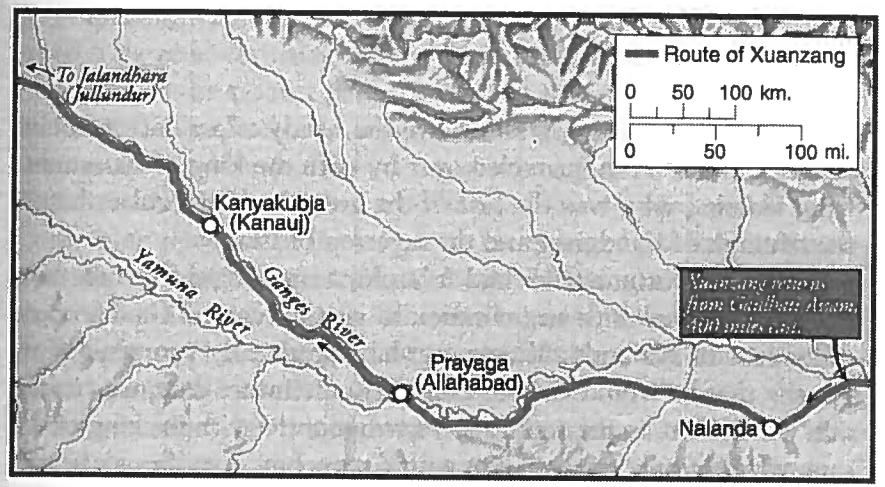
NINE

THE JOURNEY HOME TO CHINA



MAP 9.1
Itinerary of Xuanzang from India to Western China (Nalanda to Jalandhara).

The scene of Xuanzang's greatest triumph in debate took place in the capital of King Harsha on the Ganges River, in the twelfth month, 642 C.E. The pilgrim was at the height of his powers; he had consequential meetings with the king of Turfan, met the Great Khan of the Western Turks and the king of Samarkand, and consorted with oasis kings and the kings of Bamiyan and Kapisa, as well as with eminent Buddhist leaders. He had spent twelve or thirteen years crisscrossing the Indian subcontinent, becoming one of the great metaphysicians of medieval Buddhism.

Meeting King Harsha

At age forty Xuanzang would have the heady experience of being sought out and even quarreled over by both the king of Assam and King Harsha, who was the last of the great Buddhist rulers before the triumph of Hinduism and the invasion of Islam.

Just as the fortune-teller had foretold, a messenger from the king of Assam arrived with an invitation to visit his capital Gauhati, 400 miles east of Nalanda. Xuanzang, having already promised King Harsha that he would visit his court at some future date, was uncertain what to do. In the end he spent two months with the king of Assam, who not only received him with honors but, even though he was Hindu, also became a lay member of the Buddhist community. For the king's benefit, Xuanzang composed the third of the treatises that he wrote in India, a work on *The Three Persons of the Buddha:* the Phantom Buddha, who seemed to lead an earthly existence; the Social Buddha, who communicated with the Bodhisattvas; and the Transcendental Buddha.[1]

King Harsha, having returned from a military expedition in Orissa, heard that the Chinese pilgrim was with the king of Assam. He demanded that Xuanzang return at once. After a rather foolish display of bravado, the vassal king of Assam complied. He equipped a grand river flotilla and made his way with his Chinese guest to the camp of King Harsha on the Ganges River.

On the river journey on his way to meet the illustrious king Harsha, did Xuanzang remember the first time he was summoned by a king? How indeed, having left China as a fugitive, and nearly losing

his life in the desert, the Turfan king, like King Harsha, had demanded that he come to his court? How, from then on, his fortunes changed? How he was then given royal welcomes, and royal escorts all the way to Afghanistan?

In a dramatic middle-of-the night rendezvous (presumably the king could not wait until morning) several hundred men played golden drums by the light of flaming torches. As the king marched, he was always accompanied by drummers who "beat one stroke of the drum for every step taken"; no other king was permitted to march with drums keeping time to his gait. King Harsha came to Xuanzang's pavilion, bowed at his feet, scattered flowers and recited long verses praising him.

Such was the respect paid to religious leaders in India as well as in Central Asia. Such also was his reaching out to Xuanzang and to Mahayana Buddhism. Like many a ruling monarch, King Harsha had a conscious policy of evenhandedness toward the ardently competing religions of his kingdom. He engaged publicly in the sun worship of his father, sacrificed to the Hindu god Siva, and supported Buddhist endeavors. When he began to favor Xuanzang and lose sight of this balancing of many religions, the consequences were serious and nearly cost him his life.

King Harsha placed a high value on the talented men of his kingdom, according to Xuanzang, often leading them "to the lion throne," or highest place of honor, and listening to what they had to say. The king himself was both a poet and dramatist. One of the luminaries of his court had been the illustrious Hindu poet named Bana, who subsequently wrote about him in a famous Sanskrit poem. King Harsha was continually rewarding "the learned, the clever and the pious."[2]

For this patron of learning Xuanzang had an additional exotic attraction—he was from far away, and specifically from China. When describing their portentous meeting, Xuanzang writes that the king had said: "You came from China, and I have heard you have a musical composition called the 'Triumph of the Prince of Chin' [Qin] in your country. I do not know who this Prince of Chin is and what meritorious deeds he has done to earn such praises for himself."[3]

Xuanzang replied in an unusual passage. Normally it was only his biographer who recorded his personal reactions. This time he included his own reply to King Harsha in his *Record of the Western*

Regions, written for the Tang emperor. He explained to King Harsha that his emperor had been the Prince of Qin and the people had composed this song and dance to celebrate his victory in 620 C.E. over the last opponents of the Tang dynasty. Then Xuanzang used the opportunity to deliver in high-flown Chinese a eulogy of his emperor.

> At that time the whole country was in a condition of complete tumult without a lord to rule over the people. Human corpses piled high in the wild fields and human blood flowed in the rivers. Evil stars appeared in the sky at night and an ominous atmosphere condensed during the day. The three rivers were suffering under avaricious pigs and the four seas were troubled by poisonous snakes. Being a son of the emperor, the prince led his troops personally and suppressed the rebellious forces, in compliance with the order of Heaven. With his military power he established peace in the whole country and restored tranquility in the universe, making the sun, the moon and the stars shine brightly again. As people in the whole country felt grateful to him, they composed music in praise of him.[4]

After these flattering words, did Xuanzang go on to suggest that there should be diplomatic relations between King Harsha and the Tang court? Or was it King Harsha himself who initiated fruitful contact between the two great powers? Whichever it was, Chinese sources record the arrival of an embassy from Kanauj (Kanyakubja) in 641. There were four Tang embassies to Middle India between 641 and 658. On one of them the Chinese envoys returned with a "longevity doctor" who claimed to be 200 years old and able to produce an elixir of long life. (The emperor tried some of his medicine.) On another mission the Chinese sought to learn the technology of sugar making. At no other time, at least until the Ming dynasty, were so many embassies sent to an Indian kingdom so frequently in so short a period.[5]

At their next meeting at King Harsha's palace, the king was eager to see *The Destruction of Heresy,* a treatise Xuanzang had composed at Nalanda. After examining this polemic against the opponents of Mahayana Buddhism, both Hinayana and Hindu, the king addressed his court: "I have heard that when the sun rises in its splendour, the light of the glow-worm is eclipsed, and when the sound of heaven's thunder is heard, then the noise of the hammer and chisel is silenced,

so with regard to the doctrine which the Master defends, all the others have been destroyed."[6]

King Harsha was so impressed that he proposed a grand tournament at Kanyakubja, to which he invited the disciples of all religious schools. Many years before, Xuanzang had participated in a five-day religious debate called by the king of Kapisa, but that was on a small scale compared to this one.

Debating in the Grand Tournament

642 C.E. Twelfth month. Kanyakubja. Hour after hour of waiting. Xuanzang watches the kings of eighteen vassal kingdoms, three thousand Buddhist monks, three thousand Hindus and Jains, gather. Some of the visitors arrive on elephants, others in chariots, some are carried in palanquins, many are surrounded by parasols and standards, and all of the celebrated visitors are accompanied by a retinue of servants. King Harsha and the king of Assam lead the procession. A huge, elaborately caparisoned elephant carries a golden image of the Buddha on its back. King Harsha, dressed as the god Indra and holding a white fly whisk, walks on the right of the image, and the king of Assam, dressed as Brahma, holding a parasol, is on its left.

Monks chant holy verses. Flowers are scattered in the path of the holy procession. Before and behind the statue one hundred elephants carry musicians beating drums. Xuanzang and the king's chaplains also ride on elephants followed by vassal kings and distinguished visitors. King Harsha places the golden Buddha image on a jewel-encrusted throne. This celebration of "more than oriental splendor" takes place on a mile-long ride from the king's palace to the place of the Great Debate. As a grand climax King Harsha provides a sumptuous banquet and makes offerings of gold, robes, and other valuables to the Buddha image and gives presents to all the monks. Only then is the Buddhist Master of the Law permitted to speak. Xuanzang explains in a voice that is clear and forceful, and in language elegant and harmonious, his treatise on the superiority of Mahayana Buddhism. He deports himself gravely, and is as handsome as a figure in a painting.[7]

The drama intensified. During their five-day meeting the theological battlefield became a bloody one. Xuanzang's opponents were seething with rage and made threats on his life. When the king heard of their vicious intent he issued a proclamation that anyone daring to harm the monk would be beheaded, and anyone insulting him would have his tongue cut out. As no one dared to refute Xuanzang's teaching during the eighteen-day period when challenges were entertained, the king declared him winner of the debate and arranged a triumphal procession to celebrate his victory.

