

Origins, Changes, and Integration: Cross-Cultural Art Between Dali and the Kingdom of Sukhothai

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Since it was suggested at the end of the 19th century that Thai people originally came from Southern China, “Dali and Sukhothai” has become one of the most controversial topics of Southeast Asian studies. This paper aims at showing the existence of a transcultural phenomenon between the arts and cultures of Dali and Sukhothai. In order to exam in this, this paper confronts two propositions: early Tai people establishing the Nanzhao Kingdom in Dali, and the move to the South of the Tai people. The paper focuses on three causes of the transcultural art of Dali and Sukhothai: (1) South East Asia as a cultural entity, (2) the geo-civilisational influence, (3) the trans-border ethnic migrations.

Keywords: Dali, Sukhothai, cross-cultural exchange

Introduction

Dali is located in the southwestern part of China, in the interior of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. It is the capital of the ancient Nanzhao Kingdom (CE 737-937) and of the kingdom of Dali (CE 937-1254). Since ancient times, it has been a place of cultural contact between China and India, and Southeast Asian polities, an important city for trade. Sukhothai was located in what is now the northern part of Thailand, in the interior of the Gulf of Siam. Sukhothai is located in the northern part of Thailand, in the interior of the Gulf of Siam. The Sukhothai Dynasty (AD 1238-1438) was the major first major polity established by Thai people. It has been called “暹” (xiān), in Chinese historiography and maintained diplomatic contact with other kingdoms of that time, in Southeast Asia in Chinese historiography and maintained diplomatic contact with other kingdoms of that time, in Southeast Asia as well as in China, India, and Sri Lanka. Cross-cultural contacts allow different religions, cultural practices, and arts to circulate between different regions: official exchanges, pilgrimages, gifts, trade, private exchanges, and immigration. Those cities that are located in transportation hubs, political centres, and trades are often very active in cross-cultural exchanges and become a place where cultures meet and merge (Shao, 2008).

The earliest research on Dali and Sukhothai appeared at the end of the 19th century; in a period of cultural exchange between East and West, a large number of Westerners went to Southeast Asia to discover and study its historical sites and ancient civilisations. Archaeologists and scholars brought new methods and brought new ideas. Léon d’Hervey de Saint-Denys (French), Albert Terrien de Lacouperie (from the Royal Asiatic Society), and others first proposed the idea of Thai people establishing Nanzhao. For the first time was the town in China’s southwestern edge associated with the declining dynasty of distant Thailand. This view was later

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furthered and elaborated upon by W. C. Dodd (U.S.A.), W. A. R. Wood (U.K.), and others. Thai historians Phraya Prachakitkorachak, Damrong Rajanubhab, Luang Wichitwathakan, and others have further expanded on that view, which lasted for nearly half a century.

In the middle of the 20th century, William Kridner (Germany) put forward an opposing view, arguing the impossibility of growing rice in the region surrounding Dali, and Tai people favouring settling under tropical climates. Then Wolfram Eberhard, Charles Backus, and Paul K. Benedict (U.S.A.) completely denied the Tai migration using linguistics, ethnology, and sociology. Following this view, Chinese researchers such as Fang Guoyu, He Ping, Tan Shengmin, and others have researched this view deeply and produced a large amount of literature examining the possibility of a “westward migration of the Tai people”. In the same period, researchers in Thailand, Frederick W. Mote, Sood Sangvichien, and others also developed new ideas, thinking archaeological findings proved that Thailand was actually the land where the ancestors of the Tai lived and prospered.

After that, because there were no historical remnants or written sources that could prove a kinship between Dali and Sukhothai, the research on Dali and Sukhothai has reached a dead-end, no longer attracts attention, and in recent years almost no-one has shown any interest.

And yet, for a period of time little under a hundred years, Dali and Sukhothai, geographically close to one another, sharing a similar South East Asian faith, emerged as relatively developed countries; could there be no cultural and artistic connection between the two?

