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Silk Road and its culture : the view of a Japanese scholar

(Vortrag im Rahmen der Ostasien- und Pazifikwochen der Stadt Berlin
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Silk Road and its culture – The view of a Japanese scholar –

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1 Prelude

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour to be invited to speak at "The East Asian and Pacific Week in Berlin" and to talk to you about the so-called "Silk Road". I deeply appreciate the kindness and hospitality of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences.

A point of scientific contact between Japanese and German scholars who participate in this function is certainly the Silk Road in Chinese Central Asia. Chinese Central Asia is now officially designated the "Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China". However, this area has been known under several names: for instance, "Chinese Turkestan", "East Turkestan", "Kashgaria", "Serindia", and "Chinese Central Asia". Today I shall use the most popular name, "Chinese Central Asia".

Both geographers and meteorologists sometimes call this area a frying-pan because it is surrounded by long, high mountain chains like the rims of a frying-pan namely the Tian Shan mountains in the north, the Kunlun mountains in the south, and in the west, the Pamirs, commonly called the "roof of the world", which are linked with the Karakoram mountains. On the other hand, in the Turfan area there is a place that is the second lowest point of the Eurasian Continent. It is 154 m below sea level and is accordingly known as the "navel of the globe".

Typical of this area are extremely high temperatures and dry atmosphere. In it there are several deserts. In the east there are the Gobi and Lop deserts, and in the centre there is a vast area of sand named the "Taklamakan" desert.

In spite of such severe geographic and climatic conditions, this area has played an important role in human cultural history since ancient times since it served to connect East and West. These various routes across it are called collectively the "Silk Road" as "silk" was the chief and representative mercantile commodity that

was conveyed from the East to the West (from China to Rome). The name "Silk Road" is appropriate from a Western point of view but it is inadequate from an Eastern standpoint. Since this area played a role in the transmission of Buddhism and glass-ware etc. from West to East, the Silk Road could also be called the "Buddha Road" or the "Glass Road".

2 Why to Chinese Central Asia?

In the nineteenth century Chinese Central Asia was an almost blank space on world maps. Due to improvements in sailing techniques after the tenth century it became easier to transport goods in large quantity by sea, the result being that the main trade route between East and West gradually changed from land to sea. Moreover, even in the eighteenth century nobody except the local people had exact geographical knowledge of this area.

From the 1860s on, some Europeans, most of whom were officials and botanists, undertook exploration in this area. They reported finding a number of ruins of Buddhist temples and some of them brought back fragments of Buddhist texts written on birch bark in ancient Indian language and script.

These reports and specimens inspired European scholars to make a more precise investigation. Two of the most famous explorers at the end of the nineteenth century were the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin and the British archaeologist Marc Aurel Stein. They brought back more precise information about the ancient culture of Chinese Central Asia, especially concerning Buddhism.

It is not too much to say that it was due to spectacular results of the work of these two explorers that several countries subsequently sent expeditions to the lost cities of the Taklamakan desert. Thus there began at the beginning of the twentieth century what has been called the scientific race of scholars into Chinese Central Asia.

In this great scientific race the following European countries participated on various scales: Germany sent Albert Grünwedel and Albert von LeCoq; France, Paul Pelliot; Russia, Sergei Oldenburg; Finland, Gustaf Mannerheim. Between 1902 and 1914 Germany sent four expeditions that achieved great results in the Turfan and Kucha regions.

3 How did the Japanese take part in the race?

About a hundred years ago Japan was a minor country. Since Japan was officially closed to foreigners from 1635 till 1858, it imported little by way of culture and technology from advanced countries during those 223 years. In 1868, ten years

after Japan began again to accept foreigners, a revolution took place and a new government based on the Tenno (Emperor) system was established. Under this new government Japan became very eager to absorb new ideas and adopt some aspects of the advanced culture of America and European countries. The same eagerness could be seen also in the Buddhist society of Japan. Japanese Buddhist society, which, for historical reasons, consisted of many sects, wished to learn about the various new administration systems connected with education and charities and about sciences such as Indology. To this end some Buddhist sects sent excellent young priests to America and Europe, who eagerly studied abroad in the hope of being able to meet the high expectations of future Buddhist society.

