

**DIALOGUES BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND SHAIVISM IN
NORTHWEST INDIA AND ARTS OF ANCIENT XINJIANG
; Their Relevance To The Arts of Western Himalayas**

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Sung-Min Kim

Ph.D Scholar

School of Arts & Aesthetics

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The discussion on the ancient relationship of India to other parts of Asia most often starts with the historic event of transmission of Buddhism. The opening chapter of the relation in between two grand cultural zones- Indian Subcontinent and East Asia is usually remarked by the journey of Buddhist teachings from India to Central Asia in the 1st Cent. B.C. and Central Asian contribution to the flowering of Buddhism in East Asian countries, which laid foundations for their great civilizations. The view of Central Asia as a ‘passage’ or as a ‘trade route’ through which material goods and cultural products such as Buddhism were carried forth, has fascinated us with its image of melting pot of different cultures and colourful exotic goods. However, it has considerably put off the discussion of its own indigenous ‘cultural ingredients’. And when the historic transmission of Buddhism is referred to, we are easily misled into understanding it as ‘Buddhicization’.

My presentation intends to overcome the view of Buddhist influence as one-directional, one-dimensional and one-time phenomenon, and attempt at getting to a

dynamic picture of cultural interaction between India and Central Asia. I will focus on the concurrent artistic activities of historical Northwest India, Xinjiang and Western Himalayas from 7th to 10th Cent. A.D. when 'the Silk Route' enjoyed its second flourish in the historical era, and when interactions of different regions brought great synthesis in the field of arts and religion.

Question

The question of the present paper is raised by the recognition that iconographic features of some paintings from Xinjiang, categorized as Buddhist, have apparent affinities to the mural paintings of Western Himalayas, especially those of Alchi and Tabo, that are assigned to 10th to 12th Cent. A.D.

The monastery of Tabo and Alchi were built by the early Tibetan Kingdom of Guge. And their mural paintings and other early paintings of Western Himalayas are recorded to have been painted by artists from Kashmir. Thus, we assume that they contain a great deal of Kashmir traces.¹ The question is how the remains of religious art in ancient Xinjiang come about to reveal a considerable relevancy to the arts of India. This question is approached as a part of my research in the quest for the Buddhist aesthetics and understanding it in the broad cultural basis of India. Some remarkable features in the arts of ancient Xinjiang lead us to the following inferences.

- 1) Especially, Shaivite images -but categorized as Buddhist- of ancient Xinjiang seem verifying the transmission not only of Buddhism but also of Shaivism from India to Central Asia.²
- 2) On the other hand, the iconographic features of divine images discovered in Xinjiang region, especially, Shaivite images of Kucha, Khotan of 6th to 7th Cent. A.D. and their relationship with Buddhist images corroborate the hypothesis of syncretism between Mahayana Buddhism and Shaivism, not only in India but also beyond India.

My presentation focuses on the second possibility given above, with the conviction that our terming of 'Buddhism' or 'Hinduism' is rather abstract and theoretical and it is

¹ Tucci has frequently noted that the monasteries of the western Himalayas contain the sole surviving records of Kashmiri painting prior to the eleventh century.

² If it is the case, we need look into the problem of why the Dunhuang murals do not provide any examples of Hindu gods or goddesses as main deities of worship and also why Hindu religion could not enter Chinese culture.

difficult to distinguish whether Buddhist or Hindu in the level of daily life.³ I will also examine the contribution of Xinjiang to the formation of a dynamic cultural zone covering Kashmir and Western Himalayas together.

First of all, the question of cultural congeniality of the Northwest India and Xinjiang is approached, by the careful examination of Shaiva images from Xinjiang and their comparison with images from Kashmir and Gilgit.

1) Vajrayana Buddhist and Shaivite images from Xinjiang

Eg 1. A fragment of painting showing three heads from Kizil, Maya Cave III (ca. 625-650 A.D.) H.18.73x 48.26 cm with the frame, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

: There is a figure with the third eye that is delineated not stylistically, but realistically. The halo around the figure indicates that it is a divine figure within a group of deities. This figure may be identified as Shiva.

: The relationship between the art of Kucha and that of northwest India has been long acknowledged. However, by re-dating the arts of many trade centers in India and Central Asia, the progressive theory of Buddhist arts from the earlier artistic centers in Gandhara and Afghanistan to Central Asia has been repudiated. Buddhist arts continued to be produced in Afghanistan and Pakistan until the 8th and 9th Cent. A.D. In contrast to the earlier opinions, it now appears that the art of Kizil of 7th Cent. A.D. influenced the art of Bamiyan dating to the late 7th Cent. A.D.⁴

Eg 2 Four Hindu deities on an illustrated leaf of a Manichaean manuscript, found in Kocho, assignable to 8th-9th Cent. A.D., Museum fur Indische Kunst, Berlin⁵

: They have been identified by Dr. P. Banerjee as Ganesh and Hindu Trimuri.

