Introduction

This book examines the relations between Tang China (618–907) and its major Asian neighbors. During its almost 290-year course, the Tang experienced often turbulent relations with Koguryŏ, Silla, Paekche, Parhae, the Turks, the Uighurs, the Tibetans, and the Nanzhao Kingdom, running the gamut from peaceful coexistence to open warfare. Except for the Uighurs, these countries rose to power one after another to become in turn China’s principal adversaries.

**Multi-Polarity and Interdependency in Asian International Politics**

This book uses “multi-polarity” as the analytical tool for studying Tang China’s complex external relations.1 “Multi-polarity” refers to an environment in which several countries competed against one another in the attempt to augment their respective powers. They sometimes forged an alliance against a third party, sometimes worked independently toward different goals. Without any one country permanently able to dominate the international stage, power was widely and unevenly distributed among them. Thus their relations were dynamic and unpredictable.

Asia existed in such an environment during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, a time of bewildering changes. With the short-lived Sui dynasty (581–618) crumbling, several separatist groups appeared in north and northwest China and competed for ultimate rule in China, the Middle Kingdom. Li Yuan and his supporters constituted one of these groups. Although he would eventually found the Tang dynasty, Li Yuan enjoyed no preponderant power over his competitors at this time. Farther north in the steppes, the Turks were the overlords of other nomadic groups as well as of Li Yuan and his rivals. Turkic military support for or hostility against any one of them could make or break his dream of becoming the new ruler of China. For Turkic assistance and protection, these competing groups entered into sovereign-vassal relations with the Turkic ruler. Li Yuan was no exception.

After the founding of the Tang in 618, Li Yuan was unable immediately to transform this polycentric Asia into a China-dominated world. He devoted much of his short nine-year reign to bringing the separatists to heel but could not accomplish the task. It was Emperor Taizong
(r. 627–649), his son and successor, who eliminated the last local magnate in northwest China in 628.

China achieved an advantageous position in Asia when it defeated the Eastern Turks in 630. An ascending Tang made its impact felt across Asia. The nomadic tribes north and northwest of China recognized Emperor Taizong as their “Heavenly Qaghan.” Many countries offered allegiance to China by regularly dispatching tributary missions to the Middle Kingdom.

The lord-vassal relationship between the Tang and its neighbors was, however, largely nominal.² Seemingly subservient to China, these countries often manipulated the relationship. They managed to preserve a large degree of freedom of action outside China’s preferred world order. Their tributary mission to the Tang court was, in fact, a diplomatic game played for purposes of self-protection and self-strengthening as well as a way of gaining economic and cultural benefits from China. This expedient approach to official relations with China gave staying power to the Tang tributary system, which was able to meet the needs of China and of the participating countries, to satisfy at the ceremonial level the Tang emperor’s pride as the universal ruler, and to bring about substantive benefits to the participants.³

The tributary arrangements maintained a façade of Tang supremacy but obscured multi-polarity in Asia. China’s neighbors used to be mostly nomadic and illiterate, and their societies were loosely organized. But contacts with China and the resultant spread of Chinese culture in Asia, particularly the development of indigenous culture, brought about marked progress to Asian countries.⁴ Those in the northeast (the Korean states of Koguryo, Silla, and Paekche) and southwest (the Nanzhao Kingdom) were stable states of an agrarian or semi-agrarian economy. They also developed recognizable political institutions. These changes fundamentally affected the way they interacted with the Tang. Besides contacting China, they also developed extensive relations among themselves.⁵ Asia’s geopolitical landscapes were now more complex and multifaceted than they had ever been.⁶

Power relationships in Asia now demonstrated diversity and instability, not Tang dominance. In general, the balance of power between China and its neighbors was in the former’s favor from the 620s to the 750s owing to its political stability, economic strength, and military might. In contrast, China’s neighbors were in a disadvantageous position caused by unstable institutions, internal political strife, natural disasters, and warfare among themselves.⁷ When China and a major rival both enjoyed internal political unity, their relationship became one between peers. Their conflicting ambitions often resulted in border conflicts or large-scale warfare. But political disunity and weakness on
either side could tip the scale, bringing drastic change to the bilateral relationship. A unified China could easily defeat a hostile neighbor bogged down by deadly political infighting and could, if the Tang court so wished, impose an overlord-vassal relationship on this country. A disintegrating China would, however, find it hard to maintain its superior position over other nations. It would soon be forced to forgo its pretensions to suzerain status and to deal with threatening new competitors from a humiliating position of weakness and inferiority.

