

Observations on Tang-Uighur Relations in the Early Reign of Emperor Dezong of Tang from the Tudu Incident

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Abstract: This paper takes the assassination of Tudu in the first year of the Jianzhong reign under Emperor Dezong of Tang as a point of entry to examine the structural transformation of Tang-Uighur relations after the An Lushan Rebellion. By analyzing historical records from *The Old Book of Tang* and *Zizhi Tongjian*, the study investigates the circumstances surrounding Zhang Guangsheng's ambush and killing of the Uighur diplomatic mission, revealing the underlying logic of political power struggles: the Tang court's three military appeals for Uighur aid led to institutional dependency, which allowed the Uighurs to negotiate as equals through marriage alliances during the Qianyuan era. In the first year of the Baoying reign, Prince Yong's refusal to perform ritual obeisance disrupted the established hierarchy between ruler and vassal. The essence of the Tudu Incident lies in the collision between Emperor Dezong's pro-Tibetan policy and Uighur expansionism, rooted in the imbalance of power and economic friction that had developed under the military dependency between Tang and the Uighurs.

Keywords: Emperor Dezong of Tang, Tudu, Zhang Guangsheng, Yuan Xiu, Uighurs

1. Introduction

During the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang dynasty requested Uighur military assistance three times, forming a special kind of military dependency. As a result, the Uighurs gained significant influence in Tang political and military affairs. After the rebellion, the Tang dynasty's national strength was severely weakened, and it lost the dominant position it had once held over Tibet and the Uighurs.[1] The Uighurs gradually shifted from being vassals to adopting an attitude of equality or even confrontation, leading to growing tensions over marriage alliances, court rituals, and economic interests. In the first year of the Jianzhong reign under Emperor Dezong, the acting military governor Zhang Guangsheng killed the Uighur envoy Tudu, pushing Tang-Uighur diplomatic relations to the brink of severance.[2] Through the mediation of emissaries like Yuan Xiu and the Uighur ethnic concept of "washing blood with water," both sides demonstrated wisdom in seeking peaceful coexistence amid crisis. Focusing on the Tudu Incident in the first year of the Jianzhong reign, this paper draws upon *The Old Book of Tang*, *Zizhi Tongjian*, and recent academic research to trace the causes behind the killing of Tudu and further explore the structural transformation of Tang-Uighur relations after the An Lushan Rebellion and its far-reaching consequences.

2. The assassination of Tudong and Yuan Xiu's mediation

In the first year of the Jianzhong era under Emperor Dezong of Tang, the Tang court appointed Yuan Xiu to travel to the Uyghurs with the plan to confer the title of “Wu Yi Cheng Gong Khagan” (Martial Righteous and Successful Khagan) upon the Uyghur leader Dunmohe. However, before Yuan Xiu arrived, a violent conflict erupted between the Zhenwu army and the Uyghurs. Zhang Guangsheng led an assault that resulted in the deaths of Tudong, the Uyghur prime minister, and the commanders Da and Xiao Meilu—totaling about nine hundred casualties. Consequently, “The emperor initially intended to sever diplomatic ties and ordered Yuan Xiu to return, awaiting further orders at Taiyuan. After a prolonged period, he was finally sent again, this time with instructions to escort the four corpses of Tudong, Yimi, and the two Meilus back [3].” After Yuan Xiu delivered the four bodies to the Uyghurs, the Uyghur court treated the Tang delegation with arrogance, placing them in a perilous situation. “The Khagan commanded his ministers to come in colorful robes with carriages to receive the envoy. The chief minister, Jiezisijia, sat in the main tent while Yuan Xiu and others were made to stand outside in the snow. He interrogated them about the killing of Tudong and others [3].” There were several attempts to kill the envoys, who were treated with considerable disdain and neglect. “The envoys were taken away after harsh words, given very poor provisions, and detained for more than fifty days before being allowed to return [3].” In another account, “The Khagan sent his prime minister Jiezisijia and others to receive the envoys. Jiezisijia sat in the main tent and stood Yuan Xiu and others in front of the tent in the snow, questioning them about the killing of Tudong and intending to kill several of them. They were treated with scant provisions and detained for over fifty days before finally being allowed to leave [4].”

