

The Influence of Tang Dynasty's Policies on Sogdian Commercial Networks

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Abstract: Sogdian merchants played an essential role in the commercial and cultural activities between the Tang dynasty and other states in the west of Tang, along the Silk Road. Based on the conditions for the Tarim region to be able to perform a role in the commercial transfer station and the well-established advanced monetary and postal system, the article discusses how the Tang court's policies influenced the Sogdian commercial system that the influence was mainly in three aspects: i) Tang court intentionally introduced Sogdian merchants and helped Sogdian merchants to spread; ii) The household registration of Sogdian merchants and endorsement by Tang court offered Sogdian merchants significant opportunities to earn profits from trading with Tang court when Sogdian merchants monopolized the trade between Tang dynasty and western states; iii) The fusion of Sogdian people into Han people and Sogdian people's entrance into the political system of Tang court enhanced the Sogdian merchant's commercial networks. Finally, the article concludes: The deep fusion of ethnic groups of Han people and Sogdian people was the promoter of the prosperity of the Tang dynasty, and it again made the Sogdian commercial network thrive.

Keywords: Sogdians, Silk Road, Tang, commercial network, household registration, sabao, ethnic fusion, Ancient Letters, Tarim region

1. Introduction

The term Silk Road first appeared on maps made by German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), as a Germany word *die Seidenstrasse* in 1877[1]. The term referred to the historical trade route between China and Iran, India, and Roma Empire and was named for its most popular and characteristic good: silk. When we look back to the Silk Road in history, the Tarim region is the center for developing the trade and trade route. Since Wudi established four cities in Hexi Corridor [2], China extended its influence toward the Tarim regions. The economic and cultural communications between China and western nomads in the Tarim region became more frequent and intensified [3]. Discussing trade activities along the Silk Road cannot go alone without discussing the Sogdian people. In a long time range from the 3rd century to the 12th century, their commercial networks were unbelievably successful and enduring [4]. In the Sogdian Ancient Letters, we can see the economic activities of the Sogdian people around the 4th century [5]. After the intervention during the 5th century due to the invasion of five minor ethnicities in northern China, Sogdian commercial

activities rejuvenated during the Tang dynasty [6].

From historical materials from the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty and Sogdian Ancient Letters, we can see that the Sogdian people's rise and fall depended to a large extent on China's situations [7]. When the society in the Jin dynasty was unstable, commercial activities disappeared; and when the Tang united China again, Sogdian merchants also acquired new chances to trade [8]. In the Han dynasty we know that the silk from the Han dynasty reached as far as Roma Empire [9]. From the materials of the Byzantine and Tang dynasties, Sogdian merchants were a vital force in the trading between the west and east [10]. When an unprecedented flourishing society after 400 years occurred again, the Sogdian commercial networks and the whole of Sogdian were exclusively prosperous during around Tang dynasty [11]. Then, the question arises: How did China affect Sogdian commercial networks during the Tang dynasty? From comprehensive documents from the Tang dynasty, we can summarize some answers. This article will focus on how the Tang government's systematically developed communities in the Tarim region for Sogdian people influenced their commercial network. Before discussing how Tang's policies toward Sogdian people influenced their commercial activities, it is necessary to emphasize conditions for Sogdian commercial networks' prosperity.

First, the objective condition for their success was the agricultural development in the Tarim region. Starting from the Jin dynasty, agricultural expansion based on the conversion of agricultural surpluses due to improvements in irrigation strengthened the Tarim region's capacity as transit areas between the West and China [12]. Due to the agricultural development, Sogdian people settled in almost all great oases in Tarim Region [13]. Full of people and necessities for long-distance travel, the Tarim region became an ideal transit station for trading from China to countries in the west. In addition, the natural resources lay a physical condition for Sogdian commercial networks in Central Asia [14].

