

# A Circuitous Trading Route along the Maritime Silk Road and an Active Intermediary on this Route Emerging from an In-depth Analysis of Gold and Silver Wares Excavated in Suixi, Guangdong

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## ABSTRACT

Getting complete insight into the Maritime Silk Road across India Ocean and South China Sea in the 4th-5th century resulting from thorough analysis of Gold and Silver Wares excavated in Suixi, Guangdong is the major task. There are several approaches proposed for exploring the exact ages, producing areas and cultural symbolism of 3 specific Suixi artifacts, including comparing its inscriptions with alphabets of ancient letters of Iranian, interpreting lotus petal patterns and suggesting an innovative idea of the connection with Jatayu, the legendary bird from Ramayana. The work cites perceived deficiencies of previous studies of Jiang Boqin and presents an overview the trade route, including a variety of participants and its positive contribution towards trade and cultural exchange that cannot be ignored. The reasoning above leads to the following conclusion that Funan could be the least replaceable agency on the trading route and played the role of a connecting bridge between countries and civilizations.

**Keywords:** *Funan, Suixi, the Maritime Silk Road.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *1.1. The Date when Gold and Silver Wares were Hidden away*

The paper is composed of three themed chapters, which are: a) Analysis of the discovery in Suixi, b) Tracing the footprints of the goods and c) Review the least replaceable role of Southeast Asia in the route. In detail, the first section of the paper focuses on the analysis of three representative articles in Suixi hoard in order to find out their ages, producing areas and point out deficiencies of previous studies. Chapter Two gives a brief overview of the trading route and the remaining part of the paper argues the irreplaceable status of Southeast Asia, notably Funan, in this early Maritime Silk Road. The purpose of this paper is to explore the unknown stories behind the gold and silver wares discovered in Suixi and to demonstrate the essential role Southeast Asia has played in the Maritime Silk Road.

The first section of the paper analyzes an excavation in Suixi, Guangdong, where a splendid pottery vessel containing 20 Persian silver coins inside, a broken silver bowl, a silver box, 2 gilded bottles and some gold and

silver bracelets were unearthed [1].

The first-hand report of archaeologists participating in the excavation suggests that the found silver coins were Persian Empire coins utilized during the reign of Shapur III and Peroz of Sasanian Empire (383AD-484AD) and the exterior of the pottery bottle bearing these coins exactly matches to the typical style of bottles in the South Dynasty (420-589 AD) [2]. Additionally, as stated by the Chinese famous archaeologist, Xia Nai, it is presumable that after being produced, it would not be a long time before they were buried in the ground, generally between 10 and 50 years [3]. In this way, it would be 390s-530s AD when the silver coins were buried.

## 2. THE PRODUCING AREA OF THE GOODS

Here, we need to think about the specific way of how they were saved, namely **hoarding**, which refers to a collection of valuable objects and artifacts are buried in the ground purposely. And as an extreme measure, it is only utilized in unusual circumstances when a country falls into chaos and turmoil, for example during dynastic changes of ancient China. And exactly during this period (390s-530s AD) mentioned above, a serious

regime transfer did indeed exist. In 502 AD, the South Qi dynasty was replaced by the South Liang dynasty.

Meanwhile, besides the coins the rest of wares are all household items or decorations like bowls and boxes made of precious metals [4] with reference to an original report published by the Suixi Museum. The only reason to hoard them in a sudden is that the owner has to stop using them in daily life due to a special circumstance and therefore they store away his household goods.

Taking all these into consideration, a highly possible explanation might be that the unknown owner of this hoard chose to store his collection of valuable decorations and household goods in a hoard temporarily in order to avoid from being robbed or stolen in chaos, but in the end failed to take them out. To be exact, all of these wares including silver coins and decorations, articles of daily use, were buried in the ground around 502 AD, when the South Qi dynasty ended and the South Liang dynasty started. Attention shall be paid here

that the date we have defined here therefore assists in our following research.

