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From Monasteries to Mandates: The Political Uses of Buddhism in the Silk Road

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Abstract. This paper examines how Silk Road rulers strategically employed Buddhist patronage as a mechanism for political legitimization and territorial control. The study illustrates three interconnected strategies through the examination of Xuanzang's Great Tang Records on the Western Regions and archaeological evidence, such as donor inscriptions in the Kizil and Kumtura cave monasteries and the monastic-mining complex at Mes Aynak. These strategies include the use of religious art as territorial markers, the economic integration of monastic institutions with trade networks, and the sacralization of kingship through Buddhist cosmology. The evidence shows how Silk Road monarchs used Buddhism to serve as a functional infrastructure for managing multiethnic empires as well as an ideological foundation for universal authority. Even though some stories are romanticized, the historical record emphasizes Buddhism's dual function as spiritual doctrine and political technology.

Keywords: Silk Road, Buddhism, kingship, imperial expansion, Xuanzang

1. Introduction

For a long time, scholars have examined the development of Buddhism along the Silk Road as a tale of cultural interchange and religious transmission. Beneath this spiritual spread, however, was a political reality that was well-planned: Buddhist institutions, art, and philosophy developed into effective tools of statecraft for Eurasian monarchs. Buddhism was deliberately supported by monarchs as a way to establish power, manage trade routes, and justify territorial expansion—not only as a show of piety. This essay looks at how rulers used Buddhism as a political tool to legitimize their authority and establish useful systems for running diverse empires.

The central claim of this work is that Buddhist patronage functioned through three interrelated strategies: the use of religious art as a means of establishing territorial boundaries, the economic integration of monasteries with Silk Road trade, and the alignment of monarchy with holy Buddhist cosmology. Archaeological evidence, such as the monastic-commercial complex at Mes Aynak and the royal portraits in Kizil's caves, shows how these ideological claims were materially enacted, while textual sources, such as Xuanzang's Great Tang Records, show how rulers framed their authority in Buddhist terms. This study reveals the intentional ways in which Buddhism was used to further imperial goals by examining both political speech and its material expressions.

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2. Literature review

The intersection of Buddhism and state power along the Silk Road has attracted increasing scholarly attention, yet much of the existing literature treats religious and political spheres in isolation rather than as mutually reinforcing systems. Foundational works such as those by Richard Foltz [1] and Xinru Liu [2] emphasize the transmission of Buddhism through merchant networks and pilgrimage routes, portraying rulers primarily as facilitators of cultural exchange rather than as architects of religious infrastructure for political purposes. While valuable for understanding Buddhism's transregional diffusion, these accounts tend to underplay the calculated role of state actors in shaping religious institutions to serve economic and territorial ambitions.

Research on Buddhist kingship, notably John S. Strong's analysis of the Aśokan paradigm and Jason Neelis's mapping of monastic networks [3,4], has illuminated the ideological frameworks available to rulers. However, these studies rely heavily on idealized textual portrayals, often uncritically accepting royal piety as an explanatory model. As a result, they risk overlooking the pragmatic dimensions of Buddhist patronage, particularly its integration with economic governance and frontier security.

Archaeological scholarship has begun to address this gap. Deborah Klimburg-Salter's study of Mes Aynak reveals a monastic complex embedded within a copper-mining economy [5], while Angela F. Howard and Giuseppe Vignato document merchant and royal endowments at the Kizil and Kumtura cave monasteries in Kucha [6], demonstrating material linkages between monastic institutions and trade networks. Valerie Hansen extends this analysis to Dunhuang, where cave temples functioned as both religious sanctuaries and nodes in regional commerce [7]. These studies challenge the notion of monasteries as purely spiritual retreats, instead positioning them as active participants in Silk Road economies.

Despite these advances, two limitations persist. First, most scholarship treats ideological, economic, and visual-cultural dimensions of Buddhist patronage as discrete topics rather than parts of an integrated political strategy. This compartmentalization obscures the ways rulers could simultaneously leverage sacred authority, economic control, and visual symbolism to consolidate power. Second, there remains a tendency to privilege either textual or archaeological evidence without fully synthesizing the two. This divide limits our ability to assess how political rhetoric—such as that found in Xuanzang's Great Tang Records on the Western Regions—corresponded to, or diverged from, material realities on the ground.

