



The Sogdians' Influence on the Silk Road from the 4th to the 9th Century

Yi Hu

The University of California, Irvine, History major, Humanities School, Irvine

Abstract

As an important land trade route, the ancient Silk Road has fallen into decline many times in history due to many factors. During the Tang Dynasty in China, the Silk Road once again ushered in its heyday. During this golden age of trade, the Sogdians played an important role on the Silk Road. As a unique ethnic group, the Sogdians have long been marginalized by the mainstream historical narrative. This article focuses on the Sogdians, analyzing their uniqueness and how they controlled the Silk Road from the 4th to the 9th century, and hopes to show their importance by showing their contribution to the prosperity and development of the Silk Road. Utilizing the literature research methodology, this article explains how the Sogdians eventually led to the revival of the once interrupted Silk Road trade by sorting out their influence on the Silk Road in the areas of trade, politics, military, religion and culture.

Keywords: Sogdians, Silk Road, trade network, cultural dissemination, religion

1. Introduction

The Sogdians were undoubtedly the most notable group on the Silk Road from the 4th to the 9th century AD, whose activeness revived the Silk Road. As a unique commercial nation, the Sogdians frequently traveled between Central Asia and China through the Silk Road, transporting goods to West Asia and Europe. And as an intermediary for cultural exchanges of Eurasia, the Sogdians also played a great role in the spread of religious, artistic styles, and technological innovations along the Silk Road. Although the Sogdians eventually disappeared into history with the conquest of the Arabs and the rise of Islamic culture, their contributions to the cultural and economic exchanges that took place along the Silk Road and their lasting legacies in the history of Central Asia and other regions are still remembered today.

2. The Silk Road and the Sogdians

The Silk Road is well-known as a famous trade route between the East and the West in history. The name of the Silk Road is derived from the lucrative silk trade conducted along this trade route. This term was first proposed and promoted by Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877.(Waugh, 2007,1)

2.1 The Silk Road

Although known as the Silk Road, it is not actually a single established route, but an interconnected network of trade routes. The emergence of this trade network has successfully promoted the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture between the East and the West. The ancient Silk Road refers to the trade network that starts from the ancient capital of the Han and Tang dynasties in China, Chang'an, and passes through Xinjiang to Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, connecting Mediterranean countries. Its formation can be traced back to the period before the Han Dynasty, during which the nomadic tribes in northern China were already promoting the exchange of goods between the East and the West. Although it did not form a large-scale trade, the embryonic form of the Silk Road had already emerged during this period. (Rong, 2017, p.52)

Since then, the Silk Road has gradually prospered with constant trade exchanges, but with the decline and even demise of many empires along the Silk Road, this trade route also experienced its first decline. During this period, trade along the Silk Road was often conducted in the form of official trade and long-distance trade, which required strong backing and support from major countries to sustain. (Rong, 2017, p.62) As major powers weakened one after another, the Silk Road also declined.

Although the Silk Road was gradually interrupted by the decline of the two great powers in the East and the West, the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire, as well as the demise and turmoil of the Central Asian empires along the way, the trade on the once prosperous trade route became more difficult, this trade route did not completely disappear. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) in China, this Silk Road once again became thriving and prosperous. The revival of the Silk Road relied on the role played by a special ethnic group - the Sogdians.

2.2 About the Sogdians

In history, the Sogdians lived in the Zeravshan River basin between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers in Central Asia. Sogdian territory corresponded to the modern region of Samarkand and Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan, as well as the Sughd region of modern Tajikistan. Overall, the territory included a portion of present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. They scattered and lived on some oases, becoming several independent kingdoms, such as Kang Kingdom centered around Samarkand, An Kingdom centered around Bukhara, and Shi Kingdom centered around Tashkent. In Chinese historical records, there were also Kingdoms such as He, Mi, Cao, Mu, and Bi. It is generally believed that the above-mentioned surnames are descendants of the Sogdians. After settling in China, they often used their own Kingdom's name as their surname, which is collectively referred to as the Nine Surnames of Zhaowu in Chinese historical records. It was the activeness of this nation that led to the revival of trade along the Silk Road.

