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## Kashmir through hyecho's eyes: A Buddhist pilgrim's tale

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### Abstract

Foreign travellers have been visiting Kashmir for centuries, and their travelogues provide fascinating insights into the region's history, culture, and tradition. Accounts by Fa Hien, Hiuen Tsang, Itsing Ou-Kong, and Hyecho highlight admiration and critique while documenting the complex interplay of cultures that characterised Kashmir. A prominent example is Hyecho, an 8th-century Korean Buddhist monk, who undertook a pilgrimage to India and Central Asia between 723-727 CE. His travelogue, *Wang ocheonchukguk jeon* (An Account of Travels to the Five Indian Kingdoms), records his visit to Kashmir, then a major Buddhist centre with monasteries such as Harwan, Jayendra Vihara, Parihaspur Mahavihara, and Dharmanarayana Vihara of King Asoka. Buddhism flourished in Kashmir under Mauryan patronage in the 3rd century BCE and continued through the Kushan Empire, when Emperor Kanishka convened the Fourth Buddhist Council, producing seminal texts like the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. Kashmir became a hub of Buddhist scholarship, nurturing philosophers such as Vasubandhu, whose *Abhidharmakośa* advanced Yogacara thought, and Kumarajiva, whose translations spread Mahayana Buddhism to China. As monks, texts, and ideas travelled across India, Central Asia, and China, Kashmir shaped religious and intellectual exchanges along the Silk Road. Hyecho's observations offer critical perspectives on Buddhism's decline in some regions, alongside the rise of Hinduism and Islam, while also documenting a thriving Buddhist community that practiced both Mahayana and Hinayana. His account remains a vital historical resource, opening avenues for further research in cultural, religious, and intellectual history, art, linguistics, and comparative studies.

**Keywords:** Hyecho, Kashmir Buddhism, Caityacarika, Buddhist Travelogue, Mahayana Buddhism, indo-central Asian interaction

### Introduction

The origins of Buddhism in Kashmir are shrouded in mystery. However, all Buddhist sources agree that Majjhantika, a monk from Varanasi and a follower of Ananda, was the one who introduced Buddhism to Kashmir. After the completion of the Third Buddhist Council, King Asoka's spiritual advisor, Mahavamsa Moggaliputta Tissa, sent missionaries to various countries to spread Buddhism, as recorded in the Ceylonese Chronicle. Majjhantika, a knowledgeable Buddhist scholar, was assigned to the Kashmir-Gandhara region. Several other Buddhist texts, including the Ashokavadana, the Avadanakalpalata, Yuan Chwang's travelogue, and the Tibetan Dul-va (Vinaya), also recount Majjhantika's journey of bringing Buddhism to Kashmir. The story is rich in legendary details and describes how Majjhantika faced hostility from the local Naga people and their chief. Eventually, he managed to convert the entire Naga population, including their king, to the Buddhist faith through his supernatural powers<sup>[1]</sup>.

According to the Buddhist text Divyavadana, Ashoka invited several monks from Tamasavana in Kashmir to attend the Third Buddhist Council held at Pataliputra<sup>[2]</sup>.

Kalhan recounts the founding of several viharas in Kashmir under King Surendra, who was a predecessor of Asoka. This suggests that Buddhism had already been introduced in Kashmir before Majjhantika and Asoka. However, it is likely that, despite an earlier introduction, Buddhism did not become firmly established in Kashmir until the third century B.C. under the spiritual guidance of Majjhantika<sup>[3]</sup>.

Kalhan describes Asoka (c. 273-236 B.C.) as a king of Kashmir and a disciple of Jina, or Buddha. He is credited with establishing several stupas and viharas in the valley, making him famous for constructing an impressive caitya in the town of Vitastatra. Additionally, the

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traveller Yuan-Chwang noted the presence of four stupas in the valley that contained a portion of the Buddha's relics, which he attributed to Asoka's efforts. The renowned Tibetan historian Taranatha also mentioned that King Asoka generously bestowed gifts upon numerous Buddhist sanghas in Kashmir. After Asoka, the history of Buddhism in Kashmir becomes somewhat unclear. During the reign of Jalauka, Asoka's son, Buddhism appeared to be in decline. Jalauka held a negative attitude towards Buddhism and was a follower of the indigenous Naga and Saiva cults<sup>[4]</sup>.

However, it is reported that he later changed his perspective on Buddhism, thanks to the holy sorceress Kṛtya, who inspired him to construct a viihara known as Kṛtyarama. O'kong, a Chinese traveller who visited this viihara in the eighth century A.D., referred to it as Ki-teche. Additionally, the site has been associated with Kits Ahom, located five miles downstream from the Baramulla area of Kashmir. The renowned Buddhist text, the Milindapanha, records a debate on important Buddhist topics between the Indo-Greek King Menander, also known as Milinda, and the Arhat Nagasena. This exchange marks a significant event in the history of Buddhism in Kashmir. It is said that the conversation took place just twelve yojanas away from Kashmir<sup>[5]</sup>.

During the Kushan dynasty, Buddhism gained significant support. Kanishka's reign (circa 78 A.D.) is a remarkable period in Buddhist history. He revitalised the religion, restoring its lost grandeur, and continued King Ashoka's mission of sending distinguished scholars abroad to spread the faith. Under Kanishka's rule, regions such as Kashmir and Gandhara flourished, benefiting greatly from this prosperity. Kashmir was particularly important during his reign for several reasons, including the production of renowned Sanskrit commentaries known as Vibha Sastra, the convening of the Fourth Buddhist Council, and the emergence of notable intellectuals. Many prominent scholars specialising in Abhidharma studies emerged from Kashmir, which became a significant centre for the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma. To spread their teachings, many of these academics travelled beyond India to countries such as China, Tibet, and Central Asia, where they translated Sanskrit texts into local languages. As Kashmir continued to thrive as a hub for Abhidharma studies, it attracted scholars from various nations who sought to acquire knowledge and expertise in this field<sup>[6]</sup>.

Kalhana claims that the devout Turuhka rulers Huska, Juska, and Kaniska established three towns (puris): Huskapura (Uskur), Juskapura (Zukur), and Kaniskapura (Kanespur), respectively. They also built chaityas and Mathas at Busekaetra and other locations. It is said that Juska constructed a viihara in Juskapura. According to Taranatha, Kaniska converted to Buddhism and listened to the teachings of Simha, a Kashmiri monarch who was referred to as Sudarana after his ordination<sup>[7]</sup>.

Following Kaniska, Meghavahana (circa 6th century A.D.) is another ruler known for supporting Buddhism in Kashmir. Born in Gandhara, a region predominantly influenced by Buddhism, he implemented laws to prohibit the killing of living beings in his kingdom. His queen, Amritaprabha of Pragjyotisa (modern-day Assam), constructed a grand viihara called Amrita Bhavana for the use of foreign monks. The Chinese traveller O'Kong also referenced this structure, which is represented by the ruins still visible in the suburb of Vaunta Bhavan in Srinagar, located three miles to the north<sup>[8]</sup>.

A native of Ladakh, who served as her father's spiritual mentor, constructed a stupa known as Lo-stonpa. Additionally, there are references to other queens who built several viharas. It is said that Queen Yukadevi provided accommodations for both lay devotees and monks in her magnificently constructed viihara at Nadavana. Furthermore, it is reported that Queen Indradevi established the Indradevibhavana-vihāra, which features a quadrangle and a stupa. Similarly, viharas were built under the names of queens Khadana and Samma. Notably, Queen Khadana appears to have had ties to the area known as Khadaniyar, located four miles below Baramulla. Kalhan discusses several pieces of evidence indicating that Buddhism was established during the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.<sup>[9]</sup>.

