

# NOMADS AND OASIS CITIES: CENTRAL ASIA FROM THE 9<sup>TH</sup> TO THE 13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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During the three to four centuries after the decline and demise of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, the steppe nomads launched a series of imperial ventures. Several Turkish groups, having adopted Buddhism or Islam in Central Asia, invaded India and the Byzantine Empire. At the eastern fringe of Eurasia, the Khitans, Tanguts, and Jurchen – mentioned in Chinese historiography respectively as Liao Dynasty (907–1125), Xixia Dynasty (ca. 1032–1227), and Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) – succeeded in building regional kingdoms and even empires. Then, during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongols, the supreme empire builders, conquered much of the Eurasian land mass. All the rulers from the steppe, forests, and borderlands between the ecological zones came from a cultural tradition shaped by mobile life and the worship of their god from the heavens by performing animal sacrifices. In the process of occupying the lands of settled empires and territories of other nomads, they invariably patronised the cultures and especially religious practices of the conquered peoples and became followers of world religions. The rulers from the steppe had to merge their spiritual universe based on nomadic and/or pastoral life with those of their subjects who were agriculturalists. In this process, both sides helped to create a Tantric form of Buddhism compromising vegetarianism of early Buddhism with the blood-letting rituals of pastoral societies. They also transformed aspects of Islamic practice and artistic expression in ways that incorporated Central Asia traditions.

Most often, these transitions took place in the oasis settlements, the principal zones of contact between the communities migrating between mountainous terrain, forests, and steppe and the settled sown. East of the Pamir Plateau, this was one of the historical periods when cities and tribes there were independent of the authority of any of the neighboring cultures and acted according to their local interests following the shifting political alignments. The dynamics of the encounters between nomadic and sedentary political structures and cultures brought a new life to the oases, regions peripheral to the Chinese empires and people

such as the Tanguts who migrated between forests, farm land and pastures to look for their fortunes.<sup>1</sup>

## Political re-alignment and changing cultural landscape

Unlike some of their steppe predecessors such as Xiongnu who built their empires on the steppe lands, nomads beginning with the Turks endeavored to conquer and rule directly over agricultural lands. Encouraged and enriched by their military support and commercial ties with the late Tang Empire, among the Turkic-speaking nomads the Uyghurs expanded their territory on the steppe to the oases along northern rim of the Tarim Basin and thus set out to build their own regimes in agricultural lands in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> The Tanguts (Tib. *Mi nyag*, Chin. *Dangxiang Qiang* 党项羌), pastoralists and hunter-gatherers, were resettled by the Tang authority during the 7<sup>th</sup> century on the Ordos where the Yellow River bends. They helped the Tang to suppress the rebellion of Huang Chao (875–883, 黄巢) and thus were rewarded with titles to the territory already under their control which developed into the Tangut “Great State of the White and the High.” To the south of Central Asia, Tibetans took advantage of the decline of Tang imperial influence and took over the eastern part of the trade routes around the Tarim Basin. They gradually lost political control of the region, partially due to collapse of their central polity on Tibetan Plateau in mid 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> However, their cultural legacy remained with fragments of Tibetan regimes in the region and was revived by the new rulers, including the Tanguts and Khitans and eventually the Mongols.

The centuries between the demise of the Tang Empire and the rise of the Mongols also saw the islamization of Central Asia. This was a gradual process that went through several stages and can be observed as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century in the lands of Tokharistan (present northern Afghanistan) and Transoxiana (Khorezm and Sogdiana, present Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan). Muslim mystics, the sufis, rose to prominence in the multi-lingual and culturally diverse environment west of the Pamirs, inheriting many traits from Bud-

dhist, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean communities of the Sogdian and Tokharian oasis city-states.<sup>4</sup> As Arab military conquest stopped at the Talas River, islamization in the region east of the Pamir Plateau took a longer and different path. Unfortunately for historians, Islamic scholars recorded less detailed information about the transition there than they did in the regions directly conquered by Arabs. Nevertheless, the process was almost completed when the Mongols arrived there in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. By and large, the process of islamization there was initiated by sufis from Sogdiana and Tokharistan who practiced a form of Islam already imbued with many practices unique to Central Asian religions and cultures. However, even this Central Asian oasis type of Islam, needed the support of the nomadic rulers, in this case the Karakhanid kaghanate (999–1211), to penetrate the oases of the Tarim Basin, where it encountered a new form of Buddhism, also patronised by rulers from the steppe.

Earlier, in the time of Tang suzerainty, Manichaean and Buddhist institutions in the oases around the rim of Tarim Basin sought patronage from rulers of the northern steppes and in the process converted them. The Uyghurs were adherents of Manichaeism when they acted as the power brokers for the Tang court in Central Asia, largely due to the influence of their Manichaean Sogdian clients, many of whom were merchants.<sup>5</sup> The Uyghur empire collapsed during the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, along with the decline of the Tang. Several clans of the Uyghurs migrated eastwards to the Tang border (the later so-called Ganzhou Uyghurs) and eventually settled in China. Others retreated into the steppe but regrouped into kaghanates back in Central Asia. The kaghanate around the Turfan Basin emerged as the Kocho Uyghurs in the Turfan region. Their kings gave up title of *kaghan*, a title reserved for nomadic regimes, to adopt the title *idikut*, more fitting for a ruler of agricultural society no longer claiming authority in the steppe.

Another Turkish confederation, the Karakhanids, followed the steps of earlier nomads, moved westward and conquered both oasis and pastoral lands up to the territories of the Seljuks, the Turkish nomads who had preceded them in the westward migration. The Karakhanid kaghanate, which ruled a vast region across the Pamir Plateau, initiated significant transformations of Central Asian culture. The Turkish rulers before them, the Western Turk, mentioned in Chinese sources as *Xi Tujue* (西突厥), also nomads in origin with the sky deity *tangri* as the central god, had followed Buddhism and controlled Central Asia from around 583 to 659 (Sinor 1990). Consequently, they learned the courtly style of their settled subjects who spoke various dialects of Indo-European languages. After they embraced Islam in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries

they also learned Persian and adopted the Persian language and cultural features as the high culture fit for their imperial endeavors. The Karakhanids were different. After they took over the lands of Sogdiana and Ferghana during early 11<sup>th</sup> century, they became fervent Muslims, thanks to sufi fakirs in the newly conquered land, but they insisted using their own Turkic language and adopted Arabic script for their language. Therefore, the Karakhanids were not only responsible for changing the language landscape of Central Asia on both sides of the Pamir Plateau from Indo-European to Turkic but also for bringing Islam to the Tarim Basin.

