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Sogdian merchants and Chinese Han merchants during the Tang Dynasty

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Judging from the contacts among peoples and the circulation of goods, the establishment of the Tang Empire may be described as a process of taking over the administrative power over communication and trade from the local government to the central government. Opening of post roads linking the capital city and all prefectures in the empire clearly illustrates this process.¹

As the centralized administration of communication and trade was formed, the communication system (consisting of post roads and canals) running all over the Tang Empire's territory was also established, enabling direct contact between the capital city of the Tang Empire and the Central Asian region. The complete metropolitan grid within the territory of the Tang Empire, brought personal movements and the circulation of material goods within the empire to a new height. The activities of merchants in the circulation of commodities had been brisk prior to the Tang dynasty. During the Tang dynasty, these activities produced a new and vigorous development. The region around the capital city Chang'an with its huge population deserved the name of the largest consuming metropolis of that time. With such enormous consumption needs, it attracted a flow of commodities brought by merchants.² Here I would like to call my reader's attention to the fact that Chang'an was a starting point and terminal for the commercial activities of merchants from Central Asia, the north and north eastern regions of China and the areas south of Yangzi River which was linked to the north by post roads and Grand Canal.

One of the active merchant groups within the domain of the Tang Empire were the Sogdians.

It was probably, during the Eastern Han Dynasty that Sogdian merchants began to visit China, and the Northern Wei Dynasty of the fifth century saw an upsurge of their activities. They set up settlements along the roads for their caravans and in the destinations of their goods, and with these settlements as their bases, they engaged in trade. In the territory of the Tang Empire such settlements were found in major cities along the post roads, from capital cities to Central Asia and to Youzhou 幽州, Yingzhou 營州, Taiyuan 太原 in the circuits (*dao* 道) of Hebei 河北 and Hedong 河東

¹ Arakawa, 2000, p. 214-220; 2002, p. 343.

² Cf. Hino, 1968, 1970.

in the empire's north and northeast (See map).³

Their settlement bases, allowed the Sogdians to set up their own communication system. In Northern Dynasties, before the Tang era, these Sogdian settlements were indirectly ruled through the s'rtp'w 薩寶,⁴ but during the Tang empire, Sogdian people in the settlements had become *baixing* 百姓 (permanent residents enrolled on general household registers), and the Sogdian settlements were incorporated in the administrative organization of the Tang.⁵ This Sogdian communicational mechanism, which had been established long before, was reinforced by the public communication system, which supplied two kinds of traffic travel permits called *guosuo* 過所 and *gongyan* 公驗, introduced and perfected by the Tang Empire. The examination of Turfan documents (see examples I, II and III in the footnote⁶) reveals that *gongyan* guaranteed the passage within the territory of a prefecture and it was valid for a limited period that coincided with the length of a given official journey. By contrast, the *guosuo* passport had no spatial or temporal limits; it was issued for journeys beyond the territory of a prefecture, and was valid throughout the territory of Tang empire.⁷ The Sogdian communicational mechanism combined with Tang travel permits enabled Sogdians to complete long-distance journeys, allowing speedy and safe communication and transportation.

³ Arakawa, 1999, p. 84; Rong, 2000, p. 119-151; 2001, p. 37-110; de la Vaissière, 2002, p. 148-149. Almost all of these settlements in the Circuit of Hebei were located in a region where silk was collected as tax, in a word, main product region of silk in Tang empire. Cf. de la Vaissière, 2002, p. 150; Arakawa, 2004, p. 28-32.

⁴ Arakawa, 1998, p. 171-176; Rong, 2003, p. 128-143.

⁵ Arakawa, 1997, p. 192-196; 1998, p. 176-179.

⁶ (I) 「開元二十一(七三三)年西州都督府案卷爲勘給過所事」 [The 21st of Kaiyuan (733), an official document issued by the Government general of Xizhou, concerning the examination of an application for a issue of *guosuo* passport.] (73TAM509: 8/21(a)之一, 8/21(a)之二, 8/15(a)之一, 8/15(a)之二)

【北庭金滿泉百姓·蔣化明】[Jiang Huaming, a permanent resident enrolled on general household register in Jinman County in the Protectorate of Beiting]

Yizhou 伊州 ⇌ Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Jimsa 北庭 → 「*guosuo* 過所」
Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Jimsa 北庭 → 「*gongyan* 公驗」