In his account Xuanzang recorded that the Buddha shrine was set on fire. The fire was extinguished and the irate Brahmins went even further in their fury: They hired a man to kill King Harsha. The brave monarch was able to subdue the would-be assassin and hand him over to his officers. The political wisdom that King Harsha had until then shown in encouraging all major religions had been violated this time and the consequences were immediate.

Xuanzang, too, was in a difficult position. He was becoming closer and closer to the king, who was attracted to him and to Mahayana Buddhism. Although Xuanzang had experience with many monarchs by this time, he must have reminded himself of the injunction in Buddhist Wisdom Sutras: "Be done away with flattery; cherish no self-conceit, or arrogance; free thyself from the idea of being, from the desire of making a name, of amassing wealth; free thyself from the five hindrances, from envy."[8]

Many years later Xuanzang acknowledged in a letter to one of his opponents: "As one of us expounded the tenets of the Mahayana school, the other advocated the aims of the Hinayana. In the course of debate, our arguments unavoidably got heated. In order to defend the truth there was scant regard for personal feelings. Thus, there were clashes. But, as soon as the debate was over, we did not take each other amiss."[9]

Xuanzang was longing to begin his journey home, but King Harsha insisted on taking him to Prayaga, modern Allahabad, where he was about to celebrate his sixth Quinquennial Almsgiving. King Harsha gave away all his possessions with the exception of his war horses, war elephants, and military stores. Rare jewels, precious stuffs, and special foods were offered first to the Buddha, next to the Sun God, then to the Hindu god Siva, on down the line to ten

thousand monks, to the Brahmins, the Jains, and last of all, to the poor and orphans. At the end, the king—like Prince Visvantara of the Buddha legend who donated his possessions and his family to charity—also gave away all his jewels and his outer garments until he was obliged to cover himself with tattered rags.

Then came the turn of his eighteen vassal kings to go from one beneficiary to another and ransom back the king's gifts. Xuanzang had encountered this curious ceremony before at Bamiyan; what was perhaps different this time was that it took place at a site that was especially holy for Hindus at Prayaga, on "the field of charity."

Starting His Journey Back to China

When the almsgiving was over, Xuanzang sought permission to depart. Both King Harsha and the king of Assam tried to detain him on one pretext or another. Finally Xuanzang was desperate. In order to emphasize the urgency of his mission he quoted the scriptures: "whoever hinders men from receiving knowledge of the Law, will generation after generation be born blind."[10]

In April 643, the kings finally agreed to his departure, and Xuanzang was given a north Indian king as a military escort to carry his precious books and images on horseback, and one of King Harsha's best elephants to ride. This elephant was of unusual size, capable of carrying eight men in his *howdahs* as well as the 3,000 gold pieces and 10,000 pieces of silver given to defray Xuanzang's expenses along the way. The elephant's appetite was also prodigious, for he could consume forty bundles of hay and twenty buns in two days. People could remember no other example of an elephant being given to a monk.

Three days later, as Xuanzang's procession was making its way, the two kings came galloping up on their horses like happy schoolboys to Xuanzang's caravan. They presented him with letters bearing impressive red seals, letters that commanded the rulers of the countries through which the pilgrim would pass to furnish him with escorts in relay. As much as it lay within his power, King Harsha tendered his help as far as the western borders of China. Only four years later, this remarkable, versatile monarch was gone; for the next three centuries there would be chaos in northern India.

Losing Scriptures in the Indus River

Having decided not to return by sea, Xuanzang and his party turned to the northwest. They stopped in the rainy season of 643 at a monastery north of Kanyakubja. Then they crossed northern India by way of Jalandhara and Taxila, returning in the opposite direction by roughly the same route Xuanzang had taken thirteen years before.

Xuanzang's caravan had been joined at Jalandhara by one hundred priests also carrying scriptures and images, who were glad to have the protection of numbers as they made their way through robber-infested passes. Xuanzang took the precaution of sending a monk ahead of the caravan who was instructed to say if he was stopped: "We have traveled a great distance to see the Law. Our baggage contains only Scriptures, images and holy relics. We pray you to protect us and do not do us violence."[11] By this time their loads of Buddhist manuscripts must have been substantial, but apparently this declaration worked, for the many bandits they met did them no harm.

644 C.E. The beginning of the year. Having traveled roughly 900 miles from Prayaga, Xuanzang is finally at Hund, ready to cross the Indus River. He pauses sitting atop his magnificent elephant before he makes the dangerous crossing. The rest of his retinue are in boats piled high with scriptures, relics, statues, and rare flower seeds which he had gathered from the four corners of India. But then a terrible calamity occurs: A storm springs up while they are in the middle of the mile-wide Indus River, shaking the boats and nearly overturning them. The guardian of his scriptures and flower seeds falls overboard and has to be rescued. Fifty of his precious manuscripts and all his seeds fall into the water.

The king of Kapisa is nearby at the time of the catastrophe. When he comes to meet Xuanzang, his very first question is, "Did you not bring with you any Indian flower seeds? That is the sole reason," the king explains, "for the storm that damaged the boat. It has been so from the days of old until now. Whoever attempts to cross the river with the seeds of flowers is subject to similar misfortunes."[12]

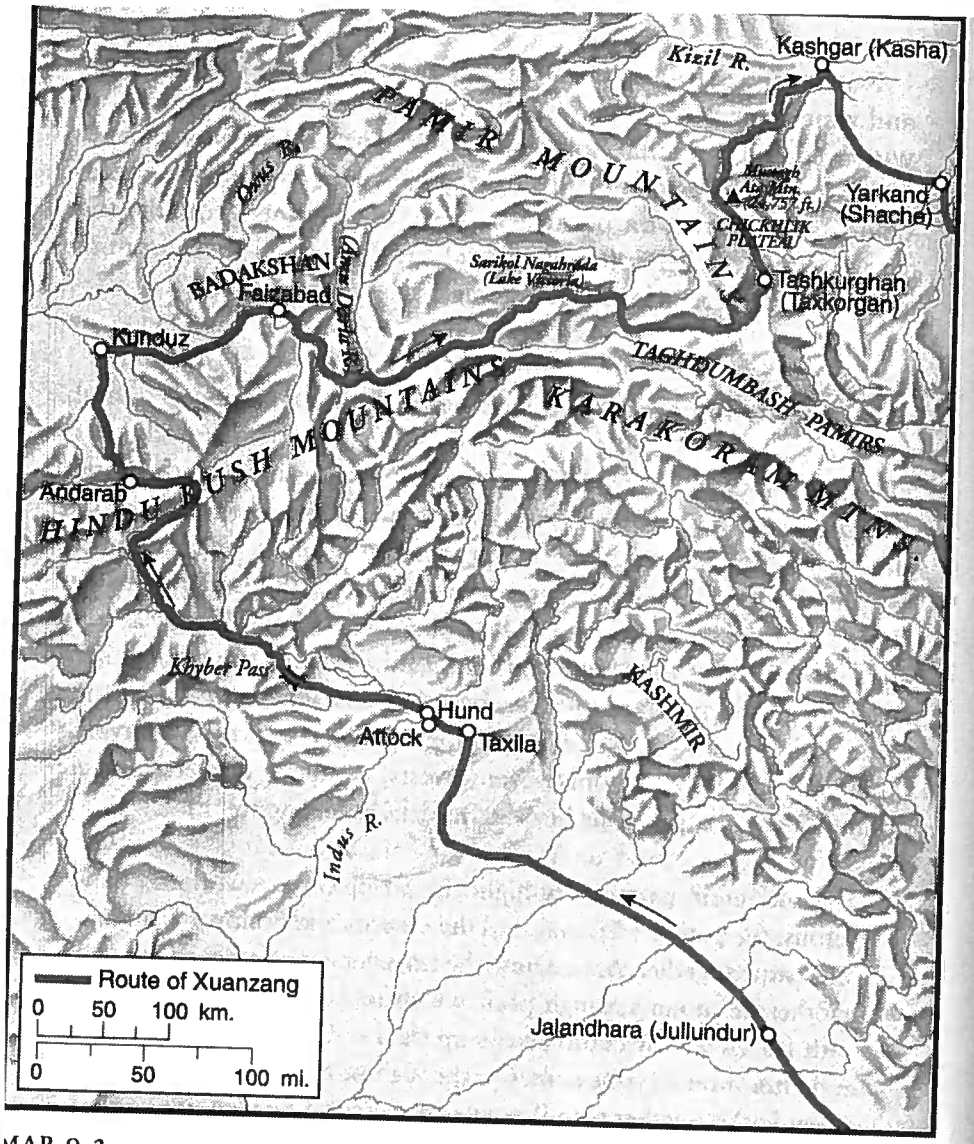
Xuanzang sent to Udyana for fresh copies of the lost scriptures and waited for nearly two months for their arrival at King Kapisa's winter capital at Hund, north of Attock. The king of Kashmir also came to pay homage and to visit with Xuanzang. Their interest could be explained on political as well as religious grounds; they were seeking the help of the Chinese court to defend them from the perceived menace of possible enemies.

