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New Light on Sogdian Colonies along the Silk Road Recent Archaeological Finds in Northern China*

(Lecture at the BBAW on 20th September 2001)

First of all, I will present the contributions that new archaeological finds in China have made to the study of the Silk Road. In particular, I will focus on sources regarding the Sogdians, who were very active on the Silk Road during the medieval period. These sources include Chinese documents from Turfan, new manuscripts and materials uncovered in the Northern Grottoes of the Dunhuang Caves, as well as artifacts and Chinese inscriptions from the tombs of northern China. I will show images of two tombs of Central Asian and Sogdian design that were found in Shanxi and Shaanxi during the last two years. I will also analyze various texts in order to present domestic lives and social activities of Sogdians in their colonies along the Silk Road.

Furthermore, I hope that this case study can enhance our appreciation of the openness of medieval Chinese society. We will see that it accepted foreign religions and ideas, along with foreign textiles, gold, silver, camels, practices such as hunting with cheetahs, and foreign music and dance.

Now let me move to my topic:

First, I will address the contribution to Silk Road studies of new archaeological finds in China, with a particular focus on sources about the Sogdians.

The Central Asian Iranian people known as the Sogdians are referred to in Chinese traditional histories by different names: *Zhaowu-jiuxing*, *jiuxing-hu*, *Zazhong-hu* and *Sute-hu*. Their original home, Sogdiana, was in the Zarafshan river valley between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya twin river system, an area roughly equivalent to present-day Uzbekistan. The Sogdians were long subject to control by powerful sur-

* It is my honor to accept the kind invitation of Prof. Peter Zieme to deliver a speech at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities on September 20, 2001, which upholds the high standards of the European academic tradition, and which has contributed much to Asian studies, particularly during this Asia-Pacific Week in Berlin. For correcting my English I express my thanks to Dr. D. Durkin-Meisterernst.

rounding ethnic groups in turn the Achaemenid Persians, the Greeks under Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, the Tocharian tribes (Yuezhi), the Kushans and the Hephthalites. The Sogdians survived as a nation despite being ruled at different times by all these ethnic groups, and they developed resilient adaptability, becoming an ethnic group with unique mercantile talents in the process. Throughout this period (roughly 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.), under conditions of comparatively weak rule, city states of varying sizes gradually took shape in the large or small oases in the areas inhabited by the Sogdians. The largest of these was Samarkand, which lay at the centre of their territory and formed the state known in Chinese as the Kang Kingdom; other city-states were known in Chinese as the An Kingdom (Bukhara), the Eastern Cao Kingdom (Sutrushana or Ushrusana), the Cao Kingdom (Kaputana), the Western Cao Kingdom (Ishitikhan), the Mi Kingdom (Maymurgah), the He Kingdom (Kushanika), the Shi Kingdom (Kashana), and the Shi Kingdom (Tashkent). At different times these states entered into alliances, and so became known in Chinese historical accounts as the Zhaowu-jiuxing, “the Nine Surnames from Zhaowu”.

As a result of war, commercial interests, and for other reasons, Sogdians in large numbers often travelled along the Silk Road to settle in China, from the Han to the Tang dynasties. There was a large number of widely scattered settlements in the Tarim basin, the Mongolian steppe and in northern China. Their commercial expertise, fighting skills, devotion to Zoroastrianism, and dancing and musical talents were to make a deep impression on China’s political process, religious complexion, and musical diversity.