3. The Sogdians Restarted the Silk Road

As a famous ethnic group in Central Asia, the Sogdians played a vital role in the Silk Road trade network in the Tang Dynasty. Since the 4th century, the Sogdians have gradually begun

to dominate the trade along the Silk Road, promoting the exchange of goods between different regions. (Wood, 2002, pp. 65 – 68) Their activeness has also led to the Sogdians being widely recorded in different historical books.

3.1 Early Records of Sogdians in Chinese History Books

Records of the Sogdians appeared very early in Chinese history books. As early as the Han Dynasty in China, there were merchants from Li Yi (also known as Sogdia) in Luoyang. In the *Biography of the Western Regions in the Book of Later Han*, it is recorded that "Kangju's vassal country, Li Yi Country, is rich in famous horses, cattle and sheep, wine and other goods, and the land is fertile." (Fan, n.d.) The Kangju vassal state mentioned here, Li Yi, is Sogdia. Modern scholars believe that the name Sogdia first appeared in the *Biography of the Western Regions* of the *Book of Wei*: "Sogdia is on the west side of the Pamir Mountains." (Wei, 1975) In ancient Chinese historical records, the image of the Sogdians is often described as a group skilled in trade. In the *Kangguo Biography of the Book of Sui*, it is recorded that the Sogdians were: "The Sogdians were skilled merchants, and many merchants from various countries went to Sogdian countries for trade." (Wei, 1975, P.158) And in the *Kangguo Biography of the Old Book of Tang*, it is also recorded that Sogdians were: "They are good at doing business and place great importance on their interests." (Liu, 1975, P.211) In the *Biography of Kangguo in the New Book of Tang*, it is recorded that the once Sogdians were "reached the age of twenty, he started doing business and went wherever he had money to earn." (Ouyang, 1975, P.624) And in *The Western Regions of the Tang Dynasty*, it is recorded that "This passage means that the Sogdia was a money society, where everyone pursued money, and even fathers and sons had a money relationship." (Xuanzang et al., 1996, P.27)

In such a social atmosphere, the Sogdians undoubtedly gave birth to numerous groups of merchants. The existence of these merchant groups was also the basis for the Sogdians to participate in the trades of the Silk Road and played a crucial role.

3.2 Geographical Features of the Area Where the Sogdians Lived

In addition to the Sogdians being adept at business, the geographical environment they lived in also played a crucial role in facilitating their active participation on the Silk Road. From a geographical perspective, the Sogdian region mainly encompasses the area between Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan. Sogdia itself is situated in the eastern part of the Tianshan Mountains, and crossing the Pamir Mountains leads to entry into China. The western region borders the Arab Empire, while the northwest neighbors the Eastern Roman and Mediterranean coastal countries. To the south lies a mountain range, and to the north and northeast are grasslands, serving as the domain of the fierce Huns and the Turks, with the Sogdians situated in between. This unique geographical location had rendered the Sogdians' residence a vital passage connecting East Asia and the Mediterranean coastal countries.

Simultaneously, the Sogdians frequently traversed the trade route from India to Russia, known as the north-south Caucasian trade route. Consequently, this region became the intersection of commercial trade routes between East and West (China to the Mediterranean coast) and North and South (Indus River basin to the Black Sea coast) during the Middle Ages. It also served as the confluence of multiple civilizations in ancient Asia and Europe. Such a superior geographical location provided unique conditions for the Sogdians to engage in commercial activities.

Moreover, this region was predominantly arid deserts, with agricultural production primarily concentrated in small oasis areas with irrigation capabilities. However, the distribution area of oases was limited, and the population they could support was constrained, compelling the

Sogdians to rely on the trades to meet their daily needs, thereby honing their characteristic prowess in business.

3.3 Summary

It is precisely due to the unique ethnic characteristics and especial geographical environment of the Sogdians that they had been constantly active in the trades of the Silk Road, and gradually revived it. During this process, the Sogdians played an important role in commercial, diplomatic, and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road.

4. Sogdians: Monopolists of Trade on the Silk Road

One of the main contributions of the Sogdians to the Silk Road was the restoration of its trade network. Due to their unique geographical environment and ethnic culture, the Sogdians also made significant contributions in expanding the coverage of the Silk Road trade network.

