

Cultural Connections Between China and Foreign Civilizations Through the Kucha Donor Images in the Kizil Caves

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ABSTRACT

Kucha was a small country once existed in the western border of China. Its famous Kizil Caves represents the importance of Buddhism to this country. This research focuses on the Kucha donor images found in some of the Kizil Caves, mainly two group of donors from cave No. 199 and No. 205. The dates, traits of clothing and “tipping toe” standing posture, and identity of these donors are argued and discussed, and they are compared to Sogdian, Bactrian, Persian, and Roman artworks that share similar clothing style or standing posture. Historical evidence is then presented throughout the paper to prove that the similar clothing style and standing posture between Kucha donors and foreign figures reflect cultural connections across the Eurasian continent, on the Silk Road. The paper also explains how the “tipping toe” standing posture is a shared artistic motif but is interpreted and used differently across cultures, thus leading to the author attempting to answer the question: why these Kucha donors were drawn in the Kizil Buddhist Caves. The research mainly uses articles and books written by professional scholars, with the support of some primary texts as historical evidence. Additional archaeological discoveries and art history visual analysis are applied to aid the conclusion of this paper.

1. Introduction

Ancient China saw the rise and fall of many great dynasties in the central plains of China, where all the Han ethnic Dynasties built their glories, but there were also many smaller countries and tribes which thrived in the western part of China. Kucha (龟兹) was one of the countries that existed and flourished in the northwest of China, modern day Xinjiang Province. The country of Kucha was established on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert, in the Tarim Basin, and centered around the Kuqa Oasis.¹ At its peak between 5th and 7th century, the country ruled the modern day Luntai County, Kuqa County, Xayar County, Aksu City, Baicheng County, and Xinhe County of Xinjiang Province, a very large region compared to other countries nearby.² As an ancient Buddhist kingdom, Kucha played a significant role on the north branch of the Silk Road in East and Central Asian history. As the network of ancient trade routes that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia to the ancient Chinese city Chang’an, the Silk Road not only carried commodities such as silk, carpets, and spices, but also built a flourishing cultural connection for different civilizations.³ Therefore, Kucha was a big contributor to the spread of Buddhism towards China as records of Buddhist monks visiting the Wei Dynasty from Kucha could be traced all the way to the 3rd century.⁴

¹ Xia Li, “龟兹壁画中国王、王后及贵族服饰研究” [Research on The Kings and Queens in Kizil Wall Paintings], *大舞台* 8, no. 9 (2014): 1.

² Li, “龟兹壁画中国王、王后及贵族服饰研究,” 1.

³ Ursula Sims-Williams, “The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 15 (2001): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24049044>.

⁴ Sengyou, *阿惟越致遮经记*, vol. 7, *出三藏记集* (Beijing, China: 中华书局, 1995), 274.

As a representation of Kucha's piety to Buddhism, the Kizil Caves located on the cliff of northside of the Muzhadi River in Baicheng County has the largest group of Buddhist caves in the ancient Kucha kingdom.⁵ There are currently 269 numbered caves with a variety of structures and wall paintings.⁶ Because of its important location on the Silk Road and diversity, the Kizil Caves is a hub that connects and blends China with foreign civilizations.⁷ On the wall paintings of the Kizil Grotto, the images of local donors appear in several caves, including Kizil Caves No. 11, No. 17, No. 30, No. 67, No. 69, No. 104, No. 171, No. 189, No. 192, No. 199, No. 205, and No. 207. These donor images have a unique combination of clothing styles and standing postures not seen at any other Buddhist cave donor portraits in China but are common in foreign art works. The wall paintings at Kizil mainly consist of Jataka and Buddhist figures, but the rare appearance of donor portraits still raises questions – why were their clothing and standing posture so unique, and how do these clothing patterns and standing postures reflect the cultural connections between Kucha and foreign civilizations? Therefore, this paper is dedicated to identifying the unique clothing style and standing posture of the Kucha donors, comparing the Kucha donors to foreign portraits to find similarities and differences, and attempting to use historical, archaeological, and cultural evidence to prove the potential cultural connections between the civilizations.

2. Descriptions of Donor Images and Discovering Their Identities

The two Kucha donor portraits this paper will be focusing on are those in cave No. 199 and No. 205, two of the most representative donor images in Kizil.

Kizil Cave 199 is a central pillar cave, a very common form of Buddhist caves found in China and Central Asia, usually consisting of a main chamber, back chamber, and a central column. The main chamber has the largest space with an arch ceiling, the four side walls covered by wall paintings; the central column with rectangular facades stands between the main chamber and back chamber, usually a Buddha statue carved in the middle; the smaller back chamber creates a path surrounding the central column with the same arch ceiling as the main chamber.⁸ Kizil Cave No. 199 was estimated to be built around 600 CE.⁹ A group of donor images can be found painted on the eastern wall in the western corridor. The group of male donors in the image stood in the same direction, heads tilting forward slightly. The male donor on the farthest right in Figure 1 has a halo. He wears a close-fitting shirt inside of a half-sleeve robe decorated by "linked-pearls" and triangular lapel, covering the male figure's knees. He wears a pair of close-fitting pants, most covered by the long robe. On his waist, he has a belt made of pieces of metals, a short knife and a long sword hang in the belt. Oddly, he stands on the tip of his feet in a pair of short boots. The other donors on the left share many similarities with the male donor mentioned above (figure 1).

