

1 Tang China and the Rise of the Silk Roads

In search of pearls, he harnesses the glaucous sea. In the north, he buys the Tangut horses. In the west, he catches Tibetan parrots. [He acquires] fire-washed linen from the Continent of Flames [asbestos from southern countries], perfectly woven tapestries from the Land of Shu [Sichuan], slave girls of Yueh, sleek of buttery flesh, houseboys of Hsi [Manchuria], bright of brow and eye.
(description of a trader by Yuan Chen [779–831], Schafer 1997: 44)

Ever since the Western horsemen began raising smut and dust, fur and fleece, rank and rancid, have filled Xian and Luo, women make themselves Western matrons by the study of Western makeup, entertainers present Western tunes, in their devotion to Western music.
(Yuan Chen, Schafer 1997: 28)

All women from the palace who accompanied the procession of the emperor wore foreign hats; they no longer hid their face behind a veil; they started to gallop on horseback, hair in the wind, even wearing masculine clothes.
(*Tangshu*)

The Reunification of China by the Sui Dynasty (581–617)

Despite the divisions of China during the sixth century, commercial and diplomatic contacts developed between Iran, Central Asia, and northern China, as well as between the Yangtze region and Southeast Asia. At the end of the sixth century, the Chinese political situation experienced a major change: an official from the Northern Zhou state, Sui Wendi, became emperor of northern China in 581, and then reunified China in 589. This reunification was the political expression of a movement of growth in exchanges and production, and the result of political and social transformations undertaken by the Eastern and Western Jin, the Liang, and the Toba of Wei (see above). The Sui took several initiatives that would have profound effects on later Chinese history. Unlike the Northern Zhou, they actively supported Buddhism and favored its spread. They introduced a system of written examinations for the recruitment of officials. They undertook the building of Great Walls in the north, and the digging of a network of navigable waterways between the Yellow River and the Lower Yangtze (as far as Hangzhou); this network was extended by a 1500-km-long Great Canal between the regions of Luoyang and Beijing. In 610, the canal stretching from the Yangtze to Chang'an and Luoyang permitted the transportation of grain to these cities, near which huge granaries were

built. The capital, Daxingcheng (Chang'an), exhibited careful planning, with avenues intersecting at right angles. It had 600,000 inhabitants in 600 CE, according to Morris's estimates (2013: 155). These major public works played a crucial role in China's later economic growth during the eighth and ninth centuries (Gernet 1999: 209–211). The second Sui emperor, Yangdi, embarked on a policy of maritime expansion, using a war fleet including five-decker ships, each carrying up to 800 men (Deng 1997: 30). Overseas shipments benefited from advances in shipbuilding – with the adoption of an axial rudder already in use during the first century¹ – and spatial location (Deng 1997: 39, 41). A Sui fleet was launched against Linyi in 604–605.² In 607, another fleet, loaded with five thousand silk rolls, left Canton to go to Chitu (Ch'ih-t'u), perhaps located on the Thai–Malay peninsula, in the Phatthalung region or south of Langkasuka.³ In 610, a fleet that had recruited “men from various southern countries” (*Kunlun* people) put to sea at Chaozhou (Ch'ao-chou) and sailed to Liuqiu (Liu-ch'iu) (Taiwan, or more probably the Ryūkyū Islands). In addition, there was a significant trade revival along the Silk Roads. According to An Jiayo (1981: 9), the arrival of glass workers from Central Asia may explain the manufacture of soda-lime silica glass in China from the Sui period onward.

Tang China (618–907): Buddhism, Long-Distance Trade, and the Development of Markets

“The Golden Age” (618–755)

In the aftermath of Yellow River floods, unsuccessful wars against the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (612, 613, and 614) and clashes against the Turks in 613, peasant revolts broke out and the general Li Yuan seized power in 617. He founded the Tang dynasty in 618 and adopted the name of Gaozu (618–626); his son Li Shimin succeeded him, taking the name of Taizong.

The Tang dynasty enjoyed a period of great prosperity, particularly until the mid-eighth century.⁴ It was partly based on military supremacy and an efficient administrative organization. Taizong (627–649) reformed the administration, the law code, and land tenure, which weakened the old aristocracy. The Tang emperors developed a system of exams for the recruitment of officials, and schools were created which prepared the candidates.⁵ State departments framed governmental decisions; these were later presented to the emperor.⁶ The army was organized on the basis of

¹ And not during the fourth century, as J. Gernet writes (1999: 288). See above.

² The capital of Linyi (probably Tra Kieu) was taken. Expeditions were also launched toward Korea (in 598, 612, and 614).

³ Wang Gungwu 1958: 68; Pluvier 1995: map 4. Some authors have located it on the southeastern coast of Sumatra (Gernet 1999: 208). The expedition also went to Locha (Lo-ch'a), which has not been satisfactorily identified (Wang Gungwu 1958: 65 n. 18).

⁴ Adshead (2004: 69) indicates that “the size of the [Chinese] economy more than doubled” between 500 and 1000.

⁵ Wong (1997: 96) points out the contrast with Europe: the Chinese state had responsibility for the education of officials and the population, while in Europe, education was left to the Church.

⁶ Adshead (2004: 46–47) speaks of “bureaucratic constitutionalism.” The administration consisted of four main organs: a Department of State (which supervised the public service, finances, religious rites, armies, justice, and public works); the Imperial Chancellery; a Great General Secretariat, and a Council of State.

“divisional militia” of tax-exempt farmer-soldiers, a system first employed by the Western Wei and the Northern Zhou; it benefited from the increasing use of armor and crossbows, and from proper training. An army composed of professional soldiers was later set up within the context of the Tang expansion to the north and northwest. “The sources for the early eighth century suggest that the Tang had about half a million men under arms . . . Tang military power rested on the fusion of steppe heavy cavalry with mass infantry developed by the states of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou and the successor Sui dynasty” (Morris 2013: 208). Interventions of the state secured the stability of the social order (Wong 1997: 98). A system of land (re)distribution ensured “the regularity of the revenue from taxes”⁷ and promoted a class of free farmers, who formed the basis of the army.⁸ Diminishing taxes and corvées also benefited agriculture, which advanced both in techniques and through an increase in land cultivated (especially for rice). In addition, China enjoyed a milder climate and increased rainfall after the end of the sixth century (during the seventh and more importantly the eighth centuries).⁹ The square-pallet chain-pump, which allowed water to be lifted – a device invented as early as the first century CE – was widely used, as well as norias (perhaps introduced from the Muslim world). Harrowing and plowing were encouraged, and rice transplanting was adopted in the Yangtze basin and southern China during the eighth century. One of the world’s first known farming handbooks was written during the eighth century. Moreover, the Tang favored territorial extension southward (Yangtze basin, Lingnan) which was “crucial in providing a sizeable external area (comparable in many ways to the discovery of America for Europe during the sixteenth century)” (Norel 2007). The Yangtze basin and the southern regions experienced a sharp increase in population: there were 3 million taxable individuals in 600 and 10 million in 742. The growing sinification of the southern regions led to tensions with indigenous populations; in 669 in particular, the Tang had to send troops into

The empire was divided into ten and later into fifteen regions, “to which Administration inspectors, Tax inspectors and Justice inspectors were attached.” These services were controlled by an Office of General Inspectorate of the Administration. Other departments were responsible for canals and waterways, shipbuilding workshops, and the state university.

⁷ Gernet 2002: 246. The fiscal system was inseparable from the practice of censuses and detailed cadastral knowledge. Taxes were paid in grain and silk, which was the main currency in China during this first Tang period: according to E. H. Schafer (1997: 8), a grain tax was paid by each adult male; each family was taxed on woven products, and took part in corvées. “Throughout Chinese history,” P. Norel notes (2005), “the imperial power tried to prevent the ‘natural’ formation of large-scale private properties, which were detrimental to tax collection . . . The political power implemented this policy by regularly redistributing lands to families of soldiers or by establishing settlements at the borders of the empire.” M. Elvin (1973: 61–63), however, points out the unstable character of the “fair system of land distribution,” with small farmers being forced to sell their properties. Moreover, slavery was still practiced on a significant scale in agriculture.

⁸ Elvin (1973: 54–56) observes a similar evolution in the Byzantine Empire, with the institution of themes, or *themata*, and farmer-soldiers. During the Tang period, the tax rate does not seem to have been higher than 10% of the household’s total income (Deng 1999: 89).

⁹ Z. S. An and L. G. Thompson (1998: 20, 28) identify wetter conditions between 625 and 975 for the semi-arid regions of China, with a peak around 825. In “semi-humid” China, two phases of higher rainfall are noticeable between 575 and 625 and later between 720 and 1175. Curiously, S. A. M. Adshear (2004: 70) speaks of “cooler and wetter” conditions between 500 and 1000 in northern China, but he does not give his sources.

southern Fujian (Clark 2009: 18). Northern China, however, remained the most populated region. The capital of the empire, Chang'an, had more than one million inhabitants (Morris 2013: 155), and was probably the largest city in the world at this time. Luoyang was also a sizeable city. Fourteen urban regions in China had more than 170,000 households. According to Adshead, the level of urbanization increased from 5 to 20 percent of the population from the beginning to the end of the dynasty.¹⁰

The economy was strictly regulated: the state controlled weights and measures, prices,¹¹ and the quality of products, partly through associations of merchants and artisans (*hang*) organized by the political power. The Tang government intervened in grain storage and transport; it secured the roads, thus facilitating trade, from which it benefited, notably through a system of internal customs. Everywhere “there were shops and emporiums for supplying merchant travelers; mules and horses were available to travelers” (Schafer 1997: 8). A postal service with posthouses and horses was set up throughout the country. Public control did not prevent commercial freedom, especially through village markets, which were being established on a daily basis (Elvin 1973: 165–166; Norel 2005). The development of an internal market was stimulated by the growing monetization of the economy. While copper coins had been instituted in China under the Former Han, the Tang introduced the bronze coins that would serve as templates during the following centuries.¹²

Growth in output and improvements in means of transportation led to the setting up of interregional commercial relations. This process was accompanied by geographical specialization, not only in products for the Chinese market, but also in products for foreign trade, which prefigured the integration of the Song period. “[Tang] economic dynamism,” as P. Norel points out, was linked to significant institutional changes: “the territorial expansion of local markets, the organized marketing of basic necessities on a national basis, the emergence of a land market despite uncertain property rights, and the development of free labor. In sum, the Tang dynasty created markets for factors and an incipient system of markets, whereas China had previously had only local markets for goods with poor links between them. Technological innovation could then be implemented and made profitable thanks to these markets for factors” (Norel 2005: 438ff.) (see also Elvin 1973: 166).