Crossing the Hindu Kush and Pamir Ranges

The king of Kapisa personally escorted Xuanzang as far as the Hindu Kush Mountains and then provided him with a guide and the one hundred porters needed to transport provisions, including hay for the elephant. Like Hannibal's crossing of the Alps with his elephants and baggage train, their crossing of Kawak Pass in July 644 proved to be far more difficult than they had imagined. Most of the porters seem to have given up before they reached the pass, which we know to be 13,200 feet in height. Xuanzang's biographer says that the caravan at this point consisted of only seven priests, twenty followers, one elephant, ten asses, and four horses. But let Xuanzang tell it:

> This mountain pass is very high; the precipices are wild and dangerous; the path is tortuous, and the caverns and hollows wind and intertwine together. At one time the traveller enters a deep valley, at another he mounts a high peak which in full summer is blocked with frozen ice. By cutting steps up the ice the traveller passes on, and after three days he comes to the highest point of the pass. [Apparently the weather was also against them, for he went on to say:] There the icy wind, intensely cold, blows with fury; the piled snow fills the valleys. Travellers pushing their way through, dare not pause on their route. The very birds that fly in their wheeling flight cannot mount alone at this point but go afoot across the height and then fly downwards. Looking at the mountains round, they seem as little hillocks. This is the highest peak of all.[13]

Struggling on for three days more, they finally descended the pass and came to Andarab, where there were three small monasteries.



MAP 9.2
Itinerary of Xuanzang from India to western China (Jalandhara to Kashgar).

Here they rested five days before pushing on to Kunduz on the banks of the Oxus River. Xuanzang had stayed at Kunduz before, at the time of a family intrigue and palace tragedy. Nothing happened this time. Xuanzang and his party rested again, this time for a month, waiting for copies of some of the important scriptures lost in the In-

dus River. With an escort provided by the ruler of Kunduz, and in the company of some merchants, Xuanzang's entourage departed.

Instead of returning the way he had come to India, on the northern caravan road to Samarkand, he would be ascending the upper reaches of the Oxus River over the Pamirs to Kashgar.[14]

This was the route followed later by Marco Polo on his way to China in 1271. From Kashgar Xuanzang would be traveling on the Southern Silk Road, which would take him to Yarkand and Khotan, eastward along the southern edge of the Taklamakan desert to Dunhuang, at the juncture of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads.

In the upper reaches of the Oxus River, the caravan came upon a settlement of White Huns who had been driven to take refuge in this wild terrain. Xuanzang told about their strange customs.[15] About forty miles farther on, Xuanzang and his caravan halted a month near Faizabad in the kingdom of Badakhshan because the passes of the Pamirs were blocked with heavy snow. The area was famous for its horses, lapis lazuli, and ruby mines. There were three or four Buddhist monasteries and a number of monks in this remote outpost.

Still heading east, Xuanzang and his company walked about 200 miles up this bleak, trackless, and nearly inaccessible Penj valley. On some of the makeshift bridges along the river, they felt as if they were "a tear on an eyelash," to use a Russian writer's words. They passed by scabby collections of mud and stone huts until they came to the Pamir ranges. These upland plains of the Pamirs, Xuanzang explained, were situated among the snowy mountains, and "on this account the climate was cold and the winds blew constantly." Here at the height of 13,526 feet they reached the banks of the Great Dragon Lake, which was rediscovered by John Woods in 1838 and renamed Lake Victoria.[16]

With his unerring eye Xuanzang noted the huge size of Great Dragon Lake, 200 *li* from east to west and 50 *li* from north to south, and the water's dark blue color, taste, and freshness.[17] He remarked on the aquatic monsters that lived in its depths, and frogs of an infinite variety and some birds about ten feet high with eggs as large as a water pitcher. He even conjectured that they might have been ostriches. Fantastic as this may seem, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1911 mentions the possibility that there were ostriches in the lower Oxus.[18]

But for the swelling rivers, which made traveling with heavily laden animals impossible, Xuanzang might have crossed at Wakhjir pass at 16,880 feet! This is the Great Divide of central Asia. The Taghdumbash Pamirs (Fig. 9.1) are the source of the Oxus River, which drains 1,000 miles to the west ending up in the Aral Sea, and of the Yarkand River, which sweeps down hundreds of miles to the east into the Taklamakan Desert, in China. Xuanzang probably went by the Great Pamir route at another pass.[19] In any event, Marco Polo called this mountain mass, this amphitheater of high peaks, the Roof of the World, for the ranges of the Hindu Kush crossing modern-day Afghanistan, the Karakorum in northern Pakistan, the Pamirs in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and the Tian Shan range in China, all meet in the Pamir knot.

FIGURE 9.1
View of the Pamirs, which Xuanzang crossed in order to go from Afghanistan to Kashgar. The American Museum of Natural History.

Stopping at the Kashgar Oasis

Xuanzang rested from his arduous climbing for a month at Tashkurghan, where the Sarikol people lived. He was impressed with the king, whom he described as being upright, honest, and as one who greatly honored Buddhism. In the old palace was a monastery associated with the monk Kumarajiva, one of the great translators of Mahayana Buddhism. Xuanzang had been to Kumarajiva's birthplace at Kucha on his way to India.

At Tashkurghan he saw the ruins of a famous fortress called the Maiden's Castle and heard its fantastic legend. A Chinese princess of the Han dynasty had been betrothed to the king of Persia and was being escorted to his capital. At Tashkurghan the way was blocked by robbers, and so her escort placed her on an isolated peak protected by rock precipices. "When tranquility was restored, and the journey was to be continued, the king's envoy in charge of the bride discovered that she was *enceinte*. On making enquiry he found that the sun-deva had visited the lady every day at noon, and that it was by him that she was with child."[20]

The people of Tashkurgan were so impressed that they begged her to remain and to rule over them; the chiefs ruling this region were supposed to have sprung from her miraculously born son. Stein is sure that the fort on the west side of the Tashkurghan River was the site visited by Xuanzang.[21]

Xuanzang's caravan was also attacked by robbers as it traveled from Tashkurghan to Kashgar. They were making their way through a narrow gorge between high overhanging rock walls. A robber band came swooping down this treacherous defile; Xuanzang's merchant companions took fright and bolted up the mountain. King Harsha's mighty elephant stampeded. The robbers pursued the frightened elephant until he plunged into the river and drowned. Stein surmised that Xuanzang lost his elephant in the Tangitar Gorge (Fig. 9.2) below Tar Bashi.

At the time Xuanzang was following the track that went across the desolate Chickiklik high plateau, passing by the western slopes of the massive, white dome of Muztagh-Ata.[22] The second-tallest peak in the Pamirs, Muztagh-Ata is 24,388 feet high. "A mountain," said Xuanzang, "the vapors of which soaring up, and coming

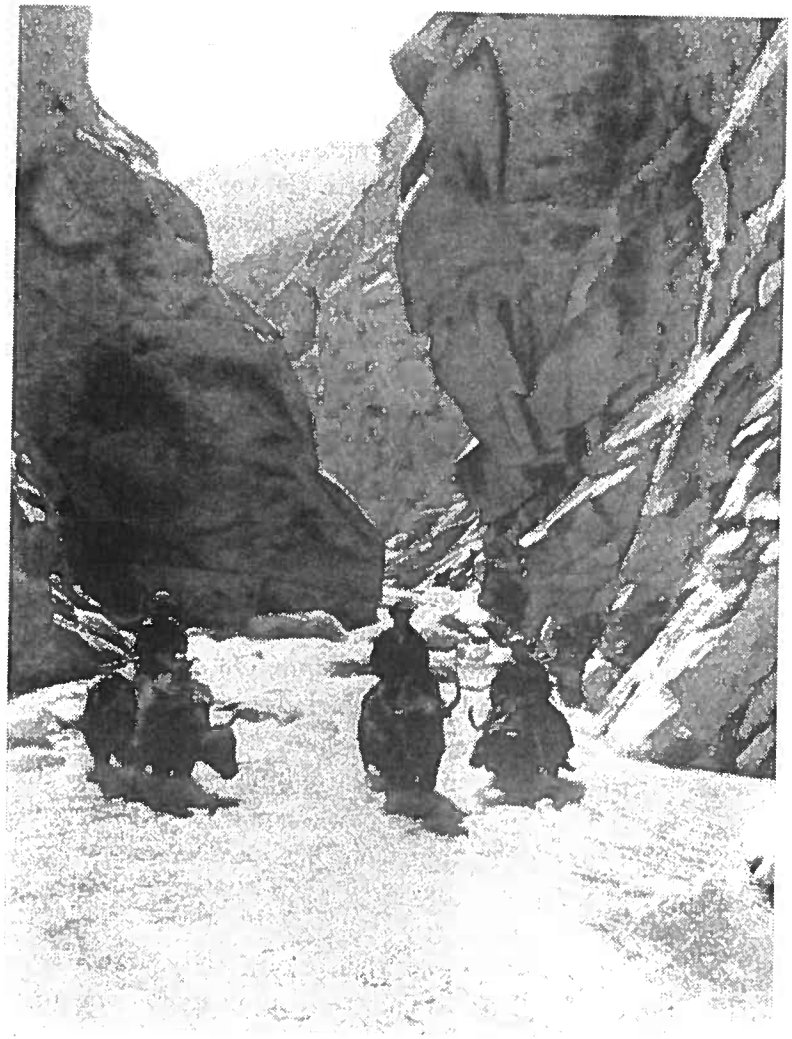


FIGURE 9.2
Tangitar Gorge, which Aurel Stein suggested was the narrow defile where Xuanzang's Indian elephant was chased by bandits, fell into the river, and drowned. The British Library.

into contact with the rocks, raised clouds; its sheer cliffs of imposing height seemed on the verge of crashing down. On the summit of this mountain was a magnificent tope [stupa]."[23] He reported that it had been built in memory of an *arhat* who, according to the legend, had lived in a trance since the time of the Lord Buddha.

