

# Reflections of Sasanian Elements in Central Asian Buddhist Art: A Case Study of the Śarīra Reliquary Box from Kucha

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## Abstract

Manifestations of the Sasanian period's artistic influence are abundantly evident in the eastern territories of this empire through archaeological discoveries and surviving artifacts. Among these, the designs on a box known as a śarīra reliquary, discovered in a Buddhist temple within the Subashi site in Kucha city, Xinjiang Province, western China, illustrate a fusion of Sasanian, Buddhist, and local artistic styles. 1 Accordingly, the present study aims to introduce and analyze the motifs of the aforementioned box, thereby addressing the following questions: 1. Which Iranian-Sasanian religious beliefs are reflected in the motifs used on the box known as the śarīra reliquary? 2. Based on the motifs of the śarīra box, what are the primary designs and themes that constitute the artistic influence of Sasanian-era Iran on the regions east of the Iranian plateau? Based on the proposed hypotheses, the motifs employed in the śarīra box reflect the most prominent religious and symbolic elements of the Sasanian period; elements whose examples can be observed throughout the Sasanian realm, Central Asia, and China, particularly along the Silk Road trade route. Sasanian art and religious beliefs found their way into China through trade exchanges, the gifting of royal presents, and the migration of Sogdians and other Iranian-speaking peoples, influencing the artistic works of those regions. The Kucha region, due to its specific geographical location in the Tarim Basin along the Silk Road in western China, was considered one of the most frequented and caravan-laden cities. Consequently, this region witnessed the formation of Buddhist temples and grottoes, an increase in the arrival of caravans and travelers, and, subsequently, the presence of artists, musicians, and other social strata of that era. Kucha gradually transformed into a city where music held a high status, and various Iranian musical instruments, such as the vertical harp and the barbat (lute), were widely played. As a result, Kucha can be considered one of the best places to study the influence of Sasanian art on Chinese art. Despite the significance of the topic, no independent research has yet been conducted on the Sasanian-Iranian elements present in the motifs of this box. The present research is theoretical in nature, conducted with an analytical-comparative approach, and its data collection was carried out through library research and the utilization of available resources.

**Keywords:** Sasanian Art, Buddhist Art, Kucha, Śarīra Reliquary.

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## Introduction

Given the significance of cross-cultural studies in understanding artistic and civilizational developments, the present research examines a prominent example of artistic interactions along the historical Silk Road: the śarīra reliquary housed in the Tokyo National Museum, originating from the Kucha cultural region in China. This ancient artifact, with its artistic features clearly reflecting the influences of Sasanian traditions, provides a unique platform for analyzing the transmission and adaptation of artistic patterns across the vast geographical and cultural expanse of Central Asia and the Far East. The construction of this box dates back to the 6th-7th centuries CE. This period coincides with the height of political relations and cultural influences between the Sasanians and the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) in China. In the late 6th century, during the reign of Khosrow I (531-579 CE), due to the commercial stability of the Silk Road, the cultural exchanges between the Sasanians and China reached their zenith, and a profound integration between Sasanian culture and Chinese art and culture is observed. The late Sasanian period in the 7th century marks the peak of contact and interaction between Iranian and Chinese cultures.

The Xinjiang region has been a cultural crossroads between the ancient East and West, where the customs of various peoples coexisted and merged. The role of Central Asian countries in the transmission of Sasanian art is highly significant. Xinjiang, known in ancient times as the Western Regions, was historically a major transit point for overland transportation along the Silk Road between China and the West, as well as a strategic area for cultural exchanges between East and West (Huo *et al.*, 2016). In this region, numerous ancient sites have been discovered that have greatly enriched the history of China and our understanding of cultural exchange, trade in materials, and the dissemination of technology between East and West. One of the most important regions where Buddhist cave-temples are concentrated is the ancient city of Kucha, the center of the Kingdom of Kucha.

Śarīra reliquaries, sacred vessels in Buddhism for preserving the remains of important religious figures, stand as unique cultural-historical objects, living testaments to the artistic and cultural interactions along the Silk Road in antiquity. This artifact, originating from a significant Buddhist and cultural center and bearing clear signs of Sasanian artistic influence, offers an exceptional opportunity to study the amalgamation of diverse artistic traditions in this region. A detailed analysis of this box can serve as a valuable case study in understanding how foreign artistic patterns were adopted and localized within a different cultural context. Investigating how Sasanian art elements were integrated into the art of Kucha and within an object with a religious function can provide novel insights into the mechanisms of cultural exchange. Ultimately, by presenting a comprehensive analysis of the artistic features of this unique box, the present research can enrich the existing knowledge in the fields of Central Asian art, Sasanian art, and cultural interactions

along the Silk Road, providing a valuable resource for researchers and enthusiasts in these areas.

The objective of this research is to conduct a detailed analysis of the artistic features of the śarīra reliquary discovered in Kucha and housed in the Tokyo National Museum, and to identify and examine the influences of Sasanian art in its motifs, in order to better understand artistic interactions along the Silk Road.

**Questions and Hypotheses:** 1. What visual components are included in the motifs used on the śarīra reliquary that could reflect religious beliefs and themes prevalent in Sasanian-era Iran? 2. What Sasanian art motifs and themes does the śarīra box reveal that could indicate the artistic influence of this period on regions east of the Iranian plateau?

In response to the first question, the hypothesis is proposed that the motifs used on the śarīra reliquary include visual components that reflect religious beliefs and themes prevalent in Sasanian-era Iran, particularly elements related to Zoroastrianism and the concepts of royal glory (farr) and its associated symbols. The arrangement and visual composition of the motifs on the śarīra box exhibit patterns that align with the visual structures known in Sasanian religious art.

In response to the second question, the hypothesis is proposed that the śarīra box displays Sasanian art motifs and themes that are also distinctly observed in the artworks of regions east of the Iranian plateau during the period under consideration, including motifs of sacred birds (such as the pheasant and parrot) along with jeweled ribbons in their beaks, Sasanian symmetry, pearl medallions, and the placement of sacred elements within them while playing Iranian musical instruments.

