

A Commercial Diaspora: Sogdian Mercantile Network in the Ancient Letters

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Abstract

The Sogdians who emerged as early as the 4th century CE have always been related with a commercial identity in the antiquity and early medieval period. As several archaeological and written evidence demonstrates, a number of Sogdian remote settlement communities known as the historiographical concept of diasporas were established away from the central Sogdian city of Samarkand, and have played important roles in facilitating the interplay of social, political, and economic ideas across the land of Eurasia. Historiographical evaluation of the Sogdian diasporas' roles, however, could be elaborated with a more sophisticated economic outlook beyond the standard social explanation. The Sogdian model of diaspora settlement could be explained as a form of commercial diaspora with particular economic significance much interdependent on the commercial activities, and vice versa.

Keywords

Sogdians; Commercial diaspora; Capitalism; Mercantile network; Trade.

1. Introduction

The Sogdians, people of Iranian origin who inhabited the fertile valley between the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya in antiquity, has always been associated with a commercial identity. From the central Sogdian city of Samarkand, mercantile activities radiated in almost all directions, leading to not only the flow of profit, but also the long lasting trans-regional interplay of social, commercial, and political ideas in Eurasia. From the early Chinese account of Wei Shu, we see evidence of the Sogdian merchants traveling across the Tarim Basin to carry out commercial activities on the Chinese border. [1] The eastward movement from Samarkand was not a petty phenomenon. Diasporas, or remote communities, were commonly established in East Asia, with most population concentrating in areas like the Gansu corridor. As a historiographical concept, the term diaspora has been more commonly used to describe a form of social and political establishment rather than associating with a more elaborate definition. In the Sogdian's case, the concept of diaspora doesn't seem to follow the traditional use of such term. With the use of the Sogdian ancient letters, another more complex perspective to the definition of diaspora could emerge, with commercial aspect being taken into consideration.

British archeologist Aurel Stein's 1907 expedition in Dunhuang revealed a collection of ancient letters composed in the Sogdian language that provides pivotal evidence for the study of the group's social and economic establishment. The Sogdian ancient letters tackled the dilemma of lacking concrete primary sources for the study of the Sogdian mercantile activity by directly supporting the existence of a well-oriented commercial network connecting Samarkand, the Gansu corridor, and beyond. Therefore, the Sogdian trading network suddenly emerged from the mist of fragmented evidence and presented itself to a degree of complexity that previous sources have failed to reflect. [2] Another key aspects of the Sogdian community that the letters demonstrate would be the existence of various diaspora settlements not only on the Chinese borders, but more impressively, in the inner Chinese city of Luoyang, which echos the

description of various ancient Chinese accounts. The geographic disparity of the Sogdian diasporas certainly attest to their well established nature in the context of antiquity.

Historiographically, the ancient letters have been extensively studied and interpreted from both a social and commercial perspective, but the two are often discussed separately rather than as a conjunctive explanation of the Sogdian mercantile activity. The Sogdian model of diaspora settlement, in particular, has been more often studied as a social phenomenon, which hinders the reflection of its economic and commercial significance. Based on the ancient letters, the Sogdian commercial activities could be examined from a more holistic outlook taking into consideration the economic importance of the diaspora communities. It is possible to prove that the Sogdian mercantile success hinged on a model of complex commercial diaspora along the network.

The Sogdian diaspora communities, as understood from the letters, possibly played a major role in shaping the complexity of the mercantile network by providing a number of financial and business opportunities. Although many scholars have acknowledged the social complexity of the Sogdian diasporas, and have highlighted some of their basic commercial functions, the communities' economic roles could be further explored. [3] This research aims to explain the Sogdian diasporas beyond a form of social organization, but a complex commercial structure of major economic importance that could contribute to the mercantile network's long run success.

2. A Commercial Diaspora

Based on the ancient letters, Etienne de la Vaissière puts forward a model of Sogdian commerce that associates the mercantile activities with an extended family connection in diaspora communities. [4] Several pieces of evidence from the letters do attest for a strong sense of community connection in the diasporas, which could serve to justify for Etienne's model. Letter III, for example, demonstrates that in the face of adversities Miwnay and her daughter attempted first to appeal for help from family relatives in local communities before reaching out to closer family members through mail. [5] A network of family connections and community council institution based on the diasporas also seems to exist, as Etienne points out, and was in charge of the commercial activities. [2] Therefore, Etienne's argument made a solid attempt at integrating an evaluation of the Sogdian diaspora establishments with a commercial outlook.

