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CHURCH LANGUAGE AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE
IN CENTRAL ASIAN BUDDHISM*

JAN NATTIER

The history of Buddhism in Central Asia—a term that I will use here to refer to the network of oasis towns comprising the ancient “Silk Road” stretching from Eastern Iran to Tun-huang¹—is a major missing piece in our knowledge of the evolution of the Buddhist tradition. Yet the scholar who attempts to compile a connected history of Central Asian Buddhism finds again and again that there is simply not enough data to reconstruct the total picture of events in this region. At times it is tempting to abandon the project altogether, appealing to the words of the great Indologist John Brough, who declared that a narrative history of the expansion of Buddhism across Central Asia simply cannot be written. As he wrote in 1965, “the surviving information is fragmentary, interpretation is often uncertain, the problems numerous and intractable.”² Certainly Brough was right in pointing out that we will probably never have all the pieces of the puzzle: Too much of the data has been lost—or perhaps never existed at all in written or iconographic form—for us to be able to put together a complete account of the diffusion and evolution of Buddhism in Central Asia.

But if we are willing to abandon the analogy of the puzzle, and think instead of our task as one of organizing the existing data into something resembling an open-weave net, the project becomes at once less daunting. Put another way, if we admit at the outset that the area occupied by the gaps in our knowledge may always be far greater than that occupied by what we *do* know, then we can forge ahead—with, of course, all due caution—in the task of organizing those small bits of data that are available into a preliminary framework. Once this has been accomplished, new perspectives may emerge even from materials that have already been examined by modern scholars, and we may also find clues for where to look for more information in the sources from adjacent regions. As the connecting link between India and China during those vital first

centuries of the expansion of Buddhism across the Asian continent, Central Asia holds a place of unparalleled importance in the history of the Buddhist religion. The value of what we may be able to learn from the admittedly fragmentary data from this region is sufficient to justify, I believe, a preliminary attempt to put the pieces into order. Specially, I would like to focus here on one of the overarching issues in the history of Buddhism in this region: the use of a special “church language,” on the one hand, and vernacular languages on the other.

Church Language and Vernacular Language: Methodological Considerations

We must begin with the problem of definition. First, what is meant by “church language” (or “religious language”) in general? Second, can we identify anything that corresponds to this category in the Buddhist context? And third, does such a thing exist in the more narrowly defined context of Buddhism in Central Asia?

Beginning with the first of these issues, we may adopt the useful system of analysis suggested recently by Richard N. Frye,³ who on the basis of his research in the Iranian cultural sphere has pointed out the existence of four distinct language categories:

1. “*religious*” or “*church*” language: a language distinct from the spoken vernacular and restricted to liturgical, scriptural, or other religious use.
2. *written administrative language*: the language used for written record-keeping in business and government. This may be simply a more formalized version of the everyday spoken language, or it may be a different language altogether (as in the case of the administrative use of Aramaic in the Achaemenid empire of Persia).
3. *spoken administrative language*: the language used for oral communication in government and business dealings. Again this may simply be a somewhat elevated version of the ordinary spoken vernacular, or it may be a separate language. In a multilingual empire the spoken administrative language (like its written counterpart) is often a *lingua franca* stretching across a number of linguistic boundaries.
4. *vernacular language*: the local dialect, spoken at home and in informal work and social situations.

In some cases, of course, these categories may overlap; in the extreme case (as in the United States, where English is generally

employed in all four capacities) a single language may be used for all four purposes, with a mere shading in tone marking the transition from the more formal expressions used in religious and official contexts to the more colloquial expressions overheard at the neighborhood bar. At the opposite extreme, as many as four distinct languages—which may even belong to four separate language families—could, at least theoretically, be used. The number of languages employed depends on a variety of factors, including the cultural influences to which the area in question has been subjected, its political dependence or independence with respect to neighboring states, and its own internal linguistic composition (that is, whether it is a multilingual society, a monolingual society, or a society incorporating speakers of a variety of closely related dialects). Since we will be most concerned in this paper with the first and last of these four categories, we may begin with a closer examination of the first.

The term “church language,” or religious language, can be used in a number of senses. It can refer, first of all, to scriptural language—that is, the language of texts considered by transmitters to be sacred, whether these texts are written or oral in form. Second, the term can refer to ritual language—language used in religious rituals and ceremonies, but not elsewhere in everyday life. And third, it can refer to the language of individual words or phrases of special religious significance which are embedded in a text written in another language—for example, the Indian Buddhist mantra *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* (an expression preserved in the original Sanskrit even when the text in which it appears, the *Heart Sūtra*, is translated into languages such as Chinese, Tibetan, or Mongolian), or the Greek phrase *kyrie eleison* embedded within the Latin mass. In the latter case we have the curious (though hardly isolated) case of a phrase in one church language embedded within a larger text composed in another. Of these various types of “church language,” our major concern in this paper will be with the first—that is, a special religious language in which sacred scriptures (whether oral or written) are transmitted. We may begin, therefore, by considering just how such a distinctive language comes into being.

In the history of religions the phenomenon of “church language”

is encountered most often in the form of a language in which a divine revelation has been received.⁴ The language of this original revelation, of course, is itself ordinarily a vernacular; presumably a divine message issued in a language the recipients could not understand would be of little use. As the faithful seek to maintain this message over the ensuing centuries, however, the language in which the revelation was originally encoded becomes increasingly distant from the continually evolving language of everyday speech. Finally—if the revelation is maintained over a sufficient period of time, or if the evolution of the spoken language proceeds rapidly enough—the language of the revelation can become nearly incomprehensible even to those who are charged with preserving it. At this point the language in which the divine message is recorded has entered the category of a pure “church language,” clearly separate from the spoken vernacular and restricted in its use to the reading or recitation of the sacred message. At this stage the “church language”—even if it is still understood by religious professionals who have undertaken special training—is virtually inaccessible to the masses of religious adherents.

The problem of incomprehensibility is exacerbated if—as in the Buddhist case—the religious tradition in question is exported beyond its original linguistic boundaries. Now the problem is no longer merely one of archaism, but of partial or total discontinuity between the language of revelation and the language of ordinary speech.

