

Azerbaijan on the Great Silk Road between China and Europe (Historical Survey)

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Abstract

Since the end of Prehistoric times, there have been trading relations between the countries. For comprehensive and permanent trade, the country must have rich natural resources, raw materials, and favorable geographical conditions. Almost all of these are available in Azerbaijan. For this reason, Azerbaijan has always played a crucial role in the realization of trade relations, including China, one of the ancient trade centers. From time immemorial, China's trade relations with Western countries have passed through the territory of Azerbaijan. Since ancient China was the only country that produced silk, silk was considered the most important fabric in other countries. Therefore, it stood in the most significant place in trade. That is why this trade became known as the Silk Road. Silk Road trade became more widespread in the Middle Ages. This paper deals with the history of the Silk Road in Azerbaijan. The author uses different primary and secondary sources for her academic analyzes.

Index terms— azerbaijan, china, trade, silk road, relationship, history.

1 Introduction

Since the end of Prehistoric times, there have been trading relations between the countries. For comprehensive and permanent trade, the country must have rich natural resources, raw materials, and favorable geographical conditions. Almost all of these are available in Azerbaijan. For this reason, Azerbaijan has always played a crucial role in the realization of trade relations, including China, one of the ancient trade centers. From time immemorial, China's trade relations with Western countries have passed through the territory of Azerbaijan. Since ancient China was the only country that produced silk, silk was considered the most important fabric in other countries. Therefore, it stood in the most significant place in trade. That is why this trade became known as the Silk Road. Silk Road trade became more widespread in the Middle Ages. This paper deals with the history of the Silk Road in Azerbaijan. The author uses different primary and secondary sources for her academic analyzes.

2 II.

3 Before Silk Road

It is possible to observe from historical sources that trade was carried out in the territory of Azerbaijan from the 2nd century BC. In ancient times, there were two states in the territory of Azerbaijan -Albania in the north of Azerbaijan and the state of Atropatene in the south. Both countries played an important role in the trade from east to west and from west to east. Azerbaijan's favorable strategic location allowed it to control this trade. Azerbaijan's rich natural resources and raw material sources attracted traders from all over the world. The parallel location of the Caspian Sea to the trade route from east to west doubled Azerbaijan's importance in trade. That is why the great empires were always trying to capture Azerbaijan, especially its northern part. It is possible to observe the invasions of the Roman Empire to the territories of Albania from the 1st century BC. They had only one goal, to reach the Caspian Sea and control the trade route. Just one example is the march of

43 Pompey, who tried to invade Albania in 66-65 BC. Although the Albanians lost two battles during this campaign,
 44 the Qabala -the capital of the state was not captured by the Romans, and they failed their goals ??Abdullayev,
 45 2018: 31). According to Strabo, Albina is also a very productive country under the influence of the Kura River,
 46 where crops are harvested twice a year. According to him, various fruits are grown here, many of which are not
 47 found anywhere (Strabo, IX, 4, 2-3). It is possible to say that traders from many countries came to Azerbaijan
 48 to buy fruits that are not available in many parts of the world. Pliny the Elder writes that one of the rivers in
 49 Albania is so salty that salt can be collected from the river (Pliny the Elder, XXXI, 74).

50 In Atropatene, salt was extracted from the mines. Also, oil, which is unique in the world, was extracted
 51 here. People used oil both to treat patients and to light rooms. They were also skilled in making fish oil and
 52 strong glue from fish innards. Iron, copper, lead, silver, gold, and other metals were extracted here. Ornamental
 53 articles discovered during archaeological excavations testify to the well-developed skills of the country's jewelers.
 54 ??Abdullayev, 2018: 24-25). All these facts give us reason to say that a country with such wealth has been a
 55 favorable market for merchants. There is no doubt that Chinese merchants, who have been traveling to different
 56 countries for trade since ancient times, also visited Azerbaijan.

