

Relationship Between Tribute Frequency and Distance to the Tang Political Center

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Abstract. This paper primarily examines the relationship between the straight-line distance from the political centers of Silk Road tributary states to the Tang capital of Chang'an and the number of tribute missions they sent. Unlike many previous studies that focus on bilateral relations between two states, this study places greater emphasis on the overall exchange dynamics among multiple states along the route and seeks to determine whether straight-line distance exerted any meaningful and general influence. The findings ultimately show that, due to the impact of complex factors such as regional military conflicts, there is no discernible pattern between the number of tribute missions and straight-line distance, and the correlation is not particularly strong.

Keywords: Silk Road Tribute System, Military Conflict, Cross-Cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

The Silk Road was the most crucial infrastructure supporting the Tang dynasty's tributary system, serving as the primary route for Middle Eastern and Central Asian states to travel to the Tang capital to pay tribute. Clarifying which factors influenced these tributary states' use of the route—and identifying which factors had the most significant impact—is essential for understanding the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Silk Road during the Tang era, as well as the broader relationship between the Tang dynasty and the Middle East and Central Asia.

Thanks to research by scholars such as Mr. Li Jia, detailed statistics now exist on bilateral relationships between major states like the Abbasid Caliphate and the Tang dynasty, including the number of tribute missions. However, such bilateral data only illuminate individual relationships and cannot fully represent the entire interactive system between the Tang and the various states along the Silk Road. This study aims to explore the relationship between the linear distance to the political center and the frequency of tribute missions from various countries within the Silk Road tributary system. In doing so, it seeks to identify which variables influenced official diplomatic exchanges between the Tang and Silk Road states. Drawing on statistical methods, this paper selects eight countries located at varying distances along the Silk Road—from Chang'an to Constantinople—to examine whether a patterned relationship exists between political center distance and tribute frequency, and attempts to explain any such patterns or the lack thereof.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Sampling method

The eight samples, as shown in table 1, were selected based on the linear distance between the capitals of the tributary states and Chang'an. Using Byzantium (the Eastern Roman Empire) as the farthest reference point, seven additional states were chosen to ensure a balanced distribution across three distance tiers.

Table 1. Tributary missions to the Tang Dynasty by distance to Chang'an

Tributary State	Tribute Missions	Distance to Chang'an (km)
Byzantine	6	6840
Persia	27	5860
Arabic Caliphate	38	5860
An State	23	3954
Kangju	17	3739
Tocharo	27	3611
Gaochang	3	1956
Tuyuhun	3	783.3

Long-distance (4,000–6,000 km): Byzantium, Persia, and the Arabic Caliphates

Medium-distance (2,000–4,000 km): An State, Kang State, and Tuhuoluo

Short-distance (under 2,000 km): Gaochang and Tuyuhun

These tiers represent the geopolitical structure of the Central Asian to Middle Eastern segment of the Silk Road. Dividing the distance into evenly spaced tiers ensures a consistent level of representativeness. Regarding the temporal dimension, the timeline is anchored from the founding of the Tang dynasty in 618 to the usurpation of the throne by Zhu Wen in 907, encompassing all recorded tribute missions during this period.

2.2. Meticulous translation details

All months mentioned in the text refer to the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, not the Gregorian calendar. Moreover, although Mr. Li Jia classifies it as communication between the Umayyad Empire and the Tang Empire, considering the complexity of the Arab imperial regimes during different periods and the Tang dynasty's indiscriminate use of the term in the aforementioned historical sources, this paper uses the term "Arabic Caliphate" to enhance accuracy.

2.3. Statistical method

Upon establishing the sampling model, a corresponding statistical model can be constructed. In this hypothesis, the linear distance to Chang'an serves as the independent variable, while the number of tribute missions serves as the dependent variable.

Due to the lack of established statistical models or computational methods for this kind of analysis, the paper adopts the manual tabulation method employed by Mr. Li Jia in his research [1]. A three-part comparison table was created for each country.

