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Central Asia and the Buddhist Cosmopolis: Mediating Ideas, Texts and Institutions

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Abstract: This study examines the evolution and dissemination of Buddhism in Central Asia, highlighting its role as a mediator of ideas, institutions, and cultural traditions across the Silk Road. Drawing upon textual, archaeological, and artistic evidence, the paper explores how Buddhism moved from India into the Tarim Basin and beyond, where it encountered and assimilated diverse influences from the Kushans, Sogdians, Parthians, Greeks, and Tibetans. Particular attention is given to the role of royal patronage and translation movements in Khotan, Kashgar, Kucha, and Dunhuang, which facilitated the spread of Sarvastivada and Mahayana schools into China. The study underscores the contributions of prominent Buddhist scholars, such as Kumarajiva and Dharmakṣema, whose translations shaped East Asian Buddhism. It further situates Buddhist material culture within the social life of Central Asia, examining stupas, monasteries, cave temples, murals, and manuscripts as evidence of both devotion and cross-cultural exchange. By tracing linguistic diversity through Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tocharian, Sogdian, Uighur, Tibetan, and Chinese sources, the paper illustrates Central Asia's role as a cosmopolitan hub of Buddhist learning. The conclusion reflects on Buddhism's adaptive capacity, its coexistence with Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity, and its enduring legacy as a bridge between the Orient and the Occident. The study positions Central Asia not merely as a recipient of Indian religious ideas but as an active crucible in shaping the wider Buddhist cosmopolis.

Keywords: Central Asia, Silk Road, Sarvastivada, Tarim Basin, Kumarajiva, Buddhist Cosmopolis

Central Asia has remained a region of enduring political and cultural vitality. During the era of the Old Silk Road (100 BCE–200 CE), it served as a pivotal corridor linking China with the Roman Orient, while also maintaining connections southward into northwestern India. This extensive network of routes became the medium through which Buddhism spread from its Indian homeland into the oases of the Tarim Basin. Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that Buddhist texts had reached Khotan during this period, where diverse dialects and linguistic mixtures facilitated their transmission and localization. From Central Asia, Buddhism advanced into China, first taking root at Dunhuang, the Western gateway. The decline of the Han dynasty in 220 CE created a political vacuum, enabling Buddhism to gain rapid influence among the northern Chinese gentry by the third century CE. Central Asia thus acted not only as a conduit of trade but also as a bridge of ideas, ensuring that Buddhism was indigenized across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

A significant moment came with the reign of King Srong-btsan sgam-po of Tibet (7th century CE), who embraced Buddhism through his Nepalese and Chinese consorts. His patronage led to the creation of the Tibetan script, modeled partly on Indian prototypes, to enable the translation of Buddhist texts. By the close of the seventh century, the emphasis of translation efforts had shifted decisively from bilingual (Sanskrit and Chinese) sources

to Sanskrit alone, marking Tibet's growing orientation toward Indian scholastic traditions. The introduction of Buddhism into Central Asia, however, cannot be studied in isolation. It was not only the result of missionary zeal but also of peaceful international relations, trade, and settlement patterns. Traditional accounts attribute the first Buddhist presence in Khotan to Indian colonists during the reign of Asoka (3rd century BCE), though no precise date can be firmly established. What is certain is that Buddhism was flourishing in Central Asia by the turn of the Christian era, and from there it spread to China by at least the mid-first century CE.

Over nearly a millennium, Central Asia became the landscape of Buddhism's transformation, stretching from China to the frontiers of Persia. Various peoples—the Yuezhi, Kushans, and later the Uighurs contributed to its expansion and localization. As a meeting ground of the Orient and the Occident, Central Asia facilitated a two-way traffic of ideas, influencing not only its immediate neighbors but also shaping the trajectory of Buddhism in regions far beyond.

