XUANZANG
A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road

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Foreword

The story of the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (in older writings spelled Hsuan-tsang, Yuan Chwang, Hiuen Tsiang, and other ways), who made a sixteen-year pilgrimage to the India of the great King Harsha in order to learn about Buddhist teachings at the source, is one of the great sagas in human history. It illuminates a phase of cultural interchange that had the most profound effect on the maturing of Chinese civilization. It is also a chapter in the larger history of Mahayana Buddhism, depicting its transmission via China through East and Inner Asia. Most immediately, as we encounter Xuanzang here, we learn about Buddhist belief and its concrete expression in the lives of this monk-pilgrim and the people he encountered in China and along the way in Central Asia and India. As such, it is a warmly human account of a remarkable personality, brought to life with sympathy and narrative skill. Xuanzang's story touches the reader, as it has touched the life of the author, Sally Hovey Wriggins, a person who, although not committed to Buddhist belief in any specific sense, nonetheless has been deeply stirred to understand the inescapable attraction of this great personality. All this is deftly and memorably communicated to the reader; the book is an important achievement.

Several aspects of Wriggins's technique in writing this book deserve special mention. One is that she has assembled a striking portfolio of illustrations, ranging from photos taken on the ground by herself and others to maps and photos of major works of art and architecture, all linked directly to her narrative. Another is her imaginative use of observations on the scenes in China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India as she followed the route of Xuanzang's travels; by describing for the reader the features of the life and of the physical setting that made the most vivid impressions on her, she re-creates what Xuanzang had seen in those places fourteen hundred years ago. Often they are seemingly insignificant vignettes of ordinary life. She uses them to remind the reader of the human dimensions of her subject's truly heroic undertaking.

As she takes the reader into that intimate encounter with the setting, she also has drawn very intelligently on the relevant secondary scholarship, thus introducing the reader to the state of the field and to the importance that scholars have always seen in the story. She has not, to be sure, pursued all the scholarly details exhaustively or exhaustingly, in the manner of a specialist's monograph. Instead, in this charmingly accessible book, she has drawn on the best of the literature to remind us of the essential points of fact and interpretation, in the mode of the best popular scholarly writing. I find her way of meeting her responsibilities to her predecessors in the field very satisfying. In fact, however, her predecessors did not give us a fully rounded picture of Xuanzang; the image of the Prince of Pilgrims that we gain from these pages bears us to a new level of that understanding and appreciation.

When we meet a figure of such immense personal achievement, and hence of importance to a phase of human cultural history, we may well ask how history would be different had he not lived. Although history is about "what really happened," asking such a nonhistorical question can help us to appreciate better what really happened. Without Xuanzang,

Buddhism of some kind would nonetheless have come to play a central role in Chinese civilization. That cannot be doubted, for the process of full-scale adaptation to the Indian religion was long under way in China by the time of Xuanzang's birth about 596 of the common era. He was born a little more than twenty years before the founding of the glorious Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.), during which Buddhism reached the height of its flowering in China. When the dynasty was founded, Buddhism had already been present on Chinese soil for six centuries, and from its beginnings there as a religion of the common people, often confused with its native Chinese counterpart, popular Daoism, it had gradually come to be recognized as a great system of religion and thought that had originated a thousand years earlier in northern India.

Over several centuries other Chinese had preceded Xuanzang to India or into Indian-dominated areas of Central Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, going as pilgrim monks who were seeking direct knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. Many Indians and others from those regions had come to China, bringing texts and knowledge of religious practice, to introduce them to the Chinese. Chinese and other merchants traveling the trade routes between eastern and western or southern Asia, especially those who followed the various sources of the Silk Road overland from northwest China into northern India, had become ardent Buddhists. They had long patronized the growing institutions, the temples, shrines, and monasteries, that sustained the religious community. The young Xuanzang could conceive of the notion of traveling to the source because so much had already been accomplished in making the Buddha's truths known within the sphere of Chinese life.

Yet even given this history, one must admit that without Xuanzang the character of Chinese Buddhism would have been quite different. The consequences of his pilgrimage, and of his entire life as a teacher-translator-scholar, which best reveal his historical importance, include the following:

1. It was his personal achievement to bring the emperor or China, Tang Taizong (who reigned 626-649), to wholehearted acceptance of Buddhism as a component of Chinese life. Because of him, the emperor began the patronage of Buddhist institutions, starting with his extraordinary favor toward Xuanzang himself; he founded a teaching and study monastery at the capital and agreed to Xuanzang's call for increased licensing of Chinese monks throughout the realm. Because of that, patronage of Buddhism by the Chinese elite greatly increased. This patronage occurred at the beginning of a stable and rich cultural era that lasted two centuries, during which the fullest flowering of Chinese Buddhism took place within a highly cosmopolitan phase of Chinese civilization.