Despite these adverse circumstances, Yuan Xiu, relying on his skillful rhetoric and negotiation, managed to mediate between the Tang and the Uyghurs, ultimately preventing war between the two states. According to the *Zizhi Tongjian*, the Khagan's envoy told Yuan Xiu: “Our people all want to kill you, but I do not. Your country has already killed Tudong and others; if I kill you in return, it would be blood for blood, further staining us both. Now I choose to wash blood with water—would that not be better? You owe us one hundred eighty thousand bolts of silk for horses; you must repay this promptly [3].” Thus, the dispute triggered by the killing of Tudong and others was peacefully resolved between the two sides.

3. The reasons behind Zhang Guangsheng's killing of Tu Dong

The immediate cause of Yuan Xiu's diplomatic mission to the Uyghurs was Zhang Guangsheng's killing of Tu Dong. Why did Zhang Guangsheng kill Tu Dong? The *Zizhi Tongjian* records the following: “During the reign of Emperor Daizong, the ‘Nine Surnames of the Hu’ often claimed to be Uyghurs, dwelling intermixed in the capital, engaging in profiteering and wanton violence, becoming a scourge both publicly and privately alongside the real Uyghurs. Upon ascending the throne, the emperor ordered Tu Dong to lead his followers and return to their homeland. They traveled with immense baggage. Upon reaching Zhenwu, they stayed for several months, demanding lavish provisions—consuming over a thousand jin of meat daily, with other goods in similar proportions. Their woodcutters and herders ravaged local crops, causing great suffering to the people of Zhenwu. Zhang Guangsheng wished to kill the Uyghurs and seize their supplies but feared their strength and dared not act rashly.” [4] Zhang Guangsheng thus devised a pretext for conflict. “He ordered a deputy general to pass by their lodging without offering the proper courtesies. Enraged, Tu Dong captured the deputy and flogged him dozens of times. Zhang Guangsheng then mobilized his troops to launch a surprise attack, massacring Tu Dong and his group, piling their bodies into a mound as a warning.” [4] In his report to the court, Zhang claimed: “The Uyghurs insulted a Tang general by whipping him and plotted to assault Zhenwu; hence, I struck first to preempt their scheme [4].”

3.1. Tang-Uyghur military cooperation

Beyond the account in *Zizhi Tongjian*, Zhang Guangsheng's killing of Tu Dong had deeper roots traceable to the Tang-Uyghur military cooperation during the An Lushan Rebellion.

In the early reign of Emperor Xuanzong, the Tang Dynasty was immensely powerful and held a prestigious status among neighboring nomadic tribes. Xuanzong himself was honored as the "Tian Kehan" (Celestial Khan). However, after the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang court sought military assistance from the Uyghurs, which subtly altered the balance of power between the two states.

In Xuanzong's later years, regional military governors began hoarding power. An Lushan, the military governor of Fanyang, seized control of key breeding grounds and stables, appropriating prized horses: "He took over the Loufan Pasture and expropriated the horses managed by Zhang Wenyan." [3] When An Lushan rose in rebellion, he absorbed these warhorses into his cavalry, leaving the Tang with only a few tens of thousands of horses suitable for mounted warfare. Confronted with a well-prepared and well-equipped enemy, Tang forces suffered repeated defeats. By December, the rebels had crossed the Yellow River and captured Luoyang, the eastern capital. In the fifteenth year of the Tianbao era, after Ge Shuhan's defeat at Tongguan, Emperor Xuanzong fled to Sichuan, and Chang'an also fell. Within mere months, the rebels had overrun both eastern and western capitals.

