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ON THE MARGINS: BETWEEN BELIEFS AND DOCTRINES WITHIN TIBETAN-RULED DUNHUANG SCRIBAL CULTURE

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ON THE MARGINS: BETWEEN BELIEFS AND DOCTRINES WITHIN TIBETAN-RULED DUNHUANG SCRIBAL CULTURE

LEWIS DONEY

Abstract

This article explores the disparity between the Central Tibetan Buddhist doctrines espoused and spread by the Tibetan Empire (Tib. Bod chen po, ca. 7th c. to 842) and those of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Dunhuang (敦煌) during the same period. It begins with the multi-ethnic background of the Tibetans themselves and how the Tibetan Empire maintained complex relations with those on its borders, as well as their Buddhism(s). It then unpacks the ‘self-presentation’ of Tri Songdétse’s (742–ca. 800, Tib. Khri Srong lde brtsan) royal discourse (Tib. *bka’ mchid*) of doctrine and its spread throughout the Tibetan Empire by means of imperial machinery of state administration. The second half of the paper focuses on Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang (perhaps late 750s/early 760s, or 787, to 848) and evidence of the many different beliefs there not contained in Tri Songdétse’s royal discourse. It looks at the *Aparimitāyurnāmasūtra* from the perspective not only of content but also of the evidence of scribal practice spread over its many copies from Mogao Cave 17, also known as the Library Cave (Chin. Cangjing dong 藏經洞). This view from the periphery suggests the variety of Buddhist beliefs not explicitly included in the royal discourse, as well as the varying perspectives on how the Tibetan emperors connect with them and some of the ways in which these influenced the margins of the Tibetan Empire after it fell in the mid-ninth century.¹

1. Introduction

The prehistoric inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau were of different ethnic groups, as is reflected in their clan names during the period of the Tibetan Empire (Tib. Bod chen po, ca. 7th c. to 842) and even today, before becoming ethnically Tibetan over the course of the past two millennia.²

¹ I would like to offer my thanks to Carmen Meinert and Kazushi Iwao for their useful feedback to earlier drafts of this paper and to Vivien Staps for all her editing work.

² Guntram Hazod, “Tribal Mobility and Religious Fixation: Remarks on Territorial Transformation, Social Integration and Identity in Imperial and Early Post-Imperial Tibet,” in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic*



Aside from Turkic and Tibeto-Burmese, there is also evidence of some later Indo-Scythian contact, as suggested by the tumulus burial traditions archaeologists have described across the plateau.³ However, in pre-imperial times these different groups came together and lived in connected polities or vassal states (Tib. *rgyal phran*) of kin-based groups that can perhaps justifiably be called Tibetan by the late sixth century. Thus, the commonly understood extent of ‘Tibet’ has more to do with the incorporation of a number of ethnicities (most notably Turkic and Tibeto-Burmese) within a single cultural matrix over time than a shared genetic makeup, and the Tibetan Empire and its imposed *lingua franca* Tibetan spoken and written language (known as Old Tibetan) made a significant and long-lasting impact in this respect.⁴

The Tibetan Empire of the Yarlung (Tib. Yar klungs) Dynasty, the hereditary rulership originating in and based around the Yarlung Valley on the Central Tibetan Plateau, expanded from this power base in all directions (except much to the direct south, due in part to the Himalayas). The land that Arabic sources of this period refer to as Tubbat was situated west of China, north of India, south of the Uyghur Turks and east of the eastern marches of the Khurāsān.⁵

The Yarlung Dynasty’s power base was at first ensured by alliances with a small collection of other minimally developed nomadic-pastoralist and agricultural families or clans centred around the relatively fertile region through which the Brahmaputra River (Tib. gTsang chu) flows.⁶ The increase in their power meant coming to rule over a far larger but still sparsely populated area—corresponding to the Tibetan Plateau and even beyond—inhabited by connected ethnic groups sharing the spoils of military conquest, Silk Road trade, and the taxation of others’ trade. This

World, 300-1100, ed. Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard K. Payne (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 43–57.

³ Guntram Hazod, “Imperial Central Tibet: An Annotated Cartographical Survey of its Territorial Divisions and Key Political Sites,” in *The Old Tibetan Annals. An Annotated Translation of Tibet’s First History*, ed. Brandon Dotson (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 175.

⁴ See also Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 27–33.

⁵ Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese During the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 163, fn. 127.

⁶ Lewis Doney, “Tibet,” in *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans (Leeds: Arc Humanities, 2020), 192–193.

expansion was achieved by taking control of other kingdoms, city states and regions (by alliance or force) between the seventh and ninth century and ruling them as an empire with an emperor (Tib. *btsan po*) at its head.

Buddhism slowly developed in Central Tibet, perhaps first patronised at the court of Emperor Tri Songtsen (ca. 605–649, Tib. Khri Srong rtsan), remembered as Songtsen Gampo (Tib. Srong btsan sgam po). One indication of this is that Tibetan writing was invented or officially organised during his reign, based upon a late Gupta script from northern India or Nepal.⁷ This choice of an alpha-syllabic script over a Sinitic character-based one may have been practical, yet another explanation may lie in the soft power of the intellectual and Buddhist traditions that were written in Prakrit and Sanskrit (see below, with consequences for the Tibetan control of Buddhist populations in more Sinitic areas in the east). Alternatively (or additionally), the choice could have been politically motivated—due to closer relations with the kingdoms of Harṣavardhana Śīlāditya (ca. 590–648) in India and the Newar Licchavis (ca. 400–750) in what is now Nepal than with the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐) during this period.⁸

All of these regions maintained strong connections with Buddhism during the second half of the first millennium, as did parts of Kashmir in the west, the kingdom of Khotan (ca. 1st c.?–1006) to the north and the Azha (ʿA zha, Chin. Tuyuhun 吐谷渾) in the north-east, and so it is unsurprising that Buddhism is remembered to have been established in some form at the court of the Tibetan Empire during this time.⁹ However,

⁷ See Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “Tibet: An Archaeology of the Written,” in *Old Tibetan Studies Dedicated to the Memory of R.E. Emmerick: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003*, ed. Cristina Scherrer-Schaub (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 218–233; Sam van Schaik, “A New Look at the Source of the Tibetan Script,” in *New Studies of the Old Tibetan Documents: Philology, History and Religion*, ed. Yoshiro Imaeda, Matthew Kapstein, and Tsuguhito Takeuchi (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2011), 45–96; Dieter Schuh, “Tibetischen Inschriften ins Maul geschaut: Beobachtungen zu Stein- und Felsinschriften sowie den Schriften des 7. bis 9. Jahrhunderts in Tibet,” in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, ed. Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra Maurer (Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2013), 143–184.

⁸ Schuh, “Tibetischen Inschriften,” 172; see also van Schaik, “A New Look,” 72–75.

⁹ See Hugh E. Richardson, “Political Aspects of the Snga-dar, the First Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet,” in *High Peaks Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 196–202, for a concise account of the politico-religious dynamics of this period and their relations with later mythologisation of the imperial establishment of Buddhism in Tibet.



the written sources on seventh-century Buddhism are mostly later and mythical. Tibetan Buddhist historiography remembers Tri Songtsen as a Solomonic and thoroughly Buddhist ruler named Srong btsan sgam po (*sgam po* means ‘the wise’).¹⁰ He is depicted as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs, with Amitābha’s head poking out of his royal turban) flanked by Nepalese and Chinese Buddhist queens who are incarnations of the goddess Tārā (Tib. sGrol ma) spreading Buddhism because the Tibetan subjects are difficult to tame.¹¹

The conversion of the Tibetan court to Buddhism reached the ears of the Tang Chinese court and was recorded in its later histories, notably the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 [Old Book of the Tang Dynasty] and the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [New Book of the Tang Dynasty] (completed 1060).¹² One telling passage in the former and the way it is expanded upon in the latter show the inclusion of Buddhist faith and monasticism in the latter. The *Old Book of the Tang Dynasty* relates that “They worship the *yuandi* god [perhaps a reference to psychopomp sheep], and believe in witches and seers,” to which the *New Book of the Tang Dynasty* adds: “They are very fond of the doctrine of the Buddha, and no important states of affairs are settled without consulting the Buddhist monks.”¹³

Evidence for Buddhism in the Azha region during this period is discussed in Carmen Meinert, “People, Places, Texts, and Topics: Another Look at the Larger Context of the Spread of Chan Buddhism in Eastern Central Asia during the Tibetan Imperial and Post-Imperial Period (7th–10th C.),” in *Buddhism in Central Asia III—Doctrines, Exchanges with Non-Buddhist Traditions*, ed. Lewis Doney, Carmen Meinert, Yukiyo Kasai, and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

¹⁰ See Per K. Sørensen, *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies. An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle Rgyal-rabs Gsal-ba’i Me-long* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 14–27; Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 56–59.

¹¹ Hugh E. Richardson, “The Cult of Vairocana in Early Tibet,” in *High Peaks Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 179–181, critically assesses the available evidence on these queens and their contributions to Tibetan Buddhism beyond such mythology.

¹² Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Matthew T. Kapstein, and Gray Tuttle, ed., *Sources of Tibetan Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 6–24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

2. Buddhism According to a Tibetan Emperor

The ascendancy of the empire under Tri Songdétsen (742–ca. 800, Tib. Khri Srong lde brtsan), with the necronym Jangchup chenpo (Tib. Byang chub chen po, Great Awakening or Great Bodhi[sattva]), who ruled over the empire at perhaps its peak of extent and cosmopolitanism, allowed the emperor to confer high status, patronage and support on the Buddhist institution of ordained monks (the *saṃgha*). Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa's (1504–1566 Tib. dPa' bo gTsub lag phreng ba) *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* [Festival for the Wise] contains a most likely fairly faithful transcription of the royal discourse (Tib. *bka' mchid*), in which Tri Songdétsen narrativises his decision to give state sanction to the practice of Buddhism in Tibet.¹⁴

It explicitly states that Buddhism was supported by previous emperors up to Tri Détsugtsen (704–754, Tib. Khri lDe gtsug brtsan), remembered as Mé Aktsoṃ (Tib. Mes Ag tshom), but that the practice faced strong opposition in Tibet during Tri Songdétsen's reign:

From the time when the religion of the Buddha was first practised with the building of the *vihāra* (i.e., monastery) of Rasa [(Tib. Ra sa)] in the reign of the fourth ancestor Tri Songtsen down to the practice of the religion of the Buddha with the building of the temple at Kachu [(Tib. Kwa chu, Chin. Guazhou 瓜州)] in Drakmar [(Tib. Brag dmar)] in the reign of the father, Tri Détsuktsen, five generations passed.