The present paper does not assume a kin relationship between the two, but regardless of whether the two places are proved to have a kinship or not, it goes further to affirm Dali and Sukhothai’s independent cultural development; it analyses and points out the originality of the art forms of Dali and Sukhothai through cross-cultural analysis, using a vast number of cultural material and works of art, showing the interactive processes in the various art forms of Dali and Sukhothai.

Southeast Asia as a Cultural Entity

East Asia was treated as a consistent subject of study for the first time in “A History of Southeast Asia”, by D. G. E. Hall, published in 1955 the book of G. E. Hall in 1955, and subsequently the concept came to be adopted across research institutions. In terms of pure geography, Southeast Asia consists of two parts, the continental and the insular. The Southeast Asia referred to in this article is the mainland, particularly Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand in connection to China South of the Yangtze River. Indeed without mentioning Southern China, it is impossible to understand the history of Southeast Asia (Tallinn, 2003). In fact, most of the time in history, Southern China has close contacts with Southeast Asia, including the early “bronze culture”, “boulder culture”, “dry building”, and “rice culture”. The cultural circle and the subsequent trade and trade of “Southwest Silk Road 1” also led to the exchange and development of culture in the region (Tarling, 2000). In fact for most of known history Southern China and Southeast Asia have been in close contact, including in cultural group formed by the earlier Bronze Age, megalithic, pile-built dwellings, and wetland-farming cultures, just as much as the later “Southwestern Silk Road” trade relations spurred cultural exchanges and development in the region.

The Southern China discussed will mainly comprise the area that has Dali as a centre, within the range of Nanzhao and the Kingdom of Dali’s rule. Up to now, it has been proved that stoneware culture, pottery culture, and bronze culture constitute an important part of its prehistoric culture. The Stone Age, Neolithic Pottery, and

the Bronze Age have been shown to constitute the main constituents of prehistoric culture periodisation. Ethnic minorities in the region still retain “megalith worship” customs. A large number of early “rain-dry” building communities were unearthed from the Jianmen Haimenkou site, the birthplace of Yunnan’s early bronze culture.

In excavations at the Early Bronze Age site of Haimenkou in Jianchuan County, a large quantity of “pile-built” dwellings have been found. On a dish unearthed at the Sangkhalok kilns within the Sukhothai area, an artist of the time has represented a “pile-built” housing; according to Thai research, Sukhothai-era people would use “pile-built” constructions as family shelters, particularly for valley-dwelling people. The “pile-built” house is the traditional architectural style of the ancient Yue tribes, and is common in Southeast Asia.

Researchers, when studying antiques in Dali and Sukhothai museums, have discovered that both regions used bronze ware made out of pottery molds, a technique human of early times used for producing bronze ware. These tools, shaped by two corresponding kiln-made molds, are molded into shape; after cooling the pottery pieces are opened and the product is taken out. This bronze ware production process is relatively simple, and was at that time common found in Southeast Asia. In addition, a lot of other similar U-type utensils have been discovered: bronze spears, bracelets, and necklaces, the appearing of jewellery, particularly bracelets being an important product in Southeast Asian bronze ware culture.

One Piece of Evidence (White, 2009)

Another important discovery made by researchers is bronze drums, a complete Nanzhao-era bronze drum kept by the Provincial Museum of Yunnan, and the headpiece of a bronze drum stored in the Ram Khamhaeng National Museum in Sukhothai Park. They are decorated using a 12-pointed sun pattern at the centre; around the sun is a circle of birdmen; their design tends towards abstraction, like a neatly arranged row of letters: The wings are drawn as delicate lines, and the feathered characters are also surrounded by bird shapes; concentric circles, small vertical lines, and triangular patterns also add to the decoration. The design and composition of the two drums are essentially the same. Compared to the scenes depicting processional fleets on Dongson bronze drums in Vietnam, or to the Zhuang bronze drums from Guanxi Province, the decorative patterns of the two bronze drums are particularly unusual.

