

Depicting Xuanzang's Pilgrimage: Buddhist Devotion and Sino-Indian Cultural Exchange in Tang Painting

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Abstract. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), the monk Xuanzang took on a pilgrimage to India in search of authentic Buddhist sutras. His experience, later recorded in Da Tang Xiyu Ji (Record of the Western Regions), greatly influenced the growth of Buddhism in the East Asian and became a recurring theme in art. This study focuses on a representative painting of Xuanzang's journey to explore the cultural and religious exchanges between China and India. Using art-historical analysis and visual analysis, the research examines the painting's composition, use of colors, artistic style, and techniques to identify how the artist conveys Xuanzang's religious devotion and cultural significance. This approach allows to reflect on the historical and cultural meaning within the context of Tang dynasty art, leading to the research question: How does the artwork of Xuanzang's pilgrimage reflect his devotion to Buddhism and show cultural exchanges during his journey to India in the Tang dynasty of China? The findings suggest that the artworks not only show Xuanzang's spiritual dedication but also reflect cross-cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, highlighting its role in contributing to the spread and development of Buddhism in China through his translations of sacred texts.

Keywords: Xuanzang, Tang dynasty, Buddhist pilgrimage, Silk Road, Cultural exchange

1. Introduction

The Tang dynasty (618–907) was a period marked by vibrant cultural exchange, during which Buddhism flourished in China. Xuanzang, a prominent Buddhist monk, resided in India for fourteen years before returning to China [1]. Upon his return, he recorded his experiences in Da Tang Xiyu Ji (Record of the Western Regions), providing a valuable account of the people and culture along the Silk Road [2]. This essay focuses on a representative artwork depicting Xuanzang's pilgrimage, examining how art shows his religious devotion and reflects Sino-Indian cultural exchanges during the Tang dynasty.

Using an art-historical approach, the research analyzes the painting's composition, color application, artistic style, and techniques to identify how the artist shows Xuanzang's religious devotion and cultural significance. This method helps us understand the historical and cultural meaning of Tang dynasty art. The research question is: How does the artwork of Xuanzang's pilgrimage reflect his devotion to Buddhism and show cultural exchanges during his journey to

India in the Tang dynasty? By addressing the question, the research aims to better clarify how paintings of Xuanzang record historical events and express the cultural values of the Tang dynasty.

2. Historical and cultural background

2.1. Buddhism's role in Tang dynasty

During the Tang dynasty, Buddhism entered its golden age in China. Temples and shrines spread across the country, which was supported by the state and private donors. These acts of charity such as funding temple renovations, donating property, and commissioning artworks and texts were believed to bring both practical and spiritual benefits. Moreover, Buddhism focused on the afterlife, the results of good and bad actions, and the promise of liberation from suffering [3]. Many new Buddhist schools emerged in China, organizing the vast collection of texts and teachings. Monasteries expanded in number and wealth, while scholars traveled to India to retrieve texts and ideas that enriched Chinese Buddhism [4]. Despite its influence, it also faced criticism from Confucian adherents. Becoming a monk or nun required renouncing family ties, marital obligations, and material wealth, which are conflicted with traditional Confucian values [3].

2.2. Xuanzang's journey to India

Xuanzang stands as one of the most influential Buddhist figures of the Tang Dynasty, renowned for his pilgrimage to India to obtain authentic Buddhist sutras. Born in 602 CE in Luoyang and initially educated in Confucianism, he turned to Buddhism and became a monk at age 13. By the age of 20, he was fully engaged with monastic life. During his time in Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), he studied Sanskrit and other languages to deepen his understanding of Buddhist scriptures. However, Xuanzang was confused by inconsistencies in the Buddhist scriptures [1]. Therefore, he decided to travel to Nālandā, a renowned Buddhist educational hub in the Magadha kingdom to study Buddhism and clarify the contradictions in the texts he had encountered in China [5]. At that time, the Tang empire was unstable. Emperor Tang Taizhong had banned travel abroad for conflicts with Turkic peoples. But Xuanzang disregarded the ban and secretly crossed the border in 629 CE [1].

Xuanzang traveled along the Silk Road for months. His knowledge, speech, and devotion to his mission earned him respect from people such as rulers, monks, merchants. The king of Kao-chang (Turfan) admired him greatly that he tried to keep him there as chief priest. Ultimately, most rulers supported his journey after witnessing his determination to reach India. Xuanzang later reaches the Gangetic Plain, which was the birthplace of Buddhism and its early cradle. Kings and people of Magadha, Vajji, Kosala, and Kuru supported Xuanzang. Many of the places he visited later became important Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Xuanzang's pursuit of Buddhist knowledge extended beyond Nālandā. He spent over ten years traveling the Indian subcontinent and studying at monasteries of various Buddhist traditions. Once satisfied with his studies, he prepared to return to China [5].