**Research Methodology:** The present research is fundamental in nature and employs a descriptive, analytical-comparative approach. The necessary information for this research has been collected using library resources (including reports, books, etc.).

## Research Background

The śarīra reliquary under study is in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum. Despite the historical and artistic significance of the Kucha region and the existence of evidence of Sasanian artistic influences in the discovered artworks, no comprehensive and independent research has been conducted on this box to date. The only relevant research that can be mentioned is an article by Li Mei titled “Adaptations of Harps Reflected in Murals of the Chinese Western Regions”. The main focus of this research is on the harp, and it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of other artistic aspects of the box, particularly the influences of Sasanian art. This article studies the harp in western China and compares the murals of Buddhist caves with the depiction of this instrument on the śarīra box. It is worth noting that this article is derived from the doctoral dissertation of one of the authors (Mina Raštgarfard) titled “The Cultural Influences of the Sasanians in China”, which discusses this box and its features in detail.

## **Kucha<sup>1</sup> and the Course of Iranian Culture and Art Transmission to the Tarim Basin<sup>2</sup>**

The Tarim Basin holds significant importance due to its location along the Silk Road between China, Iran, and the Byzantine and Eastern Roman worlds (Grousset, 1965: 178). René Grousset believed that the origin of Tarim art should be sought in the Kabul Valley during the fourth century CE, where we witness a Sasanian-Buddhist civilization and art in that region and across the borderlands of India and Iran (Ibid: 109). Herzfeld and Hackin suggest that from the fourth to the seventh centuries CE, a refined artistic style with Sasanian-Buddhist patterns, similar to the style prevalent in Kushan, also took root in the Tarim Basin and progressed to the point where, in the second half of the seventh century CE, this region was considered “an outer Iran” (Ibid: 113-114). The ancient Kingdom of Kucha (111-648 CE) in the Tarim River basin was one of the earliest centers of Buddhism along the northern branch of the Silk Road, situated at the crossroads of east-west trade routes, and played a crucial role in the transmission of Buddhism to China. Due to Kucha’s geographical location, people of various ethnicities were constantly present there (Waugh, 2020), and this is the most important factor in the fusion of different cultures and artistic styles in Kucha. Contemporaneous with the Sasanian period, Kucha was initially under the rule of local kings and then came under the control of the Tang Empire in 648 CE, subsequently becoming part of East Turkestan (Grousset, 1965: 186). According to written documents obtained from this region, the art, culture, and architecture of Kucha exhibit the greatest influence from India and Iran in the synthesis of Buddhist-Iranian art (Ibid: 108).

### **Study and Introduction of the Śarīra Box**

In the 20th century, during the excavations of Otani Kozui, a Japanese Buddhist leader and explorer, the śarīra reliquary (Fig. 1) was discovered among the ruins of the Zhao-Hu-li<sup>3</sup> Buddhist monastery at the Subashi site, located 23 kilometers northeast of Kucha. The purpose of these excavations was to explore the origins of Buddhism in this region. This artifact, dating back to the 7th century CE, is made of wood covered with linen fabric and then painted. This conical wooden box, with a height of 31 cm and a diameter of 37 cm, is quite unique in its kind (Li Mei, 2014: 45). Śarīra literally means “body”, but it is commonly used to refer to the post-mortem remains of revered Buddhist figures, especially monks and great teachers. These remains, often in the form of small, shiny crystals, are venerated as sacred relics and are believed to possess spiritual power (Keown, 2013: 77). For enshrinement, śarīra are usually sealed inside one or more ornate containers known as “reliquaries”. The stylistic and iconographic features of the śarīra box’s motifs reflect the composite nature of Kucha art. According to Bussagli, painting was one of the primary forms of artistic expression in Kucha, and this hybrid art reflects the art of India, Iran, and Rome. Pearl medallions, the depiction of two facing birds (Bussagli, 1979: 83), jeweled ribbons in the beaks of birds, pearl necklace strands



around the necks of angels, the depiction of Iranian musical instruments including the oud/barbat (Chinese pipa) and the harp, and groups of dancers in distinctive attire are all derived from Iranian art, manifesting in the form of Sasanian-Buddhist art. The following section will analyze the elements derived from Sasanian art.



Fig. 1: Śārīra Box, Tokyo National Museum (<https://www.tnm.jp/>)





## The Symbolic Meaning of Bird Motifs (Pheasant and Parrot) in China and Sasanian Art

### Pheasant

In China, the pheasant symbolizes beauty and is a metaphor for colorful lights, brightness, and a manifestation of solar power (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, Vol. 4: 436). It also represents yang<sup>4</sup>, virtue, success, and good fortune (Cooper, 1992: 277). The male and female pheasant play a fundamental role in the Far East and were one of the twelve ornaments on the robes of Chinese emperors (Hall, 1991: 75), sometimes representing the empress like the phoenix (<https://www.chinasage.info>). In Sasanian art, birds are considered creatures between earth and sky, carriers of divine messages. Although this role is not particularly prominent for the pheasant in Sasanian art (the Simurgh more often fulfills this role), the presence of a beautiful bird can generally allude to a connection with supernatural and divine forces, from which farr (royal glory) also originates. The motif of the pheasant was used in various Sasanian arts, including textile weaving and metalwork. Due to its colorful feathers and magnificent appearance, this bird could symbolize beauty, luxury, and courtly splendor. This splendor can implicitly be linked to the concept of farr, which itself represents divine glory and authority. A noteworthy point in examining pheasant motifs in Sasanian art is observing the visual differences between the examples depicted in Sasanian works and the motif on the śārīra box. The pheasant depicted on the śārīra box appears to be a different species from the common pheasant in Iran and Sasanian motifs. In Sasanian art, the Common Pheasant,

which originated in the forests of northern Iran, is frequently seen. In contrast, the motif on the śarīra box depicts another species of pheasant (possibly the Cheer Pheasant<sup>5</sup> or Golden Pheasant<sup>6</sup>).

