

A Study on the Phenomenon of Foreign Slaves in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: As one of the most prosperous periods in ancient China's economic, political, and cultural history, the Tang Dynasty's literature features many depictions of foreign slaves. These individuals became captives due to wars or arrived in China through trade exchanges along the Silk Road and other means. They played various roles in Tang society. This study is divided into five parts: the introduction, a detailed exploration of the types, sources, and primary occupations of foreign slaves in the Tang Dynasty, an analysis of the fundamental reasons for the influx of a large number of foreign slaves into Tang territory, an examination of the impact of foreign slaves on Chinese society during the Tang period, and the conclusion.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty, foreign, slave, human trafficking, captive.

1. Introduction

In the context of both Chinese and foreign history, foreign slaves were not unique to China. Long before the medieval period, African slaves were traded through the Sahara, the Nile, and the Indian Ocean to Southern Europe, Arabia, and South Asia. In ancient China, slaves were often referred to by various terms such as "tong," "private retainers," "kou," "nu," "li," and "pu." In early Chinese society, there was a distinction between "nu" for male slaves and "bi" for female slaves. The term "nu bi" gradually came to specifically denote female slaves due to the lower social status and lesser labor capacity of women.

In societies with clear class divisions, whether slave societies, feudal societies, or even capitalist societies, the legacy of the previous social system is not easily erased. For example, the presence of a large number of slaves in Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty reflects that although the practice of keeping slaves was not as prevalent as in the Han Dynasty nor as extensive as in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, it still existed significantly. The trade in slaves occupied a substantial part of human trafficking because slaves had both inherent value and practical utility, often bringing tangible benefits or meeting specific needs for their purchasers.

2. Types, Sources, and Primary Occupations of Foreign Slaves in the Tang Dynasty

The term "fan (foreign)" has been recorded since the pre-Qin period. According to the annotations in "Zhou Li," [1] it originally meant a fence outside a city or a family, later extended to mean protection, border, or barrier. In ancient times, "foreign" referred to the political-geographical concept centered

on the Central Plains regime, with the "Middle Kingdom" at the center and peripheral ethnic groups and foreign countries as "foreign," forming a hierarchical political system. Foreign slaves came from these peripheral ethnic groups and countries outside Tang territory [2].

2.1. Kunlun Slaves

The term "Kunlun slaves" frequently appears in ancient literature. For example, in "Quan Tang Shi," volume 869, Wang Changling mentions "a Kunlun leads the green horse" in his poem. The "Old Book of Tang" records: "South of Lin Yi all have curly hair and black bodies, commonly known as Kunlun," indicating their presence and recognition in Tang China.

Kunlun slaves, also known as "Gulong," "Gulun," "Kuren," or "Kulen," [3] were described as having darker skin, earning the nickname "black slaves." [4] Based on historical and material evidence, it has been found that during the Tang Dynasty, a large number of Black slaves were present in the Guanzhong region and along the southern coastal areas. Regarding the origins of Kunlun slaves in the Tang Dynasty, modern scholars have proposed three main theories: the "African theory," the "Southeast Asian theory," and the "Indian theory." Scholars have also suggested multiple routes through which they came to China:

1. Southeast Asian or South Asian countries sent Kunlun slaves as annual tribute to the capital city of Chang'an, or Black slaves accompanied envoys and remained in Chang'an.

2. Southeast Asian or South Asian countries engaged in Black slave trading through Tang Dynasty seaports.

3. Tang Dynasty sea vessels directly captured and brought Black slaves from the Arabian Sea or the Persian Gulf to southern coastal regions or inland.

4. Black slaves were brought into Tang territory by official and private merchant ships from the Abbasid Caliphate [5].

5. During battles between the Tang government and Indian governments, large numbers of Indians were captured. One document records, "Wang Xuance and his deputy Jiang Shiren led their forces to Central India... defeated them... capturing the queen, the prince, and 12,000 men and women" [6]. Following this battle, a large group of Indians was brought back to Chang'an.