After months of traveling along the southern Silk Road, Xuanzang arrived in Khotan at the western edge of the Chinese empire and sent an envoy to the emperor, explaining why he had left secretly and asking for forgiveness. While waiting a response, he began translating the Buddhist texts he had brought from India. Eight months later, the envoy returned with King Taizong's reply. The emperor pardoned him and invited him to bring collected relics and manuscripts back to Chang'an. News of his return had already spread. Monks and nuns from various monasteries dressed in ceremonial robes, carrying flags, banners, and musical instruments, lined the streets to welcome

him. Over his seventeen-year pilgrimage, he traveled 10,000 miles and visited more than a hundred kingdoms to gain knowledge about Buddhism [5].

2.3. Xuanzang's contribution to the development of Chinese Buddhism

Xuanzang translated approximately 600 *juan* (scrolls) of Buddhist scriptures, including the famous Heart Sutra [6]. Today, the Heart Sutra is recited daily in temples and monasteries across China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other regions worldwide. Famous for presenting *Mahāyāna* teachings on emptiness, it is also considered a protective talisman against danger. According to Xuanzang's biography, he first encountered the Heart Sutra after nursing a sick man back to health. In gratitude, the man taught Xuanzang the text [7]. He focused extensively on the Yogacara (Weishi) school of Mahayana Buddhism, translating 21 texts totaling 201 *juan*, such as *Jie shen mi jing* (Resolving Enigmas) and *Yujia shi di lun* (Treatise on the Stages of Yogic Practice). He also worked on sutras from esoteric Buddhist traditions [6].

In 645 CE, Xuanzang established a scripture translation workshop at Hongfu Monastery. Within just over three years, he completed the *Da Pusa zangjing* (Mahayana Pitaka Sutra), totaling 178 volumes. His travelogue, *Da Tang Xiyu Ji*, describes 110 kingdoms and 28 legendary regions across western and southern Asia, detailing geography, urban landscapes, local products, and customs. This work provided both cultural insight and valuable historical data, serving as a critical reference for modern Indian archaeology [6]. Xuanzang also translated Chinese texts such as the *Laozi* and *Dacheng qixin lun* (The Awakening of Faith) into Sanskrit and introduced them to India. In 648 CE, he became the first abbot of Ci'en Monastery. During his ten years tenure there, he produced more than 40 works in 500 *juan* and oversaw the construction of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda [6].

3. Artwork analysis

3.1. General description of the painting

Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk (as shown in Figure 1) is a large hanging scroll painting dating to the 14th-century Kamakura period of Japan. Executed in ink and color on silk, it measures 135.3 × 90.0 cm and is now preserved in the Tokyo National Museum [8]. The scroll illustrates the subject of Xuanzang embarking on his pilgrimage to India to seek authentic Buddhist sutras. Rendered nearly life-size and standing upright, the figure exudes a commanding presence, creating an immersive impression for viewers. Xuanzang is portrayed carrying a large bundle of sutra scrolls strapped to his back, skull necklace and straw sandals are illustrated in detail, showing both spiritual significance and his historic role as a transmitter of Buddhist texts.



Figure 1. Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk

The artist of this scroll of Xuanzang is unknown. Art historians suggest it was created in Japan because it uses Japanese scroll-making conventions, such as a silk support and vertical hanging format [9]. Additionally, its stylistic features, brown outlines with soft shading for depth, cool mineral pigments, white highlights on fabric folds and ornaments, and the depiction of Xuanzang as a traveling monk, reflect Song-Yuan Chinese Buddhist art. This shows that Japanese painters of the Kamakura period were familiar with and were inspired by Chinese artworks [8].

3.2. Clothing analysis

Through the clothing of Xuanzang, it is shown that he is prepared for a long journey. He wears puttees and straw sandals called zori. On his back, he carries an rectangular wooden backpack with four legs filled with sutras. A large round woven hat rests atop the wooden backpack, from which an incense burner hangs [8]. In one hand, he holds a flywhisk, which is a tool for chasing evil spirits away and on the other, he holds a scroll for sutra recitation. Around his neck, a skull necklace is hanged, which is an iconographic feature of a spirit associated with Xuanzang's pilgrimage, although their details are not distinct.. When Xuanzang was heading to the west of Dunhuang, crossing the desert, he lost his water flask. For days he traveled without water, feeling thirsty and hopeless. Then he dreamed of a huge spirit holding a halberd, who told him not to give up. After waking, Xuanzang kept going. His horse suddenly turned off the path and refused to turn back, leading them to a patch of grass and a pool of water. There, he refilled his supplies, drank, and continued [10]. Therefore, this necklace carries symbolic meanings, embodying themes such as mortality, spiritual trials, protection and transcending fear. It moulds Xuanzang as a figure who overcame both spiritual and physical danger.

Xuanzang's robes fall naturally around his body, and the painting shows the layers and texture of the fabric smoothly. Notably, the robes that Xuanzang wears are decorated with lotus motifs—symbols of profound importance in Buddhism. The lotus traditionally represents purity and spiritual awakening, as famously celebrated in the Song Dynasty poem *On the Love of the Lotus* by Zhou Dunyi. In this poem, Zhou praises the lotus for “rising from the mud yet remaining unstained,” reflecting its purity and moral integrity. By depicting Xuanzang wearing robes with lotus patterns, the painting emphasizes his spiritual discipline and his pivotal role as a monk on a challenging journey to gain Buddhist knowledge. The robes reinforce the figure’s symbolic meaning, guiding viewers toward the painting’s spiritual message.

