

Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang): The Monk who Brought Buddhism East

The life and adventures of a Chinese monk who Xuanzang In 629 C.E., a Chinese Buddhist monk named Xuanzang made a 17-year journey to bring Buddhist teachings from India to China. He subsequently became a main character in the great Chinese epic Journey to the West.



He wanted to go west to India to learn more about Buddhism, but at the time, the emperor had forbidden travel outside China. Xuanzang respected authority and he struggled with a decision on whether or not to make the journey. Xuanzang, a brilliant and devout man, in the end believed that going to India was the only way to answer questions that troubled Chinese Buddhists. He started a seventeen-year journey that year, much of it spent as a fugitive and traveling under the cover of darkness.

Xuanzang traveled along what we now know as the Silk Road. He survived the dangerous Taklamakan Desert and continued through the high and harsh mountains of Tian Shan (literally, mountains of the heavens or sky). The Silk Road took him through countries ruled by powerful leaders who sometimes wanted to keep him in their kingdom rather than allow him to travel on. His intelligence and calm devotion to Buddhism convinced these leaders to help him in this quest to reach India. He was to have many adventures as he worked his way through India, on to Nepal, the home of the Buddha, and then to Nalanda where he spent many years living with the greatest teachers and thinkers of this time. Before he returned home, Xuanzang had converted pirates who meant to rob and kill him, survived deadly typhoons, and won a Great Debate in front of thousands of wise men in India.

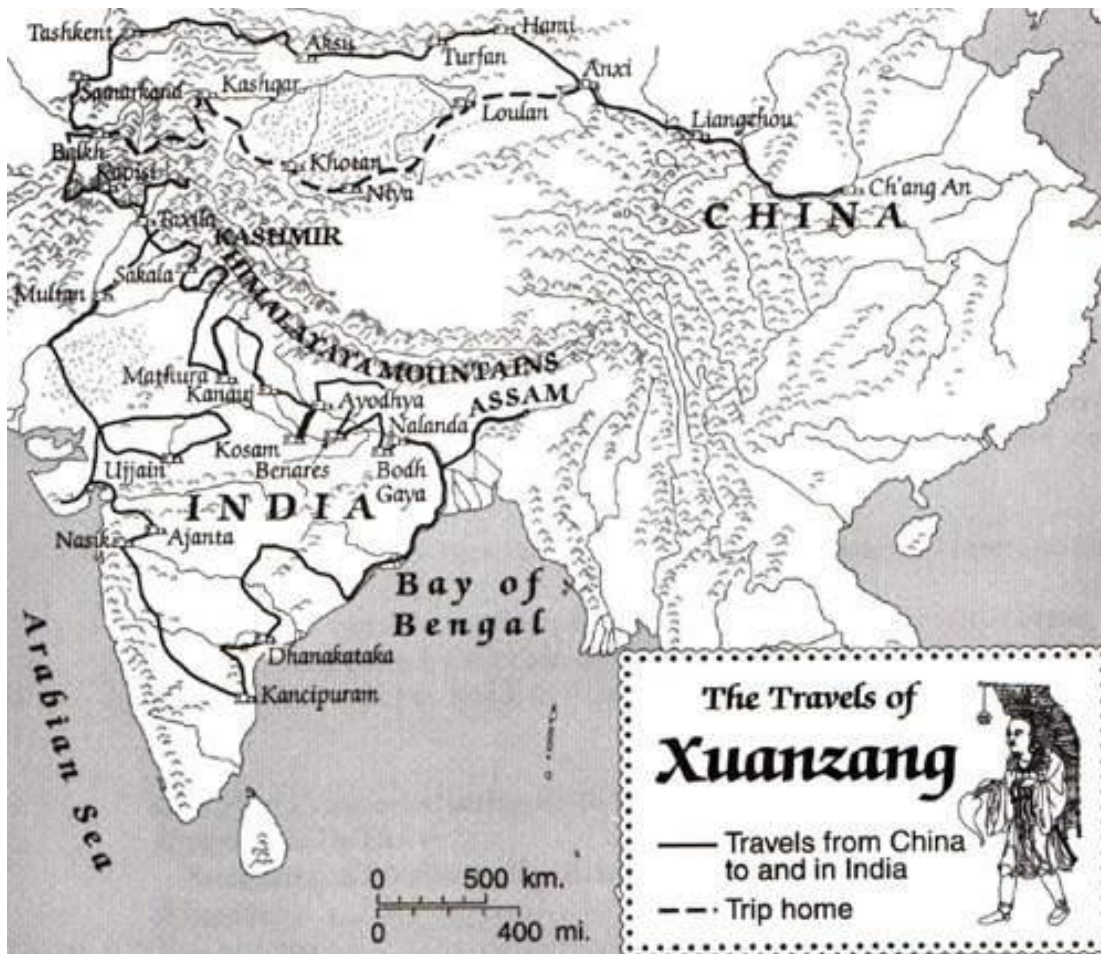
The return trip was no less difficult and he slowly made his way back studying, teaching, and learning about the cultures of the people he met along the way. Xuanzang was still officially a fugitive in his homeland, China, because he had left without permission. Xuanzang wrote a letter to the emperor describing what he had learned and as a result, the emperor not only welcomed him back, but appointed him a court advisor.