⁵ Bai Su, "克孜尔部分洞窟阶段划分与年代等问题的初步探索," preface to *中国石窟--克孜尔石窟*, by 新疆维吾尔自治区文物管理委员会, 拜城县克孜尔千佛洞文物保管所, and 北京大学考古系 (n.p.: 文物出版社, 1982), 1:10.

⁶ Li Zhao, "克孜尔石窟分期年代研究综述" [Summary of Research on the Periods of the Kizil Caves], *敦煌学辑刊*, o.s., no. 1 (2002): 1.

⁷ Su, "克孜尔部分洞窟阶段划分与年代等问题的初步探索," preface, 1:10.

⁸ Su, "克孜尔部分洞窟阶段划分与年代等问题的初步探索," preface, 1:11.

⁹ Li Zhao, Jie Peng, and 新疆龟兹石窟研究所, *克孜尔石窟内容总录* (Ürümqi, Xinjiang: 新疆美术摄影出版社, 2000), 226.

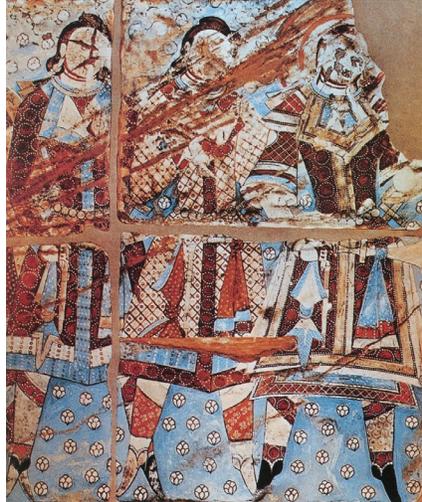


Figure 1, Kizil Cave No.199 Donor Image, Asian Art Museum, Berlin¹⁰

Kizil Cave 205 is also a central pillar cave, estimated to be built around the same era as Cave 199.¹¹ The donor portraits in this cave locates on the lower level of the northern walls. The donor imagery in Cave 205 resembles that in Cave 199, only with more details. The male donor standing in the middle of Figure 2 wears a green robe down to his calf with lapel and narrow sleeves. There are triangle decorations on the robe, with some parts on the chest and the cuffs having blue, black, and silver strips. He wears a pair of tight pants and pointy black boots, standing on the tip of his feet. The halo on his head shines and radiates to all directions. His left hand holds an incense while his right hand grabs the sword. Lastly, the male donor has a colorful ribbon tied in the back. The female donor on the left has a more colorful dress with blue and green designs decorating the creamy white underpaint on the bottom. On top of the dress, she wears a close-fitting shirt with strips that resemble those on the male donor's robe. She has a circular hat with jewelry and ribbon falling on her clothes, both of her hands holding the jewelry. Like the male donor, she also has long hair that naturally falls on her shoulder (figure 2).

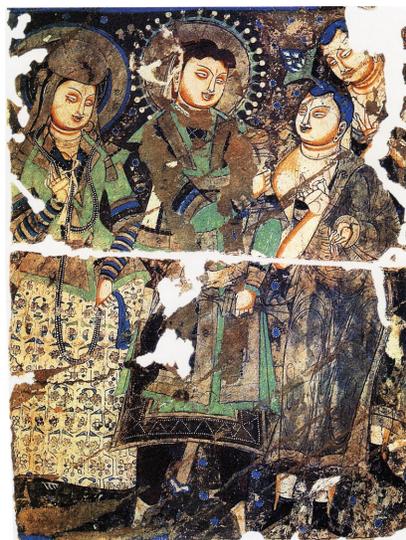


Figure 2, Kizil Cave 205 donor image, Asian Art Museum, Berlin¹²

¹⁰ 新疆石窟研究所, *西域壁画全集 克孜尔石窟壁画 (二)*, vol. 2, *西域壁画全集* (Ürümqi, Xinjiang, 2015), 128.

¹¹ Zhao, Peng, and 新疆龟兹石窟研究所, *克孜尔石窟内容总录*, 230.

¹² 新疆石窟研究所, *西域壁画全集 克孜尔石窟壁画 (二)*, 131.

