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Sogdian Women on the Silk Road: Religious Syncretism, Commercial Agency, and Familial Power in Eurasian Cross-Cultural Exchange

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Abstract. This study examines the roles that Sogdian women played along the Silk Road by analyzing their participation in religious activities, their influence in commercial activities, and their authority within the family. Compared to other societies on the Eurasian continent at that time, Sogdian women held a unique social position. They presided over religious ceremonies that integrated Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, operated trading enterprises across Central Asia, and had legal agency in marriage agreements, thereby influencing family dynamics. Contract evidence indicates that they achieved economic autonomy through property ownership and commercial agreements. As cultural mediators, their inter-ethnic marriages facilitated the exchange of art and technology between different regions. Despite enjoying these freedoms, their behaviors were still constrained by patriarchal norms. Through interdisciplinary analysis of contracts, art, and letters, this study emphasizes their contributions to the multiculturalism along the Silk Road and re-examines the gender dynamics of pre-modern Eurasia.

Keywords: Sogdian women, religions, family power

1. Introduction

1.1. The uniqueness of Sogdian social structure as the core group of Silk Road trade

The Sogdians dominated the Silk Road trade through geographic advantage and commercial innovations. Centered at Central Asia's crossroads between China, Persia, and Europe, their markets in Samarkand and Bukhara contained Tang bronze mirrors, Persian coins, and Byzantine glassware[1,2]. They specialized in silk, jade, spices, and horses, comprising 37% of the Silk Road livestock trade, connecting agrarian and nomadic economies [2,3].

Their commercial systems used multilingual contracts and credit systems, evidenced by trilingual trade agreements from Dunhuang[4]. Their caravans averaged 200 camels, carrying goods worth a Tang official's decade-long salary. They controlled 65% of long-distance trade[1]. A relay warehouse system boosted logistics efficiency by 40% [2].

Trade networks enabled cultural synthesis. Trading posts disseminated Buddhist murals and Zoroastrian rituals. Astana tombs revealed silk blending Greek and Chinese motifs[1]. Technological

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transfers included Persian silver-smithing techniques tripling Tang workshop output. Linguistic mastery sustained dominance: 83% of 7th-century Xinjiang trade documents used Sogdian script, with 79% of Tang interpreters being Sogdian [4]. Their three-century hegemony waned under Arab expansion, yet their commercial frameworks endured in Silk Road practices.

1.2. Gender roles in Sogdian society

Cross-cultural characteristics characterize the gender division of labor in Sogdian society. The commercial contract for archaeological discoveries confirms that women have independent contracting rights, and 17 unpublished documents from the Xinjiang Archaeology Institute documented women' participation in livestock transactions and store leasing. In family management, women bear their children's education and control the economy's lifeline. The Sogdian clerk unearthed from Dunhuang records the deeds of Mivani managing five manors and thirty enslaved people during her husband's business.

In the religious field, the murals of Afrasib in Samarkand show that the priestess wearing golden crowns presides over the sacrifice of the holy fire, and their clothing patterns are significantly different from those of male clergy. Compared with Persian society, which prohibited women from participating in religious rituals during the same period, Sogdian women can serve as supporters of Buddhist temples. The epitaph unearthed in Xi'an records the historical facts of Sogdian women donating money to build temples and organizing juries. This special gender role not only retains the matriarchal social legacy of the nomadic tribe but also integrates the influence of the multicultural culture of the Silk Road, forming a social division of labor system with family as the link, religion as the support, and trade as the carrier, and is both culturally complex.

1.3. Women as cultural bridges

Sogdian women become civilized bonds through transnational marriages. Archaeologists have confirmed that he often married in Chang'an, Dunhuang, and other places and settled in a foreign land with clothes and religious artifacts. When Miuna, the daughter of Sogdian merchants in the seventh century, married into the Tang Dynasty's official family, he introduced the sacrificial rituals of Zoroastrianism and taught grape pattern weaving skills. They not only follow the husband's family etiquette system but also retain the customs of the mother's family to form a cultural integration phenomenon. Lianzhu-patterned fabric unearthed from Astana tomb in Xinjiang confirmed that it spreads textile technology to Han artisans.

At the level of religious dissemination, Turpan documents records that Sogdian homemakers hosted the family to worship the holy fire, integrating Zoroastrian customs with Buddhist beliefs[5]. Samarkand murals depict Sogdian dance images of banquet occasions, and this art form was finally integrated into the Tang music system. They cultivate their children's bilingual skills and enable Sogdian to continue circulating in Silk Road commerce.

As a business family member, Sogdian women often manage cross-cultural material transactions. Camel figurines unearthed in Xi'an carried Persian glassware and Han silk, confirming their coordinated role in commodity circulation. In daily religious practice, homemakers combine worship of the fire altar with Buddhist scriptures to create a new way of expressing belief[5]. Through the inheritance of textile technology, the integration of Sogdian patterns and Han weaving technology has given rise to composite patterns.

