



# The Success Behind the Sogdian Mercantile Network

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**Abstract.** The Sogdians were people of Iranian origin, and with their homeland Sogdiana located at the center of several Silk Road routes, they were some of the most influential merchants to traverse the Silk Road. This paper explores some of the factors that led to the success of the Sogdian Mercantile Network. Through examining two of the Sogdian Ancient Letters discovered in 1907 in a Chinese watch tower west of the Jade Gate, dating to 313 C.E., it can be discovered that the Sogdian mercantile network had endured through the help of its hierarchical structure and information network. Furthermore, uncovered Sogdian goods also suggest that the mercantile network was assisted by the marketability of Sogdian goods, with its incorporation of many different cultures and popular forms of entertainment.

**Keywords:** Sogdians · Trade · Merchant · Network

## 1 Introduction

The Silk Road was a network of routes that connected Asia and Europe and served as a means of communication and commerce. Few ever traveled the entirety of the Silk Road, with Nomadic Pastoralists linking China and the West in trade. In addition to the trading of goods, the Silk Road also allowed for a vast exchange of cultures. The Sogdians were people of Iranian origin [1], and some of the most influential merchants to ever traverse the Silk Road [2]. They had no unified military power with their political organization consisting of small principalities [2]. With their homeland Sogdiana consisting of oasis towns located at the center of several Silk Road routes in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan [2], many of them being polyglots, and their language a lingua franca of the trading network, the Sogdians became widely regarded as some of the most successful merchants of the Silk Road [2]. Many religions were spread with the help of traveling and translating Sogdians, with some of the earliest translations of Buddhist scriptures made by Sogdians [2]. Despite the dominating religion at home being Mazdaism, the practice of other religions also co-existed, with the Sogdian diaspora commonly picking up various religious and traditional practices from their neighbors to use in combination with their own religion [2]. First recorded as a province of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and later conquered by Alexander the Great, the Sogdians and their homeland Sogdiana had a golden age of prominence and wealth from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries

[1]. The earliest extant records regarding the activities of Sogdian merchants in China also dated back to this period of time. Discovered in 1907 by British archaeologist Aurel Stein in a Chinese watch tower west of Dunhuang, the Sogdian Ancient Letters (313 CE) documented some of the activities of the Sogdian diaspora in China, with letters number 2 and 5 especially containing details regarding commercial activities [3]. Through exploring the operations of the Sogdian mercantile network by examining these two letters and numerous trading goods of Sogdian origin, this paper aims to answer the question of what made Sogdian merchants uniquely successful at establishing an enduring infrastructure facilitating commerce along the Silk Road.

## 2 Sogdian Mercantile

### 2.1 Ancient Letters

Through examining Sogdian Ancient Letters number 2 and 5, two features of the Sogdian mercantile network that made it especially enduring are displayed. First, through the writings of the authors, the hierarchical structure of Sogdian trade networks is revealed. When writing their letter, the author of Letter no. 2 states, “To the noble lord Varzakk (son of) Nanai-thvar (of the family) Kanakk. Sent [by] his servant Nanai-vandak” [4]. Furthermore, the author of Letter no. 2 starts his letter by sending “1,000 (and) 10,000 (times) blessing (and) homage on bended knee”, even going as far as to state “as is offered to the gods” [4]. The act of bending the knee conveys respect in many cultures. Moreover, it can also indicate submission and recognition of authority. Throughout the letter, the author continues to refer to the addressee as “sirs” [4]. Such writings indicate that at the core of the Sogdian mercantile network is a hierarchical structure. A hierarchical structure to Sogdian trading networks would contribute to its lasting as it provides many benefits and can make trade more efficient. The establishment of a clear authority in charge of decision-making establishes efficiency as objectives are clear, and conflicts between multiple persons of authority with competing goals are minimized. The establishment of a clear line of authority also clarifies reporting within the network and provides a clearer understanding of individual roles and responsibilities. This point is further backed up by how the letter is very obviously a report of sorts, with lines that state, “and now no-one comes from there so that I might write to you about the Sogdians who went ‘inside,’ how they fared (and) which countries they reached” [4]. Additionally, the letter suggests that the author also has in modern-day terms ‘employees’ of his own. When speaking on everyone’s status, the author writes, “And, sirs, it is eight years since I sent Saghrak and Farnaghat ‘inside’ and it is three years since I received a reply from there” [4], suggesting that these two individuals followed the author’s order and entered China, being expected to report back to him. Aside from the benefits such as efficiency and clear objectives that minimize confusion a hierarchical structure brings to trade, Sogdian Ancient Letter no. 2 also suggests that the hierarchical structure is actually what allows Sogdian trade to carry out. Near the end of his report on everyone’s status, the author writes, “[And I] sent Nasyan to Dunhuang, and he went ‘outside’ [i.e. out of China] and entered (Dunhuang), (but) now he has gone without (obtaining) permission from me, and he has (received) a great retribution and was struck dead in the...” [4]. By writing that by going without his permission, the individual was punished to death, the

