

Social Foundation of Sogdian Commercial Diaspora in China

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Abstract: This paper explores the Sogdian communication system, religious, cultural distinctions and adaptations, and the role of women that shaped their commercial interactions along the ancient Silk Road. The Sogdians, a mercantile empire residing in Central Asia between the 2nd and 10th centuries, relied on a well-developed communication system rooted in family kinship ties, religious and cultural distinctions, including Zoroastrianism and unique burial practices, and active engagement of women in this long-lived diaspora.

Keywords: Silk Road, Sogdian, Communication System, Zoroastrianism, Women

1. Introduction

The earth is a very large area, and there are people of different races and cultures, and contact and exchanges between nations are inevitable. The Sogdians were a mercantile empire living on the ancient Silk Road and had close contact with neighboring China and the Persian Empire. The maintenance of these relationships and the prosperity of the commercial diaspora are inseparable from his fundamental social foundation, which are a well-developed communication system, the religious-cultural distinctions and adaptations, and the substantial role of women.

2. Communication System

The Sogdian society, which existed in Central Asia between the 2nd and 10th centuries, was renowned for its mercantile prowess and far-reaching influence. To enable the functioning of their mercantile empire, the Sogdians established a unique communication system along the ancient trade route from Samarkand to Chang'an.

Unlike the modern postal, with its organized networks of couriers and relays, the Sogdians' mode of communication was deeply rooted in the intricate web of family blood relations. That intricate tapestry of kinship ties spanned across great distances and defied the constraints of geography.

A collection of primary sources called "The Sogdian Ancient Letters" [1], consisting of 5 personal correspondence within the Sogdian merchants in the early 4th century, enabled modern audiences a glimpse of the kinship tie.

In the letters (Sogdian Ancient Letter No.2 and No.3) [2], the sender, Nanai-vandak, addresses the recipient, Lord Varzakk, using terms such as "noble lord" and specifies his lineage as "son of Nanai-thvar (of the family) Kanakk." These genealogical references establish the social status and the kinship ties between the sender and the recipient. Furthermore, Nanai-vandak mentions the deposit

of staters held by Pesakk, the son of Dhruwaspvandak. Nanai-vandak instructs Lord Varzakk to hold the deposit and highlights the importance of family in handling the funds. The letter also mentions the well-being of Takut, and the potential future support for Nanai-thvar and Takhsich-vandak, emphasizing the familial responsibilities and obligations they have toward each other. Additionally, the letters express concerns about the well-being of various individuals in different locations, including Ghotam-sach, Armat-sach, and Arsach. The mention of their safety and well-being demonstrates the importance placed on maintaining connections and ensuring the security of family members and acquaintances.

Overall, the letters reveal that family blood relationships play a crucial role in the Sogdian communication system. Genealogical references, familial obligations, and concerns for the well-being of family members are recurrent themes, highlighting the significance of family ties in Sogdian society and how they shape their communication system.

In the Sogdian communication system, family lineage was crucial due to the absence of formal institutions, legal protection, and contractual enforcement. Without these safeguards, individuals relied on their family kinship networks for support, protection, and dispute resolution. Family ties provided a sense of security and trust, determined social standing, and facilitated the transmission of wealth and property. In a system without police or legal enforcement, family kinship was essential for mitigating risks and ensuring well-being.

Besides, the Sogdian postal system substantially relied on a network of intermediate stations, known as "chaharsu," also known as Chahar Suq or Chahar Souq, which was a vibrant and bustling marketplace that functioned as a knot in the infrastructure of the bazaar (Originally, a public market district of a Persian town. From Persia, the term spread to Arabia, Turkey, and North Africa. In India it came to be applied to a single shop, and in current English usage, it is applied both to a single shop or concession selling miscellaneous articles and to a fair in which such miscellany is sold), and it flourished in locations such as the heart of the ancient city of Bukhara [3]. Situated along the Silk Road, this iconic trading hub served as a crossroads for merchants, travelers, and scholars from various corners of the world. While specific primary sources pertaining to Chaharsu are scarce, historical accounts and travelogues offer glimpses into its vibrant atmosphere, economic significance and great impact on the Sogdian's commercial network.

In the comprehensive geographical treatise, a 10th-century work, "The Book of Roads and Kingdoms" [4] by Abu al-Qasim Muhammad al-Khwarizmi. Al-Khwarizmi mentions Bukhara as a prominent center of trade, mentioning its numerous marketplaces and their role in facilitating the exchange of goods along the Silk Road. While Chaharsu itself is not explicitly mentioned, its prominence as one of the bustling marketplaces of Bukhara can be inferred from al-Khwarizmi's account. Another primary source that provides insights into the commercial activity and diversity of goods traded at Chaharsu is the travelogue of the 9th-century Arab explorer and geographer Ibn Khordadbeh. In his work titled "The Book of Roads and Provinces," [5]. Ibn Khordadbeh describes the city of Bukhara as a thriving commercial center, with its marketplaces teeming with merchants and a wide array of goods from China, Persia, and other regions. While Chaharsu is not explicitly mentioned in Ibn Khordadbeh's account, his description of Bukhara as a bustling trade hub indicates the significance of its marketplaces, including Chaharsu.