After the Karakhanids divided into west and east regimes around the year 1140, the eastern Karakhanids extended their territory to include a large portion of the Tarim Basin, from Kashgar to Kucha, and the pastoral land of the Lake Balkhash basin (Biran 2015). This nomadic cum sedentary regime changed the region into effectively a Turkic language Islamic domain, with the help of sufis who knew the ways of Central Asia and did not mind living and preaching along with other religious communities (Golden 1990, pp. 353–54; Yu 1996, pp. 272–73). Meanwhile, the Karakhanids had to confront the counter-expansion of the Buddhist Uyghur state based in Turfan. In the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Karakhanids took from the Kocho Uyghurs Kucha, an oasis settlement that had a long history as a hub of cultural and economic transactions between the nomads from the north and south, and traders from both east and west. Buddhist Uyghurs in the Kashgar-Kucha region gradually became Muslims, joining the Karakhanid bureaucracy and cultural elite (Yu 1996, pp. 284–94). The region thus became the scene of the initial transition from Buddhism to Islam in the Tarim Basin.

While the Turfan Uyghurs and Karakhanids vied with each other for political and cultural hegemony in the Tarim Basin, nomads appeared on the horizon from the northeast again. The Khitans, who established the Liao Dynasty in north China, were pushed out by another people from the northeast forests, the Jurchens. The defeated Khitans migrated westward to the lush riverine lands in the Balkhash basin, at the expense of the eastern Karakhanids. The Kara Khitai, or *Xi Liao* (西辽, ca. 1124–1216) in Chinese sources, adopted Buddhism when they ruled north China and continued their adherence to that faith in Central Asia, although they employed many Muslims there to run their bureaucracy and collect taxes from their settled subjects.<sup>6</sup> The geo-political space between the Kara Khitai and the Jurchen Jin Dynasty was filled by the Tangut empire (ca.1032–1227). In possession of the Hexi Corridor, the main trade artery in Eastern Central Asia, the Tanguts were content to remain the rul-

ers of a society engaging in both sedentary agriculture and nomadic pastoralism. They were ardent supporters of Buddhism and created a script for their own language. Together with the Kocho Uyghurs, these rulers of nomadic origin had long immersed themselves in oasis agricultural life and revitalised Buddhist culture from Turfan to the Hexi Corridor. During the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, an age when Eurasian long distance trade was shifting to the ocean lanes, the nomads transformed these oases into an integrated commercial and cultural domain.

The revival of Buddhism from Kocho to Dunhuang eventually faded after the Mongol conquest. Certainly the Mongols, starting from Chinggis Khan, did not intend to destroy Buddhism in Central Asia; on the contrary, as will be elaborated later in this paper, they used the Buddhist cultural resources of the region to fashion a Buddhist state religion in Yuan China. Nor was Central Asian Buddhism destroyed by an Islamic jihad. Rather, the Karakhanids reconnected the commercial and cultural ties between the oases to the west of the Pamir Plateau and those of to the east. As argued by Peter Golden (1990, p. 353):

The lure of Islam as a civilization was strong, just as Rome had appealed to the Germanic tribes. As the full partaking of the benefits of Muslim society was predicated upon membership in the community of believers, social and economic rather than military pressure gained conversions. This pressure was reinforced by the activities of Muslim mystics, the *ṣūfīs* who journeyed to the steppe tribes to preach and propagate the new faith.

The very form of Islam they patronised, that of the sufis, inherited many cultural traits deeply rooted in Central Asia. Once sufis had assimilated those traditions, they became an effective vehicle to carry Islamic religious teachings to the eastern part of Central Asia where similar cultural practices and patterns were found in the same kind of mixed religious environment. In an important sense, music, dance, poetry, and wine drinking associated with highly developed viniculture were the traits that transcended all religious differences and gave all the religions that flourished in the area a Central Asian tone.

### **Festivities in the centers of Buddhist culture**

Nomadic groups, fresh from the steppe, most speaking Turkic dialects, moved in the land between the Tian Shan and Altai mountains starting in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of cultural differences and constant military conflicts among the various groups, they all practiced animal sacrifice to their sky god. They nevertheless entered the universe of Buddhism of karma and rebirth by assuming that the rulers themselves

and even their ancestors on the steppe were incarnations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. There is, however, an irreconcilable conflict when the universe of animal sacrifice merged with a universe where all living creatures form a continuing cycle of rebirth. That is, killing an animal could be killing a life who was related to the killer in its former lives, even could have been a loved one. For the conquered Buddhist agriculturalists in the oases, converting the horse riding new rulers was a way to tame their obsession of hunting. For some rulers coming from the steppe such as the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei, assuming the status of Buddhist deities was a means of gaining legitimacy for their regime. The Northern Wei rulers of Tuoba lineage had gigantic Buddhas carved in the caves of Yungang indicating their ancestors were incarnation of the Buddha.<sup>7</sup> However, giving up animal sacrifice rituals, the very ceremony for legitimacy in the steppe polities, was inconceivable for the rulers fresh from the grassland, at least for the first couple of generations. The Uyghurs, Tanguts, and Mongols nevertheless chose Buddhism instead of other religions practiced by some communities of their subjects.<sup>8</sup> In turn, their legitimacy was endorsed by Buddhist institutions in the Turfan and Hexi region during the three or four centuries under study. Though the intrinsic conflict between the nature of nomadic regimes and Buddhist core doctrine never disappeared, certain Buddhist doctrines and practices did ameliorate such conflicts.

