

The Hephthalites in China and Their Roles in East-West Exchanges*

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Abstract

The rise and migration of the Hephthalites left a significant impact on the exchange of East-West civilizations, and the empire they established was one of the inevitable problems in the study of Silk Road. The period from the end of 5th century to the early 6th century was the zenith of Hephthalite Empire when the alliance between Hephthalites and Sasanians was established and the Hephthalites expanded to Tarim Basin and southward to North-West India. The Hephthalite Empire played an important intermediary role in the interaction of East-West civilizations, ensuring the stable development of the Silk Road in the 5th and 6th centuries and laying the foundation for the prosperity of the Silk Road during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. The Chinese Northern and Southern Dynasties observed the Hephthalites in China and noted their interactions with different ethnic groups, such as the Han Chinese, Sogdians and Persians. Chinese written sources such as the *Book of Wei*, the *Book of Zhou* (*Zhoushu* 周书), the *Book of Liang* (*Liangshu*, 梁书), the *History of Northern Dynasties* (*Beishi*, 北史), the *Book of Sui* (*Suishu*, 隋书), the *New Book of Tang* (*Xintangshu*, 新唐书) as well as *Comprehensive Statutes* (*Tongdian*, 通典), provide substantial information about the Hephthalites. With the advancement of archaeological discoveries in recent years, the Hephthalite coins and Persian coins have also become crucial numismatic evidence for understanding the Hephthalite activities in medieval China and their relations with different ethnic groups in China and along the Silk Road.

Keywords: Northern Dynasties, Southern Dynasties, China, Hephthalites, Sasanian Persia, Sogdiana, Coins.



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Introduction

The term Yanda 嚙哒 in Chinese was first recorded in the Book of Wei and was generally considered to refer to the Hephthalites. The Hephthalites were an ethnic group mainly residing in Central Asia during the 5th to 7th centuries CE. According to Chinese written sources, the Hephthalites frequently came to China in a period dating from 456 to 586 CE. After the Hephthalites were jointly defeated by the Turks and the Sasanian Persians in the middle of the 6th century, China gradually lost contact with the Hephthalites, until they reappeared in the period of Daye of the Sui Dynasty (608–618 CE). In this paper, I will review Chinese sources and discuss what are known about the Hephthalites and their relationship with different ethnic groups along the Silk Road, as seen through the eyes of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China.

The Hephthalite state in Chinese written sources

The Hephthalites are detailed in *The History of Northern Dynasties*, *the New Book of Tang*, and *Comprehensive Statutes*. *The History of Northern Dynasties* gives a short description of the Hephthalites thusly: :

The state of Yanda (嚙哒国) [or the Hephthalite state], a branch of the Da Yuezhi [peoples] or the other branch of Gaoche, originally came from Saibei (塞北). It is located in the south of Jinshan (金山) and west of Yutian, with its capital lying more than 200 li south of the Wuhu River (乌浒, Oxus River) and 10,100 li [west] from Chang'an. Badiyan (拔底延) is the capital named Wangshecheng (王舍城). The city is more than 10 square li, and many temples are decorated with gold. Their customs are similar to those of the Turks. Brothers may have the same woman as their common wife. If the husband has no brother, the wife wears a hat with one tip; if he has brothers, the number of tips the wife wears corresponds to the number of brothers. Their clothes are decorated with yingluo. They have their hair cut. Their language is different from those of Ruru, Gaoche and other Hu. The number of the population is about 100,000. They have no cities and wander after water and grass. They live in felt-made tents and migrate to the cool places in summer and to warm places in winter. The king settles his wives in different places, 200 or 300 li away from each other. The king will go to different places according to the calendar, one month each place. He won't go anywhere in the cold winter. It is not required that the throne should be succeeded by the son. A qualified son or the brother can succeed the throne. The new king is nominated after the king dies. There are no carriages, but yu. There are many camels and horses. The punishments are very harsh. The thieves, whatever number of objects they steal, will be sentenced by waist cutting, and must return ten times the number of stolen objects. Regarding the deceased, the rich are buried in stone tombs,

