

# Research on the Communication between Tibet and Khotan from the Perspective of Road Musk

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## Abstract

Adjacent to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, there is a Musk Road that travels west along the north and south of the Tarim Basin, which is the twin road of the ancient Silk Road. Tibet strengthened its communication and exchange with its neighbors through the Musk Road when Songtsen Gampo unified the Plateau. Khotan, strategically located at the junction of the southern branch of the famous Silk Road, became an important communicator for cultural and political exchanges with Tibet. This paper intends to explore the significance of the exchanges between Tibet and Khotan along the Musk Road from the perspective of geography, politics, and culture, so as to study the historical contributions the Road had made to the formation, enrichment, and maintenance of the Chinese cultural circle.

## Keywords

Musk Road; Tibet; Khotan; Communication and Exchange.

## 1. Introduction

Under the reign of Songtsen Gampo, ruler of Tibet, Tubo people, the ancestors of Tibetans, unified the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and headquartered in Luoxie (modern-day Lhasa). Since then, Tibet's exchanges with other regions in economy and trade as well as culture became more frequent with the growing strength in its politics, economy, and culture. "According to the historical records, the Roman Empire started musk trade with Tibet in the first century AD through the road from Qamdo, Lhasa, Ngari, to West Asia, which was historically recognized as the Musk Road. From then on, the Road had further become a channel for commercial and cultural exchanges between ancient China and the West"[1]. Zhangzhung is located at the north of Khotan, both of which are of great importance in terms of their strategic position. Given Khotan's critical position on the South branch of the Silk Road and Zhangzhung's huge economic interests, Tibetans planned to take Zhangzhung as its base. From the middle of the seventh century AD, Tibet continued to invade Khotan and it eventually took it under its control in 791 AD after the retreat of the force of the Tang Dynasty, marking the start of its governance on Khotan for 70 years. Since then, a large number of Tibetans subsequently moved to China's western regions, bringing about extensive and profound exchanges in politics, economy, and culture. All these were well witnessed by historical traces such as ancient Buddhist grotto sites, beacon towers and ancient forts, trestle bridges as well as posterns along the Tarim Basin.

## 2. Geographical Connections between Khotan and Tibet

Khotan is adjacent to Tibet, both of which are restricted by geographical environment with the former on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the latter on the southern edge of the Taklimakan Desert. The two regions are separated by Altun Mountains, Kunlun Mountains, and Karakorum Mountains. With an altitude of over 5,000 meters, regions in the three Mountains

are regarded as the forbidden zone for human activities. Blocked by high mountains and ridges as well as extremely difficult and dangerous road traffic, Khotan and Tibet maintained exchanges in many aspects as well. "Currently, there are two roads for mutual exchanges identified by the academic scholars. The first road travels north through Ngari, an area in Tibet's western region, passes through the Ladakh area of the Aksai Chin Desert between the Kunlun Mountains and the Karakorum Mountains, to the north, and arrives at the Saitula Border Station in Pishan County in present-day Khotan, and it continues to go north along the Sangzhu ancient road, the Suleazi River and Kangaizi to Pishan, or go west to Yecheng, Shule, or go east to Khotan"[2]; The Musk Road, known as the twin road of the Silk Road, largely goes the same way. The second road starts from the Qiangtang Plateau in northern Tibet, travels the Keliya Road between Muztag and Qiongmztag in the Kunlun Mountains, and gets into the Kunlun mountainous area. With numerous castles, post stations, and underpasses along this section, the Road appears from time to time, making it more difficult and dangerous to move forward. Going forward, it arrives at the Keliya River Valley in Khotan County. To the north, it finally gets to the Mazartag area, a junction formed by the Yulong Kashi River and the Kara Kashi River. Thanks to the two roads, Tibet is able to promote the extensive and in-depth exchanges with Khotan and with other part of China's western regions in every aspect. On the other hand, it is also a road for expansion, which helps Tibet to unify the western regions and extend its influence sphere.

