

## CHINESE VISUAL TRADITIONS ENCOUNTERED ON SAFAVID FURNITURE

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the design patterns derived from the Chinese tradition of wood-based crafts which were applied on furniture as found in the illustrated books of “The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb” and “The Shahnama of Firdausi” during the Safavid period. The intimate connections between the Middle East and Asia over the past centuries (1501 to 1722) raised interest in both the handcrafts and decorative design motifs of the two regions. This resulted in the appearance of Chinese decorative motifs in Safavid miniatures which commenced in early Islam when Shah Ismail became a Chinese art appreciator. The Shah’s patronage is explicit through the painters and designers working in the court workshops where the practice of Chinese structural composition and designed patterns are evident with continued production during the following Safavid kings.*

**Keywords:** *Safavid, Shahnama, furniture motifs, Chinese tradition, miniatures.*

### 1. Introduction

Historically, Iran is known as a country with open doors to different cultures, including a cooperative free trade with China. Pre-Islamic Iran was occasionally in contact with the Far East through sea routes and the Silk Road with Iranian ambassadors traveling to China. Their experiences in China were reflected in Iran’s culture and civilization as seen in different aspects of material culture such as art. Chinese decorative motifs, which were highly appreciated by Iran, were transferred without any religious meaning,

unlike Islamic motifs which had definite religious ideas when applied to artifacts.

The Safavid Empire was the foundation of modern Iran which started with Shah Ismail 1 (b. 1487 d.1524), who established Tabriz as his capital in the 16th century (1501-1722). His mission statements were summarized in political and religious (Shi’ism) characteristics and his ruling system which responded to the needs of that period. After the death of Shah Ismail, his son “Tahmasb”, the governor of Herat, was crowned [3]. He was fully engaged with Timurid culture [19]. He was well educated in painting and became inspired by the other countries’ arts, and

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consequently he implemented the construction of more workshops to support and encourage artifacts made of textiles, such as rugs and the production of paintings [21]. His decision in gathering and welcoming artists in Tabriz was a turning point for Iran's visual art production. The return of Artists to this evolving centre resulted in the mixed cultural art from Heraty in Tabriz, the Timurid school (mostly in Khorasan city), and the Chinese style (such as Chinese clouds), all completed with the impact of Islamic forms (as seen in the Spiral Arabesque) [4].

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain may be considered as the initial emergence of Chinese patterns into Iran's decorative design. This had a long-lasting impact on Iranian taste and influenced the Persian economy from the early Ming period (15<sup>th</sup> century). The success of its market value influenced some artists to manufacture profitable copies in the Middle East (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. *Dish, Iran, Kirman, Edward C. Moore Collection, 1981. Bottle, Iran, Kirman, Rogers's fund, based on Buddhist vessel that was introduced into China, 1914*

These replications started to be exported and presented as a valuable gift within high-class society circles. However,

the original items (imported through established trade) were still acceptable as high art for Shah Ismail and his son. These Chinese goods illustrated the elements of Far East decorative designs which were also found on the silk fabrics attributed to Iran [15] (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. *Chinese cloud designed on fabric, the early 8<sup>th</sup> century Hijri (Islam) [15-16]*

During the Shah Abbas ruling period, relations with China were indirect since the Uzbeks from eastern Khorasan city disconnected the route to northwestern China. Nevertheless, connection by sea, as an essential business route, was under European control which held a monopoly on shipping during the early 11<sup>th</sup> century [20]. The king was also economically engaged with Western Europe and tried to stop the Ottomans by delaying their business and diverting the lucrative raw-silk trade from the overland route via Tabriz city and Erzurum to the Gulf, where the silk could be exported directly to Europe [4]. However, later he was able to negotiate a trade agreement which was administered through Iran's borders (late 15<sup>th</sup> century).

