

# Chinese References To "western Barbarians" In The Tang Dynasty Included Which Group Of People?

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The Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) stands as one of the most illustrious periods in Chinese history, characterized by cultural flourishing, territorial expansion, and vibrant interactions with neighboring peoples and distant civilizations. During this era, Chinese texts and historical records frequently referenced various groups of people considered "barbarians" or non-Han peoples, especially those located to the west of China. Among these, the term "western barbarians" was commonly used in Chinese sources to describe a diverse array of peoples inhabiting regions beyond the western frontier, particularly Central Asia and the Eurasian steppes. Understanding which groups of people were referred to as "western barbarians" during the Tang Dynasty provides valuable insights into the period's geopolitical landscape, cultural interactions, and perceptions of foreign peoples.

In this article, we will explore the key groups included under the Chinese references to "western barbarians" during the Tang Dynasty, analyze the context and implications of these references, and examine the historical interactions between the Chinese empire and these peoples.

## Defining the Term "Western Barbarians" in the Tang Context

The Chinese term often used in historical texts to describe "barbarians" is "夷" (Yí) or "胡" (Hú), with "胡" being more specifically associated with peoples from the northern and western frontiers, especially Central Asia and the Eurasian steppes. During the Tang Dynasty, these terms were used broadly to denote various nomadic and semi-nomadic groups perceived as culturally different or outside the Han civilization.

The term "western barbarians" generally refers to peoples located to the west of the Chinese empire, encompassing a wide geographical area that included Central Asia, the Iranian plateau, and parts of Eastern Europe, depending on the context. These groups often interacted with the Tang dynasty through trade, warfare, alliances, and cultural exchanges.

## Major Groups Referred to as "Western Barbarians" in the Tang Dynasty

The Chinese historical records, such as the "Old Book of Tang" (Jiu Tang Shu), "New Book of Tang" (Xin Tang Shu), and various annals, mention several prominent groups categorized as "western barbarians." These include:

# 1. The Turks (回纥 Tūjué)

## Background

The Turks were a prominent nomadic confederation originating from the Central Asian steppes. They played a crucial role in the political and military affairs of the region during the Tang Dynasty.

## References in Chinese Sources

- The Turks are frequently described as "回" (Hú) or "回纥" (Tūjué) in Chinese texts.
- They established the Göktürk Khanate, which was a significant power to the west of China.
- The Tang dynasty engaged in both warfare and alliances with various Turkic tribes, recognizing their importance as neighbors and rivals.

## Cultural and Political Interactions

- The Turks served as intermediaries in Silk Road trade.
- Tang emperors sometimes installed Turkic princes as vassals or allied them against common enemies.

# 2. The Tibetans and Western Tibetan Groups

While Tibet is often considered a distinct cultural sphere, some western Tibetan groups were sometimes included under the umbrella of "western barbarians" in Chinese records, especially when referring to border conflicts or alliances.

# 3. The Sogdians (昭武九姓 Sùtè)

## Who Were the Sogdians?

- An Iranian people from Central Asia, primarily based in Sogdiana (modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan).
- Renowned as merchants and traders along the Silk Road.

## Chinese References

- Although not always called "barbarians," the Sogdians were often described as foreign merchants and intermediaries who maintained distinct cultural practices.
- They played a significant role in facilitating trade between China and Persia, Byzantium, and India.

# 4. The Western Iranian and Iranian-speaking Peoples

Groups such as the Persians (Iranians) and other Iranian-speaking peoples of Central Asia were also referred to collectively as "western barbarians" in some Chinese sources, especially when involved in warfare or diplomacy.

## 5. The Uighurs (回鹘 Huíhé)

### Background

- The Uighurs were a Turkic-speaking nomadic people from the region of modern-day Xinjiang.
- They became prominent allies of the Tang Dynasty after the collapse of the Eastern Turkic Khaganate.

### References in Chinese Records

- The Uighurs are often described as "回" (Hú) or "回鹘" (Huíhé) in Tang texts.
- They established their own khanate and frequently interacted with the Chinese court, sometimes as enemies, sometimes as allies.