Even as early as 1916, based on a Tang geographical text found at Dunhuang, Paul Pelliot argued that there was a Sogdian colony to the south of Lob Nor. Pelliot also thought that this colony played a role in the spread of Buddhism and Nestorianism into China. In 1926, the Japanese scholar Kuwabara investigated the traces of Sogdians in the traditional Chinese sources, and did a preliminary study on this subject. In 1933, the Chinese scholar Xiang Da published his famous study titled “Tang Chang’an and Central Asian Culture”, and gave a detailed account of the Sogdians in Chang’an, the capital of the Tang, and their influence on Tang art and religion. In 1952, E. G. Pulleyblank wrote an article on the Sogdian colony in the Six-Hu prefectures of the Tang. That Sogdian colony consisted of Sogdians who came from the Mongolian steppe along with the Turks. And in 1965, the Japanese scholar Ikeda On used Dunhuang manuscripts to analyze the Sogdian colony in Dunhuang, in his article entitled “The Sogdian Colony in Dunhuang in the mid-Eighth century”. This colony is located about 500 miles east of Dunhuang city. It was formed in the beginning of the seventh century. In the middle of the eighth century, the population was apparently about 1,400, in 300 households. According to a list of names, most of the adult males in the area had personal names indicating Sogdian origin. At the colony, a temple for Sogdians to pray to the Zoroastrian god was erected, but Buddhism was also gradually spreading in the region. At the beginning, the settlers were mostly merchants, but gradually some of them turned to farming. As they developed

marriage relationships with the local Chinese people, they became Sinicized. When the political situation changed in Central Asia, due to the An Lushan rebellion in China and the invasion of Dunhuang by the Tibetans, the colony gradually disintegrated. Some of settlers became the slaves of Buddhist monasteries. By the end of the eighth century, only the Zoroastrian temple remained, but the colony had disappeared. Due to the great number of Chinese and Sogdian documents in the library cave, we have a better understanding of the Sogdians in Dunhuang than the Sogdians of other regions.

1 Turfan documents

Due to the dry climate, plenty of manuscripts and all kinds of artifacts from the Turfan Depression have survived. In the early twentieth century, the German Turfan Expeditions and the Otani expeditions of Japan obtained a lot of documents. However, Grünwedel and von Le Coq did not uncover the tombs, and thus most of their collections consist of religious texts. The Otani team, on the other hand, dug up the tombs without any archaeological training, and their collection mostly consists of fragments that are very difficult to date.

After 1959, archaeologists in Xinjiang, China, gradually uncovered Turfan tombs from the fourth to eighth centuries. They obtained a number of texts written in Chinese and one contract in Sogdian. These texts covered the entire period from the Gaochang Kingdom (the beginning of the 6th century) to the middle of the eighth century (the middle of the Tang dynasty). For the time being, these Chinese documents and dated tomb inscriptions provide sources with which to study the local Sogdian immigrants, though they are only fragments.

According to Turfan documents, we can distinguish two groups of Sogdians who moved into the Gaochang region. One group consists of Sogdians who were recorded in the household registers by local authorities; and the other is unregistered Sogdian merchants. Similar to the Sogdian situation in Dunhuang, the Turfan Sogdians lived in a particular region that previously had been a Sogdian colony.

Among the Turfan documents, there is a list of Sogdian names. Although it is a fragment, the list records 47 Sogdian individuals. Most of them were from the Cao kingdom in Sogdiana and their names were transliterations from the Sogdian language. Some of these names had been reconverted into Sogdian by the Japanese scholar Yoshida Yutaka. There is another economic document about the foreign trade taxes imposed by the Gaochang court. In more than 30 cases the exchange partners were mostly Sogdians: the sellers were from the West, and the buyers were local people, but both sides were Sogdians. The goods for trade are gold, silver, copper, calamine brass, sal ammoniac, silk, perfume, tulips, sugar, and medicinal drugs. Besides the silk from China proper, most of these items were imported from western regions such as Kucha, Sogdiana, Persia, and India. Notably, the volume

of trade is huge. For example, a Sogdian Kang Mozhi seems to have been a wholesaler, since he frequently purchased perfumes in amounts of more than 300 kilograms. At that time, the price of silk in China was much lower than in Rome, which means the merchants could earn large profits. The Sogdians were also slave traders. There is a contract in Sogdian, dated 639 C.E., for the sale of female slaves. This contract reminds us that many young Sogdian girls become serving maids in the restaurants of the capital Chang'an, and they were often mentioned in Tang poems. We know that the Sogdians brought Zoroastrianism to the Turfan region, according to a Chinese document which mentions the shrine temple, dedicated to the Zoroastrian god of heaven that is located in the east of Gaochang city. Another god named "Amo" could be a transliteration of the Sogdian Adbag, which means the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.