Once such linguistic estrangement—whether due to chronological or to geographical distance from the locus of the original revelation—has taken place, the adherents of the religious tradition in question are faced with a dilemma. Should the revelation be preserved as it is, or should the sounds be changed and the meaning translated into a new (and more vernacular) language? In other words, what is the relative importance of form, on the one hand, and of content on the other? For the believer who takes seriously the divine source of the original revelation, the answer to this question is not all straightforward. For if the message is taken out of the form in which a divine power originally revealed it and cast in another language (with all the attendant possibilities of misinterpretation), who is to say that human error has not crept in to alter

the message? In some religious traditions the result of such translation is no longer accorded the same status as the original revealed message. Thus the *Qurʿān* is viewed by Muslims as the revelation given by God to Muhammad *in Arabic*; a translation of the Arabic text into any other language is not that revelation itself, but only a human interpretation of its message.⁵ Likewise the authority of the Vedic literature of India is inextricably linked to the sounds themselves, as “heard” by ancient sages millennia ago. To mispronounce these sounds—much less to translate them into an altogether different language—is to empty them of their inherent power.⁶ Hence the cultivation of the correct memorization and transmission of these texts by the custodians of the Vedic tradition, who handed down these texts orally in an ancient form of Sanskrit (much to the amazement, and deep gratitude, of modern Indo-European linguists) for nearly two millennia before they were finally recorded in writing.

“Church Language” in the Buddhist Context

The fact that the Buddhist tradition has so often served as a stumbling block for generalizations about religion—whether for its alleged atheism or for its rejection of the notion of an eternal individual soul—should alert us to the possibility that a given religious category, even one that seems universal in other religious traditions, may well turn out to be absent from the Buddhist repertoire. We should not assume at the outset, therefore, that “church language” in the sense just described will necessarily appear in the Buddhist tradition. Before turning to the Buddhist materials from Central Asia it is worth pausing first to examine the resources for thinking about language that were present already in the Indian Buddhist tradition, and the extent to which these theoretical principles were actually followed in practice.

First of all, our initial definition of “church language” as a language in which a specific divine revelation has been encoded serves to highlight an aspect of the Buddhist tradition that is often overlooked: the fact that the idea of a “revelation” from an otherworldly source is problematic in the early years of that tradition, and indeed remains so throughout much of Buddhist history.

Unlike the *Qurʿān* or the Vedic literature of India, the Buddhist scriptures purport to be nothing other than the pronouncements of a historical person, the Buddha Śākyamuni, made at a number of locations in northeast India in response to a variety of specific circumstances. Indeed one could contend (without being overly facetious) that Buddhism is a “one-genre” religion: Virtually every text in the Buddhist canon begins with the introductory phrase “Thus have I heard at one time”—an expression that serves precisely to ground the text in the ordinary world of everyday experience.⁷ Granted, the Buddha’s wisdom and experience are ranked far above those of his ordinary followers, and such a valuation naturally lends an unusual weight of authority to his words. Nonetheless these utterances are not understood as “revelations” in any usual sense; rather, they represent the responses of a uniquely insightful human being to the ever-changing events of the world in which he found himself.

A second factor to consider in our quest for a Buddhist analogue of “church language” is to be found in Buddhist attitudes toward language itself. The majority of Buddhist philosophers have identified language with discursive thought, which is considered to be partially (or relatively) true at best and totally erroneous at worst. To enter into a detailed discussion of the concepts of “relative” and “absolute” truth would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to point out, however, that in Buddhist philosophy language is never assigned to the level of the absolute, but remains consistently on a lower or relative plane.⁸

Third and last, we find in one of the earliest layers of Buddhist literature (the *Vinaya* or monastic rules) a story in which the Buddha is described as explicitly opposing the formalized recitation of his teachings in anything other than the local vernacular. According to this tale, two brahman brothers who had been converted to Buddhism were concerned that monks “of a variety of origins and family backgrounds” were corrupting the word of the Buddha by reciting his teachings each in his own way. “Let us remedy the situation,” suggested the brothers, “by putting the word of the Buddha into *chandās*.”⁹ The precise meaning of the term *chandās* is still a matter of considerable controversy;¹⁰ in general terms, however, it is associated with the style of recitation used for the Vedic

literature—that is, the religious literature with which the two brothers would have been most familiar. The Buddha's response to this suggestion, however, is not at all ambiguous: He forbids the recitation of his teachings in *chandās*, saying that whoever did so would be committing an offense against the monastic rule. Instead he instructs his followers to teach the word of the Buddha each in his own language.¹¹ The authority of the Buddha himself, then, was called upon to encourage the propagation of his teaching in local vernacular languages, and so inhibit the formation of a special “church language” for the recitation of the Buddhist scriptures. The fact that this story appears in texts belonging to a number of different schools supports an early date for its origin (that is, prior to the first major sectarian division in the Buddhist community, which took place approximately a century and a half after the death of the Buddha). The presence of this common tradition at an early stage in the history of the Buddhist religion thus must have served as a powerful deterrent to the creation of a special “church language” for religious use.

These three factors, then—the absence of a tradition of divine revelation, the general philosophical devaluation of language, and the tradition of the Buddha's advocacy of the use of the vernacular—would be expected to have led to the actual transmission of Buddhist literature in the language of everyday speech. These are, however, merely theoretical factors, resources for thinking about language that are present in the Buddhist repertoire. The more important question, for our purposes, is what was actually done with these resources. Were these ideas translated into action in the manner we would expect?

First of all, it is important to recall that during the first several centuries after the Buddha his teachings were passed down only in oral form. Not until late in the 1st century BCE (some four and a half centuries after the death of the Buddha, according to the “long chronology”¹²) were the words of the Buddha first set down in writing.¹³ Thus it is rather difficult to determine with any degree of certainty what language, or languages, were used for the transmission of Buddhist texts during these first several centuries. Fortunately, however, we do have some fragmentary evidence even from this early period. In the inscriptions of King Aśoka (r. circa

269-232 BCE) are recorded the titles of a few Buddhist texts; in these the local dialect—an eastern, or Māghadī, form of Prakrit—can be discerned.¹⁴ Later, with the development of a written Buddhist literature, considerably more evidence becomes available. Thus we have the entire Theravāda Buddhist canon, recorded in the composite Prakrit (i.e., vernacular¹⁵) language known as Pāli, and even within this linguistically homogenized corpus we can occasionally find traces of still older vernacular forms, perhaps belonging to more than one dialect.¹⁶ A recension of the *Dharmapada* (a compendium of edifying verses corresponding to the Pāli *Dhammapada*) composed in Gāndhārī, a vernacular Prakrit dialect of northwest India, was found in the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang, P.R.C.) near Khotan,¹⁷ and the language used for certain late Nikāya Buddhist¹⁸ and early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, dubbed “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit” by Franklin Edgerton,¹⁹ still carries considerable traces of vernacular speech. At least in these first several centuries after the Buddha, then, it seems fair to say that the principles outlined above were indeed being followed, and that the Buddhist teachings were disseminated in a variety of local Prakrit tongues. Subsequently, however, with the increasing use of literary Sanskrit by educated Hindu poets and philosophers, we find the Buddhists beginning to follow their lead and (particularly during and after the Gupta period, c. 320-467 CE) producing religious literature in more or less polished forms of Sanskrit. By this time, however, Buddhism had already passed through the oasis regions of Central Asia, en route to China, Korea and Japan. What principles of language selection, then, were being followed in these Central Asian communities?

