

TAJIKISTAN AND CHINA

CHANGING IMAGES

Muzaffar Olimov*

Saodat Olimov*

Abstract:

Until recently, Tajikistan paid more attention to the development of relations with the countries lying in the north. However, the country is now establishing links with countries in the south and the east through the international transport networks. Construction of new roads, bridges and tunnels, growth of international trade, and migrations have helped interaction with the neighboring countries, in particular with China and Afghanistan. Since 2002 and until 2006 the volume of trade between Tajikistan and China grew 25 times. The largest projects supported by China in Tajikistan, in accordance with the framework of SCO, are the construction of a transport corridor and electric lines. However, restoration of the Silk Route has brought new challenges, such as Tajikistan's participation in "the new Big Game", religious extremism, illegal migration, lack of competition with the Chinese goods, etc.

Keywords:

China, Russia, Tajikistan, Transport corridors, Trade relations.

Introduction:

With the intensification of commercial, economic, political, and cultural relations with China, people to people contacts are tremendously growing with the country. What is the perception of China towards Tajikistan? This question cannot be answered without studying the Tajik perception of China. In this context, the image of the country is understood to be a set of stable, stratified, and dynamic understanding of political, historical, cultural and geographical space. At the same time, it is one of the ways of self-identification. Needless to say, that during the past two decades Tajik population went through large scale social transformation resulting in the change in Tajik perception of China. At the same time, many important archetypes, symbols and signs continue to persist in the new image, which creates difficulties in terms of the new reality. What is China's perception of Tajiks today? When we try to answer this question, the word "China" brings many contradictory responses which are caused by the complex history of Sino-Central Asian relations, as well as by the delicate ethnic history of the peoples of Central Asia. In the Tajik language, there are two geographical names of China - Khitoy and Chin. Chin¹ refers to China, Chinese Turkestan now

* **SHARQ Research Center, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.**

¹ In addition to the name «Chin» often used «Chin-u Mochin» - China and those countries which are outside it are civilizational area of China. There are different views among contemporary Orientalists of Tajikistan on the content of the title «Chin-u Mochin». Some believe that it includes other than China, Korea and

Xingjian, and Chinese. In addition to the uncertainty of geographical names, the image of China contains the notion of different time periods. For example:

- a. The traditional recordings in the classical literature in Farsi are dominated by terms like: distant country, the seat of strange people and magical creatures, production of porcelain and tea, birthplace of skilled artists, craftsmen and beauties.
- b. The second era was formed when Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union. Its dominant concepts include brotherly people, Communist Party, struggle against imperialism.
- c. After independence the basic concepts and associations include great neighbour, huge territory, successful reform, cheap low-quality goods, incomprehensible and alien culture, hardworking and unpretentious people.

In order to track these changes in the concepts associated with the Silk Route, it is necessary to recall the history of the Tajik-Chinese relations.

Historical Background:

Areas included in modern Tajikistan, maintained relations with China since ancient times. Izhan Qian was the first Chinese, who visited and wrote about the Pamirs, Davan (Fergana Valley), Tokharistan (Dahi), Kang (Khorazm) and Ansi (Parthia)² in 140-135 BC. Though relations with Tang China (618-907) were strengthened after the emergence of Silk Route, these came to a halt when the Arab armies defeated China in the battle of Talas in 751: apart from trade, there were no political or cultural ties, for almost one thousand years.³ The relations with China were revised when China became part of the empire of Chenghis Khan and his descendants and during the Ming dynasty in China (1368-1644). The maritime route by the Europeans led to the abandonment of Silk Route, and the territories of the modern Tajikistan lost most of contacts with China. The Chinese invasion of Kashgar in 1760 and the subsequent long struggle of the people of Eastern Turkestan against China did not contribute to the revival of contacts. Since then, besides trade, the situation in Eastern Turkestan spontaneously slapped the Tajik

Southeast Asia, and also Japan, while others argue that Japan is not part of the «Chin-u Mochin».

² Viktor Dubovitsky, *Tajikistan–China: From Careful Relations to Strategic Partnership*, www.ferghana.ru 25.01.2007.