The most important factor in mitigating conflict was the inclusive nature or pluralism of Buddhist doctrine and practices, beginning with the development of the faith in India. During the more than thousand years' propagation of the religion over a vast area of Asia and interactions with other cultural traditions, the universe of Buddhism became even larger, more diverse and colorful. Mahayana schools and especially the Tantric sects which prevailed in Central Asia had been enriched by many religious ideas and rituals from other religions. The numerous Brahmanical celestial beings such as devas, devatas, gandharvas and apsaras residing and moving between the many heavens and Buddha lands could readily accommodate the new rulers. The nomads thus imposed themselves on their Buddhist subjects not only as tax collectors but also as the major patrons of the religion or even incarnations of Buddhist deities, as the example of the Northern Wei shows. Unlike their nomadic predecessors who adopted languages of their sedentary subjects when they embraced their religions, the Uyghur rulers instead imposed their own language with newly invented scripts. When they acted as patrons of Buddhist institutions along the Central Asian trade routes, they followed examples of previous rulers such as Zhang Yichao (張義潮, local ruler over Dunhuang since 848),



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had their own portraits depicted on the murals, and furthermore, had Buddhist literature translated into Uyghur. While the efforts to make their subjects understand and accept the new language took time, the artistic expression of their religious devotion made a more immediate impact. This can be seen especially in their sponsorship and participation in festivals on Buddhist holidays. Music and dance processions had a long tradition among Buddhist communities along the Central Asian trade routes, and the tradition surely continued under the Uyghur and Tangut regimes. Here I will trace such festivals, one of the major forms of Buddhist rituals, to their Indian roots and show how they were integrated into the public life of Buddhist cultural centers in Central Asia.

Buddhism started as a religion with open arms to people who defected from or were rejected by the orthodox Brahmanical society and to those who were outside the mainstream of the society. During the lifetime of Shakyamuni, the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, many people from Brahman families and royal princes and princesses joined the sangha; so did hunters and fishermen living in forests and marshland, bandits who harassed travellers along the trade routes and outcasts who lived on the outskirts of cities and villages pursuing the most menial and demeaning jobs. Those who joined the sangha brought their original deities into the Buddhist universe and their rituals into Buddhist practices. Thus processes of appropriation are discernible which included the gradual transformation of deities from one pantheon to the next (see DeCaroli 2004). For example, the earliest Buddhist monuments, the stupas of Sanci and Bhar-

worshipping the stupa along with a majestic king, presumably Ashoka (268–231 [?] BCE) [Fig. 1]. Vedic deities, headed by Indra, were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon, even if their worship required animal sacrifice and many of their followers killed animals for a living.

During the first centuries after the passing of the Buddha, the conversion stories of those characters were woven into the narrative of the Buddhist universe and recorded in Pali canons and Jataka stories. In those stories, Indra gained a Buddhist name Sakka or Sakra, and became a supporter of the Buddha's cause. Wild *yaksha* tribal chiefs such as Angulimāla (garland made of fingers) and Shuciloma (needle hair) gained the status of demigods.<sup>9</sup> This universe is displayed on the stone railing of Bharhut stupa in India (2<sup>nd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE). The focus of worship was the bare dome, symbolising the nirvana of the Buddha, instead of an idol of the Buddha as a god. On the more than dozen major balusters, life-sized human figures, both male and female, face the stupa dome in postures showing piety. At one time probably all of them had inscriptions, many still legible, indicating the name of the figure and that of the donor. From those inscriptions, one recognises in one sculptured figure Shuciloma, the fierce looking yaksha who challenged Shakyamuni, as recorded in a Pali text. In this sculpture Shuciloma appears merely as a civilised, pious man [Fig. 2].<sup>10</sup> There were also pictures carved on beams and balusters depict-



Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, photo archive in the library of the University of Pennsylvania

Fig. 2. *Shuciloma*, literally “needle hair,” a fierce looking and brutal *yaksha* chief, appears on the Bharhut stupa, Satna District, India, as a polished and pious man paying respect to the Buddha. Calcutta, Indian Museum No. 144.



Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies; photo archive in the library of the University of Pennsylvania

Fig. 3. On the altar of the assembly hall of Vedic gods rests a lock of Shakyamuni's hair. Gods celebrate the symbol of his leaving mundane life by watching dancing and music performance. Calcutta, Indian Museum No. 182.

ing plots of jataka stories, where Indra/Sakka often plays a major role. Scenes depicting the major events of Shakyamuni's life, such as his enlightenment, show how all creatures, be they heavenly beings, barbarians and animals, join the festivity of dance with music [Fig. 3].

According to one of the earliest texts in the Pali canon, the Buddha forbade followers to participate in many kinds of festivals with sacrificial rituals, music and dance (Davids 1977, pp. 5-9). Even though animal sacrifice has always been off limit for Buddhist rituals, the Bharhut sculptures demonstrate that dance and music existed in the early Buddhist community and became a means to embrace peoples of other cultures. Some donors had Yakha (Pali for yaksha) Naga as their names; some had their images of dancers and musicians carved on the railings of Bharhut.

A couple of centuries later, Mahayana Buddhism flourished in the northwest Indian subcontinent. There, in Bactria and Gandhara, where Hellenistic culture and patronage of nomadic rulers exerted influence on Buddhist theology and institutions, Dionysian culture, including wine drinking and dramatic performance were common in Buddhist art (Brancaccio and Liu 2009). By this time, music and dance had become an integral component of Buddhist ritual. From Gand-

hara and Bactria, Buddhism spread to Central Asia and China, carrying not only spiritual messages translated into many different languages but also rituals including performance in music and dance. Unlike the translated religious texts, whose language might often be difficult to comprehend, artistic works and performances could reach a broad audience. We find ample evidence of this in painting and sculpture, along with depictions of patrons from among the peoples of both steppe and oasis.<sup>11</sup>

In comparing the depictions of musical ensembles in the art of northwest India, Sogdiana and the oases north of the Taklamakan, one observes that musicians at Kucha, the important oasis on the northern rim of Tarim Basin, seem to have had the largest repertoire of musical instruments. Gandharan musicians played lira, drum, and xylophone and a simple kind of trumpet (Brancaccio and Liu 2009, p. 230, Fig. 5). The vina, a string instrument originating from India, appeared on a statue of a musician in a Buddhist monastery at Airtam (near Termez) on the Amu Darya (Nehru 1989, p. 55). Sogdians also played the vina (Marshak 2002, p. 142, Fig. 93). In Kucha, there were several types of lira and even a harp, in addition to vina and different types of wind instruments including the *bili* (鬲築). Studies have suggested that the latter came from Kucha, probably inspired by horns used in herding horses. Because of its deep and loud sound, the *bili* was widely used on battlefields (Wang 2011, pp. 60-74).