### 2.1. a Silver Bowl

To find out where the gold and silver wares were from, it is necessary to pay attention to a silver bowl with inscriptions on it, which turns out to be a clear and strong evidence of the producing area.

Comparing with the alphabets of ancient letters of Iranian [5], it is possible to define which language the inscription letters belong to. The details are as follows.



Figure 1: Inscriptions on the Suixi silver bowl [6]

	Old Sogdian	Inscriptional Pahlavi	Inscriptional Parthian	Imperial Aramaic
<i>aleph</i>	𐰀, 𐰁	𐭀	𐭀	𐤀
<i>beth</i>	𐰂, 𐰃	𐭁	𐭁	𐤁
<i>gimel</i>	𐰄	𐭂	𐭂	𐤂
<i>daleth</i>	(𐰅)	𐭃	𐭃	𐤃
<i>he</i>	𐰆, 𐰇	𐭄	𐭄	𐤄
<i>waw</i>	𐰈	𐭅	𐭅	𐤅
<i>zayin</i>	𐰉	𐭆	𐭆	𐤆
<i>heth</i>	𐰊	𐭇	𐭇	𐤇
<i>teth</i>	—	𐭈	𐭈	𐤈
<i>yodh</i>	𐰋	𐭉	𐭉	𐤉
<i>kaph</i>	𐰌	𐭊	𐭊	𐤊
<i>lamedh</i>	𐰍	𐭋	𐭋	𐤋
<i>mem</i>	𐰎	𐭌	𐭌	𐤌
<i>nun</i>	𐰏, 𐰐, 𐰑	𐭍	𐭍	𐤍
<i>samekh</i>	𐰒	𐭎	𐭎	𐤎
<i>ayin</i>	𐰓, 𐰔, (𐰕)	(2)	𐭏	𐤏
<i>pe</i>	𐰖	𐭏	𐭏	𐤐
<i>sadhe</i>	𐰗, 𐰘, 𐰙	𐭐	𐭐	𐤐
<i>qoph</i>	—	(𐭑)	𐭑	𐤑
<i>resh</i>	𐰚	(2)	𐭒	𐤒
<i>shin</i>	𐰛	𐭒	𐭒	𐤓
<i>taw</i>	𐰜, 𐰝, 𐰞	𐭓	𐭓	𐤔

Figure 2: Comparison of Old Sogdian letters with those in Unicode blocks for related Iranian scripts and Aramaic.

**TABLE I**

	Imperial Aramaic	Inscriptions		Pahlavi	
		Parthian	Persian	Psalter	Book
* ('āleṣp)*	𐤀	𐭀	𐭀	𐭀	𐭀
h (bēṭ)	𐤁	𐭁	𐭁	𐭁	𐭁
e (gimel)	𐤂	𐭂	𐭂	𐭂	𐭂
d (dāleṭ)	𐤃	𐭃	𐭃	𐭃	𐭃
h (hē)	𐤄	𐭄	𐭄	𐭄	𐭄
w (wāw)	𐤅	𐭅	𐭅	𐭅	𐭅
z (zayin)	𐤆	𐭆	𐭆	𐭆	𐭆
h (hēṭ)	𐤇	𐭇	𐭇	𐭇	𐭇
t (tēṭ)	𐤈	𐭈	𐭈	𐭈	𐭈
y (yōṭ)	𐤉	𐭉	𐭉	𐭉	𐭉
k (kaṭ)	𐤊	𐭊	𐭊	𐭊	𐭊
l (lāmeḍ)	𐤋	𐭋	𐭋	𐭋	𐭋
m (mēm)	𐤌	𐭌	𐭌	𐭌	𐭌
n (nūn)	𐤍	𐭍	𐭍	𐭍	𐭍
s (sāmeḵ)	𐤎	𐭎	𐭎	𐭎	𐭎
' ('ayin)	𐤏	𐭏	𐭏	𐭏	𐭏
p (pē)	𐤐	𐭐	𐭐	𐭐	𐭐
s (šāṭ)	𐤑	𐭑	𐭑	𐭑	𐭑
q (qōṭ)	𐤒	𐭒	𐭒	𐭒	𐭒
r (rē)	𐤓	𐭓	𐭓	𐭓	𐭓
š (šāṭ)	𐤔	𐭔	𐭔	𐭔	𐭔
t (tāw)	𐤕	𐭕	𐭕	𐭕	𐭕