Xuanzang seems to have reached Kashgar by way of the River Gez, a tributary of the Kizil (Qizil) river. His first impression of the approach to China's westernmost oasis was of many sand heaps and little fertile soil. Commenting on the oasis itself, he said that "it yielded good crops and a luxuriance of fruit and flowers." How inviting the orchards, the city walls, the winding lanes, and the mud-brick walls of houses must have been! After the bleak and thinly populated Pamirs, how heart-warming the sight of streams of people coming and going, ponies and donkeys laden with goods, heralding an important trade center. Xuanzang went to the famous bazaar at Kashgar. "One gets from this country felt and cloth of excellent quality as well as fine woolen materials. Moreover, the inhabitants are clever at weaving various kinds of fine, fleecy carpets." Xuanzang also remarks that the people have green eyes, suggesting the Sogdian or East Iranian origin of some of the population.[24]

In Kashgar, there were hundreds of Buddhist monasteries with more than a thousand monks, most of whom were of a realist Hinayana school. Remains of two Buddhist sites near Kashgar still exist. The first, the Cave of Three Immortals, dating from the second century, is hewn from the cliffs of the Quiakmakh River. It now stands thirty feet high above the river bed. It has two chambers; traces of wall paintings survive in the left chamber. The second site, the ancient village of Hanoi, had been a thriving Buddhist settlement in Tang times. Xuanzang is believed to have visited the Mauri-tim stupa there (Fig. 9.3).

He did not comment on the form of government in Kashgar, but we know that in the Tang period it was under Chinese administration and the military governor was a Chinese official.[25]

Waiting at the Khotan Oasis

Xuanzang's next goal was Khotan, a fortnight's journey on the caravan road. Khotan was the largest oasis on the Southern Silk Road at the foot of the bleak, serrated Kunlun Mountains separating China and Tibet. He halted for a few days at the flourishing oasis of Yarkand (Shache) on the way. The king of Khotan, hearing that Xuanzang was in his territory, went forth to escort him into the

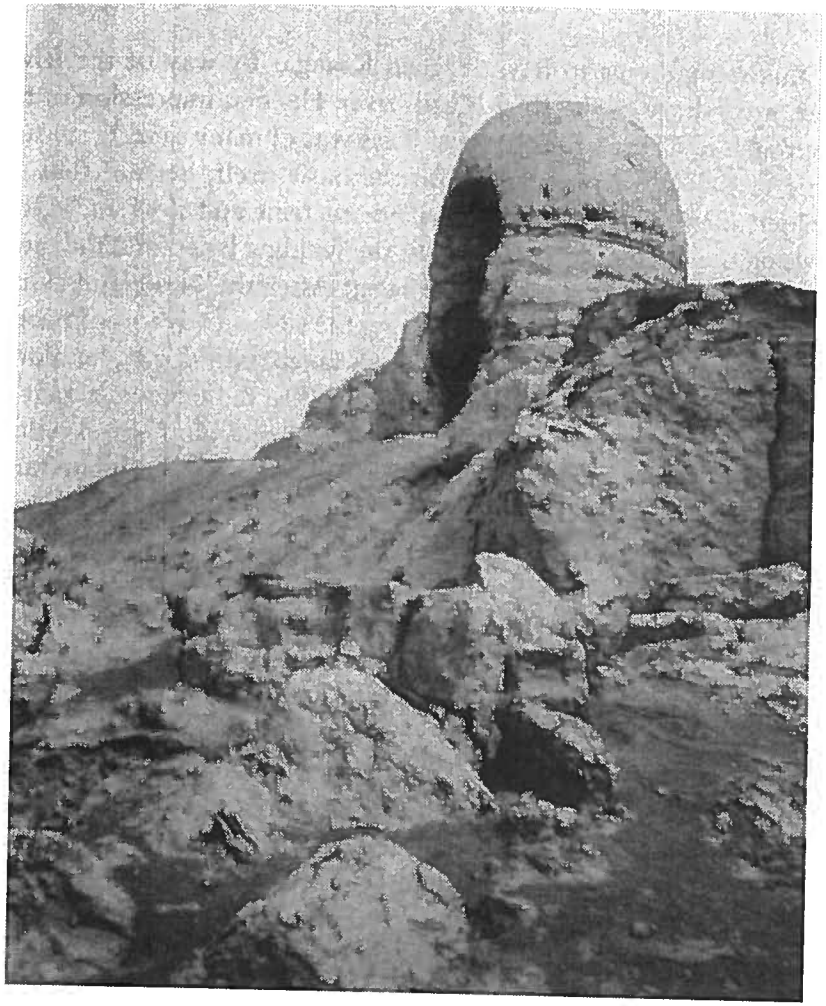


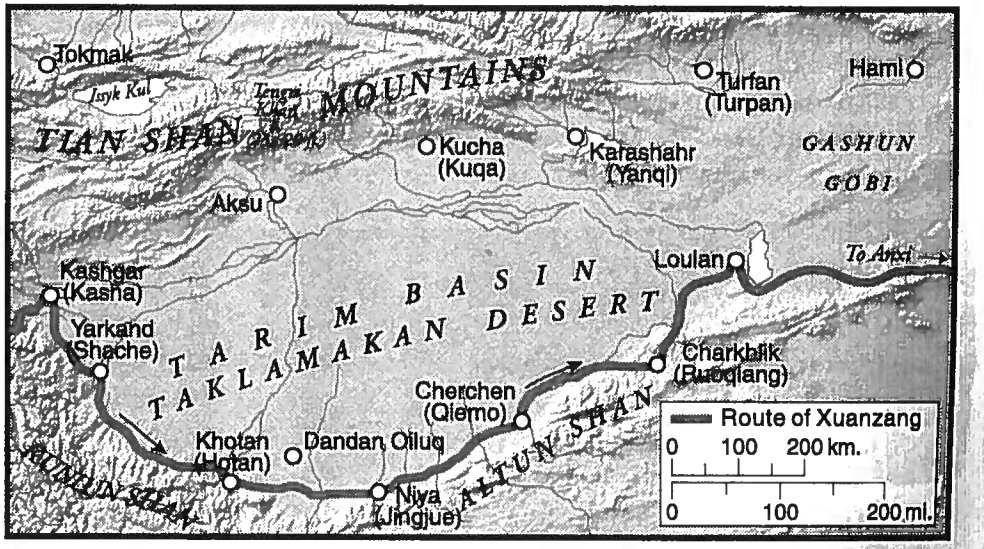
FIGURE 9.3
Mauri-tim Stupa, which Xuanzang is believed to have visited in the ancient city of Hanoi, not far from Kashgar.

capital in September 644. Xuanzang stayed in a Hinayana monastery. There were one hundred monasteries and more than five thousand monks, chiefly Mahayanist.

The remains of the ancient city of Yotkan are believed to have been the capital of Khotan in Xuanzang's time. Xuanzang was clearly impressed.

This country he describes as being above 4,000 li in circuit, more than half of it being sand-dunes; the cultivated land, which was very limited, yielded cereals and fruits of various kinds; the country produced rugs, fine felt, and silk of artistic texture, it also yielded white and black jade. The climate was genial, but there were whirlwinds and flying dust. The people were of gentle disposition, fond of the practical arts; they were in easy circumstances, and had settled occupations. The nation esteemed music and the people were fond of dance and song; a few clothed themselves in woollens and furs, the majority wearing silk and calico. . . . The system of writing had been taken from that of India, but the structure had been slightly altered by a sort of successive changes; the spoken language differed from that of other countries.[26]

Southeast of the capital, Xuanzang visited a monastery that had been built to commemorate the successful introduction of silk culture from China. (At the time Khotan was an independent kingdom.) From there silk culture was taken secretly to Byzantium.



MAP 9.3
Itinerary of Xuanzang from India to western China (Kashgar to Loulan).

China had been jealously guarding the secret of making silk, and under imperial decree, disclosure meant death by torture. Thus many centuries passed before any knowledge of the source of this extraordinary fabric spread. According to an old legend recorded by Xuanzang, in about 140 B.C.E., silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds were carried to Khotan. The king of Khotan, who was married to a Chinese princess, had instructed her to procure the means of making silk. She hid the silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds in her headdress (Fig. 9.4). At the customs barrier the guards searched everywhere, but they did not dare to remove the headdress of the princess. Later she founded a convent where the first silkworms were bred. Xuanzang saw the ancient mulberry trunks that were supposed to be the remains of the first trees planted there.[27]

Everywhere Xuanzang went, he found evidence of Indian influence at Khotan. The king himself claimed to be a descendant of Vaisravana, a Buddhist deity of northern India. The Khotanese ascribed their conversion to Mahayana Buddhism to Vairocana, the Indian Buddha of Tantric and Esoteric Buddhism, who had come expressly to Khotan. A monastery was built in his honor. Indian influences were also seen by Xuanzang in the local tradition that the territory of Khotan was colonized by Indian immigrants from Taxila. They claimed to be descendants of the men who had blinded Asoka's son Kunala, for which they were banished.[28]

Xuanzang visited the site of a splendid figure of the Buddha with a precious jeweled crown, which came from Kashmir. He saw the

FIGURE 9.4
A votive tablet depicting the Silk Princess's headdress, in which she hid silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds, in order to take the secrets of silk-making from China to Khotan. The British Museum.

famous sandalwood image at Pima, outside of Khotan, which came all the way from Kausambi in central India. This was the illustrious Udayana statue commissioned by the king of Kausambi while the Buddha was still alive.[29] How did all these statues get to Khotan? It was said that some of them flew, and a charming legend tells how a pilgrim carried a statue by day, but the statue carried the pilgrim by night.

