Xuanzang: from Buddhist Pilgrim to Pop Icon

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Suspend your disbelief for a moment, and imagine St. Paul writing a travelogue about his journeys to Asia Minor, Greece, and Palestine. Further, imagine that 800 years after his death his travels inspire a classic story, one that centuries later is reproduced in books, comics, and on television; a story that becomes as familiar to every child in Asia and Europe as the tales of King Arthur or the Arabian Nights.

This is the fame that the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim and scholar Xuanzang (602－664) has achieved in Asia through his translations, writings, travel and the subsequent stories he inspired. This paper examines Xuanzang and explores the symbiosis between his life as a Buddhist pilgrim and translator and his legend as a pop icon throughout Asia.

Diffusion of Xuanzang and his Inspiration

Language	*Name*	*Literature he inspired*	*Xuanzang's fictionalized name*
English	Xuanzang	Journey to the West	Tripitaka (from Sanskrit)
Chinese	玄奘	大唐西域記 Da Tang Xi You Ji	唐 三藏 Tang San Zang
Japanese	玄奘 Gen jō	西遊記 Sai yū ki	三蔵法師 Sanzō Hōshi
Korean	현 장 Hyun jang	서유기 Seo yu gy	삼장법사 Sam jang pub sa

(compiled by the author)

Religion

Xuanzang was born in Honan Province in the well-to-do family of a Confucian scholar. He received training in orthodox Confucianism from his father. Following in his brother's footsteps, Xuanzang then studied Buddhism at a monastery and was fully ordained as a monk at age 20. He studied both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, preferring the Mahayana form because it preached universal salvation to laypeople as well as monks (Wriggins xvi). He became interested in the metaphysical Yogacara school of Buddhism, and began to study foreign languages such as Tocharian and Sanskrit.

In seventh-century China, there was a proliferation of competing Buddhist schools and doctrines, with

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many holding conflicting views. Some of these schools based themselves on texts of doubtful authenticity, the questionable translation of which had introduced a host of erroneous ideas into Buddhism in both China and Korea (Lusthaus 89). Xuanzang concluded that many disputes were the result of the unavailability of Buddhist texts in accurate Chinese translation. He believed that a complete version of the *Yogacarabhumi Sastra* (*Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice,* written by Asanga) would resolve all of the conflicts. Xuanzang felt that the solution was to obtain a complete version of the *Treatise*. To achieve this, he spent 16 years (629－645) traveling in order to study Buddhist teachings at their source. He spent the bulk of those years with India's most illustrious Buddhist teachers, visiting holy sites, studying Sanskrit, and debating about Buddhist doctrines.

He returned to China with about 650 Sanskrit texts. Through his translations, which were sponsored by the Tang emperor Taizong, he introduced new, authentic teachings previously unknown in East Asia. He covered an intentionally wide range of Buddhist teachings: Yogacara texts and commentaries, Madhyamika texts, devotional texts, tantric and dharani (incantation) texts, major sutras, Abhidharmic texts, and a Hindu Vaisesika text (Lusthaus 90, 91). He hoped to set the record straight by choosing the most comprehensive selection possible. He is credited with the translation of more than one thousand scrolls of Sanskrit scripture into Chinese (Wriggins 191). Without question, Xuanzang became the most famous Buddhist of his day. He trained monks in the complexities of the Yogacara system and Indian logic. Students made pilgrimages from throughout China, Korea, and Japan to study with him. His Japanese students returned to Japan and established the Hosso School, while his teachings also spurred interest in Korea and were harmonized with Huayan and Son teachings, which have dominated Korean Buddhist thought for the last 1000 years (Lusthaus 91).

Xuanzang brought an authoritative quality to the Buddhist texts because of the depths of his mastery of the sacred texts and teachings he brought back from India. His translations of Sanskrit were the best available at the time. Considered one of the four preeminent translators of Buddhist works between the second and thirteenth centuries, he and his scholars translated more Buddhist scripts than any other (Wriggins191). By bringing the Emperor of China to State sponsorship of Buddhism, and legitimizing Buddhism with his translations and teaching, Xuanzang was a catalyst for the spread of Buddhism, particularly among the Chinese elite. By bridging cultures, Xuanzang aided the symbiosis of cultures in Asia.

Travel

At the Emperor Taizong's request, Xuanzang wrote a travelogue of his journey through Central Asia and India called *Record of the Western Lands*. This work is still considered one of the major sources on seventh-century India and Central Asia before the coming of Islam. He journeyed more than 10,000 miles, prompting his most recent biographer Wriggins (194) to declare him, "One of the greatest travelers of all time."

