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Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator

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BENJAMIN BROSE, *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 2021. XVI, 303 pp. USD \$24.95. ISBN 978-1-61180-722-6.

In *Xuanzang: China's Legendary Pilgrim and Translator*, Benjamin Brose offers a succinct yet profound portrait of one of the most influential figures in Chinese Buddhist history. Xuanzang, a Tang dynasty monk renowned for his arduous pilgrimage to ancient India and his monumental translation of Buddhist scriptures, is celebrated as a devout Buddhist, a cultural ambassador, and a mythologized hero in the well-known novel *The Journey to the West*. The Master's life is immortalized in both historical records and popular myths.

Within this broader context, Brose's work distinguishes itself by navigating between chronological narrative and historical account to situate the Master in the intricate intersections of religious devotion, intellectual labor, and political pragmatism. It presents a comprehensive examination of Xuanzang's life, translation work, and legacy. Building on Brose's interdisciplinary approach, which synthesizes historical records, religious studies, and cultural analysis, this review regards Xuanzang not only as a pious pilgrim or a prolific translator of Buddhist texts, but also as a strategic mediator between cultures under the framework of a complex religious, political, ideological, and intellectual landscape.

Structure and Content

Brose's book is systematically organized into three parts: "Life," "Translations," and "Legacy." Each section provides a multifaceted exploration of Xuanzang, drawing on diverse historical, religious, and political sources. This thematic structure allows for a presentation of Xuanzang's significance, with each part offering its own unique perspective.

The opening chapter sets the stage for Xuanzang's ambitious journey in 629, driven by a quest to seek authentic Buddhist scriptures and teachings. His expedition led him across treacherous terrains into ancient India, followed by his extensive studies at Nālandā—one of the most prestigious centers of Buddhist studies at that time—his interactions with regional kings and Buddhist masters, and his eventual return to China's capital Chang'an in 645 with an array of sacred texts, relics, and doctrines. This marked a defining moment in the transmission of Buddhism to China. In the first part, Brose not only recounts the physical trials and spiritual hardships Xuanzang endured during and after his journey, but also highlights the religious devotion and intellectual commitment that sustained his endeavors throughout his life.

The second part shifts focus to Xuanzang's writings, offering translated excerpts from key texts such as *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. These selected passages provide invaluable insights into the cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts of the regions Xuanzang traversed. This portion also includes personal correspondence, such as those from the *Biography of the Trepitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, compiled by Xuanzang's disciples. For instance, the letters to Indian monks and the Chinese emperor in the Tang dynasty further humanize the Master, shedding light on his diplomatic engagements and political acumen.

The final section examines the posthumous impact of Xuanzang's work and teachings. Brose discusses the dissemination of his ideas, particularly in the realm of Yogācāra, and explores how Xuanzang's narrative evolved into myth and legend over time. He also considers contemporary appropriations of Xuanzang's contributions for political and cultural purposes, underscoring the Master's enduring relevance across the centuries.

Pilgrimage and Politics: Xuanzang's Journey

Brose carefully disentangles the historical Xuanzang—"recounted by his devoted disciple and biographer Huili" (15)—from the later mythologized version, avoiding the romanticization of his travels. Rather than being simply a pious pilgrim, Xuanzang emerges as a shrewd strategist, fully aware of the geopolitical significance of his journey. Brose underscores Xuanzang's dissatisfaction with Chinese Buddhist teaching's inconsistencies as a motivating factor behind his embarkment to seek the true Dharma. Xuanzang's pilgrimage was as much an intellectual and spiritual pursuit as a political one. A crucial aspect of Brose's analysis is Xuanzang's strategic engagement with patronage networks along the Silk Road. For example, his sojourn in Khotan—a critical hub known for its thriving Buddhist culture and silk production—served not only as a physical respite but also as a diplomatic maneuver. Xuanzang leveraged the political relationships between the Tang court and Khotan, exemplified by the royal marriage between the king of Khotan and a Chinese princess, to further his mission. He recovered lost scriptures and sent a letter to the Tang court confessing his illegal departure from China sixteen years earlier (153-154). Before that, Xuanzang had laid some groundwork for his return by securing the support of King Harṣa and King Kumāra to promote envoy exchanges with the Tang court, encouraging Indian monks from the Mahābodhi Monastery to share scriptures and artifacts with China, and using his extensive knowledge of western territories, political connections, and linguistic skills to position himself as a vital asset to the Tang emperor. After several months of waiting, he received a positive response, with the authorities offering assistance for his return and extending a warm welcome (70-72).