Xuanzang spent seven or eight months in Khotan, partly because the king wished him to stay, and partly because he was still waiting for the arrival of replacement copies of some of the scriptures he had lost in the Indus River. This was the third time he had waited for the replacement of the lost manuscripts; he stayed two months at Hund waiting, a month at Kunduz waiting, and now many months waiting in Khotan. That sheds light on the high value he attached to bringing a complete library of original sources back to China. He had an additional reason for lingering. Early in his stay in Khotan he found a Turfan trader who was going to the Tang capital, and so he wrote a long "memorial" to the emperor advising him that he would be coming home.

With his lively curiosity undiminished, he visited a number of monasteries and sacred sites in the area. Often these were "the sand-buried ruins of Khotan" near the rivers that had once flowed down from the Kunlun Mountains and then dried up; the cities were the buried sites of Dandan Oilik, Rawak, and Niya (Jingjue), later made famous by the archaeological expeditions of Aurel Stein. To the east of Khotan was a once very prosperous region that Xuanzang observed had become a dried-up old city until a Khotanese nobleman sacrificed his life by marrying the "Naga spirit of the river." Once the nobleman married this Naga, the river waters reappeared and the people could irrigate their land again.[30] The legend has been useful in interpreting a fascinating painting (Fig. 9.5) Stein found at Dandan Oilik.

West of the capital were mounds inhabited by rats. Xuanzang recounted the legend about the origin of the worship paid to these rodents. A rat-headed divinity in another painting from Dandan Oilik had puzzled knowledgeable British Museum curators until Stein recalled Xuanzang's story of how sacred rats and their Rat King, by destroying the horses' harnesses of an invading Hun host, had

FIGURE 9.5
Painting of a curvaceous woman standing in a tank and a statue of Vaisravana. The woman is thought to be the Nagini, or water spirit. The British Library.

caused its defeat and thus saved the land.[31] Herodotus told a similar story in which the overwhelming threat of an invasion by the Egyptian army was stopped by mice who gnawed away so much of the enemy's paraphernalia that they were rendered helpless.

In between his explorations in and around Khotan, Xuanzang engaged in a kind of teaching marathon. Over one twenty-four-hour period he lectured to the king and his people on his old favorites, the *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* and the *Treasury of Buddhist Philosophy,* written by Vasubandhu when he was still a realist of the Hinayana school, and a famous compendium of Mahayana philosophy translated by Paramartha in 562 C.E. Xuanzang had studied all of these years before when he was a very young monk in Chengdu. He also lectured on a fourth commentary, which

Waley describes as being "the one with the unmanageably long name," which the Chinese call *Tui-fa (Abidharma).*[32]

Entering the Desert

From Khotan Xuanzang pushed on to Niya in the Taklamakan Desert.

> Going east from this, we enter a great drifting sand desert. These sands extend like a drifting flood for a great distance, piled up or scattered according to the wind. There is no trace left behind by travellers . . . and oftentimes the way is lost, and so they wander hither and thither quite bewildered, without any guide or direction. So travellers pick up the bones of animals as beacons. There is neither water nor herbage to be found, and hot winds frequently blow. When these winds rise, then both men and beasts become confused and forgetful, and then they remain perfectly disabled *(sick).* At times sad and plaintive notes are heard and piteous cries, so that between the sights and sounds of this desert men get confused and know not whither they go. Hence there are so many who perish in the journey. But it is all the work of demons and evil spirits.[33]

Marco Polo expressed similar beliefs, saying that if travelers lag behind their company, "they hear spirits malignant in the air, talking in a way that they seem to be their companions, for they call them sometimes by their names. . . . [They] follow those voices and get out of the right way so that they are never reunited to their fellows and found . . . and in this way they know not how to return and being without food and drink, many of them are dead in the past and lost." Sometimes they hear "many instruments of music sounding in the air, and especially drums more than other instruments, and the clashing of weapons."[34]

But the stark realities of brackish water and no fodder for animals or food for human beings are daunting enough. Xuanzang's caravan with all its precious statues and manuscripts finally reached the present-day Cherchen (Qiemo). The desert is blasted by

sand, which is blown by force 5 winds 145 days of the year, bearing out Xuanzang's and Marco Polo's descriptions of the perils of desert travel.[35] Xuanzang provided us with few details of his journey to Charkhlik (Ruoqiang), the next oasis, or the desolate lands of the vast region comprising the dried-up Lake of Lop Nor, whose salt-encrusted bed was worse to walk on even than glacial ice.

Not far from the Charkhlik oasis is the astonishing archaeological site of Miran, where there are many statues and yet another portrayal of the Visvantara Jataka, the self-sacrificing king. Xuanzang probably saw the ruined temples there. At this site Aurel Stein reflected once again on his patron saint, Xuanzang. "In a region where all is dead and waste, spiritual emanations from those who have passed by centuries ago, seem to cling much longer to the conspicuous landmarks than in parts where life is still bustling."[36]

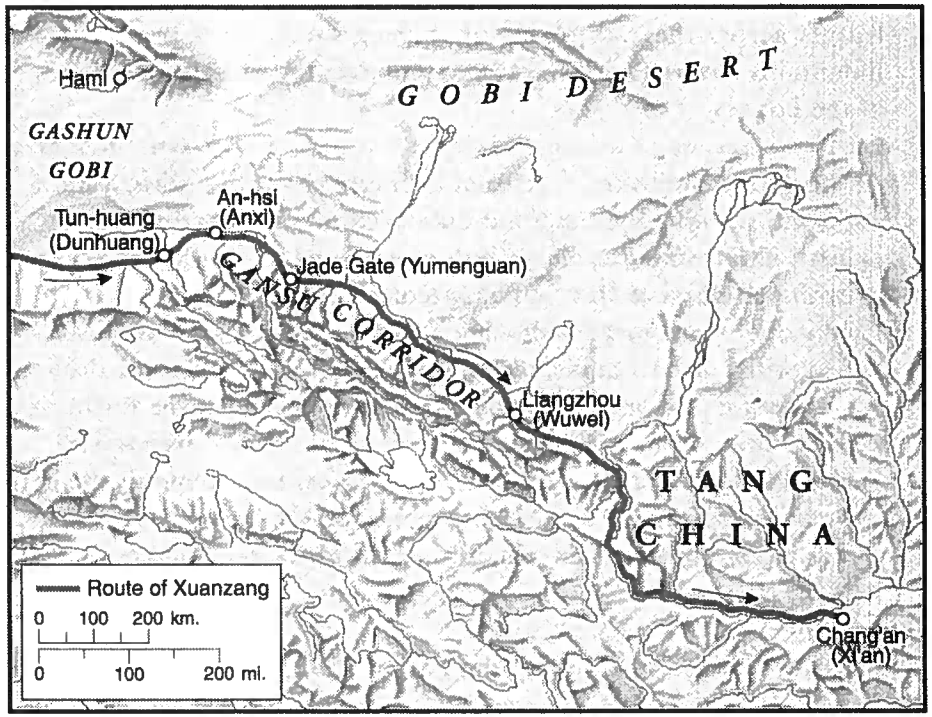
Unfortunately Xuanzang ended the record of his travels with his arrival in the territory of Loulan, a once powerful kingdom 1,500 *li* from Khotan. Evidently he considered the remaining portion of his journey home as being within the borders of the Chinese empire and hence outside the scope of his record. Huili, his biographer, takes us to Dunhuang, but the pilgrim ended with a few graceful sentences, which form a stylish epilogue:

> I have set forth at length national scenery and ascertained territorial divisions. I have explained the qualities of national customs and climatic characteristics. Moral conduct is not constant and tastes vary; where matters cannot be thoroughly verified one may not be dogmatic. Wherever I went I made notes, and in mentioning what I saw and heard I recorded the aspirations for [Chinese] civilization. It is a fact that from here to where the sun sets all have experienced [His Majesty's] beneficence, and where his influence reaches all admire his perfect virtue. The whole world having been united under one sway I have not been a mere individual on a political mission traveling a myriad *li* along a post road.[37]

Xuanzang considered this the end of his journey. He was in China now.

TEN

BACK IN CHINA



MAP 10.1
Itinerary of Xuanzang from western China back home (Loulan to Chang'an).

Sixteen years earlier, Xuanzang had left China in secret by night, against the wishes of Emperor Taizong. Now as he drew closer to the borders of the Tang empire, he did not know how he would be received. In Khotan, he entrusted to a young Turfanese, traveling with a merchant caravan to China, a letter to Taizong assuring the emperor that he was returning as a loyal subject.

In his letter Xuanzang wrote of his search for Buddhist learning, and of the sublime words of the scriptures. He outlined his travels across the vast plains of shifting sands, over precipitous mountains covered with snow, and along by the tumultuous waves of the hot sea.

> Thus I accomplished a journey of more than 50,000 *li,* yet, notwithstanding the thousand differences of customs and manners I have witnessed, the myriads of dangers I have encountered, by the goodness of Heaven I have returned without accident, and now offer my homage with a body unimpaired and a mind satisfied with the accomplishment of my vows. I have beheld the Ghridrakuta Mountain [Vulture Peak], worshipped at the Bodhi tree; I have seen traces not seen before; heard sacred words not heard before; witnessed spiritual prodigies, exceeding all the wonders of Nature; have borne testimony to the high qualities of our august Emperor; and won for him the high esteem and praise of the people.[1]

He concluded by saying that after the great elephant had drowned, he had not succeeded in obtaining enough horses for the library of scriptures that he had brought back, but despite this difficulty he hoped to go forward at once to visit His Majesty.

