

Sogdian Merchants as Iranian Cultural Carriers (Studying the Effect of Sogdians in Iran-China relations during Parthian and Sassanians)

Shahrzad Sasanpour

Assistant Professor; Shabestar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shabestar, Iran

ABSTRACT

The current analytical-historical study aims to investigate the influence of Sogdiana in Iran trading under Parthian and Sassanian Empire, motives of Sogdians trading with china, and their consequences. To do the research, Iranian and foreign books, papers, studies and researches have been used. In general, results of the study show that Sogdian merchants were playing key role in protection and business continuity of the Silk Road, particularly with China. Although the main reason of trading was economic profit, but other motives were also influential such as promoting religious rituals (Zoroastrian, Nestorian, Manichaeism and Buddhist), and expanding Persian culture, literature, and language; the motives which make Sogdians to change their trading acts to establish cultural relations between Iran and China.

KEYWORDS: Sogdian merchants, Parthian, Sassanian, Iran, China, Trade relations, Cultural relations

1- INTRODUCTION

Sogdiana (Sogd, Sogdia, and Sogdiana in Greek) is a region in Central Asia, among Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers in unity with Bukhara and Samarkand areas. In the other word, ancient Sogdia is the current Tajikistan [1]. Sogdiana region has been the main trading and relational highway of Iran with other nations such as China, Turkestan, etc. However, from about the fourth millennium B.C. Chinese had contacts with the Iran, but the most ancient direct contact with Iran was through Sogdian merchants during Parthian and Kushans. Kushans were rulers of eastern parts of Iran, who own Mathuran in India to Jihon and beyond middle Asia during 1-4 century A.D., especially Kashghar, Farghaneh valley, and Sogd [2]. By conquering the key cities of eastern parts and fall of Kushans empire during Sassanian, commercial relations between Iran and China continued, but instead of Kushan merchants, Sogdian merchants became trading interface between Iran and China. Sogdian believe in Zoroastrian, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism and Buddhist. After the establishment of new colonies and cities around the roads and remote areas of Central Asia by the Sasanian, to have trading competition with the Roman Empire, Sogdian inhabitants became skilled merchants traveling to China; some of them staying in key trading cities of China, such as Loyang in southern part of Hwangho river, and Changan, were considered as the main factors of penetration of Iranian religions and cultures in China and vice versa.

Sogdian merchants during Parthian

Commercial relations of Iran and China initiated at the time of Parthian empire in 2 century AD, with arrival of Chang Chya, Wouti ambassador, powerful ruler of Han dynasty (87-140 BC.). At first, the main mission of China ambassador was seeking alliance of China with Yueh-chih against Hsiung-nu. Hsiung-nus were probably the Huns and invaders of Central Asia, who prevented China to reach western lands. These factors were considered as failure and retreat elements of Yueh-chih. HaLoun believe Yueh-chih were Sokaeians and Hening believe they were Togara, nomadic tribe of Central Asia [2], being driven from their main homeland in north-western part of China and Kanso to western far lands by the order of Hsiung-nu.

Therefore, Yueh-Chih gradually reached Sogdiana and settled in Jeihun and Samarkand. The outcome of Chang Chian embassy was establishing political-trading relation between China and Parthian. Sokaeians were nomadic tribes of Eurasia plains inhabiting in southern parts of Russia, among Den and Denpier rivers in 7 BC. and then stretched to southern lands and Karimeh [2]. They were one of the most dangerous invaders suppresses by Mehrdad II of Parthian (87-124 BC). After the suppression, the first trading caravan of China entered Iran. After a while, Chinese suppressed Ta-yuan and established friendly and direct relations between China and Sogdians [3].

*Corresponding Author: Shahrzad Sasanpour, Assistant Professor; Shabestar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shabestar, Iran; Email: sh_sasanpour@yahoo.com

Before the union of China by Hwang Tiy, the first strong ruler of Chinese dynasty, (207-221 BC) [4], wealthy Iranian merchants and soldiers, and Buddhist and Christian preachers were communicating with China and far east, but their relations were through Kushans, then Sogdians, esp. Turks (who were ruling some parts of China) [2]. In fact, in this period, trading opportunity in central Asia and Transoxania was in the hands of Khwarazmis and Sogdians. Khwarazmis were trading with west, and Sogdians were trading with China [5]. Sogdians were expert in trading of Tarim, and Pamir, i.e. trading northern China through western Torkestan to Step Eurasia [4].

