

A New Perspective on Xuanzang's Travel Account

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Abstract

Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions mainly included detailed descriptions, such as religions, cultures, climates, geographies, demographics, and commercial activities, of each region he had explored along his journey to the holy India, which all played an essential role in comprehending the text under broader historical context. Based on the analysis of such details, one may suggest that a new perspective, other than the commonly contended religious aspect, is provided by the author, which is the pragmatic function of the book. To be specific, there are three aspects of knowledge in the text especially demonstrating the practical function of the book: politics, geographies and climates, and economics. Each of these contains enough information to act as a guide for the audience regarding the previously less-explored western regions and could offer more in-depth comprehensions on the Xuanzang's purpose.

Keywords

Western regions; Politics; Geographies; Climates; Economics.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In 629 CE, a Chinese pilgrim monk named Xuanzang departed the Tang capital Chang'an and traveled across the Tarim basin through the northern route to reach India's holy land, aiming to acquire the truth of Buddhism. After the sixteen-years journey in the west, in 645 CE, Xuanzang returned to Tang Dynasty and dedicated the remainder of his life to translating into Chinese the 657 columns of sutras he had brought from India[1]. This article is based on the source "Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions," which was dictated by Xuanzang and written down by his disciples in response to the request of Tang Emperor Taizong. The text is primarily composed of Xuanzang's travel accounts and journals in the western regions and knowledgeable information on religions and cultures. As a masterpiece composed by a monk, Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions conventionally contained supernatural elements and symbols as a religious reference; nevertheless, one may offer a new perspective regarding the comprehension of the text: Xuanzang could have a pragmatic purpose that he partly focused on the utility of the book.

1.2. Historical Context

Historically, Tang Dynasty was broadly embracing inclusiveness and eclecticism regarding both trans-regional diplomacy and domestic social environment. According to the Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription, Tsan-po, the Divine Manifestation of Tibet consulted with the king of China and ratified the agreement about the alliance of the two dominions, and emphasized that the alliance should be celebrated in every age. Also, the terms of agreement are suggested to be inscribed on a stone pillar in every generation [2]. In this scenario, both parties were willing to establish an alliance, indicating that they were open to foreign cultures. This connection can also denote Taizong's inclusiveness towards different cultures and his willingness to connect with and accept things happened beyond Tang territory. As a matter of fact, it is more comprehensible that Taizong's desire to learn about Xuanzang's fruitful pilgrimage and request

Xuanzang to compile a record of the western regions are reflections of Taizong's interests in foreign areas.

Growing up under the nurture of Buddhism, Xuanzang had devoted himself to studying and deciphering Buddhism scriptures starting from an early age. He was yearning to explore the holy land of Buddhism in India to obtain the true scriptures, to absorb the truth, and to seek knowledge with renowned teachers instead of deciphering the myth with the perplexing translations in China at that time [3].

Tang emperor Taizong requested that Xuanzang compiled his journey account into a book, which coincided with the fact that Taizong not only consolidated his power in China but also conquered Central Asia while Xuanzang was away [4]. Taizong was enlarging his empire to regions outside the Tang territory, suggesting his ambitions in politics and interests in foreign and novel affairs. Therefore, it is not unfathomable that Taizong desired information from novel lands to conduct territory expansion. Another critical factor is that Xuanzang, in his journey account, highly glorifies the emperor by claiming his eminent achievements in bringing the western frontiers to submission, restoring order, appeasing tumult, etc. Apparently, Xuanzang truly appreciates the emperor, shadowing his willingness to agree upon Taizong, and compiled such an account to satisfy the emperor's desire. Furthermore, Xuanzang has mentioned Taizong's accomplishments in holding the reign of government and excelling in the administration of the empire at the very beginning of the book[1], one can thus infer that Xuanzang had his understanding of what the emperor might want to gain from reading such novel historic records: specified knowledge that could serve as a guidance in favor of political development, and possibly planned to organize this book according to what Taizong might want to acquire.

1.3. Conclusion

Xuanzang's travel account constitutes a considerable amount of supernatural elements, as what he had seen, experienced, or believed, which without a doubt includes religious facts and knowledge. As a matter of fact, historians have long argued that one possible motif of such masterpiece is to record Buddhism learned from the west and to advocate it in China; however, this paper will focus on another perspective that Xuanzang was transmitting knowledge on various aspects other than religion: demographics, geographies, climates, cultures, and so on, for a pragmatic function.