After the Sogdians settled down around Turfan, some of them gradually converted to Buddhism. The Otani expedition obtained a stone stele in Turfan, which says that a lay person with the surname Kang, from Samarkand, made copies of Buddhist sutras during Wu Zetian's reign (684–704 C.E.), and this record also indicates that the Sogdians supported Empress Wu's new regime.

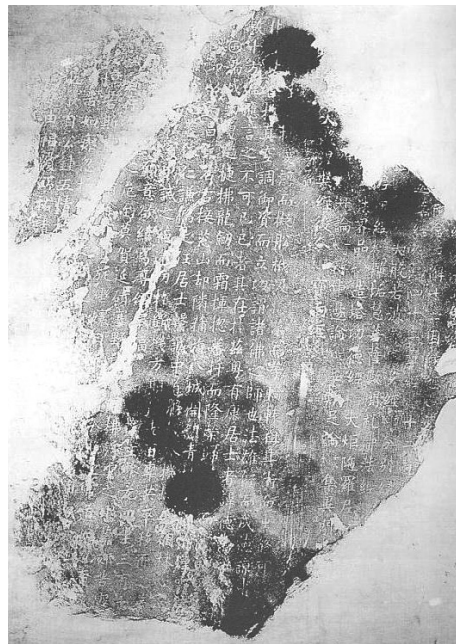


Plate 1

Chinese inscription on the coping of Buddhist texts
by the Sogdian Kang Jushi found at Gaochang City

Professor Yoshida has recently translated Sogdian Manichaean letters uncovered from the Bezklik caves near Turfan. This will deepen our understanding of the activities of Sogdian Manichaeans in the area.

2 The materials from the Northern Grottoes of Dunhuang

Like Turfan, Dunhuang is also an important town along the Silk Road. The famous Mogao caves are to be found here. More importantly, ten thousands of manuscripts and thousands of art objects were discovered in the library cave in Mogao in the early twentieth century. The study of this fruitful collection has highly improved the understanding of the Sogdian colony of Dunhuang.

Among the well-known Dunhuang documents and wall-paintings, there is still a lot of useful sources waiting for exploration. For example, recently I found an interesting Chan text about Sichuan Buddhism in the Tang period. In this text, the monks mention that their Indian ancient masters defeated two heterodox masters in Kashmir. And these two heterodox masters' names are called *mo-man-ni* and *mi-shi-he*, rather than the Brahmins in the traditional sources, *mo-man-ni* is Mani, and *mi-shi-he* is Messiah, Jesus Christ. This topic is directly connected with the spread of Manichaeism and Nestorianism to south-western China and their conflicts with Buddhism as well as with how these two religions appeared in Tibet.

But the most important new discovery is the result of the fieldwork on the Northern Grottoes in Magao conducted by the archaeologists from the Dunhuang Academy. Usually most travellers visit the Southern Grottoes in Magao to see the wall-paintings, and pay less attention to the mysterious northern part. The caves in northern area seem to be less interesting, covered as they are by huge sand dunes that make the less promising. Both Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot obtained some pieces of documents written in Uighur and Tangut in some caves of the northern area.

The fieldwork has excavated 248 caves in the northern part and uncovered a number of Chinese documents such as household registers, local government accounts, reports to the higher authority, lists of personal names, and some documents written in Uighur and Tangut as well as in Tibetan.