The political history of Central Asia is closely intertwined with the fortunes of Buddhism, since royal patronage to the creed was consistently forthcoming. This is evident in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian and Xuanzang, who recorded the flourishing monasteries and scholarly institutions across Central Asian kingdoms. Along the Northern Route, the oases of Badakhshan, Kashgar, and Kucha emerged as strongholds of the Sarvastivada school, while the Southern Route, particularly Khotan and Yarkand, became centers of Mahayana Buddhism. This doctrinal geography symbolized two religious currents flowing across the region, offering alternative yet complementary spiritual paths. The Sarvastivada school's growth was linked to the Kushan Empire, possibly even before the famed conversion of Emperor Kaniṣka, while Mahayana currents gradually gained ascendancy, appealing to broader devotional sensibilities. This flourishing was not confined to doctrine alone but was supported by political legitimacy and cultural assimilation. The Kharoshthi inscriptions from Khotan mention rulers of the Vijaya dynasty, along with donors bearing both purely Indian and hybrid names, suggesting the adoption of Indian ways of life in the Tarim Basin. Buddhism in Central Asia was thus a product of both imported ideas and local adaptation.

The expansion of Buddhism was facilitated by the contributions of savants of diverse ethnicities—Tokharian, Parthian, Sogdian, and Yuehchi, in addition to Indians. Many belonged to royal families, highlighting the prestige of Buddhist scholarship. Among the most prominent were Dharmagupta of Kashgar, Suryabhadra and Suryasena of Karghalik-Yarkand, Dharmakṣema, Sikṣananda of Khotan, and above all Kumarajiva of Kucha. Kumarajiva and his contemporaries—Dharmamitra, Buddhayasas, and Buddhabhadra were instrumental in translating vast corpora of Buddhist texts into Chinese, shaping the intellectual foundations of East Asian Buddhism.

The manuscript discoveries of Central Asia reveal the richness and diversity of its Buddhist literary culture. Among these are Fragments of Sanskrit Agamas from Turfan and Dunhuang, Asvaghoṣa's dramas and kavyas from Turfan, The Pratimokṣa of the Sarvastivadins from Kucha, Multiple versions of the Dhammapada (Udana) in Sanskrit and Tocharian. Later strata of literature include Mahayana sutras such as the Prajnaparamita, the Lotus of True Law (Saddharmapuṇḍarika), and the Suvarṇaprabhasa, translated into Uighur and Iranian dialects. Magical formulae or dharaṇis, discovered in large numbers, demonstrate the growing importance of ritual and protective practices. Texts in Kuchean, Tocharian, Sogdian, and even Bactrian Greek further underscore the region's role as a polyglot center of Buddhist culture. Buddhism in Central Asia coexisted with Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity, reflecting the region's tolerant and eclectic spirit. Its influence reached Tibet and Mongolia, where it evolved into Lamaism, appealing to ritualistic, emotional, and metaphysical needs. Material culture provides equally significant insights. Records indicate that Buddhist monks were not only spiritual figures but also landowners and participants in trade, with some even owning slaves. This demonstrates Buddhism's integration into the socio-economic life of Central Asian societies. Cultural practices such as joint family structures, the role of women, dietary habits, dress, ornaments, and recreation reveal a deep fusion of indigenous traditions with Buddhist ways of life.

Over time, Buddhism in Central Asia shifted from an emphasis on personal liberation to the promotion of moral and collective ideals. This was embodied in the Bodhisattva concept: figures such as Avalokitesvara came to symbolize mercy and compassion, postponing their own nirvaṇa for the salvation of humanity. Faith in Amitabha Buddha offered hope for rebirth in the Pure Land, appealing to popular devotional practices. These ideological transformations found expression in Central Asian Buddhist art, where Bodhisattvas were depicted as radiant figures embodying knowledge, peace, and mercy.

The transformation of Buddhism in Central Asia was the result of both internal Indian developments and external foreign influences. On the Indian side, the parallel evolution of Brahmanism and Buddhism, with increasing areas of convergence in thought and practice, contributed to doctrinal adaptability. Centers such as Taxila (Takṣasila) and Kashmir played a particularly significant role. Taxila, a renowned seat of learning, was instrumental in transmitting philosophical traditions, while Kashmir produced a large number of Buddhist savants who traveled to Central Asia and China, thereby consolidating intellectual and doctrinal exchanges. Externally, Buddhism absorbed the contributions of peoples such as the Greeks, Parthians, Sakas, and Kuṣaṇas, who accepted Buddhism and reshaped it in accordance with their own cultural traditions. The Greeks, familiar with statuary and naturalistic art forms, stimulated the development of Buddhist mythology and imagery. Their influence was particularly visible in the rise of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, where figures were crafted in the Greco-Roman style while still retaining distinctively Indian features.