Shah Abbas's reign was a prosperous era for art production in Islamic Iran's history, and apart from the wars he engaged in, his successful ruling facilitated cultures to collaborate and flourish in his new capital,

Isfahan (1597-98). Isfahan city was a turning point for Safavid art and was surrounded with beautiful architecture, highly inspired by bold colors and motifs of the Iranian-Islamic style. He also invited Chinese potters to Iran to promote Chinese ceramics, and the invitation also encouraged the Chinese style in Iranian painting and miniatures [17] (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. *Dragon and clouds, during late 16th and early 17th single pages of drawings, contained the image of the dragon [7]*

Safavid workshops were diligent in illustrating books from famous poets in Tabriz city and in promoting carpet designs, ceramic tiling and new western painting styles, especially during the Shah Abbas reign [7]. Tabriz workshops not only executed the highest quality paintings but also narrated the story of the influence of Chinese visual culture on Iranian lifestyle. The illustrated books provide the paramount reference to understand China's footprints in the Safavid era, demonstrating the influence on furniture design.

## 2. Materials and Background of the Study

Although the material and documents from the Safavid time are more plentiful than previous dynasties, a significant dispersion has occurred which is challenging for research purposes. The existing literature on the investigation of Safavid art and design has focused on the study of textiles, architecture, rugs, and metalwork; however, there is no significant research on wooden furniture. The decorative art of wood-based crafts may have been neglected, because the amounts of preserved extant examples are limited. This lack of physical evidence has led this study to review the surviving visual representations to establish indoor wooden furniture from this period and region. It is a similar technique to investigating prehistoric Greek furniture through the study of vases and wall paintings [12].

It is important to recognize that, in ancient Iran, art was in the hands of the Royal family and most paintings were made to chronicle the court's life. The wooden furniture discussed here also reflects the Royal court that employed furniture in both their informal (outdoor activities) and formal (court gathering and receiving guests) events.

## 3. Methods

The wooden furniture footprints studied here are based on the seminal books from the period, "The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb" (1524-76) and "The Shahnama of Firdausi" (originally published in 1010 A.D.). A literature review was completed to examine the background context and indications of study in historical literature written by both Iranian and international

scholars. It was found that the modern literature referred back to the period literature which also used the images from the old sources in the new publications.

#### 4. The Arrival of Chinese Motifs into Iran's Lifestyle

Chinese blue and white ceramics which appealed to the Safavid king were introduced to Iran in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which influenced tile design work during the following centuries [3]. These designs borrowed the prized handcrafts style that represented Chinese floral and animal motifs. Later, the Silk Road expanded Persia's economy through trades over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century [3]. Some of the patterns copied from Chinese dishes depict potted plants and Chinese peony blossom (Figure 1) with the stylized cloud (Figure 2), also animals such as the dragon (Figure 3) and the phoenix (Figure 4) are depicted which later is seen in the Safavid decorative elements palate [9].



Fig. 4. Phoenix designed on fabric, around 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century Hijri (Islam) [15-16]

Apart from the business experiences, travelers also provided a model of Chinese tradition for the Iranian workshops. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the “Shah Ismail Safavid” period, an Iranian traveler and writer named Ali Akbar brought together the most important aspect of Iranian endeavors in introducing Chinese style through his observations in China. He devised a series of articles about the Chinese people, civilizations, and Muslims. Ali Akbar spoke about the excellent orientation of the East, the growing population of Chinese Muslims, and the establishment of several mosques in China [20].

Considering the above, Iran and China's cooperation created a positive situation for both sides. According to Will Durant (1990) [6], Safavid's interest in imitating Chinese art has occurred from conducting business practices as well as commercial travelers who provided examples of Chinese traditions for the Iranian [1].

Ali Akbar considered that the Iran-China relationship was advantageous for both sides. Will Durant (1990) [6] noted that Chinese art in the Safavid period is illustrated on the Chehel Sotoun mansion plan in Isfahan, which is reputed to have been brought from China. Instead, the Chinese traded the Azure stone of Kashan to use in their China porcelain [14].

The decorations applied to the illustrated furniture designs in the books of *Shahnama* miniatures show that the influence of Chinese patterns and structures are clearly evident, albeit the Iranian-Islamic style prevails. The resulting designs had no direct imitation, but in many cases were combined with features adapted by Iranian artists to meet Iranian taste. It is worth noting that Persian culture and its art have also had an impact

on Chinese culture. This should be considered with an understanding that some of the influences were deliberately aimed to achieve specific goals, especially in the commercial and economic fields. Thus, some Persian potters and Chinese makers were producing goods that attracted an increased market share.