57 At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Albanians and Huns lived in the neighborhood. The Chinese historian
 58 Sima-Qian records in this work titled "Records of the Grand Historian" about the information on the Jean-
 59 Xiang, the emissary of Emperor Wu-Di (140-83 BC). He called the Amu Darya "Gui Shu" and wrote: "There are
 60 merchants and tradesmen living there, who distribute their goods to neighboring possessions by road and sea,
 61 even for a few thousand" ??Bigurin, 1950: 149-150; ??amedov, 2005: 20).

62 China's relationships with Hun Empire played an important role at the early stage of the Azerbaijani-Chinese
 63 relations since the Huns, who had been lived in neighborhood of the North of Azerbaijan (Albania), were the
 64 ancient ancestors of the Turks; the Azerbaijanis inherited many cultural and military traditions of Huns. Hunnic-
 65 Chinese relations were of a varied nature: trade ties, political relations. For example, the first Hunnic-Chinese
 66 treaty was concluded in 198 BC. According to the contract in 198 BC, the Chinese annually supplied the Huns
 67 with silk, wine, rice, etc. The Chinese also bought horses from the Huns. As stated in legend, Zhang Qian, a
 68 diplomat-traveler, a dignitary of Emperor Wu of Han, saw horses in the Fergana Valley that struck him with
 69 their beauty in the II. BC. He offered Emperor Wu of Han to take silk, wine, sweet fruit abroad in exchange for
 70 horses ??Akhundova, 2016: 11).

71 From the beginning of the Middle Ages, trade between East and West has been expanding. In such a situation,
 72 both China and Azerbaijan could not stay out of this trade. Because both countries had an ancient foundation
 73 and natural opportunities for trading.

74 4 III.

75 Silk Road in Medieval Age II century can be considered a starting point for the birth of the Silk Road, which
 76 existed until the II millennium of 16th century. With the foundation of the Silk Road, different travelers,
 77 diplomats, missionaries, merchants, etc., from various countries, who traveled great distances from Europe via
 78 Azerbaijan, Iran, and Central Asia to China, left valuable information about the countries where they arrived.
 79 In all times of Medieval period, the Great Silk Road was the main economic factor connecting the empires of
 80 Byzantium Empire and the Arab Caliphate, India, Mongolia, China, passed through the territory of Russia,
 81 the countries of Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. This is known from the writings of researchers and
 82 travelers: the Chinese Xuan Jian, the Italian Marco Polo, Arab Ibn Fadlan, the Russian Afanasy Nikitin, and
 83 others (Mahmudova, 2012).

84 During the Middle Ages (III-XV centuries), the relations between China and Azerbaijan continued to evolve.
 85 For example, goods from India and China first came to the markets of Azerbaijani cities in the III-VII centuries
 86 (Aji M, 2014; ??abibzade, 2009: 25). Within these immense boundaries, the Great Silk Road helped develop
 87 towns, agriculture, private farming, and silk production and established land and sea transport routes. It was a
 88 unique economic process in the history of Eurasian civilization.

89 Azerbaijan on the Great Silk Road can be taken as an example to illustrate these arguments with different
 90 aspects. As we have emphasized before, Azerbaijan ties as a bridge in the Caspian region, connecting the
 91 Caucasus, Middle East and, northeastern Europe. After the occupation of Azerbaijan by the Arab Caliphate,
 92 the trade route passed into the possession of the Arabs. In Arabic sources, there is a lot of information about the
 93 Great Silk Road. Especially interesting reports are from Ibn Fadlan, Al-Istakhri, Abu Dulaf and others. At that
 94 time, the cities of Derbent, Beylagan, Barda, Ardebil, Tabriz, Maraga, Nakhchivan, etc. played a significant role
 95 in the relations of trade between Azerbaijan and other countries. Trade routes of Azerbaijan linked these cities
 96 to other countries of Asia, Africa, and Europe ??Velikhanli, 1987: 50-70; ??unyadov, 1965: 38-58).