The rest of Xuanzang's life was spent in teaching, advising and translating manuscripts that made the journey home with him. Following his journey, Buddhism became more prevalent and more widely understood in China and subsequently elsewhere in the world. The record of his pilgrimage helps us to study and understand Buddhism and the cultures along the Silk Roads.



[Statue of Xuanzang]

<https://asiasociety.org/xuanzang-monk-who-brought-buddhism-east> (ed.)



**Below are some extracts from his travel diaries.
[A li is approximately 1/3 of a mile or 500 meters]**

Kingdom of K'iu-Chi (Kuchê) (northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert).

The country of K'iu-chi is from east to west some thousand li or so; from north to south about 600 li. The capital of the realm is from 17 to 18 li in circuit. The soil is suitable for rice and corn, also (a kind of rice called) keng-t'ao; produces grapes, pomegranates, and numerous species of plums, pears, peaches, and almonds, also grow here. The ground is rich in minerals--gold, copper, iron, and lead, and tin. The air is soft, and the manners of the people honest. The style of writing (literature) is Indian, with some differences. They excel other countries in their skill in playing on the lute and pipe. They clothe themselves with ornamental garments of silk and embroidery. They cut their hair and wear a flowing covering (over their heads). In commerce they use gold, silver, and copper coins. The king is of the K'iu-chi race; his wisdom being small, he is ruled by a powerful minister. The children born of common parents have their heads flattened by the pressure of a wooden board.

There are about one hundred convents (sangharamas) in this country, with five thousand and more disciples. These belong to the Little Vehicle of the school of the Sarvistivadas (Shwo-yih-tsai-yu-po). Their doctrine (teaching of Sutras) and their rules of discipline (principles of the Vinaya) are like those of India, and those who read them use the same (originals). They especially hold to the //p.20] customs of the "gradual doctrine," and partake only of the three pure kinds of food. They live purely, and provoke others (by their conduct) to a religious life.

About 40 li to the north of this desert city there are two convents close together on the slope of a mountain, but separated by a stream of water, both named Chau-hu-li, being situated east and west of one another, and accordingly so called. (Here there is) a statue of Buddha, richly adorned and carved with skill surpassing that of men. The occupants of the convents are pure and truthful, and diligent in the discharge of their duties. In (the hall of) the eastern convent, called the Buddha pavilion, there is a jade stone, with a surface of about two feet in width, and of a yellowish white color; in shape it is like a sea-shell; on its surface is a foot trace of Buddha, 1 foot 8 inches long, and eight inches or so in breadth; at the expiration of every fast-day it emits a bright and sparkling light.