4.1 Sogdian Trade Activities in Archaeological Discoveries

In 1907, the famous British archaeologist Aurel Stein obtained 8 ancient letters which recorded the business activities of the Sogdians at that time in a Chinese watchtower, just west of the Jade Gate, a fortified outpost guarding the western approaches to the administrative and cultural center of Dunhuang (at the western end of today's Gansu Province). Because of its importance, many Sogdian merchants would travel here and trade.

Among these excavated ancient letters, Sogdian Ancient letter No. 2 (Figure 1) records a lot of details about the trade of Sogdian merchants. It was recorded that the sales of linen cloth were very good, and all fabrics from Dunhuang to Jincheng were successfully sold. (Wang, 2004) The letter also mentioned many times the caravans sent from Liangzhou to the Chinese Mainland, which can be inferred that Dunhuang, Liangzhou, and other places were the main settlements and important commercial transit points for Sogdian merchants conducting trades in China. In 1959, 947 Persian silver coins and 16 gold bars were found in a crevice of a cliff in Xinjiang during archaeological work. (Li, 1959, P.482–483).

It is also speculated that they were urgently buried by Sogdian merchants when they encountered bandits during their business trips. This also proves that Sogdian merchants were widely active on the Silk Road at that time. In addition, the Turpan documents discovered by archaeologists also record a large number of Sogdian trade records during the Gaochang Kingdom period. The traded commodities in the records include gold, silver, copper, silk, spices, tulips, sugar, medicines, etc.

In addition to silk from China, many commodities also come from Kucha, Sogdiana, Persia, and India. (Rong, 2009, P.147 – 160) This record also shows that the trade network of Sogdian merchants covers a wide range. From these archaeological discoveries, it can be seen that in the 4th century, Sogdian merchants established commercial bases along the Silk Road and formed a wide-covering trade network. It is precisely because the Sogdians successfully connected East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East through extensive caravan routes and commercial activities, promoting long-distance exchanges of goods, ideas, and culture.

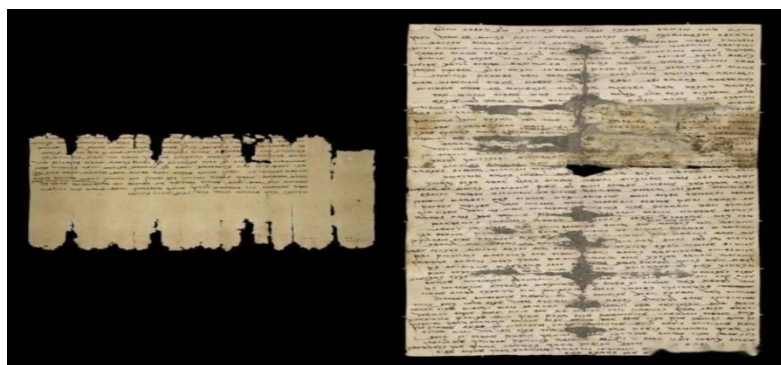


Figure 1. The Sogdian Ancient Letter 1&2. *Ancient Letters*, <https://sogdians.si.edu/ancientletters/>

4.2 High Trade Profits Drove the Sogdians' Activity

In addition, as intermediaries between the East and the West, Sogdian merchants were driven by high trade profits to remain active on the Silk Road. They promoted the trade by transporting goods such as silk, spices, precious metals, gemstones, and other luxury goods between China, Persia, India, and the Mediterranean world. For example, the silk from China was very popular in Mediterranean countries. In the late 6th century of the Eastern Roman Empire, the price of silk was much lower than the official black market price of 6 to 24 gold gemstones per ounce or 1 to 4 kilograms of gold per piece of silk. One tael of gold was worth 10 taels of silver in the Tang Dynasty, which was roughly equivalent to the value of one piece of silk. This increased the price of silk transported from the Tang Dynasty to Eastern Rome by 200-800 times. (Shan, 2015, P.33) In addition, musk was widely traded as a luxury item on the Silk Road. In the western perfume market at that time, the gold value of musk was often 3 to 5 times its weight. Even in areas close to its production site in Nepal, the value of musk was higher than that of equal weight gold. (La Vaissiere, 2015, P.52-53) It was precisely because of such high profits that the Sogdians continued to trade on the Silk Road and eventually revived the prosperity of the Silk Road.

