

A historical review of the Silk Road

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Abstract: *During the process of trade, some factors can decide whether the trade can continue fluently and which side has more dominance. This essay will focus on the trade of ancient China and the Silk road to discuss which factor has an important influence on the trade and explain the background and reasons. When ancient China was in strong period, like the early period of Tang dynasty (China at that time was one of the most powerful countries among the world), Chinese government had more trade dominance as they didn't necessarily rely on the goods of foreign merchants. However, with the decline of Chinese power, its trade dominance decrease at the same time and the government gradually lost its control of the Silk Road. Consequently, Chinese government began to develop other trade routes-- the Maritime Silk Road.*

Keywords: *Trade dominance; Control of The Silk Road; Changes of power of Ancient China; Maritime Silk Road*

1. Introduction

In this ever-changing world, China continues to embrace the world with its opening up policy and defend globalization. Since 2013 the Belt and Road Initiative has attracted a lot of investors outside of China. From South Asia to Western Europe, 65 countries have signed for the project, which connects China with partners all the way to Europe. The idea of BRI originates from the ancient Silk Road where merchants from the Han Dynasty traded with partners mainly from Central Asia.

China has a long history of trading with other countries, and most Chinese people were educated about the ancient Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road at a young age, but the term 'Silk Road' is relatively new compared to the history of such a route - 'Silk Road' was brought up by German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in the nineteenth century.

Although it is called the Silk Road, ancient China exported a wide range of products, developed various routes, and traded with partners beyond Central Asia. When ancient China traded with other countries, all merchants from different areas of the world had to bargain with the emperor, hoping to have a smooth process of trade and to achieve a satisfactory trading price. The Chinese government, in turn, established trade policies with those merchants during the process. By exploring the history of ancient Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road of China in Tang Dynasty, this paper focuses on how power imbalance changed the dynamics of trade relations between China and the world in ancient times.

2. Power imbalance – the domination of trade relations due to China's superiority over other countries

One of the most important factors that dominated China's trade relations with other countries in early to mid-Tang Dynasty is China's superiority in power compared to other countries, such power imbalance resulted in China-friendly trade policies at the expense of other countries at that time. For example, in Tang dynasty many countries such as ancient Japan and ancient Korea came to exchange goods with China. According to New History of Tang Dynasty, official record of history written by the Chinese government in Tang dynasty in ten volumes, described Chinese empire in Tang Dynasty as 'one of the most powerful countries in the world' and attracted ambassadors from hundreds of countries that wanted to establish trade relations with China. [1] In the trade negotiation process, Tang Dynasty often dominated the negotiation regarding the amount of import/export between the two countries. We can attribute their decisions to various factors. The first and the most obvious reason is that if foreign countries refuse to obey China's trade policy, the Chinese government could refuse to exchange good with them. When establishing trade relations with a new country, because China often dominated the process in setting trade regulations, trading price and quotas, the power imbalance often resulted in unfair trade policies

that the new country must comply with. Nonetheless, merchants from other countries still obey these rules because they were dependent on some Chinese exports, even if accepting a pro-China trade policy would make them lose some bargaining power in trade. Archaeological evidence has indicated that the Egyptians introduced and used silk from China much earlier than originally estimated. Austrian scientists recently discovered a foreign material in the hair of an Egyptian mummy. After analyzing it with an electron microscope, the foreign material is silk fiber, and this mummy was a woman between 30 and 50 years old during the 21st Dynasty of Egypt 3000 years ago. It can be concluded that the Egyptians had already begun to use silk fabrics at that time, despite the fact that the technique of silk production was exclusively owned by ancient China. Since there was no other silk producing country in the world except ancient China, the mummy is a proof of Chinese exports dominating the ancient Silk Road.