This episode exemplifies Xuanzang's diplomatic acumen and political stance within the framework of interactions with political elites and regional powers, beyond the doctrinal and textual aspects of Xuanzang's

legacy that may be reaffirmed in other works. Brose addresses this imbalance by highlighting Xuanzang's negotiations with Indian rulers, his receptions at court, and the symbolic prestige he gained abroad. His journey, therefore, was not simply a matter of personal piety; it was embedded within a broader matrix of geopolitical shifts, dynastic consolidation, and cultural exchange. This perspective epitomizes that Xuanzang is not merely a Buddhist monk or a gentleman scholar, but also a key figure in Tang dynasty diplomacy and political entrenchment.

Achievements And Aspirations: Xuanzang's Contribution

While Xuanzang is often celebrated for his spiritual dedication and physical courage, Brose highlights the intricate relationship between his religious pursuits and the political interests of the Tang dynasty, offering a nuanced interpretation of his role as monk, translator, and cultural diplomat. In this sense, Brose presents Xuanzang as a man whose religious and intellectual aspiration was never detached from the needs of his time. It shows that Xuanzang's journey to ancient India and his subsequent contributions went far beyond the scope of scholarship, as they, in many cases, intersected with the broader objectives of the imperial court.

Upon his return to China, Emperor Taizong commissioned Xuanzang to write *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, a text that served both as a detailed account of the lands he traversed and as a strategic document aiding Tang military campaigns against the Western Turkic Khaganate at that time (75-76). The text provided valuable insights into the political, economic, and military landscapes of western cities while promoting the Tang empire's moral authority to justify imperial expansion. More than just an account of his pilgrimage, it served as a political tool, reinforcing the Tang dynasty's divine mandate from an ideological perspective.

Xuanzang's most significant contribution, however, lies in his monumental translation work. Over his lifetime, he translated more than thirteen hundred fascicles of Buddhist texts (159) and wrote extensive commentaries, reshaping the intellectual landscape of East Asian Buddhism. His efforts reinforced both the Tang's political strategy and its ideological narrative of culture. Brose draws attention to the regime's use of Buddhism to consolidate power and moral legitimacy. In this light, Xuanzang's return to Chang'an is not simply the homecoming of a devout monk, but the arrival of a symbolic envoy whose authority the Tang court strategically appropriated to reinforce its ideological foundations of Tang rule. This interplay between religious legitimacy and imperial ideology is a subtle but crucial point that distinguishes Brose's interpretation from historical accounts. Xuanzang's collaboration with the Tang politics produced mutual benefits: the Master translated Buddhist texts and promoted monastic ordination to expand Buddhism's influence, while emperor Taizong and successor Gaozong leveraged his religious authority to legitimize their rule. On one hand, Taizong applied Xuanzang's advice to boost imperial karma and public piety, and Gaozong staged grand ceremonies and built Ci'en Monastery to symbolize dynastic continuity and divine endorsement. On the other hand, Xuanzang gained imperial patronage, resources for translations, and a platform to elevate Buddhism's status, securing both his legacy and the Tang's ideological control (78-79).