Geo-civilisational Influence

A geo-civilisation is the interlocking between human communities, brought by naturally occurring neighbouring economical, cultural, and political relationships. Originally from India, Buddhism had a widespread influence on all Asian countries. Although the specific time at which Buddhism appeared in Dali is controversial, after a meticulous study of written sources and other material, the point of view of this paper is that Buddhism had already appeared in Dali as early as in the 3rd or 4th century CE, the most important argument in this respect being that at the birthplace of the Nanzhao kingdom, on the Weishan site, the a large number of pieces of beautifully crafted Buddha statues of that period were found. These statues showed an influence by the Persian style; the head shows hair tied into an ushnisha, whereas in Han China proper Buddha statues very rarely display the ushnisha. Moreover the Buddha statues’ pose is simple, their lines are smooth, and their faces show an obvious difference in facial features with the local ethnic groups living there at that time.

During the era of Nanzhao and of the Dali Kingdom a type of statue is unique to that area, known as the

“Luck of Yunnan”, the Acuoye Avalokitesvara, presenting a unique silhouette with female forms on a male body, barefoot, a naked top, and wearing jewelry, bracelets, and necklace. A comparative study on the artistic forms of the Acuoye Avalokitesvaras, the Bodhisattvas of the Srivijaya period at the Malaysia National Museum, and some of the few Bodhisattvas originating in Thailand at the National Museum in Bangkok has been conducted. It appears that these Bodhisattva statues have been produced using a technique of copper-gilding, their faces displaying characteristic feminine features, furthermore having a naked torso and wearing bracelets and necklace.

On the former site of Nanzhao’s ancient capitals Taihe and Yangxiemie, buildings and ornamental artifacts were unearthed, and after a pictorial analysis was conducted on the buildings and ornaments found in ruins at the SukhoThai era SukhoThai and in Si Satchanalai Historical Parks, it was discovered that in both places buildings used a similar type of ornamentation, a type of square-shaped geometrical bricks, or a round one; the eaves-tiles in Dali known as “wǎdāng”, and in SukhoThai are called in a slightly different way; these geometrical ornaments suggest very particular importance; they often include protection, prayer, auspicious symbols such as lotuses, the Wheel of Dharma, heads of animals; the decorative imagery that has a religion feel predominates, having to do with the influence of Indian culture.

The Ram Khamhaeng stela, a most important document for the history of the SukhoThai dynasty, records the history of Tai people’s keen involvement in diplomacy, establishing peaceful relations with neighbouring polities. In Ram Khamhaeng’s times they took the initiative to dispatch a diplomatic mission to Yuan China, establishing a stable tribute and trade relationship, the benefits brought by that relationship including the acquisition of the technology for producing wonderful ceramics, of which the most famous is the Sangkhalok ceramic ware. Some researchers believe that the craftsmen would develop Sangkhalok ceramics which came from Zhejiang in China; the evidence for that statement being that, compared to the ceramic technology formerly available in the area compared to the surrounding regions’, Sangkhalok technology is of obviously much higher quality, having achieved the highest possible skill in high-temperature glazing and complex decorations with bright colours. Some researchers have found in Cizhou within local records mentions of Tai people recruiting potters (Wang, 2014). Besides this, in Sangkhalok Museum in SukhoThai, one may find fine quality ceramics from various places in China, mostly primarily having been found in ruins of temples and coastal sites along the maritime Silk Road.

In Dali’s Museum there are kept a lot of Chinese ceramics of the same style. The most widespread type of ceramics produced around Dali was made in dragon kilns, i.e., an earthen kiln built in the shape of a dragon on a hillslope, the size of which was comparably small compared to that of Jingdezhen; originally from the Tang-Nanzhao period, as a result of its inaccessibility with regards to transportation, this original type of manufacturing technology has been preserved to this day. Inspecting Dali’s local dragon kilns and SukhoThai’s ancient kilns, we find in both places an expert use of the potter’s technique of throwing, as well as a way of press-knocking in decorative patterns, with similar pressing-in tools; on the inside an elliptic stone bearing the strength, on the outside using wood or various kinds of patterned or textured sticks designed for pottery, the stick being knocked into the body of the pottery, and the elliptical stone holding it together against fracture. Furthermore, they all use a technique of supporting separators to prevent the products from sticking to each other during the firing, the disadvantage of that technique being the traces left of the burnt support at the bottom of the product. In the museums of SukhoThai and of Dali both are kept many such pottery supporters, and taking a look at the ancient ceramics from both places we often find such traces of burning.

