire. He was accompanied by administrative assistants and followers and received diplomatic accreditation and decrees. After receiving the commission, he left straight away, with no fear of the long distance. As soon as he reached Nanhai [i.e. Canton] he left the road and boarded a ship.

Although the goal was distant, his face showed no fear. Despite the severity, he was confident of being able to cross [the ocean] safely. His veracity was an inspiration to his subordinates, his loyalty moved spirits and supernatural powers. Consequently, Lord [Yang] cut his hair, made sacrifices to the waves and exhorted his comrades while pointing towards the sun. Thus, Yangzhou [i.e. the deity of the waves and surges] soothed the waves, and Pingyi [i.e. the deity of clouds, rain, and thunder] harmonized the winds. The sails were hoisted high in the sky, the rows moved (the ship) with all force forward. Divine lights guided the way by night and supernatural animals led the way by day. Once another year had passed he had already passed tens of thousands of countries. One proclaimed the manners of the Empire among foreign customs so that its prestige would be carried beyond the borders. Outward and return journeys were carried out according to plan, he fulfilled his Heavenly order and the mission was successfully accomplished (lit. did not fail). This, again, brilliantly highlights the loyalty and trust of our Lord [Yang].⁴⁶

44. Wang Zhenping 2013: 181.

45. *Zizhi tongjian*, 233.1599 and 1600.

46. See the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

Also the lyrical section (*ming* 銘) at the end of Yang's stele inscription, which uses to reflect on the most important events in the life of the deceased,⁴⁷ speaks explicitly of his diplomatic mission as well as his performance in the fight against insurgents and foreign invasions (Tibetans). In my opinion, this is a further indication of the importance of his mission:

The clouds follow the dragon,
 the winds follow the warrior;⁴⁸
 the merits of the ruler become obvious,
 a loyal subject supports him.
 The heaven-sent lord gave his utmost.
 He served four rulers in the course of four reigns.
 Amongst the many crows of the rooster,
 contemplating wind and rain,
 he challenged himself to the last, exhausting heart and soul.
 He defeated Geshu [Huang] without fear of difficulty;⁴⁹
 he pacified Ci and Xi and caused fear
 to the Tibetan thieves
 In the west he asked for commanders,
 to clean the central region;
 in the south he acted as the emissary (of the emperor),
 to comfort the households in the north.
 He engaged the Arabs and spread
 the word of the authority [of the emperor] far and wide;
 during the inspection of the Ru- and Luo-[Rivers]
 his merits surpassed all that had come before.
 His commitment to quickly solve affairs was without precedent;
 the imperial gifts he received were numerous and priceless.
 He humbly bowed upon his first appointment,
 and bowed deeply upon his third appointment;
 he was virtually worshiped, who would dare mock him!⁵⁰
 He was honoured with golden seals, bound with ribbons;
 and was moreover solemnly enfeoffed with land;
 A memorial stone was hewn,
 on which he is praised as a loyal subject;
 to highlight his virtues,
 to instruct his descendants.

From the inscription, however, we neither learn why Yang Liangyao was sent by the Tang Emperor as an envoy to the court of the Caliph of the 'Abbāsīd Empire in Baghdād, nor do we receive any indication of how the diplomatic encounter may have transpired. The text only generally reports:

47. See below my comments on the issue of domestic political instability.

48. For detail of this line, see the Appendix, below p. 216.

49. See the Appendix, below p. 216.

50. See the Appendix, below p. 216.

One proclaimed the manners of the Empire among foreign customs so that its prestige would be carried beyond the borders. Outward and return journeys were carried out according to plan, he fulfilled his Heavenly order and the mission was successfully accomplished.

Although the stele was discovered in 1984, the reason why this mission has never been brought up in academic discourse until quite recently is probably quite simple: Zhang Shimin is a local historian whose article, which first provided information on the stele, was never noticed by other scholars until the renowned Tang specialist Rong Xinjiang incidentally came across it.⁵¹

Yang Liangyao's Further Career

After this mission, Yang Liangyao was promoted and continued to work for the court.

In the sixth month of the fourth year [i.e. 788] he was appointed Grand Master of the Palace and in the seventh month, as the founding baron of Hongnong xian, he was gifted an apauage of 300 households.⁵²

At the age of sixty (in 796) Yang Liangyao's honorary title was increased again and was now "Supreme Grand Master of the Palace (*tai zhong dafu* 太中大夫). Three years later Yang Liangyao was entrusted with another important mission: the pacification of a rebellion. We know that in 799, Wu Shaocheng 吳少誠 (750–810), the military governor of Zhangyi 彰義, started a rebellion against Emperor Dezong, who, thereupon, asked the military governors of the surrounding circuits to attack Wu, among them the military governor of Chen 陳 and Xu 許, Shangguan Shui 上官說. The Huaixi 淮西 region was in great disorder. After the troops of Shangguan Shui and Wang Zong 王宗 failed to defeat Wu's forces – after some initial success their troops suddenly collapsed and they fled – the court, according to the inscription, ordered 20,000 soldiers under the command of Han Quanyi 韓全義 (?–805) to suppress the rebellion. Han Quanyi, however, was also unsuccessful and, according to the stele, it was ultimately due to the work of Yang Liangyao – who knew about Han Quanyi's alleged incompetence and applied a surprising and unusual tactic, infiltrating spies into the group of "bandits" to comprehend their actual intentions, thus being able to combat them – that Wu Shaocheng withdrew. According to the inscription his strategy also included offering amnesty and recruitment, a strategy that was eventually accepted by Emperor Dezong. The chronicles document that this strategy of appeasement was proposed by chancellor Jia Dan 賈耽 (729–805), and accepted by Emperor Dezong. Yang and Jia are, thus, in agreement on this event, as Rong Xinjiang has already emphasized.⁵³ Thus again, he apparently was successful. At

51. Rong Xinjiang consequently personally travelled to Xi'an to take high-resolution photos of the stele (personal communication January 2014).

52. See the "Yang gong shendao bei" inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

53. Rong Xinjiang (2015: 266, footnote 28): "Jia Dan and Yang Liangyao must have had a close relationship. In the fifteenth year of the Zhenyuan era (779), Wu Shaocheng 吳少誠 rebelled at Huaixi 淮西. According to the inscription of the stele, Yang Liangyao's strategy was to offer amnesty and enlistment, which was eventually accepted by Emperor Dezong. The chronicles document that the strategy of appeasement was proposed by Jia Dan, and was accepted by Dezong. Yang and Jia are in agreement on this event, indicating that they should have communicated with each other, and that they should have had contact with each other."

the suggestion of Wei Gao 韋皋 (745–805), military governor of Xichuan 西川 Circuit, and of Jia Dan, Emperor Dezong pardoned Wu in late 800, ending the campaign. Yang Liangyao was obviously directly involved in these decisions. The circumstances also provide further evidence that Jia Dan (see the discussion below) and Yang personally knew each other. Towards the end, the stele briefly summarizes Yang's most important achievements, among which once again, explicitly, his success in pacifying rebellions and his diplomatic skills are highlighted (as, for example, the fact that his mission greatly expanded name and reputation of the emperor (使大食而声教旁畅).

On the 21st day of the seventh month of the year 806 Yang Liangyao passed away at his home in Chang'an. Less than three months later, on the 14th day of the 10th month of the year 806, this stele was erected at the site of the grave.⁵⁴

The Historical Background and Context

The first contact between the Chinese Empire and the Arabs appears to have been in the middle of the seventh century AD. In 651 'Utmān ibn 'Affān (r. 644–656 AD [23–35 AH]), the third Rāshidūn caliph (i.e. righteous caliph) of the Umayyad Empire, is said to have sent an embassy with gifts to the court of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–683) in Chang'an.⁵⁵ Nothing is known about subsequent diplomatic missions in the following decades. Only after Umayyad troops penetrated Central Asia at the beginning of the eighth century did renewed contacts intensify.

In 704, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (661–714), the governor of caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 685–705 [65–86 AH]) and his son al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik (al-Walīd I, r. 705–715 [86–96 AH]) in Khurāsān,⁵⁶ entrusted the general Qutayba ibn Muslim (670–715) with the conquest of Transoxiana. In 709, his troops captured the rich city of Bukhara (Anguo 安國) and the conquest of Samarqand (Kangguo 康國) followed in 712.⁵⁷ After these trading centres had in vain requested help from the Turkish Türgesh (Tuqishi 突騎施), they turned to the China and asked the Chinese to assist in releasing them from Muslim control. In 713, however, Qutayba was also rushing to contact the Chinese in order to advance his claims.

This Muslim delegation – the only of its kind that is mentioned in Arabic sources⁵⁸ – was apparently received very favourably, regardless of the fact that the envoy refused to kowtow (*yejian bu bai* 謁見不拜) to the Chinese Emperor.⁵⁹ By 750 [132 AH], Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāh (r. 750–754 [132–136 AH]; Abū Luoba 阿蒲·羅拔) toppled the

54. See the “Yang gong shendao bei” inscription text and full translation in the Appendix.

55. *Jiu Tangshu* 4.69: [永徽二年]八月乙丑，大食國始遣使朝獻。Also see Twitchett & Wechsler 1979: 280.

56. Khurāsān is the name of a historical region in central Asia in the territory around present-day Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

57. Transoxania, or “Land beyond the Oxus” is the name of a historical region in western central Asia that essentially includes the land between the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya and contains the old cities of Samarqand and Bukhara.

58. Gibb 1923a: 49 *passim*; Gibb 1923b: 619; Rogers 1991: 431. Chinese sources count, however, for the period of 713–759, nineteen Arab envoys, ten from Iran (Persia), and one from Ṭabaristān (746). Gibb 1923b: 619 *passim*.

59. *Xin Tangshu* 221B.6262. Cf. also Bretschneider 1871: 8 and Cobb 2010: 238.

last caliph of the Umayyad Empire and established the ‘Abbāsīd Empire (750–1258; 黑衣大食). The ‘Abbāsīd rulers had been able to extend their sphere of influence further east than their predecessors. One year later, at the Battle of Talas (Danluosi 但邏斯, north of Samarkand in today’s Tashkent) Chinese troops under the military command of the Korean general Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝 (Korean: Go Seonji, d. 755) clashed with advancing Muslim forces.⁶⁰ The Chinese troops were defeated and China’s westward expansion came to an end. Diplomatic relations between the Tang Empire and the ‘Abbāsīd Empire, however, seem to have remained intact. Only one year after the battle (752), the Caliph sent a diplomatic delegation to China and several delegations followed in subsequent years.⁶¹

Between 755 and 763 parts of China were devastated by a rebellion led by a military governor of Sogdian descent named An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757). In order to regain control over the empire, large numbers of troops stationed in Central Asia had to be moved back into the Chinese heartland. In 757, Suzong 肅宗 (756–762), the son of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756), who had fled to Sichuan, even asked the Uighurs for military support to recapture Chang’an and Luoyang. As a stipulated reward, the Uighurs thereupon plundered the cities, initiating a series of assaults of foreign soldiers against the population – developments that definitely contributed to a more negative view of foreigners. Also, Arabs from various regions in the “Land of the Tajik” (Dashi 大食) sent soldiers to assist in suppressing the rebellion.⁶² This demonstrates that Arabs, most likely the ‘Abbāsīds, and the Chinese military had once stood side by side. This collaboration certainly paved the road for China to ask for future military assistance. Not only did this collaboration make the Chinese keenly aware of ‘Abbāsīd military power; it also suggests that the ‘Abbāsīds possessed a positive attitude towards the Chinese. But it is also clear that, against the partly anti-foreign attitude among ruling élites, the emperor would have been ill-advised to openly pronounce another collaboration with foreign troops.

The close relationship between the Chinese and the Arabs is also apparent in Arabic sources. Following the account in Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’s (839–923) universal history *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (“History of the Prophets, Kings and Caliphs”), al-Manṣūr (the second caliph of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire), as he laid in 762 the foundations of his future capital Baghdād, is reported to have said: “Here flows the Tigris and now nothing separates us from China; the river can bring us all that can be carried on the sea.”⁶³

Relations remained good and laid the foundations not only for a flourishing overland trade through Transoxiana, but also for the presence of Muslim traders in different regions throughout the Indian Ocean World as well as for the emergence of large Muslim communities in major commercial cities in Southeast Asia and China.

60. *Xin Tangshu* 5.148: [天寶十載]七月，高仙芝及大食戰于恆邏斯城，敗績。

61. *Cefu yuangui* 975.13b (3881) for 12/752; see footnote 67 and Zhang Jun-yan 1983: 93.

62. The soldiers were then allowed to settle in Northwest China and marry Chinese women. See Zhang Jun-yan 1983: 93. Mees (1984: 13 *passim*) writes that the *Jiu Tangshu* (10.247) “explicitly speaks about the involvement of Arab soldiers. Thus, it seems certain that Arabs were among the mercenaries, or at least it was soldiers of Central Asian peoples whose armies were already commanded by the Arabs. These probably were Muslims.” (Translation from the German original by Andrew Stonehouse and Angela Schottenhammer).

63. Quoted according to Zhang Jun-yan 1983: 93.

In 758, Canton is suspected to have been burned and looted by Arabs and Iranians (“In Qianyuan 1 (758), Bosi and Dashi jointly plundered Guangzhou; they plundered and burned down pantries and dwellings, then they sailed away across the sea”).⁶⁴ The effects of this destruction were felt for some time, and maritime trade only gradually recovered. As late as 792 the Governor of Lingnan 嶺南 [i.e. Canton] complained that since that event, merchants were avoiding Canton in favour of Annam.⁶⁵ In any case, such statements demonstrate the importance of Iranian and Arab traders in Canton. Although the term “Bosi”, when referring to ships, designated for some time in the seventh and eighth centuries Malay ships and trade goods, it is clear from other descriptions of their customs or religion that the term basically refers to Iranians or Arabs originally from the Middle East. Already Kuwabara Jitsuzō noted that in Tang and Song times the “Musulmans who came to China” were mostly from Sirāf and Hormuz.⁶⁶

The imperial encyclopaedia *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (“The Magic Mirror for Document Storage”) records a total of twelve ‘Abbāsīd diplomatic missions to the Tang Dynasty court for the period 752–798.⁶⁷ Of these twelve missions, the 798 mission of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809 [170–192 AH]; Helun 訶論) was undoubtedly the most important.⁶⁸ These more or less official missions are supplemented by sporadic reports of traders and other travellers. Travel restrictions within China, however, implied that such descriptions remained secret for a long time. The sea route was certainly much more important for commercial exchange.

Uprisings in the Tang Empire and Problems with the Tibetans

The Tibetans grew to become a powerful empire in the seventh century and began to adopt an aggressive position in the region (they are designated as “Xirong” 西戎 on the stele, literally: “warlike, barbaric peoples in the west”; this was originally a collective term for various ethnic groups in western China).⁶⁹ They expanded from the Tibetan highlands west to the Pamir Mountains, east to Yunnan, pushed into the Tarim Basin, which had been recently conquered by China and threatened China’s trade routes to the west. During the reign of Emperor Gaozong they destroyed the kingdom of Tuyūhun 吐谷渾,

64. *Jiu Tangshu* 198.5313: 乾元元年，波斯與大食同寇廣州，劫倉庫，焚廬舍，浮海而去。 *Xin Tangshu*, 6.161: [乾元元年九月]癸巳，大食、波斯寇廣州。 For the implications, see Schottenhammer 2010: 118 (there erroneously 785 instead of, correctly, 758).

65. *Zizhi tongjian* 234.7526: [貞元八年六月]嶺南節度使奏：「近日海舶珍異，多就安南市易，欲遣判官就安南收市，乞命中使一人與俱。」; Pelliot 1904: 133f.

66. Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1898: 54, 95.

67. *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜, by Wang Qinruo 王欽若 [962–1025], 971.11b (3853), 975.13b (3881) for 12/752; 971.12a (3853) for 02/753 and 975.13b (3881) for 07/753; 971.12a-b (3853) for 04/754; 971.12b (3853) for 07/755 and 07/756; it is also stated that at the beginning of the reign period Zhide (756–758) the Dashi (Arabs) had sent a diplomatic mission; 971.12b (3853) for 05/758; 971.13a (3854) for 12/760, certainly from the Umayyads; 972.1a (3855) for 05 and 12/762; 972.1b (3855) for 01/769 and 12/772 (the last entry, again, only speaks of Dashi); 972.2a (3855) for 07/774; 972.3a (3856) for 01/791 and 975.14b (3881) for 09/798. Also see the table in Fang Yaguang 1998: 275 passim.