2. Buddhism's transmission into China and from China through East Asia had an authoritative quality because of the depth of Xuanzang's mastery of the sacred texts and teachings he brought back from India. He greatly expanded the corpus of authentic texts available for study in China, and his life work of translating and commenting on those texts purified and expanded Buddhist doctrines. He was completely at home in both Sanskrit and Chinese; his translations greatly exceed in precision and in intelligibility those produced in earlier periods.

3. Xuanzang offered the Chinese intellectual world a greatly enhanced understanding of the highest intellectual attainment of the Indian Buddhist mind. Recognized in India as a person of powerful intellect, Xuanzang was able to penetrate the esoteric logic and

philosophy at the highest levels current there. He succeeded in giving this rarefied level of Indian thought a full and accurate Chinese cultural expression for the first time, especially in translating the basic texts of and commentary on the profound school of radical idealism called the School of Mere Ideation, the most subtle and philosophical of Buddhist traditions. This philosophical current within Indian Buddhism is also known as the doctrines of the Consciousness Only school, which, though too difficult for many to follow, nonetheless left an imperishable mark on Chinese intellectual development.

4. Xuanzang became a powerful human image that intrigued all manner of Chinese who knew him, an image that lived through the centuries thereafter. He was portrayed in popular storytelling, in drama, and in several fictional guises; he was painted in temple wall decorations and was the subject of popular wood-block prints. As a Chinese folk hero, he was a devoted believer under the protection of his Buddhist guardians, one who struggled to attain enlightenment and to bring religion to the masses of suffering humans. This image is at many points fanciful, but it was powerfully projected and undoubtedly touched more human lives than did his intellectual feats. It may be the most important aspect of Xuanzang's legacy, the most influential—if unanticipated—consequence of his daring pilgrimage in search of wisdom and truth.

Sally Hovey Wriggins, whether or not with such purpose in mind, has in this book recounted her own pilgrimage, driven by a necessity quite as real as that of Xuanzang fourteen centuries before. On one level, thus, this book records the spiritual odyssey of a twentieth-century pilgrim; that, however, is never made overt, for her genuine concern in writing lies in understanding her subject, not in revealing herself. Yet that quality of personal involvement is nonetheless latent throughout, and it adds richly to the satisfaction that the reader takes from her book. The immediacy of her sense of wonder will draw readers of all ages and all manner of expectations. In that way it surpasses even Arthur Waley's *The Real Tripitaka* (London, 1952). Written with unmatched grace and style, Waley's book makes an important scholarly contribution but leaves the pilgrim and his experiences beyond the reader's touch. Perhaps that is because Waley never traveled to Asia, whereas Wriggins has walked the ground that Xuanzang trod. Wriggins puts him directly into our company, and having thus come to feel and breathe with him, we cannot forget him. It is a memorable accomplishment.

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Preface

A Chinese emperor called him "the jewel of the empire," this Buddhist monk who journeyed from China to India on the Silk Road in the seventh century. Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang), one of the Silk Road's most famous travelers, is as well known in Asia as Marco Polo is in the West. He wanted to go to the holy land of Buddhism in India to obtain the true scriptures instead of having to rely on the sometimes confusing translations then available in China. He also hoped to study with famous religious teachers and to see the sacred places of the Lord Buddha. During his journey, from 629 to 645 C.E., he traveled an astonishing 10,000 miles.

Xuanzang was both a symbol and an instrument of cultural exchange between the two great civilizations in Asia—India and China, He was one of the disseminators of Buddhist faith and Indian philosophy in China, opening new horizons for the Chinese at a time when they were singularly open to influences from the outside world. His *Record, of the Western Regions,* which he wrote for the Tang emperor, has been used by scholars in many disciplines. Even now in the twentieth century, it remains a major source on seventh-century Asia before the coming of Islam. It is still a guide for those seeking to learn more about the art and archaeology of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, India, and China. When contemporary art historians wish to interpret cave paintings and sculptures, or when modern archaeologists seek to learn more about the sites they are studying, they look to Xuanzang. He provided an introduction to the Silk Road and to a wonderful medieval world in which pilgrims were great adventurers as well as philosophers and ambassadors of goodwill.

As an adventurer, he crossed the Great Unknown, the Taklamakan Desert, which had been called "an abomination of desolation." He traversed the icy glaciers of three of the highest mountain chains in Asia, losing one-third of his men in the first range he climbed. He crisscrossed the subcontinent of India, traversing swinging rope bridges in the upper reaches of the Indus River and facing leopards, robbers, or both in the tropical forests in the south.

From this standpoint Xuanzang seems rather more like some of the Irish monks who set forth in their tiny coracles to spread Christianity in Europe. Xuanzang traveled much farther than they did, but their motivation may have been similar to his. What led them to leave home and face the unknown? What was this restless energy, this questing urge, this passion to seek new spiritual horizons? The Irish monks were bringing a purer form of Christianity to the continent; the Chinese pilgrim was seeking to bring the real truths of Mahayana Buddhism to China.