while the poor are buried in earth tombs. The objects they own will are buried with them in the tombs. The people are aggressive and excel at war. Kangju, Yutian, Shale, An'xi and other 30 small states are subjugated to the state of Yanda, and it is known as a great state. They marry with Ruru. They sent envoys and paid tribute to China from the period of Tai'an. The envoys took a lion as tribute at the end of the period of Zhenguan. But when the envoys got to Gaoping, Wanqi Chounu (万俟丑奴) rebelled, so the envoys had to stay at Gaoping. After [the rebellion of] Wanqi Chounu was repressed, the lion was sent to the capital. From the period of Yongxi, the tributes stopped. In the twelfth year of Datong, the envoys were again sent to offer local goods. In the second year of Emperor Fei [of the Western Wei Dynasty] and the second year of Emperor Ming of [Northern Zhou], the envoys were sent to offer tributes. Later, they were defeated by the Turks, the tribes were scattered, and the tributes were completely destroyed. The tributes were again paid in the period of Daye of the Sui Dynasty. The state of Yanda is located 1,500 li north of Cao and 6,500 li west of Guazhou. During the period of Xiping, Emperor Ming asked Fuzi to lead Song Yun, the monk named Fali, and other people to the Western region in search for Buddhist texts. At that time, one monk called Hui went with them. They returned during the period of Zhenguan. Huisheng did not know the whole history, mountains, valleys and distances of the states they traveled, so he just made some brief records (Li Yanshou, 1974: 3230-3232).

The New Book of Tang elaborates on the topic of the Hephthalites in this way:

The state of Yida (挹怛) belongs to the branch of the Da Yuezhi of the Han Dynasty. After the place where the Da Yuezhi lived was occupied by the Wusun, the Da Yuezhi crossed Dayuan westward and subjugated the Daxia. And [they] controlled the city of Lanshi (蓝氏城). Daxia is [now called] Tuhuolu. Yanda is the surname of the king, and the descendants named the state after him and mistook it as Yida or Yitian (Ou Yangxiu & Song Qi, 1975: 6253).

And, finally, *Comprehensive Statutes* describes the Hephthalites in this passage:

The state of Hua [滑国] is another branch of the Gaoshi (高师). In the early Yongjian period of Emperor Shun of the Later Han Dynasty, the Han court promoted Bahua [a Hephthalite] to Houbu Qinhanhou (后部亲汉侯) in reward for defeating the northern barbarians. They [the Hephthalites] lost contact with China after the Wei and Jin Dynasties. In the early Putong period of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, the king of the state of Hua, Yandaiyisutuo (厌带夷栗陀), began to send envoys and

yellow lions, white mink furs, Persian brocades, etc. as tribute. They lived in the Sang'gan during the Later Wei Dynasty. Hua was a small state and subject to the Ruru. When the state of Hua became stronger, it conquered neighboring states, including Bosi (波斯), Kepantuo (渴槃陀), Jibin (罽宾), Yanqi (焉耆), Qiuci (龟兹), Shule (疏勒), Yutian (于阗), Gumo (姑墨) and Jupan (句盘).... It was called Hua during the period of the Later Wei Dynasty (Du You, 1988: 5258-5259).

According to the Chinese written sources mentioned here, the origin of the Hephthalites is still obscure. They are thought to be related to the Da Yuezhi, Gaoche or Cheshi tribes that originated in the pasture lands of the Altai mountains (Golden Mountains), but who moved westward to settle on fertile land. The Hephthalites expanded into Persia, Kepantuo, Jibin, Yanqi, Qiuci, Shule, Gumo, Yutian and Jupan through war, marriage and trade. In this way, the Hephthalite state developed gradually from one attached to Ruru to an empire based in Bactria, ruling an expansive region, including Central Asia, northwestern India, and places to the west. The core of the state occupied the middle sections of the Silk Road and the vast areas near the Hexi corridor of China. The areas under its rule were important transportation hubs. The trade on the Silk Road connected the Hephthalites to the Byzantine world in the Mediterranean, Sasanian Persia and China; Thus the Hephthalites who appeared in China played an important role in facilitating the East-West exchanges.