Ganesh (individual representations have been found in many parts of Central Asia) holding a bowl of golden colour in his left hand wears a golden crown of a Sassanian type.

³ Staal, Frits, 'The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion' in Klimburg-Salter, 1982, pp.39-51; the author argues in the article that the Western concept of 'religion' is not applicable to the Asian traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, etc.)

⁴ Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 'The Kingdom of Bamiyan: Buddhist Art and Culture of the Hindu Kush, Naples-Rome, 1989

⁵ Introduced in Banerjee, P., 'New Light on Central Asian Art and Iconography', 1992, Abha Prakashan, New Delhi, pp.1-6

Boar's head probably represent Mahavarahi aspect of Vishnu. He is two armed; his right hand hangs down on his knee and he hold in his left hand a vajra, which is not the usual attribute of Vishnu.

Brahmaa with a black moustache and a flowing beard in blue. He is represented with a single head, not four. He holds a lily in his raised right hand and a golden bowl in his left hand.

Shiva's identity is quite certain by the presence of the third eye on his forehead. His right hand is placed on the knee and he holds a long sword in his left hand.

Eg 3. Three- headed figure from Khotan, Skrine Collection of Central Asian antiquities, British Museum, London ⁶

: The fragment shows the upper part of a deity having three faces. The central face has a divine form with a third eye on the forehead. The face has a grim look with the teeth open to the view. These features reminds us of Shiva in his terrific aspect. The other two faces of the god are animals; one on the right is a boar, while the other a lion.

Being related to the iconographic form of Vaikuntha Vishnu, it represents a Buddhist creation as a Nilakantha or Harihara form of Avalokiteshvara who is a composite figure of Buddhist and Hindu elements.

Eg 4. Acanthus scroll with skull, Kizil Cave, ca.500 A.D.

The painted patter is distinctive with its unusual insertion of skull within the ubiquitous pattern of vegetation. The skull may reveals the association of the region with Kaapaalika cult.

Eg. 5 Shiva and Shakti, Dandan Uliq, Khotan

Eg 6. Shiva-Maheshvara, Dandan Uliq, Khotan

Eg 7. Vajravarahi mandala on Ivory plaque, Yoktan, Khotan, stylistically assignable to 9th to 10th Cent. A.D.

: Multi-armed deity is placed in the middle of space created by two triangles, that is, the up-pointed one and the down-pointed one, which symbolize the union of Shiva and Shakti, that generates the eternal creation.

Artistic evidence for the practice of Shaivism may date from the 4th to 5th Cent. A.D. in Afghanistan and Central Asia. From the 7th Cent. A.D. onwards a variety of Hindu

⁶ Introduced in Banerjee, *ibid.* pp.162-166

cult images were worshipped in central Asia and throughout northwest India. Hindu divinities like Indra and Amoghapasha are also found in Xinjiang.

One of the earliest fully developed form of Vajrayana Buddhist arts (in Xinjiang) can be found in the painted banners from Dunghung, assignable to 8th or 9th Cent. A.D. that shows Bodhisattvas holding the vajra placed in a mandala composition. The monasteries of the large oases of Kucha and Khotan were important in the development and diffusion of Vajrayana arts in the Western Himalayas.

2) Composite iconography of Buddhism and Shaivism from Northwest India

Eg 1. Vajradharma Lokeshvara, Bronze, Swat Valley, 9th Cent. A.D. H. 39.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

: It is one of the largest and earliest known tantric images. His lotus throne is supported by peacocks. He opens a lotus bud with his two lower hands. The seated image of Amitabha in his crown identifies him as Avalokiteshvara. His two additional hands hold a bow and arrow, which are important attributes of Shiva, especially the cosmic bow and a single arrow- the repository of all knowledge- with which Shiva destroyed the demon's three flying cities in the air, therefore named Tripurantaka Shiva.

Eg 2. Bhairava, Brass, Kashmir, 8th to 9th Cent. A.D. H. 22.2 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art

: Earlier, this image was identified with Vajrapani. But certain iconographic feature such as the erect phallus tied with a serpent indicates the image is associated with Shiva. In Vajrayana Buddhist iconography, Bhairava is a ferocious manifestation of Manjushri.

