

The Influence of Imported Exotic Gems and Ores on Tang Dynasty Society

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Abstract: In this work, this essay discusses how the exotic gems from the Silk Road influenced the society in different ways In the Tang Dynasty. These effects can be positive or negative. Moreover, these effects may be direct or indirect. This article included the influence of exotic gems from social life, government departments and ideological events in the Tang Dynasty through three main sections. A large number of real historical records and poems are added as strong evidence. Of course, it also refers to the analytical materials of previous seniors, in order to learn from them and fill in Buddhist records to make my argument more convincing. Finally, draw the conclusion. The purpose of this article is to enable readers to judge the influence of exotic gems more clearly and comprehensively, not only through official historical materials, but also through Buddhist records.

Keywords: Gems, political system, Ideology, social life, influence

1. Introduction

The Silk Road, which has existed for thousands of years, was not only the main trade route from ancient China to the outside world, but also the passageway connecting China and the West. Since China's reform period beginning in 1978, research on the Silk Road has broadened, and the academic community has proposed the existence of a southern Silk Road and a grassland Silk Road. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, archaeological excavations have been carried out along these Silk Roads, and a wealth of cultural relics have been unearthed. Among them, countless precious and non-renewable gems have been found in tombs. By analyzing the archaeological materials and ancient book records of unearthed treasures, this paper discusses these trade routes' influence on different levels of local society. Man's love of beautiful stones dates back to the Paleolithic Age. People at that time could not farm, build houses, smelt metal, but still learned to wear jewelry. The trade of gemstones flourished in the Tang dynasty. The gemstone trade introduced a large number of gemstones produced in areas west of China into the territory of the Tang dynasty through the overland Silk Road. Tubo, Dunhuang, Chang'an and Luoyang were all important distribution centers of foreign gemstones. The gemstone trade along the maritime Silk Road was even more prosperous than the overland route. Yangzhou and Guangzhou were also both important distribution centers of foreign gemstones, which resulted in a great variety of jewelry and a wide range of import sources in the Tang Dynasty. In the 1990s, Wu Yuguai translated the famous American Sinologist Schafer Edward's *The Golden Peach of Samarkand*. This book is a comprehensive study of the history of the exchange of material civilization between China and other countries in the Tang Dynasty. It records 18

categories and more than 170 kinds of foreign objects. The book mentions 17 kinds of precious objects, such as jade, gold, glass, fire beads, ivory, rhino horn, fish teeth, pearls, tortoise shell, car canal, coral, amber, and jade. Through the use of rich poetry and literary materials, it vividly shows the influence of foreign gems on society and culture in the Tang dynasty.

2. The Trade Routes of Exotic Gems

2.1. Sea Way

The caravans took two main sea routes, with one being through the northern seas of China, which was dominated by Korea, then known as Silla. In the 1660s, when the Silla Kingdom wiped out the Baekje and Goryeo kingdoms, navigation technology and maritime trade were mainly controlled by the Joseon people, then known as the Silla people. A large number of merchants, monks, and envoys from the victorious state of Silla, as well as a large number of refugees from the defeated state, came to the border of the Tang dynasty through this sea route. Korean ships usually sailed along the northern coast of the Yellow Sea and use the Shandong Peninsula as a landing port. It was also the official waterway for Japanese ships sailing out of Buqian until the end of the seventh century, when Japan and Silla became hostile [1].

The other, via the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, brought eager Westerners to the East. The vast majority of Tang's overseas trade was conducted through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean [2]. Most ships needed to follow the monsoon to help them reach China. On this route, the common rule is "north in summer and south in winter." In the Tang dynasty, a large number of merchant ships reached China by this sea route, and the coastal ports were crowded with thousands of miles of coming merchant ships [3].

2.2. Land Way

The wealth of foreign countries was transported to the lands of the Tang dynasty through three land routes. The land transportation routes included ethnic groups to China's northeast such as Koreans, the Donghu nationalities and Mongolian tribes. Their products passed through the Liaoyang plain and forest areas to the south through the Bohai coast, and then reached the end of the Great Wall, Lulong City. Lulong City was an important frontier fortress of the Tang dynasty, and also an important place for customs collection [4].

