

How the Sogdian Ancient Letters Show the Family Values of the Sogdians People Who Lived in China

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Abstract: Sogdiana was an ancient country of Central Asia lasting from the Han dynasty to Song dynasty in the history of China. Its people, the Sogdians, were famous for their business talents. Their contributions to the international trade system and culture blending were nonnegligible. Sogdians expanded the geographical range of their trade routes to China; some of them chose to live in China to do business. Called as Hu, a general term for non-Chinese peoples living north and northwest of China, Sogdians brought their own culture and traditions and kept their own identity when they settled in China. This paper analyzes the details and purpose of Sogdian ancient letters to explore how and why the Sogdians preserved their heritage and maintained their culture in China. In conclusion, Sogdians kept family values to form an organization to help each other when they were out of their motherland.

Keywords: the Silk Road, the Sogdian people, family value, Sogdian ancient letters

1. Introduction

From the Han to the Song Dynasty, the Sogdian people had a long history of trading on the Silk Road. They were well-known merchants in Eurasia for their business talents and achievements. The Sogdians, who originally lived in the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers in Uzbekistan, traveled via the Silk Road towards its eastern end, where their most important market and trade partner, China, was located [1-3].

The Silk Road brought various cultures, races, and ethnicities to Tun-Huang, a major city on the Silk Road. The Silk Road was established over the Eurasian land from Chang'an (today's Xian) to ancient Rome. To form an international trade route at such a big scale, the middle part of the Eurasian region, today's central Asia, played an important role as trading posts and transfer stations. Tun-Huang is in western China. Since the territory of ancient China was much smaller than that of modern China, during the Jin Dynasty, Tun-Huang was at the western frontier of the Chinese empire. When foreign business people went to China, Tun-Huang was usually their first stop. Therefore, many Sogdians went to Tun-Huang or even lived there for years for trade and other economic activities.

The Sogdian ancient letters, a key source for historians to study the Sogdians, were found by a British scholar, Aurel Stein, in Tun-Huang in 1907. These letters were written in the Sogdian language. Based on archeological evidence, scholars conclude that the letters were sent from Tun-Huang to the Sogdians living outside of China.

These letters were personal correspondence between ordinary people. Letters I and III record communications between a mother and a daughter. Letter II was written by a Sogdian merchant who ran a business in China. Unlike formal historical records of macroscopic reports of the Sogdians people, most of the letters focus on everyday situations and personal affairs. Discussing concrete problems and vividly recording people's lives, these ancient letters have unique value in studying the history of the Sogdian people and their trades.

Historians have used these ancient Sogdian letters as a great supplement to their historical research on the Sogdians. The details and descriptions of daily lives enabled researchers to learn what difficulties the Sogdian people faced when they traveled to China and their solutions and reflections. Common themes in these letters also provide information on the social fabric of the Sogdian people, such as the importance of family.

In Sogdian ancient letters I, II and III, the family takes a central role. All three letters mention family members. Letters I and III are written by a mother and a daughter, mainly discussing their personal situations and needs. In letter II, the Sogdian merchant asked for help and support from his family to continue his business in China. Thus, when studying the Sogdian people, family values cannot be ignored, and the letters can provide new insights into the role and importance of family for the Sogdians.

According to the Sogdian ancient letters, to protect themselves and maintain their business, the Sogdian people often went to China as business groups with their family numbers, all family numbers would take responsibility for others, and they had a strong familial cohesion.

2. The Importance of Family Value in Sogdians World

To begin with the analysis of first sub-topic, it is import to look at the importance of family for the Sogdians, especially the Sogdian merchants. First, the family played an important role for the Sogdians merchants. The Sogdian society valued the sense of familial belonging. The self-identity of the Sogdian people was closely bonded to their familial relations, leading to relative strong family ties. When the Sogdian merchants left their homes, they were still deeply tied to their families by this sense of belonging and family values.

Letter II offers strong evidence for the importance of family in the Sogdian trade. At the beginning of the letter, the writer uses respectful expressions to address the receiver. "To the noble lord Varzakk (son of) Nanai-thvar (of the family) Kanakk. Sent [by] his servant Nanai-vandak" [4]. In this sentence, the author uses not only the name or office title at the beginning to call the receiver, but also other names: "Nanai-thvar" and "Kanakk". It is not the first name because the text in parentheses shows that should be the father's name and family name. Therefore, the way that Sogdian call others in written language can provide evidence of Sogdian people's family value from the mention of father's name and family name, moreover, it brings the Sogdian merchants a sense of cohesion when they are out of their home country.

