The Semantic Shift of “Western Regions” and the Westward Extension of the “Border” in the Tang Dynasty

Rong Xinjiang and Wen Xin

Traditionally, the term “Western Regions” could refer to two connected geographical regions. In its broader sense, it denotes the entire area west of Yumen Pass in Dunhuang; in its narrower sense, it includes only Southern and Eastern Xinjiang. Since the Han dynasty, the relations with the region covered by the narrower sense of the term have been of grave concern for regimes in China Proper. The Tang dynasty was the most daring in its dealings with the “Western Regions”, ruling over this area for an extended period of time and exerting considerable influence over local societies. Additionally, we also possess for the period of Tang rule some of the richest historical data regarding this area and, with the help of excavated texts, many details of the Tang rule have been clarified. Based on such empirical research, scholars such as Zhang Guangda also asked broader questions of the nature of Tang rule. He suggested that “the Tang began [its westward expansion] with the conquest of Xi Prefecture (Turfan), and after a century, by the mid-8th century, a type of Han/Non-Han dual governance has developed in areas beyond Xi Prefecture (meaning mostly the Four Garrisons)”.\[1\] Wang Xiaofu further explained the nature of this dual governance: “In the Four Garrisons of the Tang, there existed a form of governance between the prefecture-county system and the vassal kingdoms. Only in the Four Garrisons do we see the real manifestation of dual
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Clearly, scholars have noticed the exceptional status of the Four Garrisons region in the Tang government: under the Han/Non-Han dual governance, the Four Garrisons region exhibited different features from regular “loose-rein” regions. In order to understand such exceptionality, this article attempts to trace the change in the meanings of the term “Western Regions” and the concurrent shift in the Tang understanding of its western “border”.

I. Semantic Change of the Term “Western Regions” during the Tang

Our standard understanding of the term “Western Regions” comes from this classic passage of Han Shu: “Communications with the Western Regions started only in the time of Emperor Xiaowu. Originally there had been thirty-six states, but afterwards these were gradually divided into more than fifty. These all lie to the west of the Xiongnu and south of Wusun. To the north and south there are great mountains, and a river flows through the middle. The distance from east to west extends for more than 6000 li and from north to south for more than 1000 li. On the east the area adjoins Han [territory], being blocked by the Yumen and Yang passes. On the west it is confined by the Congling”.[3] This region corresponds roughly to present day Xinjiang. However, ever since China Proper began its contact with Central Asia, there existed another imagined “Western Regions”. This is a cultural rather than a geographical concept. During the Tang dynasty - an era that is widely regarded as the height of Sino-Central Asian cultural exchange, this cultural “Western Regions” not only entered the works of historians, but also became a topic frequented by poets. Consequently, when we encounter the term “Western Regions” in Tang sources, it could be used in either the geographical or cultural sense. For our purposes, we focus on the use of the term in Tang official works, particularly geographical works.

During the Sui dynasty, Pei Ju, a Sui official, was sent to Zhangye and Dunhuang to gather information and “pacify” the people. His record of the trip, Illustrated Record of the Western Regions has long been lost. However, the Preface is preserved in Pei Ju’s biography in Sui Shu, and it specifies the area of the “Western Regions” at the time as “north of Khotan and east of the Pamirs”. And the three roads to the “Western Regions”, according to Pei Ju, all began in Dunhuang and ended near the “Western Sea”. Therefore, the official understanding of the “Western Regions” in the Sui dynasty covered an area between Khotan, Dunhuang and the Pamirs, which is essentially the same as the one we find in Han Shu.

This understanding continued during the early Tang. A relatively obscure trace of such an understanding is found in one passage in chapter 70 of Tang Huiyao, which explains the name...
change of a prefecture in the Henan circuit: “Ru Prefecture: in the early Wude reign [618-626, of the Tang], following the Sui institution, this place was known as Yi Prefecture; but in the eighth year [634] of the Zhenguan reign, because another Yi Prefecture was established in the Western Regions, the name of this place was changed to Ru Prefecture”. Therefore, at the time of the establishment of Yi Prefecture in 634, this region (Yiwu, modern day Hami/Kumul) was still considered part of the “Western Regions”.

