

Tang Xuanzang: The World Famous Buddhist Pilgrim as He is known in Thai Art and Literature

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Abstract

The research indicates that Tang Xuanzang was introduced to Thais as a Buddhist pilgrim in the novel *Journey to the West*, which was published by Printing Press Books in the mid-nineteenth century, although it had been translated into Thai at the beginning of that century. The story became better known to Thais after the advent of television in Thailand in the mid-twentieth century and many versions were broadcast. Illustrations from *Journey to the West* at Wat Kuti, Petchaburi, Thailand were examined. Representations of Xuanzang and his three protectors appear on the outer wall of the Main Hall, along with illustrations that depict ten incarnations of Gotama Buddha in teak woodcarvings. The artwork clearly shows evidence of Indian and Chinese cultural influences. The temple with these reliefs is today preserved as an archeological site in Thailand. Though the *Great Tang Records of the Western Regions* is an historical account, it has only been translated into Thai and published recently.

Key words: Tang Xuanzang, the *Journey to the West*, the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, art, literature, Thailand

History of Tang Xuanzang

The remarkable pilgrimage to India in the seventh century (629-645) of the Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, is known worldwide as a major milestone in Chinese and world Buddhist history. Many hold great admiration, even worship, for Xuanzang, an extraordinary traveler. He made extraordinary contributions to Chinese

Buddhism, travelling great distances and braving immense hardships, perils, and even facing death in his efforts to fulfill his desire to visit the place from which Buddhism had originally emerged, then returning laden with Buddhist scriptures, artifacts, and a treasure trove of spiritual learning for his homeland. Through his eminent abilities in translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese, and his vast knowledge of both Mahayana and Nikaya Buddhism. He became well known as Great Tripitaka Master in the Tang Dynasty, Tang Sanzang Daseng, 唐三藏大僧. or Tang Seng, 唐僧. In Thai he is called simply PhraThang, พระถัง. Xuanzang's purpose in going to India was to locate and learn about the original Buddhist scriptures; there were many versions in Chinese translation at the time, leading to some confusion and controversy. The New World Encyclopedia records his story as follows. In 629, Xuanzang reportedly had a dream that convinced him to journey to India. He pushed on to Jalalabad and Laghman, where he considered himself to have reached India. The year was 630.¹

Xuanzang's own detailed account of his travels has become one of the primary sources for the study of medieval Central Asia and India. His travels in India were extensive and many of his party died from sheer physical exhaustion or sickness; their bones were in some cases left in the desert sands or in India. In spite of these difficulties, Xuanzang never faltered or wavered, such was his indomitable spirit and desire to gaze upon the sacred origins of Buddhism. Never did men endure greater suffering by desert, mountain, and sea and exhibit such courage, religious devotion, and power of endurance. Because of his strong will and endurance in life, Xuanzang in death has, in keeping with Buddhist tradition, been worshipped as a god of success. He is believed to help overcome all kinds of obstacles, because he himself kept up his morale and spirit under such difficult conditions.

¹ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Xuanzang>.

The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions

The *Da-Tang-Xi-Yu-Ji* (大唐西域記, *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*), is a narrative of Tang Xuanzang's nineteen year journey through Chang'an to India describing the geography, land and maritime transportation routes, climate, local products, peoples, languages, history, politics, economic life, religion, culture, and customs of 110 countries, regions, and city-states from what is now Xinjiang to Sri Lanka. Compiled in 646 by Bianji from dictation by Xuanzang, the *Records* required over a year of compiling and editing, and contains more than 120,000 Chinese characters in twelve volumes

The *Records* is of great value to modern historians and archaeologists. An important document on Central Asia in the early seventh century, it provides information on the Buddhist culture of Afghanistan at the time and is the earliest textual evidence for Buddhist sculptures at Bamiyan. The text has equal importance for Indian studies, and archaeologists have used it to fill in gaps in Indian history; it has served as a guidebook for the excavation of many important sites, for example, Rajagrha, the temple at Sarnath, Ajanta, and the ruins of Nalanda Monastery in Bihar. It is known for having "exact descriptions of distances and locations of different places." It was first translated into French by the Sinologist Stanislas Julien in 1857, then into English by Samuel Beal in 1884.² A newer translation from Chinese to English was made by Li Rongxi in 1997. It has also been translated into other languages, for example Japanese and German. A translation from the Chinese to Thai was made in 2004 by Shu Xiulun, Chinese Professor of Thai Language at Beijing Foreign Studies University.³

² Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, (London: Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1884).

³ Thangsamchang Chotmai Het Kandoenthang Su Dindaen Tawantok Khong Maha Rachawong Thang, ถังซำจั้ง จดหมายเหตุการเดินทางสู่ดินแดนตะวันตกของมหาราชวงศ์ถัง. (Bangkok : Matichon Press, B.E. 2547).