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Battling harsh conditions through the Taklamakan desert and climbing through three of the highest mountain chains in Asia (Wriggins xv) in his spiritual and intellectual pursuit give his journey a larger-than-life feeling. Translator Arthur Waley eloquently states the epic nature of Xuanzang: "His kindred, in the world of our imagination are not the great travelers, not Marco Polo or Vamberry, nor the great theologians such as Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas, but rather Aeneas, King Arthur, Cuchulain. He is the hero of a sort of spiritual epic, as they of their knightly sagas." (Waley 130)

Becoming a Pop Icon

Xuanzang's famous pilgrimage became the subject for fanciful retellings even during his lifetime. Fictionalized stories including traveling partners a magical Monkey, a pig, and Sha (a nondescript monk known in English as Sandy) existed as early as the tenth century in folk tales and short stories (Bradeen and Johnson 40).

His legend is also the inspiration for one of China's most celebrated epics: *Journey to the West* (sometimes translated as *Monkey*), written in 1592 by Wu Chengen. The work is basically a compilation of the Xuanzang stories circulating in China at the time. The main character, Tripitaka, is Xuanzang renamed. The name 'Tripitaka' means "the three baskets" (used to carry the Buddhist canon) (Wriggins 71, 124) and is, in Chinese, a near homophone for Xuanzang. The general plot is Buddhist in orientation, but includes elements of Daoism and Confucianism as well. This depiction represents the religious experience of everyday Chinese, and shows the symbiosis of the three major formal religions of China.

For example, in the Heaven portrayed in *Journey*, Laozi (the legendary Daoist and author of *Daodejing*), The Jade Emperor (one of the major Daoist deities) and Buddha interact in a single cosmology. They share feasts together, counsel one another, and work together to solve mutual problems. In one section, Monkey steals elixirs of immortality from Laozi and drops in uninvited on a feast to which Buddha, the bodhisattva Guanyin and the many gods of the planets and oceans had been invited. This brings the Monkey King into war with Heaven. The Jade Emperor finally asks for Buddha's assistance, and Monkey is brought under control (cited in Bradeen and Johnson 41).

The three traditions also cooperate on earth. In Chapter 47 of the Jenner translation, Monkey asks the three to cooperate with each other: "I hope that you will combine the three teachings by honoring both the Buddhist clergy and the way of Daoism, and by educating men of talent in the Confucian tradition. I can guarantee that this will make your kingdom secure forever." (Jenner 283)

The longest section of the novel focuses on the journey of Tripitaka and his companions to India to receive Buddhist scriptures. In this respect, as Johnson and Bradeen point out, it is a classical quest story akin to Arthurian legends, or even *The Wizard of Oz*. The journey can be read as a quest for self-transformation; particularly since the Buddhist scriptures they eventually receive are blank. The self-cultivation theme is

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supported by Confucianism (emphasis on self-improvement), Buddhism (stopping desire and the non-self) and understanding the concept of the Dao, all depend on controlling the mind through the process of self-cultivation (Bradeen and Johnson 41－43). These examples illustrate the symbiosis of China's three religions. *Journey* presents not three isolated, independent religions, but a coherent Chinese religious pattern in which the total is greater than the three individual religions contained therein. *Journey* would not have endured if its version of Heaven and the world was different than everyday Chinese sensibilities (Bradeen and Johnson 41).

The stories and their countless dramatic treatments have a universality, as evidenced by their popularity throughout China, Korea, Japan and other parts of Asia. For example, *Monkey* retained its popularity throughout the Chinese Communist era, when religious practice and classical literature were both disparaged. While Chairman Mao wrote several poems about Monkey, his wife Jiang Qing was unflatteringly nicknamed 'the White Boned Demon' from one of the chapters of *Journey* (Wriggins 191). Readers (or viewers of the dramatizations) of *Journey to the West* experience "cultural mythology in the popular imagination that transcends the historical context of its story and authorship as well as its religious context." (Bradeen and Johnson 40)

Another reason for the universality of the story is the possibility of seeing and experiencing on many different levels. Youngsters watching *Dragonball Z* don't realize it is based on *Journey*; they merely want to be entertained. At its core, however, the fantastic story of Xuanzang is so rich in achievement and adventure, it has inspired a whole genre that is "part history, romantic entertainment, religious meditation, philosophical lucubration, ecclesiastical satire, and in very large part, hilarious humor." (Wells 170). Over the centuries Xuanzang has become not just a living representative of the symbiotic nature of Chinese religion, but also the personification of the symbiosis of Asian cultures.

References

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