

# Silk Trade and *Gongxian* Tribute System under the Tang Dynasty

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## Introduction

In general, the structure of international relations in premodern East Asia has been referred to as a “tribute trade system,” and from the viewpoint of economic behavior, one cannot doubt that there was a foreign trade aspect to the tribute rendered to Dynastic China. However, in more substantive terms, the act of rendering tribute and the act of conducting foreign trade are phenomena with very different characters. In contrast to the diplomatic contact that occurs between political entities in the act of rendering tribute, foreign trade can involve simple transactions and exchanges of goods between buyers and sellers without any political overtones or government intervention. That being said, within the usual course of foreign trade, it is true that trade agreements do exist between countries as preconditions to trade; and in the case of premodern East Asia, the choice by researchers to explain that region’s foreign trade system in terms of “dynastic tribute” has by no means been unfruitful. The question to be taken up here is how are we to grasp the relationship that exists between diplomacy and foreign trade.

Take, for example, the period spanning the Tang Dynasty, an era that witnessed a golden age of tributary envoys traveling to and from China with great frequency. The protocol and customs governing Tang foreign embassies as outlined by *Datang Kaiyuan-li* 大唐開元禮, compiled in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗, we find the following characteristic content.<sup>1)</sup>

- a) Decorum for Tang bureaucrats welcoming foreign missions at guest facilities or on the outskirts of Chang’an 長安.
- b) Decorum for informing foreign visitors at their lodgings on what day their audiences with the emperor are scheduled.

- c) Such details of the imperial audience as the palace setting and presentation of both letters from foreign sovereigns and gifts for the Chinese emperor.
- d) Ceremony involved in feasting at the palace, including return gifts from the Tang Court.
- e) The issuance of an imperial edict at the guest lodgings as a reply to the foreign sovereign's letter.
- f) Palace ceremony surrounding the sending off of returning foreign visitors.  
(There are also pomp and circumstance involving the attendance by foreign visitors at certain seasonal events held in the capital not directly related to tribute.)

And so, we find that diplomatic procedures related to tribute contain two elements: the exchange of sovereign letters and the exchange of material goods. The former, a basic element of any diplomatic relationship, is a means by which governments express their intentions and information with one another in any time or place; the latter was equally important during the time in question. In that East Asian world, such gifts, called *guoxin* 國信, were related to not only the acceptance or denial of diplomatic demands in relation to their evaluation, but even more closely to the authority and prestige of the giver, which is the reason why they should have been the highest quality goods that could be found.

This article will focus on two problems in this respect: 1) how did the Tang Dynasty regard the *guoxin* items it received from foreign countries in both fiscal and legal terms and how these items were disposed of; and 2) how did the Tang government procure and prepare the *guoxin* items it gave to its foreign tributaries. The method to be used here to explore such questions will be to analyze how the administrative system was operated under the *luling* 律令 legal statutes promulgated during the early years of the Dynasty and how the system evolved over time. Here a model will be constructed based on the relatively rich body of sources from the reign of Emperor Xuanzong.

## 1. Ways of Thinking about Goods Received from Foreign Countries

First, let us confirm in what manner the Tang Dynasty looked upon the goods it received from foreign countries as tribute. The preamble to the item concerning the Shangshu-sheng 尚書省 ministry's Hubu 戶部

department in charge of managing household registry and tax revenue, contained in *Datang Liudian* 大唐六典, presents a compendium of job descriptions and administrative statutes from each government bureau.

The head and assistant head of the Hubu oversees household registration on the *zhou* 州 district level. The country is divided into 10 *dao* 道 districts, each with different tax (*fu* 賦) and tribute (*gong* 貢) items depending on differences in local production. (p. 64)

This is followed by a detailed description of the ten *dao* districts. The term *gong* in the citation is none other than an abbreviation of *gongxian* 貢獻, meaning in this context goods specific to particular locations (also *tugong* 土貢), but the term is identical to the tribute system under discussion here.

As an example, let us look at the region of Hebei 河北 Dao (approximately the same area as present day Hebei Province). The *Datang Liudian* states,

- a) Hebei Dao consists of 25 *zhou* districts, three of which are inhabited by non-Han ethnic minorities (*jimi-zhou* 羈縻州).
- b) It has eastern, western, southern and northern borders.
- c) Geographic information on well-known mountains and rivers.
- d) It renders its taxes (*fu*) in the form of silk, silk fleece and raw silk.
- e) The goods rendered as tribute (*gongxian*) include woven silk goods, raw silk, hemp cloth and Indian ink. (This is followed by a list of tribute items according to which *zhou* district capital they were to be transported to.)
- f) Tribute is also received from such remote foreign places as Qidan 契丹, Xi 奚, Mohe 靺鞨 and Shiwei 室韋. (p. 66)

In the similar descriptions of the other nine *dao*, item f) mentioning the foreign countries rendering tribute may be summarized as follows.