4.3 Other Contributions Made by the Sogdians to the Economy on the Silk Road

In the process of the Sogdians maintaining trade operations on the Silk Road, many Sogdian cities, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, became the main commercial centers on the Silk Road. These cities served as important trade centers, where merchants from different regions gathered to do business, exchange goods, and negotiate transactions. These cities, as important strongholds on the Silk Road, greatly facilitated the trades between the merchants and made significant contributions to another round of prosperity on the Silk Road.

In addition, Sogdian merchants not only engaged in the direct trade of goods but also provided various financial services. This included banks, lending, and currency exchange to promote trade transactions. In *Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 2*, it was recorded that a Sogdian businessman, Lord Chirth-swan, wrote to Lord Nanai-thvar. In the content, the businessman mentioned that he hoped Lord Nanai-thvar would remind Lord Varzakk to withdraw a deposit, and both parties should calculate the interest on this principal. And after obtaining the specific amount, the two would decide who will use and hold this fund. (Waugh, 2004) From this letter, it can be seen that at that time, the Sogdians already had an institution similar to today's banks. When the Sogdians needed it, they could extract funds from it, and there was also a calculation of interest. All of these indicate that the Sogdians had created a financial system. The expertise of the Sogdians in finance and commerce helped promote the development of the Silk Road economy, enabling merchants from different countries and regions to conduct business more efficiently and safely.

Sogdians were also proficient in multiple languages, including Sogdian, Persian, Chinese, and Turkic. Their language ability enabled them to effectively communicate with people from different backgrounds and cross language and cultural barriers to engage in trade and negotiate trade agreements. As Etienne de La Vaissiere points out, out of the 35 recorded commercial transactions, 29 involved one Sogdian, and 13 involved both buyers and sellers of Sogdians. (La Vaissiere, 2015, P.138) The frequent appearance of the Sogdians in trade records undoubtedly confirms their talent in language communication and their deep involvement in the trades on the Silk Road.

4.4 Summary

Overall, the Sogdians played a crucial role in shaping the commercial landscape of the Silk Road and promoting trade and economic prosperity in the ancient world. Their entrepreneurial spirit, language skills, and cultural adaptability were important factors for the success of the Silk Road as a vibrant communication network.

5. Sogdians: Disseminator of the Culture

In addition to being a trade network, the Silk Road also played a major role in cultural dissemination. For example, Valerie Hansen believes that the cultural exchanges brought about by people traveling along the Silk Road have had a greater impact on history than trade on the Silk Road. (Hansen, 2012, P.297) The Sogdians also played an important role in this process and promoted cultural exchanges and religious diversity on this transportation network.

5.1 The Sogdians and the Spread of Buddhism

The Silk Road was an important trade network in ancient times. With the continuous activity of merchants from various countries, various religions also spread along this road. As early as the 4th century AD, Buddhist monks traveled along the trade routes, and Sogdian merchants provided crucial support and sponsorship for these religious travelers. Meanwhile, the enormous wealth brought about by prosperous cross-border trades also led to the establishment of numerous temples and churches along the Silk Road. As the most active group of merchants during this period, the Sogdians were also sponsors of many temples and churches. These temples and churches were adorned with luxurious decorations and murals, and were well managed and maintained due to the donations from the merchants. (Takao, 2020, P.59)

In many countries along the Silk Road, there was also a habit of recording religious scriptures and deeds through murals. However, due to the fact that the painting of murals often requires the use of pigments made from gemstones, it often requires a huge amount of wealth to complete the painting. It is precisely because of this that donations from many large businessmen have become one of the sources of funding for mural painting. There were also a large number of murals in many cities in the hometown of the Sogdians. Pianzhikent, located in Tajikistan, was a Sogdian city during the medieval period. During the excavation of its ruins, many murals were found in many ordinary houses in the city. Considering that Pianzhikent was not one of the most important cities for the Sogdians, the wealth accumulated by Sogdian merchants undoubtedly played a significant role in the mural painting of this city. (Takao, 2020, P60-62) Being able to spend a huge amount of money on mural painting in a less important city undoubtedly proved the piety of Sogdian merchants and their efforts and contributions to religious dissemination. In addition, the Sogdians also supported the translation of Buddhist texts into Sogdian and other languages, which also promoted the spread of Buddhism on the Silk Road.

