

The designs to be dealt with fall into two main classes, very unequally divided in numbers but both of considerable interest. To the first class, comprising the vast majority of all the specimens, belong the designs which are either of unmistakably Chinese style or else are composed of motifs likely to have been developed and applied in Chinese textile art without foreign influence. The second class is formed by designs which either display characteristic features of the style peculiar to the decorated fabrics produced in Īrān and the adjoining regions of the Near East during the period roughly corresponding to Sassanian rule, or else can be recognized as due to Chinese or other local imitation of 'Sassanian' patterns. It is mainly in connexion with this second class of designs that questions as to the origin of the fabrics which show them or as to the reasons explaining the imitation of those Western patterns far away in the East must arise and claim our attention.

Designs of Chinese origin or derived from Īrān.

Designs of purely Chinese character predominate throughout our Ch'ien-fo-tung textiles, whichever of the above detailed methods (embroidery, figured weaving, etc.) may have been employed for their execution, and all considerations of local *milieu*, geographical position, and prevailing art influence combine to account for this plain fact. We have seen already that Tun-huang throughout its chequered history had retained the character of an essentially Chinese territory ever since the Great Wall of Han Wu-ti was extended to it. During a great portion of the period of over eleven hundred years which separates that first Chinese occupation of the oasis from the closing-up of the chapel at the Thousand Buddhas, the silk industry of China proper enjoyed what amounted to practical monopoly as far West as the Mediterranean. Even later its commercial predominance must have extended far into Central Asia, just as it still does in spite of so many great changes. Its hold upon this western outpost of the empire was obviously strengthened by the fact that through this passed the great trade route which served for long centuries as the main artery of the traffic carrying the silk fabrics of the Seres to the distant West. We have had repeated occasion to concern ourselves with the tangible relics which that ancient silk trade had left behind in the shape of finished textiles.⁴

Designs of Chinese character prevail.

Even if any of the Central-Asian territories to which sericulture was extended in later times could possibly have competed in the quality of its silk fabrics and in output with the ancient home of the industry, a reference to the map shows that any appreciable export of their products as far east as Tun-huang would have been on commercial grounds as unlikely as it would be now. From Farghāna, Samarkand, and Bukhāra, the territories of ancient Sogdiana, where alone local conditions could have favoured the development of silk production on a moderately large scale, the distance to Tun-huang is nearly twice as great as from Ssū-chuan, one of the chief silk-producing provinces of China. To this must be added the fact that the difficulties of transport from the former across high mountains and mainly along desert routes are incomparably greater. The last observation applies also to Khotan, where silk-growing was introduced from China relatively early,⁵ but where the quantity of silk produced and turned into textiles could never have been large. Tun-huang itself and the neighbouring tracts of westernmost Kan-su are climatically unsuited for sericulture. Hence it is impossible to ascribe a local origin to any of the silk fabrics with which we are concerned. But, in any case, there can be no doubt about the textile designs which must have appealed most to the local population. The paintings discussed in the preceding chapter and the frescoes of the cave-shrines to be described below furnish eloquent proof that the taste of this population was in all artistic matters distinctly Chinese.

Silk textiles imported from China.

The particular archaeological value of our Ch'ien-fo-tung decorated fabrics is due, as already stated, to the fact that their approximate period of manufacture is known, or at least its *terminus ad quem*. It would hence be of special interest to compare the designs of Chinese style to be found in

Comparison of textile designs.

⁴ Cf. above, pp. 373 sq., 495, 700 sqq., 720, etc.

⁵ Cf. *Ancient Khotan*, i. pp. 133 sq., 229 sq.