The An Lushan Rebellion of 755 marked the beginning of Tang China’s decline. With the rebellion raging through China, the Tang court badly needed foreign assistance to handle domestic crises. With the Uighurs’ help, China eventually suppressed the rebellion. But the Uighurs’ involvement in Tang domestic matters signaled a redistribution of power in Asia. The court found it increasingly difficult to maintain its influence in international affairs, and Tang China ceased to be the most prominent continental power, though it was still an important one. Competition between China and Tibet, and between China and the Nanzhao Kingdom intensified. In fact, many Asian countries had never really felt part of a Chinese tributary order, and Tang China was not always able to control their rulers’ behavior even when the Tang was at the peak of its power. Now the relationship between China and these countries became one of open competition. China’s marginalization in Asia was in the making, though many Tang courtiers would have liked to pretend otherwise. Yet Tang China was also inexorably bound together with its neighbors. The Tang needed allies and external military support to handle domestic and international issues, and China’s neighbors desired cultural and economic exchanges with the Tang. To survive and to flourish, both sides needed a meaningful relationship with each other. They evaluated each other in pragmatic terms before contacting the counterpart to advance their respective interests. These intercourses were not zero-sum games but games of “complex interdependence.” With the fortunes of China and its neighbors closely correlated, multi-polarity became the distinctive feature in Asia’s power relationships.

**Soft Power in International Politics**

The complexities of a multi-polar Asia prompted Asian countries, irrespective of their size and strength, to employ soft power in external affairs. This sort of power refers to the ability to use nonviolent means to induce an outcome desirable to the involved parties. And these means entailed both tangible and intangible costs to the parties in question.8 Political allegiance that a weaker country pledged to a stronger one was a major form of soft power in premodern Asia. Using this power to
handle the Turks, the early Tang leaders created an environment favorable to their efforts of building and consolidating the Tang. Some Asian countries played a similar game with China or with one another with the aim of creating an enabling international environment for their respective foreign policies. Offering political submission was often a nominal rather than a substantive act. It was the best way for a weaker country to avoid confrontation with or to gain military support and cultural and economic benefits from a stronger country. This act did not simply render one party the winner and the other party the loser. It was a non-zero-sum game that benefited both parties in different ways. The nominal sovereign state enhanced its political prestige on the international stage by receiving tribute from the vassal states, and the latter acquired military assistance and protection as well as material rewards from the former. A telling example of this game was the lord-vassal relationship between Silla and the Tang.

Located on the southeastern coast of the Korean peninsula, Silla was geographically farther from China than Koguryŏ and Paekche. These two hostile neighbors of Silla often blocked its envoys from reaching China. And they hindered Silla’s self-strengthening program, a crucial part of which involved cultural and institutional importation from China. But Silla managed to forge close political ties with China. Silla paid lip service to Tang’s overlord status and bitterly complained that Koguryŏ and Paekche had obstructed its envoys sent to “pay tribute” to China. This clever use of soft power convinced the Tang that Silla could be a loyal ally in China’s efforts to realize its own ambition in Korea. The Tang court decided to intervene in the messy conflicts in Korea by supporting Silla. Tang expeditionary forces destroyed Paekche in 660 and Koguryŏ in 668, thus paving the way for Silla to unify Korea. Silla’s wise use of soft power advanced its self-interest in the face of an intimidating China.

Multiple loyalties were another form of weaker countries’ soft power. Sandwiched between regional powers, these countries tried to limit and to balance the power they deemed most threatening to them. For self-protection, they often jumped from one country’s bandwagon to another’s. The Nanzhao tribe, who eventually established the Nanzhao Kingdom in Yunnan province, is a case in point.

From the 650s to the 710s, China and Tibet were locked in competition for presence in Yunnan, and many local tribes sided with Tibet. But the Nanzhao chieftain, the weakest among the six major local tribal leaders, chose to be a steadfast Tang supporter. This loyalty to the Tang paid off handsomely in 712, when the court recognized the fourth Nanzhao ruler as a “Commandery Prince.” With China’s consent and help, his successor annexed other competitors and established the Nanzhao
Kingdom in 735. The two countries, however, soon became adversaries. Nanzhao wanted to extend its rule to eastern Yunnan, part of which had already been under Chinese control. Fierce battles ensued. The Nanzhao ruler, fearful of Chinese retaliation, forged an alliance with Tibet in 751, accepted a Tibetan title, and officially declared his country part of the Tibetan Empire.