68. Rogers 1991: 432.

69. Until the Sui Period Tibet appears to have been dominated by multiple warlike clans. In the late sixth, early seventh century, these clans were united by Gnam-ri-srong-btsan (570?–618?/629). His son, Srong-btsan-sgam-po (r. 605?–649), succeeded in uniting all Tibetans and making the region into a central power.

located in today's Qinghai Province. With the removal of this buffer zone between Tibet and China, Tibet posed a constant threat to the Chinese regions of Gansu and Lanzhou and forced the Tang to deploy large military contingents to the frontier.⁷⁰

In the wake of the An Lushan rebellion, Tibet took advantage of the unstable situation in China and pushed into various districts in the northwest of the Tang Empire. Various cities in Gansu Province (Liangzhou 涼州, Ganzhou 甘州, Suzhou 肅州 and Guazhou 瓜州) were quickly occupied. In spring 783, Tibetan and Chinese troops came face-to-face at Qingshui 清水. The resulting peace negotiations were successful and new borders were drawn.

As has been discussed above, Yang Liangyao also took part in a diplomatic mission to the Tibetans to ask them for military assistance repressing the mutiny of Zhu Ci. His participation in the mission meant that he acquired first-hand information on the latest developments in Sino-Tibetan relations and was, therefore, well suited as a potential candidate to negotiate the possibility of an alliance with the Arabs against the Tibetans.

When the emperor eventually returned from Fengtian in the seventh month of the year 784, he promptly received a Tibetan envoy, demanding the areas of Anxi and Beiting. According to an entry in the *Zizhi tongjian*, Li Mi 李泌 (722–789), close advisor to the Emperor, resolutely advised against handing-over the promised areas:

安西、北庭，人性驍悍，控制西域五十七國，及十姓突厥，又分吐蕃之勢，使不能並兵東侵，奈何拱手與之，且兩鎮之人，勢孤地遠，盡忠竭力，為國家固守近二十年，誠可哀憐。一旦棄之以與戎狄，彼其心必深怨中國，他日從吐蕃入寇，如報私讎矣。況日者吐蕃觀望不進，陰持兩端，大掠武功，受賂而去，何功之有！

People in Anxi and Beiting are brave by nature; the [soldiers stationed there] monitor fifty-seven states in the western areas as well as ten Turkish clans. They also divide the military strength of the Tibetans, so that they cannot combine their forces and sweep to the east. How could [we sit here] with folded hands and allow these regions to fall into the hands of the Tibetans? Furthermore, the two garrisons of men have been loyal to China and have always defended it for more than twenty years despite their isolated situation and secluded position; so we really should have compassion for them. In the event that we let them fall prey to the Tibetans, they would certainly deeply resent China. They would have reason to make common cause with the Tibetans and attack us the very next day, as if they wanted revenge. All the more this is true for the day on which the Tibetans will no longer wait, deploy a secret two-pronged strategy and begin looting, accept bribes, and leave again? What would be the outcome of such a policy?⁷¹

Following this advice, Emperor Dezong refrained from ceding these areas over to the Tibetans. This decision, however, came at a price. Tibetan troops thereupon devastated and plundered the borderlands. By the eighth month of 786 they had successfully occupied the regions Jing 涇 (today Zhenyuan 鎮原), Long 隴 (Longxian 隴縣), Bin 邠 (Binxian 彬縣), and Ning 寧 (Ningxian 寧縣) and were approaching Haozhi 好畤. They had thus penetrated to within the vicinity of the imperial capital. Emperor

70. Twitchett 1979: 35-36.

71. *Zizhi tongjian* 231.7442.

Dezong then ordered the troops stationed at Xianyang 咸陽 to mobilize. In the ninth month of the same year the Tibetans laid siege to Haozhi, and Chang'an was plunged into a state of war.⁷²

Until 785 no remarkable diplomatic initiatives with the 'Abbāsids appear in the Chinese records. Yang Liangyao's diplomatic envoy may well have been the first initiative on the part of the Chinese to send a diplomatic mission to Baghdād. But why this particular year?

It is conspicuous that Yang Liangyao's mission was launched exactly in the fourth month of 785, directly after Sino-Tibetan relations deteriorated and just before the Tibetans had executed their attack. This suggests that the purpose of the mission was not just about imperial traditions and prestige, but possibly also to cement the alliance with the 'Abbāsids in the struggle against the Tibetans. With Yang Liangyao, the Chinese imperial court was sending a proven diplomat who was particular familiar with the problems of Sino-Tibetan relations.

This statement is supported by another entry in *Zizhi tongjian* – even though it refers to 787, a good two years after Yang's dispatch. The entry states:

既而回紇可汗遣使上表稱兒及臣，凡泌所與約五事，一皆聽命。上大喜，謂泌曰：“回紇何畏服卿如此！”對曰：“此乃陛下威靈，臣何力焉！”上曰：“回紇則既和矣，所以招雲南、大食、天竺奈何？”對曰：“回紇和，則吐蕃已不敢輕犯塞矣。次招雲南，則是斷吐蕃之右臂也。雲南自漢代以來臣屬中國，楊國忠無故擾之使叛，臣於吐蕃，苦於吐蕃賦役重，未嘗一日不思復為唐臣也。大食在西域為最強，自蔥嶺盡西海，地幾半天下，與天竺皆慕中國，代與吐蕃為仇，臣故知其可招也。”

Thereupon the Uighur Khan sent an emissary with a letter in which he referred to himself as the son and vassal [of the Tang]; he would obey in all five issues that Mi had previously agreed with him. The Emperor was pleased and said to Mi, "Why is the Uighur Khan so submissive and obedient towards you?" [Mi] replied: "This is due to the great authority of Your Majesty not to me." The Emperor said: "So if the Uighurs are peaceful, then what is the meaning and purpose for Yunnan [i.e. the Nanzhao Kingdom], the Arabs, and India to establish [an alliance]?" [Mi] replied: "Now that the Uighurs have peace with us, the Tibetans will not dare to violate our borders. If we recruit Yunnan, we will be chopping of Tibet's right arm. Since the Han Dynasty Yunnan has always been a vassal of China. Nevertheless [General] Yang Guozhong has unnecessarily harassed it and thus caused [the population] to rebel and eventually to become a vassal of Tibet. Now they suffer from high taxes and the indemnities that have been placed upon them by the Tibetans, and not a day goes by when they are not yearning to return to the auspices of the Tang. The Arabs are the strongest country in the Western Territories, with a territory which – ranging from the Pamir to the West Sea⁷³ – comprises nearly half of the known world; just as India, they honour China and have been hostile to the Tibetan people for generations. So I know that we can ally with them."⁷⁴

72. *Ibid.*, 232.7470, 7472.

73. I.e. the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea, which were then the furthest points anyone from China could reach.

74. *Zizhi tongjian* 233.1599-1600.

This conversation must have taken place while Yang Liangyao was still on his journey. Judging by the inscription, he returned in the first half of 788 – Rong Xinjiang suggests that he had probably already returned in the sixth month of 787⁷⁵ – and was subsequently promoted that summer. The dialogue indicates that Li Mi had plans to forge an alliance between the Arabs, India, and the Kingdom of Nanzhao, and that the objective of this alliance was to create a united front against the Tibetans.

Given that the Tibetan invasion was the result of the Tang's reluctance to honour their agreement, it is very likely that the Emperor and Li Mi had made contingency plans for how they would counter Tibet's probably militant reaction to a breach of contract. Li Mi's plan was to isolate Tibet by forging a quasi "pan-Asian" alliance with the Uighurs, the Kingdom of Nanzhao, India, the Uighurs, and the 'Abbāsīd Empire.⁷⁶ He must have convinced the Emperor, who was initially reluctant to enter into an alliance with the Uighurs, that the latter would form an integral part of the coalition. In 788, China and the Uighurs even reached a second agreement. The daughter of Emperor Dezong was – along with a handsome dowry in the form of silk and luxury goods – given to the Uighur Khan in marriage; in return, the Uighurs agreed to the fight against the Tibetans.⁷⁷ This supports the assumption already expressed by Rong Xinjiang that it was precisely the mission of Yang Liangyao that was to secure the 'Abbāsīd Empire for an alliance against the Tibetans. The strategy proposed by Li Mi very obviously resembled the policy the famous Han envoy, Zhang Qian 張騫 (d. 114 BC), had once suggested to Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 145–87 BC).⁷⁸ Only, instead of cutting off the right arm of the Xiongnu, it was now the right arm of the Tibetans.

But the question remains as to why Yang Liangyao and this important diplomatic mission remained absent from Chinese historical scholarship?⁷⁹ First, it must be borne in mind that there were official Chinese embassies abroad only in exceptional cases. Traditionally, foreigners sent missions and tribute to China, not vice-versa. The Chinese self-understanding was that China was the sovereign or master (*zhu* 主), not the vassal (*chen* 臣). Accordingly, diplomatic missions, at least those recorded in the official historiography, were not characterized by equal bilateral relations. And where China was the petitioner seeking help, this would have been a most sensitive matter that needed to be kept secret, above all in a politically unstable situation. It should also be mentioned in this context that in the wake of the An Lushan rebellion we can anyway observe some anti-foreign tendencies, especially among military representatives, such as the military governor and general of the imperial troops, Tian Shengong 田神功 (d. 776), who initiated

75. Rong Xinjiang 2015: 255.

76. It seems interesting to me in this context that the ruler of Nanzhao at that time also presented a map to the Tang Chinese court. Under the entry *Tang Nanzhao ditu* 唐南詔地圖 included in *Yuhai* 16.9b, it states: 南詔傳:「貞元十年六月,雲南王異牟尋獻地圖土方物,請復號南詔。」西域傳:「貞觀二十二年東天竺王送牛馬餽軍,迦沒路國獻異物,並上地圖,請老子象。」[According to] "Records of Nanzhao" the king of Yunnan, Bi Mouxun 畢牟尋, in the 6th month of the first year [of the reign period] Zhenyuan [785] presented a map (地圖) and local products as a tribute and asked to be re-named [King of] Nanzhao. [According to] "Records of the Western Territories" the King of eastern India, in the year 22 [of the reign period] Zhenguan [648] sent cattle and horses for care of the troops; Kamarupa 迦沒路國 handed rare products as well as a map and asked for a portrait of Laozi."

77. See Dalby 1979: 609.

78. See Yü Ying-shih 1986 : 376-462, 408.

79. I have scoured all available databases and indices, including in the field of literature, but so far found no entry of his name. Zhang Shimin and Rong Xinjiang confirm that, according to their knowledge, Yang Liangyao is not mentioned in the official historiography.

a massacre among the wealthy foreign community of Yangzhou.⁸⁰ After all what had happened in these years, it would have been politically very ill-advised to openly announce that, once again, one planned to ask foreigners for assistance. A qualitative change in Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy that would include an exchange of official envoys occurred only under exceptional circumstances.⁸¹

In my opinion, because of the circumstances pertaining to domestic problems at the time, the situation was likely to be particularly delicate. Evidence suggests that the mission was carried out and that Yang Liangyao reached his destination. Several circumstances may explain why the sources remain mute about his mission. That the intended contact with the ‘Abbāsīd court, as well as the proposed alliance with India, never succeeded, as stated in the *Cambridge History of China*⁸², is simply not supported by the content of the inscription – which, it must be maintained, neither substantiates nor disproves either standpoint. Let us consider, therefore, the political background in more detail.

Domestic Political Instability

Since the beginning of his reign, Emperor Dezong was challenged by claims of various military governors who had managed China’s provinces during the Tang dynasty. He strained to maintain his authority and to impose his interests on the military governors. Almost his entire reign was marked by tensions between the imperial court, the central government, and military governors; in many ways he defied the interests of the bureaucrats. At the same time, he relied predominantly on eunuchs to achieve his objectives. From the perspective of the military, the Emperor acted arbitrarily, resulting in several uprisings in the course of the following years and the Emperor, as mentioned above, even had to flee the capital in 783.⁸³ The situation began to calm down due to the efforts of his Minister, Li Mi, and of a young academic named Lu Zhi 陸贄 (754–805). Through diplomatic cunning, he managed to allow the emperor to retrieve the throne and, by issuing acts of grace, enabled the rebel military officials to be reintegrated into the state

80. *Xin Tangshu* 141.4655: “The military governor of Pinglu, Tian Shengong, advanced to Yangzhou and extensively plundered foreigners, uncovered their tombs; the Arab and Iranian merchants and foreigners that came to death amounted to several thousands (平盧節度使田神功兵至揚州，大掠胡人，發冢墓，大食、波斯賈胡死者數千人)。Also *Xin Tangshu* 144.4702: [Tian Shengong] entered Yangzhou and then extensively plundered the riches and the wealth of local residents, he uncovered houses up to the cellars and killed thousands of foreign and Iranian merchants ([...]入揚州，遂大掠居人貲產，發屋剔窟，殺商胡波斯數千人)。

81. The first example we know stems from the Han dynasty, during the reign of the Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BC). The Han emperor established a policy of “peace and friendship” (*heqin* 和親) with China’s northern neighbours, the Xiongnu 匈奴. This form of intergovernmental dealing was essentially a form of marriage contract with the aim of appeasing the Xiongnu and getting them to submit without resistance. As part of this policy the ruler of the Xiongnu was given lavish gifts, including a Chinese princess as a wife. Another significant qualitative change in Chinese diplomacy stems from the early eleventh century, when the Chinese signed the Treaty of Shanyuan 澶淵 with the Khitan Liao 契丹遼 (907–1125) in 1004. In this treaty the two countries officially recognized each other as equally legitimate political entities. The establishment of relations between the two countries implied that there would be a diplomatic exchange on both sides. Apart from that, it was expected that foreign embassies be sent to China. For more on the peace treaty, see the 1959 dissertation by Christian Schwarz-Schilling; also Franke 1981, Wright 1998, 2005, Tillman 2005, and Schwarz-Schilling 2010.

82. Dalby 1979: 609.

83. Cf. Kuhn 1991: 586.

bureaucracy without losing face. The success of Lu Zhi also meant that the so-called “Inner Court”, which was composed primarily of eunuchs and Hanlin academics, such as Lu Zhi, increasingly gained political influence.⁸⁴

In order to stabilize the foreign-political situation of the Tang Empire, it was Li Mi who suggested the alliance with the Arabs; so in 785 the eunuch Yang Liangyao was sent to the court of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in Baghdād. Taking into account the delicate nature of both the external and internal political situations, it is quite possible that Li Mi wanted to restore the tarnished authority and reputation of the emperor through the alliance with the militarily powerful Arabs and therefore no one but him, the emperor, and those privies to the plan were allowed to know. Records could not be kept in order to make everything look more like matter of luck than a twist of foreign policy: the Arabs would “accidentally” attack the Tibetans, the Tang court would be relieved from a major foreign policy problem, and domestic politics would regain strength. That would be a possible scenario.

Yang Liangyao died in 805. Under the new emperor, Shunzong 順宗 (r. 805–806), and the subsequent emperors until around 820, the central government tried rigorously to strengthen the power of the emperor at the expense of both the military-governors and the eunuchs.⁸⁵ This exacerbated existing tensions between provinces and the central government. Ultimately, as Michael T. Dalby noted, Emperor Dezong’s conscious disregard for bureaucratic sensitivities and his idiosyncratic appointment of staff in leading positions has caused historians to paint his entire reign in a negative light.⁸⁶

Given the fact that in the years after Yang Liangyao’s death the central government tried to weaken the extreme political influence of the eunuchs and restore the position of power of the Emperor, it can be presumed that it was not desirable to emphasize the accomplishments of a eunuch so closely associated with Emperor Dezong.⁸⁷ That Yang Liangyao did nevertheless have a stele dedicated to his memory is undoubtedly linked to his vigour and merits in the fight to preserve the central power of the Tang Empire – achievements that probably could not be denied even by the greatest critics of the eunuchs; this probably shows that his mission was successful and should at least have been publicly recorded in such a way. The mission was therefore secret in a double sense: firstly, given the contemporary political circumstances and the relative weak position of the emperor, it would not have been wise to be made public when it took place. Records may possibly not have been officially kept. The stele itself was erected close to his home village, in an obviously rather isolated vicinity. Secondly, it should not have entered the official record according to the moral criteria of the Song historians who later composed the Tang history. As mentioned above, it was not unusual to skip or erase information or individuals from the official accounts not considered morally sound, who did not match with the official purpose or were otherwise inappropriate.

84. Kuhn 1991: 587.

85. In 805, there was even an attempted coup d’état by a small group of officials led by Wang Shuwen 王叔文 (d. 806). It was rumoured that the future emperor had even been involved. The officials tried to implement their plan to take state affairs into their own hands. Although the Wang clique introduced some measures against the eunuchs, among other things, they made themselves extremely unpopular due to their arbitrariness, and their political position began to crumble in the summer of 805 (Dalby 1979: 601 *passim*).

86. Dalby 1979: 600.

87. Even less so if he was part of the immediate or wider circle of family clans of Yang Guozhong or Yang Zhilian 楊志廉 (745–807).

Unfortunately, given the lack of further information, it is impossible to provide a definite answer to the question of why other sources remain mute on the issue of Yang and his mission. However, the internal and external conflicts mentioned, the subsequent pejorative assessment of Dezong's reign, and the place of eunuchs in Chinese historiography can offer a plausible explanation for the complete silence of the sources over this politically important diplomatic mission.