However, during Parthian, Silk Road and silk products were the main factors of Iran-China commercial relation. This issue continued to Sasanian period, but the relations were disordered, since Sogdians were the main interface of this relation, and on the other hand, internal problems of China disintegrated the relation. Therefore, after arrival of the last Chinese ambassador to Parthian court, the relations between the two countries were not establishing over two hundred years. Internal insecurity and chaos make them to be unaware of government changes of Iran from Parthian to Sassanian; this unawareness continued after the fall of Han dynasty and decomposition of China [6].

Sogdian merchants during Sassanian

For about 3.5 century, the relation between China and western governments was disordered. However, based on reports of Chin Shu, embassies of Kang-chu and Ta-yuan were sent to west during 267-285 AD. Relation of Border States of Iran in Tarim river of Sogdian and Afghanistan was under the control of Kushans and Hephthalites during this time [8]. Tarim basin is a dry area surrounded by Kunlan Mountains in south, Pamir in west, Tienshan in north, and Peishan in north-west. Kushan empire (in eastern part of Sasanian empire to north-western border valleys of Pakistan), which became rich in the shadow of the Silk Road trade, destroyed after possession of Pishavar, Send Valley, Balkh, Samarkand, and Tashkent by Shapour I of Sasanian (309-379 AD) [2]. After the fall of Kushans, Sogdiana changed to the main commercial highway of Iran-China.

Although Iranian merchants during Sasanian were travelling to China for buying silk, Sogdian trading was active in dry lands among western parts of Asia and China. Figure of Silver dishes of China show that eastern borders of Sogdiana was the main relational link between Iran and China, and in this border area, Chinese and Sogdian merchants were exchanging their goods and organizing export and import affairs [3]. Sogdians believed in various religions such as Zoroastrian, Nestorian, Manichaeism and Buddhist, and their system was based on the valuing world and preventing religious fanaticism in trading; they were composing some aspects of foreign religions with their own religions in trading. They were considered as suppliers of luxury goods and great landlords of Middle Asia. On the other hand, coin mintage in Samarkand and Bokhara make trading easy for Sogdians. In 6 century AD, Chinese penetrate on Farghaneh, Samarkand, and eastern areas and only Sogdian goods were trading. Documents found in Tun-huang, in north-west of China, located in Sin Kiang, imply trading expansion between China and Sogd [2].

However, in northern Su (421-516 AD), Southern Su (421-617 AD), Sui (589-618 AD) and Tang (reunion of China, 618-906 AD), Sogdians were able to improve their trading status with China by establishing caravanserais along with northern and southern trading roads of Tarim river, marrying with local people [3], and creating great colonist in Kansu, Changan, Loyang, and Yang Chou [7]. Based on texts driven from Turfan and Tunhuang, belonging to the early 3 century AD, about 100 Sogdian princes travelled to Tunhuang and started their own business [8]. Most of the Sogdian merchants travelling to Loyang in China were captured during Kutsang grabbing in 439 AD., and others were captured in Changan [9].

Hsieh-Liqaghn, the last ruler of northern Turks (today Mongolia), who had special attention to Sogdians, was captured by Chinese in 630 AD. Chinese captured by Turks and Sogdians were settled in BudBasha, and in 679 AD they created six Hu in southern part of Ordos as the foreigners of middle Asia, particularly Iran [2]. After revolution of 5 Sogdian rulers against China, many Sogdians were transferred to new governments and finally, Sogdian nomads were transferred to shuo chuo and yun chou in 799 AD and leave Orsous [9].

The role of Sogdians in trading and protection of Silk Road

The main overland trade route of Iran was Silk Road. Moreover, it was the main factor of connecting important internal trading centers and main transit cities with other countries. Changan, capital city of Tang dynasty that reached the zenith of its glory during Huan tsang (712-756 AD) [10] was the main trading center of

east and west in China, in which merchants were exchanging their goods. On the other hand, imported foreign goods from Central and Western Asia were stored in this city and then distributed through royal highways throughout the china [4].

After passing Changan, travellers of Silk Road were leaving to west through western gate and passing Hsieh corridor, Huang hu river, Kansu corridor, and border caravanserai of Tun Huang; after passing Tarim basin deserts in Sinkiang [11] they were reaching Khotan through south of Silk Road, and they finished their travel in east coast of the Mediterranean Sea after passing Pamir areas in Central Asia and Yarkand, Farghaneh [1], Tashkent, and Samarkand cities [12], Great Khorasan, and western Asia. In another word, Silk Road was divided to two branches in western part of Pamir: the first branch started at Farghaneh and Samarkand and led to Marv, and the second branch was passing Balkh and the reaching Marv (ibid: pp. 169-170). Silk Road was also passing central and southern cities of Iran. In west, it was passing through Hecatum polic, Rey, and Ekbatan (ibid: 121), then leading to Tisfun, Baghdad, Halvan and beaches of Dejeleh [13], Palmir (Syria), Halab, and Entakiey (ibid: 277), Sour (Lebanon), and after that commercial goods were diverted to Eskandariyeh (Egypt) and Italy by marine. Pamir and West Dejeleh Mountain pirate attack on caravans of Silk Road [14] was making the region insecure, but most of the time, places and cities located in Silk Road, were ruling by army and military troops of the country, and Sogdians were protecting roads of Central Asia [15].

