



## **Report on International Seminar on The Art and Religion of Xinjiang**

**By Dr. Radha Banerjee**

The rich geographical, historical and cultural heritage of Central Asia has been both a strong foundation for fostering a dynamic cultural pluralism in the region and cross cultural dialogue.

The Central Asian region denotes generally a wide area from the Western frontiers of the mainland of China to the eastern shores of the Caspian sea. The configuration of its mountain ranges played a vital role on the movement of races and peoples. This area served as a channel for the diffusion of cultural ideas, arts and crafts, languages and literature in various directions. Understanding Central Asia 's past is crucial, consequently, to grasp the antecedents of all the cultures that spread themselves out along its rim especially those in the Tarim basin now called the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China.

Most part of Xinjiang (Tarim Basin) is arid and inhospitable. It is surrounded on all sides by the mountains, on the north by the Tianshan, the Celestial mountain, on the south by the Kunlun which separates Central Asia from Tibet, on the east by the Nanshan and on the west by the mountain mass of Pamir. The redeeming feature of this region was the oasis towns which flourished along the northern and southern edges of the Tarim basin. The Silk Route trade which invariably passed through them made this region economically prosperous and rendered the migration of the people from one state to another, less strenuous and easy. Thus, Xinjiang became the centre of many religious beliefs and art traditions. There arose here a cosmopolitan and composite culture because of the vigorous intermingling of the people who came to live here

Xinjiang occupied a highly strategic position. It served as a gateway for the transmission of Chinese ideas, influencing the West and the coming in of western thoughts, art and religions to China. It is well known that Buddhism came first to Central Asia and from here spread to China, Korea and Japan. Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity too gained a strong foothold here. Buddhism made a significant contribution to the growth of Xinjiang art and culture.

The very name Xinjiang conjures up before our mind a picture of vast Buddhist cave temples and shrines adorned with beautiful paintings and sculptures representing the compassionate Buddha, Bodhisattvas and Jataka scenes adored by monks and laymen, soldiers and merchants alike.

Xinjiang has left a rich legacy of Buddhist culture and art. Manichaeism too left its mark on certain aspects of its culture. The vast quantities of antiquities discovered from here by various explorers throw great light on the multifaceted nature and traits of this Central Asian culture. Central Asian antiquities bear testimony to the active cultural intercourse that existed between India and this region during the early centuries of Christian Era.

The Central Asian antiquities discovered by Sir Aurel Stein and other scholars are vast in number and fall into various categories comprising mural fragments, textiles, silk paintings and banners, wood carvings, stuccoes, paper drawings, manuscripts in thousands (especially from Cave 17 of Dunhuang), Kharoshthi documents, etc dating from about the 2nd-3rd century to the 10th century A.D. and they throw welcome light on the forgotten civilization of Central Asia which was greatly influenced by Buddhist art and culture.

The seminar was organized in two phases in collaboration with the Museum Fur Indische Kunst, Berlin

and the Hongkong University , Hongkong. The first phase of the seminar was held in the Hongkong University, Hongkong from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2000 and the second phase in IGCA on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2000.

The discussion in the seminar centered round the art and culture of Xinjiang with special reference to Kizil caves. Kizil and Kucha was a very important ancient centre of Buddhist culture dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. to 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The most famous Buddhist scholar Kumarajiva belonged to Kucha.

Scholars discussed at length on the chronology and dating of the Kizil caves. Further, there was a lively discussion also on the other aspects of Central Asian art and culture including the Buddhist Narratives and the Iconographical styles of the Kizil art, the Art of Ajanta and Kizil, the Otani Collection from Central Asia with special reference to Kucha reliquary, Tantric art in Khotan, Trade Monasteries at Khotan, Trade and Commerce in Xinjiang, Hindu deities in Central Asia etc. The papers were interesting and informative and were followed by fruitful discussions. This seminar was attended by scholars from China, Hongkong, India and Germany.

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