During its heyday Tang China enjoyed a distinctive form of soft power, whose components included, among other things, well-developed institutions, laws, bureaucracy structures, and an extravagant elite lifestyle based on economic prosperity and a highly sophisticated culture. The Tang court decided to cultivate admiration for the Chinese way of life among members of foreign ruling classes, hoping that their cultural sympathy would lead to political affinity with China. To this end, the court granted foreign diplomats in Chang’an access to Chinese culture. They received copies of Chinese classics and works of literature and history; they toured the Directorate of Education to observe how Confucian learning was taught; they shopped at the metropolitan markets; and they also participated in such grand court activities as state banquets, the New Year’s Day gathering, and the birthday celebration for the Tang emperor. Besides foreign diplomats, other foreigners also gained access to China’s culture and wealth. With court permission, monks and students from Korea and Japan stayed in China for extended periods of time to pursue knowledge and to immerse themselves in the Chinese way of life. Foreign traders conducted business in the capital, at the frontier markets, or at the seaports.

This particular form of Chinese soft power found willing receivers in Asia and produced profoundly transforming effects in Koguryo, Silla, Paekche, Parhae, and Japan. They modeled their political institutions on those in China. They also adopted literary Chinese as their written language, thus coating their cultural and religious developments with an additional layer of Chinese influence. Even some nomadic and semi-nomadic rulers and members of the intellectually and politically influential groups in their countries became susceptible to Tang soft power. They developed a taste for the Chinese lifestyle. There seemed to be no insurmountable cultural barriers between China and its neighbors.

Admiration, importation, and consumption of Chinese values and institutions, however, did not necessarily translate into political subservience to China or support for China’s geopolitical objectives. Cultural and institutional borrowing was merely a means to facilitate system building at home, and the borrowed Chinese ideology often awakened or heightened foreign rulers’ own political consciousness. They rejected the Chinese dichotomy between the “civilized” Chinese and the “barbaric” non-Chinese that served as the cultural justification for China’s
foreign policy. They started to develop a political ideology that positioned themselves as the center of the world, thus rejecting the China-centered world order envisioned by the Tang. Evolution of this ideology began during the late fourth and late sixth centuries, when a number of nomadic groups occupied and established regional states in northern China. Roughly at the same time, rulers in Koguryŏ, Paekche, Silla, Parhae, and Japan also invented ideas and expressions of centrality, when they engaged in territorial expansion and strove for unification. In this process, power contenders needed the concept of centrality to demonstrate the legitimacy of their power and their preeminence over other competitors. In the case of Koguryŏ, it embarked on territorial expansion in the early fourth century. Toward the late fifth century, Koguryŏ managed to establish a vast sphere of interest that included northern Korea, Paekche, Silla, the Puyŏ (Ch. Fuyu in the Sungari River basin in Manchuria), and the Sushen (in southeastern Manchuria). On stone tablets erected in 414 for the Koguryŏ ruler and for a Koguryŏ official charged with governing the Puyŏ, the following terms and phrases appeared: “his blessing is as wide as the magnificent Heaven” (en qia yu huangtian), “his kindness and care extends to everybody” (enyang pufu), and “all under Heaven in four directions” (tianxia sifang). Furthermore, the idea of centrality led them to form their own “lesser empires” with real or perceived vassal states. Silla, for example, regarded Japan and Parhae as its vassal states, even though it had no actual control over them.

This ideology of political centrality among China’s major neighbors had a far-reaching impact on their international behavior. They refused to follow blindly China’s instructions in international affairs. Rather, they contacted China out of their domestic needs and external goals. Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla were nominal vassal states of China in early Tang. They accepted Chinese titles and paid tribute to China in order to win Chinese support in their struggle for hegemony in the Korean peninsula. Although none of them voiced verbal resentment against China’s centrality, they would not obey any Tang instruction deemed detrimental to their respective self-interest. After becoming the undisputed master of the peninsula in the 660s, Silla objected to the Tang military presence in Korea but continued diplomacy with China. Using the tributary arrangements, Silla frequently sent embassies to China seeking opportunities to strengthen cultural links and to maintain trade relations. In southern Manchuria, Parhae emerged as an independent state after an initial period of hostility toward China and some decades during which it had submitted to vassal status under the Turks. Tang China did not question Parhae’s independent status and settled into normative diplomatic, cultural, and economic relationships with the state. In Japan,
the growth of national consciousness motivated the court to try to raise its international standing and to stay away from the China-dominated world order. Like its Korean neighbors, Japan subordinated its national consciousness to national interest and waged no open challenge to China’s suzerainty. The Japanese court attempted a careful differentiation of the political, cultural, and economic aspects of its dealings with China. To maintain its independent political stance, Japan manipulated its diplomatic language to dilute the China-centered political color of the state letters it dispatched to China. But Japan did not want to damage its official relations with the Tang. It needed to make the greatest use possible of these relations to gain economic and cultural benefits from China. Moreover, the Turks, the Uighurs, the Tibetans, and the Nanzhao Kingdom requested privileged treatment by the Tang court, and China was compelled to deal with them as peer states.