### **3. Political, Economic and Cultural Exchanges between Tibet and Khotan**

#### **3.1. Exchanges in Politics**

Tibet has influenced Khotan in many aspects. That's especially true in the governance model of the society. When Tibet took Khotan under its control, it did not promote its own governance model on Khotan by compulsion. "According to the historical records of the 36th year about Yu Chiyao, King of Khotan, he did not immediately abdicate from the throne and Fu Weijin and other officials were still in their position. Even under the control of Tibet, all the original social organizations and personnel of Khotan had not been changed, which indicated Khotan was surrendered rather than occupied by force"[3]. "In addition, a series of social management system suitable for Khotan had been rolled out. For example, Tibet set off regulations and laws to solve civil affairs and put forward the policy of conciliation and detention system similar to that of in Tang Dynasty to appease tribal leaders and make them be loyal to the central government. The implementation of the systems effectively ensured the social stability of Khotan and promoted economic and cultural exchanges between the two places. Precisely because of the systems implemented, there had been no destructive and predatory warfare-- so devastating that determined to destruct the cultural beliefs and the social foundation of its rivals-- in other ethnic groups in the western regions"[4]. To a certain extent, Tibet protected the original social model of Khotan, which contributed to the improvement of its own management by drawing strength from Khotan's politics, economy, culture. The policy of conciliation and detention system towards the original aristocratic group of Khotan made it possible for Tibet to administer the place and receive tribute from tribal leaders, enabling local stability and sufficient life necessities. Given the impact of the systems and policies carried out by Tibet, it was a win-win situation for the both sides. Without destroying the original development pattern and the culture of the Khotan's society, the policies had met the demand of Tibetan aristocrats' ambition of expansion.

#### **3.2. Exchanges in Economy**

The Silk Road took the lead in promoting the communication and exchange between the western regions and the outside world, and then there was the Musk Road, which broadened the road for cultural and trade exchanges. Khotan is a large oasis on the southern edge of the

Tarim Basin strategically located at both the Silk Road and the Musk Road. Commodities from the East and the West flooded in, rendering Khotan a trading center on the southern Silk Road. At the same time, great progress was also made in Khotan's agriculture. It pioneered the silkworm silk technology from China's inland and Jade mining. With the husbandry-based economy as its pillar, Tibet exported Tibetan featured products, mainly including fine horses, musk, medicinal materials, and leathers. More often, it also engaged in entrepot trade, carrying commodities from China's inland and South Asian India to distant Central Asia, West Asia and Europe through the Musk Road or Jade Road with Khotan as a transit point along the way. Brocades, a tribute paid by Khotanese popular in Tibetans, were an important commodity in the economic trade between Khotan and Tibet. Tibet took the southern Silk Road under its control through expansion to Khotan, bringing direct economic benefits and accelerating the formation and development of its own productivity. In a word, Tibet's expansion to Khotan might be regarded as aggression by Khotanese at that time, but, historically, it contributed to the advancement of productivity and the political and culture exchanges of the Plateau.

### 3.3. Exchanges in Culture

As a representative of the converging place of the Chinese and Western cultures, Khotan is the earliest receiver of Buddhism from the India, thus it is called the "small heaven" by people in China's inland. Khotan is an area of important influence in China's western regions in politics, economy, culture, and religion. Since the first century AD when Buddhism started to spread from the West to the East, Khotan, as the gateway to China, played an important role in the exchange of the Chinese and Western culture. It is especially true in the communication and exchange of Buddhist teaching and Buddhist culture in China's inland, Tibet, and even Japan and South Korea. Khotan's Buddhism is of special significance to Tibet. In *rGya bod yig tshang chen mo*, a Tibetan script about Buddhism, Khotan is recorded as a "sacred place", because it widely absorbed the artistic nourishment of ancient India, Sassanid Persia, Greece, Sogdian and other foreign civilizations, and created Khotan-style Buddhist culture and art. This has a greater impact on the formation of Tibetan Buddhist culture and art. For domestic academic scholars, they believe that the art form of Tantric Buddhist statues in Khotan's artistic style has a relatively direct influence on the Buddhist artistic style of Tibet. For example, the Woodcut painting discovered at the Palzong Grotto site in Zada County, Ngari, Tibet, has a strong resemblance to Khotan's woodcut paintings. Therefore, we could say that the painting art in Tibet is likely to be under the direct influence of the Khotan-style painting art. G. Duqi, a famous Italian Tibetologist Professor once proposed that special attention should be paid to the "Khotan-style" Buddhist art in our research of the Tibetan Buddhist art. Many traces could be found in Tibetan historic records that Khotanese artist used to carry out artistic activities in Tibet. "In a Tibetan historical record, *Gsal-snañ (Sba)*, Tibetan btsan-po wanted to build a temple and he heard that there was a craftsman in Khotan who had built the Wenjiang Dewu Temple. Then he ordered a man to visit Khotan and brought the King of Khotan a hydropotes inermis and a letter. In the letter, he wrote, inside the cage is a hydropotes inermis. I give it to you, please keep it and send a skilled craftsmen to Tibet to build us a Buddhist temple, or we will wage war against you.[5]" The King of Khotan wanted to get the gift and he was also avaried the warfare, so he ordered the craftsman to Tibet. After numerous hardships, the craftsman finished the work and built the Samye Temple of the Khotan style. Looking at the Khotan-style Buddha statues, Buddhist murals, and decorations, btsan-po was very satisfied and highly praised the superb skill of the man and called him the "King of Khotan-style art". According to the archaeological evidence, the Khotan-style Buddhist art is most clearly embodied in Tibetan Buddhist temples, among which today's Aiwang Temple in Kangma County is a representative. The murals on the wall of Amitayus Hall are completely painted in accordance with that of Khotan style. "The Buddha statue of Sakyamuni in Aiwang Temple

was sculptured to show the heaviness of the clothes through fine, flat and soft pleats so as to make the solid clay statue become elegant and light. The style of the sculpture and technique reflected the most profound and obvious influence of Khotan-style Buddhist art on Tibet's." [6]

