International Journal Of History And Political Sciences

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue04 2026
PAGE NO. 60-62
DOI 10.37547/ijhps/Volume06Issue04-13

Sogdians' Eastern Trade Networks (5th–8th Centuries)

AkhmadovSherzod Marufjonovich
Second-year PhD (Basic Doctoral Student), Faculty of History, Samarkand State University, Uzbekistan

Received: 18 March 2026; **Accepted:** 05 April 2026; **Published:** 30 April 2026

Abstract: This article examines Sogdian caravan routes, trading colonies, and the institutionalization of diaspora networks along the eastern direction in the 5th–8th centuries CE, drawing on diverse sources. The study compares epigraphic evidence (Sogdian epitaphs around Chang'an and Luoyang), Chinese dynastic histories, archaeological materials, numismatic data, and a corpus of caravan letters. The findings reconstruct a main route chain – Sogd–Fergana–Semirechye–Tarim Basin–Gansu passage–Chang'an/Luoyang–Yangzhou/Guangzhou – and identify key commercial "nodes" in Turfan, Kucha, Khotan, and Dunhuang. The sabao office strengthened Sogdians' legal and social standing, while credit-based caravan practices and sensitivity to market signals helped secure long-term positions in eastern markets. Conclusions are grounded in a combination of comparative historical analysis, network analysis, and microhistory.

Keywords: Sogd, Silk Road, sabao, Turfan, Kucha, Dunhuang, Chang'an, Tarim Basin, caravan trade, diaspora.

Introduction: In the 5th–8th centuries, within the multi-ethnic urban civilization of Transoxiana, Sogdiana functioned as a major center of trade and craftsmanship and, in a literal sense, served as the "driving force" of Silk Road networks. The Sogdians facilitated the exchange of goods and information between East and West through commerce, and their influence was particularly strong along eastern routes. These routes passed through Semirechye to the oases of the Tarim Basin—Kucha, Turfan, Khotan, and Dunhuang—and extended along the Gansu corridor to the major cities of central China; by the 7th–8th centuries, they were further integrated into a commercial network linked with maritime ports such as Yangzhou and Guangzhou [1; 2; 3].

The relevance of this study is determined by the need to reconstruct the geography of trade networks based on concrete sources, to interpret the legal and socio-functional role of the Sogdian diaspora institution (sabao), and to understand the economic consequences of transport and logistical decisions. According to E. de la Vaissière, "the Sogdians created the most successful example of a commercial diaspora in the early medieval period" [1, p. 3]. Although this statement is somewhat generalizing, it should be approached with caution: as will be shown in the following sections, their success was not based solely on specialization in trade, but also on their ability to adapt rapidly to political and territorial changes, diversify routes, and ensure institutional legitimacy within local communities.

METHODS

This study employs an integrated approach combining comparative-historical, network analysis, and microhistorical methods. The source base is divided into four categories: (1) written sources—Chinese dynastic chronicles and biographical records, including information on leaders of Sogdian communities; (2) epigraphy—Sogdian epitaphs such as that of Shi Jun (Virkak), which allow the reconstruction of community structure, official positions, and property relations [5]; (3) archaeology—documents discovered in Turfan and Dunhuang, written scrolls reflecting the content of commercial contracts, as well as artifacts such as scales and measuring instruments; (4) numismatics—evidence of monetary circulation indicating the role of currency in structuring trade routes [2; 3; 6].

The network analysis method made it possible to model trade routes as systems of "nodes" and "bridges," as well as to map their spatial structure. The

microhistorical approach, in turn, enabled the reconstruction of everyday practices—such as credit, guarantees, and partnerships—through the study of individual merchants' biographies, epitaphic data, and caravan letters [1; 4].

For geographical precision, toponymic identification relied in part on archaeological dating for certain centers (e.g., the Suyab–Taraz corridor), while in the Gansu corridor section the chronology of Dunhuang documents was taken into account [3; 7].

RESULTS

The results of the study show that the Sogdian eastern trade networks were organized into the following stages and interconnected chains. The first stage consisted of intermediary routes from the Sogdian centers (Samarkand, Bukhara, and related networks) to the Fergana Valley. At this stage, craft products and semi-finished goods were collected, and caravan compositions were formed [1; 3].

The second stage passed through Semirechye via the nodes of Suyab and Taraz. In this region, stops were associated with the re-equipment of caravans, seasonal logistics (wintering/summering), and the organization of military protection [6].

The third stage involved passage through the oases of the Tarim Basin (Kucha, Turfan, Khotan, Yarkand, and Dunhuang). These nodes functioned for the Sogdians not only as trade centers but also as spaces for institutional experimentation: document circulation, collateral systems, debt records, and both luxury and bulk commodity exchange were carried out intensively in this zone [2; 4].

The fourth stage extended through the Gansu corridor, passing smaller markets in central China and reaching Chang'an and Luoyang. In these centers, Sogdian communities were legally recognized, and through the office of sabao, they exercised internal self-governance and external communication [5].

The fifth stage connected central cities with river and maritime ports such as Yangzhou and Guangzhou. By the 8th century, some Sogdians also established links with Southeast Asian markets via maritime routes [2; 7].