Table 2. Tribute missions from the Arab Caliphates to the Tang Dynasty (651–798 CE) [2-5]

No.	Time	Historical Recording	Sources
1	The Second Year of Yonghui (651), On Yichou Day of the Eighth Lunar Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Dashi (Arab Caliphate) first dispatched envoys to offer tribute.	Old Book of Tang, Vol. 4; New Book of Tang, Vol. 221, Part II
2	The Sixth Year of Xianqing (655), Sixth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to offer tribute.	Old Book of Tang, Vol. 4; Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
3	The First Year of Yongchang (681), Sixth Month	大食国遣使马及方物 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present horses and regional tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
4	The First Year of Tianbao (682), Fifth Month	大食国遣使马及方物 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present regional tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
5	The First Year of Wansui Tongtian (696), Third Month	大食请献师子 — The Arab Caliphate requested to offer a lion as tribute.	Zizhi Tongjian, Vol. 205
6	The Second Year of Chang'an (703), Third Month	大食国遣使马 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present fine horses.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
7	The Second Year of Jingyun (711), Twelfth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present regional tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
8	The Early Years of Kaiyuan (713)	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to the imperial court, presenting horses, jeweled belts, and other regional tribute goods.	Old Book of Tang, Vol. 198; New Book of Tang, Vol. 221, Part II
9	The Fourth Year of Kaiyuan (716), Seventh Month	大食国王穆斯里闵遣使上贡 — Sulayman, King of the Arab Caliphate of Hirimminui, dispatched envoys to present a memorial and tribute, including a gold-threaded robe and jeweled jade wine vessel.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
10	The Seventh Year of Kaiyuan (719), Sixth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to offer tribute.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
11	The Twelfth Year of Kaiyuan (724), Third Month	大食国遣使马及龙脑香 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present horses and camphor.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970
12	The Thirteenth Year of Kaiyuan (725), First Month	大食国遣使苏力及其十二人 — The Arab Caliphate sent its general Suli and twelve others to offer congratulations and present tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 970; Vol. 975
13	The Thirteenth Year of Kaiyuan (725), Third Month	大食国遣使苏莱曼等十三人 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched thirteen envoys, including Sulayman, to present tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
14	The Fourteenth Year of Tianbao (726)	遣苏莱曼等朝贡 — Sulayman was sent as envoy with tribute goods; appointed Guoyi, granted crimson robe and belt.	New Book of Tang, Vol. 221, Part II
15	The Sixteenth Year of Kaiyuan (728), Third Month	大食国领郁及美人入朝 — The Arab leader Tibidu and seven others came; all appointed Commandants and permitted to return.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971

Table 2. (continued)

16	The Seventeenth Year of Kaiyuan (729), Ninth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys; granted silk and return rights.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 975
17	The Twenty-First Year of Kaiyuan (733), Twelfth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate sent Moslian Dagan and others; all granted Guoyi and silk before return.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 975
18	The Twenty-Ninth Year of Kaiyuan (741), Day of Jiashen in the Twelfth Month	大食国领贺萨来朝 — Chieftain Hesa came, appointed General of Left Guard, bestowed robe/belt, permitted return.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 975
19	The Second Year of Tianbao (744), Seventh Month	大食国遣使马及宝器 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present horses and precious objects.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
20	The Fourth Year of Tianbao (745), Fifth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate sent envoys to the imperial court with tribute.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
21	The Fourth Year of Tianbao (745), Fifth Month	大食国王遣使贡豹六头 — The King of the Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to present six leopards.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
22	The First Year of Qianyuan (752), Day of Yichou	黑衣大食国酋长施哈结朝贡 — Arab chieftain Sheodha appointed Tang General, permitted return.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
23	The First Year of Qianyuan (752), Third Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs dispatched envoys to present tribute goods.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
24	The Second Year of Qianyuan (753), Fourth Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to the imperial court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
25	The Second Year of Qianyuan (753), Seventh Month	黑衣大食国遣二十五人来朝 — Twenty-five Arab chieftains came, appointed Commandants, granted robes/belts/tally.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
26	The Second Year of Qianyuan (753), Twelfth Month	黑衣大食国遣使马三十匹 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to present thirty horses.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
27	The Third Year of Qianyuan (754), Fourth Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to the imperial court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
28	The Fourteenth Year of Tianbao (755), Seventh Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to offer tribute.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
29	The Second Year of Zhide (756), Seventh Month	黑衣大食国遣二十五人来朝 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent twenty-five senior chieftains to court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
30	The Second Year of Zhide (757)	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate dispatched envoys to offer tribute.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 971
31	The First Year of Qianyuan (758), First Day of the Fifth Month	回纥与黑衣大食同来朝 — Uyghur envoy Duoyi Haibo and Black-Robed Arab chieftain Naowen both presented tribute; dispute led to separate entry.	New Book of Tang, Vol. 217