**Table 1: Comparison of the Pheasant Motif Depicted on the Śarīra Box and the Pheasant in Sasanian Art**

	
<p>Fig. 2: Pheasant Motif on the Śarīra Box (Authors)</p>	<p>Fig. 3: Cheer Pheasant and Golden Pheasant (<a href="https://ebird.org">https://ebird.org</a>)</p>
	
<p>Fig. 4: Part of a Sasanian Silver Bowl with a Pheasant Motif, 7th Century CE, Discovery Location: Mazandaran, National Museum of Iran (Authors)</p>	<p>Fig. 5: Common/Caspian Pheasant (<a href="https://ebird.org">https://ebird.org</a>)</p>




## Parrot

Since the parrot is not native to Iran, it is not possible to comment on its status and symbols in Iranian culture and rituals. It seems that the presence of this bird on the Śarīra box (Fig. 6) is influenced by Buddhist beliefs originating from India, the parrot's native land. In China, parrots are only found wild in the southern provinces, but they have been kept as caged birds elsewhere for thousands of years (<https://www.chinasage.info/symbols/birds.htm>). In Hinduism, the parrot with its red beak and green feathers is a symbol of fertility and is considered a messenger spirit in southern India. During the Tang Dynasty, the parrot was introduced as a divine bird and was popular among emperors. In Buddhism, the Buddha once incarnated as a compassionate and courageous parrot (<https://whatismyspiritanimal.com>). The parrot is a distinctive attribute of Kama, the Hindu god of love (Hall, 1991: 68).

The motif of the parrot can also be observed in the decorations of the tombs of Iranian Sogdians in China (Fig. 7), which seems to be influenced by local culture and Buddhist beliefs. However, the significant point is that these birds wear the customary Sasanian ribbons, which symbolize farr (royal glory); therefore, in Sogdian motifs, we witness an artistic fusion of Sasanian art with local art (McArthur, 2018). Although the parrot is not native to Iran, its existential identity is intertwined with shared Buddhist-Sasanian legends and symbols. For example, just as the pheasant carrying a necklace or ribbon represents royal farr in the Sasanian tradition, in Buddhist traditions, the parrot is often

associated with the goddess Guanyin<sup>7</sup>. In this Buddhist-Chinese legend (contemporary with the Tang Dynasty 618-907 CE), a white parrot became a disciple of Guanyin and offered a pearl or bead held in its beak to the goddess (Idema, 2008: 33) (Fig. 8).

Table 2: Evidence of the Parrot Motif Depicted on the Śarīra Box, Sogdian Tomb Reliefs, and Buddhist Mythology

		
Fig. 6: Parrot Motif on the Śarīra Box (Authors)	Fig. 7: Part of the Reliefs on the Stone Sarcophagus of Yu Hong <sup>8</sup> , Banquet Scene, 6th Century CE. Location: Shanxi Museum (Marshak, 2001: 255)	Fig. 8: Parrot Offering a Pearl or Bead Held in its Beak as a Gift to the Goddess, China, 18th Century CE. <a href="https://rcwg.scrippscollege.edu/blog/">https://rcwg.scrippscollege.edu/blog/</a>

## The Concept of Symmetry in Sasanian Art

One of the most prominent elements in Sasanian art is the use of symmetrical designs. In fact, symmetry can be considered one of the favorite pictorial traditions of Iranians (especially the Sasanians) throughout history. In the motifs of the Śarīra box, sacred birds, including the pheasant and parrot, are depicted in pairs and symmetrically, while holding a jeweled ribbon in their beaks, positioned alongside each other (Fig. 9). The significant point is that symmetry in traditional arts is not just a method of expanding designs and replicating patterns. Symmetry has a complementary and perfectionist aspect (Makinejad, 2013: 105), a factor that held a special place in Sasanian courtly art. During trade and the spread of Iranian culture along the Silk Road, many Sasanian artistic styles, including the art of symmetry in creating various motifs, were transferred to the eastern lands and gained great popularity during the Tang Dynasty, being widely imitated and used (Hayashi, 1975: 121). Diverse examples of these motifs have been found in metalwork and textiles in China. An example of this motif in metalwork can be seen in the Hejiacun hoard dating back to the Tang Dynasty (early 7th-8th centuries CE), discovered in the southern suburbs of Xi'an. A silver bowl with a gilded design of two symmetrical facing mythical lions on either side of a plant-like design resembling the Tree of Life is a notable example (Fig. 10). Regarding silk fabric examples, the findings from the Aštana tombs<sup>9</sup> in Turfan, one of the most important sites for early examples of textiles with Sasanian designs, can be mentioned. These fabrics are known as Sogdian-Turfan textiles in typological studies (Compareti, 2004). This fabric fragment (Fig. 11) depicts symmetrical birds wearing a crescent moon and star-like crown on their heads, with raised royal ribbons tied around their necks and legs, standing on a pearl platform, with the entire design enclosed within a pearl roundel (Zhao Feng, 1999: 94-99).

### The Meaning of the Jeweled Ribbon in the Beaks of Birds

The use of the jeweled ribbon<sup>10</sup> in the beaks of birds has ancient roots in Iranian art and is associated with the concept of royalty (Harper, 1978: 105), royal grandeur, sanctity, and the divinity of the monarch (Shenkar, 2014: 76) in Sasanian art. Birds such as ducks, pheasants, and peacocks, depicted in Sasanian motifs with a string of pearls in their beaks, sometimes also worn around their necks, were likely symbols related to Anahita, the goddess of waters, and the concept of sovereignty (Javadi, 2021: 40).

These ribbons were (likely) made of silk fabrics, bestowing a special status upon the individuals and creatures carrying them (Zare-Abarghouei *et al.*, 2014: 102). In Sasanian art, various creatures are depicted carrying this ribbon (mostly jeweled), among which birds play a significant role. It seems that they are messengers from the gods of fortune (Harris, 2004: 69-70), bringing the divine farr or royal insignia to the king. In the Zamyad Yasht, these birds are symbols of farr (Zamyad Yasht, verses 34-38). The symbol of birds with jeweled ribbons became so popular during the Sasanian period that it transformed into one of the main designs in various arts, and its popularity spread along the Silk Road trade route. One of the best surviving examples in China for comparison with the Šarīra box motif is a medallion painting with two symmetrical facing ducks holding jeweled pearl ribbons in their beaks, found in Cave 60 of Kizil<sup>11</sup> located 80 kilometers northwest of Kucha (Figs. 12 and 13). This motif became a popular pattern and model in China and was named “Tse-niao” or “biting bird” design. The popularity of this motif reached a point where it became a specific and exclusive design in the Chinese court, increasing its importance and value. “A section of the Tang Hui-yao<sup>12</sup> describes that only royal workshops were allowed to produce fabrics adorned with various Zeniao designs, featuring birds with ribbons in their beaks” (Hayashi, 1975: 128-129).

