

FORMATION OF SINO-ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY ALONG THE SILK ROUTES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

Amir H. Zekrgoo

Introduction

Though the origin of calligraphy in Muslim countries, perhaps, is the practice of writing the Qur'an, Hadith and the like in Arabic language, but with the expansion of the sphere of Islamic culture, this art gradually picked up acquaintance with the aesthetic values and tastes and characteristic behavior of the language of various lands and regions. Thus, a process of interaction and change set in which brought about a variety of styles of writing. For such interactions to take place a network of communication was needed, and the famous Silk Route provided the link.

For a very long time the "Silk Route" (comprising both the land and sea routes) was the most important path of travel and of communication. It was through this network of land and nautical routes that mankind experienced for the very first time a multifaceted process of globalization. Through the Silk Route cultures met, ideas traveled, religions spread and carried with them their languages, scripts and customs. Islam in the course of its spread to many Eastern and Far Eastern countries traveled through this very network. The new faith not only transformed the heart and the worldview of the peoples who embraced it, but also gave birth to new scripts and the language that came with them.

In some lands (like Egypt) the old language and script was completely replaced by Arabic and in others (like Iran) an amalgamation took place, i.e., the local language was preserved, but the script was adopted with some alterations to suit the need of the language. There are yet other peoples (like Muslims of the Indian subcontinent) whose Islamic identity is reflected in Urdu, a language that is a mixture of Hindi and Persian, and the Nasta'liq script.

Then we have the Chinese Muslims who accepted the Arabic script merely as the script of their religion at first, but gradually

developed from it – based on their own rich artistic tradition – a unique style of Islamic calligraphy known as the ‘Sino-Arabic Style’. This style is an amazing example of a cultural synthesis; it bluntly displays the Chinese aesthetic values, based on a well-rooted calligraphic tradition of China, while the letters and content of such artworks come from a faith born in Arabia. The study of the process of emergence of Sino-Arabic style would display the strength of both the faith that inspired it, and the greatness of the tradition that absorbed, digested and transformed it, and eventually made it its own. It is a perfect example of inter-civilizational dialogue through word and art.

In all instances – when it comes to speaking Arabic or any other non-native language for that matter – the spirit of native cultures may be sensed in the flow of the regional accents and dialects. On the other hand the appearance of the calligraphic styles of the different regions, despite the use of the same characters and scripts, differ.

In this paper it is proposed that the variation in speech styles (accents and dialects) play an important role in the formation of different writing styles, as both (writing and speech, or form and sound) are embodiments of but one abstracted reality: “The Word” or “الكلمة”. This will be discussed in the context of the Silk Road Cultures.

The Silk Road Spirit

The Silk Road:

The Silk Road(s) or Silk Route(s) is a term used for a historical network of ancient land and maritime highways that extended from Rome, in Southern Europe through Arabia, Egypt, Persia (Iran), Central Asia, Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, all the way Chang’an (today’s Xi’an), now an important location of Islamic culture in China. (Figure 1)