The development of porcelain allowed exportation of this luxury product to increase.¹³ Manufactured at Gongyi (Henan), the first pieces of “blue-and-white,” containing cobalt imported from Iran,¹⁴ are dated to this period. This innovation, as well as the rise of the

¹⁰ Adshead 2004: 107. Twenty-five urban regions had more than 500,000 inhabitants each.

¹¹ The *Account of China and India* notes that the Chinese state intervened in the grain market when prices were too high: “Whenever there is a rise in prices, the king releases food [grains] from his stores and sells it at a rate cheaper than the current prices in the market. Thus, inflation is averted” (Ferrand 1922a: 56; Maqbul Ahmad 1989: 48–49).

¹² These coins bore no indication of weight. The Tang emperors did not issue any gold or silver currency; however, merchants brought coins from western Asia: the discovery of Sassanid and Byzantine coins in China has already been mentioned, and dinars from the Muslim world were in use at Canton (Schafer 1997: 257). Silver was used in Gansu and in Central Asia, and in Guangdong and Jiaozhi as well (Thierry 2001: 132–133).

¹³ Porcelain manufacturing requires the firing of kaolin covered with glaze at high temperatures, which ensures clay vitrification. True porcelain was perhaps already being produced during the first century CE.

¹⁴ Recent studies also show the probable use of local sources of cobalt.

textile industry (silk) and metallurgy, appears to have been prompted by expanding internal and external market opportunities. Among the various technical innovations dating to the Tang period, one of the most important was the use of gunpowder. Its first real applications were tried out in the years 904–906 when incendiary projectiles called “flying fires” were commonly used.¹⁵ A paper industry flourished, especially in Sichuan. Woodblock printing probably appeared during the eighth century (one of the first texts to have been printed, dated to 868, has been found at Dunhuang);¹⁶ the technique spread to Korea and Japan, where Buddhist texts were printed during the ninth century. Xylography combined two processes previously used in China: sealing and stamping (Gernet 1999: 293). Some authors have suggested an influence of the Indian technique of imprints on cotton fabrics, but this technique is not well dated in India (while Alam [2002: 456] does not exclude the possibility that this technique appeared at an earlier date, he also notes that it is only properly attested from the twelfth century onward). The social transformations during this period are evidenced in painting, where individual portraits – an art form that had appeared during the Han period – became more common. There were further advances in metallurgical techniques, following the discovery of a second manufacturing process for steel production during the fifth century (through the process of “co-fusion”). Hydraulic power (with the use of waterwheels) worked the pistons of blowing-engines in foundries, and also in flour-sifting machines using a crank connecting-rod system.¹⁷ Transportation benefited from the building of segmental arch bridges (seventh century). Alcohol distillation was invented during the Tang period, or even during the sixth century,¹⁸ with possible Indian influences: a type of Indian still may have been introduced into China, along with Buddhist currents (Needham *et al.* 1980: 80).

Significant social changes went along with economic expansion. Thus, “the matrimonial regimes were geared toward the creation of market-oriented, family-run microbusinesses [Adshead 2004: 103f.]” (Norel 2009b). “These microbusinesses were well adapted to” the context of expanding textile production. “It was also because the development of local markets allowed for processes of specialization in agriculture and made the production more profitable that a labor force, essentially female, was freed up for textile manufacture, on the basis of small-scale family production [Gates 1996]” (Norel 2009b). Larger workshops also appeared, as shown by a text written by Li Fang

¹⁵ Gernet 1999: 274. “In the tenth century, a whole new wave of incendiaries appeared” (Temple 2002: 232). Temple thus describes “gunpowder fire-arrows.” The inflammable property of a combination of saltpeter and sulphur had already been noted during the seventh century. This discovery resulted from experiments probably conducted well prior to this period by alchemists looking for the magic elixir of immortality. Associated with daoism, alchemy, along with its medical applications, was popular at the Tang court.

¹⁶ Boulnois 2008: 272. As early as the seventh century BCE a technique of printing using bronze characters was being tried out. Xylography permitted the dissemination of religious and philosophical texts: knowledge of these texts was necessary for succeeding in the exam system for the recruitment of officials.

¹⁷ Temple 2002: 64–65. A sifting machine using the connecting rod-crank system is mentioned at Luoyang in 530 (prior to the Sui dynasty) in a Buddhist establishment. Piston bellows were operated in reverse mode to the operation of a steam engine: here wheels were driven by rushing water-powered pistons.

¹⁸ Needham *et al.* 1980: 136, 141ff., 150. Alcohol was called “burnt wine,” a name that would later be found in Europe (brandy). Needham *et al.* disregard this origin, despite a passage in the *Bencao gangmu* by Li Shizhen (sixteenth century) indicating that the knowledge of alcoholic distillation was acquired following the capture of Turfan, during the Tang period.

(tenth century): it recounts that a rich merchant from Tingzhou (in Fujian), during the Tang period, owned a workshop housing “five hundred looms for the weaving of silk damask,” an estimate probably exaggerated, since it exceeds the number of looms used in the imperial manufacture under the Northern Song (Elvin 1973: 174; Bray 1999: 179).

The superiority of Chinese weaponry (steel production had been mastered long before, and both crossbows and armor were improved), the development of horse breeding, and the efficiency of the military institutions contributed to the successes of the armies, and served the Tang imperialist project. The Chinese armies crushed the “hostile” Turkish populations, while other Turks chose to partner with the Chinese (Uighurs, and Tangut). Between 630 and 660, the Tang took the control of Turfān and the oasis kingdoms in the Tarim (from Kuchā and Khotan to Kashgar), thus re-establishing Chinese domination in Central Asia¹⁹ (in the face of the advance of the Tang armies, the eastern Turkish khānate disappeared in 630,²⁰ as did the western khānate in 659). Sogdiana (Samarkand and Tashkent regions) and the Ferghana valley were under the nominal suzerainty of China during the seventh century, under the reign of the emperor Gaozong (649–683), until the Arab invasions during the early eighth century (Bukhara sent emissaries to China as early as 618 and 626). During the advance of the Tang armies into Central Asia, Turks were captured by the tens of thousands and sent to China, where they helped dig canals and improve fortifications. In 649, Taizong launched a military expedition into northern India “in order to settle to China’s advantage the succession to the throne of the little kingdom of Magadha” (Gernet 1999: 221). China went so far as to intervene in the internal affairs of Sassanid Persia.

Sparked by contacts with foreign countries and reinforcing them in its turn, a taste for the exotic spread into China. It crossed all social classes and permeated various areas of life, clothing, music, and decoration (see below) (Schafer 1997: 28).²¹ China welcomed foreign merchandise, knowledge, and populations. The “cosmopolitanism” of the court and of Tang society, which aspired to be a model for the rest of the world, has often been emphasized. It was accompanied by “complexity and pluralism in thought,” which strengthened the development of critical thinking. This is manifest, for example, in the historical approach of Liu Zhiji (661–721) (Adshead 2004: 130). During the first centuries of the Tang dynasty, exchanges developed both via the Silk Roads – which retained their significance until the ninth century – and the Southern Seas, whence came “the rare and the precious,” according to the seventh-century *Suishu*.²² “The capital, Chang’an, was the meeting place for all the peoples of Asia: Turks, Uighurs, Tibetans, Koreans, people from Khotan and Kuchā, Sogdians, Kashmiris,

¹⁹ Before 589, embassies had already arrived at Chang’an, sent by the Hephtalites, from Persia, Sogdiana, and Khotan.

²⁰ An eastern Turkish khānate, however, rebuilt itself from 682 onward. It would later be overthrown by the Mongol Basmil, in 742; the Mongols were in turn supplanted by the Uighurs in 744. In the west, a western khānate was constituted from another Turkish branch, that of the Turgesh (699–740), which had Suyab and later Balasagun as its capitals (in Kyrgyzstan) (Golden 2005; Beckwith 2011).

²¹ This taste for the exotic is reflected in poems by Li Bo (eighth century), himself probably of Central Asian origin (Beckwith 2011: 127).

²² Jacq-Hergoualc’h *et al.* 1998: 268 note 6. Via these Silk Roads, the Bactrian camel spread into China; this expansion was accompanied by the invention of a new saddle for the camel (at a time not precisely determined; see Adshead 1995: 128).

Persians, Arabs, Indians, Sinhalese” (Gernet 2002: 282). Until the ninth century, China thus experienced a period of openness and tolerance, which was not without some ambiguity (Schafer 1997: 22–23).

