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A Sanskrit-Khotanese Colloquy: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 5538

Abstract: This scroll from Cave 17 in Dunhuang is an exemplar of the multi-cultural and multi-lingual social setting of the trade routes linking India, Persia and China, popularly known as the Silk Road. The scroll, which contains a series of words and phrases in Sanskrit and Khotanese, shows how Sanskrit might have been used as a language of trans-regional and cross-community communication among the Taklamakan oasis states in the late first millennium. Phrases of practical usefulness are translated between Khotanese and Sanskrit, in the style of a phrasebook. On the other hand, the scroll is comparable to medieval European colloquies, and like them, may have been used in an educational setting.

1 Introduction

The Sanskrit-Khotanese manuscript that is the subject of this study seems at first glance to be a traveller's phrasebook, but was probably actually more of a learning tool, in a similar way to the colloquy texts used in the Latinate world of medieval Europe. Sanskrit was a trans-regional language, and during the first millennium CE it was used widely across Asia. Outside of India, this was primarily in Buddhist monasteries. The Khotanese language, on the other hand, was restricted to the kingdom of Khotan, in east-central Asia, and to smaller Khotanese communities in other towns on the Silk Routes, such as Dunhuang. This bilingual text is not simply an example of the relationship between a trans-regional and local language; it also seems to be a rare surviving record of a kind of Sanskrit spoken in Buddhist monasteries, and which may have served as a *lingua franca* among travellers.

The archaeological sites of east-central Asia (comprising primarily the modern Chinese provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang) have provided some of the most important sources for the study of Asian history, religion and material culture. In terms of manuscripts, the most important single site is the Buddhist cave complex at Dunhuang, known as Mogao or Qianfodung ('thousand buddha caves'). It was here that a small cave shrine was discovered in 1900, filled with

manuscripts, paintings and other material. The latest dated manuscripts in the cave are from the early eleventh century CE, suggesting that the cave was closed soon after this time. The earliest manuscript dates from the late fourth century.¹

The Dunhuang cave, often referred to as the ‘library cave’ or ‘Cave 17’ after the number assigned to it by the archaeologist Aurel Stein, contained some 60,000 items. The location of Dunhuang, at a meeting point of several trade routes on the network popularly known as the Silk Road, resulted in a multicultural environment. The largest group of manuscripts from the cave are those with Chinese texts, closely followed by Tibetan, and there are also smaller groups of Khotanese, Turkic, Sanskrit and Sogdian texts. The subject matter of the manuscripts is very varied. Though the materials that were deposited in the cave were primarily a Buddhist, secular texts such as letters and contracts were also found there, along with a minority of texts representing other religions, including Daoism, Manichaeism, and the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.

2 The manuscript

Pelliot chinois 5538 is a scroll from Cave 17 in Dunhuang. As with the vast majority of manuscripts from the cave, the material of the scroll is paper. Scrolls were made by gluing together sheets of paper; in some cases, usually for scrolls containing Buddhist scriptures, wooden rollers and silk ties were part of the manuscript’s construction. In this case, probably because the scroll was made for a letter, these additional parts are not found. The scroll is 34.5 cm wide and 335.5 cm in length, and is in good condition, except for some damage at the top, and discolouration along one side that indicates water damage. The recto side of the scroll contains an official letter written in the Khotanese language and script. After the letter’s arrival in Dunhuang, a bilingual Sanskrit-Khotanese text was written on the verso, which would have originally been blank.²

The letter was sent in the year 970 CE by Viśa Śūra (r. 967–977), the king of Khotan, to Cao Yuanzhong, the ruler of Dunhuang. The Khotanese script is derived from the Gupta Brahmi script of India, and several different styles have been identified among the Khotanese manuscripts found in the Khotan region

¹ For an overview of the Dunhuang manuscript cave and the reasons for its existence, see van Schaik and Galambos 2011, 13–34.

