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Sogdian Translations of Buddhist Texts as A Form Intercultural and Spiritual Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the complex and multifaceted intercultural and spiritual interactions between the peoples of Central Asia and the Far East, with a particular focus on the historical processes surrounding the transmission, adaptation, and transformation of Buddhism across these regions. Drawing on manuscript evidence, philological studies, and comparative doctrinal analysis, the study highlights the role of the Sutra of Golden Light as a central vehicle for cultural integration and religious dissemination. It examines how Buddhist texts, especially in their Sogdian, Uyghur, Chinese, and Oirat versions, not only reflected the philosophical core of Mahayana Buddhism but were also reshaped by local linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts. The report also addresses the syncretic nature of these translations, the role of Buddhist rituals in statecraft (particularly in Tang China), and the use of sacred texts as instruments of moral, social, and political legitimacy. In doing so, it demonstrates how Buddhism served as a bridge between diverse civilizations and contributed to the historical development of religious thought and intercultural dialogue across the Eurasian continent.

Keywords: Buddhism, Sutra of Golden Light, Central Asia, Far East, Sogdian translations, Uyghur Buddhism, Mahayana doctrine, religious syncretism, intercultural dialogue, Tang dynasty, Silk Road, manuscript culture, spiritual exchange, historical linguistics, Eurasian civilizations.

INTRODUCTION

The Sogdian translations of texts with Buddhist content were primarily discovered at the beginning of the 20th century by a French archaeological expedition led by Paul Pelliot. These manuscripts were found in the so-called “Cave of the Thousand Buddhas” near Dunhuang, an important site along the Silk Road. In addition to these, other significant fragments of Buddhist compositions written in the Sogdian language originate from the Turfan oasis, another major center of manuscript culture in the region. Chronologically, these textual monuments are dated to the 7th–9th centuries CE, a period during which Buddhism was actively spreading through Central Asia and interacting with local Iranian-speaking communities.

The Dunhuang manuscripts discovered by Pelliot are currently preserved in the National Library of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France) in Paris,

catalogued under the designation "P" — referring to the Paul Pelliot collection. A separate portion of manuscripts, collected by the renowned explorer Aurel Stein, is housed in the British Library in London under the catalogue code Or. 8212. Furthermore, a large number of Sogdian Buddhist fragments are kept in the collections of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in Saint Petersburg, Russia. These are classified under various sigla, such as SI, O, and Kr.

The first scholarly publications of Sogdian Buddhist texts were initiated by R. Gauthiot. In 1912, he published a translation of the "Vessantara Jataka", which is the life story of one of the previous incarnations of the Buddha, Prince Vessantara. This work was later reprinted in 1946 by the eminent linguist and Iranologist Émile Benveniste. Benveniste further contributed to the study of these texts by publishing, in 1940, a facsimile edition, along with transliteration, French translation, and critical commentary of the manuscripts preserved in the Paris collection.

The London texts, which had earlier been published by H. Reichelt in 1928, were republished in 1976 by D. Mackenzie, a noted scholar of Middle Iranian languages. However, the readings and interpretations offered by Reichelt and his colleague O. Hansen were later revised and corrected in many places by É. Benveniste and Walter Bruno Henning, two of the most authoritative figures in the study of Sogdian and other Middle Iranian languages.

Among all the extant Sogdian-Buddhist texts, the "Vessantara Jataka" stands out not only for its literary and religious significance but also for its sheer volume, consisting of 1,513 lines of text. It is considered the most substantial and linguistically valuable work for the study of the extinct Sogdian language. All other Sogdian Buddhist texts are comparatively shorter in length. For instance, the ethical-philosophical treatise titled "Sutra of the Causes and Effects of Our Deeds" (Akrti anbont paturi pustak) comprises 571 lines. The "Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra", another important moral teaching, includes 207 lines, while the "Dhūta Sūtra" has 297 lines, and the "Dhyana Sūtra" contains 405 lines.

Of particular note among the Sogdian fragments is a short but significant excerpt from a sutra that condemns the consumption of alcoholic beverages. This fragment, titled "Mastkarak chashant parghun pustak", consists of only 31 lines but reflects the moral-ethical dimension of Buddhist teachings disseminated among Sogdian-speaking communities.