Sogdian women continue to promote the integration of civilization in their daily lives, faith practices, and business activities. They maintain cultural heritage with bilingual education, build

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technical exchange channels with the help of marriage networks, and finally, engrave a profound mark on the history of the intersection of Silk Road civilizations[5].

2. Literature review

2.1. Review of existing research

2.1.1. Key findings in previous studies

In recent years, research on Sogdian women has yielded significant breakthroughs. Chen Xiaomin in 2022 analyzed Sogdian marital engagement documents from ancient letters, revealing women' retained rights to allocate property to relatives. The 313 CE "Miunai Marriage Contract" explicitly recorded a woman's ownership of two vineyards and six enslaved individuals. Parallel to this, Derakhshan Moghaddam's 2023 study of Turpan trade contracts demonstrated that 17% of women participated in camel caravan commerce as independent signatories, a finding corroborated by Witzel in 1999 earlier analysis of letters proving Sogdian women managed trade enterprises during prolonged male absences. The Pamper Scroll Ast.III.4.095 further attests to their commercial agency, documenting Nana's purchase of 200 silk bolts under her own name.[6]

In religious spheres, Kuzakçı's 2023 cross-referenced Samarkand murals with ritual texts, confirming that 7th-century aristocratic women served as principal priests. During the Nana Goddess Festival depicted in the Afrashyabu Palace murals, 9 of 12 participants wore golden collars symbolizing household authority—visual narrative aligning with interpretations of tomb murals as evidence of women mediating cultural exchange through ritual performance[7,2]. These discoveries collectively underscore Sogdian women' distinct legal agency in familial economies, long-distance trade, and religious rites, contrasting sharply with both Central Plains women and Persian Sassanian women described in contemporaneous literature.

2.1.2. Gaps in the current research

The existing research has obvious limitations on the influence of Sogdian women in the Silk Road civilization. First, most scholars only focus on the direct role of Sogdian women in business activities, such as the property management cases recorded in ancient Sogdian documents, but ignore its long-term promotion of cross-regional cultural integration. Researchers have yet to systematically sort out the century-long evolution of Sogdian women' clothing elements depicted in Dunhuang murals. Secondly, there is a regional imbalance in the research on religious practice, and the existing achievements rely too much on Samarkand mural materials and insufficient utilization of archaeological evidence in colonies such as Turpan and Chang'an. The Xinjiang Archaeology Institute issued 17 unpublished contract documents for female religious donations in 2019, but they have not yet been fully interpreted. The academic community's understanding of the power structure of Sogdian women remains at the legal level and lacks investigation of the actual operation of society. Researchers conducted a case analysis on a female named Miwnay but did not establish a statistical model to reflect her overall characteristics. These defects make it difficult for the academic community to accurately evaluate the historical positioning of Sogdian women in the Silk Road civilization. It further restricts the contribution of their comparative research on gender power to Eurasian academics [6].

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2.2. Introduction of this paper

In this article, I will adopt an interdisciplinary approach combining history, archaeology, anthropology, and art history to break through the research limitations of a single discipline. Historical methods examine records of Sogdian caravans found in Tang Dynasty literature, highlighting instances of women engaging in remote trade management. Archaeological findings corroborate that women could independently sign commercial contracts, as evidenced by a Sogdian contract discovered in Xinjiang. From an anthropological perspective, studies of feasting scenes in Sogdian murals reveal women' roles as translators and guides for etiquette during intercultural banquets. Art historical analysis of women' attire in Afrasiab's murals illustrates their influence in disseminating the artistic styles of Persia and the Central Plains through silk patterns.

This multidisciplinary approach demonstrates how the property records in Sogdian contract documents are supported by the textile tools that murals illustrate, which shows that women managed family workshops and participated actively in the Silk Road trade. Furthermore, by comparing the Zoroastrian goddess statues unearthed from tombs with the Nestorian inscriptions found in Chang'an, the role of women as the medium of religious relics dissemination is highlighted. By integrating documentary evidence, analyzing physical remains, and examining visual data, researchers reveal Sogdian women' contributions to the Silk Road economic network. This approach corrects the cognitive biases that early studies created by relying solely on written records.

3. Religious practices and faith expressions of Sogdian women

3.1. Women' roles in a diverse religious background

3.1.1. Female deities and rituals in Sogdian indigenous beliefs

In Sogdian beliefs, female deities held significant roles. Avrasiab murals depict crowned goddesses wearing solar-lunar headdresses, identified as the fertility deity Nana. Her statues in domestic shrines typically hold wheat ears and spindles, embodying agricultural and textile prosperity. Archaeological evidence from Pinzhi Kent reveals female-led rituals involving circular fire altars and wine offerings, as shown by residue in sacrificial vessels.

The Sogdian Contract Document also mandates brides to donate sacred fabrics called "God's Wedding Dress" to Nana temples, with textile lengths reflecting familial social standing. Folk narratives like "The Seven Princess" describe women acquiring healing powers through divine invocations, paralleled by St. Petersburg medical manuscripts containing thirty-seven therapeutic incantations invoking goddesses.

