



**Map 3.** Xuanzang's Itinerary.  
Map illustration by Willa Davis using *Cartesia Map Art* for the base map of Asia.

## Xuanzang (600?–64)

Xuanzang was a leading Indophile of ancient China. The Chinese monk not only promoted Buddhist doctrines and the perception of India as a holy land through his writings, he also tried to foster diplomatic exchanges between India and China by lobbying his leading patrons, the Tang rulers Taizong (reigned 626–49) and Gaozong (reigned 649–683). In fact, the narrative of his pilgrimage to India, *The Records of the Western Regions Visited During the Great Tang Dynasty*,<sup>12</sup> was meant for his royal patrons as much as it addressed the contemporary Chinese clergy. Thus, Xuanzang's work is significant both as an account of religious pilgrimage and as a historical record of foreign states and societies neighboring Tang China. In fact, in the work Xuanzang comes across both as a pious pilgrim and as a diplomat for Tang China.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Xuanzang embarked on his trip to India in 627 (see Map 3), monastic institutions and Buddhist doctrines had taken deep roots in China. Almost all basic Buddhist texts had been translated into Chinese. Indigenous works explaining the teachings of the Buddha within the context of existing Daoist and Confucian ideas were being produced in large num-

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bers, and Chinese schools of Buddhism such as the Tiantai had started emerging. The influence of Buddhism extended from the mortuary beliefs and artistic traditions of the Chinese to the political sphere. Additionally, China was becoming an important center for Buddhist learning outside southern Asia, from where the doctrines were transmitted to Korea, Japan, and other neighboring kingdoms.

Born sometime around 600 CE, Xuanzang was ordained at the age of twenty. Like other Chinese pilgrims, one of Xuanzang's main reasons to undertake the arduous journey to India was to visit its sacred Buddhist sites. Dissatisfied with the translations of Indian Buddhist texts available in China, Xuanzang also wanted to procure original works and learn the doctrines directly from Indian teachers. He expresses his frustration with the translations of Buddhist works available in China in the following way: "Though the Buddha was born in the West," he writes, "his Dharma has spread to the East. In the course of translation, mistakes may have crept into the texts, and idioms may have been misapplied. When words are wrong, the meaning is lost, and when a phrase is mistaken, the doctrine becomes distorted."<sup>14</sup> The success of Xuanzang's mission is evident not only from the 657 Buddhist texts he brought back with him, but also from the quality of translations he undertook. In fact, he is considered one of the three best translators of Buddhist texts in ancient China.

Xuanzang set out on his pilgrimage to India without formal authorization from the Tang court. His illegal departure from China may have been one of the reasons why Xuanzang deliberately sought audience with important foreign rulers in Central and South Asia. He may have thought that the support from these rulers would make his travels in foreign lands and his ultimate return to China free of bureaucratic intrusions. Alternatively, perhaps, he wanted Emperor Taizong, the principal audience of his work, to appreciate the personal and intimate contacts he made with powerful rulers in Central and South Asia. His account thus provides rare insight into the political, diplomatic and religious activities undertaken by contemporary rulers in Central and South Asia.

Like Faxian, Xuanzang takes note of the Indic influences on Central Asian kingdoms. He reports, for example, that the people of Yanqi (Agni), Kuchi (Kucha), and Khotan used modified versions of Indic script. Also similar to Faxian, Xuanzang narrates, although in more detail, the Buddhist legends and miracles associated with the sites he visited and the Buddhist relics he saw. In addition, the perilous nature of long-distance travel between India and China experienced by Faxian is also evident in the work of Xuanzang. However, the most noteworthy aspects of his account are the general discussions of India presented in fascicle two of *The Records of the Western Regions* and the details of the Chinese monk's interaction with the Indian ruler Harṣavardhana that appear in fascicle five.

Xuanzang begins fascicle two with a discussion of the names for India appearing in various Chinese records. He concludes by stating that the correct Chinese term for India should be Yindu, a name that is still in use in China. Next, the Chinese monk explains the geography and climate, the measurement system, and the concept of time in India. Xuanzang then provides a glimpse of urban life and architecture and narrates in detail the existing caste system, the educational requirements for the Brahmins, the teaching of Buddhist doctrines, legal and economic practices, social and cultural norms, and the eating habits of the natives, and lists the natural and manufactured products of India.