This paper addresses both gaps by offering a comparative analysis of Buddhist patronage across several Silk Road polities. By placing Xuanzang's politically inflected narratives in dialogue with archaeological evidence from sites like Mes Aynak and Kucha, it reconstructs a more complete picture of how rulers integrated Buddhist institutions into the governance of trade, territory, and ideology. In doing so, it demonstrates that Buddhism along the Silk Road was not merely a vehicle for religious devotion, but a deliberately engineered political technology that operated across economic, cultural, and spatial domains.

3. Materials and methods

This study employs a comparative historical and archaeological approach to examine how Silk Road rulers used Buddhist patronage to consolidate political authority, focusing on three interconnected dimensions: ideological, economic, and visual. The primary textual source is Xuanzang's Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, consulted in English translation, which provides contemporary descriptions of monasteries, royal patronage, and religious culture across Central and South Asia.

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While recognizing the work's Tang-era political context—particularly its role in informing imperial policy toward Inner Asia—the text is treated as a valuable record of the spatial distribution and symbolic framing of Buddhist institutions.

Archaeological evidence is drawn from key case studies, notably the Mes Aynak monastic-mining complex in Afghanistan and the cave monasteries of Kucha, including Kizil and Kumtura. Published excavation reports, site surveys, and material analyses were used to reconstruct the economic integration of these religious sites with local and transregional trade networks. This includes the presence of ore extraction pits, smelting facilities, storage rooms, donor inscriptions, and coin hoards, which together demonstrate the entanglement of monastic institutions with commercial and administrative functions.

The study also engages secondary historical scholarship on Buddhist political ideology, economic anthropology of monastic networks, and art historical interpretations of Buddhist visual culture in Central Asia. These sources allow for triangulation between textual narratives, material remains, and interpretative frameworks, enabling a multi-scalar analysis of Buddhist patronage as a political strategy. The method emphasizes connecting site-specific archaeological data with broader patterns of governance, trade control, and legitimization along the Silk Road.

4. Aligning themselves with sacred authority

One of the most visible strategies employed by Silk Road rulers to legitimize their political authority was to align themselves with sacred Buddhist ideals—particularly through the model of the cakravartin, or wheel-turning universal monarch. As described in early Buddhist texts such as the Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta, the cakravartin is not merely a conqueror, but a righteous king who rules by Dharma, maintains social order, and upholds moral virtue. Such a king possesses the thirty-two marks of a great man (mahāpuruṣa) and seven treasures of kingship, including a miraculous wheel that rolls effortlessly across the world, symbolizing divine endorsement of universal rule [3]. Silk Road rulers adopted this imagery strategically: by convening Buddhist councils, sponsoring monasteries, and promoting moral kingship, they positioned themselves as divinely sanctioned leaders—guardians of the Dharma whose authority transcended mere temporal power.

A significant example is Kanishka I, the emperor of the Kushan dynasty, whose reign (c. 127–150 CE) marked the political and cultural peak of the Kushan Empire. Kanishka's commitment to Buddhism is well recorded by Xuanzang in his Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, where the emperor is portrayed as a Buddhist who deeply engaged with monastic life. Xuanzang writes, "He always studied Buddhist scriptures and each day he invited a monk to preach the Dharma in his palace," and further notes that "he professed the right faith and deeply believed in the Buddha-dharma. Around the small stupa he built a stone stupa, wishing to encompass the smaller one." [8]. Such portrayals not only elevate Kanishka's spiritual devotion but also strategically cast him as a legitimate ruler through religious authority. Kanishka's most significant contribution to Buddhism was the convening of the Fourth Buddhist Council, held in Kashmir. Although scholarly debate persists over whether the council was convened under Kanishka I or a later ruler such as Kanishka II [9], the event is consistently linked to the consolidation of royal authority through religious leadership. By presiding over a gathering of eminent monks—an act that implied both doctrinal oversight and material patronage—Kanishka positioned himself as the ultimate arbiter of Buddhist orthodoxy in his realm. The council's association with the institutionalization of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its universalist ethos and exalted bodhisattva ideal, provided a theological framework that elevated the monarch to a quasi-sacred status. Such imagery aligned kingship with cosmic order and moral guardianship, reinforcing the ruler's legitimacy among both monastic and

