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THE “MARRIAGE OF THE VIRGIN” IN A RECENTLY FOUND K’O-SSU OF EARLY QING MANUFACTURE

A Chinese silk tapestry piece, to which my attention was recently drawn¹, has proved to be a specimen of remarkable historical interest, mainly for its iconographic significance. Its “exotic”, Western approach makes it a highly intriguing piece to study. It is a rare k’o-ssu ² curtain of early Qing manufacture, probably dating from the late Seventeenth century. Its rarity derives from a rather unusual design of European (most likely Portuguese) origin representing the marriage of the Virgins with Saint Joseph ³.

The Western subject decoration is rendered with a typical k’o-ssu weaving technique although the design seems to have been taken after a European source, possibly a painting or, more likely, a printed book illustration imported into China by the Jesuits for didactical and edificatory purpose.

K’o-ssu weaving technique had long been used to reproduce paintings and had established itself as an independent art during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). The development seems to have come about at the time of the 1125-1127 militar and political disaster and the transfer of the capital to Hangchow. K’o-ssu appear to have been used for decorative panels, furniture ⁴, curtains (like the one examined in this article), carpets ⁵, robes for Emperors ⁶ and high ranking officials; but it was particularly appreciated as means of translating calligraphy and paintings into the weaver’s art ⁷.

In some cases Chinese connoisseurship valued the woven piece better than its painted prototype and some weavers established themselves in the history of Chinese art criticism like well known painters. Shen Tzu-fan, Chou K’o-ju, Wu Hsü, Wu-t’o, Chu Liang-tung ⁸ are among them. Consequently, throughout the Sung Dynasty and also later, one finds parallel to the rich production of paintings a series of reproduction in monochrome and in polychrome k’o-ssu in both the “boneless” mu-kou and in the “double outline” shung-kou styles.

The reason why k’o-ssu enjoyed so great a success lies mainly in its

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flexibility in rendering the most delicate patterns and colour gradations. Although in the Western part of Asia woven tapestry was hardly considered an aristocratic type of manufacture and, like *kilim*, was mainly used as a popular produce, in China its *k'o-ssu* corresspective developed into a highly refined type of art essentially confined to the use of the nobility. It seems that by the mid seventeenth century *k'o-ssu* had been outlawed for commoners and noblemen alike and exclusively limited to Court use. And although further development (as well as its decline in quality in the second half of the nineteenth century) prove that the restriction was a short lived one, it does speak in favour of the great consideration in which *k'o-ssu* was held.

*K'o-ssu* is a silk material woven with tapestry technique. After the construction of the warp, with two alternating sheds to form a plain weave, the wefts, wound on bobbins with a colour for each, were separately woven in the prescribed areas. They were systematically and tightly pressed with a special comb to cover the warp and to create a weft-faced type of tapestry. Therefore, like in embroidery, iconographic development is practically unlimited and the weaver can expand on *k'o-ssu* pattern effects like a painter on his canvas.

In the most complex designs the weaver might feel it safer to trace the design on the warps or even to put it on a piece of paper placed behind them. While embroidery is actually an external element put on the surface of the material, *k'o-ssu* has the design incorporated into the fabric thus emulating a painting. In its best examples the fineness of the weaving is astonishing and while the best Gobelins tapestry has from eight to eleven warp threads the centimetre, *k'o-ssu* from the Sung manufacture has up to twentyfour; and while Gobelins has twentytwo weft threads, *k'o-ssu* has hundred and sixteen of them.

The effect of a *k'o-ssu* is similar to a design inlaid, like a *cloisonné* for example; and the lines between the various pattern sections, when the finished work is held against the light, give the feeling of having been cut with a block cutter’s knife. This brings us to the yet unsolved problems of both the term and origin of *k'o-ssu*. The second character presents no difficulty; it is the usual one for silk. The first one is however written with different characters of the same sound one of which means cut or carved silk with obvious reference to the gaps between single colour areas mentioned above. A more technical term seems “weft[woven] silk”.

However, other variants of the term appear to point to a Chinese transcription and adaptation of a foreign word like the Persian *gazz* or the Arabic *khazz* both referring to silk and silk products.

Even the origins of silk tapestry in Chinese artcraft remain obscure. The technique seems to have been invented in Central Asia by the Sogdians, passed over to the Uighurs, who improved it, and then imported into China. Until very recently the earliest surviving Eastern silk tapestries were thought to be specimens from Emperor Shōmu’s collection in the Shōsōin repository dedicated to the Tōdaiji temple in Nara by his widow in 756 A.D. Of the same
period is *Taima mandara*, the most important silk tapestry piece, of Chinese manufacture, depicting the Western Paradise of Buddha Amitābha and treasured in the Taimadera temple near Nara since the eighth century. However, recent excavations in the Turfan area have brought to light from tomb n. 39 at Astana, dated c. 367 to 370, a pair of slippers with silk tapestry woven uppers of probable Chinese origin and have moved further back dated evidence for the beginning of that art in China. It is possible that silk tapestry weaving developed in China as a consequence of the opening of the Silk Road when the much older domestic textiles were challenged by the new, more fashionable and easy to produce Near Eastern tapestry weave.

Having thus outlined some characteristics of this important, and yet little studied art, let’s now turn to the analysis of the piece mentioned at the beginning. It is a curtain with the typical design of a couple of confronting phoenixes with plumage coloured with the five virtues colours, the left with curly and the right with long striped tail plumage. The ball of fire (or fire) between them surmounting a conventionally shaped cloud, simbolizes their mythical origin. The decoration, which is common to this type of a curtain, is always separated at the bottom from the main design by a strype of small conventional clouds.