Attention to the concept of using three pearls or jewels in this motif is also significant. The number three is a sacred number in ancient Iranian culture and religions, especially in Zoroastrianism, and in many Sasanian motifs, these three gems are depicted along with the jeweled ribbon. The motif of birds and other animals carrying this ribbon is seen in various arts prevalent during the Sasanian period (Fig. 13).






### Angels Playing Sacred Instruments? In Pearled Medallions

Between the bird motifs with jeweled ribbons, there are three circular spaces in the shape of pearled medallions, which include three winged angels playing the harp, flute, and barbat (oud) (Fig. 14).

The nude winged angels with shaved heads are very similar to the motifs found in the Miran region (Fig. 15), and considering other motifs obtained from Bagram and the Peshawar Museum, it seems that the motif of winged angels was influenced by Gandhara-Iranian art and is even older than the seventh century (Bussagli, 1979: 86).



Table 3: Comparison of Some Evidence from Symmetrical Designs and Jeweled Bands in China

		
<p>Fig. 9: Part of the Sarira Box Motif, Facing Parrot and Pheasant Holding a Jeweled Ribbon (Authors)</p>	<p>Fig. 10: Dish with Symmetrical Lion Design, Hejiacun Hoard, Shaanxi History Museum (<a href="https://usa.chinadaily.com">https://usa.chinadaily.com</a>)</p>	<p>Fig. 11: Silk Fabric with Symmetrical Birds, 7th Century CE, Astana. Xinjiang Museum (Zhao Feng, 1999: 339).</p>
		
<p>Fig. 12: Cave Number 60, Kizil, Wall Painting of Medallions with Ducks Holding Jeweled Ribbons in their Beaks, 422-529 CE, Berlin State Museums (Hiyama, 2016: 44).</p>	<p>Fig. 13: Fragment of a Coat, Sogdian, 8th Century CE, Uzbekistan, Cleveland Museum of Art.</p>	

Regarding the pearled rings and based on comparative studies, the use of frames or pearled medallions, apart from their decorative aspect, has two semantic aspects: First, these frames are placed around pre-defined sacred and symbolic elements in the Sasanian religion and thought, and their purpose is to multiply the emphasis on their importance and sanctity. Second, elements that are not inherently sacred acquire a new meaning by being placed in these frames and ultimately gain a spiritual and transcendental aspect.

The body of the box contains motifs of a musical ensemble playing various instruments and a type of local dance. One of these individuals is standing and playing the harp. The standing figure has placed the base of the harp under their belt for better control of the instrument while playing, but the angel, due to nudity, holds the base of the harp between their legs (Fig. 16).

## Iranian Music

The most prominent Iranian musical instruments that were transferred to China along the Silk Road include the Iranian harp (chang) and the lute (barbat). In China, the Tang Dynasty in the 6th and 7th centuries CE underwent fundamental changes as a result of the widespread migration of people from Iran and Central Asia, many of whom came to China as musicians and dancers. It is sufficient to know that during this period, the Tang imperial court had a music academy where thousands of people studied, and hundreds of the best musicians resided in the palace (Moore, 2000).

In addition to their presence in the imperial court, Iranian musical instruments are prominently featured in the motifs of Buddhist caves (Figs. 17-18), the motifs of burial tombs of Iranian descendants and Chinese people (Figs. 19-21), burial statues (Fig. 22),

archaeological findings, Manichean paintings, and other artifacts. In Buddhist thought in China, musical instruments gradually transformed into heavenly instruments, after which every Buddhist was eager to hear the celestial melodies of those instruments. Kings and princes also warmly welcomed music and the sounds of various instruments, and court orchestras took shape in China. The Chinese enjoyed music during worship, and the instruments became essential tools in the worship of heavenly and earthly powers. This great interest in music led the Chinese to show great enthusiasm for the introduction of novel instruments from Iran and Central Asia (Lawergren, 2002: 52). In the Buddhist caves, in addition to groups of musicians, the instruments are placed in the hands of holy Buddhist figures such as Apsaras.

### **The Historical Presence of the Chang (Iranian Harp) in China**

While the initial appearance of the vertical chang is generally synchronized with the Eastern Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) in China, subsequently flourishing in both small and large forms during the Sui (589-618 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) Dynasties (Xie Jin, 2005: 6-28), archaeological investigations in western China suggest a more ancient genesis for the extensive Sino-Western interactions and the introduction of musical instruments, including the chang. For instance, the remnants of changs recovered from ancient tombs in Zaghunluq Site 15, situated on the southeastern periphery of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, are dated to approximately 400-200 BCE. Furthermore, another chang discovered in a tomb in Shanshan County 16, east of Turfan, dates to 500 BCE (Xie Jin, 2005: 6-28). Notably, the changs unearthed through archaeological endeavors are consistently of the horizontal angular variety, exhibiting comparability with changs found in regions such as Pazyryk (350 BCE) (Lawergren, 1990: 120) and elsewhere (Konidaris, 2020: 10). Crucially, these changs bear no relation to the vertical angular types (Konghou) that gained prominence in China during the early centuries of the Common Era (Genito & Dongfang, 2017: 83). It appears that the establishment of the Yuefu (Imperial Music Bureau) during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), specifically in the first century BCE, facilitated an increased influx of musical instruments. The Yuefu's mandate encompassed the collection of regional popular music and poetry, the supervision of courtly rituals, and the recruitment of musicians (Moore, 2000). Subsequently, instruments such as the chang, the oud, and percussion instruments, frequently depicted in the mural paintings of the Dunhuang caves and other oasis settlements in Central Asia, entered China from southern and western routes, coinciding with the nascent trade activities along what would evolve into the Silk Road.