Was the mission successful or not? A definitive answer will remain elusive until we have new sources. Yang Liangyao's inscription implies that it was, but it remains vague and general ("outward and return journeys were carried out according to plan" 往返如期, 成命不墜, see appendix). The historical circumstances can be interpreted in this direction. According to Zhang Shimin, the rewards and promotions Yang Liangyao received after the mission talk alone of success.⁸⁸ I would add that the mere fact that the mission was recorded on a stele tends to speak for a successful expedition, even if this cannot be verified by alternative sources. It would definitely be very unusual to record a failure as a success, thus corrupting the facts, on a tomb stele. Glossed over or fake content would undoubtedly have been noticed immediately. In addition, any such distortion or embellishment on the inscription that would have given a completely different colour to what happened, would be an affront to the souls of the ancestors in the afterlife and would certainly not have been tolerated. Tomb inscriptions and steles were mainly intended to be a representation of a deceased person as he was in this world, and any obvious lies would have been easily detected, with definitely quite negative consequences for the still living family members of the deceased. In addition, also publicly available tomb steles had a "socio-religious" character – similar to our gravestones and similar to the inaccessible tomb inscriptions that were buried in the tomb together with the deceased. As I have argued elsewhere, tomb inscriptions should select the supposedly most important events and special features from the life of the deceased, in order to portray him or her in a positive way, but without misleading embellishments in the activity record, and according to accepted moral standards in this life that were transferred to the afterlife. Therefore, lies and falsehoods would evoke the "powers of the departed".⁸⁹ Obvious lies and distortions would have been discovered even faster by living people, if carved on a publicly accessible tomb stele.

While parts of such stelae or funerary inscriptions contain of course ornamental styles and literary embellishments, it was, however, completely contrary to the objectives of inscriptions to consciously include false information or pervert the facts.⁹⁰ Certainly, this possibility cannot be entirely excluded.⁹¹ However, because the story is recorded

88. Zhang Shimin 2005: 6.

89. Cf. Schottenhammer 2003: 80.

90. See also Twitchett 1992: 71 *passim*.

91. Mention should be made to the famous entry in *Zuozhuan* (Book VII, Duke Xuan 宣) that contains Confucius' praise of the historian Hu Dong 董狐 as a "good historiographer of ancient times" (*gu zhi liangshi* 古之良史). Hu Dong had recorded that Zhao Dun 趙盾, minister of the cruel Duke Ling 靈公 of Jin 晉 (r. 620–607 BC), had killed his ruler, although in reality he even had to flee from his country because Duke Ling was after him. Zhao Dun thereupon protested and Hu Dong replied that he recorded the story this way, because Zhao Dun had not yet passed the country's borders when fleeing, as a consequence of which he was still the responsible minister of the duke and thus remained committed and obligated to his master (cf. Legge 1994: 288). This passage already prompted Burton Watson to state that "[i]t is . . . highly disquieting to discover that the *taishi* or grand historian of Jin, rather than recording the facts as they occurred, is actually shown falsifying the record in order to make a moral point concerning the ultimate responsibilities of government." (Watson 1989: 80).

on a tomb stele and because the historical context actually supports a move of the Arabs against the Tibetans and an alliance with the Chinese, we consider it as very unlikely that the stele is falsifying the facts.

Secret diplomacy

The Arabic soldiers had advanced steadily east after the Battle of Talas, and finally they faced the Tibetans, who had occupied the region around Baltistan-Gilgit. Muslim troops attempted to invade Kashmir several times but always failed to conquer it. Already in 713, the Arab general Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim is said to have entered the frontiers of Kashmir, and in 757, the Arab governor of Sind, Hishām b. ‘Amr al-Taghlibī, had unsuccessfully tried to conquer the valley of Kashmir.⁹² Although the mountain ranges obviously constituted a major barrier to conquering the region, there is still evidence of Muslims who entered Kashmir and, at the same time, these military activities show how far east the Arab troops had come. They were consequently just outside the front door of the Tibetans, and conflict seemed inevitable.

In *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, Liu Xu 劉煦 (887–946) reports that in the second year of the Zhenyuan reign, when Yang Liangyao was still on his voyage, Chancellor Han Huang 韓滉 (723–787) raised these concerns with the Emperor:

吐蕃盜有河湟，為日已久。大曆已前，中國多難，所以肆其侵軼。臣聞其近歲已來，兵眾淩弱，西逼大食之強，北病回紇之眾，東有南詔之防。

It has been a long time since the Tibetans plundered the region around Hehuang. Before [the reign of] Dali (766–780) there were many internal problems in China, so we had to let invasions occur without consequence. I have heard that the [Tibetan] troops have suffered a major weakening in recent times; in the West they are being harassed by the strength of the Arabs, in the north they suffer from the crowds of Uighurs, and to the east are the defences of Nanzhao.⁹³

Wang Pu 王溥 (922–982) discussed the impact of the conflict between the Arabs and Tibetans, in *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 as follows:

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。

In the second year [of the reign period] Zhenyuan [786] [the Arabs] presented themselves as an impressive opponent to the Tibetans. The Tibetan troops were mostly busy trying to defend their western borders against the Arabs. Therefore, they presented little threat to our borders because their forces were insufficient.⁹⁴

The famous Chinese geographer and Tang chancellor Jia Dan provides a brief overview of the conflict between the Umayyads and the ‘Abbāsids. He detailed the explicit military difficulties facing the Tibetans as well as the appeal of Arab support. In addition to the

92. Asimow & Bosworth 1999: 305.

93. *Jiu Tangshu* 129.3602.

94. *Tang huiyao* 100.2127.

statements from *Jiu Tangshu*, *Xin Tangshu* and *Tang huiyao*, this is the only reference from Chinese sources I could find, which can at least indirectly support Li Mi's request for help against the overwhelming military might of the Tibetans.

We know that the Tibetans pursued an active history of military alliances. As early as 750, Tibet formed an alliance with Siam against China and in 778 Thai and Tibetan troops fought side-by-side in Sichuan against the Chinese. Even the Kingdom of Nanzhao and the Arabs were themselves once an allied partner of the Tibetans.⁹⁵ Jia Dan records the following:

隋開皇中，大食族中有孤列種，代為酋長。孤列種中，有二姓，一曰盆泥·末換，二曰[盆泥·]奚深。後磨訶末者，勇健多智，眾立之為王，東西征伐，開地三千里，兼剋夏獵城。

During the Kaihuang reign period of the Sui Dynasty [581–600] [a man from] the tribe of Quraysh replaced the former tribal leader in Arabia; within this tribe, there were two family clans, the Banū Marwān [undoubtedly a reference to the line of Marwanids], and the [Banū] Hāshim [certainly a reference to the family of the Hashimites, a Meccan tribe of Quraysh, after Hāshim ibn 'Abd Manāf, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muḥammad].⁹⁶ Then came a brave and wise man named Muḥammed, who ennobled the masses. To the east and west troops were sent and an area of 3,000 li was enclosed, Syria was subjugated and its capital [Damascus was occupied].

傳十四世，至末換殺其兄伊疾而自立，性復殘忍，其下怨之。有呼羅珊末鹿人並波悉林舉義兵，應者悉令着皂[衣]，旬日間，眾盛數萬，鼓行而西，生擒末換殺之，遂求得奚深種孫阿蒲·羅拔，立之。自末換以前謂之白衣大食，自阿蒲·羅拔以後改為黑衣大食。阿蒲·羅拔卒，立其弟阿蒲·恭拂。

In the fourteenth generation [after Muḥammad] came Marwān [r. 744–750, the last Caliph of the Umayyad Empire who ruled from Damascus], who murdered his brother, Yazīd [= Yazīd ibn al-Walīd, r. 743–744] and made himself ruler. He had, moreover, a cruel and merciless nature, and his subordinates hated him for it. There was a man from Khurāsān, Abū Muslim [leader of a popular movement against the Umayyads, killed in 755], who led an army of the righteous. Those who agreed with him followed his orders and put on black clothes. Within ten days, the number of his followers reached tens of thousands. They marched westward drumming, caught and killed Marwān [in the Battle of the Great Zāb in northern Iraq, 16–25 January 750], and then declared that Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāḥ (722–754, r. 749–754), a descendant of the family of the Hāshimites, would be set in [as the ruler].⁹⁷ Up to the time of the Umayyad, they were called white-dressed Tajik; since Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāḥ they have been called black-dressed Tajik. As Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāḥ died, his younger brother al-Manṣūr was enthroned [Abū Ja'far 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Manṣūr, r. 754–775].

95. Gupta & Ramachandran 1995: 22; Petech 1939: 73.

96. Judged from the transcription of “Xishen”奚深, a reference to Hishām, the tenth caliph of the Umayyad Empire, appears to be more plausible (Hishām ibn 'Abd al-Malik, r. 724–743). However, it is beyond doubt that we are dealing with a clan, not an individual in this particular case. It is highly likely that this was a mistaken transcription.

97. *Sun* 孫, “grandson”, in this case, probably means “descendant” in the general sense.

至德初，遣使朝貢，代宗立為元帥，亦用其兵攻兩部。寶應初，使又至。恭拂卒，子迷地立。迷地卒，子牟栖立。牟栖卒，弟訶論立。

At the beginning of the Zhide reign [756–757] [al-Manşūr] sent an envoy to the [Tang] imperial court to deliver tribute and gifts. Daizong [r. 763–779] promoted him to leader and general, and also took advantage of the country's troops to attack two regiments. At the beginning of the Baoying reign [762–763] the envoy came again. When al-Manşūr died, his son, al-Mahdī [r. 775–785] was enthroned; when al-Mahdī died, his son al-Hādī [r. 785–786] was set in; as al-Hādī died, his son Hārūn al-Rashīd followed [r. 786–809].

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。至十四年丁卯九月，以黑衣大食使含嵯、焉雞、沙北三人並為中郎將，還蕃。

At the beginning of the Zhenyuan reign [785–804], the Tibetans were a strong enemy. Much of the Tibetan troops had to [be used in order to] resist the Arabs in the west. Therefore, when it came to new border disputes, the strength of their troops was no longer sufficient. In the 9th month of the 14th year with the cyclical signs *dingmao* [798], Hancuo (Hamza?),⁹⁸ Yanji (Yankei or Yanker?)⁹⁹ and Shabei (Sha'bi?)¹⁰⁰, three delegates from the 'Abbāsids, were appointed commanders and returned back home from the foreign lands.¹⁰¹

It is my view that this last sentence of the passage quoted above clearly relates to the aforementioned mission of Hārūn al-Rashīd that was sent to the Chinese imperial court in the ninth month of the year 798.¹⁰² Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify the

98. If the characters are assumed to be a place name, Hancuo 含嵯, instead of Hamza, could also refer to Qocho [Gaochang] 高昌, the old oasis town between Qarashar and Hami. It could also be identified as Haozhe 郝遮, near the former capital Bishbalik [Beşbalık or Beiting 北庭] that was occupied by the Uighurs between 755 and 790.

99. The name of the second emissary is in *Jiu Tangshu* (198.5316) and *Tang huiyao* (100.1790), also reproduced as Yanji 焉雞, whereas in *Xin Tangshu* (221B.6263) his name is written as Wuji 烏雞. Perhaps the confusion stems from a calligraphic error for the character 鳥, which would then read as *niaoji* and could be called Najib in Arabic. If, for the case of Yanji, it does refer to a place name, this could also stand for the west of lake Baghrash-köl, located in present-day-day Qarashar, which was also occupied by the Uighurs from 755 until 790.

100. In the case that Shabei 沙北 refers to a location, it could be northwest of Haozhe and slightly west of Shabo 沙鉢, near Bishbalik "[Ishbara?]" after "Shabo 沙鉢".

101. The translated passage is based on a quote from Jia Dan's *Siyi shu* 四夷述 ("Exposition of the Foreign Peoples of the Four [Parts of the World]"), which is listed in *Taiping Huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (186.3574 *passim*) by Yue Shi 樂史 [930–1007], and was reproduced by Wang Mo 王謨 in his recompilation of Jia Dan's *Junguo xiandao ji* 郡國縣道記 (13b–14a). Almost word for word one finds this entry as an anonymous quote (yiyun 一云) in *Jiu Tangshu* (198.3515) and – also with origin *Siyi shu* – in *Tang huiyao* (100.2126 *passim*). Emil Bretschneider (1871: 8 *passim*) translated part of *Jiu Tangshu* at the end of the nineteenth century. I would like to thank my colleague Dr. István Hajnal from the Department of Semitic and Arabic Studies, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, for pointing out that in particular the name "Yanji" was probably not of Arab origin and could possibly relate to the origin of the general. If this reasoning is correct, Yanji could refer to Qarashar (Chin. Yanqi 焉耆, approximately in the centre of today's Xinjiang province). I would also like to thank Dr. Nurlan Kenzheakhmet of the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn for his help in the identification of possible place names.

102. See above and footnotes 67 and 68.

three Arab envoys. They are undoubtedly, three individuals. But it is important, especially in the second case (Yanji), not to exclude the possibility that the characters refer to a place name – perhaps the places where the commanders were stationed?¹⁰³ It can be assumed that all three envoys or commanders had something to do with the defence against the Tibetan invasions. However, there are apparently no further details about their actions or their assignment. Possibly, these three generals originally had even accompanied Yang Liangyao on his return trip from Baghdād to Canton and were now sent back home (還蕃), together with the other members of Hārūn al-Rashīd's embassy?

Already in 789, the Arabs under Hārūn al-Rashīd are said to have repudiated from their traditional alliance with the Tibetans, negotiated with the Chinese and sent troops to coordinate a joint attack with Uighurs against the former.¹⁰⁴ According to a different interpretation, Hārūn al-Rashīd allied himself with the Chinese to curtail the Tibetan expansion.¹⁰⁵

Admittedly, Jia Dan's passage says just as little as the other sources about the mission of Yang Liangyao or any petition from the Chinese for military help from the Arabs. However, it indirectly confirms the role played by the Arabs in pushing back the Tibetans.¹⁰⁶ Douglas Morton Dunlop claims that there is firm evidence that there was an increase in military preparedness on the eastern borders of the Empire under Hārūn al-Rashīd. His diplomatic mission to the Chinese court in 798, he concludes, appears to have been directed against the Tibetans, or at least addressed the "Tibetan issue".¹⁰⁷

What exactly do we know about the background of these Tibetan military incursions? Between 785 and 805 military incursions gradually shifted westward and were progressively less along the Sino-Tibetan border region. According to Wangchuk Deden Tsepon Shakabpa, Tibetan sources contain only vague references to conflicts with a land west of its borders.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the Tibetan army crossed the Pamir Mountains and advanced up to the Oxus River (today's Amu Darya River, which flows from the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Uzbekistan in the Aral Sea).¹⁰⁹ To this end, Alexander Berzin notes:

In order to stop this march, caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) allied himself with China. The Tibetans arrived in West Turkestan at a lake north of the Oxus, which is

103. All three locations were in Uighur held territory. That could support the theory that Hārūn al-Rashīd also planned to join with the Uighurs to attack Tibet.

104. See Devéria 1895: 301, quoted in Franke 1930-1953: vol. III, 411; Hoffmann 1990: 385.

105. Tulku 1986: 279.

106. For background on the relationship with Tibet, see Dunlop 1973. He explains (p. 302): "Whether or not the embassy of 798 directly concerned the Tibetans remains uncertain in defect of positive evidence, but that this or others did is quite likely. [...] Arabic historical sources mention Tibet especially in the 8th century". For background on the military campaigns undertaken by the Arabs in Central Asia and their relationship to Tibet, see Wang Xiaofu 1992: 209-219. Wang briefly quotes (p. 209) Li Mi's plan to establish a pan-Asian alliance against the Tibetans.

107. Dunlop 1973: 309. On the Chinese perspective on Tibetans, see Bushell 1880.

108. See Shakabpa (1967: 44), with respect to Bretschneider 1871: 10. Alexander Berzin ("The Samye Debate") notes: "Tibet continually made attacks to the west from 785 – 805. [The Tibetans at this time were allied with the Qarluq Turks and Turki Shahis against the Abbasid Arabs. The Qarluq lived in present-day Kyrgyzstan and later founded the Qarakhanid Empire (840 – 1137), centered there. The Turki Shahis ruled the Kabul Valley and present-day southeastern Afghanistan from the mid-fifth century until 870. Their kingdom was a vassal state of the Tibetans at this time]."

109. See Shakabpa 1967: 44, and Berzin n.d.

called in Arabic “Al-Tubbat (or al-Tibit)” (Tib. Al-tu-sbag). The Tibetans called it “Little Lake” (Tib. mTsho-chung).¹¹⁰

Otto Franke points out that in 798 Hārūn al-Rashīd sent “an envoy to the court of the Tang, presumably to negotiate a common struggle against the Tibetans. Unfortunately, however, the Chinese chroniclers reported nothing more than that the messenger did not perform the K’ou-t’ou.”¹¹¹ We have no records with more detailed information on how this Sino-Arab alliance had looked like or what exactly Hārūn al-Rashīd’s intent and plan had been and how he proceeded.