2. Evidence and Analysis

2.1. Politics

The first general category of evidence is political knowledge in terms of political realms, majesties, and demographics. Xuanzang's detailed descriptions and statistics regarding territories, majesties, and populations possibly act as a reference on political and diplomatic affairs for Taizong. First of all, throughout the text, Xuanzang includes statistical data regarding the territorial scope of each country and orientations for pilgrimage. He pays close attention to the framework of the book in term of the sequence of every regional description, making his trek routes comprehensible and imitable for the audiences, especially useful for those who might want to commence a similar pilgrimage to explore the western lands.

The passage also focuses on the governors and civilians of the kingdoms regarding political deeds and personal dispositions. According to what Xuanzang had recorded on Samarkand, "the people are brave and energetic, the king was of courage, and neighboring countries obeyed his commands"[5]. One may draw three conclusions from such evidence. First, the king's courageous disposition is a crucial characteristic for people in ruling class in that courage is possibly an indicator of political ambition. Being aspirant, a ruler has the desire to carry out

right and decisive actions on the sovereign of a nation and the diplomacy with other countries. Second, stating that the neighboring countries obeyed the king's commands, the author reveals that Samarkand was of greater power among neighboring countries. The king of Samarkand possibly possessed remarkable leadership and effective sovereignty which made other nations to follow. Third, as the civilians being bravery and energetic, Samarkand was likely in a prosperous state since living conditions of people can substantially reflect the level of social stability and economic prosperity. When people are living in a well-governed and well-developed society, they are likely to live in happiness and vitality. Moreover, when considering people as brave, one may infer that people are of courage and are of willingness to contribute to their nations.

In addition, Xuanzang claims that soldiers and cavalries were of mightiness and quantity, principally men of Chih-Kia whom no enemy could stand before because of their fierceness and fearlessness towards deaths [5]. Fierceness is a crucial characteristics for soldiers, which indicates that soldiers who possess such quality have the desire to fight for their nations and to strive for what belongs to them. Moreover, such qualities of the soldiers can act as helpful evidence to denote the military power of a country.

Another key instance that displays records regarding politics is that Xuanzang offers a comprehensive introduction to India, the destination of his journey, in terms of residence, clothing, education, religion, and so on, whereby social-political information can be interpreted. For example, Xuanzang noted that butchers, fishers, prostitutes, cleaners, etc have special signs marking on their abodes and are excluded from the city; they also had to hide on the left side of sidewalks when walking on downtown streets [6]. The statement bespeaks that the portion of Indian population who were of ordinary labors were disdained by their society and were considered as belonging to lower social status. Such information introduced to the audience the caste in India, which is the system of social stratification used by Indian society.

Xuanzang also provided few instances of countries imitating the customs and conventions of Samarkand [5], bespeaking Samarkand's influences beyond its territory. The imitation possibly indicates that those countries admire the traditions of Samarkand and see those customs as of relative superiority. As a result, one can thus suggest that each of the factors aforementioned as a whole contributed to the success of Samarkand; meanwhile, factors such as dispositions of rulers, civilians, and political realms could be decisive for a country or a court when taking considerations on diplomacies and political affairs. To conclude, the political knowledge in the text provided by Xuanzang was likely intended for emperor Taizong to use as a reference in political and diplomatic affairs in the western regions, serving a practical function.

2.2. Geographic Features and Climatic Patterns

Second, geographic features and climatic patterns are also of vast importance in text interpretation. Xuanzang's detailed descriptions on geographies and climates likely provide information on military affairs instead of solely on nature. For example, he describes Ling-shan, a mountain 300 li or so to the north-west of Che-meh, as an ice mountain with its hills and valleys filled with snow piles, frozen in both the spring and summer, and frequented fierce dragons impeding travelers [7]. By providing such information, he reminds audiences about the hostile environment in which pilgrims may encounter in a specific region. In a broader context, readers could estimate the potential perils in military and societal aspects in specific domains, since both of them heavily depend on climatic patterns, particularly in mountainous regions. To be specific, terrains played a crucial role in the lives of nomads who were seasonally moving on horsebacks to maintain a livelihood and in countries frequently involved in warfares who had to alter their arts of war to conform with the natural environments. Mountains could also be the connective forces between one place and another, which allowed communications and conflicts among different groups of people. Besides, Xuanzang included the very details on the

solar terms and their periods in India[6], which suggested a highly specific record of climatic patterns useful for travelers and settlers. To conclude, the political knowledge provided by Xuanzang in the text pointed to specific areas and was likely intended for emperor Taizong to use as a reference in political and diplomatic affairs in the western lands.