The interactions between the Hephthalites and ancient China in Chinese written sources

In the early third century CE, the Sasanians replaced the Parthians as the new rulers of Persia, acting as the intermediaries between the East and the West. In the fifth century CE, the Hephthalites crossed the Amu Darya River and invaded Persia. Under attack by the Sasanian kings Bahram V (420–438 CE) and Yazdegerd II (438–457 CE), the Hephthalites went south, conquered Bactria and settled there. From 457 to 484 CE, they launched three attacks against Persia and killed King Peroz I. Conquered, from that time, Persia paid tribute to the Hephthalites. The Hephthalites also invaded northwestern India several times and entered Punjab. Although Skanda Gupta (455–467 CE) repelled their attack for a time, the Hephthalites took Punjab over again and even reached Magadha, when northwest India was split into small states. Around the same time period, the Northern Wei Dynasty in China had expanded to the Western Regions in China. Emperor Taiwu adopted a more aggressive policy than before, concentrating on the management of the Central Plains, while ignoring other regions in his kingdom (Wei Shou, 1974:2259).

From the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 6th century CE, the Hephthalites paid tribute to the Northern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Zhou and

Southern Liang Dynasties. According to the statistics of textual sources, from 456 to 568 CE, the Hephthalites made a total of twenty-two visits to China: fourteen times to the Northern Wei Dynasty, two times to the Western Wei Dynasty, once to the Northern Zhou Dynasty, and five times to the Southern Liang Dynasty, each time offering tribute, including local specialties such as white elephants and lions. The Hephthalites first came to China in 456 CE at Pingcheng, the capital city of the Northern Wei Dynasty. After the Northern Wei Dynasty moved its capital to Luoyang in 494 CE, the Hephthalites came to Luoyang. From 507 to 532 CE, the Hephthalites paid tribute to the Northern Wei Dynasty thirteen times. The Northern Wei Dynasty eventually split into Eastern Wei and Western Wei in 543 CE. When this happened, the Hephthalites paid tribute to the Western Wei Dynasty at Chang'an in the twelfth year of Datong (546 CE) and the second year of Emperor Fei (552 CE). One year after the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581 CE) was established, the Hephthalites came and paid tribute in 558 CE. At the same time, the Hephthalites paid tribute to the Southern Liang Dynasty (502-557 CE) at the capital, Jiankang (the modern-day city of Nanjing) respectively in 516, 520, 526, 535 and 541 CE.

Here it is worth noting that the Northern Wei Dynasty also sent envoys to the Hephthalites. The *Book of Wei* provides detailed information about Gaohui, ambassador to the Hephthalites:

[Gao] hui, Du'er's brother...was admired by [Tuoba] Cheng, the king of Rencheng. During the years of Jingming, he was called to the court to see the emperor. During the years of Yanchang, he was sent to the state of the Hephthalites in the name of Yuanwai sanjichangshi (员外散骑常侍) and was respected in all of the countries of the Western Regions. Also, Poluohou and Wusun gave their famous horses to him. After returning, he was offered the position of Rongcongpushe (冗从仆射) and was promoted to Shesheng xiaowei (射声校尉), Zuozhong langjiang (左中郎将) and Youji Jiangjun (游击将军) during the years of Shengui. He went to the state of the Hephthalites as an ambassador in the name of Pingxi Jiangjun (平西将军) and Yuanwai sanjichangshi (Wei Shou, 1974: 754).

According to this source, [Gao] Hui visited the state of the Hephthalites twice, once during the Yanchang period (512-515 CE) and once during the reign of Shengui (518-520 CE), when the court of the Northern Wei Dynasty had moved to Luoyang, a gathering place for Hu [Barbarian] traders, including the Hephthalites. *Luoyang Qielanji* (洛阳伽蓝记) depicts the scene:

From the west of Congling to Daqin, hundreds of countries and thousands of cities were glad to establish a relationship. Businessmen and traders headed to the frontier places where there were so-called areas under

heaven and earth. The number of those who liked China and bought houses is innumerable, and there were more than ten thousand households of naturalized people. The doors and lanes were renovated, and the settlements were filled. The green locust trees provided shade and the green willows hung down the courtyards. All manner of rare goods in the world all could be found here (Yang Xianzhi, 1982: 161).

The Roles of the Hephthalites in East-West Exchanges

Chinese written sources are helpful in understanding the relationship between the Hephthalites and the Sogdians. The Sogdians paid tribute to China twenty times from 419 to 564 CE, during which time the Hephthalites had frequent contact with China. According to Chinese written sources, in the fourth year of Taiyan (439 CE), the Northern Wei Dynasty forcefully transported more than 30,000 families from Liangzhou to Pingcheng, including some Sogdians, but it was not until the early year of Wencheng (about 457 CE) that the King of the Sogdians sent envoys to redeem them (Wei Shou, pp. 90, 2270). The Sogdians and Hephthalites had formed a relatively stable but loose vassal relationship after the Hephthalites had defeated Sogdiana. When the Hephthalites established political contacts with China, the Sogdian king under their protection sent messengers to redeem the Sogdians in Pingcheng. The Sogdian merchants made full use of this condition to expand the scope of their activities into China.

