

Sociopolitics of China According to Sulayman Al-Tajir through the Book *Akhbar Al-Sin Wa Al-Hind*

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ABSTRAK

Sulayman al-Tajir merupakan seorang tokoh pelayar Muslim berbangsa Arab yang terkenal dan terawal iaitu sekitar abad ke-9M. Beliau berasal dari Siraf dan dikenali sebagai al-Tajir merujuk kepada pedagang. Kebanyakan penulisan tidak menyatakan secara mendalam mengenai asal-usul nama beliau. Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind merupakan sebuah karya yang dicatat oleh Abu Zayd al-Sirafi iaitu catatan yang menyentuh mengenai penempatan China dan India. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji fenomena sosiopolitik China yang diceritakan oleh Sulayman al-Tajir dalam geografi pelayaran beliau. Kajian ini merupakan kajian kualitatif dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif menerusi analisis kandungan data-data yang diperolehi mengenai pelayaran beliau di dalam Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa terdapat sistem organisasi yang strategik oleh pemerintah China dan diaplikasi oleh masyarakat China atau pun warga asing yang menduduki kawasan tersebut. Implikasi kajian ini supaya dapat memberi sumbangan terhadap ilmu sejarah pelayaran Muslim khususnya di rantau Asia dan Alam Melayu yang perlu dikaji dari semasa ke semasa.

Keywords: Sulayman al-Tajir, Chinese sociopolitics.

Abstract: Sulayman al-Tajir was a prominent and early Muslim Arab navigator, around the 9th century CE. He hailed from Siraf and was known as al-Tajir, referring to a merchant. Most writings do not delve deeply into the origins of his name. Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind is a work recorded by Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, which touches on the settlements of China and India. This research aims to study the sociopolitical phenomena of China as described by Sulayman al-Tajir in his geography of voyages. This study is qualitative research using descriptive methods through content analysis of the data obtained regarding his voyage in Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind. The results of this study indicate that there is a strategic organizational system by the Chinese government, which is applied by the Chinese community or foreign residents in the area. The implication of this study is to contribute to the knowledge of Muslim maritime history, particularly in the Asian region and the Malay Archipelago, which needs to be researched from time to time.

Keywords: Sulayman al-Tajir, sociopolitics of China

INTRODUCTION

One field of knowledge that has developed alongside the progress of civilization is navigation. In Islam, navigation refers to an expedition to a specific location to obtain information about a nation and country, as well as the location of ships and ports. Islam never forbade its followers from sailing. In fact, Islam encourages Muslims to sail in order to open up opportunities to exploit the riches of the environment, with the promise of great profits. (Josef 2006: 555).

The development of extensive navigational knowledge among Muslims has, to some extent, influenced society in every era of Islamic leadership, especially during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. This demonstrates remarkable and active progress, particularly during the Abbasid era, which relied on the functions of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers (Ya'qubi 2002: 20-25). The successful sailing and shipping expeditions of the Abbasid period highlight the importance of establishing cities in strategic locations. Baghdad, for example, was an excellent choice of city because it attracted many traders to conduct business there. (Ismail 1999: 141-143).

The field of navigation shows that it encompasses various aspects of life, including the process of two-way relations between traders. As a result, many Muslim navigators emerged, sailing and traveling to all corners of the world. One notable figure was Sulayman al-Tajir (9th century AD). His travel accounts have been widely debated by researchers, most of whom focus on his journey to China and India. However, discussions about his biography and personal character as a traveler have been less explored (Richard 2013: 209). In addition, according to Tibbetts (1979), as cited in the article Arshad Islam's article, Sulayman al-Tajir was the first Muslim to write about China and India in his work *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*.

