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CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH BUDDHIST GAZE: TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF FOUR BUDDHIST MONKS AT THE TURNING POINTS OF CENTRAL ASIAN HISTORY*

This article explores the economic geography and political landscape of Central Asia between the fifth and eighth centuries through the lens of four Chinese Buddhist pilgrims: Faxian, Songyun, Xuanzang, and Hyecho. Although these travelers were primarily religious seekers, their detailed observations offer critical insights into the commercial vitality, social conditions, and imperial dynamics of the regions they traversed. Their narratives document shifting centers of prosperity from Gandhara and the Tarim Basin in the early period to Transoxiana under the Western Türk Khanate in the seventh century and highlight the roles of nomadic and imperial powers such as the Hephthalites, Turks, and early Arab Caliphate in shaping regional economies. The pilgrims' accounts illustrate the resilience of transcontinental trade despite episodic warfare, dynastic transitions, and religious upheavals. Monasteries served as nodes of both spiritual and material exchange, supported by merchant patronage and embedded in caravan routes that connected India, Central Asia, and China. Descriptions of silk, precious metals, harvests, and urban markets reveal patterns of wealth distribution and decline, often correlating with political stability or external invasions. While regions under Turkic and Hunnic attack faced economic contraction, stable polities like Kucha and Samarkand thrived. Ultimately, the article argues that these pilgrimage records, when read together, constitute a valuable, diachronic source for understanding how commerce, governance, and faith intersected in early medieval Central Asia. The continuity of trade amidst political fragmentation emerges as a testament to the strategic and enduring importance of the Silk Road network.

Key words: Central Asia, Silk Road, travel accounts, historical geography, Buddhist pilgrimage.

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ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ГЛАЗАМИ БУДДИЗМА: ПУТЕВЫЕ ЗАМЕТКИ ЧЕТЫРЁХ БУДДИЙСКИХ МОНАХОВ НА ПОВОРОТНЫХ МОМЕНТАХ ИСТОРИИ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

В данной статье исследуются экономическая география и политический ландшафт Центральной Азии в период с V по VIII вв. через призму записей четырёх китайских буддийских паломников: Фасяня, Суньюня, Сюаньцзана и Хуйчао. Хотя целью их путешествий были духовные поиски, их детальные наблюдения представляют собой ценный источник сведений о коммерческой активности, социальных условиях и имперской политике регионов, по которым они прошли. В их рассказах

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отражаются смещения центров процветания — от Гандхары и Таримского бассейна в ранний период до Трансоксианы под властью Западного Тюркского каганата в VII в. — а также роль таких держав, как эфталиты, тюрки и арабский халифат, в формировании региональных экономик. Записи паломников свидетельствуют о стойкости трансконтинентальной торговли, несмотря на войны, смену династий и религиозные потрясения. Монастыри играли роль узлов как духовного, так и материального обмена, поддерживались купеческим покровительством и были интегрированы в караванные маршруты, связывавшие Индию, Центральную Азию и Китай. Описания шелка, драгоценных металлов, урожаев и городских рынков показывают закономерности распределения богатства и упадка, часто зависящие от политической стабильности или внешних вторжений. Пока одни регионы страдали от нашествий гуннов и тюрок, другие — как Куча и Самарканд — процветали в условиях стабильного управления. Таким образом, записи паломников образуют ценную диахронную совокупность источников, позволяющую проследить, как пересекались торговля, власть и религия в раннесредневековой Центральной Азии. Сквозной темой выступает устойчивость Шёлкового пути как экономической артерии в условиях политической раздробленности.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Шелковый путь, путевые заметки, историческая география, буддийское паломничество.

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Introduction

During the 5th — 8th centuries, a number of prominent Buddhist monks embarked on overland journeys from China to India, passing through the heart of Central Asia. Four individuals, notably Faxian (399 to 414), Songyun (518 to 522), Xuanzang (629 to 645), and Hyecho (724 to 727) left the records of their pilgrimages to India via Central Asia, where they depicted Central Asian states, cities, and cultures along their routes. Although these travelogues focus primarily on investigating Buddhist texts and sacred sites, they also record the historical geography of Central Asia. They provide data on the regimes, economies, ethnic groups, and geographical locations of the various Central Asian kingdoms in their respective historical periods. In this article we have analyzed the observations of the four pilgrims from the oasis kingdoms, the nomadic territories, and the areas at the crossroads of China and India in Central Asia. In order to compare the way Central Asian locations are represented in each account, we reduce the discussion of the Indian subcontinent, which often dominated the accounts of these pilgrims. The political landscape of Central Asia from the decline of Kushan influence to the rule of the Hephthalites, the rise of the Türk Qaghanate, and early Islamic expansion, economic life such as patterns of trade and urban prosperity or decline, ethnic and religious composition, and the very routes and geographies they crossed can be traced by comparing their writings.