In Japan today the biggest Buddhist sect is the Jodo Shinshu, which was established by Saint Shinran in 1224. It originated in the thirteenth century as one of the movements opposing the traditional Japanese Buddhist sects. Saint Shinran's ultimate religious aim was directed not toward the noble and wealthy, but the ordinary and poor. Saint Shinran and his followers accordingly attracted many lay supporters. In some ways it may be compared with the Protestant movement in sixteenth century Europe.

Saint Shinran was the first Japanese priest to marry. His sect has been continued under the leadership of his direct lineage and is centered around the Honganji Temples in Kyoto.

Kozui Otani was born in 1876, nine years after the establishment of the new government. His father Koson Otani was the twenty-first hereditary abbot of the Nishi Honganji Temple. He was an educated man, who wished to give his son a good education and to this end sent many excellent young priests to Western countries so that they could acquire the knowledge he required of teachers of his son. Thus Kozui Otani, who was expected to become the twenty-second abbot, received special education for the envisaged leadership of the Japanese Buddhist community.

In 1899, at the age of twenty-three, Kozui Otani left Japan together with several learned young priests. After investigating some Buddhist ruins in Sri Lanka and India, they reached England. Because Kozui Otani himself was interested in geography, he studied it at London University and became a member of the Royal Geographical Society (cf. plate 1). In Europe his students were engaged in the study of various scientific fields connected with Buddhism in London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg.

At that time Orientalists in Europe were very enthusiastic about Buddhist ruins in Chinese Central Asia. When in 1901 Aurel Stein came back to London from his first expedition to Chinese Central Asia Kozui Otani met him there and obtained much information from him. It was no doubt as a result of this interview, that he resolved to send his own expedition to Chinese Central Asia.



Plate 1

Rev. Kozui Otani (27 Dec. 1876 – 5 Oct. 1948) in London (1902)



Plate 2

Rev. Otani together with Dr. Sven Hedin in Japanese costume,
Nishi Honganji Temple, (1908)

During his stay in Europe he also visited Stockholm and saw Sven Hedin (cf. plate 2), from whom he obtained important advice about the equipment necessary for an expedition to Central Asia. So in London he bought all kinds of equipment for the journey; for instance, the newest and most powerful barometers, cameras, and so on.

Instead of returning to Japan by sea he decided to travel by land via Chinese Central Asia. Thus the first Japanese expedition to Chinese Central Asia consisted of Kozui Otani himself, aged twenty-five when they started out, and his four attendants, all young men in their twenties. The expedition started out in the same year, 1902, as the first German expedition led by Albert Grünwedel. Between 1902 and 1914 three Japanese expeditions were sent to Chinese Central Asia¹ and four German expeditions.

¹ A survey of the Otani Expeditions in Central Asia:

4 Aims of the expeditions

How does the aim of the Japanese expeditions compare with that of the European expeditions? In the case of the European expeditions, the aim seems to have been to trace how far eastward the Indo-European tribes and their culture had expanded. In other words, their aim was to trace the Greek culture that was introduced to the East by the military expedition (334-324 B.C.) of Alexander the Great. This aim of the European expeditions was well expressed in the title of von LeCoq's report "Auf Hellas Spuren in Ostturkistan". I would go so far as to say that the European expeditions were "a search for Western culture, from West to East" (cf. plate 3).

By contrast with the European expeditions, I would say that the Japanese expeditions aimed at "filling in the blanks in Buddhist history between the West and the East".

It was in the middle of the sixth century that Buddhism was introduced and imported to Japan. After that until the end of the nineteenth century, the history of Buddhism had been explained with reference to India, China, and Japan. Of course, some educated Japanese priests knew, through Chinese books, that there was a large empty space called Central Asia between India and China, but they did not know how popular Buddhism once was there.

