

Central Asia and the Republic of Korea: A Sketch on Historical Relations

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This paper attempts to reveal little-known pages from the history of relations between the peoples of Central Asia and Korea based on materials derived from written sources and modern scientific literature, as well as from medieval wall paintings from the early medieval Afrasiab Palace of Varhuman, the ruler of Samarkand, and from stone sculptures of Sogdian figures contained in Silla royal tombs. Korea's interest in the western lands led to its contact with Buddhism, which spread and later flourished in all three Korean kingdoms (Koguryo, Paekche and Silla). The spread of Buddhism in turn motivated a number of Korean monks to undertake pilgrimages to India via Central Asia.

Hyecho, a young Silla pilgrim, left evidence of his journey via the South China Sea to India in 723 AD. Paul Pelliot discovered a report from Hyecho's journey entitled *Notes on Pilgrimage to Five Regions in India* (Wang Wu Tianzhuguo zhuan) in the Dunhuang caves in 1908. Hyecho's contributions are worthy of attention, substantially complementing knowledge available for this little-studied period in the history of South and Central Asia. The information contained in Hyecho's manuscript is, in fact, considered the most significant work of the first half of the 8th century.

Research regarding the relationship between Central Asia and Korea remains underdeveloped. Existing historical evidence, however, including

the above mentioned Samarkand wall paintings, depicts the visits of two Korean ambassadors to Samarkand, and evidence from Silla tombs suggests the presence of diplomatic relations in addition to trade between the two regions.

Overall, the history of the relationship between Central Asia and Korea yields new insights into how and why these distant countries sustained trade and diplomatic and cultural exchange during this early period. Taking into account Korea's growing interest in Uzbekistan, especially in its history and culture, this article can act as a catalyst for studying the history of the two country's relations.

Keywords: Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Korea, Sogdians, Silla, Buddhist monks, Silk Road, history, culture.

Introduction

The modern Republic of Korea is one of the Republic of Uzbekistan's major trade, economic, and political partners in the Asia-Pacific region. Korea was one of the first to recognize Uzbekistan's independence on December 30, 1991, and established diplomatic relations on January 29, 1992. While the history of Korea's relationship with the peoples of Central Asia stretches far back to ancient times, we know little about contacts between ancient Koreans and Central Asians due to the scarcity and poor accessibility of relevant historical material.¹ Information obtained in the course of archaeological excavations of various segments of the Silk Road considerably supplements material available from written sources, providing data and insight into previously unknown, little understood and under-researched aspects of Central Asian people's relations with outsiders, and in particular with ancient Koreans.² One such excavation involved the 1965 discovery of the incomparable Afrasiab murals, which feature interesting frescos depicting two envoys wearing feathers, which were characteristic of ancient Korean headwear.³ The Afrasiab Palace murals depict many scenes from life within the royal court of Varhuman, the Sogdian king, including his reception of numerous foreign embassies and other royal court activities. Each of the murals portrays an exceptionally rich narrative and, despite the different interpretations offered

¹ Li Yanshou, *Bei shi* [History of Northern Dynasties], vol. 11, *Er shi wu shi bian kan guan* [24 Histories of Dynasties] (Taipei: Minguo 45, 1956); Noh Tae Don, "Study on the Interchange between Koguryo, Palhai(渤海) People and Inland Asia Resident," *Daedong Institute for Korean Studies* 23 (1989): 235-246.

² Pak Sang Nam, and N. Karimova, *Korea and Central Asia in the Depths of History* (Moscow: MBA, 2014), 38-45; N. E. Karimova, *Uzbekistan and Korea: Historical Relations* (Tashkent, 2008).

³ L. I. Albaum, *Afrasiab's Paintings* (Tashkent: Fan, 1975).

by specialists, provides a tremendous source of historical value, culture, ethnogenesis and ethnography of Sogdiana and neighboring regions in Central Asia.

Ancient Korean Missions to Central Asia

Describing the envoy's appearance, L. I. Albaum, who helped renovate the mural, noted in his *Afrasiab's Paintings* that one "group's headwear differs from previous embassies" (see Fig. 1).⁴ One embassy indeed wears peculiar headwear – a tight, round hat with a small chignon tightened by tape, from which two feathers stick out. They wear short, yellow, wide-sleeved kaftans and long bloomers with multiple pleats, with their hands hidden in the pleats of their long sleeves (see Fig. 2).