King Pravarasena II's maternal uncle, Jayendra, was a Buddhist who built the Jayendra-vihara and placed a statue of the Buddha there. However, King Ksemagupta later destroyed this viihara between 950 and 958 A.D. Additionally, Yudhisthira II's ministers supported Buddhism by constructing viharas and chaityas, and by completing other religious projects. A Buddha statue was also placed in a viihara built by Meghavahana's wife, Bhinna, by Amrita Prabha, the wife of King Ranaditya. Furthermore, King Vikram Aditya's minister, Galuna, constructed a viihara in honour of his wife, Ratnavali<sup>[10]</sup>.

Various literary documents, including the travelogues of Chinese travellers Yuan Chwang and O'Kong, the Rajatarangni, and the Korean Traveller Hyecho, certain archaeological discoveries, and epigraphic records provide a reasonably reliable view of the state of Buddhism in Kashmir beginning in the 7th to 12th century A.D.

Cetiyyacarika is a Pali word used in Buddhism. Cetiyyacarika combines the words cetiya (a shrine, stupa, or memorial connected to the Buddha or his teachings) and carika (a wandering, journey, or pilgrimage). When combined, they describe a journey to visit and honour cetiyas (such as stupas, relics, or locations associated with the life of the Buddha) or a pilgrimage to holy Buddhist sites<sup>[11]</sup>. In actuality, cetiyyacarika frequently entails going to locations such as the Taman Makam Pahlawan in Semarang, Indonesia, as part of Buddhist anniversary celebrations (like Vesak), where attendees honour relics, historical figures, or holy objects while considering the Dharma. Theravada Buddhism is the origin of the term, which highlights the importance of devotion and introspection on such journeys.

It has its roots in Theravada Buddhism and entails pilgrimages to honour these locations, encouraging introspection, devotion, and merit. The goal of cetiyyacarika is for pilgrims to celebrate the Buddha, develop their practice, and develop compassion and mindfulness.

The concept of pilgrimage is rooted in the Maha-Parinibbana Sutta, where the Buddha identifies four significant locations that devotees should visit: Lumbini, where he was born; Bodhgaya, where he attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he first taught the Dhamma; and Kushinagar, where he passed away<sup>[12]</sup>. The term "Cetiya-carika," meaning pilgrimage, refers to the act of visiting a cetiya, or pagoda. A cetiya, pagoda, or thupa is typically constructed so devotees can visit and express their respect. However, I believe that a cetiya also serves as a place where one can focus their mind on the Dhamma. Engaging in such acts with trust can lead to fortunate rebirths, as suggested by the Maha-Parinibbana Sutta. During the Buddha's time, India was known as the "Island of

Rose-Apples" (Jambu Dipa). The area where the Buddha travelled, taught, and meditated was referred to as the Middle Land (Majjhima Desa). This region roughly corresponds to the Terai lowlands of southern Nepal and the present-day Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. He meditates at a cetiya instead of simply prostrating himself. When people meditate in this way, they gain significant merit, motivating them to further their spiritual journey. The region was once one of the greatest centres of human civilisation, but today it is among the poorest areas of India. In addition to being the site of some of India's most illustrious empires, the Middle Land was also the birthplace and spiritual centre of Dhamma<sup>[13]</sup>. Since the time of the Buddha, pilgrims have travelled to this region to help others, pray, and meditate.

The Pali commentators later added four more locations to the original list, which Buddha had specified. These locations included Shravasti, Rajgir, Sankasya, and Vaishali, bringing the total count from four to eight. As a result, pilgrims began to travel to Majjhima Desa, also known as Magadha or the Middle Land. The desire to visit every site connected to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and his principal disciples—such as Sariputta, Mahamoggallana, and Mahakassapa—led to the expansion of the pilgrimage process. By the time the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang arrived in the seventh century, there was a monastery approximately every three kilometres. People travelled to these monasteries to gain merits and learn about the Dhamma, a practice that continues today. In Theravada countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, this pilgrimage tradition, known as cetiyacarika, helps reinforce Buddhist ideals and cultural identity. It is often linked with festivals and social events. For instance, during Indonesia's Vesak celebrations, honouring relics may involve visiting significant sites like Taman Makam Pahlawan in Semarang.

To contemplate the Buddha's teachings and the concept of impermanence, pilgrims engage in various rituals, including circumambulation, offerings, meditation, and chanting. This tradition traces back to the early days of Buddhism, particularly when Cetiya worship was encouraged by rulers such as Emperor Ashoka in the Sanskrit poem the Ashokavadana, whose finished form dates from about the second century AD, but whose oral origins go back to the second century BC. In the poem, Ashoka, who ruled as king of the Mauryan dynasty from approximately 274 to 232 BC, expanded his control over nearly all of India and eventually became a Buddhist<sup>[14]</sup>. He embarked on a pilgrimage to significant locations in the life of the Buddha, accompanied by his spiritual guide, the monk Upagupta. This journey retraces and honours the life of Buddha, from his birth to his death. At each site, Upagupta invokes local deities who witnessed these events firsthand, providing detailed recollections. In memory of the Buddha, Ashoka erected a monument at each location.

In the Ashokavadana, the emperor visits thirty-two sacred locations associated with the life of the Buddha, in addition to the four primary sites. These thirty-two holy places can be seen as etching the figure of the Great Man into the landscape of India, aligning with the thirty-two markings traditionally attributed to the Great Man, which the Buddha himself was believed to possess. The sacred sites of Buddhism symbolise the ideal body of the Great Man, who could either become a Wheel-Turning Monarch (possibly like Ashoka himself) or attain Buddhahood<sup>[15]</sup>. In contrast,

the sacred sites of Hindu India can be viewed as representing the mutilated body of Shiva's deceased wife. Along with visiting the thirty-two sacred sites, Ashoka, as described in the Ashokavadana, collects all of the Buddha's relics and distributes them across India in 84,000 stupas. He also honours the relics of the Buddha's most prominent followers by making various offerings at their stupas. The Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya holds particular significance for him, and he shows it special devotion<sup>[16]</sup>.

Twenty years after his coronation, King Priyadarsi another name of the emperor, Beloved of the Gods, visited this place in person and worshipped here because the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyas, was born here.

He ordered a stone wall to be constructed around the place and erected this stone pillar to commemorate his visit.

He declared the village of Lumbini free of taxes and required to pay only one eighth of its produce [about half the usual amount] as land revenue.

#### **(Rummindei Pillar Edict)**

In other edicts, Ashoka attests his concern for pilgrimage by improving the roads, building rest houses and watering stations.

#### **(From Pillar Edict v11).**

These are trifling comforts. The people have received various facilities from previous kings as well as from me. But I have done what I have primarily so that the people may follow the path of Dharma with faith and devotion<sup>[17]</sup>.

#### **Research Methodology**

Textual sources critically examine surviving manuscript fragments of Wang Ocheonchukguk Jeon (an account of travels to the five Indian kingdoms) conducted to excreted the relevant description of the Kashmir monastic institution's religious practice.

Contemporary and comparative study. Comparative study of Hyechos account with Fa-hien and Master Huiyen Tsang, Ou-Kong and local Kashmiri source (Rajatarangni) originally written in Sanskrit by Kalhan, etc., to assess continuity and transformation in Kashmir Buddhist landscape, This comparative approach helps to identify the practice of religion and religious patronage institutional development.

