

*Tang Baicheng **
*Rukhsana Iftikhar***

Muslims and the Silk Road during Ming Dynasty: A Framework for Economic Relations

Abstract

The Silk Road during Ming times was traversed by caravans sent by Muslim kingdoms and variant merchants. The products which they brought to China increased trade on Silk Road. The Muslims who settled in China also actively served the Ming government; they functioned as interpreters, envoys, officials or intellectuals. At the same time, Muslims also reconciled the conflicts of the regimes and maintained the smooth flow of trade on the silk road. The ancient Silk Road provides a rich context to the ongoing developmental projects in the realm of One Belt One Road initiative. The rich historical context will prove helpful in enhancing Pakistan's participation in international trade, carrying out cultural exchanges and making use of geographical advantages.

Key words: Silk Road, CPEC, Pakistan, China, Ming Dynasty.

Introduction

Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, it has now become a well-known brand and main channel for cooperation and exchanges between China and countries along the route. The CPEC is not only a flagship project of China's Belt and Road initiative, but also provides important opportunities for Pakistan's development. As everyone knows, the Belt and Road initiative has a long history background and tradition, which is the ancient commercial route across the Eurasian continent, that is, the world-famous silk road. Before the era of European navigation in the 16th century, the silk road was the main channel for trade and cultural exchanges between East Asia and South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Its name came from the silk transported from China. The total length of the main and branch lines of the Silk Road was more than 7,000 kilometers, and its prosperous period and use efficiency were more than a thousand years. Through the Silk Road, China's famous commodities and technologies, such as silk, gunpowder, papermaking, printing and porcelain, flowed into the western world, while daily

* *Tang Baicheng, Ph. D. Scholar, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan (Co-Cultivation with Northeastern University at Qinhuangdao, China).*

** *Prof. Dr. Rukhsana Iftikhar, Professor, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan*

necessities and cash crops from the western world, as well as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and related cultural arts, flowed into China. However, it was not until the end of the 19th century that German geographer Ferdinand Freiherrn von Richthofen named the road between China, Central Asia and South Asia as the "Silk Road" for the first time in his book *China*.¹ The term was soon accepted by the academic circles and officially used. Later, in the book "*The ancient Silk Road between China and Syria*"² published by German historian Hermann at the beginning of the 20th century, he further extended the Silk Road to the West Bank of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, and determined the basic connotation of the Silk Road, that is, the land trade channel of ancient China to South Asia, West Asia, Europe and North Africa through Central Asia. Since then, this appropriate and wonderful name has been recognized by people, especially the ancient Silk Road from Dunhuang in Gansu Province, China to the Pamir Plateau has attracted the attention of many tourists and explorers, and has become one of the research objects of historians and geographers in various countries.

In the field of Silk Road studies, Chinese scholars have made considerable achievements in the study of Buddhism and Buddhist art.³ However, they have not paid much attention to Islam, one of the three major religions in the world, and the great contribution of Muslims in the history of the Silk Road. Although Buddhism and Buddhist art, through murals, sculptures and stone carvings, reflect the exotic cultural beauty, the footprints of Muslims had covered every journey on the silk road. This paper mainly studies the role and action of Muslim population on the silk road of Ming dynasty, reveals their outstanding contribution to the development and maintenance of the silk road of Ming dynasty, and discusses how Pakistan should play more roles in the context of One Belt And One Road. It should be noted that this paper focuses on Muslims and their activities in two aspects: one is the role of Muslims in the interaction between the countries along the Silk Road and China in the Ming Dynasty, and the other is the role of the Muslims who settled in China in the exchange and cooperation with the countries along the silk road.

Muslims came to China before the Ming Dynasty

In the 8th century, the Arab Empire and Islam developed to South and Central Asia, while China in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) also developed to Xinjiang and Central Asia, which made some Western Muslims come to China to do business along the Silk Road, mainly Arabs and Persians. Gradually, some Muslims began to settle in China and often engaged in overseas business and trade activities. At the beginning of the 13th century, the Mongols rose, launched several Western expeditions, and established an unprecedented large Mongolian empire across the Eurasian continent. Central and Western Asian countries were conquered and brought under the unified management of Mongolia, which made the transportation between China and the West more convenient at that time. Subsequently, a large number of soldiers, businessmen, craftsmen and priests from central and Western Asia were forced or took the initiative to come to China. Most of them were Muslims who believed in Islam. At that time, China called them "Huihui". The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), established by the Mongols, gave Muslims a high political and economic status. They had a higher social status than the Han people in China. They often held senior positions in the government. Islam also showed a prosperous development. As a result, thousands of Muslims have come to China. There is a saying in *The history*

of the Ming Dynasty that " the Hui people were all over the world in the Yuan Dynasty".⁴ Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, Yunnan and other places have formed Muslim settlements.

