

The Research on Jades: Artistic Exchanges Between East Asia and Central Asia Along the Silk Road During the Western Liao Dynasty

Mingjun Song *

The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100080, China

* Corresponding Author Email: b20160203108@stu.ccsu.edu.cn

Abstract. The Silk Road, a historical network of trade routes connecting East Asia to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, facilitated profound cultural exchanges, including the transfer of artistic concepts and creations. The Western Liao dynasty (Qara Khitai), reigning from 1124 to 1218 over territories including present-day Xinjiang, marked an era of significant political and cultural importance. During this period, a unique artistic style emerged, seamlessly blending Chinese and Central Asian influences. This paper investigates the artistic interactions between China and Central Asia during the Silk Road and the Western Liao dynasty era. We explore to what extent the Silk Road and the Western Liao dynasty facilitated these interactions, pinpointing contributing factors and examining their impact on art evolution. The analysis includes three cases of jade ware. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the artistic interactions between China and Central Asia during the Western Liao dynasty had a profound impact on both regions, leaving an enduring legacy. It underscores the interconnectedness of civilizations along the Silk Road and highlights the universal language of art, transcending boundaries to foster mutual understanding and cooperation. By exploring this shared history through art, we deepen our appreciation for the power of artistic expression to bridge gaps and connect diverse cultures across time and space.

Keywords: Qara Khitai; jade; artistic exchange; central Asia.

1. Introduction

The Silk Road, an intricate network of trade routes, served as a conduit linking China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe [1]. This historical network played a pivotal role in fostering cultural interchanges, including the exchange of artistic concepts and creations. The Western Liao dynasty, also referred to as the Qara Khitai dynasty, reigned over territories encompassing present-day Xinjiang from 1124 to 1218 [2]. The Qara Khitai were able to legitimize their rule in Central Asia without converting to Islam, thanks to a combination of the diverse imperial Khitan culture, which integrated Chinese and nomadic elements, the stability and prosperity they introduced to the region, and their open-minded approach to religion [3]. This epoch bore immense political and cultural significance, marked by the emergence of a distinctive artistic style that seamlessly melded Chinese and Central Asian influences.

Jade sculptures held paramount importance within the realms of both Chinese and Central Asian cultures. These sculptures were often utilized for religious and ceremonial purposes, and revered for their aesthetic allure and profound symbolism. Existing scholarship on this topic has predominantly concentrated on the political and economic aspects of the Silk Road, often sidelining the artistic exchanges that transpired [4]. The objective of this study is to make a certain contribution in this field by offering an examination of the artistic interactions between China and Central Asia during the Silk Road and the Western Liao dynasty period.

The interplay of artistic influences between China and Central Asia during the Silk Road era and the Western Liao dynasty period is a captivating subject within the realm of art history. This case study aims to delve into the depth and nuances of these exchanges while exploring their significance in the broader context of art history.

The written form of the character representing jade first emerged in the 8th-century Sogdian language. Notably, it was employed as an adjective to extol the purity and whiteness resembling jade

in someone or something. Scholars inferred from this that the Sogdians were already engaged in crafting jade items during that era, with a particular emphasis on white jade artifacts [5]. From the 10th century onward, whether in Arabic or Persian texts, jade consistently became linked with the Turkestan region, primarily denoting eastern Central Asia, including locales like Khotan and Kashgar (modern-day Kashgar region), and at times extending to western parts of Central Asia such as Samarkand, the region along the rivers. Consequently, jade acquired the epithet "Stone of Turkish Land." Expressions like "White Jade River" and "Green Jade River" began to frequently surface in Arabic and Persian texts from the 10th century onwards. The Turkestan Turkic inhabitants attributed distinct qualities to jade, including invisibility, light evasion, and its efficacy in treating stomach ailments, features also acknowledged by Islamic scholars.

2. Jade Sculptures as Agents of Cross-Cultural Exchange

Between the 11th and 13th centuries, historical documents occasionally refer to the utilization of jade items within the Iranian region. Notably, during the early 11th century, nobility in the northeastern Ghazni region of Afghanistan were documented for adorning themselves with jade rings and wearing jade arm ornaments embellished with gemstones such as turquoise, jade, and other precious stones, all set within silver mounts. Furthermore, the construction of Ghazni's new palace involved the use of jade sourced from Xinjiang. Expanding beyond Ghazni, situated in the northeastern part of Iran near Central Asia, a document dated 1205 discloses that leaders in the Tabarestan region of eastern Iran, near the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, also displayed an affinity for jade. They frequently fastened jade belts over their outer garments, featuring square-shaped jade buckles engraved with verses from the Quran [5].