What Etienne's interpretation demonstrates is the commercial character of the Sogdian diasporas. Much unlike the Jewish diaspora as a historiographical concept strongly associated with a degree of religious coercion, the Sogdian diaspora settlements in East Asia appear to be rather voluntary. There is no sufficient evidence suggesting that the Sogdians were forced to resettle across the Pamir mountains as a resigned resolution. Many scholars do suggest the conquest of Alexander in the 3rd millennium BCE to be the fundamental origin of a large scale dispersion of Sogdians into the Tarim Basin, which would support the establishment of the diasporas in east Asia to be involuntary.[2] However, threats from Alexander's Macedonian army are unlikely to be a major incentive for a vast relocation over such great distances. The conquest of Alexander certainly played a role in facilitating the Sogdian population's movement, but it alone would not be enough to justify the origin of the Sogdian diasporas network in east Asia. The fundamental motive for the Sogdian diaspora's establishment would unlikely be to seek for sanctuaries elsewhere, but to establish and better conduct commerce across political boundaries; a lot of underlying economic roles are involved behind such social establishment.

Despite its merits, Etienne's argument is restricted by viewing the Sogdian diaspora settlement as a social structure based on family connections, instead of a more sophisticated commercial concept. His model is limited in that it focuses too much on the analysis of the complicated relationship between different Sogdian community members mentioned in the letters, which

hinders a more holistic evaluation of the diaspora communities' underlying economic importance, and thus could be elaborated with a new focus.

The idea of a commercial society based on extended family connection is plausible, but too narrowed by assuming that the Sogdian merchant class was elementary in structure and unable to add more complexity to their commerce model by establishing a more extensive, profit-driven network. There is, in fact, no sufficient information from the ancient letters that could directly prove the existence of a family relationship overseeing the mercantile activity. Although Nanai-thvar and Nanai-vandakk in letter II share a similar structure in their names, it is not sufficient for us to regard them as part of the same extended family. The mention of a family council regulating trade also disappears in letters II, IV, and V. Family connection could be playing a significant role in facilitating trade. However, due to the lack of Sogdian sources available, it is difficult to make such an assumption using the ancient letters alone. Although the importance of family patronage is certainly worth attention, we shall not overlook the extensive non-familial ties that existed within the diaspora communities.

Nevertheless, the letters do reveal an important message — the Sogdian merchants were intentionally scattered in and out of China among different diaspora communities for commercial purposes. The author of letter II particularly mentions the movement of various merchants deep into cities like Jiuquan and Guzang, two very important commercial cities in ancient China. [6] From the author's description, the merchants would intentionally settle in various Chinese cities for years without moving, to conduct trade in the local market, and gathering important business information. Moreover, letter II and V revealed an early model of labor division and hierarchical establishment of the Sogdian merchant class: lower-class merchants would be responsible for settling in diaspora communities within Chinese cities for trade and for gathering local information, while local trade leaders like Nanai-vandakk would remain "outside", organizing the movement of different merchants and reporting to a head merchant in Samarkand. [6] This model of trade is much more complex on a grand international scale compared to the idea of a family-oriented commercial activity. The Sogdian diaspora communities possibly served a more sophisticated role than holding together extended family connection. Labor class stratification and specialization seems to occur based on the level of interaction with the diaspora communities. Therefore, the Sogdian concept of diaspora was arguably a grand commercial establishment with a much higher degree of economic complexity for further exploration. As several evidence from the letters would soon prove, the economic potential of the diaspora communities is significant enough to have an impact on the commercial network.

3. A Systematic Flow of Information

One significant point that the ancient letters demonstrate would be the existence of a mature model of mail communication formed on the basis of the Sogdian diaspora network. Letters appear to be traveling based on a number of shorter domestic transportation linkages between the diasporas, which then join together to form an extensive belt of communication network connecting Samarkand with all Sogdian communities dotted around the vast region of East Asia. This evidence indirectly attests to the commercial importance of the Sogdian diasporas, and highlights one economic potential that could lead to the long run success of the mercantile network.

