



**The Interconnections Between the Military Reforms of the
Tang Dynasty and the Decline of the Empire**

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Abstract

The first half of the 8th century represents not only the peak of the Tang Dynasty's power, but is also frequently regarded as the Golden Age of China. However, every peak is inevitably followed by a decline - a process that, in the case of the Tang Dynasty, began in the second half of the century. What was the main cause of this decline? At first glance, the answer seems quite simple if we consider the key period mentioned above. It was the An Lushan Rebellion (756–762), which is still considered one of the bloodiest and most devastating events in Chinese history.

However, the An Lushan Rebellion was, in reality, only the final manifestation of unresolved issues that had plagued the empire for decades and ultimately triggered its irreversible decline. To thoroughly investigate this topic, it is essential to unpack and analyze each

of these problems in detail, in order to understand their severity and significance.

Many scholars believe that the primary cause of the Tang Dynasty's decline was the military reforms carried out in the 8th century, which contributed to the outbreak of the rebellion. However, considerable attention is also given to the 20-year period, when Emperor Xuanzong largely withdrew from the affairs of state prior to the rebellion. This not only weakened the institution of the emperor but also facilitated the emergence and growth of several internal factions.

The article focuses particularly on the breakdown of the "Equal-Field System" and its broader impact. This system had served as a cornerstone of the Tang Empire's military and economic structure since the first half of the 7th century. Moreover, its disintegration became a catalyst for deeper transformations in Chinese history, most notably the disappearance of the free peasantry.

Keywords: military reforms, An Lushan Rebellion, Tang Dynasty, Fubing, Equal-Field System.

Introduction

The Tang Dynasty (618–907) not only unified a fragmented China, but also launched numerous military campaigns into Central Asia. These expeditions, along with control over the Silk Road, expanded the empire's territories. The Tang Empire reached the peak of its power during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (712–756). However, the last 20 years of his rule marked a transitional period for the dynasty, which ultimately led to the end of the Tang's Golden Age. This transitional phase culminated in the An Lushan Rebellion (755–762), which nearly brought the entire Tang Dynasty to collapse. A

crisis at the imperial court, external pressures, a new military system, and other contributing factors gave the general An Lushan enough power to rebel against the emperor (Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank (1979). *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 3, 589–906, Part 1. Cambridge University Press:150).

The period under research in this article corresponds precisely to this transitional phase. Specifically, it seeks to explain the nature of the military reforms introduced under Emperor Xuanzong and to what extent these reforms contributed to the decline of the empire. Based on these core issues, the research centers around three main questions: What was the main reason behind the military reforms in the empire? What influence did these military reforms have on the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion? Were military reforms the primary cause of the empire's decline? There are numerous significant foreign academic works on this topic, which explore the issues from various perspectives. Clear examples include Edwin Pulleyblank's work *The Background of the An Lushan Rebellion*, *The Cambridge History of China* (Chapter 3), among others.

Methods

The information presented in this article is primarily based on sources in Georgian, Chinese, and English. A comparative analysis is also employed.

Results

There are many studies on this topic in the global academic sphere. This article attempts to present the transitional period in Tang Dynasty history from a new perspective and represents a step forward in the study of medieval Chinese history in Georgia.

Discussion

Causes of the Decline of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty's successful military campaigns in the 7th century were primarily based on the Fubing military system (府兵 - fǔbīng), which originated in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–535) and was further refined during the Sui Dynasty (581–618) (Ranitzsch, Karl Heinz (1995). *The Army of Tang China*:10).

In the Fubing army, free peasants aged 20 to 60 were required to serve. They were granted land by the state through the Equal-Field System, and periodically served on the frontiers, at the imperial court, in the capital, or worked their own lands (于汝波, 杨希义 (1997). *唐朝论略.军事历史研究*:83). These free peasants, who held land bestowed by the emperor, were obligated to fight under his command when needed (张涛 (2021); 杜焱博. *唐朝兵役制度和后勤制度变迁下的军事审计*. *国防科技*:136).