This study will undertake an analysis of select jade sculptures that serve as tangible evidence of cross-cultural exchange. Each sculpture will undergo a comprehensive examination, including an exploration of its physical attributes, origin, and present location. The study will delve into the artistic styles, techniques, and motifs embodied in each sculpture, drawing comparisons to illuminate both the shared elements and distinctions.

The findings from the analysis will be interpreted in the context of the Silk Road and the Western Liao dynasty period, and the key factors that contributed to the artistic exchanges between China and Central Asia will be identified. The impact of these exchanges on the development of art in both regions will also be analyzed.

2.1. Case A

According to Xu Xiaodong (2015), as shown in Fig. 1, the British Museum houses a half-preserved jade belt buckle with a crane motif, which is believed to have originated from Kabul, Afghanistan. The overall shape of the crane, as well as the depiction of its feet and the round eyes carved with small tube drills, are similar to jade artifacts from the Song and Jin dynasties. The back of the jade buckle has several pairs of bullnose perforations, which is also a traditional fixing method for Chinese jade belt buckles [6]. The British Museum attributes it to the Liao or Kyrgyzstan. It is likely that this jade artifact is from the Western Liao period or was brought to Central Asia by the Khitan people during their westward migration. In 1124, due to pressure from the Jurchens, Yelü Dashi led the remnants of the Liao dynasty to migrate westward and seek refuge in the Kara-Khitan Khanate. They then settled in the city of Kedun and successively merged with the Karakhanid dynasty, the Khwarazmian Empire, and established a powerful Western Liao regime (1124-1218), which lasted for 94 years until it was destroyed by the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan. The Western Liao period was a relatively important stage in Central Asia. During the Liao period, jade carving had already achieved a certain level of development and was accepted by the Khitan nobility. The Western Liao dynasty ruled over territories including Kashgar, Khotan, and Samarkand in Xinjiang. At that time, Samarkand was home to "Han craftsmen [6]." The jade carving traditions of the Liao dynasty, as well as the inherent craftsmanship of jade, gold, and silk weaving, were likely continued in the

Western Liao territories. In addition, the inherent jade carving tradition in the Hezhong region makes it reasonable to find jade belt buckles of this kind in western Central Asia. Yelü Chuci's "Hezhong Prefecture Chronicle" frequently mentions vessels such as agate bottles, agate cups, jade jars, and amber bottles. Based on this, it can be inferred that the Western Liao regime made a certain contribution to the jade carving craftsmanship in Central Asia.



Fig. 1 Rectangular plaque in pale green jade carved with a flying crane above curling clouds; pierced, possibly for attachment to a belt.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/710523001>

2.2. Case B

The archaeological evidence from various burial sites in Central Asia reveals intriguing insights into the burial practices and cultural influences that characterized this region during specific historical periods. These findings shed light on the burial customs of different communities and their interactions with external cultures.

One notable burial practice observed in the region involves the construction of graves using mud bricks, forming a vault-like structure. These graves, with their distinct architectural design, are indicative of the meticulous care taken in the burial process. Furthermore, the orientation of the buried individuals, facing north, suggests a deliberate alignment that might hold symbolic significance within the cultural context of the time.

Jade objects, including belt plaques and a Chinese mirror, were discovered within these graves, hinting at cultural exchanges and trade relationships. These artifacts provide tangible evidence of connections between the indigenous communities and external cultures, particularly the Chinese. The presence of Chinese artifacts, such as the vessel from the Song dynasty, underscores the extent of cross-cultural interactions during this period [7].

One remarkable burial excavation near the village of Novotroitskoe revealed distinctive features. This grave, constructed using baked bricks and covered with a small mound, contained both human and horse skeletons, along with a variety of burial goods. Of particular interest is the seating position of the buried individual, facing south, which deviates from the typical orientation observed in the region. This anomaly raises questions about the cultural significance of this orientation and its potential ties to specific beliefs or rituals.

Another notable discovery within these burials is the presence of jade objects, as shown in Fig.2, particularly 12 small plates placed near the entrance to the burial chamber. These jade plates, possibly used in a banquet-like setting, provide valuable evidence of Chinese cultural influence in the region.

The inclusion of such objects in a Central Asian burial, where the presence of a large number of vessels is atypical, underscores the significance of jade as a coveted commodity in this region [8].

It is worth noting that the presence of jade burial goods in certain graves suggests distinctions in burial practices among the Qara Khitai communities. These non-elite graves, as identified by the presence of jade artifacts, offer a glimpse into the social and cultural diversity within the Qara Khitai society.

