

The King's Gift — The Spread and Popularity of Kashmir Shawl in Europe

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ABSTRACT

By sorting out the complete communication chain of Kashmir shawl from Kashmir through Central Asia land from the 16th century, and through the British colonial maritime trade into Europe from the 18th to the 19th century, this article clarifies the operation mechanism of cross-border cashmere industry chain, which the cashmere was supplied by Ali in Xizang region, transferred by Ladak, and woven by Kashmir. Then, this article analyzes the logic of the change of the class and audience of the fabric from the ritual vessel of the Western Asian monarchy to the exclusive luxury of the European royal family, which then sank into the middle class marriage social symbol. Relying on colonial historical materials, European fashion prints, and modern literary texts, this article argues that the aesthetic taste of the French court and the trade expansion of the East India Company jointly shaped the modern European fashion trend of Kashmir shawl. It also systematically analyzes the internal mechanism of the decline of the original handmade Kashmir shawl market caused by multiple factors such as mechanized imitation, aesthetic transformation of women's clothing, saturation of raw material supply, and the rise of mass consumption in the mid to late 19th century. The article breaks away from a single narrative of clothing history and extracts insights into the rise and fall of the contemporary high-end cashmere luxury industry from five aspects: scarce value control, product scene adaptation, natural material technology improvement, gradient product system construction, and fashion culture narrative update. At the same time, it reflects on the narrative bias of modern Eurasian material exchange research from a European centric perspective.

Keywords: *Kashmir shawl, Kashmir cashmere shawl, Colonial trade, Eurasian material exchange, Modern European fashion, Luxury consumption history.*

1. INTRODUCTION: CONCEPT AND HISTORICAL TRACING OF KASHMIR SHAWL

Kashmir shawl specifically refers to cashmere shawls woven in the Kashmir region. Its name is transliterated from the place name “Kashmir” and the textile category “shawl”. This naming system was established by the British East India Company in the 18th century and widely spread in European society along with transoceanic trade. In the context of Central Asia, cashmere shawls are not called cashmere, but rather pashm or tus wool. Pashm or tus wool refer to two types of raw materials used in the production of Kashmir cashmere shawls. The core raw materials for weaving Kashmir cashmere shawls are collectively referred to as pashm and tus wool, which are key raw material identifiers for

distinguishing high-end cashmere fabrics and are also the key to naming them in Central Asia.

According to the works of the anthropologists of Xizang study, the earliest record of Kashmir shawl dates back to the 1500s. At this time, the Mughal Empire conquered Kashmir, and a large amount of Kashmir cashmere shawls and cashmere fabrics flowed into the Persian court. The Safavid kings imported Kashmir shawl from Kashmir and together with local Kerman Kork to weave and cut into complete sets of formal dresses and robes, which were awarded as the highest level Khel'at honor robes to generals, governors, and vassal leaders. This type of cashmere ceremonial robe combines the properties of keeping warm and luxurious, and is also worn by nobles during wartime, hence it is commonly known as the "honor battle robe" in later generations. Iran, on the

other hand, does not directly wear cashmere shawls, but instead sews Kashmir shawl fabric into fitted robes and cloaks, which is different from the way Indian shawls are worn.

From the 16th to the mid-18th century, it was the embryonic stage of the introduction of Kashmir shawl into Europe. Its dissemination relied on the Silk Road in Central Asia to complete the primary circulation, presenting characteristics of niche, aristocratic, and closed circles. After the Mughal Empire annexed Kashmir in 1568, it monopolized the production of high-quality cashmere finished fabrics. A large amount of Kashmir shawls and high-end fabrics entered the Central Asian River region through Ladakh and Yarkand, with oasis city states such as Bukhara and Merv as the core distribution hubs, completing cross regional transit and circulation. Subsequently, the goods were taken over by the Safavid dynasty of Persia and included in the court's honor and reward system, becoming the core fabric of the top ceremonial war robe (Khel'at), replacing early silk and wool fabrics as symbols of Persian monarchy and aristocratic status.

The Mughal Empire established a complete system of court rewards and ceremonies, and the Kashmir shawl from Kashmir was included in the official reward list. It was specifically used to award to tribal leaders, allies outside the region, and meritorious bureaucrats, becoming a material medium for the empire to maintain the relationship between monarch and subject, and to build cross regional political identity. It has dual attributes of power tokens and diplomatic ceremonial objects. In Safavid Persian society, Kashmir shawl fabric further completed the localization of clothing transformation. The upper class nobles cut cashmere fabric into daily dresses, using rare and scarce cashmere material as a visual identifier to distinguish social classes and highlight identity. The physical characteristics of Kashmir shawl fiber, which is not resistant to washing, are adapted to the traditional low-frequency clothing washing customs in West Asia and Iran, objectively reducing the daily wear and tear of cashmere fabric and promoting its continued popularity in the Persian aristocratic circle, completing the cultural landing from foreign tribute to mainstream high-end fabrics in the local area. ("Figure 1")



Figure 1 Fragment of a Kashmir Shawl from the late 1700s or early 1800s. (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.)