Mask dancing, depicted on a Buddhist reliquary dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was among the many dramatic types of dance in Kucha [Fig. 4, next page].<sup>12</sup> Following the rhythm of the drum, lira, trumpet and other instruments, dancers wear masks symbolizing a warrior, an eagle, a monkey and other human and animal forms. The scene obviously conveys some kind of story, the exact theme of which is a hard to identify, but it might be from Hindu epics or Buddhist jataka stories in which the lives of humans and animals are often joined and deeply entangled through the cycle of karma and rebirth. A ritual dance, called in Chinese *poluozhe* (婆罗遮), performed in Kucha, was noted by a Tang writer Duan Chengshi (段成式, d. 863). According to him, at the beginning of the year, the people in Qiuci or Kucha staged fights between cattle, horses, and camels for seven days to predict the fertility of their herds. They danced in the style of *poluozhe* in which performers wore masks representing a monkey and dog, day and night.<sup>13</sup> *Poluozhe* thus was a dance associated with pastoral life of the Tian Shan foothills. Here the environment of oasis life, with farming, herding, and hunting, provides a landscape compatible with the Buddhist universe where deities, humans, and animals formed a continuous circle of rebirth. This festival thus was a Buddhist ritual essen-



Fig. 4. Mask dancing with musicians, depicted on the 7<sup>th</sup>-century reliquary casket excavated at Subax.

After: Huo 1994, p. 241, Fig. 22



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Vaughn

tial to the Kuchans. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Kucha was in the territory of the Kocho Uyghur empire. Uyghur patrons of Buddhism brought in a new style of art in terms of color scheme and facial feature of the Buddha and the patrons. The Uyghur patrons depicted on the murals dress in Chinese style and look eastern Asian [Fig. 5; Color Plate III]. Red and black replaced lapis lazuli blue as the dominant colors of painting (Wu 1993). However, scenes of music and dance performance remain prolific themes in the paintings. In other words, the Uyghur patrons of Buddhism continued the Buddhist tradition of music and dance.

In the Turfan area, the center of the Uyghur empire, Buddhist traditions of festivity continued after the retreat of Tang control. According to the “History of the Song Dynasty” (Chin., *Songshi* 宋史), music, dance, horse riding and archery were all popular there. During the spring festivals, residents of Turfan gathered in the vicinity of the numerous monasteries, bringing their vina, lira, and other musical instruments to play. Though Buddhist institutions dominated the Turfan region, Manichaean and Zoroastrian monasteries practiced their own religions, with no conflicts with Buddhists — at least according to official Chinese records. The Chinese histories also noted that the Uyghur kingdom covered a large territory

Fig. 5. Uighur princes, probably depictions of deceased family members. Fragment of mural from Bezeklik Temple No. 9, 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. Collection of the Museum of Asian Art (Berlin), III 6876a.

with many different ethnic groups, including several Turkish tribes, and all enjoyed prosperity and harmony (Tuo et al. 1985, 490/14111-14112). This is certainly a generalization made by an observer from afar, but it tells that there was as yet no forced conversion to Islam.

The Tanguts built an empire to the east of the Tarim Basin after the demise of the Tang Dynasty in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It was a state that covered modern Ningxia, Gansu, and parts of Tibet, Shaanxi and Mongolia – in other words, the Hexi Corridor and the adjacent plateau to the south and desert and grasslands to the north. The Tanguts were nomadic and hunting groups who had regrouped from time to time when steppe regimes collapsed and the impacts rippled to surrounding areas (Dunnell 1994, 1996; for artistic remains, *Lost Empire* 1993). Once settled to build a multi-ethnic state taxing both agricultural and pastoral resources, the Tangut rulers became enthusiastic patrons of Buddhism. Like all the nomads from the steppe who came before or after them, the Tanguts were worshippers of the sky-deity (Liu 1975, 198/5291). As they were frontier people par excellence and still practiced animal sacrifice (Ouyang and Qi 1975, 221/6214), when converting to Buddhism they faced an even greater challenge of embracing a new faith. Though the Tangut rulers had a new script invented, they kept some cultural residue of a semi-nomadic and semi-agricultural society. Households were counted by the number of tents; one of every two men over 15 in a tent became a soldier, and other males also joined the supplementary force. When making strategic decisions, they performed several shamanistic rituals including sacrificing sheep for oracles predicting the outcomes of warfare (Tuo et al. 1985, 486/14028-14029). Yet, this

regime which still observed steppe blood-offering rituals found a comfortable position in the Buddhist universe. As was the case of the Uyghur kingdom, the landscape of pastoral and agricultural life of the Tanguts created an environment where people constantly dealt with animals. People raised domestic animals – sheep, horses, cattle, camels – and defended their livestock from predators such as wolves, lions etc. with their dogs. As hunters, they killed wild animals such as deer, boars and bears. This world where animals and humans frequently encountered one another and interacted was quite similar to the Buddhist universe of humans and animals filling various spaces. As a matter of fact, the nomads had more intimate relationship with animals and had more acute knowledge of animals and their behaviour than did farmers. A painted banner recovered from Kara-Khoto, an outpost on the northern frontier of the Tangut empire, shows four Tangut men, in front of a looming image of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, playing harp, flute, and dancing on the shore of a lake, while their horses leisurely graze the nearby grass [Fig. 6]. This Buddhist universe was quite a departure from a scene of hunting exercises before a military campaign: “Whenever a catch was made, everyone dismounted and gathered around a campfire to drink and eat, cutting off fresh meat, [at] which time [the ruler] queried each as to his views and selected the most astute [of them].” Yet, there are the same humans and animals, under the same moon in the sky and on the same landscape of pasture and waters.

