



Ancient Roots of Translation Studies in Uzbekistan: Inquiring into the Contribution of Sogdians to Translation and Cultural Transmission along the Silk Road

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical foundations of translation studies in Uzbekistan, focusing on the pivotal contributions of the Sogdians and, notably, Sogdian women in fostering linguistic and cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Positioned at the crossroads of the Silk Road, Sogdian merchants and diplomats played crucial roles as mediators between East and West, facilitating the translation of languages as well as religious, scientific, and philosophical concepts. Sogdian women, in particular, had a significant yet often overlooked impact on these processes. Through intercultural marriages and involvement in religious and monastic communities, they aided in translating and adapting texts, especially Buddhist scriptures, thereby promoting the spread of religious and cultural practices across regions. Additionally, the Sogdians expressed creative forms and traditions through their crafts, further enriching cultural exchange. This article delves into the Sogdians' influential role in shaping Central Asia's intellectual, religious, and cultural landscape. Their contributions to translation underscore the significance of intercultural communication in the evolution of early translation practice, offering fresh insights into the role of translation in cultural diplomacy along the Silk Road.

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 28th August 2024

Accepted: 26th September 2024

KEY WORDS:

Translation Studies;
Uzbekistan; Sogdians;
Sogdian Women; the Silk
Road

1. Introduction

Translation in Uzbekistan has a long history dating back to ancient times, when the region was an important hub on the legendary Silk Road. This network of trade routes not only made possible the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, and precious stones, but also served as a significant channel for the spread of ideas, cultures, and languages between East and West. When traders and travelers got through Central Asia, they brought with them not only goods, but also religious concepts, art and knowledge from their homelands, turning the entire region into a crossroads of many civilizations. The history of translation methods in present Uzbekistan during the period of the Great Silk Road is extensive and multifaceted. The region originally known as Transoxiana (or "Ma Varaun-Nahr," meaning "Land beyond the river"), specifically the area around Samarkand and Bukhara, was a key hub for trade, cultural exchange, and intellectual activity. The translation practices of the region were inextricably linked to its strategic position, religious growth, and the interaction of various languages and cultures. Scholars and translators of medieval Uzbekistan significantly contributed to the translation of works from Greece, Persia, India, and China into Central Asian languages, particularly Sogdian and Arabic, which served as a lingua franca of the Islamic world during the Middle Ages. The linguistic diversity of the Silk Road required multilingual skills, and

translators played a crucial role in facilitating communication among merchants, diplomats, and philosophers from around the world. The translation practices were informal but widespread, which made possible the exchange of technological discoveries, religious beliefs, and medical science between the East and the West. Sogdians, an ancient Iranian people who mainly lived in the territory of modern Uzbekistan, and surrounding areas, made a significant contribution to this active intercultural exchange. Surprisingly, Sogdian women played an important, albeit usually overlooked, role in this process. Sogdians worked on translations that went far beyond linguistic conversion; they contributed to the dissemination of cultural, theological, and artistic knowledge, making them significant agents of cultural transmission along the Silk Road.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the historical foundations of translation studies in Uzbekistan by focusing on the function of the Sogdians as translators and cultural mediators. It will also focus on the contributions of Sogdian women, investigating how they not only fostered communication between distinct linguistic groups but also promoted the spread of traditions, customs, and belief systems across areas.

To explore the role of Sogdians in cultural exchange and economic development on Silk Road, in-depth research method was applied. An extensive review of academic literature was carried out. Numerous books and articles related to the Great Silk Road and Sogdian's influence on ancient civilizations were collected. These studies reveal a description of different historical records, manuscripts and ancient documents, which were examined to obtain basic understandings into the activities along the Silk Road. The collected data was put through thematic analysis to distinguish recurring patterns and themes associated with cultural exchange and translation practices of Sogdians. This method facilitated the elicitation of significant insights from different sources. This article applied a diversified methodology that combined historical analysis and literature review.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Sogdia

