

ZOROASTRIANS IN CHINA

Dr. Kersey Antia

Nov 17, 2018; updated Mar 20, 2020

As noted by the *Cambridge History of Iran* (Vol. 3(2), New York, 1983, p. 1XX ii), the Sogdians “introduced Zoroastrianism in China. The Chinese court recognized Zoroastrianism in the early 6th century, and a number of Zoroastrian temples were put in western China in the early T'ang period. The Chinese were anxious to propitiate the Central Asian peoples at their borders and Zoroastrianism, as one of the religions of the Central Asian people, was spared persecution, until 845, when it fell victim to Xenophobic sentiments in China and its recognition was withdrawn.”

As reported by Antonio Forte of the Italian School of East Asian Studies, Kyoto, Japan in the *Journal of the American Oriental Studies* (116.4, 1996, pp. 645-652), there were many Zoroastrians in China at least until the rebellion of An Lushan. He connects the An country mentioned by the Chinese with Zoroastrianism. “This An Family,” he regrets, “although it constitutes very important evidence for the history of Zoroastrianism in China, had not been noticed up to now.” Even Chen Yuan's “History of Zoroastrianism in China,” January 1923 and Dr. Ishida's “On Zoroastrianism in China” April 1923 do not mention it. Forte mentions An Nantuo acting as Sabao, the chief of Zoroastrians in Kansu circa 526 according to some historians but he claims: “Those who held the office of Sabao then, were not necessarily Zoroastrian. And even if they were, this proves nothing. For there was nothing to impede descendants of a non-Zoroastrian Parthian from becoming Zoroastrian. After an exhaustive review of all conflicting evidence on this subject, Forte concludes: “An family from Wuwei was one of the most outstanding and influential foreign families in China from the fourth century period up to the period of the rebellion of An Lushan in mid-eighth century.”

Various articles in *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, edited by Etienne de la Vaissiere and Eric Trombert, presents various facts about the 2003 excavated Northern Zhou tomb of Shi Jun and his wife, located in the environs of X'ian where the Iranians had migrated after the fall of the Sasanian Empire. Other tombs also figure in the discussions since the tombs are the “hot” topic in Sogdian studies.

The Sogdian tombs yield a good deal of information concerning Sogdians in China about Manichaeism. It describes the detailed scenes carved on the exterior walls of the sarcophagus, which include four-

armed protector gods, Zoroastrian deities, banquets, caravans, and depictions of travel, ceremonies, and ascension to the heavens. Among the elements of note are a riderless horse under a canopy, horses with Sasanian-type curled-tip wings and figures holding rhytons. The most distinctive are Zoroastrian, including priest-birds who wear *padams* over their mouths and tend the sacred flames, perhaps as a symbol of Srosh and a depiction of the crossing of the Chinavat Bridge where the souls of the dead are judged. The latter is compared to the so-called animal pen shown on another funerary couch which reflect Sogdian funerary practices and beliefs regarding the soul's journey to Heaven.

A bilingual inscription in the Tomb of Lord Shi, which came to be known as the stone house of Lord Shi, *sabao* of (Liang) Zhou, where he was famous for his virtues. His grandfather had been a *sabao* of the Kingdom of Shi, and his father was so virtuous that he was compared to good jade. A man of outstanding talent, Shi Jun obeyed the rules, performed good deeds and was known for his achievements. An apt description of a Zoroastrian, he died in 579 at the age of eighty-six and his wife died soon after, and in 580 they were buried in a stone house built by Lord Shi's sons. The title *sabao* represents the political and religious leader of an area.

Frantz Grenet's article, "The Self-Image of the Sogdians," interprets the "Ambassadors" mural at Samarkand/Afrasiab. There there are parallels to elements in the Shi Jun Sarcophagus such as the *padam* worn by figures in the Nawruz procession that rides toward the mausoleum of the king's parents and the riderless horse, which Grenet says probably is destined for Mithra. The various walls of the Samarkand murals, one painted with the *Nawruz* procession, another painted with Chinese figures, and yet another with figures that point to India, are compared to walls of the pavilion said to have existed near Kushaniya (*Tangshu*: between Samarkand and Bukhara). The sources of inspiration for both the monuments were Sasanian. Like the Sasanian world, centered on the Sasanian king, the Kushaniya and Sarmarkand monuments present the Sogdian world as centered on the Sogdian ruler.

Angela Shen, "From Stone to Silk: Intercultural Transformation of Funerary Furnishings among Eastern Asian People around 475-650 CE." In the course of her discussion of some fragments of the Tenjukoku silk curtains, the author house-shaped curtains to represent the Yu Hong sarcophagus. In a banqueting scene, in which the deceased and his wife sit on a raised platform and feast while being entertained by musicians and a dancer, Yu Hong and his wife are accompanied by "four deities of Zoroastrian origin", Ameretat, the goddess of longevity who protects plants, Hauvata, goddess of health who protects water, Khshathra, god of hope who guards heaven, and Spenta Armaiti, god of

the sacred heart who guards the earth, the implication being that Yu Hong and his wife hae been judged worthy of being admitted to heaven. The book shows the spread of Persian people and culture in China in addition to what is already noted.