After looking specifically at the groups of donor images in Cave 199 and 205, there is a general pattern that describes the ornamentations, clothing, and standing posture of most of the Kizil donor images. For male donors:

- A close-fitting shirt wore on the inside with double or single lapel
- A long, half-sleeves robe that falls to the knees, the front chest opened and stripe-pattern decorations on the cuff and bottom of the robe
- A belt that usually hangs a short knife, a sword, and ribbon
- A pair of long, close-fitting pants
- A pair of pointy boots
- A halo for a few male donors (indication of their identity)
- Standing on the tip of his boots, two feet pointing at different directions

For female donors (only appeared in Cave 67, 69, and 205):

- A close-fitting, half-sleeves shirt wore on the outside with double or single lapel
- A long dress that falls to the feet, stripe-pattern decorations on the cuff and more fancy, complicated decorations on bottom of the dress
- A hat with jewelry and ribbon falling
- A pair of pointy boots
- Standing on the tip of his boots, two feet pointing at different directions

Besides observing the ornamentations, clothing, and postures of those donors, it is also necessary to identify who those donors are. First, we need to know when those caves were built. There are two groups of scholars who used archaeological and historical methods to divide the Kizil Caves into several time periods. The German scholars, led by Albert Grünwedel and Alfred von Le Coq, compiled three general periods of the Kizil Caves after their expedition and archaeological discoveries in Xinjiang for a decade, stretching from the 4th century to the 8th century. They believed most of the caves with donor images, especially Cave 199 and 205, were built between 600 CE to 650 CE.¹³ The other group of Chinese scholars, led of Su Bai and Yan Wen Ru, believed most of the caves with donor images were built between 500 CE to 600 CE.¹⁴ Although there are differences on period estimation, historical records show that the kingdom of Kucha was ruled by the Bai Family from around 100 CE to about 755 CE.¹⁵ Thus, it can be concluded that despite some disputes on the exact period, Kizil Cave 199 and 205 with its donor images were all built and painted under the Bai Family ruling Kucha. Because Kucha was at its absolute peak during the Bai Family era and the paintings in the caves demonstrated high levels of drawing skills, it is reasonable to assume that these caves were built by the rich and royal people.

Luckily, there are more records to prove the assumption. There is a line of Brahmi inscription written above the donor images in Cave 205 – “Kuci[maha](de)[vya]svaya(m)pra[bh](a)” which translates to the Great Kucha Queen, Svayamprabhā.¹⁶ This directly proves that the group of donors in Cave 205 are all royal members of Kucha, and the male donor in the middle should be the husband of Queen Svayamprabhā – King Tottika. Interestingly, only the King Tottika has a halo in the group of Cave 205 donors, which resembles the male donor figure on the farthest right of Figure 1 in Cave 199. Therefore, the appearance of the halo is a clear suggestion of the King’s status and power and the donors in Cave 199 is also a snapshot of the Kucha king with his ministers.¹⁷

Now, the clothing style and standing posture of the Kucha donors are identified – wearing extremely fancy and well-designed clothes and standing on the tip of their boots. As mentioned in the Introduction, this clothing style

¹³ Alfred von Le Coq and Ernst Waldschmidt, *Die Buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* (Berlin, Germany, 1922-1923), 7:27, 29.

¹⁴ Su, “克孜尔部分洞窟阶段划分与年代等问题的初步探索,” preface, 1:19-20.

¹⁵ Shun Jin Zhu, “浅谈隋唐时期龟兹白氏政权之始末” [Discussion of the origin and end of Kucha's Bai imperial family during the Sui and Tang Dynasties], *丝路印记*, 214.

¹⁶ Jorinde Ebert, *The Sasanian and Other Civilizations' Impacts on Clothing of Royals in the Tarim Basin from The Stories of Kucha Queen Svayamprabhā*, 2nd ed., trans. Yü Men Su (n.p.: 龟兹研究, 2015), 3.

¹⁷ Yun Wu, “龟兹服饰与粟特服饰之比较” [The Comparison Study of Qiuci Clothing and Sogdian Clothing], *装饰*, no. 224 (December 2011): 126.

and standing posture are rarely seen elsewhere in China, but common in portraits of foreign figures. Thus, the next section analyzes the similarities between the Kucha donors and foreign figures in clothing and posture separately and tries to find potential cultural connections between the countries.

3. Images of foreign civilizations and Their Connections with Kucha

The combination of clothing style and standing postures seen on the donor images at the Kizil Grotto are extremely unique, not seen in any other Chinese Buddhist Grottoes but in some foreign portraits. These similarities in the images are representations of the cultural connections built between Kucha and those civilizations through the Silk Road. This section will explore how the Kucha donors dress and stand similar to foreign figures.

3.1 Clothing Style

When observing the clothing style of the Kucha donors, it is easy for visitors to realize that the clothing looks very foreign compared to other Chinese figure images. Indeed, the Kucha donor's clothing style has many aspects in common with western civilizations, mainly Sogdiana, Bactria, and Persia.

The three civilizations mentioned above all share very similar clothing styles with the Kucha donors in their portraits of either kings or royal members. The similarities between Kucha donors and Sogdian figures can be found inside the "Hall of the Ambassadors" Sogdian mural at Afrasiab, ancient Samarkand. On the west wall of the Sogdian mural, there are three Sogdian figures who were paying tributes to the Tang Dynasty (figure 3). For Bactria, the wall painting found in room No. 16 of the northeastern corner of the Dilberjin Tepe Buddhist site, estimated to be painted either in the 5th century or the early 6th century,¹⁸ share almost the same clothing styles as the Kucha donors (figure 4). Lastly, a Persian wall scripture depicting the celebration of victory by king Shapur I during 240 AD and 270 AD see similar traits with the Kucha donor images (figure 5).