André Clot has also mentions the matter of an alliance between the Tang and Hārūn al-Rashīd.¹¹² Werner Eichhorn stated that the Chinese emperor wanted “to form an alliance with the Caliph against the Tibetans.”¹¹³ *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia*, too, addresses the idea of an alliance between the Chinese and Arabs.¹¹⁴ Christopher Beckwith discusses the historical development and the advances made by the Tibetans.¹¹⁵ The Tibetan occupation of the Ordos Basin during the year 786, he argues, placed China in real danger of being encircled by the Tibetans. He details the rocky periods of peace throughout the 780s and concludes that the month following the Treaty of Pingliang 平涼 is when Li Mi developed, as Beckwith writes, “his famous ‘Grand Alliance’ strategy of containment”:

At just about this time – somewhat after the beginning of the reign of the celebrated caliph, Harun al-Rashid – a long war between the Arabs and Tibetans began. It thus appears indisputable that the alliance advocated by Li Mi, whether formal or informal, was indeed concluded.¹¹⁶

According to Beckwith, however, there is no written evidence that the Chinese entered into an agreement with one of its allies. This begs the question: Did Yang Liangyao perhaps prepare this alliance through his mission? Especially since we know that the Arabs, much like the Nanzhao Kingdom, had previously been allies of the Tibetans?¹¹⁷

Although attacked by a grand alliance of Arabs and Chinese, the Tibetans managed to hold their position without major territorial losses, as suggested by Shakabpa. The expansionist policy of the Tibetans was, however, abandoned. Tibetan troops had even crossed the Ganges, and pushed forward into Magadha in Bihar.¹¹⁸ This may explain

110. See Shakabpa 1967: 44.

111. Franke 1930-1953: vol. III, 411, with reference to *Xin Tangshu* 221B. 6263 and to *Jiu Tangshu* 198.5316.

112. Clot 1988: 278.

113. Eichhorn 1942: 263.

114. Hoffmann 1990: 385.

115. Beckwith 1987: 151.

116. Beckwith 1987: 151 *passim*.

117. Petech 1939: 73. The king of Nanzhao solidified an alliance with China in 791, snubbing his former allies, the Tibetans. Hārūn al-Rashīd, so Petech continues, “distrustful about his two powerful neighbours, sent in 798 an embassy to the Chinese court for the purpose of organizing a joint attack on Tibetan Turkestan.”

118. Shakabpa 1967: 44.

why Li Mi also wanted to integrate India into the grand alliance. Shakabpa cites Luciano Petech, who investigated the chronicles of Ladakh (the Indian Tibet), with the words:

The very fact that nothing less than the coalition of the two most powerful empires of early Middle-Ages [*i. e.* the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in Arabia and the Tang Empire] was necessary for checking the expansion of the Tibetan state, is a magnificent witness of the political capacities and military valour of those sturdy mountaineers.¹¹⁹

Despite the fact that the role Yang Liangyao played in the realization of an alliance between the Arabs and the Chinese still remains unclear, all of the above-mentioned works agree that the Arabs and the Chinese did, in fact, take military action against the Tibetans and that they probably were allies, or at least planned an alliance.

The Sea Route between Canton and the Persian Gulf

If one considers geographical knowledge of the sea routes in the Indian Ocean during the Tang dynasty, it is likely that the voyage, in conjunction with reports from Arab traders, constituted the preliminary knowledge for the later, well-known description of the sea route from Canton to Baghdād by Jia Dan.¹²⁰

天寶中，玄宗問諸蕃國遠近，鴻臚卿王忠嗣以西域圖對，纔十數國。其後貞元宰相賈耽考方域道里之數最詳，從邊州入四夷，通譯于鴻臚者，莫不畢紀。其入四夷之路與關戍走集最要者七：[...]，二曰登州海行入高麗渤海道，[...]，六曰安南通天竺道，七曰廣州通海夷道。

During the Tianbao reign [742–755] Emperor Xuanzong [r. 713–756] inquired about the distances to various foreign countries (*zhu fanguo yuanjin* 諸蕃國遠近). Wang Zhongsi 王忠嗣 [704?–748?], Director of the Court of State Ceremony (*Honglu siqing* 鴻臚寺卿), responded with maps [and information] relating to more than a dozen countries in the western territories. Later, during the Zhenyuan reign [785–804], the Prime Minister, Jia Dan, made a very careful study of the distances and routes in the various regions, starting from the border counties to the countries of the four barbarians. He explained [his observations] to the Court of State Ceremony, and everything was recorded without exception. He noted the seven major routes into the countries of the four barbarians including border barriers and fittings. [...]. The second route led from Deng[zhou] by sea to Korea and Bohai; [...]; the sixth towards Annam and Tianzhu 天竺 (India) and the seventh from Canton to many countries overseas.¹²¹

After the Tianbao 天寶 reign (742–756), the Court of Ceremonies was instructed to cooperate with the Office of the Military Organization of Regions Outside China to collect more accurate information on foreign lands. As Prime Minister, Jia Dan had access to the data collected by both agencies. According to the *Yuhai* 玉海 of Wang Yinglin 王應臨

119. Shakabpa 1967: 44, with reference to Petech 1939: 73–74.

120. More on Jia Dan's report on geography, see *Jiu Tangshu* 138.3784. An English translation of the sea route is included in the introduction of Hirth and Rockhill (1911) and in Rong Xinjiang 2015: 257–258.

121. *Xin Tangshu* 43B.1146. See *Yuhai* 15.26b–27a, 29b.

(1223–1296), Jia Dan presented *Huanghua sida ji* 皇華四達記 (“Records of the Ways from Imperial China into Foreign Countries in the Four Cardinal Directions”) to the imperial court in 798.¹²² *Jiu Tangshu* reports that in 801 he then presented the Emperor with a map entitled *Hainei Huayi tu* 海內華夷圖, “Map of China and the Barbarians Within the Four Seas”. *Jiu Tangshu* also states that he submitted *Gujin junguo xiandao siyi shu* 古今郡國縣道四夷述, a comprehensive “Administrative Representation of Districts and Provinces [of the Chinese Empire] and [the Countries of the] Four Barbarians in Ancient and Modern Times”.¹²³

According to *Xin Tangshu*, starting from the Zhenyuan era, that is from 785 onwards, Jia Dan began to collect information on the sea routes to the west by questioning envoys and merchants who had been to foreign countries. Both Yang Liangyao and Jia Dan later resided in Chang’an, so it is likely that he had met Yang in the capital. The circumstances around the rebellion of Wu Shaocheng (see above) provide further evidence that they personally knew each other. Even if both of them possessed independent sources, it is reasonable to assume that the sea route described by Jia Dan was the same or a similar route that Yang Liangyao had taken with his embassy.

A description of the sea route from Canton to Baghdād, as detailed in *Xin Tangshu* – whether on the basis of Jia Dan’s *Huanghua sida ji* or his *Gujin junguo xiandao siyi shu*¹²⁴ –, is available in translated form in English. In my German booklet on this topic I briefly summarized the annotated English translation of the route that can be found in Hirth’s and Rockhill’s book on Zhao Rugua, complementing it by identification of place names provided by Chen Jiarong 陳佳榮.¹²⁵ The actual itinerary that Jia Dan described and the various place names mentioned therein, however, remain an issue of debate, although most place names at least have been identified (see map 1). While it is generally accepted that the route of sailors, as a rule, passed through the Straits of Malacca, Stephen G. Haw recently suggested that ships rather took the Sunda Strait to sail to the western part of the Indian Ocean.¹²⁶

Actually, the similar wording of a particular sentence in both texts (that is, Jia Dan’s route description and Yang Liangyao’s stele inscription) supports the assumption that Jia Dan did, in fact, know about the route taken by Yang Liangyao. Or, at the least, it suggests that they both knew each other and must have exchanged information. For example, Jia

122. *Yuhai* 15.29a.

123. *Jiu Tangshu* 13.395: [貞元十七年冬十月]辛未，宰相賈耽上海內華夷圖及古今郡國縣道四夷述四十卷。In his presentation on maps and books at court (*Jiu Tangshu* 138.3784) Jia Dan describes this map and the forty-chapter book. *Xin Tangshu* 58.1506; 166.5083. See *Yuhai* 14.22b.

124. It is generally assumed that the passage in *Xin Tangshu* is a direct excerpt from the now lost *Huanghua sida ji*, but there is no real convincing evidence that this is the case.

125. *Xin Tangshu*, 43B.1153 *passim*. Hirth & Rockhill 1911: 10–14. For the identification of location names, see Chen Jiarong’s 陳佳榮 website, “Nanming wang” 南溟網, www.world10k.com/blog/?p=665 (accessed on 26.06.2013).

126. Cf. Stephen G. Haw, http://www.academia.edu/10951882/The_Maritime_Routes_between_China_and_the_Indian_Ocean_during_the_second_to_ninth_centuries_CE (unpublished paper). But the route via the west of Sumatra and the Sunda Straits were generally speaking very difficult to manoeuvre and hardly ever taken by any ships (personal communication with Pierre-Yves Manguin, Taipei, May 28, 2015). The normal route towards the port of Palembang, for example, would be passing the Straits of Malacca and Bangka and then sailing just south of the island of Belitung. As to for why the ship sank close to the Belitung Island, there are simply too many unclear factors. It could have been blown slightly off course to the north by strong winds before sinking.

Dan's route description contains the following entry on the Sea of Lārwī (Arabian Sea), the sea that has to be crossed before entering the Sea of Fārs (Persian Gulf) that leads to Baṣra and al-Ubullah:

一曰羅和異國，國人於海中立華表，夜則置炬其上，使舶人夜行不迷。

The inhabitants of this land place decorative beacons in the sea, which they set ablaze at night so that the seafarers do not lose their way in the darkness.¹²⁷

The description of the lights guiding the seafarers at night matches the observation in Yang Liangyao's stele:

黑夜則神燈表路。

Divine lights guided the way by night.¹²⁸

Baṣra was, according to al-Ya'qūbī, "the chief city of the world, the centre of trade and wealth", a financial centre where Christians, Jews, Iranians, Arabs and Indians came together.¹²⁹ For the Chinese the city of Sīrāf in the Persian Gulf was also one of the most important hubs in the region. As we see in the *Kitāb 'ajā'ib al-Hind* ("Book of the Wonders of India"):

Most Chinese loaded their ships in Sīrāf, a place where goods from Baṣra, Oman, and other places are loaded onto "Chinese" ships: this is due to heavy swells in the sea and insufficient water depth at certain points. [...]. Once the goods are loaded in Sīrāf, one takes fresh water on board, sets sail, and moves to a place called Masqat, at the extreme end of Oman.¹³⁰

The ship of Yang Liangyao

The question remains as to what type of ship was used for the voyage by Yang and his crew. Was it a Chinese or a foreign, perhaps Arab, ship? The inscription says: "After reaching Nanhai (i.e. Canton), they left the road and went on board a ship". My guess is that it was either an Arab merchant vessel or Southeast Asian high seas junk. It is also theoretically possible that the delegation changed ships, first taking a junk from Southeast Asia around the Malay Peninsula and through the Straits of Malacca and then, transferring to a ship from India, Sri Lanka, or Arabia to continue on to the Persian Gulf. Such transfers were common in the Indian Ocean after around the year 1000.¹³¹ But in our case, because the ship was carrying an official diplomatic mission, it is doubtful that such a transfer was

127. *Xin Tangshu* 43B.1153.

128. See the "Yang gong shendao bei" inscription text and full translation in the Appendix. Of course we cannot completely rule out the possibility that the characters 神燈 refer to the stars and the moon.

129. Clot 1988: 270.

130. Clot 1988: 271, according to Buzurg ibn Shahriyār ar-Rāmhurmuzī, *Kitāb 'ajā'ib al-Hind* ("Book of the Wonders of India"), English translation by Andrew Stonehouse.

131. Personal communication with Jun Kimura, Underwater Archeologist and specialist for the history of shipbuilding in East Asia (20.09.2013). See Kimura 2011.

made. In addition, before the turn of the millennium it was common for merchants from the Persian Gulf to take fewer, yet longer, trips going directly from port to port. As a result, distant port cities such as Sirāf and Canton were directly linked to one another. In the ninth century, the famous Persian Captain ‘Abharah al-Rubbān is alleged to have made a total of seven trips to China. This, according to Dietmar Rothermund, was typical of that period.¹³² Furthermore, it should be noted that maritime trade in the Indian Ocean was largely dominated by merchants from the Arab world (Iranians and Arabs) in the period between the eighth and tenth/eleventh centuries. Thus, the ship could have in fact been an Arab vessel. Rong Xinjiang is actually more convinced that Yang boarded a Chinese ship, as Arab vessels were not sturdy enough to resist the stormy waves on the sea.¹³³ This is, however, more than questionable. All marine archaeologists agree that sewn ships of the Arabs (or Southeast Asians) were quite sturdy, as proved, for example, also by the Belitung ship. Why is the possibility that it was a Chinese ship actually not so probable?¹³⁴

First of all, we have no compelling evidence that the Chinese built overseas trading junks (*bo* 船) during the first centuries AD; Chinese texts, on the contrary, clearly state that they were foreign built.¹³⁵ We know that in earlier periods they sailed on Parthian ships (a sub-tribe of the Scythian that built an empire in the region of the present-day Iraq and Iran in the third century BC). During the Han dynasty foreign ships certainly brought Chinese merchants and diplomats to their destinations.¹³⁶ Also the character for ocean-going vessels first appears in written sources around the third century AD.¹³⁷

In terms of navigation and shipbuilding, the Chinese undoubtedly benefited from Arab knowledge. The unlikelihood that Yang switched vessels after passing through the Straits of Malacca is indirectly supported by an Arab source. Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī (al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956) records in his *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawhar* (“Gold Pastures and Gem Mines”) that there were ships from China in the Persian Gulf during the Tang dynasty. However, the source only states that the ships came from China and provides no clear indication whether they had been built in China or whether they were simply Chinese crews or whether the ship had just a Chinese cargo on board.¹³⁸ In another passage, al-Mas‘ūdī describes a merchant from Samarkand who was traveling to Kalāh by sea (probably Kedah on the Malay Peninsula).¹³⁹ According to al-Mas‘ūdī,

132. Rothermund 2004: 19. The Persian merchant ship captain Buzurg ibn Shahrīyār ar-Rāmhurmuzī reported on the travels of ‘Abharahs and authored his *Book of the Wonders of India*, in which he describes his voyages between 900 and 953.

133. Rong Xinjiang 2015: 251.

134. In my German booklet I still considered it at least possible that the ship may have been a Chinese one, but further research since then has more and more convinced me that this is actually very improbable.

135. See also Jacques Dars, 1992, *La marine chinoise du Xe siècle au XIVe siècle*. Paris, Economica.

136. *Hanshu* 28.1671.

137. See Schottenhammer 2006: 604 *passim*.

138. Barbier de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille (1861-1877: vol. I, 216): “C’étaient là qu’arrivaient les bâtiments venus de la Chine et de l’Inde, à destination des rois de Hirah.”

139. On the problematic issue of the location of Kalāh, Roderich Ptak explains (2007: 130): “Mystery is also the word ‘Kalah’. One point of view says it was considered a town on the west coast of Malaysia, possibly in South Kedah. Another, quite plausible suggestion, is to interpret *kalah* as a technical term. Maybe it was, from an Arab perspective, a type of port or gathering place, that was more or less travelling to and fro along the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Viewed from the west, Kalah (or even *kalah*) was located behind the Harkand Sea – that is the common Arabic version of the Bengal Sea – and thus beyond the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Overall, Kalah/*kalah* is often mentioned in the sources and

Kalāh was the place where ships from the Islamic world “nowadays” (that is, mid-tenth century) met the Chinese merchants. But al-Mas‘ūdī also notes that it was not always so. In earlier periods, “Chinese” ships had come up in the Persian Gulf towards Sīrāf or Baṣra.¹⁴⁰ Only after the “Yanchou”, i.e. Huang Chao 黃巢 (?–884), rebellion had plunged China into chaos, did the port of Kalāh become the meeting point.¹⁴¹ Kalāh and Śrīvijaya (Chin. Sanfoqi 三佛齊) seem to have developed as the new stopover points between the Western and the Eastern Indian Ocean and replaced Canton as the final destination of merchants sailing from the Persian Gulf area around that time. As earlier sites near Palembang (the capital of Śrīvijaya) suggest, local polities had taken control of the “Bosi” trading networks and traded with their cargoes long before the ninth century.¹⁴² But, as mentioned above, up to the late ninth century, port cities such as Sīrāf and Canton were still directly linked to each other, with at least some Persian Gulf traders sailing all the long distance from the Persian Gulf to Canton by themselves.