Xuanzang's devotion, piety and love of learning was a source of inspiration to his contemporaries and to later generations of pilgrims, including Yi-Jing, who took the sea route to India and back. The records of these Chinese pilgrims are the only available written descriptions of Buddhism and Buddhist sites as they existed at that time and proved invaluable in locating ruins during excavations in the nineteenth century by Sir Alexander Cunningham among others.⁴ In India, Xuanzang studied with many famous Buddhist masters, especially at the famous center of Buddhist learning, Nalanda University. When he returned to China, he brought with him some 657 Sanskrit texts. With the support of the emperor, he set up a large translation bureau in Chang'an (Xi'an), drawing students and collaborators from all over East Asia. He is credited with the translation of some 1,330 fascicles of scriptures into Chinese.

His greatest area of personal interest was in the Yogācāra (瑜伽行派) or Consciousness-only school (唯識) and the force of his own study, translation and commentary on the texts of this tradition led to the founding of the Faxiang School (法相宗) in East Asia. Although the school itself did not thrive for long, its Abhidharma theories focusing on perception, consciousness, karma, rebirth, and so on found their way into the doctrines of other more long-lasting schools. Xuanzang came to be recognized as the first patriarch of the Faxiang School. Xuanzang's logic, as described by his eminent disciple, Kuiji, has often been misunderstood by scholars of Chinese Buddhism because they lacked the necessary background in Indian logic.

Xuanzang is known for his extensive and careful translations of Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese. These translations have, in turn, made it possible to reconstruct lost Indian Buddhist texts from their Chinese translations. His translation of the *Heart Sutra* became and remains the standard in all East Asian Buddhist sects, and is the basis for all Chinese commentaries on the Sutra as well as of recitations throughout China, Korea, and Japan. Additionally, he is known for having recorded events in the reign of the northern Indian emperor Harsha.

⁴ Chan Khoon San, **Buddhist Pilgrimage**, (Malaysia: Subang-Jaya Buddhist Association, 2002), pp. 17-18.

Xuanzang's work, the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, was bestowed upon posterity by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim. While his main purpose was to obtain Buddhist texts and to receive instruction on Buddhism while in India, he did much more. He preserved a record of the political and social aspects of the lands he visited. His records of sites visited in Bengal has been very helpful in recording the archaeological history of Bengal and his account sheds welcome light on seventh century Bengal.

Xuanzang obtained and translated 657 Sanskrit Buddhist works. He received the best education on Buddhism he could find throughout India. Much of this activity is detailed in the companion volume to the *Records*, the Biography of Xuanzang written by Huili, *The Life of Xuanzang*. This book was first translated into English by Samuel Beal in 1911.⁵ An English translation of *The Great Tang Records to the West Regions* with copious notes by Thomas Watters was edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and S.W. Bushell, and published posthumously in London in 1905. *The Life of Xuanzang* was translated from Chinese into Thai by the Chinese born Thai, Kenglian Siboonreung in 1941 as *Prawat Phra ThangSamchang*, ประวัติพระถังซำจั๋ง. This book is regarded as a rare book for restoration by the Resource Center, Sirindhorn Learning, Central Library.

The Ming Dynasty novel Journey to the West

Tang Xuanzang's journey along the Silk Road, and the legends that grew up around it, inspired the Ming Dynasty novel, *Journey to the West* (*Xi-You-Ji*, 西遊記), one of the great classics of Chinese literature. In the novel, Xuanzang is a reincarnation of a disciple of Gautama Buddha, and is protected on his journey by three powerful disciples. One of them, a monkey, was and is a popular favorite whose adventures have been made into entertaining films and television programs. The monkey has

⁵ Samuel Beal (tr.), **The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang**, Translated from the Chinese of Shaman Hwui Li, London, 1911; Reprint MunshiramManoharlal, New Delhi, 1973.

profoundly influenced Chinese culture and contemporary Japanese manga and anime, including the popular *Dragon Ball* and *Saiyuki* television series.⁶ In English-speaking countries, the tale is often known simply as *Monkey*, the title of a popular, abridged translation by Arthur Waley. The Waley translation has also been published as *Adventures of the Monkey God*; *Monkey: [A] Folk Novel of China*; and *The Adventures of Monkey*. A shortened version for children, *Dear Monkey*, has also been published. *Journey to the West* is a popular fictional work and should not be confused with *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*.

