

The Sogdian Rise: Revisiting Factors That Contributed to the Success of Sogdian Merchants in Gansu Around 313 C.E.

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Abstract: Based solely on Sogdian ancient letters II and V, this article reexamines two factors that are commonly supposed to have contributed to the success of Sogdian merchants around 313 A.D. and then further explores certain commercial characteristics of Sogdian traders at that time. While scholars list Xiongnu-China war and the Sogdian post system as two vital factors that led to Sogdian traders' success, Sogdian merchants in Gansu at that time consider Xiongnu-China war as a disaster, and they didn't completely trust the their own post system according to their letters. These factors were not thought of as being crucial to the success of these Sogdian merchants by themselves. Based on their commercial behaviors in the letters, Sogdian merchants seem to be neither open nor good at grasping business opportunities. While these two characteristics seem to have been considered key determinants of mercantile success since ancient times, Sogdian merchants were still able to succeed in their business without outstanding abilities in these two fields. Therefore, exploring factors that truly contributed to the success of Sogdian merchants may provide a new insight into commerce in the old days. Besides, the lessons drawn from the experiences of Sogdian merchants may be used for reference by people who wish to gain commercial success today.

Keywords: Sogdian merchants, Xiongnu-China war, Sogdian post system, Sogdian traders' characteristics

1. Introduction

As its name suggests, the Silk Road was intimately connected to the trade of vast commodities and goods, including silk in ancient times. Regarding commerce on the Silk Road, Sogdian traders are the most commonly mentioned group by historians. In fact, from the end of the second century B.C. to the eighth century A.D., Sogdian merchants played a significant role in Chinese trade. However, the status of Sogdian merchants in China seemed to take a sharp rise during the fourth century A.D. In the second century B.C., Zhang Qian went to the Western Region as a diplomat of the Han Dynasty and opened up Chinese trade with ancient Asian regimes to the west of China [1]. From then to the end of the third century C.E., Sogdian merchants did not play a significant role among the many foreign traders in China [2]. Nevertheless, according to *Wei Shu*, Sogdian merchants seemed to have become the principal foreign merchants in China [3]. This dramatic change begs the question: What helped Sogdian traders stand out among foreign merchants in China during this particular period (the beginning of the fourth century C.E.), and what contributed to their commercial success? To answer this question, we must dive into the ancient Sogdian letters discovered by Aurel Stein in 1907. There

are five letters in total, and letters II and V are the ones that were written by Sogdian merchants in Gansu to their business counterparts in other regions during the time of their dramatic shift in status [4,5]. Even though these two letters are incomplete, both mainly concern Sogdian trade and are valuable documentary sources that reveal the true thoughts and opinions of Sogdian merchants in Gansu. Thus, these letters provide a solid foundation for my argument, rooted in the opinions of Sogdian merchants from that era. While historians like Etienne suggest that both the Xiongnu-China War and the Sogdian postal system were crucial to the success of Sogdian merchants in Gansu around 313 A.D. [2], this essay will argue that these factors may not have played such a significant role after all. This assessment is based on the ancient Sogdian letters II and V, and the premise that Sogdian traders in Gansu were likely neither open to nor skilled in embracing commercial opportunities.