Table 2. (continued)

32	The First Year of Baoying (762), Fifth Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to the imperial court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 972
33	The First Year of Baoying (762), Fifth Month	黑衣大食国遣人入朝 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys for audience at court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 972
34	The Fourteenth Year of Dali (769), First Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs dispatched envoys to the imperial court.	Old Book of Tang, Vol. 972
35	The Twelfth Year of Dali (772), Twelfth Month	大食国遣使朝贡 — The Arab Caliphate sent envoys with tribute.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 972
36	The Ninth Year of Dali (774), Seventh Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs dispatched envoys to the imperial court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 972
37	The Seventh Year of Zhenyuan (791), First Month	黑衣大食国遣使朝贡 — The Black-Robed Arabs sent envoys to the imperial court.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 972
38	The Fourteenth Year of Zhenyuan (798), Day of Dingmao in the Ninth Month	以黑衣大食国含遂, 阎沟, 莎比三人来朝 — Black-Robed Arab envoys Hansuo, Yanji, Shabi appointed Commandants, permitted to return.	Cefu Yuangui, Vol. 976; New Book of Tang, Vol. 221, Part II

As shown in the table 2, each tribute instance was manually identified from primary sources using an interpretive approach. The time and corresponding textual description were recorded to support each instance as a distinct tribute record. However, this method has clear limitations: there is no unified standard or computational method for screening the data, and reliance on subjective judgment introduces potential errors. Both Mr. Li's data and the data in this study are susceptible to such inaccuracies. Furthermore, verifying accuracy requires extensive effort. Since the purpose of this paper is to illustrate relative relationships rather than to produce precise quantitative data, these errors remain unresolved for now. It is hoped that future scholars will develop a computational model and unified standards to measure tribute frequency across multiple primary sources, thereby avoiding potential overlaps in statistical counting.

2.4. On the necessity of linear regression

Linear regression, as a widely used method to illustrate the correlation between two variables, could have been employed in this research. However, the sample selected for this study has the following characteristics: First, the sample size is relatively small, limiting the effectiveness of linear regression in revealing the relationship between the variables. Second, when the samples are arranged by the independent variable in order of distance, the main conclusion becomes apparent—that there is no fundamental relationship between the distance from the political center and the number of tribute missions. The data exhibit an irregular distribution, and even a simple visual inspection clearly supports this conclusion. Therefore, constructing a linear regression model is unnecessary for this study. Since the focus of this paper is not on advancing statistical methodology, no further analysis is conducted. Nonetheless, a methodological suggestion is offered here to guide future researchers in developing models that address this theoretical gap.

3. Literature review

In presenting the above statistical model and the results concerning the number of tribute missions from the Dashi, Mr. Li Jia, in his article **Revisiting the Communication between the Tang Dynasty*

and the Umayyad Dynasty: A New Investigation Based on Old Materials, expressed the following view: "Peace and stability formed the keynote of more than a century of political relations between the Tang and the Dashi—the two great empires. Political peace and stability inevitably brought about development and prosperity in economic, cultural, and other spheres. The friendly exchanges between the Tang and the Dashi in the medieval period promoted mutual understanding and interaction between the two sides." [1] This view illustrates Mr. Li Jia's perspective on the political ecology between the Dashi and the Tang dynasty. However, he neither connected this perspective to any variables nor examined the tributary ecology of the numerous smaller states situated between these two great powers.

Huang Xingmin, in his research, further explored the Tang–Dashi relationship in the context of the Silk Road. He argued that one contributing factor was that "an unimpeded Silk Road facilitated close economic and trade ties between the two countries." [6] He also noted that "when the two great empires were at their peak, they ensured the smooth passage of the Silk Road; after their decline, Silk Road trade degenerated into regional trade" [6] Highlighting the importance of the Silk Road to both the tributary system and the system of private trade. Furthermore, the following passage—"In short, this struggle demonstrated the conflict between southern agricultural civilizations (the Arab Empire, the Tang Dynasty) and northern nomadic civilizations (the Western Turks, etc.) over the Silk Road: the agricultural civilizations strove to protect it, while the nomadic civilizations sought vigorously to disrupt it. In fact, however, the nomads also wished to benefit from the trade and cultural exchanges between East and West, and they even directly established a steppe Silk Road." [6] The text briefly outlines the international trade and cultural exchange ecosystem shaped by the Silk Road, using the distinction between nomadic and agricultural civilizations as the central framework. It explains that both types of civilizations relied on the Silk Road system for interaction and mutual benefit. However, Mr. Huang Xingmin does not specifically compare whether countries at different distances experienced variations—due to various factors—in their unofficial or official exchanges via the Silk Road, nor does he identify which factors accounted for such variations.

