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Kyongju and the Silk Road

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1. Introduction

Kyongju was an ancient capital city in Korea for about 1,000 years, from 57 B.C. when the tribal settlement, Sara, took shape in the Kyongju plain through AD 935 when Silla submitted to Koryo. Foreign cultural elements flowed in during that period forming the cultural patterns of Silla. Core groups of Sara, such as the clans of Pak, Sok or Kim, appear in dramatic myths, suggesting influxes from outside groups.

The ancient culture of Silla was thus formed by groups which flowed in from outside and it has been widely known among academic circles that the form of wood-lined chamber tombs with stone mounds of the time was a northern style. The number of metal relics such as personal ornaments, excavated from among articles buried in the tombs, is rapidly increasing, indicating the socializing elements of the northern Scythio-Syberia line were settling in the indigenous society of Silla. Thus, around the 4th century while royal power was stabilized in the indigenous society, extraction of alluvial gold increased, resulting in a rapid increase of harness and gold articles that are found in the tumuli of Silla.

Sok Tal-hae from the clan of Sok then on the rise of power said, while seizing the house of P'yogong, that his forefather was a blacksmith, thus indicating that his clan must have been a group handling iron in the course of settlement in society. Gold crowns of Silla, which began to appear from this time, seem to have been influenced by the Shamanism of Siberia, showing the design of trees and antlers in gold crowns excavated from the tumuli of Sarmatia tribes along the coast of the Black Sea.

While Koguryo expanded its influence southward engulfing Lolang, Silla society began absorbing the civilization of the continent through the influence of Koguryo and

through migrants from Lolang. A form of stone-room tomb, possibly the typical tomb style of Koguryo faithfully reflecting the characteristic of nomads, began to surface at this time and is proved in the tumuli at Naengsu-ri, Yongil-gun Country now under excavation. The location of the Koguryo-style tumuli in an area not in the central part of Kyongju is suggestive of the route of cultural exchange at the time. In addition, the four-eared bronze pot excavated from the Kumgwangch'ong (gold crown) tumulus and the 'howu' (bronze bowl with cover) with inscriptions of Koguryo, excavated from the Howu tumulus well illustrate the interflow of civilization between the two countries. Lolang destroyed by Koguryo was a cultural outpost of Han China and its migrants flowed into Silla en masse, exerting considerable influence, particularly having a major impact on metal crafts.

Around the 5th century when Buddhism was introduced to Silla, cultural elements from the west of China (Central Asia) began to a significant degree via China. To wit, a sramana named Muk Ho-cha, who came to Silla, is known to have been a Buddhist priest either from India or Central Asia. Again, in the wake of public recognition given to Buddhism, study abroad in Tang became popular for priests and students from Silla. The 'wang och'onch'uk kuk ki,' (Travel Records on five Indian countries) found in the Dunhuang grottos by Polliot early in the 20th century and now in the custody of the National Archives in Paris, was a travelogue of a trip to India by the Silla priest Hyech'o He travelled by sea, and back to Changan in 727 via the Silk Road. This record tells us that students and priests of Silla, travelled not only to T'ang but even to the west of China, Central Asia.

Following Silla's unification of the three kingdoms in 668 AD, legal systems were modified and the capital was redesigned to enhance the prestige within the country while internationally, a variety of people like the Chinese, the Japanese, Arab merchants and Palhae (Pohai) people had active traffic by land and sea centering around Kyongju instead of via Koguryo to the north or via Paekche to the west. There is an extant record which indicates that the use of luxury goods which were excessively supplied by Arab merchants was restricted.

From among luxury goods, tails of peacock, gems called 'sulsul' (seemingly emerald), tortoise shell, rosewood, high-class incense Arab frankincense, beswellia), Persian fabrics and feathers embroidered in mufflers for woman ('chindo' feathers highly favored by Arab merchants as a luxury item) were highly prized by aristocrats. Records in China of the time also indicate that Persian goods such as gold, silver, glass, agate, crystal, cotton, wool textiles,

gold coins and silver coins were exported to China. Many of these items must have flowed into Silla via China.

