

Diaspora in Ancient China

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Rong Xinjiang, the formidable Chinese scholar wrote: "The Arab conquest of Persia resulted in large numbers of Zoroastrian followers, numbering in millions, moving eastwards to China, where they were warmly received by the Tang government. As a result, Zoroastrian temples were established in the capital cities of the *Tang-Chang'an* and *Luoyang* as well as in *Qizhou* and *Xizhou*. Zoroastrian Temples were called "ci" which is translated in English as "shrines".¹ "No effort was made to translate the scriptures into Chinese." Chen Yuan another Chinese scholar concluded that "Zoroastrianism during its spread in the Tang dynasty initially included few Chinese and its fate during the persecution in the Hulchang period (841-846 AD) can be traced to increasing proselytizing activities".²

by pallan ichaporia

In the caves of Dunhuang, there is a wealth of recorded history of Zoroastrianism in China and it was briefly discussed in 1985 by Liu Minghu.³

My research has established that in the Tang dynasty Zoroastrianism was not only popular but had a very large following in China where it was called *Xianjiao*, *Huoxian-jiao*, or *Baihuo-jiao*. This was discussed by many scholars such as, Jiang Boqin, Lin Wushu and Shi Anchang. I recommend Lin Wushu's article "A brief description of the Zoroastrian view of marriage" published in **Persian Zoroastrians and Ancient China**, Taipei, 1995, pp 71-84.

The question of Zoroastrianism in the western region of ancient China was also examined by another Chinese scholar Gong Fanzhen.⁴ Lin Micun fully documented the spread of Zoroastrianism in the light of evidences derived from archeological discoveries.⁵ A major break in the studies of Zoroastrianism in China appeared, when an article by Jiang Boqin in 1993, established that Zoroastrian rituals (*saishnin* in ancient Chinese) were performed in the Dunhuang region and Zoroastrianism exerted

considerable influence on traditional Chinese ritual offerings and Chinese culture.⁶

Short History of An Lushan

An Lushan, a Zoroastrian army general and Shi Shiiming, another Zoroastrian military officer were the leaders of rebellion against the Tang dynasty. The Zoroastrian ancestry of An Lushan was established by Lin Wushu.⁷ This was confirmed by Rong Xinjiang in a paper delivered at a conference in Taiwan and published later in 1997 ("**The Ethnicity of An Lushan and Religious Belief**".) This irrevocably gave the Zoroastrian beliefs of An Lushan and Shi Shiiming.

An Lushan besides being the formidable Supreme Commanding General in the Tang Dynasty, was also a Zoroastrian priest who personally led his Zoroastrian followers both Persians and Sogdians in religious rituals. He belonged to AN clan. It is to be noted that many Zoroastrian priests were in the state bureaucracy. The newly discovered connection between An Lushan and Zoroastrianism goes a long way in explaining why there were so many Zoroastrians numbering into millions in China.⁸

An Lushan and Shi Simming with other Sogdian-Zoroastrian leaders staged a rebellion in 763 AD against the Tang dynasty. The rebellion did not succeed but ended the prosperity of the Tang dynasty and ushered in the decline of Zoroastrianism. The failed rebellion resulted in the massacre of thousands of the members of the AN clan and Zoroastrians with the name of AN were put to death. 3000 Zoroastrian priests were exiled so they could be controlled and not meddle with Chinese customs. The members of the clan were advised to change their last name of An. Many took the name of Li or Lee.⁹ This rebellion resulted in the change in the Tang dynasty policy from openness to persecution of all foreign religions including Zoroastrianism.

Archeological discoveries and research

The archaeological discoveries of Zoroastrianism in ancient China were conducted by Chinese scholars-archeologists within the context of Zoroastrian history as follows : -

A History of Zoroastrians (in Chinese) by Gong Fangzhen and Yan Keja.

The first comprehensive history which provided fresh insight on the spread and influence of Zoroastrianism in China, published by Shanghai Social Science Publishing House, 1998. This has given us the archeological evidences of the spread of Zoroastrianism.

1.The decorations on tomb epitaphs of Ke Jing, a Zoroastrian of Northern Wei period has the names of the Zoroastrian deities identified by scholar Shi Anchang.

2.Unearthed at Anyang in 1920 are the Zoroastrian elements on Qi mortuary, carved on a Sogdian-Zoroastrian ossuary now in the Palace Museum, Peking.