In the study by Yao Daxue and Zhang Tiantian, they argued that "although during this period the Tang Empire was more advanced than Tukhara in both economic and cultural terms, the civilizational exchanges between the two were not a one-way transmission of technology and goods from the Tang; as a transit hub linking China with Europe, Tukhara also introduced products and culture from Europe and its own region into China." [7] This illustrates the value of Tukhara—as a small state located in the middle segment described above—to the Tang dynasty, as well as the exchange network built upon this value, and how two states of unequal strength interacted along the Silk Road. However, these two scholars did not compare this network with the one that existed between the great empires discussed earlier.

In Chen Yayen's article, another type of ecology found in the short-distance segment is presented: "In the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign, the Tang dynasty launched a campaign against Tuyuhun, after which Tuyuhun became a vassal state dependent on the Tang court. In the third year of the Yonghui reign (652 CE) under Emperor Gaozong, Princess Honghua requested permission to return to the capital to visit her family. Emperor Gaozong (Li Zhi) dispatched Grand General of the Valiant Guard Xianyu Kuangji to escort her. In the eleventh month of the same year, Nuohobo and Princess Honghua arrived in Chang'an and were received by the emperor. Princess Honghua thus became the only one among the fifteen Tang princesses married to frontier peoples who ever returned to her natal home to visit her parents—truly an exceedingly rare fortune." [8] This demonstrates that geographical proximity may have enabled a tributary state to engage in a broader range of

interactions with the Tang dynasty. However, the author did not thoroughly explore whether such close relations were directly influenced by distance or if other variables played a role in this relationship.

Overall, previous researchers have primarily focused on interactions between the Tang dynasty and individual tributary states, aiming to explain the forms of bilateral exchanges, their causes, and summarizing the dominant theme of Silk Road exchanges at the time as peace. However, they have not conducted comparative analyses to explore the overall dynamics of the Silk Road's exchange ecology, nor have they examined which variables exerted a general influence across the entire route. Even less attention has been given to tribute—an official form of interaction. Therefore, this paper investigates whether the variable of straight-line distance between political centers exerted a general influence on the exchange ecology along the Tang-to-Middle East section of the Silk Road.

Furthermore, similar to Xu Xuya's work [9], this study also considers the overall chronology and frequency of tribute missions by providing a comprehensive tabulation of records. Xu's primary contribution lies in compiling and systematizing the data into a general chronological framework, offering an indispensable foundation for subsequent scholarship. However, his analysis does not focus on examining the influence of any single variable—such as geographical distance—on the frequency of tribute missions. Instead, Xu's work emphasizes the descriptive details of the exchanges themselves, including the ritual, cultural, and political dimensions embedded in tributary practices. In contrast, the present study seeks to address this gap by shifting the analytical lens toward the potential causal impact of specific factors. By explicitly testing whether linear distance exerts any measurable influence on the frequency of tribute missions, this paper provides a complementary perspective to Xu's broader descriptive synthesis, thereby extending the scholarly conversation from general documentation to explanatory analysis.

Some scholars have pursued research closely aligned with the focus of this study. For example, in the introduction to his book *A Study of the Tributary System of the Tang Dynasty's Foreign Relations* [10], Li Yehong summarized: "In summary, scholars have made significant achievements in the study of the tributary system, but research on its actual implementation remains insufficient. Moreover, the academic community has not clearly distinguished between the tributary system involving the Central Plains dynasties and surrounding states, and that involving the Central Plains dynasties and frontier ethnic groups." Building on this assessment, Li approached the tributary system itself as his principal point of entry, concentrating on the institutional transformations and adjustments that occurred during specific historical periods. However, his research remained largely focused on the overall structure and nature of the system, rather than investigating how particular variables influenced the frequency of tribute missions, the extent of such influence, and the reasons behind these variations. In other words, while Li's work significantly advanced our understanding of the tributary system at a macro level, the micro-level details and causal mechanisms he did not explore constitute the core research significance of the present study.

