

The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories, Eighth Century

This document is a translation of the advice from a government minister to a Tang dynasty emperor regarding the Uighur confederacy in northwestern China and Central Asia.

The Uighurs are very strong and the northern borders are deserted. Once they stir up trouble, our weak soldiers will not be able to withstand them, and there will be no one to guard the isolated cities. If Your Majesty is concerned about this matter, he will increase the military equipment and repair the fortifications and set them in order. This would be the best plan for China and the great good fortune of the people. I, your subject, consider that the present dispositions of the borders do not fulfill their needs and that there are five causes for grave concern there. I beg permission to enumerate them.

The northern barbarians are covetous and grasping. All they care about is profit. This is the second year that their normal yearly consignment of horses has not arrived. Can it be that they have become satiated with the profit of silken fabrics? I suspect that what is happening is that they want [to wait till the autumn when] the wind will be strong and their horses fat, so that they can make a sudden invasion into China. Therefore I am sure that there will be trouble in store for the court, in regard both to preparation within and defence without. This is the first thing which should worry us.

Our armies have not yet reached full strength, our patrol system is not yet effective, our lances and armour are not yet ready, our walls and moats are not yet firmly established. The restoration of the T'ien-te Army has certainly made the barbarians suspicious and the evacuation of the Western [Shou-hsiang] Fortress has left the desert roads with nothing to depend on. This is the second thing which should worry us.

Now, if our fortresses are to protect our strategic places, and if we are to attack what is dangerous and to guard what is safe, we ought to make plans with our border generals. If then we content ourselves merely with keeping an eye on the distant River borders while thinking that we can control the situation from our exalted court, the barbarians will unexpectedly violate the borders and, in accordance with recent trends, we shall lose our advantages. This is the third thing which should worry us.

Ever since they have been our allies, the Uighurs have been fully aware of the natural layout of the mountains and rivers, and which frontier defence is manned and which not. If rebels were to plunder our various prefectures, for us to mobilise our forces would take at least ten days or a few weeks, while for them to take our men and animals prisoner would take at most a morning or an evening. By the time an imperial army could get

there, the barbarians would already have returned home. If the robbers were to stay a longer time, our recruitments would increase more and more. This is the fourth thing which should worry us.

The Uighurs and Tibetans are constantly at war with each other. Therefore the borders have nothing to provide against. At present the Uighurs are not even trading their horses with us. If the Uighurs should make a treaty with the Tibetans and relax their hostility, then our generals and their men will close up their walls and shirk making war, while the people of the frontiers will have to fold their arms and undergo calamity. This is the fifth thing that should worry us.

Moreover, Wu Shao-yang in Huai-hsi is on the verge of death, but he would be able to take advantage of their changed situation. The various provinces would have to increase their frontier guards tenfold.

I, your subject, claim that it is fitting to comply with the marriage and so cause the rites to be preserved in the barbarian country. In that case, there would be what one might call the three profits. If the marriage eventuates, then the fire beacons will have no need to give the alarm, and it will be possible to put the fortresses and their battlements in order; there will be ample numbers of soldiers who will be able to build up strength and to lay in grain and in this way stabilise our armies. This is the first.

Having done away with the grievances which are wanting our attention in the north, we shall be able to turn our attention to the south, to take care of the regions west of the Huai and to extend our orders to the troubles which are almost played out there. This is the second.

If the northern barbarians rely on the fact that our [royal houses] are related [by marriage], then the Tibetan resentment will be deeper than ever before and their state will not be at peace. We shall sit and be free from attack by them, enjoying a long respite from their robbery and plunder [of our borders]. This is the third.

It would be extremely ill-advised on our part to reject [a course of action which would be] profitable to us in these three ways, and follow one involving these five sources of worry. Now, some say that the cost of sending out a princess will be great. I, your subject, say that this is not true. One third of the tax revenue of our empire is devoted to the borders. Now, the annual tax revenue of a large subprefecture of the south-east amounts to 200,000 ligatures. So if we use the revenue from one subprefecture to meet the cost of the marriage, is not that injuring little to obtain much? Now, if we are mean about the cost of the marriage and do not grant it to them, and if their prince's armies attack the north, we shall need at least 30,000 footsoldiers and 5,000 cavalry, otherwise we shall not be able to ward them off and drive them away. Moreover, to ensure a complete victory will require at least a year. Will the provisions and supplies [we send] conceivably be as little as the tax revenue from one subprefecture?

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