THE UIGHUR-CHINESE CONFLICT OF 840–848

Michael R. Drompp

A long history of the frequent—and often overwhelming—military victories of Inner Asian peoples in their wars of conquest has perhaps obscured the fact that at times the nomads of the Inner Asian steppe battled without success. Such conflicts could include failed efforts at expansion of power or defensive wars; they could even include warfare provoked by desperation. This article considers an example of the latter, a case in which large bands of Inner Asian refugees, fleeing from the destruction of their state, were forced into a series of difficult negotiations and sometimes violent confrontations with China that ultimately led to their disappearance.

The Turkic-speaking Uighurs (Chinese Huihe, Huihu) began their domination of the Mongolian Plateau and its environs in 744, when they were part of a coalition that overthrew the imperium of their ethnic cousins, the Türks (Chinese Tujue). The Uighurs replaced the Türks as the supreme power on the eastern steppe, and used their strength to overawe and exploit their neighbors, both nomadic and sedentary, when possible. Uighur relations with China—of paramount importance to both states—were unusual. This was primarily due to the fact that shortly after the rise of the Uighurs, China's Tang dynasty (618–907) was nearly toppled by a rebellion that originated within its own military. The rebellion of An Lushan, which began in 755, unleashed such violence on the Tang government that the Tang court was forced to seek foreign assistance for its very survival. Such assistance came from the Uighurs, who sent cavalry to China and aided in quashing the rebellion.

After this, the Uighurs enjoyed both a military and a moral advantage in regard to China. Tang weakness had been revealed in the An Lushan Rebellion; although the dynasty survived the rebellion, it never regained the grandeur it had enjoyed in earlier years. Once a dynamic and expansionist power, the Tang dynasty after the mid-eighth century was diminished and fragmented. Although still a large and formidable nation, Tang China was less confident in its dealings with foreign powers than it had been prior to the rebellion, and

less interested in attempting to extend its power. In addition, the Uighurs had performed a great service to the Chinese emperor. As a result, the Tang court felt obliged to offer them privileges not normally accorded to a foreign state, particularly a system of trade (Uighur horses for Chinese silk) that was particularly advantageous to the nomads, as well as a number of marriages between Uighur rulers and princesses of the Tang imperial house of Li.[1]

As a result of their special situation, the Uighurs were able to exploit Chinese wealth while maintaining relatively friendly relations with the Tang government, despite some periods of tension. They also took advantage of their privileged position to act as patrons and protectors of the Manichaean religion—the faith transmitted by Sogdians and other Central Asians that had been adopted by many Uighur elites—within China.[2] The Chinese deeply resented Uighur religious interference and economic exploitation, but found it difficult to refuse Uighur demands. As for the Uighurs, the large amount of Chinese silk that entered their land resulted in an accumulation of wealth that had been unparalleled in earlier nomadic empires. While the Chinese regarded the Uighurs as unwelcome parasites (even though China seems to have needed horses from them as well as other suppliers), the Uighurs themselves enjoyed their relationship with China, as it benefited them enormously. Chinese silk augmented the Uighur economy; Chinese princesses and imperial appointments increased Uighur political prestige.

Despite these extraordinary advantages, Uighur power eventually began to wane. An important subject people, the Turkic-speaking Kirghiz (Chinese Xiajiasi, etc.), had rebelled against Uighur rule around 820, and this rebellion developed into a protracted war. In the 830s, vicious internecine strife among the Uighur ruling elite fur-

---

[1] On this trade, see Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Impact of the Horse and Silk Trade on the Economies of T'ang China and the Uighur Empire: On the Importance of International Commerce in the Early Middle Ages," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 34 (1991), pp. 183–198. On Tang-Uighur marriage politics, see Pan Yihong, "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses in International Politics from Han through T'ang," *Asia Major*, 3rd Series, Vol. 10, Parts 1–2 (1997), pp. 118–122. For an overview of Tang-Uighur relations, see Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations, 744–840* (Columbia, 1973), pp. 14–50.

[2] On Manichaeism in the Uighur empire and Tang China, see Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 189–198.

ther enfeebled the court. In 840, after a very harsh winter, famine and pestilence weakened the Uighur government to the point that the Kirghiz, aided by a disgruntled Uighur general, attacked the Uighur capital on the Orkhon River, assassinated the Uighur ruler (*qaghan*), and brought the Uighur steppe empire to an end. Many Uighurs were unwilling to come under the rule of the victorious Kirghiz, and fled from the rout.[3] While groups of Uighurs migrated in several different directions away from their former realm, it is those Uighurs who fled south to the Tang border that will claim our attention here.

As has been noted, Tang China in the mid-ninth century was no longer the robust empire that its founders had created and expanded. After having survived the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang dynasty had maintained its rule and even flourished, but never recaptured the position of overweening power in East and Central Asia that it had enjoyed under earlier emperors. By 840, Tang China found itself still important but seriously weakened—and with many neighbors, including the Uighurs, ready to take advantage of that weakness. Tang power was further compromised by the post-An Lushan autonomy of many regions which had been part of the Tang empire. Not only had some territory (such as the Tarim Basin) been completely lost, but other regions within China proper had asserted a degree of independence that deprived the Tang central government of their tax revenues and, at times, of their political and military cooperation.[4]

When the presence of the Uighur refugees at the northern border was first made known, the Tang court at Chang'an certainly was aware of its own weakness in that region. The northern tier of provinces included three under direct Tang control; going from west to east, these were Fengzhou (to the west of which was territory controlled by the Tibetans), Zhenwu, and Hedong. East of Hedong was

---

[3] On the collapse of the Uighur steppe empire, see Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* (Beijing, 1956), ch. 246, pp. 7942 and 7946–7947; see also Liu Xiu et al., *Jiu Tang shu* (Beijing, 1975), ch. 195, pp. 5213–5214 and Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tang shu* (Beijing, 1975), ch. 217b, pp. 6130–6131 and 6149–6150. Some of this material has been translated in Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire*, pp. 122–125.

[4] See Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "The An Lu-shan Rebellion and the Origins of Chronic Militarism in Late T'ang China,"*Essays on T'ang Society: The Interplay of Social, Political and Economic Forces*, ed. John Curtis Perry and Bardwell L. Smith (Leiden, 1976), pp. 32–60; see also C.A. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 464–560.

Youzhou, an essentially autonomous province under the control of a military governor. To the east, Youzhou bordered on Korea and the ocean, and on its northern marches were important nomadic peoples such as the Khitans (Chinese Qidan), Tatabï (Chinese Xi), and Shiwei—all of whom had been vassals of the once-powerful Uighur empire.

The Chinese, long inattentive to events within the Uighur empire, were thus caught unawares when, in the autumn of 840, Uighur refugees suddenly arrived at the northern border near the city of Tiande, on the north bank of the great bend of the Yellow River in northern Fengzhou. The first of two major refugee groups to arrive was a band led by several Uighur aristocrats, the most important of whom was Ormïzt (Chinese Womosi), a prince (*tegin*) who reportedly was the brother of the murdered Uighur ruler.[5] The number of Uighurs in this group is not given in any source, but evidence given below would suggest that it contained significantly more than 30,000 people.

Although Tang border officials were agitated by the sudden appearance of these Uighurs, no serious hostilities erupted. Indeed, Ormïzt Tegin and his followers requested asylum from the Chinese. Their submissiveness was of course due to their difficult position. Not only had their state been uprooted, but the Uighurs were now fragmented, with no recognized leadership. Groups of Uighurs had gone east and west as well as south; some may have remained on the Mongolian Plateau. The danger of Kirghiz pursuit of these refugees could not have been discounted, and might indeed have been expected. Further, the factionalism that had plagued the Uighur court had resulted in enmities within that nation, so that Ormïzt also feared rival leaders. His submissiveness in regard to China is therefore not surprising; entering China would mean escape from other, apparently more dangerous, enemies, as well as the opportunity to obtain needed provisions.