The superiority of Chinese power also influenced China's foreign relations on trade policies. For example, in Tang Dynasty, Chinese emperors further developed the Silk Road because they wanted to expand China's sphere of influence to other parts of the world and win respect from China's trade partners. Compared to the Han Dynasty when China mainly traded with countries to its west, Imperial China in Tang Dynasty exerted its influence beyond Central Asian countries. As one of the most prosperous countries among the world, China attracted many countries that were less powerful with its abundance in resources and hegemonial power in Asia. One of the most important historians in contemporary China, 'the Sui and Tang dynasties were the most prosperous times of our country (China). Its culture and political system spread worldwide: beyond the desert to the north, to Vietnam on the south, to Japan in the east, and to Central Asia in the west'. [2]Countries such as the ancient Japan were eager to learn from Imperial China and establish trade relations with the Tang Dynasty. Between 607 and 838, Japan sent 19 missions to China. Known as the *Kentōshi*, the Japanese Missions to China came to Tang Dynasty to learn Chinese culture, religion (Buddhism), philosophy, medicine, and governance. Today we can still find a lot of records such as tombs, relics, and archives of kings, ambassadors, and merchants that visited China in Tang Dynasty, telling us about the existence of a powerful Chinese Empire and its trade relations with other smaller countries, as well as stories of the past.

3. Power imbalance – China's declining power and its development of the maritime Silk Road

In some other cases, ancient China would also lose the dominance to its trade partners in the negotiation process. This phenomenon can again be attributed to power imbalance, but in a different scenario. While in the first scenario China's power completely surpassed that of its trade partners, in this scenario China was less powerful and had to make compromises to trade with foreign countries. As a result, China lost its dominance and was unable to coerce the foreign trade partner into abiding by the Chinese trade regulations. Instead, China had to make peace with other countries to ensure that trade went smoothly. If not, China might even lose to the foreign country in trade.

The late Tang Dynasty was marked by a decline in power followed by years of war.

Starting from the Mid-Tang Dynasty, western China gradually split into several spheres of influence, and the government in Central China was unable to control the Silk Road.

Before the An Lushan Rebellion which finally led to the demise of Tang Dynasty, Tang Dynasty had a tragic war with Arab troops in 751. In July of that year, Tang Dynasty fought along with the Karluks, a Turkish nomadic tribe against Abbasid Caliphate and its ally, the Tibetan Empire in the valley of the Talas River for control over the Syr Darya region of Central Asia. After several days of confrontation, the Karluks defected to the Abbasids, leaving Tang troops in isolation. According to historical records, Chinese troops were completely annihilated in that battle. The defeat marked the end of the Tang's exploration to Central Asia. After the battle the Arabs took control of Central Asia and ruled there for the next 400 years, thereby controlling the Silk Road.

By losing control of the Silk Road and its Central Asian trade partners, ancient China started to develop other routes for international trade. Since mid to late Tang Dynasty, China's economic center of gravity had been shifting to the south, where coastal ports were highly developed and had active sea trade in the Southeast. In 661, Tang Dynasty established the City Ship Division, making it an important port for China's maritime trade. Merchants from all over the world came to buy Chinese silk by sea and brought goods from all over the world to sell to China. From the late Tang Dynasty to the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the prosperity of maritime Silk Road gradually replaced the Silk Road that had been in use since Han Dynasty to trade with Central Asia.

In addition, after China's defeat in 751, the Arab Empire resumed their trade relations with Tang

Dynasty through maritime trade, along with other great powers at that time: the Persian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and ancient India. These powers are not minor to Tang Dynasty, but were willing to trade goods with Tang Dynasty, which had already given up the Silk Road and Central Asia. In this way Tang Dynasty gradually developed the maritime Silk Road and increased the variety of Chinese exports, including porcelain, cotton, silk and tea. In turn, foreign countries exported spice and gold, which China was dependent on. This cooperative mode of trade encouraged cultural exchange and paved way for Imperial China's future explorations of the overseas market in later dynasties.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, as one of the most powerful countries in the world, Imperial China dominated trade relations of Silk Road in early and middle periods of the Tang Dynasty due to its superiority to other nations. However, along with the rise of Arab nations, Tang Dynasty lost control of Central Asia after years of wars. At the same time, Tang Dynasty increased trade through the maritime Silk Road, through which Tang Dynasty exported a variety of goods in exchange for spice from abroad. From dominance to cooperation and compromises in trade, Tang Dynasty changed its international trade policy due to imbalanced power dynamics.

References

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