

## When Asia Was the World - Chap. 1

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**Prof Tatu's Note:** *This reading is quite similar to Chap. 2 of Global Asia) but it relates the biography of a 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese monk in greater depth and with slightly greater verve, and it should be of particular interest to those of you focusing on East Asian studies. How would you characterize this milieu, in terms of "players," trade objects, interests? Take some notes and be ready for discussion. – Prof. T*



### INTRODUCTION

*In the thousand years from 500 to 1500, Asia was an astonishing, connected, and creative place. It had the five largest cities in the world, all at the heart of great empires. A few, such as Delhi, Beijing, and Istanbul, remain major cities today. Others, such as Vijayanagara in southern India, exist only as ruins. It was in Asia that mathematicians invented zero and algebra. Astronomers there tracked the stars more accurately than ever before and invented the astrolabe for navigation. Poets and writers produced literature that still touches the heart. Philosophers generated systems of thinking and justice that influence us today. These works, as well as translations of Greek and Roman knowledge, formed the core of vast libraries.*

*Buddhism and Islam arose and spread along Asia's far-flung trade routes. So did luxury goods, such as silk, pearls, spices, medicines, glass, and simple things like rice and sugar. Asia produced money and credit that traders knew and accepted from the Middle East to China, and art that fills museums around the world today. The elegance and complexity of its architecture amazes travelers in our modern world.*

*Each chapter of this book is based on the actual memoir of a man who lived, worked, and traveled in this great Asian world between 500 and 1500 CE. At the beginning of each chapter are the dates of travel. These intrepid adventurers navigated oceans, traversed great deserts, and crossed the passes of the highest mountains in the world. They knew how to operate in languages they didn't understand, among an extraordinary variety of peoples, from the Bulgars in southern Russia to the Bugis in Southeast Asia. How did they manage to survive and prosper? Some had families and friendships that sprawled across much of Asia. Others were supported in their travels by chains of monasteries and rest houses. Many discovered that royal courts across Asia shared similar customs, forms of address, and codes of honor. Learning these customs eased their way in. Along the way, these travelers found people eager for the knowledge they brought, whether the subject was tropical plants, ideas of justice, inventions, or architecture. Their memoirs allow us to go along on the caravans and ships, experience the cold and fatigue, live the hopes and fears, and know the luxury and wonder of this great medieval Asian world.<sup>1</sup>*

### CHAP 1 MONASTERIES AND MONARCHS

#### Xuanzang, 618-632 CE

Into the lush fields along the Yellow River fled two young brothers, Buddhist monks. Abandoning their monastery, they set out from Luoyang, the eastern imperial capital, for Chang'an, 200 miles upstream. There, according to rumor, a prince and an army maintained order. China in 618 CE was no place for peaceful Buddhist monks.\* Around them, the brothers witnessed the final collapse of the Sui dynasty. Decades later, one of the brothers, Xuanzang, described this time to his biographer: "The magistrates were destroyed and . . . [monks] either perished or took to flight. The streets were filled with bleached bones and the burnt ruins of buildings. . . . At this time the books of Confucius and the sacred pages of Buddha were forgotten, everyone was occupied with the arts of war."<sup>1</sup> The wearying, dangerous journey to Chang'an proved fruitless. The brothers found no prince and no army. Like other monks, Xuanzang and his brother walked another 300 miles south to Chengdu, located in the current-day province of Sichuan. There, they finally found respite and a surviving Buddhist community. Xuanzang's brother said later, "There was

abundance and peace. Hundreds of men assembled under the pulpit of the Preaching Hall."<sup>2</sup> Xuanzang and his brother stayed on to study Buddhist texts and practices at the monastery.

Who was this young monk, Xuanzang? By birth and training he belonged to a class of elite public officials who served emperors. His grandfather had been head of the Imperial University at Beijing; the reigning emperor at the time endowed the family with the revenues of a medium-sized town. In normal times, sons of this sort of family could expect to serve and prosper in the imperial bureaucracy. The times, however, were far from normal. For three centuries before the Sui, no dynasty had united China. Powerful families established competing, short-lived dynasties. Huns-nomads from the eastern steppe overran and ruled the northern half of China where Xuanzang's family lived. Xuanzang's father chose to retire from this chaos far from the capital:

*Anticipating the decay of the Sui dynasty, he buried himself in the study of his books. Many offers of provincial and district offices were pressed on him, which he persistently refused; he declined all magisterial duties on the plea of ill-health. . . .*<sup>3</sup>

Xuanzang grew up reading classical texts under the guidance of his father. His older brother became a Buddhist monk, and when he noticed Xuanzang was "deeply given to the study of religious doctrine," he took him to his monastery at the imperial capital of Luoyang and taught him the basics of Buddhism. Xuanzang entered this monastery at age thirteen. He studied, listened, and meditated until forced to flee seven years later.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism was already 1,000 years old at the time of Xuanzang. The historical Buddha had lived in India, in the eastern Ganges Valley and nearby foothills of the Himalayas, in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. He meditated on life as he saw it around him and concluded that people wanted what they did not get and got what they did not want. All were subject to disease, aging, and death. People mistakenly believed they possessed some unchanging core, some soul, but were surprised at how they changed over time or in different circumstances. The Buddha saw as the human condition people's lingering desires, lack of any continuity of self, and inevitable death. This analysis is the earliest assertion of a common universal human religious experience, regardless of language, beliefs, occupation, or ethnicity.