2. THE SPREAD OF KASHMIR SHAWL FROM CENTRAL ASIA TO EUROPE

Relying on the geopolitical trade route between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, Kashmir shawl was further transported westward and divided into two main routes: the northern route passed through northern Persia and the Caspian Sea coast, entering Russia and gradually infiltrating the aristocratic circles of Eastern Europe; The southern route arrived in Istanbul via Baghdad and Aleppo, and with the help of the Ottoman Empire's position as a Mediterranean trade hub, it was sporadically brought into southern Europe by Venetian and Genoese merchants. At this stage, the finished

Kashmir shawl products were scarce in production and expensive in value due to long-distance land transportation and multiple tariffs. They were only luxury items privately held by European royal families and high-ranking officials of the Holy See, and had not yet formed a large-scale trade circulation and social aesthetic trend. They only laid the foundation for the initial understanding of Kashmir shawl fabrics in European society. The on-site accounts of the 17th century French traveler Bernier and the Persian fabric images in European court portraits all confirm this early sporadic historical state of dissemination.

The late 18th and 19th centuries were a critical stage for the large-scale dissemination and popularization of Kashmir shawl in Europe, as

modern colonial trade and court culture completely reconstructed its dissemination pattern. With the British East India Company taking control of the Indian Ocean maritime trade system, the monopoly of traditional land routes in Central Asia was broken, allowing Kashmir shawl fabrics to be shipped directly to Europe by sea, significantly reducing transportation costs and continuously expanding circulation scale. British colonists and foreign officials brought Kashmir shawl textiles from Kashmir back to their homeland in large quantities, promoting their widespread circulation among the upper classes of Western Europe.

In the early 19th century, the British East India Company sent its employee, Muckcroft, on a trial mission to Kashmir, Ladakh, and the Ali region of Xizang to gather information and prepare for British expansion in the Himalayan kingdoms. During his exploration of Xizang's Ali region, he unexpectedly discovered that the raw material for the world-famous Kashmiri wool shawls (Pashmina, also known as Kashmir) came from the wool of Ali, Xizang. He also learned about the trade network for Kashmir wool shawls, centered in Kashmir, with Ladakh controlling transit and Ali in Xizang supplying the raw wool, providing the British East India Company with crucial information to intervene in the wool trade in Xizang's Ali region. This involved partially redirecting the Ali wool transiting through Ladakh and Kashmir to wool processing factories in northern Punjab, part of British India. Meanwhile, the British East India Company made considerable progress in managing the wool trade in eastern Xizang. Prior to 1816, the company acquired Kumaon and Garhwal in northwestern Nepal, using these areas as bases to continue expanding its influence along the southeastern foothills of the Himalayas.¹

In 1834, Gulab Singh of the Jammu region Singh, in order to gain direct control over the wool from Ali in Xizang, ensuring that all of it would be transported through Ladakh to Kashmir (including the Jammu region), and to prevent more cashmere shawls from flowing into British-controlled Bashah, ordered his Wazir (also spelled Vizier: minister) Zorawar Singh to invade Ladakh. As a result of the war, cashmere shawls that would normally have transited through Ladakh were instead imported into British-controlled Rampur and other

territories.² Subsequently, in 1835, the British East India Company occupied Darjeeling in Sikkim, thereby gaining control of a key transit point on the wool trade route between eastern Xizang and Gartok in Sikkim.³ Douglas's conquest disrupted the traditional Kashmir shawl trade, causing it to shift from Kashmir to the territories controlled by the British East India Company.

At this time, a cross-border industry chain and trade network gradually took shape, centered on Kashmir for weaving, with Ladakh handling transit monopoly functions and Ali in Xizang supplying raw cashmere, becoming the fundamental support for the production and circulation of Kashmir shawls. Relying on both land and sea routes, Kashmir shawl from Kashmir was sent to Iran through Afghanistan overland and the Persian Gulf by sea, with the trade routes all documented in the records of British East India Company staff stationed abroad.