2.3. Economics

The third pieces of evidence are pertaining to economics. First, Xuanzang described Samarkand as a place where treasures from various regions converged, and its inhabitants were of skills in arts and trades better than those of other countries[5], betokening that Samarkand served as an entrepôt of the Eurasian trading network where commodities gathered. Therefore, Samarkand had a significant advantage in term of conducting international trades and promoting economics. The author also states that Samarkand is in the middle of the Hu people[5], who were foreign merchants. This evidence is possibly suggesting that Samarkand was at a center of a complicated trading network. "in the middle of the Hu people" suggests that Samarkand was in between various places of the Hu people, which means there could have been trades among the Hu people from different countries, reflecting its economic prosperity resulted from commercial activities. Besides, being skillful in arts may suggest that Samarkand's inhabitants possessed prowesses of craftsmanship, the ability of local people to produce what could be used in commercial activities, resulting in further and constant economic prosperity. Because of Samarkand's power in economics regarding trades, inhabitants, and rulers as a whole, Xuanzang's first-hand account on its society likely gained great significance from emperor Taizong and the Tang court. Another example is that people in Kapisa, which is nowadays in Afghanistan, used gold and silver coins, and also little copper coins in commerce, which in appearance and stamp differ from those of other countries[8]. In this record, one distinction can be noticed that all gold, silver, and copper coins were used in transactions, which was different from those of other countries. One difference between the use of gold and silver coins and copper coins was that gold and silver were mainly operated by elites who were of higher social status, while copper coins were accessible to ordinary citizens. In this case, all three types of coins used in commerce can denote that commercial activities in Kapisa were conducted by people in various social status, thus elevating its significance in the level of participation and popularity as well as the national economic prosperity which could be meaningful for Tang Dynasty to comprehend the text. By taking into account various small phenomena under the broader context of economics and historical backgrounds, one can conjecture that Xuanzang's descriptions could provide information on a secular aspect, namely, the degree of the economic prosperity of certain countries.

2.4. Supernatural Components

Moreover, the supernatural elements in Buddhism and the outer symbols and ornamentations of Buddhism religion may also serve a practical function in addition to religious purposes when considering the historical background of the Tang Dynasty and Taizong himself. A myriad of elaborations about Buddhism religious decorations were delineated to indicate the opulence of Buddhism as a religion, and the amounts of wealth Buddhists from those countries possessed and devoted to their religious beliefs. For example, Xuanzang depicted the scenery of a Buddhist washing basin in a convent in Balkh as "it contains about a peck and is of yellowish-white which dazzles the eyes; it is pure and shining, ornamented with various gems, and presented with offering on each of the six fast-days by the assembly of lay and cleric believers[9]. The Buddhist washing basin is apparently ornamented by dazzling gems symbolizing the amounts of wealth that Buddhists devoted in. "Presented with offerings of lay and cleric believers" indicates that a larger population indeed participated in contributing wealth to religious offerings. Since religious offerings were indeed coin-consuming, it is possible that people in Balkh, no matter Buddhists or not, contributed a considerable amount of wealth on religious purpose, therefore

denoting that a certain amount of private wealth in Balkh actually went into offerings for Buddhism. As a result, the general economic pattern and the currency flows in Balkh could be interpreted. Another example is that the author delineates a Buddha figure in Bamiyan: "the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha whose golden hues on every side and precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness. [10]" It is a well-known fact that a Buddha-figure symbolizes the Buddhism religion, and the level of extravagance denotes veneration. Furthermore, in arranging their prices as they come and go, the merchants fall in with the signs afforded by the spirits. If good, they act accordingly; if evil, they seek to propitiate the powers[10]. What could be understood with the saying that merchants acted according to spiritual goodness or evilness is that merchants in Bamiyan considered religion as of high significance, indicating that spirituality was integrating into their commercial lives. As a matter of fact, contributing wealth to religious beliefs could represent the lifestyles in certain countries, and could possibly act as a reminder for emperor Taizong to reevaluate the significance of Buddhism since, in this case, it might symbolize wealth. Therefore, one possible conclusion is that Xuanzang might have been taking advantage of Taizong's interests in wealth to, in some way, advocate Buddhism, and arouse a reconsideration of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the three aspects of knowledge provided by the text especially emphasize practicality: politics, geographies and climates, and economics. Each of these contains enough information to act as guidance for the audience regarding the previously less-explored western regions, which likely prompted the exploration of the west, as a way of social development. As a pious Buddhist monk, however, Xuanzang was actually compiling this record in a secular view with the inclusion of a considerable amount of religious components, which unintentionally enlarges the scope of audiences. The detailed descriptions of each aspect of practical matters without a doubt can be used as references and on practical issues. However, admittedly, there are limitations regarding the text itself and how scholars comprehend it, and each category of evidence might result in different interpretations. Moreover, it was Xuanzang who commenced a pilgrimage into the previously less-discovered western regions, which set up a precedent for future generations to simulate in both a moral and practical manner. Xuanzang's masterpiece inaugurates a new era of discovery in the mysterious yet spiritually abundant land.

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