There were significant contacts with Persia during the Sassanid period. In 638, a Sassanid embassy went to China to solicit assistance against the Muslims. In 674, the last Sassanid emperor, Peroz, went into exile in Chang’an with his government. Iranian influence is well documented for the Muslim period during the seventh and eighth centuries. The Iranian aristocratic style, which influenced the Abbasid court, was also copied by the Tang. Persians were present on both land and sea routes, as shown by the journey of the Indian Buddhist Vajrabodhi – who introduced the Tantric doctrine – from India to China via Srīwijaya in 717 aboard Persian ships,²³ the description of a Persian trade in China by Huichao,²⁴ the existence of a Persian village on the island of Hainan in 748, and the involvement of Persians in the looting of Canton in 758 (Wang Gungwu 1998: 75).²⁵

Illustrating the openness of the Tang to the foreign world, many embassies arrived in China during the seventh and eighth centuries. They brought “tributes” which in fact were trade exchanges. According to Chinese texts, they came from Linyi (Champa, 14 embassies during the seventh century, and 11 during the eighth century); Zhenla (Cambodia) in 623, 628, and 698; Geluoshifen (Ko-lo-shih-fen) (perhaps located to the west of Dvāravatī)²⁶ in 662; Duoheluo (To-ho-lo) (Dvāravatī) in 638 and 649; Panpan (on the Thai–Malay peninsula) in 635 and 650–655; Zhuloumi (Chu-lou-mi) (possibly on the Thai–Malay peninsula) in 655 and 656; Dandan (on the Thai–Malay peninsula) in 666–669; Moluoyu (Melayu, Sumatra) in 644 and perhaps 662; Shilifoshi (Shih-li-fo-shih) (Srīwijaya, Sumatra) in 702, 716, 724, 728, and 742; Heling (Ho-ling) (Walaing, central Java) in 640, 648, 666, 767, and 768; Poli (P’o-li) (possibly Bali) in 630; Ganzhifo (Kan-chih-fo) (Kānchīpuram) in 658 and 662; Zhanbo (Chan-po) (Champa, perhaps in the Ganges Valley) in 657; Mola (in India) in 658; Shilizun (Shih-li-chun) (in India) in 658; Po’an (perhaps located in India) (in 656); Shize (Shih-tse) (Sri Lanka) (in 670, 712, 742, 746, 750, and 762);²⁷ Sogdiana in 631,²⁸ and so on. Other embassies were more politically motivated. Byzantium (called Folin) sent a mission to Chang’an in 643 – five years after the Sassanid embassy already mentioned – and later others in 667, 701, and 719.²⁹ According to the *Jiu Tangshu*, as early as 651, a Muslim

²³ Vajrabodhi found 35 Persian ships in a port in Sri Lanka, where they had come to acquire gems; he left for Palembang on one of those ships (Hasan 1928: 118).

²⁴ Huichao was a monk of Korean origin who went to India by sea and returned to China through Central Asia in 729 (Gernet 2008: 280).

²⁵ These Persians arrived aboard vessels probably from Hainan Island.

²⁶ The location of Geluoshifen, or Jialuoshifo (Chia-lo-she-fo), perhaps different from Geluo (Ko-lo) on the Malay peninsula (?), is difficult to identify (cf. the discussion on this issue by Wheatley 1961: 57–58).

²⁷ Wang Gungwu 1998: 122–123; Deng 1997: 114. Note also a mission of the *bodoli* in 643, according to the *Tangshu*; *bodoli* is the probable transcription of the Syriac name *batrik*, “patriarch” (probably Nestorian) (Hirth and Rockhill 1911: 104ff.).

²⁸ In 631, Sogdiana sought China’s protection.

²⁹ Among the presents brought by the Byzantine ambassadors was the theriac, a “universal antidote,” which according to Pliny contained as many as 600 ingredients. These embassies are recorded by the *Jiu Tangshu*.

mission, probably sent by the commander of a region of Iran, was welcomed at Chang'an (Wilensky 2002: 1). In 713, Xuanzong received emissaries from Kuteiba, the Muslim commander in Central Asia, who demanded Xuanzong's submission to Islam. In 726, the Umayyad caliph Hisham sent a third embassy.

When the Chinese court received these foreign embassies composed of dignitaries and merchants, the emperor was expected to offer more than what he had received as a "tribute": this imbalance expressed his political power and his divine nature, which made him a source of inexhaustible wealth. By accepting gifts from the emperor, the ambassadors acknowledged his political sovereignty and his superior nature. The imperial "generosity" established the value of goods that became symbols of high status in foreign countries: the tributary Chinese system thus defined ranks, "standards both of fashion and of behaviour" (Pomeranz and Topik 1999: 14). This system helped China in "ordering the world with the Chinese state at the center" (Wong 1997: 89). The Tang dynasty also pursued an active foreign policy, often using non-Chinese diplomats. Alliances were accompanied by exchanges of princesses. Taizong thus sent two ambassadors to the Indian king Harsha (a mission perhaps also motivated by economic interests, with the Chinese trying "to learn the secret of the manufacture of sugar" [Adshead 1995: 91]), and gave one of his relatives, the princess Wencheng, in marriage to the king of Tibet. In 712, the princess Yongle was sent north to marry the Khitan khān. Suzong (711–762) gave his daughter Ningguo to the Uighur khān.

Exchanges during the seventh century mostly followed the Silk Roads. The interest shown by the Tang in Central Asia – where the Chinese presence, however, came at a price – can primarily be explained by the need to import horses, even though stud farms were created in China. These horses were exchanged for silk, tea, lacquers, and iron items. The discovery of Chinese silk remnants bearing a "Persian" decoration with vines, birds, and wine drinkers in Xinjiang (Turfan, and Niya) indicates a production specifically developed for the foreign market (Adshead 1995: 92). Slaves – whether Turks or Slavs – also came from the Khwarezm, south of the Aral Sea. Dated between the fifth and tenth centuries, the manuscripts found at Dunhuang, which was a significant trade center in western Gansu, reveal the cosmopolitan character of the population of the oases in Central Asia: Chinese and Tibetan texts, as well as documents written in Uighur, Sogdian,³⁰ Sanskrit, and Prakrit, have been found. The merchants and embassies that came along the Silk Roads also brought furs, woolen cloth, cotton fabrics,³¹ brocades, carpets, aromatics, medicines, dyes, gold and silver vessels, glass items, and precious or semi-precious stones.³²

³⁰ A Manichaean presence of Sogdian origin can also be noted in China. The doctrinal flexibility of the Manichaeans enabled them to survive in China until the fifteenth century and favored syncretisms (Bentley 1993: 96). The Sogdian language served as the *lingua franca* along the northern branch of the Silk Roads in particular. Texts written in Tocharian languages, which belong to the Indo-European family, have also been retrieved in various sites of the Tarim.

³¹ Cotton was known under various names: an ancient term *tung* is of uncertain origin; other names derived from the Iranian *bagtak* and Sanskrit *karpāsa* (Schafer 1997: 205). Cotton thread and fabrics were imported from Central Asia, Nanzhao, Champa, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and the Muslim world. Xuanzang describes cotton fields in the oases of Central Asia.

³² Jade from Khotan, a city controlled by the Tang Empire, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, amber from the Baltic Sea, and malachite (Schafer 1997: 222ff.).

From the middle of the Tang period, China became more sea-oriented,³³ for the purpose of trading with foreign countries and within the empire (transport by sea was 70 or 80 percent cheaper than transport by land) (Elvin 1973: 138). One notes advances in naval technology, with the use of leeway fenders during the eighth century: these prevented ships from running aground or listing excessively. The Tang strictly controlled long-distance trade through their main ports, among which Guangzhou (Canton) held a prominent position. This city may have had 200,000 inhabitants during the eighth century, many of whom were foreigners,³⁴ probably inhabiting separate boroughs. Located at the junction of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, Yangzhou was another trade center with the Southern Seas, which attracted substantial numbers of foreigners.³⁵ Quanzhou (named Zaiton by Marco Polo) was also described in a poem by Bao Ho (eighth century) as a flourishing port where merchants from various countries mingled. Jianzhen (Ganjin), a monk of Chinese origin who lived in Japan, describes “the argosies of the Brahmans, the Persians and the Malays, their number beyond reckoning, all laden with aromatics, drugs, and rare and precious things, their cargoes heaped like hills” (Schafer 1997: 15). China enjoyed a trade surplus; “goods were exported in exchange for precious metals, in money or other forms” (Norel 2004: 187). The Tang knew the routes going to India via the Vietnamese coast, as shown by the itinerary given by Jiadan (730–805). The foreign presence in Chinese ports was not without tensions. In 684, for example, Kunlun merchants took revenge for a humiliation they had suffered by killing the governor of Guangzhou and his entourage (Clark 2009: 27).

In 714–715, a superintendant of maritime commerce was appointed at Canton. While this official was in charge of controlling the maritime trade, he also had to ensure that foreigners were protected. “He held authority over everything concerning imported products, . . . the state monopoly of foreign trade” (Sauvage 1948: 16). Foreign traders paid customs duties and various taxes, which could account for one-third of the cargo. Moreover, agents from the court exercised pre-emption rights over the merchandise. The state regulated prices: “Once the ships were in the port, the Chinese authorities seized the merchandise. It could be sold only when the last ship coming with the same monsoon had arrived, this in order to establish a proper price for the various imported products” (Sauvaget 1948: 16). Imports included colored glass items,³⁶ coral, ivory,

³³ Gernet 2008: 273. As early as the seventh century, however, the Tang fleet was sent against Korea (648, 663, 668).

³⁴ Abū Zayd gives 120,000 foreigners at Canton in the ninth century (Schafer 1997: 282 note 65). The *Account of China and India* mentions that “the chief of the Chinese appointed a Muslim at Canton with the power to settle disputes arising among his fellow religionists” (para. 12; Sauvaget 1948). The *Ancient History of the Tang (Jiutangshu)* states that the number of vessels visiting Canton went from 4 – prior to the empire – to 4,000; here, however, the text is certainly wrong (Lo 1970: 168).

