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A Re-Evaluation

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Buddhism among the Sogdians:
A Re-Evaluation[1]

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A B S T R A C T

It is commonly believed that Buddhism did not have a significant presence in pre-Islamic Sogdiana, and that Buddhism among the Sogdians was mostly present in their expatriate communities in China. It is further reckoned that Sogdian Buddhism was derived from and dependent on that of China in every respect. The present article demonstrates that this understanding of the situation fails to take into account a broader picture of the development of Buddhism in Inner Asia.

Keywords: Sogdian Buddhism, Inner Asian Buddhism, Sogdian Religion, History of Buddhism

1 This article is extracted and condensed from chapters of my forthcoming book, *Inner Asia and the Nyingmapa Tradition of Tibet*: *The Case of Shri Singha*.

Sogdiana was the name generally given, beginning in Achaemenid times, to the region between the two major rivers that flow into what used to be the Aral Sea, the Oxus and Jaxartes (now known by their Turkic names Amu Darya and Syr Darya). Judging by archaeological evidence, the area has been the site of human settlement for several millennia; two large cities, Afrasiab (the predecessor of Samarkand) and Kök Tepe were already occupied by the eighth or seventh century BCE (La Vaissière 2005, p. 17). The Sogdian economy was originally based on irrigated agriculture, and large numbers of nomadic or seminomadic people also lived outside the city areas, a pattern that continued in the area up until recent centuries. The Sogdians' own language belonged to the Eastern Iranian family; its closest surviving relative is Yaghnobi, spoken in an area of the high Pamirs. There was never a unified political structure encompassing the whole of Sogdiana except those imposed from outside; throughout early Sogdian history, the basic governmental unit was the city-state, and the political leaders, usually from an aristocracy, were merely pre-eminent among equals.

The first recorded foreign conquerors of Sogdiana were the Achaemenids, who ruled it as a satrapy, and the Aramaic-based alphabet they introduced later became the basis for the Sogdians' own written language (and still later, the basis for the Uighur and Mongol writing systems). Alexander conquered Sogdiana in a brutal campaign beginning in 328 BCE, and his insistence on direct rule of the area ensured Sogdiana's lasting connection to its western neighbors, and that the Greek material, artistic, and religious culture was an important part of Sogdian civilization until it fell. The Greeks in their turn were followed by a series of rulers from the steppe peoples of Inner Asia, including, most importantly, the Western Türkic Khaganate, whose dominion began in 560.

Starting with the fifth century, Sogdians established a network of colonies all along the so-called "Silk Roads" of Inner Asia; all the oasis cities of the northern route around the Tarim Basin saw Sogdian settlers in nearby colonies, and the abandoned kingdom of Loulan and areas near Khotan were also resettled (Rong 2006, p. 53; 2011, pp. 518–19). By the seventh century, the Sogdian colonial network had spread to the easternmost provinces of China and Mongolia (the latter then under Turkic rule), and possibly even to Siberia (Walter 2006, p. 15 n. 42).[2] There also seems to have been a population of

2 Judith Lerner (personal communication, February 2025) has expressed doubt about this; as Walter notes, the original report

Sogdians originating from and trading in parts of the Indic world, who consciously kept up their own traditions (La Vaissière 2005, p. 72). The Chinese pilgrim Faxian noted Sogdian merchant leaders (Ch. *sabao*, Sog. *sartapao*, ultimately based on the Indic *sārthavāha*) in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia at the beginning of the fifth century (Hansen 2012, p. 160). Although it is sometimes assumed, based on Chinese stereotypes, that the Sogdians outside their home country were all involved in commercial enterprises, this was not in fact the case; their communities were made up of people working at a whole spectrum of occupations, including especially martial ones; some Sogdians are recorded as having aided in the establishment of the Tang dynasty,[3] and many served in the Tang armies (La Vaissière 2005, pp. 130–35).[4] With the Tang conquest of the city-states of the Tarim Basin (644–657), the Sogdian trade routes passed under the control of the Chinese, and Chinese political and cultural influence extended to the borders of the Sogdian heartland. During this period, the Sogdians were known to the Chinese under the name of *hu*, and they had widespread and lasting influence on Chinese culture and folk religion.[5]

The Chinese word *hu* had originally referred to the Xiongnu but later came to include others of China's northern and western neighbors who were visually very distinct from the Chinese (Xu 1996, p. 1; Yang 1998, p. 157). When Indian culture was first introduced in China through Buddhism, the word *fan* was coined to mean both the land of India and *Brahmāna*, the caste, and the word *hu* began to refer specifically to those western neighbors of China who spoke Iranian languages and lived outside the Indian subcontinent. Accounts of the early translation process of Buddhist texts from Indic languages to Chinese refer to "*hu* books" (*hu ben*) as opposed to those from India (*fan*); these were oral or written

documenting this find is no longer available.

3 Kageyama 2007, p. 13, citing Yamashita.

4 The Sogdians did not see themselves first and foremost as traders (Grenet 2005; Walter 2006, pp. 10–11), and their martial capabilities are amply demonstrated in their resistance to both Alexander and the Arabs.

5 Rong (2001, p. 148) says that the Sogdians' "commercial expertise, fighting skills, devotion to Zoroastrianism, and dancing and musical talents were to make a deep impression on China's political process, religious complexion, and musical diversity." The first recorded performance of the Lion Dance, now considered quintessentially Chinese, was by a troupe of Sogdians (Kvaerne 1987, p. 164, citing Stein and Demiéville).

texts in (probably Northwestern) Prakrit translated largely by Inner Asians.[6] Yang (1998) says that in the context of Buddhist literature, the word *hu* was gradually and systematically replaced by *fan* from the Sui–Tang period onward, not only because of the increasing use of Sanskrit rather than Prakrit in Buddhist texts, but also because of both the political and social tension between Chinese and Inner Asian peoples, and the anti-Buddhist leanings of Confucianists and the (increasingly competitive) Daoists; Chinese Buddhists attempted to deflect attacks on their religion as an uncouth (i.e., non-Chinese) creed by drawing a firm distinction between India (the land of sages including the Buddha) and the neighboring *hu* populations (incompletely civilized, to say the least). Outside the Buddhist context, *hu* continued to refer to the Iranian peoples of Inner Asia (Persians had different names.). Because in Tang China the Sogdians were the most prominent of these, the name is seen most often in connection with them, but the association is not exclusive.

