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**Dynamics in Buddhist Networks in Eastern Central Asia 6th–14th Centuries**

**BuddhistRoad Paper 6.1 Special Issue**

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**ANCIENT CENTRAL ASIAN NETWORKS.  
RETHINKING THE INTERPLAY OF  
RELIGIONS, ART AND POLITICS ACROSS  
THE TARIM BASIN (5TH–10TH C.)**

Edited by  
ERIKA FORTE



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## INTRODUCTION: ANCIENT CENTRAL ASIAN NETWORKS

ERIKA FORTE

It is my pleasure and privilege to introduce the articles collected in this Special Issue of *BuddhistRoad Papers* under the title “Ancient Central Asian Networks. Rethinking the Interplay of Religions, Art and Politics across the Tarim Basin (5th–10th C.)” The papers presented here stem from a workshop organised by myself with the cooperation of Carmen Meinert and Christoph Anderl, hosted by the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) of Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB), Germany.<sup>1</sup> The participants in the workshop were invited to explore the dynamics of cultural transmission and communication in Eastern Central Asia during the second half of the 1st millennium, following an interdisciplinary approach based on recent data acquired from archeological excavations, something which also involved an analysis of visual and textual resources. The input by the various participants resulted in a fruitful discussion at the workshop which was later developed by some of the participants into written contributions as presented here.<sup>2</sup> As they touch thematics that are being explored in the research agenda of the BuddhistRoad Project, we thought that the *BuddhistRoad Papers* would be the ideal format to present these contributions.

‘Central Asian Networks’ here denotes, both in their physical context (historical and geographical) and in a conceptual sense, special, cultural connections that were established by means of religious ideas, political alliances (often sanctioned through familial relations), and economic interests.

The territorial and ideological expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia was a strong networking factor among cultural and political entities in the Tarim Basin and adjacent areas during the period under examination.

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<sup>1</sup> The workshop has been held on June 24–26, 2014 with the funds of the Käte Hamburger Kollege (KHK) “Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe.”

<sup>2</sup> The contribution by Christoph Anderl has been published separately in December 2018, see Christoph Anderl, “Linking Khotan and Dūnhuáng: Buddhist Narratives in Text and Image,” *Entangled Religions* 5 (2018): 250–311, accessed December 19, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v5.2018.250-311>.

This factor manifests itself in many aspects of the history of contacts between, for instance, Dunhuang (敦煌) and Khotan, where Buddhism was systematically integrated with the social and the political dimensions of each culture. Throughout the last three centuries of the 1st millennium these two centres have been closely interconnected—predominantly in being two of the most important strongholds of Buddhism in Central Asia as well as in their capacities as significant political centers. Both acted as places of encounters between people, as well as places where cultural practices and religious ideas gave rise to specific artistic and textual productions.

Special focus is therefore placed on the inter-dynamics on the macro and micro levels of these networks as exemplified by the above two major hubs (i.e., Khotan and Dunhuang), and the impact that their privileged channel of communication had in the cultural and religious exchanges across the Tarim Basin. There is evidence that especially the area around Khotan functioned as a ‘laboratory’ of master narratives and religious paradigms, which eventually spread to the East and other areas of Central Asia such as Tibet.

Manifold contacts between Buddhism and other religions are attested in Khotan, as is often apparent in the visual language of the oasis. Non-Buddhist deities are integrated within the Buddhist pantheon, or re-interpreted according to the local Buddhist system. The iconographic analysis by Lo Muzio on the Brahmanical deities in the Buddhist paintings at Dandān-ōiliq is one example of ‘religious stratigraphy’ present in the oasis of Khotan, and as such testifies to the effects and dynamics of interchange and dialogue between Buddhism and Brahmanism from a Central Asian perspective.

The pivotal function of Khotan and its special connection to Dunhuang have so far received relatively little attention among scholars, but has otherwise been confirmed by new research. Significant is the diffusion of Khotanese narratives and iconographical programmes in the cave temples of Dunhuang. An interesting case (presented in the contribution by Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 and Zhu Lishuang 朱麗雙) is the appearance of depictions of the Khotanese Eight Protectors in the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao shiku 莫高石窟), which were largely sponsored by Khotanese residents in the 9th–10th centuries. These iconographies as-

sert the Buddhist legitimation of the Khotanese Kingdom and consequently the Khotanese community living in Dunhuang during the period in question.

The political and territorial expansion of neighbouring empires into the Tarim region (Chinese Empire in different periods from 1st to 8th centuries, Tibetan Empire 8th–9th centuries, etc.), reshaped the local dimension of networks, disclosing new contacts or cutting off long-established ones. The shifts in the political assets often resulted in the dislocation of people, either individuals, or groups (communities), which, in turn, created new dynamics of interactions (overlapping networks). The impact left by the Tibetans in the Tarim Basin and in Dunhuang is evident and yet tenuous, lasting far beyond the actual period (mid-8th c. to 848)—about a century—of their *de facto* occupation. This impact can be seen not only in the heritage of a large corpus of Tibetan religious and secular documents found among the manuscripts of Mogao Cave 17, but also from the signs of the existence in Dunhuang of a community, which Takata calls Tibeto-Chinese. This community of Chinese speakers, who most likely learned Tibetan in order to work in the Tibetan administration, adopted the Tibetan script to transliterate Chinese in documents. The communication strategy of such a community shows yet another side of the diffusion of Tibetan language in Central Asia, even though through forms of hybridisation, converging in the view of the existence of a sort of *lingua franca* in this area at least up to the 10th century.

The complexity of the encounter between Buddhism and other religious realities, being the local ones found in the regions where Buddhism expanded, or those with which Buddhism was in dialogue in the land of its origins (i.e. India), is analysed by Scherrer-Schaub from the angle of epigraphic and textual evidence. The role and the hierarchy among the host of divinities—especially the local ‘*numina*’—incorporated into Buddhism from other religious systems have been continuously reshaped within Buddhist narratives, and as such reflects negotiation processes that took place on the various stages of the transmission of Buddhism.

The contributions in this issue are highlighting two of the major aspects of ancient Central Asia networks through the two nodes of Khotan and Dunhuang in the second half of the first millennium: The ongoing

‘dialogue’ with the Indian subcontinent, especially its northwestern regions, through the transmission of texts, imagery and religious practices reflected in the material from Khotan, which finds echoes at Dunhuang and further eastward in China; and the effects of the Tibetan expansion in the area through the activities at Dunhuang. It appears clearly that the inputs resulted from these two aspects are assimilated and revised according to inherent dynamics of the locales, and are diffused further while being processed. Yet one wonders whether a common pattern—typically ‘Central Asian’—can be identified overall in the observed processes of transmission. Many questions remain open, but it is hoped that the papers here presented will serve as stimulus and base of departure for further research in the field.