

A Parallel Comparison Between the Social Status of Sogdian and Chinese Aristocratic Women in Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: Sogdians were active in commercial activities on the “Silk Road” in Tang and Song Dynasty of China. The interaction between Sogdians and Chinese promotes the exchange and development of both cultures, which resulted in some shared similarities between them, including the social status of women. However, further research is required to compare the social status of Sogdian and Chinese aristocratic women. This contributes to better knowledge about the family structure and marital relationships in Tang Dynasty, enabling researchers to reconstruct the life of aristocratic Sogdians and Chinese. In this paper, the term social status is deconstructed into female literacy, marital autonomy, and accessibility to the property. Two Sogdian ancient letters, one Tang epitaph, and several Sogdian and Chinese legal documents are analyzed from the three aspects. In conclusion, both Sogdian and Chinese aristocratic women enjoyed relatively higher social status in Tang Dynasty. Sogdian women were slightly superior to Chinese women, as they had more agency to divorce. Nevertheless, their relatively higher social statuses were not common across the entire gender and were still not comparable to their male counterparts.

Keywords: Sogdian, The Silk Road, Female Social Status, Tang Dynasty

1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty, distinguished as the sole dynasty in Chinese history to have a female emperor, experienced a period of flourishing transcultural trade facilitated by the expanding Silk Road. Moreover, this era witnessed the prevalence of philosophical ideologies such as Buddhism and Taoism, which advocated for the equality of all individuals. Consequently, the Tang Dynasty represented an unparalleled peak in terms of the elevated status of women within Chinese society.

The Sogdian people played a significant role in the economic exchanges along the Silk Road, establishing a strong alliance with Tang China in various domains, including trade, cultural exchange, and artistic endeavors. Both under the patriarchal social context, though, Sogdian and Chinese women in the Tang Dynasty concurrently possessed higher social status compared to women in other periods. This essay will specifically give a parallel comparison between the social status of Sogdian and Chinese aristocratic women. The social status will be deconstructed into literacy, marital autonomy, and accessibility to the property; marital autonomy encompasses the agency to choose the mate and divorce, and the accessibility to the property encompasses the right of these women to manage, possess, and inherit properties.

2. The Literacy of Aristocratic Women

2.1. The Literacy of Sogdian Aristocratic Women

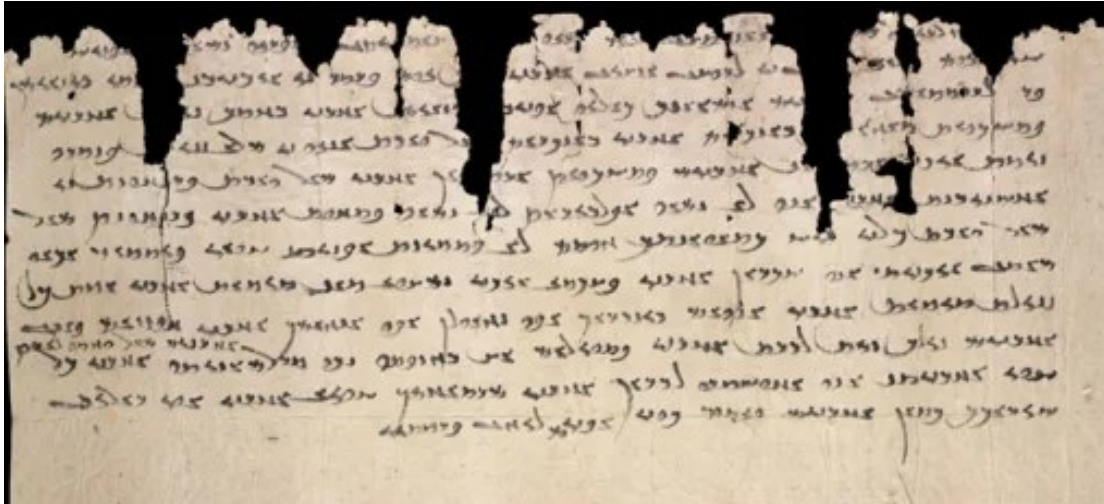


Figure 1: Sogdian Ancient Letter No.1[1]