Figure 3, Sogdian ambassadors from the West wall mural, Hall 1, "Hall of the Ambassadors", Afrasiab, Samarkand¹⁹

¹⁸ B. A. Livinsky, *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750*, ed. Guang Da Zhang and R. Shabani Samghabadi, vol. 3, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (n.p.: UNESCO, 1996), 151-152.

¹⁹ Al'baum, *Copy of Figures Numbered 2, 3, and 4*, 1975, photograph, *The Afrasiab Murals: A Pictorial Narrative Reconsidered*.



Figure 4, Kushan male figures, room No. 16, northeastern corner of the Dilberjin Tepe, Balkh, Afghanistan²⁰

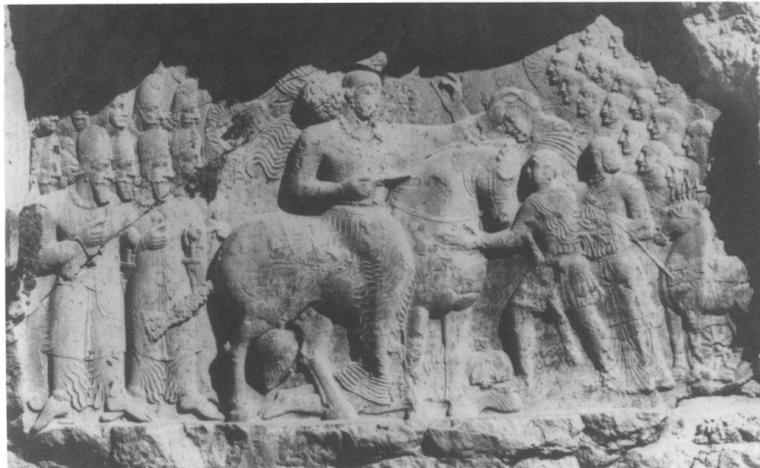


Figure 5, King Shapur I's victory celebration, Darab, Iran²¹

In all three images, the foreign characters can be seen wearing similar clothing styles compared to the Kucha donors seen in Cave 199 and 205. Although the artistic forms are different and some artistic features are vague, it can be concluded that these male portraits share the following traits with the Kucha donors:

- All the male portraits above wear long, half-sleeve robes that cover their legs. Their front chest half-opened
- These foreign figures all have a close-fitting shirt with double or single lapel wearing underneath the long robe
- All of them wear belts made of either metal or ribbon.
- A short knife or a long sword, or both, can be found on every figure painted.
- They all wear headbands that are tied to the back
- They all wear pairs of pointy boots.

In addition to the clothing similarities between the Kucha donors and these foreign art works, the foreign characters also share similar identity with the Kucha donors. For the Sogdian ambassadors, a name is inscribed on the

²⁰ Ahmad Hasan Dani and B. A. Litvinsky, *Dilberjin Fresco*, 1996, photograph, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia: The crossroads of civilizations*, A.D. 250 to 750, UNESCO.

²¹ B. O'Kane, *Rock Relief of the Victory of the Sasanian King Shapur I over the Roman Emperor Valerian in 260 A.D.*, *Darab, Fars Province, Iran*, December 3, 2020, photograph.

neck of the male figure on the right to mark his identity – “Varkhuman”.²² According to historical studies, Varkhuman was a Ikshid, or the prince, of Sogdiana who resided in the ancient Samarkand and became the king in the 7th century.²³ During the 7th century, Varkhuman was serving as one of the Protectors-general in Sogdiana for the Tang Dynasty in the western region.²⁴ In Figure 4, the Bactrian male portraits were all warriors of the royal family²⁵. Finally, the Iranian art is a portray of King Shapur I’s victory celebration as mentioned above. All the characters painted in the three images are either kings or a member of the royal family for their civilizations. Even though the time period of the four images range from as early as the 3rd century to the 7th century, their shared clothing styles and similar identities with the Kucha donor are still visual representations possible cultural connections between these civilizations.

There is evidence from various angles that can prove the cultural connections shown on the artistic works between these countries. First, the geographic locations of these civilizations indicate the likelihood of cultural exchanges. Sogdiana was a civilization originated from the modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; its core area centered around the Zarafshan River region. Geographically, Sogdiana was one of the closest neighbors of ancient kingdom Kucha. However, since the 2nd century, the Kushan Empire, established by the nomadic tribe called “Yuezhi” (月氏), ruled the fertile river regions north of the Oxus, or the Amu Darya, river, commanding some region of Sogdiana, where people of the Han Dynasty called it Kangju.²⁶ Thus, Sogdian art was heavily influenced by Bactrian art. Persia had seen the rise and fall of many great empires. The portrait of King Shapur I above belongs to the Sasanian Empire, which was located on the west of the Kushan Empire during its era. Most importantly, Kucha, Sogdiana, Bactria, and Iran were all located on the same northern branch of the Silk Road. At the western border of China, Kucha was regarded as one of the most notable trading cities on the Silk Road to connect Sogdiana, Bactria, and Iran.²⁷ Therefore, it is evident geographically to assume that the four civilizations existed some forms of cultural connections since the 2nd century.

