Introduction—Dynamics of Buddhist Transfer in Central Asia

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1 Research Agenda

Central Asia is central in understanding global historical processes—despite the fact that its role in global history is one of the most neglected even today. It is the missing link through which not only Eurasian or world history is more fully understood, but also, as this volume aims to acknowledge, of major importance in religious history. In reality, this region was not simply a transition zone through which many of the world’s cultural and religious achievements, monks and mullahs, goods and ideas travelled from one civilisation to another—be it India, Persia, China or Tibet—but is the place where all those civilisations connected and interacted through the large network of trade routes best known as the Silk Road(s). Through symbiotic relation and through interactions with nomadic areas and urbanised centres of Central Asia, the neighbouring civilisations were formed and defined; in return Central Asia equally benefitted from the outlying sedentary civilisations, and their achievements and surpluses.

In order to expose these interrelations, the present volume is the initial step of an envisioned long-term research agenda which aims to understand Central Asia through the religious field, which was most successfully propagated for around 1500 years in and through (particularly Eastern) Central Asia—namely, Buddhism.1 Buddhism was the backbone of this vital region, around which a multitude of ethnicities, languages, traditions, cults, and trends in material culture revolved and mingled together into a uniquely hybrid complex. The research programme proceeds from an understanding that the spread of Buddhism along a network of trade routes may be regarded as a ‘pre-modern form of globalisation’—the process by which a local religious impulse (originating in this case in Northwest India) developed into one of the driving forces in a societal and cultural change which was of pan-Asian importance. One particular dimension of this ‘Buddhist globalisation’ was the rise of local forms

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1 I am very grateful for productive recent discussions with Erika Forte, Kirill Solonin, Henrik Sørensen, and Jens Wilkens in unfolding my research idea on the transformation of Buddhism in Central Asia up to the here presented research agenda.
of Buddhism wherever the tradition became rooted. Therefore the envisioned research proposes to examine a complementary opposition, ‘globalisation/localisation’, and intends to trace its specific forms on the basis of evidence recovered from material culture as well as textual and artistic heritages. It is an approach, which investigates the interplay of external and internal dynamics in the unfolding of localised Buddhism, or of the way in which global trends were processed on the local level and re-launched into the global system. The focus of the research is thus on cultural and religious transfer processes in multiethnic and multilingual societies. Only interdisciplinary research will be able to look at this region as an integrated whole rather than from the perspective of fragmented sub-disciplines (e.g. Indology, Tibetology, Sinology, Turkology, Tangut Studies or even further specialised fields such as Dunhuang or Turfan Studies etc.).

The geographical settings dealt with in this volume encompass the Eastern part of Central Asia, including Tibet and the Transhimalayan region—areas marked by shifting deserts, and high mountain ranges whose snow water run off permits, for example, habitation in desert oases at the rim of the Taklamakan desert in the Tarim basin (map 1.1).

This entire region was interconnected through a network of trade routes along which a number of urbanised oases (e.g. Dunhuang or main monastic sites emerged. These ‘major nodes’ generated Buddhist impacts on the surrounding area, where the smaller centres, here determined as ‘minor nodes’ (e.g. Yulin), developed. The trade routes further connected the region to the neighbouring civilisations (e.g. Indian, Central Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese).

Buddhism began to spread to Central Asia from Northwest India at around the beginning of the Common Era. For a few centuries Buddhism coexisted alongside other religious fields, i.e. Manichaeism, Nestorianism or indigenous cults, before it became the dominant religious force in this region. Thus, the temporal span suggested for the envisioned long-term research agenda is set

2 The idea of Buddhist Central Asia as an integrated system remains generally overshadowed by the particular specialties of Tibetan, Indian and Sinological Studies, to which it provides auxiliary materials. So far, the understanding of Buddhist Central Asia as of one integrated religious entity has been, to my knowledge, only promoted by the important Chinese scholar Shen Weirong. See Shen, Weirong, “Reconstructing the History of Buddhism in Central Eurasia (11th–14th Centuries): An Interdisciplinary and Multilingual Approach to the Khara Khoto Texts,” in Edition, éditions: l’écrit au Tibet, évolution et devenir, ed. Anne Chayet, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, Françoise Robin and Jean-Luc Achard (Munich: Indus Verlag, 2010), 321–335.

3 For a definition of the terms major and minor nodes see further below in this text.