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A Brief Analysis of the Migration of Silk Weaving Craftsmen and the Spread of Silk Weaving Techniques in the Ancient Bashu Area along the Southern Silk Road

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Abstract: During ancient times, silk weaving techniques already matured in the Bashu area and “Shu Satin” silk products were widely known. Shu Satin not only performed as a high-quality commodity in the Northern Silk Road trade activities, but also conveyed cultural and social significance. Credit for the importance of Shu Satin must go to the extraordinary weavers in the Bashu area. The migration and circulation of these weavers spread the exquisite brocade and sericulture techniques throughout and beyond the Bashu area, and accelerated brocade and sericulture techniques in ancient southern China, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Accordingly, the Southern Silk Road can be seen as a path to disseminate the silk weaving techniques that originated in the Bashu area. This paper takes the migration of Shu Satin as its mainline and discusses how the weaving craftsmen spread the brocade and sericulture techniques throughout southern China during their travels and migrations, and the immeasurable contributions these craftsmen made to economic and trade activities along the ancient Southern Silk Road. This paper explores the technical accumulation and dissemination of brocade craftsmen in the Bashu area from three perspectives. The first perspective is the accumulation period of the ancient silk weaving techniques—the inflow of craftsmen from central China and the development and integration of the sericulture and silk weaving techniques in the Bashu area. The second is the technique dissemination period, centered on the silk weaving craftsmen in the Chengdu region of the Bashu area. The third is the techniques’ outmigration period and the migration and circulation of craftsmen throughout the Bashu area. This paper strives to outline the dynamic lines that the Bashu silk weaving craftsmen created and the spread of their exquisite weaving techniques during their migration and circulation. This will illustrate that the ancient Southern Silk Road was not only a trade and cultural exchange zone for ancient silk commodities, but more importantly, it was a dynamic space for the dissemination and development of brocade weaving techniques.

Keywords: silk weaving craftsmen in ancient Bashu area, migration and circulation, the Southern Silk Road

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The Accumulation Period: The Inflow of Craftsmen from Central China and the Development and Integration of Sericulture and Silk Weaving Techniques in the Bashu Area

In ancient times, the Bashu area was called “Cancong Country,” which means it was a country that was fertile with silk. Silk weaving techniques were developed early there. According to *Records of Ba*, Volume One of *Chronicles of Huayang (Huayang Guo Zhi)*, Yu, the Great once convened tribal leaders and kings at Kuaiji, requiring all to come with satin, including the head of Bashu. This illustrates that the Bashu area could produce satin at that time like other northern countries. Until the prophecy of the Shang Empire, the Ji clan were enfeoffed in the Bashu area and the treaty bound them to pay for the use of the land in silk, domestic animals, grain, and other objects every year (Chang, 2010). At the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC), the enfeoffment of the Ji clan to the Bashu area was a result of a wave of migration from central China (mainly referring to present-day Henan and Hebei provinces) to the Bashu area. During this time, silk weaving in central China was more proficient than that in the Bashu area. In his early reign, the Yellow Emperor (2717–2599 BC) ordered his queen to work on silk production. Because of the advantageous natural conditions in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, and the areas near the sea suitable for the growth of mulberry trees, the silk weaving techniques and production became proficient. The Ji clan migrated from Shandong to the Bashu area, bringing along their advanced silk weaving techniques, which renewed silk weaving in the Bashu area and increased the production of silk products. Soon, woven silk products became the biggest part of the tribute to the Zhou royal court from the Bashu area.

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), with the military conquest by Qin, central China witnessed another wave of migration to the Bashu area. The state of Qin conquered and ruled the state of Shu in 316 AD and ordered the migration of many people to the Bashu area (Chang, 2010). This is the so-called “migrating people to develop the border region” policy. During the rule of the Qin Empire, the migration to the Bashu area lasted much longer than before and included a greater number of migrants. The *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* writes: The state of Qin conquered the other six states, migrated talented people to the Bashu area, and accelerated the economic, cultural and social development of regions in the bordering areas. Rich and politically connected people in the Bashu area provided spectacular silk clothes for the royal family of Qin (Chang, 2010). This illustrates the development of the proficient silk weaving techniques in the Bashu area because the silk clothes for the royal family of Qin required excellent artistry. Under the migration policy of Qin, the migrating wave involved all sectors of society, from the royal families of the other six countries, rich traders and people

