

Čīnēstān, China the Toponym and China the Kingdom (Sasanian to Post-Sasanian Texts)

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Abstract

The cultural relationships between Iran and China date back to the ancient times. This paper deals with the concepts of the terms “China” and “Čīnēstān” in Persian texts. Čīnēstān, a Persian term, had been used in the Persian texts from Sasanian to Post-Sasanian eras. Apart from “Čīnēstān” being used as a toponym, there were different explanations of the word “China” in Persian texts, such as “a proper country”, “a realm” or the name of a king. In this paper, the author proposed that the terms “China” and “Čīnēstān” should not be explained with the same concept.

On the other hand, Arabo-Persian texts had frequently used “Mamālik and Balād of China” to refer to the term “Čīnēstān”. It seems that the term Čīnēstān has fallen into oblivion, while the Arabic terms “Mamālik and Balād of China” (i.e. Mamālik-al-Sīn) had replaced it. Additionally, in Persian texts, Čīnēstān has never been used to refer to “the country of China” specifically, but in most cases, for an expanded geographical region, or in other words, a geographical direction or realm. Other descriptions about China, such as “the king” and “the founder of China”, could be also seen in cases of other lands, such as Rome, India, Silla and Greece.

Keywords

China, Čīnēstān, China the toponym, China the king, Persian texts

1. Introduction

The cultural relationships between Iran and China date back to the ancient times. Available evidence shows that these relationships could be traced back to the Parthian period and the kingdom of Mithridates II (Wang 2007: 87, Laufer 1919: 187). In fact, cultural relationships of Iran and the Far East reached their climax during the glorious period of Sasanian Empire, when Iranian arts influenced those in China, Silla, and even Japan. The ancient artifacts obtained from these countries, including those from an ancient capital of Japan, Nara, can prove such cultural and artistic influences.

When the Sasanian Empire collapsed, the last Sasanian prince Firuz, son of Yazdgird III, escaped to China. He brought with him thousands of musicians, artists and army generals

while fleeing his home country, resulting in a remarkable impact of Sasanian arts to China and its neighboring countries. Emperor Gaozhang recognized Firuz as the legal monarch of Persia. The emperor later played an important role in the expedition of Firuz to Iran to fight against the Arabs (Pulleyblank 1991). Firuz even became a commander of the left wing of the Chinese army, which can be proved by his statute beside other nobles in China. Apart from the Chinese texts (Rong et al. 2000: 113), some Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts such as *Bundahišn*¹ have made reference to this event, and had named it “the departure to and settlement of the bereaved families of Yazdgird in the Far East (China)”.

Aligning with the historical background laid above, this article deals with the concepts and definitions of the terms China and Čīnēstān (cf. Akbarzadeh 2008: 8) in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts up to the Post-Sasanian era.

2. Čīnēstān and China in Persian texts

This paper looks at whether the terms China and Čīnēstān denoted the same concept in the Persian texts. The Sasanian texts, written in Zoroastrian Pahlavi, are quite familiar with the terms China and Čīnēstān:

Bundahišn (Navabi et al. 1978: 79ff., Bahar 1991: 72, 73, 83, 90, 128): “Mount Asborsin – after Alborz Mountain – is the largest mountain. It extends to Sistan from one side and to Čīnēstān from the other. The Asproz Mountain is located atop Čīnēstān. They (residents) who are in the land of Tur and those in the land of Salm, that is Rome, and those who are in the land of Čīn (China), that is Čīnēstān, those who are in the land of Gāy (Sogdiana) and those who are in the land of Sindh ... are all descendants (survivors) of Frawāg, son of Syāmak, son of Mash. Mounts Syāhomand and Barfomand are the mountains through which Kabul and its adjoining areas connected to China. The Road from Turkestan to Čīnēstān...”

Ayādgar-e Jāmāsbīg, in chapter VIII, (Messina 1939: 50) wrote:

“Čīnēstān is a great land and there are much of gold, musk and precious stone; the people are artisan, skillful and discerning; they worship the Buddha (idol) and would be regarded as sinners in the other world...”²

¹ *Bundahishn* (*Bundahišn*) includes different mythological and historical kinds of data in its 36 chapters. These include: Ohrmazd (Good Spirit) and Ahriman (Evil Spirit) (I), Primal Creation (2–6), On the Creatures (7), On the Mountains (9), On the Seas (10), On the Rivers (11), On the Kinds of people (14), On the Divider Bridge (26), Famous cities of Iran / toponyms (31), Kayanid kings (35), Arabs and Sasanian kings (36).