The merchant from Samarkand, however, had still travelled on a “Chinese ship” to Kalāh and then to Canton.¹⁴³ Al-Mas‘ūdī also notes that Chinese rulers would send eunuchs to Canton to receive and look after foreign merchants.¹⁴⁴ These details indicate that, at least until the middle of the ninth century, ships from China sailed westward into the Persian Gulf. There is, however, no archaeological evidence to confirm that these were actually Chinese ships. We should, therefore, keep in mind that the expression “Chinese ships” may simply indicate that the ship’s captain or most of the crew were Chinese or more probably that these ships plied the China route. For, as we know, during the Tang dynasty, most commercial shipping the Indian Ocean was carried out by Arab, Iranian or Southeast Asian merchants and ships. Arabic and Iranian merchants came to China primarily by sea. Whether Chinese merchants sailed their own ships to the Persian Gulf, remains unclear. Well into the eleventh century Chinese shipping in the Indian Ocean relied on foreign ships. The break-through in Chinese shipbuilding and maritime navigation and ocean voyages only took place in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279).¹⁴⁵

considered quasi the final point/destination of one (or the) route through the eastern half of the Indian Ocean (...) Much speaks for identifying Kalah/kalah with the Chinese *Geluo* (several varieties), which probably would amount to a specific place in or near the Kedah region at the end.” Archaeological relics undoubtedly highlight the importance of the region.

140. Barbier de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille 1861-1877: vol. I, p. 308.

141. “Le rebelle marcha donc rapidement sur la ville de Khankou, dont la population se composait de musulmans, de chrétiens, de juifs, de mages et de Chinois, et l’assiégea étroitement. Attaqué par l’armée du roi, il la mit en fuite et livra son camp au pillage; puis se trouvant à la tête de soldats plus nombreux que jamais, il s’empara par force de la place, dont il massacra une quantité prodigieuse d’habitants. On évalue à deux cent mille le nombre de musulmans, chrétiens, juifs et mages qui périrent par le fer ou par l’eau, en fuyant devant l’épée.” (Barbier de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille 1861-1877: vol. I, 303; the situation in China is detailed on pp. 302-308).

142. Wolters, Oliver W., 1967, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Sri Vijaya*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press; Manguin, Pierre-Yves, 2016, “At the origins of Sriwijaya: The emergence of state and city in southeast Sumatra”, in Noboru Karashima & Masashi Hirose (Eds.), *Early State Formation and Social Integration: Chieftdom to State*. Tōkyō, New Delhi: Tōyō Bunko, Manohar Publishers, pp. 89-114.

143. Barbier de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille (1861-1877: vol. I, 308): “Ce marchand s’était donc embarqué sur un bâtiment chinois pour aller de Killah au port de Khanfou.”

144. *Ibid.*

145. Manguin 1993.

In this context, Chinese sources reveal that private traders as well as people who were traveling on official missions, as a rule, crossed the seas on trading ships (*bo*). During the Tang dynasty, ocean-going vessels were used primarily for military purposes.¹⁴⁶ Merchants, diplomats, and monks basically travelled by private, mostly foreign, trading ships.¹⁴⁷ Throughout the Tang dynasty, these were often the high seas ships of merchants from the Middle East. *Xin Tangshu* makes mention of numerous ocean-going ships from the so-called “Western Regions” (Xiyu bo 西域舶). First, it claims there were only about four or five dockings in China per year, due to corruption; local officials were eventually prompted to act honestly and no longer ask for bribes or high taxes. Trade, thereupon recovered, so that eventually more than forty ships visited Chinese ports per year (前後西域舶泛海至者歲纔四五，勉性廉潔，舶來都不檢閱，故末年至者四十餘).¹⁴⁸

The hypothesis that Yang sailed on an Arabo-Indian or Southeast Asian ship (belonging perhaps to an Iranian, Arab, or Southeast Asian shipowner?) is to some extent underpinned by recent archaeological discoveries; and, so far no contemporary Chinese ship has been recovered in Southeast Asian seas or in the Indian Ocean.¹⁴⁹ The evidence in question was found near the Indonesian island of Belitung. In 1998 underwater archaeologists discovered what is most certainly an Arab-Indian ship, which can be dated to around the ninth century. The design of the Belitung ship belongs to a sewn-plank tradition of the Western Indian Ocean shared by both India and the Persian Gulf and possibly East Africa and is that of a traditional Arab dhow from the eighth and ninth centuries. According to underwater archaeologists, it is the first Arab dhow that has been found in Southeast Asian waters.¹⁵⁰ It carried mostly trade goods between China, Sumatra and Java, as did the Cirebon or the Intan wrecks of the tenth century, both Southeast Asian ships, which carried the same kind of cargo. On the basis of the materials found aboard the wreck, especially the ceramics, archaeologists suspect that the final destination of the vessel, or at least some of its cargo, may have been a city in the western Indian Ocean – and it most probably had left China through the port of Canton and perhaps first Yangzhou.¹⁵¹ On board the wreck, archaeologists discovered silver and gold artifacts as well as Chinese ceramics with both Buddhist and Islamic motifs. A total of 60,000 Chinese ceramic pieces was found, and large quantities of lead ingots (used as ballast).¹⁵²

146. Cf. Xia Zijin 2008: 17.

147. Compare to Faxian 法顯 (c. 337–422), *Faxian zhuan*, 167 (translated by Deeg 2005, 572): 得此梵本已即載商人大船上可有二百餘人。後係一小舶海行艱嶮。 ”After he received the books in Brahma, [Faxian] boarded a large trading vessel with some 200 people on board. There was a small ship attached to the back of the ship in case of emergency because travel at sea is very dangerous.” (Sen 2014: 45).

148. *Jiu Tangshu*, 131.3635.

149. Krah, Guy, Wilson & Raby 2010: 20.

150. Flecker (2010: 118–119): “From an analysis of construction methods and materials and hull form, the author has determined that the Belitung wreck is an Arab vessel.” Doubt in determining the place of production of the wreck existed for quite some time. In this context, the wood used for construction has been studied extensively, which ultimately provided decisive proof that the ship could not have been built in India.” Flecker (2010: 102) also emphasizes that it is impossible to distinguish due to the historical and archaeological between Arab and Iranian ships even though Arabia and Iran were considered two different political entities.

151. Hsieh Ming-liang 2010: 137–143.

152. The standard reference for this wreck is Krah *et al.* 2010.

Chinese merchants actually only began sailing long distances in the late eleventh century. This was largely a result of a particular decision of Chinese authorities: in 1090, the government removed bureaucratic obstacles for merchants, which allowed them to sail on the basis of their own calculations, provided their journey had been previously officially registered at a local administrative office. They no longer had to register at one of the three Maritime Trade Offices (*shibo si* 市舶司). This made the maritime trade immensely easier for Chinese merchants.¹⁵³ They were able, so-to-speak, to pursue their business abroad according to their own discretion.

By 971, the Song emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (r. 960–975) commissioned the officials Pan Mei 潘美 (921–987) and Yin Chongke 尹崇珂 to monitor and manage maritime trade in Canton. This date is generally regarded as the official date of establishment of the Song Maritime Trade Office (*shibo si*) in Canton.¹⁵⁴ An official had however been responsible for the regulation and management of the overseas trade (*shibo shi* 市舶使) since around 714, during the Kaiyuan era (712–741), when maritime trade seems to have experienced an upswing. Wei Guangrun 韋光閏 (in office as *shibo shi* around 722 to approximately 741) states:

梯山航海，歲來中國。[...]。諸蕃君長，遠慕皇風，寶舶薦臻，倍於恒數。

They [i.e. foreign merchants] take the long exertions [literally: they climb mountains and sail the seas] and come to China every year. [...]. All the rulers and nobles of the foreign countries admire from afar the traditions and customs of the [Chinese] empire; their large ocean-going vessels come from far away and gather in [the port], many more than it used to be.¹⁵⁵

From the 806 biography of Li Ao 李翱 (774–836), who wrote about the recently deceased provincial governor of Lingnan 嶺南, Xu Shen 徐申 (738–806, in office as military-governor of Lingnan since 802), one can learn more about the trade goods and the vessels that came to China:

蕃國歲來互市，奇珠、瑇瑁、異香、文犀，皆浮海舶以來。

Each year foreigners from every country come here to trade. Rare pearls, tortoise shells, exotic fragrances, and rhinoceros horn, everything flows from the sea [to China].¹⁵⁶

It was a first golden age of maritime trade in China, and much of that was thanks to Arab and Iranian merchants. Ethnic neighbourhoods (*fanfang* 蕃坊) in major port cities, such as Canton, illustrate the increased interaction between China and foreigners.¹⁵⁷

153. Cf. Heng 2009: 48, who designates this political measure as “1090 liberalization”.

154. *Song huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan“, 44.1b: 太祖開寶四年六月，命同知廣州潘美、尹崇珂竝充市舶使，以駕部員外郎、通判廣州謝處珙兼市舶判官。

155. *Jin Lingnan wangguan shibo shiyuan tubiao* 進嶺南王館市舶使院圖表, probably by Wei Guangrun 韋光閏 (according to the *Quan Tangwen* by Wang Qianxiu 王虔休; 737–799), in *Wenyuan yinghua* 613.8b–9b; *Quan Tangwen* 515.6b–7b. See also Huang Lou 2009: 100.

156. *Lingnan jiedushi Xu gong xingzhuang* 嶺南節度使徐公行狀, by Li Ao 李翱 (774–836), in *Wenyuan yinghua* 976.6a–9a (8b); *Quan Tangwen* 639.19a–22a (quotation: 21b).

157. Wang Zhenping (1991: 22) quoted an edict from 836 in which the establishment of an ethnic neighbourhood in Canton. *Jiu Tangshu* 182.5367; *Xin Tangshu* 177.4592.

One may even consider these merchants as the initiators of active maritime trade in China, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁵⁸ Because the overland routes were partially obstructed, merchants arrived from the sea. There are clear indications that, for example, the city of Yangzhou 揚州, located on the Grand Canal about fifteen km north of the mouth of the Yangtze River, was a major trading centre for Iranian and Arab merchants. In *Xin Tangshu* it is even noted that several thousand Iranian traders were killed during local unrest in the late 750s to early 760s.¹⁵⁹ Arabic sources also give us detailed descriptions of Arab settlements in China. In *Akhbār al-Šīn wa al-Hind* (“News from China and India”), the travelogue of Sulaymān al-Tājir (“Suleiman the Merchant”) and commented by Abū Zayd of Sīrāf, it is reported that when the rebel Huang Chao captured Canton in 878 some 120,000 foreigners (Muslims, Jews, Christians, Mazdeans) were killed.¹⁶⁰ Such a high number may be an exaggeration; al-Mas‘ūdi even estimated the death toll at around 200,000.¹⁶¹ This Arab description does not specify who exactly was a Muslim, a fact we have to keep in mind when using the term. Generally speaking, however, we can assume that in the late ninth century the term “Muslim” referred to both Arab and (converted) Iranian merchants who originally came from various regions along the Persian Gulf and had gradually built up an extensive merchant network reaching as far as China. These developments triggered a wave of Arab migration to Vietnam and Indonesia. In any case, such information strongly suggests the presence of a significant number of foreigners in the commercial cities during the Tang dynasty.¹⁶²

Against this historical background, it is very likely that the embassy of Yang Liangyao sailed on an Iranian, Arab or perhaps a Southeast Asian merchant ship.

Some Remarks on Diplomatic Practices

Once the various pieces of the story are put together, Yang Liangyao’s diplomatic mission to the ‘Abbāsīd Empire makes sense. Unfortunately, we learn little to nothing about the diplomatic conventions. However, even in this case, comparisons help us fill in the gaps.

According to the inscription, Yang Liangyao was “[in the] fourth month of the first year [of government foreign exchange] Zhenyuan (i.e. 785) [...] endowed with the purple fish bag and took over the duties of a government envoy to the Arab ‘Abbāsīd Empire. He was accompanied by administrative assistants and followers and received imperial accreditation and decrees.” Chinese custom dictated that political negotiations abroad required a particularly authorized representative (*guoxin shi* 國信使). The responsibility

158. Schottenhammer 2002: 53-59, 57.

159. *Xin Tangshu* 141.4655: 平盧節度使田神功兵至揚州，大掠胡人，發冢墓，大食、波斯賈胡死者數千人。 *Xin Tangshu* 144.4702; cf. also Wang Gungwu 1958: 80.

160. See Levy 1961: 109-121. Levy compares Chinese and Arabic sources that describe the massacre. The most detailed report stems from Abū Zayd. As for Muslim merchants in what was then China and Southeast Asia, cf. Tibbetts 1957: 38. In his 1979 monograph, Tibbetts presents sources on the geographical knowledge of Arabs about the Indian Ocean, Southeast and East Asia at the time. Cf. also Reinaud 1845 [Reprint 1982]; Cahen 1970; Huang Dashou 1990. *Xin Tangshu*, 221.6262, contains an entry on Dashi that detailed various peculiarities. For example, the report discusses that men have long noses and beards. The women on the other hand, are white and protect themselves with sun umbrellas when they leave a vehicle. Finally, he gives a detailed description of the conflicts between the Umayyads and ‘Abbāsīds.

161. See footnote 141.

162. Wink 1996: 84.

of the representative was to relay China's requests, demands, proposals or similarly, to present the foreign ruler with imperial decrees or edicts. Ad hoc diplomatic missions, which were sent in emergency situations, were normally described as "floating missions" (*fanshi* 汎使). It is possible that our case was such an ad hoc mission.

In this context, a few general considerations are needed about the characteristics diplomats needed to exhibit at that time. It goes without saying that envoys traveling as diplomatic agents were carefully selected. They had to be representative, loyal, educated, individuals who were articulate, fluent and be able to boost the prestige of their state even in an unknown, potentially hostile, environment. They also had to master the etiquette, rituals, and formal practices of intergovernmental contact. Similar had to, of course, also apply to the escorts. In our case, as the stele demonstrates, the imperial court attached great importance to the selection of a suitable person. The fact that Yang Liangyao was a eunuch and, thus, probably a close confidant of the emperor, depends, as expounded above, on the internal political environment and circumstances of the imperial court.

The inscription explains that Yang was accompanied by "administrative assistants and followers" and received "imperial accreditation and decrees." The handing over of an official imperial letter that conveys the intent of the emperor was still, centuries later, an integral part of diplomatic relations.¹⁶³ Naturally, interpreters also played an essential role. Interpreters had many more responsibilities and functions than just translations and were firmly integrated in the entire diplomatic procedure. Chinese interpreters who were fluent in Arabic and Persian, we may assume, undoubtedly accompanied Yang's mission. Possibly, Arabs who had been living in China for a long period were also recruited. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, we do not possess any concrete examples.

As far as the content of the "imperial accreditation and decrees" is concerned, we can only speculate. Were they imperial proclamations that would award the ruler of the 'Abbāsids and senior administrators official titles in the Chinese Empire? That would not have been unusual, especially if one expects a favour. Could the decrees also have contained documents outlining the Emperor's desire to form an alliance with the 'Abbāsids against the Tibetans, for example by documenting some incidents that had happened?

Judging by the stele inscription, the mission seems to have been a success. This suggests that an audience with the ruler, or at least some senior officials must have taken place. The Arabs were apparently not averse to the Chinese proposal. Sadly, we have no further details on the specifics of this diplomatic encounter.

The exchange of gifts was a central part of such diplomatic missions. Unfortunately, Yang Liangyao's inscription makes no reference to this aspect of his mission. As a general rule, great amounts of valuable gifts were exchanged at diplomatic encounters. Given the importance and military power of the Arabs, one can assume that the Chinese envoy brought many gifts such as silk, ceramics, objects made of precious metals, and perhaps also ivory. Based on archaeological findings, both inside and outside China, the export of Chinese ceramics reached significant dimensions in the Tang dynasty.¹⁶⁴ Numerous excavations have discovered Chinese pottery, stoneware, and porcelain objects in places such as al-Fustāt, Sāmarrā, Hormuz, and many others.¹⁶⁵

163. In 1266, Kubilai Khan (r. 1264–1294) sent the Japanese *shōgun* an imperial letter in which he urges Japan to accept Mongolian rule and supremacy. Cf. *Yuanshi* 208.4625 *passim*.

164. Carswell 1985: 25.

165. Kerr & Wood 2004: 733.

Although the Belitung wreck introduced above dates from the ninth century (after 826),¹⁶⁶ the findings may provide valuable insight into material exchange between Tang China and Iranian and Arab-Muslim dominated markets in Southeast Asia and beyond. For example, the Iranian historian Bayhaqī (995–1077) noted that 20 pieces of imperial China-ware (*Chini faghūrī*) and another 2,000 ceramic objects were sent as a gift from the Governor of Khurāsān, ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā ibn Māhān (before 785–811), to the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd. These pieces included plates, cups, mugs, pitchers and several other things.¹⁶⁷ In exchange for his gifts Yang could have received glass objects, perhaps horses, incense, scented woods and spices and the like.

