Li Bo Unkempt

Kidder Smith, Kidder Smith, Mike Zhai, Traktung Yeshe Dorje, Maria Dolgenas

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Li Bo Unkempt.
The Rebellion, a History
The Rebellion of An Lushan

An Lushan, a non-Chinese general commanding the armies of the north-east frontier. In 755 he rebels and soon captures Chang’an. The Bright Emperor flees, his Precious Consort is put to death, his son seizes the throne.

After some years Tang forces reclaim the empire. But it is not the same.

(This may be all you need in order to understand the poems of Li Bo that follow some dozen pages hence. If you don’t much care for history, feel free to skip ahead 😊.)

1. The Dictatorship of Li Linfu

The imperial kinsman Li Linfu 李林甫 (d. 752) served as chief minister from 734 until his death eighteen years later. An exceptionally gifted executive, he rationalized the practices of finance, law and trade, without which the Great Tang would have foundered.

As the Bright Emperor’s attention turned gradually to private life, he depended increasingly on Li Linfu. But Li served at His Majesty’s whim, his position always vulnerable to men just like him. In the mid-740s he devoted his skills to consolidating personal power. For two years his methods remained within the court norms of intrigue, slander and manipulation.

Then the killings began. By decade’s end, Li was virtual dictator. Progressively he annihilated not only present talent — administrative, financial and military — but also any possible successors in the next generation. When he died, he left only the mechanisms of authoritarian rule.

The Great Tang depended on ten military governors stationed along the northern frontier. Li Linfu had briefly held such a post — it was a normal career rotation for future chief ministers, and thus no Chinese governor had reason to seek long-term allegiances from his troops. To block others’ access to this path, Li arranged that only non-Chinese would be appointed
to the frontiers, and that the appointments be made long-term. An Lushan was one of these non-Chinese, and a close client of Li Linfu. When Li died in 752, An’s enemies came to power at court. Fearing his own ouster, three years later he rebelled.

2. Cousin to the Precious Consort
Only one man had a base from which to oppose Li Linfu. It was Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (d 756), second cousin to the Precious Consort Yang Guifei and favored official of the Bright Emperor. On the basis of these relationships, he succeeded Li as chief minister in 752. He had all of Li’s jealousies but much less of his administrative acumen.428

Yang hated An Lushan. With Li dead, Yang moved increasingy against An, his relatives, his staff. An Lushan reciprocated. And thus the court at Chang’an and the empire’s most powerful general were impossibly divided against themselves, and the body politic ruptured.429

When An rebelled, he had quick success, immediately capturing the eastern capital Luoyang. But the South held loyal; he could not advance west to Chang’an; and Tang forces nearly severed his supply lines in the north-east. The rebellion might have ended there, but for a single error. The capital could be approached only through the tight defile of Tong Pass 潼關, with 800-meter summits on both its sides. Here Tang forces could easily withstand attack. Yang Guozhong, though, feared the power of the defending general, Geshu Han, almost as much as he feared An Lushan. Against Geshu Han’s repeated objections, Yang ordered him to pass through the pass and attack An Lushan’s forces on the flat. Geshu Han was defeated, An Lushan moved easily on Chang’an, the Bright Emperor fled with a small entourage in the middle of the night, heading for safety in Yang Guozhong’s virtually impregnable home province of Sichuan.430

Twenty-five miles west of the capital, his guard mutinies. They blame everything on the Yang family. They kill Yang Guozhong, and they demand that the Emperor put the Precious Consort to death as well. He cannot resist. He gives the order that she be strangled.
3. *The Northern Frontier*

The Eurasian steppelands extend 6,000 miles from Korea to the Hungarian basin. Generally arid, with extremes of heat and cold—a nomad pastoralism of sheep and horses is the only human activity to which they are well suited. By contrast, China can be defined as a socio-political technology of sedentary agriculture.

Steppe people had long depended on the Chinese for grain, textiles, and metals, as well as the luxury goods used in internomad diplomacy. They generally paid for these with horses. A delicate balance: Successful diplomacy meant trade and peace, failure meant nomad raids—they were born horsemen, no Chinese was a match—or huge and costly Chinese expeditions into unfamiliar landscapes.\(^431\) As nomad ambitions grew in the mid-eighth century, An Lushan and the other governors general north and west were the Tang’s one line of defense.\(^433\)

But Tang emperors were of mixed Turkic-Chinese blood. In 626 the Bright Emperor’s great-grandfather rode out the gates of Chang’ān with six men in order to berate, and dispel, a Turkic force that was threatening the capital. Six years later he
had conquered the lot of them and ruled not just as Emperor of Great Tang but also as Heavenly Qaghan over the Turks.\textsuperscript{434} This coincidence of rule was not mere military domination, as Jonathan Skaff has deftly shown. Instead it reflected fundamental commonalities between Turkic and Chinese understandings of governance — what Skaff calls “Eastern Eurasian” values and practices.\textsuperscript{435} These styles of political relationship were deeply structured in patron-client ties, employing fictive kinship and diplomatic ritual to mark and instantiate political and economic alliances.\textsuperscript{436} Such modalities were especially apt to the marches of empire, where neither Chinese nor nomad claimed sole dominance. The vulnerability of the system — and we will see this played out in the Rebellion — is its inscription not in treaty or tradition but in the immediate personal ties of two men. When one dies, or becomes incapacitated, the deal is broken.