The appearance of the family name and the father's name provides evidence for Sogdian family values. At the beginning of this sentence, the author wrote "... (of the family) Kanakk," [4] which shows that he was a member of the Kanakk family. Putting the family name of Varzakk next to his name, the letter writer identifies his family as a central component of his personal title and social identity. In addition, the concept of the family name is similar to the meaning of family name today in the Sogdian culture. A family name represents which social group the Sogdians belong to. Using the family name was common in the Sogdian culture even before the Sogdian people blended into Chinese society. Sogdian merchants in China also kept using their Sogdian family names. A Sogdian family usually contains the name of the family leader--the oldest male who usually was the parent of other family members. The "(son of) Nanai-thva" [4]part in the quoted sentence shows that the father had special meanings for their family numbers.

Note that due to the lack of additional evidence of the author and the receivers, we cannot clearly define their social states— whether this kind of writing style came from an elite culture or was popular among ordinary people. In letter II, the author faced serious problems and wrote the letter to inform family members back home about his difficulties. There is no evidence in the letter that he was an official or an officer. Additionally, the writer addresses the receiver as “lord.” It might mean to address the receiver deferentially, and the author asks the receiver to allocate his personal property. The letter shows that the receiver had a higher social status and knew how to deal with the issue of property, which means that the receiver had knowledge about businesses. Thus, the receiver was at least a merchant-class person and could do trade and other economic work. In conclusion, the author and the receiver of this letter were mostly liked to be merchants, or merchants and members of the local family with higher respect than others. This means that family value was common for many Sogdian people because merchants were a big part of the Sogdian society and, as letter II shows, these merchants were tied closely to their families.

Family value took a significant part in the Sogdian people’s mind, and when it related with the foreign traveling, its meaning for the Sogdian people would be even more significant. In letter II, the author mentions the family name more than once. The following sentence—“Pesakk (son of) Dhruwaspvandak...not to be transferred, and you should hold [it . . .] sealed from now (on),” [4]— is the second time that he uses the father’s name. It also provided information about person that the author told about, at that time, the author was talked about how to deal with personal property, this person was mentioned as a keeper of the author’s staters, thus, the supplyment of a person’s information also helped with the work: it is easily to find him. At the same time, the quoted sentence shows the author’s identity and social network. When Sogdian merchants traveled around, having a familial identity made them easier to be recognized by other Sogdians who also lived in a foreign society.

3. Sogdoans Family Join Same Business Group

The family and family members were not only a symbol of identity for the Sogdian merchants but also took part in the business. When traveling for trade on the Silk Road, the Sogdian merchants usually formed business groups with other Sogdians to protect themselves and collaborate for business. Their family members were usually in these business groups since the merchants had a closer connection with their family members who could be trusted for help.

The Sogdian ancient letter I and III recorded the communication between family members, hence these two letters mentioned the family members in a business group.

These letters first certify that the family members of Sogdian merchants will come with the merchants to travel, Mewnai, the speaker in these letters, said “I have obeyed your orders, I came to Tun-Huang” [5]. In this sentence, “you” refer to Mewai’s husband, a Sogdian merchant, Mewnai’s words shows two pieces of information: first, she was with her husband to go to China, and, second, she went to Tun-Huang because of her husband’s order. Thus, it could be prove that the reason that Mewnai come to DunHuang is because her huaband. This letter show that Sogdian merchants travel in business groups with their family members.

It should be noticed that Mewnai did not talk anything about business and other economic movements in this letter, the Sogdian ancient letters I and III were different from the Sogdian ancient letter II--what just analyzed in the last section--these letters were proposed to be transported to a family member by a woman. The main problem that Mewnai talked about is also not focused on business, in fact, The letters mostly express Mewnai’s personal difficulties and her wish to go home. According to this, Mewnai’s concern was not about the business and she may not know about business, which means she was not taking part in the treading even though she was following her husband to come to Tunhuang, so the reason that her husband called her to Hunhuang may be based

on other needs. In conclusion, some family members may take other duties in the business group instead of the only business job.