In the course of investigations leading to this paper, another important discovery was made regarding the construction of the cities' irrigation systems. The ruins of ancient Sukhothai are famous for their developed water system, of which the use of pottery-made pipes is an important feature; today in the Sukhothai World Heritage Site and in Si Satchanalai Historical Park these clay pipes are still in use. Moreover, in the remains of Taihe of the Nanzhao kingdom, in the Dali, area many items of similar function have been unearthed, of a less sophisticated design, a testimony to the fact as early as the time of Nanzhao, people were already including water use and derivation in constructions. This example of clay water-pipes is rarely seen in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Trans-Border Ethnic Migrations: Trans-Border Ethnic Groups

Trans-border groups live across borders, and in fact the Tai people themselves are a rather large trans-border ethnic group. The cultures of the people of both Dali and Sukhothai have a long history, and very rich art forms, and although the folklore of the Bai and of the Tai differ vastly, because Dali since ancient times has been a multi-ethnic place different cultures, have influenced each other and have mixed together. Moreover, both Dali and Sukhothai have lived numerous trans-border ethnic groups, such as the Yi, the Lisu, the Hmong, the Tai etc; among the art forms of these different cultures, the most similar is the coloured woven fabrics, wax-dotted fabrics, including a profusion of decorative patterns on tie-dyes and batiks, the decorative motifs permeated with distinctive characteristics of the local culture.

From the 13th to the middle of the 14th century adult Tais usually in formal occasions were an article of clothing known as the sampotchangkben, the clothe expressing the wearer's status, the common man in Sukhothai having a simple long V-shaped neck, while women would be dressed in a type of silk sarong skirt; commoners would also wear belts made of silk or metal, possibly even of gold. In a Tang-era document known as the "Book of the Southern Barbarians", it is likewise recorded that a people called the Máng wore sarong skirts. An important Nanzhao-era work of art, the *nánzhāotúzhuàn* ("Illustrated story of Nanzhao") describes the lives and faith of the king and noblemen of Nanzhao during the second year of the Zhongxing era. In it there is a depiction of offerings to a sacred pillar, where the king and the nobles are wearing Tai clothes similar to those mentioned above.

Dali and Sukhothai cotton and hemp coloured woven fabrics were commonly used, an art form common to many different ethnic groups. The structure of the looms in Dali and Sukhothai is made of wood beams, including two horizontal and vertical frames on which the silk threads are lined, and the shuttle is passed horizontally between the two sets of threads, different weaving patterns creating different designs, generally geometrical, the decorative design being the most important. In addition to weaving, there are many folk arts common to the Dali and Sukhothai areas. In both places today's folk culture is inherited from the past, and although some of the crafts are lost, most of them have remained and been passed and even year after year have grown and influenced each other. For example, the technique of batik, originally from Indonesia, has relatively well developed in the Sukhothai area and acquired an obvious Thai artistic taste and style; Dali's batiks at first used by the Yi, are now also made by the Bai people.

Conclusion

The Tai first lived in the valleys of the Southeast Asian lowlands leading to the Yunnan Plateau. They gradually settled along the Chaoyang Phraya River around the 11th century CE; like the ethnic minorities

having lived in Dali for generations, they believed that all living things have a spirit, and coexisted in peace with other ethnic groups. In fact Dali was a small kingdom that managed to exist despite the pressure of ancient China, and after being annexed experienced many dynastic changes, whereas Sukhothai within Thai history only existed a short time, became for most of its existence a subordinate of Ayutthaya. But they have left, through their culture, religious traditions, and art, a profound influence on people; from the perspective of art, there exists a cross-cultural influence between the cultures and arts of Dali and Sukhothai that researchers doing comparative studies of antique material passed down to us, and particularly artifacts. Forming a cross-cultural art phenomenon, this mingling across the vicissitudes of time expresses the very fabric of origins, changes, and integration.

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