To keep expanding in Central Asia, the British East India Company moved many of its staff and merchants to areas in the northwest Himalayas, including Kashmir, Afghanistan, Ladakh in Xizang, and Ali in Xizang, to run trade. In the 18th century, British employees of the East India Company would bring Kashmir shawl home as gifts for their friends and family. The style of cashmere was also adapted to suit British tastes. For example, the picture shows a Paisley shawl; Paisley (swirl pattern) is a decorative motif that Europeans were particularly fond of.⁴

1. William Moorcroft, George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab: in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara; from 1819 to 1825*, Murray, London, W. Clowes and Sons, Stamford Street, 1841, pp.164-167.

2. C.L.Datta, *Ladakh and Western Himalayan Politics: 1819-1848*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Publishers Put. Ltd. 1973, pp.188-259.

3. William Moorcroft, George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab: in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara; from 1819 to 1825*, Murray, London, W. Clowes and Sons, Stamford Street, 1841, pp.164-167.

4. Irwin, John, *Shawls: A study in Indo-European Influences*, H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1955, p.2.



Figure 2 A shawl produced in Kashmir in the 1860s for European who preferred the Paisley pattern to cover the entire garment. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

3. KASHMIR SHAWL AS A PRECIOUS GIFT FROM CENTRAL ASIA IN EUROPE

Compared to ordinary luxury goods, Kashmir shawl has been endowed with multiple functions such as ceremonial gifts, identity confirmation, emotional expression, and wealth inheritance by the upper class of European society due to its scarcity in the East, handmade weaving texture, and high market price. It is widely used in core social scenes such as court diplomacy, aristocratic weddings, and family friend rewards, and has become a highly representative gift symbol for the elite circles of 19th century England and France.

The wedding gifts given to the court and nobles are the core field of the consumption of Kashmir shawl gifts, which has established a standardized high-end gift tradition. During the French Empire, the Kashmir shawl was officially included in the royal wedding gift system. When Napoleon married Mary Louise, he used seventeen top-level cashmere shawls as the core wedding gift, becoming a typical example of royal luxury gifts and establishing the high status of cashmere in European wedding etiquette. In the context of French society, the Kashmir shawl is regarded as a standard item in the *corbeille de mariage* of the gentleman class. It is a rigid ceremonial carrier for the upper class to demonstrate sincerity and family strength, and has become an important part of French aristocratic wedding culture. At the same time, the Victorian era in Britain also continued this trend, with

Kashmir shawls becoming popular as high-end dowries and wedding gifts. Due to the limited land inheritance rights of British women at that time, transferable and inheritable Kashmir shawl fabrics became women's exclusive movable property wealth, with both ceremonial and property values, gradually forming a family heirloom attribute and being regarded as a "soft decoration asset that can be passed down", achieving a value sublimation from instant gifts to long-term family wealth.

In daily social interactions and cross circle gifting, Kashmir shawl plays a social role in maintaining social status and constructing relationships, forming a unique gift consumption logic. Unlike popular gifts, Kashmir shawl's scarce oriental attributes come with exotic luxury narratives, making it the preferred item for upper class men to express their sincerity in giving gifts to female relatives and partners. It is also a high-end souvenir for overseas colonizers and officials returning home. In Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park", aristocratic women explicitly hope that their relatives who have traveled to India will bring back their cashmere shawls, which intuitively reflects the widespread recognition of the value of Kashmir shawl gifts in early 19th century British society and confirms their essential position in the elite social circle. This type of gift consumption is different from utilitarian material exchange. Essentially, it is a symbolic consumption formed by the dividends of colonial trade. By giving rare Eastern fabrics, it confirms social identity, consolidates social relationships, and transmits aesthetic taste.

From a cultural perspective, the gift-based consumption of European Kashmir shawl is deeply tied to the modern colonial trade system and social class order. The monopolistic trade of cashmere resources in Kashmir by Europe in the 19th century made cashmere a concrete carrier of the "Eastern treasure" from a colonial perspective. Its gift giving behavior was not only a private social activity, but also an implicit display of colonial wealth and overseas power by the upper echelons of European society. In the early stage, gift giving was dominated by aristocratic men, but in the later stage, with the rise of middle-class women's consumption, it gradually sank into the mainstream light luxury gift giving for middle-class marriage and social interaction, completing the popularization from exclusive royal privilege gifts to universal high-end gift symbols in society. Until the late 19th century, with the proliferation, scarcity, and aesthetic iteration of mechanically replicated fabrics, the gift premium of Kashmir shawl gradually declined, and its exclusive gift consumption system disintegrated, reflecting the dynamic changes in the modern European luxury symbol system and social consumption trends.

