Silk Road and Korea: Past and Present

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Abstract: The Silk Road originated in China in the 1st century B.C.E. The purpose of the route was to expand silk trade which initially was elaborated exclusively by the Chinese. European aristocrats showed great devotion for this textile, which was carried mainly by Persian merchants. Seveal commercial silk routes were created to connect China with Mongolia, Korea, India, Persia, Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and Europe. Due to its geographic position, Korea served as the last Silk Route destiny for the Arab merchants in the Asian Continent. As early as the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C-668) in Korea, Muslim traders travelled from the Caliphate of Turkey to Tang China and established contact with Shilla. Trade and cultural exchange were developed significantly and foreign influence reached Korea through the Silk Road. Arab merchants who arrived during the Koyeo Dynasty period (935-1392) were in fact the first to coin the English name "Korea". In modern period, Korea maintained an important role in the New Silk Road, participating actively during the splendid periods of Unified Shilla and the Koryeo Dynasty.
Keywords: Silk road, China, Shilla, Koryeo, Land route, Sea route, New Silk Road

SILK ROUTES

This paper makes a journey along the Silk Road, from its creation to the present time. It focuses mainly on Korea, a country located to the northeast of the Asian continent, and looks at trade and cultural relations across various Asian regions as well as at the archaeological and cultural impact that European, Arab, and Central Asian territories, as well as China, had on Korea.

The name "Silk Route (Road)" was given by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen in 1877 (Willis, 1905: 561-567). In the ancient Silk Road there were several routes although the two most important ones were the land and the sea route. The better known land trading route expanded under the Chinese Han Dynasty (202 BCE - CE 220) in the first and second centuries CE. The Chinese section began in the city of Xi'an, Shaanxi province, and then passed through the provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, near Kazakhstan in Central Asia.

Central Asia was the heart of the Silk Road, serving as the conduit between different cultures. Although the Central Asian Republics were isolated regions during the Cold War period, in ancient times this was a region where civilizations of the East and West interacted. The Silk Road served as a network of centuries-old trade routes which extended from China to Europe. The ancient spice and incense routes were also connected to the Silk Routes by ports and sea routes. (Moon Soo, 2015) The sea routes initiated from the Korean Peninsula to the Yellow River Valley of China and extended to the Mediterranean Sea, Arabia, and North Africa. Although many maps were produced for these trade routes, Korea is often ignored in most of them, even though it was an active participant in the exchange of trade and culture.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME KOREA

There is undisputable evidence that Korea was an important part of the Silk Road. The first evidence that Korea was an active participant in the Silk Road is apparent from its denomination of the country by Arab merchants. There are various names for Korea in use today, derived from ancient kingdoms and dynasties. In the Korean language, the two Koreas use different terms to refer to the nominally unified nation: Chosôn in North Korea, and Hanguk in South Korea.

According to William Brice (1981), the name of the Korean Peninsula appeared as "Silla" in the Map of Muslim Expansion until 661CE The same name appears in the Map of the Umayyad Empire c750 CE. A different name, "Kaoli", is used in the Map of the Late Abbasid Caliphate c. 900 CE, and in the Map of Almoravid, Saldjuk, and Ghaznavid Expansion c.1100 CE. In the Map of the Muslim World c. 1300 CE, the was changed to "Koryo". Modern English name "Korea" is derived from the Koryeo Dynasty period (935-1392). Through the Silk Road trade routes, Muslim merchants brought knowledge about Koryeo to India and the Middle East (Kim and Cawley, 2002: 4).

ARTEFACTS OF THE SILK ROAD IN SILLA TOMBS

After the Three Kingdom period, the Korean peninsula emerged as a singular political entity known as the Unified Shilla. During the Unified Shilla Kingdom (668-935), considered as the Golden Age of Korea, trade and cultural exchange flourished.

In the 20th century, the excavation of Shilla royal tombs in Gyeongju, the ancient capital of Shilla Kingdom, unearthed many treasures, such as the five gold crowns of Shilla Kings, gold belts and jewels, roman glasses, and many other artefacts, many of them dating approximately from the 5th and 7th centuries CE.