Unlike the Irish monks, Xuanzang was also an ambassador of goodwill. He consorted with the kings of the Silk Road oases, the Great Khan of the Western Turks and the king of Samarkand in Central Asia; with the kings of the smaller kingdoms in what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. He was a great favorite of King Harsha, the uniter of northern India. Subsequently the Tang emperor twice asked him to be one of his political advisers, and Xuanzang became his spiritual mentor in the last year of the

emperor's life.

Xuanzang was also a philosopher, metaphysician, and translator of Buddhist texts. For fifteen years prior to his journey he studied the various schools of Buddhism in China. He was drawn to the sophisticated ideas of the founders of an Idealist school of Buddhism; he toured India for another fourteen years, going on pilgrimages, talking with Indian philosophers, lecturing at monasteries, and debating before large crowds. Finally, he spent the last two decades of his life translating the texts he had brought back with him to China.

What guidance is there in trying to understand this man of so many parts, this adventurer, diplomat, and philosopher? Along with the passion that drove him from a quiet monastic life, Xuanzang is clearly portrayed by his biographer as someone who is extraordinarily dispassionate, possessing an equilibrium that made him indifferent to the flattery of kings, and a calm presence that soothed even the most vicious pirate robber. "As the turbulent waves of a river do not disturb its pure water underneath so was he." This was the Asian Buddhist ideal and perhaps also what Xuanzang was striving for when he set out on his journey.

This same quality of extraordinary equanimity can be seen and understood more easily by viewing some of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or Compassionate Ones, from famous caves in China. In these Buddhas are the paradoxes of Mahayana Buddhism, the supramundane calm and radiating energy, or unearthly detachment and great compassion. By standing and gazing long enough, one begins to understand the mission of Xuanzang and the medieval world in which he lived.

Xuanzang looked down on an early Buddhism, called Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle, or Theravada Buddhism), which was addressed largely to monks, Their ideal was the *arhat,* or holy man who occupies himself only with his own salvation. Xuanzang was devoted to a later Buddhism (Mahayana, or the Greater Vehicle), which preached universal salvation to laypeople as well as monks. Much of its appeal comes from the role of the Bodhisattvas, the Compassionate Ones, who help all sentient beings attain salvation. They represent wisdom and mercy with their half-closed eyes and mysterious smiles. Xuanzang sought their guidance for his journey.

Part of my fascination with Xuanzang is connected with my love of Buddhist art, especially an image from childhood—a supramundane sandstone Buddhist head with its secret smile—and a look of remoteness such as I had never imagined possible. The combination of detachment and compassion in this Khmer head in the Seattle Art Museum was the image upon which my heart first opened. Perhaps also the lure of "the lands farthest out," symbolized by the Silk Road, accorded with my childhood among the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, one of the wilder parts of the United States.

Many visits to Asia stimulated my interest in Xuanzang. When I talked to curators from the Kabul Museum in the mid-1970s about this pilgrim and his journey, they produced a map showing me exactly where he had passed through Afghanistan on his way to India and also on his way back to China. To me, such a detailed knowledge of the places he visited was unbelievable. Wasn't this pilgrimage only a century after the legendary King Arthur is supposed to have lived in mist shrouded Wales or northern England? What impressed me even more was that they described Xuanzang in the same way modern detectives talk about a "live witness."

I had already encountered Xuanzang when I was researching the Chinese classic *Monkey,* or *Journey to the West.* His pilgrimage had inspired a cycle of legends in China, which became this sixteenth-century epic novel. But it wasn't until my husband and I were traveling in Burma with Jeannette Mirsky that I seriously considered writing about the journey of this remarkable Buddhist. Jeannette had just completed a biography of the great explorer and archaeologist Aurel Stein; Xuanzang had been his patron saint. One evening with her I ventured to compare King Arthur and the Chinese pilgrim; both had lived about the same time, and both had inspired a vast corpus of literature hundreds of years after they had died. Jeannette exploded, "King Arthur is a myth and Xuanzang was a *real* person." She added significantly that my excitement was palpable whenever I talked about Xuanzang. I knew in that moment that I, too, had a book to write.

Good sources on Xuanzang and his travels are available, for after the pilgrim's return to China, the Tang emperor asked him to make a record of his pilgrimage. Xuanzang did so on the basis of notes he had made describing the social, economic, and political life in the foreign lands he visited. He also included several chapters on the Buddhist holy land in India, its holy sites and monuments, the eight places of pilgrimage for every Buddhist, and the chief miracles of the Lord Buddha.

Several years after Xuanzang completed his *Record of the Western Regions* in 646 C.E., Shaman Huili (Hwui-li) wrote *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang.* Huili, a younger man and an expert on Buddhist literature, was assigned by the emperor to assist Xuanzang in translating the Sanskrit texts he had brought back from India. I can picture the two of them after their day's work of translating, sitting down over a cup of tea, with Xuanzang telling his fellow monk his ordeals and triumphs on the Silk Road to India.

