

Ancient Koreans in the Afrasiab Palatial Mural in Samarkand

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Summary

The image of ancient Koreans wearing headgear decorated with feathers (*Jowooguan* 鳥羽冠) has been found in various parts of Asia, including Koguryo's tomb murals, medieval Chinese paintings of foreign envoys, Buddhist murals in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang, archaeological artefacts, and even in the Afrasiab palatial mural in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The figures wearing feathered headgear are of great interest to Korean history and have been frequently used as evidence to support the view that ancient Koreans' sphere of movement was not limited to the Korean peninsula but extended to China, to the Silk Road, and even as far as to Central Asia. They have been interpreted as evidence of ancient Koreans who traveled to China, to Dunhuang, and even to the so-called "Western Regions" (regions West of China, such as the kingdoms of medieval India and Central Asia) and directly interacted with local peoples.

As assumed by many in Korean historical circles, the paintings of figures wearing feathered headgear could be portraits of real Koreans visiting those regions, but it is also possible that they were renderings of the locals' worldview and perceptions of contemporary Koreans. The Koreans in the Afrasiab wall painting have the appearance of typical Koguryo people, judging from comparisons of various records. The painting is of particular

significance since it is the first and only verified image from Central Asia of ancient Koreans. It is a valuable resource that attests to the presence of Koreans in world history, by showing that Sogdiana (Kangguo, Kor. Kangguk 康國; also Kangju, Kor. Kanggō 康居), the medieval Central Asian state centered on Samarkand, was aware of Koreans and Korea, Koreans, although located more than 8,000 km away. In addition, Sogdiana regarded Koguryo as an important state in its contemporary geopolitical context. Thus, it is probable that the peoples of both nations communicated with and traveled to each other's countries for various purposes. Through this process they accumulated information about each other. If this was the case, their exchanges were more likely for commercial and cultural purposes than diplomatic, political, and military ones.

The debate over whether the Koguryo envoys in the Afrasiab mural were actually dispatched to Sogdiana has not been settled yet, but it cannot be denied that Sogdiana considered Koguryo as representing the eastern end of its known world. Headgear decorated with feathers and swords with ring pommels (*hwandu taedo* 環頭大刀) must have impressed Sogdians as particular features of the Koguryo people, which distinguished those ancient Koreans from all peoples in its world.

Deviating from previous Korean analysis of the Afrasiab mural that interprets the figures wearing feathered headgear as evidence for direct linear interaction between the two peoples, it can be approached as an important resource shedding light on the ancient Sogdian people's worldview and perception of ancient Korea and Koreans. That is, the focus of research can shift from tracing ancient Koreans' sphere of movement to understanding how others perceived ancient Korea and Koreans based on the information acquired through direct and indirect interactions. In the case of the Afrasiab mural, in particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the worldview of Sogdiana, which used to be in Samarkand, represented in the painting. In the Sogdian worldview, Koguryo people, who were ancient Koreans, were the people who wore feathered headgear and were portrayed as such at the eastern end of the mural, thereby manifesting their identity via the representation of others.

Introduction

The image of ancient Koreans wearing headgear decorated with feathers (*Jowooguan* 鳥羽冠) has been found in various parts of Asia, including Koguryo's tomb murals, medieval Chinese paintings of foreign envoys, Buddhist murals in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, archaeological artefacts, and even in the Afrasiab palatial mural in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The figures wearing feathered headgear are of great interest to Korean history and have been frequently used as evidence to support the view that ancient Koreans' sphere of movement was not limited to the Korean peninsula but extended to China, to the Silk Road, and even as far as to Central Asia. They have been interpreted as evidence of ancient Koreans who traveled to China, to Dunhuang, and even to the so-called "Western Regions" (regions West of China, such as the kingdoms of medieval India and Central Asia) and directly interacted with local peoples. In this paper, by "Korea" I mean the early Korean state of Koguryo 高句麗 (trad., 37 B.C.E.-668 C.E.), primarily, and to a lesser extent the other early states on the Korean peninsula that were influenced by Koguryo, such as Paekche 百濟 (trad., 18 B.C.E.-660 C.E.) and Silla 新羅 (trad., 57 B.C.E.-935 C.E.), as well as Parhae 渤海 (698-926), which controlled a large portion of Koguryo's old territory after the demise of the ancient state.