¹⁴ See Hugh E. Richardson, "The First Tibetan chos-'byung," in *High Peaks Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998 [1980]), 89–99. The text of this edict is found in Lokesh Chandra, ed., *Mkhas-pa'i-dgaḥ-ston* [The Festival of the Wise] of *Dpañ-bo-gtsug-lag* (also known as *Lho-brag-chos ḥbyuñ* [Religious History from Lhodrak]) *Part 4 (ja)*. (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1962), 109v1–111v2. See now Lewis Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja, Bodhisattva? Inscriptions from the Reign of Khri Srong lde brtsan," *Journal of Research Institute, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies* 51 (2013): 71–72 and the references found there. Pawo Tsuklag Trengwa's copy of the Samyé (Tib. bSam yas) Inscription is almost entirely faithful to the actual inscription (except for modernised spellings). Therefore, I believe that we can trust his copies of the longer edict and the royal discourse too. However, we cannot be absolutely sure that Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa copied these texts verbatim, or that he did not copy them from an already interpolated or otherwise edited source rather than from the original edicts. Therefore, it is at present impossible to claim that their representations of Tri Songdétsen are purely imperial portrayals.



After the emperor the father [of Tri Songdétsen]¹⁵ went to heaven, some of the ‘uncle-ministers’ had thoughts of rebellion and destroyed the practice of the religion of the Buddha that had been continuous from the time of [his] forefather. They objected [(Tib. *snyad*)] that it was not right to practise [according to] the southern gods and religion. Furthermore, they wrote a law forbidding its future practice.¹⁶

Then, when the [present] emperor attained the age of twenty, at first there were bad prognostications and evil omens [(Tib. *ltas shig ngan*)]. Whatever rituals were supposed to be practiced, the bad prognostications and evil omens [continued] for many months. So [Tri Songdétsen] abandoned as illegitimate the law forbidding the practice of the religion of the Buddha. When [the Tibetans] acted according to the worship of the three jewels, immediately there was a change for the good. Then, accompanied by a spiritual advisors [(Tib. *dge ba'i bshes gnyen*)], [the emperor] heard the dharma. After [this royal discourse?] document was brought into his presence, it was boxed [(Tib. *sgroms*)] so that the religion of the Buddha would be promulgated and practiced.¹⁷

¹⁵ The whole passage here is construed in the first person in Weldon South Coblin, “A Reexamination of the Second Edict of Khri-srong-lde-btsan,” in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, ed. Lawrence Epstein and Richard Sherburne (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 170–171; and Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 67–68. This is not supported by the text (and its use of honorifics like *zha snga*), but correctly expresses the sense that this constitutes a semi-autobiographical account that approximates the perspective of a living emperor.

¹⁶ The depiction of a generalised group of ‘anti-Buddhist ministers’, whether or not it fairly represents the situation in 755, becomes a hugely important literary topos in later Buddhist histories. These histories vilify Ngenlam Lukong (fl. 8th c., Tib. Ngan lam Klu khong), whom some imperial inscriptions praise, as a well-known anti-Buddhist minister; despite the record of his oath to protect Buddhism in the longer Samyé edict; see Sam van Schaik and Lewis Doney, “The Prayer, the Priest and the Tsenpo: An Early Buddhist Narrative from Dunhuang,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 30.1–2 (2007): 199–200.

¹⁷ Chandra, ed., *Mkhas-paḥi-dgaḥ-ston*, 110r4–110v2 (see also Richardson, “The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven,” 96.38–97.12): / *btsan po bzhi mes khri srong btsan gyi ring la / ra sa'i bi har brtsigs te sangs rgyas kyi chos thog ma mdzad tshun chad / btsan po yab khri lde gtsug brtsan gyi ring la / brag dmar gyi kwa chur gtsug lag khang brtsigs te sangs rgyas kyi chos mdzad phand chad gdung rabs lnga lon no // / btsan po yab dgung du gshegs kyi 'og du zhang blon kha cig gis hur 'dums kyi blo zhig phyung ste / yab mes kyi ring tshund chad / sangs rgyas kyi chos mdzad mdzad pa yang bshig go / de nas yang snyed ni lho bal gyi lha dang chos bod yul du bgyi ba'i myi rigs shes / gzhan yang phyind chad bgyid tu mi gngang bar bka' khriims bris so // de nas btsan po zha snga nas lo nyi shu bzhes pa na / thog ma ni phyag spring dang ltas shig ngan te / cho ga ci mdzad pas bshad kyang / dgung zla du mar phyag spring dang ltas ngan nas / sangs rgyas kyi chos bgyid du mi gngang ba'i bka' khriims kyang khriims su mi bgyi bar dor / dkond cog gsum gyi mchod pa yang bgyi zhes bgyis na gzod bzang por gyurd to // / de nas dge ba'i bshes gnyen gyis*

The royal discourse claims that Buddhism is not a new threat to the empire's stability. It is rather a state-sponsored religion that, as just quoted, "had been continuous from the time of [Tri Songdétsen's] forefather." The text then states that Tri Songdétsen simply returned to the Buddhism of his predecessors. His understanding of doctrine is said there to be due to spiritual advisors, or spiritual friends (Tib. *dge ba'i bshes gnyen*, Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*), whom he invited to Tibet to teach him the *dharmā*, most likely the Buddhist Madhyamaka (Tib. *dbu ma*, Skt. *madhyakama*), also Middle Way, master, Śāntarakṣita (725–788).¹⁸

The royal discourse includes a discussion of Buddhist doctrine immediately following a discussion of tensions between old and new practices in Tibet:

Looking into the religious law [(Tib. *chos*)] itself: if the effects of the religious law did not exist in the worldly sphere, countless numbers of living creatures would be born into the four kinds of existence and would transmigrate in whichever cycle they were involved, without beginning and without end. Existence is according to one's former deeds. Whatever one does well in body, speech or mind becomes virtue; whatever evil one does becomes sin; whatever is neither good nor bad is indeterminate.

The fruit of what one does to others ripens for oneself. Birth as [a] god in the spheres of heaven, as a man on earth, a demigod [(Tib. *lha ma yin*)], or a hungry ghost [(Tib. *yi d(w)ags*, Skt. *preta*)], or as an animal in hell below the earth, whichever of these six states in which one is born comes from one's past actions. Those who have transcended the world and have become victorious buddhas, the spiritually enlightened bodhisattvas, those who win enlightenment for themselves, and the disciples who attain perfection gradually, all those have attained that state by amassing for themselves an accumulation of merit and knowledge. That is how it is explained.

If it be asked what is virtue, it is the ten virtuous actions and so on. If it be asked what is not virtue, it is the ten unvirtuous actions and so on. If it be asked what is an indeterminate action, it is the four ways of behaviour and so on. If it be asked what are the accumulations of world-transcending merit and knowledge, they are, in addition to the ten virtues, the four truths, the twelve elements that arise from the accumulation of causes, the thirty-seven principles leading to enlightenment and the ten surpassing perfections and

bstangs te chos kyang gsan / yi ge yang spyen sngar brims nas / sangs rgyas kyi chos dpel zhing mdzad par sgroms so /.

¹⁸ See Lewis Doney, "Narrative Transformations: The Spiritual Friends of Khri Srong lde brtsan," in *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia: Processes of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity*, ed. Eva Allinger, et al. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017), 311–312.



so on. The fruits that come from these are the four kinds of absence from fear, the four true forms of knowing, the ten powers, the eighteen unmixed attributes, and the thirty-two compassions and so on. The detailed explanation is found in the writings of the religious law.¹⁹

Chos appears to be a broad term that held many different connected meanings, some of which are lost while new connotations are adopted over time. ‘Religion’ is an unsatisfactorily limited word in English. ‘Way’ may be a better translation, following the Old Tibetan rendering of certain Chinese Classics,²⁰ though it contains undertones of a modern western appropriation of an ‘eastern’ aestheticised spiritual idea, the way (Chin. *dao* 道). Using the (equally problematic) English loan word ‘*dharma*’ is more acceptable when translating the term in most contexts found in later histories, and some contexts with the Tibetan Empire, where I would argue the Indic (and perhaps Sanskrit) meanings are more congruent with Tibetan *chos*.

¹⁹ Translation based on Richardson, “The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven,” 93–94. Chandra, ed., *Mkhas-paḥi-dgaḥ-ston*, 110v3–111r3 (see also Richardson, “The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven,” 97.17–41): / *chos nyid kyi nang du brtags na / chos las 'byung ba ni 'jig rten gyi khams su myed pa na / sems can gyi khams grangs med pa / skye ba rnam bzhi 'i nang du skye zhing 'khor ba la gtogs so cog / dang po 'i thog ma med pa nas / tha ma 'i mtha' myed pa 'i bar du / rang gi las kyis de bzhin du srid pa las / lus dang ngag dang yid gsum nas legs gi las kyis de bzhin du srid pa las / lus dang ngag dang yid gsum nas legs par spyad to cog ni dge bar 'gyur / nyes pa spyed to cog ni sdig par 'gyur / legs nyes med pa ni lung du myi ston par 'gyur / gzhan la phar byas pa 'i 'bras bu ni bdag la smind te / gnam gyi rim pa 'i lhar skye ba dang / sa 'i steng gi myi dang / lha ma yin dang / yi dags dang / byol song dang / sa 'i 'og gi sems can dmyal ba dang / 'di drug du skye 'o cog kyang rang gi las kyis 'gyur ro // 'jig rten las 'das te sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das su 'gyur ba dang / byang chub sems dpa' dang / rang byang chub dang / nyan thos kyis rim par 'grub pa kun kyang bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs rang gis brtsogs pa las 'gyur ro zhes 'byung ngo // dge ba gang zhe na dge ba bcu la bstogs pa 'o / myi dge ba gang zhe na / mi dge bcu la bstogs pa 'o // lung du mi ston pa gang zhe na / spyod lam bzhi la bstogs pa 'o // 'jig rten las 'das pa 'i bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs gang zhe na / dge ba bcu 'i steng du bden pa bzhi dang / rkyen dang 'du ba tshogs ste byung ba 'i yan lag bcu gnyis dang / byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos sum bcu rtsa bdun dang pha rold tu phyind pa bcu la bstogs pa 'o // de 'i 'bras bu ni mi 'jigs pa bzhi dang / so so yang dag par shes pa bzhi dang / stobs bcu dang / ma 'dres pa 'i chos bco bryad dang / thugs rje chen po sum bcu rtsa gnyis la bstogs par 'gyur te / gtan tshigs zhib tu ni chos kyi yi ge 'i nang na mchis so //*

²⁰ See Fang-Kuei Li and Weldon South Coblin, *A Study of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions* (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1987), 234–235; Emanuela Garatti, “Pelliot Tibétain 986: New Approaches to a Tibetan Paraphrase of a Chinese Classic among Dunhuang Manuscripts,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 61.1 (2018): 158–159.

However, following Michael Walter's discussion of the 'explanatory' royal discourse,²¹ I have the acute sense that what *chos* may have meant for the inscription's authors and different parts of its public audience could be widely disparate. I have settled for religion here because, as the royal discourse suggests, by this time a Tibetan council had distilled 'Buddhism' into a relatively harmonised position with regards to practices aimed at a result in the afterlife, in order to spread it in Tibet, and I could consider that to fulfil certain criteria of a self-defined religion. Thus, their intended audience could be those who would be introduced to this distilled position, even if their primary meaning of the term at this point was 'tradition', 'ritual' or something else entirely.

