

Sogdian Diasporic Women's Autonomy and Limitations: Case Study of Triple Identities of Miwnay

CHEN Meicheng

Shanghai Pinghe School, Shanghai, China

While the historical works discussing the trading aspect of Sogdians are abundant, a relatively small amount of researches discuss the diasporic women who moved to China with their family members (usually husbands) who are traders. The Sogdian ancient letter is among the rare sources that provide women's perspective in Sogdian diasporic society. This work analyses the multiple identities of Miwnay, the main woman character in the Sogdian ancient letter. This paper explores the underlying privileges of women and socially constructed restrictions posed upon women. This work compares Sogdian women's situation implied in the letters with other women figures in sedentary communities'. In this work, Sogdian women's high autonomy is shown despite male dominance on financial resource distribution.

Keywords: Sogdians, gender, diaspora, Silk Road

Introduction

Sogdian ancient letters are among the early direct records about Sogdian communities. Their content, including Sogdian women's voices, was rare among the natural sources despite the increasing discovery of archaeological and historical documents in the past few decades as researchers investigate more into the role of Sogdian networks in ancient Asia. Aurel Stein found the letters in 1907 in the remains of a watchtower west of Dunhuang (Livshits, 2008). The most agreed date of original letters was around the 3rd century BC when China was in political instability. Sogdian trade communities have widely distributed in the Chinese towns, suggested in one letter as "a hundred freemen from Samarkand" and "forty men" (Washington.edu, 2022). Women send two of the letters discovered: Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 1, sent by "free women" Miwnay to her mother Catis, Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 3, sent by Miwnay to her husband Nanai-dhat, with a postscript composed by their daughter Shayn.

Recent studies regarding the emergence of Sogdian civic communities gave an overview of their social stanzas, indicating their solid aristocratic flavour (Shenkar, 2020). The other critical secondary sources (La, 2005) provided only vague interpretations of women's role in Sogdian communities. Direct sources such as the Sogdian ancient letters are fragmentary and scarce, leading to controversial discussion in women's religious, social, and political roles. Secondary sources are conjectured based on a debatable hypothesis. Records found in ancient Chinese materials such as in *The Book of Han* also focus primarily on Sogdian people's trading aspect rather than their social organization or diasporic communities' traits. The gender dynamics and women's role, especially

diasporic women, are rarely analyzed despite their relatively large population and considerable value in understanding Sogdian gender dynamics, social structure, and diasporic communities.

The Sogdian ancient letters, as one of the earliest records including rare diasporic Sogdian women perspective, are worth deep analysis. Although the letters' brevity and incompleteness pose challenges, they still leave room for interpretation based on the existing historical facts. Presenting multiple viewpoints and predictions also leads us further towards the actual situation.

This paper will analyze the multiple identities of Miwnay. Her aristocratic identity revealed in the description of "free women" in that historical context was analyzed in the structure of kinship and marriage relationships. Her access to various resources and degree of free will reflect their high social, economic autonomy comparing to Chinese restricted social values. However, the tragic ending of Miwnay and her daughter illustrated the vulnerability of women in a male-dominated society and the distant location from home. I utilized case study and comparison study to support my case. In a word, aristocratic diasporic Sogdian women enjoy a relatively high social-economic status, but they are still restricted from using resources and connections to enforce their privileges.

Aristocratic Sogdian Women's High Degree of Autonomy in Social and Economic Life

Through the letters written by Miwnay, aristocratic Sogdian women own relatively great social-economic privileges and autonomy. In the first part, the paper identifies the social-economic status of women through three indicators. Generally, in sociology, socioeconomic status is primarily measured through three dimensions: education, income, and occupation (Baker, 2014). Combined with ancient technological and cultural situations, my criteria assess the resources women can access in fields of access to financial channels, literacy (communication), and forms of servitude. This paper will mainly explore the three aspects of factual and textual (tone, diction, etc.). The second part focuses on the interaction between men and women in the kinship system, particularly the marriage system. The double identity of "women" and "aristocratic" is analyzed.

Identified Access to Resources

Aristocratic Sogdian women in diasporic communities can access various economic and social resources distributed to them.

Firstly, Miwnay was used to access at least two financial resources. She mentioned accessible money flow, namely "loan". In the tragic situation, as she was, she turned to another source, "charity from the priest". She used the terminology "so I depend on charity from the priest" (Washington.edu, 2022), presenting a tone that conveys her reliance on loans in the past. She took these money channels for granted and probably enjoyed these privileges regularly. In other words, the letter regarding Miwnay's dilemma as an exceptional case unveils the opposite normal situation when Sogdian women have access to economic resources. Financial institutions open to women were rare in ancient times. To give a clearer sense of the power Sogdian women own, what I compare is drawn between it and another sedentary country at that time, namely the Han Dynasty, China. *Nü Jie*, a book composed in the Han Dynasty by Chinese female Ban Zhao, asserted the expectations for women at that time. It advised women to "serve the family members by sacrificing their spiritual and material interests". It directly contradicts the financial quest that Miwnay asked from family members.