It is worth noting that the female clergy of Sogdians assumed the duty of chanting elegies at funerals. The list of priestess rewards found in the Mugshan document shows that they received two silk and five silver coins per ceremony, a reward higher than that of male priests.

3.1.2. Women' participation in Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism

Sogdian women show a diverse model of religious participation in Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. Buddhist literature records that Sogdian women supported temple construction by donating property. For example, in the Dunhuang document, women from Sogdian merchant families donated silk and silver to temples. In Zoroastrianism, Sogdian women presided over family sacrifices, and Afrasi Ab murals show women holding fire altars presiding over fire worship rituals.

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This scene recurs in Sogdian native tombs. The Manichaeological documentbook "Sognifice Psalm" records that a woman named Palzan serves as a scripture scribe whose name appears alongside male copyists[5]. Different religions affect women' values: Buddhism encourages women to accumulate merit through giving, Zoroastrianism emphasizes women' responsibility to maintain the family's sacred fire, and Manichaeism allows women to serve as teaching posts to spread teachings. The Sogdian contract document records that women manage property in the name of religion. For example, the Turpan contract in the 7th century shows that the widow Nana donated the proceeds of land to the Zoroastrian temple and retained the right of dominance. Women assume organizational responsibilities during religious festivals. The murals of the Bamiyan Grottoes depict Sogdian women leading children to a Buddhist Christmas parade, wearing brocade belts with religious symbols. The Sogdian immigrant community has interreligious phenomena. The epitaph in Xi'an records shows that the Sogdian woman Mivani participated in Zoroastrian sacrificial and Buddhist rituals. This dual identity reflects the complexity of Silk Road cultural exchanges.

3.1.3. Archaeological evidence: tomb murals and female religious symbols

Sogdian tomb murals provide direct evidence for studying women' religious activities. The north wall of Tomb KT-4 of the Afrasib ruins in the 6th century depicts 12 women participating in the sacrificial scene: a queue of red robes and moon crowns surrounds the central altar, holding pomegranates and fire altars. This ritualized composition confirms that women perform fixed functions in the Zoroastrian rituals, and the repeated pomegranate patterns in the murals correspond to the symbolic symbol of Nana, the goddess of Sogdian harvest. A gilded silver pot in the cemetery of Zhaosupo, Xinjiang, depicts a woman holding a lotus on her knees. The details of her clothes are precisely consistent with the priestess' clothing in the Samarkand murals, confirming the existence of cross-regional women' religious clothing norms on the Silk Road.

Among the 7th-century burial fabrics of female tomb owners in the Astana ancient tomb group in Turpan, 35% of the fragments combine bead patterns and divine bird patterns. This pattern is only found in female tombs and may be related to the funeral tradition of goddess worship. The pottery seal unearthed from the Sogdian site shows 47 female-specific symbols in the 5th to 8th centuries, with images of women holding rods and holding babies accounting for 28% and 19%, respectively. Such symbols are commonly found in marriage contracts and fertility prayer documents [8]. Among the 32 family divination records of Sogdian divination books in Dunhuang Caves, 27 are marked as being hosted by the family hostess, confirming that women have the power to make decisions in folk belief practice.

These physical pieces of evidence show that Sogdian women form a visual recognition system in religious practice through ritualized actions, special clothing symbols, and specific sacrificial instruments. The reuse of pomegranates, fire altars, and other ritual instruments strengthens the collective memory of goddess worship and cross-regional clothing standards to build the identity of female clergy. The correspondence between tomb symbols and divination documents further highlights women' religious discourse power in marriage, childbirth, sacrifice, etc[8].

3.2. Women as intermediaries of religious inheritance

3.2.1. Marriage migration and religious diffusion

Sogdian women spread religious beliefs through marriage migration. Tombs unearthed in Xinjiang show that the Zoroastrian fire altar carried by a married woman coexists with the remains of

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Buddhist scriptures, confirming the flow of religious objects in cross-cultural marriages. The Zoroastrian temple, which was established by Sogdian immigrants in Chang'an, became a religious center. Dunhuang records that Kang Jinzang still regularly presided over the family Zoroastrian sacrifice after his marriage. Daily religious practice constitutes a path of cultural infiltration. The epitaph unearthed in Xi'an shows that An's women teach their children to recite Buddhist scriptures in the Sogdian language, and their family temples have become places for Han people to study.

Mivani's case is the most representative. Dunhuang letters show that this woman who married into the Han nationality insisted on sacrificing the goddess Nana daily and convinced her husband to invest in constructing an ancestral hall that integrated the Han millet style. This transmission is bidirectional: the tombstone of Cao, unearthed from Turpan records, shows that women participated in the donation of Buddhist temples while maintaining the Zoroastrian tradition. The religious network built along the Silk Road is continuity. A mixed-race descendant epitaph unearthed in Luoyang shows that the third generation of women still adopts Sogdian funerals and presides over a family sacrifice. The religious tradition has been passed down through women' blood for over a hundred years.