The content of the royal discourse shows that Tri Songdétsen placed himself at the centre of Buddhism's explication and propagation. For his efforts on behalf of Buddhism, he was depicted as a religious king (Tib. *chos rgyal*) on his way towards enlightenment (Tib. *byang chub*), even perhaps a bodhisattva (Tib. *byang chub sems dpa'*).²²

In his royal discourse, Tri Songdétsen claims that his patronage of Buddhism is in accord with the practice of his ancestors. This almost narrative depiction of Tri Songdétsen's relation to Buddhism is supposed to reflect and legitimise his perspective; and represent him as a practical but also genuinely Buddhist Tibetan emperor (like his ancestors). This self-presentation of Tri Songdétsen portrays him as an emperor seeking to explain rather than impose his version of Buddhism—through the propagation of this document around his realm. However, this act of disseminating his edict throughout the empire forces us to question these ostensive motives. It suggests instead a hegemonic claim to *the*

²¹ Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 72–73, fn. 84.

²² Ernst Steinkellner, "Notes on the Function of Two 11th-century Inscriptional Sūtra Texts in Tabo: *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* and *Kṣitigarbhasūtra*," in *Tabo Studies II: Manuscripts, Texts, Inscriptions, and the Arts*, ed. Cristina Scherrer-Schaub and Ernst Steinkellner (Roma: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1999), 258, defines a bodhisattva as "somebody who sets his mind on the attainment of final enlightenment with the intention of remaining in the web of worldly affairs thereafter in order to guide all other beings to the same liberated state." He briefly outlines the process by which the Indian tradition of attributing bodhisattva status to kings was transferred to Tibet in the Imperial period, and its continuing popularity in the Post-Imperial period (ibid., 258–260). I used this definition as a springboard to discuss the early Tibetan Buddhist notion of bodhisattva-kingship in Lewis Doney, "Early Bodhisattva-Kingship in Tibet: The Case of Tri Songdétsen," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 24 (2015): 29–47; see also Doney, "Emperor, Dharmaraja," 73–76.



authoritative view of religion that should be accepted wherever the emperor holds power.²³ A religious conversion is never merely personal when the convert is also an emperor. Further evidence for Tri Songdétsen's political intentions is found elsewhere in the royal discourse. It records that the emperor established a council of ministers and petty rulers, not only monks, in order to codify the *dharmā*. It reads:

By inviting the minor princes under his dominion, the Lord of Azha and so on, and the ministers of the exterior and the interior, [Tri Songdétsen] held a counsel and they considered in brief these things together: first, that trust should be placed in the commandment of the Buddha; second, that the example of the ancestors should be followed; and third, that help should be given by the power of spiritual advisors.²⁴

Moreover, the royal discourse states that when some of the 'uncle-ministers' (Tib. *zhang blon*) promulgated a law forbidding the future practice of Buddhism, the newly enthroned Tri Songdétsen overturned it. It further recounts that the emperor propagated the religion using the apparatus of his imperial administration, establishing, for example, a council made up of not only monks but also ministers and rulers of local polities incorporated into the empire in order to codify the *dharmā*. By means of such councils held with his loyal nobility, proclamations concerning this Buddhist doctrine were spread to the far corners of the empire, spreading (or perhaps imposing) the religion throughout his empire, in the west as far as Zhang zhung and Little Palūr (if it was not already or still Buddhist itself) and in the east up to the Pacified Region or Dégam/Dékham (Tib. bDe gams/khams) administrative region that included Dunhuang (敦煌) and more besides. Therefore, while Géza Uray disproved later historiographical claims for a major codification of the law during the reign of Tri Songtsen, the traditional Tibetan claim that

²³ For these and other interesting speculations on the implicit ideology inherent in the propagation of these edicts, stamped with the seal of the emperor, to the farthest reaches of the empire, see Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, "Enacting Words: A Diplomatic Analysis of the Imperial Decrees (*bkas bcad*) and their Application in the *sGra sbyor bam po gnyis pa Tradition*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25.1–2 (2002): 268–269 and 273–274.

²⁴ Chandra, ed., *Mkhas-paḥi-dgaḥ-ston*, 111r4–6 (see also Richardson, "The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven," 98.3–7): 'bangs su mnga' ba rgyal phran 'a zha rje la bstogs pa dang / phyi nang gi blon po rnam la bka's rmas / bka' gros su mdzad nas / gcig tu na sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das kyi bka' lung la bsten / gnyis su na yab mes kyi dpe lugs la 'tshal / gsum du na dge ba'i bshes gnyen gyi mthus bstangs pa dang yang sbyar.

Buddhist proclamations were made during the reign of Tri Songdétse appears to be justified by inscriptional and ancillary evidence.²⁵

Tri Songdétse thereby apparently succeeded by-and-large in realising his intention of granting all Tibetans access to Buddhist liberation from the mundane world of suffering (Skt. *samsāra*).²⁶ Buddhism probably had little wider influence on Tibetan *cultural* practices beyond the court, unlike the transformations it wrought from the post-imperial period onwards.²⁷ Yet, even if the spread of Buddhism itself throughout the empire was more rhetorical or real, the idea of this spread was important in part because it reflected positively on the Yarlung Dynasty's power over their realm. The show of support for Buddhism as a state religion is perhaps mirrored in the contemporaneous identification of the emperor as Buddha Vairocana (Tib. rNam par snang mdzad, Chin. Piluzhenafu 毘盧遮那佛).²⁸ These two speech-acts may also have facilitated relations

²⁵ The seventh-century laws and administration of the Tibetan Empire (and their later representation) were first covered thoroughly in Géza Uray, "The Narrative of Legislation and Organisation of the Mkhas pa'i Dga'-ston: The Origins of the Traditions Concerning Sroñ-brcan Sgam-po as the First Legislator and Organizer of Tibet," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 26 (1972): 11–68. I attempted to complement this analysis with regard to the eighth century in Lewis Doney, "The Glorification of Eighth-Century Imperial Law in Early Tibetan Buddhist Historiography," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 26 (2017): 1–20.

²⁶ Sam van Schaik, "Tibetan Buddhism in Central Asia: Geopolitics and Group Dynamics," in *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 59–62. Later Tibetan histories recount that one of the pious Buddhist sons of Tri Songdétse, Muné Tsenpo (d. c. 798?, Tib. Mu ne btsan po), also attempted (and failed) thrice to liberate his poorer subjects from the financial inequalities of the Tibetan social system by levelling the difference between rich and poor; see Sørensen, *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography*, 404–405. However, this can be neither proved nor falsified on the basis of the (admittedly almost non-existent) contemporaneous or proximate sources on this early ninth-century period of Tibetan imperial history.

²⁷ See, most recently, Doney, "The Glorification." Yet, early influence is shown in certain cultural practices surrounding death, as shown for example in Yoshiro Imaeda, *Histoire du cycle de la naissance et de la mort: Étude d'un texte tibétain de Touen-houang* (Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1981).

²⁸ See Richardson, "The Cult of Vairocana in Early Tibet"; Amy Heller, "Early Ninth Century Images of Vairocana from Eastern Tibet," *Orientalia* 25.6 (1994): 74–79; Amy Heller, "Ninth Century Buddhist Images Carved at Ldan-ma-brag to Commemorate Tibeto-Chinese Negotiations," in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Fagernes, 1992*, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), vol. 1, 335–349, and appendix to vol. 1, 12–19; Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion,*



between the Tibetan Empire and rulers of surrounding states, which made similar claims around this time. Unfortunately, we lack concrete evidence such as written communications between these rulers that would corroborate such a hypothesis.²⁹

A mass translation exercise funded and led by imperial power formed part of the process of establishing Tibetan Buddhism.³⁰ By the ninth century, this created a quite substantial royal library—as catalogued in Lhenkar (Tib. lHan kar), Phangthang (Tib. 'Phang thang) and Chimpu (Tib. mChims phu)—that may have been intended to emulate either the monastic libraries of Nālandā and Dunhuang or the royal libraries of Chang'an (長安, modern Xi'an 西安), among others.³¹ The influx of Indic Buddhism eventually exerted a great influence on Tibetan culture, introducing new notions of virtue, concepts such as *karma* and rebirth, sophisticated methods of philosophical reasoning and advice on how to follow the ideal of dharmic kingship, and so forth over the centuries.³² Other aspects of the South Asian poetic and narrative traditions that entered Tibetan culture with the translation of all sorts of literature, and their indigenous transformations over time, are also undeniable.³³

Contestation, and Memory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59–60; Michelle Wang, *Maṅḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 52–60.

²⁹ However, on Khotanese and Tangut (Tib. Mi nyag, Chin. Dangxiang 党項) representations of the Tibetan emperors as bodhisattvas—emanating from the borders of the empire if not from outside—see Doney, “Tibet,” 213–214.

³⁰ See Scherrer-Schaub, “Enacting Words.”

³¹ See Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt, *Die Lhan kar ma: Ein früher Katalog der ins tibetische übersetzten buddhistischen Texte* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008); Georgios Halkias, “Tibetan Buddhism Registered: A Catalogue from the Imperial Court of 'Phang thang,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 36.1–2 (2004): 46–105; Helen Wang, *Money on the Silk Road: The Evidence from Eastern Central Asia to c. AD 800, with a Catalogue of the Coins Collected by Sir Aurel Stein* (London: British Museum Press, 2014), 220–223. The Chimpu catalogue is not currently available to scholars.

³² See footnote 27 above, and also David L. Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors* (London: Serindia, 1987), 381–526; David Seyfort Ruegg, *Ordre spirituel et ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet: Quatre conférences au Collège de France* (Paris: Collège de France, 1995), 1–35; Walter, *Buddhism and Empire*, 165–285.

³³ A good source of references for further reading is Ulrike Roesler, “Narrative: Tibet,” in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Volume 1*, ed. Jonathan Silk (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 515–523.

In the *sGra sbyor bam po gnyis pa* [Two-Volume Lexicon],³⁴ Tri Songdétsen even seeks to control the words of the Buddha by systematising the translation of Buddhism in Tibet. The main part of the text is a handbook for translating Buddhist terms from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Its brief opening narrative ascribes the handbook to Tri Songdétsen, perhaps in order to give authority to the administration of religious orthodoxy throughout the empire:

In the year of the pig (783–784), the [*btsan po*'s] court resided in Zung kar. In the presence of the *btsan po*, the great monk [Bran ka Dpal gyi] Yon tan, the great monk [Myang] Ting nge 'dzin, chief minister [Mchims] Rgyal gzigs [Shu theng], and the chief minister [Ngan lam] Stag ra [Klu khong] and others, the lords and ministers conferred, [and] in his presence systematised the translation of terms from Sanskrit into Tibetan and decreed [thus]: ...³⁵

This short statement provides evidence of the power of Tri Songdétsen, as well as his monks and ministers, over the interpretation of Buddhism in Tibet.

