

Commercial Activities and Their Historical Impact in the Three Gorges Area From Seventh to Ninth Century

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Received 24 March 2015; accepted 18 May 2015
Published online 26 June 2015

Abstract

From Seventh to Ninth century, business in the Three Gorges region along Yangtze River in China had presented unprecedented prosperity which featured the growing business groups, flourishing salt trades, many commodity markets and active shipping trading. The prosperity of the commercial economy in the Three Gorges region during this period of time was attributed to many factors including the natural conditions, the population growth, the development of shipping and local specialties and others. During this period of time, the business prosperity in the Three Gorges region had promoted the local economic and social development and also established its important position of the trade and commerce in the upper Yangtze River region.

Key words: Seventh to Ninth Century; Three gorges along Yangtze River; Business

Zhang, C. L. (2015). Commercial Activities and Their Historical Impact in the Three Gorges Area From Seventh to Ninth Century. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(6), 124-127. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/7111>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7111>

INTRODUCTION

Before the Seventh Century, compared with the Central Plains region, the Three Gorges region had been relatively poor and underdeveloped due to its high mountains, deep gorges, inaccessible traffic, sparse population and development difficulties. With the establishment of the

Tang Dynasty by the Li Family in the early 7th century, the country was unified and the political situation was stable. The Three Gorges region's population had continued to grow and get together and the business had become increasingly active. Social life and production were more prosperous than any previous dynasty. This paper attempts to analyze the rise of commercial economy from Seventh to Ninth Century in the Three Gorges region and its reasons and to explore the historical impact of this phenomenon.

1. THE RISE OF COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES IN THE THREE GORGES AREA ALONG YANGTZE RIVER FROM 7TH TO 9TH CENTURY

From the Seventh to Ninth Century in the Three Gorges region, the commercial activities become unprecedentedly prosperous, which mainly manifested in the growth of business groups, flourishing salt trade, many commodity markets and active shipping trading.

Firstly, the business groups had grown. With the boom of the shipping trade in the Three Gorges region, many residents went along the river down to the southern area of Hubei to get engaged in business activities, among which they mainly engaged in the shipping trading. During Tang Yizong Xiantong years, Erzhu in Wu Gorge "is engaged in business in Jingyi along Qutang Gorge." (Li et al., 1969) Du Fu's poem *Zui Neng Xing* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol. 221*) and his *Kuizhou Ten Quatrains* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol. 229*) and other poems by poets in Tang dynasty have recorded the rise of the commercial activities in the Three Gorges area. Li Bai's poem *Thinking of Badong Old Friend on the River* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol. 173*) is another example. Wang Jian's poem *Jiangling Records* vividly depict the picture of people who engaged in commodity

exchange in Jiangling (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.300*).

In addition, at that time merchants who engaged in the business in the Three Gorges area had become an important theme of the Tang poetry, such as the poem to send businessman back to the Wu Gorge: “while boating hears a merchant resting in the maple wood. Send him back home. It is like a dream. Wu Gorge connects to the Xiangpu. It is so far away the cloud and rain are even different...” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.284*) and a poem to reflect that the Three Gorges businessman who engaged in business and did not return and the wife has been waiting at home: “marry a merchant in Qutang. He has a bad faith on me. Should know tide is faithful, marry and beachgoers” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.283*). These poems show the picture that under the influence of a strong business atmosphere in the Three Gorges area merchants emerge in large numbers and they part their family doing business outside for years. They also reflect from another aspect that during this period of time commercial activities in the Three Gorges area is very active.

