

Buddhist Shrines in the Oasis Cities of Central Asia: Theories and Models of Diffusion of Religion

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Abstract;

The spread of religion and diffusion of culture is an important subject of intercultural scholarship. But the domain of religion has remained an unexplored area of intercultural scholarship. The cultural exchange and adoption of ideas and ideologies (religious philosophies) by individuals and communities from a different culture, needs to be explored. It can add new facets on intercultural exchange and adoption of cultural traditions by different individuals and communities. Because, it can provide a spatial methodology for the study the Spread and Diffusion of religion. It is also important to theorizes upon the process of spread and diffusion of religion.

The spread of religion and diffusion of culture is a multifaceted phenomenon. It includes diffusion of ideas and ideologies (religious philosophies), values and cultural symbols. The present research represents the spread of Buddhism and the diffusion of Buddhist ideas and ideologies (religious philosophies), values and cultural symbols in the land of Central Asia.

Key Words: Buddhism, Diffusion of Buddhism, Silk Route, Cultural contact, Cultural Borrowing

The Spread and Diffusion of Religion;

There has been extensive research work on the diffusion of ideas in the domains of geography but there has been little research in the field of diffusion of religion and the transfer of ideologies (philosophies). The domain of religion has even remained an unexplored area of intercultural scholarship. In fact, it is important to increases our understanding of intercultural exchange in the domain of religion. It is also important to devise new vocabularies for the diffusion of cultures.

The present study concentrates on the historical development and geographical spread of the religious tradition of Buddhism along the silk route cities. It presents the cultural history of the spread of Buddhism and adaptation of its ideas and ideologies, in an unknown realm; the oasis cities of Central Asia, where it was spread. These oasis cities even acted as unique point to diffuse it in other parts of world. Thus, it recreates the cultural identity of the oasis cities of Central Asia in the historical past.

This research may contribute to the studies of the spread and diffusion of Buddhism and the adaptation of ideas and ideologies of Buddha in the oasis cities of Central Asia.

The Spread of Buddhism;

Buddhism is one of the oldest religions of the world. Its history spans almost 2,500 years. In its long history, from its origin India, it spread across boundaries. It is, not only, overwhelming in Sri Lanka, but it flourished in Java, Sumatra, Malaya, Laos, Cambodia and in Vietnam too. It is hard to imagine Thailand without Buddhism. (Park, Chris C. 1994) It is spread along the silk route in the oasis cities of Central Asia and China (which now includes Tibet also), Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and in the larger parts of East Asia. It is found in different cultural areas including the West (in Europe and the United States). Currently, it is one of the major religious traditions of the world. (Benn, James A. 2010)

The Objective of the Study;

This paper aims to analyse the spatial distribution of the Buddhist Shrines in Central Asia which indicates the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Route. The spatial and temporal analysis of the present study extends over the Buddhist Cultural Realm of the Kushan Period; the Central Asia before the arrival of Islam.

In the spatial analysis, the paper examines the spatial distribution of Buddhist shrines and the relationship between the oasis cities along the trade route. It also examines the cultural neighbourhood and the field of influence of Buddhist shrines, with respect to the spread of Buddhism.

Through these steps, the paper deductively arrives to the conclusion of the process of spread of Buddhist shrines and diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia. At the end of the research, it puts forth the theories and models of diffusion of Buddhist culture and spread of Buddhism in Central Asia.

The Hypothesis;

The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia was the most apparent geographic phenomena of the early history (during Kushan period). It was characterized by the concentration of Buddhist shrines in different oasis cities along the trade route.

It is hypothesized that the spatial interaction of the oasis cities along the silk route led to the diffusion of Buddhism and the spread of Buddhism culture. The hypothesis of the present research is;

- The development of Buddhist shrines in the oasis cities along the silk route led to the diffusion of culture and the spread of religion.

This hypothesis detects the process of the diffusion of Buddhist culture and the spread of religion.

It is important to examine this hypothesis to evaluate the spatial and temporal pattern of the spread of religion along the silk route and its significance in the diffusion of Buddhist culture in Central Asia.