The Tibetan Emperor not only worked in an executive capacity, through edicts. Certain early Buddhist works attribute their authorship to Tri Songdétsen. One such text, the *bKa' yang dag pa 'i tshad ma* [Criteria

³⁴ Mie Ishikawa, ed., *A Critical Edition of the sGra sbyor bam po gnyis pa: An Old and Basic Commentary on the Mahāvīyūtpatti* (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1990). On the discovery of the fragments of the *Two-Volume Lexicon* in Tabo (Tib. Ta pho) Monastery, Spiti, see Jampa L. Panglung, “New Fragments of the sGra-sbyor bam-po gñis-pa,” *East and West* 44.1 (1994): 161–172. Translated and transliterated in Panglung, “New Fragments,” 164 and 168 respectively; and in Brandon Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History, With an Annotated Cartographical Documentation by Guntram Hazod* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 141. Transliterated in Scherrer-Schaub, “Enacting Words,” 319. Scherrer-Schaub, “Enacting Words,” 267, fn. 20, further discusses this text within the context of the eighth and ninth-century Tibetan Empire and Buddhism. She suggests dating the original imperial decree (Tib. *bkas bcad*) to 783, rather than 793, shortly after the royal discourse quoted in the main text of this article above. Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*, 141, concurs: “The Tabo version of the *Sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa* opens with a different annalistic entry that dates to the reign of Khri Srong-lde-brtsan, most likely 783–784.”

³⁵ Translation (including text within square brackets) and transliteration following Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*, 141. *Two-Volume Lexicon*, Tabo folio *ka*, recto lines 1–2 reads: *phag gi lo la pho brang zung kar ba (=na) bzhugs // btsan po 'i spyang ngar ban de chen po yon tan dang ban de chen po ting nge 'dzin dang / blon chen po rgyal gzigs dang / blon chen po stag ra las stsogs pa' / rje blon mol ba 'i spyang ngar rgya gar skad las bod skad du [ming btags pa] rnam / gtan la phab ste bkas bcad pa' /*.



of the Authentic Scriptures] may genuinely have emanated from the court of Tri Songdét sen and perhaps even be based on the teachings of the above-mentioned spiritual advisor.³⁶ Although analysis of this commentary would make a worthwhile article in itself, I can only mention it briefly here before concluding this section on Central Tibet.

Above, we have seen that the spread of Buddhism was as much a political as a religious act. The text of the ‘royal discourse’ suggests that hieratic Buddhism was gradually becoming entwined with the court hierarchy. The court had already sent the *Old Tibetan Annals*, other edicts, and tax collectors out to the farthest reaches of the empire. Now it began to send proclamations in favor of Buddhism as well. Tri Songdét sen

³⁶ The *Criteria of the Authentic Scriptures*, a commentary on the tenth chapter of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, is found in the *bsTan 'gyur (bKa' yang dag pa'i tshad ma las mdo btus pa* [Extract of the Criteria of the Authentic Scriptures], Peking no. 5839, Derge no. 4352). Ernst Steinkellner, “Who is Byañ chub rdzu 'phrul? Tibetan and Non-Tibetan Commentaries on the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*: A Survey of the Literature,” *Berliner Indologische Studien* 4–5 (1989): 229–252 argues convincingly that ‘Jangchub Dzutrül’ (Tib. Byang chub rdzu 'phrul), the attributed author of this commentary is none other than Tri Songdét sen—in part because of the religious name ‘Trülkyilha Jangchub Chenpo’ (Tib. 'Phrul gyi lha Byang chub chen po) that Tri Songdét sen’s tomb inscription at Chonggyé (Tib. 'Phyongs rgyas) confers (Tib. *gsol*) upon him. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation*, 45, agrees that this text probably emanated from the court of Tri Songdét sen. He also follows Steinkellner in noting that the tradition of Dharmakīrti, followed by the emperor’s contemporary, Śāntarakṣita, is less evident in the *Criteria of the Authentic Scriptures* than is a reiteration of earlier Mahāyāna formulations such as those of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* itself; yet he does not rule out the possibility that Śāntarakṣita had a hand in the work (ibid., 225, fn. 53). Kapstein quotes passages from the *Criteria of the Authentic Scriptures* concerning logic and *karma* (ibid., 45–46; see also his more extensive translation from this source in Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 119–123, from which I have borrowed the English translation of its title). This Buddhist commentary also contains a rejection of the teachings of Mani(chaeism), popular in Central Asia at the time (see ibid., 95–96 for translation and discussion of this part). Rolf A. Stein, “Une mention du manichéisme dans le choix du bouddhisme comme religion d’état par le roi Khri-sroñ lde-btsan,” in *Indianisme et Bouddhisme, Mélanges offerts à Mgr Étienne Lamotte*, ed. André Bareau et al. (Louvain-la-neuve: l’Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 1980), 334 *et passim* suggests that the wording of this condemnation betrays some Tang Dynasty influence. As Scherrer-Schaub has most recently pointed out, the text assigns the role of spiritual friend to Śāntarakṣita, “though possibly as a post-eventum narration”; Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “A Perusal of Early Tibetan Inscriptions in Light of the Buddhist World of the 7th to 9th Centuries A.D.,” in *Epigraphic Evidence in the Pre-Modern Buddhist World. Proceedings of the Eponymous Conference Held in Vienna, 14–15 Oct. 2011*, ed. Kurt Tropper (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 2014), 157, fn. 97 (see also pp. 144–145, fn. 70 for further doubts concerning the date and author of this text).

apparently offered his authority and power of disseminating proclamations willingly to the cause of spreading the Buddha's religion. In return, these edicts naturally portray him positively, as patronising and promulgating Buddhism in accordance with the intentions of his ancestors and the pre-existing traditions of Tibet. Scherrer-Schaub has described this as "the power of the written displayed to organise and control the world" of the Tibetan Empire.³⁷

If Tri Songdétsen evidently intended to spread Buddhism (and hence his own self-presentation as a Buddhist ruler) to the edges of his realm within his lifetime, here we have proof that this was achieved, at least rhetorically in the eyes of some of the elites of the subject polities. Thus, while we saw above that the imperial self-presentation of Tri Songdétsen in the royal discourse drew on alleged continuity with the customs, learning and traditions of his royal ancestors, he also appears to excel his forefathers as a Buddhist king. During the course of his life, Tri Songdétsen was represented as an emperor, a religious king, and perhaps even a bodhisattva, and the numerous topoi and terms used in creating these representations were probably assimilated in the provinces and reflected back with elements of innovation towards the end of the Tibetan Empire. In literature evidenced in the Dunhuang corpus that we shall return to at the end of this article, the once great, but now collapsed, empire was both mourned and idealised in memory as a pinnacle of religious florescence from which Tibet had since fallen into misguided practices and beliefs.

3. *Tibetan-Ruled Dunhuang*

The Tibetan Empire ruled over Dunhuang from either the 750s or 760s, or 787, until 848.³⁸ During this period, the region belonged to the military

³⁷ Scherrer-Schaub, "Tibet: An Archaeology of the Written," 233.

³⁸ The later date for the beginning of Tibetan occupation was the established one among academics, but the earlier dates were more recently suggested by Bianca Horlemann, "A Re-evaluation of the Tibetan Conquest of Eighth-century Shazhou/Dunhuang" in *Tibet, Past and Present: Tibetan Studies I, Proceedings of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 2000*, ed. Henk Blezer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 49–66. Tibetan rule of Dunhuang ended gradually between 848 and 851, according to Henrik H. Sørensen, "Guiyijun and Buddhism at Dunhuang: A Year by Year Chronicle," *BuddhistRoad Paper* 4.2 (2019). One could go into much more detail on the debates in scholarly literature about



district of Guazhou Province (瓜州, Tib. Kwa chu khrom) with its base in the Guazhou oasis, 15km to the east of Dunhuang.³⁹ This area was pivotal for trade and connectivity, since here the northern and southern Silk Roads came together before entering the Hexi Corridor (Chin. Hexi zoulang 河西走廊) that led to Liangzhou (涼州) and Chang'an. Gertraud Taenzer explains how the Tibetan administration split the inhabitants into civil and military units, the former paying taxes and remaining relatively untouched by Tibetan culture and the latter group in addition performing *corvée* labour (including recruitment as soldiers) and more often taking on Tibetan names.⁴⁰ The area was primarily Buddhist, and military units included some monks who became military citizens (though perhaps not soldiers). Regional councils (Tib. *'dun sa/tsa*) administered both the general Dégam area and the more specific Guazhou Province that included Dunhuang, and gradually new rules were introduced for the Tibetan government of both monastic and lay organisations, altering the already existing structures but with a relatively light touch.⁴¹

We must be careful here not to conflate Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts and the view from the Tibetan Empire. Imre Galambos, recently arguing against certain long-held Sinological views of Dunhuang, states:

One such assumption is that throughout the eighth and ninth centuries Dunhuang persisted as an essentially Chinese city in which the population harboured a culture of resistance [before returning to] conditions that had been in place before the occupation. Yet, as this book argues, by the end of Tibet's political control over the region, Dunhuang had become culturally different to what had existed previously. Tibetan administration may have come to an end, but Hexi remained a Sino-Tibetan region. Tibetan remained

all aspects of Tibetan rule over Dunhuang, but I have had to limit my references to secondary literature (especially Asian-language scholarship) in this more exploratory paper.

³⁹ Gertraud Taenzer, "Changing Relations between Administration, Clergy and Lay People in Eastern Central Asia: A Case Study according to the Dunhuang Manuscripts Referring to the Transition from Tibetan to Local Rule in Dunhuang, 8th–11th Centuries," in *Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th to 13th Centuries)*, ed. Carmen Meinert (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 19.

⁴⁰ See Taenzer, "Changing Relations," 20–22; for more on the geographical divisions, see Kazushi Iwao, "Organisation of the Chinese Inhabitants in Tibetan-Ruled Dunhuang," in *Old Tibetan Studies Dedicated to the Memory of R.E. Emmerick: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS, 2003*, ed. Cristina Scherrer-Schaub (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 65–75.

⁴¹ Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals*, 69; Taenzer, "Changing Relations," 27–35.

one of the main languages in the region throughout the Guiyijun [(851–1036?, 歸義軍, Return-to-Allegiance Army)] period.⁴²

Yet, within Tibetology, an assumption is too often encountered that what is written in Tibetan among the Dunhuang documents reflects what was held as orthodoxy at the Tibetan court and by ethnic Tibetans after the fall of the empire.⁴³ In order to explode both of these myths in the context of scribal culture, it is enough to point to the very physical, surface-level fact that thousands of Tibetan copies of the *Aparimitāyurnāmasūtra* written during this period resemble Chinese rolls more than Indic-inspired Tibetan *pothī* (Tib. *dpe cha*), or the subsequent shift to writing some Chinese texts from left to right and with the Tibetan-style pen rather than a Chinese brush.⁴⁴ Focusing in on beliefs in Dunhuang suggests that this is also in need of replacing with regard to doctrine too.

