CHAPTER SIX

LONG-DISTANCE TRANSMISSION TO CENTRAL ASIAN SILK ROUTES AND CHINA

Previous chapters have retraced paths of Buddhist expansion along the great arteries of the Northern and Southern Routes of the Indian subcontinent, the Old Road to Bactria, and capillaries through the mountain valleys northern Pakistan. In this chapter, the focus shifts to overland networks for long-distance transmission through the desert oases of Central Asia, which functioned as a critical transit zone for the early movement of Buddhism to China. Southern and northern branches of the so-called silk routes in the Tarim Basin of modern Xinjiang in western China merit special consideration, since an enigmatic absence of Buddhist stūpas and monasteries in the early phases of long-distance transmission raises important questions about the history of Buddhism in Central Asia and China. Why does the earliest archaeological evidence of Buddhist institutions in eastern Central Asia appear to belong to a later period than the first Buddhist communities in Han China? Which economic, environmental, and religious conditions permitted Buddhist literary and artistic cultures to eventually flourish, and how were regional monastic institutions linked to Buddhist nodes elsewhere in Central Asia, South Asia, China, and Tibet? How were Buddhist ideas, images, and other materials transformed in the process of transmission through the transit zone of the Tarim Basin? How does the process of long-distance transmission affect the early development of Chinese Buddhism, and do these initial patterns have longer-term ramifications? Although it is not possible to fully address each of these broad questions, brief descriptions of nodes on the silk route network of the Tarim Basin and a reconsideration of Erik Zürcher’s alternative model of long-distance transmission of Buddhism to China will bring dynamic patterns in the historical movement of Buddhism in intermediate zones between India and China into sharp relief. Rather than marginalized transfer points for the passage of Indian missionaries and Chinese pilgrims, Central Asian Buddhist centers developed distinctive religious cultures and played central roles in trans-regional exchanges.
Map 6.1: Tarim Basin (based on Klimburg 1982: 16-17)
Trans-Asian overland networks termed the “Silk Route” or “Silk Road” (*Seidenstraße*) by Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late nineteenth century encompassed numerous primary arteries and secondary capillaries used for various commercial and cultural exchanges, including the transmission of Buddhism between Central Asia and East Asia.¹ While the Silk Road is popularly associated with opulent grandeur and exoticism, silk was only one of many commodities traded on multiple branches of intertwined itineraries. As Xinru Liu remarks,

> The Silk Road was not a single route, nor did it remain stable throughout its existence. Depending on variations in environmental, political, and social conditions, the many branches of the Silk Road rose and fell in their frequency of use. (1998: 2)²

In the broadest sense, the silk routes extended from Rome to China along parts of the itinerary described in the *Parthian Stations* by Isidore of Charax.³ Western Central Asian routes from Margiana (Merv) reached Termes and Bactria in the Oxus valley, or branched to the north through Bukhara and Samarkand in Sogdia. Routes from Sogdia through the Ferghana valley of the Jaxartes River crossed the Alai range to join other routes from the Oxus valley on the other side of the Pamir mountain range.

This treatment is more specifically concerned with lines of communication between China and a chain of garrisons and agricultural oases in the Tarim Basin of modern Xinjiang. Chinese sources refer to

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³ See chapter 3: *Seaports and Maritime Routes across the Indian Ocean* in Chapter 3 pp. 224–225 for a discussion of the overland network from Zeugma on the Euphrates in present-day Iraq to Kandahar in southeastern Afghanistan described in the *Stathmooi Parthikoi* (Schoff 1914).
these frontier borderlands as the “Western Regions” (Xi-yu), a general term for all of Central Asia, but more often applied to “eastern Central Asia” instead of “western Central Asia.” The branches and extensions of the silk routes through eastern Central Asia were connected with South Asia via a network of capillary routes through northern Pakistan, as detailed in the preceding chapter. Like the Northern Route of South Asia, the silk routes connecting China with Central Asia were not well-maintained international highways with fixed unalterable paths, but rather functioned as parallel arteries of commercial exchange, religious transmission, cultural diffusion, and political and military expansion.

Depending on travelers’ goals and destinations, at least three fairly well-defined itineraries were used for traveling around the Tarim Basin. Southern, intermediate, and northern branches of the silk routes around the Takla Makan desert connected the western frontiers with the Han Chinese capitals at Ch’ang-an (modern Xi’an) and Loyang. After following the Ho-xi corridor between the Gobi desert and Nan-shan mountains through Gansu province to Dunhuang, the silk routes divided into northern, southern and central branches. The northern route started from the Jade Gate (Yu-men-kuan) outside of Dunhuang and continued to the Turfan oasis, a rich agricultural, commercial, and religious node described in more detail below. The northern route followed the southern foothills of the Tien-shan range from Turfan to Kucha (an urban center with numerous Buddhist caves nearby) and Kashgar, where the southern route reconnected with the northern branch. The southern route began at the Yang-kuan gate outside of Dunhuang and continued to Miran and Niya. The southern route followed the northern foothills of the Kunlun mountains to Khotan,

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4 Eastern Central Asia has also been known as Chinese Turkestan, Eastern Turkestan, Serindia, Kashgaria, and Chinese Tartary (Härtel and Yaldez 1982: 18). Western Central Asia was formerly known as Soviet Turkestan, now divided into the independent countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizistan, roughly corresponding to the ancient regions of Sogdia, Bactria and Korezm (Rhie, Marylin M. 1999. Early Buddhist art of China and Central Asia. Leiden: Brill, vol. 1, 7, fn. 2). Transoxonia is another name for western Central Asia west of the Pamirs and between the valleys of the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers.

