The Lost Empire of the Silk Road
The discovery of Khara Khoto and the art of the Tangut

The Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation/The State Hermitage Museum
This guide is meant to accompany the exhibition

**Lost Empire of the Silk Road**

*Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto (10th - 13th centuries)*

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Produced by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation
Francesca von Habsburg, executive direction
Elisabeth Storm-Nagy, editor in-chief
Concept, creative direction and text: James M. Bradburne
Readers: Emily Holland, Julia McGarvey
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James M. Bradburne/Elisabeth Storm-Nagy
Young person's guide to the exhibition
Lost Empire of the Silk Road:
Buddhist Art from Khara Khoto (10th - 13th centuries)
held at the Villa Favorita, Castagnola, Switzerland
June 25 - October 1993

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One fine evening, long, long ago,
under the last full moon of summer,
the court musicians met in the vastness
of the Mongolian steppes
to play funeral music at the side of an open grave.
The sound of the frail wooden flute floated over the desert sands,
until it rose so high that it passed out of hearing.
In time, the musicians too passed from sight,
and the land itself, Tangut, between Tibet and China,
passed out of living memory.

This is the story of the Tangut Empire,
an empire on the Silk Road that dared defy Genghis Khan,
was swept away, and buried beneath the desert sands.
This is the story of an empire at a crossroads,
the meeting point of three cultures:
the Chinese, the Central Asian and the Tibetan,
its art a unique fusion of the three.
This is the story of the discovery of Khara Khoto, the 'Dead Town',
by a determined Russian explorer,
driven by the quest for ancient civilisations
in the harsh and beautiful landscape at the sources of the Yellow River,
between the high white lands of Tibet and China.
In quest of ancient lands

What at time it was! The end of the nineteenth century was a moment of great activity for the Imperial powers of Britain, France, Austria and Russia. Fired with the spirit of adventure and the burning desire to discover the secrets of the forgotten past, young explorers set off in every direction in search of lost treasures.

The British sought the ancient wisdom of the Egyptian Pharaohs, and in the Valley of the Dead, amateur archaeologists Mr. Howard and the Lord Carnarvon found the tomb of the Boy King Tutankhamen, unspoiled by grave robbers, lying under the sand since the great Dynasties of 5000 years before. Stanley penetrated the heart of Africa in search of the sources of the Nile, found them, and finally stood at the thundering edge of the world's greatest waterfall, which he named after the British Queen, Victoria.

The French sent explorers to the land of the Old Testament, to the burning sands of Arabia Deserta, then south to Arabia Felix, overlooking the Red Sea. They penetrated deep into the highlands of Ethiopia, to Aksum, where the Ark of the Covenant lay hidden, guarded from prying eyes since the tenth century; to Lalibela, where great churches were carved from the living rock; to fabled Gondar, where Prester John was said to have reigned in a palace of glass, wearing robes woven by salamanders.

Explorers travelled north and they travelled south, in heat, in rain, in cold, seeking new lands and old cultures, determined to revitalise the empty materialist world of their fathers with the magic of ancient cultures and lost languages. The world was in a frenzy of exploration. The Austrians went to the great northern wastes, the Germans went south, deep into Africa, and soon all turned towards the mysterious East.
All eyes turned East, towards the Orient and the scattered lands that lay along the long-travelled Silk Road. The Silk Road! The name spelled mystery and adventure, and was woven like a red thread in the imagination of the young explorers. The Silk Road, the route made legend by the travels of Marco Polo. The route followed for long centuries by caravans from the fabled silk lands of the Yellow Emperor in China, up the muddy Yellow river, through the eastern spice kingdoms and the highlands of Tibet. Caravans winding their way overland to the heart of Byzantium, Constantinople, gateway to the West astride the straits of the Bosphorus. Almost every year towards the end of the nineteenth century a new expedition was launched into Central Asia. The Germans, the Swedes, the English, the French all poured vast sums into the exploration of the lands of Western China, Mongolia and Tibet, driven by the fever of new discoveries, and the desire to claim new territories.

New discoveries in the southern Russian province of Turkestan sparked the Russian interest, and the Imperial Russian Geographical Society financed expedition after expedition into the little-known deserts of Central Asia. Accounts of the travels of the great Russian Orientalist Przhevalsky captured the imagination of the young. Among them, in the faraway province of Smolensk, the teenaged Petr Kuzmich Kozlov was entranced by Przhevalsky's tales of the Central Asian steppes. By a stroke of good fortune, the very Przhevalsky, the great explorer, the legend, became owner in 1882 of the estate on which the young Petr lived.

"When I first set eyes on Przhevalsky, I recognised immediately his powerful figure, his imperious, noble and handsome face. This dedicated explorer, this sensitive connoisseur of the world of nature, the peerless Przhevalsky aroused in me a burning passion for the Asian natural world; I fell under the spell of this pure and unaffected man."

Soon Przhevalsky became not only the teacher, but almost a father to the young Petr Kuzmich Kozlov, opening his eyes to the wonders of a new world. In return, Kozlov venerated the older explorer, and in 1883, soon after his twentieth birthday, followed Przhevalsky, the 'big bellied General' on his fourth expedition to Central Asia, the first of three expeditions they would make together.
In search of the Lost City

It is now 1899, and this time, Przhevalsky cannot come, and Petr Kuzmich Kozlov prepares to leave for Mongolia and Tibet alone. Przhevalsky had tried several times to enter the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, and failed. It is now up to the young explorer to venture into the vast Gobi Desert towards the mountain kingdom. Before he leaves, a letter arrives from the great Russian explorer and diplomat, Semyonov Tyan-Shansky,

"Remember my dear Petr Kuzmich, that the development of our relations with Tibet is a matter of immense importance, and it is in your hands. In that citadel of Central Asia the name of Russia must be upheld, not with threats, but with humility and honour..."

