



Xuanzang - The Truth About the Sutra Requesting Journey of Great Monk of the Tang Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang) is one of the Silk Road's most famous Buddhist pilgrims and is as well known in Asia as Marco Polo is in the West, who advanced to the western countries to get books and pay worship the sacred relics. He noticed the hardships and dangers of the route and the difficulty of finding shelter or entertainment in the different countries visited by their successors, pilgrims to the same spots.

He was also the most popular translator who pronounced the interaction between China and India in the early Tang dynasty after returning to China. He entered a monastery at twelve, following his older brother's footsteps. He was a charismatic figure deeply immersed in Buddhist thought and practice.

In the seventh century, he traveled from China to India on the Silk Road. Like other Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, the main reason Xuanzang is to assume the arduous journey to India was to go to the holy land of Buddhism in India to obtain the true scriptures instead of relying on the sometimes, confusing translations then available in China. Disappointed with the translations of Indian Buddhist texts in China that he had seen before, Xuanzang also hoped to study with famous religious teachers and see the Lord Buddha's sacred places.

From 629 to 645 CE, he traveled an astonishing 10,000 miles during his journey since Buddhism is the first world religion, a universal system of beliefs that spread from India to Sri Lanka, Burma, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia.

In learning about Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India, we will understand how the difficult journey brought Buddhism to East Asia over the Silk Road. How has it played a role in China's Buddhism?

Therefore, this writing mainly studies traces of the 7th-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang (602-664 CE) on the Silk Roads. From Chang'an through Central Asia, he crossed the Taklamakan Desert to India. His journey through the beautiful Buddhist art that he saw and to see him examines the multiple sites of cross-cultural exchange - religious, artistic, political, cultural in the context of the two great cultures of Asia-India and China. Hence, the purpose and meaning of Xuanzang's pilgrimage to Buddhism through the Silk Road - the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, in which Xuanzang played such a crucial role. Those are the reasons why the writer chooses to research for this paper.

Introduction

China is considered a country with a rich history and cultural depth. With the traditional "self-reliance," the Chinese people have established these invaluable cultural heritages for thousands of years. One of them is Buddhist thought. Buddhism was introduced into China in the early years of Central Asia, but the development in the second century (reign of the Ming Emperor, the Later Han). Since then, throughout the Chinese dynasties, the Buddhist ideology has always kept a unique position in society, which is applied to manage Emperors' society. Chinese history also has names associated with its transition to Confucianism or Buddhism, including Tang Xuanzang – a Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveler, and translator who described the interaction between China and India in the early Tang dynasty. Xuanzang is the most famous of all Buddhist pilgrims. He entered a monastery at the age of fourteen, following in the footsteps of his older brother. He was a charismatic figure deeply immersed in Buddhist thought and practice.

Like other Chinese pilgrims before it, the idea was that one of Xuanzang's main reasons for being determined to make the arduous journey to the West was his dissatisfaction with current Indian Buddhist translations available in China. So, he wanted to find the original scriptures at the origin of Buddhism and learn the teachings directly from the Indian teachers. Mainly, it is possible to make pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites associated with the Buddha.

During his journey, from 629 to 645 CE, he traveled an astonishing 10,000 miles¹. His unshakeable determination to go to India would, even in his lifetime, make his story the stuff of legend. He became a character in the novel and a folk religious hero. It inspired the novel *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng'en during the Ming dynasty, around nine centuries after Xuanzang's death. In this story, Tang Seng and his disciples had to go through countless dangers and hardships to get to the West to ask for the true scriptures and bring them back to China. Many people still think that the characters in this novel are all fictitious. However, Tang Seng is a natural person in history with the name Tang Xuanzang (Hsüan-Tsang). Although there are many other details in the novel, it must be admitted that the journey to India to find the righteous path of this Great monk has made the next generation respect and admire it. In this article, we will learn about Xuanzang - the purpose and meaning of the Master of Law's journey to the right path, how that brought Buddhism to East Asia over the Silk Roads? and it has advantages for China Buddhism; how?

