

PULLYBLANK'S FINDS ABOUT RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

In a well-researched paper "Chinese-Iranian Relations in Pre-Islamic Time," Edwin Pulleyblank provides heretofore little known facts about the diplomatic, cultural and trade relations between China and India (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, Volume 5, 1992, pp. 424-431, Costa Mesa, California, Mazda Publishers). He observes that the door to the Iranian realms was initially opened by China in the second century B.C. when it sent a Chinese envoy westward in search of the Yueh-chih, an eastern Iranian people, in order to enlist them as allies against a common enemy, the Hsiung-nu. While the Yueh-chih were not interested in aligning with the Chinese against their common enemy as they had well established themselves by that time as the rulers of Bactria, the Chinese envoy nevertheless brought back home detailed information not only about the distant lands he had visited but also about what he had learnt from others about more distant lands, which ultimately paved the way for intense activities via the Silk Road, which in turn led to a "profound impact on both China and the Iranian peoples, unfortunately too little documented in written records". China exchanged embassies with Parthia circa 106 B.C. Ten embassies from the Sasanians arrived at the Northern Wei Court in China between 455 and 522 and many more followed thereafter. However, closer contacts between China and the Sasanians prevailed mainly during 618-907, when Yazdegerd and his son Peroz sought Chinese assistance against their Arab invaders. After Peroz's death his son, Nerseh, "was escorted to the west by Chinese troops and remained there under the protection of the Turkish ruler of Tokharistan for about twenty years before returning to die in the Chinese capital sometime between 707 and 709." All references to the Persian court disappeared after the An Lu-shan rebellion in China in 755, "though there is evidence that descendants of refugees from the Sasanian empire were still serving as soldiers at Ch'ang-an, the Chinese capital, in the 9th century."

Pulleyblank regrets that the trade relations between China and Iran are even less documented than the diplomatic contacts between the two nations. He observes that the diplomatic ties played a key role in China starting to trade with the countries west of it and trading with the newly discovered countries in turn served as an important stimulus for diplomatic missions. Pulleyblank maintains that Iranians "were predominant in promoting and controlling the overland trade from China across Central Asia." He believes that the opening of a sea route

between China and India may have been an attempt to break or weaken the Parthian monopoly over the Silk Road trade. The discovery of enormous quantities of Sasanian coins not only along the Silk Road but also along many places in China proper attest to the significant role played by the Iranian, mainly Sogdian merchants in this trade. These coins pertain to twelve different Sasanian rulers ranging from Shapur II (310-79) to Yazdegard III. While silk was the most important item in this trade, there is evidence that indicates the presence of many other commodities included in this trade such as carpets, blankets, textiles of hemp, musk perfumes, camphor, rice wine, fragrant raisins, drugs, and similiar items. Iranian objects and customs of all kinds such as clothing, foodstuffs, music, dancing, furniture, etc., were very much in vogue in China at the time. Moreover, Pulleyblank confirms many of the facts mentioned by me earlier. He believes Zoroastrianism arrived in China in the early sixth century consequent to the establishment of diplomatic missions between the two nations. It came to be known as Hsien or Xian, meaning heaven or heaven-god and was a Chinese synonym in Buddhism for Sanskrit Deva, meaning god. Moreover, the evidence for the apparent Zoroastrian terms such as "fire-god" (Huo-shen) and "fire-deva" (Huo-hsien) has also been found in early Middle Chinese writing Zoroastrianism was accorded official recognition in northern China in the later part of the sixth century, which lasted until the T'ang period. Pulleyblank too testifies for the presence of four fire-temples in Ch'angan, two in Lo-yang, and may others in k'ai-feng as well as in cities spreading along the road to the northwest region of Ch'en. The Persians in charge of these fire-temples were accorded official Chinese rank. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Chinese were quite taken up by the ritual dancing taking place in foreign temples. Although Zoroastrianism was banned in China along with other foreign religions, after the An Lu-Shan rebellion, Zoroastrian fire-temples are often referred to as late as the twelfth century.

Nestorian Christianity, in its quintessentially Persian format was introduced in China also by a Persian monk but it had little impact on the native population. It disappeared from China, until the Mogul period, when Christians and other foreigners were massacred in 878. Manichaeism was introduced into China also by a Persian in 694 A.D. Although the Chinese authorities regarded it as "a false doctrine masquerading as Buddhism", they allowed the Iranians to continue practicing it. During this period the names of the Iranian seven-day week became popular in China. The Iranian name for Sunday, Meher, used by the Manicheans and called Mi in Chinese, was marked in red in the Chinese calendar, a practice that was observed in southern China at least until the close of the nineteenth century. Unlike Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism ended up becoming the state religion in Mongolia when an Uigher Qagan converted to it after An Lu-shan's rebellion: See

Pulleyblank's "The Background of the Rebellion of An Lu-shan", London, 1955. Uigher's adoption of Manichaeism "was no doubt for the sake of the Sogdian merchants settled there." However, the collapse of the Uigher empire in 840 led to the destruction of Manichaeian temples and proscribing of Manichaeism throughout China in 843, and two years later also of all other foreign religions as they were suspected to be "seedbeds of subversion". However, small pockets of Manichaeism survived until 1600, which raises the possibility of pockets of Zoroastrianism also surviving in China after the An Lu-shan rebellion. Indeed, Dr. Pallan Ichaporia's well-researched tractate, "Dispora in Ancient China" in *Hamazor*, Issue I, 2013, lends substance to such a possibility as it covers a much later period than I could.