

*The Story of the Silk Road and Nara's Shosoin Treasure Repository
of the Emperor*

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Abstract

The story of the Silk Road is, inter alia, the most fascinating narrative of mutual cultural, linguistic, literary, artistic and religious influences that occurred among the nations and tribes that existed along the Silk Road. The Silk Road trade included various types of goods, from those that had certain economic value, such as silk, jade, spices and the like, to those that are nowadays highly esteemed in cultural and artistic terms and protected by the organizations that advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage, such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

As a country that was located at the eastern end of the Silk Road, Japan has actively participated in trade of goods that took place along the Silk Road. Of all the goods that were exchanged between Japan and other Silk Road countries, the most precious ones are certainly those that help us reconstruct or verify the facts related to the history of the Silk Road. Nara's Shosoin Treasure Repository of the Emperor contains the largest collection of the 8th century Silk Road artefacts. The aim of this paper is to analyze a number of items preserved in the mentioned repository, thus conveying the story of permeation of diverse cultures, religions, languages, literatures and arts that changed and shaped the identity of Silk Road countries forever.

Keywords: story, Silk Road, Shosoin Treasure Repository of the Emperor, artefacts.

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Introduction

In addition to a wealth of information on ancient trade of various kinds of goods, such as silk, jade, glass, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, foods, fruits, tea, spices, herbal medicines and the like, the Silk Road narrative offers a fascinating story of an unprecedented permeation of cultures, languages, literatures, arts and religions of diverse nations and tribes that existed along these ancient routes, or as Valerie Hansen rightfully emphasized in her book *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents*, stretching from China to Mediterranean countries, the Silk Road has “transmitted ideas, technologies, and artistic motifs, not simply trade goods.”¹

A number of translingual and transcultural phenomena have resulted from this unique Silk Road blend, some of which are nowadays deeply carved into the linguistic and cultural map of the world. In order to decode the multilayered fabric of this map, and hence gain new insights into the history of the Silk Road countries, researches conducted on items that are stored in cultural heritage conservation places, such as the Shosoin Repository of the Emperor in Japan, are of outmost significance. This paper aims at accentuating the role that Japan has played in the history of the Silk Road, as well as at analyzing a number of items preserved there with the aim of reconstructing and verifying the historical facts related to this ancient web of roads. The rationale behind choosing the collection of Nara’s Shosoin Repository as a focus of our research, lays in the fact that its precious treasures belong amongst the most varied and best preserved objects and artefacts originating from the 8th century Silk Road.

Nara, the Cradle of Japanese Culture, as the Eastern Terminus of the Silk Road

Often unfairly neglected or simply left out from the Silk Road maps, Japan nevertheless represents one of the most crucial stops of the eastern Silk Road route. In fact, the trade of goods between Japan and Central Asian countries was already well developed during the Asuka period (AD 538-710), but it particularly gained impetus during the Nara period (AD 710 to 794). Proclaimed to be the imperial capital of Japan by the Emperor Shōmu in the 8th century, the ancient city of Nara has attracted dignitaries and nobility coming from numerous kingdoms and tribal settlements spreading across the Silk Road. The city became a meeting place of numerous Silk Road countries’ representatives and has enabled a veritable permeation of Japanese culture and other Silk Road cultures, thus creating transcultural hybrids, which are today mistakenly confused with authentic cultural forms and patterns.

Although it is often referred to as *the cradle of Japanese culture*, the architecture of Nara clearly testifies to the great influence that Tang China had on Japan at the time, as it was modeled upon its ancient capital - Chang'an (now called Xi'an). Chinese influence on Japan was not only limited to architecture, but it has also greatly impacted its artistic forms and practices, such as painting, sculpture, the art of making musical instruments, jewelry and ceremonial clothes, which were worn during the 8th century by the Japanese imperial family and nobility. Moreover, material goods, valuable objects and artifacts, religious and philosophical teachings, as well as ideas originating from other Silk Road countries were mainly imported to Japan via China.

¹ Hansen, V. (June 2016). *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents*. Oxford University Press. p.5.