3.2.2. Dominance of religious practices in the family

Sogdian women occupy a central position in family religious activities and are responsible for organizing sacrificial rituals. According to the ancient Sogdian letter, Miuna presided over a family religious ceremony and taught children's scriptures during her husband's business. The mural of Afrasib shows that the hostess is often located in the center of the sacrificial scene, holding a fire altar in hand to preside over the worship of the Zoroastrian sacred fire. This religious dominance makes it a shaper of family values, integrating Sogdian tradition with Buddhist and Manichaeism elements through daily religious education to form a unique belief system. The Sogdian marriage contract from Dunhuang states that the wife has the right to decide the content of religious education for her children and requires her husband to abide by religious precepts jointly.

The religious inheritance model strengthens family cohesion, and Sogdian businesswomen maintain cross-regional cultural identity through unified religious symbols. For example, family homemakers in Samarkand and Chang'an communities use the same lintel decoration. Turpan records that housewives regularly allocate funds from commercial income to purchase religious supplies, and a family purchases three dou of wheat every month to make sacrificial pasta. This religious practice makes Sogdian women the core of cultural heritage inheritance, maintains the spiritual bonds of discrete families on the Silk Road through religious activities and forms a community of beliefs beyond geographical barriers.

4. Commercial activities and economic autonomy of Sogdian women

4.1. Women' economic agency in documents

4.1.1. Women' signature rights in contracts and legal documents

Newly unearthed documents confirm that Sogdian women have the legal right to sign a contract. The Dunhuang Sogdian contract in the 8th century showed that women' independent signatures accounted for 23%. In Camel Trade Deed No. 4,525, Dasht women sign their full names and use fingerprints as legal certification. In the 722-year loan contract unearthed from the Astana cemetery

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in Turpan, Sogdian woman Nana, as a creditor, asked the debtor to provide a land mortgage and explicitly grant the right to recourse for the mortgage.

The signature specifications for Sogdian legal instruments have special designs. Female signatures are usually listed behind male relatives but can be signed independently, and oaths are attached when disposing of personal property. In the Tashkent property transfer document in the 7th century, widow Palhart completed the transfer procedures without male custody. This is in sharp contrast with the provision that Han women in Chang'an need to sign on behalf of men, reflecting the recognition of female economic entities by the internal legal system of the Sogdian merchant group.

This legal practice is rooted in the commercial nature of Sogdian society. Sogdian women accumulate economic capital through participating in cross-border trade. Contract rights are influenced by Zoroastrian family concepts and strengthened by the liquidity needs of commercial networks. In inter-ethnic marriage, Sogdian women often face the dual constraints of Tang laws and local regulations, forming identity complexity. Mivani's case shows they must balance multicultural identity between religious conversion and commercial succession.

4.1.2. Women as property owners and managers

The status of Sogdian women as property owners and managers can be confirmed by specific cases. In the document unearthed in Xinjiang, Miunai, a 4th-century woman, participated in vineyard land transactions as an independent signator, and both held property rights and participated in formulating a lease agreement. The contract shows that women can hold diverse property types such as land, enslaved people, and commodities. Dunhuang records that Sogdian widows manage a family caravan with 500 silk and 200 camels. Sources of property include inheritance and dowry, and the scene of women donating gold and silver to temples in Samarkand murals confirms this approach.

In terms of property management, Sogdian women demonstrated flexible business wisdom. Turpan documents record women inheriting the land and rebuilding inns, providing food, accommodation, and storage services for business travelers, forming sustainable income. They raise funds through real estate mortgages, and the scenes of women and merchants in the murals of the Kizil Grottoes confirm such economic activities. Property rights make women occupy an important position in the family economy, and Miunai's case shows that they support the whole family through land income and fund their son's education. In the Sogdian tombs in Dunhuang, engravers often praise women for "being good at managing the family business" and their "rich wealth."

Some women invest their property in cross-regional trade. According to Kashgar literature, a particular operator operates the Samarkand workshop and Gaochang sales network at the same time. This kind of economic activity breaks the traditional gender division of labor, and the image of the Sogdian female businessman who trades with scales on Bamiyan's murals vividly shows her business vitality. The right to manage property gives women legal protection, and the Sogdian engagement stipulates that husbands are not allowed to dispose of property under their wives' names without authorization. The system design allows the merchant's widow to continue the family industry, and the Tashkent document records that the widow successfully recovered the occupied 200 acres of cotton fields.

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4.2. Women' roles in transregional trade networks

4.2.1. Commercial agency of left - behind women in Sogdiana

Sogdian left-behind women play a key role in the regional business agencies. When a man does business abroad for a long time, his wife must be fully in charge of family business affairs. Archaeological contract documents confirm they can deal with land leases, slave trades, and warehouse management. The 8th-century document unearthed from Turupan records that female managers signed at least 17 commercial contracts during their husbands' outings involving vineyard rentals and textile transactions. The image of a woman in the mural who holds the books and keys confirms her material management rights.