³ *Eastern Turkestan in Ancient and Early Medieval Period, Historian Essays*, Nauka Publishing House, Moscow, 1988, p.305.

perception of China. Added to this was the involvement of Khokand Khanate (1709-1876) in the affairs of Kashgar.⁴

Bukhara Emirate too had strong trade links with Kashgar⁵ and was the second largest foreign trade partner after Russian Empire. The volume of trade between Bukhara and Kashgar is evident by the fact that within 2-3 weeks 700-800 fully loaded camels from Bukhara crossed the Terek pass in Kashgar.⁶ The merchants from Bukhara, Kokand and Khujand exported to Kashgar fabrics, pearls, jewelry, furs, leather, sugar, metal products, and in return brought tea, porcelain dishes, Chinese silk, Chinese silver coins, etc.

Merchants used these coins to pay for goats' fleece, which they bought in Tibet and sent to Kashmir for the manufacture of shawls, which were then exported to other countries including Russia.⁷ Thus, Bukhara and Kokand merchants, until the beginning of the 12th century, played the role of trade intermediaries between Tibet and Kashmir.

So, Khujand, Isfara, Ura-Tube (Istaravshan) and other territories that makes up today's northern Tajikistan and which were parts of Kokand Khanate and the Emirate of Bukhara, maintained contacts with China through Eastern Turkestan. At the same time, eastern Bukhara and Pamir, which are now in central Tajikistan, southern Tajikistan and Badakhshan, had no links with China from the 17th–19th centuries, since they were separated from China by inaccessible mountains and inhabited by the Turks. That is why Tajiks formed a picture of China as a distant country, lying beyond the “country of Turks”.

Tajik-Chinese Relations:

During the Soviet period there were no direct relations between the Tajik SSR and China. However, after independence relations were limited to resolving border issues. This period lasted until 1997, when the civil war ended. From 1997 to 2002, relations between the two developed gradually within the frame work of Shanghai Five and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They included a few small private projects, and assistance that China provided to strengthen the Tajik armed forces.

The events after 9/11 made China to re-draw its strategies towards Central Asian countries and as such Tajik-Chinese relationships look

⁴ See: V. Nalivkin, *A Short History of the Kokand Khanate. \ History of Central Asia, Eurolins–Russian Panorama, Moscow, 2003, p.298.*

⁵ See: B. Ismailova, *Bukhara Emirate under Emir Haydar*, State University, Khujand 2000, pp. 70-73.

⁶ E. K.Meyendorf, *Trip from Orenburg to Bukhara*, Nauka Publishing House, Moscow, 1975, p.128.

⁷ *Trip from Orenburg to Bukhara*, pp. 129-130.

different today. Since then China has strengthened its economic presence in Tajikistan, and has become one of the top five leading trade partner of Tajikistan. From 2002 to 2006, the volume of trade between the two countries has grown almost 25 times. In 2006 it reached 323 million US dollars. In January 2007, China and Tajikistan signed the ‘Treaty on Good-neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation’.⁸ The main element of the treaty is combined development based on the principle of mutual respect and mutual assistance in bilateral areas in the fields of political, military, economic, commercial, cultural and educational. Particular attention is expected to be paid to strengthen scientific and technological, agricultural, humanitarian and environmental cooperation between China and Tajikistan besides combating international terrorism, separatism and illegal drug trafficking.

Border Demarcations and New Beginning:

The 430-kilometer long Tajik-Chinese border was drawn in the Pamirs between the Russian Empire and Tsin China and revised several times in the middle and late 19th century. But the geographical indications, which established the boundary line, were inaccurate. It led to several misunderstandings and claims and counter claims by the two states. China claimed three disputed sites in the territory of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) with a total area of over 20 thousand square km.⁹ In 2001, after much deliberations, Tajikistan transferred more than one thousand square km to China following which in June 2006, the border demarcation work began, and continued until the end of 2008 despite the fact that the people of GBAO protested over the transfer as they lost their pastures after the demarcation (of the border)¹⁰ while there were others who expressed concern over the transfer of Rangkul mines to China.¹¹

The resolution of the border problem resulted in the emergence of direct transport corridor between China and Tajikistan through Tashkurgan-Khorog via Kulma pass (4363 m) at Sarykol Ridge. It provides Tajikistan direct access to Xinjiang and Pakistan to reach to the Indian Ocean. The net result is the rapid development of border trade between Xinjiang and GBAO and accordingly, in 2006, Tajikistan-China trade turnover was of more than 4,250 thousand dollars. The volume of

⁸ The treaty will be effective for 25 years (Article 18) with the possibility of extension for subsequent five-year periods; <http://www.mid.tj/index.php?node=article&id=315/www.mid.tj/index.php?node=article&id=315> истраҳт.