Second, the ethnicity these civilizations is closely related. According to ancient Chinese records, Kucha people had the habit of cutting their hair – “In their traditions, both men and women cut their hair short, so the hair only falls to their necks. Only the king keeps his hair long”.²⁸ This habit, however, is first discovered as a Persian tradition, and similar traditions are also recorded to be practiced by the Sogdian people and some Bactrian people when they controlled Sogdiana.²⁹ In fact, there were many Iranian speakers living in Tarim Basin, Bactria, and Sogdiana, which further ties the connections between the four civilizations.³⁰ Other scholars have also argued that the Sogdians and some ethnic groups in the Tarim Basin are branches of the Persian ethnicity while Bactrians also shared some bloodlines with the Persians.³¹ With solid and widely agreed research on the shared bloodline and ethnicity between these civilizations, it is not strange to discover deep cultural connections between them.

Next, the archaeological discoveries around modern-day Xinjiang and Central Asia prove the commercial trades that happened between civilizations during ancient times. Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins were common items exchanged on the Silk Road. The standard Arab-Sasanian coin was a silver dirham,³² while the most common Sasanian coin in China was the silver drachm.³³ Those high-quality silver coins were used and beloved by countries in the Tarim Basin, Sogdiana, and Bactria. Especially in the Tarim Basin, these coins have been discovered in

²² Al'baum, *Copy of Figures*.

²³ Guitty Azarpay, "The Afrasiab Murals: A Pictorial Narrative Reconsidered," *The Silkroad Foundation*, 2014, 50.

²⁴ Étienne De la Vaissière, *Les Turcs, rois du monde a Samarcande* (n.p.: Royal Nauruz, 2006), 147-62.

²⁵ Dani and Litvinsky, *Dilberjin Fresco*.

²⁶ Hans Loeschner, "Notes on the Yuezhi – Kushan Relationship and Kushan Chronology," *Academia*, April 15, 2008, 1.

²⁷ H. W. Bailey, *The Culture of Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan* (New York, U.S., 1982), 67.

²⁸ Zhao Zhang and Wei Jia, *旧唐书* (Beijing: 中华书局, 1975), 8:5303.

²⁹ Wu, "龟兹服饰与粟特服饰之比较," 125.

³⁰ David Alan Scott, "The Iranian Face of Buddhism," *East and West* 40, no. 1/4 (1990): 43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29756924>.

³¹ Wu, "龟兹服饰与粟特服饰之比较," 125.

³² Michael Bates, "Arab-Sasanian Coins," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 1982, 225.

³³ Jonathan Karam Skaff, "Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian Silver Coins from Turfan: Their Relationship to International Trade and the Local Economy," *Asia Major* 11, no. 2 (1998): 68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41645542>.

various areas such as Gao Chang (高昌), Astana (阿斯塔那), and Karakhoja (阿拉和卓), all of which were minted during the reigns of fourth-century Sasanian emperors.³⁴ The economic ties between the Persians, Tarim Basin, Sogdiana, and Bactria started centuries before the painting of Kucha donors, but it was during the 7th century when the interaction reached the peak. After numerous studies on the date, coin type, and number of coins imported of those silver coins found in the Tarim Basin, Sogdiana, and Bactria, many scholars have agreed that the peak of silver coin circulation was during the 620s to the 650s, and the evidence for the circulation cut off after 710s.³⁵ Other items and goods traded on the Silk Road are also found in Kucha. Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian specie was a popular good on the Silk Road to China, and Kucha was one of the cities that learned the component from the Persians and produced the specie for sale.³⁶ Persian silk was also traded in the Tarim Basin frequently and during the Tang Dynasty, the Tarim Basin, under the command of China, even began to produce reproductions of Persian polychrome textiles.³⁷ Therefore, the appearance of commodity currency and foreign goods in Kucha, Bactria, and Sogdiana adds another layer to their ancient and deep connections with Persia.

Lastly, these four civilizations shared very similar religions. Kucha, Sogdiana, and Bactria all have religious images and scripts related to Persian culture. In Gandharan art, which was very popular in Bactria, Sogdiana, and Kucha, the depiction of Iranian-dressed Buddhist devotees was seen in Adzina-Tepe of Bactria, Bamiyan, and Kucha.³⁸ In fact, most of the Buddhist scripts at Kizil, Sogdiana, and Bactria were translated by Persian Buddhist monks into different languages, including Chinese Buddhist literature.³⁹ Iran also introduced its own religion and deities into Buddhism as it spread across civilizations. In various Khotanese texts, which was widely used from Persia all the way to the Tarim Basin, the Indian goddess Sri 'prosperity' was replaced by an Iranian goddess Ssandramata in all major civilizations.⁴⁰ Iranian Zoroastrianism was also practiced across Central Asia and many religious symbols can be found. Buddha paintings with flames shooting out from the shoulders and griffin (symbol of wisdom and enlightenment) were a common form of art found in Sogdiana and Kucha.⁴¹

Thus, combining the geographical, ethnical, and mutual religious impact found in the four civilizations, it is reasonable to conclude that Kucha, Sogdiana, Bactria, and Persia shared deep levels of cultural connections, and the similar clothing style found on the figures of these civilizations is a direct representation of their cultural exchanges.

