

Xuanzang's Design of Buddhism for Tang Dynasty

-- A Research on Buddhist Stories in Xuanzang's Travel Account

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Abstract

Xuanzang's Travel Account in the Tang Dynasty has long been used as an important source for researching South Asian history and culture. In this paper, this travel account will be examined from a new perspective, in which the cultural background under which the account is written is emphasized. This paper will discuss Xuanzang's attempt to suggest a model of Buddhism that fits into the trends of thoughts and system of values in Tang dynasty and was able to maintain a balance with two other schools, Daoism and Confucianism. Three aspects of this attempt will be discussed: 1) Xuanzang's description of a humble and peaceful Buddhism; 2) Xuanzang's emphasis of the pragmatic and profitable characteristics of Buddhist practices; 3) Xuanzang's discussion on the impacts that Buddhism would have on the politics and the society. This paper discovers Xuanzang's Travel Account's new importance as a primary source from ancient China that has the potential to reflect the clash between cultures and religions during the Tang dynasty.

Keywords

The Tang dynasty; Buddhism; Xuanzang; Religious clash.

1. Introduction

Xuanzang, a great Buddhist scholar in Tang dynasty, traveled to Tianzhu (India) for further studies in Buddhism. After he returned to China, emperor Taizong requested him to write a travel account. This travel account has long been used by modern scholars as a source for studying the customs in the southern parts of Asia where Xuanzang traveled to. However, it should be noticed whenever Xuanzang described the places he travelled to, he skillfully incorporated Buddhist stories into his description. As elites in the Tang dynasty regarded these stories as reliable source to learn about foreign cultures, especially Buddhism, Xuanzang's decision should be considered intentional and worth discussing.

Xuanzang's decision is related to the cultural background of Tang dynasty—the tripartite balance of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism [1]. Daoism, as it helped the first Tang emperor in the building of Tang dynasty, gained such a great support from Tang emperors that the royal family claimed themselves to be descendants of the founder of Daoism, Laozi [2]. At the same time, Confucianism kept its position as the political guideline for emperors and the underlying basis of Chinese social life. Buddhism, as the first real religion in China with its own set of principles and the potential to exclude people from other schools of thoughts, potentially clashed with Daoism and Confucianism and faced doubts and challenges.

In his way of telling such stories, Xuanzang was possibly trying to respond to these doubts and challenges by making Buddhism neither less attractive than two other schools nor potentially threatening their positions. In this way, Xuanzang likely characterized Buddhism to be a religion that fit into the trends of thoughts and system of values in Tang dynasty and was able to maintain a balance with two other schools.

This paper discusses how Xuanzang used implications in the Buddhist stories in his Travel Account to emphasize the traits of Buddhism mentioned above. This paper analyzes the notable details and messages in the Buddhist stories, explains the relationship between them and the history of the Tang dynasty, and discusses what impacts they have on the position of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty. It should be noted that Xuanzang's travel account was not the only work related to Buddhism in Tang dynasty, and Xuanzang's characterization does not represent the real figure of Buddhism at that time. Nevertheless, readers may be able to see Xuanzang's own attempt to design an appropriate model of Buddhism for the reasons stated above.

2. The Buddhist Model Designed by Xuanzang

2.1. A Humble and Peaceful Religion

Using Buddhist stories, Xuanzang attempted to characterize Buddhism as a humble school of thoughts that does not actively challenge other schools of thoughts.

Concerning the cultural background of Tang dynasty, which emphasizes an open and inclusive attitude towards different schools of thoughts, there might be anxiety towards an exclusive and strictly bounded school of thoughts, a religion like Buddhism [3]. Buddhism was the first real religion in China, and it is natural for a religion to exclude other schools of teaching from the "truth" and defame them. Such ideas would be incompatible with the cultural background of Tang dynasty. Xuanzang possibly responded to these doubts by including stories of Buddhism debating with other religions.