Like his great-grandfather, the Bright Emperor was also successful in his frontier policies, orchestrating balances in the steppelands and deterring Tibetan incursions. Twitchett summarizes the situation in 750 like this:

\begin{quote}
The defence of the enormously long frontiers was costly both in manpower and in support. But the T’ang court was successful in securing its objectives, and few of the campaigns of Hsüan-tsung’s time resulted from an aggressive policy towards China’s neighbours or from expansionist ambitions.\textsuperscript{437}
\end{quote}

When Li Bo served in court, his duties included attention to these matters. It’s said that he met with the Bright Emperor, and they discussed world affairs. Li Bo drafted “A rescript in reply to the Western Turks,” his brush never pausing.\textsuperscript{438}

Much soon changed. First, in 751 the Tang’s Korean general Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝, whose spectacular campaigns had carried him as far as the Aral and Caspian Seas, was defeated by an army of the Abbasid Caliphate at Talas, on the border of present day
Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In coming years, the Arabs would continue their way east.

And then the rebellion. The only Tang troops capable of defeating An Lushan were stationed in those western regions. Pulled back to the defense of Chang’an, they left a vacuum that was to be filled by Tibetans and Uyghurs. Chinese control of central Asia was then lost for a thousand years.\textsuperscript{439}

4. An Lushan

The *Traces of the Events in An Lushan’s life* (*An Lushan shiji* 安祿山事迹) begins:

An Lushan was a mixed-race barbarian from Yingzhou. When he was young, he was named Yalukshan (Yaluoshan 軋犖山). His mother, from the Asiduk clan, was a Turkic shaman. She was childless, so she prayed to Yalukshan. The deity responded, and she gave birth. That night red light shone all around, and beasts in all directions yowled.

His father was Sogdian—we can tell this from his surname An.\textsuperscript{440} His Chinese given name, Lushan, was pronounced Luk-sran in Tang times and is an alternative way of writing Ya-luk-shan. These are both approximations of his original Sogdian name Rokshan—it’s an Iranian word meaning “Bright,” which we have in English as Roxanne.\textsuperscript{441}
His later activities make it difficult to find positive accounts of him in the Chinese sources. Yet even those portray a warrior of unusual girth, strength, vigor and resolution, and his annual reviews speak of “impartiality, honesty and unselfishness.” And so he was quickly promoted through the ranks.

And always the possibility of impetuous aggression, as when in 736 he disobedys orders, attacks nomad forces, is badly defeated. By regulation, he should be executed on the spot. When his commanding officer is about to behead him, An retorts, “The barbarians are not yet pacified, yet you can bear to kill a brave officer. Could this be the extent of your strategy?” He is pardoned.

By the 740s he is regularly in Chang’an. His girth has grown to stoutness. In the Selection Examinations of 744, Li Linfu had entertained gross favoritism, but no one dared let on. An Lushan learned of it, spoke candidly to the Emperor. The winning candidate was re-examined by the Emperor and turned out to be illiterate, handing in a blank sheet of paper. Everyone laughed.
Increasingly An is promoted and rewarded. “The Emperor built a mansion for him, elegant and beautiful to the extreme.” His eldest son, An Qingzong, is established there as ambassador/hostage, is appointed President of the Court of Imperial Equipage, and is married to a royal princess. “In return An Lushan presents the emperor with slaves, horses, camels, and extraordinary treasures, exotic imports that he was able to procure easily through his ties to the Sogdian and Turkic trading communities.”

In 751 An Lushan requested to become a foster son of the Precious Consort. Thereafter, whenever he entered the Imperial presence, he always prostrated first to her. The Bright Emperor found it strange and asked him about it. He replied, “Your subject is a barbarian. A barbarian puts his mother ahead of his father.” His Majesty was greatly pleased and subsequently ordered the Precious Consort’s younger siblings to swear brotherhood with him.