against Qin, to people who broke the law. The migrants with their whole family were asked to relocate to the Bashu area. They then “took root” throughout the whole Chengdu plain, up to two hundred miles away from the southwestern Chengdu area which had a few people who had lived there before the First Emperor of Qin (*Qin Shi Huang*) ordered the migration, and people also migrated from central Chengdu to here” (Chang, 2010). The migration to the Bashu area lasted for almost a century, which raised a magnificent wave of immigration. The immigrants reached tens of thousands, and they were spread across the whole Bashu area.

These immigrants from central China brought their advanced culture, iron smelting, and textile techniques to Bashu, which significantly promoted the further development of agriculture, particularly sericulture and silk production in the Bashu area. This led to the large-scale spread of silk-spinning techniques from central China to the Bashu area and allowed the Bashu weaving industry to develop gradually thanks to the funds and techniques brought by the immigrants from central China. For the silk weaving industry, the vigorous development of Shu Satin laid the foundation for the rise and prosperity of Shu Satin during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD). Then, Shu Satin gradually replaced the Qilu and Xiangyi products until it became the national leader. After Bashu was connected to central China, the core of the silk industry was shifted to the western area and Shu Jin became prosperous and almost replaced the status of satin from the Xiangyi area (Zhu, 2018).

Due to the fact that technological transformations and innovations made Shu weave the top grade satin possible by the migrant craftsmen from central China, Shu was able to cultivate many highly skilled silk craftsmen, allowing the Bashu silk industry to complete the accumulation of advanced technological working forces and abilities. In the later years, a silk weaving base was formed and centered in Chengdu. Then, driven by various factors, the Bashu craftsmen gradually spread the brocade weaving techniques to the surrounding areas, and expanded the extensive production support along the Southern Silk Road. Their silk products began to appear in various places as people from all ethnic groups enthusiastically participated in the trade activities along the Southern Silk Road.

Migrant Craftsmen—The Spread of Silk Weaving Techniques from the Bashu Area to the Southwestern Ethnic Minority Areas

Through the long-term technological accumulation in the early Han Dynasty, Shu Satin production finally surpassed the satin production in central China. With Chengdu at the center, the brocade industry flourished. The government set up a professional brocade craftsmen institution for satin production while at the same time villagers were also becoming proficient in silk weaving. The brocade production by villagers provided an abundance of clothes for the Han Empire (Fan, 2012). The folk brocade industry was spectacular. Yang Xiong, a poet in the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC–8 AD), described the brocade production

in his “Rhapsody on the Shu Metropolis” (*Shudu Fu*) like this: “You cannot even find the edge of the satin in Shu metropolis, this spectacular scene will continue forever” (Yang, 2003).

The brocade craftsmen had extraordinary skills, and those in Chengdu and surrounding areas jointly promoted the prosperity of the brocade industry in the Bashu area. During the West Han Dynasty, the Linqiong region was known as the hometown of craftsmen. The local Zhuo clan had extraordinary brocade techniques, so it was possible that the locals had mastered the brocade techniques. The Zhuo clan was proficient with the Huiwenchong Satin. The *Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital (Xi Jing Za Ji)* records that when Zhuo Wenjun married Sima Xiangru, the dowry her father gave her included a hundred servants, a million in money, clothes and other objects (Ban, 1967). Many skilled brocade craftsmen were among these servants. Zhuo Wenjun also hired many native people in her family industry, so many natives learned the silk weaving skill. With the help and impact of these great craftsmen, the brocade produced by the Zhuo clan was more outstanding than other productions in Chengdu.

Until the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280 AD), the imperial government of Shu (also known as Shuhan in history) attached great importance to the economic income produced by the Shu Satin trade. Zhuge Liang regarded Shu Satin as the financial pillar industry of the Shu Kingdom, and said that the funding to resist enemies depended on the satin trade (Ban, 1967).