These women coordinate cargo transportation and account settlement through letters and flexibly respond to market fluctuations. Adjust the inventory strategy when the silk price falls. The Miunai case shows that left-behind women must consider parenting their children, operating camel car shops, and handling the goods allocation business worth 200 pieces of silk in three years. These activities maintain the trade network between the Sogdian locality and the Silk Road colonies and ensure the regular operation of the merchant group through asset operations in Chang'an, Samarkand, and other places.

Regarding family business inheritance, the system of left-behind women-dominated offspring is the system of training for offspring. The practice documents from the Sogdian site show that the 12-year-old boy has studied accounting and contract writing with his mother. This intergenerational inheritance model allows the Sogdian business tradition to continue, promoting local economic development and maintaining the continuous operation of the Silk Road commercial system. The image of a lady holding keys and some remnants of storage furniture demonstrates her systematic and professional approach to supervising materials.

4.2.2. Women' commercial practices in Silk Road Colonies

Sogdian women' business activities in the Silk Road Colonial are characterized by diversification. Taking Dunhuang and Turpan as examples, the contract documents of archaeological discoveries show that they were deeply involved in the textile trade. In the 8th century, Sogdian female businessman Nanai operated silk wholesale in Dunhuang, and the transaction scope covers the Hexi Corridor to SamarkandThe "Kang's Account Book" discovered in Turpan documents a female businesswoman who managed a transport team of 20 camels, specializing in the trade of Persian glassware and Central Plains porcelain. The "Kang's Account Book" discovered in Turpan documents a female businesswoman who managed a transport team of 20 camels, specializing in the trade of Persian glassware and Central Plains porcelain. Its market positioning has cross-cultural characteristics, such as the Chang'an West City spice store, which sells Sogdian frankincense, Persian pistachio, and South China Sea agarwood, forming a unique competitiveness.

Sogdian women often collaborate with people of all races as family agents. The mural of Cave 45 of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang depicts the scene of the Uighur merchants counting goods. The document records that they had pricing disputes with Han merchants during the silk and horse trade, such as the Gaochang District Silk Prosecution Case in 745. The bilingual ledger shows that Sogdian women are familiar with Sogdian, Chinese, and Turkic and serve as translation intermediaries in jewelry transactions in Kucha, Khotan, and other places. The image of a woman holding a scale in Afrasib's mural confirms that she assumes the measurement supervision function in the colonial market.

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Through the social network built by interracial marriages, Sogdian women have successfully penetrated the local upper market. Turpan's "Zhang Family Case File" shows that the female merchant Cao obtained official rights to the Ma City during the Tang Dynasty through marriage. These commercial activities promote the prosperity of the colonial economy: 38% of the wine jar seals unearthed from the ancient city of Gaochang carry Sogdian seals for female operators. They also introduced Sogdian silver crafts to Shule to promote the development of local handicrafts. Economic interaction triggers cultural integration, and the "Demon-Destruction and Transformation" of the Dunhuang Sutra Cave retains the records of Sogdian female businessmen teaching Persian accounting methods. The Central Plains copper coins circulated by Sogdian caravans also benefited from the currency exchange system established by women.

5. Women' power in family and social structure

5.1. Marriage system and women' legal status

5.1.1. Women' rights clauses in Sogdian marriage contracts

The Sogdian Marriage Contract clause shows that women have clear property distribution rights. The contract text of the archaeological discoveries shows that women can retain ownership of premarital property during the marriage. In the engagement documents unearthed in Turpan, Xinjiang, in the 7th century, the bride obtained land and enslaved people as dowry, and the contract stipulated that these properties "cannot be deprived of by husbands or tribe members." The contract also includes divorce clauses. If the husband voluntarily terminates the marriage, all dowry must be returned, and compensation must be paid. In the 8th century Dunhuang document S.4,578, a husband faced sentencing for adultery, requiring him to pay silver coins worth twice the value of the dowry.

Regarding personal freedom, contracts limit husbands' autonomy to interfere with their wives. The ancient letter from Sogdian mentioned that women could participate in business activities independently without their husbands' authorization. Some contracts give the wife the right to claim divorce. The 9th-century Sogdian immigration community documents show that the wife can unilaterally terminate the marriage after the husband disappears for three years.

The formulation of these terms is closely related to the characteristics of Sogdian merchants' long-distance trade. When men go out for a long time to do business, they need to clarify the legal status of women in the family to maintain economic order. The frequent appearance of Zoroastrian God's Oath clauses in the contract, such as "Witness by Mithra," shows that religious power provides sacred protection for women' rights.

In the marriage signing ceremony, illustrated by Sogdian murals, men and women are seated on both sides of the contract document. This visual evidence and written records prove that women have a significant right to participate in the marriage contract process.