Despite the apparent peaceableness of the Uighur arrivals, the Tang court began to prepare for the eventuality of hostilities. Although they by no means comprised the bulk of the Uighur nation, Ormïzt and his followers nonetheless represented a significant threat to the Tang border defenses, which were generally weak and unprepared

---

[5] See Michael R. Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü as Sources for the History of T'ang-Inner Asian Relations" (diss., Indiana University, 1986), p. 13. See also Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7947.

for a major conflict. Emperor Wuzong (r. 840–846), who had recently ascended the throne, ordered Liu Mian (782–846), military governor of Zhenwu and a seasoned border general, to advance his troops northward and make ready for a possible Uighur attack, but no such attack came. Instead, the Uighurs withdrew slightly from the border, and Liu Mian was ordered to return to his garrison.[6] The border situation remained uncertain for several months.

In the spring of 841, the Chinese court issued a letter of imperial decree to the "rebellious" Uighurs who had appeared at their border, chastising them for disturbing the frontier and accusing them of ruining the amicable relationship that had existed between the two peoples. It then urged them to hurry back to their homeland and help to bring about its recovery. Nevertheless, the letter also announced that despite some skirmishes that had occurred at the border (clearly identified as having been caused by Uighur raids to obtain provisions), the Tang government had ordered all its border garrisons not to engage in battle with the Uighurs—that is, not to initiate conflict.[7] This may have been more out of fear than compassion, for China had long neglected its border defences due to the great expenses involved and the relatively good relations with the Uighurs. The general unpreparedness of the northern defences was clear to Wuzong's chief minister Li Deyu (787–850), the man who oversaw the handling of the entire Uighur crisis.

The Uighurs responded with a letter, no longer extant, informing the Chinese of the circumstances surrounding their flight to the Tang border and formally requesting asylum. Although the Chinese response was sympathetic, it nevertheless continued to urge the Uighurs to return home. The court asked for clarification of the Uighurs' desires and plans, and hinted briefly but darkly of Chinese border officials who might not act in accordance with the Tang court's wishes.[8] Indeed, many Tang officials, both at the court and at the border, urged an attack on the refugees, but Li Deyu denounced such suggestions. Citing their previous merit during the An Lushan Rebellion, their current distress, and the restraint they had shown thus far at the border, he encouraged the emperor to send envoys to pacify

---

[6] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, pp. 7947–7948.

[7] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji* (Shanghai, 1936), ch. 5, p. 33. An English translation of this and all other documents from this source mentioned herein may be found in Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü."

[8] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 5, pp. 33–34.

the Uighurs and transport provisions to them. "Now, a poor bird has flown into our bosom," he said, "and we must still be compassionate."[9] Li also pointed out that the troops at many border posts were currently inadequate for resisting an Uighur attack, and urged the emperor to strengthen defences there. Still, Li made it clear that he preferred peace to war, compassion to belligerence.[10]

On the other hand, Li Deyu continued to resist the demands for asylum that were made by the Uighurs under Ormïzt Tegin. Li wanted the Uighurs to leave the border and return to their homeland if at all possible. This could reflect both his understanding that large non-Chinese populations could cause trouble when settled within China (as, for example, the Türks had done earlier in the dynasty's history) and his desire not to give refuge to someone who might be fleeing from a much stronger power—a power that might be willing to raid China to recover the refugees. The Tang government had no intelligence concerning Kirghiz numbers or movements at this time.

The Tang court's next edict to the Uighurs stated that Chinese assistance was limited, and would not continue beyond what had already been allocated (the extent of which is not known); furthermore, it refused the Uighurs' request for armor and weapons, and again urged them to leave the border and return to the steppe.[11] This request for armor and weapons is interesting; the Uighur refugees surely did not make it in the hopes of using them to recover their old realm from the Kirghiz, but rather in an effort to protect themselves from hostile tribes at the border—tribes such as Tanguts (Chinese Dangxiang), Tuyuhun, and Shatuo which resided at the Chinese northern border under Tang "loose-rein" (*jimi*) control[12]—or even rival Uighur groups or raiding Kirghiz.

With the approach of winter, the Tang court eventually relented and sent a large quantity of grain to the Uighur refugees. Li Deyu encouraged this generosity, as much from concern about possible Uighur raids precipitated by hunger as from Confucian concern for

---

[9] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, p. 101.

[10] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, pp. 7952–7953; Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, pp. 101–102.

[11] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 5, pp. 34–35.

[12] On the Tang *jimi* system, see Pan Yihong, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and Its Neighbors* (Bellingham, 1997), pp. 197–203.

virtuous behavior. The border was still unprepared for war; Tiande was still weak, and the Uighurs were hungry. Li convinced the emperor that giving the Uighurs provisions was far preferable to the loss of a border garrison. At the same time, he encouraged the emperor to transfer troops to the north and to restore the combat readiness of the garrisons there in case a conflict should arise.[13]

In January 842 the situation was further complicated by the arrival in China of an envoy representing a man who claimed the rulership of the Uighur nation and led his own group of Uighur refugees. This new claimant to the Uighur throne, Ögä (Chinese Wujie) Qaghan, also had with him the Taihe Princess—Emperor Wuzong's paternal aunt, who had been sent to the Uighur capital in 821 to wed the ruler, and had remained as *qatun* (queen) under successive Uighur rulers. Ögä made several requests: to be officially recognized as the legitimate Uighur *qaghan*, to be given guarantees for the security of Manichaean churches within China, to be granted provisions as well as troops to aid him in the recovery of the Uighur realm, and finally to be given the Chinese garrison town of Tiande, near his encampment, as a temporary residence. The Chinese agreed to the request for grain—possibly the same grain that had been earmarked for Ormïzt's group—and to the assurances regarding Manichaeans in China. The Tang court also attempted an imperial appointment for Ögä, but this proved unfeasible due to the instability of the border situation. The court refused the other requests. In an effort to reduce the new *qaghan*'s leverage, the court also made a rather transparent (and unsuccessful) effort to get Ögä to send the Taihe Princess to Chang'an.[14]

Ögä Qaghan did not, however, see himself as a suppliant in the same way that Ormïzt Tegin did. Indeed, he seems to have regarded his position as one from which he could make demands—some of which, such as the request for a border town, were unprecedented. It was this belief in his own position of strength, or perhaps the political necessity of acting as if he were in a position of strength, that ultimately led Ögä into conflict with the Tang government.

---

[13] Sima Kuang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, pp. 7954–7955; Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, pp. 102–103. Note that Li Deyu also feared the possibility of a Tibetan attack on Fengzhou.

[14] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 3, pp. 13–14 and ch. 5, pp. 29–30. See also the information in Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü," pp. 37–56.

Further, Ögä and Ormïzt were rivals—not for position, since Ormïzt never claimed the throne, but as leaders of rival factions in the Uighur court struggles.[15]

It would seem that the *qaghan* was following an aggressive strategy of bluster. His stance was not entirely unsupported, since he had with him the Chinese emperor's aunt as hostage as well as troops which far outnumbered those in any garrison in northern Fengzhou, Zhenwu, or Hedong; Chinese sources estimate his followers at this time at approximately 100,000 persons—a far from insignificant presence.[16] Ögä's purpose in pursuing this strategy seems to have been to maintain his autonomy in order to see what kind of arrangements he could work out with the Chinese and with other nomadic groups in the area. He may have been hoping to assemble enough troops and supplies to repulse the Kirghiz and reestablish Uighur rule on the Mongolian Plateau, although his request for Chinese troops to assist him in this enterprise seems both bold and ambitious. Before he could do anything in this regard, he needed time to recover and regroup. Tang imperial recognition of his position as *qaghan* would bolster his legitimacy. Provisions were crucial to his immediate survival. As for the city of Tiande, it must be recalled that many among the Uighur elite had become sedentarized to a significant degree.[17] Ögä would have been accustomed to city life, and may well have felt that such an arrangement would offer him much-needed protection should the Kirghiz be in pursuit. Unlike Ormïzt, however, he did not wish to submit to Chinese rule. He wanted to be regarded by the Chinese as a sovereign ruler.

