Woodblock print of a volume in concertina format from the
Wanshou Tripitaka
China, Fuzhou
Song dynasty, dated fourth year of Shaosheng (1097 CE)

Woodblock printed on dark yellow paper folded concertina style, each
page 27.3 x 11.2 cm, text block c. 24.5 x 11 cm, 6 columns per page,
17 characters per column, total length 10.53 metres, mounted on
brown paper (possibly in the Qing Dynasty), blue and yellow brocade
cover, sutra binding, some worming with paper losses, otherwise well preserved.

provenance
Maggs Bros., c.1960; ex
collection Harry Walton,
Virginia

The volume here is an
extremely rare and early
example of a Chinese
woodblock print.
Furthermore, it represents one
of the less than one hundred
chapters that have survived
from the 6,400-chapter
Wanshou Tripitaka, a
landmark in the history of
woodblock printing. The
colophon at the beginning of

this volume bears the date 4th
year of Shaosheng,
corresponding to 1097 CE,
and is followed by a red seal
stating that the work was
completed in the scripture
office of the Dongchuan
Temple. Firmly dated
printed books from any
earlier are unlikely to appear in
the market.

The Wanshou Tripitaka was
the second Tripitaka, or entire
Buddhist canon, to be
produced by the Song dynasty.
The production of this
immense edition began around
the third year of the Yuanfeng
period (1080 CE) and was
eventually completed in the
2nd year of the Chongnin
period (1103). Overall it
consisted of more than 6,400
juan, or chapters, in 580 cases
and required as many as
165,000 woodblocks. To
conmemorate the completion of
this huge production,
Emperor Hui named this
Tripitaka “Chongnin
Wanshou Tripitaka”, and
made Dongchuan Temple his
private ritual hall. This
particular volume contains
chapter 37, which is entitled
Maha sAngha-vinaya) and
concerns monastic discipline.

Like silk manufacturing,
woodblock printing was a
Chinese invention that
gradually travelled west along
the Silk Road. The earliest
dated woodblock print was
made in 868 CE, and by the
time of the Song dynasty (960-
1279 CE) when this work was
produced, woodblock printing
was already a thriving industry
in China. Although printing
had spread along the Silk
Road from there to the
Islamic lands by the tenth or
cleventh century, until the
eighteenth century when the
Ottomans established the first
Islamic printing presses,
experiments were restricted to
producing the occasional
amulet or cloth pattern.

In concertina format, the text
is also interesting from the
point of view of the history of
Chinese bookbinding.
Concertina binding represents
one of the first of many
experiments in developing a
booklet in place of the
traditional and unwieldy scroll
format. Like the Indian pothi
format (stacked folios held
together by string), the
concertina seems to have
mostly been used for Buddhist
texts and also attempted to
incorporate some of the
features of Indian
bookbinding. For an
illustration of another
concertina format Buddhist
text, see The Silk Road: Trade,
Travel, War and Faith, p. 217,
no. 139.
Khotan, Gandhara, Bactria, and Tibet

The central lands of the Silk Road were a fascinating stage for the meeting of empires, cultures and trade routes. It is also a region of dramatic and varied landscapes, as well as the world’s highest mountain ranges giving way to desert and lush valleys.

The city of Khotan exemplifies the diversity of cultures and languages along the Silk Road. Situated between the southern rim of the Taklamakan Desert and the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains, the city has throughout its history been exposed to the culture and imperial ambitions of its Chinese, Indian and Tibetan neighbours. The practice of writing Khotanese, an Iranian language, in Indian Brahmi script is a testament to the long-standing cultural and religious influence of the Indian subcontinent in the Tarim Basin.

Although Buddhism first spread to the Khotan region from the Kushan Empire, based in modern-day Afghanistan, the proliferation of Khotanese and Sanskrit texts in the Indian Brahmi script from the seventh century CE onwards attest the importance of the trade route to the Indian subcontinent via Gilgit. Thanks to its strategic location at the heart of the Silk Road trade network, Khotan also acted as an important point of diffusion for Mahayana Buddhism from India to Tibet and China. As well as acting as a place of exchange on the overland trade, Khotan was also famous for its mines that supplied most of the jade that passed along the Silk Road, particularly to imperial China.

Wealth and exposure to the superpowers of Asia was not always a blessing, however, and several times during the seventh century Khotan acted as a battleground between the Chinese and the Tibetans. Under the suzerainty of the Tibetans until the middle of the eighth century, Khotan then remained independent until it was captured in 1006 CE by the Qarakhanids, a Turkic confederation that had converted to Islam and was building up an empire around the Tarim Basin.

