

Investigating the story of the Chinese-Roman controversy in painting and polishing in Persian literature

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Abstract

The present article deals with a story related to the Chinese and Roman contest and disputation, and shows the skill of each over the other. The main theme of the story refers to the comparison of the art of painting and polishing the porch of the two nations. In the texts of Persian language and literature of poets and writers related to the 11th century AD and beyond, more attention has been paid to this matter. Some poets such as Fakhr al-Din Asad Gorgani, Naser Khosrow, Rashid al-Din Meybodi have only referred to this Chinese art, some, such as Nizami Ganjavi, have presented the story in more detail, and some poets and writers such as Ghazzali, Anvari, Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hasani Razi have interpreted this story in a more detail, and beyond the narration, they have drawn interesting results from it. Ultimately, the argument is that one of them paints the porch and the other polishes the other part of the porch, reflecting that painting, and finally the result and interpretation of the story is: Al-Ghazzali likens the efforts of the men of truth to purify the heart and cultivate the soul to the work of the Chinese, who, by polishing their side, perceive those manifestations better and clearer, and thus the truth is better manifested in their hearts. Jalal al-Din Rumi, the great poet of the Persian language, also believes that man should be cleansed of grudges, greed, and bad moral qualities, and he should purify himself of all evils, and for this purpose he should polish his heart. Because the turbidity that sits on the heart of man hinders his perfection and growth.

Keywords: China, Persian literature, Painting and polishing, Rumi, Nizami, Ghazzali.

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Introduction

As one of the seven climates, China and Machin have a special place in Persian literature, poets and writers have used it to create various themes, and China and its attributes are present in the poetry of most Iranian poets. In these works, Chin and Machin are sometimes used objectively and realistically and sometimes used mythical and legendary.

Poets and writers of Persian literature from the earliest times to the present have paid much attention to China and its features in their poems and writings. In Iranian historical, geographical and scientific books, the natural and cultural manifestations of China have been considered. Some of the material related to China in these works goes back to the borders of this land and its natural features; the wonders and beauties of China are another favorite subject of Iranian writers and poets, the China Sea, the beauty of the Chinese, the deer and the musk, Chinese painting and so on.

Chinese products such as silk, mirrors, bowls, cinnamon, Chinese merchants and traders have also been very popular among Iranians and have been widely mentioned in Persian books. Also, Persian poets, in addition to dealing with the real characteristics and real features of China, have sometimes given it symbolic meanings. Just as China has attracted the attention of poets and writers in Persian literature, Persian poetry has also attracted attention in China. For example, we can refer to Ibn Battuta's narration that Chinese singers sang Persian poetry (Saadi) with a good voice.

Among these poets, we can mention Daqiqi, Ferdowsi, Farrokhi, Onsori, Manouchehri, Anvari, Khaghani, Sanai, Nizami, Attar, Rumi, Sa'di, Hafez and

In general, in Persian literature, China is a land of beauties and wonders. In prose works such as History of Sistan, History of Beyhaqi, Hodud al-Alam, Ajayeb al-makhluqat, Attafhim and so on, we can also learn about China and its attributes.

Research background

So far, no article has been written in English on this subject, and only one article can be mentioned in Persian, some of which are relevant to this topic.

The story of the Roman and Chinese controversy in painting and polishing. Comparison of Rumi's narration with ... by Ahmad Ketabi, *Ayeneye mirath*, 2007, 258 to 271²

Chinese painting in Persian literature

In the following article, we will study the story of the Chinese-Roman controversy in painting. It is said that in the presence of one of the kings, there was a conversation between several Chinese and Roman artists about having the best painting and face art. The king ordered a porch to be given to the two groups so that each of them could perform in a part of it. It was decided to draw a curtain between them so that they would not be informed of each other's actions. The Romans began their work by using strange and unique colors, but the Chinese did not use colors, their only job was to polish their part. When the Romans finished, the Chinese said that our work was over. The king was surprised when the work was completed while they had not yet used the color. Chinese artists said we are ready to present our work, remove the curtain. When they removed the curtain, the beautiful design of the Roman artists appeared with more radiance and brilliance. Chinese artists have managed to make their portion look like a mirror by polishing it to reflect the Roman painting - as beautiful as it is - in double beauty.