After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, many Mongols on the Silk Road believed in Islam in order to survive, and mixed with Uighur and Huihui as Muslims. According to *the story of King Hami's revival* written by Ma Wensheng(1426-1510), there were three kinds of people in Hami of Xinjiang in Ming Dynasty, namely Huihui, Wei Wuer and Ha CiHui.⁵ Huihui refers to Muslims returning to China along the Silk Road from Central Asia. The Wei Wuer refer to Uighur Muslims who once practiced Buddhism but now follow Islam, the Ha Cihui refers to a Mongolian sergeant who became a Mongolian Muslim after he adopted Islam. With the collapse of the unified great Mongolian Empire and the Yuan Dynasty, Chinese history entered the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Although the Prosperity of the Silk Road was not as great as that of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Muslims in the Ming Dynasty played a more diverse role and assumed more diversified functions on the Silk Road than before, when Muslims were mainly engaged in trade.

The Role and Action of Muslims in the Silk Road of Ming Dynasty

1.Tributary Ambassadors

In the Ming Dynasty, there was an official trade, called tribute-trade, in which the Chinese government allowed foreign envoys to bring some native products to China to trade with the official government in the name of tribute. The central government gives generous rewards to the countries that pay tribute, and its economic value far exceeds the tribute itself. This economic exchange was not worth the cost to China, but the government was enthusiastic about it. Because it could show the prosperity of all countries paying tribute, make the emperor famous and to show off China's political position at the center of the world. Of course, this was only an illusion of the political status of ancient China, and the so-called "tributary" was only an expression of Chinese history books themselves. For the tributary states, the main purpose was to obtain relatively rich economic returns from China, without the meaning of true political submission. However, in the Ming dynasty, private overseas trade was prohibited and only tribute-trade was allowed to exist.⁶

Along the Silk Road in Ming Dynasty, Islamic countries in Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia established diplomatic relations with China, and sent Muslim envoys to China to carry out the tribute-trade. At that time, the distribution of these countries involved Xinjiang, Samarkand of Uzbekistan, as well as some areas of India, Afghanistan, Iran and Arabian Peninsula, among which Samarkand was the most prominent. Therefore, representing the king as a tribute envoy was the most important role played by Muslims in the Silk Road in the Ming Dynasty. The size of the missions in Islamic countries was different, usually between 50 and 500 people. The tribute items were horses, lions, sal ammoniac, spices, and other exotic goods, and they were rewarded by the Ming government with rich silk, paper, money, coins, clothes, etc.⁷ This kind of communication was a symbol of political friendship, rather than the nature of market goods. However, in the Silk Road tribute-trade relations, it was necessary for Muslim envoys and their Islamic Kingdom to obtain rich economic benefits.

The general situation of tribute-trade between Islamic countries and Ming-China can be roughly divided into the following stages. The first stage was 1368-1424. During this period, the Ming Dynasty just unified the whole country and publicly announced and encouraged Islamic countries to pay tribute by using the policy of leniency and moderation. In October 1403, Emperor Zhu Di of the Ming Dynasty said to the ministers of the Ministry of Rites, "recently, the people of western countries and the Huihui state of HaZhi saw our envoys in Siam(former name for Thailand), and they had followed them to pay tribute. It is commendable that the foreigners in the distance know how to respect China. From now on, those who wish to enter China according to their preference."⁸Moreover, the Ming Dynasty also granted tax-free policy to Muslim tribute countries. At that time, some western countries, such as Cini state and Muslim HaZhi state, came to pay tribute, because of the pepper trade with the people, the relevant departments asked for their taxes. Emperor Zhu Di said, "the state uses commercial tax to restrain people who pursue commercial profits, are we using it for profit? Now foreigners have come from afar to admire our civilization, if we rob them of interests we get very little, only to disgrace the country's dignity."⁹ Therefore, the tribute-trade to Ming Dynasty was prosperous and frequent in Muslim countries in this period, which led to the emergence of private Muslim trade.

The second stage is 1425-1464. The frequency of Muslim tributes to China had been maintained at a high level, and the duration of their stay had increased. A large number of Muslim merchants had settled in the central Plains in the name of tributes and became very active in commercial activities. The third stage was 1465-1545. Wars on the Northwest Silk Road were frequent and disastrous, especially the tussles between the Ming Dynasty and Tulufan over Hami, which forced the Ming to take measures from time to time to close the door and eliminate tribute. At the same time, because the Ming paid several times more than the tribute as a reward, the more times the tribute was paid, the greater the financial burden. Therefore, the Ming Dynasty made more restrictions on the tribute to ease the financial burden, such as reducing the tribute period, limiting the number of people, reducing the types of transactions, etc., which affected the Muslim tribute-trade to a certain extent. The fourth stage was 1545-1644. The frequency of Muslim tribute-trade decreased sharply and tended to be silent, which was related to the further regulation and restriction of the tributary policy of the Ming Dynasty. More importantly, with the advent of the era of great navigation, more and more Muslims joined the private maritime trade dominated by Europe, and the official tribute-trade of China was no longer attractive.¹⁰

The tributary ambassadors from Muslim countries played a crucial role in the Ming Dynasty Silk Road. The ambassadors were official envoys backed by the government, and some Kings even provided financial support for Muslim caravans they hired years in advance. The tribute-trade was not only an economic exchange, but also a political diplomatic action, and also a political guarantee to keep the Silk Road open.