1. Enlightenment in Buddhism from the Age of 14

According to history, Xuanzang (Chinese: 玄奘; Wade-Giles: Hiuen-Tsiang), the family name was born Chen Hui or Chen Yi (Chen I), was born on April 6, 602 (also said in 596) during the 16th Ts'i dynasty at the district of Kow-shi (now the town of Chow-nan) in a famous family. His great-grandfather, Kin, was perfect for Shang-Tang, under the after-Wei dynasty. During the Ts'i dynasty, his grandfather Kong was appointed president of the Imperial College. His father, Hwui, is famous for his academic knowledge. Later, because of dissatisfaction, Hiuen-Tsiang's father returned to his hometown; he did not take refuge in Buddhism but kept Confucianism and was eager to read Buddhist scriptures. Chen Yi was the fourth son. When he was only eight years old, Hiuen-Tsiang liked rituals, was as grave as a prince, and was of exceptional ability. Besides, "Even at this early age, his wisdom was remarkable; he read the Books of the Sages² and predestined with the writings of the ancient sages.

A few years later, his second brother Chang-tsi had previously become a disciple of Buddha, took refuge. His brother sometimes taught Chen Yi Buddhism, so he fell in love with it. Chen Yi lost his mother when he was five years old; when he was ten, his father died after an illness. His brother took him to the Tsing-tu temple at Loyang, where he began to study Buddhist scriptures. According to the custom at that time, anyone who wanted to become a monk had to pass an examination. If they pass the exam, they will get a certificate, called a message, and then they will be eligible to be a novice.

Right in the survey period, because he was too young, Chen Yi was not allowed to apply, but he took his stand close to Hall gate. At that time, the high commissioner, Ch'ing-Shen-Kwo, had an aptitude for recognizing talent, so he came out and asked: "What is your motive in becoming a disciple?" Chen Yi replied: "My only thought in taking this step is to spread abroad the light of the Religion of Tathagata, promoting the Buddha Dharma." Shen-Kwo listened to Chen Yi's answer. He broke the rule to allow him to participate in the exam and even said to the man next to him: "To repeat one's instruction is easy, but true self-possession and never is not so common; but this child's style is challenging to find, in the future. That will be the quintessence of Buddha's door."

Due to good homework, Chen Yi was given a message to be ordained at 14 and took the Dharma name Hiuen-Tsiang. He studied Buddhism at Tsing-tu temple until he was 19 years old.

He studied all the sutras of Hinayana, Mahayana, and then the Nirvana Sutra. The teachings were so sublime that he forgot to eat and sleep. After that, Hiuen-Tsiang entered famous Buddhist institutes in the country to study hard about Buddhist theory. He was already renowned in the Buddhist world at the age of 20. By age 21, Huyen Trang was fluent and knowledgeable about the Sutras, the Vinaya, and the Abhidhamma in Buddhism.

2. Determined to Journey to the West to find the right path

At the end of the Sui dynasty, at the beginning of the Tang dynasty, the country was in turmoil. The capital became a nest of thieves, the Hunan region became a cave of beasts, and the streets of Luoyang were full of corpses who had to flee to other places. Xuanzang and his brother went to Chengdu (Sichuan) and stayed at the Kong-Hui temple for 2-3 years, continuing to study all the scriptures of the sects.

When the internal rebellion ended, he returned to Chang'an - the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Chang'an was the first Buddhist land of China; five centuries ago, monks in India built temples there and translated the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese.

In Chang'an, Xuanzang tried to read all the translated sutras to find famous monks to study, but he found they worshiped the same Shakyamuni. Still, their doctrines were different and sometimes contradicted each other. It is genuinely unexpected that so many sects with various principles and rules, not according to any system or depending on any. Xuanzang feels bewildered, unable to recognize which is the true religion.

Like the Indian fable about blind men who look at elephants and give different meanings, as they each touch another part of the elephant and comment, it for the whole. In general, these men are blind to their unrecognizable disagreements and strange contradictions between them³.