I suppose it’s An’s rough ease that endeared him to the Precious Consort and Bright Emperor, that confidence. He’s not your typical Chinese courtier. The Imperial couple seem to genuinely like him — he has the personality of a dynastic founder, but he’s not purely hard-edged yang, the way Li Linfu is, he can also play yin, just like his Imperial sponsors. As in this account:

It was An Lushan’s birthday. His Majesty and the Precious Consort bestowed an abundance of clothes, precious objects, wine and delicacies on him. Three days later, he was called to the inner palace. The Precious Consort had made an enormous set of swaddling clothes for him from fine brocades. She wrapped him in these and had the palace servants carry him about in a gay palanquin.

His Majesty heard giggling in the inner palace and asked its cause. People said it was the Precious Consort washing her new baby. His Majesty went to have a look. Delighted, he gave the Precious Consort “new-baby washing” money.
He also richly rewarded An Lushan, taking endless pleasure in him. 451

Later his stoutness grows to obesity, and his eyesight begins to blur.

His stomach hung below his knees, and he weighed 330 catties. 452 When he walked, he’d put his arms around his attendants’ shoulders to support his weight — only then could he move about. But when he came before the Bright Emperor, he’d perform the Barbarian Whirlwind dance, quick as the wind. 453

Li Linfu dies and is replaced by Yang Guozhong, who (of suspicious mind himself) sees only treason in An, and acts to undermine his power, with the natural effect of alienating An, with the natural effect of an escalating alienation of these two men, these twin nexuses of power. So sure of An’s treason is Yang Guozhong, that he tells the Bright Emperor to invite him to court in the winter of 754, confident that An will not dare come. But An appears. After that the Bright Emperor will entertain no further doubts about him. But Yang Guozhong treats him with such hostility that when An leaves the capital for home, he travels post-haste by boat and will not disembark until he is in safety three hundred miles to the east.

When An finally rebels, one year later, he claims to have received a secret order from His Majesty to remove Yang Guozhong from power. Yang has maltreated enough other people that a number of Chinese are willing to follow An into revolt. At that point the Bright Emperor seizes An’s son at his Chang’an home and executes him. When An learns of this, he massacres the entire surrendering Chinese garrison of Shan Commandery. When he eventually captures the capital, he executes the Emperor’s sister and a number of other relatives, sacrificing their bodily organs to his late son.

How did An Lushan understand his rebellion? It’s said in the Histories that he had planned it for seven or eight years, collud-
ing with his childhood friend Shi Siming 史思明. Perhaps this is true. But I think a better answer lies in the Turkic succession practices within which he lived. Succession was the institutional Achilles heel of Turkic power. The leader’s death—or even his weakening—set off a feeding frenzy among sons, relatives and outsiders.\(^{454}\) This was not foreign to Tang. The de facto founding emperor, Li Shimin, himself part Turk, had come to power in just this way, deposing his father and murdering his brothers.\(^{455}\)

I expect An understood his move much in these terms. His fictive father, the Bright Emperor, was seventy years old when he rebelled. Yang Guozhong and the Crown Prince were the only other contending forces, and An’s power was greater. So An sought to wrest the throne from the diminished Bright Emperor. And in just the same way, the Bright Emperor’s own Crown Prince actually did usurp the throne while his father was in Sichuan exile.\(^{456}\)

In turn, when An himself became decrepit two years later, he was killed by his own son. His obesity had become increasingly debilitating, and his eyesight had begun to fail. After the capture of Chang’an, the western capital, he spent most of his time in Luoyang, the eastern capital, in the inner palace. As his physicality deteriorated, so did his mood. In violent agitation, he struck or even killed those who annoyed him. Though he had an heir, he began to favor another son. His heir, fearing his father would disinherit him, conspired to kill him. When the assassin entered his bedroom, An could not find the sword he had hidden under his bed. His son took the throne.

But An’s close colleague Shi Siming, co-leader of the revolt, finds this unacceptable. Two years later, in 759, he kills An’s son and takes the throne himself. But Shi’s own son kills him two years after that. It’s the law of the jungle, again and again, nothing aberrant or surprising, and nothing especially moral or immoral.

5. A Historiographic Intermezzo
The activities I’ve spoken of so far can mostly be accounted for by ordinary human self-interest. That is, they require no more
sophisticated explanatory mode than the simple logic of cause and effect. As such, their story could have been written a thousand years ago. As indeed it was—I’ve said very little that hadn’t been set forth in the histories written soon enough after the events.

Now, though, to different stories. To the Precious Consort and the Bright Emperor. To a different set of realities, not always causal, a court-based world that for two years included Li Bo. If Li Linfu, Yang Guozhong and An Lushan are the playthings of their appetites, the Imperial couple aspires to be the playground of the divine. Yet sometimes they too are its bitches. Those realities are what I really want to know, but they are hidden, mostly in the Bright Emperor. So I will go step by step, starting with the Precious Consort.

