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)