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Reading Hierarchy on the Silk Road-- The Ancient Sogdian Letters and Sogdian Social Structure

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Abstract. Drawing on the Sogdian Ancient Letters alongside archaeological evidence and secondary scholarship, this study examines the hierarchical structure of Sogdian society and its formative role in shaping Silk Road trade and diaspora networks. It argues that the cross-regional success of Sogdian merchants rested on an aristocracy bound by kinship, which controlled commercial networks, credit systems, and political offices within diaspora communities. This work also considers the marginal position of non-elite Sogdians as to highlight the defining role of the aristocratic order. Overall, this work highlights the central role of the hierarchical nature of Sogdian society in both economic exchange and historical memory on the Silk Road.

Keywords: Sogdian Ancient Letters, Sogdian, Silk Road, Social Hierarchy, Diaspora Communities

1. Introduction

313 AD, Xiongnu general Liu Yao sacked Luoyang city, the capital of the Western Jin regime. The city was burned, officials and commoners were killed or captured, including many wealthy Sogdian merchants. At dusk later same week, a Sogdian rider arrived at an abandoned beacon tower about ninety kilometers west of Dunhuang. These towers, once symbolized Han's control over the western regions, had long since fallen into ruin. The night was still—until noise at the door stirred him. He attempted to conceal the letters and valuables he carried. But soon, the door was burst open, and bandits swarmed in, caught him mid-act. Soon, man and horse were gone. The letters, briefly examined, were discarded and left behind in the debris.

The preceding narrative imagines the circumstances under which the Sogdian letters may have been lost. In historical fact, this corpus of documents was discovered in 1907 by the British archaeologist Aurel Stein at the ruins of watchtower TXIIIa of the Chinese Wall, approximately ninety kilometers west of Dunhuang [1]. The finding includes five nearly complete letters and more fragments, all written in Sogdian language, which all belong to a trans-regional information network, maintained by Sogdian diaspora communities. Messages were transmitted by envoys or caravans, who linked Sogdian city-states in Central Asia with diasporic communities in Dunhuang, Turfan, and beyond. Their contents range from personal affairs to commercial indigence. Based on references in Letter two: the sack of Luoyang and the emperor's flight, scholars date these letters to

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circa 312–313 CE [2]. This study primarily relies on the English translation version by Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams in 2001 (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) [3].

Although considerable scholarly attention on the Sogdian Ancient Letters mostly focused on linguistic analysis and time dating [2,3], relatively few efforts have been put on interpreting what these documents reveal about the nature of the Sogdian society. More broadly, Étienne de la Vaissière's book Sogdian Traders is considered to be a comprehensive study of Sogdian civilization, and his work offers valuable insights into the mobility of elite families and the family-based organization of Sogdian economic act [4]. Yet even in his study, there remains limited discussion on how internal hierarchies within Sogdian society continued to shape commercial organization and diaspora communities along the Silk Road.

This article aims to address the shortcomings of existing research and views the Sogdian Letters as practical texts embedded in a social context. The formalized titles, institutionalized language hierarchy in these letters not only reflect the hierarchical order of the Sogdian society but also continuously reproduce this order during the communication process. Through these letters, we can glimpse a social structure composed of bloodline and identity - this structure not only maintains the cohesion within the community but also provides institutional guarantees for cross-cultural commercial exchanges.

The study proceeds in four parts. The first examines the letters' highly formalized openings, reading them as ritualized performances that sustain social stratification. The second explores the structure of Sogdian aristocratic society, with special attention to how female authority was grounded not in autonomy but in inherited status. The third investigates how this hierarchical kinship network shaped the commercial practices and diaspora institutions of Sogdians along the Silk Road. The final part turns to non-elite Sogdians, whose marginalization in historical records serves to highlight the hierarchical nature of this social order. Overall, this paper argues that a lineage-based class structure defined Sogdian society and also decisively shaped its modes of long-distance trade and cultural mediation.