Second, Sogdian people were professional merchants and developed an advanced system to manage their commercial activities over a long distance. *Letter II* shows that there was already a merchant structure of commercial network among Sogdian people, from the intended reader, Lord Varzakk, the writer, Nanai-vandak, down to the writer's subordinates, like Nasyan and Artikhu-vandak, before the letter was written. This network showed that Sogdian people developed a commercial network that enabled Sogdian merchants to communicate regularly and manage their commercial activities in a sizeable geometrical range. The second half of *Letter II* shows that the Sogdian people already had a monetary system in Samarkand or their other settlements, including deposits, loans, and interests [15]. The modern-like monetary system represents Sogdian merchants' sensitive commercial smell of risks.

Two conditions above made it possible for Sogdian merchants to succeed in commercial activities in the 7th century. However, other powers then lead to enduring commercial networks, including what the article will focus on: the Tang court's policies to Sogdian communities.

2. Tang's Influences on Sogdian Networks

After the establishment of the Tang dynasty, the route connecting the Tarim region and China proper opened again [16]. As a result, the exchange of culture and trade between regions became more intense, and how to manage the Tarim region became a problem for the Tang court [17]. We know that the Tang government systematically developed communities in the Tarim region for Sogdian people, and the communities enhanced the Sogdian's commercial network. Three main aspects influenced the Sogdian people and made Sogdian networks flourish.

2.1. Tang Government's Introduction of Sogdian Merchants into China

A prosperous Sogdian merchant community could make the city and the region stable and prosperous, lowering Tang's military cost. There is a record in *Tang shu* that talks about Tang officially introducing some Sogdian merchants into cities and relying on them to repair cities. In the 5th year of Kaiyuan, Xuanzong wanted to recover Yingzhou 营州. Officer Jing Song insisted that they should not do that. Only Qingli articulated the benefits of it very much. After 30 days of construction, Yingzhou city was built, and Qingli was appointed as the city's office. He reclaimed land with a surplus of 80 households, attracted Shang Hu 商胡, and set up a storefront. After a few years, granaries were full, and residents were many [18]:

开元五年，奚、契丹各款塞归附，玄宗欲复营州于旧城。侍中宋璟固争以为不可，独庆礼甚陈其利。乃诏庆礼及太子詹事姜师度、左骁卫将军邵宏等充使，更于柳城筑营州城，兴役三旬而毕。俄拜庆礼御史中丞，兼检校营州都督。开屯田八十馀所，追拔幽州及渔阳、淄青等户，并招辑商胡，为立店肆。数年间，营州仓廩颇实，居人渐殷

In *Xin Tang Shu*, there is also a record of the same thing, and the result is similar[19]:

玄宗时，奚、契丹款附，帝欲复治故城，宋璟固争不可，独庆礼执处其利，乃诏与太子詹事姜师度、左骁卫将军邵宏等为使，筑裁三旬毕。俄兼营州都督，开屯田八十馀所，追拔渔阳、淄青没户还旧田宅，又集商胡立邸肆。不数年，仓廩充，居人藩辑

Two paragraphs talk about the same thing. In the fifth year of Kaiyuan, Xi and Qidan subjugate themselves to the Tang dynasty, and Xuanzong planned to recover Yingzhou city. Official Jing Song insisted that Xuanzong should not do so, only Qingli Song stated the benefits of recovering the city. Xuanzong then ordered Qingli and others as envoys to construct Yingzhou city at Liu city. They gathered labor and built the city in three months. Soon, Qingli was appointed as Yushizhongcheng and the governor of Yingzhou. Qingli ordered to farm in over 80 places, move people living in Youzhou, Yuyang, Ziqing, and other places to the newly built Yingzhou city and introduce merchant Hu and build stores for them. Over years, the Yingzhou granary became full, and the residents were gradually rich.