The example of the discussion between Li Mi and the emperor that we have introduced above also informs us about another diplomatic practice: the Uighur Khan sent an envoy that submitted a letter in which he described himself as a son and vassal [of the Tang]. Such letters, symbolically designated as “vassal letters” (*biao* 表) by Oláh Csaba, were still common in Chinese diplomacy centuries later.¹⁶⁸ The letter was addressed directly to the Chinese Emperor, therefore the emissary needed not only to have an excellent command of literary Chinese but also needed to know the correct terminology, including all of the flowery and courteous expressions. This document also served the purpose of proving that it really was the official ruler who had given the letter to his envoys and thus officially represented his country’s position.¹⁶⁹ Writing such a letter presented quite a big challenge for foreign rulers. In the worst-case scenario, the emissary would be rejected, because the letter was not drafted according to official etiquette. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the eighth century it was mostly those foreigners best trained in literary Chinese language, such as monks, who were involved in diplomatic correspondence. In the case of the Uighur Khan, one can assume that he had educated Chinese officials or scholars assisting him in the composition of this letter. At any rate, such letters were part of everyday life in the diplomatic world and they had to be written in a flowery and courteous style, evoking respect and signs of subordination. The Chinese emperor, on the other hand, presented himself as the gracious sovereign and supraordinate father addressing his subordinates in the Asian world.

Just because of the hierarchical structure, the family rites enshrined in the Confucian teaching were often symbolically mirrored in imperial diplomacy. Analogue transmission of Confucian notions of hierarchy within the family on the relationship between states lent itself well to the “strictly regulated, tiered rights, and obligations of members of a large, centralized of community.”¹⁷⁰ The Chinese emperor was the father and ruler, the

166. According to the dating of a bowl from the Changsha production, which was inscribed with the year 826 on the bottom. Cf. Krahl *et al.* 2010: 19–20, 20 (fig.12).

167. Bosworth 1968: vol. 2, 70.

168. Cf. Oláh 2009: 45, 57 *passim*.

169. It was quite common for foreign rulers or private persons to send illegal, so-called “imposter envoys,” to China – even if this phenomenon reached its high tide only in the Ming era with the maritime trade proscription prohibiting all private maritime trade. Foreign rulers often intend to send more envoys than officially permitted by Chinese regulations; private merchants or local rulers, who were not official representatives of a said country, also sought in this way to maintain commercial relations with China – a business that was highly profitable. Cf. for example Hashimoto 2008.

170. See Rosner (1981: 103), who writes: “Like the branches of a large family, who are all related to the head of family in very specific dependencies, and, like the members of a close nuclear family they need to be treated with respect and had to obey firmly established rules. This is how the neighbouring countries, through a chain of rights and obligations, should be connected to China. The explicit reference to the ‘family’ provided the diplomacy of the Emperor with a tool, on the basis of which also states far

ruler of other countries were his sons and subjects. The notion of the extended family was perpetuated for centuries by the Yuan, Ming, and the Manchurian Qing rulers.

We can, however, only speculate how Emperor Dezong may have addressed the caliph of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in his letter. It certainly would not have used the semantics of “ruler and vassal”, or “father and son”. It is more likely that a relationship between brothers¹⁷¹, as in the case between China and the Khitan Liao, was invoked. The ‘Abbāsīds were most likely seen, especially considering the state of diplomatic emergency, as China’s equal partner in the west. The discussions between Li Mi and the Emperor suggest that the Arabs were considered hierarchically equal – just as the Middle Kingdom dominated the East, so ruled the Arabs to the West.

As Christian Schwarz-Schilling has already demonstrated, despite all the official rhetoric in which they represented themselves as the superior ruler of the world, the Chinese were certainly in a position to distinguish between the spheres of morality and ideology and political pragmatism. That is to say, real political power relations were correctly assessed and acted upon accordingly, under the cloak of Chinese supremacy. The Chinese were, to put it in other words, accustomed “to applying double standards when measuring imperial idea [“Reichsidee”] and political practice.”¹⁷² In this respect there is no doubt about the fact that Emperor Dezong and his advisor Li Mi were willing and able, in compliance with the formal moral and ideological criteria for diplomatic relations, to send a request for help to the Arabs.

Concluding Remarks

In Chinese historiography, usually the seven sea expeditions of the Ming period, carried out by the Muslim eunuch, Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–c. 1433), to the “Western Ocean” (i.e. the western Indian Ocean to the coasts of East Africa and the Red Sea) between 1405 to 1433 on commission of the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (Zhu Di 朱棣; 1360–1424; r. 1403–1424), have been praised as an unprecedented heroic endeavour and the first Chinese voyages to cross the entire Indian Ocean.¹⁷³ In China, Zheng He has long been honoured as a folk hero in this context. The stele inscription of Yang Liangyao now suggests that in the second half of the eighth century, and thus about 620 years earlier, a Chinese diplomat – also a eunuch – took the sea route across the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf. Arab and Iranian merchants were already using this sea route fairly regularly during the time period under consideration here, and we know from the description of Jia Dan, that this maritime route was also known in China.

Given the fact that it was only towards the end of the eleventh century that Chinese merchants began actively to sail in greater numbers to Southeast Asia and throughout the Indian Ocean, it is very remarkable to learn that in 785 an official Chinese diplomatic mission chose to take the sea route – a decision that was undoubtedly made against the backdrop of political-military turmoil along the land routes. The envoy probably sailed in an Arabo-Indian vessel, even though lack of evidence prevents us from knowing the exact details.

beyond the scope of power of the empire clustered around the Middle Kingdom like a family of nations [...]” (Translation from German original by Andrew Stonehouse).

171. The Khitan Emperor, given his junior age, was seen as the ‘younger brother’ of the Chinese Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 998–1022).

172. Schwarz-Schilling 2010: 92.

173. Zhang Shimin 2005: 5-6.

As has been shown, Tang China was domestically unstable, especially after the rebellion of An Lushan, the authority of the emperor was injured and weak. Dezong found himself politically and militarily isolated. At the same time, the empire had to resist constant attacks from the neighbouring Tibetan empire. Would it not stand to reason that, in such a time of national crisis the Tang emperor would seek the help of a strong partner to ward off foreign aggression that threatened the position of not just the emperor but also the empire? Especially if one considers that this partner had already helped the Chinese militarily in another crisis not too long ago?

Li Mi, the adviser to the emperor, had crafted a plan to forge a kind of pan-Asian alliance with the Uighurs, the Kingdom of Nanzhao, India, and the Arabs to contain Tibetan aggression. The Arabs, as the “strongest country in the Western Territories”, were crucial to the plan. It appears that, in order to realize this project, a diplomatic mission was sent under the command of Yang Liangyao to the court of the Caliph of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in Baghdād. Depending on when Yang Liangyao arrived, he would have either dealt with al-Hādī (r. 785–786) or with Hārūn al-Rashīd. Considering the length of the sea voyage, he most likely met with the latter or perhaps with both. This Chinese strategy, at any rate, would reflect political foresight on the one hand, and a close, not only economic, relationship between China and the ‘Abbāsīds on the other.

Unfortunately, the absence of other sources means that we cannot draw any further conclusions at the moment, but have to be content with the cautious assumptions offered here. The historical circumstances, however, as we wanted to demonstrate, make his mission very plausible; and the decision to send Yang Liangyao to the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate in order to ask the Arabs for assistance in pushing back the Tibetans would also fit very well into Emperor Dezong’s foreign political strategy. The muteness of the sources concerning this event can probably be traced back to both the, in various respects, politically delicate circumstances when the mission was sent and to the negative image Emperor Dezong had in later historiography – especially in terms of foreign politics.

We hope that in the not too distant future, other sources will be brought to light, be it the tomb inscription (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) of Yang Liangyao, other written sources, or archaeological relics that could allow us to paint a more detailed picture of the background and details about this diplomatic mission.

APPENDIX

**Tomb-passage Stele Inscription of the Former Official Yang
of the Tang(-Dynasty)
(Tang gu Yang fujun shendao zhi bei 唐故楊府君神道之碑)**

Translation

Tomb-passage Stele Inscription of Mr Yang, the Special Commissioner for Rare Matters of the Three Armies to the Right, Superior Grand Master of the Palace, acting as Eunuch Ceremonial Secretary in the Palace Domestic Service, bestowed with the Purple-golden Fish-bag, the Upper Pillar of State, The Dynasty-founding Baron of Hongnong Prefecture, with a land fief of 300 households, who passed away during the Tang dynasty (Introduction).

Composed (撰) by the Gentleman for Court Audiences, acting as Aide in Nankang Prefecture, Commandant of the Fleet-as-clouds Cavalry and Scholar-in waiting of the Hanlin Academy, Lu Pi 陸邳.

Written (書) by the Gentleman for Rendering Service, Military Adjutant acting in Chenzhou, the Commandant of the Fleet-as-clouds Cavalry and Scholar-in waiting of the Hanlin Academy, Zhao Liangyi 趙良裔.¹

Carved by the Supervising Secretary, acting as Hongzhou Area Command and Adjutant in the Military Service Section, the Commandant of the Fleet-as-clouds Cavalry and Scholar-in waiting of the Hanlin Academy, Tang Zhi 湯陟.

Mr Yang had the taboo name (*hui* 諱) Liangyao 良瑤 and the courtesy name (*zi* 字) Liangyao 良瑤. His ancestor was the son of Xuanwang of Zhou 周宣王 (r. 827–782 BC), Shangfu 尚父, who was enfeoffed as Duke of Yang (Yanghou 楊侯). His fief was, however, later destroyed by Duke Xian of Jin 晉獻公 (?–651). Thereafter, many generations abounded in great morality, hence they became a renowned family. For example, [Yang] Wangsun 王孫 was praised for advocating frugal funerals; [Yang Pu 僕]² who was given the title Louchuan [general] (“Towered Warships General”)³ was famous for his great merit; [Yang] Chang 敞 was known as a humble prime minister; [Yang] Xiong 雄 was honoured for his literary contribution of Ci and Fu poetry; [Yang] Zhen 震 [with the

1. It is not indicated whether the sigillary characters of the upper part of the stele were also written or calligraphed by Zhao Liangyi, but probably they were.

2. His name could be reconstructed according to an entry in *Shiji*, 122.3149 (“Biographies of Harsh Officials” 酷吏列傳): “楊僕者，宜陽人也。……南越反，拜為樓船將軍，有功，封將梁侯。Yang Pu, a man from Yiyang. ... When Southern Yue rebelled, he was appointed General of the Towered Ships, had merit, and was enfeoffed as Marquis of Jiangling.” Yang Liangyao is here brought in connection with an illustrious person who was involved in suppressing a rebellion in antiquity. The ancestral line described here has not to be taken for reality. It was common in China since Han times to raise the social status of the deceased by connecting them with famous personalities in the past. And the surname Yang is as frequent in China as Dupont in France, for example. Interesting in our context is the fact that Sima Qian stresses the achievements of Yang Pu in contrast to those of Lu Bode 路博德. While the latter only by sheer coincidence was able to accept the enemies’ surrender by being on the right spot at the right time, the actual achievement lay with Yang Pu who forced the enemies into the hands of Lu’s troops.

3. All the translations of official titles follow Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Taipei: Southern Materials Centre, 1988.

courtesy name] Boqi 伯起 was cautiously practicing the “Four Knowings”⁴ and [Yang Bin 楊秉] [with the courtesy name] Shujie 叔節 was abandoning the “Three Delusions”⁵. Giant birds flocked on the tombs [of the Yangs] and flying sturgeons landed in their lecture halls. Ten men [enjoyed] the red wheel [vehicle for dignitaries] and four generations [held the position of] Defender-in-chief. The glory [of the family] shined through the two Han dynasties, and its richness fostered later descendants. The origins of the family can be traced back to distant times and are glorious and flourishing, therefore the family roots are deep and family branches and leaves are prosperous.

They were respected and prominent [people] in Hongnong, and the [family] clan lived in Tianshui; therefore, the ancestors of the deceased were originally people from Hongnong.⁶ Yang Liangyao's great-grandfather was a general [who counted as one of the] “subjects with first-class merits in the Tang [court under Xuanzong's reign]” (*Tang yuan gongchen* 唐元功臣); he became General of the Cloud-like Flags and Right Awesome Guard and Commandant. He was generously rewarded for [his] great merits and was granted family property in Yunyang 雲陽; this is why the family still lives there today; and they consequently became residents of Jingzhao (peripheral to the capital). [Yang Liangyao's] grandfather, Yang Huaizhen 楊懷貞, held the office as Mounted Escort in Xuzhou 許州 (southeast of Luoyang in present-day's Henan province).⁷ His father, Yang Yanyu 楊彥昱, stayed highly aloof from worldly interests and remained a private scholar living in reclusion and [enjoying life in] gardens. Yang Liangyao was his fourth eldest son.

[The deceased] had a sturdy constitution and a proud appearance, an independent mind, and a generous and lofty character that was different from the contemporary current. In his early age, he took integrity and righteousness as his aspiration for conduct, and when he grew up, he considered loyalty and courage his own responsibility. Therefore, he was able to enter into [the inner palace] as a eunuch, to serve under the jade steps in order to receive imperial graciousness; and to serve as an envoy abroad, holding the celestial order to spread the [imperial] generosity. Repeatedly having been put to the test, with increasing merits, while his loyalty and quality was evidently demonstrated, he was entrusted with increasing missions.

During the Yongtai reign period (765–766), Tashili Jizhang 塌實力繼章, the leader of the local tribe of Langshan (lit. “Wolf Mountain”) from Ci and Xi Prefectures, plundered the population, gathered soldiers and threatened prefectures and counties, disobeying imperial orders and robbing without restraint. [He and his men] slayed and ravished scholars and common people [who lived] in the outskirts of what was [the former state of] Jin [in pre-Qin period], they shocked and frightened the border regions [the former state of] Guo [in pre-Qin period]. At a time when the “Two-Rivers region” was just pacified and the four remote boundaries were still in a shock situation, it was difficult for the royal court to mobilize people, and the emperor for the moment wished to pacify people. Therefore,

4. This means, to know about Heaven, about gods and spirits, about oneself and about the sons/offsprings or intimates. *Hou Hanshu*, 54.1760. According to William Edward Soothill, Lewis Hodou 2005: 179, it refers to “(t)he four who know the workings of one's mind for good or evil – heaven, earth, one's intimates, and oneself”.

5. Cf. *Hou Hanshu*, 54.1759, 1769–1770. This refers to trials or temptations, leakages, uncleanness and bonds. Cf. William Edward Soothill, Lewis Hodou 2005: 65.

6. Cf. *Hou Hanshu*, 54.1759.

7. He held the office of a *biejia* 別駕 in Xuzhou 許州 (southeast of Luoyang in present-day's Henan province). His principal task was to escort imperial regional inspectors (*cishi* 刺史) during their stay in the district.

Liu Chongjin, as Imperial Commissioner, was sent with an imperial order to pacify [those rebels], and Yang Liangyao accompanied him as Administrative Assistant. [But] Chongjin was too scared and weak to step forward; therefore, [Yang Liangyao] bestirred himself to go alone. He mouthed the imperial graciousness and his spirit dwarfed ferocious rebels. Thus, [he] made the celestial majesty defeat their rampancy and imperial generosity flow in their bones and marrows, and all of them crossed their arms and bent their knees [i.e. they were subdued]. Discarding their armours and throwing away their bows, they reformed themselves thoroughly, lowered their heads and accepted the imperial order. After [Yang] had reported the completion of this task, his Majesty had great pleasure and his imperial mind ordered grants to be awarded [to Yang].

Therefore, Yang was entitled Gentleman-litterateur, acting as Work Supervisor in the Office of Female Services in the Palace Domestic Service. From then on, royal favours and kindness were densely accumulated and appointments were frequent. Whenever [Yang] was sent [somewhere] as an envoy, [it was with necessity] a difficult situation; and he never handled those matters improperly. Therefore, wherever it was (lit. East and West, South and North), [Yang] had subsequently hardly time to rest, and he was experienced in all kinds of danger, obstacles, difficulties and crisis.

In the sixth year of Dali (771), he was promoted to Gentleman for Court Discussion and Aide in the Palace Guards Service. He scrupulously abided by his duty and never gave up public obligations. Being received [by his Majesty] three times a day, Yang pledged his one-minded loyalty, be it windy or rainy. His Majesty's mind was never unsatisfied [by Yang's service] and his royal favour was therefore with [him]. When he was entrusted, he never vented his toil, and his heart was determined [as if assisted with] ladders and ships; thus, there was no matter and place, however remote the distance, he would not arrive at and complete. Therefore, he was sent as Pacification Commissioner to Annam 安南 (Jiaozhi 交趾, present-day Vietnam). [This mission] was like seasoning rain and dew on wild lands beyond the borders, and he entrusted loyalty and credit to turbulent waves. Both going and coming were unproblematic, and the expected time for the journey was observed.