First Expedition (September 1902 – February 1904): 5 Members: Kozui OTANI, Tesshin WATANABE, Kenyu HORI, Eryu HONDA, Koen INOUE.

Common route: London → Baku → Samarkand → Kokand → Osh → Kashgar → Yarkand → Tashkurgan. Further routes: ① [OTANI, HONDA, INOUE] Hunza → Gilgit → Kashmir → India (1903) → Japan. ② [WATANABE, HORI] Yarkand → Karghalik → Khotan (1903) → Aksu → Uch Turfan → Kashgar → Maralbashi → Kucha → Korla → Turfan → Urumchi → Hami → Xian (1904) → Japan.

Second Expedition (July 1908 – November 1909): 2 Members: Zuicho TACHIBANA, Eizaburo NOMURA.

Common route: Japan → Peking → Outer Mongolia → Urumchi → Turfan (1909) → Karashahr → Korla. Further routes: ① [TACHIBANA] Lopnor → Loulan → Niya → Keriya → Khotan → Yarkand → Kashgar → India (both members) → London. ② [NOMURA] Kucha → Kashgar → India (both members) → Japan.

Third Expedition (August 1910 – June 1914): 2 Members: Zuicho TACHIBANA, Koichiro YOSHIKAWA.

Routes: ① [TACHIBANA] London → Omsk → Urumuchi → Turfan → Lopnor (1911) → Kashgar → Khotan → Tibet → Keriya → Dunhuang (1912 both members) → Urumchi → Siberia → Japan. ② [YOSHIKAWA] Japan (1911) → Shanghai → Xian → Dunhuang (1912 both members) → Turfan → Urumchi → Turfan (1913) → Kucha → Kashgar → Khotan → Aksu → Ili → Urumchi (1914) → Turfan → Hami → Dunhuang → Baotou → Peking → Japan.



Plate 3
Otani expedition in the desert

Kozui Otani was the first Japanese to realise the importance of Buddhist culture in Central Asia. However, he realised the importance of Buddhist culture in other countries as well and sent his personal expeditions not only to Chinese Central Asia, but also to India, Nepal, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Tibet, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Thailand, Mongolia, and various regions in China. In short, Kozui Otani aimed at investigating all Buddhist areas in Asia "by the hands of the Buddhists themselves". The expeditions sent to Chinese Central Asia was only one part of his great idea.

Kozui Otani was a very powerful and influential man in Japan at that time. It is accordingly probable that he tried to persuade the Japanese Ministry of Education to send national expeditions financed by the government. But the members of the new Japanese government could not understand the importance of such investigations, and so Kozui Otani carried them out himself by using the financial means of the Nishi Honganji Temple. This is in marked contrast to the European expeditions: the Japanese expeditions, including those to Chinese Central Asia, sent by Kozui Otani were private ones supported financially by a single Japanese Buddhist sect.

In 1914, however, Kozui Otani was dismissed by the parliament of the temple from his post of abbot of the Nishi Honganji Temple. The main reason for his dismissal was that he had spent too much money on such unimportant matters as expeditions to Chinese Central Asia. I cannot help feeling deep sadness when I reflect on the fact that the leading staff of the Nishi Honganji Temple and the Japanese government of those days could not understand the scientific significance of the expeditions. At the end of World War II, being a private collection, the items brought back by the Otani expeditions from Chinese Central Asia were dispersed, and they are now housed in various places in Japan, China, and Korea.²

5 Cooperative studies

After being dismissed from his post of abbot of the Nishi Honganji Temple, Kozui Otani left Japan for China, and until the end of World War II he lived abroad, mostly in Shanghai. While living abroad he continued giving much valuable scientific information and advice connected with studies on Buddhism, India, Southeast Asia, and Tibet to his students in Japan. After World War II he came back to Japan and lived on Kyushu Island, where he died on 5 October 1948.

