India in a Chinese Mirror: An Assessment of Xuazang's Buddhist Records of the Western World

Michel Cartier

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

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Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol18/iss18/4
Owing to the scarcity of written Indian historical sources, records of ancient and medieval India left by foreign travellers are especially welcome inasmuch as they do not only complement the lacunae of the native documentation but offer synchronic descriptions of Indian reality. Of particular value are, of course, the Megasthenes' account and travelogues of Buddhist pilgrims from China, which, from the nineteenth century on, have been constantly referred to as valuable testimony of Indian history.

The *Da Tang Xiyuji* (*Buddhist Records of the Western World*) by the Chinese monk Xuanzang (596-664) has been held in especially great esteem owing to Xuanzang's personality as well as the extensiveness of his peregrinations throughout the Indian subcontinent in the first half of the seventh century. Xuanzang did travel extensively through India for more than fifteen years and left what can be considered as one of the most accurate descriptions of the cities and kingdoms visited during his stay in India. Furthermore, his visit took place at a time when Harshavardana (r. 606-647) was attempting to restore Indian political unity so that the "Records of the Western World" may be taken as first hand testimony on an event about which the main native source is the *Harsha charita*, a hagiographic relation of the reign written by Bana. We must, of course, bear in mind that the original intention of Xuanzang's account was to fill in the gaps of the documentation on India left by his predecessors; his aim was to produce the first *summa* concerning the "country of Buddhism" in the Chinese language and he conforms to the Chinese geographical tradition of a set of short chapters describing the staples of an itinerary. Thus, we are offered the description of a journey to India through Central Asia and back to China. It is important to notice
that, as Xuanzang himself makes it clear in his postface, the book does not rely on memory but was written on the basis of day to day notes. Needless to add that India was by no means a terra incognita for Chinese living in the early days of the Tang dynasty but that Indian ways of thinking and realia were already very familiar to the subjects of Taizong as a result of centuries of intercourse between the two countries. Xuanzang, a Buddhist monk and himself an authority on Buddhism, possessed a sufficient knowledge of the Indian culture and was in a much better position to understand the political situation as well as the daily realities of India than, let us say, the soldiers or merchants, the usual source of the sometimes fantastic accounts of foreign countries incorporated by Chinese historiographers into the geographical sections of the official histories. The Da Tang Xiyuji should be read without any doubt as an original account left by an author relying on personal experiences which modern historians of India are justified to treat as a primary source describing the Indian situation in the first half of the seventh century.

On the other hand, while emphasizing Xuanzang’s Da Tang Xiyuji outstanding merits, we should nevertheless draw modern historians’ attention to the danger of a too naive exploitation of this source—the more since most historians do not rely on the original Chinese text but on either of the “classical” nineteenth century translations by Stanislas Julien for the French or Samuel Beale for the English version, ignoring the fact that these two translators surreptitiously mix into the Chinese source elements of the common knowledge—as well as prejudices—of their time about things Indian. As we shall attempt here to demonstrate, the Indian image derived from an examination of the Da Tang Xiyuji should be interpreted as an image of India seen in a Chinese mirror of the time; it is thus necessary to start with a reconstruction of the conceptual grid unconsciously applied by Xuanzang to the Indian reality.

We shall first deal briefly with the nature of the information collected by the Chinese monk. We should never forget that the ultimate motive of Xuanzang’s journey was not to obtain knowledge about India but to gather Buddhist scriptures hitherto unavailable to Chinese Buddhist specialists. The travels proved a success since Xuanzang came back, after an absence of fifteen years, with a large collection of documents, enough to load a small
caravan which included an elephant! Needless to point out that his main concern was religion—he would devote the rest of his life translating the sutras brought back from India—and that he was not the least interested in collecting administrative manuals or institutional encyclopaedias, supposing that such materials were actually available on the Indian book market of the time. It is obvious that the description of Indian institutions is primarily based on oral information and that writing a detailed account of Indian institutions was far from his interests.