The political tensions between China and its Inner Asian subjects finally led to the rebellion of An Rokshan (Ch. An Lushan) in 755. An himself was half Sogdian and half Turkic, and Sogdians fought on both sides of the war, which resulted in an end to China's domination of the Tarim Basin and its other western protectorates. In the war's aftermath and the declining years of the Tang, however, the Sogdians in China were actively persecuted and, in some places, exterminated (La Vaissière 2005, pp. 202–203; Beckwith 2009, pp. 159–60; Hansen 2012, p. 158), and they ceased to exist as an identifiable people soon after; their contributions to China were until recently mostly forgotten or unacknowledged.

Religion among the Sogdians was a complex affair.[7] Congruent with the decentralized nature of the Sogdian political structure, there was never (before Islam) an official religion imposed on Sogdiana from above, and it was common that shrines in the households of wealthy merchants were larger and grander than official temples built by the governments of the city-states. All Sogdians shared a set of deities and practices based on roots common to Iranian-speaking peoples, which has been called, for convenience, "eastern Zoroastrianism," but there were many important differences between the beliefs

6 It is well known that the majority of the early translators who came to China were not Indians but rather belonged to the Iranian-speaking communities of the far northwest of India (i.e., Parthians, Tokharians, and Sogdians; cf. Zurcher 2012, pp. 13–14; Rhie 2007, p. 26). On the subject of *hu ben* and related issues of translation, see Mair 2012.

7 This subject is treated much more extensively in Gibson, forthcoming.

and rituals of the Sogdians and the "orthodox" form of the religion found on the Iranian plateau. The Greeks left religious traces in the form of certain deities and myths that became common currency, as well as evidence of mystery cults. Nana, originally a Mesopotamian goddess, became very popular among the Sogdians, as she had been among the Sogdians' Kushan predecessors. Apart from these traditions, three major world religions had significant influence among the Sogdians: besides Buddhism, both Manichaeism and Christianity left significant literature.

It has often been thought that Buddhism among the Sogdians was largely if not purely an expatriate phenomenon. It does seem to be the case that lasting Sogdian contributions to Buddhism, as will be seen, were felt far more outside of Sogdiana than within. On the other hand, to claim that the Sogdians' Buddhism began with their colonists in China[8] is surely to overstate the case. Since the Sogdians continued so many aspects of Kushan religious culture,[9] it seems odd to assert that Sogdians were in effect oblivious to and unaffected by the well-attested Buddhism among their near neighbors, the Parthians and especially the Tokharians / Kushans,[10] and only became aware of Buddhism because of more distant Chinese contacts. Therefore, the question should be re-examined.

It is common in discussions of Sogdian Buddhism to refer to the many cases preserved in Chinese records of illustrious monks whose names indicate Sogdian ancestry (usually in Samarkand), and who were active in the first centuries of the Common Era.[11] The best-known of these is Kang Senghui

8 Emmerick (1983, p. 961) opined that Sogdian Buddhists were first converted to Mahāyāna Buddhism by the Chinese; his judgment was based on the fact that most Buddhist literature in the Sogdian language was Mahāyāna, and it was translated from the Chinese language (see below). However, translations into Inner Asian vernaculars were a late development (there were none until the sixth century), and when specifically Sogdian Buddhist works began to appear, there had already been Sogdian Buddhists for centuries.

9 Most of the deities of the Kushan pantheon continued to be recognized in Sogdian religion.

10 I include under this name all the people known to the Chinese as Yuezhi, of both eastern and western branches. There has been some controversy about the exact relationship between the Yuezhi, the Kushans, and the Tokharians (Beckwith 2009, pp. 380–83; Neelis 2011, pp. 133–37; Hansen 2012, pp. 71–75), but it is not germane to the present subject.

11 The most detailed and useful English-language exposition on the early Sogdian monks is Walter (2006, pp. 22–32, and appendix, pp. 64–66); she draws on Japanese sources not used by most other commentators on the subject and lists more than twenty Sogdian monks found in Chinese historical sources. Zurcher (2007) and Rhie (2007) have additional information on some of these.

(222–280), who was born in the area of present-day Hanoi and is best known for introducing breath meditation, philosophical discourse, and Buddhist songs to South China. Kang Sengyuan (267–330), born in Changan to Sogdian colonists there, became fluent in Chinese and was later accepted as a member of the south Chinese intelligentsia (among whom his Caucasian features excited some comment).[12] While Tremblay (2007, p. 92) proposes that these monks learned Buddhism in China, La Vaissière (2005, p. 77), surmises that the families of these two translators, before heading east, were part of the Bactrian or Afghan branches of the Sogdian trade diaspora, and presumably became aware of Buddhism there.[13] Even if one were to accept that the location of many of the early Sogdians' Buddhist study was in China, however, Tremblay's statement is still misleading, as it can in no way be assumed that their teachers would have been Chinese. It has long been known that a large number of Tokharians (including the ancestors of the translator Dharmarakṣa) came to settle in Loyang between 168 and 189. Nor, in all likelihood, was the language of Buddhist instruction Chinese at this time; the Tokharians were still using Northwestern Prakrit, written in Kharoṣṭhī script, in their Buddhist texts and religious activities.[14] Whether their studies took place in the Kushan cultural sphere, the Tarim, or China, early Sogdian Buddhists of this period were probably more likely to have studied the religion with Tokharian or Parthian teachers, with whom they shared some cultural assumptions, rather than with Chinese, who were themselves still heavily dependent on foreigners as translators and interpreters.

Another Sogdian translator, Kang Falang (second half of the third century), who was also born in China and was well educated in the Chinese intellectual tradition, may serve as an example of the

12 Walter (2006, p. 31 n. 91), in reporting doubts about his historical existence, evidently has confused him in this respect with Kang Sengkai (*Saṃghavarman); see below, note 15.

13 In the case of Kang Senghui, at least, he is supported in this conclusion by Zurcher (2007, p. 51). Nattier (2008, p. 27) and Walter (2006, pp. 23–24) refer to Senghui's parents as having traded in "India" before moving to Southeast Asia, which could mean the former Kushan lands in the Indo-Iranian border area, or possibly even Śri Lanka (see note 2, and below). His emphasis on the philosophical side of Buddhism might be more in keeping with Indic Buddhism than with that predominating in the northern China of that era, and this may have been an impetus for the continuing emphasis on philosophy in the south.

14 On the Tokharian (and other Inner Asian people's) settlements in Han and post-Han China, see Zurcher 2012, pp, 23–24. Rhie (2007, p. 26) remarks on a Kharoṣṭhī Buddhist well inscription from Luoyang from this period.

process that was going on. He joined the Buddhist order when young but wandered in Inner Asia for years in search of Buddhist teachings and studying the local languages. He helped to develop a system of "categorizing concepts" (*geyi*), which attempted to relate the systematic categories of Indian Buddhism with similar lists found in Chinese literature.[15] It is difficult to understand why he would have spent years in Inner Asia if understanding of Buddhism in China had already been on par with that found in the western regions.