(II) 「開元二十一(七三三)年唐循忠腰、薛光泚、康大之請給過所案卷」 [The 21st of Kaiyuan (733), an official document issued by the Government general of Xizhou, concerning applications for an issue of *guosuo* passport] (73TAM509: 8/4-1(a), 8/4-1(b), 8/23(a), 8/4-2(a)之一, 8/4-2(a)之二, 8/4-2(a)之三, 8/4-2(a)之四)

【1. 前長史·唐循忠之腰 2. 甘州百姓·薛光泚 3. 康大之】 [1. A concubine of the ex-deputy prefect, Tang Xunzhong. 2. Xue Guangci, a permanent resident enrolled on general household register in Ganzhou. 3. Kang Dazhi]

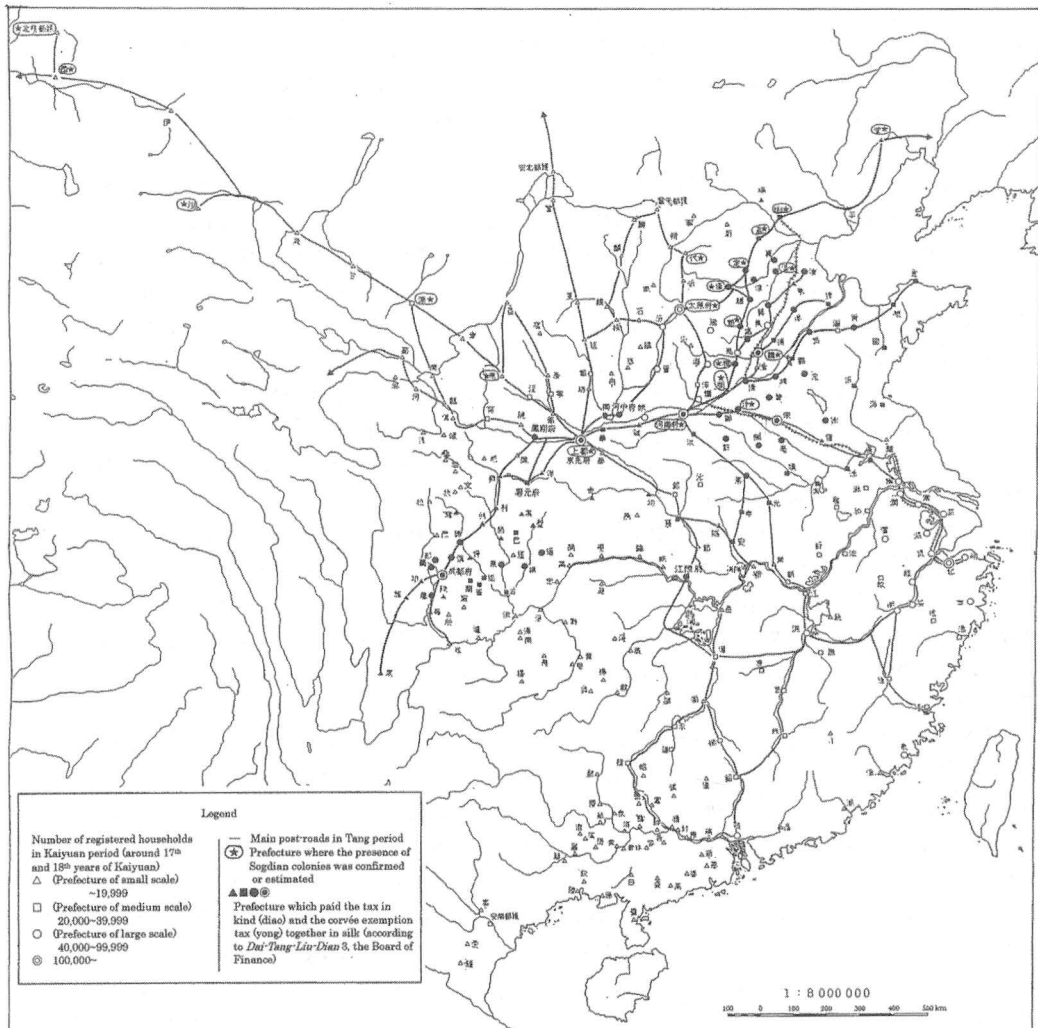
1. Anxi 安西 → Xizhou 西州 → Yizhou 伊州 → Guazhou 瓜州 → Ganzhou 甘州
... → Fuzhou 福州 → 「*guosuo* 過所」
2. Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Yizhou 伊州 ⇌ Guazhou 瓜州 ⇌ Ganzhou 甘州 → 「*guosuo* 過所」
3. Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Luntai 輪臺 → 「*gongyan* 公驗」