² The bilingual text on the verso was first translated and transcribed in Bailey 1938. His *Khotanese Texts* 7 (1985) contains a reprint of this. Another study with a new translation is Kumamoto 1988. The letter on the recto was first transcribed and translated in Bailey 1964, 17–26.

and Dunhuang. Here we have a late style, written in a neat, but not ornamental style. The beginning of each clause is written in larger letters that run to the very edge of the scroll, ignoring the left margin. At the end of each clause, the last letter is extended in a horizontal line through to the right edge of the scroll. Seals have been stamped near the bottom of the letter; they are in Chinese seal script, stating that this is a newly-issued official edict.³ A strikingly large Chinese character, 32 cm in height, is written in the penultimate clause: this character, *chi*, indicates an imperial decree.⁴

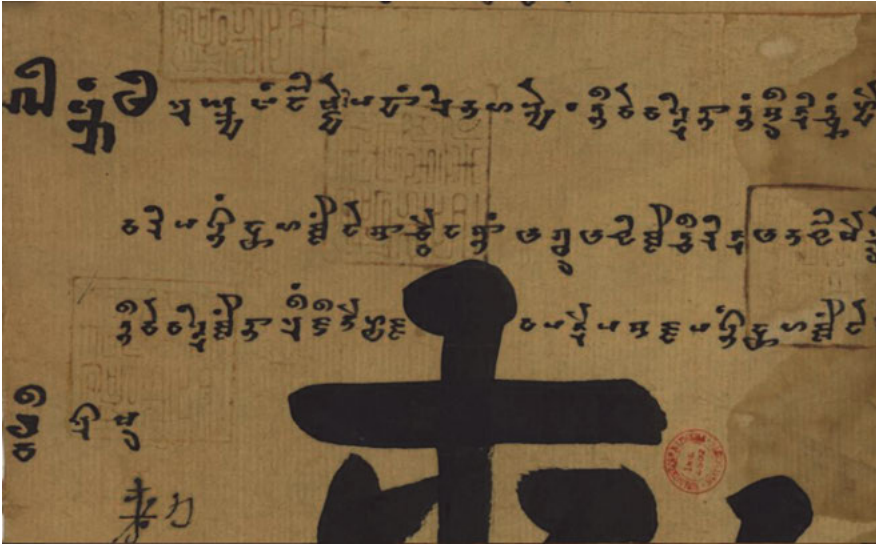


Fig. 1: Pelliot chinois 5538 (recto), detail showing the end of the Khotanese letter. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In the letter the king of Khotan reports on the threat to his kingdom from the armies of the Qarakhanid ruler Chaghri Khan, based in the city of Kashgar. According to the annals of the Song dynasty, an envoy came to the Chinese court in the following year (971), reporting the defeat of Kashgar and bringing the gift of a captured elephant. Ultimately, this war ended with the fall of Khotan

³ The seal text, in two columns, reads *shu zhao xin, zhu zhi yin* 書詔新鑄之印.

⁴ The Khotanese text of the letter is translated and discussed in Bailey 1964. Along with the letter fragment Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 4091, this is the only Khotanese document from Dunhuang that appears to have been written in Khotan itself.

to the Qarakhanids; the Song annals state that in the year 1006 Yūsuf Qadīr Khan proclaimed himself the ruler of Khotan. This marked the beginning of the end for Khotan's role as one of the major centres of Buddhism on the Silk Road.⁵

The letter presumably passed through the court of the ruler of Dunhuang, after which the scroll seems to have found its way to the local Khotanese Buddhist community, where it was re-used. This is a very common pattern: many Buddhist texts in various languages in the Dunhuang collections are written on the verso side of re-used manuscripts. In this case, the text on the verso is written entirely in the Brahmi script, but it is bilingual: a series of phrases and words, each given in Sanskrit and then Khotanese, separated by two dots, which are sometimes extended into dashes. The hand is not as careful as that on the recto, and corrections have been made at various points. The text begins with a formulaic Sanskrit phrase, the beginning of a letter, and the opening line of a Buddhist sutra, which must be pen tests, and indicate that the text as a whole was an exercise.