But with the changing political and military scene, such traditional understanding did not last very long. In the 14th year (640) of the Zhenguan reign, the Tang general Hou Junji conquered the Gaochang kingdom in Turfan. Despite wide opposition, Emperor Taizong decided to incorporate this newly conquered area into the prefecture/county system, establishing Xi (the “Western”) prefecture. Thereafter, the Tang official use of “Western Regions” no longer included the Turfan, Beiting, and Hami region (Yi, Xi and Ting prefectures) as the Tang western border began its first major westward expansion. One of the strongest opponents of this measure, Chu Suiliang seemed to have nevertheless endorsed this renewed understanding of the “Western Regions”, as he summarized Taizong’s measure as “eradicating Gaochang (Turfan) and menacing the Western Regions”, thus excluding Turfan from the “Western Regions”. But the clearest example of this new understanding comes from none other than the famous pilgrim Xuanzang. His monumental work Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang (Datang Xiyu Ji) was composed six years after the Tang conquest of Gaochang, and it is traditionally seen as a continuation of the tradition of pilgrim records initiated by the likes of Faxian. This understanding is not so much incorrect as it is incomplete. We argue that Xuanzang’s record was as much political as it was religious, because it was Emperor Taizong who commissioned the work in the first place, and two prominent officials, Jing Bo and Yu Zhining, composed its prefaces. In this regard, it is closer to Pei Ju’s lost Illustrated Record of the Western Regions in that it was written to provide information about the “Western Regions” to the government in China proper. Therefore, it was at least as much in debt to the tradition of such records on the “Western Regions” since Han Shu. This is revealed not only in the very title of the work, which emphasizes that it was the “Western Regions” of the “Great Tang”, but also in Emperor Taizong’s own endorsement of the work. In the decree written on the occasion of the completion of Xuanzang’s book, Emperor Taizong stated: “I am shallow in learning and awkward in reasoning, and am still confused by mundane matters. How could I hope to fathom the intricacies of Buddhism? The sutras that I asked you to construct are not for me to read. But naturally, I will read the Record of the Western Regions that you recently wrote”. Evidently, for Emperor Taizong at least, Xuanzang’s work was not merely another Buddhist text, which he bluntly claimed ignorance, but was of significant political consequence, and therefore required his attention.

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This political nature can also be seen in the work itself. When Xuanzang first went to India by way of the “Western Regions”, Gaochang (Turfan) was still not part of the Tang, and from the biography of Xuanzang commissioned himself and written by his disciple Huili, we know that Qu Wentai, the king of Gaochang at the time, probably played the most important role of all the patrons he attracted along the way to India. But in the Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang, his travel begins with Agni (Yanqi) and entirely skipped Gaochang, because at the time of the composition of the work, Gaochang was no longer part of the “Western Regions” and therefore, despite its great significance for Xuanzang’s trip, it could not appear in a semi-official record of the “Western Regions”.

The reason for this shift in perception is, naturally, the Tang conquest of Gaochang. After the conquest, Gaochang became Xi prefecture and, together with Yi and Ting prefectures, was incorporated into the official prefecture-county system and was no longer part of the “Western Regions”. Xi prefecture also replaced Dunhuang as the frontier of Tang relations with countries to the west. In this case, it is evident that the term “Western Regions” in Tang official works referred to “the region to the west of the Tang border”, covering areas that were not under the direct rule of the prefecture-county system of the Tang.

Around the time of Emperor Gaozong’s reign, the referent of the term “Western Regions” seems to have undergone a second westward movement. The entry of Tuhuoluo (Tocharistan) in the “chapter on border defense” in Tongdian records: “In the first year [661] of the Longshuo reign, Wang Mingyuan, special representative for the establishment of prefectures and counties in Tuhuoluo, offered Illustrated Record of the Western Regions, and requested that [in the area] to the west of Khotan and to the east of Bosi (Persia), 80 Area Command (Dudu fu)/prefectures, 100 counties and 260 military units (Jun fu) should be established, and that a stone inscription should be placed in the country of Tuhuoluo (Tocharistan) to record the sagely virtue of the emperor. The emperor agreed”. Wang’s new work on the “Western Regions” bore the same title as Pei Ju’s earlier work, indicating that he was working within the tradition of official recording of the area. What is implicit in this passage is that the presented work covered the region “to the west of Khotan and to the east of Bosi (Persia)”.