Additionally, these letters also reflected how family members differ from other group members of the business group. "I turned to an advisor Sara[ra]k, but the advisor said: 'there is no one [of your relatives] closer to [your] husband Nanaid than (5) Artivan'" [5] When Mewai needed help, other Sogdians gave her a suggestion to ask the man named Artivan, the reason was this person was her relative and he was close to her husband. This sentence was about her situation in this part of the letter, she tried to find help from an advisor in China, however, the advisor suggested that she should ask her husband's nearest relative. This means, in the advisor's mind, the family was an important factor when Sogdian people need to ask for help. Moreover, the name of the advisor shew that he was Sogdian because his name was different from the Chinese name (the name of China people during the Jin Dynasty), so he was a Sogdian officer. Also, as an advisor, he had not just dealt with the asking of Sogdian people at that time. Thus the suggestion that he told Mewnai was not an exception. Thus, in the Sogdian opinion, the nearest relative was the first choice for people to ask for help. It was a wise choice for the Sogdian people in China. During the Jin Dynasty, Sogdians have not fully adopted into Chinese society yet, they seemed like an outsider; moreover, sometimes the happening of accidents also made Sogdian merchants in unexpected situations like Mewnai. Therefore, the protection was significant for them. Family members have a stronger connection with each other than the other group members, so when the family members are in the same business group, they could help each other.

In sum, family played an important role in facilitating Sogdian business in China. People from the same family joined the business group, and they would have closer relationships, helping each other during the long and challenging journey.

4. Sogdians' Responsibility to Their Family

The Sogdian people also had to take responsibility for their family members and their actions in the Sogdian society. For the Sogdians, they were linked to their families in various ways, such as taking care of family matters.

In the Sogdian letters II, when the writer told about his property's distribution, one person he mentioned can provide about the responsibility that the writer took. "And, behold, (there is) a certain orphan . . . dependent(?) on this income...and when Takhsich-vandak is grown up [lit. "big"], then give him a wife...Takhsich-vandak should take three shares" [4]. In this quotation, the writer mentioned an orphan named Takhsich-vandak. He asked the receiver of the letter to take care of Takhsich-vandak and to ensure Takhsich-vandak's future was fruitful. This letter manifests that the writer did care about Takhsich-vandak. Sentences like "when Takhsich-vandak is grown up"[4] indicate that Takhsich-vandak was a child at the time of writing this letter. Also, the family name of this child, vandak, is the same as that of the writer. It's highly likely that Takhsich-vandak was part of the writer's family. Moreover, they might be more closely related: the writer also said that this orphan was a dependent of his. If this child was the son of his relative, he would not need to depend entirely on the writer's income. Hence, this child, Takhsich-vandak, might be very closely related to the writer by blood. This child might even be the son of the writer. As a result, the writer Nanai-vandak had the idea of taking care of this child, who might be his own son or the son of his close relative.

Additionally, this letter showcases the will of the writer. In this letter, the writer's had a long-term plan for this child. In other words, the writer thought a lot about this child's future, which means that he wants to give this child the best life possible. At the time of writing this letter, there was a war going on in China. The quotation from book Sogdians in China talked about the historical events Nanai-vandak faced. This letter also mentioned some important events happening in China at

that time. For example, "... the war...and the devastating destruction of Luoyang and Yecheng" [4]. Thus, it is clear that Nanai-vandak was in danger. When he heard about the hazardous situation in China, he knew that he might not be able to survive, so he wrote this letter as a will, in which he arranged Takhsich-vandak's life of as best as he could. This shows that he had a strong sense of family responsibility.

In Sogdian society, family responsibility helped protect the entire Sogdian family. Nanai-vandak felt a heavy personal responsibility for the child. Therefore, this child had a great chance to be alive and be cared for by people receiving this letter. The spread of the idea of family responsibility in Sogdian society tightened their family connections and prevented family members from being harmed.

As the result, The Sogdian people have to take responsibility for their family members' life and secure living, which is the protection of the Sogdians, and help with the containing of the whole family.

5. Conclusion

The Sogdian ancient letters provide insights into family values of the Sogdians. According to the above analysis, the Sogdians' cultural identity was mainly family-based. Sogdians were closely connected to their families. They did business together and survived through relying on each other.

This paper gives a unique perspective on the Sogdian family because of its research direction: The research begins from a micro point of view, by analyzing personal letters. This method can be used to complement other studies.

The research on Sogdian ancient letters and the concept of family in Sogdian society is not finished. This paper will inspire other researchers to continue working on this subject matter.

However, this paper also has limitations. The biggest problem is the lack of evidence about the letter writers and their lives. The identity of some people mentioned in the letters is never verified and thus, more analysis is needed. It is still too early to form a definite conclusion, so words such as "might" appear throughout the paper. Arguments are less valid when pivotal information is lacking or unclear.

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