Their two books complement each other. Huili put Xuanzang and his personal experiences in the foreground of what is a reverential tribute. In Xuanzang's own narrative, which begins on an oasis on the Northern Silk Road, the pilgrim stays in the background and rarely refers directly to himself. His style is unemotional and highly detached. He is, after all, writing a report for the Tang emperor. Both Huili's biography and Xuanzang's record contain solid factual information spiced with fictional elements. By embroidering on adventures that are already heroic, Huili gives them a storybook quality, so that Xuanzang is already on his way to becoming a legend.

As Fritz Mote points out in the Foreword, most people in East Asia know Xuanzang. His image in the popular culture is a powerful, albeit fanciful, one. His role as a Chinese folk religious hero is a vital part of his legacy.

The Xuanzang I present in this biographical account is also an intellectual, a theologian, a translator of great precision, a diplomat, and a keen journalistic observer. I have not stinted in presenting his substantial achievements that will endure, as they have for centuries already. Yet the religious hero, the man every Chinese knows and loves, is in this book too.

I have tried to capture the appeal of Xuanzang as a folk hero by using italics and simple language, as I distilled the best of his two biographers, Huili and Li Yongshi, to make their stories more vivid. These are dramatic incidents showing his visions, how his religious devotion saved him from death by starvation, robbers, and pirates. Sometimes the stories are dreams and omens foretelling his fate or accounts of great courage and triumph.

Unfamiliar names of people and places, difficult Buddhist nomenclature, and arcane

language in their accounts are daunting. If only Xuanzang's name had been simple like Marco Polo's. As it is, his name was written in a bewildering variety of ways even before China adopted its modern pinyin system of spelling in 19s8. In the earlier Wade-Giles system, he was known as Hsuan-tsang, Hhuen Kwan, Hiouen Tsiang, Hiouen Thsang, Hiuen Tsiang, Hsuan Chwang, Hsuan Tsiang, and Hwen Thsang. Additional ways of spelling his name are Yuan Chang, Yuan Chuang, Yuen Chwang, and Yuan Chwang. Place-names undergo many transformations. The great Tang capital was known as Ch'angan in Wade-Giles spelling and Chang'an in pinyin spelling. It then became known as Sian in Wade-Giles; now it is Xi'an in pinyin. The countless names on the Silk Roads are even worse, for art historians have used Turkic, Uighur, and other names for some of the sites. For example, some old Turkic names on the Silk Road are still in use, such as Bezeklik or Dandan Oiluq. Because readers, in following Xuanzang's journey, may want to examine modern maps with pinyin spelling or twentieth-century Indian names, I have used both modern and the best-known earlier usages.

Added to the spelling difficulty is a generous sprinkling of the nearly indecipherable titles of Buddhist Sanskrit texts and obscure Buddhist terminology used by Buddhist writers. To take a sample from Huili at random: "In a mango wood east of Ghosilarama were the old foundations of the house in which Asanga P'usa composed the Hsien-yang-sheng-chiao-lun." Maybe this combination of spelling and terminology is one of the reasons that Xuanzang is not better known in the West.

Rene Grousset's *In the Footsteps of the Buddha,* with its emphasis on art as illuminating the culture of a brilliant era in Buddhist history—the seventh century—whetted my interest in Xuanzang. But the real inspiration for me was Xuanzang himself, the individual behind the extraordinary achievements. By retracing his path, I sought to rediscover Xuanzang as a person of deep religious feeling with a powerful mind, a man of adventure with a strong personality and a gift for friendship.

The peculiar qualities of the man sometimes seem to be overwhelmed by the legends that grew up about him, even in his lifetime. Yet there were moments when he showed human frailties, such as when he, surrounded by Indian monks who dismissed China as inferior, staunchly defended his homeland. He was very Confucian in his reactions to some of the excesses of Hinduism, so that he was driven to comment, "the naked man who covered his body with ashes is like a cat who has slept in the chimney corner." After almost twenty years of seeking the truths of Buddhist philosophy, he arranged to study with the pundit Jayasena, asking him for explanations of passages *that still caused him doubt.* What tenacious truth seeking! Finally his anguish welled up at Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha had attained enlightenment. He wondered in what cycle of life he had been at the time when the Buddha perfected himself in wisdom; he reflected on the depth and weight of his own imperfection and wept. When his great teacher at Nalanda died, he said that he felt "his heart was deeply stabbed and he could not recover from such a wound."

When he defended his country, when he had doubts, when he wept at Bodh Gaya, when he mourned the death of the head of Nalanda, those were the moments when he broke the mold of the ideal Buddhist. Those were the times when I no longer followed in his shadow on the pilgrim road. Instead he had become fully human and I felt that he was by my side.