Buddhist Languages Along the Silk Road

At first glance it would appear that the use of language by Buddhist missionaries in Central Asia closely parallels what we have observed in the Indian context. Archaeologists have unearthed a multitude of Buddhist texts in an astounding variety of languages, including members of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family (Khotanese and Sogdian), a pair of non-Iranian Indo-European languages (Tokharian A and B, also known as

“Agnean” and “Kuchean” after Agni and Kucha, the cities which were the apparent centers of their use), the Altaic family (Uighur Turkish and, from a later period, Mongolian), and of course Tibetan and Chinese, as well as numerous documents in Sanskrit and Gāndhārī Prakrit. Given this vast quantity of material, one is inclined at first to agree with the great Buddhistologist Étienne Lamotte that “the Buddhist missionaries adopted without hesitation the use of ... languages of Central Asia” to disseminate the word of the Buddha in this region.²⁰ A closer look at the evidence, however, demonstrates that matters are not so straightforward. As far as the *quantity* of materials is concerned, Lamotte is certainly correct; yet if we look at the chronology of these texts a surprising pattern emerges: Not a single Buddhist text in a Central Asian vernacular language can be assigned to a date earlier than the beginning of the 6th century, and the majority were produced in the 8th century and after. Thus the earliest extant Buddhist literature in local vernaculars dates from some five centuries after the time that we know Buddhism must first have passed through this region.²¹ In other words, it would seem that the language policy established by the Buddhist community in India was not being followed in Central Asia, at least during the early centuries of the Common Era.

To construct an argument from silence using data from Central Asia, however, can be extremely hazardous, given the paucity of sources that have come down to us. First, therefore, we must consider the possibility that this aberrant pattern is due simply to an accident of preservation. We may begin by asking what languages we would *expect* to have been used for the recording of Buddhist literature in Central Asia during the first half of the first millennium CE, and then attempt to determine whether there is any evidence—direct or indirect—that Buddhist texts once existed in these languages.

A glance at the roster of the earliest Buddhist missionaries in China shows clearly that the first Buddhist spokesmen in East Asia—those who carried out their work beginning from around the first century BCE down to 265 of the Common Era—were predominantly Central Asian nationals, not natives of the Indian subcontinent.²² More specifically, the majority of these earliest missionaries were natives of the western (now Afghan and Soviet) part

of Central Asia, identifiable by their Chinese ethnonyms as Parthians (ethnonym *an* 安), *Sogdians* (*k'ang* 康), and Yüeh-chih 月氏 (ethnonym *chih* 支), the latter to be identified with the Kushans, a Central Asian people who ruled northwest India and adjacent regions from around the 1st to the 4th centuries CE. On the basis of this information we can postulate the existence of Buddhist communities in each of their respective homelands, and indeed archaeological studies have already confirmed the presence of Buddhist remains in two of these areas.²³

But where, we might ask, is the Buddhist literature in these languages? Despite the importance of the early Parthian missionaries to China (among whom An Shih-kaio and An-hsüan are two of the best known), not a single Buddhist text in the Parthian language has come down to us.²⁴ Nor have any Buddhist writings surfaced in Bactrian, the official language of the Kushans beginning in the time of King Kanishka (c. late 1st-early 2nd c. CE).²⁵ In the case of the Sogdian language the data is even more perplexing: Though the Sogdians are well represented among the earliest Buddhist missionaries to China, surviving Buddhist documents in Sogdian are uniformly late (8th-9th c. CE) and—with only two possible exceptions—consist exclusively of translations from the Chinese!²⁶

Still we must consider the possibility that there *was* an earlier Buddhist literature written in these languages, but that it since has been lost. Is there any in direct evidence for the existence of such literature? First we should take note of a fact that I have implied, but not made explicit, until now: that there *are* Buddhist texts from Central Asia dating from well before the 6th century, but these are uniformly in Gāndhārī Prakrit or Sanskrit. Thus what we have is not the total absence of written Buddhist literature before the 6th century, but simply the lack of such literature in the local vernaculars.

At this point we may turn to the evidence provided by the earliest translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese, for these texts—with their copious use of transliteration to represent Buddhist proper names and technical terms—can offer insight into the language(s) from which they might have been translated. Once again, however, the Chinese evidence confirms what we have already seen: Not a

single Chinese Buddhist text has been shown to be a translation from any Central Asian language, and the many irregularities in the transcription of Indian terms have now been shown, almost without exception, to be due to the influence of Prakrit dialectal forms.²⁷ We find, then, no independent confirmation from the Chinese sources for the existence of a Buddhist literature in any Central Asian vernacular. Thus we are left only with the evidence provided by the Central Asian texts themselves: that is, that Buddhist scriptures began to appear in the vernacular languages of Central Asia only around the beginning of the 6th century.

In addition to this chronological anomaly, we must now turn our attention to a geographical one. For although that explosion of vernacular Buddhist literature to which Lamotte referred does indeed take place in the eastern part of Central Asia, in the West just the opposite is the case: *Not a single Buddhist text written in a local Central Asian vernacular has ever been discovered west of Kashgar.* We must be careful, however, not to draw premature conclusions from this fact. The climate in western Central Asia (modern Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia) is much more humid than that of Xinjiang, thus the chances of survival of texts written on organic material—whether on palm leaves imported from India, locally produced birchbark, leather (long a favored writing material among Iranian peoples, but little used by the Buddhists for obvious reasons), or (from the 7th century onward) paper²⁸—were considerably lower here than in the East. A few scraps of Buddhist writings have survived, however, and these are uniformly written not in local languages but in Sanskrit.

One obvious question should be asked before proceeding any further. Is the absence of Buddhist vernacular literature just a special case of a more general absence of vernacular writing? That is, is there a complete lack of vernacular literature in this region during the period with which we are concerned? At least in the West—which is precisely the region in which we find a total absence of Buddhist literature in local languages in *any* period—this was certainly not the case. In the wake of the disintegration of the Achaemenid empire (after 336 BCE) the Aramaic writing system that had been used for official Achaemenid documents gave rise to a number of local scripts, which were then employed to write ver-

vernacular languages. Among these were the Parthian script (used to write the Middle Iranian Parthian language), the Sogdian script (used to write Sogdian, another Middle Iranian language once spoken in what is now the Soviet province of Uzbekistan) and the Kharoṣṭhī script (used to write Gāndhārī, a Prakrit dialect spoken in northwest India and adjoining regions). Likewise the Bactrian language (yet another Middle Iranian tongue) was freely recorded in writing, using a slightly modified version of the Greek alphabet. The use of all four of these vernacular languages is amply attested in coins, inscriptions, and secular documents.²⁹ Thus we can establish beyond question that the capacity to write in vernacular languages was indeed present.