The Silk Road was an important route from the Tang dynasty to Central Asia. It ran along the edge of the Gobi Desert, passed through the northwestern frontier region, and reached Samarkand, Persia, and Syria. It should be noted that from Yumen Pass, there are two ways to the west, and both of them are dangerous and daunting [5]. The first was the terrifying route from Dunhuang to Turpan. The second road follows the northern edge of the Kunlun Mountains to the west before reaching Khotan and Pamir, parallel to the road between Dunhuang and Turpan, and known as the southern road [5]. In the Tang dynasty, there was another route to Burma and Bengal, which was from Sichuan through Yunnan and then through the valley of the Upper Irrawaddy in Burma, and then on to Bengal.

3. The Influence of Exotic Gems on Social Life in the Tang Dynasty

Gems from abroad had a strong influence on the clothing of Tang society. People began to use these exotic gems as decorations, and this behavior became a new trend. This trend increased the difference between classes, since precious stones became the symbol of the nobility. The first aspect of how gems were utilized is in the use of accessories. For example, jade itself is not native to China, but carved jade has a long history and enjoys a high reputation in China [6]. Even in ancient legends, jade

is the jewel of the sacred mountain in the center of the world continent. According to the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, there is a jade mountain in the Western Mountains (Khotan) [7].

The real-life archetype of this imaginary sacred mountain is the ancient city of Khotan, called Gaustana in the early Tang dynasty, and Yuttina in the ninth century. Khotan lies on the southern Silk Road that runs through the Western Regions [8]. According to records, all nephrite used in ancient China came from here [9]. The white jade and jasper needed by jade workers in the Tang dynasty were also supplied by Khotan. The precious nephrite was taken from the beds of Khotan's two rivers [10]. Jade in the Tang dynasty mainly functioned as talismans for use in warding off evil. The Tang dynasty also saw the creation of new ornaments to wear because of imported jade material. Archaeologists can still see the jade birds decorated with gold and silver, as well as the jade combs decorated with human and animal reliefs. Jade ribbons decorated with fish as a symbol of rank and honor were a new form of decoration in the Tang dynasty as well. Moreover, some of the jade ornaments of the Tang dynasty came from foreign countries. For example, the Kang country once contributed a "white jade ring" to Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty [11].

Among the nobles of the Tang dynasty, it became a trend to use a belt made of jade panels [12]. This belt replaced the older leather belt, and belts made of metal rings during the Sui dynasty. Even this jade belt is sometimes a tribute to the Hu people. Lazurite which also originated from Yutian in the Tang dynasty was used as a foreign gem in Tang society and had a profound impact on their clothing. In the late eighth century, Emperor Dezong of the Tang dynasty sent Zhu Ruyu to Khotan to buy jade articles [13]. The envoy brought back not only jade articles made of nephrite, but also several hundred pounds of "sese" (lazurite). Through the efforts of historians, we have discovered that the true origin of lazurite is in "Shiguo" (Tashkurgan), and Khotan was actually the eastern market for lazurite [14]. In the Tang dynasty itself, lazurite was a very valuable gift. In fact, women in the Tang dynasty preferred lazurite as hair accessories. Wen Tingyun, a ninth-century poet, wrote a poem about this jeweled headwear titled "The Hairpin." It was not only the Han Chinese who became enamored with lazurite; it became popular among people further east as well. To the Tubo people (ancient Tibetans), lazurite was more valuable than gold, and regarded lazurite as a symbol of the blue sky.

4. The Influence of Exotic Gems on the Tang Dynasty's Legal and Political Systems

Because of the arrival of these foreign treasures, corruption, looting and murder became common in Guangdong Province. Of all the cities in the south, and of all the towns populated by foreigners, none were more prosperous than Guangzhou's vast seaport. Arabs refer to Guangzhou as "Khanfu", while Indians simply referred to Guangzhou as "China." In the bay of this colorful city, ships brought a lot of jewelry, spices and other goods [15]. In the 7th century, the governor of Guangzhou, Lu Yuanrui, took advantage of his position and looted these ships. He ended up being assassinated by the head of a Malaysian cargo ship [16]. Over the next thousand years, silk raiders of all kinds were exiled to Guangzhou, killing hapless merchants as a means of plunder to fully compensate them for the hardships they suffered in exile [17].