Kozlov's long journey began in the Altai, on the edge of the Gobi desert, following the course of the river Edzin-Gol. Tantalising rumours of the ruins of an ancient town a day's march to the east were denied by local Torgut tribesmen, who were determined that the Russians not find the lost town. Frustrated in their attempts to locate the ruins in the shifting Mongolian sands, the Russians continued their search for the sources of the Yellow River. Several times the expedition was given up for lost, and in the spring of 1901, the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan leader, sent men to find Kozlov and his expedition. For the first time, a Russian explorer sends gifts and thanks to the Supreme Ruler of Tibet. Kozlov returned to St. Petersburg two and a half long years later, having travelled over ten thousand kilometres on foot and on horseback, mapped rivers and mountain ranges. Honoured, but not content with the gold medal of the Geographical Society, he was already planning the expedition, to find the rumoured city lost in the shifting sands of Mongolia.
For Kozlov, the 1899 expedition had ended in private failure but immense public success. In 1904, fearing Russian expansion, the British captured the virtually undefended Holy City of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and the Dalai Lama fled north to Urga, capital of Mongolia with a small escort.

The presence of such an important person on the very border of the Russian State caused great interest in Russian political circles. In 1905, Tsar Nicolas II sent the famous explorer Petr Kuzmich Kozlov to meet the Dalai Lama. Kozlov's charm won him the friendship of many of the Dalai Lama's counsellors, including Dorjiev, the so-called 'Buriat Monk'. This monk was also advisor to the Russian Imperial court, and believed by the British to be a kind of spy for the Russians.

On the recommendation of the Dorjiev, Kozlov was granted a personal audience with the Dalai Lama; they met on July 1st, and spoke with each other for many hours. The XIIIth Dalai Lama, political and spiritual leader of Tibet, presented Kozlov with two bronze statues, a Buddha on the Lion's Throne, and the Maitreya, the God of Travellers. Kozlov was not allowed to photograph the Dalai Lama, but one of the members of Kozlov's party made three sketches. The Dalai Lama sent two to his Imperial Majesty Nicolas II, and kept one for himself.
The discovery of Khara Khot'o - 'the Dead Town'

Kozlov's interest in the lost city had not faded over the years. In late May 1907, he received a letter sent from Alashan by a Mongolian colleague;

"During a journey to Edzin-Gol, I made a most interesting discovery, or so it would seem. In the midst of the sands, I stumbled across the ruins of Khara Khot'o - where I made a point of spending the day, taking photographs and making notes - I enclose four photographs of the ruins. What do you think, will anything come of it?"

Khara Khot'o! The mysterious town of which Marco Polo had written in the thirteenth century! Kozlov quickly requested an audience with the Tsar, who personally guaranteed the expedition would not lack funds. Not waiting for the warmth of spring, giving no interviews to the press, Kozlov left St. Petersburg for Mongolia in the cold last months of 1907, bent on uncovering the ruins of Khara Khot'o.

New Year's Day in 1908 it was -47°C in Mongolia. In spite of the cold Kozlov and his expedition set off for the lower reaches of the river Edzin-Gol, where nine years before they had first heard rumours of the existence of a buried ancient town. On the 10th of March, 1908, Kozlov's dream was finally realised. With only four companions, Kozlov was led to the ruins by the Torgut guide, Bata. In front of them stood the ruins of Khara Khot'o, ruins that local Torgut tribesmen had been afraid to approach for centuries.

In a matter of days they had filled several crates of books in Tangut, Tibetan and Chinese, papers, household wares and Buddhist objects, which they sent back to St. Petersburg, where the sensational new discovery was announced.

The five explorers set up camp in the centre of the town. Kozlov's first digging revealed buried treasure:

"I shall never forget the sense of delight which filled my heart when, after removing a few shovels full of debris in the first ruined building, I unearthed a small Buddhist painting"

Further excavation that day revealed fragments of documents written in an unknown script, more books, a Buddhist painting of the Amitabha, a painting on silk, several small clay heads and a gilded head of Buddha with dark blue hair.

Illustration from the so-called 'Butterfly Book' [Catalogue No. 79]
The rest of the summer was spent exploring the region around Khara Khoto, and once again Kozlov had the chance to meet with the Dalai Lama, travelling from Beijing to Lhasa. The Dalai Lama received him warmly, and invited Kozlov to join him in the Holy City. Sadly, letters from St. Petersburg arrived in December and he had to refuse. Little or nothing was known of Tangut culture - the documents he had sent were unique. He was asked to return to Khara Khoto as soon as possible. The excavation of Khara Khoto began in earnest the following spring, in May of 1909. Agvan Dorjiev, tutor to the Dalai Lama, was invited to help identify the Buddhist art found during the excavations.

Kozlov's observations showed that sand had blown in from the north, almost entirely burying the town so deep that a camel could climb up one side of the high defensive walls and down the other. Outside the city walls stood a large stone tower, roughly the shape of a cone. It was a *stupa*, an ancient Buddhist tomb. Here was a real treasure trove! In it they found manuscripts, sculptures, bronzes, scrolls - all jumbled together.