Walter also discusses (2006, pp. 30–32) two less-famous translators who predated these figures in China. Kang Mengxiang (in China from 190–220) is supposed to have gone to China directly from Sogdiana, and Kang Ju (or Chu, in China from 187–199) is also mentioned.[16] These figures support the idea that the Buddhist religion was known from early days in the Sogdian homeland as well as abroad.[17] Fotucheng, the eminent fourth-century Kuchean teacher, counted Sogdians among his students (Wright 1948, p. 367); his example shows that some Sogdians were at that time still learning from non-Chinese (Fotucheng himself had studied in Gandhāra, and also had both Chinese and Indian students).

There is another sort of evidence that indicates that some Sogdians, independent of their contact with China, had an early affinity with Buddhism, and that is philological. It is sometimes forgotten that Sogdian Buddhists had their own terminology, which was not borrowed from the Chinese, but had to be based on either Parthian or an Indic language (Walter 2006, p. 44). Some of this same Sogdian Buddhist terminology can also be found in Parthian Manichaean works. These terms, obviously,

15 On *geyi* and its widespread misinterpretation, see Mair 2012b.

16 Nattier (2008, p. 102) speaks of "some Central Asianists" as saying that, strictly speaking, Kang Mengxiang was born in Ferghana rather than in Sogdiana (Kang generally indicates a connection with Samarkand), but in the present context what is important is that he learned Buddhism outside of China before traveling there. Zurcher (2007, p. 23), however, seems to think that Mengxiang was born in China. He mentions (p. 36) Kang Ju only as appearing rather later in the historical literature.

17 There is another early translator whose name indicates Sogdian ancestry, Kang Sengkai (*Sanghavarman). He purportedly arrived in Loyang in 252, but Nattier (2008, pp. 158–59) believes that, despite his widespread mention in the catalogs as a translator, not a single work can reliably be attributed to him.

date from a time well before the Sogdians began translating Buddhist works into their own vernacular from the Chinese.[18]

Before looking at the relationship between Sogdian and Chinese Buddhism, however, we will examine from several perspectives the evidence for Buddhism in Sogdiana itself after the first period of translation, during and after the era of instability in Inner Asia and northern China that was part of the Great Migration of Peoples (*Völkerwanderung*).[19] This was the time when the Sogdian trade networks first began to flourish, eventually spreading across the whole of Asia.

The first perspective is that of textual and archaeological remains. The lack of evidence in the form of excavated texts for Buddhism (in any language) in Sogdiana proper has long been noted. This can hardly be taken as an indication of the religion's absence, however, since no Manichaean, Christian, or even Zoroastrian literature has been found in the region; the preponderance of Sogdian literature from all these religions has come from the Tarim, Turfan, or Dunhuang areas.[20] This might be due in part to lack of writing material; quality paper was produced in Sogdiana only at a comparatively late date, after the battle at the Talas (755). La Vaissière (2015, p. 97) has also suggested as a factor the nature of

18 Litvinsky (1979, p. 28): "That the Sogdians played an important role in both Western and Eastern Turkistan is indicated by the fact that the word "bodhisattva" (Sogdian *pwtyst*) came into *Middle Persian*, Uighur, *and Chinese* [emphasis mine – TG] from the Sogdian language…." Tremblay (2007, p. 89) belittles this terminology, saying such Buddhist terms are "few, and pertain only to external phenomena" and that "They point to a very superficial acquaintance with Buddhism." However, the fact that profound philosophical terminology is not a part of this Buddhist vocabulary is congruent with the historical era. Even in early China, the most popular Buddhist scriptures were not profound philosophical texts; for the first centuries of the Common Era, the Chinese literati were still struggling with how to translate accurately basic concepts of Indic Buddhist doctrine, which itself had nowhere reached the levels of complexity it later attained. Tremblay himself has noted (2007, p. 117) that "The earlier Buddhist texts translated in [sic] Chinese were in fact doctrinally crude."

19 This term refers to the mass movements of nomadic ethnic groups across Eurasia from Mongolia to Europe that disrupted the classical cultures of India, China, Iran, and Rome starting at the end of the fourth century. See, for example, Beckwith 2009, pp. 93–111.

20 Sogdiana was a literate civilization, however, and as Grenet (2015, p. 137) has noted, the depiction of an Iranian god emerging from a book in Sogdiana is an indication that the Sogdians did indeed at one time possess religious texts of some sort. According to Judith Lerner (personal communication, Feb. 2025), the figure emerging from the book may be a sculpture of the god Sraoš.

the Sogdian soil, which he says is not as amenable to preservation of paper as that of Xinjiang or Dunhuang, and which resulted in the absence of not only religious but also secular literature.[21] Other factors have been suggested as well. Some have thought that an "orthodox" Zoroastrianism may have been imposed on the area during the Sasanian hegemony, but this is highly unlikely, as even Sasanian cultural influence, let alone political dominance, was far from universal across Sogdiana. Others have posited the destruction of all non-Islamic literature during one or another of the cultural purges that took place at various times after Muslim rule was imposed.[22] Still another factor that may have been involved, which Martini (2012, p. 17) postulates in connection with Khotan (but which was crucial in other Iranian areas as well): "an early and at least to an extent continued presence of the oral transmission."[23]

Given the above, it has to be said that the failure to find specimens of Buddhist literature in Sogdiana really says nothing at all about the presence or absence of the religion there, in earlier times or later. This, of course, is also true of India; if we were dependent on specimens of literature from the subcontinent to document the history of Indian Buddhism, our understanding would be much poorer.

Still, when we turn to archaeological and art-historical evidence that might bear on the question, we again find very little evidence of a flourishing Buddhist presence in Sogdiana itself at any time.[24] For a long time, archaeology in Sogdiana could point to only a few Buddhist paintings, a Buddhist inscription in Brahmi on a potsherd, and a mold for producing small (Maitreya?) statuettes (perhaps similar to modern-day Tibetan *tsa-tsa*s). Nevertheless, little evidence is not the same as no evidence, and future discoveries may still be made, as shown by a painting of the Buddha surrounded by followers that has recently surfaced in Panjikent, and a statue of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara unearthed in

21 The single notable exception being a trove of secular documents found at Mt. Mugh, east of Panjikent in modern Tajikistan.

22 Qutayba, the first Arab conqueror of Sogdiana, was exceptionally brutal in his treatment of other religions, even by the standards of the day.