A comparison with the Chinese situation casts the Central Asian data in even sharper relief. Buddhist texts were being translated into Chinese, purportedly by Central Asian nationals, a full four centuries before the appearance of the earliest Central Asian vernacular Buddhist texts. What, then, could be the explanation for this discrepancy?

The difficulty of forming a complete picture of Central Asian history, given the paucity of primary sources from this region, has already been mentioned. The difficulties are multiplied when we take the further step of trying to provide an explanation for the data that we do have. Such an attempt is necessary, however, if we are to make any sense out of the evidence at hand, which suggests that Central Asian Buddhists read their scriptures only in Indian languages until the 6th century, after which a sweeping “vernacularization” movement took place—but *only* in the East. Two parts of this scenario seem to demand an explanation: first, why Central Asian Buddhists apparently deviated from the language policy set by their Indian counterparts, at least prior to the Gupta period, that stressed the dissemination of Buddhist scriptures in local vernaculars; and second, why such an explosion of vernacular Buddhist literature began to appear in Xinjiang during and after the 6th century—but never, it would seem, farther West.

The Development of “Church Language” in Central Asia: Origins of a Policy Change

We may begin by considering factors that might have inhibited the translation of Buddhist literature into the languages of Central

Asia. As we have already seen, we cannot appeal to the absence of a usable script or of a tradition of vernacular writing. As to other contributing factors, however, at least two possibilities can be identified: first, the impact of what I would call a “border region mentality,” and second, the linguistic affiliation of the Central Asian vernaculars themselves.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Chinese context, where incoming Buddhist scriptures were immediately rendered into the Chinese language, and that of the Central Asian oasis cultures with which we are concerned, is one of cultural gravitational force. By the time the Chinese were first exposed to Buddhist ideas (c. 1st c. BCE) they were already able to claim a long and distinguished cultural history, preserved in written records dating back to at least the 14th century BCE. In spatial terms, too, China could well claim to be a major civilization, dominating a broad expanse of territory and surrounded by peoples whose cultures were clearly (from the Chinese perspective) at a lower, even “barbarian” level. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that China should have developed a cultural superiority complex with respect to its neighbors, an attitude we might describe as the “middle kingdom mentality.” For the Chinese, then, it was only natural to translate the Buddhist scriptures into their own vernacular language.³⁰ Indeed, to have maintained them in their original Prakrit or Sanskrit forms would have been to expose them to constant criticism as “barbarian writings,” a situation that would only have exacerbated the problems experienced by the Buddhist tradition in attempting to gain legitimacy as a foreign religion. In contrast to the relatively short history and small territorial expanse of the city-states of Central Asia, China was long since accustomed to singing the praises of its own civilization. In short, every cultural impulse led to the desire to domesticate the Buddhist tradition.

But is this not the case, one might argue, in every culture? Does not every group see its own way of life as superior to others? In certain mundane respects—such as food preferences, marital customs, and ideas of what constitutes politeness—this is undoubtedly true. Yet in the realm of religion we can observe a number of divergences from the Chinese pattern. In Japan, for example, the Buddhist canon has never been rendered into Japanese; those who would

study the scriptures must read them in their Chinese translations.³¹ An even more striking example is that of the Mongols, who under government sponsorship translated the entire Buddhist canon into Mongolian during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, only to set it aside largely unused, preferring to read the scriptures in their Tibetan “originals.”³²

One possible factor in the reluctance of the Central Asian oasis dwellers to translate the Buddhist scriptures into their local vernaculars, then, may well have been such a “border region mentality” with respect to the subcontinent of India. As both a major world civilization and the original homeland of the Buddhist religion, India was unquestionably in a position to inspire such humility on the part of its neighbors.

Yet another factor, however, may well have served to retard the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Central Asian languages. In the modern period this region has been dominated by Turkish-speaking peoples; indeed the areas with which we are concerned (with the exception of Afghanistan) are frequently referred to as East and West “Turkestan.” In the pre-Mongol period, however (i.e., prior to the 13th century), the majority of the population of Central Asia was linguistically Indo-European. This does not mean, of course, that Buddhist texts written in Prakrit or Sanskrit were comprehensible to the local population; it does mean, though, that they could *become* comprehensible—at least to a religious élite—after a reasonable period of study.³³ The relation of Prakrit (and subsequently Sanskrit) to the languages of Central Asia is thus comparable to that of Latin with respect to the Romance languages of Christian medieval Europe.

In China, by contrast, an entirely different linguistic situation prevailed. It would be difficult to find two more dissimilar languages than Chinese and Sanskrit (or Prakrit). The language families to which they belong are totally unrelated, their grammars are a study in contrasts, and they shared (at least prior to the arrival of Buddhism in China) virtually no vocabulary in common. In short, if the Buddhist scriptures were to be comprehended at all in China, their translation into Chinese was essential. The combination of these two factors—the operation of a “border region mentality” and the linguistic affinity between the languages of India

and those of the Central Asian oasis towns—may well be sufficient to explain the reluctance on the part of Central Asian converts to Buddhism to render the scriptures into their own languages.³⁴

We are still confronted, however, by an equally difficult question: If these two factors (which were still in effect after the 6th century) were indeed responsible for the use of a Buddhist “church language” in Central Asia, why then do we witness the sudden flowering of a vernacular Buddhist literature during subsequent centuries?

The “Vernacular Revolution” in Central Asian Buddhist Literature

We may begin by considering the cultural and political landscape of Central Asia and its environs during the period with which we are concerned. As we have already observed, the “vernacular revolution” takes place only in eastern, not western, Central Asia. Thus in considering the neighboring regions of Central Asia we will be concerned above all with China. During the early 6th century northern China was controlled by two powerful non-Chinese dynasties, the Northern Wei and the Northern Chou, in which Buddhism played a key role, being alternately persecuted and supported by the government. Moreover, it is precisely at this time that we first hear of a Buddhist text, the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, being translated into the Old Turkish language, at the initiative of the Northern Ch’i court.³⁵ In the following century, as the powerful Chinese T’ang dynasty began to assert itself, Chinese military forces appeared in eastern Central Asia for the first time since the latter Han Dynasty (1st-2nd c. CE). This military expansion was to continue (with occasional setbacks) until the middle of the 8th century, when the decisive defeat of the Chinese forces by the Arabs at the battle of Talas set a limit, once and for all, to China’s ambitions for expansion to the West. Finally, this is also the period (already underway in the 5th century) of the justly famous voyages across Central Asia to India by a number of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, whose own “middle kingdom mentality” is evident in the fact that they were not averse to lecturing other Buddhists—even in the Buddha’s own homeland of India—on which the competing Buddhist teachings were correct.³⁶ In short, the period in which we

witness an explosion of vernacular Buddhist literature in Central Asia is a time when the Chinese had assumed a high profile in this region, wielding considerable influence in eastern (but not western) Central Asia.