Yarkand and Kashgar. An intermediate route from Dunhuang led to the military garrison at Lou-lan on Lop-nor lake, where branches diverged to Miran on the southern route and Karashahr on the northern route.

While routes through eastern Central Asia were used by the Yuezhi and other nomadic groups in earlier periods, Chinese interest in the Western Regions developed in the second century BCE as a result of conflicts between the Former (Western) Han dynasty and the Xiongnu nomadic confederacy. During the reign of the Han emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE), Zhang Qian was sent as an envoy to the Yuezhi in the Oxus Valley to make an alliance against the Xiongnu. Although this mission ultimately failed, by 111 BCE the Han dynasty controlled the Gansu corridor to Dunhuang, and shortly thereafter the Great Wall was extended to the Jade Gate and a system of 570 watchtowers was constructed along the routes. Following the submission of Lou-lan in 109 BCE, Miran in 77 BCE, and Turfan (a major base of the Xiongnu) between 90–60 BCE, the Han dynasty established a series of military garrisons and irrigated agricultural oases in eastern Central Asia.

According to the *Hou Han shu*:

> Agricultural garrisons were set up in fertile fields and post stations built along the main highways. Messengers and interpreters travelled without cessation, and barbarian merchants and peddlers came to the border [for trade] everyday.

After Han influence declined in the beginning of the first century CE, Ban Chao re-established temporary Han control over the silk routes through eastern Central Asia while serving as Protector General of the Western Regions from 91–102 CE, but local and regional rulers regained power by the end of the second century CE. Chinese control of the Western Regions continued to fluctuate, but political instability...
did not necessarily hinder travel or trade along the silk routes through eastern Central Asia.\textsuperscript{12}

Archaeological and artistic patterns demonstrate significant connections between northwestern South Asia and the southwestern Tarim Basin during the early centuries CE. A brief survey of a few nodes in the Tarim Basin demonstrate intersections between South Asian, Iranian, and Chinese economic and cultural spheres in eastern Central Asia.

\textit{Kashgar}

Kashgar, located at the junction of the northern and southern silk routes on the western edge of the Tarim Basin near the base of the Pamirs, was “the main meeting point of most of the main communication routes between China and the centers of western Central Asia” (Rhie 1999: 247). As a prosperous and fertile oasis in a very strategic location, Kashgar became a protectorate of the Former Han empire in the middle of the first century BCE, but control of Kashgar wavered between Yarkand, Khotan and the Later Han administration of Ban Chao during the first century CE (ibid., 248). The \textit{Hou Han shu} refers to Yuezhi (probably Kuṣāṇa) military and political involvement in the dynastic succession of Kashgar between 87–91 CE and 114–119 CE.\textsuperscript{13}

Cultural links between Kashgar and the northwestern Indian subcontinent are evident in archaeological remains of five large \textit{stūpas} with hemispherical domes (\textit{anādas}) on circular or rectangular foundations, which are very similar to architectural patterns of Buddhist sacred centers in Gandhāra, Taxila, and other sites in Swat and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{14} Petroglyphs of \textit{stūpas} in the upper Indus, particularly at Chilas and Thalpan, exhibit many of the same features, such as hemispherical or parabolic domes on three or more rectangular foundations, like those of \textit{stūpas} at Mauri Tim outside of Kashgar, Subashi

\textsuperscript{12} Hulsewé 1974: 123; Rhie 1999: 161.
\textsuperscript{13} See Chapter 2: \textit{Dynamics of Mobility during the Kuṣāṇa Period especially Kuṣāṇa Conclusions}, pp. 114 ff., note 242.
\textsuperscript{14} According to Rhie, the circular base and hemispherical dome of the \textit{stūpa} at Topa Tim “…generally accord with the early form of Indian \textit{stūpa} and the earliest form in the Gandhāran region” (1999: 249), while \textit{stūpas} at Kurghan Tim, Kizil Debe, Khakanning-shahri (Tegurman), and Mauri Tim with square or rectangular bases and hemispherical domes are very similar to \textit{stūpas} at Taxila, Swat and Afghanistan in the first to third centuries CE (ibid., 250 ff.).
near Kucha, Niya, Endere, and Lou-lan.\textsuperscript{15} While Marilyn Rhie (1999: 252–3) and Aurel Stein (1921: 1.37–8) liken the \textit{stūpa} at Mauri Tim to a \textit{stūpa} drawing from Kara Tepe in Termez and petroglyphs found near Chitral, and draw parallels to developments of \textit{stūpa} types in Bactria, \textit{stūpa} designs on rocks in the upper Indus suggest alternative routes for the transmission of \textit{stūpa} models to eastern Central Asia from Gandhāra, Swat or Kashmir. Foucher’s argument that the Old Road was the primary route for the transmission of Buddhism (Foucher 1942: 1.3) seems to underlie theories of an early diffusion of Buddhist elements from western Central Asia across the Tarim Basin of Xinjiang to China favored by Rhie (1999: 427), although she also finds many strong parallels with the art of Swat and Gandhāra.