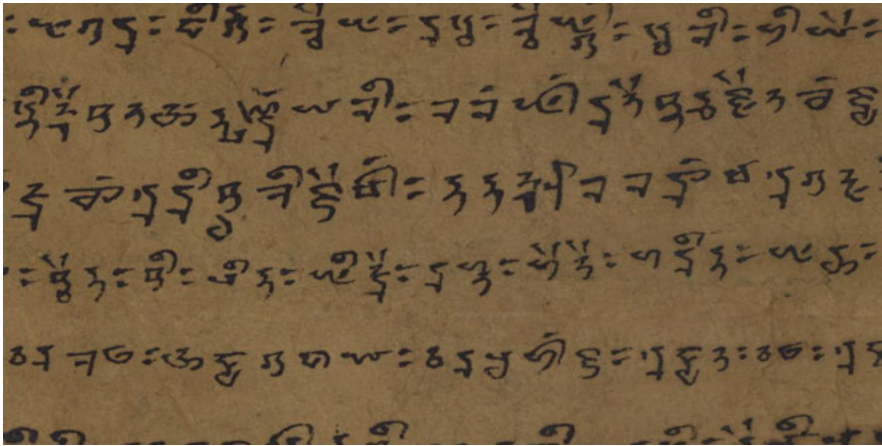


Fig. 2: Pelliot chinois 5538 (verso), the bilingual text. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The bilingual phrases begin as a conversation, apparently between a visiting Indian monk and a Khotanese monk living in Dunhuang, as follows:⁶

⁵ Kumamoto 1996, 89.

⁶ The English translation here is adapted from that of Bailey 1964 and Kumamoto 1988, with reference to the original Khotanese text.

- Are you well, at ease?
- By your favour, I am well. Is it well with you?
- Where have you come from?
- I have come from Khotan.
- When did you come from India?
- Two years ago.
- Where did you stay in Khotan?
- I stayed in a monastery.
- In which monastery did you stay?
- (no answer)
- Did you see the His Excellence the King?
- I saw His Excellence.
- Where are you going now?
- I am going to China.⁷
- What is your business in China?
- I shall see the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.

This is a conversation on the theme of pilgrimage, concerning an Indian Buddhist on his way to the popular pilgrimage site of Wutaishan in China, known to Buddhists as the dwelling place of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. After this, the conversations turn to other topics, mainly concerned with teachers and students. For example, there is a request for teaching in which the basic divisions of the Buddhist doctrine are given:

- Do you have books?
- I have some.
- Which books?
- Sūtra, Abhidharma, Vinaya, Vajrayāna; which would you like?
- I like Vajrayāna; please teach it!

There is a section that emphasizes the need to learn the Khotanese language in order to deal with the king:

- They are summoning you to the palace ...
- I do not understand the language.
- You must speak well before the king; stay here a little and learn the language.

⁷ The name of China appears in several forms in the colloquy. The Khotanese is *caiga kṣīra*, while the Sanskrit is *caina-deśa* and *cīna-deśa*.

And there is a scurrilous passage concerning a visiting Tibetan teacher and the rumours about him:

- A visiting teacher has come ... he is a Tibetan teacher.
- Liar! I will ask him.
- Ask then.
- He is dear to many women. He goes about a lot. He makes love.⁸

The reference to a Tibetan teacher dates the text to after the expansion of the Tibetan empire into Central Asia. Dunhuang was occupied by the Tibetans from the late eighth century to the middle of the ninth, but the influence of Tibetan Buddhists continued in the region after this. Therefore, the text of this colloquy may not predate the manuscript itself by very long; we can say at least that it was probably written in the tenth century.