#### **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis suggests the Comparative approach: By comparing Hyecho's narrative with those of other travellers to the region, such as Fa-hien, Master Xuanzang and Ou Kong, we can better understand Kashmir's history and culture during this period. This hypothesis investigates whether Hyecho's observations on Kashmir were mediated via his distinctive Central Asian Buddhist perspective, potentially highlighting aspects of Kashmiri Buddhism that connected with or differed from Chinese and Korean Buddhist philosophy, the life and work of eminent Kashmiri Buddhist monks.

#### **Fahien**

The monk Fa-hien was the first Buddhist pilgrim to document his journey. His adventures through Central Asia, India, and Ceylon are recorded in his small book. Originally from Shanxi, Fa-hien left home at the age of three to join the Buddhist Sangha. After completing his novice training, he



became interested in travelling to India to find the Vinaya Pitaka, which contains the Buddhist monastic precepts. When Fa-hien departed for India in 399 A.D., he was approximately twenty-five years old. According to the registry, Fa-hien resided in Chang'an. In the second year of the Hwang-che period, known as the Ke-hae year in the cycle (399 A.D.), he lamented the damaged and flawed state of the collection of the Books of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka). He proposed to Hui-ching, Tao-ching, Hui-ying, and Hui-wei that they travel to India to search for the disciplinary regulations<sup>[18]</sup>.

To reach India, Fa-hien made the perilous trek across the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains as well as through the Central Asian deserts. The pilgrims had to be very brave and determined to undertake this journey. Fa-hien consistently showed great bravery during his journey. According to Fa-hien, amid the deserts, there are hot winds and plenty of nasty demons. When travellers come across them, they are all killed by a man. Neither an animal on the ground below nor a bird in the air can be spotted. Despite your best efforts to search everywhere for a crossing point, you are unable to determine where to make your decision; the only clue is the dry bones of the deceased that have been left on the sand<sup>[19]</sup>. Fa-hien journeyed through northern India, seeing holy Buddhist sites in the Ganges River region. Fa-hien and the other pilgrims visited and described several locations, including the birthplace of the Buddha, Kapilvastu; the site of his enlightenment, Bodhgaya; the location of his first sermon, Sarnath; and the final liberation and death of the Buddha, Kushinagar. The majority of India and Central Asia were visited and recounted at some point in the other pilgrims' narratives. However, Fa-hien spent a significant amount of time visiting and documenting mid-India, often known as Magadha, the Buddha's country, after going through Central Asia and Northwest India<sup>[20]</sup>.

Fa-hien made no visits to the peninsula or South India. Fa-hien returned to China by sea from India. On his way back, he did, however, stop at Ceylon. This is the only first-person report from a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim on that significant Buddhist Island. After suffering greatly at sea, Fa-hien returned to China in 414 A.D. At one time, he was at risk of being marooned by the ship's crew, and at another, he came across a strong storm. Fa-hien's voyage is summarised in the following manner: After leaving Ch'ang-an, Fa-hien took six years to get to Central India, where he stopped for another six years. It took him three years to go back to Ch'ing-chou. He travelled through a few nations that were under thirty. The dignity of monastic life and the transformative power of the Law, from the sandy desert westward to India, were too beautiful for words to adequately convey<sup>[21]</sup>.

### **Che Mong**

In 404 AD, a Chinese monk named Che-mong left Cha' Cha'ang-an on his pilgrimage. They travelled through central Asia with 14 other monks and a Kashmiri monk as their guide until they arrived to the Pamir's, where Che Mong was able to cross with just six of his friends. The Kashmiri guide also perished while crossing the passes. Che-Mong spent a considerable amount of time in Kashmir with his friends<sup>[22]</sup>.

### **Sung Yun and Hui-sheng**

They were sent as a diplomatic mission to the western nations in 518 A.D. by Empress Dowager Ta-hao of the

Great Wei dynasty, which was a group of invading peoples known as the T'o-pa. The pilgrim's goal was to acquire Buddhist texts, and they brought back 170 volumes of Mahayana-style writings. Since Sung Yün was a native of Tun-huang, which is situated near the Chinese Central Asian border, he was most likely thought to be well qualified to go on such an expedition. The southern trade route across Central Asia ended in Tun-huang, China. Maybe this is why Sung Yün took the southern route through Khotan to get from China to India<sup>[23]</sup>.

Rather than travelling to the middle of India, Sung Yun and Hui-sheng only made it to Gandhara, which is about where Peshawar is today. When the pilgrims arrived in Udyana, which is located in the modern-day Swat valley, they were warmly welcomed. According to reports, when the country's king saw Sung Yun, he enquired about his regard and politely accepted their letters of introduction after they announced the arrival of the Great Wei (dynasty) envoy. Upon realising that the Empress Dowager was deeply committed to the law of Buddha, he immediately turned his face eastward and bowed his head while keeping his hands closed and his heart in a meditative state<sup>[24]</sup>. He then sent for a man who could interpret Wei. He asked, Are my honourable visitors' men from the region of Sunrising to Sung Yun. The sun rises according to the divine will (the command of the Tathagata) from the great sea that borders our country on the east, Sung Yun said. However, Sung Yün and Hui-sheng did not get a warm welcome in Gandhara because, upon meeting the monarch, to deliver his credentials, Sung Yün made his way back to the royal camp. The king neglected to salute him and treated him harshly. As he received the letters, he sat. Sung Yün believed that these isolated barbarians were unfit to perform public functions and that their haughtiness would not be restrained. As evidenced by the hostile actions of the king of Gandhara, Sung Yün's pilgrims were unable to travel past the Indus River to the sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites because northwest India was experiencing political unrest at the time of his travels. Having accomplished their goal of obtaining Buddhist texts, the pilgrims returned to China in 521 A.D<sup>[25]</sup>.

### **Zhi yan**

Zhi Yan, a monk from Liu Song Country in both the Northern and Southern dynasties, lived about the fifth century CE. At the age of 20, he entered a monastic order and lived at Xilinx State, which is now Wuwei, Gansu. He was recognised for his diligence in practice, dressed in robes, and as strict as a vegetarian. After visiting well-known Buddhists and reading numerous sutras, he travelled to Western regions to further his studies of Buddhism because he was eager to make a difference. Along the way, he once met Faxian<sup>[26]</sup>.

He studied Chan Buddhism with Bhikkhu Buddhasena after arriving in Kashmir and was housed at Mahendra's vihara. After studying there for three years, he gained the respect of the local Chinese monks and was praised by both his teacher and the monks. Zhi Yan met Sangye Buddhasena (Buddhasena from Kapilvastu) on Buddhasena's advice, and after being moved by his insightful remarks, he was asked to rejoin him. Zhi Yan's genuineness touched Buddhasena, who promised him a vacation to China with him. Despite the hardest travel circumstances due to snow mountains and deserts, they eventually arrived in Chang'an (others say they arrived in Weihai, Shandong by sea). Soon after, though,

local monks pushed Buddhasena out and he departed for Mount Lu. Zhi Yan stayed at Shandong Temple, which is located in the lower Yellow River valley, where he studied hard and meditated. Liu Yu (363-422) led his army on a successful westward expedition to Chang'an in the thirteenth year of Yixi's reign during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (417 CE). He retreated his troops by a path that went past Shandong<sup>[27]</sup>.