Chinese dynastic chronicles have preserved accounts of ancient Koreans' clothes and decorations. *Bei shi* (The History of the Northern Dynasties),⁵ lists parts of the uniform worn by Baekje⁶ officials of various ranks, noting that top officials "wear silvery flowers on their hat." It further informs us that their "food and dress is similar to the *gaoli* (*goguryeo*). If they visit the palace or make a sacrifice, they stick feathers on both sides of their hat. But if they go for military service, they don't insert any feathers."⁷ Goguryeo tomb frescos are convincingly similar to Afrasiab's murals.⁸ On the eastern wall of a Goguryeo tomb corridor, a painting depicts an equestrian and a man standing, wearing a hat with a chignon and two feathers sticking out of it. His dress consists of a jacket tightened with a belt, and his hands are hidden inside wide sleeves. Both men wear wide bloomers.⁹

Many ethnographers have noted that the Korean hairdo consisted of "a small chignon that is made of twisted hair and fastened in a special way with a hair pin; the chignon protrudes from the head ... and can be called a bump. Koreans also take special care that their hair in front and on the temples flatly adjoins the head and therefore wear a special headband weaved from horse hair." Such a hairdo with a chignon bump signaled that the man was married and in good standing.¹⁰ Thus, information from Chinese dynastical chronicles and other sources confirms that the western wall of the Afrasiab Palace features Korean envoys. Descriptions of ancient Korean dress and headwear found in historical sources correspond

⁴ Albaum, *Afrasiab's Paintings*, 74.

⁵ *Bei shi* (Chinese 北史) is a history of Chinese dynasties encompassing the period from AD 386 to 581 when the north of China was ruled by the Northern Dynasties.

⁶ Baekje (Korean 백제; 百濟) was a kingdom located in southwest Korea from 18 BC-AD 660. It was one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, together with Goguryeo and Silla.

⁷ Li, *Bei shi*.

⁸ Goguryeo (Korean 고구려; 高句麗) was a Korean kingdom located in the northern and central parts of the Korean Peninsula and the southern and central parts of Manchuria.

⁹ *Murals of the Tomb of Goguryeo* (Pyongyang: Publishing House of Literature in Foreign Languages, 1958), 2.

¹⁰ Albaum, *Afrasiab's Paintings*, 61.

with the fresco paintings.

Japanese historians Anozawa Wako and Manome Dzuniti also note the distinctive peculiarities of the dress and headwear of the envoys depicted on the frescos. Based on the results of archaeological research, as well as Tang and Sui chronicles, namely *Suishu* (History of the Sui Dynasty)¹¹ and *Jiu Tangshu* (The Old History of the Tang Dynasty),¹² they confirm that the feathered headwear, yellow dress and pointed footwear was worn by Goguryeo representatives from the 4th to 6th centuries AD.¹³ While it is difficult to precisely determine which Korean state's representatives arrived in Afrasiab, this most likely occurred before the Arab conquest had reached Central Asia.

Goguryeo's attempt to establish friendly ties with the Turks did not succeed. Moreover, as the *Suishu* chronicle tells us, the Sui emperor used the Turk army, and in particular the Turk Kagan Chulo and his brothers, to attack Goguryeo. Goguryeo never abandoned its struggle to stand up to the stronger Chinese power, though, and continued to seek out alliances with Central Asian countries. For instance, during Tang Emperor Taizong's (AD 627-650) attack in 642, Goguryeo sent their envoy Engesomun through the Mongolian heath to Bijangtto to strike a union with Central Asian states.¹⁴ The famous Russian Sinologist N. Bichurin also quotes historical chronicles dating back to the 7th century AD which note, "previously, the Korean King had frequently sent envoys to Kizhin's Orda," where the Turk leader Khan Kizhin possessed his domain, between the eastern and western beds of the Yellow River (Khara-Muren, Mongolia).¹⁵

As Korean authors note, historically Korean international relations centered on China. Through its western Chinese neighbor, Korea also became aware of lands outside China, the so-called "Western Countries." There is evidence that Korean merchants re-exported Chinese and Central Asian goods all the way to Japan. The Japanese exported copper, silver, sulphur, pepper, and fragrances to Korea that was in part re-exported, along with ginseng, to China, and most likely many of the treasures in the Japanese Imperial vaults found their way there through Korean intermediary trading activity.¹⁶ During the rule of the Chinese Yuan Dynasty,¹⁷ China and Korea signed a sea trade agreement under which trade and diplomatic

¹¹ Sui (Chinese 隋朝) was a Chinese dynasty that ruled from AD 581-618.

