A Southern Song tomb, Armenian manuscripts and Mongol tiles

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Silk and other textiles provide excellent examples illustrating early contacts between both ends of the Asian continent with the Iranian world at its centre. Chinese silks and embroideries reached the Classical world early in the Christian era, and between the two world wars the excavations at Dura-Europos brought to light unexpected fragments of Chinese silks and embroideries. These textiles must have reached Mesopotamia before the total destruction of this vast emporium by the Persian king Shapur I in 256 AD. The following centuries saw the appearance of remarkable textile patterns shared by Tang China, the kingdoms of Central Asia, Byzantium and the early Islamic lands. One pattern consisting of a repeat of pearled roundels is well known across Asia, and Sassanian examples of them were included in the Shoso-In treasury of Nara. Furthermore many wall paintings in sites from Samarqand to the caves of Qizil in Inner Asia, depict dignitaries wearing kaftans with beaded roundels surrounding popular motifs of birds or boar heads.

This fashion for decorative roundels on textiles seems to have been so well known that simplified patterns of these roundels were adapted by other media as seen with certain decorations on early slip-painted wares of the Islamic world. Further cross-references between textile patterns and the decoration on these ceramics do recall certain Buddhist designs of flattened lotus petals. The outline or such designs are the first manifestations of petal panels, an enduring and popular theme on wall paintings, ceramics and textiles across Asia.

Several years ago in an article on northern Sung silks, Sheila Vainker presented a number of embroidered silks, fragments of gauze, polychrome woven silks and kesi panels. She then drew parallels between these patterned silks and similar decorations on Cizhou, Ding and Yaozhou high-fired wares. Among scholars a growing awareness of the relationship between decoration on ceramics and textiles has meant that this relationship is often mentioned in cross cultural research. The recent exhibition of The legacy of Genghis Khan displayed ten important fragments of Chinese and Persian textiles which provided an interesting picture of lampas and tapestry weaves, as well as silks and cotton fabrics, although no parallels of decoration were made between designs on ceramics and textiles. Generally they were referred to as belonging to the Song or Mongol period without an attempt at more precise dating. For this reason I will try to narrow down textile dating by combining the evidence of mixed media from textiles in the tomb of a young Chinese bride dated 1243, paintings from two Armenian manuscripts dated 1286 and 1289, and glazed tiles in the palace of Abaqa Khan, the Il-khanid sultan who ruled over Persia from 1265 to 1282.

4 Fuzhou Nan Song Huang Shang (the Southern Song Tomb of Huang Shang in Fuzhou), Fuzhou provincial museum, Wen Wu Press, Beijing 1982.
The Chinese tomb

The earliest date of 1243 belongs to the tomb of a young Chinese bride Huang Shang who was buried in Fuzhou. Her tomb was discovered in 1975. At the second European Seminar of Central Asian Studies at SOAS in 1987 I presented some illustrations from this dated Chinese tomb. The text was published in 1991. However since then the remarkable contents of the tomb have seldom been referred to for dating purposes and as a source of design for Islamic textiles and ceramics. At the time western Asia was about to enter a new historical era known as the Pax Mongolica despite the earlier massacres of Gengis Khan who had died in 1227. It was the very year of the dated tomb 1243, that the Mongol armies entered Anatolia and defeated the Seljuqs of the Rum at the battle of Köş Dag. In China the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) was to survive for another thirty-six years.

Admittedly the feminine garments revealed in the 1243 tomb, would not have been the type of costume exported overseas, yet it is the range of textiles with their elegant decoration which makes them of great value for our knowledge of Chinese textile production in the late Song period and at the precise date of 1243. This young lady of seventeen, Huang Shang, had been married only one year to Zhao Yujun, an imperial magistrate of Liancheng County. She was the daughter of Huang Pu, supervisor of foreign trade in the port of Quanzhou in the province of Fujian. Such details including the date of her death in 1243, were inscribed on her epitaph showing the prominent place occupied by the family of the deceased bride. At the time Quanzhou, the Zaitun of Marco Polo, was the most important port in China for exporting wares to South-Eastern Asia and the Muslim world. Marco Polo stressed the fact that the port was one of the two greatest havens in the world for commerce. Furthermore during the Song dynasty, the province of Fujian is mentioned for its silk production as well as for the brocades of Jianyang county and numerous satins and for silk fabrics made in Quanzhou itself. Other sources, quoted in particular by Paul Pelliot, underline the dramatic importance of Zaitun and its hinterland.