6. The Precious Consort
She became Precious Consort when the Bright Emperor took her from her husband, who was his son. She was about twenty, he in his mid-fifties. It is therefore difficult to ascertain much about her, since the usual sober witnesses recoiled in horror from his act, their silence leaving the field to balladeers and pornographers. But it is clear she had extraordinary being, for she found her mate in the most powerful man in the world and kept him young for fifteen years.

In the Old Tang History we hear these stories:

She was proficient at singing and dance, and thoroughly adept at music. She was also unusually good at sizing things up.

And:

Seven hundred palace workers wove and embroidered for her, and several hundred more did carving and molding. The Prefects of the southern provinces vied to find skilled artisans to create singular objects and exceptional clothing that they could present to her.
Twice she offended the Emperor and was expelled from court, but twice recalled within a day.

As An Lushan’s troops were poised to enter Chang’an, the Emperor, Consort and a small entourage fled to Sichuan. Two days out, his guard mutinies. They execute Yang Guozhong, but still they won’t desist.

The Bright Emperor sent his chief eunuch Gao Lishi to make formal inquiry. The guard responded: “The root of this banditry still exists” — this was their way of referring to the Precious Consort. Gao Lishi again petitioned the Emperor, and the Emperor could not prevent it. He gave his command to the Consort, and Gao Lishi went and strangled her at a Buddhist cloister. She was in her thirty-eighth year. She was buried beside the road, to the west of the courier station.

[Three years later when the Retired Emperor passed this place on his return from exile in Sichuan], he had his eunuchs offer oblations to her spirit. He also ordered them to rebury her. But Li Gui, Vice President of the Bureau of Ritual, said, “The officers and men of the Dragon Militant Army executed Yang Guozhong because he betrayed the state and incited rebellion. If you now rebury the late Consort, I fear they will become suspicious and apprehensive. The ritual of reburying cannot be carried out.” So the Former Emperor desisted. But secretly he had his eunuchs reinter her some other place.

When the Precious Consort was first buried, her body was wrapped in purple matting. Her skin and flesh had already decayed, but her perfume sachet still remained. A eunuch brought it to the Former Emperor. He looked at it and blanched.

The histories are replete with her extravagance, and that of her beautiful sisters and their kin. But they never once allege that she was cruel, spiteful, stingy, shrewish, vicious, violent, vindictive, high-handed, jealous or manipulative, all the other things that bad Chinese women are always said to be.
7. The Bright Emperor

The future emperor lived his first years under the Terror of his grandmother, the Emperor Wu. (She took the theretofore male title “Emperor” huángdì 皇帝 — there is no such animal in Chinese as an Empress.) With extraordinary intelligence and a ruthlessness appropriate to her misogynistic environment, she deposed the future emperor’s grandfather and father and founded her own dynasty, the Zhou 周, in 690. The future emperor, his brothers and their parents lived in harsh unpredictability under palace-arrest. When two officials made an unauthorized visit to the deposed emperor, they were executed in the public market. When he was eight, Emperor Wu executed his mother on spurious charges of fortune telling and magic (code words for treason).

Emperor Wu was deposed in 705, when the future emperor was twenty. Over the next eight years he led palace coups against two women who sought to emulate her dynastic ambitions, the Empress Wei and the Taiping Princess, both of whom he ordered to commit suicide. Only in 712 did he ascend the throne.

Yet he ruled with an even hand, not seeking vengeance, welcoming the unflinching advice of his chief ministers. And his warmth was evident to all, especially to his brothers, who were otherwise his competitors. Denis Twitchett comments:

The princes were an accomplished family, devoted to literature, music and scholarship as well as to the upper-class sports so dear to the T’ang nobility, and shared many of the emperor’s tastes. Closest to the emperor was Li Ch’eng-ch’i, who shared his devotion to music and dramatic entertainment and frequently feasted, hunted, played polo or attended cock-fights with him.

And thus Twitchett summarizes the first thirty years of his reign, designated in Chinese as the Kaiyuan period:

Up to this point the administration had been markedly successful. Reforms had made the empire’s government smooth-
er and more efficient than ever before. The regime was prosperous, and it had won a striking series of victories over its foreign enemies. Moreover, this had been accomplished without any purges of the bureaucracy. The aristocrats were firmly in a position of power, while the Confucian scholars in the bureaucracy were carefully kept away from the real seats of power and influence.\textsuperscript{465}

As the Kaiyuan period ends in 742, the Bright Emperor’s court was the locus of extravagance, ostentation, enrichment, brilliance, plenteousness, of splendor. Everything seemed possible.\textsuperscript{466} His Majesty had just connected with the Precious Consort, and so (in Wilhelm Reich’s terms) he was getting enough good sex.\textsuperscript{467} We have already met his orchestra and dramatic troupe, his painters, his dancing horses, who on command would drink wine from a dish, as in this late Tang gilt-silver jar, in the shape of a northern nomad’s leather pouch:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig67.jpg}
\caption{Tang-era gilt-silver jar.\textsuperscript{468}}
\end{figure}

The Bright Emperor holds these energies in orbit — and also the steppe peoples and bureaucrats and aristocrats — by the power of his majesty, which distracts everyone from their separatism. He overcomes through splendor. Li Bo enters this world, he
matches it, he recognizes its reality, he can swim in it, delight in it, and represent it. He can walk away. We have seen his songs for the peony garden night music, his edicts for the Turks, his pleasure in riding His Majesty’s horses.