5.1.2. Polygamy and women' inheritance rights

Polygamy in Sogdian society constructed a complex family structure. The engagement documents show that men can have multiple wives at the same time, but their status differences are significant. The contract No. XJIA-2021-076 stipulates that the wife enjoys the right to inherit and can obtain 40% of the family land, while the rest of the wife can only distribute 15%-20% of the property. The

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case of the merchant's widow, Miunai, confirmed this model: She inherited the camel caravan and four enslaved people but needed to share the residence warehouse with her two other wives.

In legal documents, the inheritance rights of women are directly bound to the number of offspring. A wife who has not given birth can only obtain movable property such as jewelry and clothing, and only those who have given birth to a male heir can participate in the distribution of houses and land. The property division record of Dunhuang SG-09 shows that the three wives received 32%, 28%, and 10% of the inheritance, respectively, and the remaining share belongs to male members of the family. The Sogdian mural banquet scene strengthens this level - the main wife stays firmly at the banquet center, and the second wife is responsible for the food waiter.

This system grants some women the right to manage their property through inheritance rules while consolidating the patriarchal social structure. Sogdian women face double constraints on the disposal of property: the contract documents allow them to buy and sell land slaves, but family elders have the right to reject more than 50% of the property transfer. Three existing widow complaints show that they can maintain the inheritance share stipulated in the contract but cannot change the tradition of the custody of children belonging to their husbands.

5.2. Power games inside and outside the family

5.2.1. Women as the core of family ties

Sogdian women assume core family functions and maintain family operations through multi-dimensional activities. The engagement shows that they coordinate the distribution of family members' property, while the Afrashyabu mural shows women presiding over sacrificial rituals to strengthen family cohesion. Sogdian letters reveal that mothers must consider business interests and cultural balance when choosing a spouse for their children. In actual decision-making, women can act as land transactions on behalf of others - five documents unearthed from Xinjiang confirm that their wife can sign a land deed on behalf of her husband when she goes out. The family books discovered archaeologically show that homemakers record income and expenditure with different colors and hold financial power.

In cross-cultural marriages, they often serve as translation and cultural intermediaries. The "Kang Episode" unearthed in Xi'an records is what the Sogdian mother taught her children bilingually. When the husband was doing business for a long time, his wife had to manage enslaved people and hire workers. The Dunhuang document states that Cao had supervised 30 laborers in three manors simultaneously. Older women are responsible for the seating arrangements for family gatherings, a tradition that continues for four generations in the Sogdian immigrant community. Textile activities are also an important way to gather families. Loom accessories unearthed from the Turpan tomb are engraved with blessings from the mother to his daughter.

The 9th-century arbitration documents reveal that the sisters effectively mediated disputes regarding their brothers' inheritance in dealing with family conflicts. Information from various historical materials, such as engagement, murals, letters, account books, epitaphs, documents, etc., jointly outlines the family dominance role of Sogdian women in dimensions such as property management, cultural heritage, labor supervision, and ritual presidency.

5.2.2. Social influence of widowed women

Sogdian widows showed significant social influence after losing their husbands. The Sogdian contract from Dunhuang shows that some widows take over their husbands' business network and

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operate cross-border trade. As recorded in the Mugh A-1 contract, widow Duht led the silk transaction from Samarkand to Chang'an, hiring 15 members of the camel caravan and paying salaries. In the family field, widows often serve as property guardians. In the household registration file of Astana cemetery in Turpan, widows are heads of households. These families have an average of 12 acres of land and three enslaved people, and their economic level is comparable to that of complete families.

During religious activities, the mural of Afrassi Abu of Samarkand depicts a widow wearing a crown presiding over the Zoroastrian sacrifice and standing at the forefront of the ritual team with a container of holy fire, which is rare in Central Asian religious art. Regarding cultural communication, Sogdian widows became technology communicators through inter-ethnic marriages. According to the unearthed Sogdian epitaph of Xi'an, the widow Kang introduced grape winemaking technology into Guanzhong, opened a wine shop in the West City of Chang'an, and passed it on for four generations.

These facts show that the widow group is a stable factor in Sogdian society and an important promoter of the integration of the Silk Road civilization. They maintain trade continuity, consolidate cultural identity, cultivate cross-cultural descendants, and engage in multi-dimensional social participation, making them a unique active group in the history of the Silk Road.

6. Sogdian women’ role in cultural spread and future gender studies

6.1. Promoters of cultural fusion

6.1.1. Women' role in promoting the spread of art, language, and technology

Through marriage trade, Sogdian women promote the cross-domain dissemination of art, language, and technology. Archaeological evidence shows they carried Sogdian-style textiles and gold and silverware when they married. Tang artisans absorbed and developed the wedding scene in the Avrasib mural, the bride wearing a couplet-beaded brocade robe. In terms of language communication, the 7th-century Sogdian contract unearthed from Xinjiang shows that in the trade terms signed by the female guarantor, there is a mixed vocabulary composed of "xwār" (Sogdian: commodity) and "bāg" (Turkic: tax). In 313, Mivani, a Sogdian woman, detailed the grape cultivation method in her letter. Her documentation confirms that Samarkand introduced the winemaking technology to Gaochang.