#### 4.1. Decoration Patterns in the Books of Shahnama

“Decorative pattern,” a term often used to describe shapes and forms applied to handcrafts, is too general when it comes to this type of art. For a better understanding, it would be prudent to divide the decorative features into three major categories used in Persian decorative designs; a) Floral and Natural motifs, b) Animal, c) Geometric motifs painted on the furniture in Safavid books’ miniatures. The form of Chinese furniture is also considered, which can also be seen in these paintings.

The following six selected miniatures (Figures 5 to 9) are taken from the book of the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb (1524-76), with one further page from The Shahnama of Firdausi (1010 A.D.) (Figure 10), which introduces similar Chinese decorative motifs and structural form during the Tabriz school (1629-1502) in Iran.

The origin of design flows from an artist’s mind [11], which of course is influenced by their individual context; nature, people, lifestyle and later consumer growth, which result in more complex designs being produced over time.



Fig. 5. *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb. The picture shows Piran and the Khaqan of China. Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran. Many Chinese motifs presented in this picture could be because of the presence of Khaqan. The Swastika, the Chinese cloud, framed motifs, and the dragon figure. The throne structure presents the Chinese canopy bed style*

Moreover, religious matters provided strong influences during the early Safavid period, when it was decreed to forbid the use of human figures in miniatures, so floral and geometric patterns were prioritised (Figures 5 to 9) and later works included animal figures (Figure 10). By looking at the Persian paintings of this era and comparing them with Chinese visual arts, other influences may be seen, such as Chinese-Mongolian symbolism and style, which found its way into Iran artifacts even though Persian style remained independent, making it easy to distinguish from other styles of art.

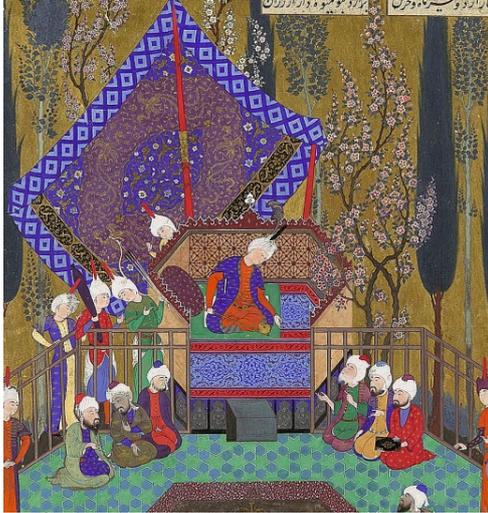


Fig. 6. A page of the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb, Chinese day bed style for the king's outdoor throne using the phoenix, and Chinese cloud bands to decorate this throne



Fig. 7. A page of the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Significant copies of Chinese wooden beds are presented in the thrones and chairs in *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb. Canopy beds and couch beds with three sides with higher back support and four chairs in the shape of Chinese "Rose chair" are the most copied ones

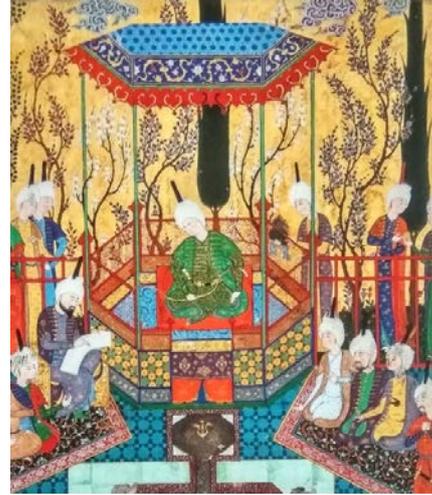


Fig. 8. *Zal and the throne*, *The Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, attributed to Sultan Muhammad and Abd al- Aziz. There are motifs of Chinese Knot and Chinese clouds, as it is shown in the picture, applied to the wooden furniture and carpets. However, the use of this pattern in court furniture reminds viewers of Chinese canopy beds



Fig. 9. A page of the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, attributed to Sultan Muhammad and Abd al- Aziz. A huge throne with a Chinese style folding chair designed with a floral pattern and framed motifs