author suggests that the connection to Sogdian authority in Samarkand allows for trade in Asia to be carried out without repercussions, in-turn indicating that authority is essential for Sogdian trade to endure. The author of Sogdian Ancient Letter no. 5 continues to show the hierarchical structure appearing to be at the core of the Sogdian mercantile network by also referring to oneself as the servant of the lord addressee [5]. Despite meaning for a different noble lord, it is obvious that the Sogdian mercantile network is composed of multiple authorities forming their own trade network hierarchies.

## 2.2 Information Network

The existence of an Information Network is also showcased by the Sogdian Ancient Letters. This feature of Sogdian trade is exemplified through the two letters both reporting on the political landscape of China. In Sogdian Ancient Letter no. 2, the author informs the addressee about the weakening of Chinese control this far west, stating, “And, sirs, the last emperor, so they say, fled from Luoyang because of the famine, and the fire was set to his palace and to the city, and the palace was burnt and the city [destroyed]. Luoyang (is) no more, Ye (is) no more!” [4]. The author also makes commentary about the trade profit that can be gained from China in its current state with its authority being threatened, “And, sirs, if I were to write to you everything (about) how China has fared, (it would be) beyond(?) grief: there is no profit for you (to gain) therefrom” [4]. By relaying information about the political landscape of China, Sogdian merchants are able to better glean profit from investing in secure trade. Trading on the Silk Road was always at threat of being plundered, and the establishment of a strong central power over the trade routes provided protection against bandits and thieves. However, with China’s control far west weakening, the outlook of trade for Sogdians became dim. As a result, the information network established was very important in ensuring the survival of the Sogdian mercantile network. The sending of two individuals ‘inside’ also suggests the existence of information networks in Sogdian trade. The writer’s concern over not hearing from them suggests that the silence conveys to the writer a worrying status of China’s political landscape. Obtaining inside information (even indirectly) on China’s political landscape is very crucial to the enduring of Sogdian trade as it provides more certainty for trade, and because political happenings are very important to whether or not Sogdian trade in China can fare as normal. The existence of an information network within Sogdian trade is further proven when the author of Letter 5 wrote, “[From] inside (China) [I] have heard worse, not better, (news) day (by) day...” [5].

## 2.3 Popularity of Sogdian Goods

Another factor that played into the Sogdian traders’ immense success on the Silk Road is the popularity of Sogdian goods in China. Figure 1 displays the fluted cup, a drinking cup of Sogdian origin that dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE [6]. It is made of silver and mercury and displays classic elements of the Eastern School of Sogdian metalwork [6]. Its beaded borders, floral scrolls, handle with naturalistic elements (in this case elephant heads), and surface textured by ring punching are all signature designs of Sogdian metalwork [6]. The discovery of similar-looking cups in a 7<sup>th</sup>-century imperial Chinese hoard at Hejiacun suggests that these cups gained enormous popularity among Chinese elites