¹² Tang (Chinese 唐朝) was a Chinese dynasty that ruled from AD 618-907.

¹³ Anazawa Wako and Manome Junichi, "About the Korean Envoys, Depicted on the Walls of the Afrasiab Palace," *The Korean Studies* 80 (1976): 22.

¹⁴ Kim Won-ryong, "Images of Envoys on the Walls of Afrasiab in Samarkand," in *History of Korean Art* (Tokyo: MyeongJo, 1976), 243.

¹⁵ N. Y. Bichurin, *The Collection of Information about the Peoples Who Lived in Central Asia in Ancient Times* (Moscow: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1950), 244-245.

¹⁶ O. Kobzeva, "Korean Studies and the Great Silk Road: Actual Problems of Study and Prospects of Scientific Cooperation in the 21st Century," in *Korean Studies and University Cooperation between Central Asia and Korea* (Tashkent, 2008), 74.

¹⁷ Yuan (Chinese 元朝) was a dynasty ruling in China from AD 1271-1368.

delegations brought raw silk, silk fabric, books and other goods including Central Asian items to Korea.¹⁸

With its realm stretching far into southern Manchuria, the Goguryeo Kingdom maintained tight contact with the northern Mongolia Turks,¹⁹ from whom Goguryeo reportedly received camels. A large number of emigrants from the Korean state of Silla lived in China's Shangdong Peninsula and along coastal areas in the middle of the 9th century AD. It seems quite probable that some of the Silla emigrants would have migrated farther west to Dunhuang. Some Koreans were also active in the Central Asian portions of the Silk Road due to the close connections between Tang China and the peoples and civilizations of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, resulting from Tang expansionist policies.

Hyecho's Journey to India

Korean fascination with the lands west of China (*Xiyu*) brought them into contact with Buddhism, which led the religion to flourish in all three Korean kingdoms. This in turn inspired many Korean monks to travel to China, Central Asia, and to India. The famous pilgrim and biographer Yi Jing mentioned eight Korean pilgrims among sixty departing to India in his *Biography of Outstanding Pilgrims to Western Regions of the Great Tang*. Five of the eight followed the Central Asian route, and all but two of the Koreans perished without a trace, either in India or on their way there along the Silk Road.²⁰

Hyecho, a young Silla pilgrim, who started his journey to India in approximately AD 723 from the South China Sea, left behind evidence in the form of a report titled *Notes on Pilgrimage to Five Regions of India* (Wang Wu Tianzhuguo zhuan). Paul Pelliot, who discovered the manuscript in China's Dunhuang caves in 1908, published them in the *Bulletin de L'Ecole Francaise de l'Extreme Orient*.²¹

Following publication, scholars from many countries, including Japan, Germany, China, and Korea, began actively researching the text.²² Researchers concluded that Hyecho's writing style was reminiscent of that of a Buddhist monk. As for language, Hyecho's command of Chinese was determined to be lacking, so his chronicle was not considered comparable to the writings of Xuan Zang²³ and Yi Jing. Nevertheless, scholars unanimously assessed Hyecho's

¹⁸ Kobzeva, "Korean Studies and the Great Silk Road," 74-75.

¹⁹ According to available data, camels were brought to Japan from Baekje in AD 599, from Goguryeo in AD 618 and from Silla in AD 680. They were brought to Korea through China. Turks used to send Tang emperors 500 camels from AD 618-626 for trade, among other goods.

²⁰ Koh Byong-ik, *Essays on East Asian History and Cultural Traditions* (Seoul: Sowha, 2004), 234.

²¹ Zhang Yi, *The Comments to Hyecho's Notes on Pilgrimage to Five Regions of India* (Beijing: 1994), 3.

²² Zhang, *The Comments to Hyecho's Notes*, 4-5.

²³ Xuan Zang (Chinese 玄奘) (AD 600-664) was a famous Chinese Buddhist monk who undertook a journey (AD 629-645) to India through Central Asia and authored a tractate on the journey called *Great Tang Records of the*

tractate as perhaps the most significant text of the first half of the 8th century.

The period was a time of conflict between several large political and military powers struggling for influence in Central Asia, including the Tang Empire, Tibet, the Turks and the Arabs. Amid the military unrest, Chinese Buddhist monks taking the transcontinental pilgrimage route to India encountered numerous hardships. One Buddhist monk who left for India in the middle of the 7th century, Xuan Zao, never returned to China. Another, Yi Jing, travelled overland to India and returned by sea. Only the Tang Empire's ambassador to India, Wu Kong, managed to return to China through the lands of the Uyghurs, who were known as the *buizu*.²⁴

Hyecho took notes containing rich historical and ethnographical information on his way from India to China via Kashmir, the Arab caliphate Bamian, and the Central Asian states. Notwithstanding the brevity of narration characteristic of this kind of text, Hyecho's notes contain information regarding the political and economic conditions, military power, judicial systems, religions, food and clothing styles of numerous countries and territories. Hyecho reached as far as Kucha during the first ten days of November AD 727. The unfortunate paucity of Buddhist monks' travel notes taken during this period makes the information from Hyecho's research into Central and Southern Asia priceless.

Silla Dynasty Connections to Central Asia

As for the relationship between the Great Silk Road traders and Korea, there is yet insufficient research in this area. However, existing historical evidence suggests that the ancient Korean state of Silla's legacy is connected to Central Asian Sogdian trading activity on the Korean Peninsula.

Excavation of an ancient Silla tomb from the Cheonmasan period (at the end of the 5th century AD) revealed a depiction of a tree resembling a birch. Silla people used the bark of this tree in graves as a talisman. However, the birch tree did not grow in Silla, while it did grow in Siberia near Lake Baikal.²⁵ The Sogdians traded in the area of the steppe connecting Siberia with Central Asia, which was the domain of nomadic herdsman. Siberian birch tree served as material for saddles and various other ware and was most certainly delivered to Silla through trade on the Great Silk Road.

Archaeological excavations in the Gyeongju area have unearthed a variety of artifacts

Western Regions (大唐西域記). See A. Khodzhaev, *The Great Silk Road: Connections and Destinies (Based on Chinese Sources and Literature)* (Tashkent: Center for Oriental Manuscripts. Abu Rayhana Beruni at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, 2016), 275-280.

²⁴ Wu Kong (Chinese 悟空) (AD ?-790) was the last Buddhist monk to travel to India along the Great Silk Road in the Tang Era. See Khodzhaev, *The Great Silk Road*, 280-282.

²⁵ Pak and Karimova, *Korea and Central Asia*, 10.

heavily influenced by foreign culture. The similar appearance and features of relics discovered in Sogdiana and the state of Silla is striking. One good example is a horn-shaped stoop used by nomadic herdsmen and traded by Sogdians on the Great Silk Road, found in ancient archaeological excavations in Silla. In ancient times, horn-shaped stoops were believed to have been made from ox horn or something similar, but in fact, on closer examination they were discovered to have actually been made of clay or iron in the shape of a horn.²⁶

Moreover, in Khwangnam (Gyeongju), researchers discovered an item made of silver or gold in the shape of a bottle (or a vessel for a signal light) that was most probably used by the Sogdians as a vessel. This type of bottle was used for bottling wine everywhere from Persia to Rome.

Historical records mention that the people in Khwangnam (Gyeongju) attempted to repair the broken handles of glass bottles by taping them with golden thread, which tells us that glass items were rare and valuable to the people of Silla. Silla's use of bottle-shaped glass vessels for torches in the period from the 5th to 6th centuries AD is evidence of the existence of trade between ancient Central Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Interestingly, throughout all East Asia, this kind of glass bottle has been excavated only on the Korean Peninsula and not in China and Japan, offering evidence that ancient states in that period used both the sea and land sections of the Silk Road for trade from Rome to East Asia via Central Asia across the entire Eurasian continent. This glass artifact from the Silla period is proof of the existence of international trade. Moreover, Silla favorably viewed all foreign items and only altered them according to their own artistic traditions.²⁷

Historians tell us that the majority of stone statues in Gyeongju tombs were modeled on tradesmen (likely from Central Asia), with the shape of the head, clothes and decorations resembling Sogdians. A waist-worn purse, in particular, resembles an item frequently used by nomadic herdsmen. The purse was made of fabric and silver. Sogdian-made silk featured a horizontal design of circles surrounding the picture of an animal or of an ornament. The Silla people had once been nomadic, but migrated to a warmer location, settling on the Korean Peninsula. In addition to these traces of nomadic herdsmen, the overall picture clearly demonstrates the influence of other civilizations. Amazingly, the remains of buildings from the end of the 7th century AD have signs that Sogdians lived in them, although the historical records of Sogdians on the Korean Peninsula are quite scarce.²⁸ Clearly, though, Central Asia and Korea engaged in trade relations and the historical evidence discovered on the Korean Peninsula from the Goguryeo and Silla periods offers proof.

People of Central Asian origin also took part in the painting of Goguryeo Dynasty tombs. The Goguryeo period left behind many monuments, including tombs in Pyongyang and in the Khillimson area in China. These paintings tell much about the traditions and

²⁶ Pak and Karimova, *Korea and Central Asia*, 10.

²⁷ Pak and Karimova, *Korea and Central Asia*, 10.

²⁸ Pak and Karimova, *Korea and Central Asia*, 12.

customs of Koreans of the time. On the ceiling of the tomb are murals depicting various constellations, the sun, and the sky, with everyday life portrayed on the tomb walls. These paintings, located in different parts of the tomb, illustrate the social events of the time. One can see scenes of fights, burials, and pictures of large bells. The faces of the people look different from those of Koreans and resemble Central Asian Sogdians. Moreover, the Goguryeo people are shown wearing clothes and decorations resembling those of the Sogdians. The shape of clothes and decorations rooted in nomadic tribes spread throughout Central Asia to encompass Western Asia and were transformed into a traditional form of dress. Koreans preserved the basic shape of their clothes and decorations, but supplemented them with various alterations. These murals demonstrate the deep roots of the Sogdian and Goguryeo way of everyday life, and also show that Goguryeo greatly affected the culture and life of Central Asian peoples, as well. Thus, for 1,500 years, Korea enjoyed tight cultural links with the peoples of Central Asia, including the Sogdians, and they in turn, influenced Korea.

One additional interesting hypothesis regarding the origins of the Korean language is worth mentioning. Specialists in the field of historical comparative linguistics classify Korean as a language isolate. Others suggest that the linguistic homeland of Korean is located somewhere in northeastern Central Asia. Some linguists have suggested a possible ancestral relationship between the Turkic and Korean languages. For example, after conducting a deep comparative analysis, the linguist Kabak proposed that Turkic and Korean languages share a similar system of organizing sounds and words. The linguist Yong-Sŏng Li submitted several Turkic and Old Korean words with common etymological origin.²⁹ This therefore suggests a close historical relationship between Turkic and Korean.

Conclusion

In recent history, Central Asia and Korea stagnated, both socio-economically and culturally. Rival interests led the neighboring larger civilizations of Russia, China and Japan to eventually colonize these countries. Our study shows, however, that Central Asia and Korea were able to sustain a long, successful mutual relationship involving diplomatic, commercial and cultural exchange, demonstrating that these countries could maintain their society's political independence and cultural distinctiveness. Further study in this field should focus analysis on all available ancient Korean and Central Asian archeological and written sources to yield new insights into the history of diplomatic, trade and cultural relationships between these countries.

²⁹ Li Yong-Sŏng, "Some Star Names in Modern Turkic Languages-I," *Bulleten* 62, no. 1 (2014): 121-156.

Illustrations



Fig. 1) The *Ambassadors Painting*. Afrasiab Museum



Fig. 2) The *Ambassadors Painting*. Close-up of Korean ambassadors. Afrasiab Museum

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