In this crisis, Li Heng (later Emperor Suzong) ascended the throne in Lingwu in the first year of the Zhide era. Shortly afterward, both the Uyghur Khagan and the Tibetan Tsanpo sent envoys expressing willingness to assist the Tang in quelling the rebellion. However, the Tibetans simultaneously seized Tang territory west of Longyou, exploiting the chaos to expand their influence. Emperor Suzong, unwilling to seek Tibetan aid, turned to the Uyghurs and dispatched Prince Li Chengcai to request military assistance. In November of the first Zhide year, the Uyghurs sent troops to assist the Tang for the first time. The Geluo Khagan sent General Geluozhi with 2,000 cavalry, who quickly arrived at Fanyang and alleviated the military pressure on the western front. The following month, they joined Tang General Guo Ziyi in battle: "Alongside the Tongluo and rebel Hu forces, they fought north of the Yulin River, inflicting a massive defeat—30,000 enemy heads taken, 10,000 prisoners captured, and the Hequ region pacified [4]."

In April of the second Zhide year, Guo Ziyi engaged rebel generals An Shouzhong and Li Guiren west of Chang'an. By May, the Tang forces were defeated with heavy losses. Guo Ziyi advised the emperor to call for more Uyghur reinforcements. In September, the Uyghurs again dispatched troops: Geluo Khagan sent his son Yahu and General Dide, leading 4,000 elite soldiers to assist the Tang. Emperor Suzong treated Yahu with great honor, hosting banquets and ordering Prince Guangping to form a brotherly bond with him. The Tang court generously supplied the Uyghur forces, providing them with "forty oxen, eight hundred sheep, and forty hu of rice daily [5]" as military provisions. The Uyghurs played a crucial role in suppressing the rebellion. During the campaign to recapture the western capital Chang'an, Guo Ziyi initially failed to gain the upper hand. At a critical moment, Uyghur cavalry attacked from the enemy's rear, throwing the rebels into disarray. Surrounded front and back by Tang and Uyghur forces, the rebel troops were utterly routed. After retaking Chang'an, An Qingxu abandoned Luoyang and fled across the Yellow River, allowing the eastern capital to return to Tang control without further conflict. In recognition of the Uyghurs' assistance, Emperor Suzong highly praised their efforts. He conferred the title "Prince of Loyal Righteousness" upon Yahu and annually awarded the Uyghurs 20,000 bolts of silk to commemorate their service in restoring order.

After the recovery of Luoyang, the Tang court hosted a banquet for the Uyghur commanders. During the event, Yahu requested permission for his troops to garrison in the Shayuan region while

he returned to the Uyghur state to obtain more horses for continued campaigns. However, upon his return, he was quickly killed amid internal power struggles. Scholar Xue Zongzheng believes Yahu fell victim to a coup led by his brother Yidijian and was executed. This marked a significant backlash from the anti-Tang faction within the Uyghurs against the pro-Tang camp represented by Yahu. [6]

3.2. Changes in the status between the Tang Dynasty and the Uyghurs

3.2.1. Changes in the status between the Tang Dynasty and the Uyghurs through Heqin (marriage alliance)

In the seventh month of the first year of Qianyuan (758 CE), Emperor Suzong of Tang arranged the marriage of his youngest daughter, Princess Ningguo, to the Gelu Khan of the Uyghurs, conferring upon him the title "Heroic and Martial Khan Who Extends Awe to the Distant—Biqia Que Kehan." However, at the wedding, the Khan wore a Hu-style hat and ochre robe, seated proudly inside the tent, surrounded by a grand and imposing ceremonial guard, while the Tang envoy Li Yu stood outside the tent [5]—an arrangement already hinting at a shift in the status between the Tang and the Uyghurs. This marriage alliance served as a bargaining chip in exchange for military aid from the Uyghurs. In the eighth month of the same year, the Uyghurs dispatched troops to assist the Tang for the third time during the An Lushan Rebellion. The Gelu Khan sent his commander Guchuo Teqin and prime minister Dide at the head of 3,000 soldiers to support the Tang in suppressing the rebellion. In the third month of the following year, Tang forces—including the Uyghur reinforcements—suffered a crushing defeat in Xiang Prefecture. Despite the military setback, Emperor Suzong did not direct his anger at the Uyghurs; instead, he hosted banquets and lavished rewards on their generals, seeking to appease and win them over. In the fourth month of the same year, the Gelu Khan passed away. The Uyghur nobles and commanders demanded that Princess Ningguo be buried with him, according to their customs. The princess fiercely resisted this demand, struggling valiantly to preserve her life. Although she narrowly escaped death, she was still compelled to conform to Uyghur mourning rituals—cutting her face with a knife and wailing to express her grief. Since Princess Ningguo had borne no children, the Uyghurs ultimately returned her to the Tang court. On the northern steppe, nomadic societies widely practiced levirate marriage, in which a deceased man's widow would marry his brother. Thus, Princess Ningguo was expected to become the new khan Tengri's khatun (queen). However, she nearly met the grim fate of ritual sacrifice. The Uyghurs, reluctant to allow Tang interference in their internal affairs, ultimately decided to repatriate the princess to the Central Plains.