5.2 The Sogdians' Contribution to the Spread of Zoroastrianism and Other Religions

Apart from Buddhism, there were also numerous other religions in the texts of the Sogdians. Texts of Christianity and Manichaeism also extensively existed in the Sogdian manuscripts excavated in Gaochang and Dunhuang. (Whitfield & Williams, 2004, P.118) The existence of Sogdian manuscripts related to these religions also indicated that the Sogdians also believed in these religions and spread these religious beliefs during the trades. In addition, the traditional belief of Zoroastrianism among the Sogdians was also spread along the Silk Road. With the continuous trade between Sogdian merchants and China, Zoroastrianism temples also appeared in Luoyang and Chang'an, China. In a letter from Princess Jun Zhezhe of the Hui ethnic group in Ganzhou she mentioned to her friends the scene of lighting a fire in the local Zoroastrianism temple. (Junzhezhe, 958) From the scene described in this letter, it can also be inferred that the traditional religion of the Sogdians had been spreading to different places with their active participation on the Silk Road. Also, based on the network of relationships operated by the Sogdians, more and more people were constantly being made aware of content related to Zoroastrianism. These all demonstrate the contribution of the Sogdians to the dissemination of religion on the Silk.

5.3 The Spread of Sogdian Culture in China

In addition to making great contributions to the spread of religion, the culture of the Sogdians themselves also spread to different countries with the active businessmen of the Sogdians. As the beginning of the Silk Road, China was naturally influenced by the culture of the Sogdians. The popularity of Sogdian dance in China is an example of the spread of their culture in China.

As the most popular dance of the Tang Dynasty in China at that time, the Sogdian Whirl dance was characterized by dancers constantly spinning rapidly on a small circular carpet and not taking a step off the carpet. (Takao, 2020, P.190) The famous Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi also mentioned in his poetry the specific forms of expression of the Sogdian Whirl dance and how the dancers at the Sogdian Whirl dance made the Tang Emperor feel very happy and joyful. (Bai, nd) Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei of the Tang Dynasty once had their favorite general, An Lushan, dance the Sogdian Whirl dance. Later, Yang Guifei also learned this kind of dance. In Ningxia, relief carvings of Sogdian whirling dancers were found in the tombs of the Sogdian family. (Takao, 2020, P.191) These findings also indicated the popularity of the Sogdian Whirl dance in China at that time. This dance, as part of the Sogdian culture, was spread to the Tang Dynasty with the active participation of the Sogdians on the Silk Road and successfully promoted the cultural diversity of the Silk Road at that time.

5.4 Chinese Culture Spread by the Sogdians

Cultural exchange is not just a process of spreading from the West to the East but also a two-way exchange. Through Central Asia, the Silk Road connects the West and the East, serving as both a trade hub and a channel for cultural exchange. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, China was in a period of strong national power, and many of its cultures were also transmitted to Central Asia and the West through the Silk Road. Among them, the dissemination of tea culture was an example, and the main task of spreading tea to the west was also undertaken by Sogdian merchants.

China is one of the earliest countries in the world to grow, make, and drink tea. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), tea had become a popular beverage. In the 8th century AD, there were many thriving tea shops in Chang'an City. With the expansion of tea planting areas, the improvement of tea-making techniques, and the increase in types, tea culture became increasingly prosperous. With the trade activities of the Sogdians along the Silk Road, tea was gradually spread westward. The specific path of tea spreading abroad mainly passed through