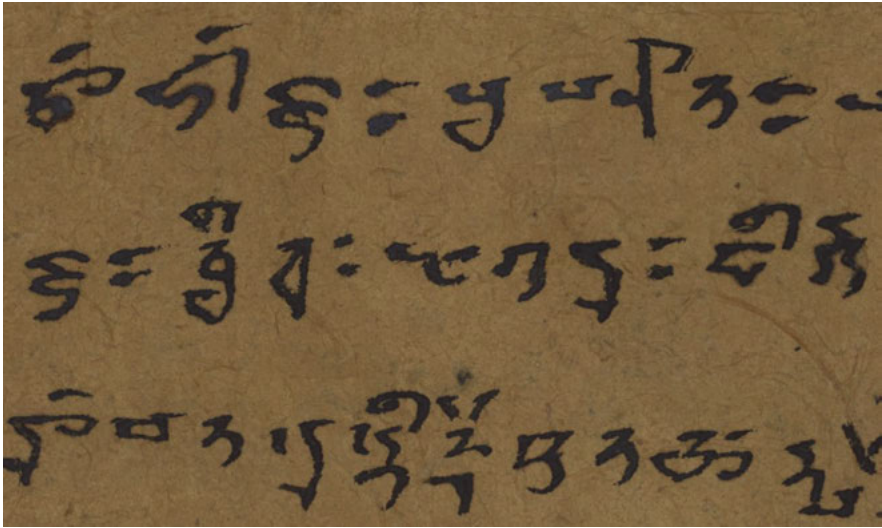


Fig. 3: Detail from Pelliot chinois 5538 (verso). © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Towards the end of the text, the conversational structure breaks down into disconnected phrases and words. These phrases continue to give a sense of

⁸ This last phrase ("He makes love") is only in the Sanskrit and may be intended as an explanation of the previous phrase ("He goes about a lot").

narrative, maintaining the scurrilous tone of the conversation about the Tibetan teacher:

- The host is coming. Conceal your things.
- Deed of assessment.
- Beat that person. Do not beat him.
- Put on your clothes. Take off your clothes.
- Bell. Parents. Teacher. Buddha.
- Let down your hair.
- He has returned.
- Pupil. Ink-pot. Old. Long. Short. Owner.
- Do not be angry with me. I will not pull your hair.
- When you speak unpleasantly, then I am angry.

Though the text initially appears to be a kind of phrasebook, it is clear by the end that it is more likely to have been a pedagogical tool, similar to the colloquies of medieval Europe. The passages on teaching situations can be compared to the Colloquy of Aelfric (955–1020 CE), a bilingual Latin-Old English text, which was used as a pedagogical tool for students learning the Latin language.⁹ Aelfric's Colloquy is written as a dialogue between a Latin teacher and his English students, in which they are questioned about their professions and told about the importance of learning. Other colloquies contain more scurrilous and shocking language, perhaps in the belief that such phrases were more likely to be retained by students. An Old High German colloquy has been described as 'intermediate between the colloquy and the phrasebook', a description that could equally be applied to the colloquy in Pelliot chinois 5538.¹⁰

3 Trans-regional and vernacular languages in the manuscript

In the second to third centuries CE the role of Sanskrit began to change; from being primarily a language of ritual, it began to be used in the royal courts. This has been linked to the increasingly influential role of Brahmins at these courts. At the same time, Indian Buddhists began to use Sanskrit in preference to other languages, composed and translating their own texts into Sanskrit. This trend was strongest in northern India, and was resisted strongly in the Buddhist tradition

⁹ See Harris 2003.

¹⁰ This is the 'Paris Conversations', ms. Paris, BnF, lat. 7641. See Mantello and Rigg 1996, 125.

that became the Theravada, which continued to use the Pali language. The reasons for this shift to Sanskrit in the Buddhist social world have been debated, and remain unclear, though a strong argument has been put forward by some scholars that this was a political move in the competition for patronage:

Sometime during the second century CE the Buddhists of north-western India shifted wholesale to Sanskrit. They did not do so because they liked Sanskrit, or because they liked the Brahmins whose language it was. Nor did they do so for some inherent quality that this language supposedly possesses. They did so because they needed to defend their interests at the royal courts in Sanskrit. They had to use Sanskrit at the courts because Brahmins had been able to secure themselves a central place at the courts by way of their indispensable skills, not because rulers had supposedly 'converted' to Brahmanism. This, as far as I can see, is the most plausible explanation of this otherwise puzzling change of language.¹¹