During the An Lushan Rebellion, the relative power and status between the Tang and the Uyghurs underwent subtle but significant shifts. The Uyghurs came to perceive the once-mighty Tang Empire as in decline, and their attitude gradually turned condescending. They began to reinterpret the previously hierarchical "monarch-vassal" dynamic as one of equal diplomatic relations between sovereign states. Although the Tang's national strength was no longer what it had once been, it still clung to a psychological superiority as a suzerain state. Tensions between the two sides became increasingly pronounced. This shifting mentality was evident in several incidents. One such episode occurred during the escort of Princess Ningguo. Upon her arrival in Uyghur territory, the Gelu Khan exhibited haughty behavior, demanding that the Tang envoy, Li Yu—the Prince of Hanzhong—perform the ritual obeisance appropriate for a subject addressing his sovereign. Li Yu firmly refused and argued with conviction: "In all past marriages between the Central Kingdom and the barbarians, the consorts have been princes of the royal house. Now, Ningguo is the emperor's own daughter, noble and honored, having traveled ten thousand li to enter into this alliance. The Khan is now the imperial son-in-law—how can he remain seated and receive the imperial edict as if he were a

superior?" [5] This powerful rebuttal encapsulated the enduring psychological perception of cultural superiority held by the Tang dynasty, even as real power dynamics had begun to shift.

3.2.2. Ritual frictions between the two nobility

The second incident occurred in the tenth month of the first year of Baoying (762 CE), when Prince Yong, then the Grand Marshal of all the armies under heaven, arrived at Shanzhou and, accompanied by dozens of attendants, proceeded to the Uyghur encampment to pay respects to Khan Tengri. During the formal ritual dance performed on the occasion, a conflict arose due to differing ceremonial protocols. The Uyghur commander Chebi immediately questioned: "The Tang Son of Heaven and the Khan have agreed to be brothers. The Khan is the uncle to Prince Yong. How can he refuse to perform the ceremonial dance?" The Uyghurs regarded the Tang emperor and the Khan as equals—brothers—and believed that even the Tang heir apparent should perform the ritual dance before the Khan as an "uncle." This reflected the Uyghurs' growing sense of equality with Tang. On the other hand, the response from Prince Yong's attendant, Yao Zi'ang, represented the Tang court's stance. According to the New Book of Tang:

The Khan reproached the prince for not performing the dance. Zi'ang replied: "The prince is the emperor's legitimate grandson. The imperial mausoleums of the two palaces are in mourning. According to ritual, it is inappropriate to perform dances." The Uyghur court pressed: "The Khan is the younger brother of the Tang Son of Heaven; to the prince, he is an uncle. How could he not perform the dance?" Zi'ang firmly refused, stating: "The Grand Marshal is the Tang Crown Prince, the heir to the empire; how could he perform a dance to the Khan?" [5]