Figure 3: table showing Imperial Aramaic, Inscriptional Parthian, Inscription Pahlavi, and Book Pahlavi, from MacKenzie, 1971



Figure 4: Inscriptions on Suixi Silver Bowl (from right to left-No.1)

Table 1 Language and meaning corresponding to each inscription letter of Figure 4

	Aramaic	Parthian	Persian	Pahlavi	Old Sogdian
A1		gimel			
A2		samekh			
A3				Heth	



Figure 5: Inscriptions on Suixi Silver Bowl (from right to left-No.2)

Table 2 Language and meaning corresponding to each inscription letter of Figure 5

	Aramaic	Parthian	Persian	Pahlavi	Old Sogdian
B1	Het				
B2		waw			
B3		yodh			
B4	sadhe				sadhe
B5		zayin		zayin	



Figure 6: Inscriptions on Suixi Silver Bowl (from right to left-No.3)

Table 3 Language and meaning corresponding to each inscription letter of Figure 6

	Aramaic	Parthian	Persian	Pahlavi	Old Sogdian
C1		yodh			Lamedh
C2		ayin			
C3		zayin		zayin	
C4		samekh			
C5		aleph		aleph	



Figure 7: Inscriptions on Suixi Silver Bowl (from right to left-No.4)

Table 4 Language and meaning corresponding to each inscription letter of Figure 7

	Aramic	Parthian	Persian	Pahlavi	Old Sogdian
D1			kaph		
D2			mem		



Figure 8: Inscriptions on Suixi Silver Bowl (from right to left-No.5)

Table 5 Language and meaning corresponding to each inscription letter of Figure 8

	Aramic	Parthian	Persian	Pahlavi	Old Sogdian
E1		ayin			
E2		waw			
E3					
E4		taw			
E5		Samekh			
E8	daleth				kaph
E9	Beth				

The result shows that the absolute majority of these letters are ancient Parthian letters while a small number of them are ancient Aramic/ Persian/ Pahlavi letters, which indicates that the silver bowl came from Persian Empire.

### 2.1.1.The Deficiencies of Previous Studies

Jiang Boqin(1991), an authority in the field of the Silk Road, demonstrated his opinion that the silver bowl unearthed in Suixi, Guangdong were made in the Eastern part of Sasanian Empire, exactly where the Sogdian were living at that time in his paper[7]. And another famous expert called Rong Xinjiang(2014) also quoted Jiang's conclusion to support his argument in his famous essay later. Since then, Chinese scholars have forged an agreement that the gold and silver wares were essential physical evidences of the theory that it was the Sogdian who dominated the Maritime Silk Road [8].

However, whether his conclusion is really up to scrutiny or not? As Jiang Boqin's argument relies heavily on his quotation from Soviet scholar Boris Marshak's book "Sogdian Silver", there is a serious weakness of his analysis based on the quote. Based on *Sogdian Silver* [9], Jiang Boqin compared the Suixi silver bowl with Sogdian silver wares and identified that the pattern of Suixi silver bowl was as same as some of the Sogdian silver wares of the 1st term of B Genre, so that he came to a conclusion that the Suixi silver bowl was an early piece of Sogdian wares produced by Sogdian people. However, Jiang's interpretation overlooks the chronological order. The Sogdian silver wares he looked into are from the sixth to the ninth century, which is much later than the date of Suixi silver bowl, and the author of "Sogdian Silver" also makes it clear that the 1st term of B Genre is imitating the style of Parthian Empire(247BC-224AD) or even earlier Achaemenid Empire(550BC-330BC). Accordingly, the only reasonable explanation of the similarity is that the Sogdian silver wares imitated early Iranian artistic style including Parthian Empire style which the Suixi silver bowl belonged to. Therefore, although Jiang Boqin's general conclusion is not overturned by this misinterpretation of the Suixi Silver Bowl, it is incorrect and unregulated to consider the Suixi Hoard discovery as one of his supporting evidence.