Dao	Foreign Tributary
Guannei 關內	Tujue 突厥 (Türk)
Henan 河南	Xinluo 新羅·Nippon 日本 (Korea, Japan)
Longyou 隴右	Countries of Central Asia
Jiangnan 江南	Wuxi-Man 五溪蠻 (Ethnic groups of Guizhou)
Jiannan 劍南	Xierhe-Man 西洱河蠻 (Ethnic groups of Yunnan)

Lingnan 嶺南

Baiyue 百越·Linyi 林邑·Funan 扶南 (Northern and southern Vietnam, Cambodia)

In sum, the Tang Dynasty regarded goods received from foreign countries as a part of the empire's tribute (*gong*) system, which was managed by the Shangshu-sheng's Hubu department.

## 2. Tang Imperial Gifts

Regarding the gifts given by the Tang Dynasty in return for foreign tribute, we frequently see them referred to in the sources as *ciwu* 賜物 (imperial gift), although the term does not only refer to gifts given to foreign envoys, but also to gifts given by the emperor to his ministers of state.

In the Zhiguanzhi 職官志 section on bureaucratic duties in *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, concerning an office in the Shangshu-sheng's Hubu department, called the Jinbu 金部, we find,

Ten [sets of] *ciwu*, each set consisting of 3 *pi* (bolts) of silk, 3 *duan* (bolts) of linen and 3 [4?] *tun* of silk fleece.... Ten *ciwu* for foreign envoys, each set consisting of 1 sheet of brocade, 2 *pi* of twill, 3 *pi* of plain silk and 4 *tun* of silk fleece.<sup>2)</sup> (p. 1828)

In this quote (missing from *Datang Liudian*), we see *ciwu* given to foreign envoys listed together with that given to Tang ministers of state. Incidentally, it was this same Jinbu office that managed “the use of gold, silver and other precious items,” while the Cangbu 倉部 office managed “the receipt of taxation and payment of government salaries,” giving the former jurisdiction over the disbursal of imperial gifts.

The *Jiu Tangshu* can be interpreted as designating *ciwu* to be imperial gifts for foreign envoys themselves, not the sovereigns of their countries. On the other hand, for example, in the item dated 5/AD 724 in Vol. 975 of *Cefu Yuanguai* 冊府元龜,

The envoy who arrived to celebrate the New Year sent from Xinluo 新羅 [Korea] under the leadership of Jin Wuxun 金武勳 has returned. The emperor issued an edict addressed to Jin Xingguang 金興光, the King of Xinluo, which said, “I am giving you a brocade tunic, a golden belt and 2,000 *pi* of twill and plain silk in response to your sincerity and devotion. Please take possession of the goods on their arrival.”

(p. 11282)

In what seems to be a sovereign letter to the King of Xinluo, the *guoxin* described here is clearly an imperial gift to the sovereign himself. Also, the amount of *ciwu* is very different from that described in *Jiu Tangshu*. Volumes 974–976 of *Cefu Yuanguai* contain a number of examples of *ciwu*, and there is a surprising amount of cases in which it is difficult to judge whether the gifts are for the envoy or his sovereign, or maybe we should merely assume that the majority were directed to the latter. Here let us look at more examples of the sovereign letters sent by the emperor to tributary sovereigns, like the above document sent to Xinluo.<sup>3)</sup>

At the end of such letters, like the “imperial edict issued to Qayan 可汗 of Türk” drafted by Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 in AD 736 (*Wenyuan Yinghua* 文苑英華 Vol. 468), we find,

I am sending a few gifts, which are listed in detail on an attachment.  
Please take possession of them on their arrival. (p. 2390)

Or in the “imperial edict issued to Qayan of the Uyghur” drafted by Bai Juyi 白居易 in 808,

I am sending a few gifts, as described in detail in the attachment. (p. 2387)

In either case, we see what were lavish amounts of gifts being referred to as “a few baubles” in the customary humble understatement of the time. In the edict of AD 700 appearing in *Tanghuiyao* 唐會要 Vol. 54,

The *ciwu* sent abroad has been recorded in detail by the Zhongshu-sheng 中書省 ministry. Include that list in the box containing this edict. (p. 1087)