2. Ritualized language in the Sogdian Ancient Letters

The Sogdian Ancient Letters exhibit a characteristic of "form before feeling"—a formalized communicative structure that precedes and constrains the expression of personal emotion. Among the five extant letters, Letters I and III are especially emotive. Written by a Sogdian woman stranded in Dunhuang, they convey intense frustration, desperation, and anger, particularly toward her husband. One of the most memorable lines reads: "Surely(?) the gods were angry with me on the day when I did your bidding! I would rather be a dog's or a pig's wife than yours!" [3] In contrast, Letters II, IV, and V—authored by male merchants—are emotionally neutral. These texts focus on transmitting market intelligence and political turmoil in China; in the way of using language, they address in a more professional, emotion-free tone.

Though with different emotions and purposes, all these letters display a certain high level of structural uniformity in format, especially in the greeting sections. These letters usually start with calling the recipients with a formal title such as "noble lord," reflecting a fixed system of address, which encodes social status between the sender and the recipient. These greetings often conclude with elaborate blessings for the recipient's health. In Letter III, for example, although the author begins by offering her husband such blessings, her emotional expressions later in the letter obviously contradict this tone—demonstrating that the epistolary format operates independently from the letter's content.

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This structural consistency across different contexts shows that Sogdian letter-writing followed a linguistic habitus —a ritualized language act that reinforced distinctions between gender, status, and kinship.

The structural consistency maintained across different contexts shows that Sogdian letter-writing followed a linguistic pattern, shaped by ritualized verbal practices. This mode of language regulated how individuals were expected to communicate appropriately within a hierarchical social framework. In these ancient letters, formulaic expressions not only serve the role of distinguishing social status and lineage, but also as a ritualized social act. The fixed phrases of greetings, far more than simple rhetorical embellishments, exist to highlight and reproduce the social order of the recipients. Through such repeated ritualized practices in daily communication, the structural relationships centered around bloodlines and hierarchy in the society are continuously reaffirmed and legitimized.

3. The structure of Sogdian aristocracy

If the ritualized greetings discussed in the previous chapter reflected a deeply hierarchical society, it becomes essential to ask: what kind of social structure produced such linguistic forms? This chapter shifts the focus from the formal features of epistolary language to the structural foundations of Sogdian society, examines the internal stratification of Sogdian society, and considers how this hierarchy served as the cornerstone for their local authority and transregional mobility.

The Sogdians were considered to be Eastern Iranian people. In Central Asia, Sogdia includes parts of today's Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, western Xinjiang province of China, and the northern highlands of Pakistan [4]. Instead of forming a centralized state, Sogdians organized themselves into a constellation of city-states, represented by the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. These city-states, while occasionally subordinated to external powers such as the Persians and Turks, maintained a high level of political autonomy and internal self-governance [4,5].

Sogdian society was divided into four classes: noble, merchant, worker, and slave. Bloodline served as the foundation of individuals' political legitimacy: social status was transmitted through hereditary descent, intertwining family prestige with public power [5]. Aristocratic families formed the political core of Sogdian city-states, also, and they monopolized religious authority through controlling the Zoroastrian fire cult, which functioned as a judicial institution in their society. They likewise dominated important trade routes, exerting influence beyond Central Asia through wealth in their caravans.

Far away from the Sogdian homeland, aristocratic families organized major trading caravans along the Silk Road and held prominent positions within diaspora communities in other civilizations. Members of important families usually acted as intermediaries between the local authority and the Sogdian diaspora populations; sometimes they even received official titles. Even outside their native cities, noble surnames such as An and Kang retained substantial authority, representing their enduring place in the hierarchical structure [6]. Meanwhile, a certain Sogdian diaspora also served as diplomatic agents or cross-regional trade representatives for various regimes [4].