(III) 「開元二十一(七三三)年染勿等保石染典往伊州市易辯辭」 [The 21st of Kaiyuan (733), a record of interrogation to the guarantors Ranwu etc., concerning the matter that Shi Randian goes to Yizhou and make a trade here] (73TAM509: 8/9(a)之一等)

【西州都督府百姓、石染典】 [Shi Randian, a permanent resident enrolled on general household register in the Government-general of Xizhou]

Anxi 安西 ← ... Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Yizhou 伊州 ⇌ Shazhou 沙州 ⇌ Guazhou 瓜州 → 「*guosuo* 過所」
Xizhou 西州 ⇌ Yizhou 伊州 → 「*gongyan* 公驗」

⁷ Arakawa, 2000, p. 294-310; 2001, p. 6.



Map 1: Main trade roads and towns in Tang China.

In principle, the administration of the Tang Empire did not permit foreign merchants to frequent the Empire. However, Sogdian merchants were an exception. With a pass *guosuo* gained in Central Asia, a Sogdian merchant who had nothing to do with diplomatic missions, could easily come to Chang'an.⁸ Within the complete traffic network of the Tang Empire, Sogdian merchants, no matter whether their residences were in China itself or not, could engage in trade while keeping close contacts with the authorities of different prefectures who were authorized to grant *guosuo*.

Also, in the latter half of the eighth century at the latest, it seems that Persian (波斯) and Arab (Dashi 大食) merchants, mainly carried on trade around cities along the Grand Canal south of Chang'an and Luoyang, and coastal metropolitan cities. That this was the case is evident from the *Story of the hu who bought a treasure* (*Huren maibao tan* 胡人買寶譚), in which a Hu 胡 merchant buys treasures such as jewels in China, analysed by Seo Tatsuhiko.⁹ The stage for this story must have been one of the large cities such as Chang'an, Yangzhou 揚州, Hongzhou 洪州, Changzhou 常州, Guangzhou 廣州 and so on, and took place later than the Kaiyuan 開元 and the Tianbao 天寶 era, when most of non-Han people who bought treasures in China, were Persian and Arab merchants. When you locate these cities on a map, you will notice that they are on the major commercial routes which connected Chang'an and the South China Sea at that time. Although the area for Persian and Arab merchants and that of the Sogdian merchants partly overlapped, the story indicates that in the latter half of the eighth century at the latest, the main stage of Sogdian commercial activities was in northern China and that of Persian and Arab merchants took place in the South.

Hu 胡 (non-Han foreigners) itinerant merchants existed alongside resident merchants (*zuo gu* 坐賈) during the Tang Dynasty. Some of them were wealthy merchants (*hao shang* 豪商). We know from historical evidence, that the circulation of Uyghur (Huihu 回鶻) and Persian money reflects the commercial activities of the Hu traders. The Uyghur money was the financial capital of Sogdian merchants,¹⁰ and the Persian money was the capital of Persian merchants.¹¹ Despite their name of "money", they were not currency, as we usually understand it. It was, instead, a general term for gold, silver, silk and other valuables used as capital for business and credit. Apart from offering loans and goods/money conversions, as financiers in possession of huge amounts of capital, these wealthy merchants were also entrusted with the care of money deposited by other people. They carried on currency conversions and transmitted money, for which they delivered to the depositor invoices, checks and other certificates. They were also involved in investment. Judging from the geographical distribution of the Sogdian and Persian merchants, the Sogdian merchants shared the foreign financial capital with the Persian merchants, the former in the north of China and the later in the south.

⁸ Arakawa, 1997, p. 171-184.

⁹ Seo, 1991, p. 283-306.

¹⁰ Moriyasu, 1997A, p. 93-119; 1997B, p. 24-28; Hino, 1965B, p. 38-49.

¹¹ Hino, 1965A, p. 367-381.