## 6. The Mongols (蒙古 Měnggǔ) and Other Nomadic Tribes

Although the Mongols rose to prominence later, some early references to nomadic peoples in the Mongolian plateau appear in Tang records, often grouped under the broad category of "barbarians" from the west.

## Historical Context and Significance of these References

Understanding how the Tang Dynasty depicted "western barbarians" provides insights into the Chinese worldview, diplomatic strategies, and cultural perceptions.

### 1. Perception and Cultural Attitudes

- The Chinese viewed these groups as culturally distinct, often associating them with nomadism, martial prowess, and sometimes barbaric customs.
- Despite this, there was also admiration for their military skills and their role in facilitating trade.

### 2. Diplomatic and Military Engagements

- The Tang engaged in complex diplomacy, forming alliances, paying tribute, or engaging in wars.
- The "western barbarians" were both threats and partners, depending on the circumstances.

### 3. Role in the Silk Road and Trade

- Many of these groups acted as intermediaries along the Silk Road.
- Their interactions contributed to the cultural and technological exchanges that defined the period.

## Impacts of These Interactions

The relationships between the Tang Dynasty and "western barbarians" had profound implications:

- **Political Alliances and Conflicts:** Alliances with the Uighurs and Turkic tribes helped stabilize the western borders and provided military support.
- **Trade and Cultural Exchange:** The interactions facilitated the spread of Buddhism, technological innovations, and cultural practices.
- **Military Campaigns:** Tang campaigns against certain groups, like the Western Turks, shaped territorial control and influence.

## Conclusion

The Chinese references to "western barbarians" during the Tang Dynasty encompassed a diverse array of peoples, chiefly including the Turks, Uighurs, Sogdians, Persians, and various Central Asian nomads. These groups played critical roles in the political, military, and economic landscape of the period, shaping the history of the Silk Road and the broader Eurasian world. While the Chinese perception often categorized these peoples as "barbarians," the reality was far more complex, involving intricate alliances, cultural exchanges, and mutual influences. Recognizing the diversity and significance of these "western barbarian" groups enriches our understanding of the vibrant interactions that defined the Tang Dynasty's frontier regions and contributed to the dynamic history of Eurasia.

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Keywords for SEO: Tang Dynasty, western barbarians, Chinese historical records, Turkic peoples, Uighurs, Sogdians, Central Asia, Silk Road, Tang diplomacy, nomadic tribes, Chinese frontier, Eurasian interactions, Tang Dynasty foreign relations

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Who were the 'Western Barbarians' referenced in Tang Dynasty Chinese texts?

The 'Western Barbarians' in Tang Dynasty texts primarily referred to various nomadic groups and peoples from Central Asia and beyond, such as the Tibetans, Turks, Sogdians, and other Central Asian tribes.

### How did the Tang Dynasty Chinese refer to the 'Western Barbarians' in their historical records?

They often used terms like 'Xiyou' (Western barbarians) or specific group names, highlighting their perception of these peoples as foreigners or outsiders from the western regions beyond China's

borders.

## **Which specific groups of people were included under the term 'Western Barbarians' during the Tang Dynasty?**

The term included groups such as the Tibetans, Turkic peoples (like the Uighurs and Karluks), Sogdians, and other Central Asian nomads and tribes that interacted with or threatened the Chinese empire.

## **What was the Tang Dynasty's attitude towards the 'Western Barbarians' as reflected in their literature and official records?**

The attitude was often mixed, portraying these groups as both enemies and trading partners. While sometimes depicted as barbaric or hostile, there was also acknowledgment of their role in diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange.

## **Did the 'Western Barbarians' influence Tang Chinese culture or politics?**

Yes, many Western Barbarians, especially the nomadic tribes, influenced Tang politics through alliances and conflicts. They also contributed to cultural exchanges, including art, religion, and technology, enriching Tang civilization.