97 In the Middle Ages, Maragheh Observatory, located on the territory of South Azerbaijan, was founded as the
 98 largest scientific center of its era. This observatory had an enormous impact on the development of astronomy
 99 in many countries. The prominent Azerbaijani scientist, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, arrived in Maragha with Hulagu
 100 Khan, who instructed him to build an observatory here. Until the end of his life, Tusi supervised the scientific
 101 and administrative work of the observatory.

102 The observatory in Maragha was the first Academy of Sciences in the Middle Ages, not only in the countries
 103 of the East but also in Europe. In the observatory, apart from the observation platform, special rooms for large

104 instruments, rooms for a library of 400,000 books, other auxiliary premises were supposed. Here a huge storage
105 was created with spacious rooms filled with books taken from Baghdad, Mosul, Syria and Khurasan.

106 A large team of scientists from Iran, Syria (Damascus), and the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia,
107 China, and India, worked at the Maragheh Observatory. More than 100 employees, both scientists and their
108 students, worked at the Maragheh Observatory and Library. ??Ibn al-Fuwati, 1962 ??1967: 19) The names of
109 many of them have remained in history. These are Muhammad Nasiraddin Tusi, Qutb ad-Din Shirazi, Grigory
110 Abul-Faraj, Muayid-ad-din al-Urdu from Damascus, Najm ad-din Qazvini, Dabirani al-Katib from Qazvin, Fakhr
111 ad-din al-Akhlati from Tiflis, Fakhr ad-din al-Maraghai from Mosul, Mohi ad-din Kamal Sheikh-Kamal, Najm
112 ad-din al-katib al-Baghdadi from Baghdad, Fao Mun-Chi, a Chinese astronomer who worked here for several
113 years, Kamal ad-Din Aflatun al-Hindi (from India), Ibn al-Fuwati, Sadr ad-Din Ali and several others. ??Rezevi,
114 1994: 41) This observatory was one of the most famous for its time. It survived only two generations: after the
115 first half of the 14th century. The remains of the building have survived to this day. ??Seyidbeyli, 2015: 144)
116 Early and Middle Medieval Age, Azerbaijan, where covers from Darband to Hamadan, was one of the richest
117 territories in the Asia. Persian historian Hamdullah Mustoufi-e Ghazvini (1280-1349) have written that income
118 stood at 25 million dinars during the period of the Seljuks and Atabeks´ and under the Shirvanshah states in
119 work titled "Nozhat al-Gholoob". This works give us to make an impression about the other regions in XIII-XIV
120 centuries: Iraq-i Arab -30 million dinar; Iraq-i Ajam -25 million dinars; Arazi-ye Rum -15 million dinars; Georgia
121 -5 million dinars (Hamd-Allah Qazwin, 1919: 78-90). Another Arabian historian, Yagut al-Hamawi (1179-1229),
122 had earlier described the historical reality reflected in these figures as follows: ´Azerbaijan is a vast country and
123 a great state´ in his work titled "Mujam al-Buldan" (Hamavi, 1983: I, 159-161).

124 Such a strong economy had to be well-founded. Among other reasons, the Great Silk Road and Azerbaijan´s
125 silk industry had played an important part. Marco Polo, who travelled to the Mongolia and China in 1271-1291,
126 wrote about Azerbaijan´s central city, Tabriz: ´Tawris is a huge city? Its residents are engaged in trade and
127 craftsmans. They produce silk fabrics, that are very expensive. Different things are brought in from India,
128 Baghdad, Mowsul, the Bay of Hormuz, and other places. Latin merchants, especially those from Genoa, flood
129 the city with their goods.´ Marco Polo did not call Tabriz an Iranian city. (Polo M. 1903: 60-65).