A rather dim detail away from all the spotlights being shine on the letters' commercial aspects, four out of the five ancient letters we have contain no address directing the messenger to their intended receivers. Except for a brief "To Samarkand" written on the envelop of letter II, there is a general absence of location details from all the letters in our sample, which seems to go against the modern rules of handling mail services.[6] It would be virtually impossible for us to

deduct the exact reason for this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the high proportion of letters without an address or location attached could indicate it as a rather intentional practice. One plausible hypothesis would be that there existed a direct route of communication between a few diasporas close to each other, which would then connect their respective routes to other communities, knitting out an extensive web of mailing network for the flow of information with all the diasporas included but not directly connected to one another. As details from the source suggest, letter I and III were composed by Miwnay in the city of Dunhuang, whereas letter V was composed in Guzang.[5] The letters certainly came from different geographic origins, but they were all discovered in the same Chinese watch tower located between Dunhuang and Loulan.[2] The geographic origins of these letters are all considerably close, as there is no evidence suggesting any letter in our collection was composed outside the Gansu corridor, perhaps in more distant Chinese cities like Xi'an or Luoyang where the presence of Sogdian community was also considerably strong. The model hence diminishes the need for an address as the letters would only flow between short designated routes to certain communities; the receivers could then possibly claim their letters by names on the versos or through other solutions. A belt of shorter mail connections between diasporas, therefore, constructed the basic unit of a complex Sogdian mailing network allowing the circulation of messages.

One way to illustrate the Sogdian mail transportation network could be to draw up a comparison with the international air routes in modern day society. A particular Sogdian diaspora might be connected with a few others, but it wouldn't connect with every single community that existed. Much like the fact that there is no direct flight route connecting Shanghai and Washington D.C, or St. Petersburg; despite the fact that these are all major metropolitan cities, a transfer flight is still needed to connect the journey. Although the limited amount of evidence we have makes it hard to prove whether or not this model was exactly the case, but it does provide a logical direction that is worth further research. The Sogdian letters would not be sent directly between the Sogdian diasporas to Samarkand because the cost of doing so would simply be too high. In stead, it first travelled with the other domestic mails to one diaspora, and then possibly followed a belt of routes that would eventually take it to Samarkand. The risk of sending letters directly across the Tarim basin would also be immeasurable; after all, we are able to evaluate these letters in detail today precisely due to the fact that they never reached their addressees, which fully demonstrates the uncertain nature of traveling in antiquity. Consequently, as evidence suggests, the Sogdian diaspora communities disintegrated long distance message transportation down to a belt of domestic postal connection for the flow of information. Without the diasporas, the practice of communicating through letters would be much more difficult given the cost and risk of long distance transportation being taken into consideration. This close connection further attests to the complexity of the diasporas as they apparently held the crucial role of maintaining the flow of messages along the network.

The ancient letters also present a high degree of participation in composing letters across different Sogdian social status in the diasporas, which would further prove the communities as center of information exchange. Perhaps the most interesting piece of evidence could be found in letter I and III, in which the two letters were either composed by the woman Miwnay directly, or at least narrated by her as both contain rather private information and were sent under her name. The practice of communicating through letters, therefore, was arguably not a downright privilege to the Sogdian men, but a common and unified custom that was attainable by the opposite sex. Historiographical interpretation of this particular evidence varies. Etienne de la Vaissière puts forward a hypothesis in "The Sogdian Traders" that suggest the existence of private letters composed by women as indicating a frequent Sogdian postal communication. [4] Nevertheless, a quote from letter III might provide some disapproving sound as Miwnay mentioned "Again and again I send you letter, but receives none from you." [5] The fact that

Miwnay sent out numerous letters does not necessarily suggest a frequent exchange of information, as it was more of a single-way mailing that she originated. It might be better to view evidence from letter I and III as indirectly suggesting a decent degree of Sogdian involvement in composing letters from the diasporas. The Sogdian diasporas certainly had a continuous connection among each other in terms of communication, hence the reason why Miwnay would seek for letter as a form of reaching out to different members of her family. Using the mailing network model mentioned above, it could be proved that the transportation of letter messages was a common practice that very much initiated from the diasporas.