## **How did the perception of 'Western Barbarians' change over the course of the Tang Dynasty?**

Initially viewed as external threats or barbarians, over time, some groups became integrated into the Tang political system or engaged in diplomatic relations, leading to more complex and nuanced perceptions of these peoples.

## **Additional Resources**

Chinese References To "Western Barbarians" In The Tang Dynasty Included Which Group Of People?

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) is often heralded as a golden age of Chinese civilization, marked by vibrant cultural exchange, territorial expansion, and a cosmopolitan outlook that embraced diverse peoples and cultures. Among the numerous facets of Tang society that reveal its interactions with foreign groups, the references to "Western Barbarians" (西夷, Xī Yí) stand out as a significant aspect of its foreign relations and cultural perceptions. These references not only shed light on the Tang worldview but also illuminate the complex dynamics of intercultural contact along the Silk Road and beyond.

This article delves into the historical and textual evidence pointing to which groups of people the Tang Chinese referred to as "Western Barbarians," exploring their origins, identities, and the nature of Tang perceptions. By examining primary sources, archaeological findings, and scholarly interpretations, we aim to clarify the scope of these references, emphasizing the importance of understanding the ethnic and cultural identities of these "barbarian" groups within the broader context of Tang foreign

relations.

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## Understanding the Concept of "Western Barbarians" in Tang China

Before identifying specific groups, it is essential to grasp what the term "Western Barbarians" (西夷, Xī Yí) entailed in Tang Chinese discourse. The term "夷" (Yí) historically denoted non-Han peoples considered culturally or ethnically "barbarian," a designation rooted in ancient Chinese ethnocentric worldview. When combined with "西" (Xī, meaning "west"), it specifically pointed to peoples residing to the west of China, often beyond the borders of the Chinese empire, along the Eurasian frontier.

During the Tang Dynasty, the empire's territorial reach extended into Central Asia, and its cosmopolitan capital, Chang'an, was a melting pot of diverse cultures. The Chinese perception of "Western Barbarians" was shaped by political, military, and trade interactions, often blending diplomatic narratives with ethnographic descriptions. The terminology evolved over time, but in general, "Western Barbarians" encompassed a broad array of peoples, often distinguished from the "Northern" or "Southern Barbarians" based on geographical location and cultural traits.

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## Primary Groups Referred to as "Western Barbarians" in Tang Sources

Historical texts, including official histories, diplomatic reports, and geographical treatises, provide clues about which groups the Tang considered "Western Barbarians." Among these, several prominent groups emerge:

### 1. The Sogdians and Central Asian Steppe Peoples

Who were they?

The Sogdians (Sogdian: Sūg), originating from the region of Sogdiana in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, were a prominent Iranian-speaking people known for their role as merchants along the Silk Road. They served as intermediaries between China, Persia, Byzantium, and India.

Tang references:

The Sogdians are frequently mentioned in Tang texts, especially in the context of trade and diplomatic missions. While they were highly integrated into the Silk Road economy, Chinese descriptions sometimes categorized them as "Western Barbarians" due to their non-Han ethnicity and distinct culture. The Old Book of Tang and the New Book of Tang include sections describing Sogdian customs, clothing, and religious practices, often framing them as foreign but vital trading partners.

Key features:

- Skilled merchants and diplomats

- Practitioners of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism
- Resided in city-states like Samarkand and Bukhara

## 2. The Western Turkic Khaganates and Other Central Asian Turks

Who were they?

The Turkic peoples, including the Western Turkic Khaganates, inhabited vast regions of Central Asia. They were often in conflict or alliance with Chinese states and played a significant role during the Tang Dynasty.

Tang references:

The Chinese court often viewed Western Turkic tribes as "barbarians," especially in military contexts. Yet, some Turkic groups, such as the Uighurs, eventually allied with the Tang, becoming integral to its foreign policy. The Tang Huiyao and other chronicles describe their customs, military prowess, and political structures.

Key features:

- Nomadic pastoralists
- Sometimes allied with Chinese forces or raided Chinese borders
- Converted to Buddhism and Manichaeism in some cases

## 3. The Tocharians and Eastern Iranian Peoples of the Tarim Basin

Who were they?