After his death, when the staff of the Nishi Honganji Temple were disposing of many articles left by him, they found two big wooden boxes in the storehouse. In the boxes there were many paper fragments from Chinese Central Asia, which in 1953 were deposited in Ryukoku University for scientific use because it had first been established by the Jodo Shinshu sect. This event marked the beginning of Central Asian studies at Ryukoku University.

The Central Asian collection kept at Ryukoku University has much in common with the German collection. Whereas the members of the Otani expeditions investigated the old Buddhist ruins all around the Taklamakan desert including the Turfan and Kucha areas, the German expeditions focused their attention almost exclusively on the Buddhist ruins of the Turfan and Kucha areas. However, it was in the Turfan and Kucha regions that both expeditions obtained most of their written documents.

The texts on these documents were written in a great variety of scripts and languages. As for their contents, most of these documents are connected with religions. About half of the documents are Buddhist, the rest being Manichaeian and Nestorian-Christian. Unfortunately, most of these religious documents have been severely

² Ryukoku University (Kyoto), Tokyo National Museum (Tokyo), Kyoto National Museum (Kyoto), Several personal collections (Tokyo etc.), National Central Museum (Seoul, Korea), Lu shun Museum (Lu shun, China), National Peking Library (Peking, China).

damaged because the native people of this area, who were converted to Islam after the twelfth century, destroyed the temples and tore up the religious texts. The Ryukoku collection encompasses some 10.000 such document fragments and the Berlin collection has in excess of 50.000 items.

After the return of the German expeditions a number of excellent scholars, mainly at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin, set about patiently deciphering their documents and have produced remarkable scientific works. During the last years of World War II these documents were evacuated from Berlin, but after the war they were brought back to Berlin and most of them were housed in East Berlin, where they were studied in the Central Institute for Old History and Archaeology (Zentralinstitut für Alte Geschichte und Archäologie) of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR.

In 1965 the Central Institute mentioned above approached scholars at the Ryukoku University with a request to catalogue the Chinese Buddhist fragments of the Berlin Collection because, although about half of the Buddhist texts in the Berlin Collection are written in Chinese, there were no specialists in Chinese Buddhism in Berlin. The proposal was accepted because scholars in Japan were quite excited about the prospect of gaining access to the other collection from the same Turfan and Kucha areas. Between 1965 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, members of the Japanese team made frequent visits to East Berlin to work on the fragments.

The first task facing scholars wishing to catalogue Chinese Buddhist fragments is that of identifying the small fragments. As Buddhism is called the "Religion of Books", Buddhism has many, perhaps too many books. In the case of Buddhist texts translated from Indian languages into Chinese and provided with Chinese commentaries by Chinese scholars, there are estimated to be altogether about one hundred million Chinese characters contained in them. Identifying these fragments means discovering their exact location among those one hundred million characters even if the fragment is no larger than a postcard. During two decades from 1965 Japanese scholars succeeded in identifying some two thousand fragments and by 1985 had published two volumes of the catalogue.³ After German reunification in 1990 Japanese scholars resumed work on the catalogue and the third volume work is now in preparation.

³ Katalog chinesischer buddhistischer Textfragmente, Band 1 [BTT VI], Berlin 1975; Band 2 [BTT XIV], Berlin 1985.



Plate 4
K 16 + 7251 + 7481 (recto)

6 International efforts to join fragments together

As we have seen, cooperation between East Germany and Japan started with the plan to catalogue the Buddhist Chinese fragments. In the course of time, our cooperation extended to other fields such as the study of Buddhist texts written in Old Turkish and Middle Iranian languages. It was due to this kind of cooperative study of Buddhist texts in Chinese, Old Turkish, and Middle Iranian languages that I realised how closely the Central Asian Collections of both countries are related.