3.Two recently discovered masterpieces of stone carvings. One in 1999 from excavated tomb of Zoroastrian Yu Hong in Taiyun, Shanxi province dated to Sui dynasty. The second major discovery are the stone carvings on the screen surrounding a

mortuary divan found during the excavation in May-July 2000 in the tomb of another Zoroastrian aristocrat *An Qi* in *Xi'an*, in Shaanxi province.

4.The full excavation of Zoroastrian temple in *Jiexiu* county town, was examined by me. The inscriptions record its first construction as *Xuanshen-lou* meaning Zoroastrian Temple. The inscriptions record its construction during the Northern Song dynasty and it was repaired in 1674 during the *Kangxi* period.

5.The partly excavated Zoroastrian Temple at Dunhuang, (see **Dunhuang Research**, Dunhuang Academy, Dunhuang, Gansu, 1999). The excavation will be completed in 2012. This was also examined on my recent field study.

6.In 1955 archeologists unearthed The Tomb Epitaph of Lady *Ma*, the wife of *Su Liang* near the western gate of *Xi'an*. The epitaph was inscribed in two languages – Chinese and Pahlavi. It is the most important bilingual text evidence of the presence of Zoroastrians in ancient China. The Japanese scholar Itoo Yoshinori published a study “A linguistic study of the Pahlavi in the bilingual in the Chinese-Pahlavi epitaph unearthed in Xi’an,1964”, and he concluded that the family travelled beyond Amu Darya (Oxus River) towards east in the wake of the Arab invasion and arrived in China during early Tang dynasty. This inscription was further studied by W Sunderman and T Thilo in 1966, and J Harmata in 1971. Helmut Humbach and Wang Shipping refined the interpretation of the epitaph, see “*Die Pahlavi-Chinesische bilingual von Xi’an*”, *Acta Iranica*, 28, 1988.

Religious Festivals and the Calendar

Dunhuang manuscript P. 4640, published in **Bibliothèque Nationale**, shows a Zoroastrian calendar covering the three year period from 899 to 901 AD, the *sixian* days (Zoroastrian festival days) were celebrated annually in the early 10th century in Dunhuang. It was called the **Festival of Seven Blessings of Zoroastrianism**. Mary Boyce pointed out that Pahlavi term “Gahanbar” indicates the six great holy days of this festival.

In the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi dynasties the Zoroastrian New Year was celebrated in the 6th month of the Chinese lunar calendar and this practice seems to have continued uninterrupted to the present. Mary Boyce pointed out that the calendar of the *KADMIS*, celebrated *No Roz* on 27th July from 1980 to 1983 and then celebrated this festival on 26th July from 1984 to 1987 exactly as was done by the Zoroastrians in ancient China.

Funerary Rituals

Exposure of dead: In an article "Medieval Zoroastrian burial evidence" published in **The Persian Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian Customs in Ancient China**, Lin Wushu described "how the Persian Zoroastrians mostly placed the corpses of the dead on mountain top and after a month, the preparation for burials begins".

Let me cite a passage from Wei Jie's "Records of the Western People" in **Tong dian**, which states: "Beyond the walls of the capital there were more than two hundred households who live apart and they are responsible for funerary matters. A courtyard is constructed and in it, they raise dogs. Whenever a Zoroastrian dies, these people go to collect the corps and it is placed in the courtyard for the dogs to devour and, when the flesh is eaten from the bones, they gather the bones and place in coffin".

A large number of Zoroastrian ossuaries have been discovered in China. Gernet, the French scholar studied a sequence of decorative illustrations on Zoroastrian ossuaries which are known *Amesha Spenta*, the "bounteous immortals." The female deity holding plant *haoma*, and a mortar, is *Haurwata*, symbolizing Integrity, the other female deity is *Ameretata* symbolizing Immortality. In some ossuaries there were sculptured figures holding a shield and arrows identified as *Verethragna*, a god of war and victory.

Furthermore in 1997 Kaeyama, the Japanese historian discussed in an article, the Zoroastrian ossuaries unearthed at various sites in Xinjiang, which

demonstrated that Zoroastrian sky burials flourished in Xinjiang from 6th to 7th centuries contemporary with Northern Qi and Tang dynasties.

The aristocratic Zoroastrians migrating to China dispensed the use of ossuaries and opted for burial. The Zoroastrian mortuary bed from Ayayang is the firm evidence of change to burial custom.