Faxian’s voyage, the first of the four, forms a Central Asian base in the early fifth century. Around 399 CE, under the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Faxian left Chang’an and moved northwest along the Hexi Corridor (modern Gansu) into the Tarim Basin. Faxian’s voyage, offers a starting point for understanding Central Asia in the early fifth century. Faxian left Chang’an around 399 CE moved northwest along the Hexi corridor, approaching Tarim (Beal 1869: 24). He traveled along the Southern Silk Road and stopped in the oasis realms, including Khotan (Yutian) and Shanshan (Loulan to Xuanzang and others) at the southern end of the Taklamakan Desert (Faxian 1995: 14). Buddhist institutions in these regions are of great interest in his memoir, A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms 佛國記

(Legge, Faxian 2005). In Shanshan, for example, he witnesses a multi-ethnic society where local Buddhist clergy read texts in Indian languages and individuals dressed as Chinese while following the traditions of India (Beal 1869: 51—55; Faxian 1995: 17; Legge, Faxian 2005: 32—41). This observation underlines the cultural syncretism of the Tarim Basin, where Indian influence deeply permeated the local community in the 4th and 5th centuries through Buddhism.

Khotan, according to Faxian, was a prosperous Buddhist kingdom and an important crossroads on the Southern Silk Road. Every family in Khotan had a miniature stupa (pagoda) built in front of its entrance, even though it was only about 20 cubits high, indicating widespread piety among the population (Faxian 1995: 73). The state's hospitality infrastructure for monks was also remarkable. Monasteries maintained rooms for monks from different countries, providing lodging and basic necessities for Buddhist travelers (Faxian 1995: 73). These details indicate an economy at least partly organized around the sustenance of pilgrims and monks. In fact, Faxian highlights how monastic communities and long-distance merchants developed a symbiotic relationship. Monks often joined merchant caravans to travel, and merchants, in turn, benefited from the safe haven and services such as accommodation provided by monasteries, sometimes giving them reciprocity (Legge, Faxian 2005: 62). This suggests the role of Khotan in the trade networks of the Silk Road. Silk, jade, and other goods circulated alongside Buddhist texts and pilgrims. Politically, Faxian provides less explicit information, focusing on religious life. He mentions kings when it is relevant to Buddhism. For example, a king of Khotan who had recently built a new monastery is mentioned in the chapter titled "The King's New Monastery" (Faxian 1995: 50—52). However, a broader historical context must be inferred. Around 400 CE, the kingdom of Khotan was an ethnically Sakha/Scythian kingdom that had long been Buddhist; it maintained its independence despite being squeezed between China to the east and the remnants of Kushan influence to the west (King 2022: 68—72). Faxian's silence on political conflicts or the powerful local magnates implies that Khotan was relatively stable. He also crossed the Lop Desert (the sandy desert) past Dunhuang (Faxian 1995: 44—50) and later crossed the Pamir Mountains southwards to Gandhara (Beal 1869: 93—94; Faxian 1995: 60—61). In Gandhara and nearby Udyana (Swat Valley), Faxian continued to record Buddhist legends and sites at the peripheries of Central Asia proper. It is worth noting that by Faxian's time, the Kushan Empire had vanished; its former territories in Bactria and the Oxus region were fragmented, which may explain why Faxian took the southern route through Khotan and the Indus, rather than passing through Bactria or Sogdiana. Faxian portrays an early fifth-century Central Asia in which Buddhism is widespread in the oasis states, local rulers patronize the faith, and Chinese and Indian cultural elements mingle on the Silk Road. There is little hint of political turmoil in his narrative, in contrast to what later pilgrims would find.