\textit{Khotan}

Coins, manuscripts, and other artifacts reflect economic and religious connections between Gandhāra, Gilgit, and Khotan, the major city of the southern silk route for most of the first millennium in tribute relationships with China.\textsuperscript{16} Bilingual coins of Indo-Scythian (Saka) and Kuşāna rulers from South Asia and coins issued by Khotanese kings with legends in Chinese and Kharoṣṭhi suggest ties between Khotan and Gandhara via capillary routes across the Karakorum in the first century.\textsuperscript{17} The distribution of bull and camel copper coins of Kujula Kadphises and copper drachmas of Kaniska in Gandhāra, Swat, Kashmir, and Khotan leads David MacDowall to conclude that that “[b]oth denominations must have been the copper currency of the Karakorum country and the upper Indus valleys” (1985: 156) and that “coinage reinforces other evidence of developing links between the Tarim basin and upper Indus” (1985: 157).\textsuperscript{18} Joe Cribb has identified thirteen


\textsuperscript{16} Whitfield 2004: 34–42, 133–168.


\textsuperscript{18} MacDowall’s conclusion that a “northern route” for the establishment of Indo-Scythian and Kuşāna empires is demonstrated by the names of Maues, Gondophares, and Kuşāna rulers in Kharoṣṭhi inscriptions from the Northern Areas is based on unreliable identifications of these names by Dani 1985. The association between Kaniska and Khotan in later literary sources can not be confirmed.
groups of Sino-Kharoṣṭhī copper coins from Khotan adapted from the copper coins of first and second century CE Saka and Kuśāṇa rulers with similar Kharoṣṭhī legends, images of horses and Bactrian camels, and weight standards. According to Cribb, these Sino-Kharoṣṭhī coins from Khotan provide evidence for a “secondary route” across the Karakorum mountains directly to Gandhāra, since “[i]t is Gandhāran cultural and political influence which is most strongly seen in the coinage of Khotan” (1985: 145).

The distribution of Buddhist manuscripts suggests textual transmission between Gandhāra, Gilgit and Khotan. An incomplete manuscript of a Gāndhārī version of the Dharmapada found in a cave at Kohmārī Mazār near Khotan in 1892 may have been brought from Gandhāra to Khotan sometime after the late first or second century CE. Close connections between monastic communities in Gilgit and Khotan during the seventh century CE are evident in the preservation of similar Mahāyāna sūtra texts (particularly the Saṃghātā-sūtra), shared palaeographic affinities and Śaka orthographic features, and Iranian proper names in colophons of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts from Gilgit. Perhaps Khotanese scribes responsible for copying the manuscripts came to Gilgit, where their work was supported by the Palola Śāhis, who were avid Buddhist patrons. Such relationships between the Palola Śāhis, scribes from Khotan, and resident communities of Buddhist monks reflect strong cultural, religious, political, and, in all likelihood, commercial ties between Gilgit and Khotan.

Many other religious and commercial items were imported to Khotan from the northwestern Indian subcontinent. Small Gandhāran stone sculptures, including an image of emaciated Siddhārtha belong-

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19 The dates proposed by Cribb for Sino-Kharoṣṭhī coins from Khotan in the first and second century before ca. 132 diverge from the dates between ca. 175–220 CE proposed by Lin Meicun, ca. mid-second century to fourth century suggested by Ma Yong, the time of Ban Chao (late first century) to third century accepted by Hsia Nai, and the Warring States period according to Enoki Kazuo (Rhie 1999: 339, fn. 31).

20 It is uncertain whether or not this manuscript edited by John Brough (1962) was actually written in Khotan, since arguments for its local composition based on the scroll format and linguistic features have been disconfirmed by recent discoveries of other Gāndhārī scrolls, including one example of another Dharmapada fragment (Lenz 2003; Salomon 1999: 102, 120, 129–30).


