

Existence of Buddhist Monument in the Cultural Landscape of Central Asia: Interpretation and Reinterpretation

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ABSTRACT

Islam has a long history in Central Asia, but the Central Asia has an even longer history before the advent of Islam. The Central Asian region was home to numerous cultures (that have evolved from different cultural centers and cultural areas; such as Parthia, Bactria and Sogdiana, from the ancient period through the medieval times). It has chronicles of many different forgotten civilizations. A rich cultural history and a fascinating cultural geography; the Central Asia have it all, but it is largely a forgotten history. The most remarkable feature of the Cultural Morphology of Central Asia, before the late seventh and early eighth century A.D., was 'Cultural Pluralism'. The great civilizations of the past had existence of many different religions (beliefs, traditions and customs); including a mixture of Polytheism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions. Christianity also existed in the region long before its spread in other parts of the world. All these cultural beliefs and religions blended to create the cultural landscape of the then Central Asia. The existence of Buddhist Cultural Landscape in the Islamic Cultural Realm of Central Asia reveals the story of existence of Pre-Islamic Culture in that region. The present study is a morphological analysis of the Buddhist cultural landscape of Central Asia. It reveals the history and geography of the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Route. Besides, the present research also evaluates the role of cultural landscape in the diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia.

Key Words : Buddhism, Diffusion of Buddhism, Silk Route, Cultural Morphology Cultural Landscape

INTRODUCTION

The Cultural Morphology of Central Asia:

A great geographical and cultural space that stretches from China in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west and from Russia in the north to Afghanistan in the south is known as the Central Asia. It includes the newly independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. These countries have a relatively new political history (since they have become sovereign countries only after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991). But prior to that, they existed as a cultural space and sometimes even as a political space, in different periods of time, with different names (Parthia, Bactria and Sogdiana) or with a collective name 'Turkestan'.

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Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions. Christianity also existed in the region long before its spread in other parts of the world. All these cultural beliefs and religions blended to create the cultural landscape of the then Central Asia. The existence of Buddhist Cultural Landscape in the Islamic Cultural Realm of Central Asia reveals the story of existence of Pre-Islamic Culture in that region.

Interpretation of Landscape:

The term landscape is used by a diversity of scientific disciplines maintaining different concepts and definitions (Forster *et al.*, 2012). A cultural landscape has simple connotations and complicated meanings. With all its complexities and ambiguities, the cultural landscape is the part of the land, shaped (affected or influenced) by culture. It could be created by and associated with a person, a group of people, a community or a civilization. The cultural landscape is related or associated with people and place at a certain period of time. It has visible and invisible elements, something revealed or shared and the rest concealed. It has legends or stories. It has narratives of historical events and memories. In a symbolic world the landscape gives meaning or a sense of place. As a living expression of the culture, it reveals the social and cultural identity of the place and the people. Collectively, it is a cultural expression. It (the Landscape) is referred as an integrating and holistic concept, which provides common ground for diverse disciplines (Butler and Berglund, 2014).

Aim and objective of the present research:

The cultural landscape is the most important expressions of culture (existing or preexisting). It is self-expression of a place or space. Thus, the landscape is a subject of exploration and evaluation. In an interpretation of landscape, the current research aims to evaluate the existence of Buddhism in Central Asia.

Objectives of the present research are:

- To identify the Buddhist Cultural Landscape of Central Asia;
- To interpret the Expression of Space (historical and cultural significance of the Buddhist Cultural Landscape)
- To evaluate the role of Cultural Landscape in the diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia

Morphological Analysis of the Buddhist Cultural Landscape:

In words and thoughts of geographers, the cultural landscape is a cultural expression of a place or a space. It is the imprint of cultural civilization. Thus, the cultural landscape reveals the past and the present of the civilization. The morphological analysis of the Buddhist cultural landscape may reveal the history and geography of the spread of Buddhism.

The diffusion of Buddhism from the main land of India and its spread along the ancient caravan route into the land of Central Asia was one of the most significant events of the history.

Evolution of Buddhism in Central Asia and Expression of the Landscape:

Landscape holds identity (Stephenson, 2006). The existence of Buddhist Shrines is an outstanding example of Buddhist Cultural Heritage. It is the greatest historical record of the existence of Buddhism in Central Asia. These monuments, embedded into the landscape, are among the most impressive testimonies of existence of religion in the Central Asian region. The ruins of these Buddhist shrines add to the authenticity and integrity of existence of Buddhism in Central Asia.

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 center 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.