A century after Faxian, the monk Songyun traveled to India on an official mission, reflecting a dramatic shift in the geopolitical scene in Central Asia. Sent in 518 CE by the devout Empress Hu of the Northern Wei Dynasty (Wang 2016: 37), Songyun's task was to obtain Buddhist scriptures from India. He and his companion, the monk Huisheng, chose a more southerly inland route out of China, known as the Qinghai Route (Chavannes 1903: 381). They made their way from Luoyang to the northeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau (via Xining and along Qinghai Lake), bypassing the crowded Hexi Corridor and eventually rejoining the main Silk Road near Shanshan/Loulan in the Tarim Basin(Beal 1869). This route was controlled at the time by the Tuyuhun, indicating that the usual northern route may have been less accessible or unsafe in the early 6th century, and soon after, they arrived at Khotan itself (Zhou 1983: 57).

Songyun, like Faxian, commented on the religious life of Khotan, recounting a local legend of a royal conversion to Buddhism. He also noted that the Hephthalite (Hua) political influence extended as far east as Khotan's gates (Chavannes 1903: 384—386). The Hephthalites were a nomadic confederation that dominated Central Asia in the early sixth century. By Songyun's time, a Hephthalite empire straddled the Oxus and northwestern India, and Songyun became one of the few observers to leave notes on them. He reported that the Hephthalites, called Yanda or Yeda (Wei 1974: 122) in Chinese sources, had a vast domain but lived nomadically without walled cities, and

their king moved with the tribes. When Songyun and Huisheng reached the border region of Badakhshan, near the entrance to the Wakhan corridor, they encountered the king of the Hua people (滑), whom they did not meet in his capital but rather in a military encampment established in the open field. The king received the envoys while actively engaged in a campaign. This Hephthalite ruler had recently conquered Gandhāra, and was consolidating control over the newly subdued territories. Songyun reports that the country had suffered significant devastation during this conquest. The cities and monasteries of the region had been heavily damaged, and the population had fled or been subjected to heavy exactions (Chavannes 1903: 390—393).

The Hua ruler appeared to them as a powerful figure who commanded vast territory, extending from the west of the Pamirs into regions formerly under Indian and Kushan influence. Songyun's account underlines the ferocity and scope of the Hunnic expansion, particularly its impact on the Buddhist institutions in these regions. As he passed through the once-prosperous Buddhist regions of Gandhara and Udyana, he “reported that the Huns had destroyed the country” (Sen, Duara 2016: 15—18). This refers to the devastation of monasteries and cities in northwestern India caused by decades of Hunnic raids. When Songyun arrived in Gandhara in 520, he found Buddhism in decline and many sites in ruins, in stark contrast to the piety witnessed by Faxian a century earlier. Despite the unrest, Songyun noticed that pockets of Buddhist practice survived. He spent some time (two years, 520—522) in the Udyana and Gandhara region, where some monasteries and relics still attracted devotion. Economically, those regions had suffered from the war. Still, we also learn that Songyun acquired 170 Buddhist sutras to bring back to China, suggesting that monasteries and scholars in those areas were still active enough to provide texts. His route back to China is less clearly documented. By early 522, he was back in Luoyang and speaking the scriptures (Egami 1990: 213—215). Songyun’s journey offers a picture of the transition in mid-sixth-century Central Asia. Politically, the rule of the Hephthalite Huns is the defining feature. He literally traveled under their auspices when he crossed into Tokharistan. The reach of their empire “reaches Khotan,” as he noted, indicating that even oasis states like Khotan probably recognized Hephthalite sovereignty at that time (Chavannes 1903: 388—390). Culturally, Buddhism was still present throughout Central Asia, but in places like Gandhara, it faltered due to conflicts. The ethnic landscape included the nomadic Huns, who ruled over heterogeneous populations of Iranians, Indians, and Tocharians. Songyun’s account, though fragmentary, emphasizes the contrast between a still-Buddhist Tarim basin and a war-torn northwest, foreshadowing the changes that would further transform Central Asia in the next century.