Traces and Evidences;

The archeological research has revealed the existence of numerous Buddhist shrine in the oasis cities along the trade routes in Central Asia. In the historical past, this area was part of historical region of Parthia, Bactria and Sogdiana. The spatial and/or temporal analysis of diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia is based on the study of the Buddhist Shrines along the Silk Route.

The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang, who visited this area in the first quarter of the 7th century reported about this region. In his travel notes, Hsuan-tsang wrote that there were Buddhist monasteries in Ta-mi (the city of Termez). There were about 10 monasteries and about 1,000 monks (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). According to Hsuan-tsang, in Balkh also, there were about 100 Buddhist monasteries and about 3,000 monks (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). Balkh was even known as 'Little Rajagriha,' after one of the holy centers of Buddhism in India. (Litvinsky B. A. 1996) These travel notes gives ample evidence that Buddhism retained its positions in northern Afghanistan and in the south of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, at the time of the Arab conquest.

Buddhist shrines were also located in the city of Marv (Litvinsky B. A. 1996, Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999). Marv was under Buddhist influence in the late Parthian period (during the 1st-2nd centuries A.D.). The city of Marv has yielded ancient Buddhist monuments and manuscripts. 150 pages of a Sanskrit manuscript in Brahmi, was found in Bayram-Ali (at Marv). (Litvinsky B. A. 1996) Manuscripts on birch bark were also found in other parts of Tokharistan. Fragment of Buddhist scriptures in significant number have been discovered from Zang Tepe. Small fragments of Buddhist scriptures in Brahmi script have also been discovered from Kafyr-Kala in the Vakhsh Valley, (Litvinsky B. A. 1996) (it belongs to 7th-8th centuries).

Large number of buddhist shrines were concentrated in and around Termez (Litvinsky B. A. 1996, Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999). In the north western part of Termez, adjacent to the Amu Darya, there was a large Buddhist centre called Kara Tepe (Kara Tappe) (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). Kara Tepe has a cave monastery. Over 150 Indian inscriptions in Kharosthi and Brahmi scripts were recovered from Kara Tepe. Adjacent to the Kara Tepe, there was another monastery. It was situated at Fayaz Tepe (Fayyaz Tappe) (Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999). There was a stupa, situated inside the monastery. The Fayaz Tepe monastery had painted walls, covered by paintings of Buddha. It has also revealed different sculptures. Indian inscriptions in good quantity were also found at Fayaz Tepe. In the vicinity of Shurkhan Darya, the Zurmala Tower, is a big stupa (it had its existence during II-IV AD), (Litvinsky B. A. 1996, Buryakov Y.F., and Others, 1999) A Buddhist complex (of II-III AD) was also found in Ayrtam, close to the Amu Darya, in the west of Termez. The Buddhist chapel and a stupa of Zar Tepe also reveals the existence of Buddhist monuments (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). These monasteries and other Buddhist shrines date from the 1st-2nd centuries to the 5th-6th centuries.

A small town now known as Dalverzin Tepe on the border of the Surkhan Darya and the Hissar river valleys in Uzbekistan was another large Buddhist center (Litvinsky B. A. 1996, Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999). Buddhist sanctuaries have been found both from inside and outside the town. At the confluence of the Kafirnigan River and the Amu Darya there was a Buddhist center of Kushan period. This place is known as Ustur-Mullo. There was a huge monastery in Ustur Mullo (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). It had a huge stupa situated inside the monastery. The monastery was decorated with paintings and murals.

Another significant Buddhist center existed at Adjina Tepe. The Adjina Tepe had a Buddhist monastery (Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999). It had small stupas in the center of the monastery. The Adjina Tepe monastery has sculptures of a seated Buddhas and a reclining Buddha. The figure of the reclining Buddha is 14-m long. In 726, another Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Huei-ch'ao also visited this area. He has described about the Tokhari city Ko-to-lo or Khuttal (situated in modern southern Tajikistan) (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). According to him there were many monasteries and monks in Ko-to-lo. In this area Buddhist complexes dating to the 7th-8th centuries were discovered. Other Buddhist sites include the Khisht Tepe monastery, the Kalai Kafirnigan and Kafyr Kala sanctuaries.