There were now two major groups of Uighurs near the Chinese border, as well as smaller bands and splinters from the larger groups, creating a confusing and potentially volatile situation. Ormïzt Tegin continued to press his case for asylum, and this was finally granted. On 2 June 842, he and his followers submitted formally at Tiande. Ormïzt and his most important followers were granted titles and positions. Although we do not know the exact number of Uighurs in this group, it must have been significant, as the number of officers

---

[15] On the relationship and rivalry between Ögä Qaghan and Ormïzt Tegin, see Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü," pp. 12–13.

[16] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7962. The original number of Ögä's followers at the Chinese border may have been larger, since Sima Guang referred to that group as "diminished and weakened" when he gave their number as 100,000.

[17] See Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire*, pp. 12–14.

alone was given as more than 2,600. The emperor then granted the submitted Uighur leaders grain, silks, and silver implements. More important, the submitted Uighurs were now designated as the "Return to Righteousness" (*Guiyi*) Army, and thereby incorporated into the Tang military structure. Ormïzt, who was granted the imperial surname of Li and the name Sizhong ("Loyal Thoughts"), was settled with his followers at the frontier, their families supported by government funds.[18]

Ögä's response to these events is unrecorded, but he must have been displeased at the Tang decision to grant asylum to Ormïzt and his followers—people who should have been the *qaghan*'s subjects. He soon requested that Ormïzt be turned over to him, as well as asking for more grain, livestock (cattle and sheep), and more guarantees for Manichaeans in China. All these requests were refused, although the Tang court ungenerously suggested that he could purchase grain at Zhenwu, using Chinese silk obtained from the horse-silk trade. As for the Manichaeans, the emperor asserted that the Manichaean temples in South China, at least, had lost support due to the fall of the Uighur empire, and so had been temporarily closed.[19]

All this could only have further alienated Ögä from China, adding to his pique at having been refused the garrison town he had requested as a residence. But Ögä still was in a difficult situation. Unable to recapture his homeland due to the weakness of his troops, he nevertheless was not prepared to submit to Tang authority. Perhaps he hoped to intimidate the Chinese into better terms. Whatever the *qaghan*'s motives, his ambiguous position was a dangerous one, and the Tang court was becoming increasingly unwilling to accommodate his demands, as well as continually discomfited by his presence as a threat at the northern frontier, where Chinese officers were becoming more and more skittish. As the likelihood of conflict increased, the "loose-rein" tribes at the border were becoming eager for the spoils that a battle with Ögä Qaghan would likely yield: domestic animals, slaves, and goods of various sorts. Furthermore, Ögä indicated to the Tang court his fear that independent tribes to the east that had once been subordinate to the Uighurs, such as the

[18] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 2, pp. 10–11; ch. 8, pp. 59–61; and ch. 13, pp. 107–108. See also Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, pp. 7961–7965 and Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, p. 6132.

[19] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 5, pp. 30–31.

Khitans, Tatabï, and Shiwei, could prove hostile, or even join forces with rival Uighur groups to attack him.

Although he still hoped that the *qaghan* would leave the border of his own accord, Li Deyu continued preparations for battle and encouraged the emperor to restrain his northern officials from making a premature assault on the Uighurs, since the border was still not sufficiently strengthened. He called for additional officers to be appointed and a regiment of 700 crossbow archers to be sent to the northern border; these archers were to be used to prepare an ambush in the event that the Uighurs kept to the forests for protection, as they often did. Li Deyu also urged the emperor to encourage and welcome defections from among the *qaghan*'s followers. In his opinion, the suffering of the Uighur refugees would make them willing to submit, and generous rewards would make their submission even more likely.[20]

Ögä, of course, was busy trying to improve his own situation, but his efforts were continually thwarted by the Chinese. He had sent an official to China in order to claim silk owed to the Uighurs for horses that had been provided prior to the Uighur empire's collapse, but this man had been detained at Zhenwu. This silk would have been important to allow Ögä to purchase provisions, as seen above. The Tang court had already granted silk to Ormïzt, and the latter now urged the court to take it back and give it to Ögä, possibly in the hope that this would ease tensions as a sort of ransom for those Uighurs who had been granted asylum in China.[21] As Chinese officials sought to understand the *qaghan*'s desires and motives, they became more and more convinced that it was more a need for currency (i.e., silk to purchase provisions) than a fear of other tribes that kept him at the border.[22] The silk was eventually sent to him, but only after irksome delays, in part caused by a Tang demand that he send an escort for the silk convoy. This measure, however, did not yield the desired effect, since the *qaghan* and his followers remained near the border.[23]

---

[20] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, pp. 106–107. In this source (and others), this document, "A Memorial Enumerating What Should Be Done to Attend to Tiande's Attacking and Expelling the Uighurs," has erroneously been appended as part of another document; see Cen Zhongmian, "Li Deyu Huichang fa pan ji bian zheng shang," *Shixue Zhuankan*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1937), p. 142, n. 1.

[21] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, p. 109.

[22] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7963.

[23] See Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü," pp. 131–133 and 142–144.

The Tang court now became concerned that Ögä would use the silk that he finally had obtained to purchase animals, particularly horses and camels, and war materiel from the "loose-rein" tribes at the border. Li Deyu asked the emperor to order the border officials to prohibit such sales.[24] Furthermore, in the autumn of 842, the Uighurs began moving southeast toward Batoufeng, on the north bank of the great bend of the Yellow River, about midway between Tiande and Zhenwu. Li Deyu began to consider the possibility of a surprise attack, and his memorial to the emperor contains some interesting observations.

> I have received successive imperial edicts regarding the Uighurs' gradual approach to Batoufeng, the necessity to attack them as soon as possible, and the question of how we can obtain the Taihe Princess. I have long contemplated [these problems], examining [circumstances] with great precision. The Uighurs are all cavalry and good at fighting in the wilderness. If [the attack should take place on] desert land, we would have difficulties fighting them. Even though our generals are excellent and our troops are strong, we would not be victorious. I have recently heard that the barbarians (*ronglu*) do not understand siege warfare. Consequently, except for knowing how to rush to and fro on horseback, they are quite unaccomplished in other [ways of warfare]. I suspect that they do not have scouts along the roads, since we have not made any sudden attack on their camp. If we order Shi Xiong to go with 1000 cavalry of the Yiwu horse army and also select 1000 Tuihun [i.e., Tuyuhun] cavalry, carefully choose infantry to serve as flanks, and gag [them] for a night attack, it will certainly be easy to achieve success. . . .[25]

But shortly thereafter, Li Deyu changed his mind and requested that the planned assault be called off, since the Uighurs had not engaged in any hostile activities.[26] Matters quickly became tense again, however, when the Uighurs bypassed Batoufeng and entered the region of Yunzhou (also known as Datong), in the province of Hedong, where they stole large numbers of cattle and horses from "loose-rein" tribes there. The Tuyuhun and Tanguts in the region pulled up their tents and fled to the mountains for safety, since they could not rely on the Tang government for protection. The Uighurs then withdrew, presumably northward.[27]

---

[24] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 13, p. 109.
[25] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 17, pp. 141–142.
[26] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 111.
[27] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 111.