Compared to the trade promotion of Britain, the aesthetic guidance of the French court is the core cultural node of the popularity of Kashmir shawl throughout Europe. During Napoleon's Egypt expedition from 1798 to 1801, the Kashmir shawl gifted by the Ottoman court was brought into France and quickly became a core fashion symbol of the French imperial court through the collection and promotion of Queen Josephine's attire. Relying on the cultural radiation of France, Kashmir shawls quickly spread to core European cities such as Vienna, Berlin, and Madrid, adapting to the lightweight women's clothing forms of the neoclassical and imperial periods, becoming a signature accessory for European aristocratic women. At this point, the Kashmir shawl fabric, which was originally used as a male ceremonial robe in Central and West Asia, has completed its functional and aesthetic transformation and fully integrated into the European clothing system.

Due to the colonization of the world by Europe in the 19th century, there were countless constructions centered around Europe. And Kashmir shawl has also been drawn into the construction of European consumption centers, with Europe generally believing that Kashmir shawl became popular only after its popularity in Europe.

The audience of Kashmir shawl fabrics in Europe has undergone a dual change in gender and class with the development of the times. In the early stages of its introduction, high procurement and transportation costs raised the consumption threshold, and only upper-class European men with sufficient financial resources were able to consume and hold Kashmir shawl products, forming the first generation of core consumer groups. With the expansion of Eurasian trade and the rise of the imitation industry in the 19th century, the price of Kashmir shawl fabrics declined and the consumption boundary extended to the middle class. Middle class women gradually replaced aristocratic men and became the main consumer group for Kashmir shawl. Cashmere shawls also evolved into a typical luxury item for British middle-class women to showcase their taste and identity. Novelist Elizabeth Gaskell has a direct literary writing about this social trend in her work "North and South".⁵ ("Figure 3")

5. Gaskell-Elizabeth. *North and South*. 1986, New York: Penguin



Figure 3 Empress Josephine, 1808 by Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835).

In this French fashion plate, the woman on the right wears a gown made from Kashmir shawl fabric and an apple-green Kashmir shawl, with white gloves, and white sandals.

4. GRADUALLY DECLINING KASHMIR SHAWL'S SALES IN EUROPE

In the late 19th century, the popularity of Kashmir shawl products in the European market gradually faded, and market demand continued to shrink. This phenomenon was driven by multiple factors such as changes in the textile industry, changes in aesthetic paradigms, restructuring of the supply system, and shifts in social consumption concepts.

Firstly, the maturity of modern mechanized textile industry has given rise to a large number of affordable cashmere like fabrics. The machine weaving technology in places such as Paisley in Scotland and Lyon in France is becoming more complete. Manufacturers replicate the classic Paisley pattern of cashmere shawls with ordinary wool and blended fibers, and the product price is

much lower than the imported Kashmir native cashmere fabric, diverting a large amount of mid-range consumer demand; At the same time, a new type of lightweight artificial fiber fabric has emerged, with a light texture and convenient washing and care, which makes up for the shortcomings of natural Kashmir shawl that is not resistant to washing and requires complicated maintenance, and is more in line with the fast-paced life of urban residents.

Secondly, there has been a structural shift in the aesthetic of European women's clothing. The large and heavy cashmere shawls of the imperial era were no longer suitable for the emerging slim and simple new women's clothing silhouettes of the late 19th century. Tight fitting dresses and lightweight short jackets became mainstream clothing styles, and the bulky Kashmir shawls gradually lost their essential position in clothing matching and lost the support of fashion scenes.

Thirdly, the saturation of imported raw materials and local imitation supply can alleviate the scarcity premium of Kashmir shawl. European businessmen directly purchase cashmere in batches

from Central Asia and Xizang for independent processing, and get rid of the monopoly of Kashmir handicrafts. Cashmere raw materials are in sufficient supply. The scarcity of cashmere as a symbol of top privilege in the past has greatly weakened, and the function of class identification has also declined.

Fourth, it is the social consumer class and the iteration of popular trends. At the end of the 19th century, with the rise of popular consumer culture, the emerging middle class shifted towards lighter and more diversified small accessories. Thick and expensive full length cashmere shawls were gradually seen as old and outdated retro items; In addition, the high-end aristocratic circle has opened up new luxury consumption tracks such as fur and silk embroidery, further squeezing the market space of Kashmir shawl.