The picture illustrates the “Marriage of the Virgin”. A group of five figures is reproduced in the foreground between some rocks with grass and shrubs, all rendered in an abstract way on the right, and a tree on the left with head and branches disappearing into the conventional clouds.

The Virgin and Saint Joseph, facing one another, are standing on a grass covered ground. Mary is holding the train of her outer robe with the left hand while resting the right one on her left shoulder. The hair thread, dyed with a type of corrosive brown, has almost completely disappeared exposing a large empty area; an unfortunate feature repeated in other parts of the tapestry. It is interesting to note that the artist has been unable to reproduce typically Western facial characteristics (unlike in the case of Saint Joseph) such as a pointed, protruding nose, a marked chin and cheek-bones with round eyes. An interesting hypothesis might be that the artist had the opportunity to refer not only to painting, but also to a living Western model of a man but not of a woman.

Saint Joseph is depicted advancing towards Mary and holding a ring in his left hand. From his right wrist hangs a vase with some grapes leaves and fruits. The sleeves of his shirt are a later restoration, also visible from the blue gradation not to be found elsewhere in the tapestry. His hair has also been lost and only a few warp threads remain visible.

The central imposing figure is of interest despite much restoration which has altered some characteristics. Hands and head are, in fact, later additions. But not the *jiu-i*, symbol of the Buddha and his doctrine that he is holding and
which might have been seen by the artist as a more domestic equivalent of a Bishop's pastoral staff. He must have been wearing originally a Roman Catholic headgear of some importance \(^9\) which the restorer substituted with a Taoist kuan\(^{20}\) topped with a cloud decoration and side wings. The traits of the face are hardly recognizable; however, the effort to stick to the Western iconography is evident: round bulging eyes, rich flowing hair, thick lips. Perplexity remains of the reasons why such a thick and dark brown had to be used for skin and hair alike.

Also the head of the man on the back left hand side has been redone, but probably with no great alteration except for the colour of the face which is of a most improbable gray. He is holding a vase, possibly an ampulla for the Mass wine. The last figure, on the back right hand side is sitting against the rocks and the thread of his outer robe as well as of the hair is damaged, but the face, except for his right eyebrow, is intact and reveals the problems confronted by the weaver in giving a Western expression to a figure taken frontally.

In the background is a landscape among clouds showing European buildings and stressing the "exotic" flavour of the whole painting. From their shapes they are more likely to have been taken from an engraving than a picture, but even so they seem to demonstrate a total disinterest for Western architectural structure.

It is not unlikely that this k'o-ssu was made on commission of some Portuguese who would have supplied the iconographical model, either for export or for Catholic use in China at the time of the early Jesuit penetration into the Middle Kingdom, when men like Ricci and Schall were building a bridge between China and the West.

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\(^1\) I thank prof. Feliciano Benvenuti, Rettore Magnifico of Venice University for attracting my attention to the tapestry in question and Mr. Umberto Sorgato for allowing me to study and publish the piece in his care.

\(^2\) For the complex problem of the terminology and the origin of this technique in China see infra, p. 126.

\(^3\) See ill. n.1.


\(^5\) See the ill. n.2: the monumental and unique carpet in the Royal Ontario Museum reproduced and described in Vollmer, K'o-ssu, n. 6 and p. 41.

\(^6\) See, for instance, ill. n. 3, an Emperor's twelve symbol dragon robe in the silk and wrapped-gold tapestry from the Metropolitan Museum of New York.
7) See the ill. n.4, ceremonial coat of a civil servant of the Sixth Rank in silk and metal tapestry of the K'ang-hsi period from the Metropolitan Museum of New York. However, the largest collection is to be found in the National Palace Museum of Taipei.

8) See the charming square album leaf of a parakeet on a cherry twig from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts inscribed: Shen Tzu-fan k'o-ssu kuo niao, that Shen Tzu-fan must have taken after a painting from the Academy in the thirteenth century. Also: Chiang Fu-tsung, K'uo-li lu-kung po-wu-yüan ts'ang-p' in hsuan-mu National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1974.

9) Ta Ch'ing hui-tien, chapter 136 of the K'ang-hsi edition 1690. Vollmer, K'o-ssu, n.22.


11) ставка.

12) ставка. Jean Meiley reports a further reading: k'ao-se 作色 (wet [woven] colours) found in the Ming Dynasty encyclopedia Ko ku yao lu; Meiley, K'o-ssu, p.10.


17) See the thorough analysis on this famous tapestry by Ōga Ichirō, Ōta Eizō, Kokuhō tsuzukureori Taima mandara, Tōkyō, 1963.


19) Prototypes might have been the ones worn, for instance, by Matteo Ricci in his famous posthumous painting by Yu Wen-hui, brought to Rome by Nicolas Trigault in 1614 or, more likely, Monseigneur Maigrot's (apostolic Vicar of Fukien) as reproduced in the picture in the Missions Entrangères in Paris (where he is depicted in Chinese robes) and illustrated in Les Jesuites en Chine. La querelle des rites (1552-1773) présentée par Etiemble, (the one but last illustration page) Paris, Julliard, 1966.

20) For informations on Taoist hats see: Shafer, Edward H., The Copeline Cantos, «Asiatische Studien» XXXII,1,1978, pp. 5-65. I wish to express my thanks to dr. Alfredo Codonna for his assistance in the not much explored field of Chinese religious hats iconography and to dr. Federico Greselin for drawing the caracters with his expert hand.