### 2.2. a Silver Box

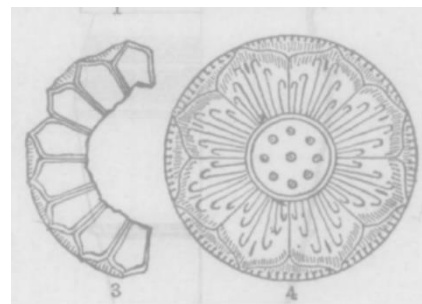


Figure 9: the button of a silver box discovered in Suixi, Guangdong [10]



Figure 10: gold plaques found in the Óc Eo [11]

In addition, a silver box also from Suixi, Guangdong is an important evidence of my logical deduction about their producing area. As what we can see in these two pictures, the button of the Suixi's silver box is of the same design and pattern as the gold plaques discovered in Óc Eo, Funan. The specific pattern composed of 8 or 12 single or double layers of lotus petals and a round circle in the center representing lotus stamens is one of most common design in arts and crafts in India or areas largely influenced by India culture. And the gold leaves

found in Óc Eo, Funan had visible defects, unevenness as well as unclear edges, showing they were not goods ready to sell but semi-finished products still being worked in progress. Considering the similarity between both, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the Suixi silver box was made in a Funan's workshop.

### 2.2.1. a Gilded Bottle

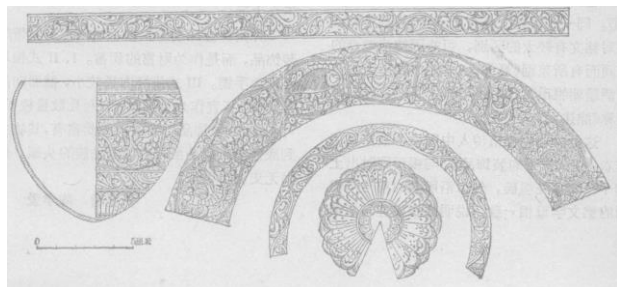


Figure 11: a gilded bottle found in Suixi, Guangdong [12]

First, attention shall be paid to the lotus motifs on a gilded bottle which is also excavated in Suixi, Guangdong. Admittedly, lotus motif is among the most popular motifs in India art and one of the most significant symbols of Buddhism. Lotus is the symbol of eternal order of the union earth, water and sky. It not only represents the life giving power of water but is also associated with the sun for the opening and closing of the petals. What's more, it is also the symbol of recreating power of life.

Besides written history, there are also physical evidence supporting the existence of cultural and commercial communication between India and Funan. Take the gilded bottle excavated in Suixi, Guangdong as an example, it has lotus motif on its button and patterns of big fish, splendid water plants and three birds on its body. These images always show up together and unite to form a representative code of India culture as well as Buddhism.



Figure 12: an enlarged view of the gilded bottle found in Suixi, Guangdong

The three birds carved on the bottle's body from right to left remind me of Jatayu, the legendary bird from Ramayana, which represents a sympathetic experience of fighting against Ravana, being defeated and losing his wings, and finally falling onto the rocks in Chadayamangalam. The pattern on the right shows that Jatayu got ready to fight against Ravana with a mighty volition; the pattern in the middle describes the spectacle of Jatayu suffering loss of his wings in pain; and the last pattern on the left shows how Jatayu was set free after Lord Rama performed his final rites. The typical Hinduism fairy tale conveying a cycle of

reincarnation could be considered as an evidence of people accepting and following Hinduism's doctrine and essence. Based on the blazon in line with Ramayana, an ancient Indian epics, it is reasonable to define that the gilded bottle is from either India or other areas fully influenced by Indian culture.