Secondly, salt well was very rich and the trading was flourishing. Archaeologists have found the remains or relics related to the salt industry in several sites in the Three Gorges region which can date back to the 11th century BC. Records on salt well in the Three Gorges region in the Seventh to Ninth Century are often found in the books. In Yun’an, there were “salt officers”; in Fengjie, there were “Yong’an well salt officers”, in Dachang, there were “salt officers”; in Nanpu, there was “Tu salt and Yuyang salt as well as two salt officers”; in Linjiang, there was “salt”; in Pengshui, there was “salt” (*New History of Tang Dynasty · Geography*). On the other hand, the salt price in Tang dynasty had continued to rise, which was recorded in *New History of Tang Dynasty · Food and Currency*. From Anshi Turmoil to the early Suzong Qianyuan year, only five to six years, the price of salt rose by ten times. To Zhenyuan fourth year, “the price of Jianghuai salt was increased by 200 each Dou and it was 310; later it was increased by 60 again” (*New History of Tang Dynasty Vol.54*). As salt price continued to rise, people were “all going around to do salt business just for the profit” (Wang, 1992). Under the temptation of the salt profit, during this period of time many residents in the Three Gorges region “cooked salt to make profits” (Dong et al., 1983) which produced a large number of wealthy salt merchants. A salt merchant in the Three Gorges region Chang was doing business in Jiangling and “accumulated a big fortune” (Li et al., 1969); salt merchant Gong Bo “was doing business and made big profits; in less than ten years accumulated a million and actually became a big merchant in Shu” (Li et al., 1969). In addition to the rich salt merchants, ordinary people also joined trading and shipping of salt to make a living through sale cooking. Du Fu’s poem *Walking when Bearing Firewood* describes women in the

Three Gorges region were “climbing high mountains to get firewood for money and bearing firewood as well as well salt” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol. 221*).

Thirdly, there were many commodity markets. During this period of time, business prosperity in the Three Gorges region was also reflected in the emergence and rise of various commodity markets and these markets were more active than ever before. Tang poems have recorded various markets in the Three Gorges region during this period time, including: (a) small market: Du Fu’s poem *Writing on the Courtyard Wall of Longxingshi Temple in Zhongzhou*: “rice is competitive in small markets” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.229*); Du Fu’s poem *Cold Japanese Pagodatree Leaves*: “New noodles come to the market nearby” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol 221*). (b) market along the river: Sikong Shu’s poem *Say Farewell to Kuizhou Banshi* mentions it (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.292*); Wang Wei’s poem *Passing Baxia at Dawn* “at water kingdom, there are markets on boats” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.127*). (c) Grass market: Zheng Gu’s *Xia Zhong Yu Zhi*: “at night boats returns to the grass market; in the spring we step on the tea mountain” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.674*). (d) Silkworm market: in *Fang Yu Sheng Lan*. There are records of “silkworm market”. (e) Medicine market: *Continuous History as a Mirror Vol. 73*: In Chuanxia, travelers gathered in each country to trade medicine. This is called medical market.” Li Fu’s *Kuizhou Medicine Records*: “Carpenter seeks medicine at the market. The store gets medicine from traders. The authenticity is not distinguished”.

Fourthly, shipping trade was very active. During this period of time, the Three Gorges region has become an important goods distribution center at the upper Yangtze River region. Many businessmen from Sichuan and Hubei gathered there to get engaged on the commercial activities. Tang poems described their activities, such as Zhang Chao’s *Chang Gan Xing* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.26*) and Li Bai’s *Song of Jingzhou* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.163*). In addition, there are many Tang poems reflecting the situation of some ethnic minority businessmen doing business in the Three Gorges region, such as Du Fu’s *Yan Yu* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.229*) and *Twelve Poems to Relieve Boredom* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.230*). A large number of businessmen gathered together in the Three Gorges region which promoted the local commodity economy.

2. THE CAUSES OF BUSINESS PROSPERITY IN THE THREE GORGES AREA DURING THE 7TH TO 9TH CENTURY

In the feudal Chinese society, prosperous regional business was always closely related to the development of

local agricultural economy. Areas which had good natural geographical conditions and a higher level of agricultural economic development usually had prosperous commodity economy, while in the areas where there are high mountains and deep gorges with poor development, commodity economy was relatively underdeveloped. However, during the Seventh to Ninth century in the Three Gorges region with “burning misty smoke” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry [Vol. 434], 1982*) under the slash-and-burn agricultural production conditions, there had been great commodity economy. The reasons can be discussed in the following four aspects.