As the precious stones brought the Tang government management problems, the Tang government also solved this phenomenon by opening new official posts. In order to bring order and discipline to Guangzhou and to ensure that the palace could receive stable amount of luxury goods from Guangzhou, the Tang government established the office of "Shibosi" in the early eighth century. The duty of the Shibosi clerk was to manage customs. However, the emergence of Shibosi did not completely solve the city's problems, partly because it was a lucrative job. In particular, some prominent ambassadors intervened in trade activities [17]. In the first year of Emperor Guangde (in 763), these senior officials even decided to raise an army against the emperor [17]. The Tang government eventually put down what became known as the Bao Guan rebellion. However, even an

honest governor like Li Mian could not stop the corruption of petty officials. At the end of the eighth century, the Guangdong governor named Wang E repeatedly embezzling gems and ivory from ships [18].

The influx of exotic treasures in the seventh and eighth centuries also led to unprecedented bans in order to control the development of Tang culture. The tendency to admire western fashion fully developed in the material and spiritual cultures of the Tang dynasty. Foreigners and their exotic costumes were everywhere, and imitation of foreigners prevailed. In this active and open age, the emperor issued bans again and again, forbidding the display of strange animals and birds, and all kinds of foreign objects, so no one could rival his extravagance [19]. An edict issued by the founder of the Tang dynasty in his first year on the throne was to restrict the import of all kinds of exotic treasures.

Nonetheless, as trade continued, valuable ore helped to build social infrastructure in the Tang dynasty. This convenient infrastructure also led to a more convenient life for local residents and economic development flourished. The military towns established in the border areas of the Tang dynasty made it possible for people and goods from outside the Tang dynasty to flow continuously into Tang territory [20]. In order to transport silk and other precious goods from the mouth of the Yangtze River to the capital smoothly, the Tang government created a complex system of canals [21]. The canal also had a great influence on commercial activities within the Tang dynasty, providing local merchants with easier transportation and stimulating the economic development of the Jiangnan area.

5. The Influence of Exotic Gems on the Ideology and Religion of the Tang Dynasty

After exotic gems entered the Tang market, there was a change in Tang culture. During the Tang dynasty, many famous poets incorporated descriptions of gems into their poems. This poetry also subtly changed people's world views. The "spirit of water" appeared many times in Tang dynasty poems to describe the moonlight, reflecting the rich spiritual life of the Tang people, such as Li Bai's poem "White Walnut." In just four sentences, Li Bai used crystal and white jade to depict gorgeous ornaments.

Gems are not only quoted in literal terms in poetry, but some poets use them as metaphors for different colors that they had never seen before. The poet Bai Juyi changed the name of the mineral "sese" (lazurite) to a color word denoting the dark colors in the blue-green range of the chromatographic spectrum [21]. In the Tang dynasty, in addition to the widespread appreciation of foreign gems in secular life, more attention was paid to its use in religion. For example, the "seven treasures" in Buddhism are no doubt foreign gems. Among them, glaze, Tridacna, pearl and agate are the four more stable types of seven treasures [22]. Moreover, exotic gems have many other uses in Buddhism. For example, when making censers, Baibao censers made for Princess Anle in the Tang dynasty were made of pearls, glass, amber, agate, coral and other foreign gems [23]. In the Tang dynasty, streamers were often decorated with exotic precious stones, coral, agate, pearls, and rubs to express the devotion of Buddhists to the Buddha's bones [24]. In the production of Bodhisattva clothing decoration, a variety of foreign jewelry is also inlaid among them. Buddhism even uses foreign gems to make vessels for storing Buddhist bone relics [25]. Foreign gems are regarded as a supreme treasure in Buddhism and can be made into glass jars for storing Buddhist bone relics. Crystal coffins were used for storing Buddhist finger relics as well. For example, Famen Temple uses chamilia beads, circular green colored glass beads and crystal balls [26].

6. Conclusion

The arrival of foreign gems along the Silk Road had a large impact on Tang society. First, several new styles of dress were developed among the upper classes and ethnic minorities. The high value of the precious stones also brought dangers to the Tang government, including looting and corruption. The government was then forced to set up new posts and laws to limit these undesirable phenomena. Unconsciously, these foreign gems also enriched the spiritual world of the Tang people. People began to use these unprecedented dazzling gems in poems, and Buddhists also classified these treasures as special Buddhist ritual vessels in their scriptures. These diversified exotic gems gave the people of the Tang dynasty more space to express their imaginations. They could use the bright gems to compare their colors or integrate the gems into the description of the environment to make the poem more vivid. Gem also became a special medium, integrating the cultures of different countries together.

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