Needless to say, not only Hu merchants undertook commercial activities during the Tang Empire, but many ethnic Han Chinese were also involved in commercial activities. One of them who has been repeatedly cited in the literature is Zou Fengzhi 鄒鳳熾, a merchant active in Chang'an during the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (AD 650-683). While buying and selling mantou 饅頭 (a steamed pastry with stuffing), he found a large crock of gold in Shengye Fang (勝業坊) to the North of the city's Eastern market and thus became a millionaire. He built himself a large residence in Huaide Fang 懷德坊 to the West of the Western market of Chang'an, a district inhabited by many Sogdian merchants. He opened and managed *dian* 店 throughout the country, making huge profits by trading local products from different places.¹² The *dian* or *didian* 邸店 were set up throughout the territory of Tang Empire, and they functioned not only as lodgings, but also as storehouses and hubs of transportation and monetary facilities.¹³

Apart from Zou Fengzhi, other noted wealthy Han Chinese merchants in Chang'an included Wang Yuanbao 王元寶, Yang Chongyi 楊崇義, and Guo Wanjin 郭萬金.¹⁴ Naturally, among the Han Chinese merchants there were not only resident merchants, but also large numbers of itinerant merchants.

We should pay a great deal of attention to the description mentioned in the article of Lidai shengshuai hukou 歷代盛衰戶口 in the *Tongdian* 通典 7, Shihuo 食貨 7. It informs us that, during the 13th year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era (725), there were many *diansi* 店肆 that served the needs of itinerant merchants (*shanglü* 商旅) as far as Songzhou 宋州 and Bianzhou 汴州 to the east, Shuchuan 蜀川, Qizhou 岐州 and Liangfu 涼府 to the west, Jingzhou 荊州 and Xiangzhou 襄州 to the south, and Taiyuan 太原 and Fanyang 范陽 to the north. "*Diansi*" is a complex word composed with "dian" 店 and "si" 肆, both meaning "shop". From this description, we can see that itinerant merchants called *shanglü* were greatly involved in commercial activities during the Kaiyuan era, basing themselves in "*diansi*" shops in the above areas of which Chang'an and Luoyang were the centers. In addition, according to the Turfan documents, such "*dian*" were set up even in Turfan of Central Asia.¹⁵

Not only Han people but also Hu people managed the "*dian*" shops in Tang Empire. The Hu merchants had business dealings with the Han people, and Han merchants in their turn, traded with Hu people.

We can see from the descriptions of the *Tongdian* and from Turfan documents, that during the Kaiyuan era in the above mentioned locations, many Han and non-Han merchants engaged in widespread commercial activities through the use of "*dian*". We should also notice that the location of Sogdian settlements, mostly occurred in the

¹² *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, j. 495 Zalu 雜錄 3、Zou Fengzhi 鄒鳳熾條參考

¹³ Hino, 1968; 1970

¹⁴ See the *Kaiyuan tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 j. 1 (Saouxue yingbin 掃雪迎賓· Haoyou 豪友· Yingwu gaoshi 鸚鵡告事條), and *Nanbu xinshu* 南部新書, j. 8.

¹⁵ For example, see the court file dated Tianbao 1 (762) (73TAM509:8/1(a),8/2(a), ed. in Wenshu 9, p. 128-134) which indicates "the shop of Zhang Youhe" (Zhang Youhe *dian* 張遊鶴店).

above mentioned regions, where "dian" were set up, centered in Chang'an and Luoyang.

While competing with each other, the ethnic Han Chinese merchants and the Sogdian merchants exchanged information with each other, lent money to each other and transferred commodities from each other and even helped to build up each other's business. Their close relationship is illustrated by documents unearthed in Turfan. These documents provide a case of cooperation between Han and Sogdian itinerant merchants in trade in Central Asia, a phenomenon that emerged shortly after the Tang Empire's sphere of influence reached Central Asia during the reign of Emperor Gaozong.

A memo (draft) submitted to the Protectorate of Anxi (Anxi duhufu 安西都護府) by Gaochang County 高昌縣.

Ref.: record the interrogation to Cao Lushan 曹祿山 the plaintiff and Li Shaojin 李紹謹 the defendant.¹⁶

Document 1 (66TAM61:17(b). (The first two lines that belong to a draft memorial to the emperor have been omitted.)