From a morphological perspective, two distinct categories of chang are discernible in China: 1. the West Asian type, belonging to the angular harps, referred to as the standing chang (shu konghou) in Chinese textual sources 17, and 2. the Indian type, encompassing the arched harps. The Buddhist cave murals of Xinjiang depict all four types of chang: two subtypes of the angular chang can be differentiated as the

Iranian chang and early forms of the hybrid Iranian-Chinese chang, exhibiting Chinese influences (Li Mei, 2014: 43).

Regarding the distribution and preferential adoption of Iranian angular changs and Indian arched changs across different Chinese regions, it can be inferred that the selection of these instruments correlated with the degree of Iranian or Indian musical influence prevalent in those areas. For instance, around 440 CE, Indian musical influence is more pronounced in the Kizil Caves. However, the Iranian chang enjoyed greater popularity across the majority of sites in China. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties (581-907), the creation of statuary depicting Central Asian musicians became a common practice in China, and musicians playing angular changs were frequently portrayed in numerous sites, including the Kizil Caves, attired in distinctive ethnic garments. These musicians held considerable prestige within China. Notably, by the Tang period, musical taste in Kizil no longer stemmed from India but exhibited a stronger inclination towards Iranian angular changs (Lawergren, 2002: 52-54). The sonic qualities of the chang elevated the solemnity of laudatory hymns. Ultimately, this instrument served not only as an indispensable component of temple rituals and imperial festivities but also played a significant role in the private lives of the populace. Alongside the barbat (lute), it was employed in the accompaniment of devotional chants, victory anthems, heroic narratives, and amorous songs during nuptial celebrations (Galpin, 1376: 67).






Concurrently with the Han Dynasty, the musical instruments introduced from the West included ouds analogous to the contemporary Middle Eastern oud, oboe-like instruments, and metallic aerophones. The barbat in China underwent subsequent modifications, with its rounded back evolving into a flat back, leading to its designation as the pipa (Moore, 2000). Similar to the chang, the barbat encompassed various forms, divisible into two morphological categories: short-necked, pyriform barbats and long-necked, round-bodied barbats.

Generally, music held a prominent position in the Kucha region. "Kucha music" possessed a distinct stylistic character and gradually disseminated and gained popularity along the commercial arteries of the Silk Road. Among all the entrepôts and caravan cities of the Tarim Basin along the Silk Road, Kucha enjoyed the greatest renown, often referred to as the "city of pleasure and entertainment", to the extent that its musicians, singers, and dancers were widely celebrated throughout China (Grousset, 1365: 182). The renowned Buddhist monk Xuanzang, in his 630 CE account of Kucha, noted, "... they surpass other countries in their mastery of the lute and pipa. They wear ornate silk and embroidered garments..". (Waugh, 2020). Kucha music, particularly the performance on the barbat, was also highly favored during the Tang Dynasty (Schafer, 1963: 52). According to extant Chinese textual sources, the earliest ouds imported into China were long-necked, round-bodied barbats from the West, arriving around 200 CE. Short-necked, ovoid barbats were introduced approximately 220 years later, around 420 CE. Tang Dynasty Chinese sources and unearthed statuary indicate that the peoples of



Central Asia played the barbat while mounted on horses or camels. The portability and light weight of the barbat contributed to its increased popularity across Asia.

**Table 4: A Comparison of Chang and Barbat Players with Other Depicted Figures from Buddhist Caves and Iranian-Descendant tombs in China**

 <p><a href="https://www.tnm.jp/?lang=en">https://www.tnm.jp/?lang=en</a></p>		
 <p>(Authors)</p>		
<p>Fig. 14: Detail of the Sārīra Reliquary Case Depiction, Angels Playing Chang and Barbat, 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE. ©Tokyo National Museum.</p>		
		
<p>Fig. 15: Mural of a Winged Celestial Figure, Miran, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE. ©National Museum, Delhi (Bussagli, 1996: 43).</p>	<p>Fig.16: Detail of the Sārīra Reliquary Case Depiction, Ensemble of Dancers and Musicians (Yatsenko, 2009).</p>	
		
<p>Fig. 17: Western Wei Dynasty, Mogao Cave 285, Dunhuang, 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Thrasher, 2000: 27).</p>	<p>Fig. 18: Chang player, Mid-Tang Dynasty, Mogao Cave 112, Dunhuang, 766-835 CE. <a href="https://www.askideas.com/buddhist-art-inside-the-mogao-caves-china/">https://www.askideas.com/buddhist-art-inside-the-mogao-caves-china/</a></p>	<p>Fig. 19: Chang and Barbat Players on a Burial Couch from Anyang, Henan Province, Northern Qi Dynasty (6<sup>th</sup> Century CE). ©Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Lerner, 2005: Plate 4).</p>
		
<p>Figure 20: Depiction of Paradise on the Wirkak Stone Sarcophagus, Northern Zhou Dynasty, Xi'an, 580 CE. Xi'an Institute of Archaeology (Gulácsi &amp; Beduhn, 2012: 1)</p>	<p>Fig 21: Detail of the Sogdian an Qie Burial Couch Depiction, 579 CE. ©Shaaxi History Museum. <a href="https://sogdians.si.edu/">https://sogdians.si.edu/</a></p>	<p>Figure 22: Figurine of a Female Chang and Barbat Player, Tang Dynasty, Late 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <a href="https://www.metmuseum">https://www.metmuseum</a>.</p>



## Conclusion

Studies conducted on the Sārīra reliquary case, obtained from the ruins of a Buddhist temple in Kucha, as one of the unique and less-studied artifacts along the Silk Road, revealed that this object not only carried Buddhist religious values but also reflected the profound influences of Sasanian art within the cultural context of East Asia. Therefore, both proposed hypotheses are proven: visual characteristics such as symmetrically arranged birds with pearl and jewel-inlaid bands, pearl medallions, and the Iranian musical instruments chang and barbat, all indicate the significant presence of Sasanian Iranian artistic elements in this work. This box is a symbol of how the styles and themes of art intermingled and were adopted between different cultures, especially in a region like Kucha that was at the intersection of civilizations. Examining symbolic elements such as the pheasant and the parrot, and comparing them with their beliefs and functions in Iranian, Indian, and Chinese cultures, clearly demonstrates the depth of these cultural interactions. The noteworthy point is that the use of motifs and decorative elements of the Sārīra case is not merely an imitation derived from the Sasanian aesthetic concept; rather, it is a conscious selection of its original meaning, and then this art is used in a new religious and cultural context. The depiction of the pheasant, native to the China region and different from the pheasant native to northern Iran, is a fine example in this regard. Even the depiction of the parrot confirms this concept: the use of an authentic Sasanian form with local Kucha characteristics. On the other hand, the placement of angels with Iranian-Gandharan features under the influence of Kushan art in a pearl medallion also serves as confirmation of the conscious selection and understanding of how to use sacred Sasanian elements in Buddhist art.