Disgruntled, he asked his brother to study religion throughout the North in the Xuyandong regions, through Hubei, Henan, Shandong, and Hebei. The more he researched those sects, the more questions he had, the more he couldn't believe the Venerables and found that there were also many contradictions

¹ Wriggins, Sally Hovey. *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996. XIII.

² Vide Julien's Religious Treatises. Translation, p. 468, 1. 31.

³ Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-modern Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

and mistranslations in the translations of Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang thought he wanted to understand the doctrine; there was only one way to discover Buddhism in India: to learn Sanskrit and then study it on the spot; his idea of Journey to the West arose from that.

In the first year of Emperor Taizong of Tang's reign in 627, Xuanzang and a few monks submitted a petition asking permission to study abroad in India. However, Emperor Taizong did not allow it. Because the country was pacified then, the kingship was unstable, and diplomatic relations with Western countries were not good. Waiting forever to not receive the Venerables with Xuanzang gave up, discouraged, and left. He patiently stayed in Chang'an, learned more Indian languages, and prayed day and night to the Bodhisattvas to give him enough wisdom and energy to make the journey that he knew would be arduous.

One night in 629, Hiuen-Tsiang dreamed of seeing a mountain in the middle of the sea, so he jumped to wade out. Just then, a lotus flower appeared to help him take him to the foot of the mountain. When a storm secretly lifted him to the top, he didn't know how to climb the cliff. On the mountain, looking around to see the vast and brilliant scene, Hiuen-Tsiang was highly excited. When Xuanzang woke up, he believed he would overcome all his difficulties if he determined to be devout.

A few days later, when Chang'an was hit by a hailstorm that failed to produce crops, the court allowed the people to go elsewhere to do business. He followed a group of migrants and headed to the West to begin a journey of thousands of miles.

3. The arduous journey to the land of Buddha

When separated from the group of migrants, Xuanzang from Xi'an crossed the citadel of Tsin-Chow, Lan-Chow, and arrived at the border town of Liang-Chow. He met a Westerner named Shi-ta-lun, who led the way out of the city gate. However, Shi-ta-lun could not bear the suffering of traveling far away and had given up. And in only a few ramparts, guards at the border advised Xuanzang to be careful. He had to avoid the five wind and fire stations, which signaled by lighting the fire when washing arrived so that the next tower watchman could see. Each station about 100 miles apart is guarded; anyone who comes to the foot of the platform will be detained and interrogated. In the end, Xuanzang was discovered by a guard; fortunately, this guard was also a Buddhist, so he released him after hearing his intention to ask for sutras.

Huyen Trang walks day and night without stopping but still can't get out of the 800-mile⁴ (800 li in extent) vast desert. The road through the desert is called Sha-ho - a river of sand, dusty dust, thirst, swollen nose, cracked lips, blurred vision, exhaustion, can't go any further. There was a time when he was depressed and wanted to return but thought again, "I swore that I would not return to the Western region; I would rather go to the West and die than return to the East and live." Then he spurred his horse to the northwest.

After passing through the Desert, Xuanzang arrived at Hami of Turfan by King Qu Wentai (Ch'u Wen-tai), who was also a Buddhist. The King respected and admired the great monk of the Tang Dynasty, even intending to keep Tang Xuanzang in the area again. With his steadfast will, Xuanzang persuaded the King to let him go in 630 and was also given soldiers, horses, and valuable equipment by the King to set out. The King also wrote a letter to the neighboring kings asking them to treat Xuanzang kindly.

Xuanzang continued his journey to the West, and he had to climb the 7200m high Pamir⁵ mountain in the Tian Shan mountains range. This area is hazardous, and the hill touches the sky. The mountain has been covered with snow since dawn and has not melted year-round. Climbing was difficult, and there were always snowstorms. After crossing the mountains, he crossed the Western Region plateau through Afghanistan and reached the Kingdom of Jiashinou (now Kashmir).