This earliest known Muslim account on the entire region of South-Southeast Asia to China is often claimed to be anonymous, and without a title. It is mainly concerned with maritime activities of the maritime kingdoms stretching from India to China with particular reference to Khanfu Port. Yet it also deals with the history of the rajas of Sindh and India, political and religious life of the region including local traits, customs and habits of the people (Tibbetts 1997)

Therefore, the study seeks to highlight Sulayman al-Tajir character through the context of his voyages, particularly his knowledge and observations of India and China. The main objective is to examine the history of the navigational science pioneered by Muslims, with a specific focus on Sulayman al-Tajir, as well as its broader development within society. Employing a descriptive content analysis design, this research analyses relevant sources to construct a clearer understanding of his contributions. The findings suggest that Sulayman's report on settlements in China provide valuable insights into the cultural and socio-politics organization of the ruling authorities of that period. This study holds particular significance as it enables contemporary society to appreciate the contributions and intellectual character of early Muslim pioneers in advancing navigation and shaping the foundation of civilization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews three key aspects related to the socio-politics context of China as recorded by the Muslim navigator Sulayman al-Tajir in his works *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*, in sailing in Islam, the figure of Sulayman al-Tajir, and the socio-political order of China.

Sailing in Islam

The history of Islamic navigation can be traced back to the early Muslim community. Josef (2006: 555-556) in *Medieval Islamic Civilization An Encyclopedia*, outlines the development of Arab maritime history across the world. In Islam, the encouragement to engage in seafaring provided inspiration for Muslim communities to undertake long-distance expeditions. The mastery of navigational knowledge enabled Muslims not only to construct ships with advanced nautical techniques but also to engage in commercial trading when arriving at settlements. Later, the development of the history of Islamic navigation is seen during the Umayyad era by adopting the Roman and Byzantine administrative systems. While the aspect of navigation existed during the reign of Caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan. There are many city ports that enter around the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea becoming active and rapidly growing port centers with trading activities.

According to John Guy in his writing *Rare and Strange Goods International Trade in Ninth-Century Asia* commented on the extensive maritime activities in Asia in the 9th century AD. Relations between China and West Asia became vibrant due to the use of sea routes which encouraged the growth of administrative success in China. Trade relations that took place in the port city of Guangzhou also expanded the economic system which was not only in the form of commodities but also taxed on income to the government. The role of

sailors was seen as very important especially in reporting stories throughout the sailing activities. In fact, these figures also became pioneers for other sailors in venturing into this field. The debate regarding the voyage of Sulayman al-Tajir was also debated by researchers.

Arshad Islam (2011) has discussed in his study entitled *The Contribution of Muslims to science during the Middle Abbasid Period (750-945)* regarding the contributions of Muslims that occurred directly in a civilization as a whole. At the beginning of the study, the author commented further on the contributions of non-Muslim communities who also played an important role in achieving progress in various fields of science. This includes the fields of medicine, education and the development of other disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy and geography. The development of knowledge mastered during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras is said to have gained cooperation among Muslims and non-Muslims with the same goal of achieving civilization in society (Arshad Islam 2011: 51-52).

The figure of Sulayman al-Tajir

Subsequently, the skills and expertise gained in navigation to some extent encouraged geographers to make notes related to the world (Nasr: 1984; Turner: 2002). They are also said to have recorded their travels, including descriptions of the terrain, people and cultures they encountered. Sulayman al-Tajir is also one of the Islamic geographers who has a lot of knowledge about geography through his explorations. He made notes in *Akhbar al-Sin wal-Hind* (237H / 851M) which was later edited and updated by Abu Zaid Hasan al-Sirafi under the title *Silsilat al-Tawarikh* in 916M. Complete notes about Southeast Asia to China are said to not include names and titles. This is because most of them are concerned with maritime activities from India to China, namely at the port of Khanfu. These notes also mention the relationship between the Chinese and Indian kings in socio-economic, cultural, political, religious, etiquette and social habits (Hourani: 1963; Tibbetts: 1979; Khan: 1997).