It is worth mentioning that, in cave B53, besides Chinese documents, Tangut Buddhist texts, and Uighur fragments dated from Yuan dynasty, there is a two-page (four-folio) complete Syriac manuscript (with Uighur scripts between some lines), which has been identified as containing parts of the Psalms of the Holy Bible. Professor Duan Qing in Peking University has identified and studied it. Her paper in German will be published in *Oriens Christianus* very soon. This discovery will greatly contribute to our understanding of Nestorianism in the Mongolian-Yuan period. And the discovery of these non-Chinese texts as well as Persian coins and Nestorian crosses, will provide fruitful new materials for us to explore the Silk Road during the Mongolian period.

3 The tombs in the Central Plain

We will now go eastwards along the Silk Road from Dunhuang, through the Hexi corridor, to enter into the Central Plain. With the development of Chinese modernization, there has been a great increase in major construction work in the cities, and some highway projects are being carried out. A great number of ancient tombs is being excavated before the building starts. And in these tombs there are quite a lot of imported goods. Prof. Xu Pingfang from the Institute of Archaeology, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has given a general survey about the new finds along the Silk Road and sorted them according to region.

In the tombs from the sixth to the tenth centuries, there is a large quantity of pottery, coins, textiles, gold and silver appliances, tri-coloured glazed pottery, and wall-paintings, as well as epitaphs with the dates of the tombs. Figures of foreigners leading a camel are very good evidence showing how the Arabic, Persian and Sogdian merchants came with camels to engage in trade. The Persian and Sogdian designs on the textiles confirm the traditional Chinese accounts which say that the Tang people liked Iranian clothes. The gold and silver appliances can be divided into three groups: Sogdian, Sassanid Persian, and Roman-Byzantine. Among these, Sogdian silver is widely represented. In a small town near Chaoyang city, in western Liaoning province, a Tang tomb was excavated in 1975, in which the archaeologists found a group of typical Sogdian silver utensils. These utensils reflect the activities of Sogdian merchants who settled as far as Yingzhou in north-eastern China. Yingzhou was the base of An Lushan's rebellion in the middle of the Tang period. And the traditional Chinese accounts have mentioned that An presented many gold and silver utensils to Emperor Xuanzong before he rebelled. It seems safe to say that these gold and silver objects are Sogdian productions, given the contemporary reports.

Among the tombs near Changan, the Tang capital, are some of Tang imperial family members. The collection from these tombs represents the highest level of Tang art, and the fashion of Tang nobles. In more than one of the tombs of Tang princes and princesses cheetah hunting pottery figures have been found. There is a picture of cheetah training in the tomb of Prince Yide. This fashion of cheetah hunting originated in North Africa and West Asia and was imported by the Sogdians into China to become the favourite pastime of Chinese nobles, according to the accounts of the "presentation of leopards" by Sogdians to the Tang court in the traditional Chinese sources.

3.1 The route of the Sogdians

In the tombs of Sogdians found in China, we can establish the immigration route of the Sogdians and the features reflecting their migration.

I have used the Chinese and Iranian documents, Chinese inscriptions and Chinese traditional sources, as well as archaeological data to draw an image of how the Sogdians travelled from Sogdiana to Yingzhou in northeast China.

They travelled along two routes in the Tarim basin, via Kashgar, Tumshuq, Ush, Aqsu, Kucha, Karashar, and Turfan on the north or via Khotan, Cherchen, Loulan on the south, and arrived at Dunhuang. And then they came along the Hexi corridor, via Guazhou (Anxi), Jiuquan, Zhangye, Wuwei, and passed Guyuan to arrive at Chang'an (Xi'an), the western capital of Tang dynasty, and Luoyang, the eastern capital. The Sogdians either came to Yingzhou, via Weizhou (Jixian), Xiangzhou (Anyang), Weizhou (north of Daming), Xingzhou (xingtai), Dingzhou (Dingxian), Youzhou (Beijing); or they passed Lingwu, via Liuhuzhou (Six-hu Prefectures), Taiyuan, Yanmen (Daixian), Weizhou (Lingqiu), and then arrived at Youzhou. In the towns along the Silk Road, some traces of Sogdians remained. The Sogdian colonists or their Zoroastrian temples appeared in most of these towns.