These crowns demonstrate cultural interactions between the Korean peninsula and the Eurasian countries. Scytho-Siberian peoples of the Eurasian steppe created gold diadems similar to Shilla crowns, such as a crown from Tillya Tepe in modern-day Afghanistan. With five tree-shaped projections, flower ornaments, and reflective discs, the Tillya Tepe crown can be compared with the natural imagery and radiant Shilla crowns, which were mainly used in ceremonial rites of the Shilla royalty during the Three Kingdoms Period (57 B.C – 676 A.D).

Prior to the adoption of Buddhism, Koreans practiced shamanism, which is characterized by the worship of nature. Shilla royalty upheld shamanistic practices in ceremonial rites such as coronations and memorial services. In these sacred rituals, the gold crowns emphasized the power of the wearer through their precious materials and natural imagery. A crown in Afghanistan also shows a prominent resemblance to the other Korean crowns, which also serves as evidence for the existence of a Scytho-Siberian connection.

Shilla gold crowns generally have three parts that were probably worn together: an openwork tall conical cap, a piece in the form of a wing or butterfly that fitted into the cap, and a diadem. The outer part of the crowns have tree shaped elements. Trees were believed to connect heaven and earth also in Siberian and Central Asia shamanism, which indicates a link between Korean shamanism, the Scytho-Siberians, and the people of the Eurasian steppe. The third part of the crown there are gold chains attached to the outer band with many thin pieces of cut sheet-gold and crescent-shaped curved jewels. These also point to Siberian influences as the symbolism of the bear was brought into Korean mythology by Korean immigrants from Siberia. These crescent-shaped curved jewels of jade and glass hanging from tree branches possibly symbolized fruits, fertility and abundance (Bonnefoy, 1991). In addition to the crowns, gold belts, daggers, earrings, and other jewellery were all placed in Korean royal tombs during the Three Kingdoms era, representing the rank and identity of the wearer.

Though the use of gold and shamanistic practices related to Shilla culture to the northern steppe cultures, Shilla royalty adopted the burial

customs of the Chinese. In Chinese burials, objects that were important in life were often buried together with the deceased. Shilla gold crowns and their luxurious materials indicate the social status of the tomb occupant.

The material composition of the belt also corresponded to this high social status. For example, tombs of Shilla royalty included gold belts, while the nobility in other regions of the peninsula had silver or gilt-bronze belts. The gold belt, for instance, was made for the burial of a Shilla king. It was like a tool belt or charm bracelet, with pendants that dangled from its band of interlinked square plates and entwining dragon openwork. Some objects were practical, such as knife sheaths and needle boxes, evoking the nomadic life of the Eurasian steppe. Others were symbolic, such as the comma-shaped ornaments seen on Silla crowns, or miniature fish which was believed to avert evil.

The gold dagger from King Mich'u Tumulus, found in Gyerim-ro Tomb no.14 (treasure no. 635), is unusual for the type of Shilla artefacts dating between the 4th and 6th centuries. The decorative symbol resembles a Triskelion, an object found in Celtic, Scythian, and Shilla cultures. Red jewel garnets were inlaid into the gold surface of the dagger hilt and scabbard, thereby enhancing their brilliance. (Connor, 1986; Choi, 1979)

Similar artefacts decorated with garnets and glass inlaid in gold have been found at a tomb in Borovoye, Kazakhstan, dating from the 5th century (Hun period), and at Taganrog, on the coast of the Sea of Azov, a north-eastern extension of the Black Sea area. The dagger shows a cloisonné technique which originated in the Byzantine Empire. There is also a mural in the Kizil caves site Xinjiang in China that depicts a noble man wearing a dagger remarkably parallel to the dagger of treasure no. 635.

Shilla tombs also contained other objects, such as Roman glass bowls and bottles, which reveal that these luxury materials travelled via the Silk Road. The glasses that were excavated from the tombs date back to the second half of 5th century and were considered luxury items. More than thirty Roman vessels, cups in different shapes and colours ranging from blue, green, and brown have been excavated. An early 5th century necklace was found in a tomb and named a "Roman chain", as it was formed by connecting small rings, a technique thought to have originated in the Mediterranean.

During the late united Shilla period, a man named Jang Bogo (787-841) was appointed as Maritime Commissioner to control the active commerce at that time. He controlled the West Sea (Yellow Sea) and the Korean coast between southwestern Korea and China's Shandong peninsula during several decades. (Wade, 2014; Lee, 2005)

In the 9th century, thousands of Shilla people were living in Tang, which was at the centre of most merchant activities in coastal Shandong and Jiangsu provinces. These people even established their own Shilla communities and Shilla Buddhist temples in the region.