In his response, Yao Zi'ang emphasized the Tang dynasty's orthodox status as the suzerain state, asserting that the heir apparent was not obligated to perform the rites of bowing and dancing before the leader of a vassal state. He also invoked mourning rites to argue that, since the coffins of Emperors Xuanzong and Suzong had not yet been interred, the Prince of Yong was, by regulation, forbidden to participate in any celebratory ceremonies. Although this justification was couched in the language of ritual propriety, its essence lay in upholding the hierarchical authority of the Tang dynasty within the vassal system and in rejecting the Uyghurs' attempt to establish a relationship of diplomatic equality. The subsequent reactions of both sides to this dispute further reflect the shifting balance of power. "The Uyghur Khagan and his ministers, unwilling to accept humiliation, had Yao Zi'ang, Jin Shaohua, and Ju Pang beaten a hundred times. Shaohua and Ju died that very night, and the prince [of Yong] returned to camp [5]." The four individuals punished by Tengri Khagan were all high-ranking officers under the Prince of Yong's Supreme Military Command. The Uyghur atrocity stirred great indignation among the Tang military, yet both the Prince of Yong and Emperor Daizong adopted a policy of restraint: "The imperial troops were furious at the humiliation suffered by the prince and prepared to punish the Uyghurs, but the prince, citing the ongoing unrest, forbade any action [5]." This response reveals the Tang dynasty's weakened position at the time.

Notably, during the second year of the Zhide era, when the Uyghur general Yiduo led troops to aid the Tang in suppressing the rebellion, Guo Ziyi hosted a banquet for the allied forces. Yiduo politely declined, stating: "Your country is in crisis, and we have come from afar to assist—how can we accept a feast [4]?" By referring to the Tang dynasty as "your country," Yiduo implicitly regarded the Tang as his own polity, reflecting a deferential attitude toward the Tang court. However, by the first year of the Baoying era, the Uyghur Khagan demanded that the Tang crown prince perform rites of bowing and dancing before him, thereby treating the Tang as an equal power. In seeking continued military assistance from the Uyghurs, the Tang had no choice but to temporarily tolerate such provocations. This starkly illustrates the changing mindset and status of both parties. Following the devastation of the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang's national strength was significantly diminished, and its reliance on foreign aid lowered its standing. In contrast, the Uyghurs rose in prestige due to

their military prowess and the Tang's dependence on their forces. Having witnessed the Tang's decline, the Uyghurs began to view the Tang with increasing contempt. Their mindset shifted from that of a subordinate vassal to an equal power, and they actively sought diplomatic parity with the Tang. However, the Tang continued to consider itself a great empire and refused to recognize the Uyghurs as equals—an attitude that inevitably led to growing tensions.

3.2.3. Uyghur plundering within Tang territory

Beyond the aristocratic frictions, the deployment of Uyghur troops by Tang to suppress rebellions also inflicted severe hardships on the common people due to looting and pillaging by the Uyghur forces within Tang borders. In the second year of Zhide (757 CE), after the Uyghur general Ye Hu led his troops into Luoyang, they looted the city extensively over three days. The Tang imperial treasury was exhausted, and Li Yu, Prince of Guangping, was powerless to stop the devastation. Eventually, the local population bribed the Uyghurs with tens of thousands of bolts of brocade and silk to bring an end to their ravages. After the joint Tang-Uyghur forces recaptured the eastern capital Luoyang, the Uyghur troops set fire to the Shengshan and Baima shrines within the city, resulting in the deaths of more than ten thousand people inside these sacred sites. In total, over ten thousand civilians perished from Uyghur violence—an event unprecedented in the history of Tang-Uyghur relations.

4. Changes in Tang-Uyghur diplomatic policy

During the An Lushan Rebellion, a series of actions by the Uyghurs increasingly alarmed the Tang court. The Uyghur military threat and their violent conduct in the Central Plains led to a growing distrust and wariness toward them within the Tang political establishment. Nonetheless, military conflicts between Tang and Uyghurs remained limited and localized, never escalating into full-scale war. Most clashes occurred during the reign of Khan Tengri, the period of most acute antagonism between the two powers. The military relationship largely depended on the attitudes and interactions between the rulers.