² This description was used very widely for Silla in Persian Texts only (cf. Ibn Khordadbeh 1992: 53, *Nokhbat-al-Dahr* (Ansari 2003: 213), *Jahan-nama* (Najib Bakran 1964: 92), *Ajayeb-al-Makhlughat-wa-Gharaeb-al-Mowjudat* (Tusi 2003: 236). For more information see Akbarzadeh 2010: 140).

The Sogdian (north-east) texts also used different words for China:

“CYNST”N” – mentioned only one time – was translated to “China” (Gharib 1995: 3340, 3341, 3355, 3359) ; “CYN” for China; and “CNTR(Y), CYNTR” even “CNTRY S-R” as “inland, inside (China)” and second to “(to) China”.

Furthermore, Manichean texts knew Čīnēstān as well (Boyce & Zwanziger 1977: 33). The term as a toponym was also known by post-Sasanian texts and Iranian poets:

Hodud-al-Alam (Anonymous 1983: 19): “The Tabarna Island is located between Čīnēstān and India.”

Ba’lami (1975: 253, 149): “Afrasyab was the king of Turkestan; his capital was Balkh (Bactria) and sometimes Marv. The Turks’ ruled from Jayhun River (Oxus) to Balkh and Marv up to Sarakhs and near Nishapur, where Afrasyab took by force from Manuchihr... up to Fraghaneh and Turkestan up to Čīnēstān were his troops... Faridun gave Čīnēstān and East to Tuj.”

fakandast dar bīšeye čīn-stān
bīyāvar za Bīžan badān kin-stān
(Firdowsi)

vaz xub yolāmān hameh Xorāsān
čun bot-kadeh ye Hind o čīn-stān ast
(Nasir Khosrow)

bād nowruzi hami ārāyeš bostān konad
tā nagāraš čun nagārestān čīnēstān konad
(Qatran)³

The question here is whether there is any difference between the toponyms China and Čīnēstān. Not only had the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts used both terms, but these toponyms also appeared in Sogdian and Post-Sasanian texts. Since the Sogdians were the pioneers of trade and cultural relations between Iran and China, they had deep understanding of this route. Considering this, should the terms China and Čīnēstān be interpreted under a single concept in the Sogdian texts?

Another question is, in the poems of the Persian poets, had “Čīnēstān” been used to mean China particularly or could it also mean a territory and/or region larger than a specific country?

³ For the poems, see Dehkhoda (1960: 481).

Moreover, it is observable in the Persian and Arabo-Persian texts that we are dealing with two “Chinas” with different geographies. In this regard, *Jahan-nama* is one of the most reliable sources:

Jahan-nama (Najib Bakran 1964: 72) had divided China into two parts, in the first, “China of China” (>Chin-e motlaq), which meant “Outer China” in the west; secondly, “Inner China” (Chin-e andarun) and “Māčīn” in the east. The “Māčīn”⁴ mentioned here included “Silla” (Korea) and “Vāq Vāq” islands (Japan) being two territories/countries within it.

Could it not the above account be comparable with Sogdian texts’ descriptions of “China” and “CYNTR”? One should also not overlook terms such as Mamālik-al-Sīn, “China territories” and Balād-al-Sīn, “China territories” (see also Hodud-al-Sīn). The Arabo-Persian texts had frequently used these terms:

Taghwim-al-Baladan by Abolfada (1970: 4, 19, 29, 30) says:

“We do not have much information about the Chinese realm because of its vastness and its Balād (territories). The world is divided to seven realms and one realm is China; the Pacific Sea (Ocean) goes to the east, to the most eastern part, where there are the Chinese Balād; that is the sea (east sea) which is coming from the Pacific Sea (Ocean), from the outmost of Chinese Balād .”

Al-Massalik-wa-al-Mamalik by Ibn Khordadbeh (1992: 53) says: “There are many kings (kingdoms) and mountains beyond China territory.”

A. Biruni, in *Athar-al-Baqiya* says (1989: 345): “Balād of China is located in the east and north of the equator.”

Ajayeb-al-Makhlughat-wa-Gharaeb-al-Mowjudat by Ahmad Tusi (2003: 121) says: “The Chinese Balād (territories) is the eastern realm.”

Ajayeb-al-Makhlughat by Mahmud-al-Makmuni-al-Qazvini (1983: 96) says: “The Pacific Sea encircles earth; it goes to the east, to the Chinese Balād (territories).”

Rashidudin Fazlollah, in *Jama’-al-Tawarikh* (1994: 156, 1343) preserved the terms: “Balād of China, Chinese territories.”