Therefore, within the context of the Sogdian communication system, Chaharsu would have served as a vital node, enabling the transmission of messages, news, and updates between Sogdian families dispersed across the Silk Road. The marketplace would have been a prime location for Sogdians to gather, exchange information, and strengthen their familial ties. Through their extensive trade networks and kinship connections, the Sogdians in Chaharsu would have been instrumental in disseminating information received from other regions and relaying it to their respective families.

They would have acted as conduits, bridging the geographical gaps between Sogdian communities and ensuring the smooth flow of communication.

“One caravan was composed of 20 men, 3 donkeys and a horse; another included 6 men, 10 women and 4 donkeys; a third had 32 men and 4 horses.” [1]

“Another example from 732–3 shows a small Sogdian caravan composed of ten mules and a horse led by a merchant, two workers and a slave, all Sogdians, who made the round-trip between the border of Gansu (Guazhou, Jiuquan) and Kucha while based at Turfan.” [1]

The examples provided indicate that the means of transportation in the Sogdian communication system relied heavily on caravans. Caravans were composed of a combination of men, animals (such as donkeys, horses, and mules), and sometimes slaves. These caravans played a crucial role in facilitating trade and communication between different regions along the Silk Road.

The first example mentions caravans consisting of 20 men, 3 donkeys, and a horse, as well as another with 6 men, 10 women, and 4 donkeys. These caravans likely transported goods and people across various distances, linking different settlements and trading centers. The inclusion of donkeys and horses suggests that they were used as pack animals to carry the goods and supplies during these journeys. In the second example, a Sogdian caravan in 732-733 is described as having four Sogdians, including a laborer and two slaves, along with ten mules. An additional horse was added later. This highlights the use of mules and horses as the primary mode of transportation for Sogdian caravans. The presence of laborers and slaves indicates the need for manpower to handle the logistics of the caravan and ensure the smooth movement of goods and people. Furthermore, the second example mentions a small Sogdian caravan based in Turfan, which consisted of ten mules and a horse. It was led by a merchant, two workers, and a slave. This example emphasizes the mobility of Sogdian caravans, as they made a round-trip between the border of Gansu and Kucha. Turfan served as a strategic location for organizing and launching these caravans, enabling trade and communication between different regions.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that the Sogdians relied on caravans, animals (such as mules, horses, and donkeys), and manpower to transport goods, people, and information across long distances. The mobility and efficiency of these caravans were crucial for facilitating trade and maintaining communication networks within the Sogdian civilization and along the Silk Road.

However, the Sogdian communication system had its own set of weaknesses and imperfections. The vulnerability of the Sogdian communication system to attacks was a severe issue. The emperor's awareness of neighboring states, such as Dayuan, Daxia, Anxi, and others, indicates the existence of trade and communication networks between these regions. These states, described as militarily weak, were portrayed as being attracted to the wealth and goods of the Han dynasty. The emperor's desire to extend his domain and establish peaceful relations with these states reflects the potential for external powers to influence and exploit the Sogdian communication system [6]. The prospect of attracting men from diverse cultures to the emperor's court, who would translate and retranslate languages, suggests the potential disruption and manipulation of existing communication channels. Moreover, the accumulation of wealth through trade made the Sogdians attractive targets for attacks aimed at seizing resources and disrupting their communication routes. These factors highlight the vulnerabilities of the Sogdian communication system, making it susceptible to external threats and potential conflicts with rival powers [6].

Although the weaknesses in the Sogdian communication system undoubtedly created some challenges and limitations, they also contributed to the thriving of Sogdian society in a number of ways. First, the weaknesses in the postal system forced Sogdians to develop new communication and transportation technologies, such as carrier pigeons or new horse breeds. Moreover, the weaknesses

in the postal system may have encouraged the development of regional trade networks and partnerships between neighboring cities and towns. These networks may have been less reliant on long-distance transportation and communication and may have facilitated greater economic interdependence and cultural exchange among local communities.

Despite these weaknesses, the Sogdian postal system was still highly regarded for its organization and efficiency, and it played a key role in supporting trade and commerce in the region. It was a significant factor in the development of the Silk Road trade network and set a precedent for future postal systems in Central Asia.