130 There is no substantial change in the 14th-15th centuries in trade via Azerbaijan. European travelers and
131 merchants started to widely travel to northern Azerbaijan for silk. Rui Gonzalez, who had travelled to the
132 Tamerlane´s capital Samarkand in the early 15th century, wrote: ´In Shamakha city, silk is produced in the full
133 quantities. Merchants whom are from Genoa and Venice, come here to buy silk.´ Ambrogio Contarini who was
134 sent from Venice to Bayandurlu Sultan Hasan Padishah´s palace in Tabriz, described the country -the Shamakhi
135 (Shirvan)-made silk was known as ´Talaman silk´. Azerbaijan traded silk with Russia in the period of Safavids
136 and Afshars. With the establishment of capitalist manufacturing in Europe in the 16 th -17 th centuries, the
137 was forced for Eastern raw materials and trades grew sharply. However, the route of trade to the Indian Ocean
138 via the Atlantic Ocean was controlled by the Portuguese. Ottoman Empire was in control of the route trading
139 through the Mediterranean and Black sea ??Mahmudov, 2012: 127).

140 At that time, the English made a surprise achievement to gain access to India via the Caspian Sea. In 1561-
141 63, Anthony Jenkinson visited Azerbaijan on behalf of the Muscovy Company and the British crown. He had
142 been charged by Queen Elizabeth with securing a trade deal with Shah Tahmasp I, but he could not achieve
143 this important objective. The shah refused to sign the agreement, as it could have damaged a peace agreement
144 reached with Sultan Suleyman I whom following years of war. The trade deal with the English could have
145 undermined Safavid-Ottoman relations ??Aliyarli, 2009: 715-716).

146 Back to Jenkinson. Despite his failure to sign a deal with Shah Tahmasp I, Jenkinson did secure a ´decree
147 on privileges´ from the shah´s beylerbeyi, or representative in Shirvan, Abdulla Khan Ustajli. The decree
148 said: ´Considering the persistent requests by envoy Antony Jenkinson, we, Abdullah Khan, who rule Shirvan
149 and Herkan, with the blessing of Allah, creator of the Earth and Heavens, have shown goodwill and kindness to
150 bestow the following residents of London -Sir William Herr, Sir William Chester, Sir Thomas Lodge, Mr. Richard
151 Mallory, and Richard Chamberlain -and their trade company with freedom, the right to cross freely and visit our
152 state?.´ ??Aliyarli, 2007: 240).

153 Antony Jenkinson sold bolts of silk and other things. The another English company leader -Thomas Allcock
154 had visited Azerbaijan for silk in 1563-67. The third English trade delegation with the leadership of Arthur
155 Edwards (1565-67) was successful meetings with Shah Tahmasp I, he secured a decree from the Shah on safety
156 of English merchants. In a letter that had been sent to London from Shirvan, Arthur Edwards wrote: ´We have
157 bought eleven bolts of raw silk, will be send to England. The silk of this region is high quality (English Travelers
158 in the State of Muscovy, 2007: 91-92).

159 In 1568-69 Edwards, along with three other business people, visited Azerbaijan to buy silk. A fifth trade
160 delegation led by Thomas Bannister and Jeffrey Docket visited Azerbaijan in 1569-74. A sixth delegation, led
161 by Christopher Barrow, came in 1580. All of them came to Azerbaijan mostly for silk, and they all used the
162 Volga-Caspian route (English Travelers in the State of Muscovy, 2007: 121).

163 There were two important factors that made these visits possible by S. Alyarly´s thought: "a) One of the
164 old routes of the Great Silk Road covered through the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan. This route has been in use
165 throughout history. Guillaume de Rubruques, who was sent by French King Louis IX to meet the Mongolian
166 Khan Mongke in 1253-55 (20 years before Marco Polo´s visit), returned to his country via this route -through the