2.Folk Merchant

If Muslim merchants wanted to participate in the trade activities of the Ming Dynasty, they could only pretend that they were servants of the ambassadors of an Islamic kingdom and enter China with them. Otherwise, the Ming government would not allow Muslim merchants to enter the border in their own names. Therefore, more and more Muslim folk merchant groups chose this way, which is why later Muslim missions became larger and larger, even numbering as many as 500 or 600 people, so that the Ming Dynasty had to strictly limit the number. In fact, in principle, any Islamic king had the right to send a mission only once a year, which was supposed to arrive in Beijing on the eve of the Chinese New Year. So every year around the autumn, a large number of Muslim merchants gather in Yumen, Gansu Province, to make friends with the mission with large amounts of money and let themselves join them to trade in China. Each caravan was made up of hundreds of merchants, formed according to different countries and businesses, and there were also different degrees of trade between them. Muslim merchants transported horses, jade, minerals, leather, medicinal materials, clothing and ornaments from Central Asia to China in exchange for silk, iron, tea, medicinal materials, paper, gold and silver jewelry.

At that time, many Christians, perhaps because of religious differences, claimed that Muslim businessmen were cheats who represented imaginary Kings, and accused them to the Ming government. However, the Ming Dynasty, which was inclined to Islamists, did not investigate the identity of Muslim envoys too much. Later, as more and more Muslim merchants came to China, making the Ming Dynasty's financial expenditure huge, the government began to pay attention to the identification of them. For example, Zhu Zhanji (reigned 1425-1435), the emperor of the Ming Dynasty, once expressed this view: "Huihui people are good at making profits. Although they pay tribute in name are actually seeking trade and profits."¹¹ Another example was in March 1487, when the Ming Emperor Zhu Jianshen sent back a Tian Muslim who he judged to be a fake tribute envoy. This is recorded in Chinese historical records as follows: Zhu Jianshen (reigned 1464-1487) said, "A Li was actually a traitor. He carried goods privately, sought great profits in the name of tribute, and made extravagant remarks in the guild hall. Considering he is a foreigner from afar, he will not be investigated for the time being. The royal guards escorted him to the governor of Guangdong for his repatriation."¹²

Of course, the merchants and the tributary Ambassadors could be transformed into each other. Some Muslim merchants travelers volunteered to offer luxury goods to the king, asking the king to issue an official seal so that they could gain the privilege of certain commercial activities and thus become ambassadors. After paying tribute to the Ming government, some Muslim ambassadors stayed in China for a long time, even settled down, engaged in trade activities, and became merchants. For example, A Muslim man named Ya Mulan, who originally lived in Turpan, later moved to Echeng, Hubei Province. He bought land extensively, sold houses and became a big merchant in the southeast of China.¹³ As envoys and merchants, Muslims' activities were not limited to the direct trade between Islamic countries and the Ming Dynasty, but also often act as envoys of Mongolia to negotiate with the Ming Dynasty, or join

the Mongolian mission as merchants to do transit trade in China, which will be mentioned in more detail later.

Along the ancient Silk Road, Muslim merchants were not only familiar with the language and ethnic customs of their trading partners, but also possessed certain economic and trade expertise, so doing business was mostly a family business. People who planned to rely on business activities needed to learn from their parents at first. Then they followed the camel caravan to travel all over the country to complete the established business activities in different races, different geographical environments, and different social environments. As a result, the business man had the ability to adapt to the colorful environment and communicate with different languages. The Islamic Kingdom recruited business professionals from these business families, not only to provide them with financial support, but also to provide them with the diplomatic documents they need as ambassadors for tributary trade.

If we say the tributary ambassadors were the political guarantee for the smooth flow of the Silk Road, then the merchants were the main body of Commerce and the real practitioners on the silk road. Because of the merchants' participation, the Silk Road trade gradually became a relatively stable trade relationship from the beginning of diplomatic relations. At that time, the Central Asian peoples still maintained animal husbandry economy, or semi farming and semi grazing. They needed to use the Silk Road to maintain close economic exchange with China, which had relatively developed agriculture and urban handicraft industry, in order to meet their material production and daily life needs, and this task was mainly completed by merchants. In short, the participation of Muslim merchants greatly enriched the scale of trade on the Silk Road, met the needs of the East and West for foreign products, realized the complementarity of the economy and life of both sides, and also stimulated the progress of social production along the silk road. Jiao Hong, a man of the Ming Dynasty, went to the northwest in person and said with emotion: "the paddy fields and land fields in the frontier are like the inland."¹⁴ The formerly famous backwater became a land of plenty. After the 13th century, European Society's demand for Oriental goods also stimulated distant trade. In order to trade with the East, Europeans had to reach commercial agreements with Muslims. Venice became very rich because of these important treaties. In this way, Muslim merchants ship East Asian products to more Western Europe.