This story has been narrated in several Persian sources and in some sources it has been interpreted. In some sources, only Chinese painting and the art of painting are discussed. In other sources, only the story of the dispute between the Chinese and the Romans and their struggle to prove the value of their art has been discussed, and this story has been interpreted in Gazzali's *Ehya al-olum*, Anvari's *Divan*, Rumi's *Masnavi* and Hasani's *Tabsaratolavam*.

Sources in which the story is mentioned and interpreted and analyzed.

In Ghazzali, Anvari, Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hasani Razi's writings and poems, this story has been accompanied by an interesting interpretation and conclusion after being mentioned.

Mohammad Ghazzali is an Iranian philosopher, theologian and one of the greatest thinkers of the 11th century. In the West, he is better known as Al-Ghazali and Algazel. He narrates the story as follows: The Chinese and the Romans, in the service of one of the kings, were proud of their mastery and skill in painting. So, the king's decision was made for both groups to paint the porch, on one side the Chinese and on the other the Romans and a curtain was hung between them so

² Ahmad Ketabi, *Ghesse ye Mera Kardane Romiyan Va Chiniyan dar Elme Naghasi Va Suratgari*. 258-271.

that they would not know each other's work. The Romans painted and the Chinese began polishing their sides, when the Romans finished their work, the Chinese also said that we finished the work. The king wondered how they did it without paint. The Chinese said that you do not know the truth of this, remove the curtain so that the truth of our claim will be revealed. When the curtain was lifted, the wonders of Roman painting became clearer and brighter on the Chinese side. Because of the polishing, their side was lit like a mirror and it was much clearer and more beautiful than the Roman painting.³

Ghazzali then likens the efforts of the men of truth to purify the heart and cultivate the soul to the work of the Chinese, who, by polishing their side, perceive those manifestations better and clearer, and thus the truth is better manifested in their hearts.

Owhad al-Din Anvari was one of the Iranian poets and scientists of the 12th century. He was proficient in mathematics, philosophy and music, and was a reference to astronomy in his day.

In a short poem, Anvari tells this story in a different way. A painting contest is formed between two Chinese painters. Hear the beautiful story of Chinese painters who wanted to paint a porch. One of the masters painted the other side like a mirror and the other master painted this side. So that every image that is drawn on that side can be seen on this side. O brother, consider yourself like that porch. If you can't be like that painted half, try to be this other half.⁴

Here, Anvari likens the porch to the human body, which should try to refine itself if it cannot be full of beautiful images.

Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi, known as Rumi, is one of the most famous Iranian poets of the 13th century. Rumi's influence extends beyond national borders. His poems have been widely translated into many languages of the world. The translation of Rumi's poems is known as the "most popular" and "best-selling" poetry of Iranian poets in the United States.

His Masnavi is considered to be one of the greatest Persian language poems. His works are widely read throughout Iran, and translations of his works are very popular in Turkey, Azerbaijan, the United States, and South Asia.

We mention this story from Masnavi:

The Chinese said, "We are the better artists;"
the Greeks said "The power and excellence belongs to us."

³ Mohammad Ghazzali, *Ehya ai-olum*, 46.

⁴ Owhad al-Din Anvari, *Dyvane Ash'ar*, 759.

"I will put you to the test in this matter," said the Sultan,
"which of you are approved in your claim."

The Chinese and the Greeks began to debate:

the Greeks retired from the debate.

The Chinese said, "Hand over to us a particular room,
and one for you."

There were two rooms with door facing door:

the Chinese took one, the Greeks the other.

The Chinese requested the King to give them a hundred colours:

the King opened his treasury that they might receive that.

Every morning, by bounty, the colours were dispensed
from the treasury to the Chinese.