There is little doubt that Xuanzang knew India much better than any of his Chinese predecessors. As we have already pointed out, his extensive peregrinations through the sub-continent did enable him to visit a great number of cities and kingdoms unknown to earlier pilgrims. He can nevertheless by no means be considered an explorer since he was mainly following the tracks of Sakyamuni and aimed at visiting places where Buddhism was still flourishing. Accordingly, he dwells on the description of holy places such as temples, relics and monasteries but casts rapid glances at the countries and cities encountered during his journey. In order to correctly evaluate the notices devoted to several "kingdoms" which constitute the core of his records it is important to assess their real nature and to understand their significance within the record.

As we have already shown in an earlier article, Xuanzang could rely on a long tradition of geographical and ethnographic literature exemplified in the "notices" on foreign countries in the official histories. Each notice can be thus divided into a series of elements such as geographical position (in regard to the Chinese capital), political characterization, customs (including information on the natural setting and the economical conditions), and finally history, emphasizing previous intercourse with the Chinese empire, presented in an invariable order. We should stress the fact that these various elements make sense only in relation to a "Chinese center" and that the geographical accounts of the Suishu, the official history of the Sui dynasty compiled precisely at the time when Xuanzang was collecting Indian data included in the Da Tang Xiyuji, imply a kind of "directional determinism" associating so-called cultural deviations with cardinal directions. Xuanzang seems to avoid deliberately such a model inasmuch as India never did belong to the political Chinese world order.
Indian “kingdoms” can by no means be equated to those States deriving their legitimacy from Chinese ultimate political recognition. Moreover, the pattern followed in the *Da Tang Xiyuji* emphasizes the following elements: 1. the relative position of each kingdom in Xuanzang’s itinerary; 2. its political organization at the time of Xuanzang’s visit (existence or not of a princely family, dependence toward other kingdoms); 3. an ethnographic characterization using in sequence the concepts of: *tu*, “soil,” or economic foundations; *qì*, “climate”; *fēngsu*, customs or manners; *xìng*, “human nature”; *qīng*, “social dispositions”; *yàn*, “language”; *xìng*, “social distinctions”; and *xīn*, “Buddhic faith”; 4. a description of the monastic communities and holy places usually constituting the major part of the notice.

Unlike the accounts of “barbarians” in the official histories the ethnographic section is limited to a skeleton and covers no more than a few sentences. This is due to the fact that Xuanzang’s intention is not to describe these “kingdoms” at length but aims at characterizing them in relation to an Indian norm described in a special chapter detailing the various elements usually found under the heading “customs.” This more theoretical chapter is significantly placed after the description of the kingdom of Kapiska, the precise point when the pilgrim enters India proper. Thus, it is clear that we should not mistake the descriptions of the kingdoms for independent chapters but that they are just constituents of a two-level description of India.

The succession of the concepts suggests a regression leading gradually from the environment (soil and climate) to the spiritual world (Buddhic faith) through social psychology and culture. This scheme of exposition differs radically from the common Chinese anthropological approach and might bear a Buddhist touch. The so-called Indian model also explicitly refers to the Indogangetic plain, an area considered rightly as the core of Buddhic culture.

There is little doubt that Xuanzang sees a strong correlation between climate and human behaviour. The Indogangetic plain together with his Himalayan hinterland is described as a fertile countryside with a mild climate encouraging a “purer” behaviour. Inhabitants of this part of India are inclined to “study” and speak a “purer” language. Peripheral India differs from this “core” inasmuch as it is exposed to “extreme” climatic conditions (in-
tense cold or torrid heat); its inhabitants are violent and deceitful. Significantly Xuanzang likes to apply to them the qualificative *kuang* (untamed) usually applied to wild animals. As far as religion is concerned, this climatic determinism ceases to make sense. Xuanzang is perfectly conscious that there is no direct relation between moral purity and religious faith. On the other hand, he knows enough about India to note a discrepancy between human geography and the religious map of the country. Although inclined toward study by a favourable climatic environment, the inhabitants of Assam and the Gangetic plain are prone to embrace “heresies,” whereas the “fierce” people of Uda, living in a torrid area, are orthodox Buddhist. Nevertheless, we are presented with the Chinese image of a centre favoured by milder climatic conditions surrounded by peripheries inclined to “cultural deviations.”