Various fields of scholarly endeavor have produced extensive research of Afrasiab's figures wearing headgear decorated with feathers. These scholarly fields include archaeology, history, and art history. Although providing multifaceted analyses, the primary research interest has generally lain in identifying the nationality—in other words, whether the images were from Koguryo, Paekche, Silla, or Parhae. In addition, there have been efforts to trace direct contact between Korea and not just China but also countries along the way of the Silk Road and in Central Asia. Such an approach has particularly prevailed in Korean research circles, which, grounded in nationalism, focuses on providing evidence for ancient Koreans' extensive ventures to the Central Plain, to Dunhuang along the Silk Road, and as far as Central Asia. This can be considered a linear, Korea-centered approach to the matter. However, this painting of people wearing

headgear decorated with feathers is also an important resource that sheds light on the ancient people of Sogdiana's worldview and perception of ancient Korea and Koreans. Thus, research should also focus on how Sogdians perceived ancient Korea and Koreans based on the information formed via direct and indirect interaction.

In this regard, research on figures wearing feathered headgear should transcend the trend of tracing ancient Koreans' ventures and direct interactions in the relevant regions. In the case of the Afrasiab mural, in particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the worldview of Sogdiana, which was centered on ancient Samarkand, represented in the painting. Bearing this in mind, this essay examines the ancient Koreans depicted in the Afrasiab palatial mural.

Figures Wearing Feathered Headgear and Ancient Koreans

Headgear decorated with feathers are also found in ancient Egyptian and Roman records; but Korean-style feathered headgear likely originated in Scythian culture, which was widespread among northern peoples in Siberia, the Western Regions (Central Asia and India), and the Central Plain (Chinese cultural sphere), including the Huns (Xiongnu 匈奴). Examples of Scythian feather-decorated headdress are, one found in the Ice Maiden site in Pazyryk, Siberia (ca. fourth century B.C.E.); an officer hat—likely the headgear of a Saka tribal chief—unearthed from the Issyk Kurgan burial mound in Kazakhstan (ca. fifth-third centuries B.C.E.); the image of a Chinese-style feathered headgear on a Han dynasty stone relief in the Central Plain; an officer hat from the Loulan excavation site (ca. second century B.C.E.-third century C.E.); and an officer hat, estimated to be a Hun king's, from the Arosi excavation site (Western Han period, 202 B.C.E.-8 C.E.). Feathered headgear was worn by people in the Central Plain region even in later times; but, at some point, feathers became generally regarded as the distinctive headdress adornment that characterized ancient Koreans.

Many written records in China and Korea attest that feathered head-



Figure 1. People Wearing Feathered Headgear in the Ssangyŏngch'ong 雙楹塚 Tomb Mural

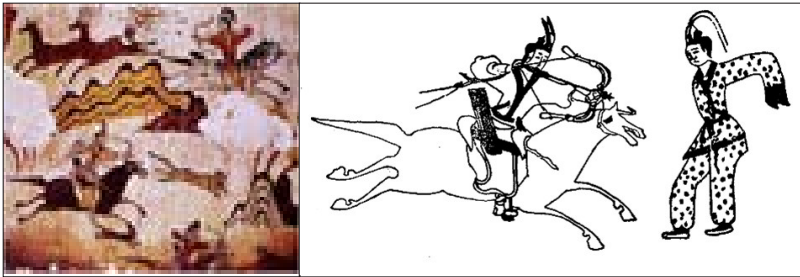


Figure 2. People Wearing Feathered Headgear in the Muyongch'ong 舞踊塚 Tomb Mural

gear was generally a typical style of Koguryo. That the people of Koguryo adorned their hats with feathers was described with clarity and specificity, and 120 remaining Koguryo tomb murals also provide detailed images of people sporting feathered headdress.

