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# On the Link Between Ancient Sichuan and the Maritime Silk Road from the Perspective of Tang Poetry

Hou Shuiping\*

**Abstract:** Shu (now Sichuan Province in the southwest of China) was famous for silk production. Many poets of the Tang Dynasty praised the magnificence of Shu brocade and embroidery. They also meticulously recorded the good sales and popularity of Shu's mulberry silk fabrics in Jinling (now Nanjing) and Yangzhou through shipments along the Yangtze River and further to Southeast and South Asian countries. Tang poetry provides evidence for the significant role the Shu area played in the trade and commerce of the Maritime Silk Road.

**Keywords:** Tang poetry; Maritime Silk Road; Shu brocade and embroidery

Many poets during the middle period of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) wrote poems themed on "The Joy of Itinerant Merchants" (*Gu Ke Le*). Among them, the works of Yuan Zhen and Zhang Ji are the most famous. Both poets depicted the life of merchants and the prosperity of commerce during this period in a realistic manner. The poems show that trade and commerce were flourishing during the Tang Dynasty and merchants traded in many distant places. They also state that the Silk Road was the outcome of this highly developed trade and commerce. The Shu area was mentioned consistently in the two poems. Yuan Zhen referred to the area in his poem as, "As asbestos cloth is made in Yanzhou; beautiful brocade is woven in the Shu area." Zhang Ji's poem contains the sentence, "Putting their cups down to mention their date for departure, they bid farewell to each other as they would go far into the Shu area." The two poems demonstrate the Shu area played an important role in trade and commerce of the entire kingdom during the Tang Dynasty.

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Shu's importance in trade lies in the fact that it abounds with numerous natural resources and is acclaimed as the land of abundance (*Tianfu* in Chinese). The area, with Chengdu at its center, was very prosperous in trade and commerce in ancient times, especially during the High Tang period. It was particularly renowned for mulberry silk fabrics. Sichuan, the land of abundance, is thus considered as one of the cradles of silk culture. Shu brocade and embroidery are the most important milestones in the development of the silk culture. Tan Jihe (2017) presented detailed and convincing studies in his paper *The Origin of Ancient Shu Civilization and Tianfu Silk*. Through years of research, Tang Lin (2017) concluded that, "Most of the weaving techniques for the famous brocades in China originated from Shu brocade" and "Shu brocade played an exclusive and extraordinary role for over 600 years from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the early Tang Dynasty" (pp. 464-474). Despite the difficult accessibility to Sichuan due to its mountainous peripheral geographical conditions for transportation as described in *Difficult Is the Way to Shu*, written by Li Bai, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, merchants spared no pains to come to the Shu area. This fully demonstrates that the silk products from the area were so precious and valuable that they were worth the efforts because they could make huge profits. The splendor of Shu brocade, the flourishing mulberry silk industry in Chengdu, and the prosperity of trade and commerce were recorded in many Tang poems. Silk fabrics from the Shu area were so resplendent and colorful beyond words that Du Mu, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, had to use it as a vehicle to describe a fascinating scene on a spring day in his poem, *To Cui Jie on a Rainy Day*. "On that day, raindrops fell onto the river surface and the ripples were mesmerizing like the patterns of Shu brocade," a spectacle he felt hard to describe in other words. Wu Yuanheng, also a poet of the Tang Dynasty, wrote "The brocade holds the spring of the Shu State" to

hail its magnificence in *Seeing off Adjudicator Cui on His Mission to Taiyuan*. In *Flower-chanting as a Gift to Huangpu the Supervisory Official*, Bai Juyi, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, highly praised, "The newly clamp-dyed fabrics in Chengdu are as splendid as rouge made in the Liang and Han dynasties." In *The Ode to the Brocade City*, Wen Tingyun, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, wrote, "To cut the brocade of colored clouds, the River breeze sends forth a nimble blow, when the flowers ascend a thousand boughs, looking as red as the cuckoo's tears of blood." In Liu Yuxi's poem titled *Waves Washing the Sand*, he wrote, "Flowers are blossoming on the banks of the brocade-rinsing river. With the spring breeze blowing, the waves are pushing the sand. Young women cut out pieces of brocade and wash them in the river. They look like sunset clouds glowing in the water." In the poet's eyes, Shu brocade was as magnificent as sunset clouds. Xue Tao, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, also wrote verses to praise the excellence of brocade weavers and compared them to talented fairies as, "Nine spirits divide into nine rosy mists. Five magic immortals ride upon five clouds. From the Sun God's mansion come the winds of spring that stealthily copy the patterns from the human world to color the blossoms." (*Trying to Make My Own Clothes, I Succeed for the First Time, in three verses*) In the poet's eyes, even the spring breeze is jealous of the ingenuity of Shu brocade workers and it makes the blossoming flowers by "mimicking the color patterns" of the secular world. The poem fully reflects the beauty of Shu brocade and Xue Tao's favor toward it. Zheng Gu created two poems on brocade to praise its beauty, "As rich families dislike plain cloth, fabrics without colorfulness can hardly be favored. The red piece is as glorious as rosy clouds, the purple piece is as beautiful as orchid blooms. Rinsed in spring water, the animal patterns seem to come alive. Brocade machines are still working on cold nights. New patterns are requested for making dancing gowns. No one cares about leafless mulberry