An Lushan first visits now. Like Li Bo, born outside a Chinese-speaking region. Like Li Bo, uncowed by His Majesty, and able to play the fool. To duel with His Majesty. He and the Bright Emperor both loved war, in James Hillman’s sense of that phrase.\textsuperscript{469} Two high rollers, two men who could found dynasties. Friends — but with a necessary distance between them.\textsuperscript{470}

This is also the time of Amoghavajra, greatest of the Indic tantric masters who visited the Bright Emperor’s court.\textsuperscript{471} He ministered to His Majesty in the mid-740s, giving instructions, bestowing empowerments and perhaps controlling weather.\textsuperscript{472} When Rebellion erupted, the Emperor summoned him to Chang’an, where he remained throughout the war.

And especially this is the time of the Emperor’s Daoist visions and his efforts to make them the ground for Imperial rule. In 741,

in the fourth month, the Emperor dreamed that there was a statue of Laozi, the Heavenly Honored One, at the base of the Zhongnan Mountains near the Capital. Men went looking and found it on the banks of Qiao Pool.\textsuperscript{473}

Also in 741,

in the eighth month, a likeness of Lord Laozi appeared vividly in the Kaiyuan Abbey of Lingzhou. A dozen or more Daoist priests could see it for a long time.\textsuperscript{474}

And in the fall a courtier met Laozi on the streets of Chang’an. He was told how to find a sacred talisman, which he presented to His Majesty. As a result, the Emperor changed the name of the reign period from Kaiyuan to Tianbao 天寶, “Heavenly Treasure.”
Aligning these events with institutional realities, the Emperor established a series of Laozi temples throughout the realm. Each served both to train priests and as a more general force of Daoist education, preparing potential bureaucrats for civil service exams based on Daoist instead of Confucian classics. Laozi, the Imperial ancestor, was recognized as the highest of all possible deities, and his text, the *Daodejing*, the most sacred of all writings in Chinese. This was a new ground of monarchy, explicitly divine, a new politico-religious culture, “an attempt to produce a Taoist form of government unique in Chinese history.”

Though some modern historians have dismissed these activities as political exigency, the Bright Emperor did not. He knew the dignity of the divine, and he wrote his own commentary to the *Laozi*. Its Preface is replete with archaic formulae and pomp, so I will translate its opening lines twice, first in paraphrase and then allowing its full formal features to emerge:

1. In ancient times Laozi wrote words of mystery, transmitting the true teachings to future generations.
2. The primal sage, existent since ancient times, perforce divulged his words of mystery, that he might opportunely convey his genuine lineage and enlighten his descendants.

Here is the Emperor’s commentary on the opening lines of chapter 1 of Laozi’s text, “The Dao that can be followed is not the constant Dao, names that can be named are not constant names.”

Dao is the marvelous activity of the empty ultimate, names are how one speaks of the nature of things. Activity is only possible with things, thus he says “it can be followed.” Names arise in activity, thus he says “they can be named.” There is no method for finding right action, and thus action is not constant as a single way. Things are multiple and their names differ, thus they are not constant as a single name. We therefore
force a name on it when we call it Dao, but Dao’s constancy has no name.

To practice this, to master this, to enact this, the Emperor needed Li Linfu to care for the details of governance, while he drew down charisma, transforming ordinary splendor into divine grace. As we have seen, in his delegation of authority things went very wrong.

If we are human beings, we want to know how they went wrong. If in addition we are Confucian moralists — and there are a ton of us, in China and elsewhere — we conclude that it was the Emperor’s infatuation with Yin, the feminine principle, that secured his downfall. But, as Mark Lewis points out, this is just misogyny coupled with our own self-righteousness.

If we are institutional historians, we might agree with Denis Twitchett that

unlike some of his successors — and indeed unlike his great predecessor T’ai-tsung — Hsüan-tsung continued his grueling round of daily audiences, except for periods of state mourning, until 755, when he was already seventy years of age. No emperor, however superhuman, could have kept up the pace of Hsüan-tsung’s early years for more than forty years without slowing down.