Eg 3. Shamvara, Brass, Kashmir, 10th Cent. H. 21.6 x W. 14 x D. 5.5 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

: Shamvara is an emanation of the Buddha Akshobhya who is seated in the crown in the image. Here, we see numerous iconographic details are borrowed from Shaivite iconography: the elephant skin, trident, crescent, third eye, skull cup and human heads. Figures of Bhairava and Camunda are trampled under the feet of Shamvara.

Eg 4. Vajrasattva and his consort from Kashmir, Brass, Kashmir, 11th Cent. A.D.

H.14.3 cm

: Both the divinities hold bell and vajra. Crown contains images of the Five Buddhas. This image is comparable to often-encountered Shiva –Parvati composition. A similar configuration is found in a late 12th Cent. A.D. representation of Vajrasattva and his consort painted on cotton, in Western Himalayas, now kept in Musee Guimet, Paris. (Pl. 11) Here, the divine couple is surrounded by eight bodhisattvas.

Shaivite iconographic features that entered Buddhist iconography are not rare in the sculptural remains of 8th to 11th Cent. A.D, in Kashmir, Gilgit and Swat regions of northwest India. (eg. Varjabhairava, Mahakaala, Vajradharma Lokeshvara, Hayagriva Lokeshvara etc.). Vajrayana iconography frequently borrowed elements from the Hindu pantheon while maintaining the superiority of Buddhist philosophy.

3) Consideration of Geo-political Relationship between North-West India and Xinjiang

By the 7th Cent. A.D. the cities of Xinjiang, located in oases and along the river valleys, had become cosmopolitan trade centers that were not merely a market junction but also the manufacturing centers. Western Turks were the dominant political power in much of Central Asia in the 6th and 7th Cent. A.D.

In the last quarter of 7th Cent. A.D., Tibetan armies advanced north into Central Asia and, in the 8th Cent. A.D., they moved west into India and Pakistan. By the 8th Cent., Tibet had emerged as one of the most important political forces in the Trans-Himalayan region. At the same times, Muslim armies were beginning their permanent conquest of present-day Afghanistan and parts of Western Central Asia. In the 8th Cent. A.D. under the king Lalitaditya-Muktapida, Kashmir was one of the great powers of Asia. The Chinese Tang Dynasty, the most powerful in Asia that time, was constantly forced to defend its territory in Central Asia. The threat of Tibetan and, to a lesser degree, Arab expansion, motivated an alliance between the Tang Chinese and the Karkota Dynasty, which, at that time ruled most of historical northwest India from Kashmir.⁷

The Tibetan conquest of rich Central Asian cities along the trade routes, such as Khotan, Kucha and Dunhuang brought cultural and material wealth to Tibet with which they could patronize religious construction and arts. (Early Tibetan kingdom occupied

⁷ Klimburg-Salter, 1982, pp. 20-21

Dunhuang from 786 to 848 A.D.)

The history of northwest India and neighbouring regions in 7th to 9th Cent. A.D. is visualized in the picture of dynamic interaction, the history involving cultural and ethnic variations.

For millennia, the main trade route between Central Asia and India was the circumventing curve connecting Kashgar, Pamir, Bamiyan and Gandhara. However, as Muslim armies steadily advanced towards the mountains, even the Pamir routes lost much of their importance. After the 8th Cent. A.D. traveling through Central Asia to India became increasingly risky because there were political troubles within China; Chinese armed conflicts with Arabs and Tibetans; and their subsequent emergence as strong powers in the region under discussion. The Uighurs and Turkic people took advantage of the power vacuum in the Tarim Basin. Much of the routes connecting Xinjiang and India shifted further east to the Karakoram routes.

The expansion of the Pamir-Karakoram trade stimulated the economies of northern Pakistan and Kashmir and facilitated the sponsorship of art production. One of the direct routes from northwest India to Xinjiang started in Swat and to Gilgit, proceeding via Hunza to the Pamirs. Another important set of tracks started in Kashmir, crossed the Great Himalayas. In 8th to 9th Cent. A.D. (Pl. 12) Western Himalayan regions, especially Ladhak became a focus of interregional communications.⁸ Monasteries, esteemed to be particularly important were built along the trade route linking northwest India, Tibet and Xinjiang.

In the 11th Cent. A.D, Muslim armies were pushing across northern India. Kashmir economy came to be in a state of decline. However, the patronage of Buddhism in the Western Himalayas increased. New monasteries were being built; many Kashmiri translators, artists and craftsmen traveled eastward to find work.