22 Hinüber 1983b: 58.
ing to a portable diptych, steatite fragments of a miniature stūpa, and moulded terracotta figures of Herakles and Serapis with Harpocrates arrived in Khotan via long-distance networks for trade and cultural transmission. 23 Such images transported to Khotan may reflect a transmission of Gandhāran Buddhist iconography and styles. Fragments of finely woven tabby silk from China reflect long-distance trade or tribute relations with Khotan during the third or early fourth centuries CE. 24 While Khotan flourished as a regional commercial and religious center of the southwestern Tarim Basin and served as a connecting point between China, India, western Central Asia, and Iran, stūpas and monasteries were not apparently constructed before the third century. Marylin Rhie tentatively concludes that “Buddhist establishments may have been rather well established in Khotan by 200 AD” (1999: 322), but she dates sculptures from the Rawak stūpa located north-east of Khotan in the late third to early fourth centuries CE. Thus, Khotan, which later became a major Buddhist center on the southern silk route, lacks definite archaeological evidence for residential Buddhist monasteries before the late third century.

**Oases of Kroraina: Niya, Endere, Miran, Loulan**

Oases located east of Khotan along branches of the southern silk routes in the Tarim Basin functioned as nodes in regional trade networks and as centers for Buddhist art and architecture. Close to one thousand Kharoṣṭhī documents in the Niya Prakrit dialect of Gandhārī from sites around Niya, Endere, and Loulan provide interesting snapshots of commercial relationships involving administrative officials, local merchants, and Buddhist monks in the southern Tarim Basin during the third to fourth centuries CE. 25 Kharoṣṭhī continued to be employed

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24 Rhie 1999: 276, fig. 4.15c.

for writing administrative documents in the southern Tarim Basin until at least 321 CE, probably after it had fallen out of general use in Gandhāra. The period of the Kharoṣṭhī documents in Shan-shan between the third to fourth centuries CE corresponds to the period of transition from Kharoṣṭhī to Brāhmī in graffiti in northern Pakistan. The subsequent decline of the southern silk route kingdom of Shan-shan during the late fourth and fifth century led to the extinction of Gāndhārī as a living language. A recently-discovered Buddhist inscription from Endere, paintings from Miran, and stūpas at Lou-lan provide valuable evidence for the history of Buddhism in Central Asia. An epithet of a Kroraina / Shan-shan king (probably Amgoka) describing him as a Mahāyāna devotee (Mahayana-[sam]prasti[da]sa) in a Kharoṣṭhī inscription from Endere provides epigraphic evidence for Mahāyāna patronage sometime in the middle of the third century. Exquisite mural paintings of the Buddha and disciples and the Viśvantara Jātaka in shrines III and V at Miran display stylistic similarities with the artistic traditions of northwestern India, but also reflect ties with the art of Iran and western Central Asia in the fourth and fifth centuries. At least five stūpas in the Lou-lan area on the northern shore of lake Lop Nor, including a very large monumental stūpa within the city walls, reflect the roles of Lou-lan as the capital of the Kroraina kingdom, a prosperous commercial center on an intermediate route through the Tarim Basin, and the headquarters of the regional Buddhist saṅgha. The economic prosperity of agricultural oases and trading centers on the southern silk route enabled Buddhist communities to establish stūpas in Niya, Endere,
Cherchen, Charklik, and Miran, and the great stūpa in Lou-lan. Just as the architectural forms of these stūpas are very similar to stūpas in Gandhāra and Bactria, Buddhist sculptures from Miran (and from the Rawak stūpa near Khotan) which belong to the fourth-fifth century “maintain considerable links with the art of the greater Gandhāra area, especially with Swat and probably Kashmir” (Rhie 1999: 425).

Political relations between Kroraina and China fluctuated from vigorous Chinese control while Ban Chao was Protector General between 80–104 CE to “virtual independence” (Rhie 1999: 331) from the last quarter of the second century CE to the third century. 31 Even during periods in the late second century CE when China lost control of Shan-shan, luxury commodities from Central Asia continued to be in demand in the Chinese capital at Loyang. 32 In exchange for luxury items from the Western Regions, Chinese silk was probably used in commercial transactions, since silk was preferred to copper coins as currency. 33 Silk fragments found at Lou-lan and Niya may have been used in transactions, since the commercial value of silk is featured in Kharoṣṭhī documents. 34

During the period when the Tibetan empire vied for control of Central Asia with the Chinese and Arabs, cross-cultural contact with Chinese in Dunhuang (controlled by Tibet from 786–848) and with local inhabitants of Khotan and Miran (directly administered by Tibetan garrisons) is reflected in Old Tibetan Annals and Chronicles.

31 Chinese documents found at Lou-lan and Niya with dates between 252—330 CE suggest that Chinese control was re-asserted after the middle of the third century (Rhie 1999: 333–5). Brough (1965: 600 ff.) proposes that the title of jitu(m)gha (corresponding to Chinese shi-zhong) in Kharoṣṭhī documents indicated the submission of the Shan-shan ruler Āmgoka in 263 CE or slightly later. However, he points out that the contrast between numerous Chinese documents found at Lou-lan and relatively few Chinese documents recovered at Niya (especially compared with the large number of Kharoṣṭhī documents) shows that “The position of the Chinese in the two principal towns was obviously very different” (1965: 603), since Lou-lan functioned as a garrison with a significant Chinese administration, while the Chinese presence at Niya was probably restricted to a frontier guard-post or customs checkpoint.

