

XUANZANG

CHINA'S LEGENDARY
PILGRIM
AND TRANSLATOR

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LIVES OF THE MASTERS

Xuanzang's Future

Politics, Profit, and Piety

WHEN XUANZANG met the Indian king Kumāra, he praised the benevolence of the reigning Chinese emperor, Taizong: "My great lord's sagely virtue extends far and his humane teachings have reached distant places. Many people from different lands with different customs venerate and submit to His Majesty." King Kumāra, according to the *Record of the Western Regions*, was duly impressed. "Since the emperor's kindness and grace is like that," he said, "I would like to pay him tribute." At the Chinese court after his return from India, Xuanzang explained that he had been serving the emperor's interests abroad, educating the people of Central and South Asia about the deep learning, formidable strength, and benign intentions of "Mahācina." He also informed Chinese officials of the wisdom and honor of the North Indian rulers he encountered. Thanks in part to Xuanzang's diplomacy, the two empires began exchanging envoys and gifts. The engagement was short-lived but it set a precedent for cooperation that modern Buddhist monks and government officials have strived to emulate. When the Chinese Buddhist cleric Taixu (1890–1947) embarked on a "goodwill mission" in India in 1940, he cast himself as a modern-day Xuanzang. "The day is not far distant," he predicted, "when the cultural relations existing between India and China in the days of Xuanzang will be re-established between these two countries."¹⁷²

Indeed, the political and economic interests of India and China are now more entwined than ever. Annual trade between the two countries approaches \$100 billion. In their regular bilateral talks, India's prime minister Narendra Modi and China's president Xi Jinping both invoke Xuanzang as a symbol of their peoples' shared history and abiding friendship. Some 1,350 years after his death, Xuanzang's work as a cultural ambassador continues.

In 2015, the state-owned China Film Corporation launched a joint venture with Eros International, a prominent Indian film production and distribution company. Together they produced *Xuanzang*—a lavishly funded blockbuster featuring a star-studded cast of Chinese and Indian actors. The mainstream Chinese film industry dutifully nominated the movie for a slate of awards and submitted it as the country's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2017 Academy Awards. *Xuanzang* was not selected and did poorly at the box office but it was only one part of a larger effort to repackage and popularize Xuanzang's story as a tale of Chinese perseverance, ambition, and outreach. As the PRC continues to extend its regional influence through the Belt and Road Initiative—a massive program of development and investment, known as the “New Silk Road”—Buddhism in general and Xuanzang in particular have become increasingly important elements of China's soft-power strategy. According to the state-run media, “Religion is becoming the glue that can help bond the region under the Chinese dream.”¹⁷⁸

To make this dream a reality, the Chinese government has mobilized a range of resources. The Chinese Buddhist Association, which is overseen by the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party, has been assigned the task of exploring how the “spirit of Xuanzang” can best support the Belt and Road Initiative. Societies for the “promotion of Xuanzang culture” and Xuanzang research centers are now organizing major international conferences on Xuanzang's life and legacy. The China National Trad-

gional Orchestra, whose mission is to implement the Belt and Road Initiative, developed *Xuanzang's Pilgrimage* to showcase "the diverse yet connected cultures found along the legendary Silk Road, combining music from China's Han, Uyghur, Kazak, Tajik and other ethnic groups."¹⁷⁴ The massive production—with an eighty-piece orchestra and twenty-four performers—has performed in London and Washington, DC.

In the international sphere, Xuanzang, like Confucius, has become the bearer of China's best intentions. In recent retellings of Xuanzang's story in China, he not only endures hardship for the greater good of the nation and works tirelessly to enrich the intellectual and spiritual life of China, but he also nurtures international partnerships based on cultural exchange, mutual respect, and mutual enrichment—just as the PRC seeks to do today. His role as transmitter of Indian Buddhist traditions to China is often downplayed, while his efforts to introduce Chinese culture to India (through his purported translation into Sanskrit of the *Daodejing*) and the rest of Asia are highlighted. Xuanzang is depicted not just as a student during his time in India but, more significantly, as an ambassador and a teacher; he had bested Indian monks in debate and even the elders at Nalanda and regional kings pleaded with him to remain in India. After Xuanzang returned to China, these narratives continue, the translations and commentaries he produced led to great revivals of Buddhism in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Xuanzang bestowed the gift of understanding on all Asia. In the present age of rampant materialism and social alienation, China and Chinese Buddhists are now called to a similar mission—to bring the wisdom of the East to the disenchanting West.

In India, local and national governments are similarly attuned to the potential diplomatic and economic value of its Buddhist heritage. Nalanda is being revived as a "secular Buddhist" university, part of a broader initiative to unleash India's "soft power on

explained, "it would be like dragging a boat out of water and onto dry land. Such a vessel would not only be useless, but it would also rot and decay."¹⁷⁶ Xuanzang eventually moved to the mountains, where he hoped to be left in peace. But the emperors, it seems, are not done with him yet.