Outside the western gate of the chief city, on the right and left side of the road, there are (two) erect figures of Buddha, about 90 feet high. In the space in front of these statues there is a place erected for the quinquennial assembly. Every year at the autumnal equinox, during ten several days, the priests assemble from all the country in this place. The king and all his people, from the highest to the lowest, on this occasion abstain from public business, and observe a religious fast; they listen to the //p.22] sacred teachings of the law, and pass the days without weariness.

In all the convents there are highly adorned images of Buddha, decorated with precious substances and covered with silken stuffs. These they carry (on stated occasions) in idol-cars, which they call the "procession of images." On these occasions the people flock by thousands to the place of assembly.

In the country of "the lord of elephants" the people are quick and enthusiastic, and entirely given to learning. They cultivate especially magical arts. They wear a robe thrown across them, with their right shoulder bare; their hair is done up in a ball on the top, and left undressed on the four sides. Their various tribes occupy different towns; their houses are built stage over stage.

In the country of "the lord of treasures" the people have no politeness or justice. They accumulate wealth. Their dress is short, with a left skirt. They cut their hair and cultivate their moustache. They dwell in walled towns and are eager in profiting by trade.

The people of the country of "the lord of horses" are naturally (t'ien tsz') wild and fierce. They are cruel in disposition; they slaughter (animals) and live under large felt tents; they divide like birds (going here and there) attending their flocks.

The land of "the lord of men" is distinguished for the wisdom and virtue and justice of the people. They wear a head-covering and a girdle; the end of their dress // [p.15] (girdle) hangs to the right. They have carriages and robes according to rank; they cling to the soil and hardly ever change their abode; they are very earnest in work, and divided into classes.

With respect to the people belonging to these three rulers, the eastern region is considered the best; the doors of their dwellings open towards the east, and when the sun rises in the morning they turn towards it and salute it. In this country the south side is considered the most honorable. Such are the leading characteristics in respect of manners and customs relating to these regions.

But with regard to the rules of politeness observed between the prince and his subjects, between superiors and inferiors, and with respect to laws and literature, the land of "the lord of men" is greatly in advance. The country of "the lord of elephants" is distinguished for rules which relate to purifying the heart and release from the ties of life and death; this is its leading excellency. With these things the sacred books and the royal decrees are occupied. Hearing the reports of the native races and diligently searching out things old and new, and examining those things which came before his eyes and ears, it is thus he (i.e., Xuanzang) obtained information.

Now Buddha having been born in the western region and his religion having spread eastwards, the sounds of the words translated have been often mistaken, the phrases of the different regions have been misunderstood on account of the wrong sounds, and thus the sense has been lost. The words being wrong, the idea has been perverted. Therefore, as it is said, "it is indispensable to have the right names, in order that there be no mistakes."

SÂ-MO-KIEN [SAMARKAND].

The country of Sa-mo-kien is about 1600 or 1700 li in circuit. From east to west it is extended, from north to south it is contracted. The capital of the country is 20 li or so in circuit. It is completely enclosed by rugged land and very populous. The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored up here. The soil is rich and productive, and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford a thick vegetation, and flowers and fruits are plentiful. The Shen horses are bred here. The inhabitants are skillful in the arts and trades beyond those of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate. The people are brave and energetic. This country is in the middle of the Hu people (or this is the middle // [p.33] of the Hu). They are copied by all surrounding people in point of politeness and propriety. The king is full of courage, and the neighboring countries obey his commands. The soldiers and the horses (cavalry) are strong and numerous, and principally men of Chih-kia. These men of Chih-kia are naturally brave and fierce, and meet death as a refuge (escape or salvation). When they attack, no enemy can stand before them.

<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/xuanzang.html>

Key Questions to consider

1. Why do you think historians focus on the writings of Xuanzang?
2. What valuable social and political information does he identify in his writings?
3. The last paragraph on page 4 contains an insight as to how Buddhism has been corrupted in his homeland of China. To what does he attribute this impurity?

Use specific evidence from his writings in your responses to these questions.