Sally Hovey Wriggins

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S.H.W.

Notes on Spelling and Pronunciation

One reason so little Central Asian scholarship has been made available to the general public in the United States is the tremendous task of presenting Chinese, Indian, and Central Asian names in a clear and simple way. It has proved impossible to adopt a uniform system of orthography for this book because there are too many differences in sources and scholarly traditions as well as discrepancies between ancient and modern names. I have tried to encourage readability by confining complicated elements to the glossary.

Chinese Orthography

For Chinese words I have used the pinyin system throughout the book. This system, adopted by the Chinese government in 1958, superseded the Wade-Giles method of romanizing Chinese names. If the spellings differ significantly, I have listed the Wade-Giles spelling in parentheses at the first use of the name in the text. I have also listed the Wade-Giles spelling in parentheses in the Glossary. When unfamiliar names have been spelled in the Wade-Giles system in extracts from works published in English, I have added the pinyin spelling in brackets.

Pronunciation of Chinese names presents perhaps the largest hurdle. However, according to Madge Huntington, pinyin words are pronounced more or less according to the rules of English phonetics. There are five significant exceptions:

C: *C* followed by vowel(s) is pronounced "ts" as in its,· thus Cao Cao becomes "Tsao Tsao."

OU; *OU* is pronounced like the "oe" in hoe. Zhou, as in Zhou dynasty, becomes "joe."

Z: *Z* is pronounced like the "j" in déjà vu or *J*acques,

Q: Q is pronounced "ch" as chin. Thus Qin and Qing (dynasties) become *"ch*in. and *ch*ing."

X; *X* is spoken like a lisped "s"—also described as an aspirated "s" or "hs." Xi'an becomes "*H*si-ahn"; Xuanzang becomes "*H*su-wan Tsahng."

Local Names

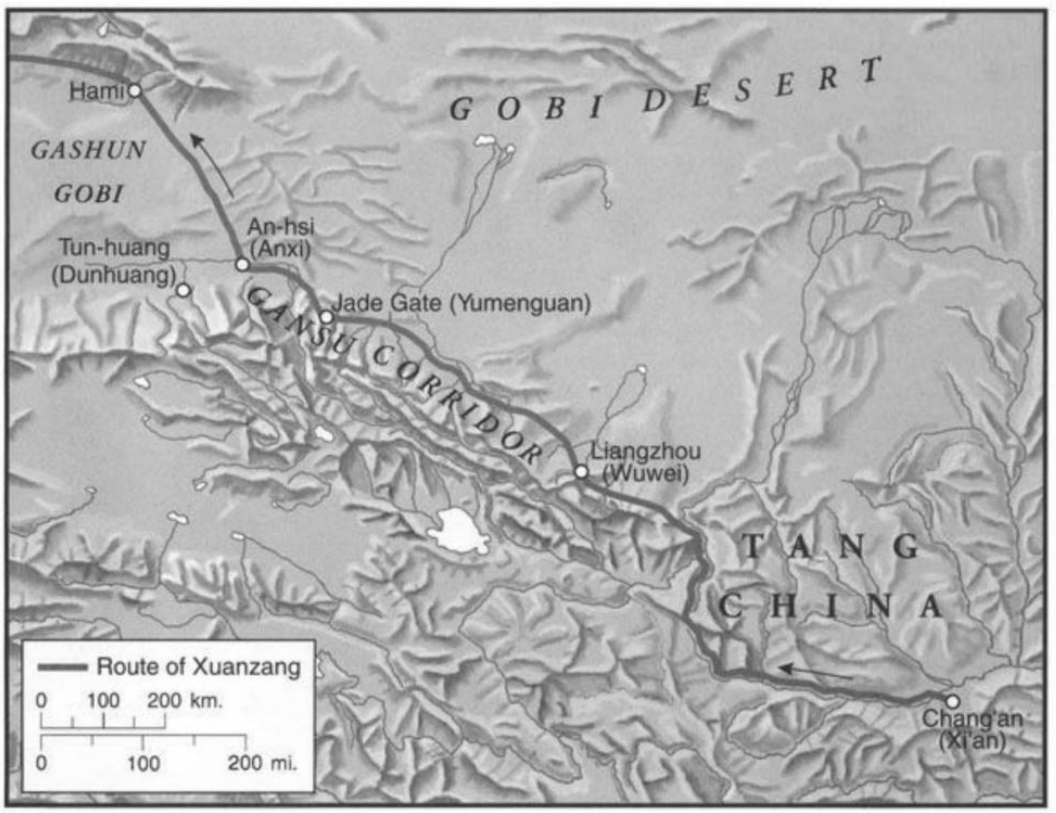
In the case of places, I have usually taken the best-known name: Kash-gar instead of Kashi; Khotan instead of Hotan, Hetan, He-tien, Yutian, or Kustana. Some of the alternative names are included in the Glossary.