The Buddha found no existing belief system and no supernatural being that could help this condition. He personally experimented with the path of pleasure and the path of extreme austerities to overcome this condition and found both wanting. Finally, meditating under a tree at Bodhi Gaya in the valley of the Ganges river, he arrived at his answer. The cause of personal suffering was desire, mainly the doomed desire to stop inevitable changes in oneself, as well as in other people, relationships, and even things.

The Buddha offered more than just an analysis of a universal human problem. He laid out a path of deliverance that required neither hedonistic pleasures nor extreme austerities. He termed it the Middle Path and, though difficult, it was available to every person regardless of gender, language, region, occupation, or position in society. The Middle Path nevertheless required a sharp break with the normal flow of life. To begin the Middle Path, a person renounced all possessions, left family and friends, and retained only a simple robe and a begging bowl. It was essential that the new follower, whether man or woman, join a group of fellow Buddhists, known as the *sangha*, for training and support. Monastic vows of poverty and chastity were designed to help the initiate become free from desire. Buddhism put the renunciation of possessions and residence in monasteries as absolutely central to spiritual progress. Traveling in search of learning and insight was an intrinsic part of the Middle Path. Although anyone could follow the Middle Path, it was monks and nuns, not lay people, who pursued insight and deliverance. Lay people gained merit by supporting the monastic institutions.<sup>5</sup> Almost certainly, ideas of deliverance from the suffering of the human condition were at the core of the regular discussions and lectures at Chang'an, attended by Xuanzang, his brother, and many other monks and laity.

In 623 CE, five years after the weary pair arrived at Chengdu, the new Tang dynasty established minimal order in many areas of China. Now fully ordained as a Buddhist monk, Xuanzang defied his older brother, left the monastery, and resumed traveling to hear oral teachings. Xuanzang sailed down the Yangtze River [Jinsha Jiang] to a famous monastery, stayed a season, traveled north through his home province of Henan, attended lectures, preached, and gained some fame.<sup>6</sup>

In Buddhism, the individual monk was responsible for his own progress toward enlightenment. It was up to him to seek knowledge, study, and find the correct path. In Xuanzang's time, the institutional structure for this search was the chain of monasteries across much of China. Heads of Chinese monasteries were strong individuals, and monasteries differed in style, meditation practices, and interpretation of Buddhist doctrine.

When a traveling monk visited a monastery, he had to engage in formal discussion and debate before the resident monks and laity on subjects posed by the head of the monastery. To be successful, a monk needed to know his texts, be able to form a good argument, and draw points from an apt story.

### **Xuanzang, 618-632 CE**

After the death of the Buddha, a millennium before Xuanzang, Buddhism spread steadily within India and out from India along both land and maritime trade routes. By the first centuries of the Common Era, Buddhism was the predominant religion in the sprawling Kushan Empire that stretched from Central Asia through Pakistan and Afghanistan to the plains of India. Monasteries were an important part of every oasis town on the caravan routes from Afghanistan to China. Some monasteries were built in isolated places to accommodate caravans whose traders, in turn, donated money for their upkeep. Along water routes, Buddhism spread from India to Sri Lanka, into Southeast Asia, and eventually reached coastal China. Early in the second century CE, the poet and naturalist Zhang Heng noticed foreign Buddhist monks in China. During its long period of expansion, Buddhism divided into several competing systems that emphasized different texts.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, all monasteries followed the core beliefs, looked to India as the Buddhist heartland, and entertained Buddhist traveling monks of all persuasions. Many Buddhist writers were aware of prior travelers and equally aware of the outer limits of the network of Buddhist monasteries.

A spectacular recent archaeological find reflects the variety of Buddhist images and practices at the time of Xuanzang. In 1996, in the city of Qingzhou, about 300 miles east of Xuanzang's monastery, earthmoving machinery cut into a vault that contained a horde of more than 400 Buddhist stone sculptures.<sup>8</sup> Most of the pieces date from just a few decades before Xuanzang. The pieces are breathtaking for their preservation of original color. Equally striking is the variety of styles. Nomad invaders who formed dynasties seemed to favor styles common in Afghanistan and oasis towns on the caravan routes to China. Other patrons seemed to favor statues similar to those made in Southeast Asia at the time. Some statues wear traditional Indian robes; others wear Chinese robes of the period. All these sculptures once belonged to shrines and temples throughout the region. Because they had become worn or damaged, they were apparently ceremonially buried together sometime in the twelfth century.<sup>9</sup>

By age twenty-six, Xuanzang had become dissatisfied. "Having visited and learned from all the teachers," he "found that each followed implicitly the teaching of his own school; but on verifying their doctrines he saw that the holy books differed much, so that he knew not which to follow."<sup>10</sup> For a young man, this was a remarkably astute summary of Buddhism in China.