"I shall never forget the powerful impression made on myself and my companions by two Chinese icons on a muslin-like material. As we unrolled them we were enthralled to see magnificent seated figures, bathed in a soft pale blue and pink radiance. From these sacred Buddhist relics emanated something living, something expressive, something unalloyed; we simply could not take our eyes off them, so inimitably fine were they..."

In the middle of the stupa stood a wooden pole, around which were arranged over twenty life-sized clay statues resembling holy men conducting a ceremony in front of hundreds of manuscripts in the old Tangut script. Near the base of the stupa a skeleton was discovered, that of an old woman.

Finally it was time to pack up and get ready for the long journey home to St. Petersburg. Many of the objects were too heavy to be taken, and the huge clay sculptures had to be left behind. Kozlov decided to hide them carefully, and to return for them on a later visit. With the dry wind still blowing sand through the partly excavated streets of Khara Khoto, Kozlov took a final look at the city he had spent so many years to find, then set off towards the west.

The Buddha shown with Stupas [Catalogue No. 06]
The Amitabha Buddha [Catalogue No. 09]
Between China and Tibet - the empire of the Tanguts

"Tibetan, Chinese, Tangut - all three have but one mother!"
anonymous Tangut poet

Who lived in Khara Khoto, and what did they do? Until Kozlov's discovery of the 'Dead Town', little was known of the lost empire 'between China and Tibet'. Now, more than eighty years later, we know that Khara Khoto was a town on the border of the Tangut Empire, an empire between China and Tibet that flourished between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

Who were these people, the Tangut?

The Tangut were an ancient Central Asian people, with black hair and ruddy complexions, who spoke a language similar to Tibetan and Burmese. They came originally from the province of Sichuan, in China, and moved north to Mongolia in the sixth century. The Tangut settled in the area between China and Tibet, near the sources of the Yellow River. Here they prospered, along with the Chinese, Tibetans, Uighurs, Tuguhun and Tatars. Here the Tangut built an empire that for over three centuries controlled the Silk Road, the rich east-west caravan routes that made their way from China to the West across the great bow in the Yellow River.

The history of the Tangut Empire begins in 982, when the Tangut leader Toba Ji-qian challenged the Chinese emperor, and set himself up as Wang, or ruler, of the Tangut State. Ji-qian died fighting the Tibetans, and was succeeded by his son De-ming, who gave himself the grand title of Emperor, in open defiance of China, who was not at all happy to have a rival power on their western borders.

By the time Ji-qian's grandson Yuan-ho took the throne, the Tangut Empire was spoken of as one of the three 'feet' of a Ting, the great cauldron that symbolised China (the other two feet were China and Tibet). On the tenth of November, 1038 Yuan-ho made sweeping changes to the Tangut Empire. He reorganised the army, he introduced special Tangut writing and music, he made his noblemen wear special Tangut haircuts, and he formally adopted Buddhism as the religion of the State. The Tangut Empire had come of age.
Official and Servant [Catalogue No. 63]
Who is Buddha? What is Buddhism?

Long, long ago, over two thousand six hundred years ago, there was a young prince of the Shakya (also spelled sometimes as Sakya) kingdom named Siddhartha, of the Gautama clan. This prince lived in the northern part of India, at the foot of the mountains of Nepal. By the time he was twenty-nine he had everything: vaults full of gold, a beautiful wife, a young son; he was soon to inherit the throne of his father and become king. One day, shaken by what he had seen of the world; beggars, sick children, old age, death, he announced to his shocked family that he was going to find out if there was something more to life than the simple passage from birth to death. That very evening, the prince Siddhartha went to the forest to think deeply until he found the Truth or died.

Many years he meditated, until one day, when he was thirty-five years old, he took his place seated beneath the great Bodhi tree. There, at last, he attained complete enlightenment, or nirvana. This means that he found complete freedom from all suffering and pain, and understood the true nature of life, in which the individual self no longer existed, but merged with all of creation. In reaching such an understanding, the young prince saw that all people could experience this true freedom and happiness for themselves.

For this great insight, the prince Siddhartha is called a Buddha, which means 'enlightened one', and also the 'Shakyamuni' Buddha, because Shakyamuni means the Wise Man of the Shakyas. Anyone who attains complete enlightenment is called a Buddha, and, because others too have become enlightened, Shakyamuni is often called the 'historical' Buddha, or the Buddha of our times.

Buddha [Catalogue No. 03]
Having discovered the Truth, and realised that this Truth could be experienced by all people, the Shakyamuni Buddha devoted his newfound energies to helping them do so. The teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha are the basis of Buddhism; one of the great religions, along with Christianity and Islam. The Buddha's wisdom, his compassion towards all creatures, are among the most important teachings of Buddhism, and this compassion for others has been the fountain of energy of the entire Buddhist movement throughout history.

The Buddha saw that every intelligent being could understand the Truth about reality, and the experience of this Truth would result in freedom, happiness and change. The greatest gift someone could give was therefore the Teaching, called in ancient Indian language Sanskrit Dharma, which comes from the word 'to hold'. It is not enough to just believe in the teaching of Buddha, it must be experienced personally. To further his teaching, the Buddha founded a new kind of school, the Sangha, a community of people engaged in learning about the Dharma.

These three parts became known as the 'Three Jewels' of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, The Enlightened Teacher, the Teaching, and the Community. To understand these three things is like finding three precious jewels; the keys to freedom from suffering, understanding reality, and happiness with others.
The Teaching Buddha [catalogue No. 5]
After his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, Shakyamuni Buddha devoted his life to teaching. Above him are the Buddha's two favourite disciples, or students. The pile of scrolls and books in the bottom of the picture symbolise the importance of Buddhist teaching.