Luxury was extravagant - shawls and belts decorated with peacock tail feathers and jade wool; carriages and saddles with agate, agilawood and tortoise shell; and wool fabrics in bedclothes- and records extant today show that use of such goods was restricted depending on the status in hierarchy.

This is part of the picture of the time. Some other records also show that expenses for the purchase of books by students in the company of delegations were reimbursed by the fisk, suggestive of an active accommodation of foreign culture.

Such foreign goods from outside contributed to technical advances made by Silla's artisans, ending up in producing artwork pieces of high quality.

There were different forms of trade between Silla and T'ang such as tributary trade conducted in the corresponding traffic of delegations, official or public trade in addition to private trade and smuggling. Between Silla and the Central Asia, indirect trade via China was significant mainstream reciprocally conducted at "Silla outposts" in such locations as Yangju and Myongju. The actual presence of people from the Central Asia in Silla is also seen in the record. Accounts on Silla by Arab merchants also point to a possibility of direct trade. Chinese and Arab merchants might have entered the port of Ulsan, about 40 kms to the south of Kyongju, conducting transactions. One may surmise by way of a legend about Choyong that they might have entered and lived in Kyongju. This assumption may be drawn from the statues of soldiers at the Kwoenung tomb and at the tomb of King Hungdok or from the clay figurines which have recently been excavated. These relics depict strange-looking people which would have been extremely difficult to describe unless witnessed or encountered in person.

As for goods exchanged in trade between Silla and T'ang, accounts on King Wonsong and King Kyongmun in the Samguk Saki (History of the Three Kingdoms) note gifts from the royal court of T'ang to Silla, with silk, gold and silverware among them. Metal-ware were named silver bowl, silver cup or gold-silver wares. There are no actual relics extant today but we can assume that these goods must have exerted great influence, directly and indirectly, on the art of Silla.

Goods taken by Silla's delegations to T'ang include horses, gold and silver, medicinal herbs, silk and wigs in addition to a variety of metal craft pieces including gold and silver bells, gold needle cases decorated with emerald and needles, Buddha statues, Buddhist scriptures and 'migan'. There is no way of knowing exactly what they were. Of what we can see today in Kyongju, there are needle cases and needles among sarira articles at Punhwangsa temple. From among relics of the Unified Silla, we can assume the level of craftsmanship at the time from ornamental combs and tortoise shell combs.

In the trade between Silla and Japan, not only those goods made in Silla but those foreign goods as well were traded, and this is corroborated in a document at Shosoin in Japan. It gives account of goods to be purchased from Silla, and some goods which were not particularly Silla's specialty. Metal craft pieces decorated with 'sulsul' were among the goods to be sent to Tang from Silla. Thus, there are some goods which must have been processed with raw materials imported to Silla via the Silk Road and some others which might have been re-exported to Japan right away.

An account in the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan) shows that some camels went to Japan via Silla in 680 (8th year in the reign of Emperor Tenmu) (Vol.29, Nihon Shoki). It is possible to assume that camels must have been in Silla at the time; some were sent to Japan from there.

Other records also show that games music or plays of the Central Asian origin were popular at the time. To wit, 'kumhwan' was a sort of acrobatics and an example of acrobats may be found in a small clay figurine excavated in Silla. Woljon and Sokdok were masked dance and Shanye was a sort of a lion's dance. We can detect traces of Silla in the origin and the characteristics of Hahwae masks. It may be worth examining the masks in the custody of Shosoin in Japan for a, similar lineage.

2. Central Asian elements found in Korean relics

A. Glassware: A variety of glassware has been excavated from Silla tumuli. Of them the phoenix-head-shaped glass bottle from the grand Hwangnamdaech'ong Tumulus at Kyongju not only has an Occidental feeling in its shape but also had its handle section repaired and re-inforced with gold thread already at the time of the excavation. This may indicate that the article was valuable. There are also cups with a base or cup-shaped glasses mostly the types of Roman glass excavated in southern Russia, near the Mediterranean or

Near Eastern regions. They are similar in shape and manufacturing technique to the cut glass of Iran and it is quite likely that they came to Silla via the Silk Road.

