

An Shi Rebellion Acted as a Turning Point in the History of the Sogdian's Trade on the Silk Road

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the economic rise and falls on the Silk Road mainly from a political perspective. It begins with the introduction to the background of Sogdian's political confusion in China before An Shi Rebellion, and then in the second part there is a brief narration to the history event of An Shi Rebellion. On top of that, by analyzing the negative influence to the Sogdian's trade on the Silk Road brought by the An Shi Rebellion, this paper gives the point that An Shi Rebellion led by the Sogdian, An Lushan, in Tang Dynasty was the turning point before which the trade on the Silk road reached the most prosperity with the the peak of the Sogdians fusion in Chinese political power, and after which the Sogdians' business on the Silk road went to decline because of the social disorder, the fragmentation of the political centralization, following problems in frontier regions, and the Sogdian's localization in China.

Keywords

The Sogdian, the Silk Road, An Shi Rebellion, trade, politic.

1. Before An Shi Rebellion

To begin with, the Sogdian's home place was nine separated cities on oases in central Asia, the geographical feature of which decided their means of livelihood in migration and decentralized residential patterns. Therefore, they had not been able to form a centralized regime as China, which was a foundation of Sogdians' flowing and fusion to China. Secondly, the intermarriage between the Sogdian and Chinese stimulated the political fusion of the Sogdian to China. As the first letter and the third one in Sogdian Ancient Letters shows, it was hard for the Sogdian merchants to bring their original Sogdian wives with them along the Silk Road, which could be easily abandoned especially in the period of social turmoil, like a time in famine or wars. [1] Therefore, there could be a huge possibility that a large amount of Sogdian merchant on the Silk Road would marry with local women in China and make a family there, which would gradually increased their sense of belonging in China and accelerate their transformation of the political identity as a result.

On top of that, the ethnic policy of the Tang court guaranteed the basic political fusion of the Sogdian to China. Because the royal families of the Sui and Tang Dynasty were the descendant of both the Han people and Xianbei people rather than pure Han people like the emperors in former dynasties [2], there was a typical underlying trend of being open and inclusive to exotic ethnic group in Tang Dynasty. At the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, in the term of ethnic policy, Emperor Tai Zong of Tang held the opinion that since ancient times the Han on Central Plain had been especially valued, while other ethnic groups had been despised, but he would treasure the Han and other ethnic groups as the same. [3] Besides that there are recorded census registration policy for the Sogdian in China in the Sui and Tang Dynasty. For instance, according to "The Transcript of the Law of Tang Dynasty Copied in Ming Dynasty Collected in Tianyi Pavilion Library", people that migrated from other nations were encouraged to be inscribed on the population registers in the same way as the local Chinese people were, and in that case, they

could have tax relief for 10 years. [4] With such kind of preferential and encouraging ethnic politics at that time, it was considerably popular for the Sogdian merchants in China chose to have a Chinese identity and used it to develop their trade on the Silk Road, because they would gain a higher acceptance by the people and the ruling class at that time when they expanded their business scope in China.

Furthermore, the Sogdian also had advanced political participation in Chinese government by working as court officials during the Sui and Tang Dynasty. According to "The history of the Northern Dynasty", He Tuo, named Xifeng, lived in Xicheng, whose father was a Sogdian, migrating to the Sichuan province because of his excellent work of trading and located in the Pi county. Tuo was very clever when he was young, studying the Confucianism in the highest education institution of the government since 8 years old. When he was 17 years old, he was rallied to the northern dynasties to work for the Prince of Xiangdong. After that because of his intelligence, he was promoted to a higher position in the government. [5] The example of an Chinese court officials from Sogdian merchant family shows that the Sogdian who mastered Confucian letters, which was an essential element to enter ancient Chinese ruling class, could share the rights and high social status with Chinese elites, and consequently they could guarantee the trade of their Sogdian family with his political power.

In a nutshell, one of the most important reason for the Sogdian's commercial success on Silk Road was their political fusion in the Chinese Empire. Just before An Shi Rebellion took place, the peak of the Sogdian's political fusion in China brought the trade on silk road reached the most prosperity.

2. An Shi Rebellion

At the most prosperity of both the Tang Dynasty and the Sogdian's trade on the silk road, An Shi Rebellion led by the Sogdian named An Lushan took place. An Lushan was a descendant of Sogdian, who gained the Emperor Tang Ming Huang's appreciation with his contribution to fighting against the Xi and Khitan people for the Tang court at first, and was appointed the governor of Pinglu, Fanyang and Hedong later.[6] After that because An Lushan was good at the Sogdian whirling dance, he was often invited to attend the royal parties, and hugely welcomed by the Emperor Tang Ming Huang and his favourite concubine Yang Kwei Fei. They were fond of An Lushan so much that even regarded him as a son. [7] There is a story that on An Lushan's birthday, Yangyuhuan took her "son" An Lu Shan as an infant and gave him a "washing ceremony" by swaddling him by beautiful brocade like a baby and letting maids carrying him around with a colorful carriage [8]. Washing ceremony is actually a custom in ancient time that washing the body for a baby when three days or a month after his birth, and relatives and friends would gather together to celebrate for it. This story implicates how favoured An Lushan was in the Tang Court at that time. His welcome by the Emperor and Yang yuhuan brought him high political power in the Tang court, and at the same time he mastered a huge amount of the political information of the Tang court and developed a wild ambition of taking the place of the Emperor Tang Ming Huang and becoming the emperor himself. So, in 755, he raised an revolt in Fanyang leading 150 000 soldiers of Pinglu, Fanyang and Hedong and moved southwards to attack the Tang Dynasty. Tang Ming Huang never expected that An Lushan would betray him, so he made nothing in preparation. As the result the Tang court were unable to keep out the powerful force of An Lu shan, so the military of the rebellion defeated the Tang armies in succession. Later in 756, An Lushan kinged himself the Emperor of Great Yan. After Emperor Tang Daizong assembled military forces all around the country [9] and even combined some armies from Uighur [10], they reoccupied the lost places in 763 and the 8-year "An and Shi Rebellion" came to an end. However, the power of the Tang court had become weak henceforward. [11]