the Hexi Corridor to Dunhuang, then got into the Western Regions from Dunhuang, crossed the Mountains, and entered various parts of Central Asia. The Sogdians were extremely active traders on the Silk Road, transporting tea to Central Asia through a large number of commercial trade activities. Tea became a commodity for daily consumption and major goods in the Silk Road trades. Since ancient times, the Chinese have valued the excellent horses raised in other regions, so exchanging Chinese tea for horses from foreign countries became a common form of trade during this period. The route of this trade was called the "Ancient Tea—Horse Road". This trade route successfully connected China's southwest and northwest regions. As part of the Silk Road trade network, the existence of the Ancient Tea Horse Road also stimulated the production of tea. In addition, tea was also used as an equivalent currency in the Silk Road trades during this period. Because many foreign merchants were not interested in bills of exchange or paper money (jiaozi), they often only accepted barter as a way of trade. Therefore, brick tea became one of the important currencies during this period. (Mamatova,2021,P.4916) During the Tang Dynasty, the tea culture of "producing seven million tea bags per year and paying more than 150,000 yuan in taxes" gradually spread westward through the Silk Road. Tea generates saliva, quenches thirst, and aids digestion, making it the best complementary beverage for nomadic peoples who mainly consumed beef and mutton. The Sogdians sold tea and spread the tradition of drinking tea to Central Asia, gradually spreading it to the West.

5.5 Summary

In short, the Sogdians played an important role in spreading religious beliefs along the Silk Road, and different culture was also spread gradually to different regions and countries with their caravans and immigrants. These had all contributed to the religious and cultural diversity along this ancient trade route. The importance of the Silk Road was not limited to its commercial role. As the world's most famous artery for religious, artistic, linguistic, and new technological exchanges between the East and the West, the Silk Road played a huge role in multiple fields. The Sogdians also successfully contributed their own efforts to cultural exchange between the East and the West through this great artery.

6. Sogdians: Political Participants

In addition to making significant contributions in cultural dissemination and cross-border trades, the Sogdians also deeply influenced the political trends of many countries along the Silk Road. The Sogdians, relying on their immense power in trade and other fields, also participated in politics between different countries.

6.1 The Role of the Sogdians in the Diplomacy of the Countries along the Silk Road

The Sogdians played a crucial role in diplomatic relations between the kingdoms, empires, and city states along the Silk Road. They often served as the mediators, ambassadors, and envoys, representing the rulers in negotiating treaties, alliances, and trade agreements between different countries. It was mentioned in the Bilge Qaghan interpretations that the Turkic Empire once sent the troops to suppress a tribe under its rule because they did not send camel caravans as tribute. (Takao,2020, P.264) This camel caravan responsible for transporting tribute to the court was undoubtedly transported by the most influential Sogdian merchant group at the time. From this record, it can be found that Sogdian merchants were able to participate in important events for some countries. In addition, as recorded in the mural in Figure 2, Sumerian king (King of the Sogdians) received envoys from China, Xizang, Koguryo, Korea and many other small countries in Central Asia in Samarkand. It also indicates that at that time, the Sogdian kingdom was already a state with sufficient influence in the eyes of many other countries.



Figure 2. Sumerian king receives envoys. *Hall of the Ambassadors*, <https://sogdians.si.edu/afrasiab-mural-paintings/>

The influence of the Sogdians on the countries along the Silk Road also came from their strong economic power. Rich Sogdian merchants could exert influence by controlling profitable trade routes, funding military operations, supporting the rulers, or giving aid to specific political factions. For example, since the establishment of The Second Khaganate, it continuously erupted into fierce conflicts with the Tang Empire. But as Bilge Qaghan gained power, he changed his previous national policy of constantly confronting the Tang Empire and instead chose to maintain peace between the two countries through silk and horse trades. (Takao, 2020, P.260-261) This silk-horse trade met the needs between the Tang Empire and The Second Khaganate, while also bringing in huge profits. Therefore, the major policy shifts between those two countries were undoubtedly influenced by Sogdian merchants who had great trade power.

6.2 The Role of the Sogdians in China's Political and Religious Affairs

During this period, there were also a large number of Sogdians living in China. With the prosperity of the Silk Road and frequent trade exchanges, the Sogdians entered the Central Plains of China through the Hexi Corridor. Due to China's strong national strength, prosperous economy and open ethnic views at that time, a large number of Sogdians settled in China. In the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* of the Northern Wei Dynasty, it was recorded that south of Yongqiao, north of Yuanqiu, and between Yi and Luo, there is a Siyi Pavilion sandwiched between the imperial roads. From the west of Congling to Da Qin, all countries and cities were happy to be attached, and merchants and traders rushed down the border every day. (Yang, 2020) The Sogdians living in China often actively sought cooperation with the government and gained political support to ensure the smooth operation of their commerce and religious affairs in China.