The inscriptions on the north wall of Mogao Grottoes' Cave 285 in Dunhuang (敦煌莫高窟 285) and the text, Zhigongtu (Picture Album of Subordinate Peoples 职贡图) written between 526 and 539 CE, also provide evidence for the relationship between the Hephthalite and the Sogdians. The cave, built in the Western Wei Dynasty, show male and female figures worshipping Buddha, including the named figures of Shichongji (史崇姬), Hua□an (滑□安), Huaheinu (滑黑奴), Huayi (滑一), He□(何□), and Ding'ai (丁爱). When describing the envoys from the state of Hua, the text Zhigongtu mentions that Fuheliaoliao (富何了了) and Kang Fuzhen (康符真) were sent as the envoys by the wife of the king to pay tribute of yellow lions, white mink, Persian brocades to the Liang Dynasty in the first year of Putong(520 CE)(Xiao Yi, 1986: 148).

Numismatic finds also provide evidence for the activities of the Hephthalites along the Silk Road. The Hephthalites based their coinage on northwestern Indian coins and those issued by the Sasanian Peroz I. They produced Peroz-imitation coins, therefore there is a good case for attributing coin-imitations to the Hephthalites. The Hephthalite coins found in Central Asia, Northwest India, China, as well as the Peroz-issued coins excavated in China provide significant information about the Hephthalites. According to a study by Zeimal, a considerable number of Sasanian drachmas and their imitations were found in various regions of southern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

(E. V. Zeimal, 1994: 245-267). In contrast, the imitations of Sasanian coins excavated in China are scarce. Thirty-nine Sasanian coins were found in Shanxi, for example: 37 of these coins were issued by Peroz, one by Kavād and only one was an imitation of a Peroz coin (Zhang Qingjie, 2011: 199-209). Two more Peroz-imitation coins were discovered in a stupa base in Ding County, Hebei (Xia Nai, 1966: 269-271). Thus, it can be inferred from these figures that the Hephthalite coins only circulated locally and didn't become an international currency on the Silk Road.

Sasanian silver coins, on the other hand, were mainly used as the international currency on the Silk Road. Many Persian coins appeared in China, likely due to Persian merchants, but also Sogdian and Hephthalite traders. According to Sunli's statistics on the distribution of Persian silver coins found in China (Sun Li, 2004: 35-55), there were few Persian coins dating from the period from the reign of Shapur II (309-379 CE) to the reign of Peroz I (459-484 CE). This period coincided with the rise of the Kidarites in Central Asia, disrupting trade in this region. Among the Persian coins found in China, the largest number date to and Peroz I (459-484 CE) and Chosroes II (590-628 CE). After the Hephthalites defeated Peroz I in 484 CE, the Sasanian Persians were required to pay a ransom of 30 mules laden with silver, which resulted in large quantities of Persian coins entering Central Asia. These coins were then used in trade and as tribute in China by the Hephthalites thereafter, flooding China with Persian coins. From 455 to 553 CE, Persia sent envoys to China 14 times, and the Persians along with the Hephthalites, brought tribute to China in 507 and in 517 CE.

In addition to the connections between China and Central Asia, Chinese written sources also mention European envoys to China. These are recorded as coming from Pulan (普嵐, Byzantine) to pay tribute to China. Specifically, it is mentioned that Gaoli, Yutian, Pulan, and Sute paid tribute to the Northern Wei Dynasty kings in the first year of the reign of Huangxing (467 CE) (Wei Shou, 1974: 115), and that the Hephthalites and Pulan together sent their envoys to China in the second year of the reign of Tai'an (456 CE) (Wei Shou, 1974: 128), indicating that the interactions between the Mediterranean and China at that time were relatively stable and frequent.