167 'Edil Sea' and the 'Iron Gate' built by Alexander -from the north to the south. In 1474, Ambrogio Contarini,
168 the Venetian envoy, led a large delegation from the south to the north (Tabriz-Shamakhi-Derbent). Even the
169 Safavid envoy to Europe, Oruj bay Bayat, preferred this route. b) Azerbaijan was an open country for trade
170 and cooperation. It had an environment of religious and moral tolerance. The head of the German-Holstein
171 embassy, Prof Adam Olearius (1636-39), also mentioned this. He said: 'Unlike Russia, Azerbaijan is not a
172 closed country. By paying the required customs duty to the state, locals and foreigners can freely travel in the
173 country. They can also do business and trade here.' ??Aliyarli, 2007, 248) This assessment conforms with the
174 aforementioned 'decree on privileges' issued by Abdulla Khan Ustajli, the Safavi baylarbayi (representative) in
175 Shirvan. Diplomat Contarini, meanwhile, noted the 'human factor'. He said: 'We left for the town of Derbent,
176 which belonged to the Shirvan shah. We sometimes stayed in Turkish villages. We were welcomed in those
177 villages? To be honest, the people there [in Azerbaijan] were very friendly. When asked who we were, we would
178 reply: "We are Christians." And this answer would be enough for them.' (Aliyarli?, 2009: 460-466).

179 European diplomats and merchants preferred the Volga-Caspian route to the Black Sea route (via Georgia
180 and Crimea), although the latter was shorter.

181 Silk and the Russian empire Silk production has had a great role in developing of the silk industry and capitalist
182 society in Russia. The Russian envoy to the Safavid state between 1715 and 1718, A. Volinsky, wrote: 'There are
183 many cattle, sheep and fish there [in northern Azerbaijan]. They [Azeris] are particularly engaged in silkworm
184 breeding. Silkworms are bred everywhere in large quantities. Only a few villages near the seashore and the River
185 Kur lack silk mills.' (Aliyarli?, 2009: 472-476).

186 Fifty years later, Academician Shamuil Gmelin wrote that there were nearly 1,500 silk-weaving looms and 'silk
187 mills' in Shamakhi. Another Russian spy, Serebrov Dzhulfinskiy, wrote 20 years later: 'In Shamakhi, almost
188 every resident of the town has a workshop or is a silk weaver.' The Russian occupation of Azerbaijan in the 19th
189 century brought about fundamental changes in the country's social and economic life. However, silk production
190 and trade retained their importance. In 1850-70, silkworm production grew fivefold and reached 150,000 pounds
191 (2,400 tons). The Nukha (Shaki) province accounted for 61,000 pounds of this.

192 Shusha, Shamakhi and Jar-Balakan were also centers of silkworm breeding. Each province produced between
193 3,000 and 5,000 pounds of silkworms a year. Northern Azerbaijan accounted for 85 percent of silkworms produced
194 in the South Caucasus. It also accounted for 75 percent (28,000 pounds) of silkworms required for Russian textiles
195 (40,000 pounds).

196 At present, the Silk Road does not exist, but the relations between China and Azerbaijan are at a very high
197 level and are comprehensive. Despite the centuries-old history of friendship, diplomatic relations between China
198 and Azerbaijan were established on April 2, 1992. On December 27, 1991, the PRC recognized the independence
199 of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In August 1992, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China was opened
200 in Azerbaijan and the first ambassador was appointed on December 1, 1993. The Embassy of the Republic of
201 Azerbaijan in the People's Republic of China was opened on ??eptember 3, 1993 ??Akhundov, 1999: 34).

202 In March 1994, Heydar Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan, successfully made a historic visit to China. The heads
203 of the two countries signed and published the "Joint Declaration based on Friendly Relations between China
204 and Azerbaijan," which contributed to the development of bilateral relations and laid a strong legal basis for
205 the successful development of relations. During the official visit of Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of
206 Azerbaijan, to China in March 2005, President Hu Jintao and President Aliyev signed and published a joint
207 communique of the People's Republic of China and Azerbaijan and witnessed the signing of twelve treaties on
208 cooperation in such areas as trade and economy, customs, information technology, taxes, culture, youth, radio
209 and television, sports, justice, extradition, etc. ??Gabibzade, 2009: 15).