The united Shilla was eventually succeeded by the Koryeo Dynasty in 935. International trade and cultural exchange continued through this new dynasty up to and throughout the 15th century. Trade relations among Song China, Japan and Arab countries expanded through maritime routes. Merchants from all over the world flushed to Chinese ports on the seacoast to participate in large-scale maritime trading. Arab merchants arrived to China's costal seaports and continued to trade with the neighbouring country of the Koryeo Dynasty. The port of Kaesong, near Pyongyang in North Korea, was the principal market place for exchanging rare and precious goods. Korea exported precious metals like gold, silver, and copper, as well as edible goods such as ginseng and pine nuts in exchange for Chinese silks, ceramics, and printed books as well as spices, glasses, precious stones and textiles from other regions of the Silk Road. As mentioned above, the name "Korea" derives from the Koryeo Dynasty time period.

BUDDIHIST INFLUENCE

While trade was flourishing, the cultural exchange and its influence on Korea expanded because of the Silk Road. Buddhism, which was born in India, passed through Central Asia, then reached China, and finally came to Korea though the Silk Road. By this time, Buddhism had become the most important religion in Asia.

It is indisputable that one of the most important cultural legacies brought by the Silk Road was Buddhism, which entered in the period of the Three Kingdoms: first Kokuryeo in 373, then Baekje in 384 and finally Shilla in the 5th century. When Buddhism was first introduced to Korea it replaced Shamanism, which was the indigenous religion of the time.

Many Korean Buddhist monks went to Tang China to further their studies as early as the 7th century. These priests later continued to India to study the philosophy in depth. One of the most prominent Buddhist priests, Hyecho (704-780) from the Unified Shilla Kingdom, studied esoteric Buddhism in Tang China first and then made the journey for India in 723. After his 4-year long experience in India, he published a writing under the title, "Wang-Oh-Chunchookgook-jun" ("Note on a Visit to Five Regions of India") introducing Indian culture to the East.

In response to Buddhism, art was created following the life of Siddhartha Gautama, and thereafter evolved by contact with other cultures and spread throughout Asia and the world.

Korean Buddhist art is evident throughout the long history of the peninsula. Over half of the nation's 230 National Treasures are Buddhist: at least 37 statues, stone Buddhas and rock reliefs, 25 pagodas, 14 buildings, 15 stupas and lanterns, bells, several paintings and several copies of Sutras, including the huge set of the Tripitaka wood-blocks at Haein-sa Temple.

Shilla's fascination with the religion is apparent in the production of Buddhist statues and reliquaries. National Treasure 83, Gilt-bronze Maitreya in Meditation, is believed to depict the Maitreya, the future Buddha, in a semi-seated contemplative pose and is one of the best known and most highly regarded Korean Buddhist sculptures. It is commonly known as *pan'gasayusang* in Korean. While the pose, with one ankle resting on the knee of the other leg, originates from early Indian Buddhist imagery, this Bodhisattva is conspicuously unadorned. In addition to the sculptures and other Buddhist arts, Sokkuram Grotto is one of Shilla's grandest monuments and is similar to cave temples in ancient India (e.g. Ellora and Ajanta) and China (e.g. Yunggang and Longmen) (Soon-woo, 2002).

Buddhism flourished under royal patronage and was seen as a symbol of unity. Great works of art were created and magnificent monasteries were built. Buddhism penetrated the culture and had a great influence on the life of the Korean people. With the fall of Shilla in the 10th century, the Koryeo Dynasty took power. Under this new rule, Buddhism reached the height of its prosperity. With royal support, more monasteries were built and more works of art were produced. The whole of the Tripitaka in Chinese translation, the most complete collection of Buddhist texts in the world, was also carved on to wooden printing blocks. These 80,000

wooden blocks were made between the years 1237 and 1249 and have been carefully preserved to the present day as part of Korea's national treasures.

DESCENDANTS OF ARAB MENCHANTS IN KOREA

As mentioned before, based on historical resources dating back to the three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE), Korea took part in trading and cultural exchange and was the last destiny for the Arab merchants in the Asian Continent.