Inhabitants of the area came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and Dunhuang was visited by embassies, armies, pilgrims, and merchants from many more lands during the long eighth century. Works found at the beginning of the 20th century at the Mogao cave complex near Dunhuang, walled up in Mogao Cave 17, are written in Chinese, Khotanese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Tibetan, Uyghur and other languages.⁴⁵ They include important Tibetan indigenous works such as the *Old Tibetan Annals* and translated literature not only from the Indic tradition but also displaying *inter alia* Sinitic influences such as works of Chan Buddhism (Chin. *chanzong* 禪宗, Tib. *bsam gtan*) known in Japan as Zen—which was popular in Tibetan translation too.⁴⁶

⁴² Imre Galambos, *Dunhuang Manuscript Culture: End of the First Millennium* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 13 *et passim*.

⁴³ See, for instance, the words of warning in Robert Mayer and Cathy Cantwell, “Continuity and Change in Tibetan Mahāyoga Ritual: Some Evidence from the Tabzhag (Thabs zhags) Manuscript and Other Dunhuang Texts,” in *Tibetan Ritual*, ed. José Cabezón (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69–70.

⁴⁴ On the latter, see Galambos, *Dunhuang Manuscript Culture*, 14 and chap. 3, especially p. 150.

⁴⁵ See Tokio Takata, “Multilingualism in Tun-huang,” *Acta Asiatica* 78 (2000): 49–70.

⁴⁶ See Sam van Schaik, *The Tibetan Chan Manuscripts: A Complete Descriptive Catalogue of Tibetan Chan Texts in the Dunhuang Manuscript Collections* (Bloomington, Indiana: Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies Indiana University, 2014). Two other Mogao Cave 17 documents (now held in the British Library), IOL Tib J 709/9 and IOL Tib J 667, together make up a treatise on Chan Buddhism that the work itself says had been authorised under the seal of Tri Songdétse. This treatise thus alludes to his activity as patron of the *dharma* coming from China as well as India.



Xinjiang Rong states that the Tibetans enthusiastically supported Buddhism at Dunhuang, which led to a period of growth in the number of monastic institutions.⁴⁷ The education of children was also placed in the hands of Buddhist temples, rather than Confucianist institutions as formerly.⁴⁸ Galambos warns against interpreting the apparently almost complete absence of secular Chinese texts translated into Tibetan during this period as a sign of the empire's cultural backwardness, pointing out that this instead “simply reflects alternative cultural values or differences in the official curriculum,” the vogue for Buddhist doctrine at the Tibetan court of this time, indicating that “Chinese classical texts were not in vogue simply because their discourses were irrelevant to a mainly Buddhist ideology.”⁴⁹ More specifically, most of the Buddhism evinced in Tibetan documents from Mogao Cave 17 dating from this period fall within the standard canonical classes of material, such as the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* and *sūtras* and *śāstras* of the *Prajñāpāramitā* genre,⁵⁰ in line with the conservative Mahāyāna orthodoxy espoused by Tri Songdétsen in his royal discourse. However, others show the richness of continuing and new beliefs and practices of the occupants of Dunhuang during this period.

Some manuscripts list simple donations to the upkeep of temples made by peasants and low-level administrators, while other lists represent larger festivals at which ordained Buddhists performed recitations and so forth in return for flour, grain, oil and other necessities contributed by selected families.⁵¹ Popular (but not only popularist) beliefs in certain Buddhist deities that were especially important at Dunhuang during this time include (1) the four heavenly kings (Chin. *siwang* 四王, Tib. *rgyal po bzhi*), especially Vaiśravaṇa), (2) the future Buddha Maitreya in his paradise, (3) Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on the Five-Peaked Mountain (Chin. Wutai shan 五臺山, Skt. Pañcaśikhaparvata)—especially due to the faith

⁴⁷ Xinjiang Rong, *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 39–40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

⁴⁹ Galambos, *Dunhuang Manuscript Culture*, 15–16.

⁵⁰ Henrik H. Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang During the Tang and Five Dynasties Period,” in *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*, ed. Vadime Elisseef (Paris: Unesco, 2000), 36.

⁵¹ Gertraud Taenzer, *The Dunhuang Region During Tibetan Rule (787–848): A Study of the Secular Manuscripts Discovered in the Mogao Caves* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 248–251.

of the famous Amoghavajra (705–774, Chin. Bukong 不空)—(4) Kṣitigarbha and his ten kings of the netherworld (Chin. *shidian yanluo* 十殿閻羅), (5) Avalokiteśvara in his many forms, as well as (6) Esoteric Buddhist deities emanated from this bodhisattva and those such as Mārīcī (Chin. Molizhi 摩里支, Tib. lHa mo 'Od zer can or 'Phags ma 'Od zer can) or Sitātapatrā (Chin. Bai Sangai Fuding 白傘蓋佛頂, Tib. gDugs dkar mo) who maintained independent cults arising from the period of Tibetan rule itself.⁵²

During this time, the increased popularity of Buddhist lay associations (Chin. *yi* 邑邑, *yishe* 邑社, *yihui* 邑會)—private organisations collecting donations from elite families for ceremonies and to help families in times of hardship—undoubtedly also played a role in increasing the number and standard of living of ordained Buddhists and Dunhuang citizens more generally.⁵³ Buddhism seems to have been a strong binding force in Dunhuang society and, though the empire did not persecute Confucianists or Daoists there, their influence became greatly diminished during Tibetan rule and did not quickly recover during the Guiyijun (851–1036?, 歸義軍, Return-to-Allegiance Army) period.⁵⁴ Over time, a number of Sino-Tibetan/ Tibeto-Chinese Buddhist communities grew up that created new (and/or developed existing) forms of (especially *dhāraṇī* and Esoteric) Buddhism that outlasted the end of Tibetan rule over Dunhuang.⁵⁵ The Buddhist lay associations apparently also allowed citizens to follow their own beliefs and practice according to whichever text or cult they wanted—without having to follow Central Tibetan doctrine and pay lip service to the emperor all the time.⁵⁶

⁵² Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 34–37; see also Henrik H. Sørensen, “Buddhism in Dunhuang,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Jonathan Silk (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

⁵³ Taenzer, *The Dunhuang Region*, 224, 251–253 and 327–329.

⁵⁴ Rong, *Eighteen Lectures*, 71–73; other elements of Buddho-Daoist syncretism in Dunhuang are discussed in Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 33–34. He concludes that, despite the well-documented existence of most of the major traditions of Chinese Buddhism except perhaps Huayan (華嚴) in Dunhuang (on which see Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 29–33), “there is virtually no real evidence of sectarianism in the Buddhist manuscripts” and that, further, “we find no signs of inter-religious strife between the members of the Chinese and the Tibetan sanghas” (Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 41).

⁵⁵ Takata, “Multilingualism in Tun-huang,” 62–68; Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 37–40.

⁵⁶ Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 35.



4. *Beliefs Between the Centre and Periphery*

The imposition of Tibetan language evidently played its part in the exercise of Tibetan power over their empire, as mentioned above. The same goes for attendant belief systems (usually in the form of mythology). With respect to doctrines, we can observe that the Tibetan Empire was only just consolidating from the seventh century onward. The internal ‘consumers’ of imperial rhetoric soon bifurcated into those who responded most to beliefs that relied on royal and ancestral terminology and founding myths on the one side, and those who sought or responded to beliefs concerning their ruler couched in Buddhist terms—often in addition to the above forms of discourse but sometimes in opposition to those types of terminology and mythologised belief.

The mixture of authorised beliefs concurrent at court is indicated by the witness of Chinese visitors to Central Tibet in the early ninth century, as described in the *New Book of the Tang Dynasty*. They encountered a large encampment of tents, with the Tibetan emperor’s in the centre. Around it stood armed men, guarding the gates, and priests wearing bird-feather hats and tiger-skin belts and beating drums. Inside sat the emperor, surrounded by golden dragons, lizards, tigers and leopards (the marks of his cosmopolitan aesthetics). At his right-hand side was the Buddhist monk-minister, Pel Chenpo (fl. 9th c., Tib. dPal chen po), below whom his other ministers were arrayed.⁵⁷ From this it appears that Buddhist monks were close to the emperor’s heart but not the only religious professionals to enjoy the patronage and ear of the ruler.

The legitimation of the Tibetan Empire to external parties may also have differed between communications aimed at the truly external, allied or hostile powers such as Tang China or Indic rulers, versus those directed towards culturally different regions recently incorporated into the growing Tibetan Empire, such as Dunhuang. Perhaps in the latter areas, where Buddhism and Sinitic culture was already established, Buddhist or Chinese types of belief system were favoured instead of Tibetan ancestral or royal modes. Yet, as we suggested above, we lack the data to confirm or deny this hypothesis in depth.

The beliefs of subjects of the Tibetan Empire are more difficult to assess. Most documents focus on the court and the statements of faith of

⁵⁷ Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle, *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, 23–24.

emperors and their families,⁵⁸ but some documents from Mogao Cave 17 suggest the official view that the higher echelons of Tibetan society and the Tibetan Empire held regarding Buddhism and the status of the rulers within the Buddhist cosmos. One key witness to this is the so-called ‘Prayer of DégayutSEL (Tib. De ga g.yu ’tsal) Temple’ recorded during the reign of Tri TsukdétSen (r. 815–841, Khri gTsug lde brtsan) also remembered as Relpachen (Tib. Ral pa can). It describes benedictions to the emperor expressed by governors and generals of Eastern Tibet.⁵⁹ Matthew Kapstein has published a series of in-depth studies on this text, which commemorates the founding of the Gachu (Tib. (’)Ga cu) / Hezhou (河州) *gTsigs kyi gtsug lag khang* [Temple of the Treaty-Edict] in DégayutSEL and celebrates Yarlung’s treaty with the Tang, Uyghur and Nanzhao (738–902, 南詔) governments.⁶⁰ In one, he shows the structure of the prayer as consisting of a series of dedications of merit to the greater power and well-being of the emperor and connected hopes to thereby

⁵⁸ In addition to the bell epigraphy, which appears to represent the Buddhist patronage of one the emperor’s queens, mention should be made of the Changbu (Tib. lCang bu) Inscription, which records the ninth-century construction and endowment of a Buddhist temple by a maternal relation of the emperor and with the latter’s authorisation; see Hugh E. Richardson, *A Corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1985), 92–105; Li and Coblin, *A Study of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions*, 300–315.

⁵⁹ See Matthew T. Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of the Turquoise Grove,” in *Buddhism Between Tibet and China*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom, 2009), 65, fn. 47. The text was written on a single *pothi* manuscript of twenty folios that is now divided into two parts, P. T. 16 (fols. 22–34) and IOL Tib J 751 (fols. 35–41) with four lines on each side. It has been the subject of many other studies within Tibetology, for references to which see Lewis Doney, “Imperial Gods: A Ninth-Century Tridāṇḍaka Prayer (rGyud chags gsum) from Dunhuang,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 61.1 (2018): 79–81 and the sources cited in the footnote immediately below this one.

