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Background and the beginning of trade relations on the Silk Road

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Abstract. The relevance to research the beginning of trade relations on the ancient Silk Road was determined by the growing interest in the “revival” of the Silk Road. China is striving to develop the concept of “One Belt, One Road”, namely the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, which aims is a new transport system, that will improve trade relations between the countries and accelerate the supply of goods through Central Asia along the historical trade routes. This initiative is supported by many CIS states and countries whose history is directly related to the history of the Silk Road. The study of the prerequisites for the formation and initial stage of trade relations along the “Route” will allow us to assess the experience and potential of the regions related to this issue for building new effective models of cooperation.

Keywords: Silk Road, China, Central Asia, history, trade relations

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Предпосылки и начало развития торговых отношений на пространстве Шелкового Пути

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Аннотация. Актуальность темы исследования обусловлена возрастающим интересом к «возрождению» Шелкового пути. Китай стремится развивать концепцию «Один пояс — один путь», а именно «Экономический пояс Шелкового пути», целью которой

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является разработка новой транспортной системы, позволяющей улучшить торговые отношения между странами и ускорить поставки товаров через Среднюю Азию. Данную инициативу поддерживают многие государства СНГ и страны, история которых непосредственно связана с историей Шелкового пути. Изучение предпосылок формирования и начального этапа становления торговых отношений вдоль «Пути» позволит оценить опыт и потенциал связанных с этим вопросом регионов для построения новых эффективных моделей сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Средняя Азия, история, торговые отношения

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The Silk Road had a tremendous impact on all spheres of life of the states in the ancient world. The results of cultural and economic exchange can still be seen today. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Silk Road Alliance University are the largest interregional associations created in response to fundamental geopolitical changes and are a kind of continuation of contacts and cooperation between countries along the Silk Road.

The history of the Great Silk Road and its importance for the economic development of countries have been studied in general. The historiography of the issue allows us to differentiate the study of the prerequisites and the initial stage of formation and development of trade relations, as well as to specify some problems related to the nature and direction of these relations. The main information about the beginning of the formation of the Silk Road is contained in such sources as “The Records” by Sima Qian and “Book of Han” by Ban Gu [1, 2, 3]. The works of foreign and Russian authors form the theoretical basis of the study. J. Keay and N. T. Rakhimov in their books described in detail the Chinese side of the development and origin of interstate relations in the space of the Road [4; 5]. The relations among the Chinese and the peoples of the Western Territory were touched upon by R. Fletcher and E. Hetherington [6]. Archaeological studies show the oldest evidence of the origin of trade relations, here it is necessary to single out such authors as V. Hansen [7], Mamleeva L.A. [8], D. Christian [9], F. Khudoyorov and F. Yuldoshov [10]. Chinese researchers described ancient trade routes in more detail, paying special attention to the spread of silk [11, 12, 13]. The novelty of this article is due not only to the attraction of new material, including in Chinese, but as well as to the systematisation of available data, highlighting the prerequisites and individual stages of the origin of trade on the Silk Road.

First of all, it is worth noting that the “Silk Road” is not one major thoroughfare that existed in a certain period of time, but a large-scale network of caravan and sea trade routes, which were booming, then periodically declined due to various factors, such as wars, natural disasters, numerous raids on trade caravans, etc. “Road” was not an isolated historical and cultural element, it became the foundation of economic and cultural relations of the time [14. P. 28]. This term covers not only a large geographical territory with centres in Bukhara, Samarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, near the present Chinese provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang, but also a long history of development of culture and religion of ancient peoples (Sogdians, Tanguts) [15. P. 10]. The term “Silk Road” was introduced in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to designate one of the routes “Rome-China”. Currently, this definition is used to describe all directions of the “Road” [10. P. 188].