He was commissioned to go to Guangzhou. When rebel troops slaughtered the generals and bandits incapacitated the imperial army, Geshu Huang⁸ – with his audacious ambitions – wanted to secure an imperial rank, threatened Yang with a sword and demanded a corresponding official letter. The emperor heard of the proud and unyielding behaviour like a standing mountain of Mr [Yang], whose will and ambitions were not to break. After the matter was resolved, [Yang] returned to the palace and was highly praised for his behaviour. In the 12th year (777), he was promoted to the position of Director of the Palace Guards. The inner court officials were in order and the Forbidden City was purged, owing to Mr Yang's conscientiousness.

Until the end of the Jianzhong era, when the imperial phoenix vehicle moved out [of the palace], [Yang] accompanied the emperor to Fengtian, as diligent, loyal and sacrificing as always.

8. In the year 773, Geshu Huang killed the district councillor of Xunzhou, the military governor of Lingnan, Lü Chongbi (循州刺史哥舒晃殺嶺南節度使呂崇贄). Then, the Tang General Lu Sigong 路嗣恭 (733–803) sent troops who killed more than ten thousand people. It is alleged that Lu Sigong took this opportunity to assassinate foreign merchants and confiscate their possessions (*duo qu nanren jinbao* 多取南人金寶), namely “several million strings of cash each” (*shubaiwan guan* 數百萬貫), as quoted by Sima Guang in his *Kaoyi*-commentary from the “Old Biography of (Lu) Sigong” (*Jiu Sigong zhuan* 舊嗣恭傳). See *Zizhi tongjian* 225.7235.

At the beginning of the Xingyuan era the heavens had yet to remove all of the disasters that transpired; snakes and boars ran crisscrossing around.⁹ The Emperor was anxiously concerned with his people and the Minister had not yet decided on a strategy. [Yang] was moved to tears of gratitude and offered himself as an envoy to the Western Barbarians (Xirong, i.e. the Tibetans). He requested military assistance from the Tibetans and returned, whereupon the latter ultimately blocked the advancing rebel forces. Their army destroyed the bandit groups of Wugong and opened up access to Zhouzhi. They stormed after them like winds and clouds and continued to increase in numbers. Through mountains and rivers they showed them the way to prevent them from becoming surrounded. In the Xingyuan era, he made (this location) his provisional capital and secured himself by the merit of taking the bridge on the Wei-(River). The restoration of the empire to its previous state is all thanks to the efforts of our Mr [Yang] and his request for military support. In the second month of the same year [784] he was appointed Executive Assistant to the Inner Palace Service (*neishi sheng jishi*) and in the sixth month he received the additional title of Steward for the Closing of the Court. These exemplary rapid promotions were the rewards for his efforts.

At the beginning of [the reign period] Zhenyuan [785-804], after the disaster caused by bandits was removed, peace ruled again everywhere under Heaven. Waves no longer rose on the four seas and envoys arrived from afar [literally “nine(fold) interpreters”] to be received in audiences. Earlier, if one had sent a mission to a remote country, [such as under] the Western Han (206 BC to 9 AD), it was difficult to come to an agreement. Today, the Emperor immediately thought of the right person to communicate with other countries. After the talent and skills [of different people] were compared, it was clear that none other than Mr [Yang] was qualified. In the fourth month of the first year [of the reign period] Zhenyuan [i.e. 785], he was awarded the Purple fish bag and commenced the duties of a government envoy to the Abbasid Empire. He was accompanied by administrative assistants and followers and received diplomatic accreditation and decrees. After receiving the commission, he left straight away, with no fear of the long distance. As soon as he reached Nanhai [i.e. Canton], he left the road and boarded a ship.

Although the goal was distant, his expression showed no fear of danger; despite of severity, he was confident of being able to cross [the ocean] safely. His veracity was an inspiration to his subordinates, his loyalty moved spirits and supernatural powers. Consequently, Mr [Yang] cut his hair, made sacrifices to the waves and exhorted his comrades while pointing towards the sun. Thus, Yanghou [i.e. the deity of the waves and surges] soothed the waves, and Pingyi [i.e. the deity of clouds, rain, and thunder] harmonized the winds. The sails were hoisted high in the sky, the rows moved (the ship) with all force forward. Divine lights guided the way by night and supernatural animals led the way by day. Once another year had passed he had already passed tens of thousands of countries. One proclaimed the manners of the Empire among foreign customs so that its prestige would be carried beyond the borders. Outward and return journeys were carried out according to plan, he fulfilled his Heavenly order and the mission was successfully accomplished (lit. did not fail). This, again, brilliantly highlights the loyalty and trust of our Mr [Yang].

9. The expression *sheshi* 蛇豕, which alludes to a passage in *Zuozhuan* 左傳, Dinggong 定公, 4th year (吳為封豕長蛇, 以薦食上國), stands symbolically for persons who intend to murder others in most cruel manners.

In the sixth month of the fourth year [i.e. 788], he was appointed Grand Master of the Palace and in the seventh month as the Founding Baron of Hongnong district. He was gifted with an apanage of 300 households. As his merits became salient, the imperial favour also became great, while overwhelmed by [the imperial favour], [Yang] remained prudent day by day.

In the 12th year [of the Zhenyuan era], Mr Yang was additionally entitled Supreme Grand Master of the Palace (*taizhong dafu*), while other [official duties] remained unchanged. In the spring of the 14th year [of the Zhenyuan era], Emperor Dezong devoutly and reverently showed his solicitude to former emperors' mausoleums. [His majesty] was considering their renovation, but again he had difficulties in selecting a candidate, who would have to be scrupulous, respectful and dutiful [in commitment to his appointed mission]. Only Mr Yang satisfied the imperial requirements, accepted the order and went there. Mornings and nights on duty working, days and months never slacking, Yang violated no classical funeral regulations while saving costs and economizing the labour. [The renovated mausoleums] looked so brilliant and completely new, and the imperial wise agreement [to have Yang appointed] was not perverted. After completion [of the renovation], [in terms of] ranking according to one's merit, Yang was unparalleled. In the eighth month of the same year, he was awarded the Purple-golden fish bag, administrative assistants and attendants. In addition, he was awarded the Green Ribbon, which was exceptional, a token of special imperial favour. After that, the supervision of the funerals of noble lords and princes who enjoyed profound imperial sympathy was necessarily entrusted to Mr [Yang]. As to gold and silks awarded to him for his glory, these are too much to be recorded here.

In the 15th year [of the Zhenyuan era], when the military governor of Chen 陳 and Xu 許, [Qu Huan 曲環], passed away, the rebels [i.e. Wu Shaocheng 吳少誠 (750–810)] of Huaixi 淮西 took this opportunity of turmoil to take action; they plundered Yangdi and attacked Xuchang. People who lived in Ru and Luo were shocked, and the region east of the pass 關東 [i.e. the Hangu Pass 函谷關, in modern Henan] was frightened. All under Heaven was aroused, and 200,000 soldiers were mobilized under the command of Han Quanyi 韓全義 (?–805), who was responsible for military affairs, to [suppress the rebellion]. The country had difficulties to exchange this military leader [who had just been appointed for this job], and critiques knew beforehand that he would inevitably not accomplish anything. When Emperor Dezong [received his ministers and officials for the morning audience], he sighed with his back to the screen, and the tassels of the crown showed his royal concern. [His majesty] wished to pacify [the region with] the ancestral temple in the Eastern capital [i.e. Luoyang] and was concerned about people living in the Heluo region. Therefore he ordered Yang Liangyao to supervise the military affairs in the Eastern capital and its environment as well as those of Ruzhou. When the order became public, three armies increased their efforts (lit. spirits), the odd situation was corrected and people were all at ease. Yang knew that Han Quanyi was incompetent and [that he] had ad hoc summoned troops under his command who were scarcely reliable; the cities in the Huaixi region were small but strong and people from nearby and far away were easy to disturb but difficult to pacify. [Yang], therefore, thought about a far-reaching strategy and applied an unusual tactics.

He sent Dong Weiwu 東惟悟, a lackey¹⁰, and Sun Zhihe 孫志和, a civilian, to infiltrate the group of the rebels and return with observations on loopholes among the rebels. After

10. *Yaya* 押衙: "a categorical designation of non-official hirelings used for menial work in units of territorial administration". According to Hucker, this is a Song position, but, as we see here, it obviously already existed in Tang times (Charles O. Hucker 1988: 576, entry 7873).

then, Yang's detailed plan was recorded in a memorial and sent to the throne, asking to postpone imperial punishment [of suppressing the rebels], allowing them instead to repent their errors. But at that time the imperial authority was a little abated, so that this matter was let rest and not carried out. It was not until Quanyi's death that an imperial order was issued to employ Yang's former strategy. Consequently, imperial mercy was granted and the crimes [of the rebels] were forgiven; the punitive expedition was stopped and people were pacified.

Yang, thus, was prepared for danger in times of peace, he planned for times of fortune while experiencing misfortune, and repeatedly requested to strengthen the city and gather grains, to mend armours and to train soldiers. This simple strategy gradually had effects, not much later, and [first] results were accomplished. Timid and overcautious [soldiers] were turned into brave and strong [ones], the hedge became a fortress. Thereafter far and near were all in peace, prefectures and provinces were safe. All this was due to Yang's tremendous efforts and loyalty and to his management and planning.

In the first year of the Yongzhen [reign period] (805), viewing that all things were settled in peace, with his sincere longing of the palace, Yang begged to return to the court and served in the intimacy of his Majesty. In the fifth month [of the same year], in summer, he was entitled Special Commissioner for Rare Matters of the Three Armies to the Right, in addition to his original official positions.

His Lord has accumulated prestige and achieved outstandingly meritorious deeds ever since. [Thanks to his service], the emperor's road was kept solemnly cleared and both the central state and foreign countries were in joyful admiration [of him]. The thousands of officials, respected him more and more, and the emperor [lit. "the nine heavy (palaces)"], trusted him increasingly. When the sun was rising on the red palatial court, the ministers and officers were standing solemnly [to pay their morning reverence]; when the moon hung still above the clear Forbidden [City], the emperor was at ease. Our dynasty and country received the love of the people, and in this respect it was as popular and flourishing as never before.

Mr Yang, because of personal diligence and toil, became feeble and vulnerable, his vigour depleted and the shape [of his body] melted away. Disease fell [onto him] but doctors and medicines could not help. Although much benevolence has been accumulated, how could his fate be altered? Chills and fever attacked him from inside, while winds and dews oppressed him from outside, [finally he] got so sick that he could not get up. Alas!

On the 21st of seventh month, in autumn, in the first year of the Yuanhe era, [Yang] passed away in his private house in Fuxingli, at the age of seventy-one.

His Majesty was very sorrowful and distressed, literati and common people were mourning in grief. On 14th of the tenth month of the same year, he was buried in his homelands in Longyun Village, Yunyang County, following his own wish before his death.

Mr Yang's second brother, Liangcai 良彩, General of Loyalty and Valiantness, his third brother, Guanghui 光暉, Mobile Corps Commander¹¹, Yang's wife Madam Liu, the Lady of Pengchengjun, had all passed away before him and their tombs were located there. Consequently, the day he was dying he remembered his life-long love and deep longing for them and requested to [be buried with them] in order not to forget them.

Mr [Yang], since he entered in [the palace] as a eunuch in the middle of the Zhide [era] and since he was successfully sent as an envoy in the year Yongtai (765), he daily gained increasing royal favours and gradually was entrusted with more important tasks: out of loyalty and obligation, he cleared up [the problem of the rebellion] in Ci and Xi [Prefectures]; showing braveness and determination, he vanquished Geshu [Huang], asking

11. A prestige title for military officials (Hucker 1988: 584, entry no. 8037).

for relief troops to protect the imperial inspection tour to the south; proclaiming cultivation and education (宣化), he pacified Beihu¹²; sent as envoy to the Arabs (Dashi), he spread the word of the authority [of the emperor] and the civilization [of the Tang] unrestrained everywhere; supervising the Eastern capital and its environments, [he accomplished it] that the people in the regions of Ru and Luo were living in peace and comfort.

[Yang] served four emperors for more than fifty years. Talking about diligence, no one before and after him could compare [with him]; speaking of integrity and grace, no peers could stand in front [of him]. Therefore, land and nobility title were granted [to him], the Golden Belt and the Purple Ribbon were tied [on him]; his position was high and his history glorious, this was celebrated and transmitted to his sons and grandsons.

Furthermore, Mr [Yang] was proud of his loyalty and braveness in his adolescence, and he did his utmost to serve the emperor as an adult. In his later years, he converted to Buddhism, repairing and constructing pagodas and temples, producing copies of sutras, donating gold to purchase farmland, handing out clothes to help curing the diseased. One can say that he fulfilled all possible duties as a royal servant and accomplished all principle causes¹³ from beyond the spheres of life and death. His industrious benevolence grew never tired, even till his toothless days.

Yang's eldest son was named [Yang] Sheng; his adopted son [Ximin], was Gentleman for Discussion, Director of Supervision for the Entertainment of Guests inside the Palace, bestowed with the Purple-golden fish bag, and Representative of the Huaqing Palace; his second son was Cao. [They all] transformed their filial piety into imperial loyalty; glory and brightness caused their moral integrity, respectful services followed former teachings, and this line of thought never ended. As said, fortune and benevolence do not have omens, wind and trees¹⁴ are not just. Sincere feelings were not fulfilled; time jumps through temporal crevice but does not stay. Memory can scarcely catch up [the departed], morality and deeds [of the deceased] are afraid of falling into oblivion; therefore, [the sons] wish to carve this on a pure stone, recording [the deceased's] meritorious deeds. [When the sons] entrusted me to compose this text, how could I dare not to write the facts? The *ming* inscription reads as follows:

The clouds follow the dragon,
the winds follow the warrior;¹⁵
the merits of the ruler become obvious,
a loyal subject supports him.

12. Beihu, an ancient kingdom in the remote south of China, here it refers to Annam, i.e. Vietnam.

13. According to the Buddhist theory of a cyclic existence of human life, once you successfully accomplish all causes, you can be liberated from *Samsāra* (lit. continuous movement), that is, from the repeating cycle of birth, life and death (reincarnation) as well as one's actions and consequences in the past, present, and future.

14. As for the analogy of one's parents' death to trees and wind, please, see 《韓詩外傳》卷九“樹欲靜而風不止，子欲養而親不待”.

15. The passage “The clouds follow the dragon, the winds follow the warrior” (*yun cong long xi feng cong wu* 雲從龍兮風從武) alludes to a passage in *Yijing*, where it says: “Clouds (the breath of heaven) follow the dragon, wind (the breath of earth) follows the tiger. Thus the sage arises, and all creatures follow him with their eyes. What is born of heaven feels related to what is above. What is born of earth feels related to what is below. Each follows its kind.” Translation according to Richard Wilhelm. See *Yijing* 易經 1. (“Qian” 乾): 文言：九五曰：「飛龍在天，利見大人」。何謂也？子曰：「同聲相應，同氣相求。水流濕，火就燥，雲從龍，風從虎，聖人作而萬物覩。本乎天者親上，本乎地者親下，則各從其類也。」 In their modified form, these words serve to accentuate the glory of Yang Liangyao by emphasizing not only his virtue and wisdom, but also the martial element *wu* 武 (instead of “tiger” *hu* 虎, as included in the original).

The heaven-sent lord gave his utmost;
 he served four rulers in the course of four reigns.
 Amongst the many crows of the rooster,
 contemplating wind and rain,
 he challenged himself to the last, exhausting heart and soul.
 He defeated Geshu [Huang] without fear of difficulty;¹⁶
 he pacified Ci and Xi and caused fear
 to the Tibetan thieves.
 In the west he asked for commanders,
 to clean the central region;
 in the south he acted as the emissary (of the emperor),
 to comfort the households in the north.
 He engaged the Arabs and spread
 the word of the authority [of the emperor] far and wide;
 during the inspection of the Ru- and Luo-[Rivers]
 his merits surpassed all that had come before.
 His commitment to quickly solve affairs was without precedent;
 the imperial gifts he received were numerous and priceless.
 He humbly bowed upon his first appointment,
 and bowed deeply upon his third appointment;
 he was virtually worshiped, who would dare mock him!¹⁷
 He was honoured with golden seals, bound with ribbons;
 and was moreover solemnly enfeoffed with land;
 A memorial stone was hewn,
 on which he is praised as a loyal subject;
 to highlight his virtues,
 to instruct his descendants.

Established on the 14th day with the cycle signs Gengshen of the tenth month, with
 the cycle signs Jingxu, of the first year of the Yuanhe [reign] (806) according to the cycle.
 Carved by Zhu Shiliang from Wujun.

16. It is clear that the words “*gang bu tu*” 剛不吐 allude to a passage in *Shiing* 詩經, Song 260 (“Zheng min” 烝民), that praises the virtues of Zhong Shanfu 仲山甫: 人亦有言、柔則茹之、剛則吐之。維仲山甫、柔亦不茹、剛亦不吐、不侮矜寡、不畏疆禦。“While the soft is easily stomached, everyone wants to purge the hard. But Zhong Shanfu does not swallow the soft, nor does he shy away from the hard. He offends no widows and widowers, and has no fear of tyrants.”

