

*Transmission of  
Sassanian Arts  
and other Indigenous  
Cultural Traditions of  
Pre-Islamic Persia to  
South East Asia*

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*The history of cultural exchange, trade and diplomacy between Persia and the societies of the Far East predates the advent of Islam, when West and Central Asian nations professed to Zoroastrianism, the monotheistic faith founded by religious prophet Zarathustra, born around c. BC 1500.<sup>1</sup>*



Under Achaemenid Persia (BC 550–BC 331), various peoples of the ancient East from Asia and Africa paid tribute to the kings of Persia as their arrival brought about the cultural interface of the peoples of diverse ethno-cultural background. Herodotus the Greek historian had described how “Darius, son of Hystaspes,” upon ascendancy on the Persian throne, had established twenty governments, which the Persians called “Satrapies,” and assigning to each its governor, and fixing the tribute to be paid by the several nations.”<sup>2</sup>

When relations between West and Central Asian peoples with the Far East developed, mainly as a result of the famed traveling routes of the Silk Road, the encounters and cross-cultural exchanges of different nations increased and improved. The origins of the Silk Road is identified with the Tocharians, an ancient people who are regarded to have been the “Silk Road pioneers.”<sup>3</sup> The Silk Road’s western end was in the Mediterranean coasts and the routes worked their ways toward the East through the Caravan routes in the Babylonian and Persian world which included most of Central Asia and Turkistan, from where the traders traveled to Sogdiana in the city of Samarkand. From Sogdiana, there were other routes which scaled the Pamir range which linked T’ien Shan South Road to Takla Makan Desert and such oasis towns as Kashgar, and Kucha, and Tun-huang.<sup>4</sup>

At Tun-huang, the merchants, priests of various religions, travelers, artisans, pilgrims, scholars and students met and exchanged ideas as Tun-huang was a cultural center and a stage in the travels, where Eastern and Western peoples intermingled as the Silk Road reached the Chinese frontier and then to Ch’ang-an, the capital city of T’ang

Dynasty (AD 618–907), in where is now the city of Xian.<sup>5</sup> It is said that as early as BC 800, the Magis, or astronomers and interpreters of the Zoroastrian faith had visited China, having brought into contact the people of Persia and China.<sup>6</sup> Another ancient people, the Scythians, also “took part in the trade between China and the West not later than fourth century BC”.<sup>7</sup> The Scythians were the kinsmen of the Persians, and from earlier times had dominated the local cultures of Northeast Asia around the Altai mountains as early as the seventh to third century BC<sup>8</sup> and their influences reached as far as Pacific Asia. Until the eighth century AD, the Iranian natives of West-Central Asia were the most active participants in the trading routes of the land and sea. The Sogdians, and Yueh-chih, Khotanese, Parthians, and Indo-Scythians traveled through the caravan routes accompanied with Indian, and other local traders. Under the Sassanid Empire AD 226–651, Persian vessels reached Nam-Viet, and southern China.<sup>9</sup> The Sassanid monarchs, Shapur I, and Hurmuzd I, tolerated Buddhism in Persia, as Buddhist temples existed by 502 AD,<sup>10a</sup> as from earlier times the tradition of converting to Buddhism among Central Asian Iranian societies among the Sogdians and Parthians existed.<sup>10b</sup> In Parthia, the Buddhist traditions started from the early period of the Christian century.<sup>11</sup>

Iranian converts to Buddhism found allies among the Silk Road traders such as the Uighurs, Indians, Kushans, and Altaic peoples. China also conducted trade by ships between East Asia and the Roman Empire as early as the 2nd or 3rd century BC.<sup>12</sup> This was the age of the Han Dynasty when Chinese commerce with the West flourished. From around BC 1 to 1 AD,

Parthians dominated the Iranian plateau to Mesopotamia. The Parthian Empire, as Hiromichi Yamamoto pointed out, “was situated at the important route on the Silk Road, and it was eager to monopolize the benefits coming from the East and the West.”<sup>13</sup> Some years earlier around BC 19, Roman Emperor Augustus made peace with the Parthians<sup>14</sup> and cultural contacts between the two western powers increased. Around AD 148, a Parthian prince named Anshikan, converted from Mithraism to Buddhism and arrived in Lo-yang, the Chinese capital, where he built a monastery called “Po-masse,” or “The White Horse Monastery,” where he introduced the teachings of the Mahayana sect for the very first time. Known by his sinicized name as An Shih-kao, he is said to have advocated meditation, or Ch’an (Zen) from around 150 AD onwards.<sup>15a</sup> Originally Buddhism first reached Eastern Persia and Central Asia and then along the caravan routes of the Silk Road into societies under Chinese cultural orbit and China proper’s empire and further east, when Anshikan translated about 200 Buddhist texts and Sogdian monks propagated the Mahayana faith in South East Asia.<sup>15b</sup>

The appearance of an Arsacid-Parthian in Mahayana Buddhism and his teachings was a turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism as his mission to Lo-yang eventually transformed Buddhist history from Northwest India and Central Asia to as far as Japan.<sup>16</sup> An Shih-Kao’s mission was later joined by Sogdians, Indian and Scythian monks. One of them, Kang Senghui, a Sogdian, traveled to Vietnam where he preached the Mahayana doctrine accompanied with Indo-Scythian and Indian monks.<sup>17</sup>



Other western contacts with East Asia existed from 166 AD, when Syria, under the administration of the Roman ruler, Marcus Aurelius Antonius had sent an envoy to China to improve the level of the exchanges between the two nations.<sup>18</sup> The Roman Empire was a great market for Chinese silk as was ancient Greece, where China was known as "Seres"<sup>19</sup> and as Professor R. Hayashi has stated: "During the reign of the Emperor Aurelian...silk brought its full weight in gold on the Roman market."<sup>20</sup> From Sassanian Persia, Nestorian Christianity, which was originally from Syria, reached China in Ch'ang-an, the cosmopolitan Chinese capital, where its churches were erected.<sup>21</sup>