⁶⁰ Matthew T. Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of De-ga g.yu-tshal: Iconography and Identification,” in *Essays on the International Conference on Tibetan Archaeology and Art*, ed. Huo Wei (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2004), 111–114, offers a translation of the prayer’s description of the temple (P. T. 16, 26b1–28b3). Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of the Turquoise Grove,” consists of a much more in-depth study on this text and a discussion of issues surrounding its historical and geographical referents. Matthew T. Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of De ga g.yu tshal: Reconsiderations,” *Journal of Tibetan Studies* 10 (2014): 32–34 offers a short reconsideration of the location of the temple (due to debate over his previous assessment cited therein) and Kapstein then identifies the most probable candidate for the location as Daxia (大夏, current-day Linxia 临夏市) in the region east of the Blue Lake (Tib. mTsho sngon po, Chin. Qinghai hu 青海湖), in western literature often referred to as Lake Kokonor) strategically placed between Tang China and the Tibetan Empire. See now the wider discussion of this area and accompanying maps in Meinert, “People, Places, Texts, and Topics.”



purify bad *karma*.⁶¹ This text, and the temple itself, perhaps tie in with identifications of the later emperors as Buddha Vairocana, mentioned above.⁶² Leaving this thorny matter aside though, these self-conscious proclamations of faith in prayer form show the extent to which other elites within the Tibetan Empire engaged in supporting the official doctrines espoused by the inner court.

Even here, caution is advised, since as Sørensen rightly notes:

While donor colophons attached to books, whether printed ones or manuscripts, tend to reflect individualised concerns, in many cases they were made by rulers or members of the local elite, who thereby signal their acts of piety in a manner that went well beyond the more narrow, personalised motives of ordinary Buddhist believers. This is because a member of the political and social elite in a given locale made their donations or offerings not only as individuals, but as leading members of society, namely as persons of significance. As someone belonging to a specific and noteworthy group at the top of the social hierarchy, norms including codes of behaviour were dispensed to the larger community in a hegemonic manner. Therefore, as soon as such events of donation became ‘public’ in the sense that they displayed a specific ordered system of power and status, they tended to take on a more distinctly official character.⁶³

Tibetan rule over Dunhuang impacted the forms of organisation and taxation there, but some evidence also shows the growing influence of doctrine emanating from the court on the monastic world of Shazhou (沙州, Tib. Sha chu). Tibetan and Chinese monks and nuns worked side-by-side in scriptoria from the early ninth century.⁶⁴ Taenzer hazards:

It is to be assumed that the monks not only were teaching the Chinese scribes the Tibetan script and language but that they were ordered by the Tibetan

⁶¹ Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of the Turquoise Grove,” 31–33.

⁶² See Kapstein, “The Treaty Temple of the Turquoise Grove,” 53; and Wang, *Maṇḍalas in the Making*, 83–100 and 107–111, on the relation between these prayers, the prayers at Yulin Cave 25 and the Tibetan cult of Buddha Vairocana, but see also Yury Khokhlov, “Uncovering Amoghavajra’s Legacy in the Hexi Corridor,” *Journal of Tibetology* 21 (2019): 48–133 for criticisms of some of the art-historical arguments contained in the above sources.

⁶³ Henrik H. Sørensen, “Offerings and the Production of Buddhist Scriptures in Dunhuang during the Tenth Century,” *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 3.1 (2020): 75.

⁶⁴ Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 38–40; Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 24–25.

authorities to go to Dunhuang to propagate the school of Buddhism favoured by the Tibetan Emperor.⁶⁵

This ‘school’ is most likely the Madhyamaka of the spiritual advisor Śāntarakṣita and his Indo-Tibetan followers. Other forms of Buddhism were undoubtedly present at court, but at least a somewhat similar top-down approach to belief as Taenzer identifies at Dunhuang on the part of the emperors is consistent with some forms of empire more generally with Tri Songdétsen’s self-presentation as a codifier and disseminator of ‘correct’ Buddhism in the royal discourse above (and later depictions of the emperors in e.g., IOL Tib J 370/6 discussed below). Yet, firm proof of this is lacking in the documentary evidence and we also lack the data to make fine-grained distinctions between the beliefs (and relative influence of the empire on them) of different social classes in Dunhuang.⁶⁶

During the Tibetan occupation, not only many monastic but also lay inhabitants of the region worked as scribes for a grand *sūtra* copying project undertaken by Emperor Tri Tsugdésen in the ninth century. There they worked in both Tibetan and Chinese on such classic outlines of the bodhisattva path and the ‘perfection of [Buddhist] wisdom’ (Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*) as the Tibetan *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong phrag brgya pa* [Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in One Hundred Thousand Verses] (Skt. *Śatasahasrikaprajñāpāramitāsūtra*) and the Chinese *Da banruo boluomiduo jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 [Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra] (T. 220.5 and 6) (Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*), as well as the Tibetan and Chinese *Aparimitāyurnāmamasūtra* (hereafter *Ap*) that lies closer to the Tantric Buddhism of spells (Skt. *dhāraṇī*, Chin. *tuoluoni* 陀羅尼) and liberation in this lifetime.⁶⁷ Taenzer suggests that the relationship between the Tibetan Empire and Dunhuang was at first amicable, and that local officials were well rewarded with official duties, titles (though never higher than Tibetans) and exemption from conscription and taxes.⁶⁸ Not only the above copied *sūtras*, but also other ritual texts and prayers dating from the period of Tibetan control over

⁶⁵ Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 25.

⁶⁶ This point is made by Sørensen, “Perspectives on Buddhism in Dunhuang,” 41, and holds true for other time periods of Dunhuang politico-religious history too.

⁶⁷ Dotson, “The Remains of the Dharma,” 5–68.

⁶⁸ Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 26 and 21, fn.4.



Dunhuang are dedicated to increase the merit or life-span of the Tibetan Emperor.⁶⁹

The offering of *sūtra* copies as a gift for the ruler has a long history in the Chinese context, and among the Dunhuang manuscripts exist many Chinese *sūtras* that were copied as gifts for various Chinese rulers.⁷⁰ Akira Fujieda mentions many of these in his introductory survey to the Dunhuang manuscripts, and they range from *sūtras* produced in central China to local productions in Dunhuang. In one case, a fifth-century governor of Luoyang (洛陽) had 1,464 rolls copied for the benefit of the eleven-year-old emperor and his mother, the empress dowager, during the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–535, 北魏) in 434.⁷¹ Other large-scale commissions, such as that of a sixth-century governor of Guazhou, in 532, dedicated the merit of *sūtra*-copying not only to the king, but to many others, and of course “to all sentient beings.”⁷² Unfortunately, no extant document gives the motives for copying Tibetan and Chinese *sūtras* as a gift for the Tibetan Emperor, nor does any document tell us who was ultimately responsible for commissioning them. The Dunhuang *sūtra*-copying project used official scribes, and had recourse to taxation, labor, and to laws governing the production of *sūtras*, so it was obviously a project that had to be approved by officials. Given the administrative structure of the Tibetan Empire, the decision to approve such a project probably rested with the pacification officer (Tib. *bde blon*), who was the highest-ranking officer of Dégam, a province incorporating many of the empire’s eastern colonies and regional military governments.

The thousands of copies of the short *Ap* and the high-quality copies of the far longer *Śatasahasrikaprajñāpāramitāsūtra* make up by far the most common single group of manuscripts found in Dunhuang’s Mogao Cave

⁶⁹ Rather than, say, the Tang Emperor; see for example, Huaiyu Chen, “Multiple Traditions of One Ritual: A Reading of the Lantern-Lighting Prayers in Dunhuang Manuscripts,” in *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, ed. Tansen Sen (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 249–252.

⁷⁰ The following information is taken from Brandon Dotson and Lewis Doney, *A Study of the Tibetan Dunhuang Aparimitāyur-nāma mahāyāna-sūtras Kept in the British Library* (with the participation of Dongzhi Duojie, forthcoming), and Brandon Dotson and I are indebted to Stephen Teiser for bringing these two Chinese examples to our attention.

⁷¹ Akira Fujieda, “The Tun-huang Manuscripts: A General Description, Part II,” *Zinbun* 10 (1969): 23–24.

⁷² Fujieda, “The Tun-huang Manuscripts,” 27–29.

17. Their existence in Cave 17 indicates belief not only in their perceived importance but in the efficacy of making copies of them (as the works themselves prescribe). P. T. 999, an administrative document related to replacing copies of Tibetan and Chinese *Ap* produced in 844 after the older copies were given to the laity in a festival, suggest that this work at least maintained a role in Dunhuang religious life after they were copied.⁷³ It describes the use of 135 rolls of Chinese *Ap* and 480 rolls of Tibetan *Ap* written “as a gift for the previous emperor, the son of gods Tri Tsugdésen.”⁷⁴ Among other things, the document demonstrates that the *Ap* copies continued to be used as objects of worship after the death of Tri Tsugdésen, and that the administrative and religious networks that produced them were still in existence at the very end of Tibetan control over the empire (and towards the end of the Tibetan Empire itself). The festival that the queen and her son, Ösung (Tib. ’Od srung, r. ca. 846–893), sponsored according to P. T. 999 appears to entail the giving of 615 *sūtra* copies to 2,700 households in Shazhou, along with a more general religious offering (Skt. *dharmadāna*), perhaps featuring teachings by the *saṃgha* on the meaning of *Ap* that may have influenced or reflected local belief in the content. Finally, these and/or the earlier copies of *Ap* found their way into Cave 17 and thereby fulfilled one of the *Ap*’s stated missions—to be spread far and wide—residing now in libraries as far apart as Los Angeles, Oslo, Saint Petersburg and Tokyo, among others.

Elsewhere within the eastern part of the Tibetan Empire, we find some evidence of Tibetan beliefs about the efficacy of the *Ap*. These are inscriptions in Lepkhok (Tib. Leb khog, in today’s Yushu 玉樹 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), commissioned during the reign of Tri Détsugtsen.⁷⁵ The *Ap dhāraṇī* has been carved into the rock wall, together

⁷³ P. T. 999 has been studied by *inter alia* Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “Réciprocité du don: une relecture de PT 999,” in *Tibetan History and Language: Studies Dedicated to Uray Géza on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 1991), 429–434; and Yoshiro Imaeda, “À propos du manuscrit Pelliot Tibétain 999,” in *Sāryacandrāya: Essays in Honour of Akira Yuyama on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Peter Harrison and Gregory Schopen (Swisttal-Odendorf: Indica-et-Tibetica Verlag, 1998), 87–94.

⁷⁴ P. T. 999, line 1: *sngun lha sras khri gtsug lde brtsan gyi sku yon du*.