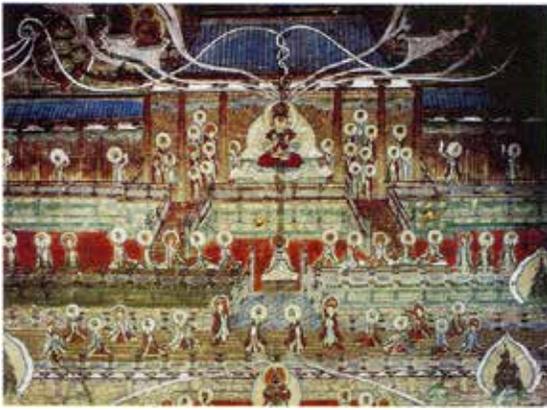
Mural painting in numerous Buddhist cave temples in the Tangut kingdom continued to flourish. The artistic style of human figures and clothing more resembled that of Turfan and the Hexi Corridor than that of Kucha. The murals display comprehensive music groups with all the instruments used in Kucha for Buddhist ceremonies [Fig. 7, next page]. Funeral rites of the Tangut rulers reveal their faith in Buddhism as the guardian of their state. Tangut kings built grand tombs, which were guarded by stone statues of court retinue and religious creatures, including a human-faced bird [Fig. 8] (Gao et al. 2009, p. 152 [Fig. 4-10]; p. 167 [Pl. IV, Figs. 42–44]). The human-faced bird is called *kinnara* in Pali, meaning “some kind of man” (Pali, *kim-nara*). In Buddhist literature *kinnara* could be a human-faced bird, lion, horse, or any other animal. The motifs of half-human creatures are ubiquitous in Buddhist art from India to Central Asia, China, and Tibet. While traditional animal sacrificial ceremonies informed decisions about military actions, the expectations of Tangut kings for future lives lay in the universe of Buddhism.

The literary texts and artworks of the Tangut kingdom document that at least from the 1130s onward the

Fig. 6. Detail of silk banner depicting the “Water Moon Guanyin,” 12<sup>th</sup> century, from Kara-Khoto. Collection of the Hermitage Museum X-2439.



After: Gao et al. 2009, pp. 35 (Fig. 1-27), 282 (VII-20)



After Cao et al., 2009, p. 267 (figs. 7-1, 7-6)



Fig. 7. Mural depicting the future Buddha Maitreya with detail of the musicians; in a grotto at Wenshu Shan, Gansu.

Tangut rulers were patrons of Tibetan Buddhist literature and art (Shen 2011). It was the time when Tibet had entered an age of Buddhist renaissance after the demise of the great Tibetan kingdom in the 9<sup>th</sup> century a consequent decline of Buddhist institutions. With the rise of Tantric Buddhism in central Tibet from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, many Tanguts, sponsored by royal patrons, traveled there to learn Buddhist dharma and Tantric meditation techniques.<sup>14</sup> Though the Tangut kingdom was conquered by Chinggis Khan in 1227, Tangut Buddhist tradition, including music and dance performance, was one of the channels through which the Mongol Yuan rulers learned the rituals of Buddhism. When the Yuan empire was established in China, it patronised Tibetan Buddhism. Khubilai, the first Yuan emperor, had a seat for a Tibetan spiritual teacher at his court. In the year 1270, the first Tibetan imperial preceptor, Phags-pa, instructed the Yuan emperor to establish a Buddhist altar in front of the major audience hall, the Hall of Great Brilliance (Chin., *Daming dian* 大明殿), to perform rituals protecting the state. According to the “History of the Yuan Dynasty” (Chin., *Yuanshi* 元史), subsequently a large-scale parade was held annually. Hundreds of Buddhist monks, musicians, dancers and soldiers surrounded and followed carriages with statues of the Buddha and other deities through the major streets of the capital. The procession extended more than 30 li, roughly 15 km. A 324-member orchestra of musicians was recruited from three groups – Chinese, Huihui (Muslims from Central Asia), and musicians from Hexi (from the former Tangut state). Each of the three groups was further divided into three groups to provide music for 300 dancers who performed a variety of programs. The performances lasted into the next day and attracted numerous spectators to the capital. In the sixth month of the year, the same parade was

also performed in Shangdu (Xanadu), the northern summer capital of the Yuan. A ministry of Hexi musicians was established in the Yuan bureaucracy in 1280 and a ministry for Muslim musicians in 1312 (Song 1976, 85/2139, 77/1926; Chen 2010, pp. 213–25). Another ritual, the “Dance of Sixteen Heavenly Demons” (Chin., *shiliu tianmo wu* 十六天魔舞), was performed at the birthdays of the emperors from the early days of the dynasty. Dancers wearing “Buddha crowns” held special ritual vessels made of human skulls decorated with jewels (Chen 2010, p. 254). The characteristic Tibetan Buddhist ritual vessels made of human skulls were introduced into the Yuan court along with the music from Central Asia. The Tibetan Buddhist impe-



Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 8. Sculpture of kinnara, excavated from XiXia imperial tomb No. 3 in 2001. Collection of the Yinchuan museum located at the site.

rial preceptor Phags-pa had initiated the program to help legitimise the Mongol regime in China. So that the festival would more closely replicate a Central Asian Buddhist festival, Phags-pa incorporated into the performance Central Asian musicians and those from the former Tangut empire, which had maintained the best ritual music among the states built by the nomads (Tuo et al. 1976, 134/2877). The very institution of imperial preceptor (Chin., *dishi* 帝師) had been started by the Tangut rulers (Dunnell 1996, pp. 46–47; 1999), this possibly the inspiration for the Yuan rulers to establish a state preceptor (Chin., *guoshi* 國師) at their own court.