A byproduct of the Sogdian hierarchical society was that women of aristocratic lineage enjoyed a markedly higher social status than in many other contemporary civilizations. For women of privileged birth, literacy was common; the author of the Sogdian Ancient Letters was one such example [3]. When their husbands were on the road, women from these noble families needed to lead the household, oversee commercial activities, and manage correspondence and diplomatic affairs [7]. Aristocratic women with a noble bloodline also have the right to divorce of their own will

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[8]. However, this relatively higher position of women's rights (compared to other civilizations, meanwhile) did not reveal gender equality in Sogdian society. On the contrary, it underscored the profound nature of a class-bound society, in which women's status was embedded in their lineage and their family's social rank.

The Sogdian Ancient Letters indicated the facts that aristocratic women could exercise certain autonomy, but such power depended on status backed by family and lineage. In Letters I and III, Miwnay (or Shayn) first petitioned for assistance and later descended into despair after being abandoned in Dunhuang. Initially, her appeal to return to her mother suggested that she retained her identity as a freewoman with access to kinship or diaspora networks. However, as she was denied escort by male relatives such as Farnkhund and neglected by her husband Nanai-dhat, her condition deteriorated. She not only lost personal freedom, but also lost the ability to exercise the autonomy conferred by her social status. This reflected the breakdown of her position within the patrilineal, class-based Sogdian social order.

4. Hierarchy in diaspora commerce

The prestige of Sogdian elites did not vanish when they left their homeland. On the contrary, their noble lineage and social standing remained key resources within diaspora networks, as a "passport" for gaining recognition and rights in foreign regimes. Aristocratic status secured their central position within migrant communities; meanwhile, it qualified them to participate in top diplomatic and economic affairs across regimes.

The Sogdian Ancient Letters show that members of the diaspora communities maintained close contact through letters, which conveyed personal matters, commercial intelligence and political affairs. As we can see in Letter II, the sender reported the Xiongnu invasion, conditions in various important trading spots, the situation of Sogdian migrants in China, and market demand for certain goods as commercial intelligence [3]. Such information was crucial to the aristocracy who owned caravans, as well as to city-states' nobles involved in policy decisions. The ability to access and exploit these networks of information was inseparable from their social rank and lineage, for only those at the top of the hierarchy could readily enter and benefit from this transregional system of communication.

The Sogdian Ancient Letters, lost during a period of political turmoil in China, excavated in the heart of the desert, reflect the high risk of overland transportation. In order to mitigate the loss, Sogdian merchants controlled the size of caravans by choosing portable and high-value commodities such as silk, spices, and silver [5]. However, such wealth also made them prime targets for bandits.

In response, Sogdian merchants developed an early credit instrument (comparable to checks), which allowed wealth to be transferred securely in symbolic form. The operation of such instruments relied on financial institutions and trust mechanisms. In the closing lines of Letter II, the sender writes: "you should remind Varzakk that he should withdraw(?) this deposit(?)" and "And if you (both) think (it) fit that the latter should not hold it, then you should (both) take it and give it to someone else whom you do think fit, so that this money may thereby become more." [3] This passage indicates the existence of a trust arrangement, in which funds could be entrusted to a third party for management and potential growth.

However, the foundation of such a credit system relied not on an individual's reputation or assets, but on the name and wealth symbolized by one's family. Aristocratic status was both the source of credibility and the guarantee against risk: even if a merchant went missing or defaulted, the family network could compensate the investor's loss. As a result, long-distance trade was almost entirely monopolized by the upper classes; non-elite Sogdians with some local wealth, but lacking noble

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lineage, had neither the capital nor the dependable credit backing necessary for cross-regional commercial activity.

The status of the Sogdian aristocracy was not only effective within diaspora communities but was also recognized by local authorities. Under the Turkic Khaganate, Sogdian aristocratic families rapidly entered the centers of power and held hereditary control over diplomatic affairs [4]. In the Tang dynasty, the position of sabao (responsible for managing diaspora communities) was often passed down within prominent families [9]. Funerary evidence further confirms this pattern of cross-polity recognition. For example, Shijun, together with his wife of noble origin (of the An family), belonged to the first generation of immigrants, and soon after arrival, he became an official of the Tang state [10]. This not only reflects his rapid reception of support from the diaspora community but also indicates that Sogdian aristocratic status functioned as a letter of recommendation that directly secured the trust and appointment of external authorities.