Cultural Expression of the Landscape:

The cultural landscape includes not only an entire landscape but also a single feature such as a sculptural object, a landmark or a building. The landscape includes features and functions. The existence of monastic complexes, along with other cultic structures, such as the stupas, clearly confirms the existence of Buddhist Sacred Spaces in Central Asia. They are located on the territory adjacent to the trade route.

Types of Buddhist Shrines	
Places for Performing Religious Functions	
Monasteries	Monastery is a Buddhist temple; it is a place for performing religious functions, used for meditation and learning, it also includes Stupa used for ritual functions and chapel for meditation, used for propagation of Buddhism.
Buddhist Temple	Sites for meditation, generally Buddhist temple includes sculpted images and a place reserved for prayer which may be a chapel.
Cave Temples	These are rock-cut caves, Cave Temples include sculpted images of the Buddha, it includes mural and paintings depicting scenes from Buddhist sacred texts, it also includes residential space of Buddhist monks.
Stupa or Relic Shrines	Stupa is Relic shrine #, stupa with a relic are the most characteristic monument of Buddhist religion, it plays an integral role in the spiritual life of Buddhists, some stupas also have the crowning umbrella (chhatra) and one or more circumambulatory passages [# stupas are structural domes, it generally contains relics of Buddha and are venerated and worshipped].
Residential Space	
Viharas	Viharas are residential space of Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks stay there for some time, generally viharas are located near to chaityas.
Chaityas	it is a prayer hall, used for meditation, it may contain stupas, at times chaityas are built inside Viharas to serve as multiple functional space such as a community hall or exhibition hall.
Other Sacred Monuments	
Chapel	A symbolic and functional space, esp. a place of worship used for meditation, set apart, with a separate altar.
Sanctuaries	Sanctuary is a sacred place, set apart from the profane or the ordinary world, it is used by the celebrated monk, for meditation.

Historical and Cultural Values of Buddhist Cultural Landscape:

Landscape has meanings. It may arise from the landscape (Stephenson, 2006). It reveals social and cultural value of past, that is present in landscape. Therefore, we must evaluate the historical and cultural values that are present in the landscape.

Values of a Buddhist Cultural Space:

Formal or Physical Value:

The Buddhist cultural landscapes were geographically significant site on ancient trade route, clusters or agglomerations of settlements in geographic space, a position of prominence (socio-economic, political and cultural) in the regional space, centers whose activities - whether economic, administrative or religious - affected a larger hinterland, a city with urban functional areas, (changing functions in the historical progression).

The morphology of a Buddhist city; a strong association with the religious landscape, Buddhist monasteries or temples and other religious structures dotted the landscape of a Buddhist city. These structures constituted one of the most visible aspects of the morphology of the city. Provides an

insight into the role of Buddhism in the public space,

Functional Value:

Monasteries stand out as important landmarks of the city or even for the region, distinctly different from other cities, served as the center for cultural expression of Buddhism; Buddhist culture and traditions, customs and rituals. These monasteries or temples served the performances of religious rights (as a center for performing religious activities). Served as the spiritual and cultural center,

The Buddhist temples had an inclusive domains; a Place or a Functional Area, with Buddhist Monasteries as its core, also complemented some of the missionary functions, role in the introduction of Buddhism and dissemination (religious and cultural exchange), these monasteries or temples also served as the center for transmitting religion (Dharma), served as center for diffusion of culture e.g. serving as the center to learn, share, pass on and promote their art and culture. The Buddhist temples served in the geographical spread of the religion.

Cultural Value:

The Buddhist cultural centers served educational

and other related cultural functions, monasteries were involved in the historical process of diffusion of culture.

In the historical past Buddhist monasteries provided shelters for the monks and merchants, it was unique spaces for community interaction, the Buddhist temples also served as a central meeting places for monks and merchants.

An important cultural landscape or religious landscape, the Buddhist Cultural Landscape gives an unparalleled memory of Central Asia to recreate the cultural and historical context, it connects and integrates cultural and historical heritage (Gandharin Heritage), historically integral to the Kushanas, reveals the processes of the spread of religion and the development of religious landscapes.

Imprints of Buddhism and Buddhist Culture:

The cultural landscape defines culture; it has significance, value or meaning, of historic, social and cultural past, present or future (Stephenson, 2006). The oasis cities of Central Asia had unique cultural and historical landscapes, it was expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths. During the Kushan period, these cities became great center of learning and knowledge.

Landscape gives clue to the corollary of convergence (Cultural convergence) (Lewis Peirce, 1979). Buddhism and Buddhist culture left a profound imprint on the culture of the people of Central Asia. It was especially manifested in art and architecture of the region, particularly in religious buildings; such as temples, monasteries and stupas, sculptures and narrative wall paintings (Abdullaev, 2013).