- 1 高昌縣 牒上安西都護府
- 2 曹祿山年卅
- (依檢?) 案内
- 3 □□ (牒得) 上件人辭稱、向西州長史 []
- 4 □□□ 在弓月城有京師漢名李 []
- 5 □□□ 在弓月城舉取二百七十五疋絹、向龜
- 6 □□ (茲。兩) 箇相逐、從弓月城向龜茲。阿兄更有
- 7 □ (馬) 疋、馳兩頭、牛四頭、驢一頭、百疋絹價華
- 8 □并椀、別有百疋絹價財物及漢鞍衣裳
- 9 調度。其李三兩箇相共從弓月城向龜茲、
- 10 不達到龜茲。其李三是漢、有氣力語行、
- 11 身是胡、不解漢語。身了知此間□ []
- 12 行恩澤於此間、請一箇 []
- (後 欠)

Interpretation of the document:

(Due to many missing parts, the document cannot be fully interpreted. The following interpretation only gives a rough draft of the meaning. Significant missing of words are indicated in brackets. The words among square brackets [] are added by the author of the present article, to complement the text and make it intelligible.)

¹⁶ 66TAM61:17(b), 23(b), 27/2, 27/1(b). Plates in Tuwen 3, p. 242-243; Transcriptions in Wenshu 6, p. 470-473. Huang, 1983, p. 344-361; Arakawa, 1997, p. 185-188.

Memo Submitted by Gaochang County to the Protectorate of Anxi.

Cao Lushan, at age 30

The said accuser claims, “To the Governor of Xizhou (characters missing) a man named Li, ethnic Han from the capital city living in the Town of Gongyue 弓月 (characters missing) borrowed 275 bolts of silk from [my brother], then he went to Kucha (Qiuci). (characters missing) [My brother and Li] went to Kucha from Gongyue. My brother brought with him (characters missing) horses, two camels, four oxen, one donkey and (character missing) and bowls worth one hundred bolts of silk. Furthermore, he had property worth one hundred bolts of silk, as well as Han-style saddles, clothes at his disposal. [My brother] and Li the Third (i.e. e. Li Shaojin in Document 2) left Gongyue together for Kucha but [my brother] did not arrive in Kucha. Li the Third is a Han. He is strong and speaks eloquently. [My brother]¹⁷ is a Hu and he doesn’t know the Chinese language. I know that during this period... (the remaining part illegible).

Document 2 (66TAM61:23(b),27/2,27/1(b))

(前 欠)

1 □□有所歸、請乞禁身、与謹對當□(者)。

祿山

2 問得款、李謹當時共兄同伴、向弓月〔 〕

曹

3 并共曹果毅及二并外生居者去〔 〕

城

4 其曹果毅及曹二留住弓月、其李三□□

5 兄邊取練訖分明付、兄与李三同□□□□(安)

6 西。李三見到、唯兄不來、既是□□□安

安西

7 西。兄不至、所以陳訴、更無□□□□、又問祿

8 山得款、別兄已來、經四年□□□(曹果)毅、曹二

□□□□多

9 胡輩處指的同舉練□□(李)三。身及外

10 生兒逐李三後去。其曹果毅、曹二是胡、

11 客京師、有家口在。身當來日、留住弓

12 月城在、身亦不在弓□□(月城)。當李三共

13 □□去時、弓□(月)〔 〕

(後 欠)

Interpretation of the document

(Like Document 1, this document is fragmented too. The following is a rough interpretation of the document. Significant missing of characters are marked with “some

¹⁷ Tuwen 3, p. 242 note 1 believes a character *xiong* (elder brother) was left out before the character *shen* (one’s self).

characters missing here” in brackets. Phrases followed by a question mark indicate conjectures. The words between square brackets [] are added by the author of this article, to complement the text and make it intelligible.)

(characters missing) may return, I plead with you to detain [Li the Third], [so that I] could confront him in court. [The following is] Cao Lushan’s complaint: “Li Jin went to the Town of Gongye with my brother. Along with them were Cao Guoyi 曹果毅, Cao Er 曹二 and his nephew. Cao Guoyi and Cao Er remained in the Town of Gongyue, while Li the Third (two characters missing here) borrowed silk (*lian* 練) from my brother, and then went to Anxi with him. (several characters missing here). Now Li the Third has arrived in Anxi but my brother alone has not arrived. Therefore I am lodging a complaint to the court. (Several characters missing), [The following is] Cao Lushan’s other statement: “Four years have passed since I left with my brother. Cao Guoyi, Cao Er and other Hu did lend silk to Li the Third. My nephew and I followed Li the Third there soon after. Cao Guoyi and Cao Er are Hu all lived in the capital city. Their families are there. (The remaining part is omitted)

The documents consist of ten fragments. We cannot examine the whole documents in this article. Instead, we will just make tentative analysis of the first two fragments.