Xuanzang "made up his mind to travel to the West in order to clear his doubts" and bring back crucial books from India, the center of Buddhism. It says much about the continuity of monastic tradition in his day that Xuanzang knew he was not the first to make such a quest and opted to follow the path of Fa Xien and Zhi Yan, who had ventured to India in similar searches two centuries earlier. Several other monks in later centuries would make the same trip.

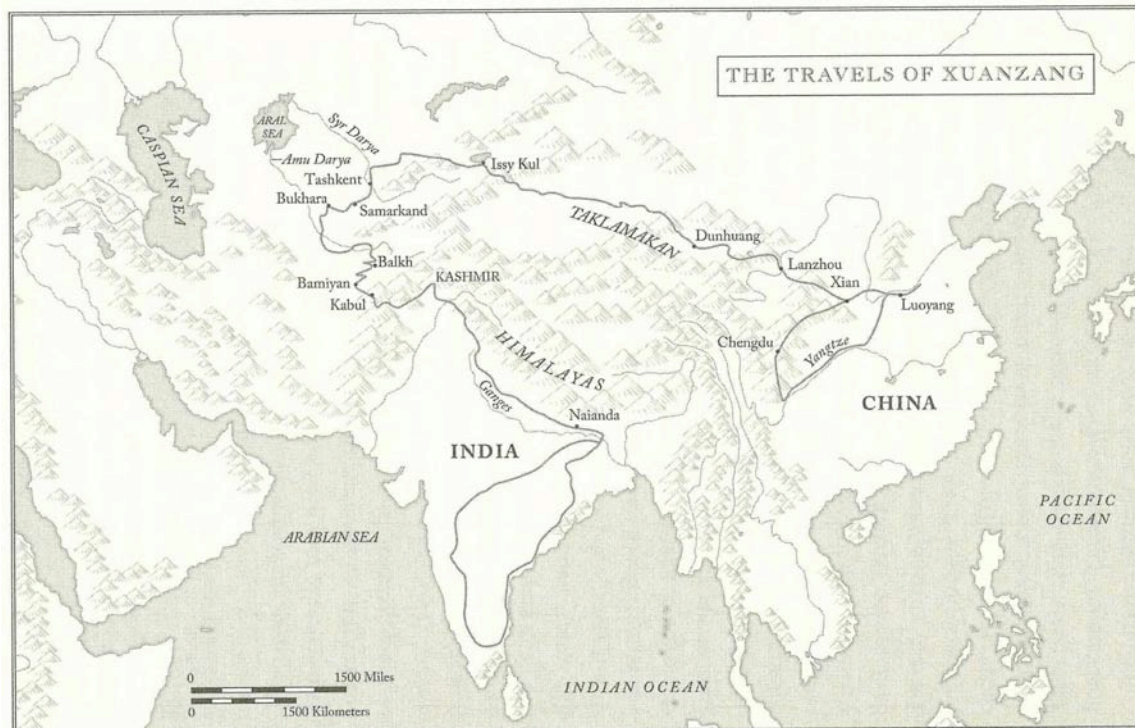
The beginning of the journey was difficult. Because of banditry and disruption outside the core areas of China, the Tang government forbade commoners to travel to the West. At the first sign of government opposition to the illegal trip, Xuanzang's two companions lost their nerve, turned tail, and left for Chang'an. Xuanzang avoided capture and pushed on alone, traveling by night, often with the covert aid of Buddhist monks and laymen. He hired a guide who had traveled to the West many times, who described the troubles ahead:

*The Western roads are difficult and bad; sand streams stretch far and wide; evil spirits and hot winds, when they come, cannot be avoided; numbers of men traveling together, although so many, are misled and lost; how much rather you, sir, going alone.*<sup>11</sup>

The immediate obstacles were seven fortified government outposts, about thirty miles apart, on the road to the West.\* Xuanzang knew that the Tang government had circulated a warrant for his arrest and return to China, but he was determined to proceed. He and his guide successfully circled around the first four outposts, but the guide then abandoned him and Xuanzang lost his way in the desert. After three days'

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\* To the east of these watchtowers is Dunhuang, one of the most famous Buddhist sites along the Silk Road. Located in western China where the northern and southern routes around the Taldamakan Desert converged, the thriving monastery was patronized by kings, nobles, and wealthy travelers. Abandoned several centuries after Xuanzang, it was rediscovered in the twentieth century and has proved an incredibly rich source of both paintings and books of the period. Current research projects include reuniting texts that went to various libraries in Europe and America.



wandering without food or water, he managed to locate the fifth government watchtower. Xuanzang was recognized, but the head sentry, a Buddhist, ignored the order to send Xuanzang back to his monastery and gave him provisions to continue his journey.<sup>12</sup>

Within days, Xuanzang's fortunes turned. Tang control apparently ended at the seventh watchtower. Less than 200 miles west of Lanzhou, Xuanzang reached a Buddhist monastery in an independent kingdom located along the caravan route on the southern rim of the Gobi Desert. Although politically independent, King Qu-wentai had traveled to the court of the dynasty that preceded the Tang and had heard lectures on Buddhism in monasteries. His own country supported several hundred monks. The king knew how to honor a learned Buddhist monk from China.