Ancient trade routes

Archaeological findings can provide information about the origins of the trade routes. The mobile pastoralist lifestyle of the peoples of the Central Asian region created favourable conditions for contacts among peoples and the spread of goods. The earliest evidence of horse riding was found in Northern Kazakhstan and southern Russia and dates back to the 4th millennium B.C., it was then when horses became used as “means of transport”. Peoples from early times exchanged such products as cattle, animal skin, meat, wool, etc. [9. P. 5–6]. Since the III millennium BC the routes of Badakhshan lazurite are known (Pamir, Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, the Middle East) [8. P. 53]. The stone came to China through the Pribaikal and Mongolian regions. At about the same time the “Jade” route was developing. Although jade according to archaeological excavations was known in China as early as in the Neolithic, the first references to routes from the Western 西域 region (the present territory of Xinjiang) date back to 1200 BC. Jade was an unusually important stone for the Chinese upper class, as it was used to make funeral urns, to decorate burials, it was used in various ceremonies [10. P. 187]. According to Chinese historians, the “Jade Road” 玉石之路, which passed from the West to the East 西玉东输, served as a basis for the formation of the Silk Road [16]. There was also a “Bronze” trade route 青铜之路 connecting East Asia with Europe. It, respectively, was intended for the transport of bronze from the western regions to the east, was actively used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (2070 BC — 256 AD) [17. P. 75]. From about 1800 BC “metallurgical provinces” appeared in the regions of Central Asia (most of Kazakhstan) and Mongolia. The very technology of bronze production also appeared in northern China, there are evidences that it developed independently from other countries [9. P. 12].

These mentioned routes are conventionally called the “Proto-Silk Road” and belong to the first stage of the birth and early development of trade relations. Over time, the nomads began to transport such goods as copper, tin, turquoise (Iran), gold from Mongolia, lapis lazuli, rubies from Afghanistan, Siberian furs, Indian cotton and Arabian frankincense [9. P. 14]. In the middle of the I millennium BC the “Steppe Way” was born, furs and skins, Iranian carpets, precious metal products were distributed through it [18. P. 24]. Central Asian traders used this route to send goods to Persia, and from there to European countries [19. P. 10]. This route is believed to be the longest. The land route of the “Road” started in the city of Chang’an (modern Xi’an) — in the province of Shaanxi. Then it went to Gansu through Dunhuang, through the passes Yuimen and Yangguan, ending up in the present-day Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. There were two most famous routes in the Takla-Makan Desert — the northern and southern routes, near the Pamirs. Passing through Central Asia, the roads reached the Mediterranean Sea. The northern routes went through the Yuimen Pass, then through Khami, Jimsara region (uyezd), (formerly known as the Principality of Yuilishi), passing through the Aral and Caspian Seas, reaching Constantinople. The Middle and Southern routes appeared during the Han dynasty, when there was a need to avoid oppression from the Hunnu nomads. It was much more convenient for trade caravans to cross the Pamirs and through it to go west [20. P. 2].

Thus, Chinese historiography distinguishes two main routes — the “northern” route 北方陆上丝路 and the “southern” 南方陆上丝路. The northern (forest-steppe and desert routes, 春秋—战国 and 汉唐 periods respectively) was the longest, over 7,000 kilometres, and was divided into three sections (eastern, middle and western), each of them also had its branches. The southern (mountain) route from Sichuan to India began to form from the 4th century BC and also consisted of branches [12].

The origin of material flows was closely connected with the geographical specific features and resource specificity of countries and peoples along the Silk Road. The more peoples were involved in the international exchange, the more actively cultural and economic relations developed. Further, the great inventions of the peoples, art objects, acquaintance with the main philosophical and religious works spread across the Silk Road.

Prerequisites and stages of development

The emergence and development of trade and exchange processes in the area of the future Silk Road took place in two main directions — from the West and from the East. The prerequisites for the development of the Silk Road from the western (European) side include the campaigns of Alexander the Great, but according to A.M. Petrov, there were attempts to start advancing

to Asia even earlier. In 401 BC thirteen thousand Greeks went to conquer the throne of the Persian king, but failed. Xenophon (430–354 BC) — a Greek historian — participated in this military expedition — he left a description of the campaign, where he expressed his impressions of Persia [21. P. 10]. Isocrates (app. 436 -338 BC) also actively put forward ideas about advancement to the eastern lands, explaining it by the fact that Greece did not have enough arable land. Addressing Philip II, he spoke of the great threat of Persia. These ideas reached his son, Alexander the Great, and in 334 BC he announced his intention to conquer the whole East [Ibid. P. 11]. Western countries did not seem interesting to him, because there, unlike Persia, there were no great cities and developed culture. The geographical knowledge of people of that time about the eastern lands was very limited: Central Asia, North-Western and Western India were known, the extreme point in the east of Asia was considered to be Mount Parnassus. Farther, as Aristotle supposed, the land ended and the boundless ocean began [22. P. 25]. Probably, this fact, as well as the fact that the army of Macedonian was exhausted, led to the cessation of campaigns. In general, it should be noted that these campaigns opened the East to the West. In the course of numerous conquests, Alexander the Great managed to expand the borders of his possessions significantly, and he was helped to control such vast territories by local officials. There were new for that time entrepots and fortifications north to Fergana. They were protection for the local population against the steppe tribes. At the same time, Chinese civilization faced a similar problem of raids.