The private merchants often mixed with envoys, and it was difficult to distinguish them in Ming Dynasty. The merchants pretended to be envoys and assumed the political and diplomatic functions imperceptibly. The Muslim rulers in Central Asia regarded this kind of trade relations as an important aspect of maintaining political ties with the Ming Dynasty, and the Ming Dynasty also used this kind of inseparable economic ties as a diplomatic means, and often threatening those recalcitrant local leaders by closing trade. In order to obtain benefits and keep the Silk Road open, merchants frequently contacted and made friends with princes and ministers of different regimes, or held various positions in the local government by virtue of their talents. Therefore, they had considerable power and influence in the Ming Dynasty, and often acted as mediators of the interests of various regimes. Of course, this information will be mentioned more below.

In addition, Muslim merchants also had the special status of cultural envoys, they brought a large number of goods including many Islamic cultures. These items with Islamic culture had gradually been widely accepted by the Chinese people and integrated into Chinese culture. The most typical one was blue and white porcelain, which is widely popular in Chinese society. The shape, color and pattern of blue and white porcelain in Ming Dynasty obviously appeared Islamic style, such as pots holding the moon, tubular flower seats and other utensils, as well as oval chrysanthemum patterns. The branches and leaves of these plants and flowers, not only the main branches curl in shape, but also the lateral branches extend in many directions, which is often called Mohammedan Scrolls. After the 14th century, China's blue and white porcelain was widely sold to Muslim trade markets in Egypt, India and Persia; since the 16th century, the blue and white porcelain was transported from Spain to Mexico and other new continents, eventually forming a global cultural element.

3. Interpreter (Be called Tongshi in ancient Chinese literature)

The majority of Muslim Tongshi in the Ming Dynasty were Muslim who had settled in China since the Yuan generations. At that time, the Ming Dynasty established official communications with Muslim countries along the Silk Road, and Muslim Tongshi were quickly made a translator in the outward exchanges of the Ming Dynasty due to their good proficiency in languages such as Arabic and Persian.

In the early years of Ming Dynasty, in order to prevent the residual forces of Yuan Dynasty from uniting with the Muslim countries for military attack, the Ming government sent a delegation familiar with the Western Muslim countries to visit, and Chen Cheng(1365-1458) was the head of the mission. Chen Cheng's five missions had been very successful, among which Muslim generals played an important role. The situation of the western regions reported by Chen Cheng to the Ming government was recorded in *The annals of the western regions* and *The itinerary of the western regions*. It was mentioned in the book that members such as "Ha Lanbo", "Timur Buhua" and "mahamuhuo" were Muslim Tongshi(interpreters).¹⁵ They understood Arabic or Persian, practiced Islam, and understood the customs of the Muslim, which made Ming visiting missions very popular in the Muslim regions. Their ancestors settled in the Ming Dynasty from the Western Regions, and they had natural connections with the Muslim countries they visited. When they joined the Ming Dynasty Mission and came to the Muslim countries, they had a close feeling of returning home to visit relatives, and Muslim countries also had a strong sense of identity with them. The Ming Dynasty adopted the strategy of strengthening economic and trade contacts along the Silk Road in order to defuse Mongolia's attempt to unite with Muslim countries to attack, in this process, Muslims served the Ming government actively. Some served as members of diplomatic missions, some were assigned to command posts, some were assigned to post stations or guesthouses along the Silk Road, and some in administrative offices on the borders. In the implementation of these policies, Muslim interpreters had played an effective intermediary and communication role. However, these Muslims were not appointed diplomatic officials by the Ming government, nor did they have the rank of Ming officials, so there are not many records in the historical records.

Corresponding to Chen Cheng's visit to the Muslim region was Zheng He's seven voyages to the Western Seas, while the latter was more well-known, and of course both had achieved great success. During Zheng He's voyages to the west (1405-1433), Islam had already occupied a dominant position in the these region, and Muslims had mastered the economic and political lifeblood of their kingdom. Therefore, Zheng He's fleet had a large number of Muslim, who were responsible for translating, recording and communicating with Muslim countries along the way. At present, the more definite Muslim members are gong Zhen, Fei Xin, Ma Huan, Guo Chongli and Ha San. Gong Zhen and Fei Xin were full-time translators and recorders. Ma Huan and Guo Chongli were selected because they were good at understanding the dialect. Ha San was the leader of Islam in a certain area.¹⁶ The language and religious advantages of the Muslim general affairs enabled Zheng He's fleets to quickly communicate with the regions they went to and gain a good recognition of religious feelings.