The Buddhist shift to Sanskrit coincided with the conversion of the Silk Road kingdoms of eastern Central Asia to Buddhism. We have thousands of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts from these sites, dating from the second century CE onwards. The vast majority of these manuscripts were written in Brahmi script. From the sixth century onwards, Buddhist monks of these kingdoms began to translate texts into their own languages, especially Tocharian and Khotanese. And from the seventh or eighth century, texts were composed in these vernacular languages. The most important of these is the Buddhist compendium written in the Khotanese language known as *The Book of Zambasta*, after the patron who commissioned it. In the colophon to one of the book's chapters, there is a complaint about the reliance of Khotanese Buddhists on Sanskrit, which, apparently, was barely understood:

The Khotanese do not value the *dharma* at all in Khotanese. Even though they understand it poorly in Sanskrit, in Khotanese it does not seem to them to be *dharma*. For the Chinese, the *dharma* is in Chinese. Kashmiri is very similar [to Sanskrit], so when they study it in Kashmiri they do understand the meaning. But for the Khotanese, though it seems like the *dharma*, they do not understand its meaning. When they hear it along with the meaning, it seems like an entirely different *dharma*.¹²

¹¹ Bronkhorst 2011, 129. Bronkhorst disagrees with Sheldon Pollock's argument (2006) that the spread of Sanskrit was linked to it being taken out of the realm of Brahminism, linking it instead to the rise in power of the Brahmins.

¹² See Emmerick 1968, 343–345. My translation here is adapted from Emmerick. I interpret the reference to the Kashmiri language somewhat differently, and therefore disagree with Nattier's argument (1990, 211) that the author is using the term 'Kashmiri' as a synonym for 'Sanskrit'.

At around the same time, the Khotanese language in the Brahmi script was being used for non-religious matters. Thus we see a gradual progression, from the importing of a sacred language (Sanskrit) and writing system (Brahmi), to the adaptation of this writing system to local vernaculars, first used to translate these sacred texts, then for composition of new Buddhist texts, and for non-religious documentary texts. Sanskrit continued to function as the sacred language for scriptural texts, and also as the language of ritual efficacy, used for recitation of sacred texts and in spells (*mantra* or *dhāraṇī*) for a variety of purposes.¹³

4 Sanskrit as a *lingua franca*

The Sanskrit of this colloquy is far from the ‘correct’ Sanskrit based on the grammatical principles first set down by Pāṇini (fourth century BCE) and elaborated in the Sanskrit tradition of grammatical analysis (Sanskrit *vyākaraṇa*). Nor can it be classified as ‘Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit’, the name given to the partially Sanskritic language of many Buddhist scriptures. The question, then, is whether we ought to call the language of the colloquy ‘Sanskrit’ or whether another more accurate name applies. The usual name given to Indian vernacular languages that are related to Sanskrit, but do not derive from it, is Prakrit.¹⁴

In fact, however, the language of the colloquy does not fit into any known form of Prakrit. The Prakrit languages had already discarded many of the

¹³ The role of Sanskrit in Central Asia was discussed insightfully in Nattier 1990. Nattier contrasts the adoption of Sanskrit in the Silk Road kingdoms with the choice of Chinese Buddhists to translate their scriptures into Chinese, interpreting this difference in social or psychological terms. According to Nattier, Chinese self-confidence as an ancient powerful culture, a ‘Middle Kingdom mentality’, meant that translation into their own language was necessary if Buddhism was going to be accepted, whereas Central Asian Buddhists lacked this cultural confidence. While this may well be true, the lack of a written language in the Central Asian kingdoms is a more obvious barrier to translation at the time when Buddhism was first becoming established there. Compare the situation in Europe, e.g. Ireland and Wales, where the spread of Latin effectively brought the vernaculars into being as literary languages which could be represented in writing.