What the mailing network made possible was a unified model of commercial communication among the Sogdian diasporas. Business and political news, as the letters demonstrate, have been incorporated by merchants in their communication with other diaspora communities, and was circulated via the postal model that was discussed earlier. The detailed mention of the political and business climate in China as part of letter II, for example, indicates the amount of information Sogdian merchants were able to gather in their Chinese diasporas. In letter II, the author Nanai-vandak spends a great deal of effort writing on the Xiongnu's raiding of Luoyang, then the capital of China in 3rd century CE. [6] With information like "Luoyang is no more, Ye is no more." and "the Indians and Sogdians there had all died of starvation.", the content of the letter certainly reflects the uncertain nature of ancient Chinese market under the constant threat of a Xiongnu plundering. It seems likely that Nanai-vandak in the first part of his letter was trying to explain the possible business opportunities in China to Varzakk, the letter's intended receiver, as he explicitly states that "if I were to write about how China has fared...there is no profit for you to gain." There is a very clear evidence from the ancient letters alone, therefore, that merchants in Sogdian diasporas were actively engaging in the transport of business as well as political information for a commercial purpose.

A news circulation system would be of great significance for the success of the Sogdian mercantile network. As basic economic theory suggests, possession of more information on consumers and the market would contribute to the clarity of business objectives. Having a wide array of information would very likely lead to a more holistic overview of the business opportunities and potential profit that could be gained from a particular market. If the Sogdians already have an idea that the cost of commerce with China would be high due to uncertainties from the potential Xiongnu plundering, they could switch to trade with other groups instead. That is, a constant circulation of business information would help the Sogdians make any necessary adjustment to their business strategies in order to minimize loss and potentially maximize profit. As shown by letter II, it seems like business interest from Samarkand would first check with the diasporas in China for information, rather than investing in commerce directly, which suggest a degree of proto-capitalist thinking with a profiting motive. The Sogdian diasporas that formulated the mailing system, therefore, contained a much deeper commercial definition. It assured the flow of business information between Sogdian merchants, which allowed an optimum condition for the development of commercial activities in the long run. A complex interdependency seems to have developed between the Sogdian diaspora, the postal system, and the mercantile network.

4. Sogdian Proto-capitalism

As previously shown, the ability to circulate business information over distance would, in theory, allow the Sogdian merchants to benefit in the long run. Therefore, the existence of a Sogdian mailing network attests to the commercial potential of the diaspora settlements from a communication aspect. However, the connection between a communication system and the commercial importance of the Sogdian diasporas appears somewhat indirect. The question arises whether there is a more direct presentation of the Sogdian diasporas' economic functions

that could support the hypothesis of such social establishments as a sophisticated commercial concept contributing to the long-term success of the mercantile network. Approaching the ancient letters from a financial perspective could help provide some answers.

Using evidence from letters II and V, it is possible to prove that Sogdian merchants had control over an early model of financial institution in place. A mutualistic relationship between the functions of diaspora communities and a degree of proto-capitalist thinking of the Sogdian merchants seems to exist, highlighting the diaspora communities' economic importance from a long term financial aspect. According to Karl Marx's theory, capitalism is characterized by the concept of capital accumulation, which essentially means investing money or any financial assets with the goal of increasing its initial value. [7] It is difficult to apply modern economics rules to the evaluation of the Sogdian commercial model due to a variety of complex reasons. Modern economics as a subject is heavily reliant on the making of assumptions to create necessary analysis. The behavior of both consumers and producers in antiquity and the early middle-age would likely be drastically different from our understanding of the market today, which would make the use of modern economic models virtually futile. However, the term proto-capitalist does not necessarily mean entirely reflecting the later emerged concept of capitalism; in the case of commerce in antiquity and the early middle-age, many actions that involved the then "evil" concept of profiting via adding value to financial assets could essentially be regarded as proto-capitalist for their similarities with many guidelines of the Marxist capitalist theory.

The first financial aspect of the ancient letters worth discussing would be the second half of letter II. The letter's narrative provides traces of interest, storage of money, and credit borrowing on the mercantile network, which provides interesting details showing the Sogdian knowledge of financial management and the existence of a primary financial institution for the circulation of money. Nanai-vandak, the author of letter II, explicitly mentions "remind Varzakk that he should withdraw this deposit..." [6] This evidence directly attests to the Sogdian practice of saving for future consumption, at least on a domestic scale in Samarkand — the letter's eventual destination. More evidence follows when Nanai-vandak suggests "give it to someone so the money can become more", which serves as a good indication of an early form of banking service involving the concept of adding value to saving through the use of interest. It is possible to interpret the evidence as an indication of the Sogdians jumping out of the traditional use of money by deliberately associating it with a profit-making motive. The group's primary perspective of money was surely not restricted to a mere medium of exchange, but began to expand towards other more complex functions such as a storage of value and a deferred method of payment as defined in modern economies. Saving, as can be interpreted from the letter, was also not a short term practice. As Nanai-vandak reveals in his letter, at least 2,000 staters of money was left behind by him as a temporary solution for the letter's addressee, which fully reflects his long term planning and familiarity with the practice of money storage. Echoing Karl Marx's idea of capital accumulation, the Sogdian merchants certainly possessed a degree of proto-capitalist thinking whereby the profit gained is reinvested into the economy via the action of saving and lending. A basic system of financial management and circulation of income seems to be gradually taking shape.