This view on the “Western Regions” marks a clear departure from the view of Xuanzang’s Record. And the reason for this further shift was, again, military. In the third year (658) of the Xianqing reign, Tang defeated the Western Turkic Khaghanate and the suzerain of the entire region to the east and west of the Pamirs shifted from the Turks to the Tang. The Tang government subsequently moved the seat of the Anxi Commandery (Duhu fu) government from Xi Prefecture to Kucha, and established four military garrisons (jun zhen), including Kucha, Khotan, Yanqi (Karashar), and Shule (Kashgar), collectively known as the “Four
Garrisons”. Although unlike in Xi prefecture, no large Tang army was stationed in these four places, the Anxi Commandery was similar to a prefecture in the prefecture-county system. In this sense, the area to the east of Khotan (the Four Garrisons) was incorporated into the Tang and was no longer part of the “Western Regions” as recognized by the Tang government.

However, given the Tibetan and Turkic threats from the south and the north, the Tang rule in the Four Garrisons was shaky after 658, to say the least, and the control of the Four Garrisons changed hands several times. In 670, the Tibetan army first took Khotan, and then Bohuan city (Aksu) of Kucha, after which the Tang government rescinded the “Four Garrisons” and retreated from the Anxi Commandery to Xi Prefecture. Four years later, the Khotanese king Fushe Xiong expelled the Tibetan forces and Tang named Khotan the Pisha Area Command. Around the same time, the Tang established two more Area Commands, those of Shule and Yanqi, and restored the “Four Garrisons”. From 675 to 676, the Tang government decided to include two important towns on the southern edge of the Taklamakan desert, Shanshan and Qiemo, into the jurisdiction of Sha Prefecture (Dunhuang) and renamed them the Shicheng Garrison and Boxian City, thus validating their status as an area under direct Tang rule. However, in the next year (676-677), the Western Turks and the Tibetans united their forces to take the “Four Garrisons” again. And this situation lasted until 679 when Pei Xingjian conducted a successful foray to Suiye, when the Tang again restored the “Four Garrisons”, and Suiye replaced Yanqi as one of the “Four Garrisons”. In the early years of the rule of Empress Wu, the Eastern Turks were revitalized as a serious threat and the Tibetans took the opportunity to attack. Under pressure, the Tang was forced to give up the “Four Garrisons” in 686. Six years later, in 692, the Tang general Wang Xiaojie recovered the “Four Garrisons” yet again, and the seat of the Commandery was moved back to Kucha.

After the recovery of the “Four Garrisons” in 692, a debate occurred between Di Renjie and Cui Rong as to whether the Tang should give up this region or not. According to Di Renjie, “[the Tang] guards the Four Garrisons in the west, and the Andong [Commandery] in the east. Corvée labor is increasing every day and the common people are suffering. To try to guard the Western Regions is like cultivating a field of stones; one cannot afford the cost and there will be no benefit, only harm”. On the other hand, Cui Rong argued that Di’s plan was exactly what Emperor Gaozong had in mind when he gave up the Four Garrisons, but the result was that “the Tibetans became arrogant and invaded the Western Regions, and the cities and garrisons to the west of Yanqi surrendered without exception”. Clearly, these two officials held very different views on the issue at hand. But both of them, when using the term “Western Regions”, seemed to be talking about the area of the “Four Garrisons”. This is because when they were proposing their views, the area was recently recovered and the political institutions of the “Four Garrisons” had not been fully
implemented. In these cases, the “Western Regions” and “Four Garrisons” referred to roughly the same region, with the former meaning referring to geography and the latter to its political institutions. Eventually, Empress Wu accepted Cui Rong’s suggestion and stationed large Tang armies in the “Four Garrisons”. This measure resulted in about a century of stable Tang rule in this region from the late 7th to the late 8th century. And the second westward shift of the meaning of “Western Regions”, which then only covered places to the west of the Pamirs, began at this time.