B. Glass Necklace with inlaid face: The inlaid glass-necklace excavated from Tomb No.3 in C Zone of the royal tomb area of King Michu employed the technique of glass eye-beads showing human faces and birds. The same technique has been observed in the Mediterranean region around the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. Glass eye-beads have the last bead inlaid with the design of human faces and birds and the deliberate artistry and the shape reveal an exotic feeling at a glance.

C. Dagger with ornamental sheath: The dagger excavated from Tomb No.14 of Kyerim-no, Kyongju is quite exceptional from among the relics of Silla. Relics of this nature are similar to those depicted in the Kizil murals and can be related to the gold ornament for a dagger said to have been incidentally unearthed from Borovoje in Kazakhstan. In terms of the arabesque design, the relic is assumed to have come either from western Turkestan or from the steppe region and is worth noting since it is dated to the 5th or 6th century. Some extraordinary relics such as the demon-faced gold ornament have come out of this in the same context as the main relics.

D. Wool fabrics such as 'tabdung' (heavy cloth and wool textile) and 'kuyu' (wool textile with design) are a sort of heavy cloth used for seat mat in Persian style. These goods were apparently quite popular in those days. The colored or floral-design seat mattress now in the custody of Shosoin is assumed to have been one of goods traded with Silla.

3. Utensils and Designs as Elements Suggestive of the Impact from the Central Asian Influence

A. Foreigners' statues: A relic most representative may be the image of Four Devas in the gilt-bronze outer case of sarira box found in the three-story stone west stupa at the site of Kamun-sa temple. Images of the Four Devas are shown on the four sides of the outer case made with four gilt-bronze plates and their countenances and armory are suggestive of Central Asia. The sarira box found in the west stupa at Kamun-sa temple best manifest refined and brilliant skill.

Ch'oyong who shows up in one of Silla's ancient legends, any figure, was from Central Asia. He came from the coast of the East Sea and his characteristic countenance, deep-socketed eyes and a high nose, suggests that he was from an Aryan race. We assume that Central

Asians must have actually lived in Silla. As if to support this assumption, we can find the image of Central Asians among the clay figurines excavated from stone-chamber tombs at Yonggang-dong in Kyongju. These figurines were excavated quite recently. Though they are less grand and less remarkable than those from China, they provide an important source for academic research in terms of the character and content. The stone statues of soldiers at the tomb of King Hungdok and the Kwaenung tomb are well known and are acknowledged to date back to the early part of the 9th century.

B. Lobed Cups: From among the metal or glass pieces of the Sasanid Dynasty, eight-lobed cup or twelve-lobed cup can be seen. Similar relics can be also found in the relics from T'ang China and in those in the custody of Shosoin of Japan.

Possible variations are some relics with the mouth part finished in a floral design. Metal bowls in a floral shape were being excavated from P'yongsan, Hwanghae-do Province and from Mt. Puso in Puyo, South Ch'ungch'ong-do province and they seem to be a variation of the lobed cups.

C. Foreign Bottles: A foreign bottle called 'hobyong' is a ewer with handles and a base manufactured with projection technique. It was called 'hobyong' in T'ang. It originated also in the Sasanid Dynasty where it was quite popular. It came to T'ang via the Silk Road and was produced in quantity in China . Some extant today show the muzzle in the form of a man, bird or dragon. There are some specimens in Korea beginning with the glass bottle excavated from the Hwangnamdaech'ong, which seem to be its variation.

D. Horn-shaped Cups (Rhyton): Both made with clay and metal are excavated from tumuli of Silla and Kaya. Its origin also seems to be in Central Asia or have been under the influence of Scythai. An account of King Talhae, in "Reminiscences of The Three Kingdoms" (Samguk Yusa) states that a servant attempted to drink water before his master did and the horn cup was stuck to his mouth, not to be taken off. This may indicate that the horn cups were in vogue from early on. The King, Sok T'al-hae, is known to have come from the blacksmith clan. As to the relics of this nature, those unearthed from the Kumgwan'ch'ong Tumulus made with bronze and others from Changnyong are noted and many more examples are seen among earthenware horn cups.

E. Hollow Animal-shaped Earthenware: Many hollow-animal-shaped earthenware pieces are seen among those of Silla and Kaya. They seem to have been related to those from Persia.