4. Officials of the diplomatic service

In contrast to the Tongshi, diplomatic officials were formal officials of the Ming Government. During the Reign of Yongle(1403-1424) in the Ming Dynasty, the Major organ of foreign affairs was Honglu Temple. Maintaining the Silk Road trade relations with Muslim countries was the most important foreign affairs activity of the Ming government at that time. There were many Muslims in Honglu Temple who played an important role. As Muslims were proficient in many western languages, some of them could be promoted to the minister of Honglu Temple. According to *The veritable records of Emperor Taizong of the Ming* (the year-by-year records of events related to the emperor), in the third year of Yongle(1405), Wang Qishiwu, the XuBan of Honglu Temple (Be responsible for the etiquette of the court meeting and banquet), was promoted to be the minister of Honglu Temple, because of familiar with the language and writing of the northern barbarians."¹⁷In the fourth year of Yongle(1406),"Ha Zhi, the XuBan of Honglu Temple, was promoted to be the minister of Honglu Temple, because of familiar with the language of the western regions. "¹⁸

5. Mediator between Ming and Mongolia

The Mongol regime maintained the traditional policy of vigorously using Muslim merchants during the Yuan Dynasty, so a large number of Muslim merchants joined the Mongol and Ming trade. For example, in 1147, more than 1,100 people of the diplomatic corps of Oirat(name used for western Mongolian tribes during the Ming Dynasty)conducted tributary trade with the Ming Dynasty, about half of whom were Muslim merchants, and Abudu, Hazhi Ali and Shehei Zanda were among the representatives. The Mongols, of course, hoped that more Muslim merchants would join the mission, so that they could expand their trade with the Ming and get more in return. According to Chinese historical records and statistics, from 1407 to 1554, Muslims from Mongolia paid tributes for 55 times, ranging from one to several thousand.¹⁹ The tribute-trade relationship initiated by the Ming Dynasty and Islamic countries along the Silk Road was an important way for rulers to obtain political and economic interests. However, military frictions and political crises often occurred between the Ming Dynasty and Mongolia, which seriously affected the connectivity of the Silk Road and further affected the interests of Muslim merchants and Islamic

countries. Therefore, Muslims were very willing to actively resolve the Conflict between China and Mongolia as a third party in order to maintain the smooth flow of the Silk Road. Among them, the most notable was the mediation performance of Muslims in "The Crisis of TuMu fortress".

In 1449, Zhu Qizhen, the emperor of the Ming Dynasty, personally marched to resist Oirat(one of the Mongolian tribes) to invade. As a result, the Ming army was besieged at the TuMu fortress, more than 50 officers, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed in the battle, and the emperor was captured, which was known as "The Crisis of TuMu fortress". The war made the relationship between Ming and Mongolia extremely sensitive. Both sides stationed heavy troops on the border, and the Ming Dynasty closed the Silk Road trade with Mongolia, which made it impossible for communicate directly.Oirat had sent envoys to discuss many times and asked to reopen the market, which were all rejected by the Ming Dynasty.²⁰ Muslim businessmen mediated and made efforts to improve the relationship between them. After being captured, Zhu Qizhen became a bargaining chip for Oirat to blackmail the Ming Dynasty, so the Ming dynasty made his younger brother Zhu Qiyu emperor. Soon Zhu Qiyu sent Li Shi, Ma Zheng and others to Oirat negotiations. Ma Zheng was the son of a Muslim from the Western regions who had been attached to the Ming Dynasty. He had come to Oirat several times as an intermediary. He had connections with the upper class of Oirat and was familiar with its social situation. After this negotiation, both sides have demonstrated their sincerity in peacefully resolving the crisis. Then Oirat sent an important Muslim, Pirma Herma, on behalf of Oirat to deeply negotiate with Ming on how to deal with the crisis. Pima Heima was a Central Asian Muslim who first came to the Ming Dynasty in 1436 to pay tribute with Aduchi, a envoy of Oirat. He led a caravan to the Ming Dynasty six times since then as a envoy of Oirat. The Ming Dynasty conferred on him honorary positions such as the DuZhihuishi and DuduQianshi(Honorary position of military officer). Such a Muslim, who was at ease in both Ming and Oirat officialdom, was an acceptable negotiator on both sides. He took advantage of his special status to run between the two sides and gave full play to his coordination ability, which contributed to the sound development of the negotiation and finally resolved the crisis successfully. The Ming Dynasty lifted the trade embargo against Oirat, opened the border market, and restored the silk Road tribute-trade.

When the Ming Dynasty emperor Zhu Qizhen was detained in Oirat, Muslim traders gave him good care, hoping the emperor could once again ascend the throne and continue to support Muslim merchants in developing Silk Road trade. According to the Persian Ali Akbar's "*Journey to China*", Zhu Qizhen was captured and handed over to local traders for management. "The merchants served the emperor, built a throne for him, held various banquets for him, and provided all kinds of delicious food and wine, such as roast whole sheep, pilaf, wine, fruit juice and so on."²¹ Based on the analysis of the food they provided, the traders were most likely Muslims. The Muslim protection of the Ming emperor played an important role in the reconciliation between Oirat and the Ming Dynasty, eventually leading to the safe return. Eight years later, Zhu Qizhen was re-enthroned. In order to repay the Muslims for meticulous care, they were given a lot of preferential treatment,

officials and gifts, which was also one of the important factors for muslims' dominant position in the tributes trade.

