CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS XIV. THE INFLUENCE OF EASTERN IRANIAN ART

CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS

xiv. THE INFLUENCE OF EASTERN IRANIAN ART

Chinese civilization has provided vast influences beyond its borders in Asia and more recently in Europe. The output of Chinese artisanship, especially in bronze, jade, ceramics, and silk textiles is unparalleled in Asia, and influences from non-Chinese sources were quickly assimilated and often transformed into an aesthetic vocabulary beyond easy recognition of their origin. Persia, as a part of Western Asia, and China were nodding acquaintances in the ancient world; but, if we include the Iranian peoples inhabiting regions of eastern Inner Asia, the relationship becomes a much closer one. In Xinjiang during the 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE, nomadic tribes, the eastern Iranian Saka as well as other related peoples, were dominated by Xiongnu and participated in the marauding of the Chinese kingdoms of the Warring States Era and the Qin and Han Dynasties. Aspects of the artistic taste in personal adornment of these and other similar nomadic tribal confederations of northeast Asia, often labeled “animal style,” can be seen in the late 1st-millennium Chinese decorative metalwork, often gilded and inlaid with silver and colored stones (Rawson and Bunker, 1990, pp. 291-307; So and Bunker, 1995, pp. 53-87; Bunker, 2002, pp.

7-37). Saka tribes spread from the eastern edge of the Achaemenid empire to Xinjiang, and were natural participants in and east/west trading network. Had the Achaemenid empire in Persia (539-331 BCE) and China of the Former Han Dynasty (206 BCE-8 CE) coincided in time, a far greater cultural interplay might have taken place. At Pazyryk in the Altai, excavations of rich tombs of nomad royalty yielded not only artifacts of indigenous workmanship, but also Chinese silks and Achaemenid Persian textiles dated from the 5th to 4th centuries BCE (Ghirshman, 1964, pp. 360-67; Jettmar, 1967, pp. 207-235; Rudenko, 1970, pls. 140, 170-75; *Frozen Tombs*, 1978, pp. 21-78). The earliest Chinese lost wax casting first appeared in China in the 6th century BCE and is tentatively traced to Western Asian influences through the cultures of the steppe lands (Li Xueqin, 1991, pp. 1-22; So and Bunker, 1995, p. 59). It has been suggested that lost wax bronze artifacts in the naturalistic style of the Dian culture of Yunnan, which included complex animal combat groups, were influenced by a migration of Saka peoples to the southwest of China, prior to the 1st century BCE (Zhang Zengqi, 1994 pp. 666-99). The technique of gold granulation, cloisonné, and a taste for gold jewelry and personal ornament appear to have filtered across the Inner Asia trade routes to China from Western Asia in the 3rd century BCE (Bunker, 1993, pp. 27-50; White and Bunker, 1994, pp. 44-47).

The earliest objects of Iranian origin to be found in China up to the present time come from princely tombs in Shandong, Guanzhou, and Yunnan and are dateable to the late 2nd century BCE (Laing, 1995, pp.11-16; Harper, 2002, pp. 97-98). These are almost identical, small lobed, lidded silver or bronze containers, related in style to lobed metal vessels of the Achaemenid empire and subsequently passed on to Seleucid and Parthian metalwork styles. Significantly, Chinese artisans added cast feet and tiny animals to the lids in an obvious attempt to make the vessels look less alien.

During the 2nd century BCE, the Former Han dynasty became more familiar with its western neighbors through the explorations of the intrepid Chinese ambassador Zhang Qian to locate the Yuezhi, who had fled west to avoid Xiongnu attacks, eventually settling in Bactria in the middle of the century. China wanted to rid Xinjiang of the Xiongnu in order to secure its borders and open trade routes to the West. In order to match the agility of the Xiongnu in military combat, in 103 BCE the Emperor Wu sent a military expedition to Ferghana to capture a breeding stock of its vastly superior “heavenly horses.” The successful introduction of horses from Inner Asia changed Chinese

cavalry warfare and led to the subjugation of Xinjiang's Xiongnu warlords, thus providing an opening to the West for commerce during the following century. With the better horses and cavalry accouterments China also received another wave of Inner Asian influence in the decorative arts, particularly on horse trappings and military regalia. Between 115 and 105 BCE, one of Zhang Qian's envoys visited the court of the Parthian king Mithridates II (r. 124-91 BCE) with gifts including silks (Hulsewe, 1974, pp. 117-35; Boulnois, 2004, pp. 71-73). In return, a Parthian delegation offered to Wu's court crystal vessels (probably glass), jugglers, ostrich eggs, exotic animals, and a type of lute that may have become the ancestor of the Chinese *pipa*.