Secondly, the text favours women's literacy. Two of the Sogdian letters are sent by women. There can be two deductions derived from the writing person of letters. They can either be written by the women who sent

them or ascribe designated by the women. The paper is prone to the first possibility for several reasons. Firstly, the first and third letters are written by the same person. Miwnay's words, "Again and again I send you a letter" (Washington.edu, 2022), suggest that writing the letters herself is the only reasonable suggestion other than a long term scribe beside her to send letters at different times. Moreover, considering Miwnay's financial circumstances, it is unlikely that she could afford the expenses along with so many letters' writing expenses. Most importantly, Letter III, containing two parts: the introductory letter from Miwnay and the postscript from her daughter Saina, was written by two hands (La, 2005). Given that they most possibly will not have more than one scribe to register for them separately, the only possibility left is that they both know how to write. The regional postal system and communication system still opened for women and conveyed their writings. Further evidence provided the base for women literacy. The basis of education is the folklore that women took a significant role in composing (Narzullayevna, 2021). Aristocratic Sogdian women in diasporic communities can access various economic and social resources distributed to them.

Lastly, the letter showed women their will to perform servitude in a foreign country as men did. In the letter that Miwnay wrote to her husband, she mentioned that she should at least teach her how to "serve the Chinese" (Washington.edu, 2022) while she was stuck on the Chinese mainland. She had her intention to survive on the Chinese mainland through working for the Chinese. Some may argue that serving the Chinese seems to be the last resort conveyed through the text's description. It is undeniable that the employment of foreign women in the Chinese Confucianist value system can hardly be acceptable. However, an aristocratic woman, especially a literate woman, like Miwnay would possibly regard herself as capable of working for the Chinese, as proved in the former argument. The term "serve" is prone to be a political context that refers to a post in the Chinese government or trade with Chinese people. Otherwise, she would not be consulting a male companion for advice.

The Egalitarian Tendency in the Kinship and Marriage System

The letters' writer saw herself as a respected aristocrat who had enjoyed respect at home country, and she was not subjugated to her husband's will through her diction and tone. First, evaluating women's options or choices in the marital residence gives expediency and individual initiative free play. Secondly, women had a say over family resources and resources, and they owned privileges in abode family. These two indicators of autonomy strongly contrast with the guidance for elite Chinese women in the Han Dynasty, *Nü Jie*. The traits of being "submissive" and "win their husbands' approval", which are advised by the Chinese guidance, grant far less freedom to wives than the practices Sogdian communities practised.

Women have the free choice regarding their marital residence. Miwnay mentioned that she "obeyed your command and came to Dunhuang" instead of "observe (my) mother's bidding nor (my) brothers" (Washington.edu, 2022). It reveals that Miwnay chose to go to China with her husband or stay in the home country after the marriage. Between these two options, she decided to go with her husband. Another important indication of women's control over family monetary resources is that Miwnay wrote the first letter to her mother for financial support instead of other family members. The letter's receiver suggests that women at least have a say in distributing monetary resources in the family.

Miwnay, in the letter, clearly enjoyed privileges in the abode family. The comparison Miwnay drew between her original family and her marriage family shows her privileged status. "In my paternal abode, I did not have such a restricted ... as with(?) you" (Washington.edu, 2022). Linked with the context of her accusing her husband of not applying or supporting her in any way, this certainly shows that she enjoyed more

resources and privileges than in her nowadays diasporic family. Her tone and diction can also demonstrate the privileged status of Miwnay. She called her husband no better than a “dog or pig”, reflecting that she faced the free choice of whether or whom to marry. She saw herself as not subjugated to her husband in the married status, instead of equal rank. Wife’s high control sphere in family, especially wives from privileged families, is further manifested by the case study of Guyuan cemetery that An Niang. She was a Sogdian woman who had records of “her patrilineal-descent-oriented kinship” and tombstones that “match in size and styles” compared to her husband, which is interpreted as having a special status in marriage (Wertmann, Wagner, & Tarasov, 2017). The same applies to Miwnay, “free women”, which refers to aristocratic identity in the letter’s historical context.

Sogdian Diasporic Women’s Limitations

Sogdian women in diasporic communities access to resources still limited due to their social context and foreign environment. As many other sources suggested, Sogdian women reflected in these situations of economic dependence and double guardianship. Financial resources were cut off in impoverished status, with no financial income from merchant husband and monetary support from the original family. Literacy failed to generate material help due to female coercive social value in China and the dis-functioning of the communication system, which is revealed by the fact that the mailman lost the letters on the midway. The form of servitude remained exploitative towards women in a foreign context. The double identity of “women” and “diasporic” is analyzed.