Based on the current sources, it seems that Sogdians usually travelled along the Silk Road in northern China. They connected the East and the West and they also linked up the Chinese regime and the northern nomad Turkish and Uighur Empires. Many Sogdians lived with the northern nomad tribes in the Mongolian steppe. At the same time, some Sogdians travelled to the southern region, i. e. Sichuan, Guangxi, and Guangdong. But it seems that there was no colony like that in the north. Also it is possible that some of the Sogdian remains along the coast may have been left by Sogdians who came to China by the maritime route.

3.2 The internal activities of the Sogdian colonies

Besides Dunhuang and Turfan, some materials on the Sogdian colonies survive in other places. A good example is a family in Wuwei among the Sogdian colonies along the Hexi corridor: it appeared frequently in both traditional sources and in a new-found epitaph. Several years ago, Professor Antonino Forte argued that the An family in Wuwei was the offspring of the Parthian Prince, An Shigao, rather than of the Sogdians from the An Kingdom of Bukhara. But the epitaph of An Yuanshou who was a member of the Wuwei An family states clearly that this family was from Sogdiana on the River Oxus, and therefore there is no connection with An Shigao. As the official Sabao, the An family led the Sogdian colony of Liangzhou (Wuwei). The word *sabao* is from Sogdian, *s'rtp'w*, originally referring to a caravan leader, which, developing from the original meaning, was used to indicate the political and religious leader in a Sogdian colony. At the end of the Sui and the early Tang, the brothers of the An family, An Xinggui and An Xiuren, led the local Sogdians to turn down the regime of Li Gui in Liangzhou and then presented Liangzhou to the Tang court. As a result, the An family obtained higher status during the Tang period. An Yuanshou, An Xinggui's son, was buried in the Zhaoling Mausoleum beside Em-

peror Taizong for his great achievements in the war against the Turks. An Yuanshou's grandson, An Zhongjing, was the governor of Shanzhou (Qinghai) in the early half of the eighth century, and he also kept his heritage from his ancestors in Liangzhou. But the Sogdian colony with the greatest influence on the political life of the Tang Empire is the Six-hu Prefectures located to the south of Lingzhou and Xiazhou. The tomb of An Pu, the leader of the Six-hu Prefectures, was uncovered in Luoyang. His epitaph is very helpful for Pulleyblank's argument about the origin of the prefecture. This will benefit our understanding of the role of Sogdians between the Tang and Turk Empires.

In the south suburbs of Guyuan, Ningxia, the archaeologists uncovered the tombs of the Sogdian Shi family of the Sui-Tang period. There are seven epitaphs belonging to the Shi family and one belonging to An. These are very helpful for studying the Sogdians on the Silk Road. Other western items have also been recovered from these tombs: a sapphire seal with a Middle-Persian inscription, a golden mask, a Persian silver coin, and a Byzantine gold coin. So we can see that though the Sogdians had adopted the burial customs of the Chinese people, the burial items reflect features of mixed cultures.

Besides the tombs mentioned above, the most important tombs of Central Asians discovered in China so far are: the tomb of Yu Hong, uncovered in Taiyuan, Shanxi in July 1999, and the tomb of An Jia, uncovered in Xi'an, Shaanxi in May 2000. According to the epitaph, Yu Hong was from the Yu kingdom, about which there is no account in the traditional sources. But the Yu kingdom seems to be a country in Central Asia since the epitaph says that his ancestors and Yu Hong himself were officials of the Juanjuan Kingdom in Central Asia.