The Tang court began to debate the appropriate course of action; Li Deyu now called for a strike, although other officials urged a more defensive posture.[28] Li urged the emperor to send more reinforcements to the northern frontier, to be drawn from regions east and southeast of Chang'an. He claimed to fear Uighur collusion with the Tibetans, which would only compound the difficult situation at the border, and also was worried about the coming of winter, when the rivers would freeze and facilitate movement across them.[29] The Tang court's deliberations were further complicated by two factors. One was the presence of various groups of Uighurs at the border that did not appear to be under a single command, and were acting independently of the *qaghan*, thus causing Chinese uncertainty as to which groups were subordinate to Ögä Qaghan and which were not. Another was the continued general weakness of the Tang border garrisons, which Li Deyu feared would not be able to withstand an Uighur assault.

In September 842, the Tang court prepared letters for both the Uighur *qaghan* and the Taihe Princess. The former was stern and censorious, but still held out the possibility for a peaceful solution to the crisis, preferably to be achieved by the Uighurs' departure from the border. The latter was both sympathetic and critical, urging the princess to use her influence for peace.[30] Although these letters may have never been sent, they do indicate the Tang court's efforts to maintain the peace at the border—and possibly to buy time to prepare for a conflict, should one break out.[31]

A third letter from that same month, addressed to a high-ranking Uighur minister at Ögä's court and carried by Liu Mian, continued to exhort the Uighurs, in a rather exasperated tone, to behave correctly as vassals of the Tang emperor, while expressing dismay at their violent actions and immoderate requests. This letter contains information of interest, as it clearly was written in response to a letter from that same Uighur minister. Although the Uighur letter does not survive, it must have contained at least hints of a threat, as the Chinese letter says, "Your letter also stated that foreigners [i.e.,

---

[28] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7963; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 18a, pp. 591–592.
[29] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 111.
[30] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 5, pp. 31–33.
[31] See Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü," pp. 161–163.

Uighurs] are easy to rouse to action but difficult to pacify. After they have been made wrathful, one cannot restrain them."[32] The Tang letter then encouraged the Uighurs to direct their anger toward their true enemies, the Kirghiz, and not toward the blameless Chinese.[33] From this we can see that the Uighurs were attempting to justify their actions in regard to China and thus warn the Chinese of the dangers of continuing to resist Uighur demands. Despite their weakness as refugees, Ögä Qaghan and his followers seem to have been determined to try to take advantage of their large numbers and relative mobility as well as Chinese unpreparedness. The Chinese response was equally unambiguous in revealing the Tang court's determination to resist the Uighurs' demands, and for the first time stressed the idea of Ögä's Uighurs submitting to China rather than returning north of the Gobi. Previous letters had urged them to submit to Tang rule, but this letter was the first in which there was virtually no mention of the Uighurs returning to their homeland. It may be that the Chinese were beginning to realize the hopelessness of getting the remaining Uighurs to move northward.

At about this same time, indeed, the Uighurs were moving further south, and Ögä continued his pressure to compel the Tang court to turn Ormïzt over to him. He also made further use of his hostage, the Taihe Princess, who sent a letter to the Chinese emperor requesting cattle and sheep.[34] Neither of these requests—regarding Ormïzt and provisions—was acted upon by the Tang court. Meanwhile, the Chinese continued to reinforce their border defenses. Li Deyu urged the emperor to reestablish abandoned courier stations to improve communications with the border garrisons and to stockpile grain for the supply of the northern troops. It is worth noting that Li also expressed concerns that "villainous persons" in the northern border region might assist the Uighurs in their designs.[35]

The gradual movement eastward of Ögä Qaghan and his followers, from near Tiande in Fengzhou to the region around Yunzhou in Hedong, caused the Chinese to fear the possibility of an Uighur attack, particularly since it was now autumn (late September–early October), the traditional season for nomadic raids.[36] For reasons that

---

[32] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 8, p. 62.
[33] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 8, pp. 61–62.
[34] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 18a, p. 592.
[35] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, pp. 112–113.
[36] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 112.

are not completely clear, Li Deyu had decided by 4 October 842, on which date he submitted a memorial on this subject to the emperor, that a peaceful conclusion of the Uighur crisis was no longer possible. He suggested two possibilities: either to attack immediately, or to delay the attack until spring. Court officials found the spring plan appealing, since in spring the Uighurs' men and horses would be lean and weak, having endured the hardships of winter, while the Tang troops would be refreshed, having been able to avoid the difficulties of a winter campaign. But there was always the chance that the Uighurs would attack in the autumn, not allowing the Chinese the luxury of waiting until spring.

The Tang court was still vexed by the problem of obtaining sufficient manpower for the defense of the northern frontier, as recruitment of soldiers had proved quite difficult. Furthermore, the "loose-rein" peoples under Tang control were not strong enough to resist the Uighurs unaided. According to Li Deyu, the largest such groups comprised only 1,000 to 2,000 tents. He pointed out that these peoples had their own self-interest in mind, and had fled when a contingent of Uighurs had approached Yunzhou.[37] To the "loose-rein" peoples, however, the matter certainly must have appeared as a case in which the Tang government could not adequately defend them from a vastly superior force.

In a memorial submitted to the throne on 14 October, Li Deyu set forth a strategy that focused on Uighur weaknesses in order to promote a spring attack on Ögä Qaghan and his followers. In particular, he pointed to the fact that the Uighurs were encumbered by their families and baggage, quite unlike a typical nomadic raiding army.[38] He had earlier expressed concern that the Uighurs would leave their families and baggage farther from the Chinese border, in a position of safety, but this had not occurred. The Uighurs' reduced mobility would make their camp vulnerable to a Chinese spring attack. Thus the Tang court chose the path of building defenses throughout the remaining autumn and winter, and postponing an attack on the Uighurs until the spring of 843.

For that purpose, in the first half of October 842, Liu Mian was named Uighur pacification commissioner (*zhaofu Huihu shi*), while

[37] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, pp. 113–114; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7966.

[38] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 115.

Zhang Zhongwu, the semi-autonomous governor of Youzhou in the northeast, was named eastern Uighur pacification commissioner (*dongmian zhaofu Huihu shi*). Ormïzt (Li Sizhong) was made group commander of the Tanguts of Hexi (*Hexi Dangxiang dujiang*) and southwest Uighur chastisement commissioner (*Huihu xinan zhaotao shi*).[39] The Tang court thus established a tripartite military structure with Liu Mian in the north-central region, Zhang Zhongwu in the northeast, and Ormïzt in the northwest.[40] The court immediately began the procurement of necessary war materiel, particularly horses, which were to be purchased from the "loose-rein" peoples in the north. This would serve to supply the Tang armies as well as to keep these horses out of Uighur hands.[41]

By 19 October 842, the court at Chang'an had learned that the Uighurs had shifted their camp southward about 40 *li* (20 kilometers),[42] apparently out of fear of a Khitan attack from the north. Meanwhile, Zhang Zhongwu had conspired with the Khitan, Tatabï, and Shiwei rulers to murder the Uighur overseers, who had apparently attempted to maintain Uighur control over those peoples despite their current difficulties. Here we can see the semi-independent region of Youzhou working together with nomadic leaders to weaken the Uighurs; according to Chinese records, more than 800 Uighurs were put to death as a result of this plot.[43] All this was done on Zhang's own initiative, and not because of any directive from the Tang court. Although we have little information regarding Zhang Zhongwu's deliberations and actions, it seems clear that the Uighur crisis was a threat to him as well, and that he would want to work in concert with Chang'an to bring about a rapid settlement of the problem; he was able to take advantage of Khitan, Tatabï, and Shiwei enmity toward their former masters to weaken the Uighur presence in his sector.

Liu Mian also carried out surreptitious activities in an effort to bring the Uighurs within striking range so that he could achieve the

---

[39] Sima Kuang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7966; see also Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 3, pp. 18–19.

[40] It should be noted that Liu Mian had been transfered to serve as military governor of Hedong in May 842, a position he continued to hold; his replacement in Zhenwu was Li Zhongshun. See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7959.