Central Asian artists, some imported from Gandhara and others of Greek descent (such as Titus at Miran), played a pivotal role in shaping Buddhist art. Inspired by Greco-Roman traditions, they introduced new visual languages into Buddhist iconography. At the same time, local traditions adopted these artistic influences with discrimination, producing a distinct Central Asian style that combined Indian narrative traditions, Persian motifs, and Chinese linear elegance.

The expansion of Buddhism across Central Asia, with the establishment of stupas, monasteries, and free-standing shrines, created a growing demand for artists and sculptors. Merchants and traders along the Silk Road became important patrons, commissioning works of art as acts of devotion. As a result, Buddhist art flourished not only as a spiritual practice but also as a commercial enterprise, with artists receiving handsome compensation for their services. Central Asian Buddhist art is marked by diversity of form and unity of theme. While stylistic variations existed across sites—from the murals of Kucha and Turfan to the wall paintings of Miran and Dunhuang, the common element was the centrality of the Buddha and his legend. Artistic competitions among Buddhist communities led to the production of innovative imagery, with Bodhisattvas depicted as figures of compassion and wisdom, embodying new ideals for mass devotion.

With the eventual decline of Buddhism in Central Asia, many monasteries, libraries, and art centers were abandoned. However, the arid climate and natural barriers of the Tarim Basin preserved these treasures. Manuscripts in multiple languages, polyglot libraries, and painted cave shrines remained sealed for centuries, protected from marauders and vandalism. It was only through the work of modern explorers and archaeologists—such as Aurel Stein, Albert Grunwedel, and Paul Pelliot that these cultural treasures were rediscovered. Today, these finds provide a vivid picture of the spiritual and material life of Buddhist communities in Central Asia.

The role of geography and communication routes in the diffusion of Buddhism across Central Asia is of decisive importance. The ancient overland networks, opened during the Han dynasty, connected Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) with India, the Near East, and ultimately the western world. From the capital, the road crossed the Gobi Desert to the oasis of Dunhuang, before bifurcating into the northern route passing through Hami, Turfan, Karashahr, Kucha, Aksu, Tumshuq, and Kashgar to Samarkand and the southern route, which traversed Miran, Cherchen, Keriya, Khotan, and Yarkand before reaching Herat and Kabul.

These routes, often described as the arteries of the "Innermost Heart of Asia," carried not only commerce but also currents of life, religion, and civilization. The region was bounded by the Tien Shan (Celestial Mountains) to the north, the Kunlun ranges to the south, the Nan-Shan to the east, and the Pamir highlands to the west. Along the Kashgar and Yarkand rivers, flourishing colonies developed, peopled by migrants and traders from diverse directions. It was in this geographical framework that Buddhism entered Central Asia in the first century CE, carried by monks and pilgrims from Kashmir and northwest India, many of whom settled in Khotan and Kashgar, claiming descent from Indian royal families.

The northwest Indian routes, passing through Hadda and Nagarahara (modern Jalalabad), reached Bamiyan, which developed into a major Buddhist cultural center. Bamiyan served as both a halting place for monks traveling onward to Central Asia and China and as a cosmopolitan hub for traders and pilgrims. Further north lay Bactria (Balkh), known as Bahlika in Indian sources and Fo-ho in Chinese records. Bactria's culture represented a fusion of Hellenic, Indian, and Iranian influences, reflecting its long history of political transitions from the Greeks to the Śakas, the Yueh-chi-Kushans, and later the Hephthalite Huns. Despite these shifts, the population's allegiance to Buddhism remained consistent, and by the 7th century, the Buddhist monastery of Nava Vihara (Nava-Saṃgharama) at Balkh had become a preeminent center of Buddhist learning.

Bactria was the convergence point of two principal routes to China:

The northern route through Sogdiana, crossing the Jaxartes, via Tashkent and the Tien Shan passes to Uch-Turfan.

The southern route, shorter and preferred by many travelers, passing through Tokharian territories near Badakhshan, over the Pamirs, and down into Kashgar.

A still shorter variant passed through the Gilgit and Yasin valleys into Tashkurgan. At Kashgar, where these routes converged, weary travelers found relief and hospitality. By the mid-7th century, Xuanzang recorded hundreds of monasteries in the area, underscoring Kashgar's importance both as a commercial hub and as a center of Buddhist expansion.