Wang Hui, the minister, was in the army at the time as well. When he visited the mountains and went into the monastery where Zhi Yan was staying, he discovered him and two other monks sitting there with a devout expression and a deep concentration on Buddhism. After a while, Wang Hui had come, but the three were completely unaware of his presence, and they didn't even respond when he talked to them. Respectfully, Wang Hui came back and explained everything to Liu Yu. They had no plans to visit the capital, despite Liu Yu's invitation. They eventually suggested Zhi Yan there after Liu Yu kept asking. During the journey, Zhi Yan was greeted politely by Wang Hui before settling at Shixing Temple. Then, considering Zhi Yan's preference for quiet and inner tranquilly, Wang Hui founded Temple Zhiyuan. Zhi Yan was advised by the scientist He Chengtian (370-447 CE) over sun shadow calibration issues when he was working on a new astronomical calendar. Zhi Yan helped in creating a new astronomical calendar and told He Chengtian about his research on solar shadow.

Zhi Yan had imported Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures from the West. He co-translated six volumes of Lalitavistara Sutra, one volume of Four Heavenly Kings Sutra, four volumes of Broad Strictness Sutra (also known as Broad Strictness non-faded wheel Sutra), and six volumes of Infinite Bodhisattvas with Sramana Bao Yun in the fourth year of Yuanjia (427 CE), five volumes of Life Sutra, two volumes of Bodhisattva Wreaths Sutra, two volumes of Ancient Indian Samadhi Sutra, two volumes of Anagami Sutra, one volume of Inquiry of Good Brahman to Devadatta, one volume of Sound Showing Saddhamma (also known as Sound Presenting Saddhamma), one volume of Regulating Species Sutra, and one volume of Goodness Upasaka Sutra. One volume containing the Saddharmapundarika Samadhi Sutra, another containing the Purity Samadhi Sutra, and additional historical Buddhist texts<sup>[28]</sup>.

He had previously complied with five precepts before to becoming a monk. Since he had already broken them once, he was constantly doubtful and depressed about whether following all the rules would grant him immortality. However, years of meditation failed to provide him with an answer. Consequently, he travelled back to India by sea and conferred with Buddhists. He was able to enter deep meditation with the help of Arhat Bhikkhu, whom he met by chance. When he encountered Maitreya at Doushuai Palace during the meditation, he was told that he had been successful in upholding the precepts. At the age of 78, Zhi Yan, delighted by this news, journeyed to Kashmir and died healthy. He was laid to rest in the Holy Sepulchre. After returning from the Western Regions, his disciples Zhi Yu and Zhi Yuan told the locals about Zhi Yan's miracle, and they all thought that Zhi Yan had at that point become eternal<sup>[29]</sup>.

### Fa Yong

Fa Yong and his associates devoted more time to researching Buddhist and Sanskrit religious traditions in Kashmir. Both Che Mong and Fa-Yong travelled to Kashmir at various points in time and remained there until

420 CE. Fa-Yong arrived in Kashmir with 20 monks after passing through Turgan, Kucha Kashghar, the Pamir Mountains, and the Gilgit Valley. This proves that even though Buddhism did not leave any written records, it was a thriving educational institution during those brief years<sup>[30]</sup>.

### Master Xuanzang

Xuanzang was born in Chenhe Village, Goushi Town, Yanshi County, Henan, and went by the secular family name Chen. His given name was Hui. His father, Chen Hui, was the magistrate of Jiangling County and enjoyed reading. His forebears had served in government for many decades. In 600 CE, Chen Hui was born into this Confucian household<sup>[31]</sup>. The Chen family had four sons, with Chen Hui being the youngest. Since his early years, Chen Hui has been intelligent and enjoyed reading. Emperor Yang Guang of the Sui Dynasty, who ruled from 605 to 618 CE, issued an imperial decree in 612 CE permitting 27 monks to be ordained as monks in Luoyang. At the time, hundreds of people enrolled, but Chen Hui was only 13 and hence ineligible for recruitment. But he caught the head examiner's eye, and he made an exception to hire Chen Hui. As a result, Chen Hui became a monk and was known as Xuanzang in Buddhism<sup>[32]</sup>.

When Xuanzang became a monk, he stayed in Luoyang Pure Land Temple with his second-oldest brother, Master Chang Jie. In the late Sui Dynasty, people lived in misery, and there were riots in the sky. Chang Jie and Xuanzang travelled to Chang'an together. At the age of 19, Xuanzang was in the first year of Wude under Emperor Gaozu of the Tang Dynasty Li Yuan (618)<sup>[33]</sup>.

At that time, the Tang Dynasty had just been founded, had not yet established itself, and riots and conflicts were far from over. The court disregarded Buddhism in favour of using military power and waging war. After travelling south, the two brothers reached Chengdu. Here, Xuanzang received instruction from well-known professors and accomplished a lot. In the third year of Wude (620 CE), Xuanzang was 21 years old when he was fully ordained at Chengdu's Konghui Temple<sup>[34]</sup>.

After receiving ordinations, he began to organise summer retreats and learn Buddhist sutras and classics by Buddhist norms, thereby becoming a Dharmacharya. After four or five years in Chengdu, Xuanzang understood the basic concepts of both northern and southern Chinese Buddhism and was conversant with both Mahayana and Hinayana views. Xuanzang, however, was dissatisfied with his level of knowledge and desired to travel north and leave Chengdu to further his education. In 623 CE, Xuanzang resolutely left Chengdu despite Chang Jie's dissuasion. He travelled by ship with merchants, crossed the Three Gorges, reached Jingzhou, and settled in Tianhuang Temple. Soon after leaving Jingzhou, he travelled east along rivers, through Suzhou and Yangzhou, and then north to Xiangzhou (now Anyang) and Zhaozhou until ultimately arriving in Chang'an, where he stayed in Dajue Temple and studied Abhidharmakosasastra under Master Daoyue.

In Chang'an, Fa Chang and Seng Bian conducted extensive research on Mahayana and Hinayana, were skilled in all three schools, and gained notoriety both domestically and abroad. Xuanzang heeded their counsel. These two gurus commended Xuanzang as a Buddhist talent and acknowledged his wisdom<sup>[35]</sup>.

However, there were still numerous disagreements and discussions within the Buddhist community at the time.

Xuanzang decided to travel west and look for sutras like Fa Xian in the Eastern Jin Dynasty to clarify these issues. According to him, visiting the cradle of Buddhism will profoundly address the issues. Prabhakaramitra, an Indian master, was residing in Xingshan Temple at the time. He instructed Xuanzang to study the Treatise on the Stages of the Yogachara (Yogacarabhumisastra), whose instructor was Master Silabhadra, the abbot of Nalanda Monastery and now the greatest Buddhist in India. Xuanzang verified his decision to travel to India in search of sutras by getting in touch with him<sup>[36]</sup>.

When provinces such as Guanzhong and Henan were hit by frost in the autumn of the first year of Zhenguan's reign (627 CE), Xuanzang took advantage of the opportunity to join a refugee team and leave Chang'an. He travelled to Qinzhou (now Tianshui), then to Lanzhou, and finally to Liangzhou (now Wuwei, Gansu).

During the Tang Dynasty, Liangzhou was a major western city situated at the intersection of the Gansu Corridor. It was frequented by traders from both the interior and the western regions. After spending a month in Liangzhou, Xuanzang received an invitation to teach the Maha prajnaparamita Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra (Mahaparinirvanasutra). People applauded Xuanzang and donated money to charity when they learnt that he intended to travel to India in search of sutras. Xuanzang merely saved enough money to cover his travel expenses to the west and donated the rest to temples<sup>[37]</sup>.