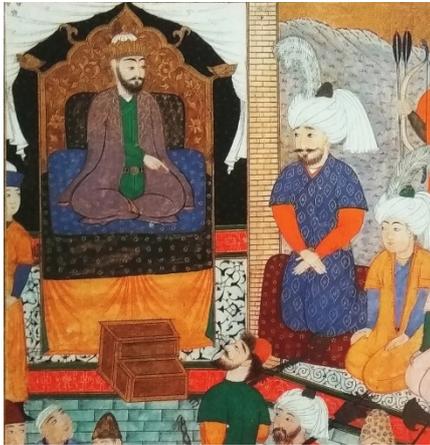


Fig. 10. *The Shahnama of Firdausi, Gilan, Iran, British Museum. This miniature shows the presence of the Chinese dragon motif as a furniture decoration in the miniature even before the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb*

In the early Safavid period, design patterns were mostly composed of single and repeated motifs, which frequently exhibited geometric patterns (Figures 5 to 8). Design motifs also combined mathematical and geometric rules, such as the golden ratio taken from the West. From the commencement of the natural and floral motif, another pattern found its way into court furniture decoration. This was developing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when “human figures and animals” made their appearance in Persian art. Extant examples among Iran and China in the early Safavid period are single symbols, such as the ‘broken cross’ (Figure 5), Swastika form that is also present in Chinese rugs and furniture), ‘eight-pointed star’, and abstract flowers. Later, from Shah Tahmasb miniatures, repeated single patterns are seen in many of the handcrafts (Figure 6 to 8). There are three forms of ornaments illustrated in the miniatures: 1. Islamic pattern (framed

motifs and arabesque) which is beyond the scope of this study, 2. Chinese root motifs (such as Chinese clouds and Chinese knots), and 3. common forms among China and Iran (i.e. the Swastika).

## 4.2. Common Motifs between China and Iran

A review of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Iranian motifs is not possible in one article. This study examines and describes the four most common Chinese motifs: the cloud, the swastika, the dragon, and the knot, which were introduced into Iran and used in the miniatures of Safavid artists.

### 4.2.1. The Chinese Cloud

A Chinese motif directly imported from the far East is called “Tchi” or the “cloud band” (Figure 11), being derived from China’s culture, which appeared on the bronze mirrors in the Zhou dynasty (510-314 BC) and was used extensively in China and Iran (Figures 5, 8, 9). It forms the wavy cloud shaped line and it is a sign of the sky in the Confucian belief [2]. Its derivation is from the Mongolian influence, who invaded Iran in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and is occasionally used by Iranian artists to design books, decorate furniture and carpets [2].

The cloud pattern symbolizes the sky, the cloud, and rain. It also was regarded as a ‘messenger of rain’ in Iran’s ancient and historical mythologies [10]. Although this Chinese pattern is supposed to be received purely from China, we need to mention that other motifs seen in Iranian art from other nations are just decorative with no formal link to external countries [13].

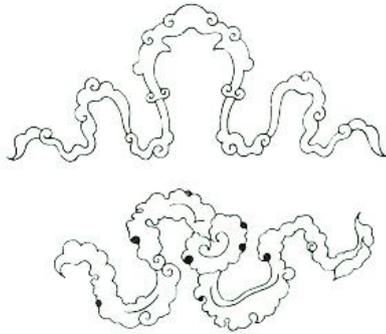


Fig. 11. Cloud band, Chinese motif that is used widely in Iranian miniatures [5]



Fig. 12. Cloud band applied to a throne (Chinese canopy style) of *Shahnamah* of Shah Tahmasb

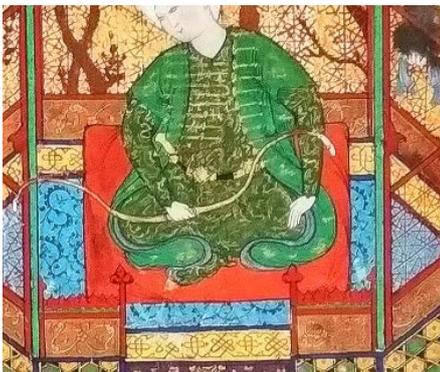


Fig. 13. Cloud bands and Chinese knot decorated Persian wooden furniture and carpets presented in *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb



Fig. 14. Cloud bands used to design carpets as well as wooden furniture presented in *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb

#### 4.2.2. The Swastika

The Swastika, a form of two intersected lines, is a geometric pattern known in Iran (Figure 7) as the broken cross (or Chilipa in Persian) and as the Wanzi motif in China (Figure 16). Various discussions and ideas have been presented about its origins, symbolic meanings, and concept including its use on Mesopotamian coinage and spiritual significance (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism). The version under study here shares some similarities with numerous different periods and is regarded auspiciously as a sign of luck and good health, normally framed within a curved perimeter [13].



