NOTES ON THE DATING OF KHOTANESE HISTORY

The oasis of Khotan is strategically located at the junction of the southern (and most ancient) branch of the famous “Silk Route” joining China and the West with one of the main routes from India and Tibet to Central Asia and China. It provided a convenient meeting place where not only goods, but technologies, philosophies, and religions were transmitted from one culture to another. Khotan, from the traditional time of its founding during the reign of the great Indian emperor Aśoka Maurya (c. 269 to 231 B.C.) until the Muslim conquest c. 1006 A.D., had a tempestuous history and suffered many invasions. However, for much of this period it was a very important and influential centre of Buddhist learning and culture.

The early history and long lost language of the ancient kingdom of Khotan have been gradually pieced together by the diligent efforts of a remarkable assembly of adventurers and scholars from many countries. We are fortunate in now having a relative abundance of information on Khotan readily available for study. The main historical sources are to be found in the Chinese histories (particularly detailed during the Han and early T'ang dynasties), the accounts of several Chinese pilgrim monks, a few Buddhist histories of Khotan that have survived in Tibetan, and a large number of documents in Khotanese and other languages discovered, for the most part, early this century at various sites in the Tarim basin and from the hidden library at the “Caves of the Thousand Buddhas” near Tunhuang.

The Li yul lun-bstan-pa or ‘Prophecy of the Li Country’ is of great historical interest. It has been preserved as part of the Tibetan Tanjur but its use of many Khotanese names and terms indicate that it was either originally translated from Khotanese or written by someone with direct access to Khotanese sources.

The few dates given in the text are sometimes contradictory and most are implausible. Attempts to identify the kings listed in it with the Khotanese kings mentioned in the Chinese histories (which are generally accurately dated) have proved difficult. The names the Chinese recorded for the Khotanese kings show little resemblance to the kings’ names in the ‘Prophecy of the Li country’ which are mainly of Indian origin. To add to the confusion, the same name is frequently used for more than one king.

The ‘Prophecy of the Li Country’ may usefully be looked at as consisting of five main sections:

a. A preface. 

b. An introduction which includes a mythologized account of the founding of Khotan during the reign of Aśoka Maurya (c. 269 to 231 B.C.). This story may well include genuine historical information.

c. An account, apparently in chronological order, of the reigns of “fifty-six generations of kings of Li and one regent”. It gives details on the reigns of only those kings who supported Buddhism by building vihāras (monasteries). The rest are simply listed by the numbers of generations.

d. A similar, though shorter, section dealing with the queens and convents of Khotan. Although it presents itself (like section c) as being in chronological order, this does not appear to be the case but, rather, information from at least two sources seems to have been haphazardly combined. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to determine the original order of events.

e. A summing-up which includes some interesting statistics on the Buddhist community in Khotan.

The following is an attempt to establish some dates for the period of the final seven reigns and the one regency contained in section c:

King Vijaya Kirti (III)

The ‘Prophecy of the Li country’, while discussing the foundation of the Bhabañya vihāra by King Vijaya Kirti and his consort, states that: “This vihāra was built at the time when the Li country was attached long ago to the Tibetan dominions and was governed by the Mgar minister Bčan-ñen Guñ-ston.”

This Mgar minister is undoubtedly the same person as the “Mgar Bčan-ñen Guñ-rtōn” who, according to the ‘Tibetan Annals’ found near Tunhuang, was disgraced by the Tibetan king ‘Dus-sroñ and executed in 695 A.D. He was, apparently, the fifth, and youngest, son of the famous Tibetan prime minister Mgar stong btsan yul bzung. After their father’s death in 667 A.D. the five brothers virtually ruled Tibet between them until King ‘Dus-sroñ (r. 676–703 or 704 A.D.) brutally restored the power of the monarchy between 695 and 699 A.D.

In 670 A.D. the Tibetans took the “Four Garrisons of An-hsi” (which consisted, at this time, of Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar and Suj-āb or Tokmak) from the Chinese who were unable to regain supremacy in the region until 692 A.D. The Mgar brothers personally led the armies which were