On this occasion I would like to demonstrate by means of two concrete examples how very close the relationship is between the Japanese and German collections. The fragments that I propose to discuss belonged originally to a single sheet of paper. One side of the sheet of paper contained a Chinese Buddhist text and the other a Middle Iranian one. The texts were written on both sides of the sheet because paper was very expensive at the time. About the second half of the ninth century, the art of woodblock printing was invented in China and many Chinese Buddhist scriptures came to be printed by this method and distributed. Thus, the old manuscripts came to be regarded as outdated and were sold as waste-paper. Speakers of Old Turkish and Middle Iranian languages bought this waste-paper and wrote their texts on the reverse blank side.

The first example I would like to discuss is a fragment of the German Collection known as K 16.⁴ The recto of this fragment contains a Buddhist Chinese text while the reverse side has an episode from the history of the Manichaean Church written in Sogdian script and language. To this fragment two pieces bearing the numbers 7251 and 7481 in the Ryukoku University Collection can be joined exactly. The matching text on both sides confirms the join (cf. plates 4 and 5).

The second example is particularly remarkable. The Berlin fragment Ch/U 6294 and Ryukoku University fragment 7122 can both be joined to the St. Petersburg fragment L 30.⁵ Plate 6 shows the combined text of the reverse side containing the Sogdian text and is based on photographs of the three separate fragments. Since Prof. Ragoza did not publish a photograph of the recto containing the Chinese Buddhist text, I was unable to combine photographs of all three fragments of the recto, but I was able to reconstruct the text as shown on Plate 7. It is the Chinese translation of the *Saddharmapundārikasūtra*.

These two examples are conclusive evidence of the importance of international cooperation in this field of study. Genuine international cooperation would mean

⁴ Sundermann, W., *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts* [BTT XI] (Berlin 1981), Tafeln 64, 65.

⁵ Ragoza, A. N., *Sogdijskie fragmenty Central'no Aziatskogo Sobranija Instituta Vostokovedenija*, (Moskau 1980), Plate XIV.



Plate 5
K 16 + 7251 + 7481 (verso)



Plate 6
L 30 + Ch/U 6294 + 7122 (verso)

that all the collections would be available equally to scholars all over the world. Whereas the Berlin collections have always been accessible to all scholars, those in St. Petersburg have been accessible to foreign scholars only since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Although the Central Asian collections kept in the Library of Ryukoku University and the National Museum are now open to all specialists, others in Japan and China are still not freely accessible to scholars.

共讚歎稱其功德爾時世尊欲重宣此義而

說偈言

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Plate 7

L 30 + Ch/U 6294 + 7122 (recto), in restored context

7 The Chinese monk Fahui in Bezeklik

Kyoto is an old capital of Japan. Nearby is the still older town of Nara, which was capital of Japan in the eighth century. During the Nara era Japan imported eagerly the advanced culture from China. As the "Eastern terminal of the Silk Road", Nara has many old and valuable cultural assets including books.

One important book kept in Nara sheds light on the history of a Buddhist monk whose portrait had been painted in a cave at Bezeklik in the Turfan area and was brought to Berlin by a German expedition.

In 1905 A. von LeCoq, who was the leader of the second German Turfan expedition, excavated one of the so-called "balcony temples" at Bezeklik, temple no. 9, that had been completely buried under sand. Most of the temples had already been damaged by local Muslims, but this temple remained untouched. Since the ceiling of this temple had fallen down without human interference before the local Muslims could destroy it, it had been preserved beneath the sand for many centuries.

After removing the sand, LeCoq and his assistant Bartus found wonderful Buddhist paintings on the inside walls. These wall-paintings are 330 cm high in the case of the tallest one and total up to about 40 m in length. LeCoq and Bartus excavated those wall-paintings and sent them to Berlin, where they were reassembled and exhibited in the Museum for Ethnology before the war. In 1913 LeCoq published a beautiful deluxe facsimile edition of these wall-paintings entitled *Chotscho*. Near the end of the war during an air raid on Berlin, the museum was hit by a bomb and the wall-paintings were reduced to rubble so that the only evidence for the wall-paintings is LeCoq's facsimile edition.