### The cultural heritage of Central Asia

Even though the political and religious landscape had changed during these centuries, older Central Asian cultural traits continued under new religions and new rulers. Practices such as idol worship lingered in the lands of Sogdiana and Ferghana for many centuries during and after islamization. Statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas were sold in Bukhara. A fire temple there had been transformed into a mosque but twice a year hosted a fair for selling idols. It is not clear whether they were Buddhist or Zoroastrian images or both (Narshakhi 2007, pp. 25–26). While pre-Islamic traditions in sculpture and mural painting were in principle off limits for Islamic religious architecture, their imagery found a different avenue for expression, one inherited from Central Asian cultures: miniature paintings for illustrating books, both religious and courtly. Buddhist communities in Central Asia had long illustrated texts with drawings on paper and probably were the first to use block-printing to propagate their religious messages. Paper-making, which spread from China to Central Asia, facilitated an exchange of knowledge that greatly influenced literature, art, science and technology not only in Central Asia but also in the entire Islamic world. If in the western part of the Islamic world paper was used in the first instance to copy the Quran and other religious books, in Iran, especially in Khorasan, the eastern region of Persian culture including part of Central Asia, Islamic book culture embraced much of the Persian heritage of literature and art. Firdausi (ca. 934–1020) submitted his long poem *Shahnama* to

Mahmud of Ghazna, the Muslim ruler of Afghanistan. The *Shahnama* was a landmark literary work using a modernized Persian language to popularize the pre-Islamic epic history of Iran. Copies of the long poem circulated on paper; illustrations are mentioned in the literature of Central Asia, even though none of the earliest manuscripts have survived (Sims et al. 2002, pp. 31–32). When the Mongol Ilkhanate (1256–1353) commissioned the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, a volume of illustrations of Firdausi's poem [Fig. 9], miniature painting on paper was already well established in West and Central Asia. Characteristically, in Central Asia, Dionysian traditions of wine drinking and music performance accompanied by dramatic dance as they had developed under the Uyghurs, Tibetans and Mongols, also came to be depicted in miniature paintings.

These cultural developments transcended political and religious boundaries, because the oases to the west of the Pamir Plateau and those to its east had long shared the same traits thanks to commercial exchange across geographical boundaries. Mural paintings reveal that city-states in Sogdiana and in oases around the Tarim Basin, Kuchā for instance, shared the same fashion in clothing. Before the Arab conquest in the

Source: <[http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUAM:71190\\_dynmc?width=3000&height=3000](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUAM:71190_dynmc?width=3000&height=3000)>



Fig. 9. Bahram Gur hunts with Azada, illustrated folio from the Great Ilkhanid *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*), ca. 1330–1340, Tabriz. Collection of the Harvard University Art Museums <[www.harvardartmuseums.org](http://www.harvardartmuseums.org)>.



(left) after: Marshak, p. 73 (Pl. 5);  
(right) courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh



Fig. 10. Detail from mural depicting one of the last episodes of the Rustam cycle, Panjikent, Room 41/VI.

Fig. 11 (right). Group of donors, mural from the Cave of the Sixteen Sword Bearers, Kizil. 600-650 CE. Collection of the Museum of Asian Art (Berlin), III 8426a,b,c.

late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant religion in Sogdiana was some form of Zoroastrianism. At the same time, the art of Kucha, which was predominantly Buddhist, assimilated Zoroastrian (or Manichaean) features such as figures wearing white-ropes symbolising purity (Zhu 1993, p. 9). The exquisitely tailored robes made of rich patterned silk textiles worn by aristocrats in Sogdian Panjikent and Afrasiab, and those of the elite patrons of Buddhism in Kucha are similar [Figs. 10, 11]. Kucha musical performances shared the spotlight with the whirling dance of Samarkand and the jumping dance of Bukhara Liu 1975, 29/1071; Liu

Fig. 12. Kucha music band, in a Daoist ritual, Song Dynasty, ca. 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.



After Huo 1994, plate following p. 251

2011, p. 60). By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the Karakhanids took Kucha away from the Uyghur *idikut* based in Kocho, Buddhist cave temples in that region, including Qumtura which had been patronised by the Uyghurs, were abandoned. Islamization of the Tarim Basin thus began in its western parts, including Kucha.

Whether Buddhists or Muslims, Kuchans never abandoned their tradition of dancing and playing music. Even before the first miniature paintings depicting practices deviating from orthodox Islamic religious norms, we know that Kuchan music was performed at the Song court (960-1279) and in Buddhist and Daoist institutions [Fig. 12]. Throughout the Song period, Confucian scholars made great efforts to re-establish Confucian ritual orthodoxy including court music. Kuchan music somehow survived in the ensembles playing “Dharma music” (Chin., *fayue* 法樂), the term for Buddhist religious music. Instruments used by these musicians include lira, bili, and the others common to Kucha (Tuo et al., 1985, 142/3348-49; Huo 1994, p. 252). Presumably, some musicians were recruited from Kucha. The musicians played for dances in the styles of a “Brahman” (Chin., *poluomen* 婆罗門), or “drunken jumping dance” (Chin., *zuihuteng* 醉胡騰), “dance of a Uyghur shooting eagles” (Chin., *shediao Huigu* 射雕回鶻) and other exotic foreign performing arts (Tuo et al. 1985, 142/3350). Some of the dancers could have been recruited from Turfan, Kucha, Bukhara, or even India.

The ritual dancers were often intoxicated by alcohol. Grape wine was one of the stimulants used in these performances. Since the Kushan era, both viticulture and Dionysian traditions had flourished in Bud-

dhist communities from Gandhara to Samarkand. According to recent studies, wine making and drinking are extensively recorded in Chinese literature, local inscriptions and verified by archaeological findings in the territory extending from Kucha to Turfan and the long period from the Han to the Tang Dynasties (He 1994, pp. 153–64). Viniculture flourished along with Buddhism and continued into the Islamic period. With the Mongol conquest in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Uyghur state of Kocho was the crossroad of cultural exchanges between the Mongols and the Tibetan and Islamic communities of Central Asia. In spite of the hostility between the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China and the Mongol Chagatay Kaghanate in the eastern part of Central Asia, trade continued, especially that in wine. Kocho, or the Turfan region, was known as a supplier of wine to the Yuan court, including a kind of distilled liquor for ritual purposes (Wang 2011, pp. 228–29).