The influences of other Silk Road countries and nomadic tribes have merged into one within Nara, including above all Persian and Indian, but also Egyptian, Roman, Byzantine, Afghan and many other influences. Due to the stunning wealth of treasures that were stored there for a long time, Nara's Shosoin Repository of the Emperor is in fact sometimes referred to as the eastern terminus of the Silk Road itself.

The Story of Todaiji Temple and Shosoin Repository of the Emperor

The Shosoin Repository of the Emperor kept valuable Silk Road treasures secret for many centuries. As a result of strict measures of preservation, the Shosoin's Silk Road collection remained almost intact to this day, thus offering scientists and researchers the opportunity to reconstruct or verify historical facts related to the Silk Road narrative, and possibly even alternate them. State-of-the-art researches on the Shosoin's Silk Road treasures require participation and cooperation of different profiles of experts, thus fully corresponding with (multi-)interdisciplinary approach in research, for which modern science strongly advocates. Seeing that the 8th century objects and artefacts stored in the Shosoin Repository came from a great number of Silk Road countries, a versatile nature of the Shosoin's Silk Road collection can only be compared to the one discovered at the beginning of the 20th century in the Library Cave at the Mogao archaeological site (otherwise called *Mogao Caves* or *Thousand Buddha Grottoes*), which is located some 25km from Dunhuang in China. These two collections combined offer an entirely fresh insight into the Silk Road's well kept secrets, helping us to better understand the history of nations and nomadic tribes that existed along these ancient routes, as well as their cultures.

The story of the Shosoin's Silk Road collection begins with the narrative about the Japanese Emperor Shōmu (701–756) and his consort, Empress Kōmyō (701–760). The latter was a member of the Fujiwara clan and, hence the first commoner-consort of the Emperor. Moreover, Emperor Shōmu has allowed his consort to participate in the empire's affairs and has established a ritsuryō office (the *Kogogushiki*) especially in her honour. Forty-nine days upon his death, i.e. when the official mourning period has passed according to the Buddhist law, Empress Kōmyō has decided to dedicate 600 pieces of Emperor's personal belongings to the Great Buddha Vairocana of Todaiji Temple. The purpose of this act was to ensure the long-term happiness to her husband in the afterlife. Empress Kōmyō has donated items that are of utmost importance in terms of interpreting Japanese history on three more occasions. This especially refers to the ones that help us reconstruct everyday life at the Japanese court during the 8th century. Following Emperor Shōmu's religious path, Empress Kōmyō has supported the construction of a great number of Buddhist temples, amongst which the Todaiji Temple stands out in particular.

Todaiji Temple or *The Great Eastern Temple* is a temple complex representing one of the most significant landmarks of the city of Nara today. It was founded by the Emperor Shōmu in 752, who commissioned its construction in order to honour his early deceased son - Prince Motoi. The first building was in fact a small temple called *Kinshosenji*, which later expanded greatly into the Todaiji temple complex. Albeit small in size, the *Kinshosenji* represented the main Buddhist temple of the Empire during the Emperor Shōmu's reign, becoming so powerful that the succeeding emperors had to relocate the capital of the entire empire out of Nara. Paradoxically, *the Great Buddha Hall* of Todaiji Temple (*Daibutsuden*) is one of the largest wooden

buildings in the world today. Todaiji Temple is also known worldwide for being the home of the world's largest bronze statue of the Vairocana Buddha, the 15 meters tall *Great Buddha Vairocana*, called simply *Daibutsu* in Japan.

The Shosoin Repository was built in the vicinity of the Todaiji temple complex with the purpose of preserving some of the most important documents and artefacts of the 8th century Japan, as well as items originating from numerous Silk Road countries. During the reign of the Emperor Shōmu, *The Shosoin Repository of the Emperor* was just one of the many similar shoso buildings (*shoso* can be loosely translated as a *warehouse*), but with time it became the only building of its kind - a structure serving as the storehouse for documents and artefacts owned by temples and other religious or governmental buildings – that resisted the test of time, therefore *shosoin* became a proper noun. The original building was modelled upon the azekura architectural style, i.e. the log-cabin structure triangular in cross section made out of cypress timbers in most cases. It relies upon 40 wooden pillars, thus it was separated from the ground, which obviously contributed to a high degree of preservation of these unique eastern Silk Road route's treasures. Even though it does not contain the Shosoin collection any more, this log-cabin style building itself represents a valuable tangible cultural heritage of Japan, and thus Eastern Silk Road cultural heritage as well.