In light of these circumstances, we may consider the following hypothesis: Could the shift to a vernacular Buddhist literature beginning in the 6th c. CE—which took place in eastern, but not western, Central Asia—have been due to the presence of Chinese influence? More specifically, could the inhabitants of Central Asia have begun to translate Buddhist texts into the vernacular under the influence of the Chinese example?

The difficulty of interpreting the few primary Central Asian materials at our disposal has already been alluded to, and if we rarely have adequate information on *what* happened in this region, we almost never have any concrete evidence for *why* it took place. But in one precious instance we have a primary source that casts light on the subject of our inquiry. Among the manuscript remains preserved in the Khotanese language—another Middle Iranian language, spoken in the city of Khotan (and adjacent regions) in the southwest part of the Tarim Basin—is a kind of Buddhist sourcebook, an anthology of “best-loved Buddhist texts” of Khotan. The language and orthography of this work, which is composed entirely in verse, are among the oldest in all of Khotanese literature,³⁷ which would point to a date of composition around the beginning of the 8th century.³⁸ Neither the name of the composer of the text nor the title of the work itself has come down to us; that of the official who commissioned the work, however—a certain *Zambasta*—has been preserved. It was this name that the renowned Iranist Sir H. W. Bailey chose when he labelled the text *The Book of Zambasta*.³⁹

This work is of tremendous value for a number of reasons. It is our main source of knowledge of Khotanese metrics, and is also a major source of information on the stories, deities, and religious ideas that were familiar in 7th-8th century Khotan. For our present purposes, however, its greatest value lies in a parenthetical remark made by the composer, in which he explains his motivation for rendering this selection of Buddhist texts into Khotanese. The composer’s reflections appear at the beginning of the 23rd chapter, where he states:

I intend to translate it into Khotanese for the welfare of all beings, this tale of how the *deva* Buddha descended from the *trāyastriṃsa*-gods.... Not such are their deeds: the Khotanese do not value the Law [i.e., the Buddhist teachings] at all in Khotanese. They understand it badly in Indian. In Khotanese it does not seem to them to be the Law. For the Chinese the Law is in Chinese. In Kashmirian it is very agreeable, but they so learn it in Kashmirian that they also understand the meaning of it. To the Khotanese that seems to be the Law whose meaning they do not understand at all.... In words the essential thing is the meaning.... The meaning being unperceived, no one would escape from the woes in *samsāra*.⁴⁰

The “Kashmirian” language to which the composer refers is almost certainly Sanskrit, the language from which most of the Khotanese Buddhist works were apparently translated (the earlier tradition having been based on Prakrit texts).⁴¹ What is quite clear in the composer’s remarks, however, is his insistence that his countrymen should abandon their practice of reading Buddhist texts in “Kashmirian,” and record them instead—as he himself is doing—in Khotanese.

This brief but invaluable passage provides us with two key pieces of information: first, that the Khotanese had a high degree of resistance to the idea of translating Buddhist texts into the vernacular, preferring to read them instead in their Indian originals; and second, that the Chinese precedent of vernacular translation was well enough known for the composer to appeal to it for support. Far from being less authoritative, the composer argues, the scriptures will become valuable to the Khotanese people only if they are *understood*—just as they are, he asserts, in China.

What this passage suggests, then, is that Chinese translation practices contributed directly to the flowering of Buddhist literature in Central Asian vernaculars, a process which seems to have begun in the 6th century in Kucha and Agni and spread to other areas (including Khotan) in the 7th and 8th. Moreover, the fact that our Khotanese composer appeals not to the translation practices of his nearest neighbors (the Tokharian speakers of Agni and Kucha) but to the more distant example of China speaks volumes about the cultural hegemony that China was able to exert in this region.

In sum, this data suggests that we should begin to consider China not merely as the recipient of Buddhist traditions from the Western

Regions, but also as the *source* of certain elements in the later history of Central Asian Buddhism. And indeed an examination of the later Central Asian Buddhist literature confirms this impression. Most of the Buddhist texts preserved in Uighur Turkish (c. 8th-12th c. CE) and all but two of those preserved in the Sogdian language (8th-9th c. CE) have been shown to be translations from the Chinese.⁴² In Khotan (as in Tibet) Buddhist texts continued to be translated mainly from Indian originals, but as we can see from the testimony of the *Book of Zambasta* the Chinese precedent was influential even in the far southwest corner of Xinjiang.

Conclusions

We may conclude, then, with two general observations. First, Buddhist literature in Central Asia appears to have been transmitted exclusively in Indian languages prior to the beginning of the 6th century. And second, the subsequent flourishing of Buddhist vernacular literature in the eastern parts of this region—but not in the west— may well have taken place under Chinese influence. From this we may draw two further conclusions: first, that the “language policy” followed by Buddhist believers has been far from monolithic, but rather has varied from place to place and from time to time, according to differing local cultural conditions; and second, that while China did indeed play a receptive role with respect to Buddhists from Central Asia during the early centuries of the first millennium, its role shifted to a far more active one after the beginning of the 6th century. Indeed it might be fair to say that by the 8th century for at least some Central Asian believers—most notably the Sogdians and the Uighurs—the center of gravity of the Buddhist world had shifted from India to China. The “middle country” of *Mādhyadeśa* in northeast India was now replaced by the “middle kingdom” of China, which would remain a major source of Buddhist inspiration for the peoples of Central Asia until the eventual coming of Islam.

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¹ In this paper I use the term "Central Asia" in the narrow sense, to refer only to the chain of oasis towns crisscrossing the southern, desert portion of Inner Asia. This area, which comprises the territory of the ancient "Silk Road," has certain features that distinguish it both from the grasslands frequented by nomadic peoples (including the Mongols) to the north and from the Tibetan highlands to the south. Most notably, it is this chain of oasis towns (and not the territory of the Tibetans or the Mongols, which remained throughout their history outside the main routes of transportation) that served as the conduit along which Buddhism travelled from northwest India to the Chinese frontier. Accordingly, I would suggest that the term "Central Asia" be reserved for the territory of the Silk Road alone, and that the expression "Inner Asia" be employed (as many specialists in the field are already doing) to designate the entire region of Central Eurasia. For further details see my article "Buddhism in Central Asia: The State of the Field" (*History of Religions*, forthcoming, 1991).