In the fourteenth year of Dali (780 CE), upon Emperor Dezong's accession, an envoy named Liang Wenxiu was sent to the Uyghurs to express condolences, but Khan Tengri did not respond. Moreover, Tengri planned to lead his entire nation southward to invade Tang territory. According to the *Zizhi Tongjian*: “When Emperor Daizong died, the emperor sent envoy Liang Wenxiu to offer condolences, but Tengri arrogantly refused to observe protocol. The Nine-Surnamed Hu allied with the Uyghurs and persuaded Tengri that China was wealthy and that now was an opportune moment to invade during mourning, promising great gains. Tengri followed their advice, planning a full-scale invasion. His relative, the prime minister Dunmohe Heda Gan, cautioned: ‘Tang is a great country and has done no wrong to us. Last year I invaded Taiyuan, capturing tens of thousands of sheep and horses, a great victory. But the distance was long, provisions were scarce, and many soldiers had to march on foot. Now if the whole nation invades deeply and fails, how will they return?’ Tengri ignored the warning [4].” When persuasion failed, Dunmohe capitalized on the Uyghur populace's reluctance to antagonize Tang, leading an army to overthrow Tengri and the Nine-Surnamed Hu's two thousand men, proclaiming himself khan.

During this period, Tang's diplomatic stance toward the Uyghurs shifted markedly. Emperor Dezong, deeply resentful of the humiliation at Shanzhou, pushed the relationship into crisis. Contrary to the alliance policy under Daizong—which had sought cooperation with the Uyghurs against Tibet—Dezong chose to pivot strategically, seeking rapprochement with Tibet while distancing from the Uyghurs. At the beginning of Dezong's reign, envoys were dispatched to Tibet, “willing to humble themselves and form a close alliance,” aiming to rely on Tibet and estrange the Uyghurs [3].

Simultaneously, Emperor Dezong ordered Dong Tu and his forces back to Tang. Dong Tu's troops "stayed in Zhenwu for several months, demanding excessive supplies, consuming vast quantities of meat daily, and their foraging devastated local crops, causing suffering. Zhang Guangsheng, the Zhenwu military governor, wished to kill the Uyghurs [4]." Aware of Dezong's resentment, Zhang Guangsheng submitted three memorials requesting permission to kill Dong Tu and his men, arguing: "The Uyghurs are originally few, supported only by other powerful nomads. Now, as they fight among themselves, with Dunmohe newly appointed, and other powerful commanders each commanding thousands, the country is unstable. Without resources, they cannot control their troops. If Your Majesty does not take this opportunity to eliminate them but instead returns them and provides supplies, it is akin to arming bandits. I respectfully request permission to kill them [4]." Though the emperor refused three times, Zhang Guangsheng nonetheless executed over nine hundred Uyghurs including Dong Tu. After this incident, Emperor Dezong did not immediately punish Zhang but recalled the envoy Yuan Xiu, initially dispatched to confer the khanship to Dunmohe, with instructions to "await orders in Taiyuan," signaling a pause in Tang-Uyghur relations. When reports came from Uyghur territories demanding revenge for the executions [4], Dezong realized the seriousness of the crisis. He stripped Zhang Guangsheng of his position and again sent Yuan Xiu as envoy to the Uyghurs, seeking to repair relations and appease their anger.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Zhang Guangsheng's killing of Dong Tu was not a spontaneous act. The conflicts between the Tang dynasty and the Uyghurs had long been escalating since the An Lushan Rebellion. From that period onward, the status relationship between Tang and the Uyghurs underwent subtle changes. By the reign of Emperor Dezong, influenced by the attitudes of the Uyghur khan toward Tang and Dezong's own stance toward the Uyghurs, the tensions ultimately culminated in Zhang Guangsheng's killing of Dong Tu and others. However, the incident was ultimately resolved peacefully. From a broader perspective, this event marks a significant turning point in the history of Tang-Uyghur interactions, reaffirming the feasibility and necessity of peaceful coexistence in multiethnic exchanges. Historical experience shows that interethnic relations are not inevitably fraught with conflict; rather, long-term harmony can be achieved on the basis of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. The interactions between Tang and the Uyghurs demonstrate that while unity among different ethnic groups often rests on shared interests, when those interests align, genuine solidarity can be attained [7].

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