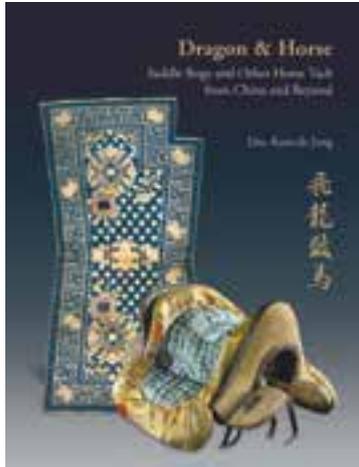


# Books



## DRAGON AND HORSE. SADDLE RUGS AND OTHER HORSE TACK FROM CHINA AND BEYOND

By Koos de Jong  
 Drs. Koos de Jong,  
 The Netherlands, 2013  
 2 volumes, English and Chinese text,  
 240 pp., 288 colour illustrations, maps,  
 line-drawings two volumes, technical  
 details, glossary, bibliography, index  
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 Reviewed by Hans König

It was a pleasure to receive this book – parts of which I had seen in a very provisional form – to weigh it in my hands and see its attractive cover. It is the first serious and detailed work dedicated to a large region's saddle rugs and other trappings in textiles and leather. Until now only some distinct groups, such as prayer rugs or nomadic bags, have been given such treatment. Other authors have concentrated on specific geographical areas or ethnic origins; by addressing such a large and little-studied group of pile work, Koos de Jong has acquired a special place in carpet literature.

Furthermore, along with the recent Feng Zhau and Dieter Kuhn-edited *Chinese Silks*, it breaks new ground by being published in two languages: in this case an English version containing hundreds of illustrations, and a Chinese version of the text with references to the illustrations, all of which have English and Chinese captions.

The high quality of the paper makes the print easy to read and also guarantees excellent colour reproduction; many publishers disregard the decisive role of paper quality. It is amazing how much information the author succeeds in squeezing into fewer than 200 pages, thereby creating a certain density which, however, is never detrimental to the meaning. There are 285 colour illustrations. Almost all are excellent, with clear details.

The introduction starts in very early, almost prehistoric, times and goes through to the beginning of the 21st century. The reader can decide which part may be of particular interest to him or her, although I would recommend everyone to read it from the first to



the last page. The book is in two parts. The first and major part is in chronological order; the second, shorter part is dedicated to the various regional rug-producing areas. While this inevitably causes an overlap, it allows the author to deal more easily with the characteristics and details of the various rug-producing areas. This is particularly true for the chapter on Tibetan saddle rugs, with its ninety

illustrations, which could easily be transformed into a separate and autonomous volume.

When one discusses saddle rugs one should also know something about the saddles themselves. Photographs of saddles from early to more recent times, line drawings and paintings show us not only how people developed saddles in order to make better use of the horse as a means of transport but



1 Gansu or Inner Mongolian under-saddle rug, second half 18th-first half 19th century. 0.75 × 1.42m (2'6" × 4'8"). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Joseph V. McMullan bequest, 1974.160.2

2 Tang ceramic female polo player, first quarter 8th century. 35.5cm (1'2")high. Musée Guimet, Paris

Photograph: R. Asselbergs

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also explain why saddle rugs changed shape over the centuries. There are beautiful proto-Mongol saddles from the 10th century, probably Liao, as well as saddles from the Yuan dynasty and a handsome Sino-Tibetan pommel fitting from the mid 15th century.

The first four chapters up to the second part of the 14th century include some early textiles such as a top saddle rug from the Tarim basin and a Sogdian saddle cloth. They also include sculptures and ceramics of saddled horses and occasionally of camels. These examples allow the author to investigate saddle rugs and similar implements on antique statuary in stone, metal or wood from the earliest periods BC to the Ming

period. Chinese paintings, sometimes of great beauty, from early times to the 18th century, are also reproduced. They give the reader a more detailed overview of the development of this type of rug and of its importance in the culture of Far Eastern and Central Asian countries. At the same time, such works of art in materials other than textiles introduce an additional and pleasing element of beauty to the book.

The author says in various places that saddle rugs preceded other types of carpet in the provinces of China, Tibet and Xinjiang. Though understandable given his enthusiasm for his subject, this statement needs to be qualified, because we know of other

carpets from this part of the world from the early Ming or Yuan periods that have survived; also carpets are depicted on a number of Tang paintings.

It is impossible here to embark on a discussion of individual points. It should be recalled, however, that the Khitan, mentioned several times, founded the Liao Kingdom in 916. Since the existence of the Kingdom of Liao, which lasted till 1125, coincides to a great extent with the northern Song period, the use of the name Liao appears more suitable.