Regarding this second shift, the entry on “loose-rein” prefectures in the geography chapter of the New Tang History (Xin Tang Shu) gives a clear indication. All of the “16 area commands and 72 prefectures of the Western Regions” listed in this entry were places west of the Pamirs. And the “area commands of the Four Garrisons and 34 prefectures” were listed under the name of Anxi.\[^{15}\] The distinction between “Western Regions (Xiyu)” and “Pacified West (Anxi)” is thus very clear. Additionally, the famous official/geographer Jia Dan recorded in his work A Record of the Spread of Imperial Splendor in Four Directions (Huanghua Sidaji) that “there are seven most important routes that lead [from the Tang] to the land of the four barbarians and these are the routes where postal stations and passes gather”. These seven routes included the following:\[^{16}\]

1. from Yingzhou to Andong
2. from Dengzhou via the sea to Gaoli and Bohai
3. from Xiazhou, beyond the pass to Datong and Yunzhong
4. from Zhongshouxiang city to the Uyghurs
5. from Anxi to Xiyu (Western Regions)
6. from Annan to Tianzhu (India)
7. from Guangzhou to the Seaborne Barbarians.

Here, route no. 5 is strikingly named “[one] from Anxi to Xiyu (the Western Regions)”. We can draw two conclusions from this piece of information: the terms Anxi and Xiyu (Western Regions) must have meant two distinctively different areas, analogous to other entries in this passage, Anxi was a “border prefecture”, whereas Xiyu was a “barbarian land”, and the region that was called “the Western Regions” in the Sui and early Tang was known in the time of Jia Dan as “Anxi” (Pacified West).

Numerous cases of a similar juxtaposition of “Anxi” and “Xiyu” can be found in contemporary sources. In the third chapter of Tang Liudian where the tribute from the Longyou Circuit (dao) was listed, that from Anxi was included in the main list, and then that from “Xiyu” was listed as tribute from barbarian lands.\[^{17}\] Similarly, in the entries for the year 757 in Zizhi Tongjian, when
enumerating border armies that returned to the Tang heartland as reinforcements following the An Lushan Rebellion, “Longyou”, “Hexi”, “Anxi”, and “Xiyu” armies were included as being from different areas. The clearest record, however, is perhaps the one found for the year 742 in *Zizhi Tongjian*. Here we find a summary of prefectural establishment at the time: “The prefectures subjected to music and education ‘Under Heaven’ (*tianxia* meaning under Tang rule) are 331; and there are 800 ‘loose-rein’ prefectures. And ten Military Commissioners are established in order to guard the border. The Anxi Military Commissioner pacifies Xiyu and governs the Four Garrisons: Kucha, Yanqi, Khotan, and Shule. Its seat is at the city of Kucha. Its army has 24,000 soldiers. The Bei ting Military Commissioner foils Turgesh and Jiankun and governs three armies Hanhai, Tianshan, and Yiwu, as well as the two prefectures of Yi and Xi. Its seat is at the Commandery of Beiting. Its army has 20,000 soldiers.”

Judging from the wording of this passage, it is clear that the duty of a Military Commissioner (*Jiedushi*) included two aspects: domestic and foreign. There is no exception among the ten examples of Military Commissioners. And the word choices for domestic and foreign duties were clear and careful. For foreign goals, the terms used were “to pacify (*juning*)”, “to guard (*fangzhi*)”, “to truncate (*geduan*)”, “to prevent (*fangyu*)” etc. And the word for the domestic regions is, without exception, “to govern (*tong*)”. Knowing the pattern in the wording of this passage, it is evident that “Xiyu” was clearly distinguished from Anxi, which is the area of the Four Garrisons, and Xiyu meant a foreign region west of the Four Garrisons that needed to be “pacified”.