³⁵ Chinese soldiers, in 760, appear to have attacked the Arabo-Persian community at Yangzhou (Salmon 2004: 34). This community must have included Buddhists, since mention was made in 838 of Persians who took part in the restoration of a Buddhist temple along with Chams (Salmon 2004: 34).

³⁶ Glass items imported from the Muslim world during the Tang period have been excavated at Luoyang, Yangzhou, in the temples at Famen (west of Xian, Shaanxi province), and Jingzhi (Hebei province) (An Jiayao 1996: 134; Ma Wenkuan 2004: 32). This glass was carried either by sea or by land. Enameled glass (in the form of plates) was found, for which Fustāṭ (Egypt) was the main production center. Incised plates at Famen may have come from Nishāpūr (Kröger 1999). In addition, glass of the “Islamic type has been recovered at Dong Son” (Dussubieux 2001: 202).

spices, medicines, perfumes (incense, myrrh, aromatic woods, nutmeg, cloves, and cardamom),³⁷ dyes (red lacquer from cochineal insects, brasil),³⁸ jewels, gems, pearls, rhinoceros horns, turtle shells, cotton fabrics, and slaves.³⁹ In exchange, the Chinese offered silk fabric, raw silk, lacquered items, ceramics,⁴⁰ spices, and metals (objects made of iron). The significance of the exportation of Chinese ceramics toward the Persian Gulf has been confirmed by the discovery of an Arabo-Persian shipwreck⁴¹ near Belitung Island (off the eastern coast of Sumatra), in 1998. The vessel contained more than 60,000 objects of Chinese origin, including 10 tons of lead ingots, 18 silver ingots, 2 kg of gold leaves, 56,500 ceramic items from Changsha (stoneware with painted decoration, produced for export), and the first ceramics of the “blue-and-white” type using cobalt (Krahl 2010). Some pieces reveal how Chinese production had adapted to buyers’ tastes (Salmon 2004: 34). The shipwreck has yielded about thirty silver or gold objects, including a gold cup featuring men from Central Asia. Some of these items, produced for export, may have been made by foreign artisans working at Yangzhou (Qi Dongfang 2010). The ship was probably sailing to Java. Ceramics from western Asia have been unearthed at various sites along the Chinese coasts, especially at Yangzhou and Fuzhou⁴² (strangely, not at Guangzhou, but this may be due to the fact that the ancient parts of the city have not been excavated) and inland, for example at the sites of Buddhist monasteries, at Yongxian and Guilin (Guangxi province). Ho (1994b) points out that these ceramics influenced Chinese production (Glover 2002).

China developed trading exchanges with southern Asia – Austronesians, Indians, Arabs and Persians acted as intermediaries – as well as with Korea and Japan. These countries were submerged by Chinese culture, with Chinese ships involved in trade (Elvin 1973: 137). From the middle of the seventh century, Japan had a civil government composed of nobles influenced by the Tang model. The capital, Nara, was built along plans similar to those of Chang’an; Nara has given its name to the period, which lasted until 794. By 750, “in the capital alone, an inspectorate and eight ministries supported 7,000 to 10,000 officials” (Lieberman 2009: 383). Large tax-exempt estates were

³⁷ Canton served as a warehouse for products such as aloeswood: “an Ibadite merchant of Oman went to China and bought [this wood] there in the 8th century” (Schafer 1997: 164). Perfumes and aromatics from western Asia arrived both by sea and land: “two kinds of jasmine were known to the men of Tang, one under its Persian name *yāsaman*, and another under its Indic name *mallikā*” (Schafer 1997: 123). Jasmine essential oil was primarily imported from Shiraz. The spread of Buddhism obviously played a role in the growing consumption of aromatics. Fragrant woods such as sandalwood were supposed to chase away evil spirits. The substances used by the Buddhists (especially coral, gems, and pearls) usually originated in distant lands (Helms 1988: 125).

³⁸ Schafer (1997: 211) also suggests the importation of kohl containing a dye obtained from the *Murex*.

³⁹ See below for products exported from Southeast Asia. Various vegetal food products were carried by ships and caravans: saffron, from India and Central Asia, and dates, known under various names, one “of Persian origin, and another perhaps of Egyptian origin” (Schafer 1997: 121–122).

⁴⁰ For the ninth and tenth centuries, Ho (1994a: 195) observes that “the assemblages of Chinese ceramics excavated in Southeast Asia do not appear to be very different from those unearthed in Sri Lanka or in western Asia. It appears that there were standard assortments of Chinese ceramics destined for export [at this time]” (quoted by Jacq-Hergoualc’h *et al.* 1998: 294).

⁴¹ The hull planks were stitched, without dowelling. Woods used for the planks of the vessels appear to have been of Indian origin (Flecker 2001).

⁴² At Fuzhou, three vases of the “Sassano-Islamic” type with turquoise glaze have been discovered in the tomb of Liu Hua, who died in 930 (Glover 2002: 173).

granted to members of the royal family, thus drawing up the feudal structures that would mark the following period. Exams for the recruitment of officials were introduced, following the Chinese example; however, only aristocrats could apply for the competitions. Buddhism became the state religion. In 741, Emperor Shomu issued an edict establishing official monasteries and nunneries, following the Chinese model promoted notably by the emperor Taizong and the empress Wu Zetian (690–705) (see Wong 2015). Japan exported gold, silver, mercury, and medicines to the port of Hangzhou, and adopted copper currency. Japan's monetization during this period has been underestimated by most historians (paddy and materials were still valuable means of exchange).⁴³ The treasure kept in the Shoso-in house at Nara, dated between 756 and 759, clearly shows the extent of the long-distance trade networks: it contains artifacts from Tang China, India (lutes and masks); Sassanid Persia (gilded bronze cups and silver ewers); Central Asia (carpets); and western Asia (glass).⁴⁴ Sassano-Islamic (a continuation of Sassanian) pottery shards have been unearthed at various sites in the Fukuoka region (northern Kyushu), in particular in a house for foreigners which contained a sizeable Chinese assemblage. A shard has also been discovered on Ikii Island, between Japan and Korea. These ceramics were probably shipped to Japan by Chinese or Koreans (Glover 2002: 173). In Korea, the combined forces of Silla and Tang China were victorious against Baekje forces and Japanese from Yamato, at the battle of Baekgang (663). In 668, the Silla kingdom unified the Korean peninsula, with the help of the Tang. The Silla kingdom was deeply influenced by the Chinese mode of government and adopted a Chinese form of Buddhism. The Silla kingdom stood until the early tenth century, during which time its power crumbled. Korean merchant ships were active in the northern China Sea, and many Koreans settled in Shandong.

Exchange networks included the Philippines and the Sulu archipelago: Tang pottery has been excavated on the Babuyan Islands, and on Luzon, Mindoro, Bohol, Cebu, Mindanao, and, further south, on Jolo (Bacus 2004: 266). Along the route to Palembang, where large amounts of green-glazed Chinese pottery have been recovered (see below), vessels from China probably stopped on the western coast of Kalimantan. In Vietnam, Thailand, and on the Thai–Malay peninsula, remnants of Chinese ceramics are often ten times more abundant than those of pottery from western Asia (Glover 2002).

It is generally considered that China's trade with the southern seas showed a surplus (Norel 2004: 195). That was probably the case during the first period of the empire, but the picture appears more uncertain during later periods. At the beginning of the

⁴³ Yamamura and Kamiki 1983: 335. Copper coins were issued twelve times between 708 and 958. A limited gold issue occurred during the eighth century; these gold coins were probably not used for trade.

⁴⁴ Buddhist institutions, which were often exempt from taxes, accumulated land and wealth. It was partly to escape the grip of the Buddhist clergy that the emperor moved the capital to Heian (Kyoto), in 794. During the Heian period, known as the *ritsuryō* era, the aristocratic Fujiwara clan held a prominent place at the head of a state that was less and less centralized. Power was monopolized by “the imperial house, court nobles and elite temples” (Lieberman 2009: 374). Influences from China and southern Asia did not come only through trade, as some foreigners settled in Japan: we know of a Persian physician, who arrived in 734 (Schafer 1997: 178). During the eighth century, Japan experienced a demographic decline due to epidemics, which resulted from increased contact with the continent (Lieberman 2009: 385).

eighth century, the Tang became aware of how much metal was draining away through commerce. A 713 decree stipulated that gold and iron should no longer be used in barter transactions with foreigners.

There were commercial exchanges, but also transfers of knowledge, social behavior, and religious ideas. The spread of xylography and metallurgical techniques from China to Central Asia has been noted above. In the other direction, the knowledge of windmills passed from Iran to China. Syrian artisan glassmakers arrived in China via Sogdiana.⁴⁵ The Chinese were interested in Indian medicine and sciences (astronomy and mathematics), and Indian astronomers settled in China. Improvements in hygiene are noteworthy during this period (Adshead 2004: 74). Contacts with the Sassanids and later with Muslim Persia led to the introduction of musical traditions, iconographic images (hunting scenes, for example), and the introduction of games (polo and chess) and fashions in clothing. The consumption of exotic goods was not confined to the court, or even the capital, but took place throughout the country.