This indicates that a “detailed attachment” listing of *ciwu* items would be sent in the same box as the official Chinese sovereign letter. Unfortunately, no such list exists in the extant source materials, which makes it impossible to know what exactly the “details” were. However, in the imperial edicts drafted by Zhang Jiuling we find the following renderings:

a) Imperial edict issued to Nieli 涅禮, the *dudu* 都督 of Kitai 契丹 in 735

(*Wenyuan Yinghua* Vol. 471, p. 2407)

I am now sending you one brocade gown and seven finely decorated belts. Please take possession of them on their arrival.

b) Imperial edict issued to the King of Shighnan in 733 (*ibid.*, p. 2409)

I am now sending to you and your generals 200 *pi* of silk, brocade outer garments, seven gilt belts and some clothing for persons of lesser rank. Please take possession of them.

c) Imperial edict issued to the King of Girgit in 734 (*ibid.*, p. 2410)

I am now sending to you 300 *pi* of silk, a silver flagon and silver platter, a garment and seven gilt belts. Please take possession of them upon their arrival.

Here edict b) includes gifts for persons of aristocratic and minister of state rank. Even when such wording appeared in sovereign letters, there is no doubt the containers holding such gifts held more detail lists of their contents. Therefore, the above edicts, authored by Zhang Jiuling should be seen as mentioning only a sampling of the most important and valuable items sent, which we find to include elaborately woven silk goods like brocade and twill, in addition to belts and utensils made of gold and silver.

### 3. State-Operated Factories for Woven Silk Goods

Let us now turn to ways in which the Tang Dynasty procured such expensive gifts in return for tribute. In the item concerning the position of accountant (*duzhi* 度支) in the Shangshu-sheng's Hubu department, contained in *Datang Liudian* Vol. 3 we find,

Goods made of gold and silver, twill and silk gauze, etc. are all manufactured using tax goods collected under *yong* 庸 (corvée) and *diao* 調 (in kind). (p. 80)

This item can be interpreted as saying that the raw materials for making exquisite goods of silk and precious metals were collected by the Hubu and dispersed by its *duzhi* for manufacture and processing; and if such a reading is correct, we have to consider the possible existence of government-run factories that did the actual work. In the *Datang Liudian* and both the new and old *Tangshu*, we find various government provisions for the manufacture of such high end goods.

The *Datang Liudian* Vol. 22 (Shaofujian 少府監 Zhangyeshu 掌冶署 p.

577) states only that “The head of the Zhangyeshu is in charge of the casting of bronze and iron,” while the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 Vol. 48 (Baiguanzhi 百官志, Zhangyeshu, p. 1271) states that “[The head of the Zhangyeshu] casts gold, silver, bronze and iron, and also processes glass and precious stones.” Here we see craftwork for government use being manufactured under the direction of the Shaofujian agency, one of the five executive arms of the Tang government specifically charged with weaving, jewelry making and mining, through its Zhangyeshu, the office of metal casting. Furthermore, the *Xin Tangshu* states concerning the Shaofujian’s Zhongshangshu 中尚署 office,

Whenever a belt of precious stones or a *yudai* [魚袋; pouch indicating rank] for it is to be bestowed on a foreign envoy, it is to be entrusted to the head of clerical affairs for Honglu-si 鴻臚寺 [the Foreign Ministry]. (p. 1270)

Here we see the above-mentioned gilt belts being sent from the Zhongshangshu to Honglu-si for bestowal upon foreign dignitaries.

As to the woven goods given in return for tribute, there was the Zhiranshu 織染署 office of dying and weaving under the Shaofujian. *Datang Liudian* states,

The head of the Zhiranshu is in charge of outfitting the imperial family and members of the bureaucracy with official crowns and uniforms. (p. 575)

*Datang Liudian* also elaborates on specifications for head-ware and uniforms; while, items on the Shaofujian in *Xin Tangshu* lists the number of the Zhiranshu’s staff as follows.

365 brocade and twill shop weavers (*lingjin-fang qiaoer* 綾錦坊巧兒)  
 83 twill weavers assigned to the palace (*neizuo-shi lingjiang* 內作使綾匠)  
 150 twill weavers for the court ladies (*yeting lingjiang* 掖庭綾匠) (p. 1269)

This item tells us that there were professional weavers employed directly by the Shaofujian under the supervision of its Zhiranshu office.

An item in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記 (Vol. 257) regarding weavers (*zhi*

*jinren* 織錦人) in the brocade shop relates the following story about their origins.

After failing his civil service examination (*keju* 科舉), a young member of the Lu 盧 Family walked to the east side of the entrance to the capital. The wind was freezing as he took a room at an inn there. Another lodger entered the inn right after him. As the two lodgers sat by the fire, the latecomer suddenly began reciting a poem:

“I trained in weaving silk,  
But nothing came of it.  
I threw the shuttle,  
Weaving crazy crisscross patterns.  
I fear meeting the government weavers.  
They will mock my work.”