Various documents reveal that Kunlun slaves held lowly statuses and often had high-risk occupations. Due to their familiarity with water, many worked as sailors. Additionally, based on the images of Kunlun slaves in the murals of the Mogao Caves, many experts speculate that some Kunlun slaves also worked as animal trainers. The "Kunlun slaves dance to the moon" in the "Song History" and the line "Kunlun virtuosos perform for you" in Yuan Zhen's "Song of the Pipa" indicate that Kunlun slaves had remarkable talents in singing and dancing. Thus, it can be inferred that there were groups of Kunlun slaves who specialized as musicians and dancers. Additionally, based on the common tasks of household slaves at that time, it is likely that Kunlun slaves also worked as farm laborers and general servants, holding low social status. Some Kunlun slaves were multilingual and were employed as translators by the military. Certain nobles believed that Kunlun slaves possessed supernatural abilities, which allowed them to demonstrate extraordinary skills on the battlefield. From the terracotta figures and their poses, it is evident that some "Kunlun children" were skilled in acrobatics. This is reflected in artifacts such as the Tang Dynasty "Black Acrobatic Figurine" in the National Museum of China and the "Black Varied Performances Figurine" in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum.

2.2. Silla and Goguryeo Slaves

During the Tang period, Silla and Goguryeo were both state powers on the Korean Peninsula. Most of the early Silla and Goguryeo slaves were brought to China as spoils of war from the successive

"Eastern Expeditions" during the Sui and Tang dynasties, to be rewarded or distributed among high-ranking officials and generals. The Old Book of Tang, Goguryeo Biography mentions, "At first, when Liaodong City was captured, among those who resisted the imperial army, 14,000 people were taken as slaves and sent to Youzhou to be distributed among the soldiers." Additionally, during the Wu Zhou dynasty, Taiping Guangji, Jingcha Yi, Guo Zhengyi records, "The Secretary of the Central Secretariat, Guo Zhengyi, conquered Pyongyang and obtained a Goguryeo slave named Yusu, extremely beautiful, and made her the custodian of the treasury. One night, Zhengyi needed rice porridge, and only Yusu could prepare it. Yusu poisoned it, and Zhengyi urgently said, 'This slave poisoned me!' He sought soil paste and licorice to counteract it, and after a long while, he recovered. Yusu could not be found, along with ten pieces of gold and silver items." This story is also recorded in Chao Ye Qian Zai, Volume 5. These slaves ended up in the Tang territory due to the defeat of their home countries.

The young female slaves from Silla and Goguryeo were highly sought after and favored in the aristocratic circles of the Tang dynasty due to their beauty and docility. They almost became objects of pursuit among the nobility, eager to include them as personal maids, court concubines, or skilled performers. The earliest record of Silla commoners becoming slaves in the Tang dynasty appears in the 10th year of Emperor Xianzong of Tang (816), noting, "Banned from taking Silla people as slaves...", indicating that the phenomenon of Silla commoners becoming slaves in the Tang dynasty existed as early as 816, and in large numbers, which caught the attention of the Silla prince who then petitioned Emperor Xianzong. During Emperor Muzong of Tang's reign (821), Pinglu Jiedushi Xue Ping reported, "Sea pirates deceive and kidnap Silla people... It is forbidden to deceive and sell good Silla people...", suggesting one way Silla commoners became slaves in the Tang dynasty was through being kidnapped by sea pirates and sold. Furthermore, according to the Samguk Sagi, from 786 to 836, natural disasters frequently struck Silla, especially severely during King Heondeok's reign, forcing Silla people to venture to Tang for survival.

There was also another route for their entry into Tang. Beautiful girls, carefully selected by the Silla royal court, learned Tang language, dance, massage, and service skills, and were usually sent to Chang'an to become exotic "treasures" of the nobility. As slaves, they were often gifted by their masters, and some ended up at the bottom of society, while only a few managed to become concubines and elevate their status.

2.3. Turkic Slaves

In the Western Regions, Turkic people, Tibetans, and Tang soldiers captured each other, making the slave trade a significant business. The Western Regions had always been an important market for the slave trade; the failure of a city-state or a battle could mean the defeated people might become slaves of the victors. This is how Turkic slaves entered the Tang territory.

Between 620 and 657, the Tang dynasty engaged in multiple battles with the Turks. It can be inferred that captured Turkic soldiers would be used as slaves after these wars. These captives would be sent to the Tang emperor or his favored ministers to perform hard labor. For example, in the fourth year of Zhenguan (630), "Xieli feared the might and fled first, his troops dispersed. (Li) Jing beheaded over 10,000, capturing over 100,000 men and women." After Xieli Khan fled, General Li Jing took the remaining people as captives. Additionally, in the 8th century, as Arabs expanded eastward, the Central Asian region came under their rule, and many Turks were sold into the Tang territory through the Silk Road, becoming slaves.