3. The Influence of An Shi Rebellion

An Shi Rebellion brought a series of negative political and social influence. Firstly, it caused social disorder and economic depression in China, which hampered the external trade and commercial development on the Silk Road. Du Fu, one of the greatest poets in Tang Dynasty, recorded the social condition in the famous poems "A Spring View" wrote in the next year after the explosion of An Shi Rebellion saying that:

"On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand;
In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown.
Grieved over the years, flowers make us shed tears;
Hating to part, hearing birds breaks our heart.
The beacon fire has gone higher and higher;
Words from household are worth their weight in gold.
I cannot bear to scratch my grizzle hair;
It grows too thin to hold a light hairpin." [12]

This poem veritably described the social reality that after the An Shi rebellion the whole society was in a huge mass. Family members were separated from each other, and it was very hard for them to keep in contact. Besides that, it was also recorded in History as a Mirror that after An Shi Rebellion, the population registered in the government decreased sharply compared with that ten years before, as there were a huge number of people dying, fleeing, or migrating. [13] The people were in so turbulent a life. that the survival of people was hard to guarantee, not to mention the economic production for the silk or other goods that were transported and sold on the silk road. Without the stabilization of the economic producing in China, the foundation of the business on the Silk Road were destroyed and naturally diminished as time went by.

Furthermore, besides the social and economic disorder, there was a decline of the powerful centralization in China. The Tang court lost efficient control to the local regions around the emperor as before, because it didn't have enough strength to suppress the rebellion completely, and to stop the long-lasting wars and avoid more and more dissipation inside the country, Tang court had to compromise by accepting the situation that the remaining forces of the traitors in the An Shi Rebellion still had local military and political governing in certain places, especially the Hebei Province in the north of empire, and formed Pan towns like relatively independent countries in the emperor. [14] At the same time, because the previous military force in the border areas had been moved and devoted to the civil war against the An Shi Rebellion, the Tang court had little energy to concern about the border issues and lost the control to the border areas in the northwest including the important part of the Silk Road. And the frontier defence was so weak that the Tibetans gained the opportunity and took the advantage of it, occupying the Hexi Corridor, which was the essential part of the Silk Road. [15] With the Tang court losing the control to the Silk Road at that time, the Sogdian merchants attached to the Tang Emperor lost the priority and leading role on the Silk Road as well. Unfortunately, it was failed for a new powerful centralized government like the Tang court before An Shi Rebellion to be reconstructed until the Song Dynasty in China. During the long period of hundreds years, the power fragmentation within China caused the problem that the commercial business on the Silk Road lost efficient political management and security guarantee. Under that circumstance, the amount of the merchants trading on the Silk road hugely reduced and consequently the development of the Silk Road was been blocked and went to downfall.

At the same time, the ethnic group of the Sogdian went on a road of assimilation to the Han Group in China. Just as the archaeological relics of the Sogdian's epitaphs excavated in China shows, after An Shi Rebellion many Sogdians chose to change their original family name to a Chinese style, and even altered their native place to a Chinese one, because at that time, a social

current of rejecting the Sogdian was raised after An Shi Rebellion. [16] Even though the essence of the rebellion was not an ethnic conflict but a power struggle in the ruling class, and many Sogdian high-ranking military officials made huge contribution to put down the rebellion against An Lushan, Chinese courts still had begun to feel suspicious to the Sogdian. On that condition, many Sogdian in China had to make them totally localized, by changing their Sogdian identity to a Chinese one and living a Chinese lifestyle instead of their original life of trading. With the assimilation process of the Sogdian to the Han people, there were less and less Sogdian merchants on the silk road, and the former livelihood of the Sogdian that traveled a lot for the trade changed a lot or even died out. So the trade leading by the Sogdian on the Silk Road lost its former glories and couldn't create it any more.

4. Conclusion

One of the most important reasons for the Sogdian 's commercial success on the Silk Road was their political fusion in the Chinese Empire, with the peak of which the trade on the Silk road reached the most prosperity just before An Shi Rebellion took place. However, An Shi Rebellion led the central authority of Chinese Empire turn to decline from the climax, and caused a series of social and economic disorder as well a border issues. At the same time, the Sogdian gradually quit the power center in Chinese history, completely localized and integrated themselves in Han group without the name of the Sogdian anymore. All in all, the Sogdian was the leading role in the history of the trade on the Silk Road, whose political status in China decided their commercial glories on the Silk Road. At the peak of the Sogdian's political power, An Shi Rebellion led by the Sogdian An Lushan played a role as a turning point in the Sogdian's commercial history on the Silk Road.

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