An early subject of Chinese monumental imperial tomb sculpture of the Later Han Era (25-220 CE) is a winged leonine creature, designated in Chinese as a *bixie* meaning, "to ward off evil spirits" (Rudenko, 1958, pp 101-22; *China: Dawn*, 2004, pp. 104-5) (PLATE 1). This animal has precedents in inlaid metalwork of the Warring States period, but its use in large-scale sculptural form is significant, and shows not only the stylistic influence of Western Asia via Achaemenid Persia and Central Asia, but also reflects its prestige as a royal guardian. Lions are not native to China, but as fanciful supernatural creatures the Chinese adapted them into varied auspicious forms.

During the Later Han Era Buddhism began to spread from the West to China, brought first by itinerant merchants by land and sea. It appeared in western Xinjiang first (closest to Buddhist Gandhara and Bactria) at Kashgar and Khotan by the beginning of the 1st century CE. A Parthian prince, An Shigao was the first important foreigner to translate Buddhist texts into Chinese, arriving in Luoyang in 147 CE. Such an enterprise necessitated a thorough knowledge of Chinese. In the prior century China had lost much of its control over Xinjiang during the Wang Mang interregnum (9-25 C.E) forcing much of the silk trade with the West to sea routes. At Kongwangshan near Lianyungang on the seacoast of northern Jiangsu is a large rocky hill covered with Buddhist scenes and images in low relief, together with representations of figures that look like Indo-Scythians (Xinru Liu, 1988, pp. 141-42; Rhie, 1999, pp. 27-47). This site is dated to the 2nd century CE and includes 105 separate reliefs, probably not all of the same date. It is possible that some date from the later 1st century, since the area was known in Chinese annals to have held the location where foreign Buddhists, merchants and monks, congregated. Originally, most of these foreigners must have come by sea and settled as trading agents on China's northern coast near places with large silk

productions. The style of the carvings at Kongwangshan has been compared with that of rock-cut reliefs at Tang-e Sarvak in Parthian Elymais by Rhie (1999, pp. 32-33). It is likely that Parthians, as well as Indo-Scythians, came to China by sea, especially during the 1st century CE, when the land routes through Xinjiang had again become dangerous.

After the collapse of the Later Han Dynasty, China suffered devastation and fragmentation. The Xiongnu reasserted itself in the north to be followed by the Xianbei, a Turko-Mongol confederation, finally coalescing into the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) in northern China. In the meantime, many of the Saka had settled into oasis kingdoms in Xinjiang, notably, Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan, and Kucha where Buddhism and its hybrid art and culture thrived. In spite of Chinese instability, Buddhism expanded east, bringing along the artistic influences of the Indo-Bactrian Kushan empire’s Buddhist imagery, as traders and translator-monks continued to arrive from India, Bactria, Sogdiana, and the kingdoms of Xinjiang, often becoming permanent residents on China’s western borders. The conquering Xianbei Tuoba became particularly devoted to Buddhism, and the period of the Northern Wei Dynasty saw a renewed vitality in trade and Western cultural influences. The Northern Wei Buddhist cave temples of Yungang near Datong (ca. 460-505 CE) reflect a new energetic eclecticism teeming with figural elements derived from Gandhara, Bactria, and Xinjiang, where Buddhist art had developed for more than three centuries. Decorative motives of ultimate Greco-Iranian origin such as palmette and vine scrolls, volutes, pilasters, hexagonal patterns, pearl borders and fretwork designs received new interpretations in Northern Wei art (Rawson 1984, pp. 55-62, 64-65). In 454, the Northern Wei emperor decreed that five large bronze statues of the Buddha be made and set up in memory of five of his predecessors. These no longer exist, but each of the first five cave temples created at Yungang contains a huge Buddha image thought to commemorate a Northern Wei emperor. Rawson (1984, p. 58) suggested that this practice echoes that of the Kushan dynasty in the Indo-Afghan region during the 2nd century CE, when dynastic shrines such as that dedicated to the Kushan king Kanishka I at Surkh Kotal in Bactria were created. It is significant to note that, when the small, devoutly Buddhist state of Liang in the Gansu Corridor near Dunhuang was conquered by the Northern Wei in 439, many of its monks and artisans were transferred to the Wei capital. These migrants were seminal in transmitting the art and culture of Buddhist Xinjiang.