and cudrania trees.” “From Wenjun’s hand, splendid brocade was made. Yet it still needs the fame of the city of brocade. Not until you have it, do you start to know that gowns cost more. When you wear brocade clothes, its splendor would impress you in the day. The colors are resplendent when it is made and they look brighter after rinse. Officials in the Ministry of Rites favor it and it wins great fame in the province.” In the *Song of Red Rosebush*, Wang Gu compared lovely flowers to Shu brocade, “Like glowing rosy clouds of sunset, silk fabrics are dried in the Jade Lake of the Queen Mother of the West. Against the spring breeze, Shu brocade appears strikingly glorious like sunset glow.” In a nutshell, Shu brocade was described as marvelous and brilliant artworks under the brushes of poets and poetesses of the Tang Dynasty. They applied all flowery dictions possible to commend it and express their favor toward it.

Poets of the Tang Dynasty not only favored silk fabrics and embroideries, but also appreciated the process and craftsmanship of Shu brocade, which were described as poetic and wonderful. Their observations of the process were meticulous and their descriptions vivid and multi-perspective. Wang Jian wrote a poem describing brocade weaving specifically. Gao Pian created *To Gaze into the Distance of the Brocade City*, “The Shu River ripples on. Looking around, I see blossoms over the city towers. So many pieces of brocade are hung on tree boughs in spring.” According to Lu Meiniang, *In Reply to Zhuo Yingying’s Spring Scene of the Brocade City*, her line of “When the silkworm market is open, everywhere is a spring atmosphere” shows fully the flourishing brocade industry in Chengdu at that time. In *The City by the River*, Luo Yin wrote, “A sweet-sounding song has a pleasant melody; an excellent poem has new patterns like Shu brocade.” Zhang Hu wrote in *Multiflora Rose* that “The night rain knocked off some blooms but they became patterns on fabrics on brocade machines.” Zhang He described the brocade

weaving scene in the *Ode to Wenjun—designed Brocade in a Spring Day by the Shu River* as, “The exquisite brocade with rectangular spiral patterns is so splendid that it impresses the entire state. Shuttles go back and forth on quiet nights. Machines are running as spring is coming. Leaf patterns should be deployed loose while flower patterns should be densely distributed. Whether flowers or birds, patterns are all lifelike.” The ode commends the exquisite layout of patterns on the brocade and the true-to-life images of butterflies and phoenixes. When the fabric is rinsed in the Jinjiang River, it seems that flowers and trees grow from the water and rosy clouds emerge from the river bottom. The green piece has the same pleasing color as willow trees in imperial palaces. The red one has the same bright colors as flowers in imperial gardens. The above lines have similar appealing effect as those in Zheng Gu’s *Three Poems About Shu*. In the poets’ eyes, the patterns of mountains, flowers and birds are so dynamic that they look verisimilar. In addition to describing its beauty, Poets of the Tang Dynasty illustrated its precious value. In another poem *Seeing off the Messenger*, Zhang Hu wrote, “The new flower patterns are made on Shu brocade; the golden moth patterns are woven into concentric belts.” to praise its value. Du Fu did not state straightforwardly how precious Shu brocade was but he did mention in *White Silk, A Ballad* that “In reeling silk one needs length, one does not need white color; for Yue gossamer and Shu brocade use a foot-long ruler marked with golden grains.” How precious could it be when such a ruler had to be used to measure it? Poets’ fondness of Shu brocade was far beyond certain preference over some goods. They felt empathy with it, a feeling of honor and dignity. In *Recalling Days in the Bell Mountain*, Du Mu recollected emotionally that, “In those years I wandered about beautiful peach groves; I picked out Shu brocade despite how drunken I was.”