3.2 Standing Posture

Another noticeable trait of the Kucha donor images is their unique standing posture. At first glance, standing on the tips of their feet and pointing in the opposite directions is a strange art motif that rarely appear in any form of artistic portraits. However, across the Eurasian continents, there are other images that share this standing posture with the Kucha donors throughout history, mainly figure portraits from Bactria and the Roman Empire.

Besides the striking similarity of their clothing style, Bactrian and Kucha art also share the "tipping toe" standing posture in portraits of royal members. One example of the "tipping toe" posture in Bactrian art is a wall painting of the Kushan king with his servant was found in the Buddhist archaeological site Fayaz Tepe, Bactria (figure 6).

³⁴ Skaff, "Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian," 69.

³⁵ Skaff, "Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian," 78-79.

³⁶ Skaff, "Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian," 92-99.

³⁷ Matthew P. Canepa, "Textiles and Elite Tastes between the Mediterranean, Iran and Asia at the End of Antiquity," in *Global Textile Encounters*, by Marie-louise Nosch, Zhao Feng, and Lotika Varadarajan (n.p.: Oxbow Books, 2014), 11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dpz7.3>.

³⁸ Scott, "The Iranian," 50.

³⁹ Scott, "The Iranian," 73.

⁴⁰ H. W. Bailey and Wilhelm EilersGernot Wiessner, *Festschrift für Wilhelm Eilers* (n.p.: Harrassowitz, 1967), 136-143.

⁴¹ Scott, "The Iranian," 52.



Figure 6. Kushan king and his servants, northwest corner of central stupa, Fayaz Tepe, Bactria⁴²

The Roman Empire, though very distant from Kucha geographically, also demonstrates this particular standing posture in its art. An image that displays such unique standing posture is a painting of emperor Justinian I, Bishop Maximianus, and the king's bodyguards and senators on the northern wall of Church of San Vitale, which was painted around 547 AD (figure 7).



Figure 7, Emperor Justinian I with Bishop Maximianus, bodyguard, senators, and ecclesiastical hierarchy; northern wall of Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy⁴³

⁴² Al'baum, *King and His Servants Restoration Sketch*, 1990, photograph.

⁴³ CameraphotoArte and Art Resource, *Emperor Justinian I, Bishop Maximianus, and attendants with members of his retine*, 2008, Venice; New York.

In the three images shown above, despite their differences in clothing styles, they do share the “tipping toe” standing posture with the Kucha donor images. More specifically, these figures share the following traits with the Kucha donors:

- They all wear pointy boots, despite the differences in shapes and colors
- Their feet are pointing in opposite directions when standing
- Visually, it seems like they are all standing up on the tip of their feet

Because this standing posture is rarely seen in not only China and East Asia, but most of the Eurasia continent. Therefore, the shared standing posture between these images might present a direct cultural connection between the civilizations.

First, there are multiple aspects that can prove the connections between Kucha and Bactria. Besides the religions, languages, and practices they shared with the Persians, Bactria also had some moderate religious impact on Kucha and neighboring civilizations. Douglas Hitch, professor at Harvard University, believes that the influence of the Kushans for Kucha and Sogdiana is extremely strong because the Prakrit language were used and many Kharosthi script, both widely used in Bactria, are discovered at archaeological sites in the Tarim Basin and Sogdiana for administration.⁴⁴ The use of Kushan title devaputra for royal members in Tarim Basin and Sogdiana is also a prove of the Bactrian influence on both cultures.⁴⁵ The strong political influence that Bactrians had spread to the Tarim Basin could be one of the main reasons that caused the Kucha royal members to instruct the painter to draw their donor images similar to the royal figures’ paintings found in Bactria.

In terms of the connections between the Romans, Kucha, and Bactria, the most direct prove perhaps exists within the standing posture itself. Russian scholar Kosolapov and Markshak believe that the weirs visual effect of the “tipping toe” standing posture found in Kucha and Bactria originated from a Roman artistic technique – point-projection perspective.⁴⁶ Chinese scholar Li Yun agrees with this opinion, stating that the feet are not actually tipping up because the heels are farther back than the toes, so it seems like the figures are standing on their toes when it is simply a use of linear perspective.⁴⁷ Another layer of connection lies inside the Kizil Caves themselves. When analyzing the painting on the Kizil Caves, a special pigment is found to be widely used in Kucha, one many scholars called “Egyptian Blue” (figure 8).

According to Werner Schmid, a conservator of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua, what makes this pigment special is that its gloss can last for thousands of years without losing the quality of the color.⁴⁸ Other historical evidence also proves the exchanges happened between the three civilizations. Buddhism was already popularized in western Iran, an area controlled by Romans when the Kizil caves were built. In some old Turkic Christian documents, the three gifts given to the baby Jesus are reminiscent of the Buddhist Three Jewels.⁴⁹ Christianity, on the other hand, did the same in Xinjiang. Records show that in the 8th century, there was a Christian ruler in Kashgar, a city located on the western end of the Tarim Basin, extremely closed to Kucha.⁵⁰ Because Roman culture and religion had spread its influence in Tarim Basin and the neighboring Bactria for centuries, some mutual artistic influences between the civilizations were very possible.