5. THE SHRINKING MARKET OF KASHMIR SHAWL IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY FASHION INDUSTRY

In the late 19th century, the demand for Kashmir shawl in the European market continued to shrink, essentially due to the value deconstruction of luxury fabrics under multiple impacts of industrial production, aesthetic iteration, consumer group changes, and product maintenance shortcomings. This industry history provides multiple practical inspirations for the development of contemporary high-end cashmere and luxury fashion industries.

Firstly, scarcity is the core premium foundation of high-end natural fabrics, and the industry needs to balance the scale of raw material supply with the narrative of brand scarcity. In the 19th century, Europe directly imported goat cashmere in bulk from Central Asia and popularized local mechanized imitation, which dissolved the unique rare attributes of Kashmir handmade cashmere and rapidly lost its class symbol value. In response to the modern fashion industry, cashmere brands should control the grading of raw materials, limit the production capacity of high-end handmade product lines, avoid uncontrolled expansion and dilution of the symbolic meaning of high-end materials, and differentiate between affordable cashmere for the general public and top-level

collectible cashmere products through a differentiated scarcity system.

Secondly, product design must adapt to the changing aesthetics of clothing and daily life scenarios, and material advantages need to rely on a suitable style system to achieve value realization. The heavy and spacious traditional cashmere shawl could not match the slim and simple women's silhouette of the late 19th century, ultimately losing its essential dressing needs; On the other hand, high-end cashmere brands continue to expand into various forms such as lightweight knitting, commuting coats, and small accessories, adapting to modern life scenarios such as daily commuting, workplace, and leisure, avoiding aesthetic aging caused by the solidification of a single classic style, and maintaining the long-term market vitality of the material.

Thirdly, the physical defects of natural materials need to be compensated for through process improvement and supporting services to lower the threshold for consumer use. The natural characteristics of Kashmir shawl, which are not resistant to washing and require complex maintenance, have increased the cost of use in the fast-paced urban life, becoming an important factor in its loss of favor. The modern cashmere industry can rely on textile improvement techniques to enhance the fabric's resistance to shrinkage and washing, while also providing washing and care guidelines, professional maintenance after-sales service, and machine washable lightweight cashmere series to weaken the shortcomings of natural materials and broaden the audience.

Fourthly, industrial imitation diverts the middle and low-end markets, and high-end natural fabrics need to establish clear product stratification and value barriers. In the 19th century, mechanical imitation cashmere seized the middle-class consumer market at a low price, and native cashmere lost its price competitiveness; This phenomenon suggests that the contemporary fashion industry should construct a gradient product matrix, covering mass consumption with affordable blended fabrics, and building high-end product lines with differentiated processes such as pure cashmere, handmade weaving, and intangible cultural heritage. Through raw material traceability, process certification, and cultural narrative, imitations and natural high-end fabrics can be distinguished, forming a stable layered consumer market.

Fifthly, the trend of luxury fashion is cyclical, and it is difficult for a single material to monopolize the fashion discourse for a long time. The industry should integrate diverse cultural symbols to continuously update brand narratives. At the end of the 19th century, European nobles turned to new luxury goods such as fur and embroidered silk, and the original Eastern exotic cultural symbols of Kashmir shawl became outdated; Modern cashmere brands need to update their product narratives by combining contemporary aesthetics, regional culture, and sustainable fashion concepts, integrating new concepts such as environmentally friendly grazing, low-carbon weaving, and intangible cultural heritage handicrafts, and continuously imbuing cashmere materials with new cultural connotations to avoid single products falling into the development dilemma of retro and outdated styles.

6. CONCLUSION

This article verifies that the cross-Eurasian circulation of Kashmir shawl is not simply a dissemination of clothing aesthetics, but rather a material carrier of modern colonial expansion, resource plundering, and collusion with class consumption order. Previous studies have been limited to the narrative of European trends, neglecting the subjectivity of the Himalayan raw material industry chain and the Central Asian Silk Road trade, resulting in a narrow perspective. Kashmir shawl has transformed from a top tier ceremonial vessel to an outdated retro item, rooted in the value foundation of natural handmade luxury goods highly dependent on raw material monopolies, aesthetic and technological barriers of the times. Industrial mass imitation and lifestyle iteration are prone to dissolve its symbolic premium, which has direct warning significance for the current high-end sheep wool industry.

If the industry sticks to a single traditional form, opens up raw material supply without restraint, and lacks a layered value narrative, it will eventually replicate the decline path of Kashmir's native Kashmir shawl. The academic community should also correct the Eurocentric view of history and return to the Himalayan and Central Asian trade routes to re-examine the global cultural value of Eastern products, in order to avoid the one-dimensional and sensationalized Western aesthetic narrative trap in the study of material cultural history.

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