During this period, there were no wars in the Bashu area, the society was in peace, and the life there remained smooth. In addition to this, the government took the “focus on the sericulture” policy, and vigorously developed agricultural and silk weaving production. Compared to the Wu Kingdom and the Wei Kingdom, the brocade industry in the Shu Kingdom was much more stable during this time. In the Shu Kingdom, craftsmen from central China and the Bashu area worked together to accumulate and advance technique strength. As a result, the core of the silk weaving industry gradually shifted from central China to the Sichuan Basin, and Chengdu became one of the centers of the silk weaving industry. In the Shu Kingdom, many families lived by brocade weaving, and in the highly skilled families, the sound of weaving could be heard everywhere (Yang, 2003). This illustrates that many Shu people were outstanding silk weaving craftsmen and that almost everyone had heard about Shu Satin. Under the leadership of Zhuge Liang, the imperial government of the Shu Kingdom also made great efforts to advance agriculture and silk weaving techniques in the southern area— Yunnan, Guizhou, Tianlin of Guangxi, and the southwestern regions in what is now Sichuan. All these areas were located in the middle part of the Southern Silk Road and therefore aided in the spread of silk weaving techniques to the southwestern ethnic minority-inhabited areas, producing great benefits for people in those areas while also having a profound impact on the southward advancement of the Southern

Silk Road and the material and cultural life of ethnic minorities in the southwest.

In the early Shuhan period, the south and central parts of the Shu Kingdom were undeveloped: no agriculture, and no education. In 223 BC, Zhuge Liang had pacified the rebellion in this area and began to carry on the “migrating to develop the border area” policy. When the Shu army occupied Tongren in Guizhou, the craftsmen in the army taught local people the brocade skills, including dyeing brocade with local cotton. The local people called this colorful satin Wuhou Satin (Wuhou was the title of Zhuge Liang) (Zhen & Mo, 2003). There were rumors that when the Shu army occupied the area inhabited by local people, many locals became ill and went to ask for Shu’s help and Zhuge Liang taught them how to weave this kind of satin as their bedding. Meanwhile, folk craftsmen also spread their superb brocade and agricultural techniques to the remote inhabited parts of the southwestern Yi area. When brocade weaving techniques were spread to Liping and Jinping, the Dong people tried to use the colorful silk to weave Zhuge Dong Satin and the current Zhuang Satin was developed from Zhuge Dong Satin and Wuhou Satin. While brocade production was booming in the south and central Shu areas, it also flourished in Yongchang of Yunnan. The income realized from brocade production was enough to support the army and the government. Zhang Yingzhao, a poet, described how Zhuge Liang promoted the brocade techniques in the southwest ethnic minority areas in the “Poem of Zhuge Satin” (*Zhuge Jin Shi*) (Zhu, 2018). With the teaching of the inland craftsmen, the indigenous people made their costumes more gorgeous and refined, and the indigenous women became proficient with silk weaving. As a result, local textile and embroidery in the southwestern ethnic minority-inhabited areas developed rapidly.

In addition to those driven by the migration policies of the government, there were also craftsmen who escaped from central China to the border areas to avoid war or slavery. They lived with the indigenous people and even intermarried with them. During the Jin Dynasty (265–420 AD), many craftsmen in the Bashu area migrated to Yunnan. The indigenous people treasured marriage with them. If their husbands or wives broke the law, the Tu clan helped them avoid pursuit by the government, and if they were caught by the government, the Tu clan even wreaked vengeance on the government (Chang, 2010).

The people from the inland and the indigenous people built a harmonious co-existence community. Mutual, skillful, joint production and peaceful living was a common phenomenon there. It can be said that the border areas were the “emergency exit” for people from the inland. The Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties were an age of wars, and the then Bashu people (including craftsmen) migrated to the border areas to avoid these wars. As they kept going southward along the Southern Silk Road, they spread advanced silk weaving, smelting and other related techniques from the inland. The dissemination of these techniques objectively promoted local economic and cultural development, which in a certain sense, is the process of inheriting and protecting cultural and social advancements.