*When [Xuanzang] entered the city, the king, surrounded by his attendants in front and rear, bearing lighted torches, came forth in person to meet him. ...[Xuanzang,] having entered the inner hall, took his seat beneath a precious canopy in a pavilion. ...[In the morning, the king] ordered food to be provided according to the rules of religion. Moreover by the side of the palace there was an oratory to which the king himself conducted [Xuanzang] and installed him there. Moreover, he commissioned certain eunuchs to wait on him and guard him.*<sup>13</sup>

King Qu-wentai intended to keep Xuanzang, by force if necessary, in his country as a teacher, but the monk refused.

*[S]eeing that he would be detained by force in opposition to his original design, [Xuanzang] declared with an oath that he would eat nothing, in order to affect the king's heart. So he sat in a grave posture, and during three days he neither ate nor drank; on the fourth day the king seeing that the Master was becoming fainter and fainter, overcome with shame and sorrow, he bowed down to the ground before him and said "the Master of Law has free permission to go to the West."*<sup>14</sup>

This strikingly early example of successful personal nonviolent resistance strengthened Xuanzang's moral authority with the king.

In the Buddhist tradition, one gained great personal merit by furthering Buddhist teachings. At this time kings, nobles, and wealthy traders across much of Asia regularly patronized monasteries and rest houses for traveling monks, and supported the production of objects used in teaching, such as sacred texts, bells, and paintings.<sup>15</sup> King Qu-wentai decided to outfit fully Xuanzang's expedition to India. The king made arrangements to ordain four novice monks to be Xuanzang's attendants and had thirty robes stitched.

*As the climate in the western countries was cold, he made for him also face-covers, gloves, stockings, and boots. A total amount of one hundred taels of gold, thirty thousand silver coins, and five hundred rolls of silk were provided for him as traveling expenses to last twenty years. Thirty horses and twenty-five carriers were allotted to him.*<sup>16</sup>

Xuanzang received a royal escort to the next kingdom and twenty-four letters of introduction to kingdoms on his route. During the next fourteen years of his travels, Xuanzang, accompanied by this entourage, was a notable teacher wherever he went.

This was the way to travel in the steppe of the seventh century. Distances were long, winters cold, water scarce, and people even scarcer, but with the right institutional support, travel--from court to court, monastery to monastery, and oasis to oasis--was possible, if not easy.\* Xuanzang's entourage was the core of a large caravan. Within days of leaving King Qu-wentai, Xuanzang sadly observed the massacred bodies of a small group of traders who had pushed ahead alone in hopes of reaching the next capital before the main caravan. On the borders between kingdoms, travel was safe only in an organized caravan.

When the caravan did reach the capital, Xuanzang found several dozen monks there. During the troubles some years earlier, they had fled west from their home monastery when he fled south to Sichuan.<sup>17</sup>

In the next stage of his journey, Xuanzang traveled north of the Taklamakan Desert. Mountain stretches in this region were dangerous and cold. For a monk raised in the land of Henan, the cold must have been a test of his resolve.

*[The snow] has been changed into glaciers which melt neither in the winter nor summer: the hard frozen and cold sheets of water rise mingling with the clouds: looking into them the eye is blinded by the glare. The icy peaks fall down sometimes and lie athwart the road. . . . Moreover the wind, and the snow driven in confused masses make it difficult to escape an icy coldness of body though wrapped in heavy folds of fur-bound garments; twelve or fourteen of the company were starved or frozen to death, whilst the numbers of oxen and horses that perished was still greater.*<sup>18</sup>

Two hundred miles further west at a kingdom on the north shore of Lake Issy Kul [Oz Issy-Kul] in what is now Kirghizstan, a king invited Xuanzang to his camp. This well-watered region drained a broad area of mountains and thus had a permanent water supply in the generally dry steppe and grasslands, so it could support a myriad of grazing animals. Such a site was the heartland of some of the steppe's large kingdoms. Six centuries after Xuanzang, Kublai Khan, the great Mongol king visited by Marco Polo in 1275 CE, centered his empire on Lake Issy Kul.

In spite of religious differences, this semi-nomadic king and the Chinese Buddhist monk shared a common understanding of elite culture. One of the ceremonies that demonstrated nobility and bound together people of high rank was the wearing and sharing of silk. The king and his nobles wore Chinese silk robes in the royal tent of audience, where the king received Xuanzang's credentials and read his letter of introduction with obvious pleasure. The king then honored the monk with thirty silk robes.

These robes of Chinese silk were highly significant. A few centuries before Xuanzang's arrival at Issy Kul, silk had become a universally accepted currency between China and the nomads west and north of the Great Wall. Silk was so important because of the ecological differences between the sedentary agriculture of China and the grasslands of the nomads to the west. The steppe nomads raised horses that were in constant demand by the Chinese elite and the army; their cattle were equally essential for sedentary agriculture.