The way back and forth became increasingly tricky; Xuanzang climbed through snow-covered peaks all year round along with vast wilderness deserts. He led the white horse and had to walk along the narrow paths on the snowy mountains. If you accidentally take a step too long, you can fall into a thousand-foot abyss and be broken bones and flesh.

In this part of the journey, a group of merchants accompanied Xuanzang. Over time the group of merchants either died of cold or fell into the abyss and buried their bodies in the ice tunnel. In his *Records of the Western World*, he wrote, "I dare not even look down into the abyss, for there are countless frozen corpses frozen below for a thousand years without being weaponized."

Experiencing many hardships, Xuanzang finally crossed the top of the ice mountain and went to Indian territory. Here the climate is a bit hot; the trees are luxuriant, and the people like to sing and dance and wear colorful costumes; that is the Indian people.

4. Inherited by the great monk, returned to his country

After two years of hardship, Xuanzang traveled through many countries on his journey to India. He even reached the northwestern border of India, traveling to many cities and studying Hinayana Buddhist scriptures from local monks. To better understand Buddhist theory, Xuanzang studied Vedic

⁴ Samuel Beal, trans. *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang* from the Chinese of Shaman Hwui li-London, 2nd ed. Manshiram Manoharlal, 1973, p.18.

⁵ Pamir Mountains are a mountain range between Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia. It is located at a junction with other notable mountains, namely the Tian Shan, Karakoram, Kunlun, Hindu Kush and Himalaya mountain ranges. They are among the world's highest mountains.

philosophy from Brahmin scholars and, at the same time, focused on studying Sanskrit. To be able to use and apply it as a tool for studying ancient Buddhist texts in Sanskrit. He lived in that area for two to three years, then traveled to Central India.

Nalanda Temple is one of the most famous temples in Central India and is the supreme seat of Buddhism in all of India, located southwest of the modern city of Bihar in northern Bihar state. That is where Xuanzang spent most of his stay during his trip. And finally, he has reached the most critical place of Buddhism that he has always wanted to go to. Over ten thousand monks live in this temple; among them are highly learned scholars studying medicine, numerology, the Vedas, or the orthodox Buddhist scriptures. Worthy of being a renowned center of Buddhist monastic education.

Xuanzang became a disciple of the abbot of Nalanda, Silabhadra (529-645) - profound wisdom, the leader of Buddhism in India, greatly respected by the King. He considered suicide after years of illness and exhaustion. But when he dreamed, he saw the gods asking him to endure and wait for the arrival of a Chinese monk to teach the Mahayana teachings abroad. Indeed, Silabhadra was extremely happy when he saw Xuanzang coming and taught his disciples everything he knew. Xuanzang became a disciple of Silabhadra in 636 and joined the Yogacara lineage of Mahayana learning. He also facilitated Xuanzang to visit the temple outside and study with other teachers in the following years. Xuanzang has been on pilgrimage and studied in India for 17 years, including five at Nalanda Temple, where many Buddhist scholars gathered. Finally, he wanted to make a pilgrimage to China to spread and teach what he had learned.

In January of the 19th year Zhenguan period of Emperor Taizong (645), Huyen Trang returned to Chang'an after a long journey. Bring 150 relics, two wooden Buddha statues, three sandalwood Buddha statues, 657 sets of sutras, divided into 520 innings, and some other treasures bestowed by the kings. Hundreds of court officials and more than 10,000 commoners greeted him in Chang'an. People gathered in the capital's western suburbs, and hundreds of thousands of monks and commoners welcomed Xuanzang back from Western bamboo carrying Buddhist scriptures.

On the next day, Huyen Trang donated the sutras and Buddha statue he brought back to the Hong-fu monastery to house scriptures and icons that he had brought back from India. Due to Xuanzang's return, 10,000 people in the capital temporarily stopped working, and many converted to Buddhism. The grand ceremony to welcome Xuanzang can be said to be rare in history.