Furthermore, the author states that the culture of the Khitan (Liao) was so closely interwoven (with Chinese culture) that a beautiful saddle with gilt silver fittings from

1018 is representative of the period of the Song dynasty. In fact the Liao were the heirs of a long nomadic tradition. It is known that Liao saddles were highly coveted by the Chinese and were occasionally exchanged for other goods. Also, in spite of their nomadic origin and the vicinity of Song China, the Liao developed a culture of their own. This is true, for example, of the golden masks used to dress the faces of deceased members of the aristocracy, and of beautiful jewellery made with materials like amber imported from the Baltic. The forms of Liao ceramics were later adopted by the Chinese, and even the style of the tombs of noble persons is distinct from Chinese tombs of the same period.



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3 Ningxia camel saddle rug, northwest China, first half 19th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation, 0.58 × 1.63m (1'11" × 5'4"). The Textile Museum, Washington DC, 1973-28.3

Therefore, although Liao artefacts often show that they were made during the northern Song period, a distinction should be made. It should also be borne in mind that the Liao entertained relations with distant empires such as that of the Abbasids in Baghdad for marriage alliances and that many tombs contain Islamic ceramics and glass, whereas the foreign relations of the Song were limited.

The author considers that the so-called 'RKO' rugs are a special group of saddle rugs; he is in excellent company because the first American dealers who imported RKO rugs before the First World War thought they were cavalry rugs and Michael Franses also adheres to the saddle rug theory. I hesitate to follow them. In the first place, the RKO rugs are quite considerably longer and, second, none of the RKO rugs is made in two pieces that are then fitted together, as is often the case for under-saddle rugs. Furthermore, strap holes are regularly absent. The typical field design is found on rugs from three different provenances, Ningxia, Gansu and the Tarim Basin, which is not the case with complete patterns. Some details of the design may vary when used in the RKO rugs, but the main feature of this pattern, the vertical and horizontal lines that cover most of the field, does not seem compatible with a saddle rug. I have to admit that the origin and the meaning of this pattern remain unknown, but I hope that it will soon be possible to give an answer to this question.

Two areas often constitute pitfalls for carpet researchers: dating and attribution. I am not sure that everybody will agree with Dr de Jong's dates; it would be a miracle if they did. Personally, I consider that his dating is reasonable and can usually be upheld by fact.

As to attribution, we have two areas where it will be more or less

uncontested. One is Tibet and the other Xinjiang. It is my impression that Ningxia is the most highly considered origin for rugs made in China and that, as Lorentz mentions, dealers often gave Ningxia appellations to rugs to sell them more easily and at a higher price. Larger rugs and carpets better represent the typical characteristics of Ningxia.

As to the rugs made in Baotou and Suyan, I have rarely seen a carpet from that area to which I would give a date before 1800. De Jong rightly stresses that, although these rugs were made in the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, the Mongols made up only a small part of the population, and that the rugs were most probably made by Chinese weavers. Production seems to have increased during

did not survive; or, finally, that there never were many of them in the first place. The reader is invited to choose the explanation he prefers, although there may be a combination of reasons.

Tibetan saddle rugs have been mentioned before in this review. I think that De Jong's Tibetan chapter is very worthwhile reading and contains much information, including about saddles and horse and camel trappings. The comparison with designs from other areas even includes a rug from southwest Persia. The saddles in this chapter are quite often called Sino-Tibetan, and in a few cases pieces made in China proper are earmarked as destined for the Tibetan market. Some of the early Sino-Tibetan saddle fittings are strikingly beautiful.

*Dealers often gave Ningxia appellations to rugs to sell them more easily and at a higher price*

the second half of the 19th century and afterwards.

For Gansu, we will have to look carefully at rugs that were thought to be Ningxia or Mongolian or even East Turkestan. The rugs so far recognised as Gansu, especially during the past twenty years, are not so frequent - which is astonishing if we take a look at Lee Yukuan's monumental volume, in which many of the pieces are given a Gansu attribution.

It is striking how few pieces from the Tarim Basin are shown. There are several possible explanations: one might be that the population was composed mostly of farmers and not of horse and sheep breeders; another that only major carpets were exported to China, India and Europe. It could be that saddle rugs were omitted or we no longer recognise them when we see them; or that they simply

Quite a few late pieces, not all of which are beauties, are reproduced. But this was necessary to indicate clearly the development and the history of the various types of saddle rug over the centuries. A special mention should be made of a rug, dated late 19th/first half 20th century, used as an under-saddle saddle rug but composed of pieces of a Khotan carpet from the late 18th century. Finally, I must congratulate the author for including a photograph of a top seat rug of a motorbike from 2010. The old tradition lives on!

Koos De Jong's work contains a great quantity of facts, theories and simple information. The sheer number of individual items is such that the reader will have to peruse this densely written book carefully. I, for one, am grateful to him and am sure I will consult this book frequently in the future.