One of the main advantages of an army based on the Fubing principle was the ability to carry out pre-planned campaigns. Since most Fubing soldiers were granted land in provinces surrounding the capital, mobilizing them was relatively easy. Up until the end of the 6th century, the empire's main adversaries were nomadic Turkic tribes, whose sudden invasions inflicted great damage. In response, during the reign of Emperor Taizong of Tang, multiple targeted military strikes and campaigns were launched. As a result, the Fubing army defeated and dismantled both the Eastern and Western Turkic Khagانات. These victories served as great motivation for soldiers, especially as military promotion was based on merit. For free peasants, a military career became a path to stable income and potential upward social mobility. Even the nobility joined the Fubing army, lured by the opportunity for fame and distinction (Newark, Tim (1961). *Warlords: Ancient, Celtic, Medieval*, p. 339 // Umair Mirza (2012). *China at War – An Encyclopaedia*, p. 4; 江增庆 (2005). *中国通史纲要*:286).

Despite the Fubing system's success, a military reform was implemented in 738. Then what was the reason for the reform when the existing system had delivered such outstanding military achievements?

First, we should consider the argument concerning overpopulation. Historians examining the mid-8th century Tang crisis often point to the empire's large population, which the existing economic system could no longer support. There was a shortage of arable land, and with population growth, the demand for food, especially in large cities, rose dramatically. This posed a serious economic threat, which, in turn, contributed to the onset of significant changes within the empire (Cotterell, Arthur (1975). *China: An Integrated Study*:99 // Dawson, Raymond Stanley (1976). *Imperial China*: 97).

However, countering this view is the fact that, according to available data, China's population growth occurred over a span of roughly 50 years and peaked in the mid-8th century (approx. 90 million). But problems within the Fubing system were already evident earlier. Since the 7th century, the empire had suffered several significant defeats and was under increasing pressure.

Some historians also link the beginning of the military reforms to the breakdown of the Equal-Field System. By the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century, rising corruption and increasing taxes on the lower classes gradually forced free peasants to abandon their land or transfer it to large landowners. Eventually, these displaced peasants became wage laborers for wealthy landowners. This trend had major implications for the empire. Most important, these peasants lost their status as free landholders, instead of paying taxes to the state, they paid their landlords. They also no longer served in the military, which weakened the Fubing army from the late 7th century

onward (Dawson, Raymond Stanley (1976). *Imperial China*: 97 // Rodzinski, Witold (1979). *A History of China*:127).

This opinion is certainly worth considering; however, we must also present a counterargument. The collapse of the “Equal Field System” and the decline of the free peasantry did not occur within a few decades. The process lasted over a century and only accelerated after the An Lushan Rebellion, rather than before it. Despite deepening corruption, illegal land seizures, and other issues, the situation was not yet so catastrophic that, during the period of demographic explosion, the empire could not muster enough soldiers.

A third and frequently cited factor in discussions of military reforms is the external pressure on the empire. By the end of the 7th century, the Tang Dynasty faced more powerful neighbours than in earlier period of the century. These included the Arabs and the Tibetan Empire to the west, Turkic tribes to the north, and Nanzhao to the south (a kingdom in what is now southern China during the 8th–9th centuries) (Rodzinski, Witold (1979). *A History of China*: 127). Furthermore, rather than facing only nomadic Turkic tribes, who could be dealt with through targeted strikes using the Fubing army, the Tang Empire began to encounter entirely new kinds of adversaries. This is especially true for powers such as the Tibetan Empire and the Arab Caliphate. These powerful empires could not be repelled with just a few military victories (Jacques Gernet (2002). *A History of Chinese Civilisation*, Volume I: 255).

Facing such formidable opponents, deploying an army based on the Fubing model became problematic due to its structural characteristics. In the 7th century, the main internal military goal of the Tang Empire was to strengthen the center, so the emperor could more easily govern the newly unified empire. For that reason, land was granted to soldiers in provinces surrounding the capital, which also

aligned with the soldiers' own desire to be actively involved (Pull-eyblank, Edwin G (1982). *The Background of the Rebellion of An Lushan* // Umair Mirza (2012). *China At War – An Encyclopaedia*, p. 4). In the early stages of the empire, the Fubing-based army was extremely advantageous, requiring less maintenance, proving effective, and remaining loyal to the emperor. However, this model left the expanded borders vulnerable when new powerful neighbouring forces emerged. Fubing soldiers were not motivated to fight for border regions distant from the imperial center.

