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THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN SOUTHERN SOGDIANA AND CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the social significance of the development of trade relations between Southern Sogd and China in antiquity. It examines how trade interactions within the framework of the Silk Road influenced social stratification, urban development, and the formation of new social groups such as merchants and caravan owners in Southern Sogd. The study also highlights the intensification of cultural, religious, and informational exchange, as well as processes of inter-civilizational integration. The research is based on historical, comparative, and systemic approaches.

Keywords: *Southern Sogd, China, Silk Road, trade relations, caravan trade, social significance, cultural exchange, interethnic integration, merchant aristocracy, urban culture, religious pluralism.*

Introduction. Central Asia has since ancient times constituted a key link in the system of the Great Silk Road, playing an important role in cultural and economic interactions between the East and the West. In particular, Southern Sogdiana (the lower part of the Zarafshan Valley, the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions) elevated direct trade relations with China to the level of interstate strategic cooperation. These interactions were significant not only economically, but also held immense historical

importance for the social life of society, culture, religious beliefs, and interethnic integration.[1]

Main part. During the 4th–8th centuries CE, Sogdian merchants were known as trade intermediaries with major states such as the Eastern Turkic Khaganate, China's Tang Empire, India, Iran, and Byzantium[2]. It was precisely the Sogdian caravans that played a leading role in transporting Chinese silk to Western markets. Archaeological findings—such as the wall paintings of Panjikent, the decorative motifs of Varakhsha, and the Dunhuang manuscripts—confirm the wide scale of these processes[3].

In official Chinese chronicles, the Sogdians are mentioned as "merchant envoys"[4]. Alongside trade, they also carried out diplomatic communications. These missions served to strengthen trust, peace, and stability between the two civilizations.

Trade relations led to deep socio-cultural integration within Sogdian and Chinese societies.

During the period of China's Tang Empire, the Sogdians formed strong communities in cities such as Chang'an, Luoyang, Dunhuang, and Turfan. Through their craftsmanship, religious schools, musical traditions, and styles of dress, they exerted a significant influence on the development of Chinese culture.

Sogdian dance, Sogdian musical instruments, and commercial etiquette were widely practiced in the life of the Chinese imperial court[5]. From China, silk-weaving technologies, papermaking methods, and certain Buddhist iconographic elements were introduced into Sogdiana[6].

Through caravans, customs duties, and international trade routes, a wealthy merchant stratum—the "Sogdian commercial aristocracy"—emerged in Southern Sogdiana. They also played an important role in political life.

[1] Бартольд В. В. *Сочинения*. Т. II. — М.: Наука, 1964. — С. 15–27.
[2] de la Vaissière É. *Sogdian Traders: A History*. — Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2005. — P. 21–45.
[3] Маршак Б. И. *Согдийское искусство*. — М.: Искусство, 1971. — С. 88–112.
[4] *Jiu Tangshu* (旧唐书), juan 198; *Xin Tangshu* (新唐书), juan 221.
[5] Whitfield S. *Life along the Silk Road*. — London: British Library, 1999. — P. 88–101.
[6] Needham J. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. 5. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. — P. 123–135.

During the Tang period, commercial and industrial activity in China intensified, leading to an increase in the social status of artisans and merchants. In Chinese sources, the term “Hu” (foreign merchant, primarily referring to Sogdians) appears frequently, indicating the strong ethno-cultural influence[1].

The Sogdians played an important mediating role in the spread of religious ideas:

Zoroastrianism spread in China, and Sogdian priests were active there.

Manichaeism was recognized as one of the official religions in Tang China (8th century).

Buddhism, conversely, exerted influence from China on Sogdiana.

Nestorian Christianity also entered China through Sogdian merchants.

These processes led to the strengthening of religious pluralism, the formation of a tolerant environment, and ideological renewal.

Trade relations played a decisive role in the development of cities in Southern Sogdiana:

- new forms and styles emerged in architecture;
- market infrastructure (caravanserais, trading stalls) expanded;
- the quality of handicraft products improved;
- the standard of living of the population increased.

In particular, economic and cultural revitalization was observed in major centers such as Panjikent, Kesh, Termez, and Samarkand.

Archaeological findings (the Panjikent and Varakhsha paintings) indicate that Sogdian women actively participated in trade processes. Women played an important role in handicrafts, weaving, and silk production. This situation enhanced women’s social status and economic independence within society.

The expansion of trade relations led to such social processes as:

- the opening of new routes,
- the construction of rabats and caravanserais,
- the strengthening of security systems,

[1] Rong Xinjiang. *Sogdians in China*. — Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2014. — P. 73–98.

- the emergence of information exchange networks.

As a result, regional integration and social dynamics increased.[1].

Conclusion

Trade relations between Southern Sogdiana and China:

intensified cultural exchange;

fostered religious pluralism;

contributed to the formation of new social strata;

enhanced urban life;

promoted the development of transport and communication systems;

supported the rise in the social status of women.

These processes contributed to the multi-layered development of Central Asian civilization, facilitated cultural and social rapprochement with China, and laid the foundation for the synthesis of civilizations along the Great Silk Road.

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