Introducing Iranian-speaking merchants (Shang hu 商胡) was vital in rejuvenating a city. Two materials show that the government systematically settled some Sogdian merchants in cities to promote a town's prosperity. We can reasonably infer that the government understood that Sogdian merchants could play an important role in flourishing a region and stabilizing the region. If there were Sogdian merchants, the government could save a lot of money and attention on a region they needed to manage. Thus, Sogdian merchants' existence could reduce the government's operation and ruling costs. In the Tarim region, the military cost could also be reduced where Sogdian merchants dwelled [20]. There are many direct translates of Sogdian names in Anle Li, most of whom are over 40 years old, and they are very concentrated, indicating that they were initially living in the Sogdian settlement of Hu people, who were compiled into the village by the Tang dynasty [21]. In *Kaiyuanhubuge* excavated from Dunhuang, one edict records that in the first year of Chuigong, the official said that if Sogdian merchants from vassal states were here, let them trade in China proper. This document shows that Tang encouraged Sogdian merchants from the west to move to China [22]. For this economic reason that the Sogdian merchants could help to stabilize the region where they dwelled, and lower the military costs for the Tang court, it is reasonably inferred that the Tang court adopted systematical policies to introduce Sogdian merchants to China proper and settle them in various cities. This action might facilitate Sogdian merchants' spread to farther regions and the extent of the whole network, supported by the Chinese government, which vastly reduced the opportunity costs and risks for Sogdian merchants to travel.

2.2. The Household Registration of Sogdian Community

Tang government adopted a systematical household registration for Sogdian people in the Tarim region and China proper [23]. The household registration of Sogdian merchants could enable the Tang court to follow these merchants better; in other words, Sogdian merchants were authorized officially. After the establishment of the new empire, the shared prosperity and mercy attitude attracted many immigrants to Hu communities in the Tarim region [24]. In *Tongdian*, Yiwu 伊吾 bears fertile soils, and there were over thousands of Shanghu 商胡 lived here in the Sui dynasty[25]. In *Xin Tangshu*, in Suye 素叶, many Sogdian merchants also lived. Together with other examples like Dianhe 典和, Xincheng 新城, and Sapi 萨毗, please give us an overview of how Sogdian merchants were popular in Tarim region[26]. These merchants would go around where they could trade. So, the Tang government registered Sogdian merchants to trace merchants' tracks on Chinese territory [27]. This also means the government gave these Sogdian merchants permits to trade on the land governed by China. For example, the Tang government permitted Sogdian merchants to pay silver coins at markets [28]. The endorsement of the government, or nationality, undoubtedly encouraged Sogdian merchants.

The endorsement by the government could provide two significant ways for Sogdian merchants to earn a considerable profit. First, the need for foreign goods and services of the elites of the Tang court created a large market for foreign merchants. In the 7th to 8th century, Upper-class women wore Western clothing while their companions wore Türk clothing for hunting. One of the most popular sports among upper-class people in Tang was polo, a sport from Central Asia [29]. The great need for western goods and services encountered the dominance of Sogdian merchants in commerce between China and western countries. An essential document from Astana (73 TAM 514:2, in 11 fragments) illustrated commercial deals likely from 610-620[30]. Of the total 35 commercial deals, 29 were related to at least one Sogdian merchant, and in 13 cases, the seller and the buyer were Sogdians [31].

The dominance of commercial activities rendered chances for the Sogdian people to supply most of the foreign goods and services directly to the governments of Tang, supported by their formal permits. Second, the permit enabled Sogdian merchants to engage in military trade. Third, there was evidence that silk was a currency in the Tarim region [32]. This is because the cost of transporting silver or bronze coins was too high. Metal coins are hefty; it was tough to transport them from China proper to the Tarim region. Besides, transportations on land were extremely risky. Combining two factors, the costs to directly pay significant troops in the Tarim region were very high, so the government paid troops by silks, a standard, government-controlled, light, high-valued universal equivalent.