23 The earliest Buddhist texts translated into Chinese may not have been based on a paper copy at all, but rather on oral transmission. On this see Zurcher 2012, pp. 19–22, 31; Mair 2012, esp. p. 155.

24 See Compareti (2008) for a comprehensive treatment of the data at the time of his writing (although some of his historical conclusions are questionable); see also Crone (2012a, p. 100) and Ashurov (2020, p. 15) for recent developments.

Samarkand. Nor can the destructive influence of Islam on Buddhist art and architecture as seen elsewhere be discounted as a possible reason for the dearth of material remains.

If we look at the Chinese testimony about Buddhism in later Sogdiana, the evidence is also scanty. The official dynastic histories generally assume its presence, if not its predominance. The *Weishu*, compiled in the 550s, says that in Samarkand, "they honor the Buddha in *hu* books" (Crone 2012a, p. 98; compare Walter 2006, p. 33).[25] The *Tangshu* says that the people in Sogdiana respected the Dharma of the Buddha but also enshrined Zoroastrian gods (Walter 2006, p. 66; compare Compareti 2009, p. 179). Tremblay (2001, p. 2 n. 3) believes that such statements can be discounted as self-contradictory, but some sort of accommodation between the two belief systems certainly is congruent with Buddhism's relationship to other local creeds across Asia (see below).[26]

The Chinese and Korean Buddhist pilgrims who passed through Inner Asia on their way to India do not offer much information. The earliest of the famous pilgrims, Faxian, avoided Sogdiana altogether, taking the more southerly route through Khotan and the upper Indus Valley, which was then (the fifth century) the more usual route. Xuanzang, in his "Records of the Western World," does not mention Buddhism in Sogdiana at all, while his biographer says that, in Samarkand, "the king and the people did not follow Buddhism, but worshipped fire."[27] He also claims that two novices were attacked when they

25 What the term "*hu* books" refers to here is unclear. It might simply mean that they were not Chinese scriptures; on the other hand, it may imply that they were volumes that still employed the Kharoṣṭhi script.

26 Tremblay's assumption (2001, p. 72) that such statements were false but were convenient for Sogdian merchants in China, may have an element of truth in it, in that Sogdian Zoroastrianism was a "national" or cultural religion and Buddhism a universal creed. Sogdians with connections to powerful people in China probably played up Buddhism as something Sogdian culture had in common with Chinese (especially when Islam was becoming a threat). In the same way, Chinese dynasties up to and including the Qing would emphasize China's (fluctuating) connections with Buddhism when dealing with Buddhist (but non-Han) peoples on their borders.

27 Litvinsky 1999, p. 428. This testimony seems odd, inasmuch as most other sources seem to agree that, although fire altars were common in private homes (along with religious images), fire temples, strictly speaking, were not common in Sogdiana (Grenet 2015, pp. 139–41). This may be a matter of translation, or else an example of the writer's employment of a common cultural *topos* as a substitute for actual knowledge.

tried to worship at an empty monastery in Samarkand (Tremblay 2007, p. 90).[28] Hye Ch'o, the Korean pilgrim, found only a single monastery and a single monk when he passed through Samarkand in 727.[29]

It does seem, therefore, that institutional Buddhism, at least, may not have been a major part of the religious scene in Sogdiana itself, even during the heyday of the Sogdian trade networks. At any rate, as will be seen, it was much overshadowed by the activities of Sogdian Buddhists outside the homeland. In sum, then, while any idea that Sogdiana in the early centuries of the Common Era was home to a thriving Buddhist activity comparable to that of the Kushan realms is not in agreement with the evidence, neither can it be maintained that the religion was unknown or discouraged there. The idea that the Sogdians were ignorant of Buddhism until they came under the tutelage of the Chinese is also untenable, and it will be further discussed below.[30]

In searching for the reasons that Buddhism did not prosper in the same way in Sogdiana as it had among the Kushans, two strong possibilities immediately suggest themselves. First of all, as noted above, Sogdiana was never an integrated political unit, and so never had a single powerful monarch

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28 A variety of perspectives have been advanced in relation to both Xuanzang's testimony and that of his biographer. It may be that Xuanzang, a strong partisan for an exclusive Mahāyāna Buddhism as he saw it, would probably not have recognized Buddhism in Sogdiana (which seemingly lacked established monastic institutions and a fixed literary canon) as Buddhism at all, even if he had encountered people who regarded themselves as Buddhists.

29 Crone 2012a, p. 99. At this point, of course, Samarkand had just been conquered by the Arabs. Though the systematic and permanent destruction of non-Islamic religion had perhaps not yet begun, any Buddhists in the area who had not yet fled might have been keeping a low profile. As to the monastery referred to, it might have been founded at the time of the Tang protectorates in the Western regions, when Chinese cultural influence extended across the Pamirs and the Tien Shan range; a monastery in the Sogdian colony at Ak Beshim in the Semirechiye region dates from this period.

30 Tremblay (2007, pp. 89–90) characterizes Buddhism's early attempts to gain a foothold in Sogdiana as "a complete failure." This is unnecessarily tendentious, and since the flowering of Buddhism among the Sogdians in exile cannot be viewed in isolation from their earlier and later Inner Asian connections, it is also misleading. Tremblay's drawing of distinctions among four types of Sogdian Buddhism (ibid., pp. 96–97), seemingly based on the three chronological layers of Sogdian Buddhist terminology he has elsewhere (2001, p. 71) discussed, hinges on the assumption that the existence of a religion among a people is the same as existence of its texts in their own language, a dubious proposition, especially considering the historical circumstances of Buddhism all across Inner Asia and the cosmopolitan character of the Sogdian diaspora. There is no reason to assume that, during the peak years of the Sogdian trade networks, Buddhist thought and practice among them would have been any more uniform than either their material commerce or their other religious beliefs.

under whose patronage Buddhism could flourish: the *polis*-style approach to religion seems to have prevailed until the Muslim conquest.[31] Furthermore, the vast mercantile networks that facilitated the growth and spread of all the great world religions among the Sogdians of the diaspora did not become part of Sogdian civilization until centuries after the fall of the Kushans, and the monastic institutions that thrived along the trade routes during the Kushan era evidently did not have the opportunity to progress as an unbroken tradition in Sogdiana because of the unstable political conditions across Inner Asia after the Kushans and the Han dynasty fell.