2. The Xiongnu-China War

Sogdian merchants around 313 A.D. didn't regard the Xiongnu-China War that went on during that time as a factor that would lead to their commercial success in any way. While experts like Etienne suggest that the Xiongnu-China War acted like a "filter" that scattered other foreigners in China and made Sogdian merchants in Gansu stand out [2], Sogdian merchants who lived in Gansu during the war seemed to disagree with this idea in their letters. In Sogdian letter II, the author first mentioned the terrible destruction that the Xiongnu-China War brought to Chinese cities and then wrote about the miserable life of Sogdian merchants in China, especially Gansu [4]. He said that "we could only survive" and that "we were both old and on the point of death." The "we" he referred to may point to a specific group of Sogdian merchants that lived together or represent the common living situation of most Sogdian merchants who lived in Gansu. Either way, we know he believed the Xiongnu-China War to be a huge disaster for the Sogdian merchants in Gansu. The reason for this lies in the following part of the letter, in which he told his business partner that there was no profit from China and that he had lost contact with merchants whom he had sent to the "inside" of China years ago. Based on this content, we can conclude that Sogdian merchants in Gansu greatly suffered from the Xiongnu-China War partly because their trade with the Central Plains was destroyed. Moreover, the Sogdian letter V contains information like the letter II. In letter V, the author, another Sogdian merchant in Gansu, told his business counterpart that he had been hearing increasingly negative news from "inside" China daily while he had become isolated [5]. Furthermore, he could only stay in Guzang since no caravans were departing, and his commodities remained unsent. Meanwhile, He described that the Sogdian residents in Dunhuang were destitute. To summarize, according to ancient Sogdian letters II and V, which were both written by Sogdian merchants in Gansu to their Sogdian business counterparts in other regions, we can conclude that Sogdian merchants in Gansu were highly likely to consider the Xiongnu-China War as a calamity instead of an essential factor toward success. While Sogdian merchants did become outstanding among the foreign traders in China after this period of political turmoil, other factors like the turmoil in the Kushan Empire around that time may better explain the successful rise of Sogdian merchants in China [6].

3. The Sogdian Postal System

Moreover, Sogdians themselves didn't entirely trust their own postal system. While it is evident that Sogdians did have their own functional post system, it may not have been as well-developed and reliable as the scholar Etienne suggested if we examine the ancient letters [2]. Since both authors were Sogdian merchants in Gansu, they likely used the Sogdian postal network regularly to communicate with their business partners. As a result, they should be quite familiar with the reliability and efficiency of the system. The writer of letter II wrote the letter to one of his closest business counterparts in Samarkand and asked his business partner to manage his financial account in

Samarkand according to what he said in the letter in an absolute and strong tone [4]. We might infer from this that the author of letter II had acknowledged that this letter might never reach its destination and that he might have written his requests in such a strong tone because he had to try his best to have his requests done in the face of great uncertainty that might be brought by the Sogdian post system. In addition, the only ancient Sogdian letters from that time that we have found today are the five letters scattered halfway to their destinations for unknown reasons. Thus, we could neither seek out any details about the Sogdian postal system nor calculate any data about it and compare them with other postal systems at about the same time to determine its relative reliability. To sum things up, the evidence for a well-developed Sogdian postal system remains unclear, and Sogdian merchants themselves, around 313 A.D., didn't seem to regard their post system as a vital factor that contributed to their success.

As this essay has analyzed in the previous two paragraphs, Sogdian merchants in Gansu around 313 C.E. didn't seem to consider the Xiongnu-China War or the Sogdian postal system as factors that contributed to their success. In the next section, I will further explore certain characteristics of Sogdian merchants that are closely related to their business aptitude, drawing on the insights from the ancient Sogdian letters II and V.

4. Sogdian Merchant Characteristics

Firstly, Sogdian merchants in both letters only mentioned the negative impacts that the Xiongnu-China War brought to their businesses without mentioning any positives. [4,5]. While it is evident that wars are violent catastrophes for human life, they also tend to bring about extra commercial opportunities for merchants. This is because both the invading side and the defensive side require huge quantities of supplies, including food and weapons, which were usually provided by third parties. When it comes to the Xiongnu-China War at the beginning of the fourth century C.E., Sogdian merchants could likely benefit greatly through the war trade. Taking risks is unavoidable for any merchant who wants to succeed. However, the risk Sogdian merchants would take if they engaged in war trade was not significantly high because they were familiar with both the Xiongnu nomads and the Chinese. Since Sogdian merchants had traded with the Chinese for over four hundred years and cooperated with the Xiongnu nomads in their homelands, it is likely that both Chinese and Xiongnu nomads were not hostile to Sogdian merchants and were willing to trade with them during the war.