Special Features in Design

A rich variety of designs are seen: two animals facing each other around a tree; two birds and an embellishment of beads design surrounding them; arabesque design to embellish Buddhist art; a bronze mirror showing the design of birds feeding on flowers and a bone ornament with a linear inscription of birds and flowers excavated from the Ananpchi Pond; a small, round silver plate from the site of hwangyong-sa temple; tiles of arabesque design with grapes and the design of winged lions excavated from various palaces and temple sites and many other design of tortoise shell in metalwares, dyed fabrics, lacquaware, tiles, and metal craftworks.

- A. Cosmic tree pattern, a pair of animals pattern, tortoise-shell pattern, a pair of birds pattern, pet birds pattern, winged lions pattern are representative ones.
- B. Honeysuckle arabesque design, grapes arabesque design rosary design and rope-shaped floral patterns are also characteristic.

Features Showing up in the Technique

A. Filigree technique: The technique, said to have originated in the 12th Dynasty of Egypt, came to Silla in the period of Han China. via Lolang, spread quite rapidly and came to represent Silla's artcraft in precious metal.

B. Ring-punched technique: The technique, closely related to metal craftwork of the Sasanid Dynasty of Persia, in particular, shows much influence of Sogdiana, and speaks for technical exchange at the time. In its style, Silla displays Silla's liberal approach rather than an orderly one, testifying to an accommodation of foreign cultures.

C. Carving and Hammering Technique: Known also as a technique from Egypt and the Asian regions, the absence of the welding technique, which is seen in gold and silver ware from Persia, is attributed to the non-availability of gas blaze.

D. Wax mold casting Technique: The technique originated in the ancient Orient and left its impact in China and can be seen often in metal craftwork of Silla.

E. 'Cloisonne' or Enamel: This is a technique of the ancient Orient, dating back to Mycenaean art of the 13th century B.C. The technique progressed in the Byzantine Church following the 6th century and came to Silla via China.

Conclusion

It has been held that because of its geographical position located in a nook of the Korean peninsula, Kyongju was slow in accommodating foreign elements coming from the northwest and that Shilla accepted them gradually. Thus, Silla was able to foster an independent capability for digesting incoming foreign influences rather than accepting them directly and indiscriminately.

This posture formed the basis from which Silla was ultimately able to achieve the unification of the Three Kingdoms. Following unification, the direct accommodation of foreign cultures, as Silla was opened to the outside world, served as potentials enabling Silla to grow as a cosmopolitan city in stability.

In other words, ancient Silla had accommodated elements of foreign culture on a series of occasions. Royal power was stabilized while elements of foreign culture were either harmonized with or accepted in struggle with indigenous society of Silla. On that basis, Silla built up its strength and wealth capable of unifying the Three Kingdoms. Culture of the Unified Silla could bloom when brilliant cultural elements via the Silk Road were grafted on that of Silla, thus adding an element of internationalism.

That this internationalism must have been much wider in its range than we assume today is testified by the figures of Silla delegation as depicted or recorded in materials extant today overseas, such as the "Travelogue to India" preserved in Dunhuang grottos and the African murals in Samarkand. Though their costume is interpreted as being of Koguryo style, the murals are estimated to date back to the period of the Unified Silla. In the case of gold and silverware which Silla received in that period, in particular, it has been revealed that they were more under the influence of Sogdia than that of Persia. These examples suffice to make us assume that the footsteps of delegations, students studying abroad, Buddhist priest and merchants reached quite far. There is no denying that they must have selected and brought back what they preferred. This allows us to assume that Silk Road traffic in those days was never a one-sided affair.

By the way, books on T'ang say that during T'ang's eras of Kaiyuan (Kaewon in Korean) and Tienpao (Ch'onbo) the extraneous cultural trend prevailed in T'ang's capital to such an extent that "foreign music was played at the royal court, foreign foods were placed on the table of aristocrats and women competed to wear foreign dresses." Likewise, records of Silla also state that this trend of T'ang also flowed into Silla to such an extent that roof-tiled houses were lined up on the streets, sounds of music were vibrating throughout the streets and gilt-ornamented residences and Buddhist pavilions were as numerous as the stars in the sky. Then, these records more than suffice for us to easily visualize the scenes of those bygone days.