This consideration might lead to questions as to how an early Buddhist presence among the Sogdians, not only in Sogdiana but elsewhere in Inner Asia, might have appeared on the ground, and for this we must turn to an idea broached in a pair of works by Crone (2012 a, b), who takes as her point of departure a well-known passage from al-Birūnī's eleventh-century travel account of India, the *Kitāb fī taḥqīq mā li'l Hind* (Sacher's translation cited in Litvinsky 1979, p. 21, and Puri 1987, p. 89; see also Crone 2012a, p. 386; 2012b, p. 25), which claims that, long ago, Khorasan, Persia, Iraq, Mosul, and the lands all the way to the frontier of Syria were Buddhist, but when Zarathustra preached his doctrine in Balkh, "the Buddhists were banished from those countries and had to emigrate east of that city." In analyzing the historical tradition behind Birūnī's statement, Crone shows that some Islamic commentators on the pre-Islamic religion of Iran and its neighbors claimed that, before the time of the Prophets, there was only one religion, whose followers in the west were given the name Kaldāniyyūn (Chaldeans) but were called in the east Sumaniyya (a deformation of the word *shamaniyya*, ultimately based on the Indic *śramana*). Exploring the history of this line of thought, Crone concludes (2012a, p. 100) that, among Muslim historians, *shamaniyya* had come into use as a synonym for a pre-Islamic "paganism" that included Buddhism: "Buddhism and the semi-Zoroastrian cults of Transoxiana blended so imperceptibly into each other that they came to be subsumed under the same label ... and jointly

31 By contrast, kings and emperors who provided state support to Buddhism in India, northern China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia were often interested in Buddhism as a creed that was useful because it transcended ethnic boundaries and could supply a legitimation for a ruler who held sway over diverse groups. This concept was not at all relevant to the political realities of Sogdiana.

identified as the pre-Zoroastrian religion of Iran."[32] That Muslim writers lumped all non-Abrahamic creeds together is not surprising, especially since lines between Asian religions in antiquity were often not firmly drawn. The difficulty of separating Buddhism from the Hindu tradition at the popular level in India, and the mutual borrowings between Buddhists and Daoists in early China, have already shown this, and the situation with the culturally Iranian areas of Inner Asia was no different.[33] It is significant, however, that the Muslims chose to label the practitioners of this eclectic trend *shamaniyya*; this would seem to indicate that Buddhism, even if not well-established institutionally, played a significant role in the popular religion of the eastern Iranian-speaking realms before Islam. It is probably the widespread transfer of certain religious approaches and practices found among the sub-elite Buddhists of the far-flung Sogdian diaspora that is behind the Tungusic word *shaman*, from which the word came into Russian and thence other European languages.[34]

From this discussion, it might be concluded that Buddhist practice among the Sogdians was mainly limited to the popular level, perhaps mostly practiced among individuals and families, and that as a people they did not contribute much to the development of the religion. Similarly, it has often been

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32 There is no evidence of widespread religious persecutions under the Achaemenids, but Muslim historians frequently conflated the Achaemenid period of Zarathustra with the later Sasanian period, during which non-Zoroastrian religions, including Buddhism, were indeed proscribed by the court.

33 For more on this, see Gibson (forthcoming). As one example, Gulacsi and BeDuhn (2012/2016, p. 17) have pointed out a scene from the Buddhist *Komāyaputta Jātaka* alongside Zoroastrian motifs on the Sogdian Wirkak sarcophagus found in China. Some sort of amalgamation or mutual borrowing or reframing process involving Sogdian Zoroastrianism and Buddhism (and ancient Turkic religion) is also demonstrated by a ritual manuscript published by Grenet and Azarmouche (2007, pp. 171–73), which not only speaks of a mandala and the Buddhist deity Mahākāla, but also includes a Zoroastrian hymn to an Iranian wind god that mentions Adbag (the supreme deity of the Sogdians, sometimes used as cognate to the Indic Indra in Buddhist texts), and prescribes the wearing of a wolfskin (the wolf was sacred to the Türks). Tremblay (2007, p. 94, see also 2001, p. 89), however, chooses to frame such interaction negatively, referring to a "debased Buddhism nurtured with Mazdaism or Daoism," and "a religious pidgin strongly magical in character." The language of "debasement" is pejorative rather than descriptive; parenthetically, it seems rather reminiscent of certain nineteenth-century British commentators on the Buddhism of Tibet. As for the latter characterization, it could equally well be applied to much sub-elite Buddhism in China itself, right up to the twentieth century.

34 More can be found about the history of the *śramana* > *shaman* term in Gibson (forthcoming).

thought that the later involvement of Sogdians in Buddhism was mostly an imitation of what the Chinese were doing.[35] This formulation is evidently based on the fact that most Buddhist literature in the Sogdian language was translated from the Chinese.[36] Some specialists in these translations have remarked on how close the Sogdian translators tried to keep to the Chinese originals, even at the cost of intelligibility in some cases; Utz claims (1978, p. 7) that sometimes the translation is literally logograph by logograph. Asmussen (1982, p. 140), however, says that Sogdian texts from Chinese are "not just slavish imitations of the Chinese versions." MacKenzie (cited in Walter 2006, p. 43) says that some Sogdian texts are almost unintelligible without reference to the Chinese. Yoshida (2015, p. 168) calls the Sogdian Buddhist texts "more or less faithful translations of the Chinese originals" – including Chinese apocryphal works – but says "a few seem to have been based on Sanskrit or Tocharian originals." Lurje says (2010, p. 7) that the translations "vary from slavish word-by-word rendering of the Chinese text (as in the case of the *Sutra of Causes and Effects of Action*, SCE) to free and elaborate composition on the well-known Buddhist subject (the almost complete Sogdian version of the *Vessantara-Jātaka* ... the longest known Sogdian text of some 1800 lines)."[37]

Whatever the case from the linguistic point of view, considering Sogdian Buddhism to be a mere outgrowth of Chinese Buddhism ignores the fact, already mentioned, that in its early stages Chinese Buddhism was initiated by mostly Inner Asian translators, including Sogdians, and that some of these translators helped to shape Buddhist thought in early China. Later on, other Sogdians not only passed on Buddhism through translation, but also sometimes took it in new directions in their original works. Sogdian Buddhists during the Sui–Tang period wrote in Chinese because that was the language in which

35 Flatly stated by Tremblay (2007, p. 94): "Sogdian Buddhism is but a part of Chinese Buddhism, and participates in all of its tendencies...." Yoshida (2015, p. 168) is in agreement with this evaluation.

36 Utz (1978) has a survey of Buddhist materials in the Sogdian language, and Tremblay (2001, pp. 66–72) a chronology of Buddhist terminology in Sogdian. Yoshida (2015) provides an updated list of Sogdian Buddhist texts. See also Walter 2006 (pp. 42–48) for a discussion of the translation issue.