He continued:

“Nobody pays attention to silk patterns these days.

Being proud of one’s prowess at the loom is meaningless.”

The young Lu was surprised by the recital because it was poem written by the renown Bai Jiyu. Lu asked his companion his name: “My name is Li, from a long line of brocade and twill weavers.” Before leaving home, Li had been employed as a weaver in a government-run factory in Luoyang 洛陽. He had come to the capital in search of employment with its weavers, but was told, “Today’s patterns in woven brocade are different from the old days. No one is interested any more in your weaving technique.” Li then took his leave and headed east. (p. 2005)

The story leaves no doubt that government-operated silk weaving facilities existed in both Chang’an and Luoyang. Therefore, with respect to ways in which the wherewithal was procured to produce gifts for Chinese ministers of state and envoys and sovereign’s of foreign tributaries, it is necessary to reconstruct the production process carried out at such government-operated factories, supervised by the Shaofujian agency.

#### 4. Tang Dynasty Provisions Concerning *Gongxian*

The ways in which the Tang government concentrated wealth produced throughout China into the capital were not limited to forms of tax collection. In the case of the Hebei region described in the *Datang Liu-*



*dian*'s section on the Hubu department, tribute (*gongxian*) was described in far more detail than was taxation (*fu*). In the case of the former, both raw materials and finished craftwork were included in the tribute mix. The same is true for the other nine *dao* regions. The content of listings of tribute items coming into the capital from these regions did not change much on a yearly basis, but rather indicates a steady supply of similar products, which can be interpreted as a system in which the Tang government ordered certain *zhou* districts in each region to submit specific items of tribute.

In Niida Noboru 仁井田陞's reconstruction of the Tang legal statutes (*ling* 令), which have been transmitted to us in a state of disarray, the articles on this *gongxian* system contained in the taxation codes (Fuyi-ling 賦役令) promulgated in the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era are summarized as follows.

Goods submitted by each region as *gongxian* will be limited to products indigenous to that region. Tribute goods will be evaluated in terms of the price of silk and will not exceed the value of 50 *pi*. Local administrators shall purchase them with public funds. [remainder unclear]<sup>4)</sup> (pp. 690–691)

In a handwritten copy of the Northern Song Tiansheng 天聖 Era codes found in 1999 at the Tianyige 天一閣 Library in Ningbo 寧波, there is an addendum containing the articles of the Kaiyuan 25 Tang codes.<sup>5)</sup> The provisions regarding *gongxian* in this copy under article 27 of the Fuyi-ling code are as follows.

All items designated as *gongxian* brought from the provinces to the capital by publically appointed officials shall be goods produced in those specific regions. Such rare goods as gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, ivory and tortoise-shell, textile goods such as leather, feathers, brocade, woolen goods, silk gauze, pongee, twill, silk thread and raw silk, as well as lacquer, honey, incense and medicinal herbs shall all be evaluated in bolts of silk. *Gongxian* goods shall not exceed 50 *pi* in value, nor shall they fall below 20 *pi*. Local administrators shall purchase them from petty expense accounts, not with storehouse grain. All that is required in the transport [of *gongxian*] to the capital is that nothing be broken or tarnished in any manner. The budget must not be wasted on unnecessary repairs. (p. 66, p. 393)

This article, which is similar to Article 35 of the Fueki ryō 賦役令 (Fuyiling) of the Japanese *Yōrō Ryō* 養老令 (Yōrō Era codes), which were promulgated earlier than the Chinese Kaiyuan 25 codes, indicates that the provisions regarding tribute date back to the earliest statutes promulgated by the Tang government.

Shihuzhi 食貨志 in *Xin Tangshu* Vol. 51 sums up provisions concerning *gongxian* as follows.

In purchasing local products every year for *gongxian*, local administrative offices are to decide their prices based on the going price of silk and make no purchases in excess of 50 *pi*. No uncommon goods, rare foodstuffs, humans, horses, hawks, dogs, etc. may be purchased as *gongxian* without the consent of an imperial edict. Any allotment increases [*jiapei* 加配 over 50 *pi*] will be attached to tax revenues [as exemptions]. (p. 1344)

This 50 *pi* quota should be understood as the yearly limit on each person or production unit, not each *zhou* district, and as a levy over and above the regular per capita taxes (*fu*) imposed each year.

## 5. The *Gongxian* System in Practice

In order to ascertain to what extent the tribute system was implemented in Tang China we need to know the situation in the provinces on the local level. Unfortunately, no such village-level records exist. However, there is some Tang period poetry which suggests the actual circumstances surrounding the system. Here are three examples.