6. Outstanding diplomat

Among the important Muslims in the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He (1371-1435) had the greatest reputation. In 1894, Yuan Jiagu found the epitaph of Zheng he's father, Ma Hazhi, in jinning County, Yunnan Province. The epitaph was written in 1407 and carved in front of the tomb by his elder brother Ma Wenming. "HaZhi" was a common name for Chinese Muslim pilgrims who have visited Mecca, indicating that Zheng's father had been there. At that time, the transportation was still very backward, few Chinese Muslims could finish the pilgrimage homework. It can be seen that Zheng he was born in a devout Muslim family. As the greatest navigator in China's history, Zheng He led seven large-scale large-scale missions in the 28 years from 1405 to 1433, and opened a route connecting the Western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The voyage was 87 years earlier than Columbus, 92 years earlier than da Gama, 114 years earlier than Magellan. It was also the largest voyage in the history of the world before the great discovery of European Geography Sailing activities. Zheng He's fleet reached more than 30 countries, including 15 countries in the east of Malay Peninsula, 3 countries in Malacca, 7 countries in Sumatra, 6 countries in South Asia and 3 countries in East Africa.²² With Zheng He's visit, many envoys came to China one after another. They established the tribute-market relationship between with the Ming Dynasty, brought a large number of native products, carried out extensive trade activities, and opened up the prosperous Maritime Silk Road.²³

According to the needs of visiting the Muslim world, Zheng He selected some Muslim translators, descendants of maritime families, intellectuals, Islamic masters and business tycoons from all over the world to serve in various industries of the fleet. The Muslim community represented by Zheng He played a crucial role in this feat of navigation. Zheng He's voyage was often restricted by natural conditions such as waves, tides, trade winds and ocean currents, as well as the invasion of pirates, which was full of difficulties and dangers. Zheng He, grew up in a Muslim family, was influenced by the spirit of exploration of his ancestors who traveled across the sea to Mecca. He believed that "there are people on the other side of the ocean" and boldly traveled to the West. The rich navigation experience accumulated by his family predecessors played a very important role in him. His physical strength had been weakened by years at sea, and finally died on the way home. His indomitable and fearless spirit of exploration and devotion to the cause of peaceful and friendly exchanges with foreign countries along the silk road is worthy of our permanent remembrance.

7. Intellectuals

There were many Muslim intellectuals in Zheng He's fleet. The reason why they were listed separately was some intellectuals had written works about the nationalities and countries along the Silk Road, which provides rich sources and information for future generations to recognize and understand the new world, especially the Islamic world, to further open up the silk road routes and expand the trade, which was of great historical significance Righteousness. Ma Huan, Fei Xin and Gong Zhen, Muslims in Zheng He's fleet, wrote books entitled "*Ying Ya Sheng*

lan", "*Xing Cuo Sheng lan*" and "*Xi Yang Fan Guo Zhi*" respectively, recording what they saw and heard during the voyage. Among them, Ma Huan, the author of *Ying Ya Sheng lan*,²⁴ took part in the fourth, sixth and seventh activities of Zheng He's western voyages, recording the situation of 20 countries. Each country has its own chapter, which gives a detailed and vivid account of its location, evolution, important cities, ports, mountains and rivers, social system, political and religious criminal law, people's living conditions, social customs and religious beliefs, as well as production status, commerce and trade, climate, products, animals and plants, etc., in concise words, which is more specific and detailed than those recorded in *Xing Cha Sheng lan*. Gong Zhen, the author of the *Xi Yang fan Guo Zhi*, took part in the seventh voyage in 1433. The book focuses on the mountain and river situation, people's customs, products and climate on the way.²⁵

The Inspiration of Muslims and the Silk Road in Ming Dynasty to today's Pakistan

After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, on the basis of the Silk Road trade of the Yuan Dynasty, most of Asia was included in its own silk road trade system. The Ming government not only had friendly and peaceful development with the traditional Muslim countries in Central Asia and Middle East through the Silk Road, but also had intermittent economic exchanges with Inner Asia Mongolia, as well as official trade relations with Southeast Asia, South Asia and North Africa. What followed was a large number of foreign Muslim tribute envoys and merchants. Armed with the documents of the king and relying on their indomitable perseverance, rich experience and superb skills, they led a mighty Muslim caravan to exchange a large amount of life and economic materials needed by the Ming Dynasty, which made the Silk Road present a prosperous scene at that time.

On the ancient Silk Road, Muslim merchants not only had certain professional knowledge of economy or trade, but also knew the language and national customs of trading partners. They bravely went abroad and traveled all over the world, went to foreign lands of different nationalities, different geography and different social environments, and vigorously dumped their own goods. Thus, their ability to adapt to the multi-cultural environment had been trained. Under the background that Pakistan and China jointly build the Silk Road, we should reasonably learn from the ancient Muslims' deeds on the Silk Road, carry forward their great and immortal spirit, and learn their wisdom and skills. Unblocked trade is one of the key contents of the Belt and Road construction. The Pakistan-China trade is complementary to a certain extent, and the total import and export volume continues to grow.²⁶ However, due to transportation and technology, Pakistan's export structure to China has been single, exports to China have been less than imports from China, and even the export volume has a slow downward trend, which is not conducive to the long-term stability of trade cooperation.