The Tocharians, an Indo-European group, inhabited the oasis cities of the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang). They were known for their distinctive language, culture, and Buddhist art.

Tang references:

The Chinese recognized the Tocharians as distinct from the Han Chinese and other Central Asian peoples. They are often referred to as "Western Barbarians" in geographical texts, especially in relation to their location in the far west of the Chinese world. Their cities, like Kucha and Turfan, served as important religious and cultural hubs.

Key features:

- Practitioners of Buddhism
- Known for silk, textiles, and religious art
- Multilingual, speaking Tocharian and other Iranian languages

## 4. The Xiongnu and Other Western Nomadic Tribes

Who were they?

Though primarily associated with northern China, some western branches of nomadic tribes like the Xiongnu and subsequent groups such as the Rouran and Hephthalites extended into the western regions.

Tang references:

While more often categorized as northern or central Asian tribes, some western nomadic groups interacted with the Chinese frontier, sometimes classified under the broad label of "Western Barbarians" due to their distant and semi-barbaric status in Chinese eyes.

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# Ethnographic and Cultural Characteristics of "Western Barbarians"

The Chinese sources often described these groups through a combination of ethnographic detail, cultural stereotypes, and diplomatic narratives. Common themes included:

- Clothing and Adornment: Many "Western Barbarians" were depicted as wearing distinctive clothing, often involving animal pelts, metallic ornaments, or unusual headgear.
- Religious Practices: The spread of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and local animist traditions among these groups was noted, highlighting their religious diversity.
- Language and Script: Many of these peoples spoke Iranian, Turkic, or Indo-European languages, often using scripts different from Chinese characters.
- Political and Social Structures: Descriptions often emphasized nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, tribal confederations, or city-states.
- Trade and Diplomacy: These groups served as intermediaries, military allies, or enemies, depending on the political context.

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## Historical Context and Evolution of "Western Barbarians" Perceptions

### Early Tang Interactions with Western Peoples

In the early 7th century, the Tang Dynasty expanded westward, establishing diplomatic relations with Central Asian states. The famous embassy of the Sogdian merchants and the diplomatic missions from the Western Turkic Khaganates were seen as evidence of the dynamic, albeit foreign, world beyond China's western frontier.

### Changes During the Silk Road Flourishing

The Tang period saw a surge in trade, cultural exchange, and religious diffusion, which led to more nuanced perceptions. While "barbarian" was still a common label, there was also recognition of the sophistication, wealth, and cultural achievements of many of these groups.

## **Decline of the "Barbarian" Label**

Over time, as some western peoples became allies or integrated into the Chinese court system—such as the Uighurs—they transitioned from "barbarians" to valued allies or tributary states. This reflects an evolving perception that moved beyond simplistic ethnocentric stereotypes.

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## **Conclusion: Which Group of People Were Referred to as "Western Barbarians"?**

In the context of the Tang Dynasty, the term "Western Barbarians" was an umbrella descriptor encompassing several distinct groups, primarily:

- The Sogdians of Central Asia, renowned as merchants and cultural intermediaries.
- The Turkic tribes, including the Western Turks and later the Uighurs, as nomadic warriors and political entities.
- The Tocharians of the Tarim Basin, notable for their Buddhist culture and distinct Indo-European language.
- Occasional references to Western nomadic tribes like the Hephthalites and remnants of the Xiongnu.

These groups shared common traits in Chinese perception: they were located in the western frontier, spoke languages different from Chinese, practiced religions alien to Confucian traditions, and often led nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles. Yet, the Tang Dynasty's interactions with these peoples also reflect a complex mixture of suspicion, admiration, diplomacy, and cultural exchange.

Understanding these references provides valuable insights into the cosmopolitan nature of the Tang Empire and its multifaceted view of the peoples beyond its western borders. It underscores the importance of viewing historical "barbarians" not merely as uncivilized others but as active participants in the dynamic history of Eurasia's interconnected world.

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