2.4. Huji (Central Asian Maids)

Among the foreign servants of the Tang aristocracy, Huji were the most renowned. Their appearance was more distinctive and beautiful compared to other slaves, with fair skin and unique eye colors. Huji did not embody the traditional "delicate beauty" but rather a "different charm." Through Huji, the Tang people could glimpse the vibrant cultures of the Western Regions, including exotic wines, Qiang flute music, and the bold and unrestrained spirit of the Western people. The Tang people's pursuit of Huji aimed to showcase their own bold and free-spirited demeanor through her. Most Huji were skilled in dance and music.

The term "Huji" first appeared in Eastern Han poet Xin Yannian's Yulin Lang, "Huji aged fifteen...". Slave trade in the Western Regions was present during the Eastern Han dynasty, with Huji typically sold by Sogdian merchants through the Silk Road. Tang poet Wen Tingyun mentioned "Huji" in his poem, "Qiang children blow jade pipes, Huji tread brocade flowers," referring to girls from the northern grasslands, although most references to "Huji" in Tang poems indicate women from Central and Western Asia.

Tang poet Li Bai wrote in his poem Qian You Yi Zun Jiu Xing, "Huji as beautiful as flowers... dancing in gauze robes...". Poet Cen Shen described in Qingmen Song Sending Zhang Pangwan of Dongtai, "At the wine booth, Huji sell wine before noon, with milk-like wine in jade vases." Scholars infer from numerous poems that Huji primarily worked in taverns selling wine or as performers. Only a few Huji, due to their beauty and talents, were favored by aristocrats and became their concubines, but this was rare.

2.5. The "Bodhisattva Barbarians"

The term "Bodhisattva Barbarians" is currently primarily used to refer to a specific poetic form, but its origin lies in the existence of a group of people known by this name. In ancient China, residents of the Central Plains during the pre-Qin period referred to ethnic minorities as Nanman (Southern Barbarians), Beidi (Northern Barbarians), Xirong (Western Barbarians), and Dongyi (Eastern Barbarians), according to The Rites of Zhou, Royal Regulations. The word "barbarian" in "Bodhisattva Barbarians" suggests that this term likely originates from southern China.

During the Tang period, there was a state known as the Female Barbarian Kingdom among the tributary states, although historical records about this kingdom are scarce. It is known, however, that the Female Barbarian Kingdom frequently sent tributes to the Tang court, one of which included the "Bodhisattva Barbarians." Tang dynasty author Su E's Duyang Zaji describes the appearance of "Bodhisattva Barbarians" as "having high hairdos with golden crowns and adorned with necklaces." These women, with their high coiffures and golden hats, decorated with necklaces, undoubtedly resembled the peerless Bodhisattvas depicted in murals, and were thus affectionately called "Bodhisattva Barbarians" by the society of the time. They were skilled in dance and the arts, captivating many literati and noble descendants, who composed poetry for them. For "Bodhisattva Barbarians" from ordinary families, becoming a tribute might have been an opportunity to change their social class.

2.6. Others

Apart from the more common foreign slaves mentioned above, some historical records also note slaves from other regions. For instance, the Tang Da Heshang Dongzheng Zhuan records: "(Jianzhen and others) arrived at Wan'an Prefecture (present-day Wanning County and Lingshui County in Hainan Island). The local leader Feng Ruofang invited them to stay at his home and provided for them for three days. Ruofang would annually hijack two or three Persian ships, take their goods for his own, and capture people as slaves. The slaves' residences spanned three days north-south and five

days east-west, with villages next to each other, all inhabited by Ruofang's slaves." From this account, it can be inferred that Feng Ruofang hijacked several ships yearly, capturing people as slaves, who were likely sold to various places within Tang territory. These crew members could have come from multiple countries, including but not limited to Arabs, Indians, Africans, and Persians. The term "Persian ships" in the Tang period was a general term for foreign ships [7].

Additionally, during the Tang period, some surrounding countries with less developed productivity would present slaves as tributes to the Tang government in exchange for rewards. Through literary research, it is known that the Heling Kingdom once offered two monk-child tributes, believed by scholars to be from Africa, either captured or sold by Arab states.