5. The four classic translators

In the year 658, Xuanzang went to Lo-yang to meet Taizong and donated many strange treasures from the trip. After that, he actively translated scriptures, propagated the Buddhadharma, and became one of the four great translators of Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang asked Emperor to write the prefaces for the translations, and Taizong wrote: "Great Tang Tripitaka Saint Records." When this series was finished, all the officials expressed their praise, and something unprecedented happened again. The officials in the Royal Family started to read Buddhist scriptures, and they promoted the Buddha Dharma.

Later, in response to the request of Duong Thai Tong, Huyen Trang also completed the book "Great Road of the West Region." The content describes the costumes, culture, geography, history, and religion of 110 countries he has traveled to and 28 countries he has heard about. With its truthful narration, rich language, beauty, and elegance, the book has been considered a significant work in the treasure trove of ancient Chinese texts. It was later translated into many languages and spread widely.

Since Xuanzang entered Buddhism, he always wanted to return to Maitreya heaven. In 664, Huyen Trang told the monks who had translated scriptures with him and his disciples: "I will surely pass away when I am 65 years old" if anyone has any questions, please ask soon." Xuanzang died on March 7, 664, and kept his ashes at Xingjiao Temple.

It understood the life and adventures of a Chinese monk who made a 17-year journey to bring Buddhist teachings from India to China. Xuanzang became the main character in the incredible Chinese epic Journey to the West.

Conclusion

Master Xuanzang walked along the road that we now call the Silk Road - where there was cultural interference and trade exchange among busy merchants in Central Asia at that time. He endured to survive through the treacherous Taklamakan Desert and continued through the high and harsh mountains of Tian Shan. The Silk Road took him through countries ruled by influential leaders, and even Buddhist kings sometimes wanted to keep him in their kingdoms rather than for him to go to worship. However, his wisdom and devotion to Buddhism convinced these leaders to allow him to leave and even helped him on this journey to India. He explored many places and had many adventures as he traveled through India, to Nepal, the home of the Buddha, and then to Nalanda, where he spent many years living with teachers and gurus, most erroneous thought at this point. Before returning to his own country, Xuanzang converted the people who wanted to rob and kill him. More miraculously, he survived deadly storms and won the Great Debate before thousands of wise men in India.

Ending his pilgrimage and returning to his homeland was equally complicated, and he slowly returned, studying, teaching, and learning about the culture of the people he met along the way. However, Xuanzang was seen as a fugitive in his native China because he left voluntarily. But before meeting the King, Xuanzang wrote a letter to Emperor describing what he had learned, and as a result, the Emperor welcomed him back and appointed him as a court advisor. The rest of Xuanzang's life was spent teaching, advising, and translating manuscripts that made the Journey home with him. Following his Journey, Buddhism became more prevalent and widely understood in China and elsewhere. His pilgrimage record helps us study Buddhism and the Silk Roads' cultures.

Throughout his life, he worked to spread Buddhism for his salvation and help all beings toward enlightenment. For this reason, the pilgrim persevered on his Journey from India back to China, bringing holy books, Buddhist statues, and relics.

Hence, Master Xuanzang was considered one of the famous pilgrims of China who played an essential role in the exchange between India and ancient China. From what he had learned and brought back to Middle-earth, he introduced new texts and doctrines to Chinese monks, bringing along Buddhist spiritual objects to perform rituals and ceremonies, and provided detailed accounts of his spiritual journey in India. Records of Indian society and moral rulers of the time. Especially the forms of flourishing monastic institutions, architecture, art, style, customs, and monastic life. More than that, stories about the miraculous power and good energy of the Buddha and his disciples are often accompanied by descriptions of pilgrimage sites in his travel records. How did the records of this arduous journey contribute to changing and developing the Chinese monks' perception of a mystical India? Though, to some people's minds, India is a sacred, even utopian country. But others perceive India as a mysterious land and the birthplace of the "civilized" and sophisticated people. In the context of China's discourse on foreign peoples who are often described as uncivilized and barbaric, these narratives have dramatically enhanced Chinese awareness of Indian society significantly.

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