The Two-headed Buddha [catalogue No. 1]
This story was told to a Chinese pilgrim during one of his long wanderings in the north: once upon a time, there were two men, both devoted to the teachings of Buddha. Each of them dreamed an image of the Buddha, but they were too poor to pay for two sculptures, so they asked an artist to make them only one. Buddha himself, in an act of kindness, divided the image in two. Kindness, or compassion, is an important teaching of Buddhism.

This clay statue was found in the stupa uncovered by Kozlov in 1909. The statue is made from the simple materials of earth and straw, but the artist has given the Buddha a smile and a gentle tilt to the head, and added colour and gold to the two faces to emphasise Buddha's compassionate nature.

Images of Buddha
For the first five hundred years after his death, the Buddha was not shown at all. The Buddha's presence was only suggested by images of an empty throne, footprints, or the great Bodhi tree under which he gained enlightenment. The absence of the Buddha was a way of showing the Buddha's complete freedom, a way of saying that Buddha had escaped all earthly things, and found Nirvana, which cannot be described in pictures or words.

Some centuries later, artists began to portray Buddha, first in the style of the Greek god Apollo, and then in the image of traditional Indian gods. These images stressed the Buddha's compassion for all living creatures, and therefore his presence on earth. He is often shown seated in flowing robes, gazing with a tender look on his face.
Buddhas and More Buddhas

Even the very earliest traditions recognised that the Shakyamuni Buddha was not a unique god, but one of a series of enlightened Buddhas who occasionally appeared to help humanity. There are therefore many, many Buddhas. Each Buddha displays one particular aspect of enlightenment. The Medicine Buddha, for instance, is a symbol of the healing power of enlightenment. The five Dhyani, or meditation Buddhas stand for the five different kinds of meditation.

The number five is very important in Buddhism. In mystical Buddhism the five transcendent Buddhas represent many things that come in fives. They are the five directions, North, South, East, West and Centre; the five colours, blue, white, yellow, red and green; the five vices that can be changed into the five wisdoms.

Bhaishajyaguru: the Medicine Buddha [Catalogue No. 8]
According to Mahayana Buddhism, Shakyamuni turned himself into a deep blue Buddha, giving off healing rays of light, and taught a gathering of men and gods the science of medicine. In many Buddhist countries the Medicine Buddha, is the patron of medicine and healing, and the special god of physician.

Buddhist ‘Hand signals’ and what they mean
Buddha's hands are usually depicted making special signs, called mudras. There are many of these gestures, with different meanings. For instance, the 'Fear-not' mudra, right hand held open in front, palm forward and fingers pointing up; the 'Earth-witness' mudra (because Shakyamuni called on the Earth to be his witness when a demon challenged his right to enlightenment), right hand palm downward with the middle finger touching the earth; the 'Teaching' mudra, both hands at heart level, thumbs and index fingers touching to form two circles; or the 'Contemplation' mudra, both hands lying flat, the thumbs touching.

The 'Fear-not' mudra
The 'Earth-witness' mudra
The Teaching mudra
The Contemplation mudra
The Sutra on Great Wisdom [Catalogue No. 80]
The Medicine Buddha Bhaishajyaguru [Catalogue No. 07]
**Buddhas and Bodhisattvas**

It was not long before Bodhisattvas joined the lone figure of the historical Buddha. Bodhisattvas are the 'enlightenment heroes' who have chosen to work, life after life, reincarnation after reincarnation, for the enlightenment of all humankind. Bodhisattvas have chosen to renounce their own freedom until all creatures are enlightened. Bodhisattvas are sent into the world by Buddhas in order to help living beings more effectively. Bodhisattvas are symbols of the Buddhist virtues of wisdom, compassion and benevolence, and are shown with very precise attributes. Paintings of Buddha are used as objects of devotion and meditation by those wanting to understand certain aspects of Buddha's teachings.

**The many flavours of Bodhisattva**

Bodhisattvas can be human (or 'historic', like the Shakyamuni Buddha), who have chosen to follow the path of enlightenment by dedicating their lives to the enlightenment of all creatures. They can be Buddhas who have chosen to manifest themselves for the benefit of all creatures. Finally they can represent of Buddhas in other realms. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the Green and White Taras, Vajrapani, Manjushri, and Samantabhadra can all be considered as Buddhas acting as Bodhisattvas in order to help all living beings.

**The Amitabha Pure Land**

The legend of Amitabha tells that as a Bodhisattva he made a promise that anyone who recited his name would be reborn after death in the Western Pure Land, where enlightenment would be easier than here on earth. This belief in Amitabha, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the Western Pure Land became very popular throughout the Buddhist world.
The Three Vehicles and the spread of Buddhism

At first, only a few people had decided to follow Buddha's teachings to seek enlightenment. These disciples often worked on their spiritual growth alone, or with other believers in monasteries. This gave rise to the first of the three traditions, or 'vehicles' of Buddhism, the so-called 'Individual', or 'Monastic' Vehicle. A vehicle is a way of getting from one place to another, and the Buddhist vehicles are ways of getting from the world of suffering to the blissful state of enlightenment.

Over the centuries, more and more people decided to follow the Buddha's teachings, there was a great desire to free all human beings and transform the universe into a realm of happiness and peace. This desire gave rise to the second tradition, the so-called 'Great', or 'Universal' Vehicle, also known as Mahayana Buddhism. This idea of a universe-transforming Buddhahood is poetically described in the Buddhist texts called sutras, which helped spread Buddha's teachings along the Silk Road to China, Korea, Central Asia and Persia.