A large number of Sogdians resided in China, and many of them hold religious and military positions appointed by the court. Since the Northern Dynasty, Chinese rulers had granted political status and power to Sogdian merchants, directly incorporating Sabao, the former leader of Sogdian caravans, into the bureaucratic system of the dynasty. They were mainly responsible for managing the business affairs of foreign merchants from Central Asia in China, as well as overseeing the matters related to Zoroastrianism. In the Tang Dynasty, the Sabao Prefecture was specifically established in the Ministry of Rites, which was responsible for diplomatic and sacrificial duties, to manage the celebrations of Zoroastrianism and related matters of followers. The Kangye Tomb Inscription of the Northern Zhou Dynasty recorded that this person named Kangye, a descendant of the Kangju King and his father, was appointed by the court to serve as the religious leader of the Sogdians and manage local administrative

affairs. (*Kangye Tomb Inscription*) The Epitaph of Kang Yuanjing also recorded that his grandfather served as a general during the Tang Dynasty, and that his father held the position of Sabao. (*The Epitaph of Kang Yuanjing*) From these records, it can be seen that the Sogdians were not a minority in serving as the officials in the Chinese court at that time. The existence of these Sogdians who served as the officials also gave the Sogdians a certain political influence within China.

6.3 The Influence of the Sogdian Rebellion on Chinese Politics

Besides to cooperating politically with the governments of various countries on the Silk Road and exerting their influence, sometimes the Sogdians also chose to rebel against local governments and use military means to influence the politics of various countries. For example, in the Tang Empire, the Six Hu Prefectures, namely Luzhou, Lizhou, Hanzhou, Saizhou, Yizhou, and Qizhou, which were used to accommodate the Turkic surrendered tribes, launched two rebellions against the Tang Empire in 721 and 722. The surnames of the leaders of these two rebellions were mostly those owned by the Sogdians, so it is clear that these two rebellions were led by the Sogdians. (Takao, 2020, P.251-252) Although these two rebellions were quickly suppressed by the Tang Empire, decades later, the rebellion initiated by another warrior with Sogdian ancestry, An Lushan, truly dealt a heavy blow to the Tang Empire and caused it to turn from prosperity to decline.

In 755, with the rebellion launched by the Sogdian Turkic general An Lushan, known as An Lushan Rebellion, the political situation of the Tang Empire underwent significant changes. An Lushan was originally a subject under the rule of The Second Khaganate, but as The Second Khaganate fell into internal turmoil in 716, many Sogdians and Turks fled to the Tang Empire, and An Lushan was one of them. When An Lushan was young, he had already demonstrated his expertise in business as a Sogdian. An Lushan was proficient in six languages and worked as an intermediary in the local market to negotiate the prices for buyers and sellers. It is precisely the commercial ability possessed by An Lushan as a Sogdian that helped him overcome the more difficult times of his youth. Later, An Lushan gained the appreciation of the military governor Zhang Shougui and gradually emerged on the political stage of the Tang Empire.

As An Lushan's power gradually grew, in 755, he finally chose to rebel against the Tang Empire. At that time, An Lushan controlled a large part of the Tang Empire's army, and he also successfully mobilized a large amount of funds through the trade network of Sogdian merchants to support this rebellion. It was precisely because An Lushan was well prepared that after the rebellion began, he continuously defeated multiple Tang armies and occupied Luoyang and the capital of the Tang Empire, Chang'an, in a very short period of time.

Although the rebellion was put down ultimately, the Tang Empire suffered heavy losses due to this internal turmoil and gradually weakened. Chinese historians generally believe that the An Lushan Rebellion was the dividing line between the Tang Dynasty's rise and fall. After the rebellion, the Tang Empire gradually lost control over the region and thus fell into a process of continuous decline.

6.4 Summary

Therefore, from the above evidence, it can be seen that the Sogdians frequently participated in major events that determined the fate of countries on the Silk Road. And they had also played a significant role in these events on multiple occasions.