In addition, many historical paintings in China, such as “tribute-bearing paintings” (*zhigongtu* 職貢圖), depictions of the distribution of Buddhist bone relics, and the murals in the Buddhist caves at Dunhuang, which project the Chinese worldview of that time, evince that the figures wearing feathered headgear were from Koguryo. The wall painting featuring figures wearing feathered headgear in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, is a very valuable resource in that it is the first and only verified image of ancient Kore-

ans in Central Asia. These ancient Korean figures wearing feathered headgear have the appearance of stereotypical Koguryo people, which was repeatedly and realistically described in many Chinese resources and, hence, must reflect deeply ingrained perceptions of Koguryo people by contemporary Chinese. Therefore, it will not be a stretch to interpret the images of figures wearing feathered headgear in China and Central Asia to be their meme for depicting Koguryo people and/or ancient Koreans.

Studies on historical Chinese paintings, such as the *Illustration of a Royal Meeting with Tribute-Bearers* (*Wanghuitu* 王會圖)—a type of “tribute-bearing painting” attributed to the early Tang painter, administrator, and politician Yan Liben 閻立本 (ca. 600-73)—which depicted envoys from Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla, account for the view that figures wearing feathered headgear were seen as emissaries from Koguryo. This account is closely linked to the general perception of ancient Koreans in written records. In other tribute-bearing pictures, people sporting feathered headgear were described as Koguryo envoys. This portrayal of Koguryo envoys continued in the *Illustration of Envoys Bearing Tribute to the Liang Court* (*Liang zhigongtu* 梁職貢圖) and paintings of royal meetings with tribute-bearers. This evidence indicates that feathered headgear was regarded as the distinctive feature of Koguryo envoys and, thus, a figure wearing a headdress decorated with feathers was an iconic image of the Koguryo people.



Figure 3.
Koguryo Envoy in the *Illustration of a Royal Meeting with Tribute-Bearers*.



Figure 4. Paekche Envoys in the *Illustration of Envoys Bearing Tribute to the Liang Court* and *Illustration of a Royal Meeting with Tribute-Bearers*



Figure 5. Silla Envoy in the *Illustration of a Royal Meeting with Tribute-Bearers*

Ancient Koreans in the Afrasiab Palatial Mural

The Afrasiab murals were painted on all four walls in a room. The paintings on the south, west, and north walls are relatively recognizable, but the one on the east wall is heavily damaged. The mural on the south wall depicts a royal parade consisting of King Varkhuman (ca. 640-70) and his royal guards on horses, the queen on an elephant, and women on horses, followed by some people on camels and a number of white geese. On the first row of the west wall painting, King Varkhuman sits with Göktürk people on his left and right; on the second row, twenty-one people are depicted; and on the third row, there are forty-two people, thirty of whom seemed to be Sogdian aristocrats and servants, while the remaining twelve seem to be foreign envoys. In the painting on the north wall, a noble woman who seems to be Chinese is boating with maids and musicians in one part, and envoys from Tang 唐 China and/or Karakhoja (Gaochang, Kor. Koch'ang 高昌) were hunting together with Sogdian people in another part.

Although the murals generally portray the real life and culture of the Samarkand region of that time, some mystical and abstract images are included as well. For example, the heavily damaged east wall has an image related to the myth of Krishna. Also, it is dubious that the boating scene on the north wall depicted a real-life event, considering various mystical elements in the background. Another example is from the mural on the west wall, which is the central painting among the murals. It depicted foreign envoys offering tributes or bowing as though praying to King Varkhuman on the west wall. Judging from the Sogdian inscription on the clothes of the characters, the main content of the painting seems to be the conversations of King Varkhuman with the Sogdian special envoy Pukarzate and with a special envoy from Chach (Tashkent). Although there are other emissaries from different countries in the same scene, the focus is on those from Sogdiana and Chach. This painting is not realistic, since it would be hard to imagine a situation where all those envoys were assembled at the same place at the same time. Therefore, the image is more likely a representation of the Sogdian worldview and perceptions of its neighbors than a real episode.