32 Rhie 1999: 331.


34 Rhie 1999: 422–3, 467. In a list compiled by Raschke 1978: 791, fn. 627 based on Burrow, Thomas. 1937. The Language of the Kharosti Documents from Chinese Turkestan. Cambridge: Univ. Press, several Kharoṣṭhī documents from Niya (nos. 3, 35, 225, 345, 348, 419, 489) and Endere (no. 660) refer to transactions and punishments involving rolls of silk (patā). Other documents refer to thefts and gifts of silk items (nos. 149, 318, 345, 353, 566), and one document (no. 35) refers to merchants from China involved in an investigation of a debt of silk.
in Tibetan Buddhist texts. For example, the *Inquiry of Vimalaprabhā* (translated from Sanskrit before 812 CE) is an *ex eventu* prophecy of relations between the kings of Khotan and Skardu (located in Baltistan in northern Pakistan) and incorporates popular narratives that associate female rulers descended from ogres (*rākṣasīs*) with the production of gold.\(^{35}\)

*Turfan*

Intermediate routes through Karashahr and northern routes through Turfan probably eclipsed the southern route by the fifth century CE.\(^{36}\) Many of the most important archaeological sites on the northern silk route are clustered around Kucha and the Turfan oasis. A local dynasty patronized Buddhism in Turfan by the end of the fourth century, and the earliest literary evidence for local Buddhism is a translation by Dharmarakṣa dated in 296.\(^{37}\) Buddhist manuscripts from monasteries in and around Turfan and cave paintings from Bezeklik provide ample evidence of Buddhism “above the ground” but there is little evidence for Buddhist items in tomb inventories “below the ground” until the sixth century.\(^{38}\) Early evidence for Buddhism in Turfan supports Zürcher’s hypothesis of long-distance transmission, since “Monasticism seemingly leaped across an underdeveloped Central Asia to the wealthy cities of China, only filtering back to Central Asia when economic conditions allowed it” (Hansen 1998: 38).

*Kucha*

Mural paintings in cave monasteries, Buddhist manuscripts, and archaeological remains of *stūpas* from sites around Kucha in the northwestern Tarim Basin display various continuities with Buddhist

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\(^{35}\) The *Inquiry of Vimalaprabhā* is translated by Thomas 1935: 137–258 and commented upon by Uray 1979: 288–289 (also briefly discussed in Chapter 3, subchapter: *Northern Route (Uttarāpatha)* p. 196. fn. 34; Jettmar 1975: 299–312; and Jettmar 1993: 107–109. The conflict between Tibetan forces and China for control of Skardu in the eighth century is attested in Tibetan Annals covering the years 721–760 CE (Uray 1979: 282–3; Beckwith 1987). The ramifications of this conflict for the upper Indus region of northern Pakistan are treated in Chapter 2, subchapter: *Palola Sāhis*.  

\(^{36}\) Rhie 1999: 392.  


\(^{38}\) Hansen 1998: 50.
artistic and literary cultures. Buddhist paintings from the Kizil caves, the earliest of which may belong to the fourth and fifth centuries, demonstrate stylistic affinities with artistic traditions of Swat, Gandhāra, Sasanian Iran, and China. Härtel and Yaldiz adopt the general distinction between “an older, western school (about AD 500–700) around Kucha, and an eastern school of later date (about AD 650–950) in the region of the Turfan oasis” (1982: 47). Early paintings from the cave monastery of Kizil (outside of Kucha) which preserve stylistic features related to sculptures from Swat and a Buddhist reliquary from Kucha with Gandhāran and Iranian elements demonstrate certain continuities between the art of the western part of the northern silk routes and the artistic traditions of Swat, Gandhāra and Sasanian Iran into the middle of the first millennium CE. Collections of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts (including some Kharoṣṭhī fragments) from the second to sixth centuries suggest links with centers of Sarvāstivādin Buddhist scholasticism in Kashmir, Gandhāra, and possibly Mathura. Brāhmī was subsequently adopted for writing Buddhist manuscripts and secular documents in vernacular languages of eastern Central Asia such as Tocharian (or Kuchean) and Khotanese Śaka. Graffiti and caravan passes written in Tocharian (or Kuchean) testify to long-distance travel by Buddhist monks and merchants during the seventh century. Among the archaeological remains at Subashi, the ancient urban center of Kucha, are two large monastery sites with small circular stūpas encased within larger stūpas, which Rhie attempts to date from the second or third centuries.