1. Wang Jiang 王建, “Zhijin qu 織錦曲” (Weaving Brocade) (*Wang Jiang Shiji* 王建詩集 Vol. 2, p. 18)

A woman of the social status of weaver (*zhijin-hu* 織錦戶)

Whose name had been recorded in the *xian* 縣 district registry.

Her boss submits a sample of her design to the official in charge.

Rumor has it the design is the subject of a complaint.

The embossed flower and leaf design is woven by hand separately.

But on this autumn day, there is fear that the silk thread may shrivel up.

The crimson thread is elegant, the violet thread as soft as a flower petal.

A butterfly dancing among the flowers is the design being woven.  
 The sound of the shuttle being thrown, then again and again.  
 The delicate arms of the woman never rest as the fine silk is woven.  
 Deep into the night her hair droops in waves of drowsiness.  
 Her hairpin falls down on her shoulder.  
 It is long after midnight when she finally falls asleep fully dressed.  
 The light is extinguished, only to be re-lit before the cock crows.  
 One *pi* is worth a thousand in gold, but will not be sold in the market-  
 place.  
 The palace is worried that the work will not be completed on time.  
 The silk is consumed like the waters of the River Jin drying up, but the  
 work is never done.  
 Everyone at the Palace must be outfitted in the finest, sheerest gossa-  
 mer.  
 Never even whisper that the Palace has too much silk!  
 A 100 *chi* (30 meters) bolt is a mere page of poetry there.

In this piece, which contrasts the life of a female weaver in Sichuan 四川 (home of the River Jin) with palace courtesans finely outfitted in the cloth she has woven continuously from morning till night, we find such facts that weavers were registered on a *xian* district basis and that they were organized under bosses, who accepted complaints from the local tribute officials.

2. Yuan Zhen 元稹, “Zhifu Ci 織婦詞” (The Female Weaver) (*Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩 Vol. 12, p. 4607)

Why are you so busy?  
 Because the worms have hibernated three times already and are still  
 trying to spin cocoons!  
 The silkworm goddess is already spinning her thread.  
 And the tax collector is early with his silk thread exactions.  
 But it's not his fault, mind you.  
 Last year, the Court fought a border war with the barbarians.  
 The battle-worn soldiers had to have their wounds dressed.  
 And the highly decorated generals needed their tents repaired.  
 There is spinning and weaving to do!  
 After the thread is spun, it has to be woven sweating over the hand-  
 loom.  
 The old grey-haired twins next door

Are so adept at pheasant wing patterns, that they were too busy to marry.

(Poet's Note: I once observed among the tribute twill weavers (*gongling-hu* 貢綾戶) of Jingzou 荊州 old women who never experienced the life of a bride.)

The silk thread hanging from the eaves waves gently in the breeze.

As spiders cavort deftly back and forth above it.

What is so enviable about these creatures is that they can climb so high.

And skillfully weave such refined webs out of thin air.

In these two poems we find two terms for weavers, *gongling-hu* and *zhijin-hu*, being used to describe similar circumstances with respect to the *gongxian* system.

3. Bai Juyi, “Liaoling 繚綾” (Liaoling Twill) (*Quan Tangshi* Vol. 13, p. 4704)

(Poet's Note: Liaoling is a form of twill indigenous to the Yue 越 people [of coastal Jiangnan]. It was sent to the capital as yearly tribute during the Zhenyuan 貞元 era [of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century].)

What does Liaoling twill resemble?

Not gauzy, gossamer twill, nor the glossy white variety of silk.

Rather, it reminds one of the 45 *chi* [14 m] long bolt of water

That falls over the cliffs of Mt. Tiantai 天臺 shining in the moonlight.

The patterns formed by falling water are extremely remarkable.

Below them rises billows of white vapor in drops as big as snowflakes.

Who weaves Liaoling twill and who actually wears it?

It is woven by impoverished women in the gorges of Yuezhou 越州 to outfit the courtesans at the Palace in Chang'an.

Last year, a messenger was sent from the Court carrying an imperial edict

Ordering the people to follow the designs worn at the Palace.

To weave scenes of geese soaring over the clouds in Autumn.

To dye their cloth with colors reflected on the waterways of Jiangnan in springtime.

To sew garments with wide sleeves and long hems.

Straighten all the wrinkles and carve cutout designs.

Producing beautifully colored tints and shades.

So that at first glance no one flower design seems the same.

The emperor loves to pamper his dancing courtesans at Zhaoyang 昭陽 Palace.

