Middle Easterners in the T'ang Tales

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Speculation has it that twice in the pre-Han times Chinese culture was influenced by Western Asiatic civilization.[1] Fresh ground needs to be broken and materials unearthed before this assertion can draw more attentive ears. Late in the T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618-906), however, clear evidence shows that Middle Easterners (a loose term used primarily to signify the Arabs, Persians and Afghans) often traveled to and sojourned in China. Things Persian and Arabic have been in vogue and adopted by the Chinese. Culinary and edible items such as rice meal prepared with sesame (*Sesamum orientale*) 胡麻飯,[2] baked bread and western pastry 胡餅,[3] Persian dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) 波斯棗,[4] grapes (*Vitis vinifera*) 蒲萄,[5] spinach (*Spinacia oleracera*) 菠菱,[6] cassia pods (*Gleditschia sinensis*) 波斯皁莢,[7] olives (*Olea Europaea*) 齊墩 or its modern name 橄欖,[8] almonds (*Prunus amygdalus*) 偏桃,[9] and numerous others have been recorded and served by the T'ang Chinese. Sources of these items spread from Russian Turkestan Fergana 大宛, Persia, Syria (or Byzantium Empire in Asia Minor) 佛林,[10] Armenia, Palinga 巴林加[11] to Baluchistan 俾路支 (East Iran and southwestern Pakistan). As food is, for the most part, culturally oriented and habitually conditioned, the prevalence of these culinary items illustrates the extent of influence they exert on the social life of the T'ang people. Indeed, many Middle Easterners went to China not only as travelers and explorers, but as traders or fortune seekers. Among them were quite a few Iranian merchants as noted by Edward H. Schafer.[12] Yet Chinese historical texts are grossly imprecise in distinguishing foreigners from beyond the Western frontier. The term *hu* 胡 (Tartars or Mongols) appiles to practically every foreigner from the West and elsewhere. In this haziness, some foreign merchants 商胡 in Schafer's article may have unwittingly been categorized as Iranians. Similarly, Chang Hsing-lang indiscriminately groups all the *hu* from the West as Arabs, although he well knows that some are actually

Persians and others of dubious nationality.[13] As is now pointed out, the *hu* in T'ang history include peoples from a wide range of areas: Japan, Silla新羅, Koryo高麗, Pakche百濟, Southern Annam占城, Cambodia眞臘, Java室利佛逝, India, Kirghiz結骨, Uighur, Syr-Tardush薛延陀, tribal sites of T'ieh-le鐵勒(from east of Volga to River Irtysh in Siberia), Tocharia (in Central Asia) 吐火羅,Sogdia康居, Parthia安息, Persia, Arabia, Syria拂菻 and other lands.[14] Apparently, pinpointing the *hu* as Persians or Arabs better focuses a historian's map but does not help much in the nebulous identification of these peoples. For clarity's sake, only the obvious Western Asiatic nationals from beyond the Chinese Turkestan are considered here and in general they are called Middle Easterners though a majority of them may be of Iranian stock. Whenever possible, names and ethnic identity of these peoples will be specified.

The material gathered in this article is based on the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* 太平廣記, a collection of miscellaneous records and tales compiled between A.D. 977 and 978 and printed in 981. About one third of the materials are of the T'ang dynasty; most others predate that time. Some of the Middle Easterners found in this collection thus have an Islamic background while others a pre-Islamic one. Their portrayals are therefore reflections of the Chinese view of their manners, customs, mores and the general image they inculcated on their host country.

In the T'ang capital city, Ch'ang-an, there were two markets. The East Market was where most Chinese merchants and traders conducted their business and the West Market together with its vicinity was where foreign merchants had been segregated.[15] Persian residence houses, Nestorian churches and Zoroastrian temples too were also landmarks. Altogether the city had two Persian and five Zoroastrian temples.[16]

In the "Tale of Tu Tzu-ch'un杜子春,"[17] Tu Tzu-ch'un, a spendthrift who becomes bankrupt, is saved three times by an old Persian. Each time Tu Tzu-ch'un is invited to the Persian Hall in the West Market and is given more money than he asks for. To fulfill his obligation, Tu Tzu-ch'un goes to a mountain to seek out the old man and to help him process an alchemical elixir. Because of Tu Tzu-ch'un's dereliction in the face of illusions, the immortal quintessence fails to transmute. Tu Tzu-ch'un has sustained all illusions of emotional temptations – happiness, anger, lament, fear, hatred, desire – but love. The Persian thereby admonishes him that potential immortals are hard to find and that Tu Tzu-ch'un, though once a prospective candidate, still has to succumb to the world of sensuality. Unlike many

other Middle Easterners who are merchants, this Persian is a priest. He wins the heart of Tu Tzu-ch'un through his generosity. Besides, he communicates well with Tu Tzu-ch'un in helping the latter, a prodigal son, to repossess his worldly fortune. But fortune is only a bait to hook Tu Tzu-ch'un on the path of immortality.