The major world religions spread into the Chinese Empire. From the dawn of Islam, Muslim merchants entered China via land and maritime routes, with sea routes becoming predominant during the eighth and ninth centuries. Islam established itself in the trading ports: Canton had a mosque during the eighth century. Inter-marriages between Muslim foreigners and Chinese progressively led to the formation of communities of mixed origins, the *hui*.⁴⁶ Buddhism, which arrived around the first century, continued to spread, with the support of some rulers such as Emperor Taizong and Empress Wu. “Sui and Tang China,” notes Gernet, “was the most brilliant center of Buddhism, the universal religion for most of the peoples of Asia. It was to this fact even more than to the victorious campaigns waged from Korea to Iran that China owed its widespread influence” (Gernet 2002: 277).⁴⁷ “During the Sui and Tang dynasties, there were a total of eighteen official translation bureaus established under the aegis of state support: five during the Sui and thirteen during the Tang . . . The chief translator was usually a prestigious foreign monk” (Wong 2015). Buddhism introduced new analytical concepts and “the notion of critical, self-reflective thought itself” (Adshead 1995: 71). The seventh century was the golden age for Buddhist pilgrimages to India. The journey – by land to and from India – of the monk Xuanzang (Hiuan-tsang), who sojourned in India between 629 and 644, is known to us through his biography and the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* written by one of his disciples, Bianji (Drège 2000: 38–40). In contrast, Yijing went to India by sea, departing from Canton aboard a “Persian” ship around 670 (as already mentioned, he stopped at Palembang; see above). Many other monks went to India during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, bringing back books and relics. Buddhism also developed in China, using the language and concepts of the Daoists, for example the Chan and Pure Land sects:

⁴⁵ For the fifth century, the *Beishi* (*History of the Northern Dynasties*, 645) mentions a Yuezhi influence in the Northern Wei state in the manufacturing of colored glass (Adshead 1995: 98).

⁴⁶ An account by Liu Xu (945 CE) reveals the size of the *hui*: in 845, “under the order of Emperor Wuzong, a total of 260,500 Muslims belonging to 4,600 mosques were forced to give up their religious practices” (Deng 1997: 158 n. 2).

⁴⁷ China, writes Adshead (1995: 103), consciously used Buddhism to enhance its world role.

“Daoism served as a cultural bridge between China and India” (Bentley 1993: 80). This Buddhist expansion was accompanied by the establishment of hospitals and other institutions involved in giving assistance to the most deprived people, sometimes on the orders of the state.⁴⁸ “Buddhist monasteries in China, unlike Benedictine monasteries in the West, drew the greater part of their income not from the land, but from commercial activities such as money or grain lending, royalties from hydraulic flour mills and oil presses, and gifts” (Adshead 2004: 86). Buddhists were the source of the introduction of new commercial practices and banking techniques.⁴⁹ Coming from Iran and adopted by the Uighurs, Manicheism, a religion well “suited to be the ideology of a mercantile community,” was also present, as well as Zoroastrianism and Christianity under its Nestorian form.⁵⁰ Iranian influences have been identified both in China (in the figure of the Amitābha Buddha) and Japan (on Tang paintings and silk damasks kept in the Shōsō-in at Nara). These influences came via the oases of the Tarim or the maritime routes.

The Chinese Downturn and the Defeat of An Lushan’s Revolt (755–763)

According to the rule set forth by Tainter (1988: 194–195), the expansion of the Chinese state reached a threshold where increasing investments finally became counterproductive. Expenditure on the army, in particular, grew from 2 million strings of 1,000 coins in 713 to 14 or 15 million in 755, amounts that can be compared to the issues of coins by the Tang: 300,000 strings at the beginning of the eighth century, and only 100,000 in 834 (Elvin 1973: 147). The arrangements for conscription appear to have been ill-adapted to the new conditions, and the system of militias was in decline.⁵¹ The state then resorted to the use of mercenaries, Uighurs in particular, and the army leaders – who were often of foreign origin – acquired considerable political power, which led to the decline of the central power. Despite continued efforts, the Tang were everywhere experiencing setbacks. In Yunnan, in 750, the Nanzhao kingdom took control of the routes of the southwest. In Central Asia, helped by the Qarluq Turks who had migrated to the region around 745, the Arabs won a victory against a Chinese army

⁴⁸ Schafer 1997: 176. Adshead notes the introduction of state examinations for doctors in imperial medical colleges (2004: 83). Examinations for doctors were also used at Baghdad under the Caliph al-Muqtadir (931).

⁴⁹ “Monasticism brought essential capitalist institutions: the prototype of the permanent, non-kinship association; the specific practices of the auction; compound interest; equitable mortgage and the money club. The Buddhist monastery was a capitalist institution . . . Buddhist monasticism implanted the notion of capital itself . . . By their teaching and their own outlay, the Buddhist monasteries encouraged spending and circulation” (Adshead 1995: 57–58).

⁵⁰ Adshead 1995: 74. It was a Manichean, Li Mi, who promoted the alliance between the Uighurs and the Tang to suppress An Lushan’s rebellion.

⁵¹ For Gernet (2008: 272), the evolution can be explained both by the political circumstances and by “the relaxation of the state’s control over individuals.” Elvin points out that the militia system had a defensive character, and was inappropriate for the expansionist situation of the empire; moreover, the impoverishment of the militia members was a cause of the system’s decline (1973: 65). See also Lieberman 2009: 509.

at the battle of the Talas River in 751, putting an end to the Chinese influence in Sogdiana. Thousands of Chinese prisoners were captured, among them “silkweavers, metalworkers and paper makers,” who were sent to Kūfa and Baghdad (Boulnois 2008: 269). In the same year, the Chinese were defeated at Dali, by the Nanzhao kingdom.⁵² The Chinese troops sent to Nanzhao seem to have been affected by epidemics. In addition, northern China was under threat from the Khitan Mongols. The Korean kingdom of Silla, allied with the Tang, also experienced a period of instability and upheavals. In Mongolia, a Turkish Uighur confederation associated with the Sogdian diaspora⁵³ emerged from 744 onward; it demanded increasing quantities of silk, in exchange for horses. China, however, had begun to develop horse breeding: in 754, the pasture manager at Longyou reported to the emperor that the number of horses in his herd was over 325,700.

On the domestic side, difficulties were exacerbated by conflicts at the highest levels of the state between the aristocracy (ancient and new) and a class of officials recruited through exams, as well as by a decrease in the number of taxable families, with small landowners passing under the control of large estates as servants: here again, Elvin (1973: 67) draws a parallel with developments occurring in the Byzantine Empire during the tenth century. The growing affluence of rich landowners and merchants was accompanied by the appearance of a mass of landless peasants. Trade was affected from 755 onward by a series of revolts. The autonomy acquired by military chiefs led to a rebellion of non-Chinese generals headed by An Lushan, a man whose father was Sogdian and mother Turkish (756–763). During the turmoil at that time, in 756–757, several thousand foreign merchants, mainly Arabs and Persians, were killed at Yangzhou (Deng 1997: 152–153). The sending of a contingent of Persians and Iraqis to Gansu by al-Mansūr in 756 to support Emperor Suzong shows that diplomatic relations had been established between China and the Muslim Empire after 751.⁵⁴ The capital Chang’an was looted by the Uighurs and the Tibetans one after the other, in 762 and 763. The economic decline and the abuses by Chinese officials at Canton triggered a revolt by “Bosi and Dashi” (Persian and Arab) merchants in 758, who sacked the city before fleeing out to sea, probably to Hainan, An-nan (Hanoi), and perhaps to Java.⁵⁵

The Second Tang Period: The “Indian Summer” (763–907) and the Fall

Internal conflicts, the disaggregation of the Chinese peripheries, and the loss of control over the trade routes of Central Asia and Yunnan might have been the prelude to

⁵² The Tibeto-Burmese kingdom of Nanzhao (which was long considered a Thai state) was formed in Yunnan during the eighth century and experienced expansion during the ninth century.

⁵³ The Sogdians, who often adhered to the Manichaean religion, appear to have played an important role in Uighur society, providing the Uighur with a script. The Sogdians were employed “as ministers, diplomats and secretaries” (Bentley 1993: 96).

⁵⁴ Some of those troops probably remained in China (Adshead 2004: 161).

⁵⁵ Wang Gungwu 1998: 79, after the *Jiu Tangshu*. “It is interesting to note that in 760–761, the Ta-shih made vigorous advances to Ho-ling. This may be related to the decline in trade on the Chinese coasts, and the Ta-shih quest for a new base in the Nanhai” (Wang Gungwu 1998: 79–80).

a total collapse of the Tang Empire. The state, however, managed to overcome this mid-eighth-century crisis and adapt itself to the new conditions. “The architects of the Tang restoration were ministers, not emperors,” which is evidence of the power and vitality of the bureaucracy (Adshead 2004: 49).⁵⁶ The state thus reacted to the decrease in the number of families subjected to taxation in the countryside by implementing an innovative fiscal policy notably using indirect taxation.⁵⁷ The tax system “was no longer based on the families of the farmers, but on lands and harvests” (Gernet 2002: 263).⁵⁸ In 780, a semi-annual tax partly paid in cash replaced the earlier taxes paid in kind and in labor (Nakazato 2011).⁵⁹ Each farmer paid this tax, whether or not he owned the land he cultivated, and the upper classes did not necessarily benefit from any exemption. In addition, the government increased the taxes on commerce and instituted monopolies on salt in 759,⁶⁰ alcohol in 764, and tea in 793.⁶¹ These monopolies spurred the rise of a new class of merchants, who, however, remained under the control of the political power.⁶² Increased monetization of the economy can be observed during this period of “transition to the Mandarin Empire” (Gernet 2002: 261).

The state reduced the number of soldiers, whom it had to provide with horses. During the eighth century, Tibetan incursions and the rebellion of the general An Lushan disrupted horse breeding. Having gained a virtual monopoly on the trade in horses after the help they had provided to the Tang against the Tibetans, the Uighurs raised their prices: at the end of the eighth century, they were asking 40 pieces of silk for one horse.⁶³ The Chinese world-empire was clearly in recession during the second half of the eighth century. The Tang lost control of the Gansu corridor and

⁵⁶ These Chinese assets obviously were lacking in the Muslim system.

⁵⁷ The state thus took into account the evolution of social structures. It was clearly impossible to go back to the ancient system of allocation of land to farmers (Adshead 2004: 90; Gernet 2008: 262ff.).