For this reason, silk was very popular in the Tarim region as a substitute for coins [33]. Soldiers bought necessities like food and hey in silks, and military officers imported foreign goods by silks, which increased silk prices [34]. As the commercial dominants, Sogdian merchants used various goods, mainly trading silk [35]. Evidence also shows that Sogdian merchants undertook the transportation jobs of silks as a military provision [36]. We can reasonably infer that Sogdian merchants dealing with the military were trustable citizens: The commercial deal with the military officers could not be assigned to unreliable foreigners. Sogdian merchants earned a lot through trading with military officers and soldiers: According to the estimation of Étienne de La Vaissière, the price of silk between Samarkand and Dunhuang doubled during the period [37]. Sogdian merchants also enjoyed the "lower-price" silks: The government took almost all costs of transporting silks from China proper. Sogdian merchants only had to take another half cost of transporting silks from the Tarim region to other western counties. With this price advantage, Sogdian people made huge profits.

2.3. The Transformation of Sogdian Merchants from Private Merchants to Officials

The official management and registration of citizenship of Sogdian people from Tang promoted the integration of multiple ethnic groups and Sogdian's commercial network. What we learned from Sogdian Ancient Letters *I and III* about the structure of Sogdian communities is that they were not just simple clusters of merchants but had very clear class stratifications [38]. They had leaders and group members in a trade caravan. At first, these leaders were just the leaders and representatives of a private trade caravan [39]. To systematically manage these Sogdian caravans and communities, the Tang government put these leaders, sabao 萨宝, in official positions[40]. Du You recorded in *Tongdian* that the sabao in charge of over two hundred houses was a ninth-class official; the sabao in charge of Yongzhou was an eighth-class official[41]. Some sabao reached even the fifth-class official. Two officers in the sabao office Shui 率 and Shi 史 could reach the fourth and fifth classes, respectively. Some originally private commercials have become official commercials of the Tang court. Some sabao was able to enter the China proper political circle. Kangpo 康婆. He was said to come from Dingzhou (in Hebei). His father was first the sabao in Dingzhou during the Sui dynasty. Kang Po accumulated a large fortune since he inherited his father's title, and in Tang, he became the director of agricultural works in the fief of a prince [42].

Another example is Kang Rizhi 康日知. According to *Xin Tangshu*, his family claimed they were from western countries during the Kaiyuan period. His father thus was appointed in Tianshan county. Rizhi served Li Weiye when Rizhi was young, and was the feudal provincial or prefectural governor of Zhaozhou 赵州[43]. We can see that some Sogdian families, with surnames like Kang 康, Mi 米, Shi 史, migrated into China and entered the political circle of China proper.

During the Tang dynasty, sabao mainly assumed diplomatic duty and connected to Sogdian commercial activities [44]. This integration of Sogdian people into China again supported the Sogdian commercial network. In *Xin Tangshu*, Jiuxinghu 九姓胡 always stayed in the capital, over thousands of people, possessing significant goods and assets[45]. In *Zizhitongjian*, the Tang government asked Sogdian people staying in Chang'an to either leave or become officials of Tang [46]. The result was that not even a single Sogdian merchant was willing to leave. The national amalgamation benefitted both Sogdian commercial activities and Tang's economy. Members of the numerous Sogdian communities that emerged during two centuries of substantial and sustained migration in the new territories of the West and Dunhuang and Gansu and the major cities of northern China were involved in various commercial and administrative activities. They were the main driving forces behind the Golden Age of the Tang dynasty [47].

3. Conclusion

For the three aspects above, we can see that the Tang dynasty's policies toward Sogdian people and Tang's systematical arrangement for Sogdian merchants promoted Sogdian commercial networks. Specifically, the Tang government intentionally introduced Sogdian merchants to regions in China proper. This helped Sogdian merchants to disperse into a larger territory. In addition, the household registration enabled Sogdian merchants to trade directly with Chinese elites and the military when they nearly monopolized the trade between China and western countries. Sogdian people further stepped into the administrative system through Tang's local policies like sabao, which encouraged the Sogdian commercial networks. The deep fusion between the Chinese and Sogdian people created the prosperity of the Tang dynasty, and the prosperity of the country then gave birth to the significant Sogdian commercial network around the Tang dynasty.

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