Even though Central Asian Muslims consider themselves to be observant believers, they created a new religious milieu that absorbed concepts and practices from religions previously prevalent in the region. Ritual drinking and dancing deviated from the strict disciplinary rules of Islam. The concept of rebirth with karma and the cosmology and eschatology of Buddhism shaping their relationship with animals can be discerned in the religious practices of some Muslim communities. Images of human and animals in artworks were more readily tolerated in Central Asia than in the western part of Islamic world.<sup>15</sup> Wine drinking when singing and dancing was routine practice in the sufi traditions.

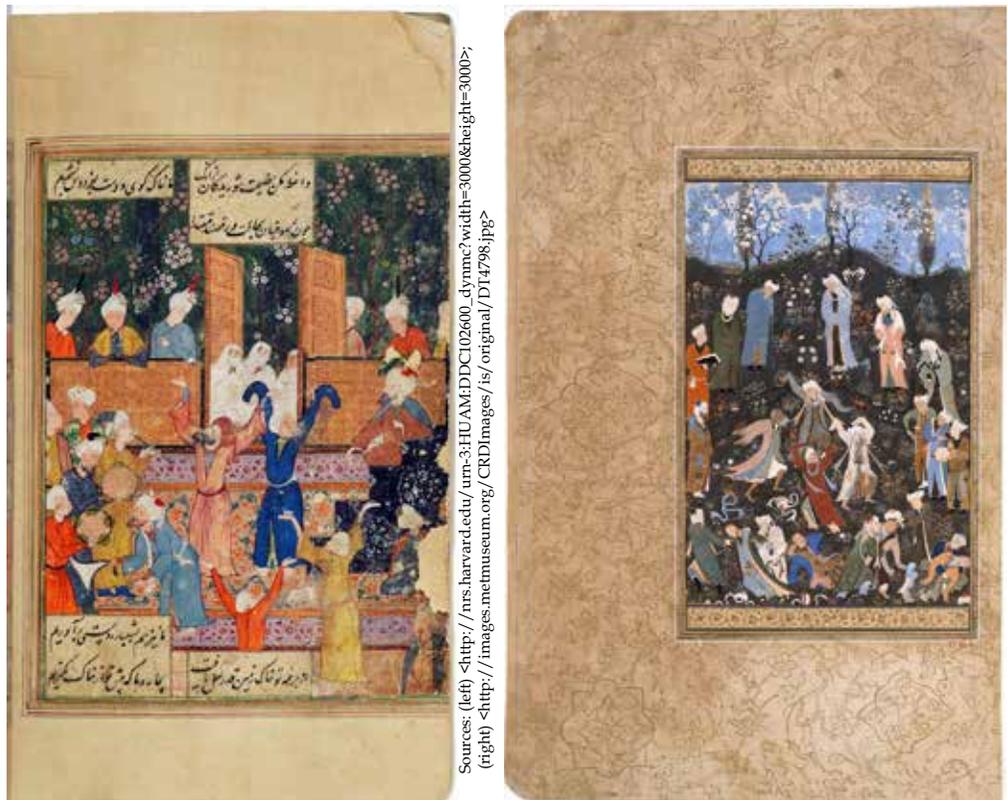
The Mongol conquests caused a flight of tal-

Fig. 13 (left). Ecstatic Dance of Dervishes, illustrated folio 149v from a manuscript of a *Divan* of Hafiz, ca 1540–1550, Safavid Iran. Collection of Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet, 1958.23.149.

Fig. 14 (right). Dancing Dervishes, folio from a *Divan* of Hafiz, painting attributed to Bihzad (ca. 1450–1535/36), ca. 1480, Herat. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art/Rogers fund, 1917, Accession No. 17.81.4.

ented Central Asians into the Iranian plateau, Asia Minor, South Asia and China that encouraged a revolution of textiles – in clothing and upholstery, silk, wool tapestry and rugs – even in regions of Eurasia beyond the reach of the Mongols. These displaced artisans spread the technology of cotton textiles to China and the spinning wheel and the water-lifting “Persian wheel” to India. Sufi teachers from Central Asia following in their steps established shrines in these countries and became effective missionaries for Islam. Jalal Ad-din Muhammad Din ar-Rumi (1207–1273), the first famous whirling dancer among the sufis, fled as a child from Balkh in present-day Afghanistan to Konia in Seljuk Anatolia. Wherever sufi teachers went, they performed *sama*, the whirling dance under influence of wine, drugs and music, their unique method of experiencing union with the divine [Fig. 13].<sup>16</sup> Idyllic pictures of sufis with wine, drugs, music and dancing within a landscape of mountains, waters, and roaming animals reveal the special Central Asian Islamic religious tradition, which was unimaginable in more orthodox circles [Fig. 14].<sup>17</sup>

While the Karakhanids embraced sufi Islamic practices, they also used their own Turkic language with Arabic script to practice the religion. In contrast to the Sejluks in the west who still upheld Persian traditions as a symbol of high culture, the Karakhanids were the first to use Turkic for both the court and religion. Turkic languages, including Uyghur, which had a rich oral tradition, now were cultivated in written



literary texts. Yusuf Khass Hajib from Balasagun (ca. 1019-1085), a Karakhanid poet, wrote a didactic long poem, the “Wisdom of Royal Glory” (*Kutadghu bilig*), in Kashgar in 1069 (Yu 1996, pp. 284-290; Dankoff n.d.; for the text in translation, Yusuf 1983). This was a poem of ethics and moral standards not only for the princes, but for everyone else, Muslim or not. It includes old Uyghur traditions from their days on the steppe, and Islamic, Buddhist and Confucian concepts of morality.