Journey to the West, one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature was written by Wu Cheng'en and published in the 1590s during the Ming Dynasty. The novel is a fictionalized account of the legendary pilgrimage to India of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang and loosely based on the historical text *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* and on traditional folk tales. The monk travelled to the "Western Regions" during the Tang dynasty, to obtain sacred texts. In the *Journey* story, the Bodhisattva Guan Yin, on instructions from the Buddha, gives this task to the monk and his three protectors and disciples, Sun Wukong (Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (Pigsy) and ShaWujing (Sandy), together with a dragon prince who acts as Xuanzang's steed in the form of a white horse. These four characters agree to help Xuanzang as an atonement for past wrongdoing.

Journey to the West has a strong background in Chinese folk religion, mythology and value systems, and the pantheon of Taoist immortals and Buddhist bodhisattvas is still reflective of some Chinese religious beliefs today. Enduringly popular, the tale is at once an adventure story, a spring of spiritual insight, and an extended allegory in which the group of pilgrims journeying toward India represents individuals journeying toward enlightenment.

⁶ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Xuanzang>.

The first translation of *Journey to the West* in Thailand (Siam at that time)

Along with trade and the spread of culture, *Journey to the West* was translated into Thai in 1806 in 17 fascicles near the end of the reign of King Rama I. Later, it was published in the *Bangkok Reader* by Dan Beach Bradley's publishing house in 1874, in the reign of King Rama V.⁷ Dan Beach Bradley (18 July 1804 – 23 June 1873) was an American Protestant missionary to Thailand from 1835 until his death. He introduced mass media to Thailand in the form of the printing press during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851) and is credited with numerous firsts, including the first Thai-script printing press in Thailand, publishing the first Thai-language newspaper, the first monolingual Thai dictionary, and with introducing Western medicine. Bradley published the Thai-language *Bangkok Reader* in 1844-1845, and the English-language *Bangkok Calendar* in 1847-1850. The first newspapers to be printed on Thai soil, the *Reader* and the *Calendar* were published for only a short period before closing down towards the end of Rama III's reign.⁸

Thus, Xuanzang was introduced to the Thai public through *Journey to the West* before the Buddhist classic *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* became available. However, the emergence and expansion of the modern public sphere was still confined to the royal elite, intellectuals, contemporary educators, and publishers. In the early days of Thai newspapers, the audience was very narrow, limited to royalty, the upper classes, and foreigners. Many of the early newspapers were printed in English and reached only members of the royal family and Western missionaries. However, the situation changed as lighter reading material became available in the form of features and entertainment, and the role of the press changed from serving the ruling

⁷ In 1939 the country's name was changed from Siam to Thailand. I have used "Thailand" throughout to avoid confusion.

Culture of Thailand - history, people, clothing, traditions, women, beliefs, food, customs, family <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html#ixzz1Vz23VU8P>.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Beach_Bradley.

class, government officials and foreigners, to providing information to common Thais. Educational reform and a consequent rise in literacy rates created a wider potential readership for newspapers, though it has to be pointed out that printing was very much limited to Bangkok. The first daily newspaper appeared in 1868 and, in 1904, the first Chinese-language newspaper appeared in the capital, catering to the large number of Chinese immigrants.

After the printing press became available in Thailand, the four great Chinese classics, including *The Three Kingdoms*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Journey to the West* were published in Bradley's *Bangkok Reader*. Books became the mode not only of literary pursuits but also of entertainment.

Indian and Chinese Influence on Thai Art

Printed books became a significant site of cultural authority for educated urban Thais in the late nineteenth century. The Chinese community in central Thailand also got news and entertainment from Chinese newspapers beginning in the early twentieth century. The Chinese classic *Journey to the West* was received not only as literary work, but also provided inspiration for a set of relief wood carvings on the outer face of the major temple (*ubosot*) at Wat Kuti in Khao Yoi District, Tambon Bangkem, Petchaburi. The temple was constructed over a 30-year period, from 1901 to 1930 (Figure 9). On the outer surface of the walls, scenes depicting ten lifetimes of the Buddha and Tang Xuanzang with his three disciples are carved in teak with masterful craftsmanship. In an interview on 22 August 2011, the Abbot of Wat Kuti told me that three craftsmen created the artwork, and the one who carved the scene of Xuanzang and his disciples was a Chinese-born Thai named Chek Kong (“Chek” means “Chinese” in Thai). The Abbot said the previous abbot had told him that the craftsmen worked together happily and with a sense of humor. The work was not rushed, but executed gradually without hiring other workers. Unfortunately, there is no additional information available, as no one knows who Chek Kong's descendents are and

the present abbot was very young at the time. The Thai Fine Arts Department, Region 1 has now renovated the temple and registered it as a national archeological site, as published in the Royal Gazette, *Ratchakitja*, volume 92, part 136, July 21, 1975.

The study of these four characters in teak reveals that they are quite similar to an eighteenth century Chinese illustration of a scene from *Journey to the West*, especially the faces (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 1:
Xuanzang



Figure 2:
Above: Xuanzang and Sun Wukong.
Below: Zhu Bajie and two women.