The "Ancient letters" discovered by Aural Stein at the watchtower site in Dunhuang is the great research on the Sogdian-Zoroastrians correspondence. The findings of Henning, Harmatta and Grenet/Sims-Williams agree that the fifth letter seems to have been issued from Guzang-Langzhouand, and Sogdian-Zoroastrians' scope of activities extended east. The major activities of their funerary rituals were: "Sky burials". The corpse was placed on "the Tower of Silent Extinction" and after wild animals devoured all the flesh from the bones, the bones were placed in an ossuary.

Fire Temples

There were several Fire Temples established in China and the majority were in large cities. In earlier period of Zoroastrianism, there was no fixed place of Zoroastrian worship and later on Zoroastrians built permanent shrines. The tradition of Zoroastrian worship is known in Chinese as *Saixian*.

The excavated Zoroastrian Temple at Shanxi which I visited this month* will be discussed in full details little later. The Zoroastrian Temple at Dunhuang is in the early stage of excavation and will be completed by 2012.

The Gazeteer of Chang'an has kept the records of the Zoroastrian Temples in the south-western corner of the Buzeng-fang, district of Xi'an.

In the Zoroastrian Temples known in Chinese as *Huxian-ci* where *Hushen* (=Ahura Mazda) was worshipped there were no images of Ahura Mazda. He is worshipped as All-Mighty with great spiritual

powers who extends salvation to all suffering ones and He is the only omnipotent God. The worshippers gathered at the fire altars in the temples. The Tang temples of Zoroastrians were under management of the *sabao-fu* which was the hereditary position. This is evident by the letter from the Xuanwu Military Commissioner and Lingu Tao, Director of Dept of State Affairs in the reign of the Tang Dynasty. It is recorded that the Chief Priest *Shishisuang's* family for generations has served as the *Sabao-fu*, (=the chief priest).

Excavated Zoroastrian Temple in Jiexiu in Shanxi province.

Lin Wushu, the Chinese scholar in his article "A study of Zoroastrian Temples" published in **Persian Zoroastrians and Ancient China**, 1995, pp139-150 was a member of our team which accompanied me to Jiexiu, in the Shanxi province. I met Ding Mingyi from the Institute of World Religions, the Chinese Academy of Social Science. He shared with me his research and his publication "**A discussion of god of the Zoroastrians in Gaochang and the Zoroastrian Temple in Dunhuang**". It was Din Mingyi who encouraged me to travel to Shanxi to examine the Zoroastrian Temple in Jiexiu county. Shi Yanling, the former curator told me that he and Din Mingyi had spent several days in 1970 working in the Zoroastrian Temple. These two men are well acquainted with the ancient building.

In 1954 Chen Mingda *et al* published an article in **Wenwu cankao zillao** detailing discoveries of ancient architecture in Shanxi province. It took two years in excavating the Zoroastrian temple located on Shunchengguan-dongjie street in Jiexiu county town. It is called Xiannshen-lou "Zoroastrian Temple". According to stele, the inscription records, "the present structure was repaired in 1674 during the Kangxi period of the of the Qing dynasty. And the original Zoroastrian Temple was erected during the Northern Song dynasty by Wen Yanbo".

The unique architectural feature of the Zoroastrian Temple as I examined, is its raised entrance which juts prominently and spans the roadway and it connects with the Yuelo "music tower" where the prayers were sung.

The temple has four tiers of eaves and the lower layer is open to the surrounding area. Connecting the two central tiers of eaves is a colonnade. The top section of the roof consists of peaked structures called in Chinese as *xieshanding* that enclose winged buffaloes in wooden carvings. Below the eaves on the three sides is an enclosed veranda with jutting balconies. The main hall is where fire altars were kept and where Hutian (=Mazda) was worshipped.

Lin Wushu, the Chinese scholar in his article "A study of Zoroastrian Temples" published in **Persian Zoroastrians and Ancient China**, 1995, pp139-150, was a member of our team which accompanied me to Jiexiu. I also met Ding Mingyi from the Institute of World Religions, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He shared with me his research and his publication "A discussion of God of Zoroastrianism in Gaochang and the Zoroastrian Temple in Dunhuang".

Beside Ding Mingyi an expert on the ancient building of the Zoroastrian Temple, I met Zhang Han and Chae Zejun, scholar-archeologists from Shanxi who gave me fruitful briefings for which I am grateful.