The Shosoin Repository as a Unique Treasure Trove of the Eastern Silk Road Route

Priceless Silk Road cultural heritage was stored in the Shosoin Repository for centuries, thus making it the most significant treasure trove of the Eastern Silk Road. Most of the treasures preserved there were brought to the Japanese imperial capital of Nara by foreign noblemen, as well as by the Japanese dignitaries and monks. These valuable gifts, which represented a sign of respect and appreciation for the then Japanese Emperor Shōmu, clearly testify of the good diplomatic ties that Japan has nurtured with other Silk Road countries during the 8th century. But even more importantly, the Shosoin's Silk Road collection conveys the story of permeation of diverse cultures, religions, languages, literatures and arts that changed and shaped the identity of the Silk Road countries forever. Some of the then cultural and diplomatic ties, as well as political connections, particularly those that existed between Japan and Central Asian countries along the Silk Road, are still strong, which is reflected in the fact that “in 1997 the “Silk Road” Diplomacy concept was formulated for Japan's policy toward Central Asia.”²

The Shosoin collection remained secret up until the Meiji government, which explains why it was not sufficiently explored to this day and why there is still an ever-present need to conduct research on many of its aspects. For the sake of preserving the Shosoin collection from the ravages of war, it was moved to the Nara National Museum during the World War II, where it has been permanently stored since 1962. Even today, only a handful of items are showcased once a year by the abovementioned museum on the occasion of the Shosoin exhibition. This narrows down the accessibility of the 8th century Silk Road treasures even more. Nowadays, the Shosoin collection contains around 9,000 documents, objects and artefacts,

² Rakhimov, M. (2014). Central Asia and Japan: Bilateral and multilateral relations. *Journal of Eurasian studies*, 5(1), p. 77.

amongst which is the valuable collection of items that are either greatly influenced by the Silk Road countries, such as Tang China, Persia, India and the like, or actually originating from the Silk Road countries. The Shosoin's Silk Road collection includes, among other things, cups, pitchers and cut-glass bowls from Persia; cups of Indian rhinoceros horn; Indian and Persian styled harps; Persian brocade; an Afghan mace; an Egyptian chest; a Byzantine cup; a Roman glass; a number of boxes made from mulberry wood and persimmon; silver and golden crowns; silk brocades; game of Go and other gameboards; Buddhist artefacts; and many other.

In order to better understand the history of the Silk Road, we will present some of the objects preserved within the Shosoin Repository, thus conveying our perspective on how these objects are testifying of mutual cultural, linguistic, literary, artistic and religious influences that intertwined in ancient times along the Silk Road, with particular focus on Japan and its position on the Eastern Silk Road route, as well as on relations that the Land of the Rising Sun nurtured with other Silk Road countries.

Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Silk Road within the Shosoin Repository of the Emperor

The Shosoin Repository has primarily preserved the tangible cultural heritage of the Silk Road, but its collection of documents, objects and artefacts is also testifying of the intangible cultural heritage, i.e. the living culture of Silk Road peoples. They are telling us the story of diverse social practices, rituals, artistic performances and traditional crafts that existed along the Silk Road. The research on both tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Silk Road indicates to what extent its cultures contain hybrid, transcultural forms, which are nowadays deeply imbued into the phenomenon of globalization. Considered together, they give a comprehensive insight into the cultural map of the Silk Road.