For this reason, the emperor eventually decided to replace the Fubing reservist army with a powerful regular army, also known as a professional or mercenary army (募兵制, mùbīngzhì). This new type of army was governed under the military governor (jiedushi) system. Each military governor had full control over the army in their assigned region, enabling rapid responses to any emerging threat. These governors commanded ten border provinces and led a force of approximately 500,000 troops (Marine Jibladze (2022). *History of China*. Golden Fleece Publishing, Tbilisi).

Given the above views and arguments, it is clear that the main driving force behind the military reforms was external pressure on the empire. The empire had shifted focus from expansion to border defence and preservation. For this purpose, a permanent, professional army was required. At the same time, the weakening Fubing army no longer met the empire's needs.

The second issue to explore is the extent to which these military reforms contributed to the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion in 755. Were the reforms the main trigger? Before discussing the question directly, a brief overview of An Lushan and the rebellion he led is necessary.

An Lushan was likely of Turkic origin. According to Chinese sources, he joined the Tang army in 732 under the command of General Zhang Shougui. Thanks to his cleverness, skill, and bravery, he rose quickly through the ranks and even became the general's adopted son. An Lushan also demonstrated his political shrewdness at the imperial court. He gained key allies, initially with Chancellor Li Linfu and later with Yang Guifei, and eventually earned the trust of Emperor Xuanzong. By 751, An Lushan had become the military governor of three north-eastern provinces (Luo Shui Rong (2010). *An Lushan and Emperor Xuanzong*. College of History and Culture, South China Normal University, Guangdong, Guangzhou, p. 88). However, sharp tensions with the new chancellor, Yang Guozhong, gradually distanced An Lushan from the imperial court.

Some historians, rather than focusing on military reforms, emphasize An Lushan's foreign—Turkic—origin and the composition of his private army, which included many foreign tribesmen. The promotion of foreigners within the Tang military was not a new phenomenon and had long-standing tradition within the dynasty. However, during Emperor Xuanzong's reign, this trend became far more widespread. The main initiator of this policy was Chancellor Li Linfu, who controlled the empire from 736 to 752. He systematically eliminated his political opponents and promoted many foreigners in the military system so that they would rely solely on him at the imperial court (David R. Petriello (2016). *General Military History of China*: 259–260). While this view deserves attention, it is difficult to consider An Lushan's and his allies' foreign origins as the primary cause of the rebellion. History contains many examples where, once individuals gained enough power, personal ambition became a more decisive factor than ethnic origin in the decision to rebel.

Some scholars believe that one of the main problems faced by the Tang Empire in the first half of the 8th century, which significantly contributed to both the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion and the weakening of the empire# was Emperor Xuanzong's relinquishment of control over the imperial governance. During the last twenty years of his reign (736–755), Xuanzong gradually distanced himself from state affairs and focused more on his personal life (Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, London, 2009).

Historians often mention the influence that the emperor's consort, Yang Guifei, had over him and the imperial court in general. This led to the emergence of various factions across the empire. From 736 onward, the chancellor (initially Li Linfu and later Yang Guozhong) governed the capital and its surrounding regions with near-total authority. A new position, military governor (jiedushi), was also established, granting these governors full control over military matters along the frontier. These governors commanded the new type of regular army mentioned above. Soon, the military governors began to oversee civil affairs as well, which caused alarm and dissatisfaction within the capital (Marine Jibladze, *History of China, Golden Fleece*, Tbilisi, 2022).