Famous Zoroastrians of Ancient China

- Sasania aristocrat Aluohn (Vahram) 616-710 who arrived in 660.
- Prince Phirooze s/o, the last Sasanian Emperor Yazdegird III, went to the Chinese capital in 675 AD and welcomed by Emperor Gaozong. He died in 678 four years later. His statue was placed in the mausoleum of the third Tang emperor, where it can be seen to this day.
- Prince Narseh s/o of Prince Phirooze. He attempted to recover his Empire from the Arabs but failed.
- Another figure was Julao "Khusro", a descendant of Yazdegird III who in 729 allied with the Turks to recover the kingdom of his family without success.
- An Lushan, General of the Teng Army, who was also a religious leader, 'Sabau' a Zoroastrian priest.
- Mh-anMsh, daughter of the late Farroxzd and wife of the Su-liang, titular general.

- Nine Families: These famous families were from the AN Clan
- Zhai Pantuo, a Zoroastrian high priest performed a miracle in an audience with the emperor Gaochang, by plunging a sword through the abdomen and raised the sword up in a circular motion but remained alive and recovered in seven days. He was conferred by the emperor the title of Mobile Corps Commander, (Dunhuang Manuscript S. 367: from Gazeteer of Shazhou and Rouyuan) 610 AD – the Sui dynasty.

The priestly positions

- Xianzheng – Zoroastrian Judge Moderator
- Fuzhu – subordinate (like raspi) entrusted with Zoroastrian religious matters
- Sabao fu – Chief ritual priest like Zaozar (Zot)
- Xianzhu – Officer of the Zoroastrian Temple

According to Dunhuang manuscripts, ms. S.3067, the terms for Zoroastrian priests in Chinese are 'xianzhu' (high priest), 'fanzhu' or 'maizhu' (Ervard), The Sogdian term for Zoroastrian priest who presided over religious rituals was 'm gupt' (magupat), and Zoroastrian missionary priest was known in Chinese as '*chang fu-muhu*'.¹⁰ "... in the performance of rituals, the god of heaven descended from the sky from where there were six sons," This was the understanding of the seven Amesha Spentas, (who are) Ahura Mazda and six others.

The major causes of the disappearance of the Zoroastrians in Ancient China, were intermarriages, proselytizing and assimilation.

Intermarriages in the Tang Dynasty

Despite government regulations discouraging intermarriages between Chinese and foreign immigrants, many West Asians and Persian Zoroastrians settled in China, started marrying local women.

"Whenever a race migrates, the men always outnumber the women", says Wu, a Chinese scholar. "They are of course eager to marry local women when they arrive in an alien land."

Intermarriages in the Song Dynasty

The southern Song government (1127-1279 AD) even made provisions for foreign Zoroastrian merchants to take official posts.

After his family had been living in China for three generations, a 'foreigner' could wed an imperial princess if at least one member of his household had an official title. This was to encourage assimilation.

Proselytizing

1. An Lushan, the Zoroastrian general and Shi Siming, another Zoroastrian general toppled the Tang dynasty and then later on the Manichean Uighurs toppled and beheaded both. After the failed rebellion, the Tang dynasty massacred all Sogdian-Zoroastrians with the name of An and killed 5000 proselytizing priests.

2. *Sabao-s*, and particularly *sabao-fu-s*, the Zoroastrian priests were actively proselytizing the Chinese.

3. The proselytizing activities resulted in the Emperor Wuzong issuing a decree ordering more than 3,000 Zoroastrian priests to return to the laity and not meddle with Chinese customs. By this decree, all the Daqin Zoroastrian priests were sent to distant places (?exiled) where they could be controlled.¹¹

4. The Tang dynasty stopped and banned proselytizing and persecuted severely in the Huichang period (841-846 AD). The Zoroastrians and particularly the Zoroastrian families with the name of AN were put to death. Persecution of Zoroastrians continued and they no longer allowed to join bureaucracy and discriminated. (cf Zhang Guangda, **Persian Fire Worship and Ancient China**, Taipei, 1885).

Assimilation

Several intermarried Zoroastrians slowly stopped practicing Zoroastrianism. They became either Buddhists or Manicheans or Nestorians or Christians, or Confucians, the religion of their spouses. (op cit Li Washu).

Conclusion

Several citations are given establishing the presence of a large number of Zoroastrians who built many fire temples and held high positions in the Tang dynasty. The citations from several Chinese scholars' research and organized studies noted their final downfall due to the treacherous acts of An Lushan, the Supreme Commanding General of the Tang army, ensuing the

massacre of thousands of Zoroastrians. Other contributing factors include their proselytizing activities resulting in their persecution from 875 AD onwards and to escape persecution they were encouraged to become Buddhists or Manicheans, and last but not the least is the intermarriages contributing to the slow disappearance of Zoroastrianism and ending in their final assimilation leaving no trace by 1670 AD.