Conclusion

From the textual and numismatic evidence presented above, one can draw the conclusion that, instead of disrupting the Silk Road transportation and cross-regional trade system, the Hephthalites actually expanded the Silk Road trading network, becoming the node between Central Asia, the Iranian Plateau and India. Though the Hephthalites are not inherently adept at commerce, they consolidated their interests in Silk Road trade by strategically leveraging and safeguarding the expertise of Sogdian merchants and the trade routes under their control, thereby expanding their sphere of operations into Chinese territories and Persian frontiers. The Hephthalite coins mainly circulated in the places which the Hephthalites dominated □ the Sasanian silver coins that were paid

tribute to Hephthalite were the main medium of exchange for the eastward extension of the Sogdian trade network under the rule of the Hephthalite Empire.

Conflict of Interest

The paper is based on Hebei Provincial Social Science Foundation Project “Research on the Interactions between Ancient Hebei and Central Asia–Iran in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative” (HB23SL002)

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چکیده

اصطلاح «یاندا» در زبان چینی که برای نخستین بار در کتاب وی ثبت شده است، بر نام قوم «هفتالی» دلالت دارد. هفتالی‌ها یک گروه قومی بودند که بیشتر در سده پنجم تا هفتم میلادی در آسیای میانه می‌زیستند. بنابر منابع نوشتاری چینی، هفتالی‌ها اغلب در بازده زمانی از ۴۵۶ تا ۵۸۶ م. به چین آمدند. با شکست هفتالی‌ها از اتحاد ترک‌ها، شاهان ساسانی به میانه سده ششم (میلادی)، روابط چین با هفتالی‌ها نیز به تدریج کم‌رنگ شد تا این‌که دگرباره و به دوره «دایه» از دودمان «سویی» (۶۰۸-۶۱۸ م.) سر و کله آن‌ها پیدا شد. دودمان‌های «شمالی» و «جنوبی» چین با هفتالی‌ها در چین آشنا بودند؛ منابع چینی به تعامل آن‌ها با گروه‌های قومی مختلفی مانند «هان» در چین، سغدی‌ها و ایرانی (پارس)‌ها اشاره کرده‌اند. منابع نوشتاری چینی، سکه‌های هفتالی، سکه‌ها و کتیبه‌های ایرانی، زمینه‌ای سترگ برای شناخت فعالیت‌های هفتالی‌ها در چین در قرون وسطی و پیوند آن‌ها با گروه‌های قومی مختلف در چین و نیز در مسیر راه ابریشم را ایجاد می‌کنند. بنابراین منابع، هفتالیان نقشی بسیار مثبت، اثرگذار و سازنده در گسترش تبادلات میان شرق و غرب داشته‌اند. هفتالیان در پیوندهای میان چین و ایران و نیز با کران دریای مدیترانه نقش‌های کلیدی داشتند؛ بنابر متون چینی، نمایندگان بیزانس، خراج‌های را به دودمان وی شمالی پرداخت کرده‌اند؛ این منابع از همراهی نمایندگان هفتالی و بیزانس به دربار چین خبر می‌دهند. بنابر منابع مکتوب چینی، سغدی‌ها از سال ۴۱۹ تا ۵۶۴ م. ۲۰ بار به چین خراج پرداختند و در این مدت هفتالی‌ها مکرراً با چین تماس داشتند. باوجود این، سغدی‌ها و هفتالی‌ها پس از شکست سغدی‌ان توسط هفتالی‌ها، از رابطه‌ای نسبتاً پایدار، اما سست برخوردار بودند.

کلیدواژگان: دودمان‌های شمالی، هفتالیان، چین، ساسانیان، سغدی‌ان.



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مقدمه

اصطلاح «یاندا» (Yanda) در زبان چینی که برای نخستین بار در کتاب وی (Weishu) ثبت شده است، بر نام قوم «هفتالی» دلالت دارد. هفتالی‌ها یک گروه قومی بودند که بیشتر در سده پنجم تا هفتم میلادی در آسیای میانه می‌زیستند. بنابر منابع نوشتاری چینی، هفتالی‌ها اغلب در بازده زمانی از ۴۵۶ تا ۵۸۶ م. به چین آمدند. با شکست هفتالی‌ها از اتحاد ترک‌ها، شاهان ساسانی به میانه سده ششم (میلادی)، روابط چین با هفتالی‌ها نیز به تدریج کم‌رنگ شد تا این‌که دگرباره و به دوره «دایه» (Daye) از دودمان «سویی» (Sui) (۶۰۸-۶۱۸ م.) سر و کله آن‌ها پیدا شد. کتاب‌هایی مانند: کتاب وی (Wei)، ژو (Zhoushu)، لیانگ (Liangshu)، تاریخ دودمان‌های شمالی (Beishi)، سویی (Suishu)، کتاب جدید تانگ (Xintangshu) و هم‌چنین اساسنامه جامع (Tongdian)، اطلاعات قابل‌توجهی درمورد هفتالیان به دست می‌دهند. در این پژوهش، نگارنده این منابع را بار دیگر مرور خواهد کرد و داده‌های درهم‌تنیده با هفتالیان و روابط آن‌ها با اقوام مختلف در مسیر راه ابریشم را مورد بحث قرار می‌دهد؛ برای این موضوع، گزارش‌های «دودمان‌های شمالی و جنوبی» چین در این باره را به گونه ویژه اساس قرار می‌دهد.