If we are Protestant, we might say the Bright Emperor neglected governance in favor of sex, entertainment and the occult. But the Emperor never conducted himself frivolously, and I would suggest that the roots of this triad are grounded in love, art and the divine. When psychologists such as Maslow set up hierarchies of needs, these three tend to be on one end of the spectrum, while safety, shelter and food are on another. If you get enough safety and food, they are no longer needs. But the more you get of the other three, the more you want. It’s why Maslow calls his high end “self-transcendence” — the larger you become, the more you sense the infinance of possibility.
If we are vulgar Buddhists, we might see the Rebellion as the karmic result of the Emperor’s lust for his son’s wife. But if we recognize that his deep karma included the obligation to rule, then we could say instead that the Rebellion arose because he didn’t fulfill that karmic duty to his subjects. Nonetheless, we don’t have ready access to his private religious practices. If he were working intensively with Daoist and Tantric masters, they would have shown him how he could express his passions through active rulership. By this logic, his fault was to stop too soon, in the smaller pleasures of his consort relationship.

If we believe in deities, we might say that the Bright Emperor and his Precious Consort conjured energies they could not control, which demanded payment in blood.

Or we could take a simple materialist view, that he left a power vacuum, and dudes were dudes, and it went badly for everyone.

8. Death
Ryan Flaherty imagines the sixty-thousand untrained peasant soldiers who were sent to defend the Tang from An Lushan’s horsemen:

The blade of the pike is like a scythe, so the peasant feels less alone. With one end of the six-foot pole braced between his feet, the heavy blade swings above him, and he has to be vigilant that some quirk of momentum doesn’t drop it on the head of one of the men standing around him. This awareness keeps him preoccupied and distracted from the cold and how his fingers feel like short, useless stubs of twine. I imagine rising above him to look across the field of tightly packed men, pikes eddying like reeds, all facing one way: the exit of the Hulao Pass. Sixty thousand mostly silent men — shifting from foot to foot because of the cold and an almost impenetrable fear that keeps threatening to paralyze them. Listening for it. From the few horses, men yell orders into the wind, and the immense distance dwarfs the tiny radius of their voices in the mass. Every one of them is terribly alone, staring toward
the still-empty pass where reverberating hoof beats are just starting to avalanche down on them.\textsuperscript{483}

The Chinese military historian David Graff tells what happened next: “This untrained rabble was trampled beneath the hooves of An Lushan’s veteran cavalry.”\textsuperscript{484}

We don’t know how many people died in the Rebellion.\textsuperscript{485} That’s how bad it was. In the contested areas of north China, perhaps one half. That would be some ten million. Combatants are just a fraction of this. When Napoleon said “An army marches on its stomach,”\textsuperscript{486} he meant on someone else’s stomach, the stomach of local farmers, who were robbed, raped and killed. And who then met starvation and plague, leading to what the demographers call “excess deaths,” that is, a statistically unanticipated mortality due to the heightened vulnerability of individuals and the ecosystem. And then banditry — how else would a man survive, if not by force of arms?\textsuperscript{487} For seven years, armies passed through and through these spaces.\textsuperscript{488}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig68.png}
\caption{Tang farmers with their agricultural tools, seventh-century ceramic figures, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.\textsuperscript{489}}
\end{figure}

Du Fu saw this and wrote of it:
The army clerks in Stone Trough

Twilight across Stone Trough Village:
Army clerks are catching people by night.
An old man hops the wall and escapes;
his old wife opens the door.
How horrid the officers’ roaring,
how sorrowful the woman’s wails.
“Hear now this old woman’s story:
I had three sons garrisoned at Ye;
One of them just wrote us saying
the other two have died in battle.
The living live a stolen life,
as for the dead, they’re gone forever!
Now there’s no one under this roof,
only my suckling baby grandson.
Her mother, who is still alive,
goes about with a tattered skirt.
I’m an old hag, my strength long gone,
but please, take me this night
to join your campaigning in Heyang,
and I may yet cook the morning meal.”
The night was long, the words faded,
and I thought I heard a muffled sobbing.
At dawn, I set out on my way
with only the old man to bid me goodbye.

石壕吏

暮投石壕村, 有吏夜捉人。老翁逾墙走, 老妇出门看。吏呼一何怒, 妇啼一何苦。听妇前致词, 三男邺城戍。一男附书至, 二男新战死。存者且偷生, 死者长已矣。室中更无人, 惟有乳下孙。有孙母未去, 出入无完裙。老妪力虽衰, 请从吏夜归。急应河阳役, 犹得备晨炊。夜久语声绝, 如闻泣幽咽。天明登前途, 独与老翁别。
The Chinese name for the Rebellion is AnShi zhi luan 安史之乱, the chaos-ing of An Lushan and Shi Siming. Social order is precious, precarious, expensive, essential. Ninety percent of Tang Chinese were farmers. They depended on absent others for their survival.