A group of gilt-bronze and gilt silver luxury vessels, all bearing the decorative

and figurative hallmarks of Greco-Iranian Hellenism, have been found at the Northern Wei capital at Datong and were probably imported from Bactria, then under Hephthalite domination (Laing, 1995, pp. 5-10; Carter, 1995, pp. 257-66; Harper, 2002, pp. 100-103). The stylistic nuances differentiating them suggest that they were not the production of a single era, but an assortment of luxury metalwork vessels that adhered stylistically to permutations of Greco-Iranian tradition in Bactria from the Kushan through the Hephthalite periods. A gilt silver plate depicting a princely boar hunt, excavated from a tomb near Datong dated to 504 CE, is close to early Sasanian royal hunting plates in style and technical aspects, but diverges enough to suggest a Bactrian origin dating from the era of the Kushano-Sasanian rule (ca. 275-350 CE) (Harper 1990, pp. 51-59; *China: Dawn*, 2004, pp. 52-53). An astonishing gilt silver ewer of Iranian type with a relief frieze of figures seemingly taken from Greek mythology was found in a mid-6th century tomb in Ningxia province (Marshak and Anazawa, 1989, pp. 54-57; Carpino and James, 1989, pp. 71-76; *China Dawn*, 2004, pp. 256-57) (PLATE 2). It is probable that this vessel was made in Bactria as well, and it suggests that luxury metalwork in that region long retained an amazingly strong component of “non-Mediterranean Hellenism.”

In the Kizil Hinayana Buddhist cave complex of Kucha in Xinjiang, a progression of wall-painting styles beginning around 300 CE suggest that Iranian influence was significant in its development (Bussagli, 1963, pp. 69-94; Yaldiz, 1987, pp. 17-98). The site lies on the route north of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang to China and most probably became connected with the Afghan-Sogdian region through trade during the 4th and 5th centuries CE. The Hephthalite-era wall paintings of Balalyk Tepe in Uzbekistan (Pugachnkova and Rempel, 1965, pp. 112-16; Frumkin, 1970, pp. 116-19), and the paintings in the niche of the now destroyed 38-meter Buddha at Bamiān in Afghanistan can be compared to Kizil’s earlier phases in terms of non-naturalistic, two-dimensional linearity and emphasis on pattern and decoration (Klimburg-Salter, 1989, pp. 154-59). Significantly, the earliest painted cave temples at Dunhuang dating from the Northern Liang to Northern Wei Dynasties exhibit features that echo stylistic elements of Kizil’s paintings (Akiyama and Matsubara, 1969, pp. 205-8). Khotan and its environs on the southern route around the Tarim Basin appear to have been early destinations for the spreading of Mahayana Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent, most notably the Swat valley and Gandhara (see BUDDHISM i.). Khotan was linguistically and probably ethnically Saka due to migrations of the 2nd century BCE from the Pamirs and was an important source of nephrite jade for the Chinese

market. The complex ideology and iconography of Mahayana Buddhism did not come into full flower in China until the Tang Era, but there can be no doubt that China was influenced by the pictorial arts of Khotan, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Painters from Khotan established impressive reputations at Chang'an (now Xi'an) during the Sui dynasty (589-617) and early Tang era. (Bussagli, 1963, pp. 53-67) The exotic style of Khotan, utilizing shadowing to produce three-dimensionality combined with strong linearity described as similar to bent and coiled iron wire (ibid.), was characteristic of this style but can only be seen in later copies by Chinese artists.