It is hard to enumerate all the Tang poems that record the prosperity of the mulberry silk industry

and trade in Chengdu or honor the greatness of Shu brocade since the total number is far too many.

It is because of its sterling reputation and popularity that Shu brocade was such an indispensable item for itinerant merchants during the the Tang Dynasty. In Yuan Zhen's *The Joy of Itinerant Merchants*, he used a few lines to describe the flourishing trade in Chang'an (now Xi'an). Yet he did not forget to mention that "brocade was made in Shu." It can be inferred that silk products from Shu had good reputation and value in Chang'an and were an important commodity sold along the overland Silk Road starting from the capital city. Wang Yi said, "Chengdu was regarded as one of the top five cities during the Han Dynasty. Till the the Tang Dynasty, Chengdu had been recognized around the world as a famous city for brocade. Silk and brocade made in Chengdu were continuously sold to Xiyu (the Western Regions) and other countries across the world through the Northern Silk Road" (Wu, 2016). Such a statement has been continually validated by cultural relics unearthed in recent years and there is little controversy over it in academic circles. The poem *Brocade* by Li Qiao, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, is also a proof, "The carriage of the Han envoy went far away; the brocade barrier was in sight in Heyang yet. The patterns of Shu brocade are as beautiful as rosy clouds. The craftsmanship of brocade weaving is as exquisite as that of the famous palindrome poem. High officials use brocade to make their waistbands. If I had brocade clothes, I would not walk at night."

Then, what was the role Shu brocade played in the trade along the Maritime Silk Road? What was the position of Chengdu? Based on the scenarios recorded by poets of the Tang Dynasty, a conclusion like that of the overland Silk Road can be drawn. Sichuan is home to many rivers which pass through the provinces and provide copious water for agricultural irrigation as well as convenient water channels for linking it to the outside in ancient times when land-based transportation facilities were underdeveloped. The Minjiang River,

Jialing River, Tuojiang River, and Qujiang River pass through Sichuan and reach Chongqing to join the Yangtze River so that the land of abundance can be connected to the lower and middle reaches of the River; and cultural and commercial exchanges among these regions can be promoted. Li Bai described the expediency of the Yangtze river channel in his unique romantic writing style as, "A thousand miles to Jiangling, I arrived in a single day" (*Setting off Early from Baidi City*). Cen Shen wrote, "Chengdu and Yangzhou, ten thousand li apart. The Changjiang River rushes torrentially eastward and the boats sail through like flying birds" (*Wanli Bridge*). The poem shows the same speediness as in Li Bai's work, except only that it describes more concretely the convenience and swiftness of travelling from Chengdu to Yangzhou by boat. Lu Lun depicted in *Accompanying He Zhao Back to Shu* that "Marine products are available thanks to the water passages and folk customs of Wu are spread due to topographical advantages." Cultural fusion and commercial prosperity are fully reflected in the poem. As shown in Tang poems, silk products from the Shu area were key commodities delivered to Jinling and Yangzhou via the Yangtze River. The number of merchants coming from the eastern coastal areas to Ba-Shu was as great as that of business people travelling between Chang'an and Chengdu through the ancient Shu Road. In Yuan Zhen's *The Joy of Itinerant Merchants*, he mentioned "Doing business across the kingdom and finally going to Chang'an City." Since the business was carried out "across the kingdom," its scope was certainly not limited to northern China but should include the southern areas. Zhang Ji's *The Joy of Itinerant Merchants* states in a more direct way the scenes when merchants from Jinling entered the Shu area. In the silk trade between the Shu area and the eastern coastal cities, the water channel to Jinling and Yangzhou along the Yangtze River was a vital passage. The honor of "Yangzhou and Chengdu — the top two cities nationwide in terms of prosperity" not