[41] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 116.

[42] One *li* is approximately one-third of an English mile.

[43] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, pp. 115–116; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7967.

merit of their defeat and the rescue of the Taihe Princess. To that end, he twice sent a spy, a soldier named Cai Xi, to the encampment of Ögä Qaghan. On his first mission, in the winter of 842–843, Cai Xi pretended to be pursuing an escaped Chinese convict. On his second mission, Cai appeared to be in an official ambassadorial capacity, bearing ten camel-loads of provisions. At the Uighur camp he met with the Taihe Princess as well as with several high-ranking Uighur officials, but did not meet with Ögä since, according to the Uighur officials, this would not be appropriate due to the *qaghan*'s unusual circumstance of being in exile from his homeland. Despite the gifts he brought, Cai Xi was mistrusted by the Uighurs until he took a blood-oath with them. The Uighurs then followed his counsel and shifted their camp closer to Yunzhou (see above), some 60 *li* (30 kilometers) distant from Liu Mian's army.[44]

The Tang court continued its buildup with both Chinese and non-Chinese troops, particularly Shiwei, Shatuo, and Tuyuhun, in addition to Tanguts already placed under the control of Ormïzt—and Ormïzt's own Uighur followers. It is clear from Chinese records that Ormïzt had requested an active role in the attack on Ögä Qaghan; therefore, the Tang court placed two non-Chinese generals, He Qingchao and Qibi Tong, along with their 6,000 troops, under his command. The intent of the Tang government was to have many of its non-Chinese troops placed under loyal non-Chinese command, on the presumption that such leaders were "well-acquainted with barbarian matters," and so could easily command such troops. But Ormïzt was cautioned to work in close accord with the Chinese generals. We should also note that many Chinese generals, such as Liu Mian and Shi Xiong, had sizeable contingents of non-Chinese troops placed under their commands.[45]

On 3 November 842, Li Deyu submitted a memorial asking that Tuyuhun troops *not* be placed under Ormïzt's command, as he had learned that the Uighurs and Tuyuhun had long been enemies. The situation was to be investigated, and "doubtful" Tuyuhun troops dismissed. To compensate for the lost Tuyuhun troops, Li Deyu, fear-

---

[44] Michael R. Drompp, "A T'ang Adventurer in Inner Asia," *T'ang Studies*, Vol. 6 (1988), pp. 1–23.

[45] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 116; ch. 5, p. 35; and ch. 8, p. 61. See also Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 18a, p. 593 and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 247, p. 7967.

ing problems of communication, thought it best not to place Chinese troops under Ormïzt's leadership, choosing instead to transfer some of Liu Mian's Shatuo troops.[46] The Shatuo themselves were speakers of a Turkic language, and so would have found communication with Ormïzt and his Uighurs a reasonably simple matter. We should note that Li's memorial also made clear that non-Chinese troops in this campaign were to retain their own native leaders, who were then placed under the command of the higher-ranking Tang generals, both Chinese and non-Chinese.

Liu Mian apparently needed to keep at least some of his Shatuo troops. Another memorial from Li Deyu's brush indicates the importance of non-Chinese troops to all Chinese armies at that time. It states, in part:

> . . . in an advancing army facing north, in every important military undertaking [there should be] one or two hundred foreign cavalry to lead the way. If we order all [foreign troops] to be taken out and withdrawn [from the various armies to be handed over to Ormïzt], the [other] armies would not be able to advance.[47]

It seems clear that non-Chinese troops were crucial to Tang armies of this period for use as guides and cavalry units, at least in northern border zones.

Late in 842, the first envoy to China from the Kirghiz arrived at Tiande. The Tang court attempted to use the latter's desire for friendly relations in an effort to rid itself of the Uighur problem. Although this remains a tangential aspect of our story, it should be kept in mind that the Chinese continued to urge the Kirghiz to attack Ögä Qaghan. Furthermore, they warned the Uighurs—in another letter to an Uighur minister carried by Liu Mian—of this contact and its potentially dire consequences for the Uighurs. This letter warned the Uighurs that the Kirghiz had sent out 40,000 troops to find the Taihe Princess (who had briefly been in their custody before being recaptured by the Uighurs) and return her to China. It then urged the Uighurs to return the princess and either hide themselves in nearby mountains and valleys or, to be preferred, come to China in submission. The letter also indicates that by this

---

[46] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huchchang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 117. Note that there is evidence that some Chinese troops were indeed put under Ormïzt's command; see Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 15, p. 121.

[47] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 117.

time the Uighurs had come to depend on the Heichezi ("Black Carts"), a group of the Shiwei people, for protection.[48]

Meanwhile, forces of the autonomous military governor of Youzhou, Zhang Zhongwu, had defeated a group of Uighurs who had broken away from Ormïzt before his submission. Some 30,000 Uighurs then surrendered to Zhang Zhongwu at the border of Youzhou. This contingent, which included two princes, a princess, and other high-ranking officials, was then dispersed within the Tang realm.[49] Again, we can see here the effects of the fragmentation and frustration that plagued the Uighur refugees (of both major groups) in their predicament at the Tang border.

In late November 842, the Chinese court gave Liu Mian, whom Li Deyu described as prone to prudence, *carte blanche* in his handling of the Uighur pacification project, in the hopes that this would embolden him to act quickly and decisively.[50] This decision by the Tang government was to have serious consequences, as we shall see below.

While Liu Mian and other Chinese generals hoped to wait for a spring campaign, Ormïzt was now quite eager to advance and attack Ögä Qaghan. He received permission to do so,[51] but the subsequent confrontation was not a major one; Chinese sources, which are not clear as to the date of this clash, claim that Ormïzt was victorious.[52] Meanwhile, the Tang court became increasingly concerned about Ögä's actions. In response to a secret court decree of late January 843, in which the Uighurs were now likened to vipers and scorpions rather than "a poor bird,"[53] Liu Mian prepared for battle, shifting his troops closer to Yunzhou. A skirmish between the Chinese general Li Zhongshun and the Uighurs under Ögä was also said to have resulted in an Uighur defeat, but again the result was inconclusive.[54]

The situation was becoming dire for the Uighur refugees. The two attacks by Ormïzt and Li Zhongshun should have signaled increasing Tang hostility. Dissension among Ögä's followers was a problem, however, as Chinese records indicate that at about this

---

[48] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 8, pp. 63–64.
[49] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 195, p. 5214.
[50] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 118.
[51] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 14, p. 118; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7969.
[52] Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, p. 6132.
[53] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 6, p. 44.
[54] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 246, p. 7969.

same time (probably about January 843), a high-ranking Uighur official went to Youzhou and offered to deliver the Taihe Princess to Zhang Zhongwu. At this time, Ögä was no more than 80 *li* (40 kilometers) from the border of Youzhou. The sources also inform us that some Uighurs defected from Ögä's camp to Tang officials at Zhenwu.[55] All of this information suggests that Ögä and his followers must have been quite dispirited in the winter of 842–843, just prior to the final Tang attack.