⁵⁸ Now “the state no longer sought to control property and [land] occupation” (Adshead 2004: 51).

⁵⁹ Note that “systems of transferring money from one place to another, by processes of clearing, were institutionalized by the state” (Elvin 1973: 155; Norel 2005).

⁶⁰ More than half of the state revenues then came from the salt monopoly. The Tang used the technique of extracting salt through evaporation using a series of basins; this system had been developed earlier by the Northern Wei in the north, at Lake Xiezhou (Hedung). See Adshead 2004: 81. This technique was borrowed by the Muslim world through the Chinese who were taken prisoner at the battle of Talas.

⁶¹ The use of tea became widespread in China during the eighth century, and later in Inner Asia.

Originating in Sichuan, tea cultivation began to spread during the Qin and the Han periods. Taxes on ores and metals were also introduced. Adshead (2004: 50) points out the importance of the establishment of fiscal policy based on indirect taxation, an innovation already initiated under the former Han by Emperor Wudi. This type of taxation was adopted by Venice and Genoa during the thirteenth century. The state perceived a specific tax on products traded.

⁶² “The state’s action in the fiscal domain resulted in favoring the rich merchants who took on the job of collecting taxes on salt” (Gernet 2008: 264). Within the context of dominance by the Confucian order, however, the merchants were not authorized to sit examinations for appointment to official positions.

⁶³ Gernet 2002: 250. A horse market was set up on the border with the steppe nomads, in the Ordos region. At the beginning of the ninth century, horses also came from Tibet. The Arabs had sent a few horses by the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth century. While the horses were primarily destined for the army, the most beautiful ones went to the emperor’s stables.

the Tarim basin.⁶⁴ Along the Silk Roads, the Tibetans took Dunhuang in 787, and then the oasis of Khotan; they won a decisive victory over an army composed of Chinese and Uighurs in 791 at Tingzhou. They would maintain control over the southern Silk Road until 851, the Uighurs being preeminent in the northern Tarim and in Djourgaria. Around the end of the eighth century, however, an alliance was struck between the Tang and the Abbasids against attacks by the Tibetans in Central Asia, and “an embassy of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd arrived at Chang’an in 798” (Gernet 1999: 250). A Tibetan–Chinese peace treaty was signed in 823 (following the Tibetan–Uighur treaty of 822). When the Kirghiz defeated the Uighurs in 840, some of the latter took refuge in China, where in 843 the Tang power massacred them.

In addition, a series of epidemics affected the coastal provinces of China from 762. Half of the population of the province of Canton died in that year, and the same overall mortality affected the Zhejiang province in 806.⁶⁵ The number of households decreased – from 12.3 to 8.9 million – between the censuses of 2 and 742 CE. These epidemics were perhaps the consequence of an increase in trade, which brought with it an intermingling of populations and the introduction of new bacteria carried via maritime routes. The upheavals in southern China during the second half of the eighth century led to a shift in trade towards Hanoi, which was, however, the victim of a Javanese raid in 767.

The first signs that China was becoming relatively closed and imposing restrictions on commerce can be observed at this time. In 779, it was forbidden for the Uighurs to wear Chinese clothes. In 780, the Tang government prohibited the use “of silver, copper, iron, male and female slaves” in trade with foreigners. Five years later, an edict forbade all travelers from taking “even one piece of cash” to western regions such as Tibet and Nanzhao (Wicks 1992: 24).⁶⁶ In 809, another edict prohibited the transportation of money beyond the Lingnan Mountains in southern China (north of Canton).

At the beginning of the ninth century, however, China’s situation improved. The Hanoi region was ravaged by wars and Canton regained its former activity and opulence.⁶⁷ At peace with the Tibetans and the Mongols, from 820 to 860, the Tang Empire experienced an “Indian summer” (Adshead 2004: 51), the significance of which should, however, be put into perspective. The loss of the Silk Roads and evolving

⁶⁴ The Tibetans had already controlled a large part of the Tarim between 670 and 692. Moreover, Yunnan was paying tribute to the Tibetans by the middle of the eighth century. Trisong Detsen’s reign (755–804) in Tibet saw an expansion of Buddhism.

⁶⁵ McNeill 1998b: 148. The first description of the plague in China dates from 610. An epidemic was recorded in Canton province in 642.

⁶⁶ An independent kingdom, Nanzhao maintained tributary relations with China. It acted as a commercial intermediary between Burma and China. In Nanzhao, trade was conducted with silk and cowries (*Xintangshu*). Gang Deng (1997: 171–172) emphasizes the growing shortage of money in the Tang Empire during the eighth and more importantly during the ninth century (whence the increasing use of silk as currency). Chinese “copper” coins were made of an alloy containing 70 percent copper and 30 percent lead.

⁶⁷ Wang Gungwu 1998: 83. The kingdom of Nanzhao (Yunnan) took the Red River valley and Hanoi in 827. Trade again prospered in Canton between 837 and 841: for this period, the *Xintangshu* writes that port officials continued to profit from trade in the southern seas, selling “at low prices the valuables they had acquired,” as “gifts” or “goods in excess of the customs dues” (Wicks 1992: 24). Moreover, officials invested in trade indirectly.

Chinese production and trade induced a more maritime and southerly orientation of the empire. “The Chinese world’s center of gravity was tending to move from the Wei valley and the central plain . . . towards the plains of the lower Yangtze basin” (Gernet 2002: 265). Whereas 75 percent of the Chinese population lived in the north during the early Tang period, that percentage dropped to 50 percent at the end of the dynasty. For Adshead, “the colonization of [southern territories] was China’s equivalent to the discovery of America . . . [It] was a prime motor of economic growth between 500 and 1000” (2004: 75, 77). In addition to more intensive rice cultivation, one observes crop diversification with the development of tea plantations in the Anhui, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Sichuan provinces,⁶⁸ of sugarcane cultivation, as well as the introduction of the cotton plant from India into the delta of the Pearl River (the sugar industry also originated in India). Domestic commerce developed, as did foreign trade through the major ports. The Lingqu canal connecting the Xiang River (which flows north into the Yangtze) and the Li River (which flows south into the Gui River and the Pearl River) was fitted with thirty-six flash locks by 825. The state permitted greater freedom of trade and entrepreneurship. An early ninth-century poet describes the opulence of a successful business trader in these terms: “Wherever profit is to be made he goes . . . His food and drink are sweet and well spiced. With interest and capital constantly breeding rich profit . . . He frequents noblemen’s houses, the residences of royal princesses . . . Knowing that his riches make him powerful as a prince” (Goucher *et al.* 1998). Rich merchants controlled traffic between the Yangtze basin and northern China, the waterways allowing the transport of grain, salt, tea, wood, textiles, and other products. This second period of the Tang dynasty thus witnessed the emergence of a substantial Chinese private enterprise for the first time in China’s history.⁶⁹

“The shortage of means of payment at a time when commercial transactions were developing rapidly” encouraged innovations in the field of credit (Gernet 2002: 265). The various provinces obtained the right to issue currency. The Tang reduced both the copper content and the weight of their bronze coins, in order to cope with the copper shortage and price increases. The state issued iron and lead coins. More importantly, one notes the appearance of new commercial techniques, using negotiable certificates of deposit (the forerunner of the bank note), issued to merchants by the representatives of their provincial administrations in the capital.⁷⁰ The first bills of exchange appeared during the years 806–820: tea traders who sold their cargoes in the capital received credit notes (“flying cash”) in exchange, “which enabled them, when they returned to their provinces, to receive payment in currency after deduction of the taxes levied in the capital” (Gernet 2002: 265). Certificates were then issued for the transfer of local taxes to the capital. In addition, bills of exchange entitled the bearer to receive merchandise such as tea and salt in another place (Elvin 1973: 155ff.).

⁶⁸ As already mentioned, recent excavations in Chang’an and western Tibet show that tea was already being cultivated in China and carried to Central Asia by 200 CE (Houyuan *et al.* 2016).

⁶⁹ A significant private sector had been in place earlier, but it was in the hands of foreign traders (Adshead 2004: 91).

⁷⁰ At the end of the ninth century, the rich merchants and financiers of Chengdu, in Sichuan, also issued (privately) “negotiable certificates of deposit, which were the ancestors of banknotes” (Gernet 2002: 265). Schafer (1997: 15) indicates the appearance of bills of exchange as early as the eighth century.

Difficulties resurfaced around the middle of the ninth century, however. China experienced significant droughts at that time, accompanied by an increase in market prices and social disorder. The internal political situation deteriorated. Within the context of a nationalist backlash against foreign influences, and also for economic reasons,⁷¹ between 843 and 845, Emperor Wuzong prohibited Buddhism and religions from western Asia (Mazdeism,⁷² Manicheism, Nestorianism,⁷³ and Islam), which led to a decline in trade with foreign countries, particularly along the Silk Roads. Although the proscription lasted only a few years, Buddhism fell into decline in China. The state confiscated the property of the monasteries, and Buddhist hospitals were managed under the oversight of public administrators; “the Buddhist church held most of the empire’s stock of precious metals in the form of objects of piety, bells, and statues, and one of the measures adopted was to melt down bells and statues into coins” (Gernet 2002: 294). The emperor’s decision followed attacks against Buddhism that were not really new, but now found a strong echo among the ruling class. The reasons were at the same time economic (lands owned by the Buddhist institutions were exempt from all taxes and corvées, and those institutions had accumulated much wealth), ideological (Buddhism was accused of undermining the core values of Chinese society, such as the family, and it “decentered China,” by making India the seat of knowledge), and political (Buddhism formed an independent power) (Abramson 2007).⁷⁴ These measures were implemented within the context of a “culturalist” movement marked by a Neo-Confucianism that had emerged during the eighth century, with the figures of scholars such as Han Yu (768–824) and Li Ao (772–836). This Neo-Confucianism would further develop later on, during the Song period.

