ACCEPTANCE, TRANSFORMATION, AND REJECTION: THE MECHANISM OF CULTURAL SELECTION IN SILK ROAD IMAGES AND ORNAMENTS

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Annotatsiya. *Mazkur maqolada Xitoy-O‘zbekiston Ipak yo‘li koridori bo‘ylab tasvir hamda naqshinkor bezaklarda madaniy saralanish mexanizmi “qabul qilish – transformatsiya – rad etish” modeli doirasida tadqiq etiladi. Izlanishda sopol, metall, to‘qimachilik va devoriy tasviriy san’at namunalari empirik baza sifatida olinib, ajnabiy vizual elementlarning Xitoy hududiga kirib borishi jarayonida ularning o‘zlashtirilishi, modifikatsiyalanishi yoki filtrlash (chetlashtirish) mexanizmlari ilmiy tahlil qilinadi.*

Kalit so‘zlar: *Ipak yo‘li, madaniy tanlov, tasvir va bezak, muzey kollektsiyalari, Xitoy-O‘zbekiston koridori.*

Аннотация. *В статье рассматривается механизм культурного отбора изображений и орнаментов вдоль китайско-узбекского коридора Шелкового пути на основе модели «принятие - трансформация - отвержение». На примерах керамики, металлических изделий, текстиля и настенных росписей анализируется, как иностранные образы принимались, видоизменялись или отвергались на китайской территории.*

Ключевые слова: *Шелковый путь, культурный отбор, изображения и орнаменты, музейные коллекции, китайско-узбекский коридор.*

Abstract. *This article examines the mechanism of cultural selection in images and ornaments along the China-Uzbekistan Silk Road corridor through an “acceptance-transformation-rejection” model. Drawing on evidence from ceramics, metalwork, textiles, and wall paintings, it analyzes how foreign visual elements were adopted, modified, or filtered out upon entering Chinese territory.*

Keywords: *Silk Road, cultural selection, images and ornaments, museum collections, China-Uzbekistan corridor.*

INTRODUCTION

The overland Silk Road was a corridor along which visual culture traveled alongside commodities. Motifs such as the pearl roundel, the grapevine, and banqueting scenes moved from Central Asia into China, appearing on ceramics, silver vessels, textiles, and mural programs preserved in museum collections and archaeological sites. The question is not merely whether these images were present, but why some were accepted, others transformed, and still others rejected upon entering Chinese visual culture.

The present study proposes an analytical framework of "acceptance-transformation-rejection" to explain the mechanism of cultural selection. Building on prior scholarship — including Rawson's work on Chinese ornament, Compareti's studies of Afrasyab, Marshak's classification of Sogdian silver, and the research of Chinese scholars Qi Dongfang, Rong Xinjiang, Jiang Boqin, and Zhao Feng — this article applies the framework across multiple material categories. The geographical focus is the China-Uzbekistan corridor, with the temporal scope centering on the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties through the Tang period.

1. ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance occurs when a foreign motif is adopted with minimal alteration. The pearl roundel (lianzhu wen in Chinese) exemplifies this process. Originating in Sasanian Iran and transmitted eastward through Sogdian intermediaries, it appears on textiles, ceramics, and metalwork across the Tang period. Its geometric versatility and absence of overt religious connotations facilitated its widespread adoption. A textile fragment in LACMA (680–900 CE) shows a pheasant within a pearl roundel, illustrating the motif's eastward transmission.



Fig.1 Textile Fragment with Pheasant in Pearl Roundels, 680-900 A.D., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Costume and Textiles Deaccession Fund, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Central Asian figures in Tang tomb murals and sancai ceramics represent another dimension of acceptance. High-nosed, deep-eyed figures in foreign costume appear not as exotic curiosities but as integrated participants in Tang visual culture, reflecting the historical presence of Sogdian communities documented by Rong Xinjiang.



Fig 2. Central Asian wine peddler, approx. 618–906. China, Henan province. Molded and sculpted earthenware figure with three-color glaze. The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P521.

2. TRANSFORMATION

Transformation involves adaptation to local sensibilities. The grapevine, originating in Hellenistic imagery, entered China during the Han-Tang period. Its original Dionysian associations were gradually stripped away; it was valued increasingly for its decorative qualities - the rhythm of its tendrils and the abundance of its fruit - and integrated alongside indigenous motifs like the lotus.

Sogdian silverware underwent transformation in both form and usage. Marshak identified distinct Sogdian “schools” of metalwork production. When these vessels entered China, Tang workshops developed their own versions, retaining foreign forms while incorporating Chinese decorative elements, as documented in Qi Dongfang’s research.



Fig. 3 Lobed cup, Sogdiana, probably Uzbekistan, late 6th-early 7th century AD, hammered silver - Freer Gallery of Art - DSC05617

Textile patterns such as the pearl roundel were adapted to Chinese weaving techniques and color preferences, with modified proportions and decorative fillings. Zhao Feng's research demonstrates how these patterns were localized while retaining their basic structure.

3. REJECTION

Rejection involves filtering out foreign visual elements. Naturalistic figural representation, the illusionistic style of Hellenistic and Sasanian art, did not achieve widespread adoption in China, where artistic traditions favored line, rhythm, and symbolic abstraction over anatomical naturalism.

Religious imagery provides a second case. While Buddhist iconography was extensively adopted, Zoroastrian visual culture remained largely confined to Sogdian communities, as documented by Jiang Boqin. Its limited integration reflects perceived incompatibility with established Chinese cultural frameworks.

4. DRIVERS AND MUTUAL OBSERVATION

Three interconnected drivers shaped these outcomes. Trade networks: Sogdian merchants were primary agents of image transmission, creating nodes of exchange in Chang'an, Luoyang, and along the Hexi Corridor. Religious change: Buddhism brought a vast iconographic vocabulary that was extensively adopted, while Zoroastrian imagery had more limited reception. Aesthetic evolution: motifs initially valued for exoticism gradually became naturalized.

The flow was not unidirectional. The Afrasyab murals in Samarkand include Chinese figural themes, with processions and figures in Chinese costume, integrated into a Sogdian visual program, as demonstrated by Compareti. This mutual observation reveals that each culture selectively appropriated from the other.

CONCLUSION

The "acceptance-transformation-rejection" model provides a systematic framework for understanding cultural selection along the Silk Road. The mechanism was shaped by trade networks, religious change, and evolving aesthetic preferences, and operated in both directions, as evidenced by the Afrasyab murals.

The practical significance of this framework for heritage cooperation is substantial. Museum collections along the China-Uzbekistan corridor preserve the material evidence for these processes, providing an academic foundation for joint exhibitions, shared image databases, and public education programs that support the interpretation of the "Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" as a UNESCO World Heritage property and contribute to cross-civilizational dialogue.

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