Gyeongju was the capital of Shilla during the Three Kingdoms (57BC-668AD) and the Unified Shilla Kingdom (668AD-935AD) for over 1,000 years. According to the *Samguk saki* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*) and the *Samguk yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*), Gyeongju became the centre of economic life of the peninsula. Merchants from China, Japan and the Middle East gathered into Gyeongju, creating an important hub for travellers by land and sea. Luxury Persian goods such as jewels, feathers, gold, silver and glassware from Persia flowed into Silla.

Apart from the prospering trade activities in Gyeongju, cultural interactions also took place in this ancient capital. Records from a small clay figurine excavated in Silla show that music and plays from Central Asia were popular at the time, including *kumwan*, an acrobatics show that originated in Central Asia. With the flow of merchants during the late unified Shilla period, Arabs started to settle down permanently in Korea, establishing Muslim villages. Later, during the Koryeo dynasty, some 100 Arabs came in September of the 15th year of King Hyonjong (1024) and another group of 100 Muslim merchants came the following year. Other Arab merchants also came to Korea during the 11th century on a large-scale trade mission, settled down, and began following their own religious rites, such as praying, fasting, and pursuing their own customary traditions.

Evidence of Arab presence in Korea at the time is found in a poem written during the period of Koryeo: the "Sanghwajeom" meaning the "Colored-eye people's bakery." The poem tells the tale of a Korean woman who goes to a Muslim bakery to buy some dumplings (Soon-woo, 2002).

The second wave of Muslim immigrants came during the Mongol control of Koryeo in 1270. During Mongol rule in Koryeo, the Mongol

rulers relied heavily on Uyghurs (Turkish ethnic groups living in Eastern and Central Asia) in managing and extending trading networks. In this period, many Muslims, mostly Central Asians, settled down permanently in Korea. They took up positions not only as officials of the Koryeo court but as private traders in almost every corner of the country. They too formed their own communities in the Koryeo capital, celebrated their festivals, and maintained their religion, Islam. They built a Mosque called *Ye-Kung* or "ceremonial hall".

Among these residents, at least two of them settled down in Korea permanently and became the progenitors of two Korean clans. One of these two Central Asian immigrants came as an aide to Mongol princes who had been sent to marry the Koryeo King Chungnyeol. Documents shows that his original name was Samga, but after he decided to live permanently in Koryeo, the King bestowed on him the Korean name of Jang Sunnyong. Jang married a Korean woman and became the founding ancestor of the Deoksu Jang clan. His clan produced many high officials and respected Confucian scholars over the centuries. Twenty-five generations later, around 30,000 Koreans look back to Jang Sunnyong as the grandfather of their clan.

The origin of the family name Gyeongju Seol also has a Central Asian background. A Central Asian named Seol Son fled to Korea when the Red Turban rebellion erupted near the end of the Mongol's Yuan dynasty. He, too, married a Korean, beginning a lineage called the Gyeongju Seol that claims around 2,000 members in Korea today.

The Koryeo dynasty was succeeded by the Chosun dynasty. The newly established Chosun dynasty (1392-1910) was less receptive to foreign cultures. The practice of Islamic religious activities was threatened by a Royal decree in 1427, when King Sejong ordered a decree against the Huihui (Korean Muslim) community that had special status. The Huihui were forced to abandon their traditions and to close down their Mosque. The assimilation policy of the early 15th century eventually eliminated most traces of the Islamic presence in old Korea. There is no further mention of Muslims existence during the era of the Chosun, and Muslim culture was only re-introduced in the 20th century (Lee Hee Soo, 2014).

THE NEW SILK ROAD AND KOREA

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the New Silk Road initiative began to emerge in various regions including the European Union, the Central

Asian countries, China, and Korea. These countries were in need of a new economic and cultural cooperation framework, which the New Silk Road sought to provide.

In response to the New Silk Road initiative, in 1995, the Republic of Korea (ROK), China, Mongolia, and Russia launched the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), a regional cooperation mechanism with the goal of strengthening economic and technical cooperation in order to obtain greater growth and sustainable development in Northeast Asia (NEA) (White, 2010) The GTI focuses primarily in the areas of transport, trade and investment, tourism, energy, and the environment.

