

# Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions

Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist traveled through Central and South Asia between 629 and 645 CE. He later recorded his reflections for the Tang emperor. The following excerpts depict some of his descriptions of Central Asia.

Now Buddha having been born in the western region and his religion having spread eastwards, the sounds of the words translated have been often mistaken, the phrases of the different regions have been misunderstood on account of the wrong sounds, and thus the sense has been lost. The words being wrong, the idea has been perverted. Therefore, as it is said, "it is indispensable to have the right names, in order that there be no mistakes."

Now, men differ according to the firmness or weakness of their nature, and so the words and the sounds (of their languages) are unlike. This may be the result either of climate or usage. The produce of the soil differs in the same way, according to the mountains and valleys. With respect to the difference in manners and customs, and also as to the character of the people in the country of "the lord of men," the annals sufficiently explain this. In the country of "the lord of horses" and of "the lord of treasures" the (local) records and the proclamations explain the customs faithfully, so that a brief account can be given of them.

In the country of "the lord of elephants" the previous history of the people is little known. The country is said to be in general wet and warm, and it is also said that the people are virtuous and benevolent. With respect to the history of the country, so far as it has been preserved, we cannot cite it in detail; whether it be that the roads are difficult of access, or on account of the revolutions which have occurred, such is the case. In this way we see at least that the people only await instruction to be brought to submission, and when they have received benefit they will enjoy the blessing of civilization (pay homage). How difficult to recount the list of those who, coming from far, after encountering the greatest perils (difficulties), knock at the gem-gate with the choice tribute of their country and pay their reverence to the emperor. Wherefore, after he (Xuanzang) had travelled afar in search of the law, in his moments of leisure he has preserved these records of the character of the lands (visited). After leaving the black ridge, the manners of the people are savage (barbarous). Although the barbarous tribes are intermixed one with the other, yet the different races are distinguishable, and their territories have well-defined boundaries. Generally speaking, as the land suits, they build walled towns and devote themselves to agriculture and raising cattle. They naturally hoard wealth and hold virtue and justice in light esteem. They have no marriage decorum, and no distinction of high or low. The women say, "I consent to use you as a husband and live in submission, (and that is all)." When dead, they burn the body, and there is no determined period for mourning. They scar their faces and cut their ears. They crop their hair and tear their clothes. They slay their herds and offer them in sacrifice to the manes of the dead. When rejoicing, they wear white garments; when in mourning, they clothe themselves in black. Thus we have

described briefly points of agreement in the manners and customs of these people. The differences of administration depend on the different countries. With respect to the customs of India, they are contained in the following records.

#### **PO-HO [BALKH]**

This country is about 800 li from east to west, and 400 li from north to south; on the north it borders on the Oxus. The capital is about 20 li in circuit. It is called generally the little Pajariha. This city, though well (strongly) fortified, is thinly populated. The products of the soil are extremely varied, and the flowers, both on the land and water, would be difficult to enumerate. There are about 100 convents and 3000 monks, who all study the religious teaching of the Little Vehicle. Outside the city, towards the south-west, there is a convent called Navasangharama, which was built by a former king of this country. The Masters (of Buddhism), who dwell to the north of the great Snowy Mountains, and are authors of Sastras, occupy this convent only, and continue their estimable labours in it. There is a figure of Buddha here, which is lustrous with (reflects the glory-of) noted gems, and the hall in which it stands is also adorned with precious substances of rare value. This is the reason why it has often been robbed by chieftains of neighbouring countries, covetous of gain.

This convent also contains (possesses) a statue of Pi-sha-men (Vaisravana) Deva, by whose spiritual influence, in unexpected ways, there is protection afforded to the precincts of the convent. Lately the son of the Khan Yeh-hu (or She-hu), belonging to the Turks, becoming rebellious, Yeh-hu Khan broke up his camping ground; and marched at the head of his horde to make a foray against this convent, desiring to obtain the jewels and precious things with which it was enriched. Having encamped his army in the open ground, not far from the convent, in the night he had a dream. He saw Vaisravana Deva, who addressed him thus: "What power do you possess that you dare (to intend) to overthrow this convent?" and then hurling his lance, he transfixed him with it. The Khan, affrighted, awoke, and his heart penetrated with sorrow, he told his dream to his followers, and then, to atone somewhat for his fault, he hastened to the convent to ask permission to confess his crime to the priests; but before he received an answer he died. Within the convent, in the southern hall of Buddha, there is the washing-basin which Buddha used. It contains about a peck [= approx. 10 pints] and is of various colours, which dazzle the eyes. It is difficult to name the Gold and stone of which it is made. Again, there is a tooth of Buddha about an inch long, and about eight or nine tenths of an inch in breadth. Its colour is yellowish white; it is pure and shining. Again, there is the sweeping brush of Buddha, made of the plant "Ka-she" (kasa). It is about two feet long and about seven inches round. Its handle is ornamented with various gems. These three relics are presented with offerings on each of the six fast-days by the assembly of lay and cleric believers. Those who have the greatest faith in worship see the objects emitting a radiance of glory.

To the north of the convent is a stupa, in height about 200 feet, which is covered with a plaster hard as the diamond, and ornamented with a variety of precious substances. It encloses a sacred relic (she-li), and at times this also reflects a divine splendour.

To the south-west of the convent there is a Vihdra. Many years have elapsed since its foundation was laid. It is the resort (of people) from distant quarters. There are also a large number of men of conspicuous talent. As it would be difficult for the several possessors of the four different degrees (fruits) of holiness to explain accurately their

condition of saintship, therefore the Arhats (Lo-han), when about to die, exhibit their spiritual capabilities (miraculous powers), and those who witness such an exhibition found stupas in honour of the deceased saints. These are closely crowded together here, to the number of several hundreds. Besides these there are some thousand others, who, although they had reached the fruit of holiness (i.e., Arhatship), yet having exhibited no spiritual changes at the end of life, have no memorial erected to them.

At present the number of priests is about 100; so irregular are they morning and night in their duties that it is hard to tell saints from sinners.

To the north-west of the capital about 50 li or so we arrive at the town of Ti-wei; 40 li to the north of this town is the town of Po-li. In each of these towns there is a stupa about three chang (30 feet) in height. In old days, when Buddha first attained enlightenment after advancing to the tree of knowledge, he went to the garden of deer; at this time two householders meeting him, and beholding the brilliant appearance of his person, offered him from their store of provisions for their journey some cakes and honey. The lord of the world, for their sakes, preached concerning the happiness of men and Devas, and delivered to them, his very first disciples, the five rules of moral conduct and the ten good qualities (shen, virtuous rules). When they had heard the sermon, they humbly asked for some object to worship (offer gifts). On this Tathagata delivered to them some of his hair and nailcuttings. Taking these, the merchants were about to return to their own country, when they asked of Buddha the right way of venerating these relics. Tathagata forthwith spreading out his Sanghati on the ground as a square napkin, next laid down his Uttarasanga and then his Sankakshika; again over these he placed as a cover his begging-pot, on which he erected his mendicant's staff. Thus he placed them in order, making thereby (the figure of) a stupa. The two men taking the order, each went to his own town, and then, according to the model which the holy one had prescribed, they prepared to build a monument, and thus was the very first stupa of the Buddhist religion erected. Some 70 li to the west of this town is a stupa about two chang (20 feet) in height. This was erected in the time of Kasyapa Buddha. Leaving the capital and going south-west, entering the declivities of the Snowy Mountains, there is the country of Jui-mo-to (Jumadh?).

Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1884).