Seven or eight months elapsed. Finally a messenger returned with a reassuring reply from the emperor, who may have been aware of some of Xuanzang's conversations with King Harsha and his contribution to Tang China's good relations with the king of Middle India.[2]

> I am highly delighted to hear that the teacher is returning home after seeking the Way in the foreign lands. You may come to see me as quickly as possible, and you may, as well, bring the foreign monks who understand the Sanskrit language and the meanings of the scriptures to come with you. I have already ordered the authorities of Kustana [Khotan] and the other regions to escort you, and so you will not be in want of carriers and horses. I have also instructed the officials of Tunhuang [Dunhuang] to receive you at the Desert, as well as those of Shanshan [Charkhlik] to receive you at Chemo [Cherchen].[3]

Resting at the Dunhuang Oasis

Shortly after he received the emperor's letter, Xuanzang departed from Khotan. The king provided him richly with guides and equipment, and help was furnished by every oasis along the way, but desert travel is always arduous and uncertain. Like many an exhausted traveler before him, Xuanzang rested at the Dunhuang Oasis. He is likely to have paused before some of the fine paintings and sculpture of the impressive shrine, library, and gallery of Buddhist art at the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. He probably saw many of the cave interiors and read some of the inscriptions of merchants who contributed funds out of gratitude for successful journeys or in the hopes that their caravans would arrive safely at their destinations. Dunhuang was the gateway to one of the oldest long-distance trade routes in history, the Silk Road, dating from the first centuries of the common era and perhaps earlier. Camel and horse caravans from India and the Turfan basin in Central Asia in one direction, and from the Tang capital Chang'an in the other, all stopped there.

Xuanzang's record closes at Loulan before he reached Dunhuang, which was part of the Tang empire. His biographer says only that he wrote a second letter to the Emperor at Dunhuang. However, a painting in Cave #103 at Dunhuang (Fig. 10.1) shows Xuanzang's caravan before the elephant given to him by King Harsha was drowned on the way down the Pamirs from Kashmir; it also portrays the pilgrim giving thanks for a safe journey.[4]

Several Dunhuang paintings on silk banners depict the prototype of the pilgrim traveler. One of them which is wonderfully suggestive (Fig. 10.2) can be seen in the Musée Guimet in Paris.[5]

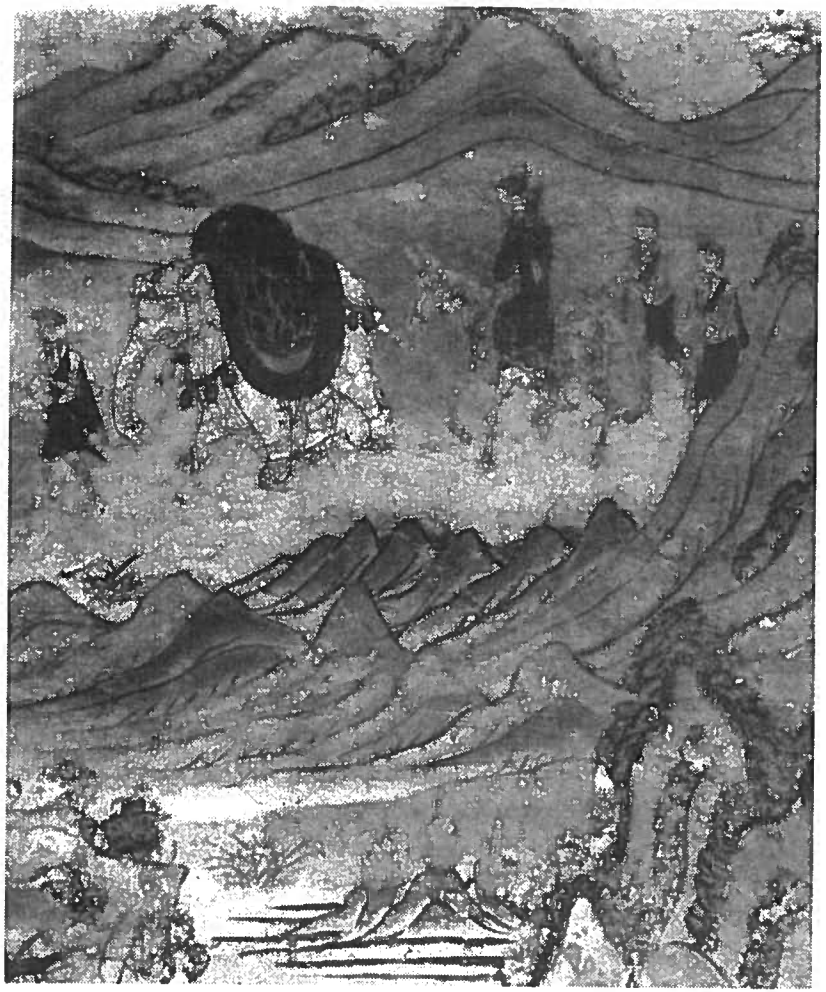


FIGURE 10.1
Wall painting at Dunhuang Cave #103 showing Xuanzang returning from India with the great white elephant given to him by King Harsha. The Lo Archive, Princeton University.

By a curious twist of fate, more than twelve centuries after he rested at Dunhuang, Xuanzang played a crucial role in a strange drama that unfolded there. Aurel Stein had heard that a vast hoard of manuscripts was sealed in one of Dunhuang's caves. On his second expedition (1906–1908), Stein met the ignorant and somewhat eccentric Daoist Abbot Wang, self-appointed guardian of the caves,

FIGURE 10.2
Silk temple banner showing an itinerant monk, the prototype of the pilgrim traveler. Musée Guimet, Paris.

which by the early nineteenth century had fallen into ruin. The abbot had commissioned a local artist to illustrate familiar scenes from the by now legendary travels of Xuanzang on a Dunhuang temple loggia. When Stein saw these portrayals, he told Abbot Wang how he had followed in the pilgrim's footsteps over 10,000 *li* from India to Dunhuang.

The moody Abbot opened up the hitherto sealed-up cave for Stein; it had been closed since the eleventh century because of marauding armies.[6] Stacks of manuscripts were piled up to the ceiling, and silk temple banners were wrapped in stout sheets of canvas. The size of this treasure trove, 30,000 manuscripts and 20,000 other artifacts, including paintings on silk and paper, banners and embroideries, was beyond belief.[7] Many that were in Chinese were examined by Paul Pelliot when he visited the shrine a year after Stein (Fig. 10.3).

This opening of cave #17 alerted the world to the long-forgotten caves of Dunhuang. Not unlike Angkor Wat, which had been swallowed up by the jungle, Dunhuang, with its mile-long galleries of medieval art, had been lost or ignored until Stein was allowed to enter. Later a copy of what is one of the world's earliest documented printed books, the *Diamond Sutra,* dated 868 C.E., was found inside.

Triumphant Return to Chang'an

From Dunhuang, Xuanzang wrote again to the Emperor Taizong and then hurried to meet him in person. Because the emperor was conducting a military expedition in the northeast, he ordered one of his lord-lieutenants to arrange for Xuanzang's reception in Chang'an. The news of the pilgrim's return soon spread, and the streets were filled to overflowing; Xuanzang was obliged to spend the night by a canal at the western outskirts of the city.

Seventh day of the first month in 645 C.E. Morning comes slowly. A body of high officials clears the way to bring Xuanzang to the capital. They arrange for a huge group of monks to parade his books, relics, gold, silver, and sandalwood images through Chang'an. The procession the next day begins at the Street of the Red Bird and ends at the main gate of the Monastery of Great Happiness. All the monasteries send monks and nuns in their ceremonial robes for the occasion. The people vie with one another in preparing their best banners, tapestries, umbrellas, precious tables, and carriages. When they reach the street of the Red

FIGURE 10.3
Photograph of Paul Pelliot, a French Sinologist, in cave #17 at Dunhuang, examining by candlelight one of the thousands of manuscripts found there. Early twentieth century. Musée Guimet, Paris.

Bird, they march forward with the sound of pearls and jade hanging from their belts tinkling in the air amidst golden flowers scattered on the road. Scholars and local officials line the ceremonial path.

The authorities, fearing that the crowds might tread on one another, order them to stay still, burn incense and scatter flowers

where they are standing. Then the whole congregation witnesses a colored cloud in the sky that seems to float over the scriptures and the gold, silver and sandalwood images as if it is welcoming the holy objects. "It is indeed the most splendid event since the death of the Buddha."[8]

Xuanzang was proud to donate 150 pellets of the Buddha's flesh and a box of his bone relics at the Monastery of Great Happiness. That was not all. He brought seven statues of the Buddha, some as tall as four feet, which had been transported all the way from India. What a flood of memories must have passed through his mind as he deposited these precious likenesses!