Nevertheless—or perhaps because of his desperate situation—the *qaghan* chose to go on the offensive. In the first month of the lunar year (3 February–4 March 843), Ögä moved westward, attacked Zhenwu, and then remained camped nearby. This move may have been because Ögä was retreating from Liu Mian's advance northward, and the raid on Zhenwu would provide him with supplies. It may also be that Ögä wanted to punish the Tang officials at Zhenwu for taking in Uighur defectors. Whatever the cause for the Uighurs' movement, Liu Mian now made his final plans. He ordered his adjutant Shi Xiong to lead non-Chinese (Shatuo, Qibi, and Tuoba) troops and make a surprise attack on the *qaghan*'s camp. His hope was that in the panic that ensued, the Uighurs would flee and abandon the Taihe Princess, who could then be recovered by Tang forces. Liu Mian would follow with a large army.[56]

Shi Xiong led his troops from Yunzhou southwest to Mayi; they then advanced northward to Zhenwu under cover of night "when the moon was darkened." Looking out from the battlements of Zhenwu in an attempt to estimate the Uighurs' numbers, Shi Xiong saw felt-covered carts attended by persons dressed in red and green clothing in the Chinese style; he was informed by spies—possibly defected Uighurs or Liu Mian's spy, Cai Xi, who was with Shi at this time—that these were the carts of the Taihe Princess and her entourage. Shi Xiong then sent out a spy to inform the princess of the impending attack on the Uighur camp; she was told to stay in her cart and not to move.[57]

Shi Xiong's attack was indeed calculated to create panic among the Uighurs. He brought together a large number of cattle, horses,

---

[55] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 195, pp. 5214–5215.

[56] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 247, p. 7971.

[57] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 247, p. 7971; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 161, p. 4235. On Cai Xi's involvement, see Drompp, "A T'ang Adventurer in Inner Asia," pp. 10–11.

and other domestic animals, as well as drummers, from within Zhenwu. During the night he had more than ten openings made in the city's walls; at dawn, flags and torches were put on the walls, and then the animals were released from the city to the pounding of drums, followed by Shi's troops. As Shi's biography states, "Torches lit the sky, and the hubbub shook the earth. The *qaghan*, terrified beyond measure, led [some of his] cavalry and fled."[58]

The attack was successful; the Uighurs were defeated and the Taihe Princess recovered. Soon after, on 13 February 843, Shi Xiong again engaged the Uighurs in battle at Shahu ("Kill the Barbarians") Mountain, and severely defeated them. A large number were killed, and many (estimates range from 5,000 to 20,000) were taken prisoner. Large numbers of livestock were also captured. Ögä Qaghan, wounded in the battle, escaped with several hundred cavalry and fled to the protection of the Heichezi.[59] The Tang court celebrated this victory and the princess' return, and publicly blamed the Uighurs' deceit and pride for their own downfall. It also took advantage of the Uighurs' destruction to begin the government takeover of the Manichaean temples in China.[60]

Still, there were remnants of the Uighurs north of the Chinese border, and the Tang government sought ways to eliminate them. Recent intelligence had informed them that Ögä was hoping to seek support from the Heichezi, and Li Deyu hoped to prevent him from doing so. Rewards were offered for the capture of the *qaghan* and his high officials,[61] but no Chinese army was able to pursue or capture Ögä, who did find his way to the protection of the Heichezi. Many of his dispersed troops apparently fled east to Youzhou and surrendered to Zhang Zhongwu.[62]

The Tang generals who had participated in the campaign were rewarded, including the Uighur prince Ormïzt. He was provided with a living and a house in Chang'an, but his "Return to Righteousness" Army was ordered to be disbanded. Many of this army's officers and soldiers were to be placed under the command of other

---

[58] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 161, p. 4236.
[59] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 247, pp. 7972–7973; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 161, p. 4236.
[60] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 3, pp. 14–15.
[61] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 15, pp. 121–122.
[62] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 247, p. 7973.

Tang armies.[63] It would seem that the Chinese did not wish to leave intact an army that was made up primarily of non-Chinese troops but, given the importance of such troops as scouts and cavalry units, it is not surprising that the Tang government would not want to lose their military services. Ormïzt's troops thus were to be divided and employed as garrison guards, a decision that was to have tragic consequences. The Uighurs under Ormïzt's command, numbering more than 3,000, refused to comply with the Chinese order to be dispersed. Liu Mian took advantage of the court's earlier command to act decisively without waiting for orders, and had all these Uighurs massacred.[64] He was not punished for this deed.

After the defeat of the Uighurs at Shahu Mountain, the Chinese continued to urge the Kirghiz, sometimes in extremely strong language, to carry out the final mopping up operations.[65] But the Kirghiz, despite some brief campaigning on the Mongolian Plateau, did not establish a permanent politico-military presence there,[66] and so the problem of Ögä and his small band of followers—which hardly seems to have been a serious threat to the Chinese—remained unresolved for a few years, and apparently resulted in some more raids on the Chinese border aimed at obtaining provisions.[67] The Kirghiz appear to have been more interested in extending their power into the Tarim Basin, something they hoped to do with Chinese help. This, of course, would bring them into conflict with those Uighurs who had fled westward after the collapse of their empire. But the Chinese ultimately chose not to get involved in this distant scheme,[68] and there is no evidence that the Kirghiz actually campaigned to control the Tarim Basin region.[69]

---

[63] Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, p. 6133; Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 7, p. 56.

[64] Cen Zhongmian, "Li Deyu Huichang fa pan ji bian zheng shang," p. 221, n. 1.

[65] See the extant letters to the Kirghiz ruler in Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 6, pp. 37–42 and supplement, pp. 285–286.

[66] On this subject, see Michael R. Drompp, "Breaking the Orkhon Tradition: Kirghiz Adherence to the Yenisei Region after A.D. 840," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 119, No. 3 (1999), pp. 390–403.

[67] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 7, pp. 56–57.

[68] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 174, pp. 4522–4523.

[69] Drompp, "Breaking the Orkhon Tradition," pp. 394 (see especially n. 23) and 396.

Possibly aware that the Kirghiz could not be forced to do their bidding, the Tang court also urged Zhang Zhongwu, military governor of Youzhou, to destroy the remnants of the Uighurs. From an imperial edict dated sometime between 5 March and 2 May 843, we learn that Zhang had been able to gain some information regarding Ögä's whereabouts. The Tang government urged Zhang to send an army beyond the frontier to eliminate the remaining Uighurs.[70] The Chinese court's own disinclination to act could be related to internal difficulties—i.e., a military revolt in Zhaoyi, followed by Tangut disturbances in the north—that had begun to demand its attention. When Zhang Zhongwu showed no initiative in this regard, Li Deyu urged the emperor on 6 June 843 to send Liu Mian out to attack the Uighurs,[71] but nothing came of this.

Late in 844, the court once again received news of the Uighurs through Zhang Zhongwu. According to this information, Ögä wished to move westward to the Tarim Basin and join the Uighurs there, while some of his followers preferred to submit to China. Li Deyu used this intelligence to urge the emperor to press Zhang Zhongwu once again to attack the Uighurs or bring about their submission by any means necessary, even promising favorable treatment for Ögä.[72] All this was done while still encouraging the Kirghiz to attack the Uighurs. Indeed, a Kirghiz envoy had suggested coordinated action against the Uighurs, but the Tang court argued that the distance involved—more than 1,000 *li* (500 kilometers) northward to the Heichezi territory—was too great. The Chinese did offer, however, to prepare border troops to kill or capture any Uighurs fleeing from a Kirghiz assault.[73] Again, no agreement was reached. It should be pointed out that the difficulties of communication between the Chinese and Kirghiz rulers were significant, due primarily to the distance between them.[74]

The Tang court—and Ormïzt—continued to worry about the Uighurs. At one point Ögä Qaghan was reported to be 300 *li* (150 kilometers) or less north of Tiande. Ormïzt suggested that he was waiting to ambush a Tang envoy on a projected visit to the Kirghiz, which had been planned in order to transport the emblems of Chinese

---

[70] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 6, pp. 44–45.
[71] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 15, pp. 122–123.
[72] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 17, pp. 147–148.
[73] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 6, pp. 40–42.
[74] See Drompp, "Breaking the Orkhon Tradition."

official appointment—something the Kirghiz *qaghan* very much desired—to Kirghiz territory. Further intelligence from a captured Uighur indicated that Ögä had only about 1,500 troops, was sorely lacking in armor and other equipment, and was forced to obtain provisions by raiding other nomadic peoples.[75]