Indian/Sanskrit

In keeping with modern practice, I have eliminated diacritical marks in Indian and Sanskrit words. Names of important Buddhist texts appear in English in the book; Sanskrit equivalents appear in the Glossary. When pronouncing words, one must sound each letter. Vowels are pronounced as in Italian; consonants as in English. The sound of every letter is invariable:

C: *C* is pronounced "ch" as in *"ch*ur*ch."*
H: When *h* appears after *p, t, d, g, b,* or *k,* it begins a new syllable. For example, *ph* as in *"*u*ph*ill,*"* not as in *"ph*iloso*phy."*
V: *V* is pronounced like *w.*
A: *A* is pronounced liked the second *a* in *"*America.*"*
E: *E* is pronounced like the French *é,* as in *"été."*
I: I is pronounced "ee" like the *i* in "L*i*ter."

ONE
THE PILGRIM & THE EMPEROR



MAP 1.1 *Itinerary of Xuanzang on the Silk Road in China (from Chang'an to Hami) (Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)*

IN 629 C.E. A YOUNG MONK named Xuanzang left China with a warrant on his head; he departed in secret by night. He made his way safely past five watchtowers in the desert and the Jade Gate, the last outpost of the Tang Empire, The fears of this solitary pilgrim were not over, for he was traveling against the wishes of the Emperor Taizong (T'ai-tsung, 626-649 C.E.) (Fig. 1.1).

This young ruler of the Tang dynasty had little sympathy for Buddhism at the time and did not want Xuanzang or any other of his subjects in the dangerous western regions. His power was far from secure and he was still grappling with the hostility and even treachery of several of the peoples of Central Asia. Disobeying the emperor would carry a heavy price, but Xuanzang was determined to go on a pilgrimage to the holy land of Buddhism in India.[1]

In April 645, after his 10,000-mile quest for truth to India, the pilgrim returned and approached the Tang capital Chang'an, modern Xi'an. The news of his arrival soon spread; the streets were filled to overflowing, so much so that Xuanzang could not make his way

through the crowds. People had heard about his pilgrimage to far-off and strange lands and wanted to see him. He was obliged to spend the night by a canal on the outskirts of the city. The magistrates, fearing that a large number of people would be crushed in the crowd, ordered everyone to stand quietly and burn incense. The emperor was away at the time, but an audience was arranged. A huge procession of monks carried the relics, images, and books that Xuanzang had brought back with him from India. The return of a hero.

In the sixteen years between Xuanzang's lonely departure and his triumphant reentry in 645, both the pilgrim and the emperor had succeeded in the eyes of the world. The twenty-seven-year-old fugitive had become China's best-known Buddhist and one of the most remarkable travelers of all time.[2] The thirty-year-old emperor, who was of Turkish-Chinese descent and therefore an expert horseman, had become one of China's greatest emperors, presiding over the expanding Tang Empire (Fig. 1.2)

Xuanzang accomplished his religious mission and returned safely with a large collection of Buddhist scriptures. He had seen "traces not seen before, heard sacred words not heard before, witnessed spiritual prodigies exceeding those of nature." He had consulted with the rulers of the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads; the Great Khan of the Western Turks; King Harsha, uniter of northern India; and many potentates in between. He would remember a close friendship with the head of India's most illustrious monastery all his life. He had crossed the most dangerous rivers and three of the highest mountain ranges in Asia (Fig. 1.3).

FIGURE 1.1 *Portrait of the Emperor Taizong, who at first forbade the young monk Xuanzang to go to India and after the trip asked him to write an account of his journey, which is one of the principal sources for this book (The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, 1947 [48.81 lj])*

Not only had the new Tang emperor consolidated his power in China; he had conquered Central Asia. First he defeated the Eastern Turks in Mongolia in 630 C.E. Then he turned his attention to the Western Turks. By a curious stroke of fate, the Great Khan of the Western Turks was murdered shortly after Xuanzang's visit; six months later his mighty empire collapsed. The Tang emperor then began to reestablish protectorates over the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads, where the pilgrim had also been. As a result of these conquests, China exercised direct control as far as the Pamirs. On occasion, the emperor extended his power through diplomacy, such as when he arranged a marriage alliance with a Tibetan royal family. He had already sent two Chinese envoys to King Harsha in India in 643 C.E. after Xuanzang's visit. Religious missions such as Xuanzang's would extend the reach of China even bevond the Pamirs.