图三 虞弘墓发掘现场

Plate 2

Sarcophagus excavated from the Tomb of Yu Hong, a Central Asian leader, found in Taiyuan

Yu Hong served as an envoy to Persia, Tuyuhun (Qinghai) Yuezhi (modern Afghanistan), and entered the Central Plain to serve as the official in charge of the Sabao government of three prefectures including Taiyuan. The official is the person sent by the central government to rule the local Sogdian colonies. He died in the twelfth year (592) of the Kaihuang period of the Sui dynasty. An Jia's epitaph clearly says that he was a Sogdian from the An Kingdom (Bukhara). He was the Sabao of Tongzhou (the modern Dali of Shaanxi Province), in the Northern Zhou and died in 579. These two tombs are the earliest Central Asian tombs with clear dates found in China. And the sculptures on both coffin platforms reflect distinct Sogdian art features. The religiousness of these tombs has attracted much attention from scholars. Four other coffin platforms were previously uncovered in Anyang (Henan), Tianshui (Gansu), Yidu (Qingzhou, Shandong), and an unknown place. One was scattered in Paris, Cologne, Boston, and Washington D.C. One was collected by a Japanese museum, named Miho, others were published by the Tianshui Museum, Gansu Province. The Chinese traditional sources, Dunhuang and Turfan documents, the epitaphs, and the new sculptures, provide us with a better understanding of the internal daily life and social activities of the Sogdian colonies.

1. At the time of An Jia and Yu Hong the local Sogdian colonies had not been integrated into the local administrative institutions by the Chinese government. So the common theme on these coffins provides the basic information about the daily life of the Sogdians. This daily life includes hunting, which was a popular activity among Sogdians and other Central Asians. The Sogdians also cultivated the vine and made wine. A banquet with dance was often held by the Sogdians. We can even see that they had a ceremony for the New Year. These images on the coffins enrich our knowledge of the Sogdian colonies in accordance with the traditional accounts.

2. The leader of the Sogdian colonies in the traditional sources is the Sabao. In the late Northern Dynasties, the central governments began to take over the Sogdian colonies. Besides establishing the Sabao government and appointing Sogdian leaders, such as An Jia, to the official position of the Sabao, the central government also sent representatives (usually Central Asians) to manage the Sabao government, a role Yu Hong may have played.

The pictures on the coffins show the owner of the tomb either as a Sabao or as an official in charge of the government. As a Sabao, An Jia sits in the middle of the picture on the platform and drinks with his wife. The upper right part of the picture shows him receiving Turks, the lower part depicts his son sitting in the middle talking about an alliance with the Turks. According to the traditional sources, the office of the Sabao passed from father to son. So I suppose that the picture reflects how a son succeeded to his late father's job. The picture attests to the fact that the Sabao has to meet Sogdian, Turkish and Chinese guests, or go hunting with Turkish, Persian, and Indian kings. This kind of life with hunting and visiting, must have been reality in the Sogdian colonies.



Plate 3

Stone panel showing Sogdians and Turks hunting from the Tomb of An Jia, a leader of the Sogdian settlement in Tongzhou (modern Dali), Shaanxi

3. In the pictures on the stone coffins there are a lot of Sogdian figures. Besides the guests of the Sabao and all kinds of kings, the common people usually have deep eyes and long noses, some of them have curly hair, some of them have short hair, and they all wear Sogdian-style clothes. This indicates that all the members of the Sogdian colonies are non-Chinese. But based on the different features of Central Asians, most of them look like Sogdians, but there are also other Central Asians. The epitaph of Zhai Tusha was uncovered in Taiyuan. This epitaph says that Zhai Tusha's father Zhai Shamohe was the Great Sabao of Bingzhou (Taiyuan). The surname Zhai could be from Sogdiana, or from another nomad kingdom Gaoche. Another epitaph, of Long Run, was recently discovered in Taiyuan. The owner has a surname Long from Karashahr in the Tarim basin. So though we assumed in the past that all the inhabitants of the so-called Sogdian colonies were Sogdians, now we have to modify this hypothesis to include other Central Asians.