210 In recent years there has been an increasing desire for dynamically developing China to play a more active
211 role as a participant in the new "great geoeconomic game". The Caspian region has become a region of great
212 geopolitical importance for China. It occupies an important place in China's foreign strategy.

213 Since the establishment of diplomatic relations today, the PRC supports Azerbaijan and its initiatives in many
214 political decisions. An example of this can be China's positive position on amendments made by the Azerbaijani
215 side in the Resolution on Cooperation between the OSCE, adopted on December 2, 2002.

216 Even though Azerbaijan, unlike the Central Asian republics, has no common borders with China. They are
217 separated from each other by thousands of kilometers of distance, very close political, commercial, economic,
218 business, cultural and other relations have been established between these countries.

219 Chinese companies in Azerbaijan are actively working in the fuel and energy complex and are doing their
220 best to expand their activities in this sector. In particular, CNPC and Shengli are participating in four projects
221 to develop oil fields onshore Azerbaijan -"Kursangi" and "Garabagly", "South-West Gobustan" and "Pirsaat".
222 They openly declare their wishes to participate in new, larger projects, up to the development of offshore fields,
223 and are ready to invest heavily in this field. The energy resources of the Caspian Sea are considered as potential
224 sources of oil and gas in China.

225 The Chinese telephone company Huawei successfully cooperates with Baktelecom, in 2005 the second Chinese
226 company ZTE Corporation has started operating in this sector, and at the end of 2006, Azercell provided the
227 subscribers of the GPRS / MMS roaming service with the operator "China Mobile" from China (Gabibzade,
228 2009: 32).

229 The number of joint and purely Chinese enterprises operating in Azerbaijan is growing. If about 30 joint

230 ventures were established in the republic and 8 Chinese companies were registered by the end of 2006, their
231 number increased significantly in 2008. The prospects of cooperation in agriculture and transport are expanding.

232 These two countries have a rapidly developing economy, a strong political base, a deep historical connection and
233 strong economic complementarity. Between these countries, the trade and economic volume is rapidly increasing.
234 In 2011, the volume of trade between China and Azerbaijan reached 1,086 billion US dollars, which is 16.5%
235 more compared to 2010 and 700 times more than the volume at the beginning of the establishment of diplomatic
236 relations. China has already become an important trading partner and the fifth largest country -the source of
237 imports for Azerbaijan ??Talibov, 2015: 11).

238 IV.

239 5 Conclusion

240 This is how the South Caucasus region was turned into an economic colony, a producer of raw materials and a
241 market for the output of Russian factories. It became a very productive colony.

242 The history of silk production and trade shows see some of the serious problems of the history of Azerbaijan,
243 the Caucasus and the Middle East. For hundreds of years, the names of Tabriz, Shamakhi, Shaki and Arash
244 -which are close to our heart -could be heard in the coffee houses of Venice, Marseilles and London. We owe this
245 to the art of silk production. However, we have no moral right to boast about this or take pride in it. If today
246 we are serious about developing the non-oil sector of our economy, and we do need to think about this, we should
247 not forget silk production, which has a long history in Azerbaijan. Otherwise, Azerbaijan will leave another of
248 its national problems unresolved.

249 The Azerbaijani-Chinese relations in science, education, culture, medicine, etc., are developing on a growing
250 scale. One of the former Chinese ambassadors in Azerbaijan Zhang Haizhou, referring to the development of
251 bilateral educational ties, said: "Quite an intensive exchange was established in the sphere of education. Every
252 year, at the governmental level, the parties mutually grant each other 15 state scholarships for students. Graduates
253 of this project already work in government and diplomatic missions of the two countries. In addition, an annual
254 number of students studying in universities of China and Azerbaijan on the non-governmental line are growing.
255 For example, now more than 200 of our students are educated in Baku. This year, the Government of China also
256 provided a onesided scholarship for study in China for 5 Azerbaijani students (Li Zhen Yin, 2013: 41).¹

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