FIGURE 1.2 *Relief from the tomb of the Emperor Taizong (ruled 626-649 C.E.), showing a general removing an arrow from a wounded horse (University of Pennsylvania Museum [Neg. #23298])*

What a difference in background and temperament of these two men! Brought up with Confucian values, Xuanzang was a bookish boy who read Confucian classics and became a scholarly Buddhist intellectual. But he broadened his intellectual skills, and far from staying in a monastic cell, he overcame robbers and pirates and became a mountaineer and survivor in the desert. The emperor, whose early education was horsemanship and archery, was a rough soldier and heroic warrior

FIGURE 1.3 *Copy of a traditional fourteenth-century portrait of Xuanzang with a modem-looking frame pack filled with the Buddhist scriptures he brought with him from India. Portrait from a rubbing taken from a stele at Xuanzang's burial place, at the Temple of Flourishing Teaching, outside Xi'an. (Courtesy Abe Dulberg, photographer)*

who had come to the throne after assassinating his elder brother. Yet the emperor in the early years of his reign came to be regarded as a moderate, frugal, and wise Confucian ruler who sought the advice of his ministers and was concerned for the welfare of his people,[3] As

a final irony, it was Xuanzang's secular knowledge of foreign affairs gained from years of arduous travel that interested the Tang ruler, although toward the end of his life, the ailing emperor changed his views on Buddhism, sought out Xuanzang for solace, and accepted him wholeheartedly as his spiritual mentor.[4] At the first meeting of the emperor and the pilgrim in 645, both men were at the height of their careers. The experiences of the Chinese pilgrim and the political interest of the emperor coincided in a remarkable way. With the expansion of his new empire, the emperor needed firsthand information about the successes and failures of his imperial policies. Xuanzang was the ideal informant. The emperor questioned the forty-three-year-old monk in detail about the rulers, climate, products, and customs of the countries he had been through. Impressed by Xuanzang's knowledge of foreign lands, Taizong asked him to be a minister to advise the emperor on the new Asian relationships and problems of his kingdom. Xuanzang declined. Then the emperor requested that he set down a detailed account, country by country, of the western kingdoms that he had visited. What interested Xuanzang the most—information on the monks, their schools of philosophy, and especially the monuments and stories of the Buddha—were matters of indifference to his patron.

No matter. Writing an account of the western regions was a new kind of request for Xuanzang who was used to those who sought his advice on religion or philosophy. A man of many parts, adventurer, intellectual, theologian, priest, and ambassador, he had given spiritual advice and inspiration to many political leaders and potentates in Central Asia. A "Prince among Pilgrims," this Buddhist monk moved easily in both religious and secular worlds. His powerful personality had impressed both the Emperor Taizong and the great Indian King Harsha. A man of unusual flexibility open to the new and strange wherever he found it, Xuanzang was an ideal observer of foreign cultures.

Studying in Monasteries

Who was this Chinese pilgrim, and how did he happen to go on his long journey? According to his biographer, Xuanzang was born near Luoyang in the province of Henan in 602. He was the youngest of four sons, an heir to a long line of literati and mandarins. His grandfather had been an official in the Qi (Ch'i) dynasty ¡479-501 C.E.) and held the post of eminent national scholar. His father had been well versed in Confucianism and was also distinguished for his superior abilities and elegance of manner. However, this Confucian gentleman preferred to busy himself in the study of his books and pleaded ill health rather than accept offers of government service at the time of the decaying Sui dynasty (581-618 C.E.).

Xuanzang was brought up in a Confucian household, At the age of eight he amazed his father with his filial piety, a strong virtue in Confucianism. He even began to study the Confucian classic books about this time. But the intellectual vitality of Confucianism was waning,[5] and Xuanzang's older brother became a Buddhist monk. He took an interest in his younger brother and saw to it that he began to study Buddhist scriptures at his monastery in Luoyang at a young age.

Xuanzang was the kind of serious boy who was old before he was young. When he was only twelve years old, an unexpected royal mandate announced that fourteen monks were to be trained and supported by the state at his brother's monastery in Luoyang, the eastern capital of the Sui dynasty. Several hundred candidates applied at the Pure Land Monastery for this important ordination. The young adolescent Xuanzang loitered at the monastery gate until the imperial envoy, who was about to supervise the ceremony, engaged him in conversation. "What is your name? Your age?" And when Xuanzang revealed how very much he wanted to be a monk, the official asked him why. "My only thought in taking this step, " he replied, "is to spread abroad the light of the Religion of Tathagata (Buddha!."[6]

Such an unexpected and formal reply impressed the official, who recognized the boy's remarkable qualities from his eagerness, confidence, and modesty. The official selected him as one of the novices to be ordained despite his youth, for, as he explained to his fellow officials, "To repeat one's instructions is easy, but true self-possession and nerve are not so common."[7]

For the next five years Xuanzang lived with his brother at the Pure Land Monastery. He plunged into the study of Buddhist scriptures, both the austere doctrine of early Buddhism and the mystical doctrine of the Greater Vehicle, or Mahayana. Xuanzang was irresistibly drawn to this later Buddhism, whose two key words were "Emptiness," signifying the object of wisdom, and "Bodhisattvas," or Enlightened Beings, who postponed their own salvation for the sake of others (Fig. 1.4.).[8]

His philosophical studies were interrupted in 618 C.E. when the Sui dynasty collapsed. Because of the anarchy that followed its downfall and the civil war between the Tangs and their rivals, many parts of the empire fell into chaos.[9] Xuanzang and his brother fled first to Chang'an in the northwest, which the Tang rulers had proclaimed their capital. They found the city swarming with soldiers, so the two brothers, along with a large community of monks who were gathering from various parts of the empire, made their way to Chengdu, in Sichuan. Xuanzang and his brother spent two or three years there studying the different schools of Buddhism.