According to LeCoq's report, on the wall of the entrance to the inner hall of temple no. 9 three East Asian or Chinese monks were depicted (cf. plate 8). Of these LeCoq published colour photographs. Each monk has his own bilingual inscription in Chinese characters and Uigur script. The monk on the left has the name Fahui in Chinese and Vapgui in Uigur.

This monk Fahui portrayed in the Bezeklik cave temple must be the same person as the one whose short biography is contained in the *Meisodensho* ("Extracts from the Biographies of Famous Monks") kept in the library of the Todaiji Temple in Nara.⁶ Early in the sixth century, there was in China a monk named Baochang, who collected biographies of famous Buddhist monks and compiled the *Ming seng chuan* ("Biographies of Famous Monks") in thirty volumes. A copy of the *Ming seng*

⁶ Kudara, K., "On the trail of a Central Asian monk: A Bezeklik portrait identified", [The Ueno Memorial Foundation for the Study of Buddhist Art], Report No. 22 [Studies on the Buddhist Art of Central Asia] (1992), pp. 1-6.



Plate 8
The three East Asian monks in Bezeklik,
Cave No. 9, from LeCoq, Chotscho, Tafel 16a.

chuan was brought to Japan during the Nara era, but in China itself this voluminous biographical work was lost at an unknown date.

On the other hand, in Japan, it is clear that this Ming seng chuan (pronounced Meisoden in Japanese), survived in Japan until the thirteenth century because in the first half of that century it was read in the Todaiji Temple in Nara by a learned monk named Shusho (1202-78), who later became abbot of the Todaiji Temple. Shusho extracted from the Ming seng chuan the most interesting biographies that are not contained in other sources, and made from them in 1235 the one-volume work known as Meisodensho. In the course of time the Ming seng chuan itself was lost in Japan too so that the only knowledge we have of its contents are the extracts contained in Shusho's Meisodensho.⁷

In the Meisodensho, the monk in question, Fahui, is described as "Fahui, at the Cave Temple of Sages in Gaochang". Gaochang is the old name of the modern Turfan area. Fahui was a native of Gaochang, but of Chinese origin. In search of enlightenment he travelled along the northern Silk Road between the Turfan and Kucha areas in the latter half of the fifth century.⁸

8 The year 2002

For both Japan and Germany the year 2002 will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the departure of their expeditions to Chinese Central Asia. Although the aims of the expeditions were different, the finds in both collections are closely connected as I demonstrated above.

I should like to propose that we organise some common cultural events for the year 2002. It would not be difficult to arrange a scientific meeting or symposium of scholars in Kyoto or Berlin. Besides this scientific meeting, it would be a good opportunity to make a special exhibition of the Central Asian Collections of both countries. To advertise such an exhibition, I suggest a reconstruction of the wall-paintings that were originally in cave 9 in Bezeklik which were destroyed in the Berlin air raid. Being some 3 m high and in total up to about 40 m in length the reconstructed wall-paintings could themselves constitute an attractive gallery. The Berlin Wall has largely disappeared. Would it not be a good idea to reconstruct the wall-paintings of Bezeklik which were lost in Berlin more than fifty years ago?

⁷ Concerning the *Meisodensho*, see: Wright, A. F., "Biography and Hagiography Hui-Chiao's Lives of Eminent Monks", Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun Kagaku Kenkyusho Kyoto University (Kyoto 1954), pp. 383-432, esp. p. 408ff.

⁸ Concerning a German translation of Fahui's biography in the *Meisodensho*, see: Liu Mau-tsai, *Kutscha und seine Beziehungen zu China, vom 2. Jh. v. bis zum 6. Jh. n. Chr.*, (Wiesbaden 1969), pp. 189-190.