China became more inward looking. Only eight embassies from Southeast Asia are recorded for the ninth century, and most of them arrived during the first half of the century. They came from Zhenla (Chen-la) in 813, Heling in 813, 815, and 818, Shepo (Java) in 820 and 831, Zhanbei (Chan-pei) (Jambi, Sumatra) in 852 and 871, and Zhancheng (Chan-ch’eng) in 877. Following economic difficulties and famines in northern China, peasant uprisings broke out, and in 879, the troops of the rebel chief

⁷¹ The Uighurs, who often practiced moneylending, thus became scapegoats at this time of recession and rising prices. Moreover, the huge wealth accumulated by the religious institutions incited covetousness on the part of the authorities.

⁷² Mazdeism (Zoroastrianism) was dominant in Sogdiana, although the *Suishu* describes the Sogdians as Buddhists. Sogdiana played a major role in trade and cultural exchanges via Central Asia. In addition to Zoroastrianism, it contributed to the spread of Manicheism toward the east.

⁷³ According to the stela of Xianfu, erected in 781 near Chang’an, written in Chinese with a few lines in the Syriac alphabet, Nestorianism arrived in China in 635. The text may have been written “by a learned Persian monk named Adam, who knew Sanskrit and helped an Indian Buddhist monk to translate Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Chinese; he was well versed in Buddhism, Daoism and Confucian philosophy” (Boulnois 2008: 278). The Nestorian presence in China is probably older: Nestorians founded archdioceses at Merv, Herat, and Samarkand as early as the Sassanid period. Many Chinese Christians came from Sogdiana; this region was home to a large Nestorian community until the fifteenth century. A Christian church dated to the seventh century has recently been discovered outside Chang’an (Adshhead 2004: 157). The Nestorians exercised some influence at the Tang court.

⁷⁴ In Japan, “the great monasteries of Nara in the eighth century were so powerful that Emperor Kammu decided to move the capital in 784, and finally settled in Heiankyo (Kyoto) in 794; the move was to gain the court’s independence from the stranglehold these monasteries had on state affairs” (Wong 2015).

Huang Chao – who had come from the Yellow River valley – massacred the foreigners at Canton.⁷⁵ According to the historian Abū Zayd, from Sirāf, 120,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews, and “Iranians following the old faith” [Zoroastrians] were slaughtered. While that number is probably exaggerated, it reflects the large size of the foreign communities in the great Chinese trade centers.⁷⁶ The multiplication of military districts led to political disintegration that worked in favor of governors who behaved as independent potentates. The central power lost control of the provinces, and uprisings continued until the end of the Tang dynasty in 906. There were as many as “15 short-lived kingdoms between final Tang collapse and imperial reconsolidation under the Song” (Lieberman 2009: 500). The second half of the ninth century was a period of climate change marked by colder and more arid conditions in China (between *c.* 850 and 940; Zhang *et al.* 2008), which certainly had an impact on yields from cultivation and aggravated economic and political problems. Chinese trade with foreign countries declined during this period as well as during the early tenth century (at the same time, between 869 and 883, southern Mesopotamia was devastated by “the Zanj revolt,” followed by violent social upheavals inspired by the Shiites). On the Thai–Malay peninsula, for example, “the tenth century appears as a period of low import levels of Chinese ceramics” (Jacq-Hergoualc’h 1998: 294).⁷⁷ At the same time, Japan was experiencing an economic decline marked by significant demonetization and falling trade. Fear of foreign contacts led Heian to “cancel its mission to China in 894 and to rebuff tenth-century requests from China, Korea, and Manchuria to resume relations” (Lieberman 2009: 397). In Korea, the Silla kingdom disintegrated during the early tenth century. However, the Goryeo kingdom united the majority of the peninsula around 936.

The second period of the Tang dynasty was part of an overall recession in the world-system, but developments were taking place alongside the Chinese decline that heralded the times ahead. Geographic and social transformations as well as the innovations introduced clearly served to underpin the future advances of the Song period. In the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, the independent kingdoms of Nan Han and Min developed agriculture and commerce, providing the basis for those regions’ prosperity during the Song dynasty.⁷⁸ The tomb of Liu Ha, niece of the first king of Nan Han and wife of the third ruler of Min, contained Persian ware, attesting to trade with the Persian Gulf via Canton and Fuzhou (Salmon 2004: 41).

⁷⁵ The rebels occupied Luoyang in 880 and seized Chang’an in 881. The misfortunes of Canton benefited other harbors such as Quanzhou.

⁷⁶ According to Mas’ūdi, “the victims who fell under the sword of the rebels were innumerable, and the number of Muslims, Christians and Jews alone who were killed or drowned for fear of the sword amounted to 200,000” (Mas’ūdi, para. 329–332). See also Gang Deng 1997: 153, according to Sima Guang (1084). The size and wealth of these foreign communities partially explains the violence of the xenophobic reaction.

⁷⁷ For continental Southeast Asia, Lieberman (2003: 225) notes a more arid climate between 860 and 950, and a wetter phase between 950 and 1280.

⁷⁸ Wang Gungwu 1990: 402. During the tenth century, one again sees a plurality of currencies, and a “sectoralization of the monetary circulation” corresponding to a fragmentation of political power (Thierry 2001: 137). The Northern Song would resume a sizeable minting of bronze coins.

China and the Indian Ocean: Evidence from Arabo-Persian Texts

During the Tang period, Chinese ships rarely ventured into the Indian Ocean, and certainly did not venture beyond the Malabar coast in India, despite advances in maritime technology since the Han dynasty, for example in sails⁷⁹ and in locating the position of vessels.⁸⁰ Trade with Muslim and Austronesian merchants, however, took on crucial importance for the Chinese economy, and through these merchants, the Chinese gained knowledge of the distant countries of the Indian Ocean. The first mentions of the African continent in Chinese texts were linked to the presence of black slaves in China in the seventh and eighth centuries. While the Persians and the Arabs were certainly prominent in the slave trade to the Orient, Sumatran and Javanese people and ships also played a role in that trade. It is possible that the tall black “*Kunlun*” slaves who were already present at the Chinese court during the fourth century were Africans.⁸¹ Various terracotta figurines dated to the Tang period appear to feature Africans.⁸² We know that between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, Sriwijaya [Zabaj, or Zabag, for the Arab geographers] controlled the trade routes between the Indian Ocean and China. Chinese sources have recorded offerings of *sengki* (*seng-k’i*) (*zangi*) or *sengzhi* (*seng-tche*, *seng-chih*) (*zanji*) slaves to the Chinese court by the kingdom of Shilifoshi (Palembang, kingdom of Sriwijaya) in 724.⁸³ As early as 614, “Java” sent two *sengzhi* women to China, and in 813, an embassy from the kingdom of Heling presented four slaves of the same name to the Chinese court. In his dictionary, *Yiqie jing yinyi*, compiled around 817, the Buddhist monk Huilin includes the *sengki* [Zanj] in the Kunlun category. “The text attributes negative qualities to dark-skinned people” (Pelliot 1925: 262; Wilensky 2002: 7–8). According to D. Lombard, “[this] allows us to state that at least some of the Zeng slaves acquired on the African coasts were carried to Java, and that some of them were even sent to China.”⁸⁴ One is tempted to link the mention of Zanj slaves in Java to the account of the attack by Waqwaq people (Indonesians) on Pemba during the tenth century: the

⁷⁹ Gang Deng – probably wrongly – states that the journeys of the Chinese monks to India relied “entirely on Chinese ships” (1997: 15). Sails were used from ancient times by non-Chinese maritime populations. According to Deng, the Chinese word *fan* (“sail”), however, only appears in dictionaries during the period of the Eastern Han (1997: 33), but J. Needham (1971: 599) claims that this sign goes back to the second millennium BCE; it would represent a double mast with a four-pointed sail that is found today only in the Melanesian area.

⁸⁰ “Instruments estimating the latitude of ships’ positions by measuring elevation and bearing between the horizon and the Polaris or other stars at a given time” were invented during the Tang period (a star-measuring ruler has been recovered from a shipwreck dating to the Song period in 1974 at Quanzhou) (Deng 1997: 37).

⁸¹ Wang Gungwu 1998: 45; Miller 1998: 185. However, we cannot exclude the sending of Papuans from eastern Indonesia (see below).

⁸² See the figure of a boy from the British Museum (Illustration 1v), and the figure of a male dancer from the Metropolitan Museum, New York (ref. 1981.470.1).

⁸³ Ferrand 1919 (March–April): 330–331. See also Yang shao-yun, not dated. For the two spellings *sengqi*/*sengzhi*, see Pelliot 1904: 290–291. See also Mahdi 2008: n. 17. *Zanggi* or *janggi* in Malay is also pronounced *jenggī*, found in an inscription in Java (860) (Mahdi 2008: n. 17).

⁸⁴ Lombard 1990, 11: 30, based on the *Xintangshu*. The embassies from Heling in 815 and 818 also brought five *sengzhi* boys and two *sengzhi* women, respectively.

Indonesian states perhaps went to fetch slaves and other products on the East African coast. It cannot be totally excluded, however, that some of the *sengzhi/sengki* slaves were “black people” from the Pacific Ocean, the Papuans also being named *jenggi* by the Malay/Javanese world (Derideaux 2002–2005b).

Buddhist monks were an important source of knowledge on the Indian Ocean. The monk Huichao, of Korean origin, who went to India via a maritime route during the first half of the eighth century, writes in his “Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India” that “the journeys from the Western Sea to the Southern Seas often aim to acquire precious merchandise from Ceylon and Kunlun gold.” The name Kunlun usually refers to Southeast Asia and the dark skin of its inhabitants,⁸⁵ but some authors have argued that in this passage Huichao may have been referring to East Africa and gold from the Sofala coast.