Liangzhou Li Daliang, the governor, upheld the court's prohibition and forbade monks from travelling overseas in private. He gave Xuanzang the order to return to Chang'an right away after learning that he was at Liangzhou. Luckily, two students of a distinguished monk in Liangzhou were tasked with sending Xuanzang to Guazhou in stealth. As a result, Xuanzang avoided exposing himself by walking at night and sleeping during the day. When Xuanzang asked about a way to get west, someone informed him that the only road leading west was Jade Gate Pass and that the location to the north was 50 li away<sup>[38]</sup>.

There were five beacon towers at 100-li intervals that were tightly guarded by soldiers. 800 li of the Gobi Desert was outside the beacon towers, which belonged to Yiwu County. That same evening, Xuanzang left Guanzhou City after asking a young Hu man named Shi Pantuo to be his guide. Gobi Desert Crossing Xuanzang and Shi Pantuo took a different route around Jade Gate Pass, but Shi Pantuo refused to continue, so Xuanzang rode a crimson, slender horse and traversed 800 li of the vast desert by himself. After traversing more than 80 li, Xuanzang was able to determine the direction based on bones and horse excrement, and he eventually saw the first beacon tower.

Wang Xiang, the army officer atop the beacon tower, was a Buddhist. He prepared drinking water and solid food for Xuanzang, travelled over 10 li to see him depart, defined the route, and then wished him farewell. As per Wang Xiang's specifications, Xuanzang proceeded directly to the fourth beacon tower. He concealed the fifth beacon tower and proceeded straight into the vast desert as directed by beacon officer Wang Bolong.

Xuanzang can view holy treasures like monks, Buddhist temples, and images in modern-day Afghanistan. Buddhist influences become more apparent after travelling to India. Xuanzang travelled to the north of present-day Pakistan to worship Buddhist treasures. He worshipped Buddhist relics in Ushnisa City and viewed the pagoda constructed by King Ashoka in Nagahara. He visited the ruins of Buddhist temples and the relics of earlier Buddhists in Gandhara, and

he saw the Bodhisattva pagoda constructed by King Kaniska, surrounded by reverent Buddhist figures<sup>[39]</sup>.

In September 631 CE, Xuanzang arrived in the valley from the west and spent two years there. After paying his respects to the holy sites, he proceeded to a night monastery of Husc-tri or Husksh across from Baramulla, where he was greeted by the king's mother's younger brothers at a stone gate<sup>[40]</sup>. When Xuanzang visited Kashmir in the Durlabhavardhan region, he was welcomed with open arms. According to Xuan Zang, Kashmir is encircled by high mountains, which accurately describes the valley itself. However, when he states that the kingdom's circuit is 7 thousand li, or 1166 miles, he must be referring to the entire kingdom of Kashmir, not just the valley, which is only 3 hundred miles long, but also the extension of the political boundary from the Northern Indus to the Southern Indus and the Eastern Ravi. Great rivers run around the nation's capital on the west side. The region is abundant in fruit and flowers, medicinal plants, fo-chu, and aromatic turmeric, and the soil is suitable for growing cereals<sup>[41]</sup>.

The climate is cold and stern, and there is much snow but little wind. The people wear leather doublets and clothes of white linen. They are light and frivolous and of weak, pusillanimous disposition. The people are handsome but are very cunning. They love learning and are well instructed, and consist of both heretics and believers. He mentions about 100 Sangharamas and 5000 priests. Ashoka built four stupas, each of which holds approximately one pint of Tathagata Buddha's remains. The most significant fact Hiuen Tsang mentions in his records is that there used to be a dragon lake, and the Lord Buddha told Ananada that three hundred years after his Mahaparinirvana, an arhat by the name of Majjhantika would establish a kingdom there, civilise the people of the Pacific, and propagate the law of Buddha<sup>[42]</sup>. When the arhat, a disciple of Ananda (Majjhantika), who had acquired the six spiritual capabilities and been given the Vimokshas, learnt of the Buddha's prophecy fifteen years after Mahaparinirvana, his heart was ecstatic and he returned to this nation. The dragon, who was filled with tremendous faith, asked him what he wanted when he was sitting peacefully in a wood on top of a high rocky crag. The arhat replied, "I ask that you grant me a place in the centre of the lake that is just the right size for my knees." On this, the dragon drew water so far and gave the spot; then, using his spiritual power, the Arhat increased the size of his body, while the dragon king held back water with all his might. As a result, the lake dried up and the water ran out. This Naga begged for a place on his flight. The Arhat then stated, "You and your prosperity may continue to reside in the small lake that has a pool of 100 li in circuit to the northwest of this<sup>[43]</sup>.

According to Hiuen Tsang, King Kanishka developed an interest in Buddhist texts and requested a monk to teach him the Dharma. However, he was not pleased and sought advice from the venerable Parshva regarding the actual truth. On his recommendation, he called for the fourth Buddhist council, which included representatives from several sects. He was keen to bridge the rifts within the church and religion. To house 500 monks who were tasked with writing pitaka comments, the king constructed a monastery. At Baramulla, Hiuen Tsang describes spending the night at the Jusk vihara after crossing into the valley<sup>[44]</sup>. When Xuanzang arrived in Kashmir, the local king sent his preceptor to the border to welcome him, and then brought his ministers to see him at home. To assist Xuanzang and his warriors, the king hired five servants and twenty sutra copyists, and he provided for all of their needs. A sixty-



year-old local teacher taught Xuanzang the sutras three times a day: Abhidharmakosasastra in the morning, Nyayanusarasastra (the Orthodox of Shastra) in the afternoon, and Hetuvidya and Sabdavidya in the evening. Xuanzang was highly praised by the elderly teacher for his intelligence, modesty, and good memory.

Hy echo's pilgrimage is closely connected to the Buddhist history of Kashmir and is part of a broader tradition known as *cetiya-carika*, or Buddhist travel narratives. Hy echo's journeys, similar to those of Xuanzang and Ou Kong, exemplify the concept of *cetiya-carika* and enhance our understanding of significant locations, such as the monasteries in Kashmir. Pilgrims travelled to *cetiyas* to learn about, revere, and document Buddhist culture.

In 721, an eighteen-year-old Buddhist monk named Hyecho embarked on one of the most remarkable journeys in the history of Buddhism. He travelled from his home country of Korea to China. After arriving in China, he sailed to the kingdom of Srivijaya on Sumatra, in present-day Indonesia, and reached India in 724<sup>[45]</sup>. Hyecho continued his journey across what are now India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, visiting sacred Buddhist sites in South Asia that were connected to the life and previous incarnations of the Buddha. While many other pilgrimages ceased, Hy echo's journey continued westward. For reasons we can only speculate, he travelled to Persia, where he encountered Islam and wrote one of the earliest known Buddhist accounts of the faith. Afterwards, he travelled east along the Silk Road's trade routes across Central Asia, making a stop in the oasis town of Dunhuang in 727. Most of what we know about this young Korean monk comes from a fragmented manuscript of Hy echo's journal, which was discovered by the French scholar Paul Pelliot in the famous Library Cave in 1908<sup>[46]</sup>.

Hyecho was neither the first nor the last East Asian pilgrim to travel to India, regardless of their level of prominence. He is not included in the extensive body of Chinese Buddhist literature because he did not become a distinguished translator or a significant teacher upon returning to China. If it weren't for Pellot's efforts to preserve his journal, Hyecho might have been lost to history. However, what stands out in the incomplete text is an unconventional journey that is truly remarkable among the documented pilgrimages undertaken by Buddhists over the centuries. Although Hyecho primarily followed the pilgrimage route established by his ancestors, he took several detours along the way. He visited many of India's traditional sacred sites, although he missed a few significant ones, such as the monastic university at Nalanda. Nevertheless, he travelled farther than any other Buddhist pilgrim, journeying south to the Buddhist caves near Nasik and even venturing into Persia—far off the typical path. Hyecho achieved his goal of reaching the Buddhist heartland, but he was unaware of the main reason why Chinese monks study and collect Sanskrit literature related to the origins of Buddhism.