The first factor is the natural and geographical conditions. During this period of time in the Three Gorges area it was full of high mountains and deep gorges. This area was sparsely populated and its cultivation index was very low. Agricultural practices were still based on slash and burn cultivation then. In Tang poems there is vivid description of this primitive agricultural economy such as Du Fu’s *In Autumn in Kui Family Sending a Letter to Zheng and Li* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.230*). Another example is Liu Yuxi’s *Walking on the Primitive Farmland* (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.354*). The burning farming methods of agricultural production have not been changed until three or four hundred years. Historical records in Song Dynasty reads: “Farmers in gorges have a difficult life with big mountains around the farm. The red soil is barren and it is hard to get farmland...” (Fan, 1982). Agricultural production is absolute dependent on climatic conditions. Even in good years it is not easy to maintain a basic living. If experiencing famine, people have to deal with hard situation. Li Fu in the Tang Dynasty once wrote a poem to describe the hard situation people experienced (Sun, 1991). Due to the harsh natural and geographical conditions, to seek a way of life, many people in the Three Gorges area during this period of time had to abandon reliance on land and agriculture and turn to trafficking trade, which has promoted the rise of commerce.

The second factor is the population pressure. During this period, along the upper Yangtze River region, the political situation was stable. Whenever the Central Plains have war, the ruling class and the general civilians would move to the Three Gorges region for refuge, which led to making this region a significant increase in the population. Meanwhile, since the political situation was stable and the economy continued to develop, the natural population growth rate was quite high. This also led to a rapid increase in population in the Three Gorges region. On the other hand, many loyal family members and officials were demoted to the Three Gorges region, which was also an important factor of the population growth during this period. According to the records of *New History of Tang Dynasty*, the oldest son of Emperor Taizong of Tang Dynasty, Cheng Qian, was deposed and

exiled to Qianzhou; the fourteenth child Princess Cao Ming was deposed and exiled to Qianzhou; the oldest son of Emperor Gaozong Zhong was deposed and exiled to Qianzhou. Some high-ranking officials such as Liu Yan, Diwu Qi, Lu Zhi, Bai Juyi were demoted to Zhongzhou; Wang Shuwen was banished to Yuzhou; Wang Pi was banished to Kaizhou. Accompanying these loyal family members and officials, their family members also moved to the Three Gorges region.

During this period in the Three Gorges region, population continued to increase, while on the other hand it was restricted by the limited land resources and primitive farming methods, which resulted in the increasing pressure of ordinary people’s lives. According to the records of *New History of Tang Dynasty · Geography*, from the early Tang Dynasty to Tianbao years, in the Three Gorges region, the population grew by 67,300 people. The population of Kuizhou increased from 39,550 people in Zhenguan years to 75,000 people in Tianbao years with an increase of nearly twice more than before. Rapid population growth provided more ample labor productivity in the Three Gorges region for economic development, but it also further intensifies the contradiction between people and land, forcing some people to change to make a living from engaging on commercial activities.

The third factor is shipping development. During this period in the Three Gorges region, the shipbuilding was well developed and the sailing technology created a convenient transport condition. From historical records, “In May when boats sail through the gorges, not a boat would lose among a thousand official boats” (Yuan, Qian, & Li, n.d.); to the 9th century, even “memorials to the throne from Xichuan would be sent through Wu Gorge”. Convenient waterway made the Three Gorges region an important commodity distribution center in the upper Yangtze River region such as the Three Gorges Yun’an. The development of shipping promoted the prosperity of transit trade in the Three Gorges region. There were many Tang poems which described this situation such as “wind and smoke fly over Wu and Shu; boats are used to deliver salt and Ma paper” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.221*), “people welcome good from Sanshu” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.276*), “Shu Ma paper and Wu salt have been delivered along this way since ancient; giant boats sailing pass like wind” (*Complete Collection of Tang Poetry Vol.229*) and two other poem from *Complete Collection of Tang Poetry*. Development of shipping brought new vitality to the Three Gorges region during this period, and it also led to the transport trade development of the Three Gorges region.