When the Tang Emperor Wuzong died on 22 April 846, still nothing had been done about the Uighurs north of China. The new ruler, Xuanzong (r. 846–859), disliked Li Deyu and so rejected him and his policy of friendship toward the Kirghiz, although he did ultimately approve an embassy to the Kirghiz with emblems of Chinese imperial appointment for the Kirghiz ruler.[76]

Ögä Qaghan was assassinated in 846, possibly by an Uighur minister, or possibly by the Heichezi, who are said in at least one source to have been bribed to do so by one of Ormïzt's high officials.[77] A new *qaghan*, Ögä's younger brother Enie, was able to muster about 5,000 followers, and they dwelt among the Tatabï, protected by the latter's ruler Shishelang. In June or July 847, Zhang Zhongwu inflicted a severe defeat on the Tatabï. The Uighurs, now reduced to some 500 people, fled to the Shiwei. When Zhang Zhongwu attempted to capture the new *qaghan*, the latter fled westward with his wife, son, and nine cavalry; the remaining Uighurs were parcelled out among the Shiwei tribes.[78]

Not long after that, apparently some time in March 848, a Kirghiz force said to number 70,000 suddenly attacked and defeated the Shiwei, and then took the Uighurs with them back to Kirghiz territory. However, some Uighurs appear to have escaped by hiding in mountain forests, and later plundered other tribes in order to survive. Those few Uighurs who escaped the Kirghiz were said to have gradually made their way westward to Gansu and the Uighur state that had been established there.[79] As for Enie, his fate is unknown.

---

[75] Li Deyu, *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji*, ch. 17, p. 148.

[76] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 248, p. 8030; Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, p. 6150.

[77] Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 195, p. 5215; Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, pp. 6132–6133.

[78] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 248, pp. 8028 and 8032; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu*, ch. 195, p. 5215.

[79] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, ch. 248, p. 8032; Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 217b, p. 6133.

Conclusion

In examining this particular incident, we can learn much about Inner Asian ways of warfare when war was not a planned act of conquest, but indeed an act of desperation. First, we must note that the Uighurs' situation was from the outset disadvantageous to them. The struggles and problems that had led to their empire's collapse, as well as the ensuing chaos, meant that the survivors had no common leadership and no common strategy; it also meant that their normal economy was disrupted, making the need for provisions a serious and constant source of worry. Furthermore, the Uighur troops were in the difficult position of having with them their families and possessions—a rare condition for nomadic armies facing China.

Why did these refugees choose to go to China? In the case of Ormïzt Tegin, the answer seems relatively simple. China and the Uighurs had enjoyed relatively peaceful relations for decades, although the Chinese found the horse-silk trade onerous and expensive, to the point of being seriously in arrears in regard to payment. Still, the Tang court never attempted to use force to stop or even modify the trade, and this could have signalled to Ormïzt (and Ögä) that China was unable or unwilling to employ force against the nomads. Faced with the double threat of a political rival (Ögä) and the possibility of Kirghiz pursuit, it is no surprise that Ormïzt would see the advantage of entering the relative safety of China, even if it meant doing so as a suppliant. At the Chinese border he had behaved impeccably, even revealing to Chinese officials a plot by other Uighur leaders within his group to attack Tang territory, and then luring the conspirators to his camp and killing them.[80] By coming to China before Ögä's elevation to the throne, Ormïzt had avoided the stigma of rebellion. By not allowing his followers to attack China's border garrisons, he had displayed his powers of restraint. And by revealing another Uighur leader's plot to attack the Chinese border and then thwarting that plot by murdering his own compatriots, he had shown his sincerity and trustworthiness. As a reward, he was accepted into China and made a part of the Tang establishment.

As for Ögä Qaghan, the question of why he chose to deal with China in the manner that he did is less easily settled. As a sover-

[80] Drompp, "The Writings of Li Te-yü," pp. 56–57.

eign ruler, he would not wish to become subservient to China. On the other hand, there were many historical examples of Chinese assistance being given to a weakened Inner Asian leader who then used this help to re-establish his power on the steppe, and Ögä may have been aware of them. Indeed, in its communications with the Uighur refugees the Tang court frequently mentioned one of the most well-known precedents for this: the submission of the Xiongnu ruler Huhanye (r. 58–31 B.C.E.) to China's Han dynasty, formalized by a visit to the Han court in 51 B.C.E. In his struggle for the leadership of the Xiongnu empire, Huhanye finally requested and used Chinese assistance (including gold, silk, and provisions, all of which he received through his act of submission) to defeat his half-brother Zhizhi and reestablish his power on the Mongolian Plateau.[81] Chinese relations with the Xiongnu remained friendly for more than half a century, in part because the Han court continued to provide goods to the Xiongnu each time one of their rulers visited China.[82]

This important foreign policy coup, which has been called "the most important single event in the history of foreign relations of the Han period,"[83] had a significant impact on later international relations in the region. The situation in which a weakened Inner Asian ruler sought assistance from China in an effort to reestablish his power is what Thomas J. Barfield has called the "inner frontier strategy" employed by nomadic peoples in times of civil war. In this strategy, one of the combatants would seek aid from China to destroy his rival. Such a strategy was employed in the direst circumstances, when a steppe empire had broken (or was in danger of breaking) apart, but still required that the suppliant maintain his autonomy and not come under direct Chinese control.[84] Barfield contrasts this to an "outer frontier strategy," in which a strong and united nomadic state would employ violence and the threat of violence to extract wealth from China.[85]

---

[81] See Michael R. Drompp, "The Hsiung-nu *Topos* in the T'ang Response to the Collapse of the Uighur Steppe Empire," *Central and Inner Asian Studies*, Vol. 1 (1987), pp. 1–46. Note that this article cannot be used effectively without the list of errata and corrigenda provided in *Central and Inner Asian Studies*, Vol. 4 (1990), p. 82.

[82] Ying-shih Yü, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 45–49.

[83] Yü, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, p. 45.

[84] Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Oxford, 1989), p. 63.

[85] Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, pp. 49–50.

Examined in those terms, it would seem that Ögä Qaghan was following Barfield's "inner frontier strategy" in an attempt to win Chinese aid to recover his homeland. However, we have seen that Ögä's dealings with the Tang court were generally belligerent, which was not in keeping with the pattern established by the Xiongnu ruler Ḥuhanye. Still, it may be that Ögä Qaghan felt that a degree of aggressiveness was necessary for him to maintain his autonomy and not come under the direct control of the Tang government as Ormïzt eventually did. It is also conceivable that Ögä was attempting to block Chinese trade with the Kirghiz, even though such trade was never really established, since he relied on the possibility of Chinese wealth for his own survival and recovery.

There is more to consider in this question. The "inner frontier strategy" model is complicated by the fact that during the Tang dynasty, China had relied on nomadic power when it was in a state of civil war. Early in the seventh century, when the Sui dynasty was collapsing, there were many contenders for the throne of China. The victor, Li Yuan (566–635, r. 618–626), who established the Tang dynasty in 618, succeeded in part because he had been able to obtain assistance from the Türks, whose cavalry strengthened his forces.[86] Further, we have already seen that the Uighurs aided China during the An Lushan Rebellion, and thus helped save the Tang dynasty from destruction. Therefore, we can see both China and Inner Asian peoples pursuing a policy of seeking assistance from the other in times of extreme political instability. Ögä's actions at the Tang border may be seen as part of this larger historical pattern, and hence a strategy that had been pursued by many other rulers—on both sides of the Gobi—when they found themselves in danger of losing their thrones.