Indeed, one limitation to such a perspective would be that the financial institution described in letter II could just be based on a restricted domestic scale within Samarkand. It is important that we don't refer to the financial service as a systematic concept. By referring to the financial establishment in the letter as "someone", Nanai-vandak could be suggesting that such early banking service was provided on a microscopic scale, possibly undertaken by specific individuals. This hypothesis would to a certain extent rule out the possibility of diaspora engagement in facilitating the financial institutions.

However, there is another possible angle of interpreting Nanai-vandak's meaning. There is little evidence from the letters suggesting the Sogdian model of financial service as systematic, nor is there any form of regulation monitoring the service on a large scale as we would expect in the modern-day economy. The Sogdian financial establishment, therefore, seems to be a rather specialized individual concept, rather than a mature "institution". If this holds true, such financial service would be able to exist within the scattered diaspora communities due to their independent nature. Any individual who held knowledge about the system and its operation — presumably through the mature mailing service — could take on the intermediary financial role in their respective regions. Letter V would provide useful evidence supporting this perspective. Fri-khwataw, the author of Letter V, incorporated a detailed description of his attempt to retrace debt from another Sogdian in Guzan, presumably as ordered by Aspandhat, the letter's addressee.[8] As shown by his informative tone of writing and the mention of specific details within his description, it is clear that Aspandhat had decided to loan out his money to another merchant Kharstrang, who, as described in the letter, was trying to avoid the full payment of his debt. The exact narrative of Fri-khwataw appears to be somewhat confusing due to the letter's poor condition, but the overarching message is clear — money was not treated as private wealth but rather a commodity that could be circulated to create more wealth in trade. Such individualized model of financial service could have strong connection with the diaspora concept. Aspandhat was likely the one specialized individual who undertook the role of operating the community's financial establishment. Aspandhat certainly knew Kharstrang or had some degree of knowledge in terms of the flow of his money, as shown by his attempt to retrace the debt. It is plausible that the financial service was based on a community connection and therefore existed on a domestic base. We need to remember that the Sogdian diaspora establishment was fundamentally a well oriented social structure with some degree of stratification. In the verso of letter V Fri-khwataw clearly referred to Aspandhat using the term "s'rtp'w", which attests to Aspandhat's position in the diaspora community.[8] As scholarships mention, the head merchant, or s'rtp'w of the Sogdians held a very influential position in the diasporas. It is important to note that the translation of the term s'rtp'w contains some controversies beyond our scope of discussion, use of this term in our context refers to the definition of a head merchant. From the 5th century CE onwards, there were even attempts from the Chinese government to include the s'rtp'w as part of its local bureaucratic system. The authority that associates with a high position of the s'rtp'w, as well as the resources they were able to obtain matches the ability to successfully operate a financial institution capable of offering loans and accepting savings. It is plausible, therefore, the Sogdian financial service was rooted in the authority of Sogdian head merchants in various diaspora communities.

If this hypothesis holds, the financial aspects of the Sogdian diaspora will help attest to another degree of its important economic roles. The diaspora communities would provide an essential opportunity for merchants to obtain the loan needed on a more domestic base, which would greatly help fund the commercial activities and business conduct in the long run. According to our model, instead of moving to Samarkand or more distant settlements for loans, the Sogdian merchants could obtain it on a local level in various diasporas, so the money could be put into commercial uses instantaneously. With more money would come a higher bargaining power in ancient markets; the profiting motive of Sogdian merchants would, in theory, generate a continuous flow of income by maintaining their competitiveness. As the profit earned was reinvested, a basic circular flow of income would emerge, resulting in higher income and profit in the long run. The existence of a financial aspect of the diaspora, therefore, explains the proto-capitalist characteristic behind its establishment and demonstrates its connection with the mercantile network's long-run success.