Following Faxian and Songyun, other pilgrims also set out to reach India. While some prominent monks, such as Yijing, preferred to travel via a maritime route that became more accessible thanks to the developments in the naval technologies that were brought about by the interactions in the Indian Ocean, one of the most prominent monks to have visited India, Xuanzang, preferred a land route via Central Asia. Xuanzang’s journey in the seventh century is the most famous and well-documented of the four travel accounts discussed in this article. By Xuanzang’s time, the political map of Central Asia had been altered again. The Hephthalite Empire had disappeared, replaced by new powers: the Western Türk Khanate in the Transoxiana and Semirechye regions and a patchwork of smaller kingdoms, some under the suzerainty of the Western Türk khanate in the Tarim Basin and Afghanistan. Xuanzang’s travels, meticulously recorded in his 大唐西域記 Great Tang Records of the Western Regions, provide an unprecedented detailed investigation of the geography and conditions of Central Asia around 630—645 CE.

Xuanzang left Chang’an illegally in 629 since the Tang court, concerned about its own consolidation, had forbidden foreign travel (Benn 2002: 21—22). He was motivated by a burning desire to obtain authentic Buddhist teachings in India and perhaps diplomatic ambitions (Xuanzang 1884; 2000, chapter 1). His route out of China took him through the Hexi Corridor and the Northern Silk Road. Before beginning an account of the different countries he visited, Xuanzang begins with a Buddhist cosmology where he depicts different continents of the world in a way that befits both Chinese and Buddhist audiences. He first praises the previous Chinese emperors and then continues to

praise Tang Taizong. Then he goes on to depict the continents around Mount Sumeru, the Jambu continent, and the countries of the lord of men, elephants, horses, and treasures. These are not exact definitions, especially in the cases of the land of the lord of horses and the land of the lord of treasures. The land of the lord of men corresponds to China both geographically and culturally. The Land of the lord of Elephants is a rough definition of India in terms of its geographical positioning in the south and the description of its geography. The land of the lord of horses, on the other hand, seems to comprise the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, and the land of the lord of treasures might be either Rome or Persia or an amalgam of the two and the Sogdians of Transoxiana. Furthermore, he holds the land of the lord of men, that is, China, in the highest regard, and the lands of the lord of treasures and horses are given a relatively lower place regarding their geographical and cultural qualities. This introductory cosmology sets the stage for his approach to the Central Asian geography and its peoples. He first visited the Kingdom of Gaochang (Turfan), an ethnically Tocharian city-state ruled by a Han Chinese king from the Qu clan. There, the devout Buddhist ruler provided Xuanzang with patronage, supplies, and letters of introduction (Grousset 2011: 98). This hospitality illustrates how, at the beginning of the Tang era, the oasis kingdoms still respected the Buddhist clergy and saw value in helping their pilgrimage. Xuanzang noted that Agni (Yanqi, Karashahr) and Kucha, other nearby oasis states, used modified Indian scriptures and had thriving Hinayana Buddhist communities, indicating a strong Indian influence in local literacy and religion (Xuanzang 2000, chapter 1). For example, Kucha had “over a hundred monasteries with five thousand monks” dedicated to the Sarvastivada school (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1), and his study of texts in the original Indian languages left a deep impression on Xuanzang.

Continuing westward, Xuanzang made a dramatic detour north of the Tian Shan range to meet the Western Türk qaghan. In 630, on the northwestern frontier of the Issyk-Köl region (near Tokmak, in present-day Kyrgyzstan), he met the Western Türk Khan Tong Yabgu, who received him in a royal camp and held a feast in his honor (Xuanzang 2000; 2016). This meeting underlines the diplomatic aspect of Xuanzang’s mission: as a Tang monk abroad, he cultivated the goodwill of Central Asian rulers. The Western Türk Khanate at this time controlled Sogdiana (Samarkand, Bukhara) and beyond, although vassal tribes loosely organized it. A rare glimpse into politics and actions performed by rulers in Central Asia current during the late 8th century may be found in Xuanzang’s account. He describes the khan’s rule. Also, he notes the unrest that followed the khan’s death: as he moved through the Sogdian territories (Samarkand, Bukhara, the Oxus Delta), he observed “warring factions of ruling Turkic chieftains, with rampant disease and pestilence,” and many areas depopulated (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1). This probably alludes to the internecine wars that broke out between the Western Türk factions in the 630s and a possible pestilence or famine. Despite these problems, major cities were still standing. Xuanzang visited Samarkand (capital of Kang Kingdom), describing it as a large and prosperous city where “numerous heretics” worshipped in fire temples, and only a few Buddhists remained (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1). His use of the term “heretics” for non-Buddhists indicates that in the seventh century, Zoroastrianism and local pagan cults (practiced by the Sogdians) dominated religion in Sogdiana. At the same time, Buddhism was marginal, a reversal of the Tarim Basin, where Buddhism was the mainstream religion.