To speed up the construction of CPEC, improve traffic conditions and production technology, expand industrialization rate and improve product competitiveness are the fundamental measures for Pakistan to expand its export. But in addition, more Pakistanis can learn from the ancient Muslims, go abroad, actively participate in international trade and transit trade, and improve their commercial ability in

practice. Pakistan can actively use the Shanghai Economic Cooperation Organization (SCO) to carry out economic cooperation in various fields in Xinjiang, China, Central Asia and other countries, and give full play to the economic advantages of regional characteristics. The government can introduce preferential policies to encourage more people to go abroad, expand overseas markets, and fully protect their interests, even grant them some privileges to participate in the competition of international trade. Young Pakistanis can also use Chinese e-commerce platforms to sell their own products online, or even live-stream them. At present, cross-border e-commerce is not yet developed. From the perspective of prospects, cross-border e-commerce trade between China and Pakistan has a great prospect of development. Of course, this requires the government to invest more in logistics construction, reduce logistics costs and speed up, and also needs to strengthen Internet supervision to ensure. At present, Huawei, Xiaomi and other mobile phone brands are commonly used in the two countries' markets. Pakistan can add software on mobile phones to build the Silk Road, increase the network connection channels with China, and let more people participate in the goal of jointly building the silk road. This can not only ease the pressure of domestic employment, reduce the trade deficit with China, but also help to achieve a more long-term and healthy trade cooperation relationship.

Looking back on the history, we can find that one of the reasons why Muslims played such an active role in the Silk Road trade in the Ming Dynasty was they mastered the languages of many countries or nationalities, and were very familiar with the cultural customs and social features of the trading places. This was very helpful to the smooth development of economic-trade cooperation, which one of the important reasons for the prosperity of the ancient Silk Road. But today, compared with the political and economic exchanges between China and Pakistan, their cultural exchanges and mutual understanding lag behind. This is mainly due to the strangeness caused by the communication barriers and cultural differences. The friendly impression of the Pakistani people towards China mainly comes from the propaganda of the government and the media, which are imposed by external information sources, rather than the inherent friendly feelings through close exchanges and mutual familiarity. The cultural exchange between Pakistan and China is a short board, namely "Bucket effect", no matter how high a bucket is, the height of its water depends on the lowest board.

To carry out richer cultural exchanges is the foundation for closer people-to-people ties between two countries and an inevitable requirement for joint development of the Silk Road. At the level of academic exchange, Pakistan can continue to deepen the exchange and cooperation of academic talents with China. For example, the government can set up the Silk Road Cultural subsidy project to encourage more students and scholars to go to China to carry out research, so as to realize language exchange. In particular, it can promote the exchange of talents in science and technology, cooperate in major scientific and technological research, and jointly improve innovation ability. At the level of media exchange, the two governments can reasonably introduce films and documentaries to each other according to their own people's preferences and curiosity, so as to enhance the common people's understanding and familiarity with each other's culture. The people of the two countries can also make full use of the network media platform to realize daily

communication, such as the popular social software wechat and microblog. At the level of social exchange, the two countries can carry out library construction, book exhibition cooperation, and put relevant books on the market. In addition, we can strengthen tourism cooperation, expand tourism scale, and jointly create international excellent tourism routes and tourism products with the characteristics of the silk road.

Looking back on the history, we can also find that China's trade with the Islamic world in the Ming Dynasty gave full play to the role of Chinese Muslims, who acted as ambassadors, intermediaries, translators, businessmen and intellectuals. Chinese Muslims had a natural blood relationship with the Muslim countries they are sent to. Their language and religious advantages also made the Chinese caravan quickly obtain good communication and religious emotional identity with the areas they went to, which leads to the prosperity of the silk road. Therefore, Pakistan can follow this idea and make full use of China's Muslim population and regions to develop its own export trade. The existence of Muslim areas in Northwest China makes Pakistan and China have basic, long-term and personnel ties and communication channels. As an important part of Islamic culture, Chinese Muslims are the cultural and spiritual ties. From the diplomatic history of new China, Muslims in Northwest China played a very important bridge role in the process of establishing diplomatic relations between China and Arab countries, which can be regarded as a model of promoting the benign interaction of national politics by the natural link of Muslim culture and religious belief. This means that in the process of revitalizing the Silk Road, Northwest China's Muslim region is likely to play an important role. Its unique religious advantages and spiritual culture contain the potential to attract Pakistani Muslim business travel and capital northward. Therefore, the Pakistani government can pay attention to and attach importance to the Muslims in northwest China, and make use of their language and cultural advantages to enable the Pakistani caravan to gain good communication and recognition in China, expand export trade to China, and enhance cultural exchanges between each other.