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lay audiences. In Xuanzang's account, Kanishka is not merely a supporter of Buddhism but a central figure in shaping its doctrinal trajectory, thereby fusing temporal sovereignty with spiritual authority in a manner that strengthened his control over a culturally and religiously diverse empire.

However, this portrayal is not without debate. Firstly, written for imperial audiences, the work reflects the Tang dynasty's interest in understanding and potentially emulating the political uses of Buddhism abroad, especially for Emperor Taizong, the purpose was 'to obtain the data of the Western Regions for the reference of future military action against the Turks' [10]. This political framing means that Xuanzang's depiction of Kanishka may be less a neutral historical record and more a selective portrayal that emphasized the strategic value of religious patronage, thereby projecting a model of rulership that aligns with Tang imperial priorities. Meanwhile, some scholars argue that Kanishka's actual religious convictions remain unclear, pointing out that most Buddhist accounts emerged centuries later or were filtered through authors like Xuanzang, who wrote with political intent. Numismatic evidence further complicates the picture: coins issued during his reign depict a diverse pantheon—including Buddhist (see figure 1), Hindu, Iranian, and even Greek deities (see figure 2) [11]—suggesting either personal eclecticism or a calculated policy of appealing to multiple religious communities within his empire.

Figure 1. Buddhist

Figure 2. Greek deities

Yet despite these criticisms, the outcome remains the same: the image of Kanishka as a Buddhist ruler—whether shaped by faith, politics, or later idealization—served to strengthen his legitimacy and secure his empire's place in the religious landscape of Eurasia. His symbolic alignment with Buddhism provided a powerful model of rulership that transcended regional boundaries, shaping how kingship would be understood across the Silk Road for centuries.

5. Controlling key trade networks through monastic institutions

Beyond aligning themselves with sacred authority, Silk Road rulers recognized that Buddhism's institutional presence offered a practical mechanism for controlling the arteries of Eurasian trade. Monasteries, often situated along strategic caravan routes, were not merely spiritual retreats but multifunctional hubs that combined religious, economic, and political functions [12].

In Gandhāra and Kāpiśī, Xuanzang notes numerous well-maintained monasteries under royal patronage, though he does not comment on their economic functions. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests these sites were strategically placed along key caravan routes and often integrated into local economies. At Mes Aynak, archaeological investigations have revealed that a large Buddhist monastic complex was situated in close proximity to—and in some cases physically integrated with—extensive copper mining installations. The site contained ore extraction pits, smelting areas, storage facilities, and coin hoards alongside stupas, assembly halls, and monastic quarters. This spatial and functional overlap suggests a symbiotic relationship in which the

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monastery may have played a role in overseeing mining operations, storing valuable goods, and managing the redistribution of resources. The presence of imported goods and Kushan-era coins indicates the site's connection to broader trade networks, while the scale of industrial activity points to significant economic capacity. Rather than existing solely as a spiritual retreat, Mes Aynak functioned as a hub where religious, commercial, and administrative activities intersected, exemplifying how Buddhist institutions could operate as economic power centers along the Silk Road [13]. Similar result was found in Kucha, donor inscriptions in the Kizil and Kumtura cave monasteries record endowments from merchant guilds and rulers, underscoring the economic foundations of monastic life [14].

These archaeological evidences from Mes Aynak and Kucha illustrate a broader dynamic in which monastic complexes functioned as economic, political, and religious hubs embedded in strategic trade corridors. Understanding why rulers invested in and regulated such institutions requires examining the ideological, economic, and political incentives that underpinned this form of patronage.