This knowledge gives us insight in reading familiar records. In the “Shiguo” (Tashkent) entry of chapter 99 of *Tang Huiyao*, we find a famous passage on the prelude of the Battle of Talas: “In the early Tianbao reign, Tashkent repeatedly offered tribute. In the 5th year [746], [the Tang emperor] made the prince Naju chebishi the Huaihua king, and conferred the iron tablet (*tie juan*). In the 9th year [750], the Anxi Commissioner Gao Xianzhi reported that the king was failing at his vassal duties and asked to attacked [Tashkent]. The [Tashkent] king agreed on a capitulation treaty. [Gao] Xianzhi ordered his subordinates to deliver [the king to the Tang capital]. And as they were only several dozen *li* away from the Kaiyuan Gate [of the capital Chang’an], [Gao Xianzhi’s people] broke the treaty, captured the king as a hostage, and offered and killed him in front of the palace gate. Since then, [all kingdoms] of the Western Regions harbored resentment”. It is reasonable to read the “Western Regions” in this passage, as we have in previous mid-Tang passages, as meaning the area to the west of the “Four Garrisons”. And indeed this would be in line with our understanding of the political situation at the time, when the “Four Garrisons” were under the Tang control. If we understand the term “Western Regions” according to the traditional sense of the Xinjiang area, it is quite difficult to conceive that they would react to a political event involving the
king of Tashkent. However, if we see the “Western Regions” as the kingdoms to the west of the Pamirs, the story makes much better sense because the kingdoms harboring resentment would then have been the ones near Sogdiana, where Tashkent was prominent. These cases indicate that from the reign of Empress Wu until that of the Emperor Xuanzong, the official use of the term “Western Regions” in Tang governmental documents did not include the region of Taklamakan (Four Garrisons), but exclusively referred to the area to the west of the Pamirs. This “Western Regions” was therefore a completely different place from the one designated by Han Shu, which lay “to the east of the Pamirs”.

To summarize, during the early and mid-Tang, there were two westward “moves” in the areas covered by the term “Western Regions”. The first move, from “west of Dunhuang” to “west of Gaochang (Turfan)”, occurred as the Gaochang kingdom was conquered and incorporated into the Tang official prefecture-county system. The second move, from “west of Gaochang” to “west of Khotan (geographically, west of the Pamirs)”, first occurred in 658, and after several fluctuations back and forth, was finalized in 692. This move reflected the change in the nature of the “Four Garrisons” region within the Tang local administration as well as the political shifts in the region.

Concomitant with these shifts was the westward shift of where the Tang and its western borders were situated. With the westward shift of the Tang border, the land thus “incorporated”, i.e. the “Four Garrisons” region, must have undergone certain changes in political institutions. How should we understand these changes? Do these changes that presumably occurred during the second “shift” resemble in any way the change that happened to Gaochang in the first “shift”? The next section will discuss these questions by examining the status of the Anxi Commandery, or the “Four Garrisons” region, in the Tang political realm.

II. The Status of the “Four Garrisons” in the Tang Political System

Different from the clearly delineated borderlines among modern states, the medieval Eurasian states adjoined each other in a much vaguer manner. But this vagueness does not mean that the idea of a border did not exist for people of the time. At the very least, the notion of a general “area of influence” did exist for these states. For the Tang dynasty, for example, such a notion of an “area of influence” is preserved in geographical works commissioned by the government. Because of the official nature of such works, they usually provide us with first-hand information, among other things, about Tang policy regarding the status of the “Four Garrisons” region in the Tang political system. According to the chapter on geography in the Jiu Tang Shu:
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Now (I) survey the geography of the 11th year [752] of the Tianbao era. The Tang land extends eastward to Andong Commandery, westward to Anxi Commandery, northward to Rina Prefecture, and southward to Chanyu Commandery. As for the north-south expanse, [the Tang] is as great as the Former Han; to the east it does not match [the Han], and to the west it exceeds [the Han]”. [21]

The accompanying original note to this passage explains the shifts in east-west directions: “Han lands extended to Lelang and Xuantu, which are Gaoli and Bohai of the present day. They are located in Liaodong and are not part of the Tang’s lands. [On the other hand,] the Han border reached westward to Dunhuang, the present day Sha Prefecture, which is part of Tang territory. But additionally there is Kucha. Therefore [to the west, the Tang land] is more extensive than that of the Han”.

This passage offers a snapshot of the Tang political geography in the year 752, and explicitly regards Kucha as a part of “Tang land”. The source for such a claim should have been the official archives of the Tang government. Similarly, in the chapter on livelihood and economy (shihuo) in Xin Tang Shu we find the claim that “after the Zhenguang and Kaiyuan reigns, dozens of prefectures on the borderlands including Gaochang, Kucha, Yanqi, Xiao Bolü (Gilgit) in the west and the former land of Xu Yantuo in the north are stationed with a heavy military presence. Military farms and local land taxes are not sufficient in providing for the armies, which was why the (policy of establishing a) private military market was first instituted”. [22] This passage is a much briefer summery of what is essentially a similar situation. Notably, the Gilgit area was also regarded as part of Tang land and it became a “prefecture on the borderlands”.

