

Cultural Exchange on the Ancient Silk Road: Fashion Diffusion Speed and Globalization

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I. Introduction

The Silk Roads are in general divided such three routes as steppe, oasis and maritime. The modern terminology of "Silk Road" is English translation of German "Seiden Strassen" which was used for the first time by Richt Hofen (1833~1905), the German scholar on geography who used this word for explanation of silk trade between China and the West. Since the 2nd century B.C., the Silk Roads have been the most important channels for cultural exchange between the East and the West. From the 4th century and afterward, both oasis and maritime silk routes had been already established and connected the Roman world on the west, Persia and India along the way, and China and Korean peninsula on the east. As history unfolded, Sassanian Persians and later Arabs also joined to play an important role in the cultural exchanges further enriching the international fashion in Asia.

II. Discussion

In the ancient Korea, the cultural diffusion and influence as a result of silk road contacts became vigorous in the Unified Shilla period. Frequent wars all but destroyed the ancient literature that might have shed light on early contact with west Asian regions and what little remains is very fragmentary. Nevertheless, it is believed that Islamic and Turkish culture has had a significant influence on Korean culture

since ancient times. Documented references are few and far between, but sufficient remain to give proof of substantial commerce between Korea-the Arab world-the Byzantine Empire.

The introduction of an Arabic and Persian culture and its products into Korea before Islam, was largely a result of indirect contact between Korea and those countries through China. But direct contact of Arabs and Central Asians to the Korean peninsula was also achieved from time to time.

One example are the glasswares excavated from ancient tombs in Kyung-ju, the capital of the ancient Korean kingdom of Shilla (57 BC ~918 AD). Most of glasswares unearthed from the tombs of ancient Shilla were either from Arabia or Persia. Glasswares attract the greatest attention from among ancient Korean crafts associated with the Silk Roads because most pieces are believed to have been directly imported from the West, not only in terms of raw materials, but in form as well. More than 20 glass cups were recovered from ancient Shilla tombs. The glass cups belong to the line of Roman and Persian glass on account of its alkali ingredients. The plastic technique is quite variegated employing the tortoise shell pattern, the dotted pattern, the round-cut pattern, the ribbon glass, etc., all belong to the glass technique then commonplace and widely used in the West. Assuming that the tomb was constructed toward the close of the 5th century or at the beginning of the 6th century, it can be safely said that about that time Arabian or Persian

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merchandise had already found its way into Korea and was being used by Koreans.

Another important example is the case of a small silver cup in a bowl-like shape, unearthed from the great Hwangnam tomb, assumed to be from the fifth century. The outer surface is circumscribed in a tortoise shell pattern with animals. An extraordinary human figure is set within this design. More than any other features, the big eyes of this human figures show exotic countenance. The design and motif of this human figure suggest great similarities to the Anahita statue, the traditional Goddess of Iran. This means the silver cup was directed brought from Persia through the Silk Road.

One of the documents shows the coming of Sogdian merchants to the Paekche dynasty. Moreover during the archaeological digs carried out in Korea, several clay busts were revealed whose shape resembled Central Asians (Turks) with beards and moustaches. These resembled those that was to be found in the old royal tombs, the middle of 7th century. After Shilla's unification of Korean peninsula, cultural exchange with Tang China quickened and Shilla royal families adopted Chinese burial custom. However, no case of military guardian statues of foreign guise is found at royal tomb in China. The stone statues of military officers at Kwaerung(King Wonsung's tomb) might have been modelled on earthen figurines of Tang. On the other hand, the head bands characteristics of Iranians, are minutely depicted in the stone statues at Kwaerung. This leads us to presume that there must have been some direct contact with Iranians.

The influence of Sassanid culture was very strong in regions on its periphery. The winds of Iranian style blew forcefully on the cultural centers of Tang in the eighth century. In the fields of music, art, literature and related disciplines, Iranian motifs came to Korea, stimulating imports and the subsequent popularity of design and patterns initially inspired by the imported goods. These are represented by "The design of pearl-studded roundels" and symmetrical, zoo-

morphic patterns. These designs were used in a variety of ways in China, and gradually moving eastward as far as Korea.