Khatay-nama by A. A. Khataee (1993: 62, 89) says: “This (rule) is the same in all “Mamālik of China” (Chinese territories).”

⁴ Māčīn is the name of an Island near Silla in *Kush-nama* by Iran-shan ibn Abal-khayr. Machin’s king joined Silla to fight against China according to the text (cf. Akbarzadeh 2014: 150).

The Persian term Čīnēstān had been used in the Persian texts since late Sasanian to the early Islamic period. However, at certain junctures, Mamālik and Balād of China had also been used (with the advent of Islam) along with it. It seems that the term Čīnēstān had gradually fallen into oblivion, as the Arabic terms Mamālik and Balād of China started replacing it.

One may wonder whether there may be any semantical connection between Čīnēstān and Balād and Mamālik-al-Sin (or Hodud-al-Sin), “territories of China”, as well as whether Mamālik/Balād-al-Sin be considered sort of a translation Čīnēstān.

Furthermore, the unfixed boundaries of Čīnēstān both on the land (the Silk Road) and the marine routes could be understood through Arabo-Persian texts. *Hodud-al-Alam* (Anonymous 1983: 17, 9, 25, 26) is one of the most important early Islamic sources to provide valuable information in this field:

The text referred to “Khomdan as the capital and the farthest of Čīnēstān”.⁵ The first border city of Čīnēstān was called the Mānsā Mountain. Also, Tibet was described as a part of Čīnēstān.⁶

Its western border was observable in this text (Anonymous 1983: 57, 60 ff., 79, 12, 19, Garadzizi 2005: 370):

“from the border of Čīnēstān to the border of Khazaran,⁷ which is mostly desert and the dwelling of the Turks. Čīnēstān’s realm is located to the east where the Eastern Ocean is; from south it is limited to Vāq Vāq,⁸ Sarandib Mountain and from north to Tibet, Toghzo Ghos and Kher-Khiz” (cf. Ibn Khordadbeh 1992: 16).

“Khomdan, Kachan, Khamju, Sucho, Kucha, Shachu⁹ and Kashghar are among the cities of Čīnēstān. As for the maritime border, there are references made to the Qolzom Sea and Čīnēstān; the Island of Tabarna is the border between Čīnēstān and India within which there is a big city called Mus.”

⁵ It is quite clear that Khomdan had been the capital of China around 350 B.C. (Gharib 1995: 2117).

⁶ However, Ibn Khordadbeh (1992: 52) considers Luqin the first settlement of China (not Chinestan).

⁷ The Khazars had a powerful reign in the north of the Caspian Sea up to the Caucasus in the 6th century and in racial terms are affiliated to the Altaic group. Ibn Khordadbeh (1992: 15): “The Turks are regarded as Chinese.”

⁸ Cf. Middle Chinese name of Japan: Vaqvaqu (Pulleyblank 1991: 324, 116, 319). Ibn Khordadbeh (1992: 50, 53) while emphasizing on this issue, has named Shila its easternmost city.

⁹ Most of these toponyms are known through Sogdian texts (cf. Gharib 1995: passim).

Apart from Čīnēstān being a toponym (cf. Agostini & Stark 2016: 20), we can also interpret China as a proper country, a realm, as well as a king in Persian texts. The following sections will explain these interpretations respectively.

3. China the Toponym

In most Sasanian texts up to the Islamic period, the term had been used for both China as a proper country (without understanding its exact borders) and China as a realm (East). The second concept is closer to the geographical zone of Čīnēstān.

The following examples made references to China, which had been located geographically before Machin with the concept of a country; the location could mean the Chinese western borders. Also, Machin was mostly used in referring to the eastern part of China, where Silla was located (cf. Anonymous 2009: 27).

Akhbar-al-Tawal (Dinwari 2011: 45) says: “Soleyman arrived in Merv from Iraq and from Merv went to Balkh and proceeded to China ...”

Tarikh-e Sistan (the History of Sistan) (Anonymous 2004: 170) says: “He traveled to China through the sea and from there to Machin ...”

Zayn-al-Akhbar (Gardizi 2005: 59) says: “Alexander prepared an army and went to India via Turkmenistan, and defeated all and captures Turkistan, China, Machin, India and Kashmir...”

Tajareb-al-Omam (Moskuyeh Razi 1990: 86) says: “He talked about China, the expansion of the country and frequency of the rhythms and its wonders...”

Ibn Khordadbeh (1992: 45) says: “In Aden there are plenty of Indian, Chinese, Ethiopian and Persian commodities.”