Hyecho travelled through various cultures and settings in a relatively short period, documenting his observations in his journal more as an ethnographer than as a Buddhist. His interactions were primarily focused on art and architecture, geography and climate, people and livestock. Additionally, he likely gathered information from fellow pilgrims and merchants, as he could not speak the local languages. Hyecho is notable not only for his remarkable achievements, which provide intriguing insights into his character, but also for the many things he was not and did not do. His journal and travels present a unique perspective on the Buddhist environment of the eighth century. In 720, Hyecho

embarked on a boat from Guangzhou, leaving behind Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty (modern-day Xi'an). He returned to Chang'an around 728 after journeying through India and Central Asia.

Hy echo's account of northeast India marks the continuation of the Wang Ocheonchukguk Jeon. He begins his journey in Varanasi, the site where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon. He then visits Kushinagar, where Buddha entered Nirvana, followed by a stop in Vaishali. From there, Hyecho travels to Central India. His journey takes him from Central India to the southern regions of the country, which takes three months. After that, he spends another two months travelling to western India. Three months later, he reaches Punjab, located in the upper Indus River region. His route includes a stop in Taxila, now in modern-day Pakistan, and then he proceeds to Kashmir, which takes him an additional month. Hyecho likely crossed the Gangetic Plains before entering Kashmir from the south, possibly over the Pir Panjal Pass.

According to the Hy echo diary, I travelled north for fifteen days, crossing a mountainous region, until I arrived in the county of Kashmir, as noted in the Hy echo journal from Sindhukula. Kashmir is regarded as part of northern India and is quite expansive. The ruler lives in the highlands and possesses three hundred elephants<sup>[47]</sup>. The roads in this area are poor and treacherous. No foreign nation has ever invaded Kashmir. The people here are generally doing well, though there is a significant number of impoverished individuals and very few wealthy ones. The monarch, leaders, and affluent citizens wear clothing similar to that of central India, while the common people use woollen blankets to cover their bodies. This region produces sheep, cows, cotton textiles, iron, copper, and woollen blankets. In addition to rice and grapes, there are also elephants and a few horses<sup>[48]</sup>. In contrast to the previously mentioned countries, the climate here is quite chilly. Winters bring snow, while autumn brings frost. There is a significant amount of rainfall during the summer. The leaves are lush, and the plants remain green throughout the year, though the grasses tend to wither in the winter.

The valley is small and narrow. Travelling from south to north takes five days, while a journey from east to west can be completed in just one day. The valley is bordered by dense mountains that cover much of the surrounding country. The roofs of the dwellings are covered with rows of planks, as there is no use of straw or tiles<sup>[49]</sup>.

The Three Jewels are highly revered by the king, chiefs, and common people alike. Within the valley, there is a dragon pool. Although no one has ever seen the thousand Arhat monks who receive daily offerings from the dragon king, observers have reported that food, cakes, and rice appear from beneath the river after these offerings are made<sup>[50]</sup>.

It can be inferred from this that they are well-fed. These traditions have continued to the present day. When the king and chiefs go out, they ride elephants, while ordinary people walk, and lesser authorities ride horses. The nation is home to many monasteries and monks, with both Hinayana and Mahayana practices being followed<sup>[51]</sup>.

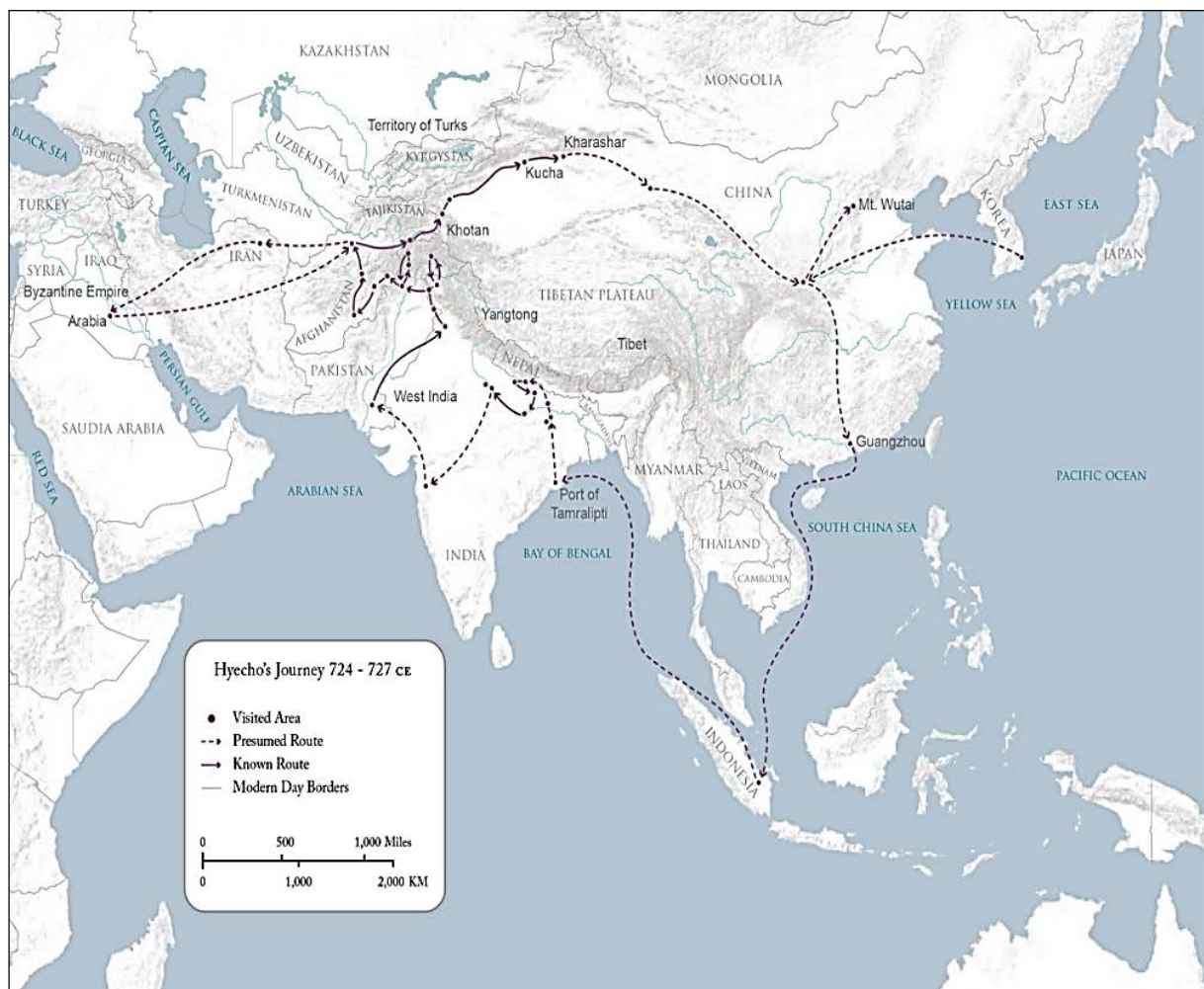
In the five regions of India, it is common for monasteries to be built independently by the king, queen, consorts, princes, chiefs, and their wives, each contributing according to their talents. They believe that cooperation is unnecessary since everyone possesses unique, admirable qualities. This practice is also followed by other rulers. Whenever a monastery is constructed, the entire village and its residents are offered to the Three Jewels as a donation. A monastery cannot be built without the contributions of the hamlet and

its inhabitants. As is customary in this unique nation, the king and his wives reside in separate villages, each with their own people<sup>[52]</sup>.