The third great Buddhist tradition is known as the 'Tantric' or 'Esoteric' Vehicle. This tradition is also called the Vajra, 'Diamond' or 'Thunderbolt' tradition, because it uses magical practices, such as physical exercises (Yoga), spoken formulas and powerful images to speed up the processes of enlightenment, which normally take countless lives to accomplish. These tantras, or magic practices, were very popular, especially in Tibet and India, and were sometimes believed to be the original secret teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha.
**How to tell a Bodhisattva from a Buddha**

All Buddhas are said to have three bodies: a Truth Body, a Beatific Body and an Emanation Body. The Emanation Body is what can be seen by normal human beings, and what is normally shown in Buddhist art. Buddhas are most often shown in monastic robes, and can be either standing or seated, often on a lotus blossom. Buddhas always have gentle and compassionate expressions. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, can appear in terrifying forms, with fierce expressions and multiple arms.

**The Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva [Catalogue No. 14]**

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is one of two Bodhisattvas (along with the Tara) that come from the 'Western Pure Land' of the Amitabha Buddha. Avalokiteshvara is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and is said to have taken his vows to protect the people of Tibet, the 'Land of the Snows'. He is therefore often considered the protector of the mountain kingdom of Tibet.

**The Green Tara [Catalogue No.19]**

Tara's name means 'the one who saves', and her desire to save is said to be stronger than a mother's love for her children. In some myths Tara was born from the compassionate tears of Avalokiteshvara in the Pure Land. Tara is is the best example of the Bodhisattva as goddess, and represents the miraculous activities of all Buddhas by helping beings overcome difficulties on the path to enlightenment.

**Manjushri [Catalogue No. 50]**

Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and like all Bodhisattvas he can take many forms. Often he is shown as a young man, sixteen years old, as a way of saying that even the young can understand Buddhist wisdom. The so-called 'Prince of Wisdom' is said to dwell in China, of which he is the protector. This painting of Manjushri is said to be a perfect example of 'Chinese' style.

**Samantahadra [Catalogue No. 51]**

Samantahadra is both a Buddha and a Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva Samantahadra is the embodiment of benevolence. As a Buddha, he is an important object of meditation.
The terrifying faces of Enlightenment

Many of the most shocking images in Buddhist art come from the Tantric, or 'Varja' tradition. Often these are images of violence: of skulls full of blood or urine, of wrathful gods crushing people underfoot - terrifying and magical images of many-armed gods clutching fearful weapons and decorated with bracelets and belts made of human skulls. This tradition, which has its roots in India, and spread to China and Central Asia, flowered in the mountain kingdom of Tibet, 'The Land of the Snows', and is one of the main influences of the art of the Tangut.

Tantric Buddhism: changing bad into good
The Tantric form of Buddhism developed alongside the devotional worship of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as a challenge to the monks' belief that the world must be given up in order to find enlightenment. Tantric Buddhism believes the keys to enlightenment can be found in the human condition, however coarse or humble. They believe that even the most negative human emotions - hate, lust, envy, greed - can be turned enlightenment, or realisation of the Truth about reality. This belief is shown in pictures of 'wrathful' deities: Bodhisattvas trampling human bodies, Bodhisattvas drinking blood, Bodhisattvas carrying terrible weapons. Meditation on these frightening images help the viewer understand the possibilities for enlightenment even in the most dreadful aspects of human character. These images help the viewer understand how to change negative feelings into positive feelings.

Samvara Yab-Yum [Catalogue No. 26]
Vajravarahi [Catalogue No. 22]
Unlike other forms of Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism celebrates the feminine as the highest form of enlightenment. Female forms called Dakinis, or Skydancers. The Dakinis symbolise the fact that enlightenment is beyond sexual identity. Thus the same figure can appear in Tantric Buddhist images as a lone man, a lone woman, or the union of man and woman. Vajravarahi sometimes appears by herself as a female Buddha, or as a Dakini embodying perfect Wisdom. Shamvara is shown sometimes by himself as the Bodhisattva of perfect Compassion. Sometimes they are shown bound in sexual union, the perfect Buddhist marriage of Wisdom and Compassion.
Why do they have so many arms?
Bodhisattvas have vowed to work for the enlightenment and happiness of all beings, in the spirit of perfect compassion. To better reach out to more people, a Bodhisattva often grows extra arms. In this way his compassion is expressed visually. A Bodhisattva with infinite compassion may have a thousand arms, if he wanted to see everything he may have a thousand eyes and have a thousand faces.

Why are they holding each other?
Buddhahood, or enlightenment, is often shown as the perfect union of compassion and wisdom. This whole is often expressed visually by the sexual union of a male figure and a female figure, or Yab-Yum, which is sometimes translated as Mother-Father. By meditating on this image, and imagining themselves to be both figures in the image, Tantric Buddhists gain an insight into the deeper aspects of reality.

What is the bowl he is holding?
Fierce manifestations of Bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities often hold bowls called kapalas, made out of the top of a human skull. These bowls are filled with dreadful things: sometimes blood, sometimes urine, sometimes guts. The skull bowl is a symbol of the conquest of all demonic forces, and the way in which ordinary blood of evil can be changed into the elixir of immortality. Sometimes Bodhisattvas take the form of a Heruka, or 'blood-drinker', to symbolise wisdom's drinking a lifetime of ignorance.