Turning south, Xuanzang crossed the dangerous highlands of Tokharistan. In these regions, he found a series of small kingdoms ruled by local princes, some under the sovereignty of Western Türk Khanate, others newly independent. Tokharistan had more districts; Xuanzang noted it as a land where Hinayana Buddhism persisted in many cities (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1). Later, in Bamiyan and Kapisi, modern-day Kabul, he was pleased to meet thriving Buddhist communities. He famously described the colossal statues of Buddha carved into the rock of Bamiyan and reported that the devout king of Bamiyan had built monasteries around these giants (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 2). This suggests that the eastern fringes of the Iranian world still lived in a Buddhist golden age at the beginning of the seventh century. Xuanzang’s narrative tells of the bustling monasteries of Bamiyan and the veneration of relics such as the Buddha’s ushnisha (cranial protuberance) at Hadda. Interestingly, Faxian had visited the same shrine as the relics two centuries earlier.

Xuanzang notes the continuity, although he measured the relic as larger than in Faxian's time (Faxian 1995: 57; Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1). This kind of longitudinal observation, a pilgrim explicitly comparing his discoveries with the documentation of a predecessor, demonstrates the conscious historicity of Xuanzang's work. It shows conscious awareness of change over time: during Xuanzang's visit around 630, he observed the decline of Buddhism in areas such as Udyana and Gandhara, where "Buddhism was in decline and Hinduism was on the rise (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1), in contrast to the Faxian era.

In economic and geographical terms, Xuanzang provides quantitative notes rarely seen in earlier pilgrims. It details the distances, climate, agricultural products, and currencies of the various states. For example, in Khotan, which he visited on his return journey via the southern road around 644 CE, he gave the longest account of any pilgrim, mentioning his two names (Kustana in Sanskrit, Huanna in the local language, vs. Yutian in Chinese, and telling his founding legend at length (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1). He also commented on the language and the script of Khotan. He noted that the kingdom was still devoutly Buddhist, with many monasteries evidence that Khotan remained a bastion of Buddhism even as faith declined in the adjacent regions (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 12). Another economic detail: Later sources attribute to Xuanzang the observation that the Khotanese used white silk as currency in local markets (Xuanzang 2000: chapter 1), reflecting an economy with trade networks spanning into China. Throughout Central Asia, Xuanzang was sensitive to trade and manufacturing. For example, he mentions that Samarkand produced abundant gold, silver, and textiles and that Bukhara had fine grapes and thriving markets. While his primary focus was religion, Xuanzang's attention to worldly details makes his record a valuable geographical work on the Central Asia of the seventh century (Waley 2011: 23—29).

In essence, Xuanzang's journey illustrates Central Asia as a region at the crossroads of change: the rulers of the Central Asian steppes exercise power over the Sogdian and Tokharian cities; Buddhism resists strongly in the Tarim and Kapisi regions but is declining in long-standing borderlands such as Gandhara; trade continued along the Silk Road, although instability in the Western Türk Khanate posed new risks to travelers. His academic and diplomatic approach produces an almost encyclopedic account, bridging the gap between an earlier era of Buddhist Central Asia and the future age of Islamic influence.

Hyecho (724—727 CE): in the Wake of Islam — the Observations of a Korean monk

By the time Hyecho embarked on his pilgrimage in 720 CE, Central Asia had entered another new phase. Hyecho, a Korean Silla monk, embarked on his journey about 80 years after Xuanzang, during China's Tang Dynasty and the early years of the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate. His route differed from his Chinese predecessors: Hyecho traveled Central Asia on his return from India to China. Arriving in India by sea in 724 and spending over two years visiting Buddhist holy sites across the subcontinent, Hyecho did not retrace the sea route but ventured further west to the frontiers of the known Buddhist world. "Where the pilgrimages of others ended, however, the one to Hyecho continued westward," notes a modern study: he traveled to Persia, making him "the only Buddhist pilgrim of his time known to have traveled to Persia" (Buswell 2009: 1059) In doing so, he became one of the first East Asian witnesses of the early Islamic world.