China raised grain, and only China produced silk. These four items were the main spoils of war. Successful Chinese armies seized cattle and horses from nomads they defeated, just as successful nomad raids on China brought back grain and silk. When China occasionally tried to end nomad raids through a marriage alliance with a nomad leader, silk and grain formed the dowry.<sup>19</sup>

For the steppe nomad confederations, grain and silk were important for holding together fragile alliances. Grain allowed a band to stay together through the lean times of a long winter. Silk was more complicated. Nomad leaders traded some of the precious fabric for necessities like iron, but its main use was to reward and retain the loyalty of followers. The presentation of silk robes was an important occasion for nobles to

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\* Caravans traveling east from the oasis cities carried horses and high-value goods, including jade, but especially glassware, from as far away as the Middle East.

acknowledge their solidarity under a powerful leader. "Robes of honor" came only from the hand of the leader and defined a man as suitably attired at court. In subsequent centuries, the ceremony spread widely through Asia and was used by kings both west and east of the steppe. Even at this early date, Xuanzang and the semi-nomadic king both knew the meaning and importance of robes of silk. When Xuanzang returned to China from India many years later, the emperor would honor Xuanzang with elegant robes. The Tang emperor, too, belonged to the same broad system of honor.

While the nobles feasted on meat and wine, the king prepared special vegetarian food for Xuanzang: butter, honey, grapes, rice, and sugar. Rice and sugar, though found at this royal table, grew nowhere in the steppe. Rice likely came from China by the same route Xuanzang had followed. In Xuanzang's time, sugarcane was grown and processed only in India. It likely came over the Khyber Pass and north through Afghanistan, then east along the caravan routes.

It is not known exactly what dish the king served Xuanzang, but sugar, butter, rice, and fruits suggest what is known as a pilaf. Such a dish was prepared all along the routes from China to Turkey and was known by a closely associated group of words in many languages: *pilaf* in Iraq and Turkey, *polow* in Iran and southern Russia, *pilavi* in Armenia, *pilau* in Afghanistan, *palau* in Uzbekistan, and *pulao* in northern India. Similarly, filled breadlike dumplings are called *mantou* in China,  *mantu* in Afghanistan and Iran, *mandu* in Korea,  *manti* in Central Asia, and *momo* in Tibet.<sup>20</sup> Pasta and biscotti also came along the caravan routes from the Asian world and found their way to Italy when the cities of Venice and Genoa were western termini. Traders brought flavorings such as saffron and such fruits as the bitter orange to Europe and spread cuisines that used them.

Xuanzang and his entourage traveled west along the caravan routes through a variety of language regions: Turkic, Mongolian, and Uighur. This was yet another reason to travel with a large caravan, which surely had guides and multilingual interpreters. One incident at the Issy Kul court suggests that not only specialists learned more than one language at this time. In the king's entourage was a "young man who had spent some years in Chang'an and could speak Chinese." He became Xuanzang's interpreter.<sup>21</sup>

The monks eventually reached the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Along the way, they were occasionally welcomed at monasteries, and Xuanzang met monks who had made the trip to India in search of knowledge. He regularly engaged in theological discussion and debate. Xuanzang next followed the Amudarya River [Oxus] upstream. From there the monks pushed overland southeast to Balkh, then south through Afghanistan. This portion of the journey was Buddhist territory, complete with monasteries, statues, and relics.

*In the hall of Buddha, there is the water-pot of Buddha . . . there is also here a tooth of the Buddha....There is also here the sweeping brush of the Buddha, made of Kasa grass. . . .These three things are brought out every feast day, and the priests and laymen draw near to worship them. The most faithful behold a spiritual radiancy proceeding from them.*<sup>22</sup>

Xuanzang was awed by massive figures carved into the face of the mountain at Bamian in northern Afghanistan. "Northeast of the capital, on the declivity of a hill, there is a standing stone figure about 150 feet high. To the east of the figure there is a [monastery], to the east of which is a standing figure of Sakya [Buddha] ... in height one hundred feet."<sup>23</sup> These figures were, alas, destroyed in 2001 CE by the Taliban.

Xuanzang's party proceeded over the Khyber Pass and east into Kashmir and the valleys of the Himalayas. Besides worshipping relics, listening to teachings, worshipping at shrines, and observing footprints of the Buddha, Xuanzang regularly debated doctrine. Kings often sponsored and listened to these debates. In a monastery west of Kashmir, "the discussion meeting lasted for five days and then the people dispersed. The king was highly pleased and separately presented five rolls of pure silk ... as a special honor" to Xuanzang.<sup>24</sup>

During the millennium from 500 CE to 1500 CE, the highest mountains on earth, the Himalayas, which Xuanzang crossed to get to India, did not form a religious, political, or economic boundary. Regions on both sides of the mountains were part and parcel of the same world. Both had similar Buddhist monasteries and welcomed travelers. Theological discussions included Brahmans from India, Zoroastrians from Persia, and people with other beliefs. Large kingdoms regularly encompassed portions of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the northern plains of India. Trade passed over the mountains in both directions.

There were good reasons that Xuanzang found Buddhist kings from China to India. At this time, a king's most vexing problem was building loyalty beyond ethnic or language ties. Buddhism could help.<sup>25</sup> Its beliefs appealed to a universal humanity and bridged kinship or ethnic differences. Buddhism made the

king and his Buddhist subjects joint supporters of the spiritual work of monks and monasteries but gave the king great status and merit as the largest endower.