¹⁴ Prakrit is a term from traditional Indian grammatical literature, but is often used now as roughly synonymous with the Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) languages, which include Pali and Gandhari. There is another category, Apabhraṃśa, which may either refer to languages from a specific region of India, or to a development from the Prakrit languages but pre-dating the modern Indo-Aryan languages.

features seen in the language of the colloquy, such as conjugation according to gender and multiple conjugations of the past tense, many centuries before.¹⁵ Therefore, we have either to consider the Sanskrit of the colloquy as a ‘Sanskritized’ Prakrit, or as a genuine form of Sanskrit – but certainly not one of which traditional grammarians would approve. Philologists indeed consider many Buddhist Sanskrit scriptural texts to be examples of Sanskritized Prakrit: the theory is that when Sanskrit was accepted as a sacred language by Buddhists from the second century CE onwards, many Prakrit texts were translated, often imperfectly, into Sanskrit.

However, this is unlikely in a language of conversation, which is what the colloquy is clearly meant to be teaching. It seems more likely that we are looking at a *lingua franca*, a form of Sanskrit used by Buddhist monks – and perhaps other travellers such as merchants – as a language of everyday communication. Here we might compare the spoken Latin that was in use in the monasteries of medieval Europe. The concept of a ‘vernacular Sanskrit’ is not well defined in scholarship on the language. Madhav Deshpande has shown that vernacular forms of Sanskrit described by Patañjali were Sanskrit/Prakrit hybrids that were similar to Buddhist Sanskrit, and these ‘Sanskrit vernaculars’ seem to have been in use outside of the restricted domain of Brahmin ritual.¹⁶ In his influential work on the social role of Sanskrit in South Asia, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, Sheldon Pollock appears to deny the existence of spoken Sanskrit used for ordinary communication:

Moreover, all that we can infer about the sociality of the language from the moment we can glimpse it provides further counterevidence to the belief that Sanskrit ever functioned as an everyday medium of communication. Never in its history was Sanskrit the vehicle for memories of childhood and adolescence, or for a whole range of comparable life experiences associated with this-worldly language use.¹⁷

But elsewhere in the book, in the context of comparing Sanskrit with Latin, Pollock accepts the existence of vernacular Sanskrit:

To return to a question raised at the start of this account, a variety of Sanskrits, perhaps even what we might want to designate as ‘vernacular Sanskrits’, admittedly existed in spoken and certain written registers, but their use for the production of *kāvya* and *prāśasti*

¹⁵ Gandhari, the geographically closest MIA language has many other differences: for example, Gandhari had lost the *ai* vowel and intervocalic consonants *th* and *dh* by the first century CE.

¹⁶ Deshpande 2008, 180.

¹⁷ Pollock 2006, 49.

was completely restricted; the ‘conservatism’ and ‘uniformity’ of Latin literary culture were as characteristic of Sanskrit as its ‘widespread geographical diffusion’.¹⁸

Thus, while acknowledging the existence of these vernacular Sanskrits, Pollock distinguishes them from literary Sanskrit, the latter being referred to simply as ‘Sanskrit’ elsewhere in the book. This explains the apparent contradiction with the first passage quoted. In any case, seeing the text in Pelliot chinois 5538 as a vernacular Sanskrit fits well with the role of the text as a colloquy used by Khotanese monks to learn the form of Sanskrit used for communication by Buddhist pilgrims and other travellers. This also opens the possibility of fruitful comparisons with the use of Latin as a spoken language in medieval Europe.¹⁹

5 Conclusion

The scroll Pelliot chinois 5538 has survived to the present day almost by accident. We do not know why it was placed in the small Cave 17 in the Buddhist cave complex at Dunhuang, but it is one of many ephemeral manuscripts from that cave reflecting the day-to-day life of the region in the tenth century. We are left to make our own educated guesses as to who used the manuscript, and for what purposes. As we have seen, Pelliot chinois 5538 was first a copy of an official letter to Dunhuang from the kingdom of Khotan. A little later, the blank verso side was used to copy bilingual phrases written Khotanese and a vernacular form of Sanskrit.