The most prominent conveyors of Iranian art and culture to China from the Han period through the Tang were the mercantile Sogdians, who took advantage of Chinese and Kushan control of the trade routes during the Western Han Era and continued trade by land and sea through the eighth century. As they made their way through Xinjiang, some settled in the oasis states and some in western China, where they intermarried and were assimilated into the local culture (Luo Feng, 2001, pp. 239-45). As the "middlemen" of Central Asian trade, the Sogdians were pre-eminent in carrying Iranian art and cultural influences to China. At the western end of the trade routes Sasanian Iran exerted enormous influence on Sogdian art in spite of the hostilities between Iran and the Hephthalite empire, which included Sogdiana from the mid-5th to the mid-6th century. Under nominal Hephthalite rule the Sogdians expanded their trade with Northern Wei dynasty China, as noted above. When the Hephthalites were conquered by a coalition of Sasanians and Turks in the mid-6th century, Sogdian traders and immigrants to China became even more numerous. The Sogdians resident in later 6th-century northern China appear to have retained their native Zoroastrian traditions to some extent, while adapting them with Chinese funerary customs, including the use of underground tombs equipped with elaborately carved stone funerary beds (Scaglia, 1958, pp. 9-28; *Miho Museum*, 1997, pp. 247-57; Carter, 2002, pp. 263-87; *China Archaeology*, 2000, pp. 15-84; Marshak, 2004, pp. 57-65; Juliano and Lerner, 2001), pp. 54-61; *China: Dawn*, 2004, pp. 276-83). The stone funerary beds fit well into the Zoroastrian tradition of preventing the corpse from defiling the earth. They have the shape of their Chinese prototypes, but display panels in painted and gilded low relief that are patently non-Chinese in subject matter. Most show some references to Zoroastrian ideology (i.e., fire altars with birdman attendants and funerary scenes, deities such as Mithra or Nana), but most prominently display lively scenes of hunting and banqueting (PLATE 3). This imagery must have been

shaped over a significant period of time on the eastern trade routes, and in colonies in China that had existed from as early as the third century. On their treks to and from China, Sogdian caravaneers lived in tents and wagons like their nomadic ancestors. Scenes featuring such encampments are often depicted on the stone bed reliefs. Some motives seem to have been adapted from Central Asian Buddhism, but most have their origin in the ancient Iranian tradition of heroic hunting exploits and luxurious feasting.

In the latter half of the 6th century a wealthy clientele for imported luxury goods emerged in China, especially under the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou and Sui dynasties. At this time artisans from Sogdiana, Bactria, and neighboring Xinjiang immigrated in increasing numbers, influencing both Chinese taste and style. The culminating era was the first century-and-a-half of the Tang Dynasty (618-906), when China opened its gates most widely to western traders, seemingly fascinated by foreign culture and exotic luxury goods, and not only produced foreign-inspired artifacts, but adopted forms of foreign music, dance, and dress (Schafer, 1963; Juliano and Lerner, 2001). Sasanian Iran extended eastward into Afghanistan after the Hephthalite defeat in the mid-6th century and vied with the Sogdians and their Western Turkish masters for trade with Byzantium. As the Sasanian empire began looking more eastward culturally, there is evidence through coins and inscriptions that Sasanian traders took part in the growing scramble to tap China's wealth. Yet, in the mid-7th century when trade with China was thriving, the Sasanian empire suddenly collapsed under the onslaught of Arab Islam. Remnants of the Sasanian royal family and nobility sought aid and refuge at the Tang court, but to no avail. Between 650 and 700, many Iranian artisans, having lost their aristocratic patronage, must have migrated eastward to Sogdiana, Tokharistan, Xinjiang, and ultimately China. Due to such events it is difficult to specifically identify the origins of the complex crosscurrents of stylistic influence that swept over early Tang China.