In addition to Jatakas and Sūtras, several manuscripts include fragments belonging to the genre of Dharaṇī (Buddhist magical or protective chants). These include a 75-line fragment of the Padmacintamaṇi Dharaṇī, as well as portions of the Nīlakaṇṭha Dharaṇī and others. These texts indicate the presence of esoteric Buddhist practices among the Sogdians and provide invaluable insights into the transmission of Buddhist ritual traditions in Central Asia.

Thus, the corpus of Sogdian Buddhist texts, although fragmentary, constitutes a vital source for the study of the religious, linguistic, and cultural history of Iranian-speaking peoples along the Silk Road during the early medieval period. Their preservation in international libraries and the ongoing efforts of philologists underscore their global scholarly importance.

Thanks to the efforts of the first generations of scholars who studied Sogdian-Buddhist compositions and their successors, considerable progress has been made in identifying the sources of Sogdian translations of Buddhist texts. Although Sanskrit is occasionally mentioned as the source language for some translations, it has become evident that the majority of Sogdian translations were based primarily on Chinese versions of the Buddhist canon. This conclusion is supported by textual analysis and comparative philological research.

Further evidence of the Chinese influence comes from the discovery that many of these Buddhist texts were copied by Sogdian scribes in Dunhuang. This is clearly indicated in a small colophon found at the end of the text titled "Mastkarak chashant parghun pustak", which confirms its transcription by Sogdians living in that region. A particularly intriguing historical detail is the copying of one of the most significant Mahayana sutras—Vajracchedika Prajñaparamita Sūtra (The Diamond Sutra)—using the Sogdian script by a Buddhist of Turkic origin named Qutluġ, meaning "The Fortunate One." This unique instance reflects the multicultural and multilingual environment in which Buddhist literature was transmitted and preserved along the Silk Road.

While Chinese Buddhist texts formed the foundation for most Sogdian translations, references to Tibetan versions are also encountered. Some manuscripts even cite Sanskrit originals, presumably to lend the translations

greater legitimacy and spiritual authority. However, in a comparative philological study, the renowned scholar David Mackenzie demonstrated that the majority of Sogdian Buddhist texts were, in fact, closely aligned with Chinese source versions, both in content and in structure.

At this point, I would like to draw particular attention to one of the most significant works in the religious consciousness of Buddhist communities—the Suvarṇaprabhasa Sūtra, more commonly known as the "Sutra of Golden Light". This sutra, known in Chinese as Jīn guang míng jīng and in Old Turkic as Altun Yaruk, was one of the most widely revered Mahayana scriptures throughout Central and East Asia. It served not only as a text of devotional practice but also as a spiritual guide for moral purification.

The Sutra of Golden Light elaborates detailed rituals and practices for the spiritual cleansing of sins in accordance with Mahayana Buddhist principles. This suggests that the Sogdian Buddhists of Dunhuang—and possibly those along broader segments of the Silk Road—were adherents of Mahayana traditions, embracing its doctrines of compassion, karmic retribution, and spiritual evolution. The sutra also deals extensively with metaphysical concepts such as karma—the law of moral causation—and outlines how individuals, through acts of piety, merit accumulation, and meditative practices, can purify themselves and achieve spiritual advancement.

Moreover, this text was not only religiously significant but also held socio-political importance. In many East and Central Asian polities, the Sutra of Golden Light was used in state rituals and royal courts to invoke divine protection, ensure peace, and affirm moral governance. Its presence in Sogdian translation attests to the integration of Buddhist ethics into the local Iranian-speaking cultures and their interactions with Chinese and Turkic religious traditions.

In conclusion, the Sutra of Golden Light—with its emphasis on repentance, karmic law, and spiritual renewal—played a central role in the religious life of Sogdian Buddhists. Its transmission in Sogdian, Chinese, and Old Turkic languages further exemplifies the dynamic cultural and religious exchanges that characterized the spiritual landscape of medieval Central Asia.

The Sutra of Golden Light (Suvarṇaprabhasa Sūtra) exerted a profound influence on the formation of the cultural and spiritual worldview not only of the Indian and Chinese civilizations, but also of the peoples of Central and East Asia. Beyond its translation into Sogdian, the sutra was rendered into several other languages, including Uyghur, Tibetan, Oirat, Mongolian, and others. Its message resonated widely and was particularly revered among the Turkic-speaking peoples, where it gained elevated status as both a spiritual guide and a moral-philosophical text.