37 Lurje also notes (2010, p. 7) that "the Buddhist texts contain a number of the names of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other religious and mythological characters, which are either transcribed in Sogdian from Sanskrit (sometimes with visible traces of mediation of Chinese, Prakrits or Central Asiatic languages) or translated; semi-translations can be also found."

they could have the broadest impact,[38] and also because, during most of their lives, China was the world power that was the most active in preserving and spreading Buddhism. Two Sogdians in particular were of signal importance in shaping the nature of East Asian Buddhism, although their ancestry has often been ignored in discussions of their contributions.

Fazang (643–712) is a key figure in the history of the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism, which takes as its primary inspiration the *Avataṃsaka* sutra. Although he is traditionally known as the third patriarch of that school, he is in fact commonly acknowledged to have been its *de facto* founder (Cook 1991, pp. 32–33; Cleary 1983, p. 13), bringing together the contributions of his predecessors and adding his own, to form a new cohesive outlook that proved widely influential. He was without doubt of Sogdian ancestry; not only does his surname Kang indicate Samarkandian origins, but several of his family had been ministers in Samarkand, and his father was a functionary in the Chinese government. (Chang 1977, pp. 227–38; Chen 2005, pp. 13–14).[39] Possibly owing to these court connections, Fazang himself became an intimate of the Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705), who was an exemplary supporter of Buddhism. Although this support was probably in part in search of justification of her rule as a female (which was completely against prevailing Confucian ideology), she also took a genuine interest in its doctrinal teachings, in particular that of the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, on which Fazang lectured. It was allegedly for the empress that Fazang composed his famous "Golden Lion" treatise[40] and set up a hall of mutually reflecting mirrors to illustrate the jewels of Indra's Net in the well-known cosmological metaphor. Their continued association resulted in new translations of both the *Avataṃsaka* and the *Lāṅkavatāra* sutra, on which Fazang duly wrote a commentary. After the death of Wu Zetian, in 704, Fazang remained on good terms with her heirs, Zhongzong (r. 705–710) and Ruizong (r. 710–712).

Fazang is remembered today mainly for his association with the *Avataṃsaka* and his profound

38 Also to be remembered in this context are the contributions of Korean masters who composed new scriptures in Chinese that were given back-translated Sanskrit titles, accepted as canonical, and gained currency in both China and Tibet. On this, see Buswell 2007 and Kapstein 2000.

39 Walter (2006, p. 30, n. 85, citing Kamata) claims that Fazang had an Indian father and a Sogdian mother, but as this is apparently based only on the *Song kaosengzhuan*, it seems to be just another instance of a tired cliché, used to manufacture prestigious Indic roots; on this, see also the biographical material on Amoghavajra immediately below.

40 This treatise has been discussed often; for one of many translations, see Chang 1977, pp. 224–30.

works of Huayan thought. It can be only speculation that the first of these was due in part to the sutra's provenance and popularity in Inner Asia, but certainly Fazang's genius in reconciling the disparate schools of the Buddhist teachings, assigning each to a particular niche in an ultimately non-contradictory view, reflects a typically Sogdian approach that could be seen as paralleling that of Sogdian religious art, which drew on motifs from all the civilizations it had relations with. The same could be said about the doctrines of mutual non-obstruction and mutual penetration of *dharma*s that the Huayan school expounded (which have no Indian counterpart). Nevertheless, his interests and skills went far beyond philosophy, and his Inner Asian background was reflected in his career in several other ways. As with many prominent Inner Asian teachers, he was also active politically.[41] At the request of the emperors he served, he allegedly performed several feats of weather-altering magic, thus continuing in the tradition of Inner Asian teachers going back to Fotucheng and Śrīmitra. And, like Amoghavajra (see below), he was called on to employ destructive rituals on behalf of the dynasty against invading armies.[42]

Nevertheless, it was Amoghavajra, the last of the major Sogdian teachers in China, who had the broadest and most lasting impact on Buddhism. Amoghavajra (704–774), also known as Bukung,[43] was one of the most influential Buddhist teachers who ever lived. While he is revered by the modern Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism as one of its three founding patriarchs, many scholars, even scholars of Buddhism outside of those who specialize in Buddhist esoterism are barely familiar with the extent of his career and accomplishments. As befitted his Sogdian heritage, he was not only an energetic traveler and capable linguist but also an innovative religious thinker, borrowing, adapting, and synthesizing material from several of the cultural spheres the Sogdians were familiar with, and a skilled politician, who was honored by several Chinese emperors and used his political connections to further the

41 Details in Chen 2005, pp. 49–55.

42 Fazang was called upon by the emperor to oppose a rebellion of China's Khitan subjects in 696. He employed a ritual based on the eleven-headed form of Avalokiteśvara, who was already popular in China, and perhaps long known to Wu Zetian. Chen (2005, pp. 33–46) gives a thorough discussion of this episode.

43 Orzech (1998) prefers to use his Chinese name, as he wrote in Chinese and was most active in China, and Amoghavajra is a reconstruction of his Indic name from the Chinese. Amoghavajra is used in this work because it is more recognized among those who are not Chinese specialists. The name is not known to Indic-language sources, however.

teachings and practices he thought valuable to the religious elite and to ordinary people, as well as those that were demanded by his historical circumstances. Not only did his career shape East Asian Buddhism as much as any other teacher of his time; his legacy survives in both the rituals of the Shingon school, and also possibly in the very survival of Buddhism in China during and after a period of great social and religious tumult. There has been a certain amount of dispute about the birthplace and heritage of Amoghavajra in the past. Since he seems to be a prime example of a putatively "Indian" teacher who was in fact Inner Asian, a fairly detailed account of the controversy over his birthplace is not irrelevant here.

Formerly, it was almost universally accepted that Amoghavajra was an Indian, this received account evidently being based on little more than the "three countries" model of esoteric Buddhism's history in East Asia,[44] and Amoghavajra's biography in the *Song gaosengzhuan*, which says that he came from a Brahman family of Northern India.[45] The first to cast doubt on this assumption was Chou Yi-liang (1945), in his seminal examination of the history surrounding the traditional three patriarchs of Shingon.[46] Chou notes (p. 285 n. 2) that other sources merely give Amoghavajra's birthplace as "the Western Regions" (*hsi yu*). He also notes that the *Jiutangshu*, an official history of the Tang dynasty, unequivocally calls him *hu seng*, and, most importantly, observes that his mother's surname was Kang, indicating ancestry in Samarkand. Chou provides still another reason to doubt Amoghavajra's Indian provenance, which he unveiled by a careful study of Chinese history. In 740, he says, there was a revolt against the dynasty led by a Liu Chih-cheng; as he had a *hu* as a co-conspirator, all the *hu* monks were deported. Amoghavajra left on a sea trip to India in 741, allegedly on the orders of his late master

44 This model, popular among Japanese Buddhist scholars until recently, assumed that Buddhism, especially its esoteric forms, originated in India and was passed on, essentially unaltered, through China to Japan. On the weaknesses of this reconstruction, see especially Payne 2011, pp. 1040–54.