Obviously the young bride had been buried with her luxurious newly made wedding trousseau which consisted of 201 pieces of clothing and an extra 153 pieces of cloth. According to the listed contents of the tomb a large number of the fabrics were made of high quality silk, including gauze, crepe and damask. Jacquard weaving was mostly used for unique designs of flowers overlapping each other like clouds. Gold painting, gilding and of course embroidery enhanced the delicately cut and stitched garments. A remarkable series of line-drawings of these embroideries were published in the Chinese archaeological report of 1982 and some of them will be used to illustrate the importance of Chinese designs for western Asian decorative arts during the last decades of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279).

It is quite clear that in dealing with the trousseau of a young woman, the selection of designs enhancing her garments would have been chosen to conform to her sex, her age and her social position. The whole feminine garment, usually a jacket, was made from a silk fabric woven with an overall pattern. These patterns, usually floral, were large scrolling repeats of flowers.

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8 Fuzhou Nan Song Huang Shang, p. 2.
Although the complexity of most patterns still amazes us today, these patterns go far beyond any model the weavers and potters of the Islamic world would have chosen to reproduce. And in the catalogue of the exhibition *When Silk was gold*, there are no examples of textiles resembling the large floral patterns found in the 1243 Chinese tomb. It is rather the motifs on the narrow bands of embroidery made to edge both sides of the opening of the jacket that would attract an untutored eye and provide details more readily appealing to designers in western Asia. Thus this dated material may be used to explain the renewal of a decorative vocabulary in Mongol Iran. These designs may be grouped into floral subjects, phoenix, lion and fish representations.

**Two Armenian manuscripts**

By 1258 Genghis Khan's grand-son, Hulagu, had eliminated the Abbasid caliphate and taken Baghdad, after overrunning the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia. In 1265 he was succeeded by his son Abaqa who ruled over the Il-khanid Empire until 1282. Meanwhile in the far-east Khanbaligh/Peking, had fallen to the Mongols in 1279 and Kubilai Khan became the first Yuan emperor of China. As a result, for about a century trade routes across Asia were safely in the hands of the Mongols and commercial exchanges amongst others, increased from one end of Asia to the other and as far as Europe. Travellers’ reports reinforce the evidence given by precious Chinese silks, and, reaching the Mediterranean, found buried like talismans in 14th century tombs such as that of Cangrande containing a number of Chinese textiles; he died in Verona in 1329.

If Quanzhou/Zaitun was a world centre for trade in the far east during the Yuan-Mongol period, at the western end of Asia it was the port of Ayas-Layas, in the gulf of Alexandretta, which played a vital role in Mediterranean trade as Marco Polo described it after his visit in 1295: for you must know that all the spicery, and the cloths of silk and gold and the other valuable wares that come from the interior are brought to that city. And whatsoever persons would travel to the Interior (of the East), merchants or others, they take their way by this city of Layas.

The eradication of the kingdom of Greater Armenia by the Saljuks in 1071, after the battle of Manzikert, increased the Armenian presence in Cilicia where Armenian royal power was able to maintain its autonomy within its mountainous frontiers along with suitable alliances. Its main port had grown in importance after the fall of Antioch to the Mamluks in 1268 and that of Acco in 1291. By then it had gradually become the western outlet for international Asian trade at the heart of the smaller Cilician kingdom of Armenia. Official documents bare witness to contracts with Mediterranean powers and in particular with Genoa and Venice. The Florentine Pegoletti in his *La Practica della Mercatura* reports acquiring invaluable experience as he travelled around the eastern part of the Mediterranean in 1336. Earlier in 1307, the Armenian historian, the monk-prince Hayton, presenting his *Flor des Estoires de la terre d'Orient* to pope Clement V, wrote that from Cathay came so many strange and wonderful things and of such fine work that that these men appear to be the most gifted and talented men in arts and crafts. No doubt that in addition to international trade some of the best far eastern goods were donated to official

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9 *When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese textiles*, an exhibition, New York 1997.