The Circulation and Migration of the Bashu Craftsmen—Generation of Silk Weaving Techniques Spreading to the East and the South

During the Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Bashu area steadily developed its silk production, and silk weaving techniques were further improved. Ma Jun reformed the jacquard machine and became known as the “most skillful craftsman under the heaven.” After the Jin Empire conquered and ruled the Shu Kingdom, this technique was also promoted in Shu. At the end of the Western Jin Dynasty (265–317 AD), Bashu silk weaving techniques were spread by the southward and eastward escaping Shu people, as two aspects of one thing. At the end of the Western Jin Dynasty, the Qin and Yong refugees escaped to the Bashu area to find enough food to eat, then about one-hundred thousand families from the prefectures of Liang and Yi escaped to the Jinchu area while the other ten thousand Shu people escaped to Ningzhou (Duan, 2004). During the period from the late Chenghan regime till its destruction, troops of the Liao people (僚人) advanced into the Bashu area, and the Shu people became the new refugees, and migrated to the east. As the Shu refugees migrated towards the east, all the Shu cities were abandoned (Wei, 1979).

This was the beginning of the eastward spread of the Bashu brocade weaving techniques which continued and succeeded in gaining the support of the Liu Song Dynasty (420–479 AD). There was no foundation for brocade production in the Jiangnan area (an alluvial plain located in the middle and south of present-day Hubei). But by relying on Shu Satin to open the markets of the Wei and Wu kingdoms, the Jiangnan area became the trade transition center for Shu Satin. According to the *Chronicles of Danyang (Danyang Ji)*, “There was no brocade production before, and brocade was always flourishing in Bashu, so Wei and Wu traded with Shu during the Three Kingdoms Period, and brocade production then started there. Wang Qianzhi, head of Danyang, set up a brocade bureau in Danyang and employed craftsmen from the Shu refugees, moving them to Danyang if necessary. He also set up the Douchang Satin Department in Douchang Market-town, Yuan City. Due to these moves, the brocade techniques spread to Jiangnan (lands immediately to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, including the southern part of its delta).” The silk weaving techniques in Jiangnan were also spreading to the south with the Jin government’s support. These exchanges of northern and southern, and western and eastern migrants helped spread and develop the brocade weaving industry in the southern areas and made it possible to thrive over time.

Attracted by the favorable migration policy of the Chenghan regime, the Liao people migrated to the Bashu area, and learned how to use the original weaving machine to gradually produce brocade. As a result, the frequent use of the original web loom in the textile industry in the early Chenghan regime was largely due to the low acceptance of the Liao people. However, the Liao people still realized many benefits from the silk weaving

techniques, which improved their lifestyle and incorporated them into the Shu people with extraordinary silk weaving techniques and skills. In addition, the Chenghan government encouraged agriculture and sericulture, and the silk weaving industry was restored and developed steadily even after the Chenghan regime was overturned.

Ordinary craftsmen who had mastered the silk weaving techniques escaped from Shu so they could avoid the war, and their circulation and migration spread the silk weaving techniques to further places. Allopatric people were exposed to and learned the silk weaving techniques. As for the elite of Shu, they were deeply influenced by the Shu weaving industry and knew the brocade well. He Tuo was a Chengdu resident who observed and understood the silk weaving and trading industry well. When He Tuo was a child, his father did business in western Sichuan, and settled there. After He Tuo grew up, he became the Gongguan (an official position in the government) of the Zhizhu Golden Satin. His nephew He Chou, an intelligent man, was the monitor of the Sui government. He was ordered to pattern the Golden Satin Robe from Persia. The final copy was even better than the original as He Tuo had very proficient silk weaving skills. This illustrates that during the Southern dynasties, and the Sui and Tang dynasties, some elites in the Bashu area also contributed to the spread of Shu brocade with the government's help.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the domestic and international silk trade flourished. The official brocade craftsmen serving corvee labor produced far from enough silk to meet the needs of the government. By contrast, folk craftsmen made a considerable contribution to the spread of weaving techniques and the mass production of high-quality silk products. Driven by the interests of silk, governments and traders began to employ huge numbers of folk craftsmen, who were called Hegugong. There were three employment ways—Mu, Qing, and Hegu. The three ways were different in their working hours and personal freedom. In addition to the three ways, there were Mingzijiang and Qiaoer. These two were similar to Gujiang (hired casual laborer) but had more fixed status. The craftsmen employed in these two ways were the technical backbone and masters who possessed the weaving equipment. Fanjiang were very exquisite craftsmen. The appearance of Fanjiang is the best example of the absorption and exchange of new techniques with ethnic minorities in the Tang Dynasty. As recorded in Chapter 3 of the “Treaties of State Offices” (*Bai Guan Zhi*), the *New Book of Tang*, there were five thousand and twenty-nine Duanfanjiang. Obviously, the Shu craftsmen were included. A special workshop was built in Yizhou (present-day Sichuan) to produce brocade exclusively for the royal family, and the local officials also looked to craftsmen in this area for the spectacular brocade. “The governors of Yangzhou, Yizhou, and Lingbiao (Lingnan) looked to local craftsmen for exquisite brocade.” At that time, the silk weaving achievements made in Yangzhou were inseparable from the spread of northern silk weaving techniques.

