

Journey to the West: Chinese Travellers to South Asia

As Buddhism became popular, there was also rising interest in its origins in South Asia, the birthplace of the historical Buddha. Scholars and monks from China journeyed to important Buddhist sites in Asia, seeking answers to the philosophical questions that came up in their studies of Buddhism. The records they left behind are a valuable insight into the peoples and societies of the time. A generalization of the journeys of three such intrepid scholars has been outlined here.

Faxian (c. 337-422 AD)

Faxian walked through Central Asia to get to South Asia, but returned to China by sea. He visited many early Buddhist monasteries, collecting Buddhist texts on monastic life to take back to China. He also visited the capitals of important city-states of the era, such as Pataliputra and Rajgriha (the latter also a key Buddhist pilgrimage site). He also collected small Buddhist reliques and statues of deities.

Xuan Zang (c. 602-664 AD)

Xuan Zang left Luoyang in 617 AD for the capital of Chang'an. He traveled to South Asia to settle concerns and questions on Buddhism. He traveled by foot, documenting the various geographies, cultures, monuments and people he encountered. He studied at Nalanda, a recently established Buddhist monastic university close to Rajgriha, remaining there as faculty for three years. He traveled extensively throughout South Asia. The classical Chinese novel, "Journey to the West," was based on his adventures.

Yijing (c. 635-713 AD)

Yijing left for India by sea in 671 AD. He appears to have used the same route on his outbound and homeward bound journeys, but spent most of his time in the area around Bodh Gaya and Nalanda, the latter at which he remained for 10 years. He travelled for 25 years, collecting hundreds of manuscripts, many of which he translated into Chinese himself. His records deal with lifestyle topics such as health, medicine, and well-being, along with cultural descriptions. He also spent several months in the kingdoms in Southeast Asia, like Srivijaya (Palembang) and Kedah.

Legend

- Faxian
- Xuan Zang
- Yijing
- ★ Capital city
- Buddhist site
- Popular Buddhist site