Conclusion

Ancient Muslims were the participants, practitioners, creators and maintainers of the Silk Road connecting the Islamic world with China. They played a pivotal role in the history of exchanges between Chinese and Western civilizations. Because of them, the great Silk Road was connected, smooth and prosperous. In the Silk Road, Muslims effectively connected the economic exchanges between China and the Islamic world, and formed a synchronic "Muslim cultural corridor" from west to East, which promoted the mutual exchange between the two major world civilization systems, Islamic civilization and East Asian civilization, promoting the close combination of eastern and western world. Before the advent of the era of European navigation, the role played by Muslims in the Silk Road should be fully concerned and affirmed. Today, One Belt One Road construction can be understood to a great extent as a great revival of the Islamic world and China's economic relations under the new historical conditions. We should learn from the history of silk road actively and get inspiration, continue to create new brilliance and achievements along the Silk Road of the ancients. The East-West "Muslim cultural corridor" created by ancient Muslims on the silk road is the basic geopolitical,

religious and political geographical situation in the process of revitalizing the silk road. In this sense, the rise of the "New Silk Road" between the Islamic world and China is bound to be marked by a large number of Muslim businessmen coming eastward again and the reactivation and reorganization of Muslim cultural and religious heritage in the areas along the silk road. This is the greatest inspiration and inspiration given to us by history.

Notes & References

¹ Ferdinand Freiherrn von Richthofen, *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien, Erster Band*, (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1877)

² A.Herrmann, *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien*, (Berlin: Inktank Publishing, 2019)

³ Jia Yingyi and Qi Xiaoshan, *Buddhism spreading eastward to China*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2006). Okazaki, *Silk Road and Buddhist Culture*, (Guiyang: Guizhou University Press, 2013)

⁴ Qing government official, *Biography of salmahan-the History of the Ming Dynasty*, (Changchun: Jilin People's publishing house, 1995), 5621.

⁵ Ma Wensheng, *The story of King Hami's revival*, (Lanzhou: Lanzhou Ancient Books Bookstore, 1990)

⁶ Li Yunquan, *History of tributary system: A Study on the system of foreign relations in ancient China*, (Beijing: Xinhua press, 2004)

⁷ Hu Yunsheng, "The Hui's trade in presenting tribute in Ming Dynasty," *Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies*, no.2(April 1997): 37-53.

⁸ Zheng Hesheng, *Compilation of historical materials of Zheng He's voyages to the west*, (Beijing: Ocean Press, 2005), 776.

⁹ Zhang Xingfu, *Compilation of historical materials of Chinese and Western Transportation*, (Beijing: Chinese language publishing house, 2018), 713.

¹⁰ Hu Yunsheng, "The Hui's trade in presenting tribute In Ming Dynasty," *Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies*, no.2 (April 1997): 40-47.

¹¹ Wei Yuan, *Illustrated Annals of Overseas Countries*, (Changsha: Yuelu publishing house, 2011), 825.

¹² Edited by thread bound publishing house, *Basic historical materials series of Ming history-Frontier Volume*, (Beijing: Thread bound publishing house, 2005), 1318.

¹³ Yahya LinSong, *Huihui history and Islamic culture*, (Beijing: China Today Press, 1992), 66.

¹⁴ Wang Xiong and Jiao Hong, *Tribute biography, Compilation of historical materials of Mongolian Chinese books in Ming Dynasty*, (Hohhot: Inner Mongolia University Press, 2006), 441.

¹⁵ Chen Cheng, *The annals of the western regions*, (Beijing: Zhonghua publishing house, 2000)

¹⁶ Ma Guangde, "The role of Muslims in Zheng He's voyages to the west," *Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies*, no.2 (April 2005): 85.

¹⁷ Ming government official, *The veritable records of Emperor Taizong of the Ming • September of the third year of Yongle(1405)*, (Taipei: Institute of history and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1962), 713.

¹⁸ Ming government official, *The veritable records of Emperor Taizong of the Ming • March of the fourth year of Yongle(1406)*, (Taipei: Institute of history and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1962), 778.

¹⁹ Zhang Wende, "A Study on the envoys of Tianfang state in Ming Dynasty and people's understanding of Tianfang state," *The Western Regions Studies*, no.4 (August 2015): 50-58.

²⁰ Gu Yingtai, *History of the Ming Dynasty chronicle ins and outs*, (Beijing: Zhonghua publishing house, 1977), 482,483,490.

²¹ Ali-Akbar, *A journey to China*, (Beijing: Chinese Press, 2016), 36.

²² Ge Zhuang, "Islam and Muslim in the Society of The Ming Dynasty," *Studies in World Religions*, no.1 (February 2001): 119.

²³ Roderich Ptak, "China and the Trade in Cloves, Circa 960 -1435," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.no.1 (March 1993)

²⁴ Ma Huan, *Ying Ya Sheng Lan*, (Beijing: Commercial press, 1937)

²⁵ Ge Zengfu, *Dictionary of Chinese Book Title Interpretation*, (Jinan:Shandong friendship press, 2007), 377.

²⁶ Muhannad Irfan Shahzad, *Essays on Pakistan China relations*, Translated by Chen Jidong, (Kunming: Yunnan University Press, 2014), 80-82.