The results of the present research emphasize that Sasanian art, utilizing symbolic structures, specific iconography, and magnificent visual effects, has been able to influence Buddhist ritual art in East Asia and be recreated in a new form. In this context, the Tarim region and the city of Kucha have played the role of a civilizational intermediary, providing a platform for the transfer, reproduction, and localization of Sasanian artistic patterns.

This study also demonstrates the importance of comparative excavations between the art of Iran and East Asia in the form of intercultural studies and indicates that rereading lesser-known works can illuminate the hidden dimensions of cultural exchanges in history.

As to how the enchanting sound of the Sasanian chang resonated as far as China, the political interactions and royal gifts of the Iranian court can be considered one of the reasons. However, another important factor that may remain hidden from view is the trading people who eased the hardship of the challenging Silk Road journey by playing the chang during their travels. Evidence for this is the statues obtained from Chinese tombs. The Iranian chang, which was played for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years during banquets, battles, religious ceremonies, and prayers, and seemingly no task

was completed without its sound, was carried by minstrels and merchants to the farthest points of that era.

And just as it mainly had a ritualistic and religious function in its homeland, in China, it also manifested in a religious space within its new cultural context. The evidence obtained for the presence of the Iranian chang in China can be sought in Buddhist centers, including the murals of caves and Buddhist temples. It seems that the minstrels, who were singers and reciters who remembered and sang the epic and romantic stories of various nations accompanied by instruments, conveyed the sound of this enchanting instrument to peoples who were culturally and religiously completely different from the Sasanians, and in this way, a platform was prepared for the cultural richness and customs of Iran to appeal to the Chinese, who embraced it as a means to express their own thoughts, tastes, and instincts.

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### Observation Contribution

This article is extracted from the doctoral thesis of the first author, written under the supervision of the second author (as primary and secondary supervisor) and the third author (as advisor). Accordingly, the content was collected by the first author and the manuscript was prepared under the guidance and supervision of the other authors.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest and have adhered to publication ethics in their citations. All data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

### Endnotes

1. Kucha (龜茲): This region is located in present-day Aksu Prefecture, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

2. Tarim: A large endorheic basin covering an area of 1,020,000 square kilometers. This basin is situated in Xinjiang Province in western People's Republic of China; it is bordered by the Tian Shan Mountains to the north and the Kunlun Mountains to the south. The Taklamakan Desert lies in the center of this basin. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Tarim-Basin>.

3. (昭怙厘大寺遗址) (This is the Chinese name of a site; without further context, a direct translation would be "Zhaohuli Great Temple Ruins").

4. Yang (陽): In Chinese philosophy, particularly in Taoism and Confucianism, Yang is considered one of the two fundamental and opposing forces that shape the world and all its phenomena (Chang, 1985: 30-35).

5. Another name for it is the Wallich's pheasant. Its origin is the high-altitude regions of the Himalayas, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, and Nepal, and it usually lives in high-altitude grasslands and forests at altitudes of 1500 to 2700 meters.

6. The golden pheasant, also known as the Chinese pheasant and rainbow pheasant (Jobling, 2010: 105), is native to the forests of the mountainous regions of western China (<https://ebird.org/species/golphe>).
7. (观音) (This is the Chinese name for Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.)
8. (虞弘墓) (This is the Chinese name for the Tomb of Yu Hong.)
9. The Aštana Cemetery is located 6 kilometers from the ancient city of Gaochang and was used as a cemetery for Chinese immigrants from the 4th to the first half of the 8th century CE (Mahler, 1959: 30).
10. Among other equivalent words is the word "turban" (Soudavar, 1382: 39 [Persian calendar year, roughly 2003-2004 CE]). In this research, the word "Ribbon" is used because it has a broader meaning.
11. (克孜尔) (This is the Chinese name for the Kizil Caves.)
12. Important writings from the Tang Empire.
13. (米兰) Miran is an ancient city located on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert in the Xinjiang region, China, and was once a station on the Silk Road trade route (Whitfield, 2004: 16).
14. Greco-Buddhist art or Gandhara art is an artistic manifestation of Greco-Buddhist culture, a fusion of ancient Greek culture and Buddhism, that flourished in Central Asia for a thousand years, from the time of Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia in the 4th century BCE to the Arab invasion in the 7th century CE. The origin of Greco-Buddhist art is the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom (250 BCE - 130 BCE) in present-day Afghanistan (Gardner, 1393: 687 [Persian calendar year, roughly 2014-2015 CE]).
15. (扎滚鲁克)
16. (膳善)
17. (竖箜篌)

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- <https://www.chinasage.info/symbols/birds.htm>