In the case of Shilla, these patterns were usually employed as relief decoration for roof tile ends. However, the presence of the rosary design on a long, large stone is exceptional. A granite base in the court of the National Kyungju Museum shows a row of three round patterns in intaglio covering the whole surface. The pattern in the middle is encircled with a rosary design and within it, a pair of birds under a tree is carved in relief. To the right of this design, an image of a lion under a tree while the circle on the left, oddly enough, has no design carved within it. These designs are typical of the Sassanid Dynasty and its expressive technique is very sophisticated and refined. We do not know what this stone was used for but we presume it was part of a foundation for a Buddhist building.

It is also of interest to note that alfalfa or 'medicago lentilata wold', a plant which is native to Caucasus, Arabia and Persia, was transplanted to the Korean peninsula. According to the SAMKUKSAKI, there were four state-run farms in Shilla, where alfalfa was grown. However, glass and alfalfa are not the only things to have reached the Korean peninsula in ancient times. According to the "Sino-Iranica" of Berthold Laufer, some of Persian and Arabian products such as Persian emerald called "Se-se", aloe, ambergris, pomegranate and sesame, and such Central Asian products as grape, peppermint and walnut were transplanted to Korea.

Few Korean historical documents are available to give proof of the substantial commerce between Korea and the Islamic world as described above. From the SAMGUKSAGI(Chronicles of three kingdoms), we can find out about some of the materials which were traded by Muslim merchants in China. The chronicles lists a set of commodities used by royal families and high ranking government officials. The list includes emeralds, Persian tapestry, woven from a whole range of wools of various colours in

rich patterns, peacock feather, the feathers of a type of king-fisher found in only Cambodia, and imported luxury goods, very popular among Shilla aristocrats, were shipped to China by Arabian traders via ports in South-east Asia. Furthermore, historical discoveries show that the aristocrats of Shilla loved frankincense and other high-quality perfumes produced along the coast of the Arabian peninsula near Hadramant on the southern tip.

Thanks to the very close commercial ties between China and Arabia, it was very natural that Islam should be brought first to the south-east coastal cities of Canton, Zaitun (Ch'uan-chou), Yang-chou and Hang-chou. From the Tang to the Sung period, the Arabs and Persian merchants came to China in increasing numbers. Bazaars established at that time in Baghdad, the capital of the Arab Empire, specialised in the sale of such Chinese products as silk fabric, porcelain ware, tea, and natural silk. Similarly in the west and east markets of Tang capital, Chang-an, the Hu people (foreign people) filled the street. There were shops such as the 'Hu-tian (foreign shops)', 'Hu-ti (foreign residents). These specialised in the sale of precious stones, ivory, rhinoceros, horns, spices, glass, pearls and other products from Arabia and Persia.

Imports from China in bulk consisted of paper, tea, silk, porcelain, cloth (especially natural yellow fibre cloth), ink, peacocks, fiery horses, saddles, felts, cinnamon, aromatics and medicine.

Import items included such drugs as gum benzoin, sandal-wood, myrrh, plaster, white camphor, frankincense, perfume oil, pitchuk and spices (pepper, cloves, nutmegs, areca-nut), food stuffs (sugar, sea-worms, sharks-fin, honey), all these being produced to marketable standard by Arab merchants, and such luxury items as rhinoceros horn, ivory (The East African Coast), tortoise shell, gold, elephant tusks, different varieties of rose essence from North Africa i.e. the various kinds of perfumes used by women today, corals, pearls (the Arabian Gulf), emeralds, gums (Arabia), sword (Damascus), jade (raw materials from Burma), iron sheet, glass (Egypt), were also im-

ported. Although the Chinese invented many things, at that time, they did not know how to manufacture glass and iron sheets. What is nowadays considered relatively cheap, glass and iron sheets, were considered luxurious commodities in old days in China and Korea.

Export items to China included ivory, perfume, gems, glassware (Africa), pearls, spices and uncut jade (Ceylon, Burma and South East Asia).

SAMKUKSAKI has a detailed account of five peculiar musical numbers- dances and instrumental pieces, introduced into Korea from China by Ch'oi Ch'i-won, a great Korean scholar. This music was different from Chinese forms and seemed strange to the Koreans at that time.