First, there was a sandalwood image, three feet five inches tall, of the Buddha preaching his first sermon at Sarnath on a glittering pedestal; then another sweet-smelling sandalwood statue, two feet nine inches tall, after the image of King Udayana when he was desirous of seeing the Buddha. Each statue called up the setting, the experiences of the famous places of pilgrimage, which Xuanzang had visited. The third image, which was the largest statue in his baggage train from India, was a shining silver Buddha fully four feet high, in imitation of the Buddha descending from heaven at Sankasya. The fourth replica, three feet five inches high, may have been made of gold. It was the Buddha preaching the *Lotus Sutra* at Vulture Peak. Xuanzang could well remember his feelings when, like the pious Faxian before him, he had gone to pay reverence to this holy mountain. He knew this statue would be well-received, for the *Lotus Sutra* was popular in China. To these he added a fifth image, an aromatic sandalwood statue about fifteen inches high, carved in imitation of the Buddha's shadow left in the cave at Nagarahara. This was where he himself had been vouchsafed a vision of the Buddha. It was one of the first statues he had collected on his journey. Somehow he located a golden image three feet three inches tall from the Dragon Cave at Pragbodhi Mountain near Magadha. This sixth replica resembled the Sarnath image of the Buddha Turning the Wheel of the Law. Finally, he deposited another sandalwood image of the Buddha, this one with the Buddha making his daily rounds at Vasali, where he had preached so many sermons.[9]

We know what three of these images looked like. One was the Udayana image, copies of which are believed to have been made century after century. The Udayana images were typically standing images garbed in long robes with folds arranged in a very symmetrical fashion and with the hands assuming gestures of reassurance and charity. Two of the images were copies of the Sarnath image of the Buddha preaching. Pratapaditya Pal wrote that some of the images Xuanzang brought back with him must have looked very much like this bronze of another standing Buddha from the John D. Rockefeller Collection (Fig. 10.4).[10]

FIGURE 10.4
Bronze image of a Sakyamuni Buddha standing with his right hand raised in the "fear not" gesture. The Asia Society, New York.

Xuanzang also collected 657 books with strange Indian writing on either birch bark or the trimmed leaves of palm trees strung together in layers, bound in 520 cases. These were classified as 224 Mahayanist sutras and treatises; writings from a number of Hinayanist sects that were for the most part quite unknown; and no fewer than thirty-six general works of logic and thirteen works on grammar.[11] A charming silk scroll painting from Dunhuang (Fig. 10.5) shows twenty horses bearing these scriptures, trotting into a temple with elegantly dressed priests and officials looking on.

Once safely home, Xuanzang's greatest wish was to translate as many of these scriptures as possible.

Being Interviewed by the Emperor

Xuanzang had two interviews with the emperor in the Palace of the Phoenix at Luoyang, the second imperial capital. Their second meeting was well-documented.

> Having sat down the emperor asked: "Why did you go (to India) without telling me?"
>
> The Master replied with apology. "When I was preparing for my journey, I had sent petitions to Your Majesty several times,

JRE 10.5
ese painting on silk scroll from Dunhuang, called Return of Xuanzang the Buddhist Scriptures. The Courtesy Fujita Museum.

> but as my project was unworthy, I did not enjoy the favour of being granted with an official permission. Because of my utmost sincerity for seeking the Law, I went away privately for which offence I beg the pardon of Your Majesty."
>
> The emperor said: "Since you are a monk, you are different from lay people in this matter. I am delighted that you went to seek for the Law at the risk of your life for the benefit of all the people. There is no need to ask my pardon."[12]

When the emperor showed astonishment at his being able to make such a journey, Xuanzang replied in the language of diplomacy that it was the universal prestige of the new dynasty that made it possible. "I have heard that it is not far to reach the Heavenly Lake for those who could ride on a speedy wind, and it is not difficult to cross a stormy river, if one sailed in a dragon-boat. Since Your Majesty ascended the throne to rule over the country, your virtue and benevolence prevailed in all the areas, with the wind of morality blowing to the hot countries in the south and your political influence reaching as far as beyond the Pamirs."[13]

Here Xuanzang was acknowledging the notable foreign policy successes of the emperor and perhaps even his own. He was no longer the young idealist who defied the king of Turfan; he spoke with the poise of a man who had been honored by King Harsha, and who, on his journey, had consorted with the Great Khan of the Western Turks as well as many kings and princes.

The emperor found Xuanzang full of valuable information on the climate, products, rulers, customs, and history of the peoples of Central Asia and India. The emperor suggested he write a book. "These Buddhist kingdoms," said the emperor at last, "are so far off that up until now our history books have given us very imperfect accounts of the sacred sites and the religious teachings. As you have recently seen it all for yourself, you ought to write a book containing this new information."[14] This was an unusual comment from an emperor who is usually portrayed as being anti-Buddhist because of the powerful influence of one of his Confucian advisors.

That same emperor, realizing that Xuanzang was a man of great talent who could be useful, exhorted him to become his advisor on Asian relations. Xuanzang explained that he had become a monk at

an early age and had been totally absorbed in Buddhist studies. "If your Majesty orders me to return to secular life, it would be like dragging a boat from the water to the land." The emperor had been busy giving instructions to his general about launching a campaign in the northeast. He had intended to give Xuanzang a few minutes' audience, but the conversation was of such interest that the emperor's brother-in-law had to remind him that Xuanzang was staying in the official hostel and would be locked out if he didn't leave soon.

According to Huili, the emperor protested. "I have not yet said all I wish to say in our hasty conversation. I wish you to go with me to the East on my political inspection, so that I may talk with you beside my work of commanding the troops. What do you think of it?"[15]

Xuanzang tried to decline, excusing himself on grounds of fatigue. The emperor reminded him that he had been able to travel all alone in foreign countries and that this was but "a short distance for him."

Xuanzang protested that he would add nothing to the campaign, and furthermore the monastic rules stated that a monk was forbidden to watch a military campaign. "Since this is the teaching of the Buddha, I must report it to Your Majesty. It will be good fortune for me if your Majesty will have compassion on me." The emperor took him at his word and dropped the subject.[16]

Writing the Record of the Western Regions

Xuanzang lost no time in beginning his book, *Record of the Western Regions*. He had brought back with him a mass of papers consisting partly of accounts of his own experiences and impersonal records of various kingdoms in India and elsewhere. Xuanzang noted that each province had its own official for preserving a record of events in writing. "Official annals and state papers, good and bad are recorded and instances of public calamity and good fortune are set forth in detail."[17] These materials from "the above seventy kingdoms" in India must have been useful to him as he collected information for his book.[18]

It is doubtful that anyone had drawn on them in such a comprehensive way or used so many sources. No one before had made

fresh observations after traveling the length and breadth of India: Xuanzang would become a major source for historians studying the India of the seventh century before the coming of Islam.

The writing of history has been one of China's great strengths. Chinese annals exist dating from the first century C.E. Indeed, the greatest literary achievement of the Han dynasty (210 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.) was historical writing.[19] The Chinese have traditionally viewed human affairs in a temporal framework and have excelled at compiling detailed, fact-laden, objective histories. (In contrast to the Chinese concept of time, which is linear, the Indian concept of time is often described as cyclical.[20]) Xuanzang exhibited the Chinese pattern of historical awareness and scholarship even in his travel chronicle.

Although he was heir to this tradition, Xuanzang carried with him certain predilections reflecting his background. With his keen interest in government and administration, his early reading in Confucian classics, and his fervor toward Buddhism, he showed a bias in those areas.[21] However, Xuanzang was not blindly partial to Buddhist rulers or oblivious to the qualities of non-Buddhist kings.[22] It must have been just this impartiality that impressed the Emperor Taizong and caused the emperor to support his next task—the giant translation project that engaged Xuanzang for the next nineteen years of his life.[23]

ELEVEN

THE LAST YEARS

The fulfillment of a dream. The Emperor Taizong sanctioned Xuanzang's translation work; later it was supported by other members of the imperial family. Twelve monks of great learning from all over China were appointed to assist him along with nine grammarians. Among them was Huili, his biographer. Not counting stenographers and copyists, over twenty-three monks were assigned to the translation team. Xuanzang was able to embark on what was to be almost twenty years of labor totaling seventy-four different works translated into 1,335 chuan (chapters) of Chinese.[1]

The true complexity of translating texts from Sanskrit into Chinese is hard to imagine. No languages could be more different than those of India and China.[2] Consider that

> when Xuanzang made his one hundred-fascicle translation of the Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice (Yogacharabhumi-shastra), (1) he himself translated from Sanskrit to Chinese, (2) a recorder transcribed the oral Chinese translation, (3) a Sanskrit reader verified the correctness of the Sanskrit characters, (4) an ideogram corrector confirmed the accuracy of the written Chinese, (5) a meaning verifier carefully studied and discussed the meaning of individual translated sentences in addition, (6) a sentence arranger put them in correct order, (7) a revision supervisor oversaw the whole project. Because of this system, Xuanzang's translations were exceedingly accurate.[3]

Such elaboration was the result of many years of the growth of Buddhism in China. In the first stage, roughly from the second to the fourth century, all the monks and other translators were foreign missionaries. In order to make Buddhism attractive to Chinese, missionaries and translators often took liberties; Indian terms like *dharma* (the Buddha's teaching), *bodhi* (enlightenment), and *yoga* were all translated as "the way," a word that both Daoists and Confucianists had endowed with their own special meanings. Indian abstractions tended to be expressed in terms of concrete images: "perfection" became for the Chinese simply "round." In the second stage, foreign and Chinese monks worked together to achieve very good results. Kumarjiva (344–417) and Paramartha (449–569) were Indians, but they both had lived in China for many years and knew Chinese. (Kumarajiva was the son of an Indian of high birth who had settled in Kucha and later was called to Chang'an because of his great literary gifts.) Sometimes their translations were more liberal and appealing than those of Xuanzang. During the third stage Chinese Buddhist scholars such as Xuanzang and I Ching acted as translators.[4]

How did Xuanzang choose what to translate? At one point the Emperor Gaozong, who followed Taizong, suggested that he translate texts that had not been translated before. Although this seemed logical on the surface, Xuanzang explained that it was not quite so simple. Indeed, some of the previous translations were either very bad or incomplete. So he received royal permission to work on translations that he considered to be inferior.