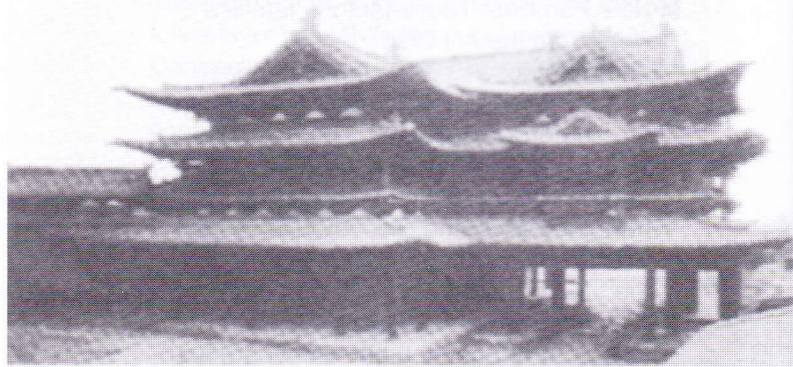


*Note to the reader: This article was submitted by the author in early August 2012.

Notes:

- 1 "Research on Zoroastrianism in China," Peking University Journal, Dec 2000
- 2 'A Study of the introduction of Zoroastrianism to China', Peking University Journal, Vol 1, 1923.
- 3 "Zoroastrianism As Seen in Dunhuang Manuscripts", **A Collection of Articles on Dunhuang Studies**, Lanzhou, 1985
- 4 ("Studies in religions in the Western Region," published in **Zhoughua Wenshi Luncong**, Peking, 1986).
- 5 **A General Discussion of Ancient Ethnic Religions**, Higher Education Publishing House, ed. Gao Yongjiu, 1997.
- 6 '**The Hutian (mazdeyesnans) of Gaochang and the Zoroastrian temples of Dunhuang**', Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua, ed. Pingqui, 1993:1.
- 7 "**The comprehensive history of AN clan of Wuwei**, Shanghai, 1996".
- 8 Chen Yuan, "A Study of the introduction of Zoroastrianism in China" **Chen Yuan xuchu lunwenji**, Zhonghua Shuju, 1980, pp 306-311.
- 9 Hu Sanxing's annotation of **Zizhi tongjian** which reflected this anti-Zoroastrian psychology after the rebellion.
- 10 Dunhuang Manuscripts published by Nationalities Publishing House 1992, pp 68-69 and 173-174.
- 11 LI Wushu, "Tang Policy Towards Three Persian Religions, Manichaeism, Nestorianism and Zoroastrianism, 2000, pp103- apud).

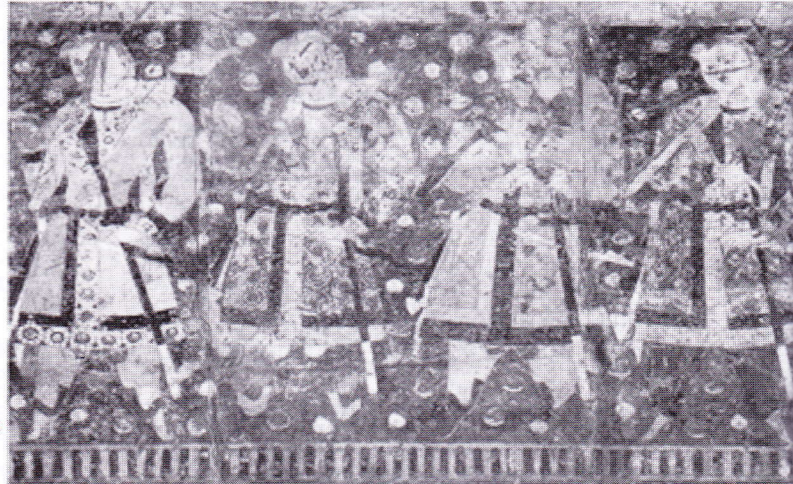
Dr Pallan Ichaporia has a PhD in Business Administration and DPhil in Ancient Iranian Languages & Culture. He is the Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Presented papers at several International Seminars and Conferences. His articles are published in many academic journals and has authored and co-authored several books that have been printed in Europe and USA.



Ancient Zoroastrian temple in Jiexiu repaired in 1674



Caves of Dunhuang



Prince Phirooze at the Royal Museum



Zoroastrian piece in the Royal Museum
[due to lack of space image placed horizontally]