Buddhist monasteries also provided practical benefits for both a king and his subjects. The chain of monasteries was an infrastructure that promoted trade. Wherever Buddhism flourished, traders were prominent patrons of shrines and monasteries. One incarnation of the Buddha, the compassionate Avalokiteshvara, became a kind of patron saint of traders and travelers. In a world of disease and death, monasteries were also repositories of medical knowledge. The monks often treated both kings and ordinary laity.

On the Jumna-Ganges Plain in northern India, Xuanzang found the heartland of Buddhism that he had so long sought. Here, 1,000 years before Xuanzang, the Buddha and his disciples had walked, taught, and meditated. Pillars celebrated events from the Buddha's life. Relics of the Buddha formed the core of hundreds of shrines. Thresholds and steps were already deeply worn by the bare feet of thousands of pilgrims. As his biography noted, Xuanzang found many flourishing monasteries with thousands of monks: "From ancient days 'til now, royal and noble personages endowed with virtue and love, in the distribution of charitable offerings, have resorted to this spot for the purpose."<sup>26</sup>

Through the center of the plain, however, many ancient Buddhist sites were deserted. Xuanzang discovered that "[there was formerly a Sangharama [monastery] here, but now it has been overturned and destroyed."<sup>27</sup> Shrines that held relics of the Buddha were unattended. The ancient Buddhist kingdom of Kapilavastu was "all waste and ruined."<sup>28</sup> Xuanzang acknowledged competition not only between the two major schools of Buddhism, known as the Great Vehicle and the Small Vehicle, but also with non-Buddhist Brahmanic sects that he termed "heretical." They had lived side by side in competition, not always friendly, for 1,000 years. At Bodh Gaya in present-day Bihar was the tree under which the Buddha had found enlightenment, but Xuanzang noted that as "wicked kings have cut it down and destroyed it, the tree is now only fifty feet high."<sup>29</sup>

After three years of mountains and rivers, kings and hospitality, Xuanzang arrived with great ceremony at the renowned Nalanda monastery (located in the eastern Ganges valley), which at the time housed 10,000 monks in a variety of residences.<sup>30</sup>

The monastery provided Xuanzang with quiet quarters, more than adequate food, and a novice to assist him. He found the teacher of the texts he sought and stayed for five years. Xuanzang's routine included studying and copying manuscripts, listening to teachings both Buddhist and Brahmanic, participating in the rituals and discussions, and visiting Buddhist sites throughout the region. After five years at Nalanda, Xuanzang traveled for four years to monasteries in Bengal, south along the eastern portion of peninsular India, north through the western region of India, and back to the Nalanda monastery.

Xuanzang's story is one of success. After two more years of study, he decided to return to China.

*I have visited and adored the sacred vestiges of our religion, and heard the profound expositions of the various schools. My mind has been overjoyed, and my visit here, has, I protest, been of the utmost profit. I desire now to go back and translate and explain to others what I have heard.<sup>31</sup>*

King Kumara, from the region of the Nalanda monastery, provided the funds for a major return expedition across Central Asia that carried 657 books, plus several dozen relics and statues, each of which would become the center of a shrine in China. In keeping with the monastic commitment to medicine, Xuanzang also carried many plants and seeds from India.

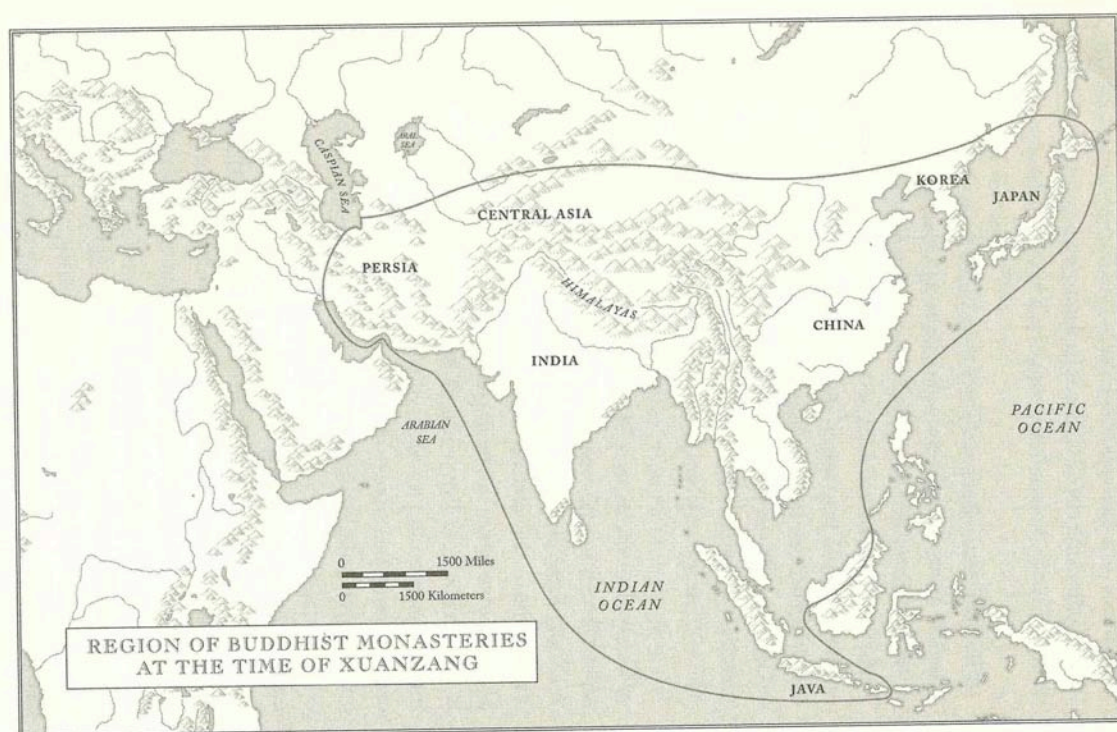
South of the Taklamakan Desert, Xuanzang wrote a contrite letter to the emperor of China. He apologized for leaving illegally seventeen years earlier, but summarized his trip with some pride.

