

Yang Liangyao's Mission of 785 to the Caliph of Baghdād: Evidence of an Early Sino-Arabic Power Alliance?

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Introduction

The primary focus of this article is the information inscribed on the tomb stele (*shendao zhi bei* 神道之碑) of a Chinese eunuch, a certain Yang Liangyao 楊良瑤 (736–806). This stele was originally discovered by the Chinese archaeologist and historian Zhang Shimin 張世民 in Shaanxi Province, close to present-day Xi'an 西安 (in the village of Xiaohuyang 小戶楊 in Yunyang 雲陽 county of the district of Jingyang 涇陽 near Xianyang 咸陽, see map 2).¹ It is reportedly 189.5 cm high and 93.5 cm wide, the upper part introducing the stele in seal characters is 85.5 cm high (see illustration below). A “*shendao bei*” is normally placed in the path leading to or directly in front of the tomb. Yang Liangyao's tomb itself, which could provide us with additional information including his tomb inscription (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘), has not yet been excavated.

The text of the stele with the self-designation as “Tomb-passage Stele Inscription of the Former Official Yang of the Tang(-Dynasty)” (“Tang gu Yang fujun shendao zhi bei” 唐故楊府君神道之碑) first appeared in the “Local Chronicle of Jingyang District” (*Jingyang xianzhi* 涇陽縣志) in 2001.² In 2005, Zhang Shimin released a version of the inscription based on his analysis of the original text. Subsequently, Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 of Peking University has critically analysed the inscription using rubbings, and in 2011 and 2012 has

* Prof. Angela Schottenhammer, University of Salzburg, History Department, IOWC, McGill University. This study is part of the MCRI (Major Collaborative Research Initiative) project sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to express my special thanks here to Dr. Hashizume Retsu 橋爪烈 from the Chiba Institute of Science (Chiba kagaku daigaku 千葉科学大学) especially for his helpful suggestions concerning transcriptions of Arabic names. I would also like to thank the editors of BEFEO for their helpful comments and suggestions to an earlier version of this article. My first study on this topic has been published in German in 2014 as *Yang Liangyaos Reise von 785 n. Chr. zum Kalifen von Baghdād. Eine Mission im Zeichen einer frühen sino-arabischen Mächte-Allianz?* Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag.

1. The stele can be found in the museum of Jingyang. Rong Xinjiang kindly provided me with copies, photos, and a rubbing of the stele made by Zhang Jianlin 张建林 (the then Vice-director of the Archaeological Institute of Shaanxi Province). I also received a copy of Zhang Shimin's latest article (2013) in which he not only published a rubbing of the stele, but also a careful transcription of the text. I would like to thank both of my colleagues for allowing me to use the photos, the rubbing, and the transcription for this project. During a research expedition that took me to Xi'an in August 2015, Zhang Shimin informed me that local authorities have already applied for funds to locate and unearth Yang Liangyao's tomb. So we can only hope that further information on the life and personality of Yang Liangyao may be available in the near future and that grave robbery will not upset these plans.

2. He Ping 2001.