Historically aware or not, Ögä Qaghan may have felt that by holding the Taihe Princess as hostage, and by virtue of the recent amicable relations between China and the Uighurs, he was entitled to some help from the Tang court. It may have been his hope that such assistance would buy him both protection and time so that he could make plans either to regain his homeland or establish a power base elsewhere. But the Chinese were willing to provide only limited aid to the new *qaghan*, and some of his demands were considered excessive. Granting provisions, as well as the silk payments

[86] See Woodbridge Bingham, *The Founding of the T'ang Dynasty: The Fall of Sui and Rise of T'ang—A Preliminary Survey* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 99–100 and 122–123.

already owed to the Uighurs, was expensive but manageable. The bestowal of territory, however, even if limited to a single garrison city, was symbolically powerful and therefore unpalatable to the Tang government. The empire had been bequeathed to Emperor Wuzong by his ancestors; to give away even a small piece of its territory would be at the very least unfilial, and at worst a symbolic surrender to Uighur power. Furthermore, Ögä's demands regarding the return of Ormïzt and the protection of Manichaean temples were seen as interference in China's internal affairs—something that would not have been regarded in a positive light by the court at Chang'an.

Because neither he nor the Tang government was willing to make all the concessions required by the other, Ögä Qaghan was forced into dangerous maneuvers at the border which ultimately led to the debacle at Shahu Mountain. Drawn southward by the possibility of Chinese protection and the lure of Chinese wealth, Ögä carried out sporadic raids which, although clearly intended to obtain supplies, may also have been calculated to warn the Tang court of his power. He constantly sought to obtain assistance from China, but with only moderate success. It is interesting to note that the Kirghiz also requested Tang cooperation for two projected actions: the elimination of the Uighurs and an attack on the Tarim Basin. The Chinese refused, and the Kirghiz eventually pursued only the first of these actions—and then only after the Uighurs had been so seriously weakened that seizing them proved to be not much of a challenge.

The Chinese had worked steadily to weaken the Uighurs' position by preparing their own border defenses, adding reinforcements, and sowing dissension among the Uighurs through the use of spies. Uighur weakness provided the Chinese with sufficient time to allow this policy to take shape and be implemented. Chinese success was favored by the Tang court's willingness to make effective use (as scouts and cavalry units) of "loose-rein" Inner Asian peoples who had been settled within China's borders. Furthermore, the Tang government also was able to take advantage of Uighur rivalries, as even Uighur troops were used in the efforts to destroy Ögä Qaghan. The fact that Uighur personal or familial loyalties took precedence over tribal or "national" loyalties is not unexpected in Inner Asia, particularly since those "larger" loyalties had been diminished by long years of internal strife. Ormïzt, in a weak position, managed to survive by valuing self-preservation above all else. Ögä, seeking to retain some measure of power and dignity, was unable to achieve his goals; his defeat and death spelled the end of Uighur power on the Mongolian Plateau.

Glossary

An Lushan 安錄山
Batoufeng 把頭烽
Cai Xi 蔡襲
Chang'an 長安
Dangxiang 党項
Datong 大同
dongmian zhaofu Huihu shi 東面招撫回鶻使
Enie 遏捻
Fengzhou 豐州
Gansu 甘肅
Guiyi 歸義
Han 漢
Hedong 河東
Heichezi 黑車子
He Qingchao 何清朝
Hexi Dangxiang dujiang 河西党項都將
Huhanye 呼韓邪
Huihe 回紇
Huihu 回鶻
Huihu xinan zhaotao shi 回鶻西南招討使
jimi 羈縻
li 里
Li Deyu 李德裕
Li Sizhong 李思忠
Li Yuan 李淵
Li Zhongshun 李忠順
Liu Mian 劉沔
Mayi 馬邑
Qibi 契苾
Qibi Tong 契苾通
Qidan 契丹
ronglu 戎虜
Shahu 殺胡
Shatuo 沙陀
Shi Xiong 石雄
Shishelang 石舍朗
Shiwei 室韋
Sui 隋
Taihe 太和
Tang 唐
Tiande 天德
Tuihun 退渾
Tujue 突厥
Tuoba 拓跋
Tuyuhun 吐谷渾

Womosi 嗢沒斯
Wujie 烏介
Wuzong 武宗
Xi 奚
Xiajiasi 黠戛斯
Xiongnu 匈奴
Xuanzong 宣宗
Yiwu 義武
Yunzhou 雲州
Youzhou 幽州
Zhang Zhongwu 張仲武
zhaofu Huihu shi 招撫回鶻使
Zhaoyi 昭義
Zhenwu 振武
Zhizhi 郅支

Bibliography

Barfield, Thomas J. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Beckwith, Chistopher I. "The Impact of the Horse and Silk Trade on the Economies of T'ang China and the Uigher Empire: On the Importance of International Commerce in the Early Middle Ages." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 34 (1991), pp. 183–198.

Bingham, Woodbridge. *The Founding of the T'ang Dynasty: The Fall of Sui and Rise of T'ang—A Preliminary Survey.* Baltimore: Waverly Press, Inc., 1941.

Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉. "Li Deyu Huichang fa pan ji bian zheng shang 李德裕會昌伐叛集编證上." *Shixue Zhuankan* 史學專刊, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1937), pp. 107–250.

Drompp, Michael R. "Breaking the Orkhon Tradition: Kirghiz Adherence to the Yenisei Region after A.D. 840." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 119, No. 3 (1999), pp. 390–403.

Drompp, Michael R. "The Hsiung-nu *Topos* in the T'ang Response to the Collapse of the Uighur Steppe Empire." *Central and Inner Asian Studies*, Vol. 1 (1987), pp. 1–46, and Vol. 4 (1990), p. 82.

Drompp, Michael R. "A T'ang Adventurer in Inner Asia." *T'ang Studies*, Vol. 6 (1988), pp. 1–23.

Drompp, Michael R. "The Writings of Li Te-yü as Sources for the History of T'ang-Inner Asian Relations." Diss. Indiana University, 1986. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1987. 8628069.

Li Deyu 李德裕. *Li Weigong Huichang yipin ji* 李衛公會昌一品集. Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1936.

Lieu, Samuel N.C. *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.

Liu Xu 劉煦 et al. *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975.

Mackerras, Colin. *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations, 744–840.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973.

Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修 et al. *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975.

Pan, Yihong. "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses in International Politics from Han through T'ang." *Asia Major*, 3rd Series, Vol. 10, Parts 1–2 (1997), pp. 95–131.

Pan, Yihong. *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and Its Neighbors.* Bellingham: Western Washington University Press, 1997.

Peterson, C.A. "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang." *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I.* Ed. Denis Twitchett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 464–560.

Pulleyblank, Edwin G. "The An Lu-shan Rebellion and the Origins of Chronic Militarism in Late T'ang China." *Essays on T'ang Society: The Interplay of Social, Political and Economic Forces.* Ed. John Curtis Perry and Bardwell L. Smith. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976, pp. 32–60.

Sima Guang 司馬光. *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑. Beijing: Guji Chubanshe, 1956.

Yü, Ying-shih. *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

HANDBOOK OF ORIENTAL STUDIES
HANDBUCH DER ORIENTALISTIK

SECTION EIGHT
CENTRAL ASIA

edited by

DENIS SINOR · NICOLA DI COSMO

VOLUME SIX
WARFARE IN INNER ASIAN HISTORY (500-1800)



WARFARE IN INNER ASIAN HISTORY (500-1800)

EDITED BY

NICOLA DI COSMO



BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN
2002

Illustration on the cover: Chinese ink drawing of the Mongol general Sübötei Ba'atur (1176-1248).

This book is printed on acid-free paper

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Cosmo Di, Nicola:
Warfare in Inner Asian warfare / ed. by Nicola Di Cosmo. – Leiden ; Boston ; Köln : Brill, 2002
(Handbuch der Orientalistik : Abt. 8, Zentralasien ; 6)
ISBN 90–04–11949–3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is also available

ISSN 0169-8524
ISBN 90 04 11949 3

© Copyright 2002 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by E.J. Brill provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910 Danvers MA 01923, USA. Fees are subject to change.

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS