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The Journey to the East: The Motif of Grapes and Grapevines along the Silk Roads

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This paper is an art historical attempt to discuss the transfer and transmission of a certain visual idiom along the Silk Roads[1] and to show the multi-dimensionality of the trans-regional, trans-cultural movement. The motifs of grapes and grapevines are discussed here for this purpose, including the grape-and-vine motif mixed with other animated figures and plants. A special emphasis is on China and its reception, but regional varieties within East Asia are also discussed. The motif is one of the most longstanding and versatile visual idioms, widely distributed along the regions of the Silk Roads. This deceptively familiar motif came to China, where grapes and viticulture were introduced far later than the West. The West developed various symbolisms ranging from manic revelry and heavenly unity with mystic beings, to royalty and power in different cultures. In China, this visual idiom was eagerly received in association with something exotic and re-interpreted in the context of Chinese culture. Without active viticulture,

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[1] Although it has been widely used among scholars and the general public, a question is often asked as to the suitability of the singular form of the word "Silk Road" or "the Silk Road." Does the term reflect the wide cultural and geographical diversity and the vast timespan it covers? Even in the original usage when the term was coined by Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), it could mean the "Silk Road" or the plural form of "Silk Roads." It is rather common-sense, when dealing with such a vast area and timeline, that nearly all forms of trans-regional, transcultural communication took place in a complex mode with myriad forms, not in a single linear way. In this article, the plural form of the term is used to emphasize the multidimensionality and multifariousness of transcultural interactions.

the motif transformed itself into beautiful design patterns and space fillers in China and East Asia. The natural appeal of jewel-like grapes acquired new meanings of fertility and happiness in the traditional East Asian cultural context. To see the cultural effect of viticulture on the visualization of this motif, the Islamic reception of the motif is briefly touched upon when countries to the West of China (서역 西域) were fully Islamized and heavily affected by the prohibition of alcoholic drinking.

Key words: grapes, vine motif, viticulture, China, Iran

Introduction

The Silk Roads act as a defining symbol that unifies different regions and cultures. The term often alludes to dazzling adventures (mainly of European men) and international conspiracies of the so-called "Great Game." In addition, the culture industry has consistently conjured up a romantic image of trans-regional trade with camels and horses carrying loads of precious goods on their backs. Among the various symbols of cultural interactions along the Silk Roads, silk, especially Chinese silk, is definitely the item, so precious, so coveted in various places and frequently exchanged as to represent these multi-regional, trans-continental trade networks. If silk was the epitome of Chinese luxury exports to the West, it could be argued that the motif of grapes and grapevines enjoyed similar status along the trans-Eurasian trade routes, only in the opposite direction. Unlike silk, it moved eastward.

The motif is arguably one of the most widespread artistic expressions across vast expanses from Rome to East Asia. Almost every region on the western reach of the Silk Roads relished it. Many vessels decorated with the motif of grapes and grapevines were used in wine feasts and special drinking scenes for royals and dignitaries, the visual evidence of the association between the vine and the throne in ancient times. In addition, the visual and material arts of the Western world have presented a series of religious interpretations and spiritual symbolisms to this motif, far beyond the mere depiction of an actual plant.

As many biblical parables and allegories are related to it, the motif was a longstanding favourite of biblical implication in the artistic repertoire of the Abrahamic religions. Many remains of ancient Jewish art, especially textiles, show the skilful use of the motif.[2] Symbolising the connection of the Christian with Christ, the motif is frequently encountered in Christian art, and the image of grapes is devotedly used as the visual image reminding the faithful of the life of Christ in their observances and rituals. A chalice now in the Widener Collection was used in Catholic liturgy and beautifully embellished with a series of grapes in

[2] Reba Wulkan, "The Grape and the Vine: A Motif in Contemporary Jewish Textiles," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* 217 (1998): 369-371. I am deeply grateful for a reviewer for drawing my attention to this article and the Jewish artistic expressions of the motif.

fine metalworking technique (fig. 1).[3] In spite of the prohibition of alcoholic drinks in Islam, Islamic art, in particular when it formed its own unique visual and material vocabulary out of the fully developed artistic traditions of the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, inherited the ancient symbolisms of the motif and developed a rich variety of its visual expression to decorate artefacts and newly developed architecture.[4] In this respect, the vine motif sets itself apart from other recurrent vegetal motifs such as the acanthus, palmette, and honeysuckle. It transcends the level of the mere representation of a natural plant to the symbolic significance highly charged with spirituality in the West. As many instances in the scriptures of Abrahamic religions confirm, the symbolic elevation of the motif is related to its association with wine and viticulture.[5]

As wine means an alcoholic drink made from fermented grapes,[6] and viticulture is the cultivation and harvesting of grapes, how is the motif of grapes and grapevines represented in a culture with little knowledge of wine and viticulture? Although the motif has fascinated many scholars – Riegl, Gombrich, and Rowland among many others[7] – few scholarly attempts have been made to connect this motif to the different drink culture of East Asia. Compared to the West, a wine and wine-related drink culture appeared quite late in China and other parts of East Asia, as will be discussed in a later part of this article.[8] Against this background, questions can be raised as to when or how the motif was visually represented in a region of different drink traditions. We can also ask whether the motif retains the same cultural significance when it is visualized. This paper traces the movement of the visual representations and cultural interpretations of this deceptively familiar motif along the Silk Roads. A special emphasis is on China and its reception. Regional varieties within East Asia are also discussed. The motifs discussed here include those of grapes, grapevines and grape-and-vine mixed with other animated figures and plants.

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[3] Rudolf Distelberger et al., *Western Decorative Arts* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993), 4, 9.

[4] The vine (known as *al-karma* in Arabic) was received with visual authority in the early Islamic architectural decoration repertoire. The earliest Umayyad mosque in Damascus sets the example of "the subsequent association between mihrab and vine ornament in several parts of the Islamic world." Finbarr B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 111.

[5] Hugh Johnson, *Vintage: The Story of Wine* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 11-16.

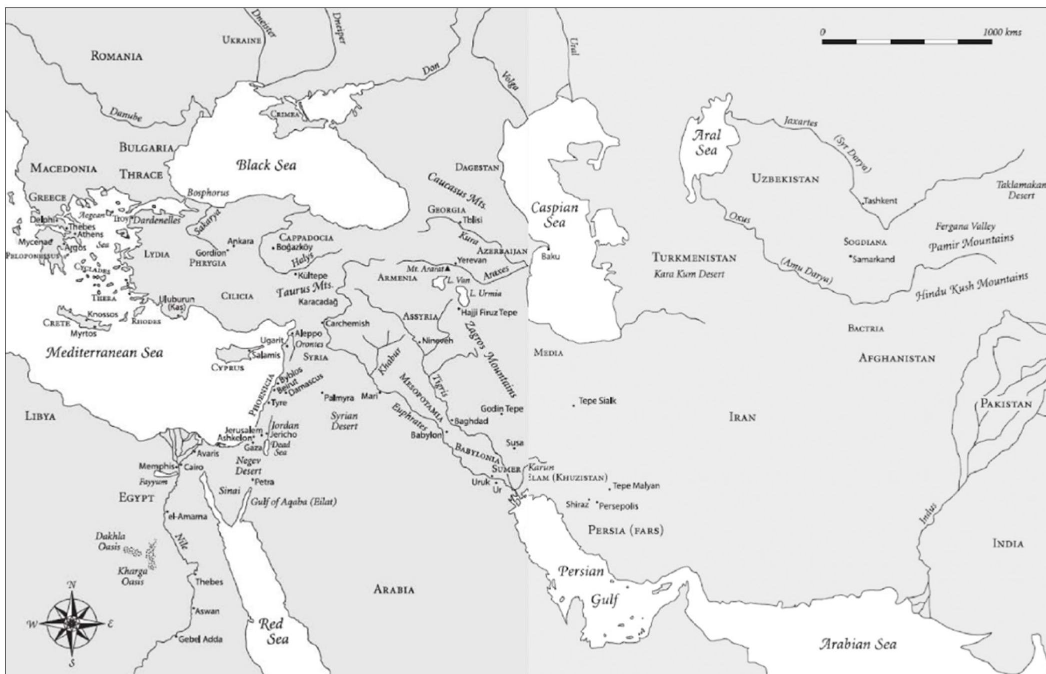
[6] As Gina Hames has pointed out, grapes were not the only fruit for producing wines. Archaeological evidence shows that the date palm, olives and figs were also cultivated to produce fermented beverages. Gina Hames, *Alcohol in World History* (London: Routledge, 2012), 6.

[7] Aloïs Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004); E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984); Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967).

[8] There is earlier evidence of a wine made from fermented grapes in Jiahu village in Henan Province, China (c. 7000–5500 BC), but it was a mixed fermented beverage of rice, honey and grape (or other fruits). Patrick E. McGovern et al., "Fermented Beverages of Pre- and Proto-Historic China," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101, no. 51 (2004): 17593-17598. Ancient Chinese wine, however real and well consumed, is too remote to have any meaning to the later spread of grape wine.

The Visual Idiom of Grapes and Grapevines in the West

As with wine, the origin of the vine motif is still controversial. Map (1) shows grape and viticulture sites widely distributed from ancient Egypt to Central Asia. Both the vine and wine were known in Egypt for at least three or four millennia BCE. By the second millennium BCE, scenes of harvesting grapes and serving wine are vividly depicted in the wall paintings of tombs. A close analysis of the grape motif in a fragment of wall painting reveals dense clusters of grapes with delicate outlines of the leaves, showing the craftsmen's factual understanding of the plant, not to mention their skillful workmanship (fig. 2). However, some archaeological discoveries support Mesopotamia, including the ancient Iranian cultural region, as the place of its origin. Recent archaeological technology has confirmed that grapes and winemaking can be traced back to the Neolithic site of Hajji Firuz Tepe in the northern Zagros Mountains of Iran.[9]



Map 1) Principal areas of the Old World where viniculture began[10]

Even if more research may be needed to prove Iran as the earliest wine-making region, it cannot be ignored that the Iranian cultural zone has made a unique contribution to the

[9] Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 65-74.

[10] McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, xxii-xxii.

development of the motif and its spread along the Silk Roads. Famous for their love of wine and sophisticated drinking etiquette, Iranians made it a rule "not to bring large cups to their banquets, evidently thinking … abstinence from drinking to excess … although they drink so excessively."[11] Gold and silver were deemed the most appropriate materials for tableware. As described in the Bible, Iranians "gave drink in vessels of gold [Esther I.7: 7]." It was an insult to the guest at a royal banquet if wine was served in a vessel of clay or another metal lower than gold and silver.[12] The office of cup-bearer in the palace was one of importance, usually consisting of "rare beauties and descendants of the very kings and queens of Turkestan."[13]

As an important component of the traditional Iranian royal pastime of *razm u basm* (fight and feast), the wine-drinking scene was commonly linked to power and royalty in Iranian culture. The prominent scene with this cultural connotation is of male figures under grape arbors. The legendary golden couch of Darius the Great (550 -487 BCE) was known to be overshadowed by a golden vine. In the "Banquet scene," Ashurbanipal (r. 668-627 BCE) is depicted reclining on a couch beneath a grapevine with his queen sitting on a throne opposite him (fig. 3a). Each holding a shallow bowl, they are drinking with refreshments on the table. Maids fan the royal couple with fly-whisks; others bring food or play music. The royalty and power of the royal couple in the drinking scene is more emphasized by the head of Teumman, King of Elam, suspended from a tree behind the queen (fig. 3b).[14] This grisly depiction serves as visual evidence of Ashurbanipal's military prowess and superior power, which deserves to be celebrated in a wine-drinking feast with bunches of grapes. As an efficient visual device to show the power and wealth of its owner, the symbolic representation of the vine motif duly spread beyond the Iranian royal court to lesser regions of the Iranian cultural zone.[15]

As with many other cultural journeys along the Silk Roads, the transmission routes of the motif of grapes and grapevines to East Asia from the Iranian zone was not simple and straightforward. The complexity becomes even more prominent considering the constant cultural encounters and dialogue between the ancient Persian and Hellenistic and Byzantine world.[16] Ancient Greece and its subsequent cultures developed different interpretations and

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[11] Xenophon's remark, quoted in Berthold Laufer, *Sine Iranica* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1919), 224.

[12] St. John Simpson, "The Royal Table," in *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia*, eds. John Curtis and Nigel Tallis (London: British Museum, 2005), 104.

[13] Ehsan Yarshater, "The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry," *Studia Islamica* no. 13 (1960): 44.

[14] Richard D. Barnett, *Sculptures from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (668-627 B.C)* (London: British Museum, 1976), 57, pl. LXIV.

[15] The scope and depth of the Iranian visual repertoire of the wine drinking scene and its cultural connotation is most vividly felt in the eleventh- to twelfth-century Buddhist mural painting in the Dukhang (Assembly Hall) in Alchi, Tibet. The Buddhist pantheon includes paintings with secular themes. Among them, the so-called "Royal Drinking Scene" along the east wall of the hall has been particularly noted for its uncommon non-Buddhist theme. The Iranian cultural tone is noted in the centrally seated man's robe decorated with a series of typical Iranian roundel motifs and a woman offering a stemmed cup for drinking wine. A S Melikian-Chirvani, "Iran to Tibet," in *Islam and Tibet: Interaction along the Musk Routes,* eds. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 89-115.

[16] Ehsan Yarshater, "IRAN ii. IRANIAN HISTORY (1) Pre-Islamic Times," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XIII/2, 212-

visual vocabulary of the same motif.

Whichever region the motif came from, ancient Greece was as famous as Iranian culture for their love of wine and its related artistic expression. The Greek influence on both the visualization and semantic formation of the motif cannot be emphasized enough. It is well known that the ancient Greeks worshiped Dionysus or Bacchus, and the motif of grapes and vines often appeared as the visual equivalent or a symbol of the god and the related rituals. Even before Dionysian revelry and mysticism became predominant, bunches of grapes were taken as a symbol of fertility. Excavated in Pompeii, a *vaso magico* (magic vase) bears large bunches of grapes (fig. 4). Here, they are found with flowers, musical instruments, focaccias, lizards, and other motifs. It is known that the combination of these motifs, together with phallic imageries, was related to the scheme of ancient fertility symbols from the ninth to the fifth century BCE.[17]

The Greek cult of Dionysus and its visual idioms were inherited by the ancient Romans, who continuously produced wines in their conquered territories. A mosaic in western Spain shows the lively scene of treading grapes (fig. 5). At the same time, the cult spread the artistic expressions of Dionysian ritual. Found in Italy, a second-century statue of Dionysus confirms the symbolic status of grapes as an essential attribute of the god in Hellenistic culture (fig. 6). With the expansion of the Roman Empire and its trade network, the grape-vine motif spread alongside Roman wine exports.[18] As its most enduring association, Dionysian imagery was deeply embedded in the visual repertoire of those areas ancient Rome contacted and traded with. An example of its popularity is the famous "Great Dish" in the Mildenhall treasure found in Suffolk in the UK. In this late Roman silver tray, Dionysus is depicted holding a bunch of grapes in the midst of a Dionysian celebration (fig. 7). Through ecstatic drunkenness, the vine imagery affirms the joy of life and vivacity.

The motif of grapes and vines also served as a symbol of the renewal of life. Many examples of the motif are found in Roman sarcophagi. A prominent place to see such visual trends is in necropolises in Palmyra, the easternmost entrance to the Roman market (Map 2). Palmyra was strategically located on the crossroads of the western tracks of the Silk Roads connecting from the head of the Gulf to East Asia and India by sea, and stretching across the Eurasian continent to China by land.[19] Hellenization brought wine drinking and viticulture to this trading centre, where it mixed with other cultural elements. A large necropolis outside the urban area of Palmyra is filled with figures lying on couches on grand tombs, many of which are decorated with elegant motifs of grapes and vines (fig. 8a). Funerary figures and statues

224 and XIII/3, 225, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iran-ii1-pre-islamic-times, accessed December 30, 2012.

[17] Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, IBM, *Rediscovering Pompeii: Exhibition by IBM-ITALIA*, New York City, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, July 12-September 15, 1990 (L'Erma di Bretscheider, 1990), 146-7.

[18] Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson, *The World Atlas of Wine* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2013), 10; George F Hourani, *Arab Seafaring: In the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 135.

[19] Gary Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade, International Commerce and Imperial Policy* (London: Routledge, 2001), 136-86; Otto Maenchen-Helfen, "From China to Palmyra," *The Art Bulletin* 25, no. 4 (December 1943): 358-362.

wear dresses intricately decorated with grape-and-vine motifs, as are their vessels. A funerary relief shows a lady with the name of Aqmat wearing a set of beautiful grape earrings (fig. 8b).

Map 2) The location of Palmyra in modern-day Syria, Google Maps

At its peak, Palmyra was an important trading post along the Silk Roads. Many pieces of textiles excavated from Palmyra were found to have been woven in a Chinese way. One of the pieces shows a scene of men harvesting (or holding) grapes (fig. 9).[20] The motif of two-humped camels in the background clearly points to its Central Asian connection. As various cultures and trade items gathered, the city encountered different cultural features without much discrimination. Hellenistic elements were flawlessly combined with Iranian culture. Funerary figures in the necropolises very often hold various forms of vessels in their hands.[21] Some of them are two-handled *skypho*s, a typical Roman vessel, while their boat-type vessels are reminiscent of Iranian heritage. While figures wear typically Hellenistic garments with flowing drapes, they are reclining on couches, following the image of the ancient Iranian kings at a wine-drinking banquet.

The centuries-old contacts between the Hellenistic and Iranian cultural zones nurtured various kinds of symbiotic culture on both sides. Both were known to favour gold, silver and glass for their tableware, which included various shapes of jugs, strainers, hemispheric bowls, and shallow lobed bowls. A Sasanian silver vase, datable to the sixth to seventh century, has a distinctly Roman feel in the form and in the treatment of its decoration (fig. 10a). The bosses

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[20] Andreas Schmidt-Colinet et al. *Die Textilien aus Palmyra: Neue und Alte Funde* (Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 2000), 47, 145-6.

[21] Katsumi Tanabe, *Sculptures of Palmyra* (Tokyo: Ancient Orient Museum, 1986), 74-6, 271-3, 405-7; Takayasu Higuchi and Kiyohide Saito, *Tomb F, Tomb of BWLH and BWRP: Southeast Necropolis Palmyra, Syria* (Nara: Research Center for Silk Roadology, 2001), esp. Plates 4-6.

round the neck are a common feature of late Roman tableware, as is its subject matter, an embossed vine scroll inhabited by birds, a fox, and naked boys harvesting grapes. This so-called "inhabited imagery" or "peopled scrolls" were frequently found in Roman artefacts[22] and in late Sasanian silver vessels, particularly bottles and ewers.[23] Dionysian imagery is also found on their silverware (fig. 10b). The visual representation of Dionysian imagery in an Iranian art scene is so similar that Ettinghausen chose the repertory as a case of "transfer" of Byzantine art to Sasanian material culture.[24]

It should be noted, therefore, that the visual representation of the motif was the amalgamated product of such multifarious contacts and combinations, with wine-drinking rituals and artistic symbolism travelling to China from the Iranian cultural zone along the Silk Roads. Neither can a crystal-clear line be drawn for this travelling route. Many agents were involved in the long journey, in the guise of regional cultures, local trading partners, and other necessities of political, religious, or ecological demands.

The Visual Idiom in the East

China developed its own unique drink culture, different from other parts of the Eurasian continent. Although the word "wine" has been used rather confusingly to translate the Chinese word for alcohol "jiu" (酒), it means all types of alcoholic beverages. The earliest mention of grape wine (*putao jiu* 葡萄酒) in the Chinese historical records was made in the account of the heroic explorations of Zhang Qian (~113 BCE) and his followers to the western regions during the reign of Han Wudi (r. 141- 87 BCE).[25] While the grape was eagerly received, no evidence of grape wine consumption has been found during the Han dynasty. In the archaeological site of Mawangdui of the later Han in Changsha, for example, no grape seeds or wine residue was found amongst various kinds of food and food ingredients.[26]

In fact, it was not grapes but rice that remained the main ingredient of alcoholic beverages in China. Even before the Han period, millet, barley, and rice became the staple sources of alcohol, in which "mold saccharification" (Jiu Qu, 酒麯) was used.[27] Without apposite filtering, alcoholic drink in early China was closer to a sort of alcoholic mush, a thick liquid with a very low alcohol content. To consume this thick beverage, "eating" may be

[22] J. M. C. Toynbee and J. B. Ward Perkins, "Peopled Scrolls: A Hellenistic Motif in Imperial Art," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 18 (1950): 1-43.

[23] Ann C. Gunter and Paul Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the A M Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 211.

[24] Richard Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 3-10.

[25] For Zhang's journey, see Sima Qian, *Shi Ji*, 123/63 (Beijing: Guo li Beiping yan jiu yuan shi xue yan jiu hui, 1936), 677-692; Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian of China. Han Dynasty,* Vol. II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 264-289; Ban Gu, *Qian Han Shu: The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Vol. 2, trans. Homer H. Dubs (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1944), 27-136.

[26] K. C. Chang, "Ancient China," in *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. K. C. Chang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 23-52, 70-71.

[27] McGovern et al., "Fermented Beverages of Pre- and Proto-Historic China," 17598.

more appropriate than "drinking," in the sense of "eating the soup." A brick relief from the Han period shows some gentlemen sitting on the ground with a *zun* full of alcoholic drink placed in the middle (fig. 11). A long-handled spoon is in it for taking the alcoholic drink out. They hold drinking bowls or alms bowls. In Qin and Han, the most common vessels were ear-shaped cups, whose two small handles were convenient for drinkers to hold and "eat/drink." Although the vessels became thinner and lighter using different materials and reflected the development of filtering over time, the basic Chinese drinking set was preserved from the Neolithic period until the Han: a bulky drinking container, scooping ladle and small drinking vessels.

In this historical context, grapes and grape wine came to China when the drink tradition was already firmly established. Their time-honoured traditions may have acted as a cultural resistance or at least hesitance to fully accepting grape wine culture in China. Even when the Tang Chinese finally made grape wine, it never supplanted rice-alcohol. It was rice wine experts, not grape-wine makers, that a Chinese princess, having married a Tibetan ruler, asked the Tang emperor to send to Tibet in the mid-seventh century. The Arabic merchant Suleiman wrote in 851 CE that "the wine taken by the Chinese is made from rice; they do not make wine from grape."[28] His remark confirms that grape-wine was still a luxury or an exotic item exclusively available to a limited circle of the Tang society.

The visual motif of grapes, grapevines and grape-and-vine appeared in China before the Tang. A gilt-bronze stem cup from Datong, dated to the fourth century, is decorated with a spiralling grapevine containing birds and cherubs.[29] This typical vine motif is recurrently found in Northern Wei decoration.[30] The motif also appears in Buddhist monuments. In the halo of a Bodhisattva at the Longmen Grottoes, the figures in the vine include a naked woman (fig. 12).

The motif of vine with a naked woman has often been interpreted as "a sure sign of Western influence."[31] However, "Western" in the statement cannot be just the Hellenistic motif of the inhabited vine. It must have been a cultural mixture of non-East Asian regions. Long before the Greek god Dionysus was introduced, ancient Iranian art and artefacts had been embellished with various divinities from their own Zoroastrian pantheon. One of them is Anahita, the Iranian goddess associated with fertility and wisdom (fig. 13).[32] The naked

[28] Quoted in Laufer, *Sine Iranica*, 231.

[29] Its origin is rather obscure. James C. Y. Watt et al., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 220 - 750 AD* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 149.

[30] From this historical context, we can recognize that the Wei dynasties were connected with the vine motif, while the south did not produce much of the same motif. The territory of the Wei dynasties covered those areas famed for fine wine. It could be argued, therefore, the apparent unilateral development of decorative motifs, floral motifs in the south and vine scrolls in the north, is more attributable to cultural familiarity with wine and visual knowledge of the grapevine in their local environment rather than a conscious choice of a certain style. Arguably, it was never knowingly under-represented.

[31] Susan Bush, "Floral Motifs and Vine Scrolls in Chinese Art of the Late Fifth to Early Sixth Centuries AD," *Artibus Asiae* 38, no. 1 (1976): 78.

[32] Mary Boyce, "On the Zoroastrian Temple Cult of Fire," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 3 (1975): 454–465.

woman in the halo could be an East Asian version of the maenads, attendants of Dionysus, but it is more probable that she could be an early Buddhist representation of an Iranian goddess in China. In view of its innate feature of being Buddhist art, another possible origin lies in the Buddhist region of north India. North India yielded certain groups of sculptural decoration, all dealing with drinking scenes. They have been interpreted as relating to Dionysian revelry and having "nothing to do with Buddhist or Hindu iconography."[33] Note must be taken, however, that Indian local iconography of *Yaksa* imagery is found with the vine motif. Indians also relished wine so much as to allocate it only to the upper castes, as Xuanzang clearly documented.[34] Furthermore, archaeological discoveries strongly support the fact that Buddhism was not indifferent to wine making and distribution, unlike popular belief in their anti-alcoholism.[35] Thus, it cannot be discounted that Buddhism may have played a role in the propagation of the motif. The eastward travelling route of the vine motif was thus not clearly pinned down in one consecutive line from the Hellenistic or Iranian world to China. The visual depiction of grapes and grapevines on Chinese soil is more likely the result of longstanding, meandering flows and interactions of different cultures.

In delivering this cultural product, it can be argued that Sogdians acted as the agent transmitting this Eurasian visual idiom to China. Figures of Sogdian merchants or traders have been found holding a big bottle of wine (fig. 14). Sogdians were not just the carriers of wine as a final product. They are reputed to have created lush orchards and fields in the Tarim Basin where there had been only wasteland. By bringing the use of underground irrigation tunnels, known as *qanats* (or *kariz*),[36] to East Asia, they produced grapes, succulent melons and fruits of all kinds. It was from here that the famous "Golden Peaches of Samarkand" came.[37] The reputation of wine from Tarim Basin and northern parts persisted throughout Chinese history even after wine was made in China.[38] By the time of Tang Taizong (598-649), when wine was finally made in the Central Plain of China, larger species of Sogdian "mare-teat" grape were known to be the best.

Thanks to the Sogdian presence from the fifth to the eighth centuries, the oasis cities lining both the northern and southern route through the Tarim Basin were strongly Iranianized. When Turkistan fell into the hands of Turkic tribes, they also absorbed the widespread culture of their Iranian predecessors, while living together with the Sogdians. Iranian drinking

[33] Benjamin Rowland, "The Vine-Scroll in Gandhāra," *Artibus Asiae* 19, no. 3/4 (1956): 353.

[34] Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions by the Tripitaka-Master Xuanzang under Imperial Order*, trans. Rongxi Li (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research, 1996), 64.

[35] F. R. Allchin, "India: The Ancient Home of Distillation?" *Man* 14, no. 1 (1979), 59-60.

[36] Irene M. Franck and David M. Brownstone, *The Silk Road: A History* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), 193; D R Hill, "Physics and Mechanics: Civil and Hydraulic Engineering Industrial Process and Manufacturing, and Craft Activities," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, eds. C. E. Bosworth & M. S. Asimov (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000), 266.

[37] Edward Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 141-4; Laufer, *Sine Iranica*, 247. Even the etymology of "Tarim" can be traced back to "grape place." J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair, *The Tarim Mummies* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 169.

[38] Xinru Liu, "Viticulture and Viniculture in the Turfan Region," *The Silk Road* 3, no. 1 (2005): 23-27.

scenes are faithfully depicted in Sogdian tombs located in China.[39] In addition, the earliest visual representation of wine making on present-day Chinese soil is allegedly found in the panel of Yu Hong's sarcophagus (fig. 15a).[40] Yu Hong (533-592), whose background was Turkic, is known as having been of Persian or Sogdian origin. Although the tomb structure attests Sogdian accommodation of Chinese life, its various representations of Iranian culture are easily detected in the tomb paintings. In them, Sogdian men are depicted hunting and drinking wine, while participating in a Zoroastrian ceremony. Some sit beneath grape trees, like the royals depicted in wine drinking scenes in the ancient Iranian visual tradition. The same visual repertoire is found in the pictorial representations of other sixth-century Sogdian architecture (fig. 15b).[41]

By the Tang period, when wine became widely available, luxurious tableware made of gold and silver was also produced in the shapes of cups, bowls and utensils. Two pottery jars unearthed at Hejiacun, Xi'an, were crammed with more than 200 gold and silver vessels alongside other treasures. While gold and silver had been only occasionally used for personal jewelry and ornaments in previous dynasties,[42] an exceptionally large number of functional objects were made of or decorated with gold and silver in the Tang period. The Tang Chinese fascination with these precious metal wares led to the establishment of the imperial Gold and Silver Workshop (*Jinyin zuofang yuan* 金銀作坊院) and of numerous workshops by the latter half of the dynasty.[43] Interestingly, no Tang ceramics have been discovered with the vine motif. The shift in taste for the material of drinking vessels is resonant with the Iranian preference for precious metals for the containers of fine wine.[44] It also confirms that wine was still a luxury only available to the upper echelon of society among the Tang.

As such, the vine and wine still retained spiritual affinities with the West even when the Chinese could make grape wine within China. They belonged to the group that Edward Schafer called "a transitional group of 'semi-exotics,' being culturally foreign but politically Chinese."[45] Their exotic status was evocated in various ways of material, shape, and decoration. Grape wine was commonly poured in a golden goblet, silver cup, or fine glass. Yang the Precious Consort (楊貴妃, 719-756) was known to drink fine grape wine from a glass cup decorated with "the Seven Gems." The vine scroll is found on such objects of exotic shape as ewers, foliated bowls, flat platters, octagonal wine cups and stem cups.

The vine scroll in Tang metalware is commonly found in combination with other motifs of animals and plants. The animals cavort in high relief through a net of vine tendrils bearing

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39 Gustina Scaglia, "Central Asians on a Northern Ch'i Gate Shrine," *Artibus Asiae* 21, no. 1 (1958): 9-28.

40 Watt et al., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 220 - 750 AD*, 275-9.

41 Dorothy G. Shepherd, "Iran between East and West," in *East-West in Art. Patterns of Cultural and Aesthetic Relationships*, ed. Theodore Bowie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 84–105.

42 Emma C. Bunker, "Gold in the Ancient Chinese World: A Cultural Puzzle," *Artibus Asiae* 53, no. 1/2, (1993), 27-50.

43 Wang Rensheng, *Culinary History of China*, trans. Yong-ha Ju (Seoul: Minumsa, 1989), 368.

44 In view of Tang fascination with precious metalwork, it can be argued that Tang *sancai* was produced mainly because of mimicking the natural shine of gold and silver. Qiqi Jiang, "Tang Sancai" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2009), section 3.

45 Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 141.

a few leaves and many bunches of grapes. On a small silver box, the grapes grasped by the squirrels are rendered especially luscious in repousse, and birds in flight sometimes are incorporated into the design, such as on a melon-shaped parcel-gilt silver box and cover (fig. 16). Combined images of vine scroll and palmette leaf appeared on a waisted cup with a small ring handle and thumb-rest, which first appeared during the Tang dynasty. It was influenced by Sasanian – more particularly Sogdian[46] – silverware. These motifs are deemed a Chinese variation of popular inhabited imagery.

In the mirror scheme, this inhabited vine motif took the place of the old abstract and magical designs. The mirror thus decorated is commonly known as *qinshouputaojing* (禽兽葡萄镜), which may have dispersed further east. In particular demand was the mirror of "lion and grape" design (fig. 17). It was suggested that its composition and the number of lions were of Manichaean symbolism and its sudden disappearance may have coincided with religious persecution in 843-45.[47] The paintings of Uyghur Manichaean ritual confirm that the grape was the main offering in ceremonies.[48] Equally probable, though, is that it may have been used as just one glamorous motif to appeal to extravagant Tang taste. A large silver plate, another popular Tang object, shows the possibility of combining various motifs of diverse origins purely for visual appeal. It depicts *makara* of Indian origin with bunches of grapes from the West and peony.[49] It must be noted that many other items did not persist after the calamitous mid-eighth century. The silver cup with a ring-handle, for example, suddenly disappeared.[50] Even the knowledge of grape-wine making and drinking rapidly subsided.[51]

Until the Mongols came, the situation of wine consumption and production in China was dramatically reduced to the level of before the Tang. During the interval between the end of the Tang and the Mongol-Yuan dynasty, the Chinese almost forgot viticultural knowledge and made grape wine by mixing grapes with rice alcohol rather than fermenting grapes. With renewed contact with the countries west of China (서역 西域) under the *Pax Mongolica*, grape-wine making was also rediscovered in China. This revival of wine was particularly attributed to the Mongol's love of alcoholic drinks. Even before conquering China, the Mongols enjoyed grape wine in glass bottles, and Ogodei admitted his fatal weakness was grape wine.[52] The popularity of wine in this period can be measured by a plain black-glazed jar unearthed in Inner Mongolia (fig. 18). It shows a clear inscription of "wine bottle" (*putaojiuping* 葡萄酒瓶). Its elongated shape suggests it was made for storing the flavour of wine longer, like

46 A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Iranian Silver and Its Influence in T'ang China," in *Pottery and Metal in T'ang China*, ed. W. Watson (London: Percival David Foundation, 1977), 12-18.

47 Schuyler Cammann, "The Lion and Grape Patterns on Chinese Bronze Mirrors," *Artibus Asiae* 16, no. 4 (1953), 265-291.

48 Moriyasu Takao, *A Study on the History of Uighur Manichaeism* (Osaka: Osaka Daigaku Bungakubu, 1991), ii, plate XVI.

49 Annie Chow and Wee-wan Tang, eds., The *Silk Road in Inner Mongolia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 53.

50 Carol Michaelson, *Gilded Dragons* (London: British Museum, 1999), 101.

51 Michael Freeman, "Sung," in *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. K.C. Chang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 141-192, 156.

52 *The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. Won-Su Yoo (Seoul: Sakyejeol, 2004), 302.

Roman containers and contemporary decanters. Its functionality, lack of ornamentation and clay-based material support the popularisation of wine consumption in this period. It is Yuan celadons and blue-and-white wares that introduced the earliest depiction of grapes on ceramics in China.[53]

The interesting point to consider in this historical context is the visual representation of grape-and-vine in Goryeo celadons, a product earlier or contemporary with Yuan China. A particular example is a ewer with a twisted handle decorated with red grapes and vine leaves in a *sanggam* (inlaid with coloured clay) technique (fig. 19). Reminiscent of Roman or Iranian objects decorated with "inhabited imagery," eight young boys are holding vine branches, which are also depicted in the same technique. The technical feat of Goryeo potters is shown in the vivid red of the grapes, which could have been achieved by manipulating volatile copper oxide with success, a first in ceramic-making history.[54] Further to its technical inventiveness, the inhabited vine imagery reinvented itself into an image of new significance. Here, the inhabited vine motif survived in the East Asian cultural context but with modification. The cherubs became little boys or boy monks in the case of understanding them within the framework of Buddhism.[55] Even putting the Buddhist connotations aside, the visual idiom of grapes with young boys in the vine scroll conjurs the image of numerous generations of offspring and conjugal happiness. With this newly acquired meaning, the grape-and-vine motif became an auspicious symbol and was frequently used in the decoration of textiles for a bride's dress.

Grapes and vines would become more common in ceramics of the Ming period. The most popular motif was three bunches of grapes amid vine leaves (fig. 20). The motif is that the inside of the dish is decorated with grapes in the centre and a range of flower scrolls in the cavetto. The grapes are painted as a group of three with scrolling vines. This motif was later faithfully copied by Islamic potters when the dishes were exported. A point to note is that nearly all the vessels decorated with the pattern of grapes and vines are plates or bowls, not drinking receptacles. Although the bunches of grapes with vine scrolls on the Chinese dish meticulously deliver the very fine detail of a real plant, it is highly likely that the different drink cultures in China and East Asia did not automatically link this vegetal motif with the actual wine drinking scene.

In this way, Ming cermaics had already dissociated the motif from the mythic connotations and spiritual symbolism of the West. Most probably, Chinese drink culture did not allow the vine motif to grow to that stage. Without pervasive viticulture, bunches of grapes were

[53] Stacey Pierson, *Designs as Signs: Decoration and Chinese Ceramics* (London: Percival David Foundation, 2001), 24.

[54] This celadon example calls its common dating of the twelfth century into question; considering the renewed popularity of wine and its related artistic representation in the Mongol-Yuan period, we could ask if there is a possibility of a later period than the twelfth century for these motifs on celadon wares. This refined object with grape-and-vine decoration could have been produced under the Mongol Empire when transcultural items and elements were common and the upper echelons of society could afford them.

[55] I am indebted to the one of the reviewers, who pointed out the Buddhist orientation of Goryeo society. In this interpretation, the boys grabbing the grapevine and playing are Buddhist monks, and the scene symbolizes the Buddhist ideal world embodying abundance and peace.

alluded to simply as "hanging jewels" in East Asia, as noted by Yi Kyu-bo, the thirteenth-century Korean Confucian scholar.[56] The separation from the previous association of the vine motif was finally established when grapes were more often depicted as one of several fruits in a design than the single motif of the Ming dynasty. Vines with grapes became just another vegetal and decorative device by dissociating itself from gods, royalty, and mysticism.

After the Yuan dynasty, China took the road of secularisation by adapting Confucianism as the principle of its national administration. This societal change was even more prominent in Joseon Korea, where they declared promoting Confucianism and oppressing Buddhism the political slogan of the dynasty.[57] In this cultural milieu, hyper-realism with exceptional attention to exquisite detail become the ultimate goal of Chinese vine decoration. This artistic trend spread to other states in East Asia. The grape-and-vine design was popular in contemporary Korea and Japan, especially on ceramics. Many types of flasks during the Muromachi period (1336–1573) contained the motif, reflecting the popularity of grapes. A black lacquered wood flask shows the grape-and-vine motif in red lacquer painting (fig. 21a). Because of its realistic depiction, it was even suggested that the vine decoration was a copy of a particular grape painting.[58] Similarly, the realistic depiction of vine branches with grapes is found in Joseon white porcelains, usually expressed in iron-oxide brown (fig. 21b). As the jar is not for drinking, the motif could represent a subject of the philosophical contemplation of Confucian scholars, like in contemporary ink paintings.[59] The most obvious example of rendering the vine motif realistically is a late Qing vase of five-colour decoration (*wucai*). The vase is designed with twining grape vines in openwork (fig. 21c). The pattern is so exquisitely and vividly carved that tiny insects are clearly shown creeping on the vines. Although it constitutes a superb technical feat of ceramic decoration, it scarcely delivers the vivacity, blissful intoxication, or royal grandeur of a drinking feast of the West.

As with many other products and commodities along the Silk Roads, the vine motif moved in a full circle, coming back to the West. It was done mainly through Chinese ceramic trade of the Yuan and later periods. By that time, the area was fully Islamized and heavily affected by the Islamic prohibition on alcohol. "There is a devil in every berry of the grape," states the Quran. Wine production was largely extinguished in North Africa, the Middle East, and areas of Iranian cultural tradition.[60] Rare cases exist depicting the glorification of wine and drinking scenes in Iranian poetry and paintings. Sultan Muhammad's painting shows the exuberant pictorial transport of Hafiz's poetic vocabulary (fig. 22). The visual depiction of such alcohol-induced exhilarations was tolerated only as a Sufi allegory of mystic unity with

[56] "蒲桃之緣樹下垂者 如纓珞然可愛 Lovely to see bunches of grapes drooping down the tree, like hanging jewels." Yi Kyu-bo (1220-1241), "Tongjaegi (通齋記)," *Dongmunseon* (東文選, *Anthology of Eastern Poetry*) Book 66, Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics, http://db.itkc.or.kr/itkcdb/mainIndexIframe.jsp

[57] Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[58] Seunghye Sun, *The Lure of Painted Poetry* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2011), 98.

[59] This was suggested by one of the reviewers, with whom I agree with gratitude.

[60] Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of the History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2000), 161-5.

God in the guise of the absolute oblivion of drunkenness.

A fifteenth-century Islamic blue-and-white dish visually sums up the changed culture of the area. The dish is decorated with a vine motif in typical Chinese decorative style (fig. 23). With a rugged rock cliff in the foreground, weary vine scrolls without any grapes wander the upper parts of the inside decoration. The dish came from Samarqand, the very place famed for its excellent wine in Chinese historical records. The vine motif fills the ceramic space with wandering tendrils and clusters of grapes, but the glory and significance attached to wine drinking is gone in the Islamic vine decoration. As shown in the visual representation of grapes and vines in Ottoman tiles (fig. 24), the decorativeness and ornamental aspect became more prominent over time. It became as meticulous, decorative and sober as its Chinese counterpart.

Conclusion

When the motif of grapes and vines reached China through meandering routes, this visually appealing motif had been through various stages of acclimatization. The social, political, and ritual importance relating to wine in wine-producing regions elevated the motif to the dimension of a vital cultural code and visual symbol, which ranged from manic revelry and heavenly unity with mystic beings, to royalty and power. In China, this visual idiom was eagerly received in association with something exotic and re-interpreted in the context of Chinese culture. Without active viticulture, the motif transformed itself into beautiful design patterns and space fillers. In addition, in the traditional East Asian cultural context, the natural appeal of jewel-like grapes finally acquired new meanings of fertility and happiness, which curiously reverberate with the image of *Vaso Magico*.

From the fifteenth century onwards, the visual idiom came back to the Islamic cultural sphere, where no veneration of wine existed any longer. Instead, there was widespread hostility and abhorrence towards it. In these regions, the vine motif survived cultural obstruction by becoming an exotic motif again. This time, it came from China, being an object for meticulous copying. While visually attractive and highly decorative, the motif in Islamic artefacts did not conjure any further spiritual connotations such as it once had. Coming full circle from the Iranian cultural zone to East Asia and back on the Silk Roads, the motif of grapes and vines distanced itself from the mythic standing of spiritual significance where wine-drinking culture had not survived. To adapt to cultural change in the regions, it remained an efficient decorative device, losing its age-old symbolic trappings.

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Illustrations

(measurements in centimetres)

Fig. 1) Chalice (and its detail). Sardonyx cup with gilded silver mounting with various precious stones, 2nd-1st century BCE. Mounted in early 12th century CE, Alexandria, H 18, D 12, D (base) 11. Widener Collection.

Fig. 2) Sandstone panel with grapevine. New Kingdom, Amarna Period (reign of Akhenaten, ca. 1353–1336 BCE). Probably from Middle Egypt, Hermopolis (Ashmunein; Khemenu), H 23, W 42. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 3a) Gypsum wall panel of "the Banquet Scene." Neo-Assyrian (654 -635 BCE), Kouyunjik (Nineveh), Iraq. L 58.2, W 139.7, D 15.24. British Museum, London.

Fig. 3b) The detail of "the banquet scene" of Fig 3a.

Fig. 4) Vaso Magico (magic vase) Terracotta, 9th -5th century BCE, Pompeii, H 35 D 14.2 (base), 30 (mouth). Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, IBM, Rediscovering *Pompeii: Exhibition by IBM-ITALIA*, New York City, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, July 12-September 15, 1990 (L'Erma di Bretscheider, 1990),146, plate 12.

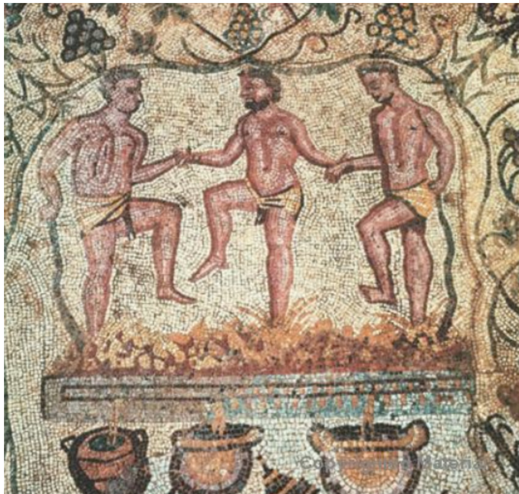

Fig. 5) "Treading of grapes." Mosaic in the Amphitheatre. Roman (2 CE) Mérida (Unesco World Heritage List, 1993), Badajoz Province, Extremadura, Spain. Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson, *The World Atlas of Wine* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2013), 10.

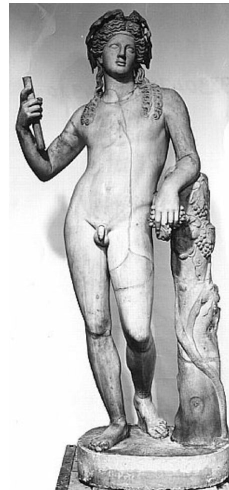

Fig. 6) Statue of Dionysus found in Italy. 2nd century CE (arms and legs were heavily restored in the 18th century). Marble, H 208. Louvre Museum Ma 87 (MR 107, Richelieu Collection).

Fig. 7). "The Great Dish" from the Mildenhall treasure. 4th century CE, Roman Britain. Suffolk, D 60.5. British Museum, London.

Fig. 8a) Architectural decoration with grape motif. *Palmyra Sculpture*, plate 27.

Fig. 8b) Funerary relief of Aqmat with grape earrings. *Japan Exhibition of Syria*, plate 222.

Fig 9). Textile ornament (illustration), Palmyra. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet et al., *Die Textilien aus Palmyra: Neue und Alte Funde*, 47.

Fig. 10a) Silver vase strainer. Late Sasanian, 6th century CE. British Museum, London.

Fig. 10b) "The triumph of Dionysos," silver dish. Sasainan, 3rd Century CE. British Museum, London.

Fig. 11) Han brick relief of feasting and drinking. Zhiyan Li, *Chinese Ceramics* (New York & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 133.

Fig. 12) Detail of halo in mandorla of a Bodhisattva outside Cave XVI at Longmen. End of the fifth century. Susan Bush, "Floral Motifs and Vine Scrolls in Chinese Art of the Late Fifth to Early Sixth Centuries AD," fig. 31.

Fig. 13) Ewer with dancing females within arcades. Sasanian, ca. 6th–7th century CE. Silver, mercury gilding, H. 34 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (67.10a, b).

Fig. 14) Glazed Earthenware of a Central Asian man (Sogdian) with wine flask. Northern dynasties (304-439), H 9.4. Unearthed in 1979 in Caochangpo, southern suburbs of Xi'an, Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. Jian Li, ed., *The Glory of the Silk Road: Art from Ancient China* (Dayton: The Dayton Art Institute, 2003), Plate 81.

Fig. 15a) "Wine making," line drawing copy of a panel. Sarcophagus (from the tomb of Yu Hong dated 592), Sui dynasty. H. 96. Shanxi Museum. James C. Y. Watt et al, *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 220 - 750 AD*, 277.

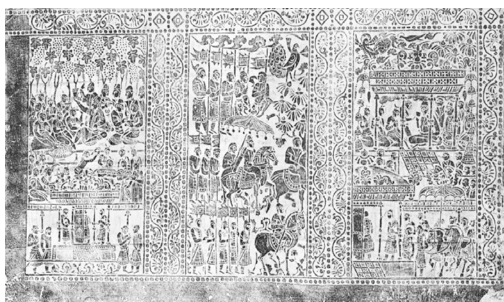

Fig. 15b) "The Banquet scene," funerary bed (attributed), from Anyang in Henan province or from the vicinity of Zhangdefu in Hebei near the Shanxi border. Dark grey limestone. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig. 16) Parcel-gilt silver box and cover. 7th -8th century, Tang. H. 8. Eskenazi, *Early Chinese Metalwork in Gold and Silver* (London: Eskenazi, 2011), 33.

Fig. 17) Mirror with "lion and grape." D 15.2cm, Tang. Private collection.

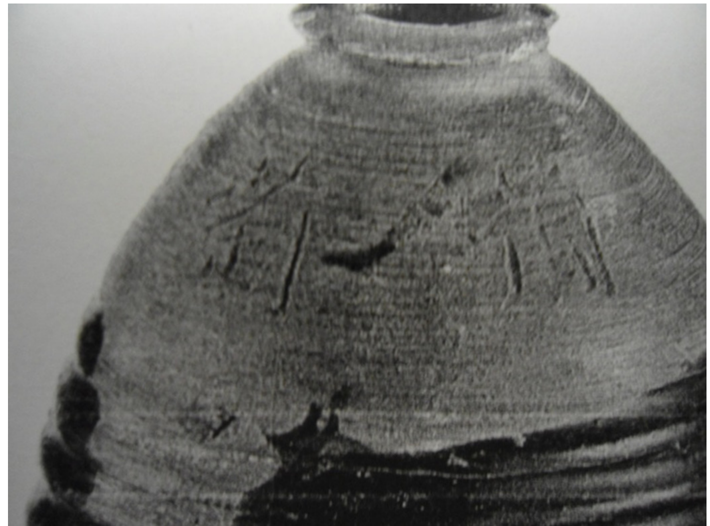

Fig. 18) Black-glazed wine jar (known as "chicken-leg jar") and its shoulder with Chinese characters of "wine jar"(detail). Yuan dynasty, H. 43, D. 4.4 (mouth), 8.5 (base). Inner Mongolia. Annie Chow and Wee-Wan Tang, eds., *The Silk Road in Inner Mongolia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 173.

Fig. 19) Celadon with *sanggam* and copper oxide decoration. H. 34.5, Widest dia. 14.4. Goryeo. National Museum of Korea, Seoul.

Fig. 20) Detail of a Chinese blue-and-white dish, painted bunches of grapes, 1403-24. D. 41cm. British Museum, London.

Fig. 21a) Sake Flask, lacauer, Japan. Muromachi Period, 16th century. Cleveland Museum of Art.

Fig. 21b) Porcelain vase, Joseon. H 53.3 cm, D (mouth) 19 cm, D (bowl) 43.3 cm, D (base) 18.6 cm. Ewha Women's University Museum, Seoul.

Fig. 21c) Underglazed five-color porcelain vase (the detail). Second year of Emperor Xuantong reign, late Qing. H. 41.5, D. 11 (mouth), 12.8 (base). Hunan Provincial Museum.

Fig. 22) "Allegory of Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness," folio from the Divan of Hafiz, Sultan Muhammad (active first half 16th century), ca. 1531–33. Attributed to Iran, Tabriz. H 28.9, W 18.1. The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Fig. 23) Fritware painted under the glaze. Dish with Vine. Uzbekistan, probably Samarqand 1400-50. Victoria and Albert Museum (C. 206-1984), London.

Fig. 24) Underglazed tile with grapes and vine leaves. Damascus, Syria, late 16th century, Ottoman period. H 25.5, W 26.5, D 2. Harvard Art Museum (1985.279).