Why is he wearing a necklace made of heads?
Fierce Bodhisattvas often wear necklaces made of skulls or human heads. Often they are of three kinds: moist, dried, and skulls. These three forms represent the three poisons: greed, hate and delusion, negative attitudes turned into ornaments.

Why does the same Bodhisattva look different in different pictures?
A Bodhisattva is devoted to helping other creatures become Buddhas, and will show himself in many forms. Thus the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri, will show himself as a kind and mild figure, a young man of sixteen; as Yamantaka, the fearsome conqueror of the god of Death Yama and as four-armed Bodhisattva holding a sword and the sutra of Wisdom. When a Bodhisattva is shown with several heads and sets of arms, they show many of his different aspects, both Fierce and Mild, in a single image.
"Along the verges peach trees bloom; wild black geese fly
A traveller walks, lightly shod and clothed
Spring has melted the white snows of winter..."
Tangut Ode: Month after Month

An Empire on the Silk Road

The Tangut Empire was first and foremost an Empire on the Silk Road.

The Silk Road: the trade route that joined the rich provinces of Imperial China to Constantinople, capital of Byzantium. Through the Tangut Empire passed caravans making their way across the steppes to Constantinople past the minarets of Samarkhand, through the fabled streets of Baghdad. Long lines of camels crossed dry oceans of sand heaped with bolts of woven silk and baskets of spices, burdens smelling of nutmeg, cloves, frankincense and myrrh. In the bazaars of Constantinople traders bartered and travellers told tales of the mysterious East. From Constantinople the cargoes found their way to sea, and were loaded into the groaning holds of ships bound for Venice, for Rome, Marseille and beyond to the cold lands to the North.

The Silk Road ran like a thick red vein of trade across the harsh desert, pumping silk and spices from China to Constantinople across the Tangut Empire, bringing influences from abroad. Tangut gathered influences from all corners of its Empire, and beyond. It heard travellers' tales from the faroff Venice of Marco Polo, translated the sutras brought by the monks from Tibet, listened to rumours of war told by riders from Mongolia, and heard of the splendours of the Imperial court in China. The Tangut Empire, in the great sweeping bowl of the Yellow River's bend; was an Empire where all tongues had their say, where all ears listened.

The Tangut were a people at the crossroads, and their art can tell us a great deal about their life, their culture, and their society. The picture on the facing page is a good example. Look at it carefully. A Bodhisattva floats over an open grave; Tangut musicians wearing distinctive Tangut haircuts play funeral music to help the dead man reach his next life; horses whinny and champ impatiently. What can this image tell us about Tangut life?
The Bodhisattva Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46]
Masters, Slaves and Servants

In 1038, the Emperor Yuan-ho made far reaching changes to the way the Tangut Empire was organised, to make it more like the Chinese system. The Emperor ruled the state by means of the army, a council of advisors, and a secret service who guarded the state against treason. The army was built around the cavalry, and the cavalry elite, the feared 'iron hawk' riders, were equipped with the most advanced lightweight shields, spears and camel-mounted catapults. The Emperor and his court were protected by Imperial guards, and the Tangut boundaries were kept safe by border patrols. The whole country was linked by an elaborate and effective system of messengers, ready to transmit the Emperor's orders.

The Tangut economy was made rich not only by taxes on the caravans that passed along the Silk Road, but by agriculture, horsebreeding, raising camels, goats and cattle, and by producing highly refined salt. Tangut horses were considered 'the finest in the subcelestial sphere' by contemporaries, and Marco Polo writes lovingly in his journals of Tangut rhubarb.

Tangut society was based on slave ownership, and if you were lucky enough not to be born a slave, all citizens were considered either officials, monks or commoners. Tangut society was a 'melting pot' of Tanguts, Chinese, Tibetans and Uighurs from Central Asia, and except for the rare occasion when a native Tangut claimed seniority, all were considered equal under Tangut law.

Noble or common: who's who in Tangut society
Dress regulations made it easy to tell who was important at the Tangut court. All Tanguts wore shirts next to the skin, with loose-fitting gowns. Government officials wore purple gowns, while military officers had gowns that were purple and patterned. The gown was tied at the waist, and the military gowns were decorated with metal plates to indicate their rank. Commoners, and those who did not work for the government, wore black gowns, while nobles, even if they held no government post wore green gowns.

The Tangut hairstyle: the tufa
On November 10th, 1038, as part of his radical programme of reform, the Emperor Yuan-ho decreed that all Tanguts should have their hair cut in a distinctive Tangut hairstyle, called the tufa. This style shaved the top and back of the head, left a fringe of bangs over the forehead, and let the hair grow in two braids over the temples. This hairstyle can often be seen in paintings of Tangut, such as the four musicians in the corner of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46]

Detail of Nobleman and Servant from Guanyin Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46]
Buddhist Patriarch [Catalogue No. 65]
Portrait of a Nobleman [Catalogue No. 62]
Death, Dying and Rebirth

The Tangut Empire officially adopted the Buddhist faith in the year 1038, although Buddhism was known for several centuries earlier. Buddhists believe that until a person is enlightened and becomes a Buddha he is condemned to being reborn again and again. In every life a person strives towards enlightenment, but also must suffer for sins he may have committed in earlier lives. Becoming a Buddha may take a countless number of lives, but because of the cycle of reincarnations, there is no real hurry. Enlightenment is usually only attained after many thousands of lifetimes of effort.

