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Textile trades throughout Northeast Asia, and their connections with the West

Koryŏ (918-1392) conducted many trades with the outer world, not only in its early half (10th~12th centuries) but also in its latter (13~14th). Among the items exported there were porcelain and textile products including ramie and silk. The former were mainly exported to China, but the latter was sometimes exported to regions beyond Northeast Asia. There were some introduction of Indian silk to the Koryŏ people at the end of the 13th century, as the Mongol emperor sometimes bestowed ‘Western silk (西錦)’ to the Koryŏ king while Indian (Mabaar, 馬八) dignitaries paid visit to the Koryŏ court, and a few decades later a Koryŏ king was exporting ramie or silk products to either Central or West Asian Muslim merchants (回回).

Primary questions to be examined in this article would be, how much and how various types of Western silk (in addition to all the Chinese silk that had been entering the Koryŏ realm for the past few centuries) was entering Koryŏ in this period, what kind of effects it actually had upon the Koryŏ market (and its consumers and manufacturers), what was the international situation at the time in terms of textile trades and how keenly the Koryŏ people were assessing it, what kind of Koryŏ textile was being exported and how such trends changed over the years, and finally, what this type of Koryŏ-China-West Asian textile trades meant in the overall East-West material exchanges.

For preparation of this article, Koryŏ records will be primarily examined, but in order to ascertain trends of textile production imports & exports throughout Northeast Asia at the time, chronological records, legal codes and harbor almanacs generated by the Mongol Yuan empire will be analyzed as well, and if possible, European or Arabic information referenced in Western studies will also be reviewed.