The identified network geography is consistent with the commodity profile. While silk, silk fabrics, and woven textiles served as the primary exchange equivalents, the Sogdians also traded glassware, perfumes similar to olive oil-based essences, tin and copper alloys, finely crafted metal objects, as well as horses and animal hides [2; 3].

Mechanisms close to insurance—such as partnerships and guarantee systems—were employed for price signal interpretation, assessment of arbitrage opportunities between markets, and mitigation of caravan risks [1; 4]. Within these communities, distinct roles included caravan leaders, accountants, translators, and local market agents.

Some epigraphic evidence suggests that Sogdian merchants established long-term contracts with local communities and widely practiced partial delivery of goods over time [5]. The stability of the network depended on two main factors: route diversification (e.g., shorter but riskier routes via Turfan and longer but safer routes via Khotan) and the presence of political protection and transit infrastructures, including escort units, border tariffs, and permits [6].

DISCUSSION

From a scholarly perspective, Sogdian trade along the eastern route can be characterized not as a "single road," but as a chain of interconnected oases. V. Hansen's well-known statement emphasizes this point: "the Silk Road was not a single road but a network of routes linking oases" [2, p. 6]. However, this definition also requires refinement: the success of inter-oasis connectivity was not based solely on geographical proximity, but also on legality (the sabao institution), the accumulation of trust capital, and a multilingual culture of communication.

More precisely, the Sogdians constructed the network at two levels: at the macro level, as long-distance caravan routes, and at the micro level, as a system of trading houses, warehouses, and agreements with local authorities in settlement centers. According to J. Skf, "By the Tang, the sabao served as the legally recognized leader of Sogdian communities" [5, p. 142]. Building on this view, its economic implications should also be noted: the sabao institutionalized relations with local governance, acted as an arbitrator in dispute resolution, and reduced risks in foreign trade. This function represented one of the key mechanisms for reducing transaction costs.

Political factors played a decisive role in shaping the architecture of the network. Trade-and-access policies between the Turkic Khaganates and the Tang dynasty were reflected in road security, tariff structures, and licensing practices. As a result, at certain periods the Gansu corridor became more prominent, while at other times the southern "detour" route of the Tarim Basin gained dominance [6].

In response to this variability, the Sogdians diversified their network: when the northern route of Eastern Turkestan via Turfan was more secure, the Chang'an direction became more active; otherwise, a longer but less risky transit was ensured through the southern route via Khotan and Yarkand [3].

E. de la Vaissière notes that the Sogdian diaspora maintained network stability through “mobilité choisie et imposée”—both voluntary and forced migrations [1, pp. 45–68]. Here, we adopt a partially critical stance toward this interpretation: forced migrations in many cases should not be viewed solely as crisis-driven phenomena, but also as strategies for testing new market opportunities and distributing risk. Thus, rather than emphasizing the “forced” nature of mobility, it is more appropriate to highlight its “portfolio-based” character.

CONCLUSION

During the 5th–8th centuries, Sogdian trade networks along the eastern routes developed as a multi-layered, diversified, and institutionally robust system. The Sogd–Fergana–Semirechye–Tarim Basin–Gansu–Chang’an/Luoyang corridor, along with its maritime extensions (Yangzhou, Guangzhou), created a trade landscape based on interconnected nodes. The sabao institution defined the legal status of the Sogdian diaspora, ensured unified representation in external relations, and facilitated internal conflict resolution, while practices such as credit, guarantees, and partnerships reduced transaction costs and distributed risks.

Comparative analysis of archaeological, epigraphic, and written sources demonstrates that Sogdian merchants were able to flexibly integrate markets through rapid response to price signals, multilingual competence, and informational advantages. Based on the discussed evidence, the following general thesis can be proposed: Sogdian trade along the eastern routes was not a “single road” system, but a complex of managed and regulated networks, whose stability relied on the interaction of logistics, institutions, and trust capital.

The methodological implication of this study is that network stability depends on the interrelation of diversification, institutional trust, and information transparency; the historical experience of the Sogdians serves as a clear illustration of this principle.

REFERENCES

1. de la Vaissière, Étienne. Sogdian Traders: A History. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005. — 336 бет. (Қаранг, айниқса: p. 3; p. 45–68; p. 121–140).
2. Hansen, Valerie. The Silk Road: A New History. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. — 320 бет. (Қаранг: p. 6; p. 95–130).
3. Litvinsky, B. A. (ed.). History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Volume III: The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996. — 568 бет. (Муносабатли фасллар: pp. 185–240; 335–372).
4. Rong, Xinjiang. The Silk Road and the Sogdian Colonies in China: A Reappraisal. The Silk Road, Vol. 3 (2005), Seattle: Silkroad Foundation, pp. 3–10.
5. Skaff, Jonathan K. Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. — 364 бет. (Қаранг: p. 140–160; p. 201–210).
6. Beckwith, Christopher I. Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. — 472 бет. (Қаранг: p. 120–150).
7. Whitfield, Susan. Life Along the Silk Road. London: John Murray Publishers, 1999; revised ed. 2015. — 288 бет. (Қаранг: p. 45–78; p. 155–180).
8. Liu, Xinru. The Silk Road in World History. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. — 168 бет. (Қаранг: p. 51–84).