The most typical examples are the story of Deva winning over a Brahmin who tried to discredit Buddhism [4] and the story of Dharmapala winning over an anti-Buddhist minister [5]. In Deva's story, a Brahman tried to challenge Deva's authority and they began a debate. It is recorded that Deva answered Brahman's questions in a simple but mysterious way, and easily conquered the Brahman. Then the Brahman respected Deva for his "humor and wisdom." In Dharmapala's story, a king believed in a religion that was hostile to Buddhism and decided to organize a debate between scholars from that religion and Buddhist monks. It was a costly debate: if the scholars won, they cut their tongues; if the monks won, Buddhism would be completely eliminated in that country. In the end, Dharmapala still won. But he stopped the heretic scholars from cutting off their tongues—he converted them into Buddhists.

There are many other similar stories about debates, such as Gunamati [6] and Silabhadra [7] winning over other religions. Deva was even mentioned more than once.[8] There is no complexity in these stories. They are both straightforward and follow an established formula, just like other debates mentioned in the book: it is always the other religions that challenge Buddhism intentionally and Buddhism never challenges another religion or school of thoughts. In debates, the speaker for Buddhism is never the first one to speak; he either answers his opponent's question or rebuts his opponent's arguments. Buddhism usually wins the debate—though it has the capacity to win over other religions, it never intentionally expands itself.

These stories showed a respect for those who cling to schools other than Buddhism and the worst defaming was only the description of losing in debates. When schools debate with each other, it showed that they recognized that each other's ideas were at least worth listening to and none of the sides put itself above the other. Such humility would make Buddhism acceptable in a society that respected many other schools of teaching.

Xuanzang not only characterized Buddhism to be humble, but also emphasized the peaceful trait of Buddhism. What distinguished Buddhism from other schools of teaching in China was that Buddhism had the word "heretics", denying that people who believe in other schools can know the truth. In Tang dynasty, there were many "heretics" in China if Buddhism would like to call them so—there are people who believed in Confucianism and Daoism [9]. This possibly caused concern about whether Buddhism could fit into a diversified culture and treat other

religions or schools of thoughts peacefully. Using Buddhist stories, Xuanzang likely suggested that Buddhism would fit in to such a culture by showing the tolerance of Buddhism for heretics even when heretics posed great threats on Buddhism and thus proving Buddhism to be peaceful. On the Dharma Service in Kusumapura, a heretic assassin attempted to kill the king of Kusumapura, who was a great supporter of Buddhism, out of the hostility against Buddhism. In the end, he was arrested but only slightly punished. The heretics who engaged in such a serious crime were only driven out of the country [10]. In Dharmapala's story mentioned above, Buddhism was severely threatened by another religion and eventually avoided punishing the heretics after winning over them.

In the stories, Xuanzang interestingly set up a juxtaposition between Buddhism and other religions. The other religions are so aggressive that their challenges against Buddhism usually come with serious threats, such as eliminating Buddhism in a certain country, or other violent behaviors such as cutting tongues or killing monks. Though it is always Buddhism that wins, Buddhism never conducts retaliation. It is shown that Buddhist attitude towards "heretics" is so tolerant and even respectful, as Xuanzang mostly focused on their friendly interactions and Buddhism's tolerance but seldom discussed who could know the truth, thus avoiding defaming heretics in his own stories while emphasizing Buddhism's peaceful trait.

In this way, Xuanzang suggested that Buddhism could fit into the culture of Tang dynasty and be compatible with other schools of thoughts in Chinese society and would not seek to challenge the authority of the supporter of Tang dynasty, Daoism and the basis of Chinese politics, Confucianism.

2.2. Pragmatic and Profitable Religious Practices

In the Buddhist stories Xuanzang told, there are many descriptions that emphasized the divine parts of Buddhist practices to make them seem pragmatic and profitable. Such emphasis of divinity should be linked back to one of people's pursuits in Tang dynasty—the pursuit of immortality and supernatural power, represented by the description of "celestial beings" from Daoism. Tang elites were very enthusiastic about the benefits they could get from Daoist practices. Five Tang emperors even died from "celestial drugs," which were said to be magic drugs that could turn people into celestial beings and make them immortal. In Chinese ancient literature, the concept of celestial seldom implies great morality, but often related to the satisfactory people get from enjoying luxurious materials. Fine wine was referred to as "celestial liquid," grand houses were referred to as "celestial rooms" [11], and even beautiful prostitutes were described as "celestial women" [12]. Daoist practices were so welcome by people in Tang dynasty partly because of this practicality that assured people they could enjoy an infinite life in which they could better satisfy their material desires after practicing Daoism. Buddhist practices seemed to be on the contrary: In some versions of Siddhartha's story, the pain that Siddhartha endured before his success was emphasized a lot, and his realm of success mostly helped him eliminate his human desires rather than satisfy them. In Buddhist principles, great morality was the only pursuit, and human desires were the source of evil. If Xuanzang fully adopted these principles in his description, it would have made Buddhism less attractive than Daoism when it came to the pursuit of immortality and supernatural power that people were enthusiastic about. Therefore, Xuanzang tried to avoid discussing these painful parts and emphasized the parts of Buddhism related to supernatural power solving realistic problems.