Further in comprehensive researches carried out recently by Korean scholars, they postulate that Ch'o-yong of the Ch'o-yong mask dance was a real human being who might have originated an Arian tribe that came to Shilla in 880 AD. This fact can be more clear when we take Chinese situation then into consideration. Abu Zaid tells us that at the time of Huang-ch'ao Rebellion in 879 AD, about 120,000~200,000 Arabs, Jews, Christians and other foreigners perished at Canton. Even if the report is taken as slightly exaggerated, we can have some idea of the number of Arab Muslims on the south-east coast of China, if we bear in mind most of the foreigners in China at that time were Arabs. During the Huang-ch'ao Rebellion, many Arab and Persian Muslims, to escape from massacre, moved to the Indo-China peninsula or the Malay ports where they joined existing fellow groups. Other Muslims might well have proceeded to the Korean peninsula with its well known convenient sea-routes of only three days travel to other ports. The appearance of Ch'o-yong is exactly coincided with the end of the Huang-ch'ao Rebellion in China.

It is very likely that Shilla traders came into contact with their Muslim counterparts in China for the purpose of mutual trade. Muslim merchants may have extended their own trade routes to the Korean peninsula themselves or

with the guidance of Koreans in China, while trade was the primary reason for contact, it seems that many elements of Islamic culture were introduced to the Korean peninsula as well. This development is well supported by accounts on Silla found in Islamic books of geography, history and travel written by seventeen Muslim scholars ranging from Ibn Khurdadbi of the mid-9th century to Abu'l Fazl of the early sixteenth century.

We will now present a survey of early Muslim contacts with the Korean peninsula, drawing on bibliographical sources on Shilla compiled in Arabic and Persian languages. In the course of this exposition, we will elucidate some facts about early Islamic geographical knowledge of the Korean peninsula, Arab-Korean maritime relations and the early Muslim settlement in Korea through a detailed analysis of Muslim sources.

III. Conclusion

From the above facts on cultural relations between the West and Korea through the various channels of the Silk Routes, we understand that the Korean peoples of even 1000 years ago, would contact with other world in the west by its technology and commodities. In particular, the royal families and high rank of Shilla society fully enjoyed the world fashion and rare luxurious goods transacted by mostly Arab-Persian merchants. Because the Silk Routes as cultural diffusion lines were open and functioned very active interchange role among major capital cities along 8,500km. The most important cultural cities on the Silk Roads in 8~9th centuries were Constantinople of Byzantine Empire in the West; Baghdad of Islamic Abbasid Empire in the Orient; Chang-an of Chinese Tang Empire; Kyungju of Korean Shilla Kingdom.

How the newest fashion in Constantinople or latest style of wool handbag in Baghdad could be reached to Shilla aristocrats in almost same period?

How about fashion diffusion speed 1000~1200 years ago from Constantinople to Kyungju?

How to carry the rare luxurious goods and how much the value of precious glasswares transacted in Kyungju?

How long did it take for camel caravan from the west end to Shilla through the Silk Roads?

The lineal distance between Constantinople to Kyungju via Baghdad and Chang-an is about 8500 km. The caravan in general was consist of at least 100 camel loaded. Caravan owners can load a camel with 500kg of trade commodities. A heavily laden camel can move 400km without eating and drinking for a week. Thus camels have extraordinary transportation skill in the desert. Camels are the most efficient transportation in the Silk Roads since ancient times. Trough the Silk Roads, caravansarays(guesthouses) were established for the traders and camels every 20~30km except in the desert of Gobi and Taklamakan Deserts. Moving to 40 km taking about 10 hours in a day is not too difficult. It means that it takes 210 days to reach Shilla from Constantinople. However for certain luxurious items, delivery might be shortened. Because the rare goods should reach to Shilla aristocrats earlier than the rivals. Therefore, six months were quite enough to reach to Kyungju. If he arrived with commercial items later than a week, his business was severely damaged.

The fashion diffusion speed is therefore almost six months between the west and the Shilla society, the eastern end. The people of 1000 years ago lived and enjoyed various world styles under the contemporary fashion trend. The speed of cultural diffusion was surprisingly fast and its spread was beyond our imagination, even 8~9th century.

Korean culture was always open to out world and ready to accept them and to Koreanize very positively. The cultural melting pot of ancient Korea was strong and vigorous to accept any kind of advanced technology and ideology together with trade goods. These open-minded attitude and international spirits became a strong foundation of globalisation for Shilla society

which shall be good lesson for today's Korean peoples.

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