The quest for immortality, of course, has a long tradition in Chinese writings. The Persian therefore conducts himself like ages of Taoist priests who enchant others with the opportunity of achieving immortality. In this sense, the Persian priest is Sinicized. Ironically, in his reprimanding Tu Tzu-ch'un's failure to resist the lure of human emotion, he, too, cannot control his anger. Seeing the busting of his elixir refinement, he grasps Tu Tzu-ch'un's hair and soaks the latter in a cistern of water. Having been patiently waiting for Tu Tzu-ch'un's cooperation for so many years, he finally exposes his restive desire. He dramatizes this agony and yearning when he scrubs the brass pillar of the medicinal stove in an attempt to secure some possible remnant elixir. Such parsimonious act stands him in strong contrast to his former generosity, lavishing Tu Tzu-ch'un with money. Yet, despite the dramatic change in attitude, what this Sinicized Persian priest does gives the impression that ultimately all human efforts toward transcendence can be vain. Naturally, there are other Middle East priests who exercise control of illusions and magic too. But they do not seem as Chinese as this one.

In other stories, two separate Zoroastrian temple chiefs, one in Ho-nan 河南,[18] the other in Liang-chou 梁州,[19] perform magic after they have prayed. The former stabs a knife through his abdomen and it comes out of his back. Despite the bleeding, at the chief's own spitting out of water and reciting charms he regains his normal condition. The latter hammers a nail from his forehead through to the armpit. He then sets out to travel as fast as flying, covering instantaneously hundreds of miles. On his return he pulls out the nail and is restored in no time.

What we see here are fantastic deeds. While the old Persian acts with civilized composure and even speaks a language that appeals to the Chinese mind, the other two patriarchs fascinate the senses through their magic and violent shows. In the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* the first tale is categorized as "Immortals" and the latter two "Illusions." This reveals the extent of acceptability to the T'ang Chinese. If the Tu Tzu-ch'un story is a metaphysical one and thus more refined in taste, the stories of the Zoroastrian patriarchs evidently are deemed physical and mundane. One reason why

the Persian priest appears civilized is that he acts like indigenous Chinese Taoist priests whose ordeals are to cultivate the spirit and things spiritual. Tasks should be conducted calmly and ritualistically though the supernatural may be conjured. Practices of violent acts and thoughts are deemed below par if not heretical. In contrast, the Zoroastrians' traumatic feats remind one of the acts and deeds in the *Arabian Nights* in that often horrendous actions are taken to achieve a goal. What goals these Zoroastrians may have are not disclosed. A probable conjecture will be that the protagonists want to manifest supernatural power and that some of their immediate concerns are to stay uninjured at vulnerable moments. Uncouth and stunning, the protagonists' actions render the semblance of Zoroastrianism more like a cult than religion. The appeal to magic of muscular strength and bizarre phenomena definitely reminds a Chinese of the unrefined stereotype image of "barbarians from the West." When the narrator mentions that the Zoroastrians kill pigs and sheep to feast their god in the Ho-nan temple, one can be quite sure that these Middle Easterners are non-Islamic Persians rather than Arabs and Jews who shun pork.

Other down to earth roles of Middle Easterners in the T'ang tales are merchants and fortune seekers. Many are dealers of pearls and jewelry. This typological image is in keeping with that of the recent Kuwaiti Arabs peddling mother-of-pearls in London before their country developed their petroleum production. Oftentimes these dealers do not bargain, but buy at whatever price they are told to pay. Some are merchants by trade, others seekers of valuables or self-styled emissaries traveling to restore a lost national treasure. One example is the case of the District Defender (military commandant) of Lo-yang, a metropolis where a large number of Middle Easterners take abode. He is given five tales of cockscomb-colored gold. His nephew bids him to sell it to a dealer for an exorbitant price. Upon seeing the special gold the dealer bows in thanks and says that Western Tartar merchants are particularly interested in this kind of gold and price is no object to them.[20] There is no appearance of Mid-Easterners in the story. However, through reportage one is informed of their likes, disposition and value judgment. Still, the story contains a racial enigma because the reason why the Mid-Easterners favor the cockscomb-colored gold is not explained. Nevertheless, the tale conveys the notion that Mid-Easterners are fond of exotica which is a legitimate motive.

In line with the exotic pursuit, Middle Easterners seem to be ubiquitous just for the search of it though customarily they appear at several strategic

cities. It happens that the Accessory Clerk of Chü-jung 句容 vomits a thing like a shoe sole after digesting a hundred catties of fish. The County Magistrate orders a petty officer to put it up for sale in Yang-chou, another metropolis with a sizable number of Middle Easterners. There a Middle Easterner appears, claiming the thing is a dissolver of fish and that it can also dissolve polyps in the stomach. After pleading, he follows the petty officer to the magistrate's home begging to buy at least half the dissolver so that he can bring it back to his country to cure his prince's stomach tumor.[21] This Mid-Easterner is portrayed as someone who comes to China in search of a miraculous cure-all. His country has previously offered an award of a thousand pieces of gold to anyone who can eliminate the prince's stomach polyp. This man is unmistakably one of the many driven to China to harvest a windfall. While the Chinese physicians and sorcerers cannot tell what that vomitted substance is, he recognizes what it is and how it works. He is no ordinary adventurer but a knowledgeable man who also has a lofty goal. Such portrayal of the adventurer is in keeping with the Chinese convention of herbal physicians who are often explorers in mountains and inland terrains in search of some known or unknown life-saving substance. Likewise, there is another Mid-Easterner who comes to buy a blue tint pearl from a Buddhist temple. The pearl was once a tribute paid by a Western country. It functions to turn a pool of mud into water so that treasures in the mud appear apparent. He stores the pearl by inserting it into his leg but is ultimately forced to surrender it to the court of Empress Wu Tse-t'ien.[22]