2.1 The Silk Road and Sogdia's Strategic Location

The Silk Road was one of the most important trade routes in history, entitling trade between the East and the West for thousands of years and extended from China to the Mediterranean sea. Sogdia- an ancient Iranian culture that existed in Uzbekistan and was one of the places that played a key role in the functioning of the Silk Road. The strategic position of Sogdia made it an important hub for trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Cities, including Samarkand, Bukhara, and Panjikent, became bustling centers where various cultures, beliefs, and languages intersected. Sogdia was strategically situated in the heart of the Silk Road, making it an ideal hub for traders traveling between China, Persia, India, and the Mediterranean. As Rojanskaya (68) claims, in the spread of scientific knowledge, trade was of great importance. Sogdians began trade with India, China, Byzantium, Russia, and the countries of the Mediterranean basin, moving up the Volga. In the west, it was connected to the Persian and Byzantine empires, which were important markets for these goods. Sogdians imported from China carpets, perfumes, musk, rice wine, camphor, and other goods. At the same time, Sogdians borrowed sericulture and silk weaving in Sogdia, the technology of iron smelting in Fergana and paper making, also the cultivation of rice, peaches, apricots, cinnamon (Gafurov, 365).

Samarkand was one of the most famous cities on the Silk Road. Thanks to its strategic location, it has become a prosperous cosmopolitan metropolis, attracting merchants, scholars, and religious figures from various civilizations. The city's bazaar was filled with Chinese silk, Indian spices, Persian fabrics, and Roman glass. Samarkand also served as a cultural and intellectual center, where artistic traditions, religious views, and philosophical concepts were exchanged. Bukhara, another important city, was known for its academic and religious activities. In the following decades, Bukhara became famous for its scholars, mosques, and madrasas. However, due to its location on the Silk Road, Bukhara was already a forefront of Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Manichaeism, and Christian ideas even before the arrival of Islam. Panjikent, albeit less well-known than Samarkand and Bukhara, was a prominent urban hub in Sogdia. It was a rowdy town with a well-established trading network, rich traditions, and objects from archeological excavations that

demonstrated cultural interchange. Panjikent was also a center for craftsmen who made high-quality products for trade along the Silk Road.

2.2 The Role of Sogdians in Translation

The Sogdian language, which belongs to the group of Eastern Iranian languages, quickly became one of the main *lingua francas* of the Silk Road. Its growth was facilitated by the impact of Sogdian merchants, who carried the language over great distances. Inscriptions, letters, and documents found in such distant regions as China and India show that the Sogdian language became a means of communication for trade, officials, and religious individuals from various cultures. Sogdians were people who could today be called "influencers." Living for almost 2000 years, the Sogdian people were an influential community that, although relatively small in number and with limited political power, contributed to changing the world around them. Sogdian travelers, merchants, and translators influenced various forms of art, fashion, lifestyle, technology, and religious ideologies that transformed parts of the world far from their homeland (Lerner, 2023).

They were multilingual traders and middlemen who could speak Sogdian (an Eastern Iranian language), Persian, Chinese, Sanskrit, and a variety of Turkic languages. Their linguistic ability enabled them to serve as interpreters and cultural intermediaries between civilizations along the Silk Road. Sogdian merchants traveled widely along the Silk Road, especially to China, where they founded villages and promoted commerce. They translated both commercial and religious writings, helping to promote religions like as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity. Sogdian interpreters helped spread Buddhist teachings throughout Central Asia. They translated essential Buddhist works from Sanskrit or Chinese into Sogdian, facilitating the spread of Buddhist ideals to the region's Turkic and Iranian populations. These translations lay the groundwork for the later growth of Buddhism in China.

Manichaeism, a syncretic religion founded in Persia, moved eastward into China thanks to the efforts of Sogdian translators. Using their linguistic capabilities, Sogdians translated Manichaean writings from Syriac, Middle Persian and Parthian into Sogdian, and therefrom into Turkish and finally Chinese. By the end of the sixth century the Sogdian Manichaeans were powerful enough to announce their independence from the leader of the church in Baghdad, provoking a schism which was remained standing for over one hundred year (Lieu, 112). The translation of Manichaean writings from Middle Persian or Parthian into Sogdian and Chinese helped develop Manichean communities along the Silk Road, particularly in locations like Dunhuang.