Cultural and institutional borrowing was thus a competitive political process. China used its cultural attractiveness to influence its neighbors’ China policies. As cultural borrowers, these neighbors adapted Chinese ideas but formed their own ideologies and used them to fend off China’s imposition of its will on them. When China’s neighbors began to pride themselves on their own centrality in the world, the Tang lost its monopoly on ideas of an orderly international community. China had fewer willing followers of its course. The conditions that prior to the 750s had created China as the most powerful continental power were gone; the game of international politics in Asia had changed.

**Hard Power and Its Limits**

In an inherently dynamic Asia, the ascending Asian countries were revisionist powers. They sought changes to their relations with China to reflect their new stance toward the Middle Kingdom. They brought about such changes either by prudent and peaceful means or by force. To handle an insubordinate or hostile foreign ruler, the Tang court sometimes exercised hard power: the threat of war or the application of actual violence. In the first case, the court would summon a foreign ruler (or his representative) to an audience to explain his unruly behavior. This audience was a coercive measure backed by the threat of force. It aimed at exerting psychological pressure on a foreign ruler, compelling him to change his course of action and to fulfill his tributary commitments to China. If a disobedient foreign ruler refused to comply, China might launch a punitive operation against him.

Although violence was always an intrinsic element of international politics, China needed to ponder some tough issues before going to war to stop an unappealing international development. Did China have the
necessary resources to launch and win a war? After an initial victory, could the Tang occupying forces effectively control the defeated country and eventually transform it into Tang territory? Or, alternatively, could the Tang identify a local puppet and entrust him with local governance? Reflections on these questions revealed that hard power used alone had apparent limits in solving bilateral issues. Instead of producing a final and satisfactory solution, a preemptive strike often created new situations too complex for the Tang occupying troops to handle. The Tang military forces—and the Tang court, for that matter—were often not fully prepared for the hard work sustained over many years that it would take to reestablish and maintain a viable local order in newly acquired foreign lands. China’s war against Koguryŏ is a case in point.

**New Dimensions in Tang Strategic Thinking: Pragmatic Pluralism**

The limited effectiveness of naked violence and the promising potential of soft power in addressing external issues in a multi-polar world prompted Tang officials to develop a new strategy for foreign affairs. They adopted “know yourself and your neighbors” as the first principle in formulating a strategy that would reflect the changes in China and the wider world. And they tried hard to avoid the pitfalls their predecessors fell into owing to insufficient knowledge of the outside world: that is, imagining, rather than understanding, their neighbors; marking foreigners as characterized by implacable hostility and disdain for Chinese values; and regarding complex international relations as a kind of morality play, in which there were only supporters and opponents of China.

When examining China’s external relations, Tang emperors and officials tried to bridge cultural gaps and to view facts without moral squint. Emperors Gaozu and Taizong were the first to abandon the simplistic and one-dimensional view of the Turks. They developed a rounded view of their polity and a grasp of the different strands of the power relationship among various Turkic leaders. They came to realize that the Turkic confederation was fluid in nature. Power was dispersed among various groups rather than concentrated in a paramount ruler’s hand. The Turkic threat to China was thus a multifaceted, rather than a unified, effort. While a Turkic leader often had extravagantly ambitious goals toward China, he could not guarantee to other chieftains that each of his operations would succeed. A setback or defeat would adversely affect his leadership position. Unable to provide his followers with plunder, reward, and protection, he was vulnerable to internal conflicts and a potential implosion. By encouraging subtle distinctions among Turkic groups and avoiding caricatures of them, the Tang court was able to exploit the Turks’ vulnerability and to disintegrate their
ranks. At times, China thwarted a Turkic attack by playing on the differences between Turkic groups or between the Turks and their allies, thus preventing them from acting in unity.

