A Study of An Lu Shan's Rebellion

The T'ang dynasty is one of those splendid dynasties which, like the Han, have left their names stamped on the memory of the people. The Chinese refer to themselves not only as "Sons of Han" but also T'ang jen, i.e. men of T'ang. The reign of Hsuan-tsung (玄宗) is one of the most celebrated in T'ang dynasty, both because of the splendour with which it began and also because of the disaster that marked its gradual downfall.

The reign of the emperor Hsuan-tsung of T'ang (712 - 756 A.D.) was one of the most prosperous and powerful periods in the history of imperial China. Two periodical titles are used by the emperor during his reign. From 713 to 741 it was known as K'ai Yuan (開元) and from 742 to 755 as T'ien Pao (天寶). During the first period, the Emperor made the government and the people his chief concern, but the situation was very different during his latter years. The chief cause for this change was that the men to whom the fame of K'ai Yuan was due, Yao Chung (姚崇) and Sung Ching (宋璟) were succeeded by the unworthy Li Lin-Fu (李林甫) and Yang Kuo-Chung (楊國忠). About this time, the emperor, tired of his daily routine of his high office, began to addict to luxury and women, and then famous beauty Yang Kuei-fei (楊貴妃) was able to fascinate the aged monarch. Not only her brothers of whom Yang Kuo-Chung was one, but her sisters, too, received titles of nobility. The effect upon the nation, as a poet of T'ang Dynasty informs us, was that Chinese mothers of that time began to think more of their daughters than of their sons.

The event that brought the reign of Hsuan-tsung to an unhappy termination was the rebellion led by a man of Tartar descent named An Lu-Shan (安祿山). This tartar general had gained the full confidence of the emperor, and he was with an adopted son of Yang Kuei-fei, too, the emperor's favour, he was appointed to hold the governmentship of three frontier commanderies of Ping Lu (平盧), Fan Yang (范陽), and Ho Tung (河東). This meant that he had the best and largest armies of the empire under his immediate command. Gradually all the Chinese officers under him were displaced by Tartars, but still the emperor refused to be alarmed.

In 754, An Lu-Shan, viceroy of the three above-mentioned Commanderies in Hopei (河北) and Shansi (山西), rose in revolt against the central government. The empire had been at peace for many years and there were no
adequate forces ready to defend the metropolitan area against the advancing rebels. The Emperor had to flee westwards to Szechwan (四川). On his was escaping from the Capital City. The soldiers mutinied, killed Yang Kuo-Chung, and forced the emperor to execute his favorite concubine, Yang Kuei-fei, who was held responsible for the calamity that had befallen the nation. Emperor Hsuan tsung was also forced to abdicate the emperorship to his son, Su Tsung (肅宗).

Finally, the T’ang empire was compelled to employ the service of Ouigur (回纥), mercenaries together with the Chinese generals, to fight with the rebels. The rebellion was rapidly to be crushed. An Lu-Shan was to be assassinated by his son Ching Hsu (慶绪) who in turn was murdered by his general Shih Sau-ming (史思明).

The rebellion of An Lu-Shan was then successfully put down. The dynasty remained in power until 906, but the successors of Su Tsung, were, with few exceptions, mere either palace debauchees, or puppets in the hands of their powerful eunuchs. Besides, several of the former rebel chiefs were appointed to the governorship of the major commanderies along the Greatwall. The government at Chang An (長安) was unable to keep close and effective supervision over them. Since their positions became largely hereditary, they were almost independent from the control of the central government, and were ready at any moment to partition the empire. The troubles that came to hasten the downfall of the house of Li may be summarized under three headings: there were the rise of the border tribes, the insubordination of the military governors, and the power of the eunuchs. Thus, the rebellion of An Lu-Shan served a great turning point in the T’ang history for it nearly overthrew the T’ang dynasty and left it so weakened that it never recovered its former unity and strength.