4. China the Kingdom

Obviously, in pre-Islamic Iran, genealogy was one of the most important known sciences. In other words, having a family background and the royal blood was most crucial for one to become a king. Apart from the book *Avesta* in the northeast (cf. Dustkhah 1991: 86, 176, 607), the Achaemenid kings (royal inscriptions) in the southwest had repeatedly mentioned this point in their inscriptions (cf. Kent 1953: 116). In the Sasanian period, this class system had been understood through some texts. The family background, with great assumption, had its roots in the class system.

Also, “China” was supposed to be a person from a prestigious family. Therefore, China had been one of the terms used in the Arabo-Persian texts both in the form of a specific (individual) name and the name of a country.

Akhbar-al-Tawal (Dinwari 2011: 25–27) says: “The first group that came out were the sons of Japheth, Noah’s son, who were seven brothers named Turk, Khazar, Soqlab, Taris, Mensk, Komari and China who went to the North and the East ...”

Ajayeb-al-Makhlughat-wa-Gharaeb-al-Mowjudat (Tusi 2003: 242) says: “The text called ‘China’ as the ‘Čīn-e ibn Faghfur ibn Komari ibn Japheth ibn Noah’ (China is son of Faghfur).” Other texts (cf. Gardizi 2005: 370, Anonymous 2009: 124, Ibn Khordadbeh 1992: 15) had also used such narrations frequently.

Gardizi (2005: 370) also says: “Noah divided the world among his three sons, Sām, Hām and Japheth. He gave Turk, Soqlab and Gog and Magog up to China to Japheth.”

The history of Tabari (Tabari 1996: 137–154) says:

“It is said that Afridun (Faridun) was the first one who divided the earth (world) among his three sons: Tur, Salm and Iraj; he gave the expanded realm of Turk, Khazar and China, which was named Čīn-e Bayā, to Tur and annexed all the nearby areas; he gave Rome, Soqlab, Barajan and the nearby areas to Salm, his second son, and gave the central and prosperous part of the earth which is the territory of Babylon and was called Khonareth, together with India, Sindh, Hijaz and other places, to Iraj, the youngest brother. Salm received Rome and the West; Tur became king of Turk and China; Iraj received Iran and India as well as the throne.”

Zayn-al-Akhbar (Gardizi 2005: 36–39) says: “Faridun gave China, Turk and Tibet to Tur and thus it was named Turan.”

Tajareb al-Omam (Moskuyeh Razi 1990: 60) says: “Faridun had three sons; he gave Bakhtar (west) to Salm, Turan and China (east) to Tur, and Iran and India (central part of the world) to Iraj.”

Masudi in *Moruj-al-Zahhab* (2008: 128, 591) says: “There are differences among people about the origin of the people of China. Many have said that when Noah divided the world, the children of Amur ibn Subil ibn Japheth ibn Noah proceeded towards the East. There, they split into several territories and some of them such as Turk, Khazlaj and Toghoz Ghodz chose nomadic life.”

Also Masudi in *Al-Tanbihyah-wa-al-Ashraf* (2011: 79) says: “China and Silla are of the same origin and the children of Amur (genealogy).”

The above texts show that China, India, Turk and Silla are the names of people who have founded their countries, with the name of these countries being the eponyms of those people. In Masudi's report, Silla is among the children (genealogy) of Amur, similar to China.

In the post-Sasanian (and Arabo-Persian) texts, we can witness three types of traditions or narrations in the genealogy of the peoples. One is the Iranian tradition, where all groups were somehow of the Iranian origin. This belief can be traced back to the very old times in the pre-Islamic period, when Iran was considered the center of the world. This belief originates from an old Iranian myth. According to *Bundahišn* (Pakzad 2005: 191):

“Those who are in Iranian (Aryan) lands, those who are in non-Iranian lands, that is to say, those who are in the Tur's land, those who are in the Salm's land, i.e. Romans land, those who are in the Sin's land, i.e. 'Čīnestān', those who are in the Sind land and those who are in the six other lands, all of them are the descendants of Frawāg, son of Syāmak, son of Mash.... Romans (people) and Turks and Chinese and Gays and Taziks and Sinds, namely Indians, and Iranians and those who are in the other six lands...”

The second one is a Semitic tradition. According to this tradition, nationals who turned into Semitic genealogy included Iranians and non-Iranians; most of them are Noah's sons. The tradition was highly influenced by Islamic thoughts. With the advent of Islam in Iran, it became prevalent among writers. Its examples are attributions of different ethnic groups to Noah and his children such as Amur, and they had been referred to by Masudi as China and Silla. In contrary to the Iranian concept, this tradition understood Islam as the basis of the interpretation of genealogy.

