The Origin of the Visual Language

Arcane Texts and Visionary Representations

The field of Central Asian meditation literature sparked renewed interest in 1964 when Schlingloff published his reconstruction and translation of a fragmented text written on the bark of birch trees, which the third German expedition of 1905–07 had brought back to Berlin from Qizil itself. The manuscript is known as Yogaehrbuch or Yoga Manual, a provisional title given by Schlingloff since the original one was missing. This publication caused a second awakening in that its repercussions were similar to those which followed the Hoernle translation of the Bow-
er Manuscript in the early 1890s, when interest in the Cen-
tral Asian field began. Like six other fragments retrieved in the Tarim Basin, the Yoga Manual is written in North Turkestan Brahmi, Type A, a script developed by the Toch-
arians from northwestern Indian scripts. In spite of the very damaged state of the work, Schlingloff succeeded in recovering forty-two percent of the original text. Remarkably, this fragmented manuscript and others related to it came to light exactly at the same time as the ruins of monasteries – surface temples and cliff caves – were dis-
covered, as if to underline the parallel between the two and hint at the possibility that Kuča monastic communities and their art depended on or were nurtured by this literature.

The novel form of religiosity contained in the Yoga Manual, which took mind concentration as a salvific tool leading to enlightenment, has also become the motivating factor and the springboard of the present work. Far from leading to enlightenment, has also become the motivating praxis sprang most likely from Sarvastivadin belief, but it also acquired indigenous Kuča characteristics before un-
obtrusively disappearing. Nobuyoshi Yamabe in his doc-
toral dissertation studied other meditation works whose origin he believed to be Central Asian and whose text con-
tained subject matter similar to that of the Yoga Manual. He came to the conclusion that this type of literature was popular in the Tarim Basin, where it remained localized, at least most of it, as it was not translated into Chinese or Tibetan. Centuries later, similarity with the meditation praxis described in the manual is found in Mongolian Eso-
teric Buddhism, an affinity already noticed by Schlingloff him-
self. In 2006 Hartmann and Yamabe added to the re-
print of the Yoga Manual the translation of other frag-
ments with the same provenance and belonging to the same kind of meditation practice, such as those in the Paris Pelliot Collection, thereby confirming the popularity of this mental praxis and extending the field of research even further.

Besides agreeing that the Yoga Manual retrieved in Qizil is indigenous to the Kuča geographic milieu, scholars by and large concur that the manual is a pre-Mahayana work; it is not a canonical piece, but is strictly a teaching tool of meditation and the creation of the Sarvastivadin School, which prevailed among Kuča monks. A specific date is not given by Schlingloff. Perhaps one could suggest a 5th cen-
tury date following Sander’s dating of the sutras retrieved

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1 I thank Lore Sander for this information.
in Kuča (although she does not specifically mention the Yoga Manual among them).5

While the impact of the Sarvastivadin is undeniable, Dharmaguptaka followers were also present in Kuča, albeit not as influential as the Sarvastivadins, as I discuss below. We gauge the importance of the Sarvastivadin School on the basis of the retrieval of quite a few written sources reflecting their teaching, an indication that the westernmost oases of the Northern Silk Route were Sarvastivadin territory from Kushan time onward, 1st-7th century CE, Kuča being its most orthodox center. By 671 when Yijing visited Kuča, only a few Dharmaguptaka monks may have been active in the kingdom; their diminished importance is deduced from the fact that they were not even mentioned in Xuanzang's records of fifty years earlier.6 Furthermore, the prevalence of Mainstream Buddhism in Kuča rests on the fact that Mahayana texts, in their entirety, were not found in Kuča, although we cannot exclude the possibility that trends of the later tradition might have circulated in the local Mainstream, or Nikaya, communities.7

Sarvastivadins evolved from the Mahasasakas and Mahasangikas. Their origin was in Mathura after the Second Council, from where they fanned out to Gandhara and Kashmir, then to Central Asia and China. During the reign of Ashoka, in the 3rd century BCE, they reached Kashmir, then to Central Asia and China. Since their inception and throughout their mature stage in Central Asia, Sarvastivadins held fast to pure Mainstream Buddhist teaching stressing the observance of moral precepts (sila) and of meditation (samadhi), requirements to which they remained always committed, their goal being arhatship, rarely pratyekahood and not yet buddhahood.8

The Sarvastivadin emphasis on samadhi found expression in miraculous power and their stress on observance of the paramita resulted in their use of jataka and avadana stories to spread Buddha's teaching. They conceived Buddha as an actual human being, but magnified his attainments and powers, moving gradually toward a conception of him as a superhuman being. This development, in my view, is reflected in the décor of Kuča caves, in which we are treated to endless stories of his past lives and avadana stories, then to major episodes of Buddha simultaneously as teacher and meditator-miracle-maker, and finally to superhuman being in the monumental image caves. Sander interprets slightly differently how Sarvastivadin beliefs affected the décor of the devotional central pillar caves. Her opinion is based on the fact that this school placed the story of Buddha's life in the sutra section, instead of in the vinaya, or discipline, section, with the intention of emphasizing Buddha's moral teaching which leads to enlightenment. Thus, in Kuča caves the décor consists of preaching scenes (on lateral walls), avadanas and jatakas (on the ceiling) and the Parinirvana cycle in the rear area of the cave.9 Sander's interpretation omits the aspect of Shakyamuni as mediator and miracle-worker.

Schlingloff himself acknowledged that the manual was aligned with Sarvastivadin teachings since it adopts the same dogma and mythology in addition to following this school's cosmology.10 Moreover, the Yoga Manual, in

7 The writings of Sander on the importance of the Sarvastivadins in Kuča are several and pivotal. See in particular Lore Sander, “Early Prakrit and Sanskrit Manuscripts from Xinjiang (second to fifth/sixth centuries C.E.): Paleography, Literary Evidence, and their Relation to Buddhist Schools,” in Collection of Essays 1993: Buddhism Across Boundaries: Chinese Buddhism and the Western Regions, eds. Erik Zürcher and Lore Sander (Taipei: Fo Guang Shan Foundation for Buddhist & Culture Education, 1999), 61–106. Sander, “The Earliest Manuscripts from Central Asia and the Sarvastivada Mission,” 133–56. The abundance of Sarvastivadin fragmentary written sources found in the Kuča area is proven by the creation of a still ongoing dictionary the Sanskrit-wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Fundten. Ernst Waldschmidt conceived it, but Heinz Bechert established it as a project of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. The starting point was 1968, but the first fascicle appeared in 1975, Waldschmidt being the editor of the first five volumes. I am grateful to Lore Sander for this information.
9 Sander, “Early Prakrit and Sanskrit Manuscripts from Xinjiang,” 88 note 63.
10 Schlingloff, Ein buddhistisches Yogalehrbuch, 10, 26, 31, 129. Schlingloff is also aware of the presence of incipient Mahayana traits, as in the text meditation culminates with a Nirvana experience. Dietz discusses Sarvastivadin cosmology in: Siglinde Dietz, “Die Kosmologie nach den buddhistischen Sanskrit-Texten aus Zentralasien,” in Indien und Zentralasien Sprach und