In the above two stories, Middle Easterners are shown to be not mere treasure hunters but dedicated archaeologists who know the value of their pursuit and who are determined to restore art objects from oblivion and waste. In the story of the mud-transforming pearl, the treasure marks an era of diplomatic relationship between China and Middle Eastern countries at the time of Wu Tse-t'ien. Subtly, the treasure reflects the megalomaniac mentality of the empress who sees tributes from foreign countries as disposable rather than treasurable. Apparently, such an unconscious decision is made known to the tribute offerers who make plans to go back to China to redeem their precious items. Truly, the tribute though miraculous, is repeatedly being neglected. As the story notes, after the empress repossessed the pearl, it is cherished only until the time of Emperor Hsüan Tsung; thereafter it is lost to the court again. In a way such a social trend reveals that the original proprietors are not being taken seriously. The fact that

soon these Middle Easterners can buy back or acquire the treasure indicates that they pose no threat whatsoever to the Chinese. But even then these people develop a unique method of searching and safekeeping the treasure by inserting it into parts of their body. Such a method is unknown to the Chinese. It may be said that these Middle Easterners are cautious, discreet, shrewd and persevering in acquiring miraculous treasure.

Another discerning Persian on his trip to Fu-feng 扶風 buys a stone lain at his host's front door. He breaks up the stone to obtain an inch-wide pearl which he inserts into his armpit for safekeeping. However, on his homebound voyage, the sea turns rough. The Persian has to gouge out his pearl which immediately is grabbed away by a sea deity coming up from below the water.[23] This and the blue tint pearl story again recall the *Arabian Nights* with their exotic and fantastic episodes. Nothing seems impossible and no uncanny event is too strange. The human characters scheme to procure the treasures yet they do not victimize others, nor do they exploit the ignorance of the owners of the treasure. In their acquisition of valuable pearls the Middle Easterners attempt to trade fairly, though they know they still come out with a bargain.

If the above portrayals reflect how Middle Easterners strive only to have their labors lost, others have better luck. A Chinese creditor traveling to Yang-chou takes abode in an inn. He casually mentions to the Tartars gambling treasures at the inn a pearl he found on the crown of Emperor Wu of the Chou located at the back of a temple. These foreigners volunteer to pay the debt others owe the Chinese scholar and ask him to hasten away and bring the pearl back. Upon his return, the Tartars pay him 50 times the money he asks for and invite him to go aboard their ship to witness the value of the pearl. Once in the East Sea, they meet an emir who is simmering milk[24] in a silver saucepan. He then puts the pearl in a gold vase and places the vase in the simmering milk. Seven days later, two old men and a train of followers come to the ship bringing valuables and jewelry to ransom the pearl. The emir declines the offer. Some days later, hoards of exquisite goods are brought forth but the emir again rejects them.

> After more than thirty days, all gift bearers leave the ship to return. Two dragon girls, with fair complexion and comely looks, come up to throw themselves into the vase. They melt with the pearl to form an ointment.
>
> The scholar asks, "Who are they that just came as ransom?"

The emir answers, "This pearl is a great treasure. It should have two dragon girls to serve as guardians. The dragons cherish their daughters, so, they send in all the valuables to ransom the pearl instead. But I merely intend to transcend this world. What do I care for worldly riches?"

Having said that, he rubs the ointment on his feet and walks on the sea, leaving the ship behind.

The Middle Easterners separately claim, "We all contributed to buy this pearl. Why should you monopolize the benefits? After your honor's departure, how are we to return?"

The emir bids them paint their ship with the simmered milk, so that they will have a fair wind homebound.

Things happen just as the emir said. The emir is then lost from sight.[25]

至三十餘日，諸人散去。有二龍女，潔白端麗，投入珠瓶中，珠女合成膏。士人問所贖悉何人也？胡云：此珠是大寶，合有二龍女衛護。群龍惜女，故以諸寶來贖。我欲求度世，寧顧世間之富耶！因以膏塗足，步行水上，捨舟而去。諸胡各言共買此珠，何爲獨專其利？卿既往矣，我將安歸？胡令以所煎醍醐塗船，當得便風還家。皆如其言。大胡竟不知所之。