The Shosoin collection contains a great number of textiles that were produced in different Silk Road countries. In the work *The Shoso-in Textiles of the Era of Emperor Shomu*, Atsuhiko Ogata distinguishes the following types of fabric preserved there: “brocade (錦; multi-color patterned weave), twill (綾; figured twill), plain-weave silk (平絹), gauze (羅; complex gauze, 紗; simple gauze), tapestries (綴丸), and plain-weave cloth made by ramie-and-hemp (麻布).”³ Perhaps one of the most evident signs of the significant role that Japan has played on the ancient Silk Road is the *Blue silk cord* preserved at the Shosoin Repository. This silk cord was used during the consecration ceremony for the Great Buddha at Todaiji temple complex. The ceremony took place in 752 in accordance with the orders issued by the Emperor Shōmu and was attended by more than tens of thousands of monks. Performance of thousands of dancers has made it the most memorable celebration that took place in Japan during the 8th century. On the occasion of the same ceremony, Emperor Shōmu has worn a pair of scarlet red *ceremonial shoes*, which are today one of the central pieces of the Shosoin collection, measuring an incredible length of 31.5 cm and embellished with golden ribbon, silver flowers and metal studs filled with coloured glass, crystals and pearls. These resemble greatly “red-dyed deerskin boots (that) were

³ Ogata, A. (2012). *The Shoso-in Textiles of the Era of Emperor Shomu*. p. 5.

à la mode during T'ang"⁴ dynasty in China, thus indicating the great influence that China as the main Silk Road country had on Japan's court ceremonial dress, but also on all other aspects of life in Japan. This influence can particularly be noticed when observing the folding screen panels entitled *Torige Ritsujo no Byobu*, depicting a woman under a tree wearing clothes decorated with bird feathers. The woman's makeup style is identical to the one that was popular in Tang China at the time.

Next to Tang China, Persia was one of the crucial Silk Road countries with which Japan began the exchange of both material and cultural goods as early as in the 6th century CE, albeit mostly through China. Cups, pitchers and cut-glass bowls from Persia, Persian styled harps and brocade, which were preserved at the Shosoin Repository and exhibited on several occasions by the Nara National Museum, testify to this fact. They include objects of Persian origin that were intended for everyday use, such as *Haku Ruri no Wan* - 8.5 cm high bowl made of white glass with circular facets, *Haku Ruri no Hei* - 21.2 cm high pear-shaped white glass ewer with handle, which greatly resembles those preserved at the Iran Bastan Museum; as well as 5.1 cm high metal vessel with eight lobes made of cast and gilt copper, which is similar to many such items that could have been found throughout the entire Eurasia at the time. Furthermore, the "traders of various Asian nationalities traveled the silk routes to caravan cities near the Mediterranean to supply the Roman depots with such things as silks from China and spices from India."⁵ The Silk Road trade took place in other direction as well, therefore the Shosoin collection contains a cup made of blue glass that came to Japan all the way from Roman Empire, testifying to the unprecedented connectivity that was achieved along this ancient web of roads. To this day, only the World Wide Web has provided a greater level of connectivity.

The exchange that occurred along the Silk Road did not only involve the trade of material goods, but it has also enabled the permeation of what is today referred to as the Silk Road intangible cultural heritage. The music is one of the most precious intangible cultural heritages of the Silk Road. Diverse musical forms and styles have spread from one Silk Road country to another and merged with time to such an extent that it is nowadays almost impossible to discern who exerted the greatest impact upon a particular musical genre. This has led to some of them being considered authentic of a certain country or people that existed on the Silk Road, while in fact they represent a mixture of diverse Silk Road musical influences. It is also important to emphasize that music was often closely related to religious rituals and practices, as sacred chants were greatly practiced by Buddhist monks, followers of Islamic Sufi orders, dervishes and the like. These religious men often came to Japan from other Silk Road countries, bringing their own music with them and, thus changing the traditional music of Japan.

Comparative Overview of the Shosoin's Musical Instruments

As a result of dissemination of diverse musical influences and practices along the Silk Road all the way to Japan, the Shosoin Repository possesses an outstanding and unparalleled collection of musical instruments of the Silk Road origin. In this regard, one of its essential pieces is a document listing musical instruments stored at the Shosoin Repository at the time. Today, over seventy musical instruments represent

⁴ Schafer, E. H. (1963). *The golden peaches of Samarkand: a study of T'ang exotics* (Vol. 742). University of California Press. p. 107.