The bilingual dialogues on the scroll paint a picture of Buddhist monks from different parts of the world travelling on pilgrimages and communicating with each other across linguistic and cultural barriers. The use of vernacular Sanskrit for day-to-day communication by Buddhist monks has been little studied, and it is perhaps only through the fortuitous survival of ephemera such as this scroll that such things come to light. Rather than a phrasebook to be consulted on the road, the presence of this text on the scroll is most likely the result of an educational setting. Given the Khotanese setting of the text and the scroll on which it was written, it was probably used by a monk or nun whose first language was Khotanese, to learn a vernacular Sanskrit used by Buddhist pilgrims travelling along the Silk Routes towards China.

¹⁸ Pollock 2006, 269.

¹⁹ See <<http://www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk/web/latin-in-medieval-britain.html>> and the reference there to Wright 1982.

Appendix: A selection from the colloquy

The following selection, from the beginning of the colloquy, gives the Sanskrit and Khotanese phrases as they appear in the text. Underneath each Sanskrit phrase, a more standard version is given in italics.

Sanskrit (Classical Sanskrit in italics)	Khotanese
śāmbana svastī kuśala śarīri <i>śobhanaḥ svastiḥ kuśalaḥ śarīriḥ</i>	śaika tta tta nai tsāmṣṭa
ttava prasadaina ²⁰ kūśala <i>tava prasādena kuśalaḥ</i>	ttūñe mvaiṣdi jsa ma śaika ttai
ttava śāmbhana asti <i>tasya śobhana 'sti</i>	tvī tta śaika tta nai
kasmīm sthane agatta <i>kasmin sthāne āgataḥ</i>	kūṣṭa aunaka vā pastai āvai
gaustana deśa agatta <i>gaustanadeśāt āgataḥ</i>	hvanya kṣīra ānaka vām āvūṃ
hīdūkadeśe kī kale agatta <i>hindukadeśāt²¹ kim kāla āgataḥ</i>	hīdva kṣīra aunaka vā ca bāmḍa pastai avai
sabatsara dvaya babūva <i>saṃvatsarau dvayau babhūvatuḥ</i>	dvī salī hamye
gāmstanadeśai kūttara sthanai ttaiṣṭatta <i>gāmstanadeśe kutra sthāne tiṣṭhati</i>	hvanya kṣīra kūṣṭa pastai mūdai
sagarmāi ttaiṣṭatta <i>saṅghārāme tiṣṭhami</i>	sakhyairma mūdai
kasmī sagarmāi <i>kasmin saṅghārāme</i>	kauña sakhyairma pastai mūṃda
rajsa śāmbhana draiṣṭa <i>rāja/rājasya śobhanam dṛṣṭam²²</i>	rai tta śaika sāmṣṭa nai
śāmbana draiṣṭa ²³ <i>śobhanaṃ dṛṣṭam</i>	śaika sāṣṭai

²⁰ The vowel change *e* → *ai* is common in this manuscript.

²¹ One of the Chinese words for India, Tianzhu 天竺 is a transcription of the Iranian, ‘Hindu-ka’; see Bailey 1985, chapter 7, ‘Hinduva’.

²² Note vowel change *ṛ* → *rai*.

²³ Note the same vowel change plus the double *rr*.

Sanskrit (Classical Sanskrit in <i>italics</i>)	Khotanese
īdanī kūtra gatsasī ²⁴ <i>idānīm kutra gacchasi</i>	vañam kūṣṭa tsai
cainadaīśa gatsamī <i>cīnadeśam gacchāmi</i>	caiga kṣīra tsū
cainadeśam kī karma astī <i>cīnadeśe kiṃ kārma asti</i>	caiga kṣīra va cī kīra
majāśrruī baudasatva paśamī <i>mañjuśrībodhisattvaṃ paśyāmi</i>	majāṃśrruī baudasatva sāsūṃ

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²⁴ Consonant change *cha* → *tsa*; compare Tibetanized Sanskrit.

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