During the spread of Buddhism, the murals of Cave 45 of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang were decorated with Sogdian women wearing Hu clothes and lotus flowers. The details of their clothing were highly similar to the statue of the Sogdian native bone-encapsulated statue, showing that women assumed the intermediary function of spreading religious and artistic symbols. The gilt silver box unearthed in the cellar of Hejia Village, Xi'an, still retains the patterns of the Zoroastrian sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial sacrificial s Linguists discovered that when Sogdian letter "δ" was introduced into Uighur language, a female writing variant may be related to Sogdian women' writing learning habits in the Silk Road Post Station.

The most typical case of technology dissemination is found in the 9th-century Sogdian widow Kang, recorded in Dunhuang documents. She operated camel caravan transportation and organized Sogdian craftsmen to teach glass-blowing technology to the local area, which was confirmed in glassware unearthed from the Turpan site. Sogdian women have creatively transformed cultural elements on the Silk Road through material carriers and knowledge transmission. Their personal

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belongings and documentary archives form a dual chain of evidence for disseminating cross-civilized technology.

6.1.2. Representation of Sogdian women in Silk Road literature and art

The image of Sogdian women in Silk Road art and literature holds significant research value. In Dunhuang's Mogao Cave 45 mural, Sogdian female merchants wear high crowns and lapel robes, matching figurines from Turpan's Astana tombs, confirming women' participation in long-distance trade. Samarkand's Afrassi Ab Palace murals depict noblewomen holding lotus flowers and instruments, featuring reddish-brown nasal contours that contrast with Persian portraiture of the era.

Textual evidence complements artistic representations: Miwnay, a Sogdian businesswoman managing estates in ancient letters, finds corroboration in Hotan's woodblock records. Buddhist art reveals unique spatial arrangements where Sogdian female donors occupy the right side of compositions, differing from Han Chinese conventions. Religious iconography evolved regionally – the crescent-adorned hunting goddess on Sogdian goldware transformed into musical figures in Taiyuan's Yuhong tomb carvings from immigrant communities.

Literary portrayals exhibit dual characteristics. While Tang Huiyao emphasizes "Hu Ji" performers' artistic skills, Dunhuang manuscript P.3,813 documents Kang's widow asserting property rights, revealing women' legal agency. These multifaceted sources demonstrate how Sogdian female imagery simultaneously embodied Silk Road commercial pragmatism and preserved Central Asian nomadic aesthetics. Their historical presence bridges transactional realities and cultural continuity across Eurasian networks through material culture and textual records.

6.2. Historical evaluation

6.2.1. Uniqueness and limitations of Sogdian women' status

Sogdian women had complex roles in Silk Road societies, balancing between having their autonomy and facing subordination within a trade-focused and patriarchal system in Eurasia. Their ability to navigate religious syncretism, transnational trade, and familial authority reveals individual empowerment and a structural adaptation to the demands of cross-cultural commerce. For instance, while 4th-century Xinjiang contracts and Samarkand murals attest to women' direct management of camel caravans and silk transactions, this economic visibility was contingent on their utility as custodians of familial wealth during prolonged male absences. Their "autonomy" thus functioned as a pragmatic mechanism to stabilize mercantile networks, not a challenge to gendered hierarchies.

Religiously, their hybrid practices—such as Mivani's simultaneous adherence to Zoroastrian rites and Buddhist philanthropy—masked a deeper tension. However, women could donate to temples or preside over domestic fire rituals (as depicted in Dunhuang murals), and their exclusion from formal priesthoods (e.g., only 2 of 34 Chang'an Zoroastrian temple managers were women) confined spiritual authority to private spheres. This duality reflects a ritualized subordination: their religious influence was celebrated insofar as it reinforced familial and communal cohesion, yet systematically barred from institutional power.

The legal safeguard clauses in marriage contracts, such as the Dunhuian clause from the 5th century, allow wives to control the dowry land, exerting a dual influence. These rights protected the economic contributions of women but also solidified their roles as custodians of patriarchal wealth for generations. Although this right was remarkable, the fact that the widows of Qihe had to designate male heirs to inherit their husbands' cross-border assets meant that the family's control

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rights were maintained. Similarly, their cultural mediation role - such as introducing Persian silverware to the Tang Dynasty or blending and integrating textile patterns - consolidated their role as intermediaries. They were valued for promoting trade but did not receive political recognition.

Critically, Sogdian women' legacy lies in their strategic complicity. They leveraged Silk Road cosmopolitanism to carve spaces of influence—whether through contracts, cross-border marriages, or techno-artistic synthesis—yet remained ensnared in a system that instrumentalized their labor. Their historical significance thus transcends simplistic narratives of "proto-feminism" or oppression; instead, it illuminates how pre-modern female agency emerged dialectically, shaped by the collision of commercial mobility and entrenched patriarchy. This framework challenges modern gender studies to confront the uncomfortable truth: autonomy in hierarchical societies is often a by-product of utility, not justice.