In conclusion, the Sogdian communication system, family lineage and kinship ties played a crucial role due to the absence of formal institutions, legal protections, and contractual enforcement. The reliance on family networks provided a sense of security, trust, and social standing within the community. Family members acted as support systems, arbitrators, and protectors, helping to mitigate risks and resolve disputes. Additionally, the Sogdian communication system relied on vibrant marketplaces, such as Chaharsu, along the Silk Road, which served as nodes for information exchange and facilitated the transmission of messages. Despite weaknesses in the system, such as vulnerabilities to attacks, the Sogdian communication system contributed to the thriving of their society through the development of new communication and transportation technologies, regional trade networks, and the establishment of the Silk Road trade network.

3. Religious Cultural Distinctions and Adaptions

Over the course of history, many alien communities finally ended up assimilating into the local cultures. For example, Xianbei originated from the modern north Mongolia region was completely sinified and disappeared in history. However, Sogdians, over the 8th century of their active commercial activities in Eurasia, always maintained their own identity. There exist multiple religious and culture practices that make differences between the Sogdians and Chinese. At the same time, they also helped the Sogdians successfully adapt to Chinese society. Both these religious and cultural adaptions and distinctions had significant impacts on the process of which the Sogdians made commercial interactions with China.

Firstly, the distinctions include Zoroastrianism, which was predominantly followed by many of the Sogdians, an ancient Iranian religion founded by Zoroaster [7]. This was in contrast to the predominant religious traditions in China, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and later Buddhism. Secondly, there were unique styles of Art and Symbolism. Sogdian art was heavily influenced by their Zoroastrian beliefs and often depicted religious themes and symbols. Sogdian murals, wall paintings, and pottery often featured deities, sacred animals, and scenes from Zoroastrian mythology. Thirdly the Sogdians had their own language, which was an Eastern Iranian language known as Sogdian. It belonged to the Iranian language family and was distinct from the Chinese language. Also, in addition to Zoroastrianism, the Sogdians were also known for their involvement in the spread of Manichaeism, a syncretic religion founded by the prophet Mani. Manichaeism incorporated elements from various religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. It gained popularity among the Sogdians and other Central Asian peoples, but it was not a mainstream religion in the Sogdian community of China. At last, Sogdians had special Burial Practices, which differed from Chinese customs. The Sogdians often practiced sky burials, where the deceased were placed on mountaintops or high platforms to be exposed to the elements or consumed by scavenging birds. In contrast, the Chinese generally practiced burial in coffins or tombs.

These distinct religious and cultural practices of the Sogdians played a significant role in establishing their reputation as skilled merchants and attracting Chinese traders to engage in business with them. One key aspect was their expertise in long-distance trade. Through generations of involvement in trade along the Silk Road, the Sogdians acquired extensive knowledge of the trade

routes. They knew the terrain, understood the logistics involved, and were familiar with the various markets along the routes. This expertise allowed them to navigate efficiently, minimizing risks and maximizing profits. Chinese traders recognized their capabilities and sought their services to facilitate trade between China and the West. The Sogdians' adoption and promotion of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism also played a crucial role in their success. These religions provided a common ground with diverse communities along the Silk Road. By embracing and spreading these religions through their trading networks, the Sogdians fostered connections and built relationships with different cultural groups. This enabled them to bridge the cultural divide between the Chinese and other Central Asian peoples, facilitating smoother communication, understanding, and cooperation in business transactions.

Language and communication were another advantage the Sogdians possessed. They used their own language, Sogdian, as a means of communication within their merchant networks. This linguistic capability allowed them to serve as interpreters and intermediaries. While Chinese traders might have faced language barriers when interacting with other foreign merchants, the Sogdians could effectively communicate and facilitate negotiations. Their linguistic skills and cultural understanding helped build trust and establish fruitful business relationships between Chinese and non-Chinese traders.

The Sogdians' reputation for honesty, integrity, and fair dealing in business transactions also contributed to their success. They adhered to the principles of their Zoroastrian and Manichaean beliefs, which emphasized moral and ethical conduct. Chinese traders recognized the Sogdians as trustworthy partners who would honor agreements and ensure the safety and security of goods along the Silk Road. This reputation for reliability further attracted Chinese traders to engage in business with the Sogdians.

Finally, the Sogdians' adaptability and cultural sensitivity were significant factors in their business success. They demonstrated an ability to adapt to different cultural environments and respect the customs and traditions of the regions they traded with. They were open to embracing local practices, learning from other cultures, and incorporating diverse influences into their trading operations. This flexibility allowed them to cater to the specific needs and preferences of Chinese traders, making them an attractive choice for conducting business.

In summary, the Sogdians' distinctive religious and cultural practices, combined with their expertise in trade, cross-cultural connections, effective communication, trustworthiness, and adaptability, contributed to their image as exceptional merchants. These qualities attracted Chinese traders, who recognized the Sogdians as reliable partners and facilitators of profitable trade along the Silk Road.