after reaching China in the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century [6]. The popularity of such Sogdian goods in China contributed to the success and lasting of the Sogdian mercantile network as Sogdian traders obtained a big market with a lot of demand they can fulfill, allowing for more guaranteed trade and leading to an increase in profit. Only if trade is turning a profit will Sogdians continue investing in their mercantile network. Figure 3 displays the Winged Camel Ewer, which is another type of Sogdian trading good that gained immense popularity in China. The Winged Camel Ewer was of Sogdian origin, made out of silver and gilt, and dates to the late 7<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> century CE [7]. This piece of metalwork also displays prominent floral and foliate designs with naturalistic elements [7]. Additionally, it depicts a dragon's head on the handle, a trait that also reflects its Sogdian origin [7]. On each side of the vessel adorns winged versions of Bactrian camels [7]. These metalworks became very popular in China as imitations in Tang-period metalwork and ceramics were unearthed in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-century Tang tombs [7]. Aside from trading goods, the traditional dressage of Sogdian man and the Sogdian Whirl Dance also gained popularity in China, especially in the Tang empire courts [2]. Such popularity contributed tremendously to the enduring Sogdian mercantile network as Sogdian merchants obtained a big market with high demand, leading to continued investment in Silk Road trade.

## 2.4 Marketability of Sogdian Goods

Lastly, the marketability of Sogdian goods assisted the Sogdian mercantile network to find great success. Despite Sogdian artisans having a signature style, they incorporated designs of many other cultures and depicted popular sports on metalworks to increase their goods' marketability and attract more buyers. Figure 4 displays the Cup with Goats, which is a drinking cup of Sogdian origin that dates back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, and is made out of silver [8]. This artifact is a prime example of how Sogdian artisans incorporated designs of other cultures. First, despite its Sogdian origin, the shape of this cup is actually borrowed from the metalwork of neighboring Turks [8]. Furthermore, the narrowing of the neck of the bulbous body is an element typically associated with steppe peoples [8]. Such a multicultural design increased its marketability as it became attractive to a wider range of consumers. Additionally, this drinking cup also features a thumb rest depicting two wrestlers grappling. Such a design further increased its marketability as wrestling (or Kurash) was a sport widely practiced across Eurasia [8]. By depicting such a popular form of entertainment, Sogdian traders further succeeded in attracting a range of consumers.

## 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sogdians are widely regarded as some of the most successful merchants of the Silk Road with their ability to command influence and reach impacts far and wide. Through the establishment of a hierarchical structure and an information network, Sogdian merchants were able to more efficiently conduct trade and invest in trades that will actually turn a profit. Their trading goods too revealed a reason as to why they were so successful in gleaning profit from Silk Road trades. The designs of Sogdian goods



**Fig. 1.** Fluted Cup [9]. *Source: Wine Cup With Elephant Heads on Ring Handle.* Photograph. Freer Gallery of Art. 2012. <http://n2t.net/ark:/65665/ye3d50581300d6b-447e-847e-5367d7321c06>

that increased its marketability combined with the popularity of many types of Sogdian goods assisted in the enduring of the Sogdian mercantile network as they created a big market and steady demand that allowed the Sogdians to continue investing in Silk Road trade.

Figure 1 displays the Fluted Cup, a drinking cup of Sogdian origin that dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

This Fig. 2 shows the back-to-back elephant heads on the thumb rest of the Fluted Cup displayed in Fig. 1.

Figure 3 displays the Winged Camel Ewer.

Figure 4 displays the Cup with Goats, a drinking cup of Sogdian origin that dates back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.



**Fig. 2.** Fluted Cup. *Source: Fluted Cup with Ring Handle Decorated with Elephant Heads.* Photograph. Freer Gallery of Art. 2012. <https://sogdians.si.edu/fluted-cup/>



**Fig. 3.** Winged Camel Ewer [10]. *Source: Jug Depicting a Winged Camel.* Photograph. The State Hermitage Museum. <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/08.+applied+arts/211>



**Fig. 4.** Cup with Goats [11]. Source: Cup with Goats. Photograph. The State Hermitage Museum. <https://sogdians.si.edu/cup-with-goats/>



**Fig. 5.** Cup with Goats [11]

This picture shows the two wrestlers grapping on thumb rest of the Cup with Goats displayed in Fig. 5.

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