

[\*7] One thing that stunned me in reading this biography was the almost infinite wealth of documentary material that Jin seemed to find on which to found his narrative line. Remember, this is the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the “dark ages” in the Western world. An historian documenting an individual European’s life from that period might have difficulty asserting with confidence much more than a born/died chronology. But almost every little shred of Bai’s life seems somehow to have been recorded, either expressly or inadvertently, in forms preserved intact for over a millennium now. How was this possible? The only answer I could come up with was a material one: The Chinese had available to them paper, one of their cultural inventions, a cheap, storable, and relatively sustainable medium for archiving information. The Western world relied on parchment, derived from animal hides, a difficult to produce and therefore expensive medium in limited supply. The impact of this difference on general cultural literacy was dramatic—almost everyone Bai encountered along the way seemed to be able to read and write, thus the intrinsic value of his own prodigious literary skills. And his life and exploits were well-documented. In the West, literacy was limited to religious elites, who could afford to produce and read the lavish parchment-based books that have survived from that otherwise “dark” era.