In the first year Xuanzang's extraordinary team of translators produced a number of worthy translations. During the following year, 646, he continued with his translating and also sent the completed *Record of the Western Regions* to the emperor. Yet there were always unavoidable interruptions. When a Chinese mission returned from India, the emperor asked Xuanzang to translate their diplomatic messages into Sanskrit. Earlier, another Chinese envoy came back from India with a request from the king of Assam, with whom Xuanzang had stayed for two months, asking for a translation of the classic Daoist work *The Way and Its Power (Daode jing; Tao Te Ching)* into Sanskrit, so the emperor commissioned Xuanzang along with leading Daoists to make a translation.

Xuanzang also began translating *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*. Since one of the main purposes of his going to India was to acquire, study, and then introduce this work to China, he devoted about two years to perfecting his translation. About this time, in 648, Taizong returned from an expedition to Korea. He was in increasingly poor health and so retired to his summer residence, the Yuhua Gong (Jade Flower Palace), sixty miles north of Chang'an, and asked Xuanzang to join him. The emperor pressed Xuanzang a second time to consider a position in government. Xuanzang declined once again. Then the emperor inquired as to what books he had been reading. Xuanzang replied that he had just finished the 100-chapter *Yoga Treatise*. "What wise man wrote it and what is it all about?" the emperor wanted to know.

Xuanzang explained that the treatise described the seventeen states of Buddhahood. He then enumerated the stages, from a phase of being dominated by the Five Senses to the one entirely independent of Causation. Later the emperor said to one of his courtiers:

> Looking at these Buddhist works is like gazing at the sky or sea. They are so lofty that one cannot measure the height, so profound, one cannot measure the depths. The Master was able to get these deep teachings explained to him when he was abroad; but I have been so much taken up with soldiering that I have not been able to devote any attention to the study of Buddhism. I see now that there is no limit to the scope it covers. Confucianism, Taoism and our other schools when compared to it are like mere puddles measured against a mighty ocean. It is sheer nonsense when people say that the Three Doctrines come to much the same thing.

And he gave orders that *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* should be distributed to the principal towns of China.[5]

The emperor finally got around to writing a preface in his own hand to some scriptures Xuanzang had translated earlier. He bestowed on Xuanzang a magnificent golden cassock, which had been made by the ladies of the palace; it was worth 100 pieces of gold and was so finely sewn, no stitches were visible. The pilgrim

had been in the habit of giving away whatever gifts he received, but this one present he did keep, and after he died, he was buried in it.

Licensing of 18,500 Buddhist Monks

In an important edict of the ninth month 648 in which he ordered the enrollment of 18,500 monks and nuns, the emperor stated:

> When the former Sui dynasty lost its power of governance, the empire was shattered to pieces. The people within the Four Seas suffered great misery with all the eight quarters in turmoil and confusion seething like a cauldron. It befitted us to suppress the turbulence, and we had to go in person with our troops. We were frequently attacked by wind and frost and spent the night on horseback. In spite of taking medicine, we were not promptly cured of illness. Only recently have we recovered health. Is it not a symbol of good fortune effected by good and beneficial deeds? Each of the monasteries in the capital and the various states of the empire should ordain five monks, with the exception of Hongfu Monastery which should ordain fifty.[6]

Buddhist sources give full credit to Xuanzang for this increased licensing of monks, and confirm that indeed the emperor said to Xuanzang, "We intend to perform meritorious deeds, but which is the most beneficial?" Xuanzang said in reply, "As the propagation of the Dharma depends upon men, the most beneficial deed is the ordination of monks."[7]

At the end of 648, the Crown Prince announced that the Monastery of Great Maternal Love (Dacun) was complete and ready to be occupied by Xuanzang and his assistants. Built in the southwest corner of Chang'an, this was one of the great monasteries of Chang'an in Tang times. All the relics, images, and sacred texts were transported from the Hongfu Monastery in a grand ceremonial parade. All the inhabitants of Chang'an were present for this occasion, which was celebrated with nine palace orchestras playing tunes from India, Central Asia, and Korea. Would Xuanzang take on the position of the new abbot? Xuanzang declined this honor, saying that he wished to devote all his time to translating.

Death of the Emperor Taizong

The next summer, in 649, Xuanzang accompanied the emperor to his retreat south of Chang'an to escape the heat. Freed at last from military battlefield responsibilities, and with ill health to remind him of his mortality, he spent many hours talking with Xuanzang about Buddhism. The emperor had also installed an Indian longevity doctor in a special apartment in the palace, whose task was to produce an elixir to restore his heath.[8] The emperor took some of his pills and began to think about his own karma. What good deeds had he done in his life? Xuanzang answered his many questions about the retribution of good and bad deeds and the surviving memorials of long-ago saints in India and Central Asia. The emperor was moved by Xuanzang's words. Again and again he rolled back his sleeves and said with a sigh, "It is a pity I met you so late and I could not propagate Buddhism to a greater extent."[9]

The emperor, we are told, was a little out-of-sorts when he left Chang'an. On the 25th day of the fifth month, he complained of a slight headache and made Xuanzang sleep in his apartments. Neither karmic good deeds nor the Indian longevity doctor was able to prolong his life. The next day, the Emperor Taizong died at the age of 49. He had presided over one of the most successful reigns in Chinese history.[10]

The day before the emperor's death, Xuanzang made a fresh translation of the *Heart Sutra.* In English it runs to only about four hundred words. It is supposed to contain the essence of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* and is recited by monks and nuns in almost all Buddhist schools in Asia.

Xuanzang returned to the Monastery of Great Maternal Love determined to devote every moment to the work of translation.

> He made a timetable for himself; and if he did not complete his work because of the interference of some business or other in the

daytime, he would finish it at night. He put down his pen only after the second watch [9 P.M.]. When he had laid aside the scriptures, he would worship the Buddha's image as a means of practicing the Way until the third watch [10 P.M.] and then go to sleep for some time. In the fifth watch [2 A.M.] he would get up to read the Sanskrit texts and mark out with red ink the paragraphs he would translate the following day.[11]

Even though he was not the abbot, he gave two lectures a day, and was busy consulting with over a hundred students and foreign visitors and supervising eunuchs from the palace who came with orders for scriptures and images.

The Emperor Gaozong and the Big Wild Goose Pagoda

The Emperor Taizong was succeeded by his ninth son, known as the Emperor Gaozong. The new emperor, like his father, held Xuanzang in high esteem, providing support for his translation work until Xuanzang's death. He sponsored two important monasteries in Ch'ang-an. Unlike his father, he showed no personal interest in Buddhist doctrine.[12] Xuanzang boldly suggested that the Emperor Gaozong build a pagoda on the site of the Monastery of Great Maternal Love to house the Buddhist scriptures and images that he had brought back from India.

He pointed out that in a stone building, they would be less exposed to the risk of loss by fire; Chinese structures were usually made of wood. Xuanzang had been thinking of a tall, multi-storied stone building like the ones he had seen in India. Xuanzang desired the pagoda to "show the magnificence of a great country and to be a monument for the Sakyamuni Buddha." However, before construction was begun, an imperial secretary to the emperor was asked to inform the Master: "As the pagoda you intend to construct is so tall, it will perhaps be difficult to build with stone. It should be constructed of brick." The final structure was much smaller than what Xuanzang had in mind. It was built Indian style, with five stories, and reached 175 feet. On the south side were monuments inscribed

with passages from the Preface to Xuanzang's translations, composed by the Emperor Taizong and the Emperor Gaozong. Xuanzang himself helped to carry bricks for the construction of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, as it came to be called. The project took two years to complete. The much-restored Big Wild Goose Pagoda still stands as a major tourist site in what was the Tang city of Chang'an, present-day Xi'an (Fig. 11.1).

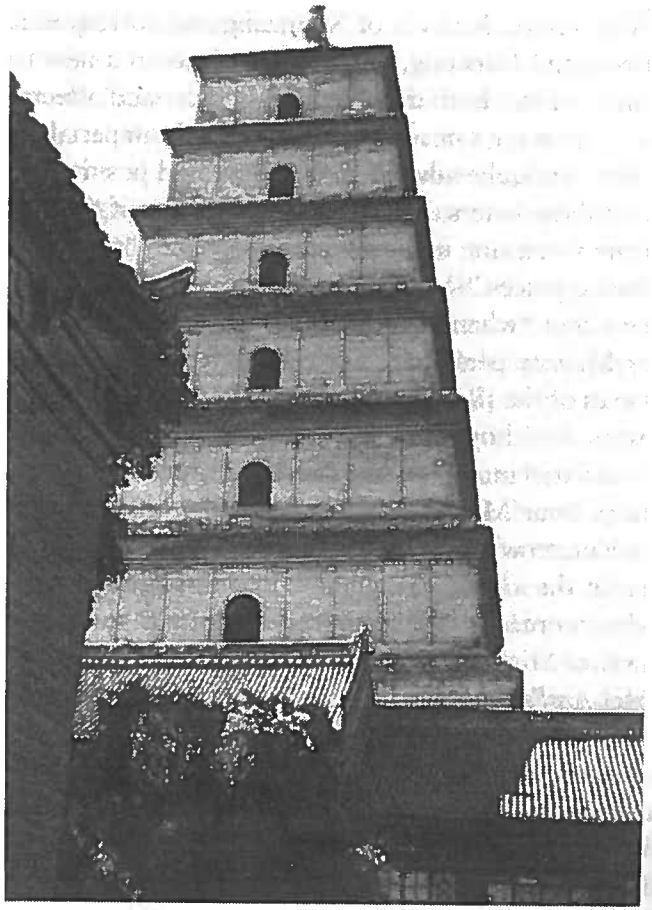


FIGURE 11.1
The Big Wild Goose Pagoda, which was erected in the seventh century to house the scriptures Xuanzang had brought back with him and which has been restored many times.