Moreover, even though most goods traded by Sogdian merchants were luxuries like musk and grape wine, the letters indicate that they also traded in rice and linen cloth [7]. Since rice was an essential food source, especially for Chinese soldiers and linen cloth could be used to make clothes for soldiers, both two goods would be extremely valuable in the Xiongnu-China War as Chinese and Xiongnu production of commodities waned during the war. Additionally, Sogdian merchants may have been able to provide the Chinese government with high-quality horses that only existed in the Western Region in that era. Since Chinese soldiers needed to fight with Xiongnu nomads, most of whom rode horses of great quality, they would be at a disadvantage without enough horses. Unfortunately, the Chinese government around that age found it difficult to raise enough horses for the war because of the lack of grasslands in the Central Plain and thus had to buy horses from the Western Region. This presented a great business opportunity for Sogdian merchants as their homelands were famous for raising horses of great quality. Thus, Sogdian merchants seemed to have tons of business opportunities to embrace in the Xiongnu-China War without having to take much risk. However, they seemed to neglect these opportunities upon reading the letters they had written. I believe that is due to certain common characteristics of Sogdian merchants. They seemed to be relatively inflexible in adapting to new social conditions and highly risk-averse. They may not have been prepared to capitalize on the shifting business opportunities.

Secondly, it is worth noting that both these letters were delivered through the Sogdian postal system, even though we could tell from the contents of the letters that the Sogdian merchants didn't entirely trust this system [4,5]. While the content of letter II indicates that it was supposed to be delivered to Samarkand in Central Asia (more than three thousand kilometers away from Gansu), the destination of letter V was more likely to be near Khotan in Xinjiang, China [7]. While the writer of letter II may have chosen the Sogdian postal system because it was the only way to have the letter sent to its destination, it is possible that other postal systems existed at the time that could have delivered letter V as well. For instance, a reliable Chinese postal system may have also covered these regions (Khotan and Gansu) because the Chinese government (Jin Empire) still had control over Gansu through a comprehensive local political system around that age, according to *Jin Shu* [8]. Meanwhile, *Jin Shu* and *Han Shu* reveal that the Chinese had been in contact with important sites in Xinjiang, like Khotan, for a few centuries [8,9], so the Chinese government may have developed a postal system that covered Khotan and Gansu around 313 A.D. for commercial and military use. Nonetheless, the writer of letter V still delivered his letter through the Sogdian post system. Meanwhile, since both letters were written solely in the Sogdian language and no letters from other ethnic groups like the Chinese or Indians were connected to these Sogdian letters, the use of the Sogdian post system appeared to be exclusive [2]. Moreover, when closely reading the fragments of these two letters, it's clear that they didn't include any details about people from other ethnic groups. Even though letters II and V both mentioned a dramatic social change in the Central Plain caused by the Xiongnu-China War, every detail included in the remaining part of the two letters was about Sogdians., although it is evident that Sogdian merchants were quite united as a specific group, we have no evidence of Sogdian merchant exchanges with other ethnic groups within the context of studying the background surrounding the ancient Sogdian letters II and V. This indicates that Sogdian merchants may not have been so open to outsiders and perhaps lacked the confidence and trust to engage deeply with people of other ethnic backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sogdian merchants in Gansu considered the Xiongnu-China War to be a calamity, and they did not place much faith in their postal system. These factors were previously thought of as being crucial to the success of Sogdian merchants. However, based on their commercial behaviors in the letters, Sogdian merchants seem neither open to nor good at grasping business opportunities. While these two characteristics seem to have been always considered key determinants of mercantile success in ancient times, Sogdian merchants could still succeed in their business without outstanding aptitude in these two fields. Thus, exploring the factors that truly contributed to the success of Sogdian merchants is of great significance, as it may provide a new insight into how commerce worked in the old days. Meanwhile, the lessons drawn from the experiences of Sogdian merchants may even present helpful insights for reference by people who seek to engage in commerce of any sort today.

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