Just one layer of the spring garments he bestows on them costs a thousand in gold.

Never to be worn again once stained with perspiration or make-up.

No one cares if the hems are dragged on the ground or through the mud.

The amount of time and effort needed to weave Liaoling twill

Makes the weaving of standard silk cloth look like child's play.

The troublesome, intricate hand-reeling of the yarn is a painful task.

The sound of the shuttle goes on and on, but produces only a single *chi* [30 cm] of cloth.

If the courtesans at Zhaoyang Palace

Could only see how Liaoling twill is woven, surely they would take better care of it.

Here we observe another, coercive aspect of the *gongxian* system, directions from the Palace to commoners about how to design, weave, cut and sew garments for the aristocracy.

All three works of poetry, written during the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries under the theme of the lives of the women who weave silk and the women who wear it, are by no means attempts to record the actual conditions under which the *gongxian* system operated. On the other hand, given the comments added by Yuan and Bai to their works, the poetry was inspired by direct observations of conditions at specific locations involved in that system. Therefore, they cannot but offer the historian at least one suggestion that the pattern of the re-distribution of brocade and twill manufactured by commoners in the provinces to the capital as described in these mid-Tang period poems was, compared to earlier times, indicative of the more commercially developed economy that would arise during the latter half of the period. It seems that the same situation existed during the reign of Xuanzong (712–756), as indicated by the *Datang Liudan* description of the Hubu department's procurement of *gongxian* tribute goods from the kingdom's *zhou* districts.

Turning back to the subject of tribute and foreign trade, such top grade silk textiles acquired by the Tang court as tribute no doubt found their way into the sphere of foreign tribute in the form of imperial thank-you gifts to foreign dignitaries and sovereigns. For example, in *Tongdian* 通典 Vol. 6, which describes many instances of *tugong* (local tribute) during

Xuanzong's reign, we find among the *tugong* items from Guangling-jun 廣陵郡 (Yangzhou 揚州) "50 outer garments of brocade for foreign envoys." We can regard this garment of brocade as "brocade tunic" written on the sovereign letter to the King of Xinluo mentioned at Chapter 2. The Tang court, especially during the latter half of the period, was not only manufacturing brocade and twill at government-operated weaving shops, but also obtaining a great deal of the best quality silk textiles from local weavers 專戶 through the *gongxian* system, in order to bestow gifts on the representatives of its foreign tributaries. *Gongxian* exactions on local producers were not limited to silk goods, but also included bronze mirrors from Yangzhou, medicinal herbs from Luozhou 洛州, pearls from Lianzhou 廉州 (Lingnan-dao 嶺南道) and *baiyaozi* 白藥子 (*stephania cepharantha* root) from Wuzhou 梧州.<sup>6)</sup> The households who produced or provided such products probably did so on a permanent basis, by virtue of being specialized village craftspeople passing on their skills from generation to generation. These people, not being involved in primary industries, but being burdened with strict time limitations, were able to guarantee their livelihoods by selling their wares to the Tang government for a maximum 50 *pi* of silk per year. In terms of taxes in kind (*diao*), each adult male owed the government one-half *pi* of silk per year, making 50 *pi* of *gongxian* worth the *diao* of 100 men.

## 6. The Task of Warehousing Tribute in the Capital

As to how the taxes and *gongxian* tribute goods brought into the capital and the goods made at state-operated factories were accounted for and disbursed is a question requiring an analysis of the Tang government's storehouse system. The research to date, based on such institutional sources as *Datang Liudian*, has identified three main government storehouses in the capital of Chang'an: the east warehouse, west warehouse and the inner warehouse.<sup>7)</sup> The east and west warehouses, which held tax goods (east warehouse) and *gongxian* (west warehouse), respectively, were managed by the Taifu-si 太府寺 executive agency, while the inner warehouse came under the supervision of the Neishi-sheng 內侍省 (Imperial Household Bureau). Therefore, goods received from foreign tributaries would find their way into the right [west] warehouse, but what about the exquisite silk textiles and precious metal craftware produced at the shops operated under the Shaofujian? In *Datang Liudian*'s descriptions of the Neishi-sheng's Neifu-ju 內府局 office, we find,

At the Court meetings where bureaucrats gather, whenever the emperor bestows such gifts as silk and other textiles, gold and silver products to members of the fifth rank (*pin* 品) and above, the Neifu-ju will oversee the supply of those goods, and similarly in the case of imperial gifts for decorated generals and foreign dignitaries returning home. (p. 361)

*Xin Tangshu* (Vol. 47) has this to say about the Neifu-ju,

This office will supervise the presentation of imperial gifts to members of the fifth rank and above attending Court meetings, as well as decorated generals and foreign dignitaries returning home. (p. 1224)

Since the goods handled by the Neifu-ju were stored in the inner warehouse, imperial gifts specified under the above were supplied from there, including those for foreign dignitaries, leading to the conclusion that the inner warehouse was also the source of Chinese *guoxin*. If this is true, it would follow that products manufactured at government-operated shops would be stored there as well.