The villages and their residents are owned by the princes and chiefs, who can make independent donations without needing the king's approval. This also applies to the construction of monasteries; they are built as needed without consulting the king. The monarch is hesitant to intervene because he fears that doing so could tarnish his reputation. Wealthy commoners also strive to construct and manage monasteries independently, even if they lack towns to donate to. Whenever they acquire items, they present them to the Three Jewels. Just like in the five Indian regions, humans are not sold as slaves. Instead, villages and their inhabitants must be donated to the monastery since there are no slaves present<sup>[53]</sup>.

According to his journal, this area is markedly different from the warmer, monsoon-soaked regions of central India. He describes the frigid weather, which includes summer showers that make the valley lush and green, frost in the autumn, and significant snowfall in the winter. In stark contrast to the oppressive heat of Magadha or Gandhara, he notes that "the land is very cold." He adds that the roads were "dangerous and bad," suggesting that even experienced travellers faced challenges on the treacherous mountain slopes.

Although Xuanzang studied for years at the renowned monasteries in Kashmir, Hyecho visited only briefly, and his observations were more shaped by the region's social issues, its people, and the climate than by its intellectual legacy. In the eighth century, Kashmir was a prosperous yet isolated kingdom located in the foothills of the Himalayas. It played a vital role in the Silk Road, a trade route network connecting China, India, Central Asia, and beyond. While pilgrims like Hyecho sought holy relics and texts, merchants transported manuscripts, silk, and spices. Monasteries in Kashmir, such as Parihasapura and Huskapura, were centres of Buddhist scholarship that attracted scholars from across Asia. Although Hyecho's description of Kashmir is not as detailed as Xuanzang's, it offers a unique perspective. Hyecho viewed the region as a rugged landscape filled with diversity and resilience, while Xuanzang saw it as a learning centre. Hyecho's focus on coexistence, clothing, and climate indicates that he approached his journey with a sensitivity to the human aspects of his travels, rather than merely the sacred geography. His more comprehensive travelogue reflects a globalised Buddhist society where goods, ideas, and artistic expression flowed freely. Hyecho's narrative remains relevant today as an example of perseverance and curiosity. His journey, undertaken during a time when travelling meant enduring months of hardship, serves as a reminder of how far people are willing to go in search of meaning and knowledge.

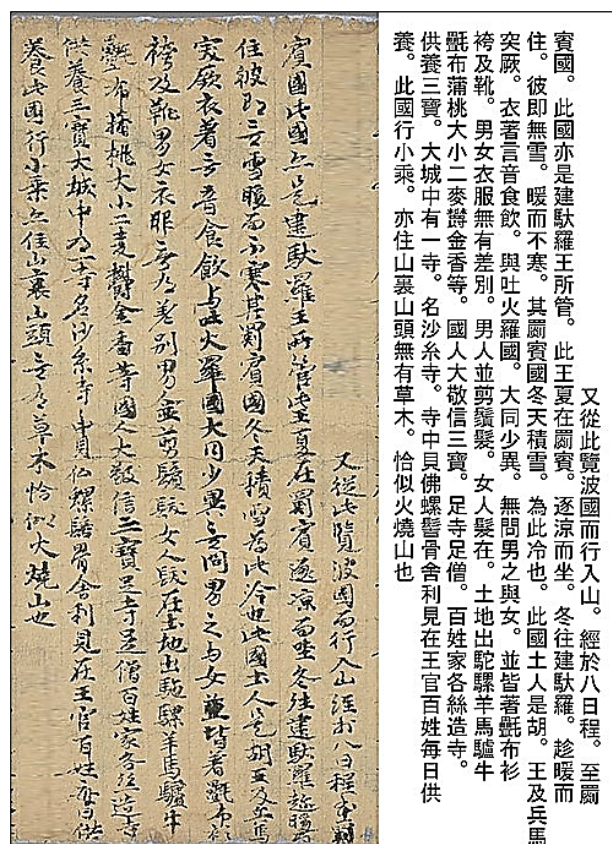


**Pic 1:** sources: <https://hyecho-buddhist-pilgrim.asian.lsa.umich.edu/pdf/map.pdf>





**Pic 2:** Sources: Lopez, D.S., Bloom, R., Kevin Grey Carr, Chun Wa Chan, Ha Nul Jun, Sinopoli, C.M. and Yokota, K. (2017a). *Hyecho's journey: the world of Buddhism*. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.



**Pic 3:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9d/Wang\\_wu\\_tian\\_zhu\\_guo\\_zhuan\\_%E5%BE%80%E4%BA%94%E5%A4%A9%E7%AB%BA%E5%9C%8B\\_%E5%82%B3\\_by\\_Hui\\_chao\\_%E6%85%A7\\_%E8%B6%85\\_Visit\\_of\\_Jibin\\_by\\_Hui\\_chao\\_%28with\\_transliteration%29.jpg/500px](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9d/Wang_wu_tian_zhu_guo_zhuan_%E5%BE%80%E4%BA%94%E5%A4%A9%E7%AB%BA%E5%9C%8B_%E5%82%B3_by_Hui_chao_%E6%85%A7_%E8%B6%85_Visit_of_Jibin_by_Hui_chao_%28with_transliteration%29.jpg/500px)  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9d/Wang\\_wu\\_tian\\_zhu\\_guo\\_zhuan\\_%E5%BE%80%E4%BA%94%E5%A4%A9%E7%AB%BA%E5%9C%8B\\_%E5%82%B3\\_by\\_Hui\\_chao\\_%E6%85%A7\\_%E8%B6%85\\_Visit\\_of\\_Jibin\\_by\\_Hui\\_chao\\_%28with\\_transliteration%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9d/Wang_wu_tian_zhu_guo_zhuan_%E5%BE%80%E4%BA%94%E5%A4%A9%E7%AB%BA%E5%9C%8B_%E5%82%B3_by_Hui_chao_%E6%85%A7_%E8%B6%85_Visit_of_Jibin_by_Hui_chao_%28with_transliteration%29.jpg)

Hyecho was deeply impressed by the natural beauty of Kashmir and its people, despite the challenges they faced. He portrays a culture in which the common people lived in poverty, using woollen blankets to keep warm. In contrast to Xuanzang, who praised Kashmir's wealth and sophistication, Hyecho highlights the simplicity of everyday life. He observes that monasteries are scattered throughout the region and that Buddhism is practised alongside other religions, but he doesn't delve deeply into their rituals or doctrines. This brevity may reflect his role as an observer rather than a researcher intent on studying Kashmir's texts, such as those on logic or Abhidharma, which attracted others to the area. The most valuable historical documents from their era are the travelogues of two Buddhist monks, Hyecho and Xuanzang, who journeyed from Asia to India in search of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Hyecho, a Korean monk from Silla, wrote "Memoir of a Pilgrimage to the Five Kingdoms of India," which details his travels between 723 and 727 CE. Xuanzang, a Chinese monk, authored "The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions," based on his journey from 629 to 645 CE<sup>[54]</sup>. The goals, approaches, and focuses of the two monks' visits to Kashmir, a significant Buddhist centre, differ greatly.