## بازتاب عناصر ساسانی در هنر بودایی آسیای میانه: مطالعه‌ای موردی جعبه یادبود سریرا از کوچا

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### چکیده

نقوش جعبه‌ای موسوم به سریرا که از معبدی بودایی در محوطه سوباشی<sup>۱</sup> در شهر کوچا<sup>۲</sup> در غرب چین به دست آمده، شواهدی از ترکیب هنر ساسانی، بودایی و بومی را نشان می‌دهد. در همین راستا در پژوهش حاضر سعی بر آن است تا به پرسش پیش‌رو پاسخ داده شود: ۱- نقوش به کار رفته در جعبه سریرا بازتاب‌دهنده کدام یک از باورهای مذهبی ایرانی-ساسانی است؟ ۲- تأثیرگذاری هنری ایران دوره ساسانی بر کشورهای شرق فلات ایران، براساس نقوش جعبه سریرا بیشتر شامل چه نقوش و مضامینی است؟ بر اساس فرضیات مطرح شده، نقوش به کار رفته در جعبه سریرا بازتاب‌دهنده برخی مفاهیم مذهبی و نمادین دوره ساسانی هستند که نمونه‌های آن‌ها در قلمرو ساسانی، آسیای میانه و چین، به ویژه در امتداد مسیر جاده ابریشم مشاهده می‌شود. از مهم‌ترین نقوش مذهبی به کار رفته می‌توان به عناصری در ارتباط با جلوه‌های بصری فره‌ی ایزدی اشاره کرد. هنر و باورهای مذهبی ساسانیان از طریق مبادلات تجاری، اهدای هدایای سلطنتی، مهاجرت سغدی‌ها و دیگر اقوام ایرانی تبار به چین راه یافت و آثار هنری آن مناطق را تحت تأثیر خود قرار داد. منطقه کوچا به دلیل قرارگیری در مسیر جاده ابریشم، یکی از شهرهای پرتدد و کاروان‌رو به شمار می‌آمد و شاهد ورود مسافران، و به تبع آن، حضور هنرمندان، خنیاگران و دیگر اقشار جامعه آن روزگار از ایران و دیگر کشورها بود. کوچا به تدریج به شهری تبدیل شد که موسیقی و نواختن سازهای ایرانی نظیر چنگ و بربط در آن جایگاهی والا یافت؛ در نتیجه، کوچا را می‌توان یکی از بهترین مکان‌ها برای مطالعه تأثیر هنر ساسانی بر هنر چین در نظر گرفت. با وجود اهمیت موضوع، تاکنون پژوهش مستقلی در خصوص عناصر ساسانی-ایرانی موجود در نقوش این جعبه صورت نگرفته است. پژوهش حاضر از نوع نظری بوده، با رویکردی تحلیلی-تطبیقی انجام گرفته و گردآوری اطلاعات آن به شیوه کتابخانه‌ای و با بهره‌گیری از منابع در دسترس صورت پذیرفته است.

**کلیدواژگان:** هنر ساسانی، هنر بودایی، کوچا، جعبه سریرا.

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## مقدمه

جعبه یادبود سریرا در موزه توکیو، نمونه‌ای برجسته از تعاملات هنری در جاده ابریشم است. این اثر متعلق به قرون ۶-۷ م. از منطقه کوچا در سین‌کیانگ، تأثیرات هنر ساسانی را به خوبی نشان می‌دهد. دوره ساخت جعبه هم‌زمان با اوج روابط ساسانیان و سلسله تانگ (۶۱۸-۹۰۷ م.) در چین بود، به‌ویژه در دوره خسرو اول (۵۳۱-۵۷۹ م.) که ثبات تجاری موجب گسترش تبادلات فرهنگی شد.

منطقه سین‌کیانگ به عنوان گذرگاه اصلی جاده ابریشم، محل تعامل فرهنگ‌های مختلف بود و کوچا به عنوان مرکز مهم بودایی، نقش کلیدی در انتقال هنر ساسانی ایفا می‌کرد. پژوهش حاضر با دو پرسش اصلی به بررسی این اثر می‌پردازد؛ نخست این‌که، مؤلفه‌های بصری جعبه چگونه باورهای مذهبی ساسانی را بازتاب می‌دهند؟ و دوم این‌که، چه نقش‌مایه‌های ساسانی در جعبه دیده می‌شود؟

براساس فرضیه‌های مطرح شده، نقوش جعبه، بازتاب‌دهنده عناصر مذهبی و تزئینی مانند فره ایزدی و پرندگان مقدس با روبان<sup>۴</sup> جواهرنشان، مدالیون‌های مرواریدی و سازهای ایرانی است.

تحلیل اثر نشان می‌دهد که هنرمندان اهل کوچا با درک عمیق از مفاهیم نمادین ساسانی، این عناصر را با هنر بودایی تلفیق کرده‌اند. این تلفیق نه تقلید سطحی، بلکه بازآفرینی خلاقانه در بافت فرهنگی جدید بود. جعبه سریرا گواهی بر نقش سرزمین‌های همسایه شرقی مانند سین‌کیانگ در انتقال و تطبیق عناصر فرهنگی است و اهمیت مطالعات میان‌فرهنگی در درک تحولات تمدنی را برجسته می‌سازد.

منطقه تاریم<sup>۲</sup> به عنوان حلقه ارتباطی حیاتی در جاده ابریشم، نقش بی‌بدیلی در انتقال فرهنگ و هنر ایرانی به شرق آسیا ایفا کرده است (گروسه، ۱۳۶۵: ۱۷۸). مطالعات تطبیقی نشان می‌دهد که در فاصله قرون چهارم تا هفتم میلادی، سبک هنری پیچیده‌ای با تلفیق عناصر ساسانی و بودایی در این منطقه شکل گرفت (گروسه، ۱۳۶۵: ۱۱۳-۱۱۴) که نمونه بارز آن را می‌توان در نقوش جعبه سریرا مشاهده کرد (Li Mei, 2014: 45).

این اثر استثنایی که براساس مطالعات باستان‌شناسی به قرن هفتم میلادی تعلق دارد، از جنس چوب است که با پارچه کتان پوشیده شده و سپس روی آن رنگ‌آمیزی شده است (Bussagli, 1979: 83). بررسی دقیق عناصر تزئینی جعبه نشان‌دهنده تلفیق عمیق و هوشمندانه هنر ساسانی با نمادپردازی‌های بودایی است. ویژگی‌هایی چون: مدالیون‌های مرواریدی، نقوش پرندگان قرینه با روبان‌های جواهرنشان (Harper, 1978: 105)، و تصاویر دقیق سازهای ایرانی مانند چنگ و بربط (Moore, 2000)، همگی گویای تأثیرات چندلایه هنر ساسانی هستند.