² John Brough, "Comments on Third-Century Shan-shan and the History of Buddhism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 28 (1965), 582-612 (p. 582).

³ First proposed in his article "Methodology in Iranian History," in R. N. Frye, ed., *Neue Methodologie in der Iranistik* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), pp. 57-69 (p. 64), and elaborated in a lecture delivered at Harvard University, October 1986.

⁴ For a discussion of "church language" from a history-of-religions perspectives see Wade T. Wheelock, "The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50 (1982), 49-71; and the article "Sacred Language" by the same author in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 439-449.

⁵ See William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

⁶ For recent studies on the concept of the power of sound in Indian religion see Harvey P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantra* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

⁷ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule; the texts of the Vinaya ("monastic rules") section of the canon begin not with this entire phrase, but with the more abbreviated expression "at one time" (Pali *tena samayena* and variants), while the Abhidharma (Pali *abhidhamma*) and portions of the *Kṣudraka-āgama* (Pali *Khuddaka-nikāya*) sections of the canon begin with no such introductory phrase at all. It is worthy of note, however, that the absence of such an opening phrase was considered by some Buddhists to be sufficient evidence that the Abhidharma literature was extracanonically (that is, not the word of the Buddha); for this opinion (cited by the 5th-century Theravādin writer Buddhaghosa, who does not however share this view) see the *Aṭṭhasālinī* (Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgani*, the first book of the Theravāda *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*) translated into English as *The Expositor* by Pe Maung Tin and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Luzac & Co., 1920), vol. 1, p. 37-38.

⁸ This does not mean, of course, that Buddhists were incapable of reifying the written word; we need only refer to the now well-known "cult of the book" (see

Gregory Schopen, "The Phrase 'sa pṛtīvīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 17 [1975], 147-181). Likewise we find in Buddhist history examples of the reification of the non-written word (or rather, of the written word reproduced in oral form); a striking example of this phenomenon may be found in the teachings of the 13th-century Japanese evangelist Nichiren, who advocated the chanting of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (or rather, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit title of the text); for an up-to-date analysis of his life and works see the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by Jacqueline I. Stone (U.C.L.A., Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, 1990). Despite these examples, however, there was always present in the Buddhist tradition a powerful corrective to extreme versions of this tendency

⁹ Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1958), p. 610, citing the Pali Vinaya (II, p. 139).

¹⁰ See Franklin W. Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 1-2 and especially p. 1, n. 4, and more recently John Brough, "Sakāya Niruttīyā: Cauld kale het'" (pp. 35-42) and K. R. Norman, "The Dialects in Which the Buddha Preached" (pp. 61-77), both in Heinz Bechert, ed., *Die Sprache der ältesten buddhistischen Überlieferung*, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Dritte Folge, Nr. 117 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980).

¹¹ Lamotte, *Histoire*, p. 611.

¹² On the "long" and "short" chronologies for the Buddha's life see Lamotte, *Histoire*, pp. 13-15, and more recently Heinz Bechert, "The Date of the Buddha Reconsidered," *Indologica Taurinensia*, vol. 1 (1982), 29-36.

¹³ On the first recording of the Buddha's teachings in writing see Lamotte, *Histoire*, pp. 402-403 and 710-711.

¹⁴ Jules Bloch, ed. and trans., *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Belles Lettres," 1950), p. 154, n. 5; cf. S. Lévi in *Journal Asiatique*, 1912, II, p. 495.

¹⁵ The term "Prakrit" refers, strictly speaking, to a vernacular or "natural" language, in contrast to the polished or "cultivated" form of classical Sanskrit. The name is also applied, however, to the Pali language, which is not a real vernacular (i.e., a spoken language) but a literary language based on vernacular forms. For a discussion of the varieties of Prakrit dialects and their place in Indian literature see Maurice Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, 2nd ed., Eng. trans. by Mrs. S. Ketkar (1927; rpt. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1972), vol. 1, pp. 46-51, and more recently Oskar von Hinüber, *Das ältere Mittelindisch in Überblick* (Vienna, 1986).

¹⁶ On "Magadhisms" (variant non-Pāli forms, attributed to the influence of an underlying Māgadhī dialect) in the Theravāda canon see the pioneering works by Sylvain Lévi, "Observations sur une langue précanonique du bouddhisme," *Journal Asiatique*, 1912, pp. 495-514) and Heinrich Lüders, *Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons*, ed. by Ernst Waldschmidt (Berlin, 1954). These are now to be supplemented by more recent studies, a valuable collection assembled in Heinz Bechert, ed., *Die Sprache* (cited above, note 10).

¹⁷ For an edition of the text with a scholarly introduction see John Brough, *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹⁸ The term "Nikāya" (lit. "group" or "school") refers to the various Buddhist schools (or, less accurately, "sects") that emerged in the wake of the initial

schism between the Sthāviras (“elders”) and Mahāsāṃghikas (“majority-ists”) that occurred approximately a century and a half after the death of the Buddha. The partisans of these schools (of which there were eighteen, according to an idealized traditional figure) are sometimes referred to as members of the “Hīnayāna” (“inferior vehicle”) by advocates of the self-styled “Mahāyāna” (“great vehicle”) schools, but the term “Hīnayāna” is clearly polemical and should be avoided in scholarly writing except in direct quotations of polemical discourse. Some scholars have chosen to use the Pāli term Theravāda (“teaching of the elders”) in place of the pejorative “Hīnayāna,” but this is not an adequate substitute as it refers to only one of the numerous non-Mahāyāna schools, albeit the only one that survives today. The term “Nikāya Buddhism” is to be preferred, as it encompasses all of the so-called “eighteen schools,” both prior to and after the emergence of the Mahāyāna.

¹⁹ See Edgerton’s articles “The Prakrit Underlying Buddhistic Hybrid Sanskrit,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, VIII (1936), 501-516, and “Meter, Phonology, and Orthography in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 66 (1946), 197-206.

²⁰ Lamotte, *Histoire*, p. 607.

²¹ The date of the first appearance of Buddhism in China is not known. A tangential mention of Buddhists in an edict of 65 C.E., however, establishes that the religion was already known, and had gained adherents, in China by that date (see Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959], p. 19).