2. TRADING MOTIVES OF SOGDIAN MERCHANTS

Sogdians had different trading motives, particularly trading with Chinese rulers; the main motives include:

Economic benefits and the consequences of economic policies of Sassanian government:

The main trading motive of Sogdian merchants was economic benefit, but economic policies of Sasanian in relations with China were more important. Sasanian were using silver in coin mint and Romans were using gold coins. However, in a tacit agreement, these two empires selected silver coins of Sasanian as the coin used in trading. Silver coin of Sasanian had such a value and reputation that was used in remote areas such as India and West China. Coins minted in north eastern part of Iran during Sasanian were more pure and one of the main silver mines was located in Panjir, Khorasan (north east of current Afghanistan) [16]. Based on the history of coin mint at the early 6 century AD during Sasanian, it is implied that new level of economic and commercial development was created in Middle Asia, especially in Sogd (ibid: 108). Exploring silver coins from 5-7 century AD represents, silver coins were used for adjusting goods payment, which were adopting financial policies of China [3].

Promoting religious rituals

Another motive of Sogdian along with commercial interests was tendency toward promoting religious rituals among foreigners [9]. The main religions that Sogdians believe in them and promoting them in China and Turkistan include: Zoroastrian, Nestorian, Manichaeian and Buddhist

1 Zoroastrian

Zoroastrian was probably reached to China through Sogdian merchants [6] and expanded to border area of Turfan. The kings of northern Chou (421-516 AD) accepted this religion (Watson, 1989, p. 666-667) and then during Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), this religion expanded in China [6]. After establishing Iranian colonies, especially Sogdi, some altars were built in Kanying [16], Loyung, Changan [15], Kayfeng and western cities and states [3], and north-west of China, headed by Iranian Hirbads [6].

Nestorian

Sogdian and Turkish texts with Nestorian context found in Turfan and Bulayiq, represent Nestorian Christianity was expanded in Sogdian, Time river basin and China [8]. The influence of Christianity in late 6 century AD in Iran and assistance of Yazdegerd III and his son Peroz in building Christian churches in China represents the influence of Christianity among royal and noble Iranian families in Sasanian [16]. Iranian Nestorian preachers in China, not only attempted in religious duties, but in establishing civil and cultural relations between two countries (ibid: p 166-167). After prescribing the order of banning non-Chinese religions by Faghfour in 845

AD, the influence of this religion among Chinese was reduced [6]. Nestorian Christianity, like Zoroastrian, was related to foreigners, especially Sogdian in China, and had not very much influence among Chinese [7].

Manichaean

After offering his religion to Shapour I of Sasanian (241-273 AD), Mani invited some people in Khorasan and Indochina region through their representatives [17]. And he travelled to Babel, north Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine, Adyaben, Nasibin and nearby Rome to promote his religion. However, one of his disciples, Maramou, had the mission to promote Manichaean in east of Iran [18]. When Shapour I refused Mani, he travelled to China and Mâčîn and promoted his religion in those areas [19]. Consequently, most of the inhabitants of east and Indians, Chinese and Sogdiana with the capital cities of Samarkand and Tashkent, were following Mani [20].

After the persecution of Manichaeism reign coincided Nersi (293-302 AD), and Hormoz II (302-309 AD), a group of Manichaeism migrated to Babel (the origin of Manichaeism rituals), and east and north areas, and a group of them settled in Sogdiana and gradually after disobeying Babel Caliph, they established an independent group and disconnect with their western coreligionist. Therefore, eastern Manichaeism started to translate their religious texts to Sogdian language, and those texts were gradually translated to ancient Turkish language [21]. Ultimately, Manichaeism reached Mongolia, Time river basin, China, Changan, Takahrestan, Marv, Balkh, Turkistan, etc. To satisfy the people, Chinese government supported Manichaeism and Mazdaism [3]. By decree of the Emperor Fu - Totti to freedom of Mani's religion, Manichaeism were allowed to establish their own religious-cultural centers in Changan [8]. In 649 AD, Huantsang reported that an Iranian called Fotudan, came to the queen Wu and offered her Manichaean treatises. In 719 AD, a Manichaean astronomer entered China with the letter of Turkistan local ruler recommendation and requesting permission of the Chinese ruler to build a temple. Most of Iranian Manichaean seems to be astronomers [7].