Armenian missions on occasions such as the visit of Het’ün I to Hulagu probably in Tabriz in July 1264, and later Levon’s mission to Abaqa Khan in 1269 and 1272. From the early days of the constable Sembad’s embassy in 1247-1248, contacts were maintained with the Great Khan first in Karakorum and later in Khanbaligh.

In order to underline the presence in Zaitun of foreigners in addition to Indians, Persians, Arabs and Malays, it is worth quoting Andrew of Perugia, Franciscan bishop of Zaitun who died there in 1344: *There is a certain large city by the ocean called Zaitun in the Persian tongue. In this city a rich Armenian lady has built a church, fair and large enough, which she has given and bequeathed with suitable endowment to brother Gerard the bishop and our brethren that were with him, after it had by her will been made a cathedral by the archbishop*. Recent research on funerary stones reused in the now demolished walls of Quanzhou, points to the important presence of a Franciscan mission in the early 14th century.

The visual evidence of relations between the Mongols and their Armenian vassals can be detected in pages of royal manuscripts composed possibly after the coronation of Leo II. In a gospel from Hromkla in eastern Cilicia on the Euphrates, he is painted before his coronation in 1269 as prince Leo wearing a robe decorated with pearled roundels surrounding a lion and sun, incidentally also the same symbol on coinage for the last Saljuq of Rum Kay Khusraw II. In the later gospel of 1287 commissioned by Archbishop John (mss. 197, fol. 341v), an

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14 On May 7th 2004 an evening of three lectures was organised by the Circle of Inner Asian Art (CIAA) at SOAS to appreciate the recent work of Sam Lieu, Ken Parry and John Guy on Quanzhou. They reassessed the importance of Christian and Muslim tombstones in that town dating from the late 13th and 14th centuries.
15 Mutafian, p. 61, Mat. 8321, fol.15.
ordination scene shows archbishop John, half-brother of king Het’un I, and the constable Smbat, with his left hand on the head of a young man. His garments are made of more precious textiles than on an earlier representation of him in the Freer manuscript of 1263. There are two different designs on his 1287 cope: one is a standard repeat pattern of a small black cross, the other is the representation of an elongated Chinese dragon. The material carrying the dragon may have been cut out from another piece of material, possibly of Chinese origin, and would have been appliqued to the cope (fig. 1). In a sense the two different designs on the same garment illustrate the meeting of two traditions: the usual cross-pattern of western Asian design, and the Chinese dragon so different in inspiration and shape from, for instance, the earlier Baghdad gate dragons.

The glazed tiles and bowls of the Il-khanid period

In 1258 Hulagu, the brother of the Great Khan Möngke, consolidated the Mongol conquests in western Asia by taking Baghdad and killing the last caliph al-Mustasim. The Il-khanid rule was thus established over Mesopotamia and Persia for the next century. As mentioned earlier the Armenian kings of Cilicia became early vassals of the Mongols and maintained regular contacts with them. In a similar way to the Armenian miniature painters, Persian potters responded to the arrival of textiles from farther east. The glazed tiles on the site of the Takht-i Sulayman in north-west Iran bears witness to the influence of Song themes such as lotuses, dragons, phoixnixes and deer. The site appears to have been abandoned after the death in 1282 of Abaqa Khan. The Il-khanid Mongol ruler had planned a vast summer palace with an imposing portal and two octagonal halls next to pre-Islamic ruins. While some of the decoration on the tile work provides further evidence of the strong Chinese influence with nouvelle vague depictions of dragons, phoixnixes, other designs cover star-shaped, rectangular and hexagonal tiles, and some lustre tiles are still painted with more traditional themes alluding to local legends. They are dated 1271-3 and 1275-6. This use of both standard and exotic themes has already been noticed on the Armenian cope of 1286.