*I accomplished a journey of more than 50,000 li; yet notwithstanding the thousand differences of customs and manners I have witnessed, the myriads of dangers I have encountered, by the goodness of Heaven I have returned without accident, and now offer my homage [to the Tang emperor] with a body unimpaired, and a mind satisfied with the accomplishment of my vows. I have beheld the Ghrirakuta Mountain, worshipped at the Bodhi tree: I have seen traces not seen before; heard sacred words not heard before; witnessed spiritual prodigies, exceeding all the wonders of Nature....<sup>32</sup>*

The reply – three months in coming – forgave Xuanzang and provided an imperial escort for the remainder of the trip.

In all, Xuanzang traveled more than 15,000 miles and still stayed within the institutional support of Buddhism. Through personal experience Xuanzang knew of the monasteries and rest houses in the cold dry world of the steppe and heard reports of the monasteries and numbers of monks in the warm ocean world of Southeast Asia. Everywhere Buddhism flourished it was supported by royal and noble patronage, supplemented by pious women and traders.<sup>33</sup> Across the chain of Buddhist institutions moved teachers, ritual objects, texts, medicines, ideas, and trade. Curiosity and hospitality were hallmarks of the system. Although specific practices might differ, all Buddhist travelers, whether monk or layman, found similar settings and symbols in Buddhist monasteries and rest houses.

Xuanzang's journey coincided with the vigorous beginning of the Tang dynasty in China. Chinese influence soon extended not just to the seven watchtowers of Xuanzang's journey but west more than 2,000 miles along the caravan routes, as well as east to Korea and Japan. In a long, touching passage, Xuanzang recounted the virtues of China to monks of the Nalanda monastery and the virtues of the Tang emperor to King Kumara of India.<sup>34</sup> In several portions in his memoir, Xuanzang described kings he met as urbane, sophisticated, and spiritual. Foreign places and foreign things fascinated the Tang emperor, who commanded Xuanzang to recount his travels.



Xuanzang's pilgrimage set off a flurry of diplomatic missions between China and India, more than fifty in the next century. Many were couched in Buddhist terms: to donate a particular Chinese robe to an Indian monastery or to receive the ambassador from an Indian king thanking the Chinese emperor for the donation. However, these contacts between various kings in India and the Chinese court had functions quite beyond Buddhism. Kingdoms in India and the Tang emperor, for example, explored their mutual interest in keeping a rising Tibet in check.<sup>35</sup> Both sides learned of trade possibilities. Foreigners were welcomed at the imperial capital, and their clothes influenced fashions at court.<sup>36\*</sup> Less than a decade after Xuanzang's journey, the second Tang embassy to India brought back both sugarcane and the technology to press it. Within the context of Buddhist donation and pilgrimage, frequent diplomatic contacts between India and China continued for more than four centuries.

Buddhism changed China in profound ways. The heartland of Buddhism was India, not China. All the sacred places were thousands of miles away from China. The largest monasteries, the least corrupted texts, the most famous teachers were all in India. Those texts were in Sanskrit, not Chinese. Buddhism stood as a

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\* Official documents and literature recount exotic goods of every sort arriving at the Tang court: dwarfs and dancers, lions and elephants, hawks and peacocks, date palms and narcissus, lac and lapis lazuli.



spiritual and intellectual challenge to the recurrent Chinese attitude of self-sufficiency and self-importance. Buddhism connected China to the outside world in ways even deeper than trade.

Buddhism competed with Taoism and Confucianism in China, but it also competed with Zoroastrianism in Central Asia and Brahmanism in India and Southeast Asia. Xuanzang stood ready to debate texts and practices of other sects and religions just as he frequently debated his rivals within Buddhism, followers of the Little Vehicle. Courts of kings across Asia were often the venue for such debates, and the participants vied for truth, honor, and patronage.