### 2.3. Conclusion

As a result, we know the silver bowl and silver coins were from Persia, the silver box was from Funan while the gilded bottle was from either India or areas largely influenced by India, which means that the gold and silver wares found in Suixi, Guangdong were a combination of several batches of goods from Persia, India and Funan. In that case, maybe the Suixi hoard could be regarded as a sample of diverse exported goods and it may become a living and powerful symbol of the thriving commercial engagement of the countries along the Maritime Silk Road.

## 3. TRACING THE GOODS' FOOTPRINTS

### 3.1. Definition of the time horizon of the goods

The previous sections review a few key details about the gold and silver wares excavated in Suixi, Guangdong and now we know that part of them came from the Persian Empire. To date, it is mentioned in the report of the Suixi Museum that the amount of silver coins unearthed in Suixi, Guangdong is relatively big. And since each emperors launched their own coins, they can be divided to four genres accordingly. Genre 1 is Shapur III, Genre 2 is Yazdegerd II, Genre 3 is Peroz I-type A, Genre 4 is Peroz I-type B, spanning across about a century from 383AD to 484AD. Meanwhile we have already concluded that it is around 502 AD when they were buried in the ground. Therefore, take the earliest batch of these silver coins (Genre 1) for example, roughly a hundred years has passed after being produced and before being buried in Guangzhou, Guangdong. So what happened in this 100 years? Based on what we have known, I then figure out what exactly happened to the goods and how was the route like around the fifth century.

### 3.2. Tributes or Goods?

Generally, there are two possibilities of how the wares came to Guangdong, China. One is that these exotic products were **tributes** from a foreign court to the Chinese emperor. There were no historical records about tributary system of the South Qi dynasty but according to Book of Liang, the earliest record of the tribute from Persia authority to China was 530 AD in the South Liang dynasty, which is much later than the date of Suixi gold and silver wares mentioned above [13].

Despite that the time order might be an evidence of

the argument that they were not tribute articles then, it is possible that tributes before then were not well documented or they still remained untouched. But even though an assumption is drawn here that Persia had a long history of paying tribute to China before appearing in records, it is hardly possible that Suixi gold and silver goods could be tribute articles.

If they were actually articles of tributes, they should have been delivered to the capital of southern dynasties instead of being left in a remote area far from the centre of power. Also since there were no evidence suggesting the owner's identity or social status in the Suixi hoard, there is no evidence suggesting that the owner is someone important who could have these official articles of tribute in his hands. All things considered, the owner could only be a wealthy merchant who could afford and access to valuable exotic goods, which means that the Suixi gold and silver wares were tradable goods instead of official tributes.

### **3.3. the Constitution of the Route across India Ocean and South China Sea**

Now it is almost certainly that there exist goods from Persia and Funan among the Suixi gold and silver wares and based on the time range spanning nearly a hundred years, we can easily come to an elementary conclusion that there must have been an indirect trade route between Iran and China back in the fifth century. And my assumption of the route is consistent with records from a Chinese history book called Book of Liang. In chapter 54, the author described how was the route like and how Southeast Asian merchants helped the trading route function smoothly as an agency. According to the Book of Liang [14],

"There was a coastal country called Dunxun, subject to Funan, over 3000 miles away from the south boundary of Funan. ... While Guangdong is located in north of Dunxun, some foreign countries like Persia and India are in west of Dunxun. Merchants come and go to Guangdong. At high tide, there is no bays or shores for ships to anchoring off, so neither can the ships stop nor can they go farther without supplies. The market of Dunxun connects the north and the west trading network, and around ten thousand people visited the market everyday. Treasures and rarities, there is everything you want."