Ideologically, rulers supported monasteries because Buddhism framed wealth creation as both socially beneficial and spiritually meritorious, fostering a natural alliance between the sangha and commercial communities [15]. Patronage thus legitimized and encouraged merchant activity while placing rulers at the center of economic and spiritual exchange. Economically, monasteries in Central Asia often served as cultural and economic nodes, collecting rents, managing caravan goods, and lending to traders. By appointing abbots, approving projects, and granting endowments, rulers embedded themselves in the economic governance of the region, exerting soft control over commerce. Politically, monastic patronage stabilized frontier zones by providing safe havens for traders, reducing risks, and symbolically linking prosperity to royal benevolence. Such institutions —as recorded by Xuanzang—were deeply integrated into the Silk Road's economic landscape.

6. Using religious art to visibly claim territory

Religious art along the Silk Road functioned as more than aesthetic expression; it was a potent instrument of political communication. By sponsoring the construction of monumental Buddhist images, stupas, and temple complexes, rulers inscribed their authority onto the physical and spiritual landscapes of their realms. These works, visible to both local populations and itinerant merchants, signaled the ruler's piety, wealth, and capacity to mobilize resources on a grand scale. In contested frontier zones, such artistic patronage acted as a visual claim to sovereignty, linking territorial control to the universalist ideals of the Dharma.

Xuanzang records numerous instances where kings used Buddhist art to project their power. In Kāpiśī, for example, the ruler commissioned an annual silver image of the Buddha eighteen feet in height, an undertaking that required immense financial and logistical resources. This image was the centerpiece of a quinquennial assembly during which wealth was distributed to the poor—an act that fused religious symbolism with public spectacle [8]. The Buddha image, glittering with precious metals, not only drew pilgrims and merchants into the city but also reminded them of the king's generosity and divine favor.

Despite the evidence in the Great Tang Records, other material sources—such as the murals of Kizil Cave 60 in the Tarim Basin—also reveal the political role of Buddhist art in Central Asia. In this cave, royal patrons are depicted in richly adorned attire alongside Buddhist imagery, an intentional pairing that signaled the rulers' role as benefactors and guardians of the Dharma [16]. It have noted that the visual culture of Buddhism in the region was characterized by syncretism, incorporating Indian iconography, Iranian motifs, and Chinese stylistic elements. By embedding

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themselves in this cosmopolitan artistic tradition, Silk Road rulers communicated their place within a larger civilizational network. The imagery of the bodhisattva, for example, resonated with ideals of compassionate rulership, while depictions of the cakravartin linked kingship to cosmic order. In this way, religious art operated as a multilingual medium of political legitimacy, intelligible across Eurasia.

Through such projects, rulers transformed religious art into enduring statements of political geography. The monumental presence of Buddhist imagery in urban centers, trade routes, and frontier regions visually affirmed the integration of these spaces into the ruler's domain. Whether in the form of colossal Buddha statues, elaborately decorated caves like those of Dunhuang, or intricately carved stupas, these works embodied the fusion of faith and statecraft that defined Buddhism's role in the imperial strategies of Silk Road rulers.

7. Conclusion

Along the Silk Road, Buddhist patronage was a calculated strategy for power consolidation rather than just devotion. Through the use of councils, religious symbols, and colossal art, monarchs combined political sovereignty with spiritual legitimacy by connecting themselves with sacred authority. Mes Aynak and Kucha archeological evidence demonstrates how monasteries that were enmeshed in mining areas, connected to caravan routes, and backed by merchant guilds served as administrative posts, commercial hubs, and places of worship. Rulers were able to control these institutions, maintain border stability, control trade, and portray themselves as intermediaries between the religious and the secular.

This power was enhanced by monumental art, which conveyed sovereignty in a visual language that was understandable throughout Eurasia. Despite being influenced by Tang political objectives, Xuanzang's Great Tang Records show a larger trend: Buddhist patronage functioned as an integrated political technology, sanctifying the image of rulers, stabilizing economic networks, and charting imperial territory. The emperors of the Silk Road established Buddhism as the cornerstone of imperial authority by fusing religious cosmology, financial resources, and visual propaganda.

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