Hyecho's travelogue, Wang Ocheonchukguk Jeon 往五天竺國傳 (Hyecho 2023). Account of the Journey to the Five Indian Kingdoms, translated to English as The Hye Ch'o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India (Hyecho 1984) and survives only in fragmentary form discovered in a cave in Dunhuang in 1908 (Lopez 2017, 23). Nevertheless, it provides acute observations of Central Asia around 726-727. After leaving Gandhara at the end of 726, Hyecho passed through Udyana and went towards Gandhara. He visited Bamiyan and headed to Tokharistan. In Gandhara, he noticed that a Turkic king, most likely of the Turkic Shahi dynasty, still ruled and, together with local chiefs, greatly revered the Three Jewels (Hyecho 2023: 36—44).

This indicates that by the early 8th century, the Kapisi region remained under a Turkic Buddhist royal house, continuing the legacy of Buddhist patronage even as the surrounding areas changed.

When Hyecho moved west into Khorasan and Tokharistan, he encountered the expanding realm of Islam. The Arab armies of the Umayyad Caliphate had pushed into Central Asia by the mid-seventh century, and by 720s they controlled much of Tokharistan and parts of Sogdiana. Hyecho arrived during a period of transition: he describes Tokharistan as "subjugated by the Arab army but notes that the local king was probably a vassal prince and the common people still worshiped the Three Jewels and did not practice heterodox religions. Heterodox here supposedly refers to Islam; thus, Hyecho explicitly notes that the native population of Gandhara remained Buddhist despite being under Islamic political control. This is a valuable testimony to the persistence of Buddhism in Central Asia even after Islamic conquests, a nuance sometimes lost in later historical narratives. However, Hyecho also points to the unrest caused by the new rulers: newly installed Muslim governors imposed "excessive taxes," which led to local rebellions that were "quelled by the powerful Arab army" (Hyecho 2023: 45—52). These lines encapsulate the turmoil of the first Muslim rule in Central Asia: economic pressure and resistance, followed by harsh reprisals. They also suggest economic decline or hardship: the heavy taxation likely reduced the prosperity of the cities that Xuanzang had seen generations earlier.

Hyecho's journey westward probably reached the margins of Persia proper, perhaps in greater Khorasan. Discovering that Buddhism had no presence beyond, he "headed east, traveling through Central Asia along the Silk Road trade routes, and stopping in the oasis city of Dunhuang around 727" (Hyecho 2023: 51—53). His return route took him through the oases of Central Asia to Tang China, perhaps passing through Badakhshan through the Pamirs and then the Tarim Basin before arriving at Dunhuang. Although details of his stops are scarce, he no doubt saw evidence of the Tang-Tibetan struggle that was taking place in Central Asia: Tang China had garrisons in Kashgar and Khotan in the 720s, while the Tibetan Empire was pushing towards the Pamirs. Hyecho does not explicitly mention these imperial rivalries, but the context of his journey which moved under the protection of the Tang once he approached Chinese territories implies their presence.

Hyecho's narrative portrays a Central Asia in which Buddhist, Turkic, and Islamic forces coexisted uneasily. In Bamiyan and Kapisi, he saw the last glimmers of the Buddhist civilization that had thrived under the Kushans and Hephthalites, still intact but now isolated. In Tokharistan and beyond, he witnessed the implementation of Islamic rule on a Buddhist and Zoroastrian population, essentially capturing the region at the time of religious transformation. Ethnically, the Turks had become key players as nomadic suzerains and local kings as in the case of the Turkic Shahis of Kapisi. The Arabs were newcomers, described by Hyecho more in political than cultural terms as he labels their rule as "heterodox" and focuses on its effects. The economy and cities of Central Asia, according to Hyecho's account, were under great pressure: rebellions and taxes suggest a decline compared to the relative stability of Xuanzang's time (Hyecho 2023: 33—50). Yet, long-distance trade had not ceased: Hyecho's ability to travel from India to Persia and back to China in four years speaks to the enduring connectivity of the Silk Road, indicating the breadth of geographical knowledge that could be achieved along these routes even amid changing political winds.

Conclusion

Comparing accounts from Faxian, Songyun, Xuanzang, and Hyecho, we distinguish the dynamic changes in Central Asia over three centuries.