7. Conclusion

The influence of the Sogdians on the Silk Road was profound and multifaceted, covering cultural, economic, and political levels. As cultural ambassadors, they pushed forward the exchange of religious beliefs, artistic styles and languages, enriched the cultural context of the Silk Road, and successfully facilitated the integration of Eastern and Western cultures. In the economic field, the extensive trade network they established successfully promoted the revival of the Silk Road and the dissemination of goods. In politics, they mainly indirectly influenced the political situation of multiple countries through their diplomatic skills proficient in multiple languages and their enormous influence in the trades, and directly participated in political affairs that affected the countries along the Silk Road.

Overall, the heritage of the Sogdians demonstrates the power of cultural and economic exchange in shaping human history. Their ability to navigate different cultures and political patterns provides valuable lessons for contemporary society, emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural understanding, economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement.

References

- Ancient Letters (n.d.). [Digital Image]. <https://sogdians.si.edu/ancient-letters/>
- Daniel C. Waugh (2004). *The Sogdian Ancient Letters 1, 2, 3, and 5*. UW official website, <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/sogdlet.html>
- Daniel C. Waugh (2007). *Richthofen's "Silk Roads": Toward the Archaeology of a Concept*. The Silk Road 5, no. 1 (2007): 1–10.
- Etienne de la Vaissiere (2005). *Sogdian Traders: A History* / by Etienne De La Vaissiere; (J. Ward, Trans). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047406990>
- Hansen, Valerie (2012). *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford University Press. *Hall of the Ambassadors. Site XXIII: I, mid-7th century*. Wall painting; H. 3.4 m × W. 11.52 m. Afrasiab Museum, Uzbekistan, Afrasiab. <https://sogdians.si.edu/afrasiab-mural-paintings/>
- Juyi, Bai (nd). *HUXUANNV*. Gushiwen. <https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwen/d782914e5d4c.aspx>
- Jun Zhezhe (958). *Letter from Princess Jun Zhezhe*. International Dunhuang Programme <https://idp.bl.uk/collection/8B78BD6446FD4BC9AF4F006B749C8F67/?return=%2Fcollection%2F%3Fterm%3Dletter%2520written%2520by%2520Princess%2520Jun%2520ZhEzhe>
- Kangye Tomb Inscription, Northern Zhou Dynasty, China (557-581). Xi'an Museum, Xi'an, China. [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BA%B7%E6%A5%AD%E5%A2%93#/media/File:Northern_Zhou_Dynasty_Tomb_of_Kong_Ye_\(992379995\).jpg](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BA%B7%E6%A5%AD%E5%A2%93#/media/File:Northern_Zhou_Dynasty_Tomb_of_Kong_Ye_(992379995).jpg)
- Mamatova, M. B. (2021). THE TEA ROAD: FROM CHINA TO UZBEKISTAN (7-15TH CENTURIES). *Psychology (Savannah)*, 58(1), 4913–4924. *The Epitaph of Kang Yuanjing, Tang Dynasty, China (618-907)*. National Library of China, Beijing, China. <https://doi.org/10.17762/pae.v58i1.1710>
- Whitfield, S., & Sims-Williams, U. (2004). *The Silk Road: trade, travel, war and faith* / edited by Susan Whitfield with Ursula Sims-Williams. Serindia Publications.
- Wood, Francis (2002). *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*. University of California Press.

- Xuanzang, Bianji, and Jung-hsi (1996). *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions /Translated by the Tripitaka-Master Xuanzang under Imperial Order; Composed by Sramana Bianji*. (L.Rongxi, Trans). Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research.
- Xinjiang, Rong (2009). *New light on Sogdian Colonies along the Silk Road : Recent Archaeological Finds in Northern China*. Berichte und Abhandlungen
- Xinjiang, Rong (2017). *Ou Ya Da Lu Shi Ye Xia De Han Tang Shi Chou Zhi Lu* in Journal of the International Silk Roads Studies, Volume.1 edited by Li Xiao, 59-68. Life Reading Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore.
- Xu, Liu (1975). *Old Book of Tang*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Yang, X. (2020). *Luoyang Qie Lan Ji / Yang Xuanzhi Zhuan*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Ye, Fan. (n.d.). *Book of Later Han*. 5000 yan. <https://houhanshu.5000yan.com/xiyuzhuan/2405.html> 482–483.