کتاب دودمان‌های شمالی، کتاب جدید تانگ و اساسنامه جامع دربردارنده داده‌هایی کوتاه از هفتالیان است.

«ایالت «یاندا» (ایالت هفتال)، شاخه‌ای از (مردم) «دا یوئچی» یا به عبارتی شاخه‌ای دیگر از «گائوچه»، که خاستگاه آنان از «سایبی» است. این شهر در جنوب «جین شان» و غرب «یوتیان» واقع و پایتخت آن بیش از ۲۰۰ لی در جنوب رودخانه «وو هو» (جیحون) و در فاصله ۱۰۱۰۰ لی (از غرب) «چانگ‌آن»^۱ قرار دارد. بسیاری از پرستشگاه‌های پایتخت با زر تزئین شده‌اند. آداب و رسوم آن‌ها همانند آداب و رسوم ترک‌ها است. چند همسری در آنجا رواج دارد. موهایشان را کوتاه می‌کنند. زبان آن‌ها با زبان رورو، گائوچه و سایر «هووها» متفاوت است. در سیستم پادشاهی، پسر الزاماً جانشین پدر نمی‌شود؛ چه بسا برادر نیز می‌تواند جانشین شود؛ جانشینی پس از مرگ شاه رخ می‌دهد؛ در این کران شتر و اسب زیاد است. مجازات‌هایشان بسیار سخت است. سارقان هر تعداد اشیاء را که بدزدند باید ۱۰ برابر اشیاء مسروقه را برگردانند و سپس کشته می‌شوند. درمورد مردگان، ثروتمندان در قبرهای سنگی، درحالی‌که فقرا در قبرهای خاکی (زمین) دفن می‌شوند. آن‌ها اشیائی را با مردگان دفن می‌کنند. آن‌ها در جنگ سرآمد هستند...».

دیگر منابع چینی چون منابع دوره تانگ، داده‌هایی ارزشمند از هفتالیان را به دست می‌دهند. با وجود این و بنابر منابع چینی نمی‌توان به خاستگاه اصلی هفتالیان دست یافت. آن‌ها از مرزهای پارس (ایران) تا به دیگر کرانه‌های گسترده بودند. از یک سو تا به نزدیکی بلخ و از سوی دیگر تا به هند.

با فروپاشی دودمان اشکانی، و بر روی کار آمدن شاهنشاهی ساسانی، آن‌ها نقشی کلیدی میان غرب و شرق (آسیا) بازی کردند؛ در سده پنجم میلادی، هفتالیان با گذر از جیحون به مرزهای ایران تازش آوردند؛ با وجود این نمی‌توان نادیده گرفت که «پیروز اول ساسانی» در نبرد با هفتالیان جان خود را از دست داد و مدتی خراج‌گزار آن‌ها شد. هفتالیان هرچند شکست‌هایی

۱. چانگ‌آن پایتخت چین به دوره تانگ و شهر مدرن کنون شیآن است (م.).