2. The Role of Translation in Cultural Transmission on the Silk Road

3.1 Translation of Scientific, Religious and Medical texts

Zoroastrianism, the major religion of the Sogdians, expanded down the Silk Road, particularly westward to Persia and eastward to China. As Zoroastrian merchants went around Central Asia, they translated religious concepts and scriptures into other languages, including Sogdian, Pahlavi, and Turkic, allowing the religion to spread throughout a large geographical area. Similarly, Manichaeism, a syncretic religion originated in Persia, moved across the Silk Road to China, where it became followed by many Sogdians and translated into other languages, including Chinese. Nestorian Christianity, which originated in the early Christian church, was another religion that profited from the efforts of Sogdian translators. Sogdian Christians translated biblical texts and liturgical works from Syriac into their native tongue, so helping the spread of Christianity along the Silk Road to China. According to Sims-Williams (441), majority of the Christian writings discovered in the Tarim region were found by four German expeditions to the Turfan oasis from 1902-14. A generous amount of these are manuscripts dating to the ninth and tenth centuries from a Nestorian monkery at Buyaliq, north of the oasis. They contain hymns, Psalms, prayers, lectionaries from the New Testament, and commentaries. Albeit, the majority is translations from Syriac, some of the Sogdian translations are older than their known Syriac copies, and a few do not have known Syriac versions. Benveniste (89) also insists that among the Nestorian writings which have been detected in the Tarim Basin since the beginning of the twentieth century, a prevalence are in Sogdian or show proof of having been translated from Sogdian versions.

In addition to religious texts, the Silk Road facilitated the exchange of scientific, medical, and philosophical information between peoples. In accord with Rojanskaya (103), before the Arab conquest, it is possible that the science of astrology in Middle Asia was created under the strong influence of ancient Babylonian astronomical methods and Greek astronomy. According to the information given in the first Uzbek Soviet encyclopedia (477), about 100 astronomic tables were created in the 8th-9th centuries. About 20 of these were created in Movarounnahr or with the participation of Movarounnahr scientists and Sogdians.

3.2 The Nature of Sogdian Translation Practices

Sogdians were among the most bilingual people along the Silk Road, making them crucial as interpreters and cultural intermediates. Sogdian merchants and diplomats were multilingual, speaking Sogdian, Persian, Chinese, Sanskrit, Turkic languages, and, later, Arabic. Their language diversity allowed them to conquer cultural divides and promote communication among diverse communities. The Sogdian script, originating from Aramaic, was one of the most common writing systems used along the Silk Road. It was a versatile script that could be used to write a number of languages, including Persian, Turkic, and Mandarin. This variety made it the ideal scenario for diplomatic and commercial communication, allowing for easier translation between languages. The treasure of manuscripts discovered in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang includes works in Sogdian, Chinese, and Sanskrit. These manuscripts, which include religious texts, trade records, and personal letters, demonstrate the wide range of Sogdian involvement in translation and cultural exchange. One of the notable texts is the Sogdian translation of a Buddhist sutra, which demonstrates how religious concepts were adapted for a Central Asian audience. *Xuanzang*, a Chinese monk who traveled to India in the seventh century to collect Buddhist texts, largely relied on Sogdian translators. These interpreters assisted him in navigating the complicated linguistic landscapes of Central Asia and India, allowing him to acquire Sanskrit writings that were later translated into Chinese when he returned to China. Inscriptions discovered in Turfan and other Central Asian sites include Sogdian translations of Christian and Manichaean texts. These inscriptions, written in the Sogdian script, frequently include both religious and commercial material, illustrating Sogdian translators' dual roles as spiritual and economic middlemen. Although Syriac was the sacred language of the Nestorian church, the language in which Nestorian Christianity was common across Asia was primarily Sogdian, like it was for Buddhism and Manichaeism also (Benveniste, 85).

Sogdian translators did not always translate works word by word; instead, they frequently altered the content to make it easier to understand or meaningful to their readers. The method of cultural adaptation was especially crucial in religious translation, where novel notions had to be communicated in a way that relevant to the target audience. For example, when Buddhist sutras were translated from Sanskrit to Sogdian, the translators frequently replaced Indian cultural elements with more familiar Central Asian ones. Similarly, Manichaean writings were altered to match the dualistic Zoroastrian worldview that the Sogdian audience already knew, making the religion more understandable and enticing, according to Shen (11), the characters *Weng* 翁 and *Mingtian* 明天 are the same word in another writing way, developed by Zoroastrians to show their worship of the god of light. Translation played a wide-ranging and diverse function on the Silk Road, acting as an important medium for cultural transmission, religious spread, and diplomatic involvement. Sogdian translators, in particular, played an important role in fostering communication among the various cultures that traded along this ancient trade route.