The reason for this treatment can also be found in our historical documents. According to the chapter on the Western Regions in the Xin Tang Shu, “in the 6th year [747] of the Tianbao era, [the emperor] ordered Gao Xianzhi, the vice-commander [of Anxi Commandery] to attack it (Xiao Bolü). And thereafter this country was pacified. [Gao Xianzhi] captured the king of Xiao Bolü and his wife and took them back to the capital. [The emperor] ordered that the name of the country be changed to Guiren [meaning “returning to humaneness”] and a Guiren garrison be established, with 1000 soldiers recruited to be stationed there”. [23] This passage indicates that after the year 747, as in the Four Garrisons region, the Gilgit region was under the direct military rule of the Tang dynasty. Therefore, in the Tang document preserved in the chapter on livelihood and economy (shihuo) in Xin Tang Shu, Xiao Bolü (Gilgit) was seen as part of Tang territory. Similarly, in the chapter on the Western Regions in Xin Tang Shu, “the Kepantuo [kingdom] has its domain in the Pamirs and its capital on the Xiduo River. During the Kaiyuan reign, [the Tang army] conquered
this kingdom and established the battalion (shouzhuo) of Congling (Pamirs). This is the westernmost stronghold of the Anxi [Commandery]”.\[24] The kingdom of Kepantuo, Tashkurgan in present day Xinjiang, was also under direct Tang military control during the Kaiyuan era and therefore was regarded as the “westernmost stronghold of the Anxi [Commandery]”.

The Tang government was very actively involved in the editing and compilation of various geographical texts. Each local government was required to edit a text on the places within its jurisdiction. This text was called an “illustrated geography (tujing)”, and had to be submitted to the Tang central government once every three years and a nation-wide text of a similar nature was compiled on the basis of such local works. Although we have not seen any such work specifically for the Four Garrison region, the records in the nation-wide compilations are helpful for better understanding the status of the region in the Tang political system. The Dunhuang manuscript Record on the Ten Circuits of Tianbao is one of the only national geographical compilations we have. And in it the section on Anxi reads:\[25]

Anxi: 7,500 li from Chang’an; 8,300 li from Luoyang. The local tribute includes felt carpet, red carpet, bronze peas, 7,000 pi of white silk, and three watermills. There is no county, and it governs four fan (non-Chinese/foreign) Area Command.

Kucha Area Command: 4,974 households, in Anxi city. No monetary capital [in the local office].


Yanqi Area Command: 1,167 households … No monetary capital [in the local office].

Shule Area Command: 1,860 households, 2 … Anxi … newly established in the second month according to the royal edict. No monetary capital [in the local office].

The content and formatting of the information in this passage are identical to those on regions in China proper. It includes the distance to the two capitals, the local tributes, subordinate political units and their locations, as well as whether the local office had monetary capital for loans. The fact that the “Four Garrisons” (= Anxi) region was almost treated as if it was a normal prefecture is also substantiated by another list of local tribute in Tang Liudian, which lists Anxi as one of the 21 prefectures of the Longyou circuit.\[26] Therefore, it is clear that the recognition of the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi as a regular prefecture in the Tang political system was quite widespread at the time. In the 5th year (746) of the Tianbao reign, Emperor Xuanzong issued an edict announcing the measure of sending special envoys to survey the entire empire. In this edict, Qixi (west of Gobi),
which was the new name for Anxi, was used along with other regular Tang circuit names as if it was also a regular circuit.[27] This record confirms the impression we gained from the previous discussions.