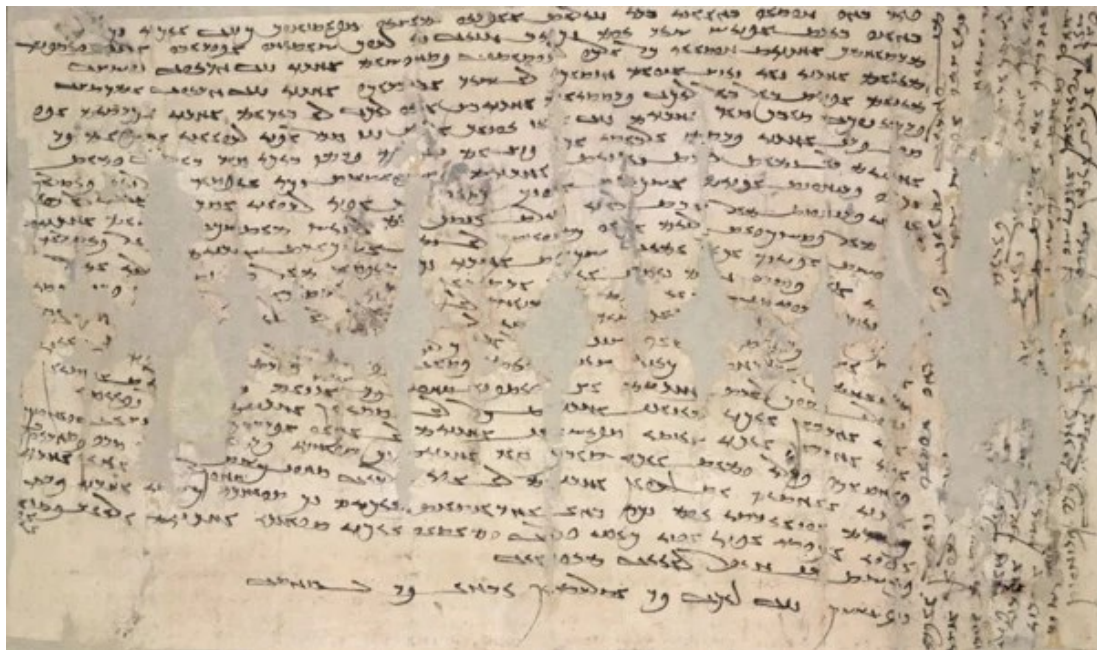


Figure 2: Sogdian Ancient Letter No.3 [1]

As shown by Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, these are two letters written by a Sogdian woman Miwnay, who was abandoned in Dunhuang by her husband for three years and forced to be a servant with her daughter. *Letter No.1* was written from Miwnay to her mother to seek help, and *Letter No.3* was written to blame her husband for forsaking her. Miwnay is a likely aristocratic Sogdian woman, given that she composed these letters during a period when paper held significant value.

Comparing the handwriting of both letters, *Letter No.1* is neater and includes a greeting introduction, while *Letter No.3* written to curse her husband displays a more hasty and less organized handwriting style without greeting. Moreover, Miwnay's daughter Shayn also added a proscript, and

Miwnay was not likely to hire two scribes for one single letter. Therefore, letters were written by Miwnay and her daughter, serving as a testament to the literacy of aristocratic Sogdian women.

2.2. The Literacy of Chinese Aristocratic Women

Cao Yin was born into a Bureaucrat family during the reign of Emperor Gaozu of Tang. He died young, and his wife Zhou wrote *the Epitaph of Cao Yin* [2] for him. In the epitaph, Zhou expressed “*Life is preordained, death is also preordained, knowing this idea, there is no need to grieve,*” which resonates with the philosophical perspective of Zhuang Zi, who contends that the existence and cessation of life are governed by destiny.

The epitaph serves as evidence of Zhou's literacy and extensive education, highlighting the comprehensive and profound educational opportunities available to aristocratic ladies throughout the Tang Dynasty.

3. The Marital Autonomy of Aristocratic Women

3.1. The Marital Autonomy of Sogdian Aristocratic Women

In *Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 3*, Miwnay wrote, “*I obeyed your command (lit. took your command upon my head) and came to Dunhuang and I did not observe (my) mother’s bidding nor (my) brothers’.*[1]” The letter indicates that Miwnay violated her mother and brother to follow her husband to Dunhuang. Regardless of whether it was the right decision, it reflects Miwnay's freedom to marry.

Another crucial discovery is a Sogdian ancient marriage contract dated to around 709-710 CE, in which a rigorous system was established to protect the bride’s rights. The bride, named Chat, is the stepdaughter of a Sogdian prince. The groom Ot-tegin does not have a title. According to the marriage contract, Ot-tegin was asked to treat Chat “*with honour and love, as a lady possessing authority in his own house.*” Moreover, the contract recorded that “*If, however, Ot-tegin, without sending Chat away, should take another wife or concubine, or keep another woman that does not please Chat, then Ot-tegin, as husband, will be owing and pay Chat, his wife, a fine of thirty good, poor dirhams... and will not keep that aforementioned woman either as a wife or as a concubine, but will send her away.*[3]” Fidelity used to be a yoke only for women, and men regarded it as nothing. However, Chat could request Ot-tegin to remain faithful to her, which surpasses conventional disciplines for males. Therefore, she was manifested as an unusually powerful wife in ancient patriarchal societies. Therefore, Chat not only procured autonomy but also possessed the leading voice at least on the issue of taking concubine in her marriage.