را از «گوپتا» (شاه هند) چشیدند، اما به شمال غرب هند یورش برده و پنجاب را به دست آوردند؛ واکنش «بهرام پنجم (گور)» و «یزدگرد دوم»، بهانه رانده شدن هفتالیان به سوی کرانه‌های جنوبی و استقرار در نزدیکی بلخ شد. در همین دوره زمانی، دودمان «وی شمالی» (Northern Wei) به گسترش مرزهای غربی همت گماشت؛ امپراتور «تای وو» (Taiwu) سیاستی تهاجمی، برخلاف پیشینیان، اتخاذ کرد، بر دشت‌های میانی تمرکز کرد، اما از دیگر بخش‌های شاهنشاهی خود غافل ماند. هفتالیان از میانه سده پنجم تا میانه سده ششم میلادی باج‌گزار وی شمالی بودند. بنابر منابع چینی، سفرای متعددی هفتالی از چین بازدید داشته‌اند. منابع چینی هم‌چنین از پیوند سغدیان و هفتالیان داده‌های ارزشمند به دست می‌دهد؛ از خراج‌گزاری سغدیان تا پیوندهای خوب از جمله بهره‌برداری از روابط مناسب هفتالیان و چین. افزون‌تر، هفتالیان در ضرب سکه از سکه‌های پیروز اول (ساسانی) بسیار تقلید کرده‌اند؛ سکه‌های (دراخما) ضرب شمال غرب هند، آسیای میانه (ازبکستان و تاجیکستان) تا به چین کمترین گواهی این موضوع است. باوجود این، گونه سکه‌های تقلیدی کمی از چین یافت شده است؛ بنابراین و برپایه این شمار می‌توان چنین فهمید که سکه‌های هفتالی تنها در کران محلی استفاده شده و در «راه ابریشم» به ارز بین‌المللی تبدیل نشد.

برخلاف این، درهم‌های (سکه) ساسانی بیشتر به عنوان ارز بین‌المللی در مسیر جاده ابریشم مورد استفاده قرار می‌گرفت. شمار بسیاری از سکه‌های ساسانی از چین به دست آمده که به گمانی به بهانه رفت و آمد بازرگانان ایرانی، سغدی و حتی هفتالی بوده است. نمی‌توان نادیده گرفت که شمار سکه‌های ساسانی از پادشاهی «شاپور دوم» تا آغاز پادشاهی پیروز در چین بس ناچیز است؛ آشکار است که در این دوره زمانی «کیداریت‌ها» (Kidarate) در مسیر بازرگانی این مسیر (راه ابریشم) اختلال ایجاد کردند. سپسین‌تر، سکه‌های ایرانی از راه بازرگانی و نیز به عنوان بخشی از خراج هفتالیان به چین، به کشور راه یافت و در چین روایی یافت.

نتیجه‌گیری

هفتالیان در پیوندهای میان چین و ایران و نیز با کران دریای مدیترانه نقشی کلیدی داشتند؛ بنابر متون چینی، نمایندگان بیزانس، خراج‌های را به دودمان وی شمالی پرداخت کرده‌اند؛ این منابع از همراهی نمایندگان هفتالی و بیزانس به دربار چین خبر می‌دهند. بنابر منابع مکتوب چینی، سغدی‌ها از سال ۴۱۹ تا ۵۶۴ م.، ۲۰ بار به چین خراج پرداختند و در این مدت هفتالی‌ها مکرراً با چین تماس داشتند. باوجود این، سغدی‌ها و هفتالی‌ها پس از شکست سغدی‌ان توسط هفتالی‌ها، از رابطه‌ای نسبتاً پایدار، اما سست برخوردار بودند.

کوتاه سخن این‌که، برپایه شواهد متنی و سکه‌شناسی ارائه شده در بالا، می‌توان به این نتیجه رسید که هفتالی‌ها نه تنها به ایجاد اختلال در حمل‌ونقل در مسیر جاده ابریشم و سیستم تجارت فرامنطقه‌ای روی نیاوردند، که درواقع شبکه تجارت جاده ابریشم را گسترش دادند؛ آن‌ها به یکی از مهم‌ترین گروه‌های رابط میان آسیای میانه، فلات ایران و هند تبدیل شدند. آن‌ها برای مدت طولانی نقش واسطه‌ای مهمی در تبادل بین شرق و غرب داشتند و رونق جاده ابریشم را در قرن پنجم و ششم پس از میلاد تضمین کردند؛ هفتالیان از سکه‌های ساسانی، به عنوان ارز بین‌المللی راه ابریشم، به فراوانی بهره بردند و در انتقال مجموعه‌هایی

از این سکه‌ها به چین نقشی بی‌مانند داشتند. این سکه‌ها، بخشی از خراجی است که به هفتالیان پرداخت شده بود. به هر روی، هفتالیان پایه‌ی اساس توسعه و گسترش جاده‌ی ابریشم را هم زمان با دو دوره از دودمان‌های «سویی» (Sui) و «تانگ» (Tang) را پی‌ریزی کردند.