Of the numerous Buddhist ruins in this region dates back to the Kushan dynasty (1st-3rd centuries). Buddhist tradition describes Kaniska, the most famous Kushan ruler, as the patron of Buddhism. He took an active part in religious activities and built numerous Buddhist religious structures.

In the upper Zeravshan valley (in Tadjikistan) Penjikent has yielded fragmentary representation of Buddha and Sogdian Buddhist inscriptions. (Litvinsky B. A. 1996) Close to Bishkek, ruins of Buddhist monastery and two temples has been found from AkBeshim (ancient Suyab). (Buryakov Y.F, and Others, 1999) Buddhist monuments were also found in Kuva in Ferghana and especially in Semirechye (Kyrgyzstan) in the Chu Valley, (Litvinsky B. A. 1996). Although Buddhism was not widespread in these areas.

Long before the arrival of Islam, Buddhism was well established within the historical region of Central Asia. (Xinru Liu, 2011) The Arab invasion was a point of departure in the historical development of these cities. It led to the destruction of Buddhist shrines and the end of Buddhism in the Central Asia.

The process of diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia

The traditional location theory and spatial interaction theory reveals different dimensions of the location of Buddhist shrines in oasis cities. It can be illustrated by means of examples given above. In historical narratives, several theories can be proposed on the expansion of Buddhism. The most acceptable theory of spread of Buddhism and diffusion of Buddhist culture is known as the theory of 'cultural contact' and 'cultural convergence', it suggests that the cultural contact and interaction of Buddhism with other cultures led to the process of 'cultural transmission'.

The 'cultural transmission' took place as a result of 'cultural contact' and 'cultural convergence'. Eventually it led to the expansion of Buddhism. This theory is corroborated by the evidences of the international contacts and free movement of missionaries, who travelled long distances along the most frequented routes. The cultural traditions, especially the religious ideas, accompanied merchants along the overland Asian trade routes in pre-modern times. (Richard Foltz 2000) In the course of history, slowly and gradually, the religion spread along the network of caravan routes through trading contacts. It was along these routes that merchants and monks spread their religion. (Heirman Ann and Bumbacher S.P. 2007)

Buddhist missionaries, on the other hand, continued to exert their influence throughout the whole of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Their famous centres at Bamiyan, Balkh and Termez maintained continuous contact with the centers in Gandhara and Central and East Turkistan. (Litvinsky; B. A. 1996) The missionary activities helped the spread of Buddhism far and wide. It was crucial for the spread of Buddhism and its development into a world religion. (Heirman Ann and Bumbacher S. P. 2007) These Buddhist Monks, wandering from place to place spread the Dharma.

The 'contact of cultures' and the 'exchange of ideas' led to the spread of religion. The expansion was based on an intimate acquaintance of different 'cultural regions'. But the Buddhism really started to flourish, stimulated by the security and stability of the Kushana empire. (Heirman Ann and Bumbacher S.P. 2007) In the beginning it spread slowly but the spread of Buddhism was pushed at a faster rate, along the trade route, by royal patronage.

Theories and Models of Diffusion of Religion of Buddhism;

Scattered through the vast expanse of deserts of Central Asia there are several Oases Settlements. The favourable conditions for the Diffusion of Buddhism, in these oasis settlements around the trade route, were as follows;

Natural Advantage and Regional Potential; The oasis cities were large settlements spread along the trade route. These oases settlements were well endowed with ecological or environmental resources. Within the regional space, the settlements also had better social, cultural and economic potentialities (in relative terms). The attraction of the oasis settlements (potentiality of the settlements) led to the concentration of Buddhist shrines.

This proposition is based on the assumption that the attraction (gravitation) of the oasis settlements determined the location and agglomeration of Buddhist shrines. The spill over of ideas from the oasis settlements led to the diffusion of religion.

Space Relation and Cultural Contact; generally, it appears that due to the locational limitation of oasis, the settlements are relatively distant or isolated, but the oasis cities develop with water (in isolation) and expand with trade. Therefore, the spatial distribution of a cities is constrained or facilitated by the accessibility and connectivity among settlements. Due to their location (site and situation), the oasis settlements had relative advantage of cultural contact. Thus, the oases settlements had favourable circumstances for the exchange of commodities and culture.