From the discussions above, several comparative ideas can be deducted:

Political transformations

Each pilgrim encountered a different dominant power structure in Central Asia. Faxian saw a constellation of independent Buddhist oasis states without a single great power in control: the influence of the Kushan Empire had long since diminished, and neither China nor Persia dominated beyond their borders at that time. By Songyun's journey, the Hephthalite Huns had forged a vast

nomadic empire: he witnessed their king firsthand and noticed their authority reaching Khotan. The Xuanzang era brought the rise of Turkic hegemony: it was hosted by the West Türk Khan and saw the local kings submit to Turkic lords although the Tang dynasty was beginning to extend its influence in the Tarim basin. Finally, Hyecho traveled when Islamic rule had penetrated Central Asia: unlike his predecessors, he explicitly mentions Arab governors and the imposition of a new political order in Tokharistan. However, Hyecho also refers to the Tang presence and Tibetan pressure on the fringes of the region. Consequently, in the span of 300 years Central Asia has shifted from a collection of Buddhist kingdoms to a disputed region of empires, first nomadic (Huns, Turks) and then the first Islamic caliphate, with competing Chinese and Tibetan states on the fringes. Pilgrims' accounts serve as indicators of these changes, whether one notes the lack of fortifications under nomadic rule or the presence of foreign troops and tributes, Xuanzang on the Turkic "masters" and Hyecho on the Arab tax lords.

Continuity and change in Buddhism

All four pilgrims were devout Buddhists, and their main concern was often to record the state of Buddhism in the lands they passed through. A clear trend is the gradual contraction of Buddhism's dominance in Central Asia over time. In Faxian and Songyun's accounts, virtually every place from the Tarim Basin to Gandhara is described as Buddhist, although Gandhara was damaged by the war in Songyun's time. Xuanzang still found vibrant Buddhist communities in the oases of Tarim, Kashmir and Afghanistan even reinvigorating some with his teachings. Yet he also encountered regions such as Samarkand where Buddhism barely had a foothold among the prevailing Zoroastrian cult or other local cults. By Hyecho's time, the Buddhist heart had shrunk to pockets: for example, the Kabul Valley and parts of the Tarim. Hyecho's poignant remarks about once-grand monasteries lying in ruins and some cities "having no monks" illustrate this decline (Hyecho 2023: chapter 1). The advent of Islam greatly accelerated the shrinkage of Buddhism in Tokharistan and Sogdiana, but even before Islam, Xuanzang noted that in Sogdiana people "do not believe in Buddha" (Xuanzang 2000: 122—124). Thus, the pilgrim records collectively trace the ebb of Buddhism moving from west to east: strong in the eastern oases in all periods, it disappears first in the far west, Transoxiana, and eventually also in strongholds such as Balkh and Kapisi under the pressure of Islam and the Hindu revival. In particular, all travelers also mention the flourishing of Buddhism in more sheltered niches: the Khotan, for example, remained a bastion of Mahayana Buddhist scholarship throughout, as evidenced by the large number of texts and the lively monastic hospitality that both Faxian and Xuanzang describe. The resilience of Khotan's Buddhist community, even if neighbors have fallen, underlines how geography allowed it to be the last refuge of the Buddhist culture of that era in Central Asia.

Ethnic and cultural interactions

The travelogues draw Central Asia's multi-ethnic and multicultural maps. Faxian and Xuanzang both noted the influence of Indian culture on Central Asian societies: for instance, the dress and language in Loulan, where people wear Chinese style clothing yet observe Indian customs, as well as the use of Indian scripts and languages in Kucha and Khotan. This demonstrates the deep penetration of Indian civilization into Central Asia via Buddhism. At the same time, Iranian and Turkic influences became more pronounced in later accounts. Songyun's encounter with the Hephthalites brought him face to face with a Turkic nomadic elite. Xuanzang provides vivid ethnographic observations about the Turks — depicting them as brave, generous, and honest warriors by nature and the Sogdians, whom he regarded as prosperous traders but adherents of "heretical" (non- Buddhist) ideas. Hyecho, on his part, encountered the Arabs and early Islam. His terminology "heterodox religion" reflects a Buddhist perspective that did not completely grasp the doctrines of Islam but clearly respected the influence of the Arabs, even while lamenting their