The fourth factor is the local specialties. Three Gorges region was rich in natural resources during this period, which provides a good condition for its commercial prosperity. As noted earlier, the Three Gorges region was

rich in salt resources. The distribution and mining area of salt was large; therefore, the salt industry has become an important handcraft sector and the main content of the goods trade in the Three Gorges area in Tang Dynasty. Three Gorges region had always been rich in tea. During this period of time, there was much well-known tea, such as Kuizhou's "fragrant tea" (Li, 1957), Fuzhou's "three types of tea: most honored is Binhua tea...next is Baima tea... followed is Fuling tea" (Wang, 1986); "there are four tea plantations in the south of Zhongzhou: Duoling, Duobo, Poluo, and Silong" (Zhang, n.d.). All these were famous tea then. Yiling city in the east of the Three Gorges was an important town along the gorges then. "It has controlled Jing and Wu since the ancient times" and there were many "pepper, paint, paper merchants". "Yiling paper" was particularly famous and widely sold. During this period, the Three Gorges textiles were also found in the historical data. According to the records of *New History of Tang Dynasty·Geography*: Suizhou's "Chupu silky cloth", Hezhou's "Ge cloth", Kaizhou's "Baizhu cloth", Wanzhou's "Mianchou", Fuzhou's "Liao cloth" and Nanzhou and Zhenzhou's "Ban cloth" were all well-known textiles, and are tributes for the imperial court. During this period, the Three Gorges region was also rich in various kinds of fruits. Du Fu in Kuizhou West Village mainly planted citrus with an area of 40 Mu. Litchi was widely planted. The quality of Litchis from the Fuzhou Concubine park was the best and "they were the biggest". Rich fruit was not only the food of people, but also enters the market for commercial transactions. Fan Chengda in Song Dynasty once wrote a poem Kuizhou Bamboo Song which indicates that fruit was also one of the important commodities. During this period, the Three Gorges region was also rich in a variety of yams and herbs, and it formed a special medicine market. There were also a lot of bears, brown bears, monkeys and other wildlife. Their fur often were tradable goods. In short, the rich natural resources attributed to important commodities in the Three Gorges area. They provided a good physical condition for the prosperity of the business during this period in the Three Gorges region.

CONCLUSION

During Seventh to Ninth Century, the economy had been prosperous in the Three Gorges region, which improved of the overall economic standard of the Three Gorges region. According to the records of *New History of Tang Dynasty·Geography*: "Based on the number of households to judge whether the place is rich or not", in the Tang Dynasty in the Three Gorges region, the proportion of top and medium counties was much higher than other area in

the upper Yangtze River region. Just take Kuizhou as an example. Among the four counties, two were top counties; one was a medium county; and one was a low county. How did they create such great economic development in the poor natural conditions? The author believes this was inextricably linked to the rise of business in the Three Gorges area in the 7th to 9th century. The rise of the business during this period of time in the Three Gorges region reached the high point after the 10th century and it contributed to making the important position of the Three Gorges area in the upper Yangtze River region in terms of commerce and trade. In a long period of time after the 10th century, the agricultural economic development in the Three Gorges region has been slow, but in terms of the average household commercial tax, the Three Gorges region has greatly exceeded other areas in the upper Yangtze River region and its tax is even higher than Chengdu Plain which is well-known for its business prosperity. The main reason for that is the boom of commercial economy in the Three Gorges area during the Seventh to Ninth Century.

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