45 There are two sources (see Goble 2012, pp. 205–206) that support the tradition that Amoghavajra was born in Central Asia, but from a Brahmin father, or that he had an Indian father and a Sogdian mother; this latter view is followed by Yamasaki (1988, p. 19) and Lehnart (2011, p. 351).

46 This work has been partially reprinted in Payne (2006), but unfortunately without the valuable footnotes and appendices that Chou used as additional support for his conclusions. As the discussion here refers to this "disappeared" information, I am obliged to cite Chou's original article.

Vajrabodhi, who had died just before.[47] It is interesting that Chou did not claim outright that Amoghavajra was not Indian, but rather simply presented information that would lead the careful reader to that conclusion. Possibly as a result of his circumspection, it was a long time before other specialists in East Asian Buddhism began to question the traditional account.

By now, however, it is widely recognized that this account of Amoghavajra's background is inadequate, and few specialists in East Asian Buddhism continue to refer to him as simply "Indian,"[48] though this is not the case among non-specialists, who still seem to be relying on the traditional biographies.[49] A recent commentator on the question of Amoghavajra's birth and ethnicity, Jeffrey Goble (Goble 2012, pp. 201–208), provides an overview of all the existing evidence from the literary-historical sources. In addition, he analyzes in detail Amoghavajra's close relationships with various Inner Asian warlords of the northern borderlands of China and the "pacified West" (Chinese colonies in Inner Asia), and concludes that his popularity among them must have been at least in part due to ethnic and cultural sympathies. The upshot for him is that Amoghavajra was in all likelihood "ethnically

47 Chou 1945, p. 288. Chou painstakingly proved (p. 282 n. 56 and p. 288) that the dates given in the official ecclesiastical sources for Amoghavajra's departure and the death of Vajrabodhi just before this are off by nine years. It is interesting that Vajrabodhi's death occurred at the time of the *hu* expulsion; his biography has him claiming that the expulsion order was not binding on him because he was Indian (*fan*) and not Central Asian/ Sogdian (*hu*). Perhaps, given the fraught relationship between the Chinese and the Sogdians in the mid-eighth century, some Chinese did not see the difference.

48 An exception is Weinberger 2003, but the bibliography of this work is completely free of any sources, even as old as Chou's article, that deal at all with the ethnic and historical backgrounds of the three early masters.

49 There is a theory that has Amoghavajra being born in Śri Lanka; this appears to be based on the identification of that island with the Chinese Xilang found in a single Chinese source (Goble 2012, p. 206–207); Chou thought Xilang might refer to Liangzhou. On the other hand, Chou (1945, p. 321) thinks that Amoghavajra's uncle was probably a Sogdian merchant, and points out another source (T. 55.881a15), which says that Amoghavajra met Vajrabodhi in Java. Sundberg and Geibel (2011, p. 30) accept Śri Lanka as his birthplace, without comment on his ancestry. La Vaissière (2005, p. 88) accepts a Śri Lankan birth, but he nevertheless believes that Amoghavajra was ethnically Sogdian. Since, as noted above, Faxian had encountered Sogdian merchant chiefs in Śri Lanka already in the fifth century, and there were cases of Sogdians domiciled as far away from the homeland as Hanoi, there is no contradiction involved. In any case, though, the "North Indian Brahmin" trope must be regarded here as in so many other places as nothing but a pious fiction.

Sogdian, or at least Central Asian." He too regards the "Brahmin father" tradition as an attempt to establish a distinguished pedigree.[50]

Another factor that should not be ignored in this context, not mentioned by Goble, is Amoghavajra's translations of literary works of astrological magic. In the Buddhist astrology of China and Japan, which probably grew in importance with the need to find proper times to celebrate esoteric rituals, there is a set of planetary deities in a text (T. 1299) attributed to Amoghavajra.[51] Their names are written both in Chinese and in the Chinese transcription of Sogdian, which are in turn transcriptions of the names in Middle Persian (Kotyk, 2017a, p. 46). Kotyk (2017b) has reproduced paintings, followed by contrasting descriptions of planetary deities in both Near Eastern and Chinese sources, which prove beyond any possible doubt the iconographical and mythic dependence of these deities on Egyptian-Hellenistic models rather than Indian.[52] It is highly unlikely that anyone except an Inner Asian, and probably a Sogdian, would have had the knowledge of the Sogdian and Persian languages and of Near Eastern iconography that these works display, and probably only a Sogdian would have favored that iconography and lore over the Indic in introducing occult astrology to China.

There are many possible reasons for the attribution and acceptance of Indian ancestry to Amoghavajra. One reason, of course, ties in with the prestige of India as the font of authentic Buddhism, and the deliberate disassociation of the Chinese Buddhist literati from the *hu*, compounded later by the "three countries" model. In the present writer's opinion, however, there is an even more important factor: the virulent anti-Sogdian reaction in ninth-century China, as discussed above.

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50 Interestingly, Goble (2012, p. 31 n. 69) also regards as fiction the story of the expulsion order against the Sogdians given in the *Song gaosengzhuan* on the grounds that it does not appear in the official dynastic histories. He does not seem to speak to the *Cheng yuan lu* (T 55.878c18), which was the source that Chou (1945, p. 320) employed to substantiate this episode (the present writer does not have the linguistic competence to check this reference). Van Schaik (2016, p. 55 n. 40) cites an unpublished paper by Palumbo which dates the expulsion order to 736 but says that in some cases its implementation was delayed. The historicity of the order has seemingly been accepted by Orzech (2011, p. 280)

51 Zhu (2006, p. 697) accepts the attribution to Amoghavajra, on the grounds that the work was annotated by Yang Jinfeng, a direct disciple of his.

52 Kotyk (2017b). According to Sørenson (2011c, p. 232), this had already been noticed in a Japanese-language article by Hayashi, but Kotyk was evidently unaware of this.