Resources Based on Male Companions (Gender Dynamics)

Sogdian women still need approval and consent from the male family members or companions to enjoy the abundant resources. In the letters discussed, three support networks exist. When each network fails, the women ought to turn to the next for financial support. The first network is her husband. Men in the Sogdian marriage system are the ones that bring about financial income into the family, especially in the diasporic society where women focused on child-raising and men concentrated on trading. Miwnay’s daughter made the aim to contact her father quite clear, which was asking for “twenty staters” (Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 3), money. The clan member, the double guardianship she got, was Farnkhund. He required Miwnay’s husband’s consent on her mobility. When Miwnay’s husband failed to satisfy her needs, she turned to her original parental abode for help. Although she wrote to her mother for confirmation to receive charity help, her mother did not necessarily hold a family asset or financial resources but rather own socially equal status in the marriage relationship.

Moreover, Miwnay related her father to protection, reflected in “If(?) I(?) (had) no guarantee, no protection, my father ...”. She also seems to be more obedient and respectful to her father. In the sentence “How much more would I have ... by my father if ... a servant of the Chinese”, “more” implies that Miwnay has been through some degradation of some kind imposed by her father. There is a strong emphasis on her father’s aristocratic status and family pride. Her description of him further illustrates this: “A free man ... who found ... and ... keeps (his) clothing in good condition(?) (Washington.edu, 2022). Women, especially aristocratic women, still emphasise the father’s lineage and male protection. When she could not receive a reply from the parental abode, she relied on charity. However, the priest’s response said that “a man should go with you”, denying women’s capability of travelling alone.

Vulnerability of Foreign Identity (Diasporic Identity)

Sogdian aristocrat women are vulnerable in diasporic communities with unstable family long-distance connections and foreign identity. Since the diasporic wife was away from home, relying on the communication network, their status in marriage will be negatively affected in three ways. Firstly, the Chinese traditions on women may influence the social construct sphere of Sogdian communities, creating dual identity conflicts. As mentioned before, the Han Dynasty in China regards women as subjugated to men. The exact social expectations may be imposed on Sogdian communities within China's border. Secondly, the distance and mobility of the husband prevent Sogdian diasporic women from executing many privileges in marriages, such as divorce or keeping their male companion's chastity. Another primary source regarding Sogdian aristocratic women in her parental abode (Marinova, 2021) suggests a high degree of freedom granted to women from privileged families and demand groom received from several aspects. Thirdly, Sogdian diasporic women lack the alternative of going back to their paternal abode when marriages fail.

If the marriage relationships fail, women are subject to worse endings. Without her husband's consent, Miwnay was stuck in Chinese territory, incapable of travelling back home. If they manage to travel around, the dangerous route is hardly an option, especially during periods of political instability. More possibly, Sogdian women like Miwnay will be stuck in foreign territory and fall to tragic endings. Despite Miwnay and her daughter's will to serve the Chinese politically, they fell to be Chinese servants who "watch over a flock of domestic animals". The fate of these two women is worth further interpretation. Based on the fact that Chinese society regards "barbarian maids" from Sogdian colonies with the lowest stratum and subject of exploitation (Marinova, 2021), Miwnay and her daughter, with their financial dependence, may be reduced to the stricter forms of servants of Chinese.

Conclusion

Aristocratic Sogdian diasporic women had undeniable influence over demanding husbands fulfilling their duty and could access. They at least subjectively believed to have granted access to various resources, showing their social and economic autonomy. Simultaneously, these women were subject to men's disposal of monetary resources and vulnerable to the absence of male companions. I used to compare and contrast Sogdian women's situation with Chinese women at the same period to suggest Sogdian women's relatively high social and economic status. I also use a case study of other primary sources to conjecture the high degree of freedom in marriage relationships. I made the concession that Sogdian women still had considerable limitations in power dynamics with men. I utilized a case-by-case study to ensure that all resources that women can access contain some degree of masculinity, reflecting Sogdian society's social construct. A comparison study is used again to prove that foreign identity restricts privileges that aristocratic women can enjoy. It is essential to state that the comparison is not a negation of Chinese ideology but rather a presentation of the epitome of Chinese and Sogdian social views towards female communities. It only presents the difference in order to demonstrate the relative autonomy of Sogdian communities.

In conclusion, women's access to resources determined by diasporic identity and marriage relationships shows an egalitarian tendency; the social ideology still tends to be male dominant. This analysis can provide insight into aristocratic Sogdian women's privileges in male-dominated societies and the contrast between women's status in different sedentary cultures. Further studies can focus on most Sogdian women who do not

have privileged lineage, investigating women's overall social opinion and treatment. Another area of great significance is to what extent and how the Chinese social environment influenced diasporic society.

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