4) Relationship between Buddhism and Shaivism in North-West India

Some important philosophical-religious activities in these two regions during 6th to 11th Cent. A.D. have to be also referred. The syncretism between Hinduism and Buddhism is

⁸ Until the 1940's, Leh was an important trade centre, with caravans meeting from all directions, particularly from Yarkand or Khotan in the north and Kashmir in the west.

well known from literary sources and is reflected well in Tatric Buddhist iconography.⁹

North-West region, especially Kashmir, had been an important center for Buddhism even before the Ashoka's propagation, and was one of the most important centers of Mahayana Buddhism. And, it was Kashmir Buddhists who inspired the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism that centred around monasteries in the Western Himalayas neighbouring to Kashmir. Buddhism in Kashmir continued to be the centre of Mahayana Buddhism till the last phase of development of Buddhism in India and live on upto the Turco-Afghan invasion to North India in 11th Cent. A.D. Due to its geographical isolation, Buddhism was not radically eliminated even then.¹⁰ Xuanzang stayed in Kashmir and recorded about region that 'as the country is protected by a dragon, it has always assumed superiority among the neighbouring people.' (Beal 1884; 1,148) He also expressed a high esteem in saying, "they have high standards of Buddhist learning, its priests could not be compared with those of other nations, so different were they from the ordinary class". (Beal 1911; 71)

However, North-West India has been one of the strongest regions of Shaivism at the same time, and it was Kashmir where the Shaiva tantric traditions obtained a body of exegesis and were synthesized into a refined philosophy and practice. Shaivism became increasingly important in northwest India from the 6th Cent. A.D. onward. Hindu Tantrism also has real affiliations with Himalayan regions; the most important centers of the tantras are situated in Swat, Gandhaara and Kashmir in the northwest India. At the same time, Swat Valley and Gilgit area (called Bruzha in ancient Tibetan texts) have been renowned in antiquity for their occult forces. Buddhist rock sculptures, art objects and manuscripts found in Baltistan, Gilgit testify to the presence of Buddhism. Xuanzang reported the existence of 100 Buddhist monasteries "with something like 1000 priests, who show not great zeal for learning and are careless in their moral conduct". (Beal 1884: 1,135)

The Avalokiteshvara's identification with Siva is well narrated in the record of Xiuen Tsang. He associated Avalokiteshvara with the Potala mountain. As the pilgrim describes, the mountain Potala is a very steep mountain with dangerous passes. On its top is a Lake with clear water and by its side is a rock-cut palace of the Devas. Avalokiteshvara takes his residence on the Potala mountain which is situated to the east

⁹ Archaeological site of Tepe Sardar at Ghazni in Afghanistan revealed Hindu and Buddhist images together; Durga Mahisasuramardini and a Buddha with three-pointed jeweled cape, which seem to be the 8th Cent. A.D. addition to the original Buddhist chapel. Klimburg-Salter 1982, P. 85

¹⁰ Naudou, Jean, *Buddhist of Kashmir*, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1980; Preface

of the Malaya mountain and the earnest devotees climb the mountain to have a sight of the god. For those who cannot climb the mountain, the merciful god appears before them in the form of 'Ishvara' or a 'Paashupata' Yogin.¹¹ In the Kaaranda-Vyuha, Avalokiteshvara, like Shiva is called 'Girisha' ('one whose abode is mountain').

Hindu images were produced in the same medium and in similar styles as contemporaneous Buddhist icons. We see frequent syncretism of Buddhist and Hindu iconographic concepts during this period; for example, Shiva is considered as the best of the physicians in the Vedic literature. The epithet of healer was applied also to Buddha, named Bhaishajyaguru; the bowl held in the left hands of many figures from Xinjiang seem to have the association with the concept of elixir that will cure physical and mental illness.

In this small section, I tried to emphasize the concurrent development of Buddhism and Hinduism, especially Shaivism in the northwest India and their assimilation through iconographic details of their divine images. The comparison between the Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantric Shaivism in terms of their philosophy and religious practice will have to be taken up in a separate paper.

5) Cultural Context of Arts of Western Himalayas

Then, coming back to the first point of the presentation, how are Tibetan arts related to the present topic on the art of northwest India and Xinjiang regions?