Fig. 15. Wanzi motif applied to a Chinese rose chair style presented in the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb in the Safavid period [5]

The word “Wan” in Chinese tradition, rooted in the Buddhist culture, represents the harmony of life, and for the Chinese, it is a symbol of endless happiness, wealth and longevity [13]. In Iran however, the relation between the broken cross and its philosophy in Islamic art is not clear to researchers. On the other hand, in pre-Islamic history, this form is described as a sign for four directions, or four angels supervising four seasons. This pattern was used occasionally between Iranian periods with the latest examples being observed in Safavid architecture and art [18].



Fig. 16. *Wanzi motif that was used to decorate tables and beds in China especially in the Ming dynasty [13]*

#### 4.2.3. The Dragon

Among the Chinese, the dragon motif was considered an important court sign and was applied to kings' clothes and furniture. The head of the dragon was regarded as a sovereign sign, illustrated in Safavid paintings, and was evidently taken from China (Figure 17). In Chinese philosophy, the dragon is a sign of the Royal family and male fertility. It is also an

animal motif with an important positioning in Iran's poetry and literature that influenced artists to invest unique ideas in miniatures [4]. This style continued until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The appearance and behavior of the dragon in Iranian visual arts were influenced by a combination of European and Asian depictions of dragons.

Although the dragon motif positioning in Chinese and Iranian art is different, the Persian artists observed their tradition, yet were inspired to use it as a positive design motif. For instance, *Shahnama* miniatures mostly visualized the Dragon figure (Figure 18) as a symbol of evil and vindication [4], however on occasions, it followed the influence of Mongolian art which alluded to the bold king's social status (as used in the Chinese style) and placed in a dominant position, such as the top rail and crest rail on furniture (Figure 10), or in the lower part of kings' thrones, providing structural stability as in the leg support (Figure 5) [13].



Fig. 17. *The Dragon motif, Yuan dynasty, this motif has been seen in *Shahnama's* miniatures [24]*

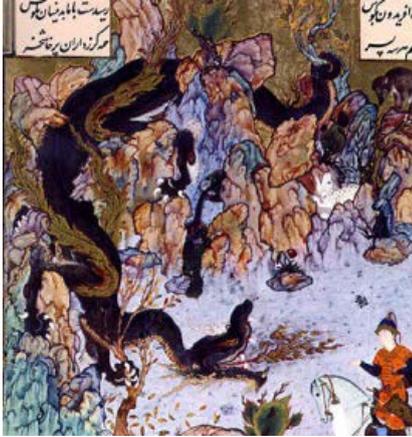


Fig. 18. *Similar Dragon as Yuan dynasty presented in the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb* [5]



Fig. 19. *Dragon motif used to decorate the legs of Shah's throne. Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb miniature*



Fig. 20. *Dragon head decorates the top rail. The Shahnama of Firdausi*

The design of the dragon is mostly employed in Chinese carpets and pottery,

and used in Iranian paintings. There is a great resemblance between the dragon of the Chinese pottery and the dragon of Iran. The designed dragon on the Yuan Dynasty's pottery (Figure 17) seems to be the same as the ones used in the Shahnamas [18].

#### 4.2.4. The Chinese Knot

In China, the symbol of the knot was recognized (Figure 21) as a sign of happiness, longevity, and prosperity. This tradition has been known for thousands of years, being passed down from generation to generation in China. It is a significant decorative pattern and commonly used in handicraft among the rich and poor, where it is seen in the decoration of clothes, jewelry, furniture and musical instruments, as well as being frequently employed for festivals and celebrations such as weddings.