4. Discussion on the correlation of distance

Based on the table above, it is clear that there is no relationship between the straight-line distance from a tributary state's political center to Chang'an and the number of tribute missions sent. Statistically, no consistent pattern emerges across long-, medium-, or short-distance cases. For example, among the long-distance states, there are significant differences in the figures: Byzantium, the farthest, sent only six tribute missions, whereas the Dashi—second farthest—sent thirty-eight. Meanwhile, Sogdiana (An), which is closer than the Dashi, sent twenty-three missions, and Tukhara, even closer than Sogdiana, sent twenty-seven.

believe the following factors contributed to the excessive number of variables, making it impossible to establish stable trade relations. First, the eastward expansion of the Dashi caused instability along the Central Asia-to-Middle East section of the Silk Road, preventing various states—except for the Dashi themselves, who were engaged in military disputes—from developing a fixed, periodic tribute pattern. Second, due to the impact of warfare, the status of various states was unstable. There were frequent instances in which tribute was interrupted because of military conflicts with either the Tang dynasty or the Dashi. For example, after Persia was conquered by the Dashi, members of its royal family fled to the Tang court—a situation in which it is difficult to determine whether such contact should be classified as tribute.

In summary, due to the influence of these other variables, the effect of the single variable—the straight-line distance between political centers—on the number of tribute missions becomes negligible.

Hypotheses and Preliminary Exploration of Factors Leading to Low Correlation Based on the above, the impact of warfare appears to be substantial. Through statistical analysis, this study finds that nearly all tributary states experienced factors affecting tribute—such as regime collapse—primarily as a result of military conflicts. The specific details are listed below:

Table 3. Termination of tribute relationships with Tang China

Tributary State	Reason for Termination of Tribute Relationship with Tang China
Byzantine	Did not terminate
Persia (波斯)	Destroyed by the Umayyad Caliphate
Umayyad Caliphate (大食)	Did not terminate
Anguo (安国)	Did not terminate
Kangguo (康国)	Destroyed by the Umayyad Caliphate
Tocharo (吐火罗)	Did not terminate
Gaochang (高昌)	Conquered by Tang China
Tuyuhun (吐谷浑)	Conquered by Tang China

As demonstrated above, the vast majority of tributary states experienced fluctuations in political stability and diplomatic relations due to military conflicts with either the Dashi or the Tang dynasty. These conflicts undoubtedly influenced the frequency of tribute missions to some extent. For instance, military confrontations with the Dashi, which resulted in military pressure or regime collapse, had a significant impact on the recorded number of tribute missions throughout the Tang dynasty's existence. Similarly, military conflicts with the Tang dynasty could directly sever tributary relations. In summary, even countries located relatively close to Chang'an were unable to increase the frequency of tribute missions based solely on geographical proximity. This paper argues that military conflict was the primary reason why distance had a minimal effect on the number of tribute missions.

Furthermore, tribute was also, to some extent, influenced by factors such as national strength. However, since this paper focuses on the effect of distance as a single variable and examines why the influence of this factor on the number of tribute missions was not significant, it does not discuss in detail the direct impact of other factors. It is hoped that future scholars will build upon the ideas presented here to further investigate the primary relationships between additional factors and the number of tribute missions during this period.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the influence of numerous other factors, the straight-line distance between political centers did not serve as an effective variable for determining the number of tribute missions to the Tang dynasty. A principal factor hypothesized in this paper to explain this phenomenon is military conflict. Adopting a holistic perspective, this study examines the overall tribute ecology of the Silk Road through statistical analysis, rather than focusing narrowly on the point-to-point exchange model between a single tributary state and the Tang dynasty, as previous research has done. It also explores one potential factor of general influence. It is hoped that future scholarship will employ this conceptual framework to conduct further studies in this series, progressively examining the impact of various factors on the number of tribute missions, refining statistical models for tribute frequency, and ultimately enabling a synthesis across multiple works to summarize the correlations between key factors and tribute during this historical period.

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