The Sogdians were among the first to establish ties with ancient China. Although they were influenced by the Kushans, Turks, etc., they had their own developed culture. It was the Sogdian language that was used at that time in conducting trade in the east near China. With the help of these merchants, such new religions as Buddhism from India, Persian Manichaeism [19. P. 10] got to the Celestial Empire. Archaeological research proves that their trade relations with the Chinese began in the 2nd century B.C. Because of the grandiose conquests of Alexander the Great, many Sogdians left their former habitats and formed settlements near the borders of China.

The very emergence of the Chinese Road is usually associated with the name of Emperor Wu-di. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), the Chinese were frequently attacked by nomadic tribes, among them the Hunnu, or Xiongnu, who, despite their raids, were also important suppliers of livestock, especially horses — the basis of the army and the key to mobility. The Chinese themselves considered this tribe as a barbaric and described it as “prone to eating raw meat and blood” and, in order to secure their borders, considered it more profitable to “pay them off” (rice, wine, cloth and silk) than to wage war with them [1]. In the middle of the II century BC, the Chinese ruler received news about nomadic tribes at war with the

Hunnu. They were called “Yuezhi” (Kushans), and “originally lived between Qilian, Tianshan Mountains and Dunhuang”. In 138 BC it was decided to send a detachment of 100 men led by official Zhang Qian (张骞) to the north-west to form a military coalition against the Xiongnu [2; 3]. The diplomat’s goal was to make contacts with the Yuezhi chiefs who were in frequent military conflicts. He had to find the tribe, persuade them to return to the east to fight together against the Hunnu. During the journey Zhang Qian was captured by the Hunnu, where he remained for a decade, and then he escaped, travelled through Xinjiang and reached the Yuezhi settlements. But, it turned out that other nomadic tribes had displaced potential allies and Zhang Qian decided to go further west. Eventually, he reached Fergana, located on the outskirts of Parthiana (north of modern Afghanistan). Here the diplomat collected detailed evidence of trade, resources, culture learnt about the existence of India (Shendu) and Arshakid Parthia (Ansi) [18. P. 15]. Already in Bactria, where lived Yuezhi, he offered to conclude an alliance, which was refused. Further, he was captured by Hunnu again. Yet in 126 BC he managed to escape and return to Chang’an, where he was promoted [2]. The report that Zhang Qian provided to the emperor described places previously unknown to China. As an example, the lands of Parthia, Mesopotamia, and the Aral Sea. The report made Wudi think about the need to establish trade relations with Western countries, but this was complicated by the raids of nomadic tribes. Zhang Qian believed that western states highly valued Chinese goods and could become subjects of the emperor. The Ferghana kingdom could unite with the Han in confronting the Xiongnu, while Bactria, Parthia and Shendu (India) were more focused on trade and agreed to pay tribute. Therefore, one of the next tasks of Zhang Qian (122 BC) was to reconnoiter the route from Sichuan to India 蜀-身毒道 [12. P. 186]. However, at that moment the development of trade was not a priority for China. The emperor aimed to stabilise the situation on the borders, so the movement of Chinese commodities to these regions was of political and diplomatic importance. In 121 BC, General Ho Qu-bin expelled the “barbarians” from Gansu province. On the recaptured territories — from Jincheng to Dunhuang — military settlements and a line of defences were built. Thanks to military campaigns by 115–114 BC relations with Central Asian countries were established [4. P. 197]. During the next journey Zhang Qian in 106 BC took with him a lot of silk, gold, but it was no longer a diplomatic visit, but rather a trade mission, its purpose was to exchange silk for horses. From this moment it is considered that China begins trade on the Silk Road [23. P. 3].