To the south of Khotan across the Karakorum and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, the areas known as Gandhara and Bactria provide equally vivid examples of cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Gandhara is the area of mountain passes extending across modern northern Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and Kashmir which has always been the funnel through which central Asian conquerors have entered India, and through which in more peaceful times India has traded with Iran, China, and indirectly the Middle East and Europe. At the time of the production of these documents, Gandhara was the centre for the spread of north Indian Buddhism into Central Asia along the Silk Route. It was the Buddhist traders whose donations made possible the building of monasteries in the oases of the Silk Route deserts. Gandhara is also controversially associated with the intrusion of Hellenistic elements into Buddhist artistic style, reflecting the influence of the Hellenistic cities of Bactria, with which Gandhara was closely linked. The camel trains bearing silk from China to India, Persia and Rome were the material foundation for the rise of Mahayana Buddhism.

Trade running west from Gandhara would have passed through Bactria, roughly corresponding to the province of Balkh in modern-day Afghanistan. From the time of Alexander the Great’s conquests in the fourth century BCE Bactria was a particularly important outpost of Greek culture along the Silk Road. For centuries Greek was the official and administrative language of the area, though eventually a modified form of the Greek alphabet was adopted for the local Iranian language, Bactrian. Even after the demise of the independent Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, Bactria continued to play an important role as a transmitter of Hellenic culture.

The political balance along the Silk Road was dramatically altered with the emergence of the Tibetans as a key political and cultural force. From mysterious origins, the Tibetans burst into Central Asia at the beginning of the seventh century CE to consolidate a vast empire that dominated Central Asia and even took the Chinese capital Chang’an, forcing the ruling Tang dynasty to pay tribute.

Although by the middle of the ninth century CE Tibetan power had fragmented, the seeds had been sown for what was to become Tibet’s most important export along the Silk Road: Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. Although diplomatic relations with China may have lain behind King Songsen Gampo’s decision to adopt Buddhism as the state religion, India was the chief source of inspiration and knowledge in the evolution of Tibet’s own highly ritualistic and visually striking form of Buddhism.

Photo: Stupa on the edge of Suyang Cheng. Sir Aurel Stein
A Buddhist monastic text with praise to various Buddhas in Khotanese on reverse
China, Dunhuang
Five dynasties or early Song dynasty, 10th century CE

Scroll (juanzi), manuscript, black and red ink on thick hemp paper,
17 characters per column, 26.6 cm x 4.21 metres,
each sheet 47.8 x 26.6 cm.

The front side of this scroll belongs to a Chinese version of a work from the Vinaya Pāṭaṇa literature that laid down Buddhist monastic rules. The orthography and calligraphic style indicate that this is the work of a devotee rather than professional copyist. The hemp paper and xīānsū (semi-cursive) script are typical of tenth-century post-Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts. In the first quarter of the section, punctuation marks of three red circles are found at the beginning of every paragraph, a standard feature of later Dunhuang scroll production.

The most interesting feature of this manuscript is the Khotanese text on the reverse. Written shortly after the Chinese text, the text provides us with a fascinating microcosm of some of the developments along the Silk Road in the tenth century. According to Professor Skjærvø at Harvard University, the text is a homily to various Buddhas, and like the Chinese text was almost certainly penned by a devotee.

Following the establishment of formal relations between Khotan and Dunhuang in 901 CE, Khotanese missions to Dunhuang became frequent. Members of the royal family, high-ranking officials, and monks would have participated in these missions, bringing with them a great number of sutras and Buddhist works. While in Dunhuang many of the Khotanese engaged in local Buddhist activities, which included the copying of texts. Paper was an expensive commodity in Dunhuang in the tenth century, and it was probably this that led the copyist of this text to use the back of a damaged Chinese manuscript. The copying and preservation of Khotanese Buddhist texts became a particularly urgent task due to Muslim incursions into Khotan in the tenth century, and many Khotanese manuscripts were stored in Dunhuang for safekeeping.

Both the Khotanese text and the original Chinese scroll were written with a wooden pen, a practice borrowed from the Tibetans after the Tibetan invasion of 786 CE cut off the supply of Chinese brushes. For illustrations of comparable documents, also written in both Chinese and Khotanese, see Wang Jiqing, “Photographs in the British Library of documents and manuscripts from Sir Aurel Stein’s fourth Central Asian expedition”, The British Library Journal, vol. 24, Number 1, Spring 1998, p. 70; and The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith, pp. 311-12, nos. 271, 272, where reports for a Khotanese mission to Ganzhou are written on the reverse of Chinese sutra scrolls.
A Buddhist amulet scroll of protective invocations
Khotanese mixed with Sanskrit in South Central Asian Cursive Brahmi script
Chinese Turkestan, 8th century CE

Elegant professional script in black ink on paper,
manuscript, 37 lines of text on each side, 48.5 x 6 cm,
tears without loss of text at either end.