Silver vessels had come to China through trade from the Han Era onward. Sima Qian, the great historian of the Eastern Han era, noted that the inhabitants of Dayuan (Ferghana) turned all the Han gold and silver they could get into vessels and used them as currency by weight, a practice well-known in ancient Iranian culture (Watson, 1961, p. 280). Silver vessels became popular early in the Tang Dynasty due, not only to the flood of imported goods, but to the growing Chinese taste for exotic luxuries that flourished with newly prosperous times. Sogdians in great numbers, together with other peoples of

Iranian heritage, settled permanently in China in the 6th and 7th centuries, bringing their treasured silver with them. Immigrant silversmiths and native Chinese artisans mutually influenced one another in their output. Under a Tang dynasty aesthetic, however, shape and ornamentation were gradually assimilated into a newly created Chinese silverwork idiom often only vaguely reminiscent of its prototypes (Grabar, 1967, pp. 83-84; Uldry, 1994, pp. 145-53; *China: Dawn*, 2004, pp. 318-21).

Silk brocades of Iranian and Central Asian origin became highly fashionable in China during the same era. Silk weaving was known in the oasis kingdoms of Xinjiang from the 5th century, and the brocades of Samarkand are mentioned in the Sui Annals (vol. 83; Rossabi, 1997, pp. 7-19; Comparetti, 2003, pp. 1-44; Zhao Feng, 2004, pp. 67-77). Prior to 650, finely woven silk brocades with pearl roundels encircling a variety of single elements must have come to China primarily from Sasanian Persia. A diaspora of silk weavers from Iran after 650 no doubt vastly enriched both Sogdian and Xinjiang workshops, where a variety of brocade designs continued to be made in similar style. From the Tarim Basin to China the exotic style of silk weaving flourished. Iranian-inspired silk brocades became articles of fashionable luxury during the Tang Dynasty, and can be seen depicted here (PLATE 4) as the robe of a Buddhist deity at Dunhuang (Akiyama and Matsubara, 1969, pp. 60-61).

One luxury item from the West that China prized highly was glassware, especially bowls, cups, and flasks, beginning with imports from Roman Syria. Since the Chinese had no knowledge of glassblowing technology, glass was considered to be some sort of natural material like jade or crystal (An Jaiyao, 2004, pp. 57-65). The earliest Sasanian glass vessel, a hemispherical bowl with pointed bosses comes from a Western Jin tomb dated 307 CE. Later during the Northern Wei fine, faceted Sasanian glass bowls have been excavated from tombs in Jiangsu and Datong. Although the Chinese had made small objects of molded glass, it seems probable that the technology of glassblowing was introduced to China by Bactrian artisans brought to the Northern Wei court at Datong, although the Chinese manufacture of blown glass did not begin to expand until the mid-seventh century. Sasanian glass continued to be imported from the Sui into the early Tang eras and was considered to be of great value.

The Chinese retreat after their defeat by the Muslim Arab armies at the Talas River north of Ferghana opened the way for the Tibetans to wrest Xinjiang from the Tang Empire in 751. Shortly afterward a court Tang favorite of

Sogdian origin with the Chinese name of An Lushan fomented a rebellion that almost destroyed the dynasty. After these setbacks China began to turn inward. The Uighur Turks who were brought in to help quell the rebellion against the Tang became protectors of ethnic Persians and Sogdians in China until 840, when their own empire was destroyed by the Kirgiz. Difficulties ensued for all communities of alien heritage, especially during a persecution of foreign religions between 843 and 845. Gradually, all peoples of Iranian heritage in China lost their cultural identity. Sogdian trade continued by sea on the southern routes, but by the time of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) it had ceased. Nevertheless, an indelible Iranian imprint remained in Chinese art, music, and dance, primarily through the Sogdian vehicle. The Uighur Turks adapted their initial script from Sogdian, which itself was originally derived from Syriac. The Uighurs passed on much of their alphabet to the Mongols. The Manchu, who were founders of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), adopted a modified version of the same alphabet. In summation, it is clear that Iranian culture, particularly that of "Outer Iran," played a significant part in the development of Chinese art and culture.

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