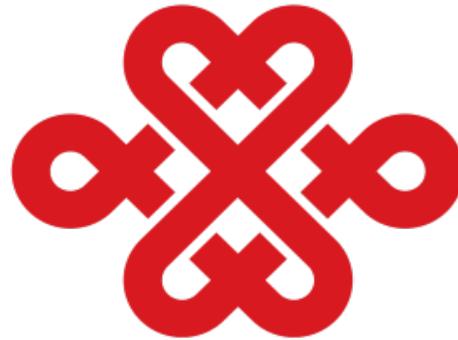


Fig. 21. *Chinese knot* [24]

In Iran, another form of Chinese knot is known as the "Chinese wood knot," which is a highly original art form that has been in existence since the Abbasid period and is often seen in historical Persian monuments [10]. The Islamic-Iranian "Chinese wood knot" presented in

Shahnama's miniatures is the combination of geometric shapes and repetition (Figures 5, 13 and 22). The design is typically polygonal in the middle, surrounded by some other geometric forms to fill the space, being applied to wooden furniture and carpets. The Chinese knot is not merely a unique decoration or expression of the artist's feelings, on the contrary, the purpose of constructing it is the wisdom movement and guiding people toward its mystical insight [4]. This is the reason that commonly used wooden Chinese knots appeared in the architectural holy places.

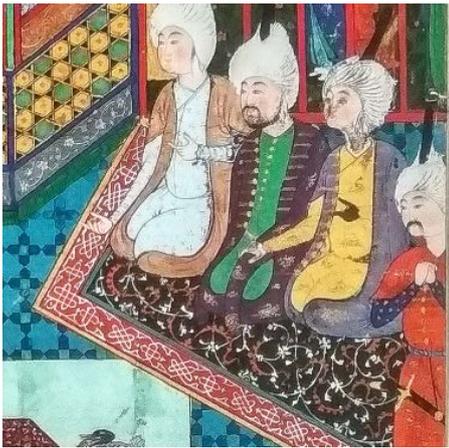


Fig. 22. *Chinese knot decorated Persian wooden furniture and carpets, Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb*



Fig. 23. *Chinese knot on the Persian rug, Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb*

## 5. Chinese Furniture Structure

Based on the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb miniatures, the structural form of thrones and chairs found in Persian art are taken from Chinese wooden furniture (mostly Ming Classic furniture). Canopy beds (Figures 5 and 8), couch beds with three sides and higher back support (Figures. 6, 7, 9), and folding chairs (Figure 9) are the most frequently copied items found in Shahnama of Shah Tahmasb. It is important to note that there is no real evidence from Safavid wooden furniture to decide if the first examples were directly brought into Iran from China, or that they were copied using the artists' observation.



Fig. 24. 16<sup>th</sup> century canopy bed with its wooden structure inspired Safavid painters to illustrate the outdoors beds for kings [23]

However, the Couch bed presented in the Chinese style is wider than what is represented in the *Shahnama* miniatures, where it is designed for one person (not royalty, but other high-level authorities) to sit on (Figure 19). There is also a developed Chinese couch bed in the shape of a throne (Figure 25), which is explicitly designed for kings. This furniture has three sides with a much higher backrest, as seen in the miniatures, where it is complemented with a stool in front of the bed (Figures 6, 7 and 9).



Fig. 25. A throne with three sides, Ming dynasty. Similar forms are shown in Figures 6, 7, 9 and 10 [23]

As the the miniatures show, the human figure's political importance in the miniatures is shown by the size of the furniture. For instance, king thrones are the tallest and most extensive (Figures 5 to 10), the chairs (folding chairs or small day bed style chairs in Figure 7) are offered to courtiers with higher positions and to the guests from other countries. Finally, the rug is provided for the lower level courtiers (Figure 5, 6, 8 to 10). The rest of the figures who are standing could be the least important people, such as servants and soldiers.

## 6. Conclusion

Iran and China interactions started from the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Mongols invaded Iran (1219-1221). Through Mongolian rule in Iran, the Silk Road, political and trade relations between Iran and China during the Safavid period, not only imported Chinese goods, but Chinese motifs also found their way into Persian decoration.

Through the miniatures of *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasb and *Shahnama* of Firdausi, it is clear that many Chinese visual traditions are applied to Safavid furniture, although there is no surviving evidence from that era. However, these Chinese motifs and their furniture structure are reflected on Safavid furniture in both *Shahnamas*. These were not previously given as a reason for cultural influence and had only been considered from the ornamental and aesthetic point of view.

In design motifs and structure, the cloud band, the phoenix, the Chinese knot, and the dragon, the Chinese canopy bed and the day bed style for the king's throne, the rose chair and the folding chair for the other important figures, are the most notable examples.

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