From Kashgar, the routes extended along the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, linking a chain of prosperous oasis states. These included Yarkand, Khotan, Niya, and smaller but influential centers such as Dandan-Uiliq, Endere, and Miran. Each of these oases not only facilitated cultural exchange between China and the western regions but also fostered Buddhist monasteries and centers of learning.

The region broadly constituted an Iranian cultural zone, as demonstrated by numerous Kharoshthi inscriptions discovered by modern explorers. Among these states, Khotan (Chinese: Yu-tian) figures prominently in ancient records. Traditional accounts suggest that it was colonized in the time of Asoka, with his son Kunala, the blinded prince, established as ruler. Khotan's Gomati vihara became one of the premier Buddhist institutions in the region, renowned for its learned monks who contributed to the writing and preservation of canonical texts. The countries along the northern route from Kashgar to the Chinese frontier played a role no less significant than those on the southern route in shaping the history of Buddhism in Central Asia. These centers were vital both commercially and culturally, acting as channels for the dissemination of Indian culture and Buddhism not only across Central Asia but also deep into China. Among the most important were Bharuka (Chinese: Po-lu-kia, near Uch-Turfan), Kucha (Chinese: Kiu-tse, modern Kuchar), Agnideśa (Chinese: Yen-ki, modern Karashahr), and Turfan (Chinese: Kao-chang). While the peoples and languages of these northern centers differed from those of the southern Tarim Basin, they shared a common bond in their adherence to Buddhist religion and culture.

The kingdom of Kucha, much like Khotan on the southern route, rose to prominence as one of the most influential Buddhist centers of the region. The rulers of Kucha bore distinctly Indian names such as Suvarṇapuṣpa, Haradeva, and Suvarṇadeva, reflecting the deep imprint of Indian traditions on local political culture. Kucha's monks were renowned for their mastery of Sanskrit, as confirmed by archaeological finds of manuscripts in Sanskrit and

bilingual documents in Kuchean-Sanskrit. The testimony of Chinese pilgrims further attests to Kucha's reputation: it was not only a major center of Buddhist study and translation but also a staging ground for the expansion of Buddhism into China.

The most celebrated intellectual figure associated with Kucha was Kumārajīva (344–413 CE), whose life and work illustrate the significance of the northern route in the Buddhist world. A brilliant scholar and translator, Kumārajīva relocated to Chang'an, where he became one of the greatest transmitters of Buddhist doctrine into China. His translations of key texts such as the Lotus Sutra and Madhyamaka treatises profoundly influenced the development of Chinese Buddhist schools such as Tiantai and Sanlun. Despite differences in ethnicity and language, the kingdoms of the northern route shared cultural and religious affinities with their southern counterparts. They were united in their role as intermediaries of Buddhist culture, hosting monasteries, producing manuscripts, and training scholars who would shape Buddhist thought across Asia.

Conclusion

The development of Buddhism in Central Asia was shaped by a fusion of Indian intellectual traditions and foreign cultural influences, particularly those of the Greeks and Kushans. Its art reflected this synthesis, blending Graeco-Roman realism with Indian symbolism and local creativity. Patronage from merchants and rulers ensured the vitality of Buddhist institutions, while the desert itself preserved its monuments and manuscripts for posterity. The rediscovery of these treasures underscores the importance of Central Asia as a crucible of Buddhist art, thought, and cultural exchange, bridging East and West across more than a millennium. The routes of Central Asia provided not only commercial arteries but also pathways for Buddhism's transmission and localization. From the monastic centers of Bamiyan and Balkh to the prosperous oases of Kashgar and Khotan, the Silk Road functioned as a network of religious, cultural, and intellectual exchange. The interplay of geography, trade, and political patronage transformed the Tarim Basin into a zone where Buddhism thrived as both a spiritual tradition and a cultural force, linking India, Iran, and China into a shared religious landscape. The northern route of the Silk Road, stretching from Kashgar through Turfan and Kucha to the Chinese frontier, was both a commercial artery and a cultural corridor. Centers like Kucha served not only as local strongholds of Buddhist learning but also as launching grounds for the expansion of Buddhism into China. By fostering scholars such as Kumārajīva and preserving Indian traditions through their rulers and monks, the northern kingdoms ensured that Buddhism in Central Asia became a powerful intellectual and cultural force linking India and China.

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