From the later part of the 13th century tiling of large wall panels was a new departure in Persian interior decoration; it often replaced stucco work that was enhanced with red and white as well as blue washes. In the first quarter of the 13th century those fine mihrabs made in Kashan were lustre-painted on a white ground. Turquoise and lustre are the usual grounds for tiles at the Mongol palace. In addition, a very dark blue colour makes its first appearance at the Takht-i Suleyman. It is the well known lajvardina colour, meaning the colour of lapis lazuli, onto which fine gold leaf has been applied. Such a deep shade of blue with added gold leaf on the moulded shapes of phoixnixes and dragons was unknown on earlier western Asian ceramics. However throughout the 14th century it frequently was used as far as Samarqand in the Shah-i Zinda until shortly before 1400. Could this colour scheme be yet another way in which Chinese textiles influenced ceramic colour schemes? The over-glaze addition of gold leaf may well have simulated the textiles of Huang Shang’s trousseau described as: gold painting and gilding [...] introduced as complements to relief printing and painting.

17 Fuzhou Nan Song Huang Shang, p. 3.
Decorative themes

Flowers

Undoubtedly the best known flower is the lotus, a flower belonging in the first place to Buddhist iconography from the early days of its visual expression. By the time of the Mongol onslaught across Asia the configuration of the lotus flower followed fairly precise patterns which no longer involved only the petals panels of Tang designs. New shapes for lotuses had already been outlined in a Chinese book on Architectural Styles commissioned in the 1090s and printed in 1103. And the lotus on Huang Shang’s embroidered purse illustrates the flower par excellence. The other flower on the purse is less distinctive and I have been tempted to describe it as a dianthus for convenience sake (fig. 2). Surprisingly none of the numerous line drawings of embroidered bands in the Chinese report of 1982 illustrate a lotus apart from one unique design outlining a fanciful flower and leaf. Does this indicate that the lotus was such a standard motif that it would seem out of place, too banal, to include it as a pattern on sophisticated garments for a distinguished Chinese bride? Other flowers, camellias, tree peonies, plum blossoms, chrysanthemums and roses are certainly depicted with great skill and elegance. Yet these are not chosen by the Persian artists. Their time did come towards the end of the Yuan dynasty in the mid 14th century with the new exports of blue and white porcelain.

These modern suggestions do not conflict with the fact that at the time the Chinese lotus motif was an immediate success and entered triumphantly into every designer’s pattern book west of the receding Buddhist world. All media adopted it, and from Samarqand to Cairo it can be seen with or without the dianthus on tiles, textiles, stone and wood carvings, book flaps and frontispieces of Qurans. The partnership of the dianthus and lotus may not have lasted for a long time although it is well illustrated on textiles painted in two early illustrated volumes of Rashid al-Din’s History of the world dated 706/1306-7. Several miniatures represent warriors...

18 Ying Zao Fa Shi, architectural styles compiled by Li Jie, first printing 1103, reprint 1954. I am indebted to Sheila Vainker for this reference.
19 Fuzhou Nan Song Huang Shang, p. 130, no. 60.
wearing overcoats adorned with a lotus and dianthus pattern in white either on a blue ground or red ground. The same pattern occurs also on throne furniture, and on hangings in paintings of the Demotte Shah Namah.

The lotus had thus become a central motif in the pattern book of designs during the Pax Mongolica through the influence of Chinese textiles, yet its lasting influence throughout western Asia spread also with patterns wholly inspired by the crafts of the new Ming dynasty. Sheets of line drawings attributed to the 15th century, reveal the transformation of original Chinese patterns into a new decorative vocabulary.

**Fabulous beasts**

Not only do lotuses enter the vocabulary of western Asian design under the Mongols but fabulous Chinese birds and beasts also have their part to play in the repertoire of the new pattern books available across the world of Islam. In the 1243 tomb the embroidery of phoenixes, no. 11, is rather sketchy (fig. 3). Other representations are embroidered on Chinese silks with gold thread. Further reproductions of Chinese birds include egrets and swans.