Figure 3: Zhu Bajie



Figure 4: ShaWujing

The background is a mountain in the wilderness and there are three Chinese characters, 岭山香, carved at the corner (Figure 8). Xuanzang is portrayed as a human hero for his religious convictions. The companions, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and ShaWujing, are a study in themselves.

The Thai carvings clearly display a mix of Indian and Chinese influences. Xuanzang and his three disciples are depicted without shoes, in contradistinction to the Chinese illustrations (Figure 5).⁹ What is more, the style of dress follows the very conservative Indian standard of keeping the legs covered, particularly in the depiction of Xuanzang. Some of the symbols representing the four companions, including weapons and physical details are somewhat changed. For example, Zhu Bajie should be carrying his weapon, the Nine-Toothed Rake (*Jiu Chi Ding Pa*); instead he carries a pole from which are suspended his belongings, and his ears should be pig's ears instead of human ears (Figure 7). The illustration of ShaWujing, particularly the face, is not similar to the original Chinese, and he has a spade where he should be wielding a double-headed staff as a weapon. On the other hand, the portrayal of Sun Wukong, particularly the face, is rather the same as in the Chinese, except for the style of his clothing (Figure 6). His weapon can be seen as a Magic Golden-Clasped Rod (*Ru Yi Jin Gu Bang*).¹⁰

⁹ In many religions, bare feet are seen as a sign of humility and respect. In Thailand, Master Jinshen, a Buddhist monk, walks 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) per day barefoot as a reminder to others to pursue a material life to protect and be concerned for Mother Nature. He also states that he does this to follow Buddhist rules, lead people to the path of virtue, and to develop his Buddhist spirit. Some Christian churches practice barefoot pilgrimage traditions, such as the barefoot ascent of Croagh Patrick in Ireland. There is a great deal of symbolism related to the feet in Indian culture. Traditionally, to appear before someone bare-footed was a mark of respect, and in South India and Bengal, women were, until a few years ago, brought up not to wear shoes, as a sign of respect for their husbands. Other cultures may regard the wearing of footwear as a sign of civilization and going barefoot as a sign of poverty, though many in ancient times, such as Egyptians, Hindus, and Greeks, saw little need for footwear, and most of the time, preferred going barefoot. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barefoot>.

¹⁰ This rod is of unlimited size, and Wu Kong is able to grow as it tall as the sky or shrink it to the size of a needle at will. Wu Kong likes keeps it in his ear when he is not using it. Occasionally, he uses it to sew his clothes. <http://www.vbtutor.net/Xiyouji/psunwukong.htm>.

Two unique symbols identify Xuanzang: a multi-part crowned hat, though the original Chinese is five-part crowned hat, and the fly-whisk in his hand, believed to be used to drive away evil spirits. It may be seen, then, that the Chinese artisans in Thailand did not simply copy the Chinese designs, but mixed in Indian motifs that had been adapted to Thai culture.



Figure 5: Xuanzang, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and ShaWujing; teak carving on the outer wall of the Main Hall at Wat Kuti, Petchaburi.



Figure 6: Sun Wukong



Figure 7: Zhu Bajie



Figure 8: Chinese characters



Figure 9: Wat Kuti Main Hall (*ubosot*) under construction, 1901-1930.



Figure 10: Main Hall (*ubosot*), Wat Kuti, 2011.

Tang Xuanzang becomes well-known through television

Television came to Thailand during the second rule of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram with the first broadcast on 24 June 1955. Early fare included Thai dance dramas, and foreign films. The first film version of *Journey to the West* was broadcast in installments on Wednesdays in 1969, and again in 1976. The film was broadcast yet again in 1980 and 1997. It was through television then that Xuanzang and his three powerful disciples became well known to the Thais. A part of the novel's enduring popularity comes from the fact that it works on multiple levels: it is a first-rate

adventure story, a dispenser of spiritual insight, and an extended allegory in which the group of pilgrims journeying toward India stands for the individual journeying toward enlightenment.

Conclusion

Artwork often includes the best artifacts for uncovering the culture of a nation. This article deals with some of the contributions that have made Xuanzang a world cultural celebrity. The Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* is a valuable work that conveys or expresses the beliefs and cultures of the people rooted in the soil of the country. Thailand has adopted much from two world cultures, the Chinese and the Indian, as is clearly evident from Buddhist art. The wood carvings that depict the story of Xuanzang on the outer wall of the Main Hall of Wat Kuti, Thailand, are an amazing work of art and educational resource. Scholars and visitors from all around the world can enjoy and study the mixing of these two ancient cultures with Thai culture when they observe the carvings.

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