The items that the Tang Dynasty presented to foreign visitors and those that its diplomats carried with them abroad were goods of unusually high quality, to signify China's national honor and dignity, and as such were not items rendered as taxes. The tax goods kept in the east warehouse were used for such expenses as paying government salaries and military costs, while gifts bestowed by the emperor were chosen from *gongxian* purchased in the provinces and products manufactured in the government-run shops of the capital, both kept in the inner warehouse. If this is true, then we can only conclude that *gongxian* first delivered to the west warehouse was later transferred to the imperial treasury when needed. According to Kiyokoba Azuma 清木場東, the process began with a goods order made by the Neishi-sheng bureau to the Zhongshu-sheng and Menxia-sheng 門下省 bureaus. After the order was accepted, the Hubu office would make arrangements for disbursement, and the Taifu-si agency would deliver the goods from either the west or east warehouses to the Neishi-sheng.<sup>8)</sup> This means that it was possible for tribute goods received from one foreign country to be transferred from the west warehouse to the inner warehouse for the purpose of imperial gifts for another foreign country.

## Conclusions

It has been a recent trend in the historical study of the so-called “Tang-Song transition” to focus on various changes in social structure that occurred over the relatively long period of time from Tang times through the Northern Song period. What are the implications for such an approach from the perspective of the problems dealt with in the present article?

To begin with, when comparing tax revenue during the mid-Tang period with that of the late Northern Song period, we find a trend away from taxes rendered in hemp cloth to those rendered in silk, to the extent that the Song Dynasty collected one-quarter of the hemp and twice the silk collected by the Tang Dynasty.<sup>9)</sup> Lying in the background to such a change was a large-scale southern expansion of China’s silk production region from the lower Huanghe 黃河 River basin and Sichuan, where the weavers of top quality *gongxian* silk were concentrated during the Tang period, to the region spanning the lower Chanjiang 長江 River basin and Zhejiang 浙江 Province.

Secondly, together with the development of commerce in 9<sup>th</sup> century Tang China, Chinese merchants advanced into the overseas trade.<sup>10)</sup> Of course, the Tang government was not about to allow these merchants to trade freely with other countries, as shown by the frequent regulations it imposed upon them; but at the same time, it is clear that the era of trade structured around state-appointed diplomatic tribute missions, as described in this article, was over. Then the Tang Dynasty fell, giving way to a decentralized Five Dynasties era and intensifying this trend in foreign trade. Then during the Northern Song period, official communiqués issued by the Chinese emperors were, at least on one occasion according to the end of travelogue kept by the Japanese Buddhist monk Jōjin 成尋, *San Tendai Godaisan-ki* 參天臺五臺山記, carried to the Japanese sovereign by one Sun Ji 孫吉, a Chinese merchant, not a diplomat. In other words, as the Tang government collapsed, weakening centralized power, the tributary countries rendering *gongxian* to China wound up losing their main trading partner. It is only natural, therefore, that the silk goods that had been involved in that trade would have to find other buyers.

In Five Dynasties era Zhejiang Province, where silk production was taking off, the small independent kingdom of Wuyue 吳越, developed on the strength of its foreign trade. In the Japanese source, *Honchō Monzui* 本朝文粹 Vol. 7, pp. 169–170, on two occasions, in 947 and 953, Japan sent



official communiqués to Wuyue, which relate that merchants from the kingdom had delivered brocade and twill to Japan. Moreover, the transition from Japanese Tang Dynasty tributary diplomatic missions (*kentōshi* 遣唐使) to foreign trade relations with Song China can be explained in terms of the large-scale geographical and quantitative expansion of silk production in China in conjunction with the decentralization of wealth (i.e., tax revenue). And so, the changes that occurred between the late Tang and Northern Song periods worked to change the character of “tribute,” the symbol of the international order, from the act of exchanging goods through officially dispatched government-appointed diplomatic envoys into a body of fundamental rules followed by foreign trade merchants, as during the Ming and Qing periods.<sup>11)</sup>