⁷⁵ See Pa sangs dbang ’dus and Don grub phun tshogs, *Spu rgyal bod kyi rdo brkos yi ge phyogs bsgrigs kyi ma yig dag bsher dang de’i tshig ’grel dhwangs sang gangs chu* [Clear Glacial Water: Analysis of a Collection of Tibetan Imperial Epigraphy Together with Commentary] (Lha sa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2011), 122–123. See also



with images of Vairocana (very important at the Tibetan court) and Maitreya (also maintaining a strong cult in Dunhuang). The *Ap* inscription is damaged, but we can reconstruct the *dhāraṇī* sufficiently to conclude that it is somewhat longer than even the longest form of the *dhāraṇī* that we find among the thousands of copies of Tibetan and Chinese *Ap* from Dunhuang. More importantly, the contemporaneous inscription below it contains a helpful summary of why one carves, writes, and recites this *dhāraṇī*. The text of the *Ap sūtra* found in Cave 17 of course gives many such reasons itself, and this is its main theme. However, this Lepkhok inscription is important because it represents a more pertinent portrait of contemporaneous ideas about the *sūtra*'s and *dhāraṇī*'s purpose, expressed in the words of whomever dedicated the verse:

This *dhāraṇī* [...] extends life and removes sins. The gods will also protect you. In your next life, you shall not be born in a lower realm, shall not be born a woman, and so on [...] where you wish [...] and shall obtain the power of recollection in your next life. You shall prostrate and offer to the Buddhas of the ten directions. Reciting this, your recitation is multiplied 80,000 times with respect to the heaps of *dharma*. Apart from these many qualities [...].⁷⁶

This sentiment reflects well the *Ap*'s own declared intentions.⁷⁷ In the context of patronage and offerings, Henrik H. Sørensen has recently

the new analysis in Changhong Zhang, “A Stone Carved Old Tibetan *Tshe dpag du myed pa 'I mdo* Found in Leb 'khog of Yu shul, Qinghai Province / 青海玉树勒巴沟发现的古藏文刻经《无量寿宗要经》,” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 64 (2022): 708–735.

⁷⁶ Translation to appear in Dotson and Doney, *A Study of the Tibetan Dunhuang Aparimitāyur-nāma mahāyāna-sūtras*. Pa sangs dbang 'dus and Don grub phun tshogs, *Clear Glacial Water*, 122–123 reads: *sngags 'di [...] du mchog na tshe ring sdig 'byung/ lhas kyang bsrung bar 'gyur/ tshe phyi ma la ngan song du myl skye/ bud myed du skye la stsogs pa dang [...]s [?]gar 'dod [...] tshe phyi ma dran pa thob par 'gyur/ phyogs bcu 'I sangs rgyas la phyag byas zhing mchod par 'gyur/ 'di blags na chos kyi phung po stong phrag brgyad bcu blags par 'gyur ro// gzhan yang yon tan mang mod kyi/ 'dlr ni [...].*

⁷⁷ For the preparation of Dotson and Doney, *A Study of the Tibetan Dunhuang Aparimitāyur-nāma mahāyāna-sūtras*, we were indebted to Jonathan Silk for sharing with us the unpublished 1999 paper that he presented at the International Association of Buddhist Studies seminar in Lausanne: “The most important Buddhist scripture? The Aparimitāyurjñāna and Medieval Buddhism.” See also Jonathan Silk, “A Sūtra for Long Life,” in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 423–430; Richard K. Payne, “The Cult of Ārya Aparimitāyus: Proto-Pure Land Buddhism in the Context of Indian Mahāyāna,” *The Pure Land* 13–14 (1997): 19–36; Richard K. Payne, “Aparimitāyus: ‘Tantra’ and ‘Pure Land’ in Late Medieval Indian Buddhism?” *Pacific World* 3.9 (2007): 273–308; Georgios Halkias, “Aspiring for Sukhāvahī in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Entering the *dhāraṇī* and *buddhakṣetra* of Buddha Aparimitāyus,”

discussed other possible motives behind Dunhuang scripture copying in general, both private and the public ones that concern us here:

Public and, more specifically, organised monastic projects for producing and re-producing Buddhist scriptures [...] by their very nature would be more labour intensive and also more costly (than privately funded scripture copying). They were evidently the most efficient manner of transmitting and preserving Buddhist scriptures in Dunhuang during the period of manuscripts. Being focused projects undertaken by Buddhist specialists, often assisted by outside funding, such reproduction primarily aimed to supply and amend the holdings of the local monastic libraries. This, of course, does not exclude the fact that sets of scriptures produced for monasteries by the local leaders, including the powerful clans, were not also donated with the idea of religious merit behind them.⁷⁸

The benefit for the scribes themselves may have been different, according to their belief systems. We have not yet found direct evidence of this in the *Ap* corpus, but among other texts created as part of the same copying project we find certain important clues. For example, a jotting on P. T. 1425, 294v, discovered “on the otherwise blank verso at the end of a volume of the *Śatasahasrikaprajñāpāramitāsūtra*, contains a prayer that appears to relate to the work of sūtra-copying.”⁷⁹ Brandon Dotson translates this as follows:

By the merit of reciting this holy dharma, may the spiritual teachers, the dharmarāja, the councillors, the patrons, my parents, relations, and friends—and however many endless beings there may be—enjoy release from whatever faults they have committed, and may they be endowed with bodhicitta and be born there in that excellent field.⁸⁰

Journal of Buddhist Studies (Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka) 11 (2013): 77–110; and Georgios Halkias, *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet. With an Annotated Translation and Critical Analysis of the Orgyen-ling Golden Short Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013), 68–75.

⁷⁸ Henrik H. Sørensen, “Offerings and the Production,” 98.

⁷⁹ Brandon Dotson, “The Remains of the Dharma: Editing, Rejecting, and Replacing the Buddha’s Words in Officially Commissioned Sutras from Dunhuang, 820s to 840s,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36–37 (2013–2014): 33.

⁸⁰ Dotson, “The Remains of the Dharma,” 34. Transliterated in Marcelle Lalou, *Inventaire des manuscrits tibétains de Touen-houang conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale (Fonds Pelliot tibétain). Tome III* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1961), 53 (updated to modified Wylie transliteration) as: *dam chos ’dl brjod bsod nams kyis/ / dge bshes chos rgyal blon po dang/yon bdag pha ma gnyen bzhes dang/ / mtha’ yas sems can*



Dotson notes:

This prayer is particularly interesting for the fact that it gives the spiritual teachers (dge gshes) precedence over the king. This matter was very much up for negotiation during this period, in a way that it had not been previously.⁸¹

Private donations and scriptures ordered to be copied by locals around this period may also prove instructive. For instance, Sørensen points out:

[While] motives [for their creation] cover many aspects of Buddhist life, it is clear that those relating to mortuary practices and beliefs tend to dominate the sources. In other words, scriptural donations were in many cases directly concerned with the creation and transference of merit on behalf of a deceased family member.⁸²

He also suggests that shorter texts were more popular for donations than longer and more expensive ones, despite the latter's more 'canonical' status.⁸³ However, larger texts were donated privately during the Tibetan control of Dunhuang, as also described by Gertraud Taenzer:

The concept that religious institutions were a bequest of the Tibetan Emperor did not deter the people of Dunhuang from presenting donations to the temples. Lists in Chinese of donated gifts are extant. Apart from cloth and silk, precious items and robes are listed. P. 2912 includes a certificate of a donation (Chin. *shi* 施) of Kang Xiuhua (康秀華). It gives the price for a privately commissioned *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*. The complete donation amounted to three silver plates weighing 35 *liang* (Chin. *liang* 兩), 100 *shi* (Chin. *shi* 石) of wheat or barley, 50 *shi* of foxtail millet, and four *jin* (Chin. *jin* 斤) of powder—paper, ink and writing had to be supplied by the scribe.⁸⁴

Taenzer also notes the expense of this donation relative to the average wage paid to a farm-hand (180 *shi* per year).⁸⁵

ci snyad pa' / ci nyes pa' I skyon mams kun bral te // byang chub sems dang ldan bzhin du / zhing mchog der ni skye bar 'gyur/ /

⁸¹ Dotson, "The Remains of the Dharma," 34.

⁸² Sørensen, "Offerings and the Production," 76; see also p. 99.

⁸³ Sørensen, "Offerings and the Production," 98–99 concludes: "Among ordinary clerical and lay Buddhists, the sources show that it was popular to have short apocryphal scriptures copied. In fact, we may even go so far as to insist that when it came to private, small-scale scriptural donations, the surviving donors' colophons clearly indicate that apocryphal scriptures were indeed favoured over canonical sutras."

⁸⁴ Taenzer, "Changing Relations," 29.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

Scribes usually wrote nothing but the text itself and a line to say “xxx wrote [this].” Yet, a few exceptions to this scribal practice of only copying the *sūtra* and adding a scribal ‘signature’ exist. Brandon Dotson and I found jottings and names in Chinese on at least thirteen Tibetan *Ap* copies now housed in the British Library, and at least twenty instances of scribes writing “Praise to Amitābha” (Tib. *na mo a myi ta pur*), just before the colophon.⁸⁶ IOL Tib J 310.46 adds the *dhāraṇī* after the end of the text. In a few cases, *Om* is written after the scribe’s name or the editors’ names. Other scribal additions include “dedicated as a gift for the lord, the son of gods,”⁸⁷ and “written as a gift for the great king.”⁸⁸ These additions all fall within the stated belief system of the *Ap*, or what we would imagine to be the intentions of its sponsor(s): to present these as a gift for the Tibetan emperor. Yet, it is interesting that the scribes seemingly make a connection between the *Ap* and Amitābha, whether this means they indentify the latter with the deity Aparimitāyurjñānasuviniścitatejorāja praised within the *Ap*, or at least see it as a fitting ending to this text to include praise to Amitābha in addition.

Other evidence of beliefs expressed by the scribes employed on the imperially sponsored copying project surveyed by Brandon Dotson “range from writing exercises and scribbles to outbursts of profanity and devotion.”⁸⁹ Among the more devotional of these, in the bottom margin of P. T. 1399, 51r, one jotting states, “to the west of here, the world of

⁸⁶ IOL Tib J 310.426, 310.967, 310.1034, 310.1038, 310.1040, 310.1103, IOL Tib J 1598 and 1610 contain Chinese on their versos. IOL Tib J 310.204, 310.908, 310.1187, IOL Tib J 1626 and 1679 contain Chinese in the margins at the crossover between panels. IOL Tib J 310.68, 310.134, 310.258, 310.285, 310.287, 310.392, 310.523, 310.543, 310.553, 310.575–79, 310.603, 310.609, 310.776, 310.1045, 310.1098, 310.1100 and IOL Tib J 1591 all contain some variant of the phrase *na mo a myi ta pur*. On *a myi ta pur* as the Tibetan rendering of the Chinese Amituofo, see Jonathan Silk, *The Virtues of Amitābha: A Tibetan Poem from Dunhuang* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1993), 17–19.

⁸⁷ IOL Tib J 310.168, IOL Tib J 310.939: *rje lha sras gyI sku yon du bsgos the*.

⁸⁸ IOL Tib J 310.699: *rgyal po chen po de'i sku yon du bri*.