At first, the Yue people (natives of Yangzhou) did not do any weaving. After Xue Jianxun

was in power, he ordered single soldiers to marry the weaving women. In just one year, there came hundreds of weaving women (Zhu, 2018). Depending on this, the intermarriage between northerners and the Yue people enabled the introduction of the silk weaving techniques to this area. It greatly improved the social outlook and the economic condition of the Jiang-Zhe region (present-day Jiangsu and Zhejiang). Driven by their interests in silk, the imperial court and local governments, even remote ethnic minority regimes realized the importance of silk weaving craftsmen. For example, the Nanzhao regime in Yunnan had plundered a great number of craftsmen, including brocade craftsmen from the Bashu area to develop their homeland. The inland people moved into Yunnan, with tens of clans occupying their places, and although languages were a little different, the lifestyles and costumes were similar and they identified themselves as offspring of those from central China (Ouyang & Song, 2000).

In Erhai, the inland people who settled there had an advanced leading role in the living mode of local society. The exquisite Shu brocade craftsmanship was simply stunning. Every time the Nanzhao invaded the inland, they would capture and take a large population back to Nanzhao. In 750 AD, Geluofeng invaded Yizhou (present-day Zunyi); in 770 AD, Yimouxun invaded the prefectures of Mao, Li and Ya; in 829 AD, Nanzhao invaded Chengdu, each time capturing a great number of people, and mostly the “captured” migrants were brocade craftsmen. Some of these captured craftsmen, some were directly controlled by the government, while most were independent and free non-official craftsmen. Their migration to Yunnan from Sichuan was of great significance in the silk development history of Yunnan, and even the whole country. “The Luopi people never knew how to weave silk until the Man people invaded Xichuan (western Sichuan) and captured the extraordinary craftsmen back in the Third Dahe Year (829 AD). Now natives are proficient with weaving” (Ouyang & Song, 2000). The resettlements of the Shu craftsmen spread the advanced techniques of the inland to the southern areas, which facilitated a qualitative leap to the Yunnan silk industry, and the quality of Yunnan native brocade quickly became comparable to that of the inland. In terms of geographic location, Yunnan is connected to India, and Yunnan’s silk weaving industry enormously boosted the development of the Southern Silk Road. Because of this, even with the war in the inland interrupting its domestic trade activities, Yunnan could still produce and export silk products and so continued the trade activities with India and Myanmar. Thus, the Southern Silk Road was never interrupted. Silk trading activities were closer to traders from India and Myanmar in intuitive and concrete forms, and Shu brocade craftsmen contributed greatly to this.