Amoghavajra first appears in the historical record in the company of his teacher Vajrabodhi in 721, when they arrived in Changan. In 741, after the death of his master in China, he left for India and Śri Lanka to further his studies.[53] He returned from the island in 746 or 747, accompanied by an embassy from the Śri Lankan king, and was received by the emperor Xuanzong, who put him to work as a government functionary, performing rituals for the benefit of the state and lecturing on the *Scripture of Humane Kings*, an apocryphal work aimed at the protection of the empire during difficult times.[54] Amoghavajra also granted the emperor initiation into the *Compendium of Buddhas* (*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*), a key tantra in East Asian Buddhism.[55] As a result, the emperor bestowed on him the purple robe, the highest honor possible for a monk in China (Lehnert, 2011, p. 355). For one reason or another, however, Amoghavajra left Xuanzong's court and made his way west, where he was given patronage by Geshu Han, a local potentate in Gansu, and began granting initiations and doing translation work again. He was soon recalled to the capital, however, and stayed there during the rising of An Rokshan, where he performed wrathful rites of Acala for the benefit of the dynasty. In a separate incident, Acala rites performed by Amoghavajra had been credited with floods, infighting, and the sickness and death of a Turkic general that resulted in the breakup of a Uighur alliance with the

53 Lehnert (2011, p. 352) surmises that on this trip he came to know about the use of Buddhist literature and rites that were then in vogue in India as a response to the political pressures caused by fragmentation into warring states; he evidently relies here on Davidson's (2002) theoretical framework. This is perhaps not unreasonable, but Sundberg (2004, pp. 105 ff.) suggests that since Amoghavajra seems to have spent far more time on Śri Lanka than in India proper, and since he returned from the island together with an official mission to the Emperor of China from the Śri Lankan king Śilamega, it was probably from there that he obtained the larger version of the *Compendium of Buddhas* tantra (see below). There is an increasing literature on esoteric currents in the Buddhism of Śri Lanka, including discussion of an inscription from the *Compendium* found in the heart of the capital city; one might begin with Sundberg 2004 for more sources. All this might suggest that the spread of the *Compendium* throughout not only Inner Asia and China but also Southeast Asia (as seen for example in the temple at Borobudur) might have been enabled by the Sogdian commercial network. Parenthetically, this may be another instance of considering "India" as a unitary cultural whole leading to a blurring of the historical record.

54 This work has been thoroughly examined by Orzech (1998).

55 The traditional reckonings claim that this scripture originated in an Iron Stupa, often located in South India, which was opened through ritual practices and circumambulation (Yamasaki 1988, pp. 86–89). Yamasaki recognizes the mythic rather than strictly historical importance of this legend.

Tibetans in 765 (the latter having conquered Changan in 763) (Goble 2012, pp. 138–39, 160).[56] With the abdication of Xuanzong, Amoghavajra requested sponsorship of a new translation of the *Humane Kings*, and performance of its accompanying rituals, from the new emperors Suzong and later Daizong (this "translation," however, like the old version of the scripture, was not based on an Indian original).[57]

As a result of this imperial patronage, Amoghavajra was able to accomplish a vast amount of work in furthering Buddhism. He allegedly translated into Chinese more works than anyone except Xuanzang (Orzech 2011, p. 281), although how many of his "translations" were actually his own compositions, or adaptations, or later works that sought acceptance under his considerable penumbra, is still an unsettled question.[58] He founded a series of monasteries, notably rebuilding five at Wutaishan, one of which (the Golden Pavilion) became the official center of Amoghavajra's esoteric practices in 767 (Goble, 2012, pp. 250ff.). He evidently felt a close connection to Mañjuśrī, establishing that bodhisattva as the official patron of the empire (Orzech 1998. p. 200),[59] and translated (or authored) a work that places the bodhisattva among the astrological deities (Sørenson, 2011c, p. 239).

While major works such as the *Compendium of Buddhas* tantra, the *Mahāvairocana* sutra, and the *Sutra of Humane Kings* have received the most attention from scholars of East Asian esoteric Buddhism, some other works associated with Amoghavajra are also becoming better known.[60] He was responsible for introducing to East Asia the *Adhyardhaśatikāprajñāpāramitā* sutra (*Transcendent Wisdom in 150 Verses*, referred to in Japanese as the *Rishukyō*); [61] the figure of Vajrasattva as

56 There is also a tradition that Amoghavajra called on the protective divinity Vaiśravaṇa to defeat an Arab invasion of China's western protectorates, but Goble (2013) has shown the dependence of this legend on an earlier tale set in Khotan and related by Xuanzang, itself employing a story also found in Herodotus. Goble points out that the significance of the story does not lie in its (bogus) historicity, but in its demonstration of the strong belief in the efficacy of Amoghavajra's wrathful rites.

57 See especially Orzech 1998; also Lehnert 2011, p. 356.

58 Sørenson 2011b, p. 182.

59 On the longstanding connection of Mañjuśrī with Inner Asia, see Gibson, forthcoming.

60 For a list of works ascribed to Amoghavajra, see Lehnert 2011, pp. 358–59.

61 The *Rishukyō* still has a major ritual role in modern Japanese Shingon.

representative of enlightenment was introduced to China for the first time in both the *Compendium* and the *Rishukyō*. Amoghavajra's *Catalogue of Dharani* was largely responsible for the concept of esoteric Buddhism being considered a distinct school (Goble 2013, pp. 83–84). He (or his disciples) also introduced what became the orthodox East Asian rite for feeding the hungry ghosts (Orzech 2005, p. 318; Sørenson 2011, p. 130), which in turn became integrated with the earlier Ullambana tradition; observation of this rite, says Orzech (2005, p. 317), "is second in stature only to the lunar New Year" in modern Chinese culture.[62]

It was not only in East Asia that Amoghavajra's accomplishments resonated, however; the present writer has elsewhere (Gibson, forthcoming) elaborated on the under-appreciated effect of his and other Sogdians' careers on early Tibetan Buddhism,[63] as well as the importance that clans of Sogdian and other Inner Asian ancestry had among the Buddhists of the Tibetan empire (Gibson 2024).

It can thus be seen that, even though the region of Sogdiana itself never came to be a bastion of Buddhism in the same way that other Inner Asian locales such as Kucha and Khotan were, the Sogdians were far from being mere passive spectators of the Buddhist atmosphere that surrounded them in Late Antiquity and early medieval times, or mere imitators of Chinese Buddhist doctrine and practice. Sogdian Buddhists not only seem to have had a lasting influence on sub-elite religion all across Inner Asia but also made crucial contributions to their neighboring Buddhist realms as translators and culture-bearers, royal chaplains, and philosophical and ritual innovators.

62 The *ullambana* tradition itself may have been based on Iranian culture. Iwamoto (cited in Teiser 1998, pp. 22–24) believes that the tradition borrows from Iranian ritual, and that its Chinese name is in fact derived from *urvan*, the Iranic word for "soul."

63 Shri Singha (normally written in its reconstructed Sanskrit form *Śri Siṃha), a key figure in the Tibetan Nyingmapa school, was almost certainly Sogdian.

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