The Chinese chronicles do not mention direct relations between China and Africa under the Tang during the ninth and tenth centuries, except the “accidental” journey of Du Huan,⁸⁶ but they reveal the existence of a sizeable maritime trade. Various African products were known in China as products from the country of the black Zanj: ivory, rhinoceros horn, myrrh, incense, and ambergris, which Duan Chengshi (ninth century) mentions with its Arabic name *‘anbar*, transcribed *ā-muāt* (it means that ambergris was brought by Persians or Arabs) (Wheatley 1975: 104–105). The Chinese also knew ambergris under the name “dragon’s spit.” The search for ambergris in the Indian Ocean was probably stimulated by the Chinese demand (Fauvelle-Aymar 2013: 43). Later sources mention gold (perhaps from Zimbabwe). Moreover, the oldest Chinese coins found on the eastern African coast are dated to 620.

A passage in Mas‘ūdī raises the possibility of ancient Chinese navigation to India and the Persian Gulf. Writing of Kalāh, located on the Thai–Malay peninsula, Mas‘ūdī notes:

At this place, Muslim ships of the Sīrāfis and ‘Umānis stop at the present time [before 947], and meet the ships that have come from China. But in earlier days, it was otherwise: the ships of China (*marākib al-ṣīn*) used to come to the land of ‘Umān and Sīrāf and the coast of Persia and the coast of al-Baḥrayn and al-Ubullah and al-Baṣra, and conversely ships used to go from the places mentioned to China. (Mas‘ūdī, para. 336, 1962: 127)

Arab and – more importantly – Persian ships had been sailing to China from the second half of the seventh century (and probably earlier). It is understandable that after the massacre of all the foreign merchants at Canton by rebel forces in revolt against the Tang dynasty, in 879, Persian and Arab vessels preferred to stop at Kalāh, a port which benefited from the rise of Srīwijaya. The Chinese chronicles do not mention any navigation of junks toward the Persian Gulf or Arabia in ancient times

⁸⁵ According to the *Jiu Tangshu*, “the people living to the south of Linyi have curly hair and black bodies and are commonly called *kunlun*” (Wilensky 2002: 6).

⁸⁶ Taken prisoner by the Arabs at the battle of the Talas River, Du Huan later embarked on a journey in the Red Sea; this sea has been identified through the countries of Molin (the Erythrean coast) and Laobosa (Al-Habasha, Ethiopia). See Smidt 2001 and below. Wilensky (2002) claims that Molin refers to Malindi, but this is unlikely.

(however, as pointed out above, Gang Deng states that Chinese ships reached Sri Lanka and later sailed beyond that island as early as the Han period). Pelliot (1928), echoed by Needham (1954), has also claimed that Chinese who had been taken prisoner at the battle of the Talas River returned to China aboard “Chinese junks” in 762. Jiadan’s writings, compiled between 785 and 805, describe the route from Canton to Baghdad via the Malabar coast and the port of Quilon, but Jiadan does not give the “nationality” of the ships plying this route.⁸⁷ Hourani claims that there is no evidence to support Chinese navigation to India and beyond, at least until the late twelfth century.⁸⁸ Conversely, Boulnois, based on the writings of Cosmas, thinks that “in the middle of the sixth century, Chinese boats came regularly and in large numbers to trade in the main port of the island” of Sri Lanka (Boulnois 2008: 250; see above). One might ask whether these “Chinese ships” that sailed to the western Indian Ocean well before Mas’ūdi’s time, were not in fact Indonesian ships, but then we would expect to find some mention of Zabag or Kalāh.⁸⁹ Or should we consider those ships as “Chinese” because they sailed to and from China? Balādurī and Dīnawarī (whose works Mas’ūdi may have consulted), however, also speak of “Chinese ships” at al-Ubullah, a port dating to the Sassanid period: they mention a letter from the Commander ‘Utba ibn Ghazwān to the Caliph ‘Umar mentioning the capture of Ubullah, “port of the seagoing vessels from ‘Umān, Bahrein, Persia, India and China.”⁹⁰ “We will have to recognize,” writes Sauvaget, “that the Chinese introduced the Arabs to navigation towards eastern Asia; it was aboard their junks that the merchants from the Persian Gulf first sailed to the southern seas.” In 762, Du Huan “was brought home by a junk from the Persian Gulf.”⁹¹ We should recall that Chinese stoneware jars, perhaps dated to the fifth century, have been discovered at Sirāf and Suhar,⁹² although the carriers are not known. These data are in line with the *Account of China and India, Akhbār al-Sīn w-al Hind* (written in 851).⁹³

As for the places which they reach they relate that most of the Chinese boats are loaded at Sirāf and that the goods are shipped to Sirāf from al-Basra, ‘Umān, and other ports . . . To the eastern side of this sea between Sirāf and Muscat, . . . in this sea are the mountains of ‘Umān and around

⁸⁷ According to various authors, however, they were indeed Chinese ships. See for example Lewicki 1936: 173–174, quoted by Hamidullah 1974: 196.

⁸⁸ Hourani 1951: 66, 76. According to Tampoe (1989: 120), too, clear evidence of long-distance Chinese navigation only exists from the Song period onward. Manguin writes (1993: 269): “until the last centuries of the 1st millennium AD, [Chinese] skills were applied to build only riverine and coastal vessels . . . It was therefore only after the establishment of the Song dynasty in the 10th century . . . that the large oceangoing ‘junks’ later witnessed by travelers began to be built on any remarkable scale.” Ray (1999b: 12) also rejects the idea of Chinese ships in the Persian Gulf at this early date.

⁸⁹ Labib (1974: 228) adopts this point of view: “It is an established fact that long before Islam, and before Srīwijaya, ships of the Maharajah of Kalah had sailed to the Persian Gulf and the Sassanid ports.”

⁹⁰ Sauvaget 1948: xxxix. Also Hamidullah 1974: 196. J. Needham (1970: 140) also claims that Chinese ships reached Sri Lanka during the fourth century and the mouth of the Euphrates during the fifth century.

⁹¹ Sauvaget 1948: xxxix. See also Drège 2000: 53 and Smidt 2001.

⁹² But this dating remains controversial (see Volume 1).

⁹³ The author of the *Account of China and India* remains unknown. Ferrand has wrongly attributed the text to a merchant, Sulaymān, whose name is mentioned in the text.

them is situated the spot called ad-Durdūr. It is a narrow passage between two mountains which the small boats cross, but the Chinese boats do not cross it . . .

Then from there [Muscat], the boats set sail for India, destined for Kūlam Malay. The journey from Muscat to Kūlam Malay, with moderate winds, is of one month. At Kūlam Malay . . . taxes are collected from the Chinese boats . . . From the Chinese boats one thousand dirhams are collected, and from the other boats, [the collection is] between ten and twenty dinars.⁹⁴

Here again, should we understand “Chinese ships” as meaning ships that sailed to and from China? Chinese coins dated to the late ninth century, however, have been recovered at Persian Gulf ports such as Sīrāf, and a coin of the emperor Taizong dated c. 990–994 has been excavated in the Maldives (Mikkelsen 2000: 21).

Gang Deng states that ships of the *fuzhou* type (usually called “junks”) may have appeared in the late Tang period. The oldest mention of this vessel, however, dates back to the Song period (Deng 1997: 27; see below).

The Advent of the Northern Song

After the demise of the Tang dynasty, while northern China was ravaged by wars, Sichuan, the Yangtze basin, and the southern maritime provinces experienced a period of prosperity partly founded on trade, which the state tried to promote. The Min kingdom, in Fujian, developed silk and ceramics exports, and Canton enjoyed growth during the tenth century. It would therefore be incorrect to suppose that the fifty years of political disaggregation experienced by China during the tenth century were a totally negative period. In fact, it appears to have been creative in institutional terms, as “intermediary periods” often are (Adshead 1995: 110).

In 951, the short-lived dynasty of the Later Zhou unified northern China. It rehabilitated canals and dikes, and in 955 confiscated the property of the Buddhist monasteries, whose copper statues were melted. The recovery effort accomplished by the Zhou would be of great help to the government of the Song dynasty, founded at Kaifeng by a general brought to power by his troops in 960.⁹⁵ An era of radical transformations and major expansion then began for China, in all areas (Gernet 2002: 303ff.).

The period between the sixth and tenth centuries can be viewed as a new phase of integration of the various regions of China, marked by the increasing significance of the Yangtze basin, with Korea and some regions of Japan now forming semi-peripheries. China was more strongly connected than previously with Southeast Asia, India, and western Asia, via the terrestrial and maritime “Silk Roads,” during the phase of growth of the world-system. This rise of eastern Asia was inseparable from

⁹⁴ Paragraphs 13 and 14 of the *Account of China and India*, Maqbul Ahmad 1989: 38 and Sauvaget 1948. From Kūlam, the boats set sail to the Sea of Harkand (Bay of Bengal) and Langabālūs. Sauvaget believes that the toponym Langabālūs transcribes the Chinese Lang-p’o-lou-sseu, which refers to the western part of Sumatra, but it is more likely that the Chinese derives from the Arabic (cf. the Barusai Islands of Ptolemy, sometimes considered as being the islands situated on the west coast of Sumatra).

⁹⁵ “It is not simply a matter of a change of scale . . . but of a change of character” (Gernet 2002: 300).

crucial developments in western Asia and the Mediterranean. The formation of an extensive empire linking the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean through the two corridors of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea represented another driving force of the world-system. This empire was founded not only on the desire for power of an elite, but also on the adherence of various populations to the same ideology, based on Islam.