Zhang Qian’s mission in Chinese historiography got the name 张骞凿空, which means “Zhang Qian paved the way” (to the West). China used more than just military might to excel in the international arena. Populating the intermediate zones with its allies, mostly nomads, the dynasty established its

settlements under the administration of “duhufu” 都护府, military viceroys, in order to maintain a more or less stable situation on the border [5. P. 23]. It is necessary to mention the concept of “border” for the Celestial Empire. As E.N. Grachikov writes in his book “Geopolitics of China”, for the Chinese in ancient times there was no concept of the border as defined and accurately marked on maps. It rather referred to the concept of space between the territory of their own state and the intermediate zone between everything else and reflected the desire to subjugate tribes [24. P. 109]. In 108 BC Western Han managed to conquer the lands of Turfan and Cherchen (at that time they were strategically important points of trade routes), and in 101 BC. — Fergana. In 59 BC the dynasty actually established a protectorate and controlled these lands for many years [6. P. 308]. Thus, China began to control a significant part of the Great Silk Road. About this time we can speak about a more or less complete route of the Chinese Silk Road. It passed through Xinjiang (three routs), took Central Asian countries, then passed to Afghanistan, to Kashmir and got to the northern part of India, or to the Mediterranean Sea. Then the goods were moved to Iran (Persia) [9. P. 72].

The main commodity that China exported to the West was silk, and the Celestial Empire was associated with it. This material had such value that it was put alongside gold and even used as an international currency. “Land of silk” — this was the name by which China was known in the Roman Empire. Chinese researchers distinguish two main stages in the emergence of silk in the West. The first originates from the 春秋 (770–476 BC) and 战国 (475–221 BC) periods, the second dates back to the Western Han (206 BC. — 24 AD). Silk first appeared among nomadic peoples on the outskirts of China in the form of gifts and rewards. Then the exchange trade of silk and horses began. In Xinjiang and Dunhuang there are records of the Western Jin period (265–316) about the existence of a developed “Sogdian trading artel 粟特商团”, which traded not only in Xinjiang, but also in Chang’an, Luoyang, using silver coins, wool and jute products [11; 13].

There is a legend about the silk banners of the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, which impressed and frightened the Roman soldiers [25]. According to another legend, Caesar once appeared in a Roman theatre wearing a silk garment, which attracted so much attention that the prices for this commodity increased immediately. In Rome they said: “The inhabitants of the silk country produce exquisite silks, thin as a spider’s web with floral patterns in numerous colours” [20. P. 10]. During the reign of Han, it was used as payment for the army, as in some remote lands of China money was not introduced [22. P. 33]. In addition to silk, Chinese merchants exported iron, nickel, lacquer ware, precious stones. The Celestial Empire imported gold, slaves, glass, spices, cosmetics. The Silk Road brought to China such vegetable crops as pomegranate and walnut trees, alfalfa, beans, saffron. But it is worth noting that on the early routes, trade between China

and the rest of the world developed extremely slowly. This was due to geographical factor, hard accessibility and low road pass ability due to mountains (Himalayas, Tien Shan and Pamir) and deserts (Takla-Makan). Equally, the Chinese perception of other peoples as “barbaric” complicated the process of rapprochement and development of contacts.

Conclusion

Based on the studying of the early history of the Silk Road, the following stages can be distinguished. The earliest so-called “proto-Silk” routes include the “Jade” and “Lapis Lazuli” routes, the origin of which dates back to the V-IV millennia BC. Later the “Bronze” and “Steppe” routes were formed. They represented scattered segments, on the basis of which the trade routes of the Great Silk Road were subsequently developed. After Zhang Qian’s journey to the Western Region 西域, the Silk Road, which connected Europe and Asia, began to take shape. The prerequisites for the formation and beginning of the Silk Road include the campaigns of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC and the journeys of Zhang Qian during the Han Dynasty in the 2nd century BC.

The importance of the functioning of the routes is emphasised by trade processes along these sections and cultural exchange. Thanks to the Silk Road, Asian and European states began to come into contact, and the economy received a new impetus for development. For many centuries, the Silk Road contributed to the rapprochement of peoples, the cultural exchanges, the spread of religion, and the mutual enrichment of languages. Despite many military clashes, economic or political difficulties, the “Road” continued to exist. The need to develop trade was understood by many states, which contributed to the improvement of the quality of roads. Economic growth, cultural enrichment, transition from the Ancient Age to the Middle Ages — all this happened thanks to the functioning of this large-scale branch of roads that connected more than one state.

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