Sogdian Women's Role in Translation, Cultural Transmission, and Trade Negotiations

4.1 Marriage as a Tool for Cultural and Commercial Exchange

Sogdian women frequently married men of many cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including Turkic, Chinese, and Persian aristocrats. These marriages facilitated both diplomatic ties and business relationships, with women serving as cultural translators, negotiators, and middlemen. Throughout the sixth and seventh century CE, Sogdians established a strong political and economic relationship with the Turkic Khaganate. Marriage relationships between Sogdian women and Turkic monarchs played an important role in

strengthening these ties. These unions were more than just symbolic; they served real functions in aiding trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. As Zhang notes (350), each culture is specific, real, and unique, and is created by each ethnic group adjusting to a certain natural environment and living under a certain social structure. When members of different cultures interact with each other, they have to consciously or unconsciously learn from each other and selectively assimilate according to their needs. With various cultures cooperating, both selecting and refusing appeared. Sogdian women frequently worked as cultural and language mediators in these marriages. Women were fluent in Sogdian, Turkic, and occasionally other Central Asian languages, and women assisted their Turkic husbands in navigating the complexity of Sogdian trade networks and governing structures. Their bilingual or multilingual skills proved invaluable in diplomatic relations and trade discussions with other Silk Road merchants. Sogdian women used marriage to develop commercial lines across Central Asia and the Turkic Khaganate.

4.2 Sogdian-Chinese Marriages of the Tang Dynasty

The merger of Sogdians with Han-Chinese society predates the Tang Dynasty, but the culmination of this process and this completion took place both in the Tang Dynasty and ended in the Tang Dynasty (Liu, 2). Sogdian merchants played a significant role in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), and interethnic marriages between Sogdians and the Chinese elite were common. As Kobzeva notes (127), especially large colonies of Sogdians were in such Chinese cities like Chang'an, Lanzhou, Dunhuang. Only in Dunhuang at the beginning of the 4th century there were about 1000 people from Sogdian communities. Turpan, Dunhuang writings, and some archaeological findings proved that Sogdian commune existed near the Tarim Basin, Heshuo area, Chang'an and Luoyang. These settlements had an important bond with their trading activities (Li et al., 250). Subsequently, Sogdian colonies were created along the entire eastern section and existed until the 9th-10th centuries. According to research of 21 marriages of Sogdians whose spouses are known, around the years 580 and 650 in the heartland of China, reveals that in 19 cases the marriages had occurred within the Hu communities. The two exclusions connected to a particularly mixed Sogdian, whose father was already an official under the Zhou (577–581), and a Sogdian widower whose first husband was Sogdian and whose second was Chinese (Rong, 132). These marriages served as bridges between Sogdian and Chinese societies, facilitating cultural and financial contacts Sogdian women, who were often proficient in both Sogdian and Chinese, played a crucial role in mediating trade talks and diplomatic discussions between their merchant families and the Chinese court or local Chinese officials. They facilitated communication and managed the gaps between Chinese official processes and Sogdian mercantile customs, which were critical for maintaining trade flows throughout the Silk Road. In addition to trading, Sogdian women helped to spread their religious and cultural traditions throughout Chinese culture. One notable example is the discovery of tombs in Xi'an containing Zoroastrian emblems, and it could demonstrate that Sogdian aristocratic ladies might have retained their religious and cultural identity even after marrying. This illustrates their contribution to cultural transmission and the merging of Sogdian and Chinese behaviors.

Conclusion

Historical Roots of translation studies in Uzbekistan, as represented by the role of Sogdians on the Silk Road show a history of compound and dynamic cultural exchange. Sogdian women also played a significant role in this process, serving as a bridge between many cultures due to their intercultural marriages. Contributions of Sogdians to the transmission of knowledge across various cultures played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Central Asia and the Silk Road. By emphasizing the often underrated role of Sogdian women, this article also reveals deeper insights of how translation functioned as a tool for cultural exchange and innovation. Their work not only fortified the civilizations they visited but also laid the groundwork for centuries of cultural interactions and translation in the region. Their heritage continues to make sense in the field of translation studies, offering lessons in how translation can bridge different cultures across time and space.

Sogdians played an important role in the Silk Road trade and their contributions to the exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge cannot be exaggerated. Despite their significance their legacy has been

forgotten in present days. However, archaeological discoveries and academic research have brought Sogdians again back into the spotlight. By remembering Sogdians we can gain an extensive understanding of the history of the Silk Road and the relationship between ancient civilizations. Sogdians developed their own language and script which was used as a medium to record commercial transactions as well as religious and scientific texts. Their script which was a predecessor to the Mongolian script, was also an important link in the evolution of Central Asian writing systems. By remembering Sogdians we can get deeper insights of the linguistic diversity of the ancient world. Reverence of their contribution is essential for understanding the history of the Silk Road and the development of ancient civilizations.

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