Here are several things of interest to our understanding of these Mid-Easterners. First, they develop a mutual trust with the Chinese scholar by paying the debt due him to save him his trip to Yang-chou. They do not plot to ambush and rob him of the pearl, but patiently wait for his return while their donation to compensate his debt is at stake. Second, upon being asked to purchase the pearl, they laugh and offer to multiply many times the suggested price. This laughter reflects a good-humored appreciation of the pearl's value and their abstention from tricks in order to obtain it. These Middle Easterners are honest people. They even claim at the outset that they have long known China was in possession of the pearl. They want to ransom it back, but will not do so with foul means. Third, while these people gamble in public, though most likely for entertainment, they must not have violated their moral code or religious doctrine. Islamic law simply bans gambling. These people, therefore, are most probably non-Islamic or live in the pre-Islamic age in view of the fact that they behave in other matters conscientiously honest. Fourth, their having easy access

to board and sail a ship indicates that they must either be Arabic or Persian merchants who come to the Yang-chou area by sea. Manchurian or Mongolian Tartars rarely engage in business, nor do they go to South China to develop trade.[26] Fifth, the pearl is allowed to reveal the full play of its magical power. In "The Tale of Tu Tzu-ch'un" the old Persian needs to boil a 9-foot cistern under a violet flame to refine his elixir. The emir here simmers the pearl over milk to obtain a miraculous result. In both cases, boiling is a necessary procedure, as it is in alchemy. While the dragon girl is a common Chinese motif as in other T'ang romances, e.g. "Liu I chuan 柳毅傳," the use of milk as a catalyst is definitely a foreign one. After all, Chinese, especially Southern Chinese, usually do not drink milk. But it is a staple for Middle Easterners. The eliciting of the magical effects of the pearl certainly carries an exotic ring to it. The whereabouts of the emir as well as his fellow clansmen, too, renders the story even more enchanting. On the one hand, the emir has already decided to forsake mundane riches to seek to transcend this world. This intention coupled with his being lost without a trace, place the story firmly in the category of Taoist literary writings. Open-ended stories often leave their readers with a sense of nostalgia, reminiscence and unoppressive melancholy. While many other tales notably in the "Immortals" section of the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* may exemplify this, this technique is one lyrical convention that elevates the story to a higher level of narrative skill. Even if the content of the story is deemed fantastic, at least this poetic device merits closer attention to the story. On the other hand, the story betrays the patriarchic social system of the people. The emir, who simmers the pearl to obtain its magic, takes the first and best share of the miraculous results. But he is not a heartless tribal chief, so he sees that his fellow tribesmen enjoy some of the remaining good and return home safely. There is a certain degree of egalitarianism here once the social and political dominance of the superior is recognized.

Similar miraculous pearls abound at this time. One is officially demanded by a foreign government and in fact since the pearl was placed in the mouth of a deceased Persian it had preserved the body to look as if it were alive.[27] Another pearl stored in a Ch'ang-an temple is up for sale in the tenth year of the K'ai-yüan era (A.D. 722). It attracts the interest of a noble Arab. Through interpretation he understands that the "Water-inducing Pearl" is priced at one billion.[28] He can merely counter with an offer of 40 million because he has lived in China for a long time and has

depleted part of his wealth. The Chinese abbot agrees to settle the deal at 40 million. The delighted Arab then explains that the pearl is an Arabian national treasure. It was presented to the Chinese court in the early Chen-kuang 貞觀 era (A.D. 627-49). However, back home, the Arabs think of that pearl so often that an announcement has been made: whoever returns it will be offered the prime ministership. The entire country has been launched to search for it for seventy to eighty years. This pearl if buried two feet underground will immediately pop up with a spring serving thousands of soldiers during military deployment. They test the pearl and it works.

This time, we see someone who claims himself to be an Arab. He does not question the value of the pearl, and in his sincerity he relates the pearl's background and even shows how efficacious it is. Apparently, deep trust and good faith business dealings are the accustomed practice between the Chinese and Arabs. The language barrier in this incident does not arouse the slightest misgiving. This candid relationship also applies to that between the Chinese and Persians in other tales. Li Mien 李勉,[29] a District Defender provides shelter to a sick old Persian in the K'ai-yüan era (A.D. 713-41). The Persian is of royal blood. He comes as a merchant for more than 20 years in quest of a lost national dowage pearl. His country has promised whoever brings the pearl back will be enfeoffed with a hereditary dukedom or the prime ministership. At his death-bed, the merchant scrubs out the pearl from his buttock and offers it to Li Mien who places it in the mouth of the Persian and buries him properly. Later, Li Mien meets a young Persian who looks much like the deceased one. The young man turns out to be the old man's son coming from Persia to seek out his father. Having been told the burial site the young Persian excavates the tomb to take back the pearl and departs from China.

To put the story in historical perspective may shed light on understanding the behavior of the Persians. In the K'ai-yüan era, Sasanid Persia had been subjugated by the Arabs, having first exhausted its military might in recent clashes with Byzantines. Earlier, when other newly expanded provinces were sequentially consolidated, major cities such as Basra in Iraq (in A.D. 635-36), Cairo (in 641 or 642) and the Byzantine Africa (in A.D. 670) were founded, the Muslims started to exercise a secure hand on the whole of the Iranian possessions.[30] Many Persians, for fear of persecution and rebellion of their once Semitic-speaking subjects fled east to China. Among them were probably numerous members of the royal house and

aristocracy.[31] Indeed, upon the overthrowing of the Sasanid, its young sovereign Isdigerd was killed on his way to escape. His pedigreed son, Firuz 卑路斯, took refuge in China in the Hsien-heng 咸亨 era (670-74) and eventually died in Ch'ang-an. Firuz's son, Narses 泥涅斯, too, subsequently passed away in Ch'ang-an in the second year of the Ching-lung 景龍 era (708).[32] Thus, a former royal Persian coming to China as a merchant is no big surprise. Besides, in this Islamic age, beginning with the Umayyad Caliphs (661-750),