From the above passage, we know that Dunxun is part of Funan(today's Vietnam), and the author described its location, introduced how it connected southern China and Persia and India as a point of intersection of the early Maritime Silk Road, and spoke highly of the stable and prosperous Dunxun market. Meanwhile, the in-depth analysis of Suixi gold and silver wares shown above also certified the record's authenticity and veracity, thus proved the existence of

the trade network once again.

### **4. THE LEAST REPLACEABLE AGENCY ON THE TRADING ROUTE: FUNAN**

Funan, notably Dunxun, has gradually emerged as an economic and cultural center of the Mekong Delta. As an important position on the Southeast Asian external trading, Funan has become a meeting place for craftsmen and traders from India, Persia and China, which provides adequate conditions for the development of flourishing commercial engagement along the Maritime Silk Road.

Back in the fifth century, restricted by a low shipbuilding level, unreliable weather forecasts, the limited amount of food and energy accessed on board, poor medical treatment and their short quality guarantee period and so on, people of that period were not able to travel too far by ship and they desperately need supplies and places to rest on passage. For merchants active around Indian Ocean and South China Sea, the best place to dock at is Southeast Asia, which is located at the middle point and has enough high-quality harbors.

In consequence, countries like Funan in Mainland Southeast Asia not only benefited from trading route but also promoted the development of the Maritime Silk Road as a whole. Meanwhile, the businessmen in Funan had double duties. On the one hand they do business with either the east or the west directly as normal merchants, on the other hand they provide supplies and markets for both the east and the west as business agents. However, in my opinion, the function and achievements of Funan merchants are, to some extent at least, underestimated by the public. And even in ancient China, some Chinese history records misidentified the area as India due to the fact that Southeast Asia, particularly the Mekong delta, which was brought under the cultural or political influence and control of India.

Only after years of technology development and knowledge innovation, sailing on open seas become true. Before that, the Mekong delta, right on their path, is the first and only option for merchants to rest, do business, exchange money and goods, spread religions and also promote intercultural communication. Several trading ports in Funan and markets in Dunxun, Jiaozhi and so on were thriving in the area and attracted thousands of merchants to gather here. In general, it was the model how people living in Southeast Asia made their fortune by operating large-scale, stable and thriving business, which could be regarded as the earliest route to wealth-accumulation for both individuals and governments in Southeast Asia.

What's more, while learning and absorbing foreign countries' religions, crafts and social systems, Funan was integrating and disseminating various exotic cultures together all the time. Take the gilded bottle for example, although the cultural imagery originated in India, both lotus motifs and the religious connotations

represented by it have been widely spread in China. That was exactly how Funan emerged in the early Maritime Silk Road as an active participant instead of a passive intermediaries.

If the Funan merchants had not existed, Indian Ocean and South China Sea would have been in trouble being connected as a whole and the Maritime Silk Road might have been much less thriving. Even more, there might have never been a Silk Road until years later.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The essay attaches great importance to gold and silver wares buried in Suixi, Guangdong as an essential evidence of subsequent historical arguments. By an extensive and comprehensive analysis about the way to store the three representative wares among the artifacts, it is clear that the Suixi hoard was a combination of several batches of goods from Persia, India and Funan. As a result, the Suixi hoard could be regarded as a sample of diverse exported goods and it may become a living and powerful symbol of the thriving commercial engagement of countries along the Maritime Silk Road. At the same time, the essay points out and corrects some deficiencies of previous studies. Then the essay indicates a reasonable explanation of the trading route of gold and silver wares discovered in Suixi, Guangdong and emphasizes the contribution and status of Southeast Asia countries like Funan, which deserves immediate attention and in-depth reflection. The crucial and the least replaceable role of Southeast Asian area like Funan was set out very clearly in the essay.

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