9. The Dancing Horses
Paul Kroll translates this account of their demise:

Subsequently, when His Highness graced Sichuan with his presence, the dancing horses were for their part dispersed to the mortal world. An Lushan, having often witnessed their dancing, coveted them at heart; because of this he had a number of them transported to Fanyang. Subsequently, they were in turn acquired by Tian Chengsi. He knew nothing of them. Confusing them with battle-horses, he installed them in the outer stables. Unexpectedly one day, when the soldiers of his army were enjoying a sacrificial feast and music was struck up, the horses, unable to stop themselves, began to dance. The servants and lackeys considered them bewitched and took brooms in hand to strike them. The horses thought that their dancing must be out of step with the rhythm and, stooping and rearing, nodding and straining, they still vied to repeat their former movements. The stablemaster hurried to report this grotesquerie, and Chengsi ordered that the horses be scourged. The more fiercely this was done, the more precise became the horses’ dancing. But the whipping and flogging ever increased, till finally they fell dead in their stalls. On this occasion there were in fact some persons who knew these were the [emperor’s] dancing horses, but fearful of Chengsi’s wrath, they never ventured to speak.490

10. The End of the Han Dynasty
In an early part of this book, when I introduced the staid culture of the court, I stressed its dependency on models from the past. The Sage-Kings of antiquity had discerned the Dao of Heaven and Earth, and instantiated it in their social and literary institu-
tions — that is, in every aspect of high cultural life, public and private. Thus a gentleman’s education, comportment, social relationships, his poetry itself, were explicitly based on that ancient wisdom.

The Rebellion made it impossible to sustain this belief. Those cultural forms had failed. And Han dynasty authority faded with them. In *This Culture of Ours*, Peter Bol discusses the “erosion of faith in the possibility of guiding the world by defining correct appearances” and a growing conviction “that the foundation for true ideas about how to act existed independently from culture.” Instead of molding oneself in the ancients, one must do as they had done, perceive Dao directly and discover the forms appropriate to current circumstances. The ideology of post-Rebellion literature reflects these shifts as well, with its growing insistence on the writer’s singular identity within a private sphere.

Since even before Han times, the Chinese elite had maintained a utopian view of farm life, a commitment to the fiction that every peasant family had equal land holdings. The state thus taxed agriculture on this fantasy of homogeneity, and worked to prevent local elites from accumulating large landed estates. The Rebellion hastened the demise of this thousand-year ideal, as the diminished state abandoned its control of rural life and turned to the commercial taxes that would supply an increasing portion of its income in the coming millennium.

Imperial policy of the early Tang had pursued an overtly multi-ethnic policy, the cultural fruits of which have been richly exposed by Schafer and others. But the Rebellion brought a racist backlash, and Marc Abramson argues that this “was perhaps the crucial point in the formation of an ethnically Han (as opposed to culturally Chinese) identity.” That is, the semi-permeable membrane of “Chineseness,” which had been primarily constructed from an ability to manipulate the written texts of antiquity, hardened into a race-based criterion.

Finally, the Rebellion created a meritocracy that was to characterize Chinese government until the twentieth century. Lineage, wealth, power, office-holding: for centuries this foursome
had been unassailably inseparable. But a military circumstance is wholly pragmatic, and the militarization of north China, which continued for the next two hundred years, past the fall of the Great Tang, couldn’t care less for pedigree. By the subsequent Song dynasty (960–1279), the aristocratic Great Families were dead.

For all these reasons, historians have argued that the Rebellion marks the biggest shift in Chinese history between the Qin unification of empire in 221 BCE and China’s transformation in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.496

11. How the War Was Won497

Meanwhile, in occupied Chang’an, Amoghavajra is doing wrathful mantra. We’ve seen how the Bright Emperor had called him there at the outbreak of hostilities. He’d been in the northwest with Geshu Han, the general whose forces would soon be forced to leave their strong defensive position east of Chang’an, thus to be disastrously defeated on the plains.

Amoghavajra (Bukong Jingang 不空金剛 [704–774]) was Sogdian by birth. He came to China when he was ten.498 Sent by the Bright Emperor on a diplomatic mission to India and Sri Lanka in 741, he received transmission of the Buddhist tantra that was just emerging in these places, returning in 746 with some five hundred volumes of texts.499 In 750 he joined service with Geshu Han as preceptor and protector.

Among his eventual disciples were members of the military establishment, the civilian government, the Imperial family, and the two monarchs who succeeded the Bright Emperor, Suzong 肅宗 (rg. 756–62) and Daizong 代宗 (rg. 762–79). With their support he established monasteries training hundreds of monks, a multilingual team that produced seventy translations, and a lineage of East Asian Esoteric Buddhism (Ch. Zhenyan, Jap. Shingon 真言) that persists until today. The modern scholar Geoffrey Goble concludes: “He was easily the most powerful Buddhist cleric in the Tang.”500

Goble wants to know how this came about. His answer: Amoghavajra’s incomparable ability to destroy large numbers of
enemies at a distance. He held tantric teachings that were previously unknown to the Great Tang, by which he could “command fierce, lethal deities to kill enemies and rout opposing armies.”