Moreover, the marriage contract registers thorough safeguards for Chat’s right to divorce. The contract claims that “*But if it should occur to Ot-tegin that he will not have Chat as a wife [any more], but send her away, he will release her with [her] inherited and acquired property, [as well as] with the gifts received, without compensation, and [he] will [also] not be owing or pay any compensation [to her], and after that he may marry such a woman as pleases him. And if it should occur to Chat that she will not remain with Ot-tegin, but will go away from him, she will leave him the undamaged garments and ornaments, all that, which is received by her from Ot-tegin, but she will take [back] her own share with an indemnity and will not be owing or pay any other compensation, and after that she may marry such a man as pleases her.*[3]” From the treaty made for both Chat and Ot-tegin, it can be inferred that Chat has the right to initiate a divorce on her own. Moreover, Chat’s cost of divorce is lower than Ot-tegin's, which eliminates her possible worry about either getting divorced or being divorced.

3.2. The Marital Autonomy of Chinese Aristocratic Women

According to the *New Book of Tang: Biographies of Emperors and Princesses*, 135 princesses in the Tang Dynasty had marriage records, and 23% of them had remarried [4]. This reflects that aristocratic women have the right to divorce and choose their mates, which embodies their marital autonomy.

Although taking concubines was restricted in the Tang Dynasty, men could still legally take concubines without the allowance of their wives. *Tang Code*, the law code of Tang Dynasty, stipulated that “*a man could take concubines if his wife is over 50 and has no child.* [5]” Some aristocratic ladies also engaged in the practice of having “Mianshou” (charming male companions) as sexual lovers or for political reasons. The *Old Book of Tang* has the recordation of four Mianshou of Wu Zetian [5], the only female Emperor in Chinese history. Unlike men, only women at the very peak of power could take Mianshou, and most of them tried to disguise themselves, except for Emperor Wu. Though they had a certain degree of autonomy, Chinese aristocratic women had no voice before their husbands as Chat did.

4. The Accessibility to the Property of Aristocratic Women

4.1. The Accessibility to the Property of Sogdian Aristocratic Women

It is worth noticing that in *Letter No.1* Miwnay was asking for help from her mother. This infers that Miwnay’s mother was probably in charge of the family finances. Additionally, Miwnay had a comprehensive understanding of financial operations and exhibited proficiency in managing assets, as evidenced by the financial term “loan” she used in her letter. Her large consumption of letter paper in such an era shows that she is not only accessible to family finances but could even manage a great part of them.

The well-secured female property right is manifested in the Sogdian ancient marriage contract. In the marriage contract, the diction “*inherited, acquired property*” implies that Chat can inherit, procure, and deal with possessions, which indicates Chat’s - also, Sogdian aristocratic women’s - high economic agency.

4.2. The Accessibility to the Property of Chinese Aristocratic Women

During Tang Dynasty, aristocracies fed from farmers’ tributes through “Shi Feng Zhi”, which is a derivative of the feudatory system. The *Old Book of Tang* recorded that “*the court women, depending on their ranks, had access to the court's supplies, which were at their disposal, and they had property rights over these supplies.* [6]”. This statement elucidates that aristocratic women in the Tang Dynasty possessed and controlled property, thereby affirming their ability to engage in financial transactions.

Moreover, the first administrative law in China *Tang Liu Dian* stipulates “*if there is no male[in the family], then the female can inherit a half of the tribute [that the male would have inherited through Shi Feng Zhi] ...if the princess enjoyed the tribute [from Shi Feng Zhi], [Shi Feng Zhi] stops after her death.* [5]” Though constricted, the law mirrors that Chinese aristocratic women could inherit properties.

5. Conclusion

Both Sogdian and Chinese aristocratic women displayed high social status in the Tang Dynasty from three aspects: literacy, marital autonomy, and property accessibility. The higher agency of divorce enjoyed by Sogdian aristocratic women makes them slightly better than Chinese women in terms of marital autonomy. The social status relished by these women most likely profits from their aristocratic

status and is still not comparable to that of their male counterparts, and the subordination and dependence of women are still evident, as shown by these primary sources.

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