With the conquest of Arab in Iran and resumption of relations between the Turks and the Chinese, Manichaeism found new life. When Peroz, son of Yazdegerd III (632-653 AD), under the support of Sogdians and Hephthalite princes in Takahrestan, failed to prevent progress of Muslim Arabs in east of Iran, they take refuge in China and Chinese ruler accepted them. His claim to the throne of Iran, led the Manichaeism to find court to strengthen ties. Finally, in 732 AD, Emperor Hsuan-tsung of China decreed an issue by which the Manichaeism recognized as the national religion of Sogdians [20]. He ordered the freedom of foreigners and non-Chinese inhabitants to stay in Manichaeism [6]. After orientation of one of the Ighouri rulers to Manichaeism, and entitling "Mani Symbol" [22], Middle Asia compromised Buddhist environment of the area and used Buddhist terminology and legends [21]. Finally, this religion was declared as the state religion in 760 AD by Ighouri ruler in Loyung city [20], and their temples were active for some centuries later in Kucha state along with Silk Road [18].

Buddhist

In 2 century AD, Kushan Empire (east of Iran) was one of the main centers of Buddhist communicating to China. In 481 AD, Shi Kao, Parthian prince came to China and was one of the first persons translated Buddhist texts to Chinese [7]. He was very influential in introducing this religion to China. After the collapse of Kushan Empire by Sasanian, Buddhist entered China and Turkistan by Sogdian. Available Buddhist Sogdian texts (mostly are Chinese translations) show that Sogdians were joined Buddhist many years before and Buddhist texts were translated to Chinese by Bokhara and Samarkand translators (Kong-Ku) [8]. Basic terminology and specific Buddhist-Ighouri names representing the influence of Sogdian instructors in this religion are mainly derived from Middle Persian texts, particularly Saadi. Abundant number of words and Middle Persian elements in Ighour Buddhism indicates that Sogdians invited Turks to take their doctrines. In fact, common Buddhist of Ighours reached Tarim river basin, China and Japan through Balkh and Sogd (ibid: p 731-734)

At the end of 6 century AD, common people were also invited to Buddhist, they were proposed a Buddhist religious book called "nirvana – sutra", a translation of Sogdian and spoken language of many people, particularly high classes of Turks were familiar with them (ibid: p. 731). Although Buddhist was first spread in China, but finally, based on Huan tsang writings, it was changed to Zoroastrian by Chinese Buddhist monks in 630 AD (ibid: p.730).

Influence and promotion of Persian language and literature

After the creation of Iranian nomadic in Central Asia, Iranian merchants were trading in China under the support of Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian, Bactrian, and Ighourian writers. Factors influencing expansion of Iranian culture in China include Sogdian nomadic in Ichou and south Labnor, and presence of Sogdian merchants in Loyang [9]. On the other hand, continuity of Turfan Manichaean Middle Persian texts and Parthian-Sogdian texts, and also Parthians and Sogdian manuscripts in Mortough, Sangim and Toyough during Tand synasty (618-907 AD) [9] was representing influence of Iranian culture and language in China. After arrival of Islam in Iran and fleeing of Sasanian aristocrats to Middle Asia and China, and also expansion of Persian language in Bokhara and Samarkand instead of Sogdian language, the influence of Iranian culture increased in those areas [23].

CONCLUSION

It follows from the discussions in this paper that in Sasanian period, like Parthian era, Silk Road was the main trading route in Iran-China relations; and eastern parts of Iran, particularly Sogd, was considered as its key links. After the victory of Kushan Empire, as trading interface of eastern parts of Iran with China from Parthian time, and grabbing Send, Balkh, Samarkand and Tashkent cities, Sogdians became trading interface of Iran-China. On the other hand, Sasanian efforts to maintain the monopoly of the silk trade in east and competition with the Byzantine Empire made colonies and new cities to be built around roads and remote areas of Middle Asia.

The inhabitants of these colonies gradually changed to skilled merchants who were communicating to different areas of China. On the other hand, by settlement of many Sogdian merchants in Louyang, Chanan and Sogdian colonies, not only Persian language and literature, but Zoroastrian, Nestorian, Manichaean and Buddhist penetrated China. Consequently, Sogdian merchants were not only main trading interface of Iran-China, but transferor of Iranian culture.

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