The earliest possible date of the documents is the fourth moon of the first year of Xianheng’s (咸亨) era (AD 670) when the Anxi Protectorate was moved to Xizhou due to the capture of the four garrisons of Anxi by Tibetan troops. The latest possible date is the fourth year of Xianheng Reign (AD 673) when the occupant of the excavated tomb died.

The basic content of the documents concerns a lawsuit caused by a loan of silk between the Sogdian creditor Cao Lushan’s elder brother (Cao Yanyan 曹炎延) and the Han debtor Li Shaojin (Li the Third). The party who lodged the complaints in the Xizhou court was Cao Lushan. At the beginning of Document 1, Cao Lushan’s accusation (*ci* 辞) is quoted and corroborated by the first line of Document 2. The other parts of the fragmented documents are records of the case’s investigation and statements made by concerned persons (signature and oral testimonies). Document 2 is a record of Cao Lushan’s statement.

By analysing this documents, we learn that all the people involved in the law-suit were Sogdian and Chinese Han living in the capital Chang’an. They formed a group and went to Central Asia. The witnesses to the financial transaction were Cao Guoyi and Cao Er (Bi Suo 畢娑) from China’s capital city (see Document 2).

This is a case of a commercial venture carried out jointly by Chinese Han and Sogdian merchants (*xinghu* 興胡) living in the capital Chang’an. They formed a trade caravan, went to the Anxi town of Gongyue, and further westward, and carried on commercial activities over a wide area.

So far, we have not found any evidence of such commercial joint ventures in regions other than Central Asia, but we can assume that such ventures existed even in the Chinese heartland, where many Han and non-Han merchants carried out a flourishing trade through the use of a large number of “dian”.

In the latter half of the eighth century, while an increasing number of Persian and Arab merchants made inroads mainly into southern part of China, Sogdiana came under the control of Islam. However, as one can read in *Akhbār al-Šīn wa al-Hind*, there were

still Sogdian merchants traveling overland to China's heartland from Sogdiana in ninth century.¹⁸ Also, just as Moribe Yutaka and Étienne de la Vaissière have already pointed out.¹⁹ we have to bear in mind that the Sogdians coming from Mongolia like such as the Turkic Sogdian, were entering in China heartland. And in the middle of ninth century, Uyghur began to move southward and westward.

Under these circumstances, after tenth century, the Uyghur merchants who arose after the Sogdian merchants, built their trading networks in northern China, Mongolia and Central Asia, as their predecessors had done. The "Uyghur" merchants in this article while referring to merchants from the (Uyghur) state of Huihu, in fact, included many Sogdian and Han people.²⁰ Chinese Han merchants must still have preserved a close relationship of mutual assistance with Sogdian, conducive to the exchange of information, accommodation of funds and merchandize, and business cooperation in northern China, Mongolia and Central Asia.

Sogdian and Uyghur texts of the tenth century attest a word *tym* meaning "inn, hotel" which is known to have been borrowed from Chinese dian 店.²¹ It indicates that "dian", which were set up throughout Central Asia and China's heartland during the Tang dynasty, played an important role not only in the commercial activities of Han people, but also in the activities of Sogdians over a long period of time. The trade network of the "Uyghur" merchants in northern China, Mongolia and Central Asia, was more or less based on the Sogdian-Han's model that existed during the Tang dynasty.

¹⁸ Fujimoto, 1976, p. 56.

¹⁹ de la Vaissière, 2002, pp. 196-221; Moribe, 2004.

²⁰ Moriyasu, 1997B, p. 28-35, 111-116.

²¹ Sims-Williams and Hamilton, 1990, p. 30; Yoshida, 1994, p. 379.

Abbreviations

- Wenshu 文書 . . . *Tulufan Chutu Wenshu* 吐魯番出土文書 1-10, Wenwu-chubanshe 文物出版社, Beijing, 1981-1991.
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The establishment of the Tang Empire brought the commercial activities of Sogdian merchants to a new height, because that their commercial activities was reinforced by the communication system running all over the Tang Empire's territory and the "dian" shops set along the main post roads. The communicational condition mentioned above enabled Sogdians to complete long-distance journeys, allowing speed and safe communication and transportation. And Chinese Han merchants in the Tang Empire, along with Sogdian merchants, expanded their commercial activities on a wide scale, encompassing Central Asia.