From a historical and cultural standpoint, the Sutra of Golden Light was composed in India, likely in the early centuries of the Common Era, during the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. In China, it made its first appearance at the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century, translated by a Buddhist monk named Dharmaananda. Scholars speculate that he may have been of Turkic or Sogdian origin, and he adopted the name in honor of Ananda, the Buddha's most beloved disciple according to Buddhist tradition, who accompanied him during his lifetime and was present at the first Buddhist council after his enlightenment.

However, the most influential and widely accepted Chinese version of the sutra was the one produced by the renowned Buddhist monk and scholar Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang), who undertook an extensive pilgrimage across Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent during the 7th century in search of sacred Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang's translation, known for its accuracy and elegance, became canonical in Chinese Buddhist literature and contributed significantly to the spread of the Mahayana tradition in East Asia.

Among the various translations of the Sutra of Golden Light, the Uyghur version is regarded as one of the most accomplished. It was produced around the 8th century, during the time of the Uyghur Khaganate, which flourished in what is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of modern-day China. Numerous fragments of this Uyghur translation have been unearthed in the Turfan region, particularly in the famed Mogao Caves, also known as the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas." These manuscripts offer invaluable insights into the adaptation of Buddhist texts within Turkic cultural and linguistic environments.

The Oirat version of the Sutra of Golden Light represents one of the most recent and syncretic transformations of the text. It was translated in the later period, likely under the influence of the Lamaist (Tibetan Buddhist) tradition. This version significantly reworked certain elements of the sutra to align it with the theological and ritualistic frameworks of Tibetan Buddhism, reflecting the dynamic and adaptive nature of Buddhist scripture across diverse regions and epochs.

Thus, the Sutra of Golden Light serves not only as a spiritual guide promoting purification from sin, karma justification, and ethical conduct but also as a mirror of cultural transmission and transformation. Its wide-ranging translations and reinterpretations underscore its central role in the religious and moral life of many Eurasian societies across centuries, especially among Turkic, Mongolic, and Sino-Tibetan peoples.

Now let us turn to the core doctrinal ideas presented in the Sutra of Golden Light (Suvarṇaprabhasa Sūtra), which played a significant role in shaping the ethical, spiritual, and even political landscape of Buddhist communities throughout Central and East Asia.

1. The Primary Goal of the Sutra: Karmic Purification

The central objective of the Sutra of Golden Light is the establishment of a path toward karmic purification. As is well known, karma—in Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Eastern religions—is the cumulative result of an individual's actions and their consequences, which determine the circumstances and character of one's rebirth or reincarnation. According to this belief, one's fate in the next life is directly shaped by virtuous or unwholesome deeds performed during the current existence.

However, the Sutra of Golden Light introduces an important doctrinal innovation: it asserts that sins can be absolved through sincere repentance and devotion. Specifically, the recitation of the sutra, the memorization of its passages, and its faithful reading are all considered powerful acts of atonement. To support this doctrine, the text presents a wide array of narrative material—parables, fables, moral tales, and accounts of historical events from the lives of Buddhist monastic communities—demonstrating how recitation and devotion have led to spiritual liberation and divine favor.

2. The Magical Power of the Word

A notable emphasis in the Sutra of Golden Light is placed on the mystical and transformative power of speech. Merely uttering the name of the sutra is believed to be a meritorious act. According to the Buddhist understanding expressed in the text, the power of sacred language is such that even a single verbal repetition can bring immense blessings and protection from misfortune. This reflects the Mahayana belief in dharaṇī, or magical formulas, and the salvific efficacy of oral transmission of sacred texts. Such doctrines highlight the performative and ritual dimension of Buddhist practice in both lay and monastic settings.

3. Sin Is Not Eternal: The Path to Enlightenment Is Open to All

A fundamental doctrinal message of the Sutra of Golden Light is that sin is not a permanent condition. Instead, it can be washed away through virtuous conduct and spiritual discipline. The sutra affirms that every individual, regardless of their past misdeeds, possesses the potential for spiritual liberation and the attainment of bodhi—enlightenment, or even Buddhahood. This inclusive doctrine reflects the core Mahayana idea that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature and can, through diligent effort, overcome ignorance and suffering.