impact on Buddhist communities. Through these narratives, we can observe multilingualism and translation in action: pilgrims frequently mention the necessity for interpreters or learning foreign phrases, indicating that Central Asia was linguistically diverse, with languages including Sanskrit, Prakrit, Gandhari, Khotanese, Tokharian, Sogdian, Turkish, Chinese, and eventually Arabic in use. The ethnic mosaic is also clear: for example, the Khotan of Faxian and Xuanzang was inhabited by an Indo- European people (Sakha) who practiced Buddhism, the Kapisi of Songyun was ruled by the Hunnic king Mihirakula, Xuanzang met Tangut and Chinese monks in Turfan, and Hyecho encountered a Turkic ruler in Kapisi alongside Arabs in Tokharistan. Through their interactions and observations, each traveler sustains that Central Asia was a site of intercultural contact: the Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Turkic, and later Arab worlds intersected there.

Economic geography

Although pilgrims were not traders, their accounts shed indirect light on economic conditions and geographic business patterns. Urban prosperity against decline can be traced: Faxian's enthusiastic account of the wealth of Khotan monasteries suggests economic well-being (Faxian 1995: 16—18), as does Xuanzang's praise of the fertile soils and bustling markets of Samarkand and Bukhara where he saw abundant harvests and trade. However, Xuanzang has also witnessed war-torn regions; he speaks of cities in Sogdiana emptied of conflict and disease implying that by the 7th century, decades of Turko-Persian warfare had taken a toll on some trade arteries (Xuanzang 2000: 122—127). Songyun's note that the Huns "destroyed the country" in Gandhara similarly indicates the economic collapse in 520 CE (Beal 1869: 91). Hyecho's mention of exorbitant taxes and rebellions in Tokharistan suggests economic tension under the first administration of the Caliphate, which probably disrupted local trade and agriculture. Yet, despite the episodic interruptions, the continuity of trade is a surprising underlying theme: all four could travel thousands of kilometers precisely because the caravans still traveled those routes. Pilgrims often relied on the hospitality of monastic networks, which were supported by mercantile patronage. They also describe goods and wealth: silk appears both as a donated object and also as money as in Khotan; precious metals and aromatic properties are occasionally noted as in Xuanzang's observations on the gold and grapes of Samarkand and Bukhara. Thus, accounts confirm that transcontinental trade was the lifeblood of these cities, and political powers, from Hunnic chieftains to Arab governors, sought to control and tax that trade. The variance in the economic fortunes that pilgrims record is often related to political stability: for example, Xuanzang found Kucha and Turfan prosperous and secure, thanks in part to a stable government, while regions under scrutiny by the Huns or Turks were impoverished. Over time, the place of wealth shifted: in the beginning, the Tarim and Gandhara were wealthy; by the seventh century, Transoxiana had re-emerged as a wealthy nucleus under the Western Türk Khanate until the war destroyed it, and by Hyecho's time some of that wealth had been hijacked by the new Arab rulers. The underlying geography, fertile valleys like Fergana and well-watered trading ports like Samarkand, remained a constant which stood the test of time despite the geopolitical shifts around them.

The accounts of Buddhist pilgrims collectively form a narrative of the history and geography of Central Asia from the late fourth to the early eighth centuries. Through their eyes, we see how political dominance over Central Asia passed from one group to another, how Buddhism spread and then retreated, how a diversity of peoples met and mixed, and how the trade routes survived as a conduit throughout. These narratives, when read side by side and integrated with modern studies, allow us to redraw a detailed picture of the states and cities of Central Asia during this crucial period. What emerges is a region in constant change but linked together by shared networks of faith and commerce. Each pilgrim's testimony adds a layer: Faxian's optimism on a Buddhist frontier, Songyun's testimony of nomadic conquest, Xuanzang's comprehensive investigation at the height of Tang-era engagement, and Hyecho's sincere look at a world where a new faith was taking hold. Together, they provide an unprecedented longitudinal study of the historical geography of Central Asia, solely "from the bottom up", i.e. from the point of view of travelers who experienced first-

hand the landscapes and societies of medieval Inner Asia. Their writings remain indispensable primary sources for understanding the pre-modern Central Asia and its transformations, rendered with an academic rigor on which modern historians continue to rely and refine.

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