These preliminary remarks help us to conceive the danger of a reconstruction of the political map of India in the first half of the seventh century solely based on a naive literal interpretation of the *Da Tang Xiyuji*. Xuanzang made extensive travels through the entire subcontinent, collecting a mass of invaluable information. It is clear, however, that he had only limited contacts with the Indian ruling class.

A superficial reading of the “Records of the Western World” allows us to gather a great deal of information concerning the political map of the seventh century and, first of all, to draw a seemingly exhaustive list of some seventy “kingdoms” (*guo*). Our first concern shall be an attempt at delineating the semantic content the word *guo* in order to understand the meaning conveyed through that term to a Chinese scholar living in the beginning of the seventh century. It is thus especially important to keep in mind the “feudal” flavour of a term alluding, first, to a territorial division of the land, and secondly, to a delegation of powers. This is the precise meaning found in the official literature and it is obvious that the official “diplomatic” documents of the time draw a clear distinction between barbarian countries recognizing a Chinese overlordship and “savages” left outside the Chinese world order. In the case of India, the term *guo* is applied to countries neither having diplomatic relations with the Chinese empire nor seeking any official recognition of their legitimacy; it should then be understood either as denoting a political situation
bearing some resemblance with the Chinese “feudal” order or as an equivalent for “territory.” Moreover, Xuanzang is especially careful in avoiding the use of the correlated term wang, \(^8\) “prince” or “vassal king,” which conveys definite political connotations, and prefers to apply to Indian sovereigns the more neutral expression of changjun, “lord,” in the same way as he calls kingly capitals daducheng, “great capital city,” a term unused in the current Chinese literature. Xuanzang is fully conscious of the irrelevancy of his Chinese terminology: he knows that some of these “kingdoms” have no more political reality—they may be “without lord”—or are in fact in the dependence of another kingdom. He mentions, when the case occurs, that the reigning family does not belong to the “kingly race” of the ksatriya.

A closer glance at the Da Tang Xiyuji reveals that its author takes into account only three kings—Harsha-vardhana, Bhaskaravarma and Pulakecin II, whose appearance in the “Records” is highly symbolic. The attention paid to Harsha-vardhana is not surprising. As a political leader, Harsha-vardhana had much in common with the founder of the Tang dynasty. He was at the same time the restorer of national unity and the founder of a political order based on morality. It is thus understandable that Chinese should look for him as a true representative of the Indian people, and a possible ally. In fact the Tang court did send two embassies to him, the first one in 643, some time before Xuanzang’s return to Chang’an, the second in 647, immediately following Harsha-vardhana’s death. Xuanzang seems extremely anxious to accentuate similarities between the two rulers. The origin of the Pashyabhuti dynasty is left obscure. The Da Tang Xiyuji solely mentions the fact that the ruling family originated from the vashya race (zhong). On the other hand, the book deals at some length with the episode of Prabhakana-vardhana’s succession. According to the story told in Book 5, \(^9\) following the Prabhakana’s death, his eldest son, the legitimate successor to the throne, having been trapped and murdered in an ambush laid by the king of Kanauj, the second son, Harsha, was pressed to accept the crown by Bana and other grandees. Feeling inferior to the task, the young prince is said to have first declined the offer and retired into a temple of Avalokitesvara where he had been given a confirmation of his “mission” through a vision: he then realized being the reincarnation of a biksu predestinated to restore the Law of
Buddha. It is only at that point that he accepts to be raised king. Xuanzang goes on with a narration of Harsha’s military campaigns presented as an act of revenge against the felony of the Kanauj ruler. A war that eventually brings out the reunification of the “Five Indias” and the restoration of a political order based on a strict adherence to the Law (prohibition of the killing of animals, universal benevolence, exaltation of the sages and the saints) culminating in the repeated depiction of the quinquennial ritual whereby the king, who has refused to assume the title of “great king” (dawang) and to ascend the “lion throne” (shiwei), gets rid of all his riches before receiving, in the form of countergifts from the other rulers, the equivalent of his distributed treasuries. We shall not concern ourselves with the problem of the exactness of this description, leaving to Indian specialists the appreciation of the degree of truth in Xuanzang’s work. On the other hand, we would like to draw the attention of our readers to the striking resemblance, for a Chinese of the seventh century, between this image of Harsha-vardhana and the official version of Li Shimin accession to the imperial throne: succession of the second son after the murder—attributed to an envious king—of the legitimate heir to the throne, selection made by ministers, hesitation of the second son and his eventual acceptance, after the revelation of his “holy mission.” We shall further notice that the whole atmosphere is rendered definitely “Chinese” with the recurrent use in the narration of moral concepts familiar to a Chinese audience such as the outstanding merits of the founder of the dynasty, the responsibility of the ministers in the discovery of the concealed virtue of the legitimate ruler, the eventual punishment of villains—and that the use of violence in destroying various kingdoms is a posteriori legitimated by the restoration of a superior order based on virtue and Buddhist Law. The whole story may thus be read as an implied justification for the establishment of the Tang dynasty.