Brose interprets this politicking as part of a broader Tang strategy of co-opting charismatic religious figures to enhance the dynasty's moral prestige. Xuanzang's contribution was deeply embedded in his Buddhist aspiration and the imperial politics of the time. His efforts to build a Buddhist translation team were supported by the court precisely because they aligned with the Tang state's interests. Xuanzang's two refusals to Taizong's offers to join the imperial court (76) may suggest that he was an apolitical saint. However, he also demonstrated a keen awareness of the political landscape, recognized the importance of being a "cleric of

influence at court” (78), and took on the responsibility of securing imperial support for Buddhist monasteries. Brose’s book opens a productive space to consider how religious authority in the Tang dynasty was often inextricable from statecraft. Xuanzang’s advocacy of Buddhist teachings was not merely doctrinal partisanship but a strategic effort to systematize Buddhist thought in a way compatible with Tang intellectual sensibilities.

Memory and Myth: Xuanzang’s Afterlife

While the historical monk’s accomplishments were extraordinary in themselves, Brose argues that the “mythical version” (204) of Xuanzang accrued additional layers of meaning in subsequent generations, especially through literary and religious myth-making. One of the most influential shifts in this regard was the transformation of Xuanzang into the fictional figure in the sixteenth-century novel *The Journey to the West*, attributed to Wu Cheng’en. Brose’s brief but incisive analysis of this transformation reveals how Xuanzang became a symbolic vessel for broader Chinese concerns about pilgrimage and morality (247-252).

Although Brose does not explore *The Journey to the West* in depth, his framing encourages readers to consider how historical figures are reimagined to serve other ideological and aesthetic purposes. In this sense, Xuanzang’s life becomes a case study in the mutable boundaries between history, biography, and fiction. Brose does not dismiss the value of any novel or legend; instead, regarding them as additional lens to examine the processes of myth-making and religious storytelling. In this way, Brose’s book doubles as a study in historiography, probing how cultural memory is constructed and adapted over time.

Critical Assessment

Despite its many strengths, the book's brevity occasionally works against it. Certain contexts, such as the doctrinal debates Xuanzang engaged in at Nālandā, are sketched too lightly. Readers with a background in Buddhist philosophy might desire a more in-depth description of Xuanzang's contributions to Yogācāra teachings or his philosophical dialogues with other Indian traditions. Furthermore, while Brose provides a thorough exploration of Xuanzang's external political engagements, there is limited discussion of the internal tensions he faced, particularly his delicate balancing of loyalty to the Buddhist monastic community and his obligations to the Tang court.

Nevertheless, these omissions are not serious flaws but rather invitations for further research, as they do not detract from the overall strength of the book. The book succeeds in its primary goal: to offer a balanced, insightful, and intellectually rigorous portrait of Xuanzang as a historical figure, unshackled from devotional hagiography or nationalist appropriation.

Conclusion

Brose's scholarship stands out for its depth, clarity, and academic rigor. He balances an academic approach with accessible prose, making the book both suitable for specialists and for general readers interested in Buddhist studies. By grounding his analysis in primary sources, such as *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* and the *Biography of the Trepitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, while also engaging with recent secondary literature in Buddhist studies and Chinese history, Brose offers an examination of Xuanzang's life and legacy. A notable strength of the book is its portrayal of Xuanzang not simply as a religious figure but as a dynamic individual navigating the complex

intersections of religion, politics, and culture. Brose resists reducing Xuanzang to either a nationalist symbol or a mystical saint. Instead, he presents a multifaceted, ambivalent, and human figure whose life continues to resonate with contemporary concerns. Moreover, Brose illustrates how Xuanzang's story has been reshaped over time to serve various ideological agendas, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics. This examination prompts readers to consider the fluidity of historical narratives and the factors influencing their evolution. To sum up, Brose's work provides insights into the intersection of historical culture, religious pilgrimage, and sociological development. Xuanzang emerges not as a solitary hero but as a node in a vibrant network of Buddhist transmission stretching from India to China, from oral preaching to written scriptures, from imperial courts to monastic communities. In this book, Xuanzang in the robe, as a Buddhist monk, embarks on a transformative pilgrimage to the western territories; Xuanzang under the robe, as a sophisticated diplomat, facilitates cultural exchanges; Xuanzang beyond the robe, as a renowned hero, serves as a model for intellectual engagement across borders.

Notes on the Contributor

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