Buddhists believe that there is an in-between state, after death and before a person's next reincarnation, and many Tantric Buddhist paintings are designed to help a person prepare for the sometimes terrifying, sometimes peaceful visions he will encounter after death, in order to obtain a good rebirth. In some Buddhist societies, the body of the dead person is read instructions during the forty-nine days after his death, warning him what to expect, and counselling him how to respond to each vision. In the painting of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46] we see two incarnations of a Tangut noble. An open grave is in the lower right hand corner, and the dead man is shown below Guanyin in a green gown, with an embroidered hat and holding a censer in his hands, a servant beside him. In the upper right, the dead man is shown again, this time reborn as a boy, reaching out his hands to the Bodhisattva in prayer.

Detail of Nobleman reborn as a child from Guanyin Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46], Rebirth in Amitabha Pure Land [Catalogue No. 40]
The Sinner Preta [Catalogue No. 37]
A preta is a hungry demon, someone being punished for sins committed in a previous life, in the Preta’s case, for having eaten too much. The Path of the Pretas is one of the six paths to rebirth a dead man might choose, depending on his deeds during his life. Other paths he might follow are those of Higher Beings, Mankind, Animals and Hell (the Nobleman in the painting of Guanyin is following the path of Mankind.)

Here we see the ever hungry preta: his wide-open mouth, his beseeching eyes and his swollen belly show how very hungry he is. Even though he holds a bowl of rice and a spoon he cannot eat - as his punishment he has no way to swallow food.

Kubera Vaishravana [Catalogue No. 55]
This image is dominated by lion-riding Kubera, one of the 'World gods' that guard over the cardinal points. This painting combines elements drawn from Indian, Tibetan and Chinese stories. The small figure of a man in loose clothing, a Chinese hat and wearing the mask of a hare is the recorder of the good and bad deeds of the dead. In China, the hare and the moon are always associated with the dead.

Lessons in Enlightenment
Sometimes Buddhist parables were told in visual form, like cartoons, with captions above the pictures to tell the reader what it is about. This text, called the 'Golden Radiance' sutra [Catalogue No. 77], begins at the right hand end of the bottom line, and is read from right to left. It is the story of an official, Zhang Zu, who liked to eat meat, and therefore killed animals. This destruction of living creatures made certain Buddhas angry at him, so they put an evil spell on him. One fine evening he fell ill, died and passed on to the next world, where he was brought face to face with the Lord of the Underworld. In a long trial, Zhang Zu was condemned, but then pardoned and sent back to the world to tell people his story.

This cartoon also tells us about the daily life of the Tangut. Here we see how they dressed, the way they slaughtered animals, and the way they burned bundles of money as a sacrifice to ensure the recovery of the sick.
The music of the spheres in Tangut Society

Horoscopes and astrology were important for the Tangut, and special temples were often erected to the Planet gods, and Buddha's benevolence was needed to tame any misfortunes emanating from the planets. The Tangut names for the planets are translations from the Chinese, and the Chinese style is apparent, but in this painting the influence of the Silk Road can be felt clearly - the twelve signs of the Greek zodiac are portrayed to the left and right of the Buddha, as are the twenty eight signs of the Indian zodiac, shown in the form of Chinese officials.

Music and the Tangut court
In the lower right hand corner of the painting Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46] we see a group of four courtiers, two dancing, two playing musical instruments as their horses graze and a banner flaps gently in the breeze. This is the only known painting with a concert shown in it. The stringed instrument is of a kind common in Central Asia, and the bamboo flute was widespread throughout Asia. Compare the stringed Tangut instrument to the lute held by Planet Deity of Venus in the painting Planet Deities [Catalogue No. 57], an instrument imported from the Chinese court.

Seeing Elephants
Elephants sometimes appear in Buddhist paintings. Often the thrones of Bodhisattvas are carried on the backs of elephants, such as in the painting of Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 48]. In other paintings, such as in the painting of Samantabhadra [Catalogue No. 51], elephants appear to be flattened, to emphasise their importance of the figures above them. Some scholars think that these elephants show an Indian influence on Tangut paintings. Elephants were common in India, and the elephant-headed god Ganesh plays an important part in the Hindu religion.

Name the Deity
Often figures in Buddhist paintings can be identified by what they are wearing, how they are standing, or what they are holding in their hands. In this sculpture of a stupa [Catalogue No. 16], four deities are shown, all wearing Chinese-style armour. Vaishravana is holding a trident and a small stupa. Virupaksa is holding a snake and a jewel. Dhrtarastra is playing a lute, and Virudhaka is holding a sword, and a lasso with which to capture demons.
Buddha and Planet Divinities [Catalogue No. 57]
Tibetan, Chinese or Central Asian?

"Far to the west stand the mountains of Tibet
Far to the east stand the lowlands of China"
12th century Tangut verse

As the Tanguts were at the crossroads of three cultures: the Chinese, the Tibetan, and the Central Asian, it is natural that Tangut art should draw from each of the three styles of painting. The Bodhisattva Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46] is painted in a Chinese style, as is the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta [Catalogue No. 53]. In Chinese paintings, colours do not usually have special meanings, but are used to convey a general feeling. Compare this to the painting of the fierce protector deity Acala [catalogue No. 32], painted in a striking Tibetan style. In Tibetan paintings, every colour has an important meaning; for instance when colours symbolise vices, blue is hate, yellow is pride, and white is delusion. Here the painting is both symmetrical and highly coloured. A painting of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara [catalogue No. 14] looks different from both of them. This Tangka clearly shows the features of Central Asian style.