The outline of a chosen beast, such as a recumbent dragon, is immediately applied to the flat surface of an hexagonal tile, which at this early stage cannot be confused with a *simurgh*, the mythical Persian bird. In examples from the Takht-i Sulayman and especially on rectangular tiles, the bird is in full flight with or without extended tails. And when applied inside a Sultanabad bowl phoenixes whirl around its curved surface. A similar phoenix in full flight spreads its wings at the centre of the headpiece on folio 334 in the Lectionary of Prince Het’um II who was to reign from 1289 (fig. 4). In China the association of a phoenix with a dragon usually symbolises the emperor and his consort. But this message has no significance for the outsider who uses both beasts simply as an exotic decoration. The same folio of the 1286 lectionary, contains in both spandrels a combination of a dragon and a phoenix, albeit rather clumsy (fig. 5). The volume is now in the Matenadaran library of Erivan (mss. 979).

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Yet the most intriguing design to have been devised on a hexagonal tile is that of a quadruped, possibly a prancing lion (fig. 6). This quadruped is not the Romanesque type of lion which is illustrated on the title page of the remarkable Homiliarium of 1202. An embroidered detail from the 1243 tomb, no. 46, provides the answer: here the lion is kicking a brocaded ball with ribbons (fig. 7). This Chinese model may not have made much sense to the Persian tile designer who fancied the lion, reproduced it but got rid of the brocaded ball as well as its ribbons. Another more imperial looking kind of lion is depicted in the spandrels of prince Het’un’s lectionary, folio 293 (fig. 8). Here again the Chinese influence is quite striking. This type of lion with a curly mane already decorates silver dishes in the Tang dynasty and thereafter remains a constant theme to be copied in Chinese art. Other beasts such as deer are frequently woven into silk fabrics and can be seen on tiles from the Takht-i Sulayman. Representations of fish, usually carp, as in the 1243 tomb, no. 39a, remain a standard motif in Persian imitations of celadon bowls.

**Conclusion**

The use of such alien themes shows the ability of artists to renew their pattern books with exotic designs from late Song times as international trade with Central Asia was reinforced by political alliances and exchanges of visits with the Mongol Great Khan in China. In the particular case of the Armenian Cilician court and its orders of sacred texts, it is therefore not surprising to see Chinese phoenixes, dragons and lions invade the more remarkable head pages of the 1286 lectionary and decorate the garment in the 1287 gospel.

After this brief survey of cross cultural and cross media motifs, it is obvious that neither textiles, nor ceramics, nor for that matter any other applied art, exist in isolation. Often their shared designs are modified by new influences when embassies and international merchants, either by land or through maritime trade, deliver desirable goods. There remains one important fact to be emphasised: it is that new styles and designs can only appear and develop forcefully under the leadership of certain world rulers, such as Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Oljaitu, Timur or Yongle. This remarkable Ming emperor, who ruled from 1403 until 1424, was the creator of the Forbidden City in Beijing. What is less appreciated is that the embassy of Ulug Beg in 1221 coincided with the inauguration of that City. Consequently it is relatively easy to imagine the amazement of the Timurid mission confronted with an incredible complex of buildings, totally alien to those of Samarqand and Bukhara. The profusion of marble carvings, glazed tiles on roofs and specific panels, not to mention the furniture and the rich clothing of the court, must have made a very strong impression on all members of the embassy, although, I would

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23 Drapian I., Hakopian G. and Korkhmazian E., *Armenian miniatures of the 13th and 14th centuries from the Matanaderan collection, Yerevan*, Leningrad 1984, pl. 1. This Homiliarium is the largest known Armenian manuscript.
suggest, a feeling of inferiority must have prevented the recorder of the embassy, Ghiyathuddin Naqqash, from expressing or even analysing the magnitude of the spectacle\textsuperscript{24}. Nevertheless it is from that time that the influence of Chinese themes on western Asia grew even stronger, yet they were tempered by remarkable adaptations in the world of Islam.

\textsuperscript{24} Thackston W.M., \textit{A century of Princes}, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1989, p. 287.