only gives credit to the two cities' flourishing industry and commerce after the Anshi Turmoil in the the Tang Dynasty, but also demonstrates the close industrial and commercial links between the two cities. Du Fu once wrote the lines as, "Fabrics from Shu and salt from Wu were exchanged since ancient times and heavy cargo ships fleeted like wind" and "Mist and clouds pass through the Wu and Shu areas and ships transport salt and fabrics between the two places" (*Kuizhou Songs: Ten Quatrains*). It is also worth reading again the two lines of a famous quatrain written by Du Fu, "The window frames the western mountain's thousand-year snow. By the door moor ships from Eastern Wu ten thousand li away." At that time when the economy was underdeveloped, people did not have enough financial and transportation resources to travel to places far away. Therefore, ships from Eastern Wu to Shu must be merchant boats. With its crucial location on the Yangtze River, Yangzhou has enjoyed commercial prosperity from ancient times. Merchant ships going from Chengdu to Yangzhou and other eastern cities set off one after the other. Such scenes were described vividly in many Tang poems. For instance, Li Bai wrote, "The brocade-rinsing river extends a thousand li; various ships sail off to Yangzhou City" (*Emperor Xuanzong's Tours to Chengdu: Ten Songs*). In Zhang Ji's *The Joy of Itinerant Merchants*, he depicted "Many merchants travel from Jinling to the western region; during the trip, they live on steady boats." In *My Suggestions to Your Ambition*, Du Mu commented that, "Upright masts look like woods and the river waves surge high. Spices from the south and brocade from Shu are piled up on ships nearby." Those merchant ships went to and fro frequently and many of them were large vessels loaded with huge quantities of cargoes, including tens of thousands of pieces of Shu brocade. In *Three Poems About Yangzhou*, Du Mu wrote, "Ships from Shu are loaded with

heavy quantities of red brocade. The word "heavy" demonstrates the huge quantities and great value of the Shu brocade sent to Yangzhou. Du Mu's poems also show the large number of merchant ships setting off from the Ba-Shu area and the good reputation of Shu brocade and silk products in the eastern coastal areas. The reason why Du Mu compared the scene of raindrops falling onto the river surface to Shu brocade may also lie in the fact that merchant ships were commonly seen along the river and fully loaded with mulberry silk products from Shu and the beauty of such products were widely known.

The Tang poems state only that mulberry silk fabrics were continuously shipped to Jinling (now Nanjing), Yangzhou and some other cities. Then, is there anything to do with the Maritime Silk Road? In fact, Nanjing and Yangzhou were key cities in the trade along the Maritime Silk Road. Special products from the Ba-Shu areas, including Shu brocade, were delivered to those cities not only for satisfying local purchases, but also for merchant ships going overseas. During the the Tang Dynasty, the kingdom was very open to the outside world. Many foreign merchants set up businesses in commercial cities such as Yangzhou. This situation was also recorded in Tang poems. As Du Fu described it in *Getting Rid of the Blues* that "Foreign merchants left their homes for Yangzhou," it proved that many Persian or Tazi business people came to Yangzhou for trade and commerce. They would surely take a liking for exquisite Shu brocade and other Ba-Shu specialties and return home fully loaded with those items. As a matter of fact, the Shu area had other ways to be connected to the outside world in addition to transshipment from Yangzhou and Nanjing. During the Southern Qi period, "Foreign merchants were sometimes seen in the Shu area."<sup>①</sup> In other words, foreign merchants were active in trade with the land of abundance from that time on. "During

① *Book of Southern Qi. Vol. 59, Story 40, Ruirui.* Retrieved from <http://www.my285.com/shishu/nqs/059.htm>.



the Five Dynasties, Chengdu, as the starting point of the 'Southern Silk Road,' attracted numerous foreign merchants and visitors as well as political figures of ethnic minorities with its economic prosperity, highly developed culture and good accessibility." "People from Sogdiana, Persia, Arabdom, India, Tukhara, Silla and Japan as well as minorities from the ancient Tibetan regime, and Nanzhao" came not only for trade and business in Chengdu, but also "took an active part in events of various levels of society." They turned "Chengdu into a cosmopolitan city where cultures of different races and ethnic groups mingled with one another with exotic elements" (Chen, 2017, pp. 249-269). Du Fu mentioned in his poem *Yanyu Hillock* that,

"After singing a nostalgic song, the boatman looked back and found that the foreign merchant had tears running down his cheek."

According to researches by He Yimin, Chengdu had established links with the outside world through the Maritime Silk Road as early as the Han Dynasty (He, 2017). Special local products of the Shu area, such as silk, were carried eastward by merchant ships along the Yangtze River to the Kingdom of Wu and further sold to Southeast and South Asian countries and places even further away, making Chengdu a key city in the trade and commerce along the Maritime Silk Road.

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