A fourteenth-century painting of the monk Xuanzang returning to China with Buddhist texts.

Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Xuanzang\\_w.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Xuanzang_w.jpg)



Map 4. Harṣavardhana's empire and tributary states.  
Map illustration by Willa Davis.

After this overview of India, Xuanzang proceeds to give a detailed account of the kingdoms and towns he visited in India, including, in fascicle five, the city of Kanauj, the capital of King Harṣavardhana's empire (Map 4). Xuanzang reached the city sometime in 637 or 638, when Harṣavardhana was at the height of this rule, his empire extending from northwestern Bengal in the east to the river Beas in Punjab in the west. Harṣavardhana had, for the first time since the collapse of the Gupta empire in the fifth century, brought peace and prosperity to northern India; and both Buddhism and Hinduism are said to have flourished under his reign. As with other sections of his work, Xuanzang begins the fascicle with a general description of Kanauj and a narration of the legend associated with its founding. The reigning king, he points out, was Harṣavardhana, and notes his virtues, valor, and

sympathy for the Buddhist doctrine. Xuanzang then reports his audience with the Indian king, who, we are told, was aware of the reign of a "compassionate" ruler in China. Xuanzang explained to Harṣavardhana that the ruler he had heard about was none other than the reigning Tang emperor Taizong. "He has," Xuanzang told the Indian king, "reduced taxes and mitigated punishments. The country has surplus revenue and nobody attempts to violate the laws. As to his moral influence and his profound edification of the people, it is exhausting to narrate in any detail." Harṣavardhana responded: "Excellent! The people of your land must have performed good deeds in order to have such a saintly lord."<sup>15</sup>

The praise notwithstanding, this meeting between Xuanzang and Harṣavardhana resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kanauj and the Tang court. The contribution of the Chinese pilgrim to the initiation of official exchanges is fully acknowledged by the official scribes of the Tang dynasty. In fact, after returning to Tang China, Xuanzang continued to play a key role in promoting Buddhist and diplomatic exchanges between the two courts. Xuanzang's motivation to promote such relations may have been related to the fact that the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India and the learning center at Nalanda were part of Harṣavardhana's empire. Xuanzang might have believed that a cordial relation between the two courts would facilitate Buddhist exchanges between Tang China and northern India.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the issue of "borderland complex" among the Chinese clergy indicated in the work of Faxian is manifested in the account of Xuanzang's travel to India. In a conversation between his Indian hosts at the Nalanda Monastery just after he decided to return to Tang China, Xuanzang was reminded of the peripheral position of China in regard to the Buddhist world in India. "Why do you wish to leave after having come here?" enquired one of the monks at Nalanda. "China," he continued, "is a borderland where the common people are slighted and the Dharma despised; the Buddhas are never born in that country. As the people are narrow-minded, with deep moral impurity, saints and sages do not go there. The climate is cold and the land is full of dangerous mountains. What is there for you to be nostalgic about?" Xuanzang replied, "The King of the Dharma (i.e., the Buddha) has founded his teachings and it is proper for us to propagate them. How can we forget about those who are not yet enlightened while we have gained the benefit in our own minds?" He argued that China was a civilized land with laws, principled officials, and cultured people.<sup>17</sup>

Such dialogues between Xuanzang and Indians make the account of his travels unique and significant for the study of cross-cultural perspectives. It not only offers the views on India and the Indian society of the Chinese pilgrim, it also provides rare glimpses into the Indian perception and knowledge of China, seldom available in contemporary Indian sources. Xuanzang's account is also exceptional because of his meticulous records of Buddhist sites such as Bamiyan and Nalanda. These notices have already aided the work of modern archeologists and historians of medieval South Asia.<sup>18</sup> Thus, *The Records of the Western Regions* is a rich resource for historians, archeologists, Buddhologists, and those interested in studying cross-cultural interactions in the premodern world.