A typical example is the description of Siddhartha Gautama turning into Buddha. "Siddhartha had come to the greatest realm of Buddhist practice. He sat under the tree. Although the sun had turned its orientation toward the tree, the shadow that Siddhartha was sitting in did not change at all. Siddhartha's father saw this and knew that Siddhartha had become a divine being" [13]. In this piece of description on Siddhartha's realm of success in Buddhist practice, the supernatural power of Buddhist practice is emphasized, but not what Siddhartha really

experienced as a human being—this whole process is in fact a human being thinking about the truths of the universe while observing other people. Ashoka's brother, who tried to cleanse his sin by sincere Buddhist practices, reached a success. Xuanzang described that he "went up into emptiness, showed magical power and left the mortal world. Then he would enjoy his life in a clean and divine place" [14]. This description was very similar to the description of becoming celestial in Daoism. Similar stories also include Buddhist practices healing ill men by touching them [15]; Buddha fighting off ghosts using his supernatural power [16], all stressing the benefits of divine power from Buddhist practices.

If a reader only looks at these descriptions, he would possibly think that Buddhism is another version of Daoism, because the description here gives the readers an illusion that once a man succeeds in Buddhist practices and reaches a realm, he is no longer human and gains some supernatural power. Using the supernatural power, the man could gain some actual benefits in his real life such as healing diseases, fighting off ghosts or immortality. Xuanzang was likely responding to people's enthusiasm about Daoist practices here, implying that the material benefits people thought they could get from Daoism could also be gained from Buddhism. Xuanzang did not discuss whether these material benefits should be taken as ethical one, though in Buddhist principles the desires for such benefits would very unlikely be taken as immoral ones. He mainly focused on how Buddhism could be taken as pragmatic and profitable. It was not a religion that simply eliminate desires, impose pain on people and dehumanize them. On the contrary, it brought actual benefits that people could enjoy as human beings with secular desires. When it came to the pain in Buddhist practices, Xuanzang did not mention them here, but he put them later in his book and made a comparison between painful and enjoyable religious practices from which he did not get a conclusion about which are better. In this way, Xuanzang likely avoided to make Buddhist practices seem painful and useless from a realistic perspective.

In conclusion, concerning the widespread enthusiasm for supernatural power and immortality in Tang dynasty, Xuanzang did not want Buddhism to seem less desirable than other religions, especially Daoism that carried out a system of celestial pursuits. Such defense of position is important for Buddhism to maintain an equally desirable position as Daoism and keeping a balance with it.

2.3. Positive Political and Social Influences

In his travel account, Xuanzang included some specific stories to illustrate the positive effects that Buddhism had on politics and the overall society, showing that Buddhism does not contradict with the underlying system of values of Chinese society, Confucianism.

As a Confucianist citizen, one should always take the burden of concerning the issues in the country and spare no effort to become one of the elites so that he can help build a better country. As a Confucianist son, one should pursue filial piety. It is the worst sin to abandon one's parents [17]. These basic principles, which have been the ultimate guidelines for Chinese political and social life [18], would have faced huge conflicts with Buddhism, starting from Siddhartha's Jataka stories. Buddha's father had been inquiring him to take over the country and be a good king, and yet he left his country and his family. From a Confucianist perspective, he had committed the two worst crimes: abandoning his country and his family [19]. In a Confucianist society, such a story would cause huge anxiety about the legitimacy of Buddhism and its potential negative influences on Chinese society. In his travel account, when recording such stories, Xuanzang carefully included some detailed description to soothe that anxiety.