⁹ Viktor Dubovitsky, *Tajikistan–China: From Careful Relations to Strategic Partnership*, www.ferghana.ru , 25.01.2007

¹⁰ Tajik herders leave 37 mountain ravines to China, I. Rahmon, May 27, 2008, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1211964420>

¹¹ <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1211964420>

transferred goods (in 2006) amounted to 9166 tons.¹² Keeping in view the difficulty of shipping along this mountainous route these numbers are significant.

Economic Relations:

Tajik-Chinese relations began to develop rapidly after the signing of this treaty (on 15 of January, 2007). With the help of China infrastructure projects were started in Tajikistan within the framework of the SCO. For instance in 2006, Tajikistan obtained from China a preferential loan of 608 million dollars, mainly used for the construction of high voltage lines LEP-500 South-North and LEP-220 Lolazor-Khatlon in the Khatlon region, and also for the construction of a tunnel under Shar-Shar pass on the road between Dushanbe-Kulyab.¹³ The Export-Import Bank of China loaned to Tajikistan funds to build a highway from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan. The project includes rehabilitation of the road Dushanbe-Aini-Istravshan-Khujand-Buston-Chanak (border of Uzbekistan); the construction of new detour roads in the settlements, new bridges and a new tunnel *Shahristan*, which is more than 5 km long.¹⁴

In the area of hydropower development China is the main partner of Tajikistan among all Central Asian states. There are currently plans to build several hydro and thermal power plants with the participation of China. Besides high-level business meetings, the state visit of President Emomali Rakhmon to China, contributed to the growth of mutual trade within the framework of the Second Eurasian Economic Forum in Xi'an. In 2006- 2007, the trade with China increased by 62% - from 323 million to 524 million dollars.

The increasing activity of the Chinese capital owners to develop the Tajik market and opening of the State Development Bank of China in Dushanbe affected the growth of private Chinese business in Tajikistan. More than 50 joint projects were undertaken in Tajikistan besides over 40 enterprises with Chinese assistance. The number of these enterprises is growing¹⁵ is evident by the fact that 80 Chinese companies were operating in Tajikistan, in 2008.

As a result of these developments, the immigration of Chinese citizens in Tajikistan is growing day by day. In 2007, more than 4000 Chinese citizens (2006 - 1316 persons, which is 205% increase) obtained visas to enter Tajikistan.¹⁶ Most of them work in the Chinese companies to build roads, bridges, factories, etc. Besides they also come from

¹² *Tajikistan–China: From Careful Relations to Strategic Partnership.*

¹³ See: <http://www.mid.tj/index.php?node=article&id=315>/www.mid.tj/index.php?node=article&id=315исранhttp

¹⁴ The reconstruction of roads to the tunnel under “Anzob” pass is being completed with the help of Iran.

¹⁵ Tajikistan Ambassador in China: Tajik-China Trade-Economic Relations are Increasing, <http://russian.china.org.cn>.

¹⁶ Tajikistan Embassy data in China: <http://russian.china.org.cn>

neighbouring countries like Kyrgyzstan. According to the Migration Service of the IOM, in 2006, the number of Chinese in Tajikistan was more than 3 thousand people while in July 2008 it was more than 10 thousand.¹⁷ Similarly, business and labour migration of Tajik citizens into China is also growing and there were more than 8 thousand Tajik citizens working in China during the period 2006-2008.¹⁸ This result was an increasing number of people travelled by air which in 2007 was 29700 (25360 people in 2006, an increase of 17%), consequently additional flights, new air routes linking the cities of Tajikistan and Urumchi were operational.

China has also shown interest in history, culture, tradition and language of Tajikistan. The number of Tajik students in Chinese universities is increasing gradually and by 2008 there were about 200 Tajik students studying in China. Most of them study Chinese language besides the subjects like economics and traditional Chinese medicine. China also helps Tajikistan in training workers in various sectors of economy, culture, in addition imparts training to armed forces, border troops and National Guards.¹⁹

The Components of the Tajik Perception of China:

To understand the Tajik perspective of China, public opinion polls have shown that the people of the Republic of Tajikistan have positive attitude towards China and its people (the table below shows the results of the poll).