The Greeks said, "No tints and colours are proper for our work,
except to remove the rust."

They shut the door and went on burnishing:

they became clear and pure like the sky.

There is a way from many-colouredness to colourlessness:

colour is like the clouds, and colourlessness is a moon.

Whatever light and splendour you see in the clouds,
know that it comes from the stars and the moon and the sun.

When the Chinese had finished their work,
they were beating drums for joy.

The King entered and saw the pictures there:
that, as he encountered it, was robbing him of his wits.

After that, he came towards the Greeks:

they removed the intervening curtain.

The reflection of those pictures and works
struck upon these walls which had been made pure.

All that he had seen there seemed more beautiful here:

it was snatching the eye from the socket.

The Greeks, O father, are the Sufis:

without study and books and erudition,

But they have burnished their breasts pure

from greed and cupidity and avarice and hatreds.
 That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt,
 the heart which receives images innumerable.
 That Moses holds in his bosom
 the formless infinite form of the Unseen from the mirror of his heart.
 Although that form is not contained in Heaven, nor in the empyrean
 nor in the sphere of the stars, nor on the Fish,
 Because those are bounded and numbered:
 know that the mirror of the heart has no bound.
 Here the understanding becomes silent or it leads into error,
 because the heart is with Him, or indeed the heart is He.
 The reflection of every image shines unto everlasting from the heart alone,
 both with plurality and without.
 Unto everlasting every new image that falls on it
 is appearing therein without any imperfection.
 They that burnish have escaped from scent and colour:
 they behold Beauty at every moment without tarrying.
 They have relinquished the form and husk of knowledge;
 they have raised the banner of the eye of certainty.
 Thought is gone, and they have gained light:
 they have gained the throat and the sea of gnosis.
 Death, of which all these are sore afraid,
 this people are holding in derision.
 None gains the victory over their hearts:
 the hurt falls on the oyster-shell, not on the pearl.
 Though they have let go grammar (nahw) and jurisprudence (fiqh), yet they
 have taken up mystical self-effacement (mahw) and spiritual poverty (faqr).
 Ever since the forms of the Eight Paradises have appeared,
 they have found the tablets of their hearts receptive.
 A hundred impressions from the empyrean and the starry sphere
 and the void: what impressions? No, it is the very sight of God.⁵

⁵ Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi Rumi, *Mathnavi*, 190.

Rumi's conclusion in this story is that, man must be cleansed of malice, greed, and immorality, and must cleanse himself of all evil, and for this purpose he must purify his heart. Because the rust that sits on the human heart prevents its perfection and growth.

Hasani Razi (first half of the seventh century AH/13th century AD), This narration is quoted differently in *Tabseratolavam*. This book was written by Sayyid Morteza Hasani Razi. He attributed the painting to the Chinese and the polishing to the Romans. In a famous anecdote, Chinese and Roman painters boasted to the king. they closed the curtain in the middle of the line and each of them was busy with their work as they did not know about each other's work. So the Chinese painted and wrote in a very good and perfect way that no one had ever seen before, and the Romans polished this side like a mirror, When the Chinese finished, they pulled back the curtain. Chinese painting was reflected, but this side was polished and smooth, the photo on the other side made it better and more pleasant for the Romans, because whatever you put in front of the mirror, its image is more beautiful in the mirror.⁶

At the end of the story, the author says: The purpose of this story is that, whoever left the interests of the world and engaged in thinking and austerity, achieved inner purity and became prone to accept the heavenly sciences.

Sources in which the story is told without its interpretation

Hakim Nizami Ganja'i is an Iranian poet and storyteller (12th century AD), who is known as a poet with a style and leader of storytelling in Persian literature.