²² J. W. de Jong, “Buddha’s Word in China,” 28th George Ernest Morrison Lecture (Canberra, Australian National University, n.d. [c. 1960]; reprinted in Gregory Schopen, ed., *Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays of J. W. de Jong* [Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1979], pp. 77-101), p. 6 (p. 82 of the reprint edition).

²³ On the Buddhism in Parthia see G. Koshelenko, “The Beginnings of Buddhism in Margiana,” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 14 (1966), pp. 175-183, for a discussion of the discovery of a stupa site in the Merv oasis, dating from the late Arsacid period (2nd c. CE). On Buddhism in Bactria, the base from which the Kushans established a powerful dynasty in northwest India, see B. Ya. Stavisky, “Kara Tepe in Old Termez: A Buddhist Religious Centre of the Kushan Period on the Bank of the Oxus,” in J. Harmatta, ed., *From Hecataeus to Al-Huwārizmī: Bactrian, Pahlavi, Sogdian, Persian, Sanskrit, Syriac, Arabic, Chinese, Greek and Latin Sources for the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), pp. 95-135. No Buddhist remains have yet been found in Sogdiana, despite the fact that the Sogdians (identified by the Chinese-language ethnonym *K’ang*, derived from the final syllable of the city of Samarkand) are well attested among the earliest Buddhist missionaries in China. It is possible that this is an accident of historical survival; it seems more likely at present, however, that Sogdian Buddhism was (unlike Parthian Buddhism) essentially an expatriate phenomenon.

²⁴ There is evidence, however, that individual Buddhist terms may have been transmitted into other Central Asian languages through Parthian. See Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Indian Elements in Parthian and Sogdian,” in Klaus Rührborn and Wolfgang Veenker, eds., *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), 132-141.

²⁵ Specialists in the Bactrian field have speculated that such literature must once have existed, and might someday be discovered; see for example B. Ya. Stavisky,

“Kara Tepe in Old Termez,” in J. Harmatta, ed., *From Hectaeus to Al-Huwārizmī* (cited above, n. 23), 95-135 (esp. p. 133), and Richard N. Frye, “Kushans and Other Iranians in Central Asia,” in *Reşid Rahmeti Arat İçin* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1966), pp. 244-247. For an argument that one of the extant Bactrian fragments is from a Buddhist text (based, however, on a single reference to a “king of the *rakşasas*”) see I. Gershevitch, “Bactrian Inscriptions and Manuscripts,” in *Indogermanische Forschungen*, 72 (1967), 27-57 (esp. pp. 38 and 40, n. 18).

²⁶ On Buddhist literature in Sogdian see David Utz, *A Survey of Buddhist Sogdian Studies*, *Bibliographia Philologica Buddhica*, Series Minor, III (Tokyo: The Reiyukai Library, 1978). For the two exceptions see below, note 39.

²⁷ See Franz Bernhard, “Gāndhāri and the Buddhist Mission in Central Asia,” in J. Tilakairi, ed., *Añjali, Felicitation Volume Presented to Olives Hector de Alevis Wiyesekeera on his 60th Birthday* (Peradeniya, 1970), pp. 55-62 (especially pp. 58-60 and the further references cited on p. 62, n. 17).

²⁸ The use of paper, invented in China at the beginning of the 2nd c. CE, spread relatively slowly across Central Asia, and even more slowly into India itself. The first recorded instance of the production of paper by Central Asians was in Sogdiana, where paper-making was begun in Samarkand in 751 (Dard Hunter, *Papermaking*, 2nd revised ed. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947], p. 469). Paper imported from China came into use in eastern Central Asia by the early 3rd century (as attested in the paper documents among the texts discovered at Niya), but appears to have been adopted in western Central Asia only around the middle of the 7th century (*op. cit.*, p. 468). In India paper did not appear on the scene until it was brought by the Muslims in the 11th century, and accordingly it was distrusted by the local people as the writing material of the “heretics,” a reaction which had also slowed its acceptance in Europe (*op. cit.*, p. 60).

²⁹ The use of the Parthian language and script to record civil documents is amply attested from around the beginning of the 1st c. B.C.E., while coin legends in Parthian began to appear in the middle of the following century. Parthian-language inscriptions appear only from the beginning of the 3rd century, earlier monuments having been recorded in Aramaic or Greek. For an admirable overview of Parthian literature and literary traditions see Mary Boyce, “Parthian Writings and Literature,” in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, part 2, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1151-1165.

The oldest evidence for the use of the written Sogdian language is in coin legends, which date from perhaps the middle of the 2nd c. C.E. From the 4th century we have both personal correspondence (the so-called “Sogdian ancient letters”) found at Tun-huang and ostraca from the region of Bukhara. Justly famous (though considerably later) are the documents found at Mount Mugh in northern Tadzhikistan, which date from the beginning of the 8th century and comprised the archives of the Sogdian ruler Dēwāstīč. The extant Sogdian inscriptions are quite late (9th and 10th centuries) and from outside the Sogdian homeland; one is from Mongolia (a trilingual inscription in Sogdian, Chinese, and Uighur Turkish), and the other from Ladakh. For a survey of the extant Sogdian literature see Mark Dresden, “Sogdian Language and Literature,” in Yarshater, *op. cit.*, pp. 1216-1229.

The Bactrian language, presumably the native tongue of the Kushans by the time they established a foothold in northwest India, was recorded not in a script

derived from Aramaic (as were Parthian and Sogdian), but in a slightly modified form of Greek. The use of the Bactrian language is first attested on the coins of the Kushan ruler Kanishka; their date is problematic, however, since the reign dates of that ruler are far from the subject of consensus (see A. L. Basham, ed., *Papers on the Date of Kanishka* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968]). A date of the late 1st or early 2nd c. C.E. would probably not be far from the mark. The inscriptional use of the language is attested soon after, in the Nokonzok inscription dated to the 2nd century C.E. and the inscriptions found at Dilberjin (modern Afghanistan) and near Tirmidh (Uzbekistan, U.S.S.R.), both assigned to the 3rd or 4th c. C.E. Manuscript fragments have been discovered to date only in eastern Central Asia, where texts have been found in the Turfan area and at Lou-lan; these vary in date from the 4th century to the 9th. For a survey of extant Bactrian sources see Ilya Gershevitch, "Bactrian Literature," in Yarshater, *op. cit.*, pp. 1250-1258.