Attitude to Tajiks towards China & others²⁰

Attitude	China	Russia	Iran	France
Very friendly	33.6	79.5	69.6	16.3
Rather benevolent	48.2	18.0	26.4	63.2
Rather not benevolent	16.1	1.9	3.1	12.9
Very unkindly	2.1	0.3	0.2	0.9
Don't know	-	0.3	0.7	6.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

¹⁷ Report of deputy head of Migration Service of Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan at the Workshop on Labour Migration in Dushanbe, June 19, 2008.

¹⁸ Report: “*Migration and Development*”, ILO–Research Center SHARQ, Dushanbe, 2008.

¹⁹ Tajikistan Ambassador in China: <http://russian.china.org.cn>.

²⁰ The survey materials, May 2008, Research Center SHARQ, Dushanbe; Survey on the basis of national representative sample, 1000 respondents, percent of error – 2.5%.

To compare the results with similar surveys conducted in 2006, we can see some interesting trends. In 2008 the number of respondents who had earlier felt well about China fell by 7% while as whose attitude was very friendly decreased as well.²¹ This was because Tajikistan transferred to China more than 1000 square km of her territory in the process of resolving border disputes. In November, 2007 public opinion poll, more than 90% of respondents believed that China has positive impact on Tajikistan wherein 41.1% indicated that the impact of China is very positive, 49.8% felt it was rather positive, 6.8% rather negative, 1.4% very negative. What these polls show is that most of the people regard Russia as the best partner (89%) followed by Iran (9%) and China (8%). But people opine that the greatest impact on Tajikistan in the coming 10 years would be that of Russia (50.8%); followed by China (22%) and Iran (16.7%).

The people of Tajikistan believe that China is playing a stabilizing role in international relations: 87% of respondents mostly like Chinese serene behaviour in the international arena; 32% of respondents mostly value Chinese economic system; 11% admire the culture of China; while there are about 9% who like the political system of China.

However, Tajiks do not trust the military image of China as only 6% believe that China is the closest ally of Tajikistan, while 59% hold Russia as closest ally and 11% hold Iran.²² At the same time, they do not believe that China is a threat to Tajikistan's security and stability in Central Asia as just 3% fear China while 13% fear Russia. It seems that the Tajik society is not fully aware of the growing presence of Chinese in the country and has not yet formed an attitude toward the new reality. Referring to the image of China, reflected in public opinion polls, we should not forget that there is an enormous difference between the general public and that of political, economic, military and intellectual elite. It is caused by the difference in the levels of interaction of different social groups with Chinese. The Tajik ruling elite has the most positive attitude towards China for which the common attitude towards pan-Turkism also plays very important role. The political elites of Tajikistan, which is an Iranian-speaking country in the region, are afraid of Turkish ethno-political community thus identifying itself with China against the Turkish national movements.

²¹ In 2006, 89% respondents referred rather positive impact of China. The survey materials, October 2006, Research Center SHARQ, Dushanbe; Survey on basis of national representative sample, 1800 respondents, percent of error – 2.5%.

²² The survey materials, November 2007, Research Center SHARQ, Dushanbe; Survey on the basis of national representative sample, 2000 respondents, percent of error – 2.5%.

The pro-Iran intelligentsia from northern Tajikistan has the most negative attitude towards China. They have not forgotten China's claim to the Farghana Valley and her brutal policy towards the Kashgar ruler Yaqub-Bek (1865-1877).²³ Another group which has negative attitude towards China and her increasing influence in Tajikistan is of Islamists which will become a major obstacle for China's interests in Tajikistan. Because Tajikistan is entering a period of post-secularism, it now identifies itself as an integral part of the Muslim world.

Conclusions:

The people in Tajikistan hold the image of neighbouring countries and particularly of China as was established during the Soviet era. It seems that present Tajik society will take time to form a collective understanding of neighbouring peoples and countries. This process will have a profound impact in changing Tajikistan's identity.

²³ A. D. Vasilev, "Interrelations: Ottoman Empire and State of Yaqub Bek", *Journal Vostok\ Oriens*, No.2, 2007, pp. 15-22; E.V. Bunakov, "On issue political and economic contacts of the Central Asian properties of Russian Tsar with Eastern Turkistan under government Yaqub-Bek (1865-1877)", *Bulletin Uzbek SSR of the Academy of Sciences*, No.5,1945.