King Bhaskararvarma, the second ideal sovereign depicted in the “Records of the Western World,” is not recorded in Indian history. In the first half of the seventh century, the kingdom of Assam is no more than a small peripheral state, untouched by the military campaigns of Harsha-vardhana. Xuanzang states that it does not belong to the Buddhic world but has been ruled for “one thousand generations” by a Brahman family. It is a kingdom...
apparently ignored by history. Its difference from other kingdoms visited by Xuanzang during his journey through India comes from the personal involvement of the narrator.\textsuperscript{12} While staying in Nalanda, the main Buddhist center and the goal of his Indian journey, Xuanzang receives an invitation from the Assamese king who expresses his desire to pay tribute to the monk's vast knowledge. Xuanzang first declines the invitation but later accepts because of the insistence of the messengers. The point made clear in this episode is that the king honors in Xuanzang both the Buddhist scholar and the subject of the Tang emperor. The account of the meeting between the monk and Bhaskaravarma provides the author of the "Records of the Western World" with a good opportunity to praise the Chinese ruler's "virtue" as he counsels the Assamese king to show his allegiance by sending an embassy to China. At this occasion, the Chinese reader discovers the geographical proximity of Assam, a kingdom separated from the Middle Kingdom only by the Himalayan chain.

The case of Pulakecin II of Maharastra is altogether different. This king, who is credited by historical sources for the southern extension of the dominion of the Chalukya dynasty, appears here as the principal opponent to Harsha's policy of unification. In fact, Pulakecin II owes to his victory on Harsha-vardhana in 620 A.D. the privilege of being recorded in Indian history. Interestingly, Xuanzang depicts Pulakecin as a positive figure. The king is here described as extremely virtuous and his subjects as devout Buddhist.\textsuperscript{12} Their strenuous resistance to Harsha's conquest is attributed to their bellicose nature. Applying Montesquieu's wording, we could view the "sense of honor" as their main motivation. The inhabitants of Maharastra are prone to take vengeance. The military strength of the kingdom mainly relies on an elite corps of several hundreds of crack warriors reinforced by war elephants. The king simply takes advantage of their "warlike fury." They swarm over the enemy before the rest of the army enters into action.

As pointed out above, individual accounts of Indian kingdoms only take on their true meaning when read in conjunction with the description of India presented in Book 2 under the heading of "General Assessment of India" (Yindu zongshu). This more theoretical section is divided into seventeen paragraphs and aims
at defining an Indian norm which is a substitute for the “Chinese	norm” usually implicit in the descriptions of foreign—or
barbarian—countries. In accordance with a well established tradi-
tion in Chinese geographical literature, much space is devoted to
material aspects of culture such as housing, clothes, food,
hygienic habits, as well as to social institutions and wedding and
funeral rituals. We shall leave aside an examination of these realia,
which constitute an invaluable source of information already
tapped by historians, but shall limit our investigation to a few
concepts underlying the description of social organization, politi-
cal institutions as well as the characteristics of the Sanskrit lan-
guage in order to clarify the limitations of Xuanzang’s an-
thropological perspective.