Sociopolitics in China

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Yusuf (1999) in his book entitled *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind* has discussed the voyages made by Sulayman al-Tajir and Abu Zayd Hassan al-Sirafi. This book has also been reorganized by him regarding the records of China and India as had been done before. Yusuf has divided the book into two parts to include the records of the two sailors. This book also tells about the records of China and India which include the settlement of a society, regions, and products of the sea such as pearls (Yusuf 1999: 10).

Nizar (2012) in his book entitled *The [European] Other in Medieval Arabic Literature and Culture: Ninth-Twelfth* has discussed a little about the biography of Sulayman al-Tajir, although not comprehensively. However, through this discussion we can see his background. He also explains the feelings of the Arab sailor while trading throughout his journey. It is said that these feelings became increasingly distant from the world of trade and he began to engage in the world of sailing. Furthermore, this book also discusses the adventures he had in China and India. Sulayman al-Tajir wrote about various aspects of life that were synonymous with those in that community. In addition, this book also tells about an Arab merchant, Sulayman, who traveled and recorded information about the sea and islands.

The Character Of Sulayman Al-Tajir

Sulayman al-Tajir is better known as Sulayman the Merchant around the 9th century AD. He was a Muslim traveler who came from the Far East. The title al-Tajir is because he was a merchant of goods. He made the *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind* records throughout the journey. He is said to have an extraordinary quiet nature

during his life, both in terms of his career and also his journey as a merchant to the East. Sulayman al-Tajir came from the city of Siraf which was a place and starting point of his voyage that crossed the Indian Ocean before reaching the Indians and the journey continued to China (Nizar 2012: 25).

Sulayman al-Tajir is also said to have possibly come from the South Arabian region. Then he made several expeditions by visiting China until he was able to produce the earliest records of the journey. The text of the records he made has many complete ethnologies and anecdotes of the settlements he stopped at. The writing that was written in the form of records also shows that the importance in the aspect of navigation can be used as a guide for sailors or traders so that they can distinguish any form of fraud and imitation (Anna et. al. 2011: 21).

Furthermore, Sulayman al-Tajir is a name that is very synonymous with Arab travelers and is also interpreted as the first traveler to appear and be known as Suleiman. He was a merchant who also traded in India. In the 9th century AD, he is said to have undertaken several sailing expeditions from the Persian Gulf to Malabar and the Coromandel Coast. He was a merchant who carried out trading activities in Southeast Asia and China around 840 AD. He explains about port cities, Chinese pottery manufacturing and Muslim merchant communities (Pamela 2005: 74-75).

Sulayman al-Tajir's writings focused more on the social, religious, political and economic cultures related to India and China around the 9th century AD. In fact, with the beginning of the journey, he felt as if he was far away from trading activities and began to tame himself to become an observer. Baliau became carefree and engrossed in traveling that not only looked at the East but also looked at the further reaches such as the Indian Ocean (Nizar 2012: 26).

Sulayman al-Tajir was the first Arab navigator and trader around the year (237H / 851M). His ability in trade and his keen interest in sailing led to the production of written works in the form of notes. The notes carefully display information throughout the journey. The information collected consists of various aspects including ports, commodity exchanges during trade, weather and wind, and ocean surface conditions. The journey he took classified geographical aspects in addition to understanding physical and humanitarian aspects (Kagen 1993: 1254).

In addition, Sulayman al-Tajir can be classified as a dynamic and interesting traveler. This is a series of comparative elements implemented in his notes related to religious, social, political, economic issues, the state of a culture practiced by Chinese and Indian people. The notes he wrote depict the attitude of a figure with high ethics where he did not include the issue of differences and similarities in the two nations as polemic material. At the same time, he was more inclined to disagree with notes without any positive moral form. In fact, negative notes are considered by him as a deviation from the religious norms that are adhered to and the traditional culture that is practiced (Nizar 2012: 27).