(The gravity model is useful for locational analysis and interaction too. It constitutes an important reference to determine the interactions of oasis cities.)

The Exchange of Commodities and Culture; The oasis settlements are self-sufficient settlements but dependant on other oasis settlements; a reciprocal relationship exists between the oasis cities. The accessibility and connectivity of the oasis cities also provided several other advantages with respect to trade relations in general and cultural contact in particular. In general, the interaction of the settlements led to the diffusion of religion.

The processes of diffusion can be also be identified from the spatial and/or temporal concentration of Buddhist shrines along the silk route.

Spatial Separation and Interaction; The oasis cities were integrated by the most developed corridors of trade routes. The processes of diffusion and patterns of spread of the religion was dependent on level and nature of spatial interaction through these trade routes. Some of these oasis cities had strong spatial interaction and high potential of spread of new ideas and ideologies. The intensity of the spatial interaction determined the spread of religion and religious ideas of Buddhism.

The spread of religion (Buddhism) is a spatial process. Thus, the spatial configuration and the spatial interaction (regional interaction) of the oasis

settlements determined the diffusion of religion. (It is based on the assumption that the spatial interaction of oasis cities determined the diffusion of religion.)

Spatial Interactions of Merchants and Monks; Although there were several barriers to the diffusion of Buddhism; these included physical barriers such as mountains and deserts and cultural barriers like language and religious differences. The merchants and monks acted as carriers of Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy.

The process of spread of Buddhism and diffusion of Buddhist culture included both, the Merchants and Monks. Merchants and Monks participated in the spread or transmission and propagation of religion.

The spatial interactions of merchants and monks (contact and exchange of ideas and ideologies), extended the diffusion of culture in several directions (with varying rates in spatial domain).

The Cultural Influence of Buddhist Shrines; The oasis settlements of Central Asia had natural advantages in terms of cultural diffusion. The Buddhist Shrines located along the trade route had larger spatial relationship (and larger field of cultural influence). The Cultural Influence of the Buddhist Shrines facilitated better cultural communication and dissemination of ideas and ideologies to other oasis settlement due to cultural proximity and easy connectivity.

Being situated on the trade route, the oasis cities also had advantages of mobility. These cities had a higher degree of spatial interaction (relationships to / between different oasis cities) due to better accessibility. The level of accessibility and spatial integration of regions determined the spread of culture.

The Cultural Neighbourhood; The oasis cities also had relative advantage in terms of spatial movement, as compared to the other settlements. The 'neighbourhood effects' led to the diffusion of religion.

The oasis cities located along the trade route had large cultural neighbourhood. The cultural neighbourhood of these cities extended even beyond the geographical and cultural boundary.

The Geographical Proximity and Cultural Similarity; The spatial and temporal clustering of Buddhist Shrines increased the potentiality of cultural

diffusion. Due to 'Culture Contact', these oasis cities became regional centres of Buddhism. (at the strength of sustainability of the settlement, with regard to resource and mobility, culture and language). The geographical proximity and cultural similarity of the oasis settlements also facilitated the growth and spatial diffusion of Buddhism.

The cultural similarity goes beyond the geographical distance.

During 1st century A.D., there were many flourishing Buddhist cities in the Trans Hindu Kush region that included Gandhara. Historically, Bulkh was also one of the great centers of Buddhism in ancient Bactria. Close contact between Parthia, Bactria and Sogdiana created an ideal condition for the desert settlements to become the centre of Buddhist culture. Thus, the oasis cities became important religious cities during the second half of the first century AD, when Buddhism spread into Central Asia.

Conclusion;

Expansion of Buddhism was the cumulative result of 'diffusion of religion' and 'cultural borrowing' over time and space. These theories, based on empirical generalizations of events and circumstances, are accepted as an explanation for the spread of Buddhist ideas and ideologies.

The natural process of 'Cultural Contact' and 'Cultural Borrowing' between different civilizations led to the diffusion of new culture (the Way of Life or the Philosophy of Buddhism).

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