The Tang ruling elite acquired in-depth knowledge of the nomadic and frontier societies. Nomads moved around to seek water and pasture-land. Depending on their strength relative to that of the Middle Kingdom at a specific time, they sometimes submitted themselves to the Tang court and assisted China in a military campaign, and at other times they rebelled against the Tang or adjusted their relations with other nomadic groups. In frontier regions, the situations were even more complex because the Chinese cohabited with the nomads. Local people there enjoyed greater freedom than those in the central region. They moved quite freely from one place to another, and they often offered allegiance to various authorities who tried to rule them. Disorderly mobility and multiple loyalties thus characterized frontier society and its people. The Tang ruling elite well understood that fluidity was the norm for the material and political life in the nomadic and frontier societies from whence their ancestors came. However, they often demonstrated such knowledge with derogatory remarks on nomads’ unique mobile qualities: They were greedy and rash. They knew nothing of loyalty and friendship. And they had no sense of propriety.

Insight into the fluidity in the vast borderlands and among their inhabitants formed the cornerstone for Tang’s defense strategy. The Tang court perceived that the fluidity in question and China’s limited resources would render permanent spatial control over the borderlands impractical. Instead of creating fixed-lined frontiers, they determined that China should maintain zonal frontiers by erecting fortifications and walls in strategic places. These facilities aimed not at keeping an enemy out of China, but primarily at monitoring enemy movements and alerting the court of possible invasions. When an invasion did occur, Tang forces would go inside the forts and behind the walls, and prepare them for a counterattack.

This defense strategy prefigured a precarious situation of “neither peace nor war” that would prevail in Tang China’s external relations. Since neither China nor its adversaries could afford protracted war or maintain lasting peace, there were recurring frictions and tensions between them even when China was in a position of relative strength. To ensure greater peripheral security, the Tang court established “loose rein prefectures” headed by surrendered or defeated foreign chieftains. The chieftains retained control of their tribesmen but were subjected to a Tang official’s supervision. This was a nuanced policy of indirect control that rested on a shrewd calculation: that a Tang military victory over the non-Chinese and their consequent political allegiance to China
were but temporary. It was unwise to formally incorporate the newly acquired foreign lands into the Tang Empire or to replace local institutions with the Tang administrative system. Doing so would be equivalent to projecting a temporary triumph into an indefinite future. Establishment of “loose rein prefectures” thus prepared China for any eventual outcome. The Tang court would be ready if the surrendered non-Chinese revolted again.

Following the principle of “knowing yourself,” Tang emperors and courtiers carefully assessed China’s own strength and the resources at hand, and prioritized their foreign policy goals accordingly. They also concluded that Tang China could not effectively promote its own interests without taking into consideration those of other countries. This was the idea of harmony of interests, or “mutual self-interest.” It emphasized that Tang courtiers needed keen perception of the power relationships between China and its neighbors at a given time so as to formulate appropriate foreign policy. Such a policy would also be most effective since it would produce results acceptable to the involved parties. At first glance, this approach to foreign issues, with its focus on appropriateness and effectiveness, seemed contrary to the universal moral principles of virtue (德) and righteousness (义) that the Tang court often employed to justify its aspirations and actions abroad. In fact, virtue and righteousness as moral commands were compatible with efficacy and appropriateness in Tang strategic thinking. This line of thinking argued that policies suitable to the specific circumstances of time and space were manifestations of the abstract moral principles of virtue and righteousness. State actions guided by these policies were themselves virtuous deeds because they exemplified the supreme morality in politics: acting on full consideration of the circumstances and the consequences. After all, political ethics judged any policy by its consequences.

Tang foreign policy was thus guided by pragmatic pluralism, not by any emperor’s grand moral vision for the world. Such a vision was dogmatic and apparently inadequate as a device through which to view a multidimensional world. Although dressed as the moral purpose of the universe, Tang foreign policy was idealistic in appearance but realistic in substance. It was a marriage between moral principles and pragmatism, and a product of incremental change and adaptation. These changes were free of ideological preferences and evolutionary in nature. They aimed at improving the fit between China and its changing international environment. Thus, to understand how the Tang court sought to arrive at a mix and balance of policies that would make a win-win outcome more likely in the complex relations between Tang China and its neighbors, we need to examine these relations in terms of multipolarity, mutual self-interest, interdependency, and appropriateness.