Indeed, this knowledge that the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region was part of a regular local administrative unit of the Tang Empire was not merely present in the Tang official record, but can also be seen from accounts kept by foreigners. In the 15th year (727) of the Kaiyuan reign, the Silla monk Huichao returned from his pilgrimage to India by way of Central Asia. This was the height of Tang rule in the region, and his travelogue Account of the Trip to the Five Tianzhu (Indian) Kingdoms (Wang Wutianzhu Guo Zhuan) offers us a previous peek into the political contours of Central Asia at the time. Particularly important for this present study is his attention to the political affiliations of the various Central Asian kingdoms. Here we quote his record of the journey from the Humi Kingdom (present day Wakhan) via the Shini Kingdom (present day south of Sighnan, on the Pamirs) to the Pamirs:[28]

The Humi king has a small army with few horses and could not protect himself. Therefore it is controlled by Dashi to whom it offers 3,000 pi of tax silk every year. … In the mountains to the north of the Humi Kingdom there are nine Shini kingdoms, and each king has his army and horses. There is one king who is subordinate to the king of Humi. The others live on their own terms and do not belong to any other kingdom. … From Humi kingdom, one travels eastward for 15 days, crosses the Bomi River, and reaches the Congling (Pamirs) garrison (zhen). This region belongs to the Chinese (Han).

The Congling garrison was located in what used to be the kingdom of Kepantuo mentioned above. Clearly, Huichao’s understanding of the border of the Tang/Chinese was identical with the understanding in Xin Tang Shu. Because of the minute details of this record (notice the different political affiliations of the nine Shini kingdoms), it is safe to assume that Huichao had an intimate understanding of the local politics of the region, and his record is thus very important. As he travelled further eastward, he passed the region of Khotan. And here again he remarked on the border of the Tang state: “Everywhere east of here (Khotan) is part of the Tang domain. This is common information known by everyone and does not need to be articulated”. [29] If we follow his wording, then the area he traversed between these two passages, which roughly equals to the Anxi region under our investigation, must have “belonged to the Han” because it was to the east of the Pamirs. Yet it was to the west of Khotan and was therefore not included as part of the region that was “known by everyone” as “part of the Tang domain”. The latter status was only conferred on
places east of Khotan. Such vagueness reveals a certain ambiguity in the Tang attitude towards the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region, but confirms nevertheless that this region was regarded as in one way or another as part of the Tang official administration system.

This status of the Anxi region can even be tested with numerical evidence regarding distance. According to chapter 216 of *Zizhi Tongjian*, in the 12th year (753) of the Tianbao reign, “China (Zhongguo) is at the height of power. From the Anyuan gate of Chang’an, the Tang domain extends 12,000 li westwards. [With its] connecting households and uninterrupted fields of mulberry and hems, the Longyou region is the richest place under heaven”. Here, Hu Sanxing’s commentary notes: “The northernmost gate on the western wall of Chang’an is called Anyuan Gate, which was originally the Kaiyuan Gate during the Sui dynasty. ‘The Tang domain extends 12,000 li westwards’: This means that [this calculation] includes the kingdoms of Western Regions which pledged allegiance”. From the numbers recorded in the *Xin Tang Shu* we know that Khotan was 9,700 li west of Chang’an, whereas for Xiao Bolü the distance was “more than 9,000 li”, and for Jibin it was “more than 12,000 li”. Allowing for some margin of error between the different texts, it is nevertheless easy to see that the “Tang domain” that supposedly “extends 12,000 li westwards” must have encompassed the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region including Khotan. In this regard, Hu Sanxing’s commentary is not entirely accurate, because although kingdoms such as Sogdiana and Tuhuoluo were among the “kingdoms of Western Regions which pledged allegiance”, their status was different from that of the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region, which was part of the “Tang domain”.

Therefore, it is clear that, although not anywhere comparable to the degree of meticulousness in the demarcation of borders among modern nation states, the conception of a “border” nevertheless existed and was understood quite clearly in the Tang. This understanding is most noticeably seen in the geographical texts cited above. From our analysis it is evident that from the late 7th century, when the Tang stationed mass numbers of soldiers in the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region, to the late 8th century, when this region was conquered by the Tibetan Empire, the notion that the “Four Garrisons”/Anxi region was part of the official (as opposed to the “loose-rein”) administrative system of the Tang was very widely acknowledged. And the fact that the term “Western Regions” ceased to be used for this region should be understood in this context.
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NOTES


[10] Yang Jianxin has pointed this out as the understanding of “Western Regions” during the Tang, see “Xiyu bianzheng” “西域辨正, Xinjiang Daxue Xuebao, 1981-1, p.27.


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[26] Tang Liudian, p. 64, 68.
[27] Quan Tangwen, vol. 32, p.357.