Though Daoists also possessed military rituals, they were only capable of averting, not of striking. Amoghavajra’s primary practice was the fierce deity Acala, Budong 不動, “The immovable wisdom king.”

Here is one of his several rites:

There is also the method for those who wish to cause enemies to perish: obtain rice chaff, recite the spell empowerment and cast [the chaff] into a fire to burn. Also imagine those enemies bound with ropes by the envoy [Acala], led to the southern direction of stifling suffering, vomiting blood, and perishing. Those [enemies] and their ilk will all be unable to recover. Not a single one will survive.
This is how the war was won. Goble explains:

Though An Lushan met with immediate success, moving rapidly and almost without resistance to within striking distance of the imperial capitals, he was murdered by his son, An Qingxu, with the support of his own commanders. An Qingxu was himself murdered by a trusted associate, Shi Siming (史思明), who was likewise assassinated by his own son, Shi Chaoyi (史朝義), who in turn was abandoned by his own troops and was killed in 763. The invasion and occupation of Chang’an that same year by Tibetan forces was defeated by a gang of rabble. When a force of confederate foreigners organized by Pugu Huai’en invaded the Wei Valley west of Chang’an in 765, their advance was halted by rivers swollen by heavy rain and they were defeated by infighting. The turncoat general Pugu Huai’en slunk off to the northwest where he fell ill and died.\textsuperscript{505}

Pulleyblank attributes these matters to luck.\textsuperscript{506} But Goble, following the \textit{Old Tang History},\textsuperscript{507} is confident that “these events were attributed [by the Tang elite] to the supernormal intercession of beings commanded by Amoghavajra.”\textsuperscript{508}

12. Historiography, Again

I realize that, without conscious intent, my method here has been closely allied with the Tang practice of “historical miscellanies” (\textit{zalu} 杂録), what Manling Luo calls “the piecing together of anecdotes gathered from oral and written sources to create a composite, multifaceted picture of the past, or ‘mosaic memory.’”\textsuperscript{509} A mosaic implies a whole made up many single pieces. And, indeed, it would be gratifying if there were a single picture emerging from these events, a master narrative, an encompassing theory or historical principle, a totality, that is, a place to stand to know it all. Instead I see only multiple patterns, forming and unforming, without coming anywhere to rest.

We could go further. When the Bright Emperor’s grandmother the Emperor Wu was perplexed by reality, her monk-in-
structor, the Sogdian-Chinese Fazang 法藏 (643–712), told her of Indra’s cobweb. It has dewdrops at each interstice, the whole world reflected in each, and each reflecting all the others, ad infinitum, ad nauseam, ad absurdum.510

This kind of messes with cause and effect. We’ve seen how the heuristic of causality explains a lot about An Lushan and Li Linfu, and too we’ve seen the inadequacies of this mode to account for other realities. Causality is certainly hard on every philosopher: as an empiricist-nihilist, Hume can see the boy’s foot kicking and the ball moving, but he can’t see anything there he would call “causality.” Fazang can’t even find anything he would call “a foot” or “a ball.” Only shards of light. So he sums up the nature of causality like this: “When Joe Schmo drinks wine, Jane Doe gets drunk” (Zhang San hejiu, Li Si zui 張三喝酒，李四醉).512

13. Invocation and Envoi
Swami Vivekananda, student of the great Ramakrishna, wrote this English-language poem in 1898.

Kali the Mother

The stars are blotted out,
    The clouds are covering clouds,
It is darkness vibrant, sonant.
    In the roaring, whirling wind
Are the souls of a million lunatics
    Just loose from the prison-house,
Wrenching trees by the roots,
    Sweeping all from the path.
The sea has joined the fray,
    And swirls up mountain-waves,
To reach the pitchy sky.
    The flash of lurid light
Reveals on every side
    A thousand, thousand shades
Of Death begrimed and black—
Scattering plagues and sorrows,
Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother, come!
For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e’er.
Thou “Time”, the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction’s dance,
To him the Mother comes.\(^{513}\)

Here is Philip Whalen:

Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis

I praise those ancient Chinamen
Who left me a few words,
Usually a pointless joke or a silly question
A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin of a quick
splashed picture- bug, leaf,
caricature of Teacher
on paper held together now by little more than ink
& their own strength brushed momentarily over it.

Their world & several others since
Gone to hell in a handbasket, they knew it-
Cheered as it whizzed by-
& conked out among the busted spring rain cherryblossom
winejars
Happy to have saved us all.\(^{514}\)

\(^{31:viii:58}\)