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40 This general distinction does not mean that all of the paintings in cave monasteries near Kucha exhibit the same style and belong to the same period between ca. 500–700 CE. Härtel and Yaldiz 1982: 49 point out that the Chinese style of Buddhist painting which was predominant in the Turfan area is also found in paintings at Kumtura near Kucha. According to Bussagli, Mario. 1979 [1963]. Central Asian Painting, Treasures of Asia. Geneva: Skira, “It is generally considered that painting at Kucā began in the fourth century AD and continued, somewhat attenuated, throughout the eighth century, and even beyond” (1979 [1963]: 71).
42 Sander 1999: 75 ff.
“if not earlier” (2002: 644), but the arguments for such early dates are inconclusive.

Material remains from sites along the northern and southern silk routes around the Tarim Basin in eastern Central Asia reflect close relations between long-distance trade and patterns of cultural and religious transmission from the northwestern Indian subcontinent and western Central Asia. Since the most direct routes from South Asia to the Tarim Basin passed through the mountains and river valleys of northern Pakistan, this intermediate border region probably played a crucial role in transmitting architectural forms, artistic elements, and South Asian languages written in Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī scripts to eastern Central Asia. Branches of the silk routes which extended westward beyond eastern Central Asia to Sogdia and Bactria and southward to Kashmir and Gandhāra via capillary routes in northern Pakistan continued to flourish from the Later Han period in the first centuries CE through the Wei and Tang periods in the middle to end of the first millennium CE, even though the Xiongnu, autonomous local and regional rulers, and Tibetans, Turks, and other foreign powers constantly challenged Chinese control of the Western Regions. Although the routes through modern Gansu to Xinjiang were originally established in order to secure China’s western frontiers against nomadic raids, tribute relations involving gift exchanges of rolls of Chinese silk for horses from Ferghana, jade from Khotan, and other luxury commodities eventually led to extensive commercial and cultural contacts between China and Central Asia.

**Long-distance Transmission Reconsidered**

The movement of Buddhism across geographical and cultural frontiers between northwestern South Asia and Central Asia was a critical step in the early spread of Buddhism to China. As already discussed, Erik Zürcher emphasized that models for gradual diffusion by “contact expansion” of Buddhist monasteries along trade routes connecting urban centers and agricultural oases do not apply to the earliest stages of the establishment of Buddhism in Xinjiang.44 Rather than accepting

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44 Chapter 1: *Diffusion vs. Long-Distance Transmission* (pp. 4–7) introduces models of long-distance transmission developed by Zürcher in some of his later publications (1990, 1999).
diffusion-based theories, Zürcher develops an alternative paradigm of “long-distance transmission” for the cross-cultural movement of Buddhism in the “transit zone” of Xinjiang during the first centuries CE. The process of long-distance transmission closely corresponds to the movement of Buddhism through the upper Indus region of northern Pakistan, which also functioned as a transit zone in the periods before Buddhist stūpas and monasteries were established. Inscriptions and rock drawings created by travelers in the early to middle first millennium CE now provide ample evidence for the use of direct routes from Gandhāra, Swat and Kashmir through northern Pakistan to the Tarim Basin. Networks of capillary routes through northern Pakistan were not the only routes for the transmission of Buddhism to Central Asia and China, but they did serve as critical links for long-distance travel, trade and religious and cultural transmission between Buddhist centers in the Indian subcontinent and southern silk route oases in Xinjiang. However, many scholars still consider indirect routes from Taxila through the Hindu Kush in present-day Afghanistan to the Oxus valley the most likely path for the propagation of Buddhism to western Central Asia, eastern Central Asia and China.

The diffusion of Buddhism by contact expansion was more difficult, if not impossible, in the high mountains of the Himalayas, Hindu Kush, and Karakorum, in the desert of the Tarim Basin, and in other areas which lacked arable land to maintain the local population above subsistence levels. The early transmission of Buddhism from the northwestern Indian subcontinent to Central Asia probably did not result from contact expansion, since surplus resources necessary to support the establishment of Buddhist monastic institutions were not available. For this reason, the desert environment of Serindia (modern Xinjiang) remained devoid of Buddhist monasteries during the Later Han period in the first centuries CE. According to Zürcher, “The unanimous testimony of the archaeological data and the Chinese written sources leads us to conclude that at the time when Buddhism started to settle in China, in the first two centuries of our era, Serindia still was virtually untouched by monastic Buddhism” (1990: 176). Zürcher maintains that the earliest reliable archaeological evidence for the establishment of Buddhist monasteries in the Tarim Basin belongs to periods after

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ca. 250 CE, about one century later than the first translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese arrived in the Chinese capital of Loyang and nearly two centuries after the first Chinese literary references to Buddhist monks.\textsuperscript{46} However, he acknowledges that “the oases in the Lop Nor region and along the southern branch of the Silk Road present a somewhat different picture” than sites along the northern silk routes, since “the traces of Buddhist activity reach back to a somewhat earlier period” (Zürcher 1990: 173), especially in the Kroraina kingdom between Niya and Lou-lan and in Khotan.\textsuperscript{47} Zürcher adopts a “working hypothesis” that the development of Chinese types of irrigated agricultural colonies (\textit{tuntian}) in Xinjiang during the second century CE which led to “explosive population growth…urbanization, a flourishing trade, and the formation of a prosperous urban elite” (1990: 181) created the conditions necessary for monastic Buddhism to flourish in southern silk route centers of Khotan, Miran and Lou-lan by the middle of the third century. Before this period, “Serindia appears to have played the role of a neutral transit zone” (ibid.) in long-distance transmission of Buddhism to the Chinese capital at Loyang.