3. Fundamental Reasons for the Emergence of Large Numbers of Foreign Slaves in Tang Territory

Firstly, the economic and political prosperity of the Tang dynasty created a high demand for labor. Although the Tang government severely punished the practice of capturing and selling good people as slaves, this applied only to Tang citizens. Enslaving violated human nature and reduced the tax base of the self-cultivating farmers on which the court relied, thus there was greater tolerance for foreign slaves. Edward H. Schafer, in his book *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, mentioned that generally, trading foreign slaves was a relatively safe business, as it did not elicit moral condemnation in the Tang market. Strictly speaking, since foreign slaves were not considered citizens of the Tang territory, they were not seen as "real" people, leading to a brisk trade in foreign slaves. Due to certain moral and legal deficiencies, the trade in foreign slaves was very prosperous during the Tang period, becoming increasingly severe and directly affecting relations between the Tang dynasty and Silla.

Secondly, the Tang people's curiosity about foreign people and things was strong, and they had an inclusive attitude towards all foreign items. Additionally, the Tang nobility often displayed exotic treasures to showcase their status and wealth, with foreign slaves being among these treasures.

Thirdly, the developed transportation systems of the Tang dynasty, both land and maritime, provided the fundamental prerequisites for trade, economic development, and cultural exchange. This made Tang an important hub for commodity exchange, attracting merchants from various regions, with a large influx of agricultural products, handicrafts, and exotic treasures from all over the world.

Lastly, some foreign slaves were tributes from vassal states and were not to be returned, to maintain protocol. Others were viewed as spoils of war. Out of humanitarian considerations, the Tang government could neither kill nor release these captives, so they were brought back to the Tang territory to increase the labor force.

4. Impact of Foreign Slaves on Chinese Society During the Tang Dynasty

Susan Whitfield, an author studying the Silk Road, vividly described the complex network of the ancient Silk Road, noting that some slaves played special roles within this network. They were seen as unique commodities, traded, used, and even profited from, paralleling the trade of silk. During the long and tortuous overland and maritime transportation processes, many slaves were transported to, or even scattered in, distant foreign markets.

Foreign slaves in the Tang dynasty came from various channels, including trade, tribute, and captivity, and they engaged in various types of labor within the Tang territory, significantly contributing to the prosperity of Tang Chang'an city. They applied their skills in various fields, including agriculture, handicrafts, and construction, providing a solid foundation for the economic take-off of the Tang dynasty. However, due to their low social status, it is challenging to trace their lives in historical records. Their living conditions can only be inferred from the sparse available materials, such as literature and paintings. The Tang people assigned different types of work to

foreign slaves based on their ethnic backgrounds, utilizing their strengths for both personal and national service. For instance, Kunlun slaves, skilled in water navigation, were primarily assigned maritime work, and those with exceptional animal taming skills were employed in related tasks. Slaves from the Mongolian grasslands and Central Asia, known for their horse-taming abilities, often worked as herders and grooms. Beautiful slaves such as Huji, Silla maidens, Goguryeo maidens, and Bodhisattva Barbarians typically served as personal maids or entertainers, without having to engage in extensive household labor.

Regardless of their ethnicity, foreign slaves had little hope of returning to their homelands once in Tang territory. These individuals gradually assimilated into the Han populace, eventually becoming part of the Tang society. Their distinctive appearances made them subjects of legendary stories and paintings. For example, Kunlun slaves frequently appeared in various tales, and their images can be seen in Dunhuang murals. Huji, who were proficient in music and dance, were often praised in many surviving works, providing insight into the performances and costumes of foreign arts at that time.

In summary, foreign slaves in Tang territory enriched secular life with their diverse backgrounds. Their labor not only spurred the economic prosperity of the Tang dynasty but also supported its cultural flourishing. Their presence played a significant role in maintaining social stability and development while promoting intercultural exchange and integration. They enhanced the cohesion and unity of Tang society and were an indispensable part of the social structure at the time.

5. Conclusion

The prevalence of slavery during the Tang Dynasty is a complex historical phenomenon that reflects the vast social class disparities and the endless suffering of the lower classes at that time. It was an era filled with power struggles and inequality, where the fate of slaves was tightly bound to the bottom of society, and human rights were not protected in any way. This phenomenon, like a shadow of history, spanned multiple eras, becoming a profound depiction of the rigidity of social strata in ancient Chinese society.

In today's society, which is characterized by the integration of diverse cultures, we should remember the lessons of history, deeply consider how to treat various cultures equally, respect the dignity of every individual, and strive to eliminate social inequalities, ensuring that everyone enjoys equal rights and opportunities. This is not only a respect for history but also a responsibility for the future. We need to address this from multiple aspects, including education, law, and social systems, to create a fair, just, and inclusive social environment. Only in this way can we truly achieve social progress and development, allowing everyone to enjoy the benefits of social advancement.

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