The use of a local Prakrit dialect for inscriptions is attested already by the monuments of King Aśoka (ruled c. 269-232 B.C.E.), and is continued in the Aramaic-based Kharoṣṭhī script by the Greeks, Sakas and Parthians in the far northwest of India from around the 1st century B.C.E. until well into the following millennium. The use of Prakrit (likewise in the Kharoṣṭhī script) for coin legends begins in the reign of Demetrius, who established what is known as "Indo-Greek" rule south of the Hindu Kush in around 180 B.C.E., and ruled this area until his death c. 170 B.C.E. That the language must have been used for civil documents is quite certain, though extant texts have been found only in eastern Central Asia (in the Lou-lan area of modern Xinjiang), dating perhaps from the early part of the 3rd century. No convenient summary of this literature as a whole is available. For the Aśokan inscriptions see the edition of Bloch (cited above, n. 14). For the use of Prakrit on Indo-Greek, Saka, and early Kushan coins see Michael Mitchiner, *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage*, 9 vols. (London: Hawkins Publications, 1975), K. Walton Dobbins, *Coinage and Epigraphy of the Śakas and Pahlavas: A Reconstruction of the Political Chronology and Geography of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, 130 B.C.-A.D. 70* (Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1972), and John R. Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

³⁰ Or rather, into a literary version of Chinese. Buddhist texts in Chinese are almost all composed in the elevated, literary style known as *wen-yen*; those texts composed in a genuine vernacular (e.g., certain Ch'an texts and the well-known *pien-wen* found at Tun-huang) are the exceptions rather than the rule. The important point here, however, is that Buddhist texts were indeed translated into Chinese (even though they followed the conventions that separated written Chinese in general from the spoken language), and not retained in an Indian language.

³¹ Certain individual scriptures have, of course, been rendered into vernacular Japanese, but this has never been done for the Buddhist canon as a whole. Beginning in the early 20th century an attempt was made to issue the entire canon in so-called "Japanese reading," a project known as the *Kokuyaku Issaikyō* ("National Translation of all the Sūtras"). This is not, however, a genuine "translation," but merely the rearrangement of the characters in the Chinese texts into Japanese syntactic order, together with the insertion of certain syllables in *kana* (Japanese syllabic writing) to reflect the grammatical categories of Japanese, all based on the *kaeriten* ("return marks") system developed centuries earlier. Nor is this in fact a "complete" rendition of the Buddhist scriptures into semi-Japanese; despite its

name, the series (to date) contains only a portion of the works included in the Chinese Buddhist canon.

³² On the translation of the Tibetan Buddhist canon into Mongolian see Walter Heissig, "Zur geistigen Leistung der neubekehrten Mongolen des späten 16. und frühen 17. Jhdts.," *Ural-altaische Jahrbücher*, vol. XXVI (1954), 101-116. The preference of the Mongols for the Tibetan version of the scriptures rather than their laboriously executed Mongolian translations is well documented, and has persisted into the 20th century. See for example George A. Cheney, *The Pre-Revolutionary Culture of Outer Mongolia*, Mongolia Society Occasional Papers, no. 5 (Bloomington, IN: The Mongolia Society, 1969), pp. 72-73; Paul Hyer and Sechin Jagchid, *A Mongolian Living Buddha: Biography of the Kanjurwa Khutugtu* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), pp. 73-74; and for numerous examples of writing by Mongolian scholars in Tibetan rather than in their own language see Sh. Bira, *Mongolian Historical Literature of the XVII-XIX Centuries Written in Tibetan*, ed. Prof. Ts. Damdinsüren, translated from the Russian by Stanley N. Frye, Mongolia Society Occasional Papers, no. 7 (Bloomington, IN: The Mongolia Society, 1970).

³³ An alternative explanation is offered by Richard Salomon of the University of Washington, who suggests that the role of Gāndhārī Prakrit as the written administrative language in this region may have been a more important factor in preparing the way for the transmission of Prakrit and Sanskrit Buddhist texts than was the Indo-European character of the local spoken vernaculars (personal communication, 1989).

³⁴ An interesting contrast is offered by the Tibetan example, in which only one of these two factors was operative. The Tibetans, speaking a language more closely related to Chinese than to Sanskrit, found it necessary to translate the Buddhist canon into Tibetan, which they did beginning in the 7th century CE. The style of translation, however, offers clear evidence of the "border region mentality" in operation: the Tibetans were so slavish in their rendition of Sanskrit expressions that it is almost possible to reconstruct the Sanskrit original from the Tibetan translation, working backwards from each prefix, root, and suffix to the corresponding Indian element. The result was a wooden and complex language that bears scant resemblance even to the written administrative Tibetan language of the time. Buddhist Tibetan thus cannot in any sense be described as a "vernacular"; rather, it is an artificially created "church language" that uses vernacular elements to produce what are essentially calques on Sanskrit forms. This terminology was standardized at the beginning of the 9th century and recorded in a number of Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionaries, of which the best known is the *Mahāvīyutpatti*. For a discussion of the early history of Tibetan Buddhist translation techniques see Nils Simonsson, *Indo-tibetische Studien* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1957).

³⁵ See Annemarie von Gabain, "Buddhistische Türkenmissionen," in *Asiatica, Festschrift Friedrich Weller* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954), pp. 161-173 (especially p. 164).

³⁶ Samuel Beal, trans., *The life of Hiuen-tsiang* (1911; rpt. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1973), pp. 173-181. For a popular account of this encounter see René Grousset, *In the Footsteps of the Buddha* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1932), pp. 204-211.

³⁷ R. E. Emmerick, ed. and trans., *The Book of Zambasta: A Khotanese Poem on Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. vii.

³⁸ R. E. Emmerick, in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, part 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 964.

³⁹ Emmerick, *Zambasta*, p. vii.

⁴⁰ Emmerick, *Zambasta*, pp. 343-345.

⁴¹ The terms "Indian" and "Kashmirian" were apparently intended as synonyms by the author of the *Book of Zambasta*. The shift from "in Indian" (*hiṃ-duvau*) to "in Kashmirian" (*kašpārau*) was probably made for poetic reasons; the latter term not only offers terminological variety, but also provides an interesting alliteration with the expression *khaṣṣa-phaṣṣä* occurring in the same section.

⁴² Two Sogdian Buddhist texts may be translations from languages other than Chinese. The so-called "Sūtra of the Condemnation of Intoxicating Drink" claims in its colophon to be based on an Indian original, but shows what has been described as "heavy Chinese influence, to say the least"; see Werner Sunderman, "First Results of Cooperative Work Between Ryukoku University and the Academy of Sciences of the GDR on Buddhist Sogdian Turfan Texts," *The Annual of the Institute of Buddhist Cultural Studies, Ryūkoku University*, no. 12 (1989), pp. 12-18, esp. p. 14. The other, a fragment of an as yet unidentified text which according to its colophon was translated from Kuchean (*'kwcyk*, i.e., Tokharian B), is more likely to be a genuinely non-Chinese based translation; see W. B. Henning, *Sogdica* (London, 1940), pp. 59-62.