After Song quelled the Bashu area, the Shu silk weaving industry experienced rapid development. Silk products from the Bashu area “were produced every day and satisfied the whole country’s demand.” The Shu brocade waving techniques continued to spread after the Northern Song (960–1127 AD) destroyed the Later Shu regime, and the royal court ordered the migration of a great number of Shu brocade craftsmen to Dongjing (present-day

Kaifeng) in 996 AD. The brocade industry in Dongjing flourished because of this and these Shu craftsmen became the backbone of Dongjing's silk industry. The Song government set up Ling Jin Yuan (Academy of Silk and Brocade) with more than 400 weaving machines exclusively for the royal family. Shu brocade techniques once again spread to the north through the official channels, which promoted the restoration and redevelopment of silk weaving in war-torn central China. In 1083 AD, Lv Dafang, an official of the Chengdu government, founded Chengdu Jin Yuan (Chengdu Academy of Brocade), which marked the first attempt in history to organize the individual productions of brocade craftsmen into an officially run operation. This was beneficial to cooperation and technique development during production and finally brought brocade output to new levels. The brocade industry continued to flourish in the Bashu area, and people continued to develop and innovate the weaving techniques. Shu people worked hard to satisfy the demand of the whole country for brocade products.

In the late Northern Song Dynasty, Emperor Gaozong fled to the south and, following his lead, many brocade weaving craftsmen also migrated to the south. As a result, a weaving department was set up in Suzhou. As increasing numbers of northern people escaped to the south, the advanced techniques of all the industries spread to the south again. Meanwhile, inhabitants in the Bashu area escaped to the Bashu frontiers, minority-inhabited areas such as Guizhou, and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The southeastward flow of the Shu people became a trend and as silk weaving techniques again were spread to the east, Jiangnan once more became the silk weaving center.

In the early Yuan Dynasty, the Shu silk weaving industry suffered a heavy loss as many Shu people became prisoners or were sold everywhere as slaves. Women in Chengdu suffered from the Ban on Night Light, and they dared not weave even at night (Yang, 1970).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 AD), the Shu brocade weaving industry was in a downturn because a large population (including many craftsmen) escaped and the local government implemented rigorous, repressive policies. Shu people fled to Yunnan and Guizhou, and the silk weaving industry flourished there. Not until the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD) was the Shu brocade weaving industry in Sichuan restored. Still the silk and cocoons from there had remained famous throughout the country for their quality and quantity. Sichuan became a major supplier of raw materials for silk weaving. When it came to the period between late Ming and early Qing, the Bashu area suffered another unprecedented catastrophe. "Daxi army destroyed all the weaving machines when they were invading Chengdu," and what made this worse was that when the army evacuated Chengdu they also captured and forced a great number of brocade craftsmen to go to Yunnan with them (Chang, 2010). Thus, at the end of the Ming Dynasty, most of the Chengdu craftsmen were captured and taken to Yunnan, leaving only a few in Chengdu. This was the last spread of the Shu silk weaving techniques (Chang, 2010).

Obviously, it was a catastrophe for Sichuan, but it was a breakthrough for the silk weaving industry of Yunnan. Under the guidance of the Shu craftsmen, Yunnan locals started to produce Tonghai brocade, which earned great fame for its high quality.

After the capture of the craftsmen in Chengdu and their forced relocation to Yunnan, Shu craftsmen and their extraordinary brocade weaving techniques made a great contribution to Yunnan and to the benefit of future generations. Later, Sichuan ushered in social stability and craftsmen returned to Sichuan from the Jiang-Zhe region and spread their techniques. Yin Daocheng, then Magistrate of Chengdu Prefecture employed craftsmen from Jiang-Zhe to pass on their silk weaving techniques in the Cheng-Yu region (present-day Sichuan and Chongqing). Thus, trained technical workers for the restoration of the Shu silk industry were once again producing brocade.

Conclusion

Through gradual accumulation and renewal, the ancient Shu brocade techniques were spread along the Southern Silk Road over time and were driven by the migration and circulation of Shu craftsmen. The spread of silk brocade weaving techniques promoted the development and prosperity of the silk industry of southern China, which made China's silk industry develop continuously through constant innovations. The more far-reaching impact was that the Bashu sericulture and silk weaving techniques were spread to Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand, making the Southern Silk Road truly famous. As a result, Sichuan craftsmen's spread of silk weaving techniques across regions and ethnic groups allowed the Southern Silk Road to become the space and channel for communications in both a social and cultural sense. The Southern Silk Road was developed through the efforts and skills of these great ancestors.



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