A young Korean monk named Hyecho set out on an incredible adventure at the beginning of the eighth century that would take him over 20,000 kilometres across continents, through mountains, deserts, and seas<sup>[55]</sup>. His travelogue, *Memory of a Pilgrimage to the Five Kingdoms of India* (Wang Ocheonchukguk jeon), provides a distinctive look into mediaeval life from the viewpoint of a Buddhist pilgrim. Among the many locations he visited, his writings offer a vivid yet nuanced portrayal of Kashmir, a northern crossroads of trade, faith, and culture. Even though Hyecho's echoes of Kashmir are brief, it conveys a sense of stark contrasts. From Chang'an (China), Xuanzang travelled about 25,000 kilometres, mostly by land, through Central Asia to India. He spent years in northern and central India before making his way back via the Silk Road in 645 CE. His itinerary was more centred on Buddhist heartlands, and he spent a lot of time studying and staying at places like Nalanda and Kashmir.

Unlike his more well-known contemporaries, like the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who painstakingly documented Buddhist doctrine and monasteries, Hyecho took a more thorough and nearly ethnographic approach. His travelogue, which is written in Chinese, skilfully captures the sights, sounds, and hardships of the places he visited by fusing spiritual reflection with astute observations of daily life. With a focus on climate, culture, and everyday life rather than in-depth religious analysis, Hyecho's observations in Kashmir demonstrate his ethnographic eye. He most likely came across Buddhist artwork from Kashmir, including bronze statues of Vajra sattva, a key figure in Vajrayana Buddhism who represents wisdom and compassion through ritual items like the bell and vajra. Although Hyecho's journal doesn't focus on it, Kashmir was a centre of Buddhist scholarship and creative innovation, influencing styles to Dunhuang. His more extensive travels, which include Kashmir, provide a glimpse of a connected Buddhist world, where trade routes allow goods, art, and ideas to be shared throughout Asia<sup>[56]</sup>.

Kashmir's dual function as a centre of culture and religion made it significant in the eighth century. Beautiful sculptures and bronzes were created in its monasteries,

many of which featured characters such as Vajra sattva, a bodhisattva who is essential to Vajrayana Buddhism, which Hyecho practised. These sculptures, which were frequently made of alloys and embellished with ceremonial items such as the ghanta (bell) and vajra (thunderbolt), represented wisdom and compassion. Similar styles were found in cave paintings and statues in Dunhuang, China, demonstrating the artistic influence of Kashmir. Though his journal does not dwell on these icons, possibly taking their existence for granted, Hyecho, who was trained in esoteric traditions, would have recognised them. Although Kashmir was a political power unto itself, Hyecho also points out that it had ties to neighbouring areas. He lists three kingdoms under Tibetan suzerainty that are located northeast of Kashmir, most likely in the region of Ladakh or Baltistan. He claims that, in contrast to Tibet, which at the time lacked Buddhist institutions, these kingdoms practised Buddhism and had monks and monasteries. This observation is noteworthy because it was made decades before Buddhism became widely accepted in Tibet, underscoring Hyecho's significance as a witness to a turning point in Himalayan history.

Hyecho's extensive itinerary included Kashmir as just one destination. He then continued westward, stopping in places like Bamiyan, which is home to enormous Buddha statues, and travelling to Gandhara, Central Asia, and Persia. By 727 CE, he had returned to China via Central Asia, having visited Arabia and observed the existence of a Persian king and Zoroastrian customs. In addition to its size, Hyecho's journey was noteworthy for its isolation; unlike Xuanzang, who usually travelled with escorts, Hyecho frequently travelled alone, depending on the hospitality of merchants and monasteries.

### **Ou Kong.**

The next Chinese visitor to Kashmir was Ou-Kong. Using the same route that Hiuen Tsang had chosen, he travelled from Gandhara to Kashmir in 759 CE. He spent four years here. During the Karkota dynasty's rule under King Lalitaditya, Ou Kong travelled to Kashmir. During this time, China and Kashmir enjoyed a cordial connection that made it easier for Buddhist missionaries to travel between the two nations<sup>[57]</sup>. Ou Kong's decision to travel to Kashmir was heavily influenced by the monarch of Kashmir's decision to send a royal family religious tutor to China. Here, the king welcomed him, allowed him to enter the monastery of Husakpur, and assigned him to three teachers—Acaraya, Upadhaya Kamacharya, and Upadhaya—who taught him the Vinaya text in seven portions. The settlement of Uskar (Huskapura) is home to the Husakpur monastery, which Sten Konow identified as Mung ti based on his Chinese sources. According to Ou-Kong, King Asoka constructed significant stupas and images during this period, and Kashmir is home to over three hundred Viharas. In addition to Mung ti vihara, Ou Kong lists the seven Buddhist temples in the valley: Ki teche (Krtayasrama-vihara jo-jo, k'o-toon), Nago-mi-topwan (Amitabhavana), and Ngo namli (Anandabhavan)<sup>[58]</sup>.

During his voyage to Kashmir in the middle of the seventh century A.D., the well-known Chinese pilgrim Ou-Kong referred to the three main commercial routes in the region. From ancient times, these vast roads served as the primary means of communication between the Kashmir Valley and the outside world, cutting over the towering mountains that

encircle the valley. The first route travels to Ladakh over the Zoji La Pass, and then via Demchok to Tibet. The second route crosses the Khunjab Pass to reach Central Asia and Chinese Turkistan via the upper Kishenganga Valley and then continues to Skardu, where it connects with the Gilgit route. The third route travels westward via the Baramulla Gorge, following the Jhelum River<sup>[59]</sup>.

Though his imprisonment and prolonged stay imply less control over his route, Ou Kong probably sought to imitate Xuanzang's scholastic pilgrimages, beginning later in life. Though Hy' Echo's path was more autonomous, both were driven by devotion. At the same time, outside factors influenced Ou Kong. Because of the nature of his documents, there are no direct environmental descriptions that have survived. Although there is no record of his extended stay in Kashmir, it appears that he was familiar with its conditions. The sources concentrate on monastic groups rather than the people or daily life of Kashmir. Though his imprisonment and prolonged stay imply less control over his route, Ou Kong probably sought to imitate Xuanzang's scholastic pilgrimages, beginning later in life. Though Hy' Echo's path was more autonomous, both were driven by devotion. At the same time, outside factors influenced Ou Kong. Because of the nature of his documents, there are no direct environmental descriptions that have survived. Although there is no record of his extended stay in Kashmir, it appears that he was familiar with its conditions. The sources concentrate on monastic groups rather than the people or daily life of Kashmir.

### Conclusion

In his Memoir of a Pilgrimage to the Five Kingdoms of India, Hyecho describes his journey through Kashmir, offering a unique and nuanced glimpse into the Buddhist heartland of the eighth century. Kashmir is a land of contrasts, stunning in its lush summers and harsh winters, rich in monastic tradition but shadowed by social injustices and perilous avenues, according to his account, which is characterised by a pilgrim's pragmatism rather than scholarly reverence. Hyecho's observations are brief and centre on the lived experiences of both the pious and the impoverished, in contrast to Xuanzang's voluminous chronicles. While his descriptions of Kashmir's religious landscape suggest a vibrant interplay of Buddhist and Hindu practices, his note of the region's autonomy, unaffected by foreign conquest, emphasises its fortified isolation. In Hyecho's trans-Asian odyssey, Kashmir is a brief but poignant chapter that shows how resilient Buddhist culture can be, with the monk's simple yet timeless words serving as a testament to its legacy. His story prompts contemplation on the timeless interaction of religion, environment, and human struggle in forming a region's identity, in addition to preserving a moment in Kashmir's illustrious past.

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