Sulayman al-Tajir is known as a merchant and traveler who played an important role in documenting the geography of a voyage, especially to China and India, and even including areas in the Malay World. Sulayman al-Tajir's voyage notes were carefully compiled by Abu Zayd Hasan ibn Yazid (al-Sirafi) or also known as Abu Zayd al-Sirafi. He considered that the voyage undertaken by Sulayman al-Tajir is considered to be the earliest work in Arabic describing economic, social, cultural, and political life in China. The French writer Jules Verne (1828-1905) described al-Tajir's voyages to India and China using modern maps because al-Tajir's notes were accurate and scientific.

The journey from Muscat to China which took more than four months was found to not only list the stages of the journey but also provide a clear explanation of the geophysical of a settlement in addition to the products and trade goods are also recorded in detail. Al- Ya'qubi or his real name is Ahmad ibn Wadih al-Ya'qubi is one of the historians and geographers who also stated that there were many products from India and China around the Baghdad market. The goods found in ports such as Aden were mostly from merchant ships from Guangzhou (Canton) (al-Ya'qubi, 1995, Vol.2: 483).

Sociopolitics Of China Through Al-Sin Wa Al-Hind Newspapers

Sulayman al-Tajir mentions the settlement at Khanfu or Canton (in English) which was a gathering place for Muslim traders. The sea route became an important stopover for many ships and sailors to China, including those from Iraq. Khanfu was considered a meeting point for traders as well as a center for Chinese legal arbitration of disputes involving the Muslim community in the region. However, the acceptance of Chinese officials towards foreign traders, especially from Iraq, can be traced by allowing religious practices such as prayers and holding sermons, which were also practiced (Maqbul 1989: 37; al-Sharuni 1999: 37).



The Route to Bilad Al-Sin

(<https://afakv.home.blog/2022/01/03/guangzhou-islam-in-tang-china/>)

Chinese political institutions are also discussed by Sulaiman al-Tajir. Chinese society is said to have a systematic organizational structure in addition to effective social and economic services. Most societies in China, especially in Guangzhou, were pioneered by the Muslim community. The Chinese government at that time had given permission to the Muslim community to resolve legal matters under the supervision of judges among Muslims. This can be seen in the use of a passport system imposed on foreigners to travel within the country, called the Tang code, around 653 AD. Fingerprints were also used for the purpose of verifying the identity of foreigners visiting the country and were used in its administrative laws. The system applied in the administration shows the importance of emphasizing genealogy and ethnic origins in Tang social organization. In fact, there were also regulations that limited the movement and activities of foreign traders, including regulations related to ports. This proves that there was a systematic framework for any trade activity within China (Alain 2015: 23). According to Sulayman, he wrote about Khanfu (Ghuangzhou) where port duties were charged on goods and using fingerprints as signatures (Khamouch 2005: 11-12).

Sulayman al-Tajir has described the situation in China at that time when the prices of goods were increasing. The rulers used food reserves and sold them to the needy people at a cheaper rate than the prices of goods in the market. In addition, Sulayman al-Tajir was also impressed by the free health services provided by the Chinese government to the lower classes. Meanwhile, financial compensation assistance was also provided to the population for storage purposes. The allocation of assistance was the result of the collection of taxes imposed when the population was involved in the employment sector (Maqbul 1989: 48-49)

The efficiency of the actions taken by the government which does not impose taxes on the population except that taxes will be collected for each head (one) on the basis of personal ownership of wealth and land. Meanwhile, every birth, the name of the child will be registered with the authorities. After reaching the age of eighteen, tax collection will be imposed on each individual. For individuals who are eighty years old, no taxes are imposed and a certain salary (pension) is paid through the treasury in addition to providing shelter. The government has recognized the justice behind providing modern social pensions to the people (Maqbul 1989: 51-52).