⁵ Liu, X. (2010). *The Silk Road in world history*. Oxford University Press. p. 20

some of the most valuable treasures of the Shosoin collection. These include mostly the ones made by Tang China artisans, embellished with mother-of-pearl from the South Seas and lapis lazuli from Turkey. Furthermore, the Shosoin collection contains a number of one-of-a-kind and truly unique musical instruments, such as the shiragi-goto from the Korean kingdom of Silla.

Namely, while most of the Silk Road musical instruments preserved at the Shosoin Repository came from China, there are also those originating from Korea, Persia, India and other Silk Road countries. Obvious similarities that exist between Japanese and other Silk Road countries' musical instruments make it quite difficult to discern the authentic origin of a particular musical instrument. In order to demonstrate these similarities, we have compared the Silk Road musical instruments with those said to be national musical instruments of Japan. Shosoin's shiragi-goto is named after one of the three ancient kingdoms of Korea - the Korean kingdom of Silla (Shiragi in Japanese language). It is quite similar to Japanese national musical instrument called koto. However, there is one important difference - shiragi-goto has twelve strings and koto has thirteen of them. Nevertheless, when they are observed together a permeation of ancient mutual influences stretching across the Silk Road from the Korean kingdom of Silla to Japan is clearly visible.

A precious lute called *Kuwanoki no genkan* is one of only two remaining "Genkan" round-bodied lutes in the world, both of which are proudly preserved at the Shosoin Repository. This rare piece most likely originates from China and (probably) owes its name to one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove who loved to play this instrument (a group of Chinese scholars, writers, and musicians who lived during the reign of the Chinese Jin dynasty, i.e. in the 3rd century, which greatly influenced poets and painters of their time). A painting located at the central part of this mulberry wood lute displays an image of two people playing a game of go, an ancient game that was considered as one of the four essential arts of aristocratic Chinese scholars, and an onlooker at its very centre. This image conveys Chinese belief in immortality, which became ever-present in Japan during the Nara period.

We have further analyzed and compared the Shosoin's aforementioned Chinese lute *Kuwanoki no Genkan* and Japanese the *Raden Shitan no Gogen Biwa*, the only five-stringed lute-like wooden biwa in the world. These two rare pieces of musical instruments are made of different materials: the first one is made of mulberry wood and the second one out of sandalwood. The overall shape is quite similar, especially the neck, but the Chinese mulberry wood lute's body is much more rounded. Furthermore, materials and techniques used for crafting these ancient musical instruments are much more elaborate and sumptuous in the case of the *Raden Shitan no Gogen Biwa*. Special techniques – raden and mokuga were used in producing this one-of-a-kind musical instrument, in which we discern patterns made from a mesmerizing blend of pieces of shells and beautiful embellishments in the form of scarlet red-colored flowers (on the back), birds and a tropical tree (on the front). Moreover, the neck of the *Raden Shitan no Gogen Biwa* is more stylishly and richly adorned than the one of the Chinese mulberry wood lute. A central part image of the Japanese biwa lute can be easily interpreted – in it we can clearly see a Persian man playing the instrument while riding a camel (this artistic motif alone testifies to the great permeation of cultures that occurred along the Silk Road, in this particular case indicating a great level of connectivity between Japan and Persia), which cannot be

said for the central image of the *Kuwanoki no Genkan*. The latter central piece is much more difficult to grasp due to a somewhat ambiguous nature of artistic motifs, leading scientists to hesitate in terms of claiming who the people playing a game of go are (whether they represent the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove or Chinese Immortals). Nevertheless, these two musical instruments obviously have a common conceptual design and have resulted from a similar artistic craftsmanship, which makes the sound they produce very similar. Above all, this comparative analysis indicates the great level of connectivity that was achieved between Japanese and Chinese music along the Silk Road, while at the same time incorporating Persian artistic motifs as well.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the Shosoin's Silk Road treasures, whether they are Japanese imitation of Chinese, Persian and Indian ones or are actually originating from a particular Silk Road country, is extremely valuable for decoding transcultural and translingual hybrid forms that are now deeply rooted in cultures spreading along this ancient web of roads. Future research, particularly those exploring transcultural and translingual phenomena, should be conducted in this area. Therefore, our contribution was aimed at both emphasizing the importance of this type of research projects in the future and offering examples of good practice in this regard.

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