4. The Role of Woman

Based on the provided Sogdian ancient letters and the archaeological background information that, “the results of the excavations of six tombs dating to the Sui and Tang dynasties from a cemetery in the southern suburbs of Guyuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region were published in two comprehensive reports written in Chinese. Three of the six tombs contained joint burials of husband and wife, while the others were individual burials” [8]. Most Sogdian women did not have independent inscriptions and were not buried independently, it can be inferred that Sogdian women may not have been prominently represented in written records or official documentation. However, it is important to note that the absence of independent inscriptions or individual burials does not necessarily indicate a lack of status or capability for Sogdian women. Other forms of evidence, such as their roles in daily affairs and their involvement in handling various matters, can provide insights into their social status and active roles in the Sogdian mercantile network.

From the letters, we can observe that Sogdian women were engaged in correspondence and had agency in communicating their concerns and desires. In Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 3, the daughter

Shayn writes to her husband, expressing her grievances and frustrations about her situation. This indicates that she had the ability to voice her thoughts and expectations within the marital relationship. Similarly, in Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 5 [9], the servant Fri-khwataw addresses the noble Lord Aspandhat, highlighting their own circumstances and interactions with other individuals. This suggests that women, even in servant positions, were capable of participating in affairs beyond their immediate roles.

Although the inscriptions and burials may not provide a complete picture of the status of Sogdian women, it is evident that they were actively involved in various aspects of life. The letters reveal their participation in economic activities, such as trade and financial matters, and their concerns for family relationships and well-being. This suggests that Sogdian women had the capacity to handle affairs and make decisions within their social contexts.

Therefore, while the lack of independent inscriptions and individual burials may limit our understanding of Sogdian women's status, the evidence from the letters supports the idea that they were not passive or marginalized individuals. They actively engaged in correspondence, expressed their thoughts and concerns, and participated in economic and familial affairs, indicating they had agency and capabilities in handling various matters.

Besides, as an integral part of their society, Zoroastrian law played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of Sogdian culture. One particular aspect of this legal framework was the unique position of Sogdian women, who could represent the family in the absence of men. However, while women were empowered in certain aspects, such as being able to dispose of property, they did not possess full ownership rights. This organic composition of gender roles not only supported Sogdian mercantile society but also reflected the complexities of their cultural norms.

In Sogdian society, the influence of Zoroastrian law was evident in the division of roles between men and women. When men were absent from the household, either due to trade expeditions or other obligations, Sogdian women were entrusted with the responsibility of representing the family. This provision within the legal framework was likely established to ensure continuity and stability within Sogdian households, allowing women to make decisions in the absence of male heads. By entrusting women with this authority, Zoroastrian law acknowledged their competence and capability in managing familial affairs.

The central role of women in the family, especially in the absence of men, also had a significant impact on Sogdian mercantile society. Sogdians were renowned for their extensive trading networks, and their position along the Silk Road facilitated lucrative commercial activities. As men embarked on trading ventures, women, as the representatives of their families, were responsible for overseeing domestic affairs, including managing household finances, making decisions related to trade, and maintaining contact with other traders. This allowed Sogdian women to actively participate in the mercantile sphere and contribute to the economic prosperity of their families and communities.

While Sogdian women enjoyed certain privileges and responsibilities within the framework of Zoroastrian law, it is important to note that property ownership was primarily vested in men. Sogdian women could dispose of property, which implies they had the authority to manage and distribute it. However, this did not equate to full ownership. The concept of property ownership was deeply ingrained in the patriarchal structure of Sogdian society. Men, as heads of households, were the primary owners of property, and women's authority was limited to managing and allocating it under specific circumstances.

This organic composition of gender roles in Sogdian society, with women representing the family but not owning property, reflected the underlying cultural norms and beliefs of the time. The practice of assigning certain responsibilities to women while retaining property ownership for men was likely a reflection of broader societal expectations and power dynamics. It is essential to understand this context to grasp the complexities of gender relations in Sogdian society.

Furthermore, this unique legal arrangement played a crucial role in supporting the mercantile nature of Sogdian society. By empowering women to act as representatives in the absence of men, Zoroastrian law acknowledged their role in sustaining the economic well-being of the community. This organic composition allowed for continuity in trade and commerce, as women ensured the smooth functioning of households and maintained connections with other traders. The division of labor and authority supported the intricate web of economic relationships that characterized Sogdian mercantile society.

To sum up, Zoroastrian law exerted a significant influence on Sogdian society, shaping the roles and responsibilities of women within the family and the larger mercantile sphere. While Sogdian women were empowered to represent their families in the absence of men, property ownership remained primarily within the hands of men.

5. Conclusion

The above three aspects are particularly significant to the Sogdian business community, and the success of the Sogdians on the Silk Road is indivisible from these factors. But above them, the most important thing is the family blood connection because it connects the Sogdians scattered throughout the Eurasian plate as a whole, making the Sogdian commercial diaspora one of the most famous mercantile empires in history.

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