3.3. Composition, color and technique

The creation of this scroll involved stretching the figure on fine silk with ink outlines. Mineral-based pigments, including green, blue, and brown, were then applied in layers, with subtle shading to create a sense of volume, particularly on Xuanzang’s face and torso. Finally, white was added to highlight folds, ornaments, and patterned robes, endowing the figure both precision and liveliness [8].

The painting primarily employs cold mineral colors such as green, blue and brown to convey mood and meaning. For instance, green dominated the robes, conveying a calm and sober appearance. The silk background, layered pigments, and white highlights on robe folds and the wooden backpack’s pattern creates depth and dimension, rendering the painting more detailed. Overall, the colors balance realism and spiritual presence, making Xuanzang appear both human and elevated, while also guiding the viewer’s attention to his face, clothing, and the objects he carries.

3.4. Function of painting

Although there is no direct information about the original function of Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk, scholarly research provides insights into its probable purpose. Through the article “An Icon in Motion: Rethinking the Iconography of Itinerant Monk Paintings”, Haewon Kim explains that such monk portraits were often created as devotional and educational tools, intended for temple display to facilitate meditation [9]. Kim also emphasizes the strong influence of Song–Yuan Chinese Buddhist figures on Japanese Buddhist art during the Kamakura period, showing how Japanese artists adopted techniques and iconography from China. Therefore, Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk likely served a similar purpose that it probably functioned as a devotional image in temples or religious spaces, designed to prompt viewers to reflect on Xuanzang’s piety and scholarly pursuit. The scale of the figure suggests that the object was not portable but rather fixed in a temple or religious setting, showing the viewer about the monk’s presence. In this way, the scroll functioned more of a spiritual image, to guide meditation, reinforce Buddhist values, and show Xuanzang’s journey for devotion and learning, reflecting upon the cultural exchange between China and Japan.

However, the scroll differs from conventional static portraits of seated Buddhist figures in meditation. It captures Xuanzang in motion, while facing a side rather than facing the audience directly. This composition diverges sharply from traditional Buddhist meditation imagery, implying the work may not have been intended for pure meditation. Instead of guiding the viewer inward calm, the painting emphasizes action and the spread of knowledge, serving as a symbolic representation of his legacy, designed to encourage admiration and honor for his achievement.

4. Discussion

Comparative Analysis with “Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk, 14th century” and “The Buddhist monk Xuanzang travelling with a tiger on the Silk Road, Dunhuang, Gansu, 9th century.”



Figure 2. The Buddhist monk Xuanzang travelling with a tiger on the Silk Road, Dunhuang, Gansu, 9th century

Both the Dunhuang and the Kamakura period hanging scroll illustrates Xuanzang as a Buddhist monk on his pilgrimage, depicting him carrying scrolls and holding a flywhisk on his journey. The Dunhuang painting features a tiger at Xuanzang's side, symbolizing spiritual protection and the ability to overcome obstacles [11]. Meanwhile, the tiger also symbolizes rigorous self-discipline and mastery of inner peace over worldly desires. In contrast, the Kamakura period hanging scroll from Japan does not contain the image of a tiger, focusing instead on Xuanzang's devotional aspects and emphasizing his spiritual perseverance.

Both artworks illustrate how different cultures adapted the image of Xuanzang during his journey. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of Xuanzang's diverse traits and ways in which he has been honored across cultures.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India was essential for the spread of Buddhism in China, as he translated numerous scriptures, helped establish a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings and deepened their influence across Chinese society. The artistic depictions of Xuanzang, such as the 9th-century Dunhuang painting and the 14th-century Japanese Kamakura scroll, reflect a strong respect and a long-lasting influence he had on Chinese Buddhism and cultural exchanges between China and India. Through the analysis of Xuanzang's clothing, posture and facial expression, it emphasized his inner calmness and faith through his travel. While symbolism of the lotus designs on his robe indicated his spiritual purity and moral integrity. Artistic techniques such as soft lines, gentle shading, and cold mineral colors further suggested this tranquility in his spirit that guided him throughout the journey. Although the function of the portrait remains unclear, some scholars suggest it may serve as a tool for meditation. However, the structure and format differ from the traditional hanging portraits displayed in temples, where figures are seated in meditation. This may have suggested that the purpose of "The Portrait of Xuanzang as an Itinerant Monk" was intended to reflect Xuanzang's inner self value. In either case, the portrait indicates his spiritual significance and the respect for his devotion to clarify the inconsistencies presented in the texts had encountered in China. His later achievements such as the translations of extensive texts demonstrate how his journey enriched Chinese Buddhism, emphasizing a pivot contribution in the religious transmission across China and India.

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