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Central Asia and the Republic of Korea: A Sketch on Historical Relations

Abstract

This paper surveys historical material on the relationship between Central Asian peoples and ancient Korea. The earliest contacts of ancient Koreans with Central and Southern Asia were developed predominantly with forming of the Silk Road outside China, the so called Western Regions (西域) of Central Asia, which became known to Korea through traders. There is evidence of Korean merchants mediating trade in Chinese and Central Asian goods reaching as far as Japan.

Korean interest in the Western Regions was also fueled by the Buddhism then thriving in all three Korean Kingdoms; many Korean monks to India. Hyech'o, a young pilgrim from Silla, started his journey to India in approximately 723 AD from the South China Sea. A report on his journey called "Notes on Pilgrimage to Five Regions of India" ("Wang Wu Tianzhuguo zhuan") was found by Paul Pelliot in the Dunhuang caves in 1908. Scholars unanimously believe Hyech'o's account to be among the most significant texts of the first half of eighth century.

Existing historical evidence suggests that Silla is linked to the penetration of Sogdian trading activities into the Korean Peninsula. In this regard, the wall paintings from the Early Medieval Afrasiab Palace of Varhuman, the ruler of Samarkand, depicts two Korean ambassadors coming to Samarkand. Moreover, among the statues of Turkic and Sogdian aristocrats near the Silla royal tombs there are 2 statues made of granite depicting Central Asian ethnic representatives. Both are located at the tomb of King Wŏnŏng, the 38th king of Silla. The appearance and clothing shows that these statues depicted Sogdians and were erected around the second half of the seventh century when Central Asia faced Arabic invasions. The second object is the statue complex at the tomb of Hŭngdŏk, depicting another Sogdian aristocrat.

Key words: Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Korea, China, Sogdians, Buddhist monks, Great Silk Road, history, culture.