17. This characterization of Yang Liangyao refers to an eulogy on an ancestor of Confucius (551–479 BC) transmitted in *Zuozhuan* 左傳, Duke Zhao, Year 7, 9th month (with a parallel in *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 11.1, “Guan Zhou” 觀周): 及正考父, 佐戴、武、宣, 三命茲益共。故其鼎銘云: 『一命而僂, 再命而傴, 三命而俯, 循牆而走, 亦莫余敢侮。饁於是, 鬻於是, 以餬余口。』其共也如是。[Then] there was Zheng Kaofu who served [the dukes] Dai, Wu, and Xuan. Three times he received a baronial appointment, and with every step his humility increased. Hence, the inscription on the tripod [in his ancestral temple] said, “When he received his first appointment, he walked with his head bowed down. When he received the second appointment, he walked with his shoulders bent; when he received the third appointment, he walked with his whole body bent. In this way he hurried along the walls, [saying to himself], “Thus no one will presume to despise me. I will have congee in this [boiler]; I will have gruel in this [boiler], to satisfy my hunger (see the prolegomena to vol. IV, par. 18). Such was his humility”.

Chinese text

唐故楊府君神道之碑

唐故右三軍辟仗太中大夫行內侍省內給事賜紫金魚袋上柱國弘農縣開國男食邑三百戶楊公神道碑銘並序[1]

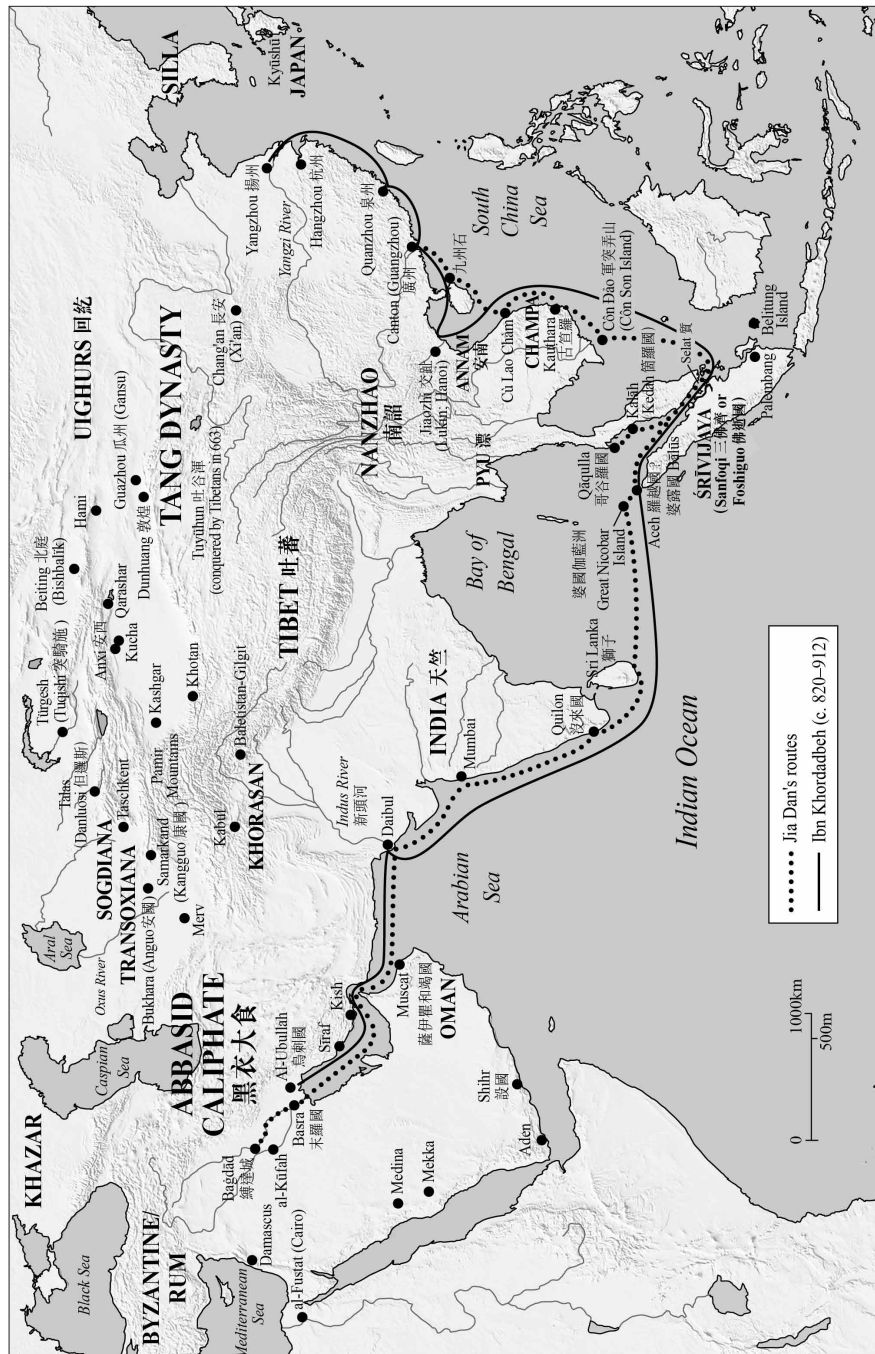
朝請郎行南康縣丞雲騎尉翰林待詔陸邕撰承務郎守郴州司兵參軍雲騎尉翰林待詔趙良裔書給事郎守洪州都督府兵曹參軍雲騎尉翰林待詔湯涉篆額[2]

公諱良瑤字良瑤其先周宣王子尚父受封諸陽實曰楊侯晉滅其國因以為氏厥后代濟助德遂為名家至若王孫以薄葬稱樓船以大功命敵因謙畏為相雄由辭賦榮名洎乎伯起之[3]慎四知叔節之去三惑大鳥集於葬墓飛鱣降於講堂或朱輪十人或太尉四代光照兩漢裕垂後昆氏族源流遠矣盛矣於是根蒂旁薄枝葉蕃昌有望表弘農有族居天水則公之先代本弘農[4]人也及公曾祖為唐元功臣官至雲麾將軍右威衛中郎將以功多賞厚賜業雲陽至今家焉遂為京兆人矣祖懷貞皇許州別駕考彥昱處士高標世利處士園林公即[5]處士之第四子也公質狀殊觀心靈獨立氣概感激懣於時流少以節義為志行長以忠勇為己任故得入為內養侍玉墀以承恩出使外方將天命而布澤累經試效益著功勞誠素既彰[6]委任方重當永泰中慈隰等州狼山部落首領塌實力繼章掠眾聚兵逼齊州縣不顧王命恣行剽掠度劉晉郊之士庶震駭號略之封疆于時兩河初平四遠猶聳朝廷難於動眾[7]皇上姑務安人遂遣中使劉崇進銜命招撫以公為判官崇進畏懦而莫前公乃憤發而獨往口宣恩德氣激凶頑遂使天威挫其鋒芒皇澤流其骨髓莫不交臂[8]屈膝棄甲投弓革面回心稽顙受詔既而復命闕下大愜聖衷有詔賜祿仍授文林郎行內侍省掖庭局監作由是恩顧稠疊委任頻繁奉使必適於所[9]難臨事未嘗有不當是用東西南北匪遑止寧險阻艱危備嘗之矣大歷六年加朝議郎宮闈局丞守職不渝在公無替晝日三接風雨一心天顏不違聖眷斯至當信重[10]之際罔敢告勞安梯航之心何遠不屆遂奉使安南宣慰降雨露於荒外委忠信於洪波往返無疑匪償程度復命至於廣府會叛軍煞將凶徒阻兵哥舒晃因縱狼心將邀[11]王命承公以劍求表上聞公山立嶷然不可奪志事解歸闕時望翕然至十二年遷宮闈令內官式敘中禁肅清由公是拜也洎建中末遇鸞輿順動隨[12]駕奉天勤勞匪躬始終一致興元初天未悔禍蛇豕橫塗皇上軫念於蒼生臣下未遑於定策公乃感激出涕請使西戎乞師而旋遮寇以進覆武功之群盜清罄屋之前途風[13]雲奔從而遂多山川指程而無擁興元既得以駐蹕渭橋因得以立功再造寰區不改舊物翳我公乞師之力也其年二月遷內侍省內給事六月加朝散大夫此例驟遷蓋賞勞矣貞[14]元初既清寇難天下又安四海無波九譯入覲昔使絕域西漢難其選今通區外皇上思其人比才類能非公莫可以貞元元年四月賜緋魚袋充聘國使於黑衣大食備判官內[15]兼受國信詔書奉命遂行不畏厥遠屆乎南海舍陸登舟邈爾無憚險之容慄然有必濟之色義激左右忠感鬼神公於是剪髮祭波指日誓眾遂得陽侯斂浪屏翳[16]調風掛帆凌汗漫之空舉棹乘顛淼之氣黑夜則神燈表路白晝乃仙獸前驅星霜再周經過萬國播皇風於異俗被聲教於無垠往返如期成命不墜斯又[17]我公仗忠信之明効也四年六月轉中大夫七月封弘農縣開國男食邑三百戶功績既著恩寵亦崇若驚之心日慎一日十二年加太中大夫餘如故十四年春[18]德宗度虔孝思陵寢是恤將復修葺再難其人必求恪恭祇奉於事唯公愜旨受命而行夙夜在公日月匪懈不改經制惜費省勞煥乎咸新無乖奢約及乎[19]卒事議功莫儔以其年八月賜紫金魚袋判兼等并加綠綬非例也特恩及之其后貴主親王監護喪葬聖情念切者必委於公至於以榮更賜金帛紛綸不可[20]備記矣十五年陳許節使云已淮西承襲而動剽掠陽翟攻逼許昌汝洛驚惶關東大恐天下激發二十萬師韓全義統之且撓戎律國家難於易帥議者知必無功時[21]德宗皇帝負辰興嘆凝旒軫慮思安東都宗廟念濟洛蒼生是用命公監東都畿汝州軍事聞命而三軍增氣戾正而百姓咸寧公知韓全義無才烏合眾難用[22]淮西城小而固遐邇易動難安遂思遠圖獨出奇策使押衙東惟悟孫白身志和深覘寇情觀釁而返乃具所謀畫遽獻表章請緩天誅許其悔過當皇威未霽事寢莫行及[23]全義大崩詔用前計遂申恩舍罪罷討息人公乃居安慮危處否思泰復請完城聚谷繕甲

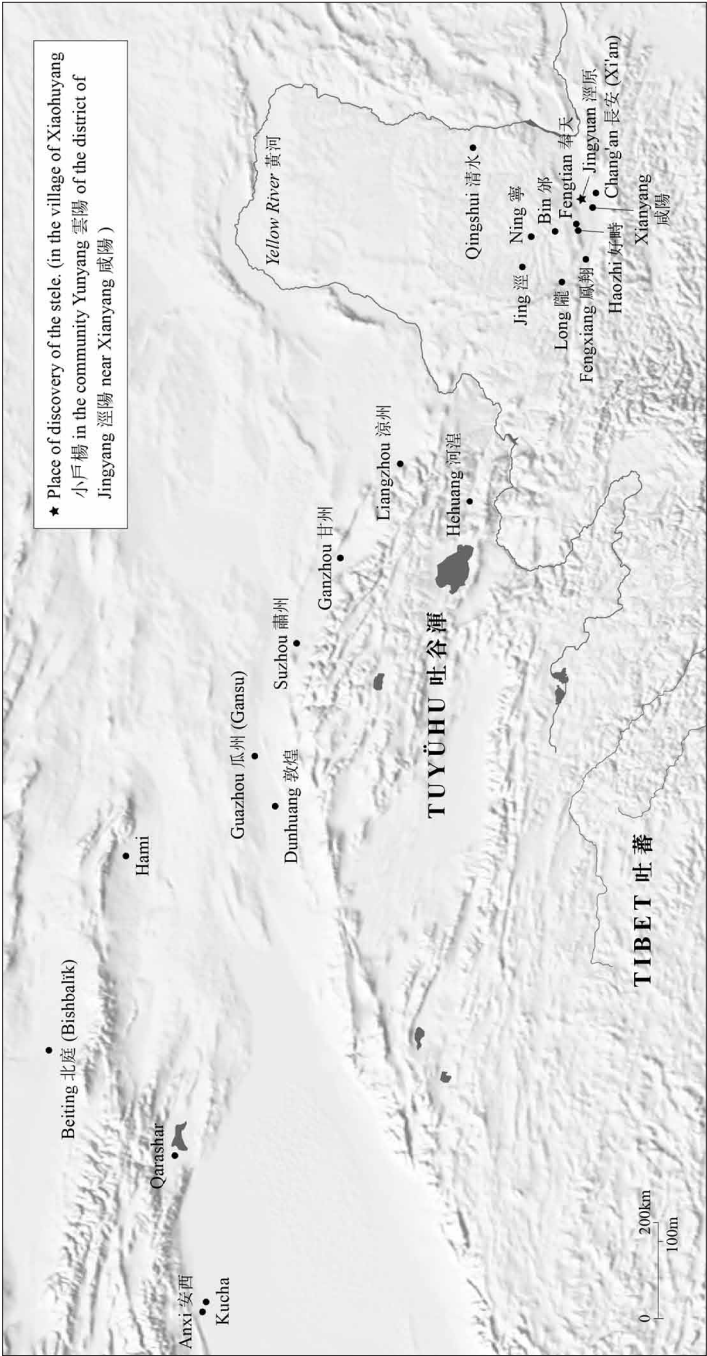
理兵用簡易而漸謀不日月而功就化怯懦為勇健 變藩籬為金湯於是遠[24]近獲安道路斯泰皆公之盡力竭忠經略所致也至永貞元年以事既寧輯戀闕誠深懇請歸朝供侍近密夏五月本官領右三軍僻仗公素積威望久著勛庸[25]警蹕誠嚴中外悅服千官以之加敬九重以之益深日出彤庭而臣下朝肅月固清禁而天子夜安國朝之環拱得人心於斯為盛公以躬勤之故衰朽易侵心神[26]耗消體貌癯瘠疾生而醫藥不救善積而命運奈何寒熱內攻風露外迫遂至不起嗚呼痛哉以元和元年秋七月廿一終於輔興裡之私第享年七十有一[27]皇上軫悼士庶同悲以其年十月十四日歸葬於雲陽縣龍雲鄉之原順其先志蓋以公之仲弟忠武將軍良彩季弟游擊將軍光暉夫人彭城郡君劉氏皆先公而終墳墓所在則臨終之[28]日思及平生友愛念深遺命不忘之故也公自至德年中人為內養 永泰之歲出使有功恩渥日深委信漸重至若震忠義以清慈隰明勇決以伏哥舒乞師護於南巡 宣化安於北戶使[29]大食而聲教旁暢監東畿而汝洛小康供奉四朝五十餘載議勤勞而前后無比論渥澤而流輩莫先故得祚土分茅紆金拖紫名高史冊慶傳子孫況公壯年以忠勇自負[30]長歲以盡瘁勤王及乎晚途歸信釋氏修建塔廟繕寫藏經布金買田舍衣救病可謂竭臣子人間之禮 盡生死區外之因 孜孜善心沒齒無倦矣長子升嗣子承議郎內侍省內掖者監賜紫金魚袋[31]華清宮使希旻次子操移孝為忠光昭令德祇奉前訓罔極是思謂福善無征風樹不正誠感未達隙駒莫留想像既難於攀追德業實懼於湮沒 願琢貞石紀勒芳猷見托為文敢不書實銘曰[32]

雲從龍兮風從武聖功出兮忠臣輔天降公兮竭心府歷四紀兮奉四主雞常鳴兮忘風雨躬盡瘁兮心神苦伏哥舒兮罰不吐撫慈[33]隰兮懲戎虜西乞師兮清中宇南奉使兮慰北戶聘大食兮聲教普監汝洛兮勛超古校切業兮無儔伍賜賚繁兮莫得數一命僕兮三命俯恩彌崇兮孰敢侮[34]垂金章兮結綬組既分茅兮亦祚土琢貞石兮表忠臣昭令德兮示后人[35]

元和元年歲次景戌十月庚申朔十四日癸酉建吳郡朱士良刻字[36]



Map 1
Reconstruction of Jia Dan's sea route description from Guangzhou to Baghdād
(map drawn by Inspiration Design House, Hong Kong).



Map 2
Northwest China, Chinese-Tibetan border region and parts of Inner Asia
(map drawn by Inspiration Design House, Hong Kong).



Fig. 1

Estampage of the Stele Inscription of the Former Official Yang.
(A larger, folding version of this image is attached to the back cover of this volume.)



Fig. 2
The stele with the inscription of the Former Official Yang.

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