This amulet scroll would once have been rolled up and placed inside a container. It begins with the auspicious Sanskrit formula siddham, and proceeds with an invocation to the Buddha and various deities, including Sarasvati, Brahma, Soma, Varuna and Indra. The paper and script are typical of pieces from the Taklamakan Desert, and though rare, such scrolls are known from Khotan and Dunhuang. For examples among the collection of Stein, see Stein, *Seresédia*, Oxford, 1921, vol. I, pls. CLI, CXLV, vol. III, pls. CXLVIII, and by the same author, *Ancient Khotan*, Oxford, 1907, vol. II, pl. CX.
A large wooden board with Khotanese inscription
Khotanese in Southern Central Asian Brahmi
Chinese Turkestan, 8th century CE

Black ink on wooden board, 15 lines of Khotanese text on
left hand side, right on the right hand side, reverse blank,
17 x 66 cm, 4 mm thick.

This long and impressive
document is a finely written
Khotanese financial record
and contains figures of items
such as barley, wheat, millet
and flour. It is likely a record
from a granary or bakery.
The style and nature of the
document can be compared to
items in the British Library,
published in P.O. Skjæerve,
Khotanese Manuscripts from
Chinese Turkestan in the
British Library, London,
2002; and a Khotanese
account book published in
Ronald Emmerick, “A
Khotanese monastic account
book”, Turfan, Khotan und
Dunhuang, Berlin, 1996,
pp. 51-65.
A two-volume manuscript of the Auspicious Aeon Sutra
Western Tibet, c. 1350 CE

Two volumes, Tibetan in gold ink on mulberry paper, paper dyed black, text area burnished with rice powder, about 300 folios to each volume, each folio 22.5 x 63.5 cm, over 500 illustrations of various Buddhas and stupas, later wood covers.

This is a beautifully illustrated two-volume manuscript of the Bhadrakalpika Sutra, or Auspicious Aeon Sutra. The ‘Auspicious Aeon’ of the title refers to the present age, which is considered blessed due to the proliferation of Buddhist teachings. The work clarifies the characteristics that distinguish a Buddha from all other beings. Importantly, the sutra provides a description of a vast array of different Buddhas, including those who have already appeared during this aeon – Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kasyapa and Sakyamuni – as well as the thousand Buddhas yet to come. Concerning the latter, the circumstances of their birth, their special qualities, their life span, information concerning their teachings, and the relics they will leave behind are detailed. For an English translation of this sutra, see The Fortunate Aeon: How the One thousand Buddhas Become Enlightened, 4 vols., Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, 1986.

The painting style of the Buddhist deities suggests that this manuscript was produced in Western Tibet in the mid fourteenth century. Compare the paintings in the present work with two thangkas attributed to this region: one is a portrait of an abbot illustrated in P. Pal, Art of Tibet, Los Angeles, 1983, p. 73, pl. 9 (no. 3 P3); the other is a painting of Vajrasattva with a consort, published by P. Pal in Art of the Himalayas, New York, 1991, pp. 146-7, no. 82. Note in particular the similar treatment of the lotus-based thrones and surrounding mandorlas, jewellery, crowns, and representation of the central and secondary figures.

Providing detailed description of past and future Buddhas, the Bhadrakalpika Sutra is an important work for Buddhist iconography. While Tibetan manuscripts were often illustrated on the first and last pages, this manuscript is extremely rare in being illustrated throughout. In addition to the depictions of ten large Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on the first few opening pages, the manuscript also contains very rare illustrations of Tibetan-style stupas. As in the case of most Tibetan manuscripts of the highest quality, the mulberry paper was dyed black and the text area burnished with rice powder. The size and quality of manuscripts like this attest the status of books in Tibetan culture as objects of great sacred and material value.

Like Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan manuscripts were strongly influenced by Indian traditions. Many Tibetan manuscripts adopted the Indian pothi format, whereby a number of palm-leaf unbound pages were held together by a string piercing through the pages. Tibetan manuscripts in pothi format found in the Dunhuang caves attest the longevity of this tradition; see for example, The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, Faith and War, p. 214, no. 135. Even in unbound manuscripts such as this one, deference is still paid to the pothi format in what had become a purely decorative feature: circles drawn in the centre of the page through which the strings would have once run.