The third is a tradition that could be found in written history (reality). For example, in most texts in Alexander's genealogy, he had been referred to as the son of Philip (Hellenic tradition). Alexander, however, was a known personality and his story had been different from toponyms like Silla and China. For this tradition, we can cite what Darius the Great said in his inscriptions (cf. Kent 1953: 116) or events of Shahpur the Great's inscription (ŠKZ) (cf. Akbarzadeh 2003: 42).

Obviously, China had been the name of the land, instead of a period or a king, in the Iranian texts since the beginning of bilateral relations. There was no specific image and document for the Iranian writers, the authors in the early Islamic centuries since the beginning of the relations with that country. Therefore, they named the Chinese “the children of China” and the Turks “the children of Turk”, etc.

5. Conclusion

Although cultural relationships between Iran and China dated back to ancient times, the use of different terms to refer to China in Persian texts from the Zoroastrian Pahlavi up to the

Islamic texts has been questionable. We need to accept that, diversity of these terms may have occurred by chance, and to relate them according to linguistic features can be very difficult.

Nevertheless, Bailey (1979: 102), Boyce & Zwanziger (1977: 33) (also see Henning 1947: 39–66) and Gharib (1995: 3355, also see Dehkhoda 1960: 481) had interpreted China and Čīnēstān in their works under the same concept. In the texts, Čīnēstān had been used with the suffix “stān” (Dehkhoda 1960: 471), which is specific to expanded territories (such as Hindustan and Barbarestan). The term China itself was sometimes used to refer to a specific country and sometimes as a territory – the Eastern territory in contrary to the Western territory (Rome). This can be shown in the following verse:

“One brother left Rome and the other one China
the poison was mixed with honey.”¹⁰

In the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts (i.e. *Bundahišn*), the borders of Čīnēstān started from Central Asia (confirmed by Muslim authors). According to the text of *Bundahišn*, (cf. Pakzad 2005: 127) “Asproz Mountain is located atop Cinestan”. It is imaginable that parts of the border of Čīnēstān included Turks as well; as Ibn Khorda said: “The Turks are regarded as Chinese”. At the time of the writing of *Bundahišn*, the Iranian domination had been lost in many northeastern parts, but repeated usages of this term for this expanded region can somehow be related to the interweaving of the Turk ethnic group (and other ethnic groups in Central Asia) with China from the racial perspective, and sometimes the unity between China and Turk from political outlooks (cf. Ibn Khordadbeh 1992: 44).

Still, Čīnēstān could cover these boundaries (cf. Sogdian texts), as well as ethnic groups who lived between the borders of Iran from Khorasan up to the farthest points of the Far East, which was Silla. The creation of the term Čīnēstān can be accounted for several possible reasons: apart from the domination of the Chinese governments over parts of the eastern borders regions of Iran (with the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and in the early Islamic centuries) and other suggestions such as the rise of different Chinese governments on the Western borders (China), some also accounted this for similar physical appearances of the diversified ethnic groups and their occasional political unity with each other, as well as cultural similarities of these groups in that expanded region.

In fact, Čīnēstān had never been used as “China proper” specifically in the Persian texts. Instead, this term was mostly used to refer to an expanded geographical region, or in other words, a geographical direction or realm. This same concept can sometimes be seen in the case of the term China.

¹⁰ For other samples, see Dehkhoda (1960: 471).

Furthermore, other descriptions such as “China the king” and “founder of China” could be seen in the case of other lands such as Rome, India, Silla and Greece. The absence of accurate information on the formation of the governments and the kings’ genealogy can be a significant factor in this regard (Akbarzadeh 2016: 31). Nevertheless, all those traditions, including genealogy, had changed with the advent of Islam.

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薩珊王朝時期及期後文獻中 “辛那斯坦”及“中國”作為地名或王國名稱的用法

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提要

波斯文獻中有“中國”(China)和“辛那斯坦”(Čīnēstān)的用語，本文將探討其背後所表述的概念。“辛那斯坦”為波斯語，除了用作地名，在波斯文獻中亦有不同詞義。作者認為不應以相同的概念解讀“中國”(China)和“辛那斯坦”(Čīnēstān)。

在阿拉伯—波斯文獻中，常用“中國之境”來指稱辛那斯坦。在波斯文獻中，“辛那斯坦”未被用來指稱“作為國家的中國”，反之多用來指一個廣闊的地理範圍。此外，中國一詞的其他釋義，也可在其他地區中找到。

關鍵詞

中國，辛那斯坦，中國(地名)，中國(國王名)，波斯文獻

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