4. In the middle of the pictures on the coffin platforms, there are illustrations of the banquet held by the owner of the tombs. The male host has the features of a Central Asian. The ethnic features of the hostess of An Jia tomb are quite ambiguous. But the hostesses in Yu Hong's tomb and the objects in the Miho museum could be seen

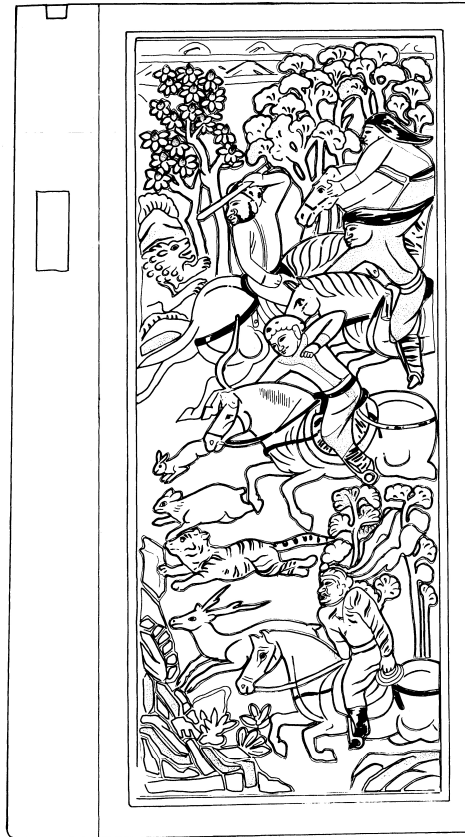


Plate 4

Detail of one of hunting pictures from An Jia's stone panel, showing a Sogdian leader shooting a lion, a motif of Persian art

as Central Asian. According to the epitaph and other sources, the Sogdians who came to China at the beginning usually married other Central Asians. Because they usually lived in the Sogdian colonies, and they had little contact with the Chinese.

5. Accounts of the Central Asian colonies of Dunhuang and Turfan mention that Central Asians usually worshipped in Zoroastrian temples. This shows that the main religion of the Sogdian colonies was Persian and Sogdian traditional Zoroastrianism. This is confirmed by the ancient Sogdian letters found by Aurel Stein in a tower of the Great Wall, near Dunhuang. An Jia and Yu Hong's tombs also confirmed the religion of the Sogdians. On the upper part of the gate of An Jia's tomb there is a fire altar supported by three camels, and accompanying by two half-human and half-bird

priests. Below there are the typical Sogdian donors, and above we see flying figures carrying *konghou* and *pipa*. The camel represents the god of victory, so this is the image of the fire altar of the upper class. On the bed part of Yu Hong's coffin is a sculpture of a fire altar too. Besides these, the pictures also contain many Zoroastrian themes, such as depictions of Mithra and Nana. All of these show that the main religion of the Sogdian colonies was Zoroastrianism.

6. The Sogdians usually follow the funerary rite of allowing dogs to feed on the corpses and then placing the bones in ossuaries for burial. Some ossuaries were found in Turfan, but no ossuary has been found in the Central Plain. The Sogdians began to accept the burial customs of traditional China: burying the bodies in the earth in a coffin. Very many of the Sogdian tombs recovered seem to have followed the traditional Chinese burial pattern. But An Jia's and Yu Hong's are quite different. There is no wooden coffin in them, just coffin platforms. And the bones of An Jia were placed outside the gate of tomb, and these bones seem to have been burnt. An Jia's tomb shows clear influence of the Zoroastrian funeral rite.

The new finds in China have contributed a lot to our understanding of the Sogdian colonies, and this will help us to comprehend the material and spiritual culture imported by the Sogdians. I believe that with the progress of Sogdian studies, we will get a deeper awareness of the history of the cultural links between the West and the East, which would also improve our understanding of each other today.

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