The role of leaders is very influential in the context of the country. Sulayman al-Tajir showed the phenomenon that occurred in China when there was an increase in the price of goods. The king used food reserves and sold them to the needy people at a cheaper rate than the market price (Maqbul 1989: 49). In fact, al-Tajir was also impressed by the free health services provided by Chinese society to the poor. Therefore, the underprivileged were never oppressed and ignored in various ways. Meanwhile, financial assistance was also provided to the population so that they could enjoy the pensions they had saved. The assistance provided was the result of taxes imposed when they were involved in the employment sector. Al-Tajir also noted the accuracy of the actions taken by the government which did not impose any taxes, whether land tax or property tax, starting at the age of 18 until 80 years old. In fact, they would be provided with a percentage of the amount saved. When they reached the age of 80, the government would pay them back and also provide shelter. The government acknowledged the justice behind providing modern social pensions to the people (Maqbul 1989: 52).

According to al-Tajir, China has produced a very great herb and is famous as an expensive drink. Made from fragrant and slightly sour leaves. Chinese people enjoy it by boiling the leaf water first and adding the leaves in small quantities. Notes about tea were not only written by Sulayman al-Tajir as the first traveler but were also recorded by several other sailors about China (Richard 2003: 216). In addition to taxation, the prosperous and efficiently administered treasury of the Chinese state derived significant revenue from the production and trade of a remarkable herb, which was cultivated extensively and processed into China's most widely consumed and highly valued beverage tea. Al-Tajir provides one of the earliest descriptions of this commodity, noting that the herb is "leafier than green trefoil and slightly more perfumed, with a soury taste." He describes its preparation method as involving the boiling of water, over which the leaves are sprinkled. This hot infusion, known as *al-sakh*, was widely consumed in China and believed to possess medicinal properties, used as a remedy for various ailments (Nizar, 2012).

Al-Tajir's account is significant not only for being the earliest known reference to tea by a Muslim traveler, but also for supporting the credibility and authenticity of his observations on Chinese society and culture.

High Moral Values

Sulayman al-Tajir noted that China possessed high aesthetic values in terms of religion, spirituality, cleanliness and morality. He was also impressed by the achievements of the literate society among the Chinese. They were skilled in various fields, including calligraphy, carpentry and the art of writing (Maqbul 1989: 47). This illustrates that Chinese society, consisting of various layers was capable of producing general political policies while also expanding the spread of education. Al-Tajir highlighted the important role played by scribes and teachers in imparting knowledge to both the poor and their own children (Maqbul 1989: 52).

The sensitivity toward knowledge in China was evident in the participation of people from different walks of life, both rich and poor, who engaged in studying writing and calligraphy (khat). Government support was reflected in the existence of public school facilities funded by the state treasury, particularly during the Tang dynasty. In addition, China also developed a papermaking industry, and this technology was exported to Khurasan, eventually leading to the establishment of linen paper production (al-Nadim 1970: 1997). Chinese society can be regarded as highly creative, having successfully produced glassware and textile products for export. Glass products, though fragile and heavy, were suited for sea transportation, while ceramics were more practical for land transport. Glassmaking technology was said to have been mastered by the Chinese. Furthermore, al-Tajir mentioned that China was also a major producer of silk for commercial purposes (Alain 2015: 29).

Overall, based on the notes of Akhbar al-Sin and Hind, China was described as an exclusive and prosperous settlement. It was considered more pleasant and beautiful compared to other places. The community enjoyed a healthy lifestyle and was less affected by chronic diseases, largely due to clean air. On average, the population in China had fewer disabled individuals, such as the blind and handicapped. The region was also blessed with impressive river systems, fertile land and mountainous terrain. In term of identity, the Chinese community was even said to resemble the Arabs in their clothing and the animals they used for riding.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Ahkbar al-Sin wa al-Hind is a valuable record by an Arab merchant or traveler that highlights the social, political and religious issues of Chinese and Indian society. Beginning in the 9th century AD, he undertook a voyage to collect notes after notes about the settlements he visited. His recording approach relied on full writing based on observations and experiences. There are various issues recorded by him in the Book of Ahkbar al-Sin wa al-Hind which are generally related to the universal life of the two countries. However, this study focuses on socio-politics, especially China, to be evaluated and studied in more depth. Further research could also be carried out to explore more thoroughly the role of Islamic sailors, especially Sulayman al-Tajir, in the journeys he undertook.

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