> Arabic literature with the other appurtenances of civilized life slowly developed.... The rich merchant, who travels far by land and sea in pursuit of gain, and the qādī (judge) or faqīh (cannon lawyer) skilled in the religious sciences, holding high office in the state or communicating his knowledge by teaching, become the ideal type, rather than the ghāzī (raider) of the early days or the mujāhid (fighter for faith, cf. jihād).[33]

Merchants, seeking legal profits, particularly a lost national treasure, therefore are dignified personages and in fact they render commendable service to their country. This, of course, is a far cry from the Chinese norm which traditionally classifies all walks of life into four categories in descending order: scholars, farmers, laborers and merchants. Because of the Middle Easterners' different estimation of the merchant class, even a former tycoon, in his taking refuge in China, is contented to be a pastry seller. But like many other fortune-seekers he inserts a miraculous pearl in his left arm in order to keep it safely.[34] Sometimes, the merchants may be unwittingly offended if the lost treasure of their nation is sold back to them at an indecently low price of a mere million.[35] This time, the treasure being a precious stone, which stands out among all other prized items, is rediscovered by the Middle Eastern merchants at an annual gathering sometime after the Turkish An Rokshan's 安祿山 rebellion in China. At the gathering, the merchants compete with one another over the treasures they have on hand. The stone has been lost for over 30 years during a national disruption (presumably the Islamic conquest of the Sasanians) and the Middle Eastern king offers the prime ministership for any citizen who redeems the stone. This story, like "The Tale of Li Mien," or "The Tale of Water-inducing Pearl" lures the Persians to restore the national treasure with big promises. Despite the lapse of time, the Persians seemingly

all remember their obligation as well as privilege aside from their daily business dealings. In general, treasures from the Middle Eastern countries are mostly pearls, and these countries may span across most parts of the Asiatic continent from Arabia to the Kashmir罽賓.[36] Occasionally, there may be an informed Ch'ang-an Tartar merchant offering to buy a pearl for no more than what it is worth with good explanation.[37] Middle Easterners are thus seen as gemologists both in the sense of being connoisseurs and appraisers. While Chinese are jade specialists, Middle Easterners are without doubt pearl specialists. Obviously, there are also discreet buyers who settle the pearl or precious stone at an agreed upon price but remain silent as to how valuable or efficacious the treasure actually is.[38] These pearl purchasers may well be considered less than honest in their transaction.

Other Middle Eastern contacts with China are not limited to those of merchants and adventurers. One story notes that in the first year of the Yung-ning era of Emperor Chang of the Han章帝永寧元年 (A.D. 120), Chaldea條支 sent an auspicious bird鵁鶄 as a tribute. The bird was seven feet tall and understood human speech.[39] Originally in the southern part of Babylonia, Chaldea was a state that occupied the land on the Euphrates River adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Its people were Semitic. The Chaldean (Neo-Babylonian) Empire fell when the Persians captured Babylon in 539 B.C. The descendants of these Semitic speaking Chaldeans most probably helped cause the Persians to flee to China when the Islamic Arabs took reign of the land. Dynastic Chinese histories such as *Shih chi, Han shu* and *Hou Han shu* carry some brief entries concerning the Chaldean kingdom, mentioning that it is located west of Parthia and that the country produced big birds. The two T'ang dynastic histories, *T'ang shu* and *Hsin T'ang shu*, do not mention Chaldea though they list other countries including Parthia. What makes a good postulation here is that Semitic peoples, including the Arabs in the T'ang dynasty, have long intrigued the Chinese in one way or another. Auspicious birds, in particular, relate well to the Chinese mind. Thus even though Chaldea is no longer extant by the T'ang era, its historical significance still comes alive in the T'ang text. Besides, Chinese writers may think it gratifying to note that there once was a friendly Semitic state that paid tribute to the Middle Kingdom.

If the big bird is exotic, the Persian fleet with their mail-carrier pigeons too are enticing. These birds take the Chinese mind to a land it may otherwise not bother to visit. The Chinese are not known as a people of wide travels and exploration, but still now and then they are captivated by

the desire to roam overseas in search of the supernatural.

> Cheng Fu-li, the Assistant Minister of Court of Judicial Review, once said, "Most Persian ships nurture pigeons on board. Pigeons can fly thousands of miles. The seamen often release one to return home as a safe arrival announcer."[40]

> 大理丞鄭復禮言：波斯舶上多養鴿。鴿能飛行數千里，輒放一隻至家，以爲平安信。

A similar account is also noted by Li Chao 李肇 in *T'ang Kuo-shih pu* 唐國史補 when he served as the Left Bureau Director of the Department of State Affairs 尚書左司郎中. Such being the case, the long range flight pigeon is verifiable and true to history. In fact, Li Chao's book tabulates events generally taken place during the K'ai-yüan to Ch'ang-ch'ing 長慶 eras (A.D. 713-824). Persian ships, i.e., ships sailing from the Persian Gulf,[41] are said to come every year[42] to Annam 安南 and Canton and that pigeons set free by the seamen can return home by flying thousands of miles.[43] Among other officials Chang Chiu-ling 張九齡 (673-740), a prime minister, has previously used pigeons to transmit messages, the method of which he learned from the Persian vessels. Much as they admire the Persians and Arabs with shiploads of precious goods, the Chinese officials must have faintly recalled the P'eng bird in *Chuang-tzu* that traverses thousands of miles and is virtually untrammeled by space. In that connection the Chinese see some of their dream visions in the practice of the foreigners who breed pigeons. Besides admiration, there probably is a great deal of empathy. Arabs and Persians then, especially those coming by the sea route, are not merely regarded as seasonal merchants but as people whose realms tickle the fantastic imagination and beacons impulsive rich merchants to set forth to journey.[44]