5. Connection with the Silk Road Concept

The concept of the “Silk Road” has been popularized especially in recent years, shining light on the inter-regional interplay of the Eurasian societies and beyond. Tamara Chin in her work puts forward two separate ideas of the “Silk Road”: the invented and the reinvented.[9] The reinvented silk road, according to Chin, refers to an idealized model of exchange and global cosmopolitanism. The invented silk road, on the other hand, was popularized by Sven Hedin and Ferdinand von Richthofen that seems to associate with a deep superior Eurocentric attitude.

The Sogdian mercantile activities and the study of its commercial diaspora in our agenda lean more towards the first concept. On the one hand, the Sogdian commercial network certainly prompted the cultural, commercial, and political interplay among different Eurasian settlements. The diffusion of funerary couch into the Sogdian culture, for example, demonstrates a degree of cultural exchange that’s been taking place between China and the Sogdians as a result of increasing commercial contact. The Sogdian mercantile activity circulated not just commodities, but the exchange of ideas between different ethnicity groups. Through the integration of the commercial diasporas, the cultural exchange and integration was taken to a much higher level. Significant amount of Sogdian merchants were able to settle inside another country’s sphere or influence without conflict, demonstrating a perfect example for the idealized concept of global cosmopolitanism.

Nevertheless, there are limitation with such perspective. Modern economists and politicians often argue the concept of globalization to be the cure for all human conflicts, and the recently reinvented concept of “Silk Road” also centers around this particular argument. To a certain extent, this argument is economically accurate. However, it needs to be realized that the exact concept of nationality was a rather new invention after the rise of European colonialism, and is reflected through Richthofen’s invented “Silk Road”. Silk road commerce, with the Sogdians included, was not formed on the basis of nationalities. It is very easy to ignore the Sogdian diasporas’ connection with the Chinese societies — they were part of the Chinese bureaucracy, not a separate nation. The ideal model of “Silk Road” commerce characterized by groups like the Sogdians weren’t as successful in bringing regional peace via trade as imagined, as different groups weren’t even interacting on a national basis. The attempt to apply modern rules of globalization to the the “Silk Road”, therefore, would not be very accurate. The reinvented “Silk Road” is relatable to the Sogdian commercial network, but only to a limited extent.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to argue the Sogdian commercial model of diaspora settlement as the golden key to mercantile success. Nor is there intention of suggesting the Sogdian commercial activities as a singlehanded success or failure. The intention is to discuss a part of the Sogdian commercial identity that past scholarships have sometimes chose to unpack with a relatively narrow perspective, which could restricts the presentation of the diasporas’ underlying potential both commercially and socially. What the ancient letters present is the economic roles of the Sogdian diasporas and their great potential in contributing to the long run success of the commercial network. Historiographical understanding of the term diaspora in the case of Sogdian history is restricted by viewing it as a complete social phenomenon, and could be further elaborated with a more sophisticated commercial agenda.

From both a financial and communicational perspective, the diaspora settlements played important roles in establishing the basic foundations for the heyday of the Sogdian mercantile activities. Through the interpretation of the ancient letters, an economic analysis of the Sogdian commercial diasporas is possible by shifting focus away from ostensible aspects such as the portray of commodities exchanged. A tight bond seems to exist between the Sogdian diasporas,

a mail communication service, a proto-capitalist concept of financial service, and the potential success of the Sogdian commercial activities. To a certain extent, the four aspects interdepend on each other. Absence of any one of the aspect would greatly hinder the upper limit of the Sogdian commercial achievement. In other words, the Sogdian diasporas were able to aid the conduct of business on a more fundamental level. Although the diasporas didn't directly lead to the flow of profit into pockets of the Sogdians, they certainly created the condition needed for such dream of all merchants to become reality. Pursuing profit, the Sogdian language echoed around the markets of Eurasia for centuries before gradually fading into the inner Asian mountain corridor. The diasporas might just be minute shooting stars in the vast galaxy of Eurasia, yet they are indeed the flashing lighthouse in the dark, guiding the Sogdian merchants towards their dreams of success.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Richard Payne from the University of Chicago and Ms. Yanqing Shen for providing me guidance throughout my research process. Their revision of my work and the advice provided were fundamental to this essay, and their insights I value greatly.

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