The Central Asian art had, by and large, developed from the fusion of the major Art Traditions. The result of this union is distinctly observed in the famous art of school of the Gandhara (Haesner, 2016). The art and architecture, especially of the later Kushan period, was largely Buddhist in subject matter (Golden, 2011). Gandharians were highly successful in merging the Indian

and Greek aesthetic traditions (Liu, 2011). The spread of Buddhism, together with the ideas and principles of Buddhist architecture and iconography, led to the diffusion of Indian philosophy in addition to related moral and ethical principles (Litvinsky, 1996).

The landscapes are lived experiences, landscapes contain evidences of history (Stephenson, 2006, Butler and Berglund, 2014). The oasis cities of Central Asia have evidences of history, dating from the ancient Greeks or even before. The historical urban landscape of the area expresses the long history of transition and transformation. These cities have a unique identity shaped by its distinctive historical development (spatial and socio-cultural continuity). Being connected to three regions in three continents, different cultures met and coexisted here, thus each contributed their own culture to the identity of the oasis cities. The area became the melting-pot for different cultures, sometimes simmering quietly and at other times erupting; the reciprocal influence and intermingling of cultures was equally intense (Litvinsky, 1996). These oasis cities had unique character as a multilingual and multicultural city. It was hubs of businesses and varied economic activities. During this period the oasis city witnessed the fusion of different communities and cultures. It was reflected in the art and architecture of the region.

The History of Transition and Transformation:

Landscape gives clue to the corollary of cultural change (Lewis Peirce, 1979). Change in cultural landscape, spatiality and temporality, reveals the interaction between people and places, it explains the events through time. Long before the arrival of Islam, Buddhism was well established within the historical region of Central Asia (Liu, 2011). The Arab invasion was a point of departure in the historical development of these cities. It changed the sense of place of the city.

Ruins are irreplaceable material for cultural and historical investigations. It reveals many things, that history can not reveal. The Arab invasion reshaped the

Change in the Cultural Landscape of Central Asia		
Cultural Landscape Before Buddhist Period	Cultural Landscape During Buddhist Period	Cultural Landscape after Buddhist Period
Central Asia has great history and culture, Since the ancient times Central Asia became melting pot of cultures.	Merchants and Monks traveled between Central Asia and India through the Silk Route, it enhanced the spatial and socio-cultural continuity of the oasis city.	A long history of conquests and conflict began around 650, the Arabs accessed to Central Asia after a series of incursions.

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Central Asia was home of multiethnic society tolerant of religious differences, a mosaic of different religious faiths, all possibly at times coexisting and at other time intermixing.	Buddhism spread in Central Asia through the movement of merchants and monks, diffusion of culture took place through a prolonged process of contact.	The Arabs came bringing with them the new faith of Islam, region became fully integrated into the world of Islam, it created socio-cultural discontinuities.
Oasis Cities such as Balkh developed as centers of international trade, Travel and trade along the silk route facilitated the cultural exchanges over a wide area.	Buddhism changed the cultures of the region, Buddhism expanded its influence, even in the landscape.	The local population converted to the new religion, Islamisation of the population occurred within a short period of time.
# Balkh was called 'Little Rajagraha'. The title 'Little Rajagraha' means that Balkh claimed its importance to the Buddhist followers just next to Rajagriha. (Xinru Liu, 2011)	Buddhism changed the face of Silk Road Towns, Monasteries and Stupas dominated the Cultural Landscape.	Monasteries were replaced by mosques in the landscape. Most of the Monasteries and Stupas were destroyed by new waves of invaders, Central Asia lost the old cultural identity.

diversity and identity of the city. The social and economic changes threatened the local culture and creativity of communities. There was change in the landscape character of the oasis cities. There was change in the landscape values and change in the cultural (religious) significance of the cities. Above all, there was change in the identity of these cities.

Conclusion:

The landscape of the oasis cities of Central Asia are unique. The historical and cultural landscapes, of these oasis cities, expresses a great variety of religious buildings of different faiths. These oasis cities had unique character as a multilingual and multicultural city.

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The existence of Buddhist shrines in the oasis cities of Central Asia gives clue to the corollary of cultural convergence along the Silk Route. During the Kushan period, these cities became great center of Buddhism. Buddhism brought with it not only the Indian religion and philosophy but also literature and art within the reach of Central Asian civilizations. The main contribution of Buddhism to the cities of Central Asia is in the domain of literature, art (sculptures and paintings), architecture, music and other spheres of life. Buddhism and Buddhist culture left a profound imprint on the culture of the people of Central Asia. Thus, it served a bridge between Central Asian civilizations and Indian civilization.

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