

Revisiting the Silk Route Trade in East Eurasia: The Tang Empire's World View

Masaharu ARAKAWA, Osaka University

In the seventh century, the Tang Empire spread along traffic routes between China and the “neighboring barbarian regions.” These routes were not only for official use. They were also accessible to private individuals who held a pass called the “*guo-suo*”, which allowed them to go back and forth on these routes. The inland merchants traveling long distances across Chinese territory probably obtained such a *guo-suo*. However, due to ideological differences, it was impossible for “barbarian” merchants to get one. Only the envoys of the states in the neighboring “barbarian regions” that paid tributes to the Chinese emperor could obtain the *guo-suo*.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that Sogdians, such as individual Sogdian merchants were granted the *guo-suo* and even obtained privileges of entrance into the imperial capital for the purpose of trade. These privileges were on par with those of the tribute envoys regarding the entrance into the empire and capital.

In general, when Tang's *chou* and *xian* commoners, referred to as the “*bai-xing*”, were granted a *guo-suo* to leave their permanent residence, an administrator of the *chou* and *xian* processed the applications. Applicants obtained their *guo-suo* from these administrators. It has been found that Sogdian merchants went through exactly the same procedure as other commoners who applied for the *guo-suo*.

Even though Sogdian merchants, in principle, were allowed to cross the border only once they had become naturalized Tang commoners, in reality they were able to enter and leave the Chinese capital freely and conduct trade by carrying the *guo-suo* issued for private use. This fact indicates that Sogdians, who were merely one of the people in the “neighboring barbarian states,” were able to go back and forth across Tang territory under the same conditions as inland merchants.

As I will emphasize in my discussion, in my view, this preferential treatment of the Sogdians can be related to the Tang Empire's worldview.