Varna (“caste”) is a notion completely alien to Chinese ancient
political thinkers, from the pre-imperial times to the Tang
dynasty. Classical philosophers make a clear distinction between a
“feudal” (fengjian) social system using kinship as its organizational
scheme and a “centralized” (junxian) system, the foundations of
which were already laid in the Legalist states of the Warring
Kingdoms period. Whether society is depicted as consisting of
four occupational groups (zhi, “functions”—the so-called shi (of-
ficers), nong (peasants), gong (artisans), shang (merchants)—or as a
hierarchy of “grades” (deng), a militaristic pattern, both models
can be considered as “open” inasmuch any individual has the
possibility of changing his status from his own initiative or as a
result of a decree. It is true that, especially at the end of the Han
dynasty and during the period of disunity known as the North
and South Dynasties—a period coinciding with the diffusion of
Buddhism as a state religion—the implementation of the “nine-
rank” (jiupin) system almost brought forth the creation of a
quasi-hereditary “rank-society.” Xuanzang nonetheless deliber-
ately denies any similitude between varna and the Chinese con-
cepts of “function” or “rank”,13 preferring to present the Indian
social organization in terms of “kinship.” Hence the heading of
the paragraph dealing with the social division: Zuxing, literally
“kinship and clan names.” On the other hand, inasmuch as these
Chinese concepts are evidently unable to express the various
facets of the Indian varna, they are supplemented by references
to such notions as zong (lineage), zhong (semen, race) or liu (cur-
rent), which conveyed, in the language of the time, strong reli-
gious connotations. These hesitations—varna is variously rendered, within a distance of a few lines, by “current,” “race” and “clan name”—make it difficult for a Chinese of the seventh century to understand the fabrics of the Indian matrimonial system which is only very loosely defined. Xuanzang makes it clear that matrimonial unions must take place within the “group,” a definition which should rule out the use of the term *xing,* expressly denoting in Chinese an exogamic group. Similarities can nevertheless be found: the Indian system excludes marriage within the kinship group and prohibits remarriage of widows. Xuanzang is fully conscious of the inadequacy of the Chinese concepts for Indian realities; he admits that the Indian matrimonial system is more complicated and that it would be difficult to give a full treatment of the subject. Thus the varna neither corresponds to a social “function” (*zhi*), an occupational distinction, nor to a kinship category; it has religious connotations and the hierarchy of the four varnas is eventually a matter of “purity.”

Our second example shall concern political and fiscal institutions, which are only briefly characterized in the notices of “kingdoms.” Once again Xuanzang finds it extremely difficult to express Indian realities with Chinese concepts. The predominantly military character of the *ksatrya,* untouched in the paragraph expounding the varna system, is stressed in a succeeding passage dealing with military institutions. Indian “dynasties”—a term rendered here in Chinese by *xing,* “patronym,” but without any varna connotation—are established through the use of violence. Though the foundation of a new dynasty is equated to an “usurpation,” possibly implying the “murder” (*zuan*) of the legitimate king, founders are by no means regarded as “illegitimate.” We have already mentioned the fact that some of the reigning families—this is especially stressed in the case of the Pashyabhuti dynasty—do not belong to the *ksatrya* “race” (*zhong*). Inasmuch as administration is concerned, Xuanzang emphasizes the striking contrast between the highly centralized Chinese bureaucratic system and the “looseness” (*kuan*) or “succinctness” (*jian*) of Indian institutions. Xuanzang gives several examples of this “simplicity” in various passages concerning the exercise of power or justice, showing the limitation of the political sphere combined with a very low level of administrative intervention in economic affairs. We shall content ourselves with some considerations on royal
revenues. Indian kings neither take censuses nor impose corvée duties to their subjects. If we follow the interpretation proposed both by S. Beale and S. Julien in their classical translations of the text and followed by some modern historians of India, the State revenue is mainly derived from the product of "kingly estates," and equally divided into four parts respectively covering the State’s expenses, the compensation of ministers and officials, the encouragement of talents and the funding of sanctuaries. There is no need to tax peasants or merchants and it is possible to offer salaries to soldiers and workers employed in public works. We shall not discuss here at length the correctness of such an interpretation. Suffice it to say that the use of a terminology borrowed from Chinese land institutions and, in some instances, allusions to the "equal field" (juntian) system add to the difficulty of the text. Wangtian, an expression here rendered by "kingly estates," usually refers to the paramount right on the totality of the land possessed by the Chinese emperor. Should we take at their face value terms such as shiye (the fraction of the farm transmissible to heirs) and koufen (the lots distributed according to the number of "mouths") characterizing the rights of Indian peasants on cultivated land? It is obvious that a Chinese reader of the seventh century might draw the conclusion that a large part of the cultivated land is "rented" (dian) to peasants and that "tenants" give a fixed proportion (one sixth) of the crop. It is interesting to note the concomitant use of the term "feudal" (fengjian) applied to ministers and officials. Civil servants do not get salaries but are granted land rights on parts of the public land. Should we accept this "feudal" interpretation of seventh century Indian institutions as corresponding to the social practice of the period? We shall leave this question open, our present purpose being solely to assess the appropriateness of concepts used by Xuanzang.