The rise and fall of competing religions was an expected phenomenon. Xuanzang observed the decline in patronage for Buddhist monasteries in the Central Ganges Valley. Two Chinese monks who traveled to India a century after Xuanzang found that more and more, Indian kings patronized Hindu gods and temples; Buddhism slowly disappeared in much of India.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, it remained strong in Bengal and Sri Lanka, and expanded in Southeast Asia. Centuries later, when Buddhism was almost gone from its Indian heartland, there was a mass conversion to Buddhism in Tibet. In spite of these regional advances and declines, the power of Buddhism to promote universal ideas and institutions that altered local cultures and promoted trade was proven. Asia was transformed and connected in ways previously inconceivable.

And what of Xuanzang after his return to China? In spite of several requests by the emperor to become a high official, Xuanzang chose to stay a Buddhist monk. He found his brother still alive and still a practicing monk. Xuanzang spent the rest of his life supervising a team of translators and teaching Buddhist texts in the city of Chang'an, the very city in which he and his brother had sought refuge from robbers and bandits in their youth. He became abbot of a newly dedicated monastery and designed and helped build a library for the texts. The seven-tier pagoda-shaped building exists to this day.<sup>38</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

### INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> This book generally uses social network theory, including older work such as Everett M. Rogers and D. Lawrence Kincaid, *Communication Networks: Toward a New Paradigm for Research* (New York: Free Press, 1981) and Mark Granovetter's work on strong and weak ties, in addition to more recent research on networks of trust, degrees of separation, and dense connections. I balance social network theory's focus on linkages with a focus on real people, connecting them with larger scale trends and developments. I also look to the analysis of the Scandinavian philosopher Per Otnes in *Other-wise: Alterity, Materiality, Mediation* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1998). He finds that the primary human unit is not the individual alone but a relationship between two people connected by a material object. This seems an astute way to describe many of the networks and relationships of the Asian world.

### CHAP. 1

<sup>1</sup> Shaman Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. Samuel Beal (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Triibner and Co., 1911), 4-5. There have been several recent books on Xuanzang, all useful. Sally Hovey Wriggins, *Xuanzang A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), stays quite close to the memoir but adds useful maps and illustrations. The same author's *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Boulder: Westview, 2004) is a revised version that adds more material on Xuanzang's visit to southern and western India. Richard Bernstein's *Ultimate Journey: Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk Who Crossed Asia in Search of Enlightenment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) is precisely what the title suggests. Bernstein went to China when the western regions opened in the mid-1990s and followed Xuanzang's route. The people he met and the conversations add a layer to Xuanzang's trip.

<sup>2</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> These core ideas and a variety of practices can be found in Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Helmut Brinker, "Early Buddhist Art in China," in Lukas Nickel, ed., *Return of the Buddha: The Qingzhou Discoveries* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Nickel, "Longxing Temple in Qmgzhou and the Discovery of the Sculpture Hoard," in Lukas, *Return of the Buddha*, 34-43.

<sup>9</sup> Su Bai, "Sculpture of the Northern Q Dynasty and Its Stylistic Models," in Lukas, *Return of the Buddha*, 54-59.

<sup>10</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15. For a reinterpretation of frontier zones at this period, see Jonathan K. Skaff, "Survival in the Frontier Zone: Comparative Perspectives on Identity and Political Alliance in China's Inner Asian Borderlands During the Sui-Tang Dynastic Transition," *Journal of World History* 15 (2) (March 2004): 117-153.

<sup>12</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 25.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>15</sup> See Roderick Whitfield and Susan Neville Whitfield, *Cave Temples of Mogao* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000). Also, Roderick Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands: Buddhist Art from the Silk Road* (London: Textile and Art Publishers, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia E. Karetzky, "Imperial Splendor in the Service of the Sacred: The Famen Tea Treasures," *Tang Studies* 18 (19) (2000-2001): 68-69.

<sup>18</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Xinru Liu, "Silk, Robes, and Relations Between Early Chinese Dynasties and Nomads Beyond the Great Wall," in Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York: Palgrave,

2001).

<sup>20</sup> Najmieh Batmanglij, *Silk Road Cooking: A Vegetarian Journey* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2004), 18, 46, 153-168.

<sup>21</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> At the time, in portions of Asia, there were competing belief systems that claimed universality, such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Nestorian Christianity. None achieved the widespread patronage and institutional development of Buddhism.

<sup>26</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>30</sup> The ruins of Nalanda monastery are in present-day Bihar state, India.

<sup>31</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>33</sup> See O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Srivajaya* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

<sup>34</sup> Li, *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 174.

<sup>35</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 10-30.

<sup>36</sup> In the three centuries after Xuanzang, hundreds of monks and students from Japan traveled to China to study Buddhism. In the first century of Tang influence, Chinese fashions, language, and literature were all the rage at Japanese courts, and the incipient Japanese monarchy attempted a Confucian model of government. Thereafter, Japan returned to a more inward-looking phase. Locally powerful families used Buddhist monasteries as tax shelters, and Buddhist beliefs coalesced into local sects. A good general introduction to this period is Donald M. Shively and William H. McCulloch, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, *Heian Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chaps. 5-8.

<sup>37</sup> For stories of individuals on the Silk Road in the three centuries after Xuanzang, see Susan Neville Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road* (London: John Murray, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> For Xuanzang's later life, see the extensive documents in Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Tripitika Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, trans. Sramana Huli and Shi Yancong (Berkeley: Numata Center of Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995).