Of these Middle Easterners, most are males. Females are often portrayed as dependent daughters of sick merchants and are either stranded in China or are eventually married away after the death of their parent.[45] There is, however, one female figure who plays an active role in the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*. She is the young daughter of a Persian emperor who intends to build a city at Tocharia to celebrate his merits of reigning a thousand-state empire. But the city wall keeps on collapsing. The princess finally suggests

that the emperor proceed with construction within the bounds of her footsteps. She cuts her little finger and asks the masons to follow her blood drips to start the construction. When the city is finished she transforms herself into a sea nymph.[46] While the tale has the ring of a sacrificial ritual, it is the one unique story that concludes with a pathetic and mystical ending. Like many Chinese stories that sermonize on filial piety, this one too illustrates that convention. It is the story of a daughter who perceives that the father's vainglory and eagerness will not be placated until the city is built. In the emporer's mind, if the city wall can not be erected he must not be a virtuous king and is not approved by Heaven. The princess therefore sacrifices her life to deliver her father from his vainglory as well as his battle-ridden empire. In victimizing herself to uphold filial piety, the princess gives the story a strong Chinese flavor. Yet, in the sense that the Persian emperor is redeemed by blood, the story frames a Middle Eastern passion and a still broader context.[47] After the deliverance the transformed sea nymph dwells in a crystal clear sea which still exists, so the story goes, below the city castle. This sounds like other folkloristic motifs of transformation and self-sacrifice[48] except that the Persian princess is by no means tragic and she evokes no less adoration and memory in the ages to come.

By gleaning through some 6000 anecdotes and tales of the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*, we have been able to gather some vignettes of Middle Easterners in the T'ang. Many of these texts are fictional accounts and some are historic narratives. Since *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* is eclectic in nature, there is already a built-in random sampling of data. As has been seen, while the images of Middle Easterners signify a different civilization, the Islamic culture does not play a key role in these instances because a large portion of the Middle Easterners' activities has been those of the Sasanian Persians (A.D. 226-642). Besides, the Chinese record and portray them not through the eye of an imperial traveler or colonizer, but as a host who is interested in a foreign culture. The sole purpose for doing that may possibly be to gratify an intellectual curiosity and for recreational entertainment in conversation, discourse and story-telling. T'ang China has been noted for its accommodation to various religious persuasions, missionaries, emissaries, foreign students, and merchants from all parts of the known world. A taste for foreign luxuries, valuable merchandise and marvels is widespread at court and among the average citizenry. It seems, to a large extent, the Middle Easterners fulfill that expectation. Among them, Persians and Arabs are considered to be the *hu* from major Western Asiatic powers by this time. Thus, their

appearance at many of the metropolises may draw the Chinese's special attention even in tales. Indeed, Sasanians after the fourth century made greater use of the sea route while maintaining the overland trade routes. After the middle of the eighth century, Muslim traders replaced their pre-Islamic Persian and Arabic predecessors to establish direct contact between the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258) in Baghdad and the T'ang court.[49] As when merchants from the Persian gulf arrive with shiploads of goods, their curios enable them to make a fortune; many of them who opt to settle down can therefore afford to live royally and spend money lavishly.[50] There is no doubt that these people signify wealth wherever they go as in the many tales above. They also give the Chinese the impression that they are often associated with pearls of marvelous nature.

When the Middle Easterners are not merchants, they may have special talents, magical power or are in control of a talisman. Their acts may be fantastic but rarely sensational. Regardless of which type of person, they are generally accepted by the Chinese. But more often than not they have no names in the tales. Perhaps that is because, despite their wealth, Middle Easterners have not achieved social prominence yet. It may also be that culturally they have not been sufficiently Sinicized, or their indigenous names are simply too difficult for the Chinese tongue to pronounce. Whatever the reason is, perhaps Middle Easterners are so numerous and their stay so common in the metropolises that the narrators do not bother to describe their physique despite their Caucasian looks which are quite different from that of the Chinese Mongoloid. These foreign guests may have voyaged over high seas or traversed deserts, inhospitable terrain and snow-capped mountains, but their goals for coming to China must probably be alike. For that matter, they present a similar impression to the Chinese and there simply are not many different types. In the order of their appearance in *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*, these Middle Easterners are grouped primarily under the following categories: immortals 神仙, magic and illusions 幻術, medicine 醫, spirits and supernaturalism 靈異, treasures 寶, miscellaneous treasures 雜寶, and birds and fowls 禽鳥. Sometimes the Mid-Easterners are the protagonists; other times they serve the mere purpose of a passing remark. If a Chinese is to travel to the Middle East, his chronicle and description of the local dwellers may perhaps be more diversified and somewhat more concrete. Facts and fiction duly considered, since there are no significant military, religious or economic conflicts between the Chinese and the Middle Easterners, the T'ang tales together with the Chinese

historical records do not forge a Saracen image,[51] rather they seem to perpetuate a relatively frank communal perception of the Middle Eastern nationals.

