S'F'E'M'T

SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE D'ETUDES DU MONDE TIBÉTAIN

February 2025

In spring 2024, the Musée Guimet replaced the term "Tibet" with "Monde himalayen [Himalayan world]" in its permanent exhibition rooms and panels (see the SFEMT statement here). Some months later, in its exhibition about the Tang dynasty (Nov. 2024–Mar. 2025), the Musée Guimet systematically used the Chinese term "Tubo" to refer to what Tibetans as well as Tibetan studies academics worldwide call in English the "Tibetan Empire", in French "Empire tibétain" (*circa* 620-842) or, simply, "Tibet". Both in the exhibition and in the catalogue *La Chine des Tang. Une dynastie cosmopolite* (Paris: RMN, 2024), one can find "Tubo" used with a capital letter as an anthroponym, as in "Invasion du territoire Tang par les Tubos [Invasion of the Tang territory by the Tubo]" (p. 290), "époque Tang, période Tubo [Tang era, Tubo period]" (pp. 68, 72-73), or "royaume de Tubo [Tubo kingdom]" (p. 80), or as an adjective of nationality, for instance as in "troupes Tubo [Tubo troops]" (p. 21), "objet en or Tubo [Tubo golden object/artefact]" (p. 68), "culture Tubo [Tubo culture]", "époque Tubo [Tubo era]" and "style Tubo [Tubo style]" (p. 72) (where Tubo is noted with a capital letter, in contradiction with the conventional French spelling).

The SFEMT, as a society bringing together French, French-speaking or France-based academics, and specialized in Tibetan studies, rejects the use of "Tubo", for two reasons, linguistic and historical.

Firstly, while Chinese historical sources of Tang period do use the characters 吐蕃 to refer to the Tibetan empire, its reading as *tǔbō* is inaccurate. *Tǔbō* is a contemporary reading which was dismissed as anachronistic as early as 1915 by the sinologist Paul Pelliot, who demonstrated that the linguistically correct pronounciation of these two characters, during the Tang era, was *tǔfān*. Two eminent linguists of Chinese languages, Edwin Pulleyblank and South W. Coblin, strengthened Pelliot's arguments in more recent publications (respectively in 1992 and 1994). Thus, when referring to and quoting historical Chinese sources, it is customary for academics to use "Tufan", not "Tubo".
Reading "Tubo" instead of "Tufan" is thus at best due to a lack of awareness of historical linguistics, but it is often political in nature – in the People's Republic of China, this reading is employed to support a spurious etymological connection relating the original Tibetan name བོད་ (*bod*) for "Tibet", to the Chinese term "Tubo".
In the current exhibition at the Musée Guimet, the impression that the choice of the term "Tubo" is not simply a linguistic or historical approximation is reinforced by the fact that other empires surrounding the Tang dynasty are sometimes called by their commonly accepted Western names ("Japan", "Persia", "Korea", "Turks"), or, if they are referred to by their Chinese name, this is followed by their commonly accepted modern name, as for instance in "the khaganat *tujue* (turc) oriental [the Eastern Tujue (Turkish) khaganate]" (p. 49) or "royaume de Silla (Corée) [Silla Kingdom (Korea)]" (p. 58), a treatment that is not granted to the neighbouring Tibetan Empire.

Secondly, the Musée Guimet catalogue's formulations, especially "époque Tang, période Tubo [Tang era, Tubo period]", used for objects coming from the Tibetan imperial court, imply that "Tubo" (*Tǔbō*) is a period within the Tang dynasty and, therefore, a part of the Tang Empire.
However, the historical sources, both Chinese and Tibetan, prove the contrary. For instance, the official histories of the Tang, the *Jiu Tangshu* and the *Xin Tangshu*, both have several chapters dedicated to the Tibetan Empire, its dynasty, political institutions, as well as military conflicts with the Tang Empire. The Tibetan occupation of the Tang capital Chang'an in November 763 for a few weeks, and the installation of a new ruler surrounded by a court of officials chosen by the Tibetans, represented the peak of these military conflicts. The same Chinese sources also mention the diplomatic relations that were initiated between the two courts as early as 634, with numerous embassies (several of which coming from the Tang court offering an annual tribute to the Tibetan court), two matrimonial alliances, and the signature of several peace agreements. These agreements, such as the famous Sino-Tibetan Treaty from 822 inscribed on a pillar in Lhasa, not only stipulated the restriction of the Tibetan and the Chinese rulers' sovereignty to their respective empires but also established a formal frontier between the two territories.

The Musée Guimet's decision to omit any explicit reference to the Tibetan Empire in its exhibition and related publication, is indicative of a denial of the Tibetan Empire's existence and independence. Moreover, the use of Tubo, totally ignored by the public, deprives the non-specialist visitor of a clear vision of the regional context of Tang China. Nor does this choice reflect the commonly accepted position of contemporary scholarship where the terms "Tibetan Empire" and "Tibet" are widely used, demonstrating a lack of knowledge or interest in the long-established academic research on the Tibetan Empire.