تحلیل نمادشناختی نقوش پرندگان بر روی جعبه از اهمیت ویژه‌ای برخوردار است. قرقاول که در فرهنگ چینی نماد خورشید، روشنایی و قدرت‌های آسمانی محسوب می‌شد (شوالیه و گربران، ۱۳۸۷، ج ۴: ۴۳۶)، در هنر ساسانی با مفهوم فره ایزدی و شکوه شاهانه پیوند خورده بود (Shenkar, 2014: 76). از سوی دیگر، طوطی که پرنده‌ای غیربومی برای ایران به شمار می‌رفت، در این اثر با ویژگی‌های مشخص هنر ساسانی به تصویر کشیده شده است (McArthur, 2018).



یکی از مهم‌ترین جنبه‌های این پژوهش، بررسی نقش موسیقی ایرانی به عنوان رسانه انتقال فرهنگی است. سازهای اصیل ایرانی مانند چنگ و بریط که در مراسم آئینی ساسانیان کاربرد داشتند، از طریق شبکه‌های تجاری جاده ابریشم به چین راه یافتند (Xie Jin, 2005: 28-6). مدارک متقن باستان‌شناسی شامل نقاشی‌های دیواری غارهای بودایی مانند غار قزل<sup>۵</sup> و مجسمه‌های تدفینی، حضور پررنگ این سازها را در چین باستان تأیید می‌کنند (Li Mei, 2014: 43).

تحلیل سبک‌شناختی جعبه سریرا نشان می‌دهد که هنرمندان منطقه کوچا با درک عمیق از مفاهیم نمادین هنر ساسانی، این عناصر را در خدمت بیان مفاهیم بودایی به کار گرفته‌اند. مدالیون‌های مرواریدی که در هنر ساسانی برای تأکید بر تقدس به کار می‌رفتند، در این اثر نیز برای برجسته کردن عناصر مقدس بودایی استفاده شده‌اند.

### نتیجه‌گیری

مطالعه جعبه یادبود سریرا، اثر به دست آمده از ویرانه‌های معبد بودایی در کوچا، نشان می‌دهد که این شیء، نه تنها ارزش مذهبی دارد، بلکه تأثیرات هنر ساسانی را در شرق آسیا بازتاب می‌دهد. ویژگی‌های بصری مانند نقوش پرندگان به صورت قرینه، نوارهای مرواریدی، مدالیون‌های تزئینی و تصاویر سازهای ایرانی (چنگ و بریط)، همگی گواه حضور پررنگ عناصر ساسانی در این اثر هستند. این جعبه نماد امتزاج هنری بین فرهنگ‌هاست، به ویژه در منطقه‌ای مانند کوچا که در تقاطع تمدن‌ها قرار داشت. بررسی نمادهایی مانند قرقاول و طوطی، که در فرهنگ‌های ایرانی، هندی و چینی معانی متفاوتی دارند، عمق این تعاملات فرهنگی را نشان می‌دهد. نکته کلیدی این است که نقوش ساسانی در این اثر صرفاً تقلید نشده، بلکه با درکی آگاهانه در بافت جدید مذهبی و فرهنگی بازتفسیر شده‌اند. نتایج پژوهش تأکید می‌کند که هنر ساسانی، با نمادپردازی‌های خاص و جلوه‌های بصری چشمگیر، بر هنر بودایی شرق آسیا تأثیر گذاشته و در قالب‌های جدیدی بازآفرینی شده است. منطقه تاریم و شهر کوچا به عنوان پل ارتباطی، این انتقال و بومی‌سازی سبک‌ها را ممکن ساخته است. این مطالعه اهمیت پژوهش‌های تطبیقی میان هنر ایران و شرق آسیا را برجسته می‌سازد و نشان می‌دهد که بررسی آثار کمتر شناخته شده می‌تواند زوایای پنهان تبادلات فرهنگی را روشن کند.

یکی از شاخص‌ترین موارد، گسترش ساز چنگ ایرانی تا چین است که احتمالاً از طریق مبادلات سیاسی، هدایای دربار، و به ویژه بازرگانان صورت گرفته است. مجسمه‌ها و نقاشی‌های دیواری غارهای بودایی در چین، حضور این ساز را در آئین‌های مذهبی تأیید می‌کنند. به نظر می‌رسد خنیاگران و راویان دوره‌گرد، با اجرای داستان‌های حماسی و عاشقانه به همراه موسیقی، زمینه پذیرش این عناصر فرهنگی را در جامعه چین فراهم کرده‌اند. این فرآیند نشان‌دهنده انعطاف هنر ساسانی و توانایی آن در هماهنگی با بسترهای جدید فرهنگی است.

در مجموع، این پژوهش بر نقش محوری جاده ابریشم در تبادل هنری و پیچیدگی‌های فرآیند اقتباس فرهنگی تأکید می‌کند. آثار مانند جعبه سریرا نه تنها میراث هنری، بلکه گواهی بر گفت‌وگوی میان تمدن‌ها هستند که می‌توانند الهام بخش مطالعات آینده در حوزه باستان‌شناسی و تاریخ هنر باشند.

## سپاسگزاری

در پایان، نویسندگان بر خود لازم می‌دانند از داوران ارجمند مقاله به دلیل بازبینی دقیق و موشکافانه سپاسگزاری نمایند. نظرات سازنده و علمی ایشان نقش بسزایی در ارتقاء کیفیت علمی این مقاله داشته است.

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## پی‌نوشت

1. Subashi

۲. Kucha (龜茲) این منطقه در استان Aksu امروزی، در منطقه خودمختار Xinjiang در چین قرار دارد.

۳. Tarim، حوضه بسته بزرگی است که سرزمینی به گستردگی ۱,۰۲۰,۰۰۰ کیلومترمربع را در بر می‌گیرد. این حوضه در استان

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۴. ازجمله دیگر کلمات معادل، کلمه «دستار» است (سودآور، ۳۹:۱۳۸۲) در این پژوهش از واژه روبان استفاده می‌شود

چراکه دارای معنای عام‌تری است.

5. Kizil (克孜尔)

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