The painting on the west wall features figures wearing feathered headgear. It is generally assumed that the scene depicts situations of the mid-7th century, although many scholars have suggested various dates: V. Livshits, 640 C.E.; M. Mode, 649 C.E.; KIM Wonyong and CHOE Kwang-shik, the mid-7th century, when King Varkhuman obtained the investiture of the governor of Sogdiana from the Tang emperor; KWON Young-pil, 651-57 C.E.; ANAZAWA Wakou, mid-7th century before 660 C.E.; F. Grenet, 660 C.E.; S. A. Yatsenko, 662 C.E.; CHÖNG Suil, right before 666 C.E.; B.I. Marshak, 666 C.E.; L.I. Al’Baum, late 7th century; NOH Taedon, late 7th century; LEE Jaesung, July 662 or April 663-75, which was the last year of the reign of King Varkhuman of Samarkand.

The most popular opinion in Korean historical circles is that the image of the Koguryo envoys in the west wall mural depicted actual Koguryo envoys sent to Sogdiana. Then a collateral assumption would be that all the foreign envoys in the same scene with King Varkhuman of Sogdiana and the khan of the West Göktürk Khanate, actually visited Sogdiana. In 650 C.E., around the time of the scene, Tang incorporated Samarkand of Sogdiana and other neighboring states into a self-rule system (*jimi*, Kor. *kimi* 羈縻, lit. “loose reign”), though in formality only, thereby transferring the suzerainty of the region from the West Göktürk Khanate to the Tang dynasty. In addition, Koguryo was engaged in a long but intermittent period of war with Tang in the mid-7th century. In this geopolitical backdrop, would Koguryo be able to deploy its envoys from its capital P’yöngyang to Sogdiana, located 8,000 km away? If so, what would be the purpose, and what benefits would it gain from this deployment?

Some scholars speculate that the two Koguryo envoys with feathered headdresses and swords with ring pommels were sent to Samarkand in order to contain or check Tang and/or to build diplomatic and commercial ties with the Göktürks and the Sogdians. Some also suggest that the mural depicted the investiture of Varkhuman as the governor of Sogdiana, a ceremony attended by envoys from various countries. Another speculation is that Koguryo sent its envoys to Samarkand in pursuit of a new alliance against Tang after failing to form an alliance with the Tiele 鐵勒 of Mongolia. Others even argue that the figures wearing feathered headdress were in

fact envoys from Silla or Parhae; but the general consensus is that they were Koguryo envoys.

If Koguryo in the Far East really had deployed envoys as far as to Samarkand, Sogdiana might have considered it an opportunity to expand its trade network to a new region to gain commercial benefits, and thus they must have welcomed those guests. The envoys would travel the route from Koguryo, passing through one of the regions of Shiwei 室韋, Mohe 靺鞨 (Kor. Malgal), or Khitan 契丹, then across the Steppe Road (Caoyuanlu 草原路), which crossed Mongolia east and west, and reaching the Orkhon River and Selenga River. They would have continued westbound, climbing over the Altai Mountains, then passing Dzungaria (Jungaria) and Zetysu (Semyrechie), which lies between modern-day Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan, and finally arriving at Samarkand, Sogdiana. To complete this journey, it would be necessary to obtain cooperation from the locals along their route, but it is not certain whether Sogdians provided guides and/or the locals were cooperative. However, this route was an international passage that both nations could use when necessary.