### Notes

- 1) Iwami Kiyohiro 石見清裕, *Tō no hoppō mondai to kokusai chitsujo* 唐の北方問題と国際秩序 [The northern tribes question and the international order in Tang China] (Tokyo: Kyūko-shoin 汲古書院, 1998), part 3; *idem*, “Tō no kokusho juyo girei ni tsuite” 唐の國書授與儀禮について [The ceremonial presentation official communiqués by the Tang dynasty], *Tōyōshi kenkyū* 東洋史研究 57, no. 2 (1998), pp. 37–70.
- 2) In premodern China units of weights and measures were calculated into total amounts, but the logic is still unclear.
- 3) There are a total of 95 official communiqués issued by the Tang Dynasty that we know of. See Iwami Kiyohiro, “Tōchō hakkyū no “kokusho” ichiran” 唐朝發給の『國書』一覽 [A list of official communiqués issued by Tang dynasty], *Ajia yūgaku* アジア遊學 (Tokyo) 3 (1999), pp. 39–54.
- 4) The problem of unclarity stems from the fact that the source of the code, *Tongdian* 通典 Vol. 6, p. 112, does not indicate where the quoted article from the code ends.
- 5) The one-volume copy, found by Dai Jianguo 戴建國 in 1999 and entitled *Guanpin-ling* 官品令 was published in 2006 as Tianyige bowuguan 天一閣博物館 and Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan 中國社會科學院, *Tianyige cang Ming chaoben Tianshengling jiaozheng* 天一閣藏明鈔本天聖令校証 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2006). Incidentally, the Kaiyuan codes were not adopted by the Northern Song Dynasty, but were probably included as a reference.
- 6) Miyazono Kazuyoshi 宮蘭和禧, *Tōdai kōkensei no kenkyū* 唐代貢獻制の研究 [The tribute system under the Tang dynasty] (Kita Kyūshū: Kyūshū kyōritsu daigaku chiiki keizai kenkyūjo 九州共立大學地域經濟研究所, 1998).
- 7) Muronaga Yoshizō 室永芳三, “Tōmatsu naiko no sonzai keitai ni tsuite” 唐末內庫の存在形態について [The raison d’être of the imperial treasury in late Tang times], *Shien* 史淵 (Fukuoka) 101 (1969), pp. 93–109; Nakamura Hiroichi 中村裕一, “Tōdai naizōko no hen’yō” 唐末內藏庫の變容 [Evolu-

- tion of the imperial treasury (nei-tzsang-ku) in Tang China], *Machikaneyama ronsō* 待兼山論叢 (Osaka) 4 (1971), pp. 137–168; Kiyokoba Azuma 清木場東, *Teishi no kōzō* 帝賜の構造 [The structure of imperial gift-giving in Tang China] (Fukuoka: Chūgoku shoten 中國書店, 1997), section 1, chap. 2.
- 8) *ibid.*, pp. 411–417.
- 9) Umehara Kaoru 梅原郁, “Hokusō jidai no fuhaku to zaisei mondai” 北宋時代の布帛と財政問題 [Textiles and fiscal issues during the Northern Song period], *Shirin* 史林 (Kyoto) 47, no. 2 (1964), pp. 46–82; Matsui Shūichi 松井秀一, “Tōdai ni okeru sansō no chiikisei ni tsuite” 唐代における蠶桑の地域性について [Regional differences in sericulture in Tang China], *Shigaku-zasshi* 史學雑誌 85, no. 9 (1976), pp. 1–41.
- 10) Yamauchi Shinji 山内晋次, *Nara-Heian-ki no Nihon to Ajia* 奈良平安期の日本とアジア [Japan and Asia during Nara and Heian periods] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan 吉川弘文館, 2003), part 1, chap. 4; Wu Ling 吳玲, “9seiki Tōnichi bōeki ni okeru higasi Ajia shōnin-gun” 九世紀唐日貿易における東アジア商人群 [East Asian merchants involved in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Japan-Tang trade], *Ajia yūgaku* 3 (1999), pp. 96–110; Ma Yihong 馬一虹, “Kodai higasi Ajia no naka no tūji to osa” 古代東アジアのなかの通事と譯語 [Language interpreters and translators in Ancient Eastern-Asia], *Ajia yūgaku* 3 (1999), pp. 111–131; Murakami Fumio 村上史郎, “9seiki ni okeru Nihon ritsuryō-kokka no taigai ninshiki to taigai kōtsū” 九世紀における日本律令國家の對外意識と對外交通 [The Ritsuryō State’s perceptions of and contacts with foreign countries during the ninth century], *Shigaku* 史學 (Tokyo) 69, no. 1 (1999), pp. 25–49.
- 11) Hamashita Takeshi 濱下武志, *Chōkō shisutemu to kindai Ajia* 朝貢システムと近代アジア [The tributary system and modern Asia] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten 岩波書店, 1997).