The golden age of Sassanian civilization reached its peak in the seventh century AD, when the diffusion of Sassanian culture to China coincided with the Islamic invasions of the Persian Empire from 641 AD.<sup>22</sup> Already Sassanid art had initiated another branch of "Irano-Buddhist art"<sup>23</sup> when Sassanian art reached East Asia. In the seventh century, the Sassanids had contacts with the most remote kingdoms of South East Asia. Korean envoys arrived in Samarkand in Sogdiana<sup>24</sup> and "Tibetan kings had direct contact with the Sassanian court,"<sup>25</sup> when an earlier tradition records the arrival of a letter from the Khagan of Tibet to the Sassanian King Anushirvan, The Just.<sup>26</sup> The Islamic conquest of Persia in 651 AD, by the Saracen Muslims ended in the tragic death of monarch Yazdgerd III as Sassanid Persians in the tens of thousands took refuge to the T'ang Empire, accompanied with the royal families and princes of Sassanian dynasty and court nobles from around AD 651 to 732 traveling through Central Asian regions of the Persian Empire.<sup>27</sup> The departure of these affluent Persians of the Sassanid era to China in a

way helped to preserve and spread the blossomed flower of Persian culture in the Far East, as these nobility did not allow their cultural achievements to wither in its native soil.<sup>28a</sup> Thus, from the period of the arrival of the Sassanids to China in large numbers, a degree of aesthetic principles in Persian art experiences and religious-philosophical concepts were assimilated by the society and court life of China. In this regard, T'ang-shu, official history of T'ang era, has described that, "palace life during the flamboyant court of (Emperor) Ming Huang was heavily influenced by Persian elements," and as Professor R. Hayashi concluded: "Persian styles, then, were in vogue as influence reached even the common people."<sup>29</sup>

Suffice it to say, Persian culture captivated the Chinese court as Persian music was held in high esteem<sup>30</sup> and other musical elements from Central Asia and compositions from Kucha, Sogdia, India, and Champan influences enhanced the tastes of noble men of Chinese court.<sup>31</sup> Added to Persian customs, food, cakes<sup>32</sup> as well as a horseback sport, a polo-like game<sup>33</sup> were among the most popular leisure of Chang-an nobility. The extent of these cultural experiences is symbolized by the ninth century Chinese poet, Wang Chien, who wrote, "The families of Lo-yang learn Iranian music."<sup>34</sup>

Persian vessels continued to call at various ports of China and South East Asia for trade after the eighth century AD. Jikaku Daishi, a Japanese monk who traveled to China in the T'ang era, has recorded in his diary that the Persians were official representatives for trade affairs between West Asia and China in such southern ports as Canton and Yang-chou.<sup>35</sup> It was one of these Persian operated ships which took the

Buddhist monk of India, Vajrabodhi, from Sri Lanka to South East Asia.<sup>36</sup> Vajrabodhi's teachings had a significant level of influence on the introduction of Tantric Buddhism in the Far East as far as Japan.<sup>37</sup>

Persian art from Central Asia's "School of Khotan," which had flourished between 5th-8th century AD, as P.N. Puri has confirmed, "provides evidence of assimilation of Indian, Sassanian, Chinese, Sogdian, and perhaps Chorasmian influence."<sup>38</sup> Such profound influences in the Buddhist arts later reached Japan as well through Sino-Persian assimilations.<sup>39</sup>

The T'ang Dynasty, itself impressed and fascinated with Sassanian aesthetics, borrowed Persian themes and improved its crafts, and gold and silver vessels.<sup>40</sup> In Japan, the Nara Court (AD 646-794), as Ryoichi Hayashi has said, caught the fancy of Sino-Persian styles which were passed on to Japan by the T'ang artists.<sup>41</sup> In the year 736 AD, a ship from China carried foreign visitors to Japan and as it landed in Naniwa in what is now Osaka, among several distinguished arrivals were the Buddhist dignitaries Fo-che from Indochina, and the Indian high priest Bodhisena, and a man whose sinicized name was Li-mi-i, who is said to have been a Persian. The arrival of this Persian to Japan has been described by art historian Ryoichi Hayashi as, "a significant moment in world history."<sup>42</sup> From China, other Persians in the ninth century reached Burma [Myanmar], where they settled as traders.<sup>43</sup> Burma had a seafaring port at Martaban, a famous center for its seaport transactions. Martaban, was located at the mouth of the Salween River, where visitors and goods from Persia, India, Arabian peninsula, Ceylon and China arrived.<sup>44</sup>

From Burma, Sassanian arts reached



Thailand as evidenced in the designs of Thai ceramics from various provinces in the south, central, and northern regions of ancient Siam.<sup>45</sup>

In Japan, a large number of Sassanian treasures preserved in the Shoso-in repository in the city of Nara at the Todaiji Temple represent the Persian world's artistic sphere in these most isolated islands of the Eastern seas.

In Persia, after Islam, indigenous traditions did not wither away altogether. Persian language, the symbol of linguistic identity of the Persians remained loyal to its soil, and found a motivation to preserve the Sassanian identity in literary, artistic, cultural, and oral traditions, as much as by habits, festivals, food, sports, and particularly those magnificent pottery techniques.<sup>46</sup> In South East Asia, likewise, the discovery of Sassanian cultural elements, and other aspects of the Persian world's heritage are symbols to indicate the existence of legendary and historical bonds of kinship between the peoples and cultural traditions of Asiatic civilizations in the East and West Asia since time immemorial.

## NOTES

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