Notes

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1. Su Hsüeh-lin 蘇雪林, "Yü-wai wen-hua liang-tu lai-Hua ti lai-tsung-ch'ü-chi" 域外文化兩度來華的來蹤去跡, *Chung-kuo kuo-hsüeh* 中國國學, 14 (Sept. 1986), 41-47.
2. *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*, 3 vols. (1753; rpt. Taipei: Hsin-hsing, 1973), 34.lb; ibid, 324.6a. For the origin of *Sesamum orientale*, see Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran*, trans. Tu Cheng-sheng 杜正勝, *Chung-kuo yü I-Lang* 中國與依朗 (Taipei: Kuo-li pien-i-kuan, 1975), pp. 124-29.
3. *TPKC*, 42.1b; 338.7a; 384.2a; Hsiang Ta 向達, *T'ang-tai Ch'ang-an yü Hsi-yü wen-ming* 唐代長安與西域文明 (1933; rpt. Taipei: Ming-wen, 1982), pp. 48-49.
4. *TPCK*, 410.7b; *Chung-kuo yü I-Lang* (Hereafter *Sino-Iranica*), pp. 235-44.
5. *TPKC*, 411.4a-4b; *Sino-Iranica*, pp. 42-74.
6. *TPKC*, 411.7a; *Sino-Iranica*, pp. 244-51.
7. *TPKC*, 406.5a; *Sino-Iranica*, pp. 276-80.
8. *TPKC*, 406.6a, catalogued as 齊聊. This probably is a corrupted form of 齊墩 because medieval Persian of the term is transcribed as *Zeitum*, see *Sino-Iranica*, pp. 271-76.
9. *TPKC*, 410.6a; *Sino-Iranica*, pp. 259-62.
10. *Sino-Iranica* identifies 佛林 as Syria, pp. 295-96. However, 佛林 is a transliteration of the Arabic for the place name *Rom* which to some is the Eastern Roman Empire, or the Byzantium Empire in Asia Minor. See Liu I-t'ang 劉義堂, *Chung-kuo pien-chiang min-tsu-shih* 中國邊疆民族史 rev. ed. (Taipei: Taiwan Chung-hua, 1979), p. 232. 佛林 is also transcribed as 佛箖.
11. *Sino-Iranica*, p. 224.
12. "Iranian Merchants in T'ang Dynasty Tales," *Semitic and Oriental Studies Presented to William Popper*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology, 11 (1951), 403-22.
13. Chang Hsing-lang 張星烺, *Chung-Hsi chiao-t'ung shih-liao hui-pien* 中西交通史料彙編, 6 vols. (1928; Taipei: Shih-chieh, 1969), III, pp. 189-226. Many of the tales he cites overlap with those discussed in this article.
14. Hsieh Hai-p'ing 謝海平, *T'ang-tai liu-Hua wai-kuo-jen sheng-huo k'ao-shu* 唐代留華外國人生活考述 (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial, 1978), pp. 2-7.
15. Hsiang Ta, *T'ang-tai Ch'ang-an yü Hsi-yü wen-ming*, pp. 35-39; Hsieh Hai-p'ing, p. 46.
16. See the map of Ch'ang-an in *T'ang-tai liu-Hua wai-kuo-jen sheng-huo k'ao-shu*, pp. 32, 33. For the situation of the Nestorian Church in T'ang China and the early relationships between Persia and China, see Lo Hsiang-lin 羅香林, *T'ang-Yüan erh-tai chih ching-chiao* 唐元二代之景教 (Hong Kong: Chung-kuo hsüeh-she,

1966).