Thus, the sutra's appeal lies in its moral optimism and universalism. It promotes a vision of Buddhism as a path of personal transformation in which the striving for goodness, the rejection of evil, and the cultivation of compassion and wisdom are accessible to everyone.

4. Political Interpretation in Ancient China

In ancient China, the Sutra of Golden Light acquired a unique and influential political interpretation. Particularly during the Tang dynasty, it was regarded as a text capable of safeguarding state authority and ensuring the prosperity and stability of the empire. Chinese emperors institutionalized the practice of reciting the sutra within the imperial palace, believing that it could ward off calamities, foster harmony, and secure divine protection for the realm.

The sutra thus served a dual function—as a spiritual guide for personal salvation and as a political tool for reinforcing legitimacy and divine sanction for imperial rule. It exemplifies the intricate relationship between religion and state in East Asian political culture, where spiritual texts often played a role in affirming the moral authority of rulers.

The Uyghur Translation:

The Uyghur version of the Sutra of Golden Light can be described as a refined and creative adaptation of the original, rendered in a relatively free manner into the Turkic—specifically, the Uyghur—language. The linguistic richness of the Turkic idiom allowed for a high degree of accommodation of Sanskrit (referred to in Uyghur as anatkak) concepts within the Turkic cultural and linguistic matrix. In this regard, the Uyghur language proved to be particularly effective in conveying complex philosophical ideas and in

offering a lexicon broad enough to absorb foreign religious vocabulary. Some manuscript versions of the sutra reveal a significant degree of creative rewriting and a fusion of the transformed Buddhist narrative with the epic storytelling traditions of Turkic peoples, reflecting both doctrinal fidelity and cultural localization.

The Chinese Translations:

The Chinese versions of the Sutra of Golden Light are distinguished by their vivid imagery and textual enrichment through the inclusion of commentaries, allegorical tales, and didactic expansions that reinforce the sutra's core ideas. Within Chinese monasteries, the sutra was treated as a sacred text for public ritual. It held a prominent role in liturgical recitations, especially in court ceremonies and communal prayer assemblies. The Chinese translators often sought not only linguistic clarity but also theological amplification, embedding the sutra into broader moral, cosmological, and political narratives.

The Sogdian Translation:

The Sogdian version stands out for its incorporation of local cultic elements and influences drawn from Zoroastrian traditions. The renowned Iranologist and Sogdologist W. B. Henning, in his seminal article "The Sogdian Buddhist Text 'Sutra of Golden Light'", pointed to a remarkable syncretism between Buddhism and Zoroastrianism within the Sogdian fragments of the sutra. These hybrid features reflect the complex religious environment of Sogdiana, where Buddhist cosmology was reinterpreted through the lens of indigenous Iranian beliefs, demonstrating the dynamic interactions between doctrinal content and local worldviews.

The Oirat Translation:

The Oirat translation of the Sutra of Golden Light is marked by the significant imprint of the Lamaist (Tibetan Buddhist) tradition. This version was not merely a literal translation but a syncretic rendering adapted to Lamaist rituals and theological needs. It was used in ceremonies of purification and played a role in elaborate liturgical performances and sacred processions. The adaptation aligned the sutra's message with the ritual structure and spiritual aspirations of Tibetan-style Buddhism among Mongolic peoples.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the Sutra of Golden Light emerged as a crucial unifying thread linking the Buddhist cultures of India, Central Asia, and China. It serves as a vivid example of the integrative capacity of religion, demonstrating how a sacred text can be simultaneously preserved and transformed across diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural frontiers. The Silk Road played an instrumental role in facilitating the diffusion, transformation, and localization of Buddhist teachings, ensuring their relevance within a variety of regional contexts.

In Place of a Conclusion:

The Sutra of Golden Light, along with other Buddhist scriptures—including their Sogdian versions—constituted a significant historical and cultural phenomenon in their time. The adoption of Buddhist ideas by various peoples helped elevate Buddhism to the status of a world religion, contributing to the development of intercultural relations and the dynamic evolution of religious thought across the Eurasian continent.

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