

SASANIAN OVERTURES TO CHINA

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

Yazdegard appealed to the Turkish *khaqan*, the king of Sogdia, and the emperor of China for help, but in 651 he was killed by a miller at Marw. The royal family and a number of Iranian nobles then went to China.

As Patricia Ceone comments, “China was not quite to distant a place as we might think” today. She provides the following facts to substantiate her statement, providing references for each of them.¹

The Sasanians knew of China about two centuries before the Arab invasion because of its expansionist policy in Central Asia, and there were many diplomatic exchanges between the two empires. Yazdegerd II and the emperor of the Wei dynasty had exchanged delegates in 455. Kavadh had sent an embassy to China circa 518, apparently bring Zoroastrianism along with it as the empress dowager Ling is said to have been impressed by it. Khusraw I sent two embassies to China in 553 and 555 respectively, and the Chinese reciprocated by sending several, one of them to Khusro II. They also prepared a report on Po-szu (Persia) to familiarise themselves with Persia and Persian affairs. By then there was also a strong Iranian presence in China with the Sogdians dominating the overland trade between Iran and China, as well as inside China itself. Described as Hu (Westerners) by the Chinese, these Zoroastrians also brought with them their 'Heaven-God (Ahuramezda) who was exempted from being branded as a heretical cult by about 500 and was approved again in the 570's, but not for the Chinese, who were not permitted to use the Hu places of worship. A bureau for the Cultic affairs of the Hu was set by Chinese authorities and it existed with some reduction in 713 down to 845. The official history of the Tang reports that one thousand dogs devoured the dead bodies of the Zoroastrians in the outskirts of Taiyuan. The Chinese also found it fit to write several accounts of the religious beliefs and behaviour of the Hu, and made some artistic representations of them.

Yazdegerd III had sent an envoy to China asking help against the invaders in 638, after his first defeat by the Arabs; but in vain. His son Peroz settled among the Turks, took a local wife, and received troops from the king of Tukharistan (ancient Bactria). In 661 he established himself with Chinese help as king of Po-szu (Persia) in a place which the Chinese called Jiling (Chi-ling) and which is supposed to be Zaranj in Sistan. His campaigns are mentioned in Muslim sources

1 Crone P. *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran : Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2013, p. 3.

which mention revolts in Zaranj, Balkh, Badghis, Herat, and Bushani and also in Khurasan, during the First Civil War, during 656 to 661 and 661-80. They do not mention Peroz himself, but they report that governors of the Sasanian king had come to Khurasan from Kabul and that the Khurasanis had rebelled. Peroz's comeback cannot have been entirely insignificant then, though Khurasan was reconquered by the Arabs. Peroz went to Changan, the capital of the Tang empire, where they gave him permission to build a fire-temple in 677.

Peroz had a son called Ni-li-shih, Narsai. He went to Central Asia in 679, accompanied by a Chinese 'Ambassador for Pacifying the Arab States', and stayed for twenty years in Tukharistan without accomplishing anything at all. Eventually he returned to Changan. "The Arabs seem to have confused him with Peroz himself.

Later they refer to Peroz's grandson, Khusro appearing among the Turks at Kamarja in 728 and telling them that he had come to restore his kingdom. But in 730 and 737 the same Khusraw is depicted in the Chinese sources ascending up in Changan. This was the last attempt at a comeback by the Sasanians.

Someone who called himself king of Persia dispatched embassies to China in 722 and 732. In 744 and 746 the Chinese received envoys from two rulers of Tabaristan on behalf of eight kingdoms on the Caspian coast. But in 751 the Chinese themselves were defeated by the Muslims at Talas, and as we have already noted in 755 the Tang empire was shaken to its foundations by the revolt of An-Lushan, or Rokhshan, a Sogdian general in the Chinese army. Some of the refugees from the Sasanian empire are said to have been recruited into an army formed to fight him. Thus Iranians briefly played a major role in military as well as commercial spheres of China. Yet another came to the China embassy from Tabaristan in 755, but the 'Abbasids soon conquered Tabaristan. In 845 there was a backlash against foreigners in China when practising any foreign religion was prohibited. However, the Iranians appear to have kept at least some of their fire-temples. In circa 872 an Iranian aristocrat of the well-known Suren clan buried his daughter or wife near Changan and placed a bilingual inscription in Chinese and Middle Persian over her grave. According to the inscription he was a commander in the 'Left Divine Strategy Army' and that his wife or daughter had died at the age of twenty-six. There is no record of the Persian refugees in China since then.

The Sogdians had colonies in Mongolia and China, because they dominated the trade along the Silk Road even after the coming of the Arabs. Sogdian was the *lingua franca* along the Silk Road, just as Persian was the *lingua franca* of the southern seas. One Sogdian lost his favoured position in the Turkish army in 713 and fled to China, where his son, better known as An-Lushan, raised a revolt in 755-63 which

affected the Tang dynasty much more adversely than the Arabs defeating the Chinese at Talas in 751 in the opinion of Crone.

There were numerous fire-temples in China in the seventh and eighth centuries which were served by Magi (Mu-hu), i.e. Zoroastrian priests. The Chinese called them Hu who were associated with spirit possession and illusion tricks and in Tang tales the Hu trader is often an alchemist and magician. Even in the first century BC a Chinese writer had observed that the Transoxanians were experts at conjuring. Crone provides some colourful descriptions (p. 101).