As well as taking a single borrowed style, the art of the Tangut sometimes combined features of each in the same picture, such as in The Amitabha Pure Land [Catalogue No. 43] in which the main part of the painting is in the Chinese style, while the Buddha figures at the top of the painting are in the Tibetan style. On other occasions, in fact quite rarely, Tangut artists tried to combine all three styles to create a distinctive, uniquely Tangut style. This Tangut style can be seen in the painting Samantabhadra [Catalogue No.52].

Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta [Catalogue No. 53]
Samantabhadra [Catalogue No. 52]
The Amithaba Pure land [Catalogue No. 43]
Avalokiteshvara [Catalogue No. 14]
Acala [Catalogue No. 32]
Tangut Art: the marriage of China and Tibet

The main image in the scroll painting *Guanyin, Moon in Water* [Catalogue No. 46] is the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Guanyin is his Chinese name, although he is known in other Buddhist countries by different names: in Japan he is known as Kannon, and in Tibet as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Here he is shown with the features of two different Guanyin Bodhisattvas mixed together in the same picture, the 'White-robed' Guanyin (you can see the white shawl thrown over his dress) and the 'Willow-branch' Guanyin (a vase on the table contains a willow branch to ward off evil).

Chinese-style paintings often stress the link between heaven and earth, as you can see in the painting of the *Guanyin, Moon in Water*. In the lower corner is the body of a dead Tangut man wearing and embroidered hat. Above him hovers the figure of the Bodhisattva. The two areas are only separated by a thin strip of land.

Chinese-influenced paintings often have strongly asymmetrical compositions. This means that one side of the painting is *not* the same as the other - your face is *symmetrical*; you have one eye on either side of your nose. Compare this painting to the tangka of the Vajrasana Buddha [Catalogue No. 02]. Tangkas are paintings on fabric were made to be easily rolled. In this painting the composition is very symmetrical and balanced, with similar elements appearing on either side of the composition.

Detail, Guanyin, Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 46]
Guanyin Moon in Water [Catalogue No. 47]
Guanyin [Catalogue No.48]
Vajrasana Buddha [Catalogue No. 02]
The passing of the Tangut

The empire of the Tangut, between Tibet and China, lasted less than three short centuries. By the beginning of the twelfth century, the Mongols led by Genghis Khan were gathering strength as the Great Khan and the 'Golden Horde' subdued all rivals on the Mongolian steppes.

The Tangut were keenly aware of the rising power on their northernmost border. In 1205 Genghis Khan, Khan of All the Mongols, launched his first attack on the Tangut state, sweeping across the northern frontier to pillage the western provinces of the Tangut Empire. As a consequence of the devastating defeat, the Tangut Empress Lou, the Emperor's mother plotted to replace the Emperor Chun-you with his cousin An-quan.

An-quan was no more successful against the ravages of the Great Khan and the Golden Horde, and to make peace, he gave one of his daughters to be the third wife of Genghis Khan. Not satisfied, Khan forced An-quan to become his servant, and in 1211, the disgraced An-quan gave up his throne.

After several years of uneasy peace with the Mongols, the Tangut clumsily tried to mount a resistance to the power of the Khan. In 1225 the shadow of the Great Khan himself fell across the Tangut, and vowed to destroy the Tangut 'to the very last slave'. The Horde swept across the Empire like a brush fire. One of the first towns to fall was Khara Khoto, in the north. Mongol legend has it that a 'rich black general' buried his treasure in a deep well in the northwest corner of the town. His treasure was considerable: manuscripts, paintings, jewels, and over 50 tonnes of silver alone. He then killed his son and daughter so they would not be tortured by the attackers. In the final battle for Khara Khoto, the general himself was killed and his armies destroyed. The town was burned to the ground but the vast treasure was never found.

In 1227 the aging Genghis Khan died on Tangut soil, and the Tanguts were hunted down and slaughtered without mercy, and the once great Tangut Empire fell, became a Mongol province, and passed out of memory as the desert claimed its ruins.
The last expedition

Kozlov's kept dreaming of future journeys to Khara Khoto. He had wanted to return in 1911, but was delayed. Two years later, the First World War made travel to Mongolia impossible. Finally, in 1923, fourteen years after he last saw the ruins of the 'Dead town', Kozlov set out on the last expedition of his life. His personal mission, to bring back the treasures of Tangut art he had buried so many years ago - the huge clay statues.

He arrived in Urga with a Buick motorcar, piled high with baggage like a camel, and tried to reach Khara Khoto again, a place he had kept secret, not even noting the exact place. He stumbled across the trackless desert, through its monotonous hills and plains, finally reaching the spot that he thought he remembered so well. There was nothing, nothing at all to be found. Everything was covered, buried in sand. The spot where he had buried the statues could not be found. Kozlov kept driving round and round in the big Buick, but no matter how he motored back and forth, this time, Khara Khoto did not reveal itself.

For three years he searched, but the sands had moved, and the treasure was never found. Kozlov saw that Khara Khoto, its artifacts and its legends, was slowly being swallowed by the desert. Kozlov last saw the 'Dead Town', his beloved Khara Khoto, in 1926, but the treasure he had buried had disappeared. To this day it sleeps somewhere under the shifting Mongolian sands.
Maybe
one fine evening, many, many years from now,
under the first full moon of summer, the court musicians will meet in the vastness of the Mongolian steppes to play music among the dunes.
The sound of the frail wooden flute will float over the desert, and the drifting sands will part again to reveal the sleeping treasures of the Tangut, the empire at the crossroads, the meeting point of three cultures: the Chinese, the Central Asian and the Tibetan.

And the moon will ride high over Khara Khot, cradled in the vastness of the Mongolian steppes, at the sources of the Yellow River, between the high white lands of Tibet and China.