In the legend of Padmasambhava, he imported Buddhism from Uddiyana (the modern Swat Valley in Pakistan) to Tibet in the 8th Cent. A.D. Guhyasamaja tantra ('Secret Union') was already translated to Tibetan in the 8th Cent. A.D. From the 10th and 11th Cent. A.D. the kings of Western Tibet subsidized monks, such as Rincen Zangpo (958-1055 A.D.) who traveled to Kashmir three times and other part of northern India in search not only of teachers and texts, but also of artists and arts. Rincen Zangpo invited many pandits to Tibet and said to have properly established the custom of preaching (the Yoga Tantras)¹². Tabo monastery in Spiti Valley, one of the earliest Tibetan monasteries founded by Rincen Zangpo reveal the trace of the Kashmiri painting which is assumed to have been an established painting school.

¹¹ Lokesh Chandra, 'Origin of the Avalokiteshvara of Potala' Kailash, Vol. VII, No. 1, 1979, pp.5-6

¹² Roerich, George N., Trails to Inmost Asia; Five Years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition, New Haven 1931, pp.351-352

As the legend goes, many iconographic themes of mature Tibetan art, such as Vajrayogini, Padmasambhava and Kaalacakra have been originated in the northwest India or Central Asia include. Sarva-tathagatha-tattva-samgraha and Durgati-parishodhana were the particularly favoured texts. It is assumed that Tibetan artists adapted iconographic forms imported from Kashmir and Central Asia in the 7th Cent. A.D. It is seem arts of Western Himalayas that belong to 10th to 11th Cent. A.D. still having the reminiscence of Kashmir and Central Asian fragrance. By the mid-11th Cent. A.D. the region had absorbed diverse influences, and so called 'Vajrayana arts' was established, centred around the Buddhist monasteries. Kashmir's religion and artistic ideas seem to have influenced on Western Himalayas either directly or indirectly via Central Asia.¹³

Development of shared belief system and visual themes may have allowed artists of the region to seek employment at various monastic centers along the trade route.

Conclusion: Reconstructing an cultural context of a regional unit 'Western Trans-Himalayas' from 7th to 10th Cent. A.D.

No painted devotional images survive in India from 7th Cent. A.D. Therefore, paintings from Xinjiang preserve the most important testimony of parts of India to which it had direct contacts.

Composite Shaivite images from Xinjiang of 7th to 10th Cent. A.D. imply the cultural congeniality between Northwest India and Xinjiang that had to be preceded the iconographic similarities that are found in religious images of these regions. And a large body of materials contains tantric themes important for arts of Western Himalayas that reflect the compositional and stylistic affinity as well as common iconography of deities. Xinjiang actively participated in the formation of trade and cultural unit that encompasses Western Trans-Himalayan regions, that is, the triangular area connecting Kashmir, Yarkand (or Khotan) and Ladhak, and further south down to Lahul-Spiti-Guge area. These areas can be bound together as a cultural unit, in terms of both physical and

¹³ An inquiry has been raised into the impact of Central Asian arts that carried along Chinese traces on the arts of northwest India and Western Himalayas. The hypothesis of an international style that pervaded from 8th to 12th Cent. A.D. covering the areas from Afghanistan and Swat to Karakhoto has been consistently argued throughout Klimburg-Salter, 1982

meta-physical aspects, in the picture of dynamic interactions of 7th to 10th Cent. A.D. Therefore, Composite Shaivite images of Xinjiang provides us the clue to reconstruct the picture of dynamic cultural context in which arts of Western Himalayas can be understood with insight. The zenith of Indian philosophical, spiritual and artistic expression that is found in the Northwest India and West Himalayas could not have reached without the solid cultural background. We may also understand the refined exegetical works of diverse tantric traditions in Kashmir (starting from 8th Cent. A.D.) and their pinnacle in synthetic philosophy of Abhinavagupta of 10th Cent. A.D. in that context. Therefore, we obtain the foundational basis from which the aesthetics of the religious traditions of the region can be searched for, which is not rigidly bound to any sectarian religion such as 'Vajrayana Buddhism'.

As Frit Staal pointed out that 'the level like 'Hindu' or 'Buddhist' are misleading and fail to characterize the cultural unity of the Himalayan region'¹⁴, the arts of the region should not be confined to the category of 'Vajrayana' or 'Esoteric Buddhist Art' and should not limit ourselves to the method of reading it as 'Buddhist', which will hamper us in comprehending the powerful spirit of arts of Western Himalayas. Therefore, the interaction among various religious practices and among regions has to be paid much attention to as the critical conditions that had constituted the artistic activities.

Sung-Min Kim, email: nabisori2001@yahoo.com

¹⁴ Staal, Frit, 'The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion' in Klimburg 1982, pp.39-51