Xuanzang used the story of Ashoka to illustrate the positive effect Buddhism has on politics. He mentioned that Ashoka was originally a brutal king. After seeing the noble behavior of a Buddhist monk in the prison he built, he became kind and intelligent [20]. Implicitly, Xuanzang

showed that Ashoka's country was rich while ruled by a Buddhist—Ashoka could afford to build many temples for monks, which is mentioned many times in the book.

The concern that Buddhism was contradicting Chinese political value too much could be possibly soothed by the way Xuanzang told the story. From a pragmatic level, it was unlikely for an emperor to become a monk, and he should only concern the actual impacts that Buddhism could have on his country. The result of Ashoka's story is possibly responding to that concern by showing that the actual impacts Buddhism could have on a country were straightforwardly good from a secular political perspective—the king was kind to his people, and the country was rich. It is important to note that when Xuanzang described Ashoka to be a kind and intelligent king, his description would likely remind the readers of the traditional Chinese concept of "benevolent governance," which is the best kind of governance from the perspective of Confucianism [21]. At this point, Xuanzang was likely suggesting that the principles of kindness in Buddhism could be linked to the concept of benevolence in Confucianism. A real Confucianist emperor would always pursue benevolent governance, and Xuanzang was possibly suggesting that a Buddhist approach would help a Confucianist emperor reach his goal.

By exploring the political meanings of Buddhist principles and giving an example that illustrates the practice of these principles, Xuanzang likely emphasized the pragmatic part of Buddhism and showed that it would positively influence countries that adopt it.

Besides addressing the political concern, Xuanzang possibly also noticed the potentially most contentious part of Buddha's story—Buddha abandoned his parents, losing filial piety. In order to make the story seem less rebellious to the Confucianist principle, Xuanzang emphasized the secular, humanized part of Buddhism by telling a short story after Buddha's death. After Buddha passed away, his mother came down from the heaven and cried so sadly that she fainted. When she woke up, Buddha sat up in the coffin to console his mother. However, a monk asked a question after seeing this: "If people later ask me about what happened today, how should I answer their questions?" Xuanzang did not explain why the monk was asking it. This monk probably realized that neither Buddha's mother's nor Buddha's behaviors were appropriate regarding Buddhist principles, for the mother was too much bothered by the natural rule of death, and Buddha was touched by the secular emotions between mother and son. Buddha responded in this way: "Tell them that after Buddha passed away, his mother came down from heaven and went into the trees. Buddha sat up in the coffin and began a lecture to educate those human beings who don't treat their parents well."

At this point, Buddha's secular and emotional part almost becomes explicit—to console his mother, Buddha even bothered to give up acting in accordance with Buddhist principles and tell a little lie to his later followers. In Xuanzang's description, it seems that Buddha was such a good son because he respected his mother and spared no effort to take care of her emotions. Xuanzang was possibly trying to maintain Buddha within the frame of a saint that Confucianism had designed. In all the moral principles of Confucianism, filial piety always occupies such an important position that if one fails to treat his parents well, he would forever lose the qualification to be called a saint, no matter how successful his career is or how great his other moralities are [22]. Therefore, Xuanzang likely emphasized Buddha's secular part so that he would still be considered a saint regarding Confucianist standards, regardless of how he actually left his parents and failed to take the responsibility of a son and a king.

In conclusion, though Buddhism itself encourages its followers to give up secular life and responsibilities, Xuanzang still discussed Buddhist influences from a secular perspective. In this way, Xuanzang likely avoided Buddhism to be seen as a religion that was too rebellious against Confucianism and would negatively influence the society operating under Confucianist principles.

3. Conclusion

Through implications in the Buddhist stories he recorded, Xuanzang characterized Buddhism to be a humble and peaceful religion. He also characterized Buddhist practices to be pragmatic and profitable practices that did not contradict directly with Chinese underlying system of values. In this way, Xuanzang demonstrated his intention to portray a model of Buddhism that could maintain its importance in the Tang dynasty peacefully and safely. From a Buddhist monk's perspective, Xuanzang's travel account illustrates a particular moment in Buddhist history when different schools of thoughts clashed and competed for their positions in the mainstream culture. Moreover, the travel account has a huge potential to reflect the history and culture of the Tang dynasty given the abundance of details and messages.

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