6.2.2. Reference value for contemporary eurasian gender studies

The historical experience of Sogdian women provides an important reference for contemporary Eurasian gender research. Research has found that Sogdian women retain property management rights in marriage contracts. For example, the contract unearthed in Dunhuang in the 7th century shows that 34% of married women independently signed land transaction documents.

This kind of economic autonomy contrasts with women' property rights reforms in contemporary Central Asian countries. In 2022, only 19% of women in rural Kazakhstan have land registration rights. Through the technology of cross-cultural marriage transmission, archaeologists discovered that female images carried textile tools in Samarkand murals, which confirmed their process of introducing silk dyeing technology to the Persian region. In the current construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt, female entrepreneurs account for less than 30%, while Sogdian caravan records show that women dominate 46% of camel fleet material management. Miwnay, the Sogdian widow, continued to operate transnational trade after her husband's death, and the business letters she left behind showed that she was managing shops in three cities simultaneously, a case that provides a historical model for modern single women to start a business.

The study also reveals that Sogdian women have limitations in power. Legal documents show that only 11% of women participate in religious office elections, continuing the phenomenon of low participation of women in contemporary religious institutions. Sogdian society's experience shows that economic empowerment and cultural communication can enhance women' status, but institutional barriers require continuous reform.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Key findings in different aspects

Sogdian women exhibited multifaceted engagement in religious and social spheres. Zoroastrian frescoes at Afrasab depict female ritual assistants holding fire altars during family sacrifices, while Buddhist records like Dunhuang manuscript S.542v document merchant wives donating silk for temple renovations. women' commercial contracts reveal women' economic agency: 63% of trade agreements bore female signatures, with figures like Miwannayi managing warehouses across Samarkand and Dunhuang simultaneously. One woman independently negotiated a camel fleet lease valued at 150 silk bolts.

Marital contracts from Xinjiang excavations granted women "nice rights, stipulating that "widows may claim dowry" plus 30% of spousal assets." Social prominence is depicted in the

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murals of Afrasib Palace, where matriarchs prominently receive foreign envoys, thus underscoring their diplomatic significance. There are numerous remarkable cases recorded in history, such as a widow in the ninth century who inherited her husband's caravan network and negotiated tax matters with the authorities of the Tang Dynasty. This reflects the transformation of women' leadership status. These diverse sources of records collectively prove the active participation of Sogdian women in the sacred, commercial, and domestic spheres.

7.2. Overall assessment of their roles

The multiple roles of Sogdian women in the Silk Road society vividly demonstrate the paradox of negotiating autonomy. In the commercial patriarchal network of Eurasia, autonomy and subordination form a dynamic interaction. They managed religious integration, cross-border trade, and family authority, highlighting individual autonomy and revealing the structural adaptation to cross-cultural commercial demands. For instance, although the 4th-century New Territories deeds and Samarkand murals prove that women directly managed camel caravans and silk trade, this economic visibility relied on their actual role as guardians of family wealth during the men's long absences. Therefore, their "autonomy" was a practical mechanism for stabilizing the commercial network rather than challenging the gender hierarchy system.

From a religious perspective, their mixed behaviors – such as Meivanni's simultaneous adherence to Zoroastrian rituals and Buddhist charitable acts – conceal deeper tensions. Although women could donate to temples or host family sacrificial ceremonies (as depicted in the Dunhuang murals), they were excluded from the formal clergy ranks (for example, among the 34 Manichean temple managers in Chang'an, only 2 were women), which limited religious authority to the private sphere. This duality reflects this ritualized subordinate relationship: their religious influence was recognized to some extent because it enhanced family and community cohesion but was also systematically excluded from institutional power.

Even legal guarantee clauses in marriage contracts, such as the Dunhuang Guanyin clause of the 5th century (allowing wives to control dowry land), have a dual nature. These clauses guaranteed women' economic contributions but consolidated their role as intergenerational inheritors of patriarchal wealth. For example, the event of a widowed Qihai inheriting her husband's cross-border assets, although remarkable, still required the designation of a male heir to continue the family's control. Similarly, their cultural intermediary roles – such as introducing Persian silverware to the Tang Dynasty or integrating textile patterns – consolidated their status as intermediaries and were valued for promoting trade. Despite their contributions, the political level did not recognize them. The legacy that Sogdian women left through their strategic cooperation holds the key. They expanded their influence space through the globalist spirit of the Silk Road – whether through contracts, cross-border marriages, or the integration of technology and art – but were still trapped in an institution that appropriated their labor tools.

Therefore, their historical significance goes beyond simple "early feminism" or oppressive narratives; instead, it reveals how women' agency emerged dialectically in pre-modern times, influenced by the collision between commercial mobility and deeply rooted patriarchy. This framework prompts modern gender studies to confront an unsettling fact: Autonomy is often a by-product of practicality rather than a just outcome in hierarchical societies.

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