However, despite the potential connections of Kucha, Bactria, and the Roman Empire reflected in the “tipping toe” artistic motif, the form and purpose of this standing posture and other artistic details in the images were used differently under each culture.

⁴⁴ Douglas A. Hitch, "Kushan Tarim Domination," *Central Asiatic Journal* 32, no. 3/4 (1988): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41927885>.

⁴⁵ Werner Winter, "Tocharians and Turks," *Aspects of Altaic Civilization*, 1963, 239-251.

⁴⁶ B. Markshak and Kosolapov, *Central Asia Wall Painting -- Art History and Experimental Research*, trans. Jun

⁴⁷ Yun Li, "论克孜尔石窟壁画人物的'脚尖站立'造型" [Discussion of the "Tipping Toe" Standing Posture of Walling Painting Figures in The Kizil Caves], *新美术*, 9th ser., 2015, 50.

⁴⁸ Gan Yu, "克孜尔与拜占庭" [Kizil and the Byzantine], *中国美术学院学报*, November 2015, 118.

⁴⁹ Daniel Veidlinger, "The Information Superhighway of Old," in *From Indra's Net to Internet: Communication, Technology, and the Evolution of Buddhist Ideas* (n.p.: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 115, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn3dp.8>.

⁵⁰ Veidlinger, "The Information," 115.

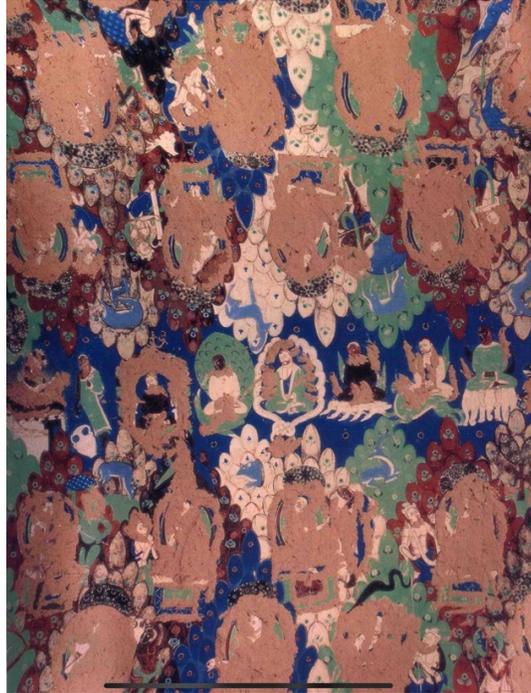


Figure 8, Egyptian Blue used in the Magadha Sangmo Jataka stories on the ceiling of cave No. 224, Kizil, Xinjiang⁵¹

Starting with the Romans, the two images mentioned above present traits that are not seen in Kucha and Bactrian images. All the Roman figures are facing forward, without any direct eye contact with one another. It looks like a snapshot or picture taken at a second, only displaying the positions and status of each character, no stories or contacts were presented in the image. Next, although slightly skewed, the Justinian portray has a symmetric structure, with the Emperor Justinian I standing in the middle. Symmetry has been used in art forms for thousands of years in history because it is one of the most direct and convincing methods to emphasize a certain figure or item at the center of the symmetry. In this case, the Roman emperor is the focus point of this entire painting due to his critical position at the center of the symmetry. The clothing of each character also plays an important role in representing their status. Justinian I wears a long, purple chalmys in front of the neutral green and gold background, a color contrast that sharply distinct him from the rest of the figures in the image as the background color puts more emphasis on the specialness and royalty of his purple robe. To Justinian I's left, Bishop Maximianus is the second most important figure in this image, and although he wears a white robe like other clergies, the green and gold cover resting on his shoulders makes him stand out from the rest. Lastly, the boots and spacing of "tipping toe" standing posture are different for each figure in the image. Justinian I is the only figure wearing a pair of dark purple boots, and his feet possess the largest space in the middle, no one else's feet are covering his feet or his ground. Bishop Maximianus has the second largest spacing, and the rest of the figures have less spaces for their standing posture as their status decrease. Therefore, it is apparent that the "tipping toe" standing posture is only a part of how Roman artists used subtle details to display the power and status of the Emperor Justinian I.

In the Bactrian image, however, some details are different than the Roman image. The Bactrian image also uses symmetric structure to emphasize the power of the king standing in the middle. It is hard to tell the color of the clothing due to the loss of the upper parts, but the bottom part of the image still shows that each figure wears a different color, with the king wearing a red robe. Nevertheless, the bodyguards on the sides of the king are not looking forward; instead, they are looking at their king with different expressions. Some are looking up with admiring eyes, and some are looking down, trying to avoid direct eye contact with the king. This artistic detail presents more interactions

⁵¹ 新疆石窟研究所, 西域壁画全集 克孜尔石窟壁画 (二), 149.

between the characters in the painting, almost providing a background story of what was happening when the portray was drawn. Most importantly, the difference of spacing between each character is gone in the Bactrian painting. The king shares the same amount of spacing with all other figures. However, it is worth noticing that because of the limit spacing, many characters have their feet covered by the feet of figures standing next to them, but the king is the only character in the image that has both of his feet shown. Instead of being covered, the king's feet cover the feet of his bodyguard standing next to him, displaying every aspect of his portray. Thus, the "tipping toe" standing posture had lost some of its details in the Bactrian image to emphasize the power of their king, but it still uses the detail "the king's feet not covered by anyone" to glorify the Bactrian king in the overall image.