FIGURE 1.4 *Wall painting and sculpture in one of the earliest Dunhuang Caves in China. Center figure is a Bodhisattva, or Maitreya (these are beings who postpone their own salvation so that they may help others). (The Lo Archive)*

Xuanzang's biographer compared the two young men: "His elder brother . . . was elegant in his manners and sturdy physically just like his father., . . His eloquence and comprehensiveness in discussion and capacity to edify people were equal to those of his younger brother." He continued, "But in the manner of loftiness of mind, without being affected by worldly attachments; in profound researches in metaphysical aspects of the cosmos; in ambition to clarify the universe . . . and in the sense of self respect even in the presence of the Emperor," Xuanzang surpassed him.[10]

In 622, when he was twenty, Xuanzang was fully ordained as a monk. Shortly afterwards he left his brother behind in Chengdu and returned to the capital.

Preparing Himself in Chang'an

Chang'an had much to offer Xuanzang. It was the greatest city in China—perhaps in the entire medieval world. Tang historical sources are so detailed that we know, for example, that it occupied an area of more than 30 square miles.[11] Rome at its height occupied 5.2, square miles. Chang'an, a city of a million people in the seventh century, became the center of the great culture of the Tang dynasties. In 742 C.E. its population had swelled to two million inhabitants, of whom five thousand were foreigners.[12]

With its rich cultural life, prosperity, and the variety of nationalities that came to live there, Chang'an was a radiating center of Asian civilization. New stimuli from northern

India and the kingdoms of Central Asia enriched Chinese Buddhism and made it the most lively and influential system of thought in its day. From Iran and Central Asia came other new religions, including Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeanism, and Nestorian Christianity. Together with these intellectual and spiritual influences came many new developments in the arts, ranging from music and the dance to metal working and fine cuisine, as well as important technical and scientific influences in mathematics and linguistics. A galaxy of poets and artists were also part of this glittering capital. The latest in Buddhist doctrine and in pictorial models, the newest in entertainment and fashion, could be found in Chang'an.

A time of preparation. Xuanzang continued his Buddhist studies in Chang'an and sought out those foreigners who could give him instruction in the languages spoken beyond China's borders. He probably went to the Western Market, the area of the city connected with the Silk Road, to learn some Tokharian, which was spoken in many places in Central Asia, such as Turfan. His gift in languages would serve him well in the future. He also began to study Sanskrit in 626 C.E. so that he would be able to communicate with foreign monks whose native language was unfamiliar to him. Like Latin in the Christian monasteries of medieval Europe, Sanskrit was the language of Buddhist scriptures and monasteries in all of northern Asia.

Indian scriptures had been translated into Chinese since the first centuries of the common era. Missionaries from India and Kashgaria (modern Xinjiang), Parthians from Iran, and Sogdians (from the area of Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union) had founded monasteries in Luoyang and Chang'an, where individual monks and teams of monks were busily translating the vast Buddhist literature coming out of India. There were also many Chinese monks who had gone to the west. At least fifty-four clerics before Xuanzang, the first one in 260, had traveled westward, though not all of them reached the land of their faith. Among those who did, the pious Faxian (Fa-hsien) and Zhiyan (Chih-yen) stirred his imagination.[13]

By this time Xuanzang had spent fifteen years in Luoyang, Chengdu, and Chang'an, studying languages and mastering the teachings of the various schools of Buddhism. In so doing he formed serious doubts about some of the Chinese translations. They were conflicting, garbled, or simply inadequate. He came to feel also that each abbot uncritically followed the teachings of his particular school. Like the Indian fable of the blind men, each touching a different part of the elephant and taking it for the whole, these men were blind to the strange discordances and contradictions among them. Some of their theories were either vaguely or manifestly in contradiction with the holy scriptures. Which precepts were authentic? Was it true that all men or only part of humanity could attain Buddhahood? He was bewildered and unable to decide which theories should be accepted. Thus he made up his mind to go to India to clear up his doubts and to bring back the complete Sanskrit text of what came to be called *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice,* by Asanga,

Xuanzang was drawn to the sophisticated writings of Asanga and his brother Vasubandhu, who were the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, only part of whose huge compendium of philosophy had reached China.[14] This school of thought professed a metaphysical idealism in which the outside world did not exist but was a projection of one's own consciousness.

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,