#### **4. Research on the Significance of Political, Economic and Cultural exchanges between Tibet and Khotan**

When Tibet settled down on the Plateau, it gradually took areas like Helong, Tarim Basin, and Pamirs began under its control with an expansion towards the east, west, and north. In a sense, Tibet had already held an important strategic position on the south and middle part of the Silk Road, and thus became the center of trade and cultural exchanges between the east, the west, the north, and the south.

##### **4.1. Political Significance**

The Four Garrisons of Anxi were Chinese military garrisons installed by the Tang Dynasty. They were Qiuci (Kucha), Khotan (Hotan), Shule (Kashgar), and Yanqi (Karashahr). Among them, Khotan had a very important strategic position. After the An Lu Shan Rebellion broke out, the Tang army stationed in Anxi, Beiting, and Xizhou retreated to China's inland. Then, Tibet started to take possession of the three places. Despite the fact that communication and exchange between Tibet, Khotan, and other parts of China's western regions were carried out by force of conquest, Tibet's governance on Khotan and even the northwestern areas of the Tang Dynasty managed to fill the power vacuum left by the Tang Dynasty because of its decline. This effectively guaranteed the stability of the northwest ethnic groups. Tibet, deeply influenced by Chinese civilization, had maintained the integrity of the Chinese cultural circle formed by the exchanges of various ethnic groups in the northwest with the Tang Dynasty as the core, which was of great political significance to ancient China.

##### **4.2. Economic Significance**

Generally speaking, Tibet made more contributions in economic and trade exchange due to its export to China's inland rather than import. The reason behind this might be its nomadic economy, which pushed it to absorb the outstanding achievements of civilization from other cultures so as to promote its own development. Specifically, Khotan, as the main artery in southern section of the Silk Road and an important distribution center for trade, played a critical role in boosting Tibet's economy and trade. Regrettably, specific objects testifying the exchange and communication between Khotan and Tibet were in a serious lack. Ancient records in Tibetan script, Chinese character, and Khotan script as well as archaeological discoveries had become a study of the economics between the two places during this historical period. The economic and trade exchange between Khotan and Tibet along the Musk Road had not only promoted the social productive forces and production technologies of the two places, but also exerted a positive effect on surrounding areas like Tianzhu and Nanzhao, advancing the economy in border areas of the southwestern part.

##### **4.3. Cultural Significance**

Tibet's control over China's western region had lasted for many years. During its ruling, the army stationed in Khotan made a huge impact by the way of setting up official position, spreading Tibetan language, and integrating culture into the local region. Therefore, cultures in Khotan still bore the mark of the Tibetans. For example, many geographical nouns in ancient Tibetan language are still used in modern-day Khotan to express people's good wishes for life. "Tu Wai Te Xiang" (Tuwaite Township) in Moyu County, Khotan, means the place where Tibetans live. "Sang Zhu Xiang" (Sangzhu Township) in Pishan County, Khotan, means Good Luck in Tibetan language; "Zha Wa Zhen" (Zawa Township) in Pishan County contains

the meaning of prosperous place. When it comes to cultural exchange between Khotan and Tibet, they mainly focused on the exchange of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism bore the imprint of Khotanee Buddhism, which had become the highlight of the cultural exchanges with Buddhist Culture as a link between the two sides. Tibetan Tripitaka or Tibetan texts from Dunhuang, mainly referring to *Liyul lun-bstan-pa*, *Li yul gri dgra-bcom-pas lun-bstan-pa*, and *Li-yul-chos-kyi lo-rgyus*, are famous works translated from Khotanese into Tibetan or compiled in Tibetan. They represented the contribution Khotanese made to the Tibetan Buddhism. The Khotanese Buddhism and Buddhist culture and art had a great influence on the generation of that of the Tibetan Buddhism, which also testified the close cultural and art exchanges between Khotan and Tibet.

## 5. Conclusion

In the middle of the ninth century, an all-out civil war broke out in Tibet. With its declining, Tibet gradually lost the control over the western regions and Khotan restored its strength and reestablished the Kingdom of Khotan. From a macro perspective, the exchanges between Tibet and Khotan promoted the development of both sides and diversified the ethnic groups through dialogue, communication, and cultural integration, thus enriching the Chinese traditional culture. In other words, this also testified that Tibet and Khotan had created splendid cultural exchanges based on their communication in ancient times. As an indispensable part of the Chinese culture, both Tibetan and Khotanese cultures have long been unified with the Chinese culture since ancient times.

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