On the other hand, it is questionable that Koguryo in the mid 7th century actually deployed envoys to Sogdiana to contain or restrain Tang. Thus, it has been suggested that the mural adopted a widespread iconic image of Koguryo envoys from China instead of depicting their actual visit to Samarkand, based on the comparisons of figures wearing feathered headgear in Chinese tribute-bearing paintings and other historical records, the murals in Dunhuang caves, and Afrasiab murals. Regardless of whether it is an iconic image adopted from China or a depiction of the information acquired through direct contact with Koguryo people, it does not change the fact that the mural image expresses the Sogdian worldview and perception of ancient Koreans. In the mural, the envoys from Central Asian regions such as Afghanistan or Tashkent, and those from Tang or Karakhoja (Gaochang), stood in the center while the Koguryo envoys were placed at the periphery of the painting. This could be a symbolic rendering of the idea of Sogdian people about Koguryo being a nation representing the eastern end of their world. As the mural is a conceptual and symbolic representation of the Sogdian worldview, its portrayal of Koguryo people is a valu-

able record to help understand Sogdiana's perception of ancient Korea and Koreans.

Except for feathered headgear and swords with ring pommels, which were generally regarded as distinctive features of the dress of Koguryo people, the attire of the Koguryo envoys in the Afrasiab mural is rather more generic representative of Koguryo. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how those Koguryo envoys became part of the Afrasiab mural. There are most likely two possibilities. The first possibility is that Sogdiana adopted the iconic image of Korean envoys disseminated from the Tang capital Chang'an 長安 (present-day Xi'an) or Dunhuang in China to Central Asia and used it for the mural. Given that King Varkuman was appointed Governor of Sogdiana in the 650s, during the reign of Tang emperor Gaozong 唐高宗 (649-83), it is probable to assume that Tang's worldview influenced that of Sogdiana. The second possibility is that Sogdiana had contact with Koguryo while closely interacting with China and the Göktürks, and thus acquired information about Koguryo people. From their experience with Koguryo people, feathered headdresses and swords with ring pommels could be ingrained in the collective memory of the Sogdian people, and the deep-rooted image was expressed in the mural painting, which depicted Koguryo people as representing the east end of their world.

There are diverse perspectives in interpreting the Afrasiab palatial murals in Samarkand. From the perspective of world history, the mutual perceptions and interactions between ancient Koreans and the Sogdian people should receive their due attention, but research must be handled with more balance and objectivity, avoiding unilateral, nationalistic, and linear biases.

Conclusion

The figures wearing feathered headgear in the Afrasiab mural could be a portrayal of ancient Koreans who visited Samarkand, or they could be an iconic projection of the Sogdian worldview and perception. Comparison of many resources indicates that the ancient Koreans in the Afrasiab painting

share the idiosyncratic or conventional depiction of Koguryo people. The mural has particular significance, as it includes the first and only image of ancient Koreans found in Central Asia, which attests to the presence of Koreans in world history. Sogdiana, which was located in Central Asia, 8,000 km away from Korea, was aware of ancient Korea and Koreans and perceived Koguryo as an important nation in its contemporary geopolitics. The two nations must have communicated and acquired information about each other, and it is possible that their peoples even visited each other. Their encounters were likely more commercial and cultural on the whole than political, diplomatic, or military.

As discussed before, it is unclear whether Koguryo envoys were actually deployed to Sogdiana, but the Afrasiab palatial mural indisputably evinces the presence of Koguryo in the worldview of Sogdiana as a nation representing the east end of their world. To the Sogdian people, feathered headdress and swords with ring pommels were the most impressive and distinctive features that set Koguryo people—that is, ancient Koreans—apart from other neighbors in the world.

The figures wearing headgear decorated with feathers in the Afrasiab palatial wall painting must be interpreted synthetically after carefully examining the issues, such as geopolitical situations, involving Koguryo, its neighbor Tang, the Tiele, the Göktürks, and Sogdiana; problems that might occur while traveling the Göktürk route; and a close analysis of the mural itself. Only the thorough investigation of these issues will facilitate an accurate understanding of the painting in the relevant historical context.