Ultimately, this discontent escalated into a confrontation between Yang Guozhong and An Lushan, beginning around 752. The new chancellor saw the increasingly powerful An Lushan as the main obstacle to consolidating his authority at court. The tension reached its peak in 755 when Yang Guozhong began arresting and punishing high-ranking officials in the capital who supported An Lushan. In response, An Lushan launched a rebellion, swiftly captured several important cities in the empire's northeast, and by 756 had even taken the capital (Cotterell, Arthur (1975). *China: An Integrated Study*, pp.

97–98; Umair Mirza (2012). *China At War – An Encyclopaedia*:4; 子陌 (2021). *The Tang Dynasty Was Actually Very Interesting*, Beijing: 87).

The theory that internal court rivalry contributed to the rebellion is well-grounded. However, an important counterargument must be considered: had military reforms not empowered the military governors as they did, the conflict between Yang Guozhong and An Lushan would not have been possible. During the Fubing system era, no military officer could accumulate such power because the army reported directly to the emperor.

Some scholars who study the An Lushan Rebellion argue that it was the military reforms themselves that served as the main catalyst for the uprising. These reforms allowed An Lushan to build a personally loyal army, which enabled him to launch the rebellion (Newark, Tim (1961). *Warlords: Ancient, Celtic, Medieval*:340; Harold M. Tanner (2010). *China: A History* (Vol. 1):192). As a result of these reforms, the empire's central military strength was significantly weakened, since regular troops were deployed along the frontiers to counter external threats, and the Fubing army stationed in central regions was virtually dismantled (Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank. *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3: 589–906, Part 1, 1979: 562).

Considering these viewpoints and facts, it can be argued that the military reforms were the primary cause of the An Lushan Rebellion. Without them, An Lushan would never have gained the power necessary to contemplate or carry out a rebellion. He commanded the armies of three major frontier provinces, which obeyed him personally. He also oversaw both military and civil affairs in those provinces. Had it not been for the sharp conflict with Yang Guozhong, perhaps An Lushan would never have rebelled, but an official with

such extensive power would inevitably have posed a threat to the empire sooner or later.

The final issue discussed in the article is whether the An Lushan Rebellion was the main cause of the Tang dynasty's decline. Interestingly, many historians agree on this point. In their view, the rebellion marked a turning point after which the Tang Empire could never fully recover its former glory (Newark, Tim (1961). *Warlords*, p. 351). Often, the rebellion and the radical reforms implemented by the imperial court to suppress it are treated as one cyclical problem. These radical measures included military mistakes caused by diminished trust in high-ranking generals and the court's decision to call for assistance from the Uyghurs and Tibetans, even as the latter plundered Chinese cities en route (J. Peers, Michael Perry (1995). *Imperial Chinese Armies 590–1260 AD*: 10).

However, in my view, the real reason lies elsewhere. While working on this article, I came to believe that the main cause of the Tang Empire's decline was the collapse of the "equal land distribution system" and the disappearance of the free peasant class. These two events were interconnected and should be viewed as one combined problem.

Old aristocratic clans, which had been significantly weakened during Empress Wu Zetian's rule, gradually regained strength during Emperor Xuanzong's reign—particularly during the chancellorship of Li Linfu (Jibladze M. (2022). *History of China, Golden Fleece*:288). Along with various other problems, the strengthening of corruption and land seizures by the elite led to the rapid decline of the free peasant class. This, in turn, triggered a domino effect that played out as it did. A system that could no longer control the greed and ambition of its upper class was doomed to collapse eventually. After the An Lushan Rebellion, the imperial court no longer had the strength to control

the powerful aristocrats in the empire's periphery the way it had in the 7th century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Tang dynasty's military reforms were closely tied to the empire's decline. However, in our opinion, these reforms were not the main cause of the irreversible decline. They were largely responsible for triggering the An Lushan Rebellion, but both events were ultimately symptoms of deeper processes within the Tang dynasty. These processes included social class changes, particularly the emergence of a wealthy, landowning aristocracy and the weakening of the free peasantry during the 7th–8th centuries. The Tang imperial court failed to adequately address these changes or implement necessary reforms. This failure became the main challenge—one that not only persisted but intensified until the 11th–12th centuries, by which time the free peasant class had ceased to exist.

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