Later in 2013, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping proposed the land-based "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB) and oceangoing "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) with the goal of focusing on connectivity and cooperation among countries of the Old Silk Road. In response to the Chinese "Silk Road Economic Belt" in October 2013, ROK President, Park Geun-hye, proposed the "Eurasia initiative." Under the slogans of "one continent", 'creative continent', and 'peaceful continent', it sought to create a single and unified system of transport, energy, and trade networks, along with the implementation of economic cooperation and exchanges within the spheres of science, technology, culture, including interpersonal relationship exchanges with the goal of improving inter-Korean relations.

Based on these initiatives, the Trans-Korean Railways Project (inter-Korean railways infrastructure) was projected to connect ROK, DPRK, Russia, and China with the TSR (Trans-Siberian Railways) in the hope of halving the time taken to transport freight from eastern Asia to Europe and earn substantial transit fees in the process. The purpose of connecting these railways in the two Koreas is to establish a new transportation network not only on the Korean Peninsula but also all throughout Northeast Asia and Europe by creating a Eurasian Railway. Connected railways allow for transporting more diversified goods from Asia to Europe in a convenient fashion. The implementation of this project would allow for transporting cargo from Asia to Europe faster and safer than is currently done by sea. To put this into perspective, what could be delivered in 17-20 days by railway would take 35-40 days by traditional transportation methods. (Biswal, 2015; Cigui Liu, 2014)

Parallel to the TSR and TKR projects and for cooperation with the Central Asian countries, The Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, a multilateral dialogue mechanism between the ROK and five countries

in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan –, was launched in 2007. In this Forum, Korea announced a roadmap for cooperation with Central Asia designed to implement its Eurasia Initiative and strengthen its diplomacy with Central Asia. The forum theme deals with "advancing ROK-Central Asia relations for shared prosperity and cooperation: happiness of the people, national development, and the creation of the future," and focuses on specific ways to work together in the fields of public healthcare, agriculture, and environment. Korea's policy toward Central Asia is driven by energy needs and political security, while the Central Asian republics seek the opportunity to diversify their foreign relations, their sources of foreign investment, and their export routes.

In the area of new cultural ties, Korea's new inter-Asian connections began growing with the end of the Cold War and were bolstered by Korea's growing economic development. In 1992, South Korea established diplomatic ties with the newly independent Republics from the Soviet Union, which soon became major importers of popular Korean culture in a phenomenon called "Hallyu, the Korean Wave" literally meaning "flow of Korea." (Cummings, 2012) The growing popularity of Korean modern culture in many parts of the world, including those countries of Silk Road, has pushed the government to continue supporting its creative industries.

The Korean Culture and Information Service (KOIS), a wing of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism plays an important role in transmitting the "Hallyu" in the central Asian region, a great place for Korean and Middle Eastern culture to meet. For this, the KOIS organizes various Korean culture festivals in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in hopes of increasing interest in Korean culture, specifically traditional percussion performances, K-pop, Korean movie screenings, and traditional and modern Korean food displays. In this way Korea is paying back the flow of culture received from the Old Silk Road by sharing the popular "Hallyu" with the countries along the New Silk Road.

CONCLUSION

Stretching from the Mediterranean to the Three Kingdoms of the Korean peninsula, the Silk Road connected a vast territory of ancient cultures. The Korean Peninsula was the furthest destination for the international merchants along the Silk Road. During the period of the

Silla kingdom and Koryeo dynasty, the Silk Road served to bring materials, techniques, religions, and ideas from as far away as Rome.

In modern times, South Korea has established itself as a significant economic player in Silk Road. The presence and influence of South Korea in Central Asia since the 1990s has steadily expanded. South Korea and the five Central Asian states are engaged in the areas of political, economic, and social exchanges. Activities include cooperation on energy and natural resources construction and infrastructure, science and technologies, medicine and healthcare, finances, textile, and agriculture. South Korea's on going cooperation with China is essential in terms of security for the region and mutual economic development. Korea's policy towards the Middle Eastern region will continue in order to increase economic development and attempt to resolve its energy vulnerability. South Korea's expansion in the New Silk Road is prominent, and is an important component for economic cooperation and cultural interactions, or transculturality. The contemporary Korean culture *Hallyu* continues to ride the wave of globalization worldwide. It is particularly popular in Asian countries and Middle East. Through the New Silk Road, Korea once again has taken an active participation in contributing to the interconnected modern culture in a variety of ways beyond national borders.

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