⁸⁹ Dotson, “The Remains of the Dharma,” 31. For their expressions of popular or folk beliefs rather than religious content, see Brandon Dotson, “Popular Wisdom in the Margins of the Perfection of Wisdom: On the Structure and Date of Tibet’s Oldest Collection of Proverbs,” in *The Illuminating Mirror: Festschrift for Per K. Sørensen on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Olaf Czaja and Guntram Hazod (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), 119–130.



Sukhāvātī⁹⁰. These indications may feed into recent scholarly discussions regarding the precise relationship between Amitābha, Amitāyus, Aparimitāyus and Aparimitāyurjñānasuviniścitarāja, and that between the Pure Lands Sukhāvātī and Aparimitaguṇasaṃcaya.⁹¹

Evidence of beliefs in other deities are also found among these marginalia, for instance the *mantra* of Avalokiteśvara (P. T. 1453, 1r) and a text related to generating the *maṇḍala* of Samatabhadrī, but some of these could have been written by persons other than the scribes.⁹² One interesting seven-line prayer to Parṇaśabarī and Mahābala ends by situating its petitioner in Dunhuang:

[...] in the region of Shazhou, we pray that you please grant your blessing and your protection to Khang Pel-lek [(Tib. Khang Dpal legs)] and those within his household, and pacify such illnesses as those affecting men and those affecting livestock.⁹³

Thus, though this paper has focused on belief and doctrine, there is also much to say about ritual and liturgy in the same vein.

Exploring such relatively unguarded sentiments in other sources from Mogao Cave 17 and beyond will help in the future to further problematise an easy identification of Dunhuang and Central Tibetan Buddhism during the Imperial period. Furthermore, as Dotson notes:

These prayers and insults, side-by-side, defy any sweeping conclusions about whether the work of these scribes and editors was devotional ritual activity on the one hand or grudging servitude on the other. This helpfully explodes any simplistic spiritual-versus-secular dichotomy. The jottings also give us some idea of the range of these scribes' activities beyond the sūtra-copying project.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ P. T. 1399, 51r: *'di ni nub kyi phyogs rol na bde ba cen kyi 'jlg rt[en]*. In Dotson, "The Remains of the Dharma," 33; see also Lalou, *Inventaire des manuscrits tibétains*, 44.

⁹¹ On this point, see Payne, "Aparimitāyus," 283–86.

⁹² Dotson, "The Remains of the Dharma," 33 and his words of caution on pp. 33–34.

⁹³ P. T. 1485v: [...] *sha cu yul phyogs gyi/ khang dpal legs gyi 'khor d khyim gyi nang 'khor dang bcas/ myi nad dang phyugs nad las tsogs pa zhi cir mdzad cing/ bsrung ba dang bskyab par gyin kyi brlabs par gsol*; translated in Dotson, "The Remains of the Dharma," 33; see also Lalou, *Inventaire des manuscrits tibétains*, 68.

⁹⁴ Dotson, "The Remains of the Dharma," 34.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the disparity between the Central Tibetan Buddhist doctrines espoused and spread by the Tibetan Empire and those of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Dunhuang during the same period. The background of the Tibetans themselves was multi-ethnic, and the Tibetan Empire maintained complex relations with those on its borders, as well as their Buddhism(s). The self-presentation of Tri Songdétsen's royal discourse of doctrine probably had both an internal and also external audience in mind. Its established orthodoxy was apparently spread throughout the Tibetan Empire by means of imperial machinery of state administration, raising the question of to what extent these doctrines were accepted within the belief systems of its more local subjects (new and old).

Turning then to the margins, I focused on Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang, and evidence of the many different beliefs there not contained in Tri Songdétsen's royal discourse authoritative exposition. Of especial interest was belief in the power of the *Ap dhāraṇī* and the copying and merit dedication enjoined by its *sūtra*. This *sūtra* links Central Tibet with Dunhuang through an imperial copying project and the copies of the *sūtra* spread around the region afterwards, suggesting the influence of the Tibetan Empire on the practice and popularity of the *Ap dhāraṇī* and certain connected Buddhist beliefs, though not necessarily their solidification into doctrine (as 'authoritatively handed down belief').

However, surveying some of the jottings in the margins of the *Ap* copies as well as other sources of this time indicate the wealth of other beliefs held in Dunhuang then. These should be weighed against the somewhat false witness of the popularity of *Ap* given by the many copies of its *sūtra* left behind in Mogao Cave 17. These sources reflect not only a multitude of Buddhist beliefs but also varying perspectives on how the Tibetan emperors (whether living or dead) connect with them.

These connections are part of the impact of the Tibetan Empire's Buddhism on Dunhuang and wider Central Asia, whether intended or not, at the end of the first millennium. Central Tibetan Buddhism continued to blend with local beliefs in these regions well into the first centuries of the second millennium. The Dunhuang corpus also shows the long-lasting influence of Tibetan *language* as both an international and a local *lingua franca* among Chinese and Khotanese across all sorts of genres of communication. Takata observes:

BuddhistRoad Paper 1.6. Doney, "On the Margins"



After the expulsion of Tibetan forces from Tun-huang, all political pressure to use the Tibetan language and script would of course have disappeared. But once a particular custom has been established, it does not vanish all that easily, and one must also take into account the possibility that this tradition was preserved by a social stratum that had been alienated from the study of Chinese writing.⁹⁵

Certain beliefs and worldviews come along with language Tibetan use, as well as the continuing influence of Buddhism and ongoing existence of Buddhist lay associations set up under Tibetan rule.⁹⁶ These seem to include a reverence for the importance of the *saṃgha*, certain Buddhist deities, and the Tibetan emperors who supported the former and were in some sense identified as among the pantheon of the latter.

The abiding impact of Tibetan Buddhism among East and Central Asian devotees is now certain. It has become clear that Tibetan Buddhism played a role in the imperial *florissance* among other kingdoms such as the Ordos, Uyghur and Tangut peoples, the latter of whom would later play their own part in world history in their relations with the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368, 元). Thus, the heritage of Tibetan-controlled Dunhuang spread out beyond this region and period to impact international Asia in the centuries to come.

When the Tibetan Empire began to collapse in the mid-ninth century, it gave up control of Guazhou and Dunhuang to the local Zhang clan (張, 848–ca. 915).⁹⁷ In this uprising, the private army of Zhang Yichao (799–872, r. 851–867, 張議潮) was aided by the clergyman Hongbian or Wu Sanzang (d. 862, 洪辯, 吳三藏, Tib. Hong pen) to whose memory the walled up Mogao Cave 17 was originally dedicated.⁹⁸ Some scholars have even suggested that Buddhism was at the root of the general implosion of the Tibetan Empire.⁹⁹ Others instead see the process working in the

⁹⁵ Takata, “Multilingualism in Tun-huang,” 65.

⁹⁶ See Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 41–44, on the increasing popularity of Buddhist lay associations after the end of Tibetan rule and the role they played in binding Dunhuang society together.

⁹⁷ See Taenzer, “Changing Relations,” 19.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 35–37; Yoshino Imaeda, “The Provenance and Character of the Dunhuang Documents,” *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 66 (2008): 81–102; and see now Mélodie Doumy and Sam van Schaik, “The Funerary Context of Mogao Cave 17,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia III—Doctrines, Exchanges with Non-Buddhist Traditions*, ed. Lewis Doney, Carmen Meinert, Yukiyo Kasai, and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

⁹⁹ Hazod, “Tribal Mobility,” 48; Charles Ramble, “Sacral Kings and Divine Sovereigns: Principles of Tibetan Monarchy in Theory and Practice,” in *States of Mind: Power, Place*

opposite direction: economic bankruptcy of the empire having an effect on both its previous expansion and also its ability to fund the monastic institutions, including at Dunhuang.¹⁰⁰ Many on either side of this debate maintain that Buddhism in Central Tibet was exclusively a religion centred around the emperor at his court and not shared by all (with the attendant effects on literacy that this may have had), whereas others dispute this view.¹⁰¹ All serious scholars now agree that there is certainly no evidence that Buddhism in Central Tibet or at Dunhuang or other outlying parts of the empire suffered from the mythical anti-Buddhist persecution by Tri Ü Dumten (r. 841–842, Tib. Khri 'U'i dum brtan) also known as Lang Darma (Tib. Glang Dar ma) that once held a firm place in the historical imagination of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and Tibetan Studies. The evidence instead suggests that the emperors stayed Buddhist to the end.¹⁰²

In post-imperial sources from Dunhuang's Mogao Cave 17, beliefs and doctrines surrounding the Tibetan emperors (now more often described as 'kings', Tib. *rgyal po*) as part of wider Buddhist cosmology become increasingly idealised. They are here first described as celestial bodhisattvas, spreading specifically Vajrayāna Buddhist practices in Tibet.

For instance, IOL Tib J 370/6, now generally known, following Richardson, as *The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven*,¹⁰³ recounts how the two kings, Tri Songtsen and Tri Songdétse, established the teachings in their realms.¹⁰⁴ Historical elements are woven into this statement of belief: it mentions an edict written on a stone pillar, and though it does not describe the content, it describes the edict as recording the imperial attempt to transmit the *dharma* from India to the Tibetan

and the Subject in Inner Asia, *Studies on East Asia*, ed. David Sneath (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 2006), 133.

¹⁰⁰ Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 77–79; Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Central Eurasian Culture Complex in the Tibetan Empire: The Imperial Cult and Early Buddhism," in *Eintausend Jahre Asiatisch-Europäische Begegnung: Gedenkband für Dr. Peter Lindegger*, ed. Ruth Erken (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 233.

¹⁰¹ van Schaik, "Tibetan Buddhism in Central Asia," 62.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰³ Hugh E. Richardson, "'The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven': A Tun-huang Fragment," in *High Peaks Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 76–77 contains a translation of this text, which *ibid.*, 74, wrongly refers to as India Office Library no. 370 (5) instead of (6). For further description of this manuscript, see van Schaik and Doney, "The Prayer, the Priest and the Tsenpo," 196 and n. 49.

¹⁰⁴ See, most recently, Doney, "The Glorification," 9–14.



people. It represents the two rulers as turning straight to the source of Buddhism, India. In this belief-system, these are god-like kings: “Although they [the kings] had the bodies of men, their ways were those of the gods.”¹⁰⁵ They are not deified bodily, from birth or with distinguishing marks (as in later histories), but through their actions. From this Tibetan Buddhist perspective, their study of Indian Buddhism led them to divine action later in life. In this way, Tri Songdétse’s reign is yet again recontextualised for the greater glorification of a re-imagined ‘Tibet’. This representation from Cave 17 links to later Central Tibetan historiography, but I hope to have shown above that we should resist making easy connections between sources from the centre and those from the Dunhuang region.

¹⁰⁵ Richardson, “‘The Dharma that Came Down from Heaven’,” 76; IOL Tib J 370/6, line 12 (according to the numbering of *ibid.*, 75) reads: *myi lus thob kyang lha 'i lugs*.

Abbreviations

- IOL Tib J Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London (formerly in the India Office Library (IOL)).
- P. T. Pelliot Collection of Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

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