Thus, the social standing of Sogdian aristocrats was not only preserved in the process of migration but also reinforced through diaspora communities, systems of credit, and institutionalized offices. This phenomenon reflects the central role of social hierarchy in long-distance commercial and political connections. Also, it will provide a point of reference for understanding the marginal position of non-elite Sogdians within the Silk Road system.

5. Non-elite Sogdians

In Sogdian society, non-elites made up the majority of the population, which included local farmers, small merchants, hired laborers, and slaves. Though Sogdian city-states were renowned for their important role in Silk Road trade, the agricultural economy remained important [4], with most lands concentrated to aristocratic families and religious institutions, worked by ordinary Sogdians [4]. These non-elite Sogdians were numerous not only in the homeland but also in diaspora communities. Yet, whether in epitaphs, inscriptions, or letters, historical records almost exclusively focus on the upper stratum, while the vast majority of the lower-grade population are absent by name or deed. Their presence emerges only as part of elite narratives or in diaspora administrative records, where they appear merely as anonymous statistical entries [5]. This absence was no accident but a product of the hierarchical Sogdian society: the production and preservation of historical records were monopolized by the elite, and the acts of remembering naturally excluded the non-elites.

In the operation of the Silk Road commerce, non-elite Sogdians formed the major labor force of caravans. This group included both low-status free persons and slaves, who undertook heavy tasks such as carrying goods, while the leadership of the caravans was Sogdian aristocratic elites or their agents [11]. Given the long-standing Sogdian dominance over trade along the eastern segment of the Silk Road, the scale of such Sogdian labor was considerable. Tang dynasty population records for the Sogdian settlement in Chonghua Township show a markedly low proportion of adult males, a demographic imbalance that likely reflects the fact that many men were away, engaged in long-distance transport and for long periods serving as caravan laborers [5].

The Sogdian Ancient Letters provide vivid corroboration. The sender of Letter 5, Fri-khwataw, describes the existence of large numbers of Sogdians stranded in Guzang (present-day Wuwei in Gansu province) due to instability along the commercial route caused by warfare. He himself had also been stranded there, but with the assistance of local community leader Ghawtus, he managed to leave and reach Dunhuang: “When Ghawtus went (away) from Guzang I went after him, and I came to Dunhuang, (but) I was prevented(?) from straying(?) outside (China).“ [3] Unlike him, whose higher status enabled him to escape, the rest of the ordinary Sogdians were forced to remain in the

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deteriorating conditions of Guzang: "Many Sogdians were ready to leave, (but) they could not leave, for Ghawtus went by (?) the mountains. I(?) would (have) remained (ed) at Dunhuang, but they [=the Sogdian inhabitants] were destitute." [3] These details not only reveal the vulnerability of the non-elite Sogdian population within the social hierarchy, but they also formed the indispensable operational base of commerce, yet bore the greatest share of risk and sacrifice.

This correspondence between the huge disparity in historical materials and social stratification precisely reflects the highly hierarchical nature of the Sogdian society. Social status determined not only who would be recorded and who would be forgotten, but also who held decision-making power in Silk Road commerce and who was relegated to the provision of labor.

6. Conclusion

The Sogdian Ancient Letters, when read alongside archaeological evidence, reflect a society whose commercial success and diasporic cohesion were inseparable from its blood-based hierarchy. The ritualized epistolary forms shown in the letters were not mere conventions but active performances of social order, embedding status distinctions into the method of communication. The aristocracy, sustained by family networks and recognized across political boundaries, monopolized long-distance trade, diplomatic positions, and credit systems. In contrast, non-elite Sogdians formed indispensable labor base of Silk Road commerce, yet remained very invisible in historical records.

This asymmetry in both material life and historical memory underscores a central point: the Sogdian role in Silk Road exchange was not the product of an open, egalitarian marketplace, but of a closed and stratified social system.

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