17. *TPKC*, 16.1a-4a.
18. Ibid. 285.2a-2b, "Ho-nan yao-chu河南妖主 (Sorcerer Chief in Ho-nan)." The character妖 most probably is a corruption of祆, Zoroastrianism.
19. Ibid. 285.2b, "Liang-chou yao-chu 梁州妖主 (Sorcerer Chief in Liang-chou)."
20. Ibid. 35.3a-4a, "Wang Ssu-lang王四郎 (The Tale of Wang Ssu-lang)."
21. Ibid. 220.6a-6b, "Chü-jung tso-shih句容佐史 (Accessory Clerk of Chü-jung)."
22. Ibid. 402.3a-3b, "Ch'ing ni chu 青泥珠 (The Blue Mud Transformation Pearl)."
23. Ibid. 402.3b-4a, "Ching-t'sun chu 徑寸珠 (The Inch-wide Pearl)."
24. *TPKC*, 402.4b, 醍醐 , has two meanings: one is milk, the other wine. Both glosses make sense in the story. However, to render the tale sound exotic and give it a Mid-Eastern flavor I take the first gloss.
25. *TPKC*, 402.4b, "Pao-chu 寶珠 (The Precious Pearl)."
26. Chang Hsing-lang, *Chung-Hsi chiao-t'ung shih-liao hui-pien,* III, pp. 223-224.
27. *TPKC*, 402.6b, "Li Kuan 李灌 (The Tale of Li Kuan)." This tale is also similar to "The Tale of Li Mien" in n. 29 because the pearls in both tales are being searched for by their home country, Persia.
28. *TPKC*, 402.5a-5b. "Shui chu水珠 (The Water-inducing Pearl)." The Chinese original is 億萬 . In the T'ang times, 億 was only equal to the modern figure of a hundred thousand (100,000). See the gloss of the T'ang rhyme book *Kuang-yün* 廣韻 . 億萬therefore makes the modern equivalent of one billion (100,000 x 10,000).
29. *TPKC*, 402.5b-6a, "Li Mien 李勉 (The Tale of Li Mien)."
30. D. M. Dunlop, *Arab Civilization to A.D. 1500* (London: Longman and Libraire du Liban, 1971), p. 13.
31. Chang Hsing-lang, *Chung-Hsi chiao-t'ung shih-liao hui-pien,* I, p. 119.
32. Hsiang Ta, *T'ang-tai Ch'ang-an yü Hsi-yü wen-ming,* p. 25. For details in Chinese of the downfall of the last ruler of the Sassanid refer to Chang Hsing-lang, III, pp. 14-17.
33. Dunlop, p. 20.
34. *TPKC*, 402.9a-9b, "Yü-ping Hu 鬻餅胡 (The Persian Pastry Seller)."
35. Ibid. 403.7a-8a, "Wei Sheng 魏生 (The Tale of Scholar Wei)."
36. Nationally renowned pearls of the two corresponding countries are found in the respective tales: *TPKC*, 34.2a-6b, "Ts'ui Wei 崔煒 (The Tale of Ts'ui Wei)," and *TPKC*, 402.7a, "Shang-ch'ing chu 上清珠 (The Celestial Pearl)."
37. *TPKC*, 457.4b-5a, "Chih-hsiang ssu hsien-che 至相寺賢者 (The Worthy of Chih-hsiang Temple)."
38. Ibid. 402.7a-7b, "Shou ch'uan che 守船者 (The Ship Guard)" and 404.7b-8a, "Ch'en Shih 岑氏 (The Tale of Mr. Ch'en)."
39. Ibid. 461.5b, "T'iao-chih kuo 條支國 (The Chaldean Kingdom)."
40. Ibid. 461.6b, "Ko-hsin 鴿信 (Pigeon Mail-carrier)."
41. These ships may be manned by either Persians or Arabs. Pai Shou-i 白壽彝 *Chung-kuo I-ssu-lan-shih ts'un-kao* 中國伊斯蘭史存稿 (Yin-ch'uan 銀川 : Ning-hsia jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1982), p. 114.
42. A sea voyage from Canton to the Persian Gulf or vice versa took about 90 sailing days in the ninth century. However, if embarkation, loading, avoidance of the summer monsoon and taking advantage of the northeast trade wind in the following winter are added up the trip requires an entire year. See Kuwabara Jitsuzo 桑原騭藏 *Chung-kuo A-la-po hai-shang chiao-t'ung-shih* 中國阿剌伯海上交通史 , trans.

Feng Yu馮收 (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial, 1967), pp. 109-111. For the navigational schedules of sailing eastward with the monsoon winds from March to September and the return voyage with the northeast wind from November to January, see John E. Vollmer et al. *Silk Road. China Ships* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983), p. 28; also Kuwabara, pp. 129-31.

43. *T'ang Kuo-shih pu,*卷下 (Shanghai: Ku-chih ch'u-pan-she, 1979), p. 63.
44. See for example "The Tale of Wang Hsieh王榭傳," of a wealthy Nanking navigator who impulsively desires to go to Arabia, in Lu Hsün魯迅 ed., *T'ang Sung ch'uan-ch'i chi* 唐宋傳奇集(Hong Kong: Ta-t'ung, 1959), pp. 277-81.
45. "The Tale of Li Yueh李約," *TPKC*, 168.1a-1b.
46. "The Tale of a Persian Princess 波斯女王," *TPKC*, 374.3b-4a.
47. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955), has a section on blood motifs. Some relevant ones to the present story in other literatures are: (1) disenchantment by drawing blood, D712.4, II, p. 82, (2) child sacrificed to provide blood for cure of a friend, S268, V, p. 321 and (3) sacrifice of child to remove barrenness, S271, ibid.
48. Transformation of blood to another object, see Stith Thompson, D457.1, II, p. 49.
49. John E. Vollmer et al, *Silk Road. China Ships*, pp. 76-77.
50. Kuwabara, pp. 85-87.
51. Rana Kabbani presents the latest study on the colored and biased supposition of the Middle East and the Saracens, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: MacMillan, 1986). Also see my article in Chinese, "Chung-ku Ying-wen ch'uan-ch'i chih Sa-la-hsun-jen中古英文傳奇之撒拉遜人 (Saracens in Medieval English romances)," in *Chung-hua-min-kuo ti-i-chieh Ying-Mei wen-hsüeh yen-t'ao-hui lun-wen chi* 中華民國第一屆英美文學研討會論文集, ed. Kuo-li Chung-hsing ta-hsüeh wai-wen-hsi 國立中興大學外文系, rev. ed. (Taipei: Shu-lin, 1987), pp. 3-22, 435-39.