The first comparative dictionary of Turkic languages (compiled most probably between 1072 and 1077), illustrated with abundant examples from Turkic folk literature, was the work of Mahmud al-Kashghari (ca. 1028/38 – ca. last quarter 11<sup>th</sup> century), who was likely related to the eastern branch of the Karakhanid Dynasty (Yu 1996, pp. 290-92; Dankoff n.d.; Golden 2015; text and tr., Kāshgarī 1982-85). Since he wrote in Baghdad and dedicated the work to the Arab caliph, his explanatory text is in the standard academic language of the time, Arabic. In this pioneering work though, he argued for the richness of Turkic as a literary language, and one manuscript of the work contains a unique map placing his Turkic homeland at the center of the world (for the map, see Golden 2015, pp. 522-23). Islam in this Turkic-language environment and imbued with Central Asian cultural traditions provided not only legitimacy but also strong indigenous roots for the Karakhanids.

In the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the sufi Naqshbandi order under leaders called khojas gained influence and wealth in the western part of Central Asia. These Turkic-speaking khojas propagated Islam to the entire Tarim Basin in subsequent centuries in the face of efforts by Mongol rulers to strengthen the position of Tibetan Buddhism (Green 2012, pp. 80-101; Togan 1991; Fletcher 1995, XI/4-12). It appears ironic that while the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China imported musicians and dancers from Islamic Central Asia to perform in Buddhist rituals, the Tarim Basin and the conquered land of the Tanguts, despite the Mongols’ patronage of Buddhism, became an Islamic land. Actually the religious transition of the region was quite natural if one considers that Central Asian culture has always evolved through the interactions of nomads and agricultural communities, enriched by different religious traditions coming from all directions. The settling of nomads in the oases injected new life in their religious establishments and thus made them hubs of cultural activities during the centuries when agricultural empires were abandoning the land routes across Central Asia and turning their interests in trade to the maritime routes. Even as Central Asia was being deprived of much of the profit from long-distance trade, regional economies might still flourish, as did

the cultural achievements which creatively combined the talents of nomadic and sedentary peoples of different languages and beliefs.

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## Notes

1. The encounters of nomads on Central Asian steppe and oases have been the subject of much scholarly discussion and research. See, e.g., Khazanov et al. 2001; Golden 2003.
2. A major rebellion broke out in 756 in the Tang Empire. The Uyghur kaghanate (roughly 744–840), established on the steppe north of the Tarim Basin, sent an army to help the Tang suppress the rebellion. After that, the Uyghur kaghan-

ate maintained a steady trade selling horses to the Tang till the late 9<sup>th</sup> century when the Tang was at the brink of collapse.

3. For the history of the Tibetan empire, see Beckwith 1987; see also on the political changes in this period Dunnell 1994.

4. On the transition to Islam in the western part of Central Asia see Liu 2011.

5. On the Sogdian conversion of the Uyghurs to Manichaenism, see Liu 1996, pp. 182ff., and the important article by Clark 2000.

6. Why the Kara Khitai deliberately employed Muslims instead of Buddhists to run their bureaucracy is discussed in Elverskog 2010, p. 129; Biran 2005b. The standard history of the Kara Khitai is Biran 2005a.

7. For the Tuoba ruler's motives in carving the Yungang Buddhas, see Liu 1988, pp. 150–52.

8. Manichaeism, practiced by some Uyghurs before their conversion to Buddhism, was also an anti-sacrificial, vegetarian religion.

9. See Horner 1975, pp. 284–96; for a discussion of the story of Angulimala as depicted in Buddhist art, Brancaccio 1999.

10. Davids, pp. 264–66. The encounter between Shuciloma and the Buddha is depicted at the beginning of DiCaroli 2004.

11. The idea that music was to be heard in the heavens and the Buddhist paradises can be vividly seen in the murals at the important Mogao grottoes in Dunhuang. For a very useful collection of line drawings of all such depictions of musical performance there, see Shi and Jin 2007.

12. For vivid color renditions of how the paintings on the reliquary box might have looked when fresh, see Huo and Qi 2006, pp. 170–71, and Li 1995, pp. 134–37.

13. Duan, Chengshi 段成式, *Youyang zazu* 酉阳杂俎 [Anecdotes from Youyang] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), p. 46, quoted in Zhu 1993, pp. 19–20.

14. The Tibetan sources for Tangut Buddhist practices have been discussed in Davidson 2005, pp. 332–35. His section on “Kagyupa Missionary Activity and the Tanguts” provides specific information on Tangut students in Tibet.

15. Theological mingling between Buddhism and Islam in Central Asia has been fully discussed in Elverskog 2010.

16. Liu 2012, pp. 37–40. *Sama* has been a controversial practice in the Islamic world. For a brief introduction to the topic see Green 2012, pp. 8–10.

17. In addition to the image reproduced here, see especially one from the Collection of the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Studies, reproduced in Sims et al. 2002, p. 260 (Pl. 176). As explained by Green (2012, p. 106): “While it later became standard practice for Sufi commentators to explain that the ‘true’ meaning of such early Persian poetry was inward and spiritual – drunkenness meant absorption in God and not wine, the beautiful youth was a metaphor for divine perfection, and so on – there seems little point in doubting that many (perhaps even most) of the medieval audiences of these songs enjoyed them for what they appeared to be: celebrations of wine, sex and songs.”

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A shorter version of this article is to appear soon in Chinese as: “Zhong Ya Zongjiao Wenhua he Shehui de Zhongda Zhuanzhe (9 zhi 13 shiji) 中亚宗教文化和社会的重大转折—9至13世纪 [Major transitions in Central Asia, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries]. *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 [Religious Studies] no. [?] 2015[?]: 13–26.

**Plate III**

[Liu, "Nomads and Oasis Cities," p. 50]



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*Uighur princes, probably depictions of deceased family members. Fragment of mural from Bezeklik Temple No. 9, 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. Collection of the Museum of Asian Art (Berlin), III 6876a.*