Zürcher proposes that the “embryonic and archaic phases” (1999: 15) of Buddhism in China during the Later Han period resulted from long-distance transmission rather than contact expansion. Features of Later Han Buddhism directly related to long-distance transmission (in contrast to features which would result from contact expansion) include “extreme hybridization, the diffuse incorporation of disparate elements, no coherent complexes of doctrines or scriptures, but rather a random collection of single translated texts” (Zürcher 1990: 182). Zürcher distinguishes three different “sectors” in the “composite phenomenon” (1990: 159 ff.) of Han Buddhism:

1. Hybrid court Buddhism at the élite level
2. Nucleus of monastic Buddhism centered in the “Church of Loyang”
3. Diffuse adoption of Buddhist elements at the sub-élite level.

\textsuperscript{46} Zürcher 1999: 13.
\textsuperscript{47} See Khotan subsection earlier in this chapter.
The first “hard evidence” (ibid.) for the existence of Buddhism at the élite court level is an imperial edict issued in 65 CE which praises Liu Ying, the King of Chu:48

The king of Chu recites the subtle words of Huang-lao49 and respectfully performs the gentle sacrifices to the Buddha. After three months purification and fasting, he has made a solemn covenant (or: a vow) with the spirits. What dislike or suspicion (from Our part) could there be, that he must repent (of his sins)? Let (the silk which he sent for) redemption be sent back, in order thereby to contribute to the lavish entertainment of the upāsakas and śramaṇas. (Zürcher 1959: 1.27)

Chinese literary sources of the second century CE such as the “Rhapsody of the Western Capital” refer to Buddhist monks (sangmen), relics (sheli), and “white elephants” (a symbol of the Buddha’s conception).50 These references show that some popular aspects of Buddhism were adopted in a hybrid cult associated with court circles, but “there is no suggestion of any kind of monastic organization” (Zürcher 1990: 162).

In contrast, the activities of An Shigao in Loyang beginning before ca. 150 CE herald the entry of “organized monastic Buddhism” (Zürcher 1990: 163). An Shigao and his co-translators were foreign transplants rather than local enthusiasts for hybrid novelties. Not only was there a large chronological gap of several decades between the embryonic hybrid cult and An Shigao’s arrival, but “there is no evidence of any connection between this embryonic Buddhism, with its quaint terminology and its puzzling relations with court and courtiers, and the activities initiated by An Shigao” (Zürcher 1991: 283).51 Early Chinese translations by An Shigao, Lokakṣema, and other Parthian, Sogdian, and foreign translators suggest that the texts were intended for a select group of Chinese lay devotees interested in meditation techniques, breath control, and esoteric traditions, which provided distinct alternatives to traditional Chinese systems of belief and practice.52 Since ordination formulae were not translated into Chinese

48 The kingdom of Chu corresponded to northern Jiangsu province and southern Shandung, and the court was located at Pengcheng (Zürcher 1959: 1.26).
49 “The study and practice of Taoist arts which were supposed to lead to bodily immortality, and which were much en vogue at the imperial court and among the princes around the middle of the first century” (Zürcher 1959: 1.26).
until the third century, most of the early Chinese followers were not monks, but clerks, copyists, traders, and artisans who belonged to a literate intermediate level of society (‘gentry’). Although distinctions between monks and laymen were probably not so important, “the earliest community bears the stamp of authenticity: a nucleus of monks who devote themselves to the practice of the religious life; active in translating, preaching and explication, and supported by a circle of upāsakas” (Zürcher 1990: 163).

The origins of the early foreign translators reflect geographical patterns of the initial long-distance transmission from northwestern South Asia and western Central Asia. Based on the names, ethnonyms, and provenance of the earliest groups of eminent monks preserved in Chinese biographical sources (Gaoseng zhuan and Xu gaoseng zhuan), Zürcher (1999: 29–33) distinguishes four phases of Buddhist propagation between the second to fifth centuries CE:

1. An early phase from ca. 150 to ca. 270 CE of “western Central Asian dominance” by Yuezhi, Parthians and Sogdians during the period of the Kuśāṇa empire
2. Another phase from ca. 270 to ca. 380 CE marks a decline in the number of foreigners, but the influx of translators from Khotan and Kucha “reflects the beginning of a flourishing monastic Buddhism in the oasis states from the early third century” (1999: 32)
3. A phase of “maximum activity” (ibid.) from ca. 380 to ca. 450 CE by prominent monks coming from northern India, especially Kashmir
4. A final phase of “modest input” (ibid.) from Buddhist centers in Southeast Asia, especially from Funan in the lower Mekong delta, beginning in the middle of the fifth century.