When it comes to the Kucha donors, further changes can be seen. The symmetric, linear perspective art form have almost vanished in the donor images, especially in the donor image of No. 205. None of the characters are facing forward, all looking in a skewed direction, which feels like they are either all looking at something outside the image or they are interacting with each other. Despite the differences in clothing, the contrasting styles, colors, and patterns do not contribute to glorifying the king or queen among the donors. In terms of their "tipping toe" standing posture, there is no pattern on the spacing of their feet and no obvious emphasis on the covering of each character's feet. Either all donors have the exact same spacing and covering, or how their feet are positioned have no interactions or correlations at all. One might beg the answers, therefore, of what is the purpose of this "tipping toe" standing posture drawn on the Kucha donor images and what is the purpose of these donor images within the Kizil Buddhist Caves in general?

Although most of the donor images in the Kizil Caves are portraying Kucha royal members, most of the donor images were located on the lower level of the wall, including the two examples from cave No. 199 and No. 205 mentioned previously.⁵² In other words, the Kucha donors are not the core of the Buddhist art at Kizil, serving more as auxiliary images on the bottom. It is an expected role for the donors because although they donated their wealth to build the caves, the purposes of establishing those caves at Kizil were to worship the Buddha and to illustrate Kucha's piety to Buddhism as an entire country. Because the royal members intentionally positioned themselves on the lower level, they are stand under the Buddha and the Jataka stories, presenting a sense of inferiority in front of the divine. As a result, when local and foreign monks and worshippers came to visit the Kizil caves and walked around the corridors of the caves, they would see the Kucha donors after admiring the Buddha and the Jataka stories, highlighting the importance of Buddhism over royalty. This visual scenery reminds the visitors to be more pious to Buddhism because even the kings with great power and wealth lower their positions in front of the Buddha. By doing so, Kucha also demonstrates its characteristic as one of the most important Buddhist kingdoms, which played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism towards the Han-Chinese Dynasties.

However, serving as auxiliary images doesn't mean the Kucha royals wouldn't do their best to glorify their power and wealth in a more subtle way. As described in the previous sections, the Kucha donors' clothing and ornamentations are astonishingly detailed and extremely well-preserved, which ties to the "Egyptian Blue" pigment used by both Kucha and the Romans.⁵³ The clothing style they shared with other civilizations was a common style they had, but wearing clothes with such lavish and luxurious ornamentations, like the Sogdian, Bactrian, and Persian images of kings wearing luxurious clothing, is a clear display of their wealth and power. Besides their clothing, the Kucha royal members also hoped for more details to showcase their power, so throughout the centuries of connections they have had with Romans and Bactrians, they probably learned a special art motif – the "tipping toe" standing posture – and maybe even saw it used to portray kings and queens from other countries. Without truly understanding the artistic techniques and purpose of this standing posture in Roman or Bactrian context, the Kucha royals might assume that this standing posture was a unique posture that could only be used to portray royal members and aristocrats to represent power, wealth, and social status. Hence, this weird standing posture appeared on the Kucha donors.

Overall, though interpreted and used differently, the "tipping toe" standing posture still serves as one of the elements on the Kucha donor images to glorify the king and queen's power and wealth, similar to how the standing

⁵² Zhao, Peng, and 新疆龟兹石窟研究所, *克孜尔石窟内容总录*, 226, 230.

⁵³ Yu, "克孜尔与拜占庭," 118.

posture functioned in foreign artworks. Besides displaying power, the Kucha donor images themselves also helped Kucha to demonstrate their piety to Buddhism, reflecting the country's importance on the spread of Buddhism on the ancient Silk Road.

4. Conclusion

Although located in a region that is stark and almost abandoned, the Kizil Caves have some of the most well-preserved ancient Chinese history and art. As a part of ancient Kucha, the Kizil Caves are a symbol of the glorious Buddhist history that flourished in the Tarim Basin and an important station for Buddhism to spread into the Eastern Han-Chinese regions. Except the vast amount of Jataka paintings and famous Buddha portraits, the Kucha donor images also hold a special place in Kizil Buddhist art. It is a representation of the cultural connections that happened along the Silk Road, a witness of the long history of China's communication with the Sogdians, Bactrians, Persians, and the Romans. The clothing style and standing postures of the local royal members are a combination of various royal portraits from the western civilizations. These Kucha donor images not only demonstrate Kucha royal's power for the ancient people, but also remind us today that China has never been an isolated, closed country. Thousands of years ago, China had already opened its gate to embrace foreign art, commodities, items, and cultures on the Silk Road. Just like what famous Chinese scholar Qi Dong Fang wrote, "The Great Silk Road is a road of commerce, also a road of East-West communication; a road of friendship, and most importantly, a road of cultural connection and combination."⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ Dong Fang Qi, *我在考古现场* (Beijing: 中华书局, 2021), 197.

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