Our third and last example shall be Xuanzang’s presentation of the Sanskrit language, a topic about which a monk well versed in the Buddhist Scriptures would not be denied a special competence. It is now well established that the discovery of Sanskrit, a flexional language with an alphabetic notation, was crucial to the development of Chinese linguistic reflection. Unfortunately, we must admit that the Da Tang Xiyuji offers only a very superficial treatment of the Sanskrit language. A brief paragraph in the "Yindu zongshu" under the subheading "Script" (Wenzi) attri-
butes to the god Brahma the creation of a system of forty-seven “syllables” (yan) capable of expressing the “Ten thousand beings”; Xuanzang further sketches a history of the Sanskrit alphabet emphasizing adaptation to local pronunciations. In his eyes the Gangetic pronunciation does represent a linguistic norm. The theory of a degeneration of language is explicitly stated in a passage of the notice devoted to the city of Salatura, Panini’s birthplace, in which the founder of Sanskrit grammar is credited with the restoration of an adequate relation between language and reality through an emendation of superfluous ‘words’ (letters?). It is clear that in this specific case the lack of a Chinese linguistic terminology is a handicap limiting drastically Xuanzang’s expression. The limited vocabulary at the monk’s disposal consists of a few terms such as wen, “script,” zi, “character,” yan, “syllable,” yin, “sound,” yun, “rhyme,” and xun, “phonetic gloss,” which do not permit the distinction between word and script. It is evident that Xuanzang does not intend to propose a new theory of the Sanskrit language, a language already very familiar to Buddhist monks, the true nature of which was of little concern to the lay population. Assessing the linguistic (phonetic) purity of each kingdom serves as another way to measure its degree of conformity to Indian cultural norms.

The various remarks presented in this article are not meant to create doubts about Xuanzang’s outstanding knowledge of India or to deny him competence in Sanskrit. Our main intention in writing this paper was to call the reader’s attention to the fact that Xuanzang’s perception of Indian realities is conveyed through a Chinese conceptual grid. The modern reader who uses the translations of S. Beale or S. Julien comes to Xuanzang’s vision of seventh-century India through a second, Western, screen superimposed on the Chinese one.

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

NOTES

1. A description of India presented to the Court of Chang’an in 646 by the Buddhist monk Xuanzang. References are made to the Shanghai edition of 1977.
2. Da Tang Xiyuji, Book 12.
3. Michel Cartier, “La vision chinoise du monde: Taiwan dans la littér-


8. The term wang appears nevertheless in composition as an equivalent to raja in several binomial expressions such as dawang (supreme ruler), wangzhong (kingly race, an equivalent for ksatriya) and wangtian (public land?).


10. This is a distortion of historical facts. Li Shimin, third son of Li Yuan ascended to the throne only after having murdered his two elder brothers (626) and deposed his father (627). Court historians took much trouble to make the whole story more consistent with moral standards of the time, presenting the young prince, and not his father, as the actual founder of the Tang dynasty.


13. Xuanzang does not fail to notice the resemblance between the quadripartite division of Chinese society and the varna occupational specialization. The two systems are nevertheless very different inasmuch as Chinese "functions" refer exclusively to economic activities.

14. Zong, "sib," was taken by Chinese Buddhists as an equivalent to "sect"; on the other hand, zhong, "semen," in composition with min, "people," has the meaning of "chosen people."

15. Literally: "written language and script."


17. We should not forget that the semantic unit in Chinese is the syllable and that there is no equivalent for "word."

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