Famous translators from Xinjiang with foreign backgrounds such as Dharmarakṣa (ca. 233–311 CE), a Yuezhi monk from Dunhuang, and Kumārajīva (344–413 CE), a monk of Indian descent from Kucha who studied in Kashgar and Kashmir (Jibin), came to the Chinese Buddhist centers of Ch’ang-an and Loyang after the period of initial long-

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distance transmission. Although traditional biographies claim that Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva came from the Tarim Basin in the third and fourth centuries, there is surprisingly little archaeological evidence for Buddhist monasticism in eastern Central Asia prior to periods when they began their extraordinary careers as prolific translators of Mahāyāna sūtras and other Buddhist texts from Indic languages into Chinese.

At the beginning of the fifth century, “a highly standardized homogenous scriptural language” (Zürcher 1999: 25) for Chinese translations of Buddhist texts was developed by Kumārajīva and his collaborators, whose translation projects were patronized by the court rather than private devotees. In the oral/aural/written translation process, an “international translation committee” (Boucher 1998: 498) of Chinese and Central Asian students, monks and scribes often assisted the foreign masters, who usually do not seem to have been able to write Chinese (with the exception of Kumārajīva). In Zürcher’s opinion, “the role these foreign masters played in the actual formation of Chinese Buddhism appears to be less decisive and less substantial than we would assume it to be at first sight” (1999: 58) since they only supplied the “raw materials” of written or memorized texts, while Chinese assistants and Central Asian intermediaries did the real work of reinterpreting and reformulating the translations.

While Chinese Buddhist literary sources preserve more information about “high-class translators” (Zürcher 1999: 5) who received official patronage and élite scholar-monks who belonged to “the tiny tip of the iceberg” (ibid., 18), many anonymous foreign monks (huseng) were responsible for the transmission of Buddhism at sub-élite levels. These foreign monks (whose biographies are rare) fulfilled numerous roles as magicians, miracle-workers, faith healers, meditation experts, ordination experts, and authenticators of relics (ibid., 5, 19, 53). They were involved in the ongoing “diffuse and unsystematic adoption of Buddhist elements” (ibid., 19) and promoted the veneration of images of the Buddha, six-tusked elephants, and auspicious relics which were associated with the afterlife in popular beliefs and practices. Such foreign monks also produced “anonymous translations” (shiyi) which

represent “a ‘special’ layer in early Chinese Buddhism, a type of Buddhism that is less sophisticated, less scholastic and more laity-oriented than the level represented by foreign masters who are known by name” (ibid., 24).\textsuperscript{56} According to Zürcher, “The vast majority consists of free (and sometimes drastically shortened) versions of \textit{sūtras} taken from the \textit{Āgamas}, or narratives of the \textit{Jātaka} and \textit{Avadāna} type, which suggests a public of lay readers satisfied with simple, edifying stories” (ibid., 22). Similar genres of Buddhist literature are well represented in an early collection of Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts in the British Library.\textsuperscript{57} 

\textit{Conclusions}

During the early phases of Buddhism in China in the Later Han period, the first Iranian and western Central Asian foreign monks and translators were active in Loyang about a century before residential monasteries were established in the Tarim Basin. The paucity of archaeological evidence in the transit zone of Xinjiang does not corroborate a pattern of diffusion by contact expansion from monastery to monastery following major trade routes. Élite centers of Buddhist literary and artistic production only develop later when sufficient economic surpluses are available for making donations to support year-round monastic institutions. However, such a network of monasteries was not necessary for sub-élite agents of Buddhist transmission who crossed formidable boundaries in the mountainous northwestern frontiers of South Asia and the Takla Makan desert in eastern Central Asia, but who remain largely anonymous in literary traditions.

These concluding observations are not intended to reify a false or misleading dichotomy between contact expansion at élite levels of eminent monks and nuns eulogized in official hagiographies and long-distance transmission at the sub-élite levels of itinerant Buddhist merchants, wonder-workers, and spell-casters. Certainly there was considerable overlap, since prominent foreign translators were actively

\textsuperscript{56} Zürcher 1999: 24 notes that about 100 “anonymous translations” are preserved in the Taishō canon, but observes that the number should be much larger, since many of the later attributions to early non-anonymous translators are unreliable (ibid., fn. 15). More than 317 anonymous texts (about twice the number attributed to specific translators) are listed by Dao’an (314–385 CE) in \textit{Zongli zhongjing mulu}, but 90% of these have been lost (ibid., 20–21).

\textsuperscript{57} Lenz 2003; Lenz 2010; Salomon 1999: 24–6, 30–39.
engaged in long-distance transmission and everyday monks and nuns clearly benefited from the trickle-down effects of “high level patronage” of monastic centers. Nevertheless, Zürcher’s heuristic distinction between patterns of contact expansion and long-distance transmission is useful for generating alternative paradigms to the spread of Buddhism by diffusion.