On a spring day, the king accompanied the Chinese king and the tables were spread out, telling us to check to see who was the smartest person in the world. One said that trickery and sorcery arise from India. One said that Roman painting was very popular. Another said that the Chinese engraving is very famous in the world. Disagreements arose over Roman and Chinese painting. They decided to build an arch and draw a curtain between the arch. On the one hand, the Romans would do their work, and on the other hand, the Chinese would polish. They got to work. When they pulled back the curtain, the painting and the color were the same on both sides, and the viewers were amazed. The king searched for their secret, but found nothing. The only difference was that one reflected and one accepted. Again the king ordered that the curtain be hung between them. At this time, the Roman painting retained its water and color, but the Chinese side became dull. The King was astonished. He knew that the reason was polishing.

⁶ Mortaza Hasanie Razi, *Tabserat al-Avam*, 128.

The Romans became known for painting
 The Chinese became famous for polishing
 Every picture that was painted on the porch
 It shone and lit up on this side

The king ordered that both be attractive
 No one like the Romans can paint such a beautiful painting
 Also, no one like the Chinese can master polishing ⁷

And after this, Hakim Nizami points to Mani painter's arrival in China, whose painting caused many Chinese to gather around him

We will now cite evidence from the works of Persian writers who have only referred to the art of Chinese painting. Of course, most of these sources date back to the tenth century AD and beyond. Such as Naser Khosrow, Salman Savoji, Fakhr al-Din Asad Gorgani, Tafsir Meybodi, Golestan Saadi.

Fakhreddin Asad Gorgani is an Iranian poet and storyteller who lived in the 11th century. He is the author of *Vis o Ramin*.

Fakhreddin says in his book:

She made up for it so beautifully that it was as if Mani was decorating Arjang China.
 And he adorned that beautiful idol as if the Chinese painters had decorated the garden of Eram.⁸

Abu Mo'in Naser Khosrow is an Iranian poet, philosopher, sage and tourist who lived in the 11th century.

Nasser Khosrow says in a poem:

Comparing nations, he says that Arabs are skilled in composing poetry, and Greeks in medicine, Indians in magic and sorcery, Romans in arithmetic and music and Chinese in painting.⁹

Abolfazl Rashid al-Din Meybodi is a writer and interpreter of the Quran in the 12th century. His most important work is the interpretation (Tafsir) of *Kashf al-Asrar*.

Rashid al-Din Meybodi has paid attention to Chinese painting in *Kashf al-Asrar*:

Zuleykha's beauty was such that Chinese painters copied her beauty.¹⁰

Sa'di Shirazi is one of the poets and writers of the 13th century. People of literature have given him the title of Master of Speech, King of Speech, Sheikh Ajal, and even Absolutely Master. His works, including *Golestan* to Prose, *Bustan* in the form of *Masnavi* and lyric poems

⁷ Elyas Nizami Ganjei, *Eskandarnama*, 401.

⁸ Fakhr al-Din As'ade Gorgani, *Vis o Ramin*, 48.

⁹ Abu Mo'in NaserKhosrow, *Dyvane Ash'ar*, 83.

¹⁰ Rashid al-Din Meybodi, *Kashfalasarar*, 38.

Golestan is one of the magnificent works of Persian language and Sa'di has mentioned Chinese painting in this work:

Fereydoun said Chinese painters

To sew around his tent:

O conscious man. Beware of bad people

because good people are noble and happy ¹¹

Conclusion

As one of the world's great civilizations, China has been instrumental in the literature of various nations, including Iran. In Persian literature, China has been the center of beauties and wonders, and one of these wonders has been their painting. As can be seen in the article, the story of the Roman-Chinese controversy has been widely used in Persian literature, and usually China and its features have been one of the most interesting topics for Iranian poets and writers. As we have seen, this story has been used in many works of poets and writers of Persian literature. Some have only mentioned it and reflected it briefly in their works, and some, like Nizami, have described it in more detail without commenting on it. And others, such as Ghazzali Anvari Rumi and Hasani Razi, have accompanied it with a different interpretation. From this story, they have obtained interesting results. In a way, this story is not just an ordinary narrative, but it has become one of the tools with which to convey valuable ideas to the reader.

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¹¹ Mosleh al-Din Sa'di Shirazi, *Golestan*, 189.

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