In summary, the archaeological findings in Central Asia's burial sites offer a window into the complex interplay of burial customs, cultural interactions, and trade relationships in the region. These discoveries underscore the significance of material culture in understanding the dynamics of Central Asian societies during specific historical periods, particularly concerning the Qara Khitai and their interactions with external cultures, notably the Chinese.



Fig. 2 12 small jade plates in the main burial chamber.

Source: Photo by Kubatbek Tabaldiev and Kunbolot Akmatov

https://static.cambridge.org/binary/version/id/urn:cambridge.org:id:binary:20231004120030953-0624:S1356186322000621:S1356186322000621_fig18.png

2.3. Case C

The British Museum's collection includes a piece of decorative plaque made of pale yellow semi-translucent jade with white inclusions, including a hare gazing at the moon sitting amongst rockery and lingzhi plants carved in high relief with pierced work (Fig.3). The hare, which is a symbol of longevity, is depicted gazing at the moon, which is a symbol of immortality. The lingzhi plant is also known as the "mushroom of immortality [9]". The plaque's overall shape is rectangular and rounded at the top, forming a rocky mountain shrouded in clouds. The reverse side of the plaque is undecorated and uneven, and the piece is polished to a good gloss.



Fig. 3 Decorative plaque of pale yellow semi-translucent jade with hare and lingzhi plants
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1612941094>

3. Analysis of the above Cases

Jade sculptures, exemplified by Case A, serve as tangible relics of cross-cultural exchange. The jade belt buckle with a crane motif, discovered in the British Museum, demonstrates a synthesis of artistic styles and techniques. The crane motif, similar to those found in the Chinese Song and Jin dynasties, suggests shared artistic motifs [10]. The use of bullnose perforations, a traditional Chinese fixing method, further underscores the connection. This artifact likely originated from the Western Liao period, a time of significant cultural convergence in Central Asia due to migrations and political shifts. It is reasonable to infer that the Western Liao dynasty contributed to the development of jade carving craftsmanship in Central Asia, as indicated by the presence of jade artifacts in the region.

Case B, based on archaeological findings, highlights the burial practices and cultural interactions in Central Asia. The use of mud-brick graves with specific orientations reflects meticulous burial customs, while the inclusion of Chinese artifacts, such as a Song dynasty vessel, signifies cross-cultural interactions. Jade objects found in these graves, particularly 12 small plates, underscore the influence of Chinese culture in Central Asia. Additionally, the varying burial practices among Qara Khitai communities, as indicated by the presence of jade artifacts in non-elite graves, reveal the social and cultural diversity within this society.

Case C further exemplifies the fusion of artistic motifs and symbolism. The jade decorative plaque in the British Museum showcases a hare gazing at the moon amidst lingzhi plants. These symbols of longevity and immortality, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, are depicted on a plaque that likely found its way to Central Asia through the Silk Road. The plaque's high relief and pierced work techniques echo Chinese jade carving traditions.

4. Summary

In summation, the artistic interactions between China and Central Asia during the Western Liao dynasty were profound and intricate, leaving an enduring imprint on the cultural landscapes of both regions. The evidence derived from jade sculptures and archaeological findings serves as compelling testimony to the intricate web of cross-cultural exchanges that unfolded along the Silk Road. These exchanges were not confined to the mere exchange of physical commodities; rather, they functioned as dynamic conduits for the transmission of artistic motifs, techniques, and symbolism.

Moreover, the Western Liao dynasty emerged as a pivotal actor in this cross-cultural interplay, as its westward migration and subsequent establishment in Central Asia acted as a catalyst for cultural amalgamation. The presence of Chinese artistic elements within Central Asian artifacts, as well as the reciprocal influence on Chinese art, underscores the profound impact of this era. This historical intermingling of cultures underscores the interconnectedness of civilizations along the Silk Road, underscoring that artistic expression transcends geographical confines. In essence, the Western Liao dynasty serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of cultural diffusion and artistic exchange that defined the Silk Road, molding the artistic legacies of both China and Central Asia for generations to come.

In a more expansive context, the examination of artistic exchanges along the Silk Road during the Western Liao dynasty furnishes invaluable insights into the interwoven nature of human societies. It accentuates the notion that art operates as a universal language, transcending political boundaries and fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse cultures. By delving into the past through the prism of art, we cultivate a deeper appreciation for the shared history and heritage that unites us all, thereby exemplifying the enduring power of artistic expression to bridge chasms and cultivate connections across temporal and spatial dimensions.

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