C: C followed by a vowel is pronounced "ts" as in *its;* thus Cao Cao becomes "Tsao Tsao."
OU: OU is pronounced like the "oe" in hoe. Zhou, as in Zhou dynasty, becomes "joe."
Z: Z is pronounced like the "j" in *déjà vu* or Jacques.
Q: Q is pronounced "ch" as in *chin*. Thus Qin and Qing (dynasties) become "chin" and "ching."
X: X is spoken like a lisped "s"—also described as an aspirated "s" or "hs." Xi'an becomes "Hsi-ahn"; Xuanzang becomes "Hsu-wan Tsahng."

Local Names

In the case of places, I have usually taken the best-known name: Kashgar instead of Kashi; Khotan instead of Hotan, Hetan, He-tien, Yutian, or Kustana. Some of the alternative names are included in the Glossary.

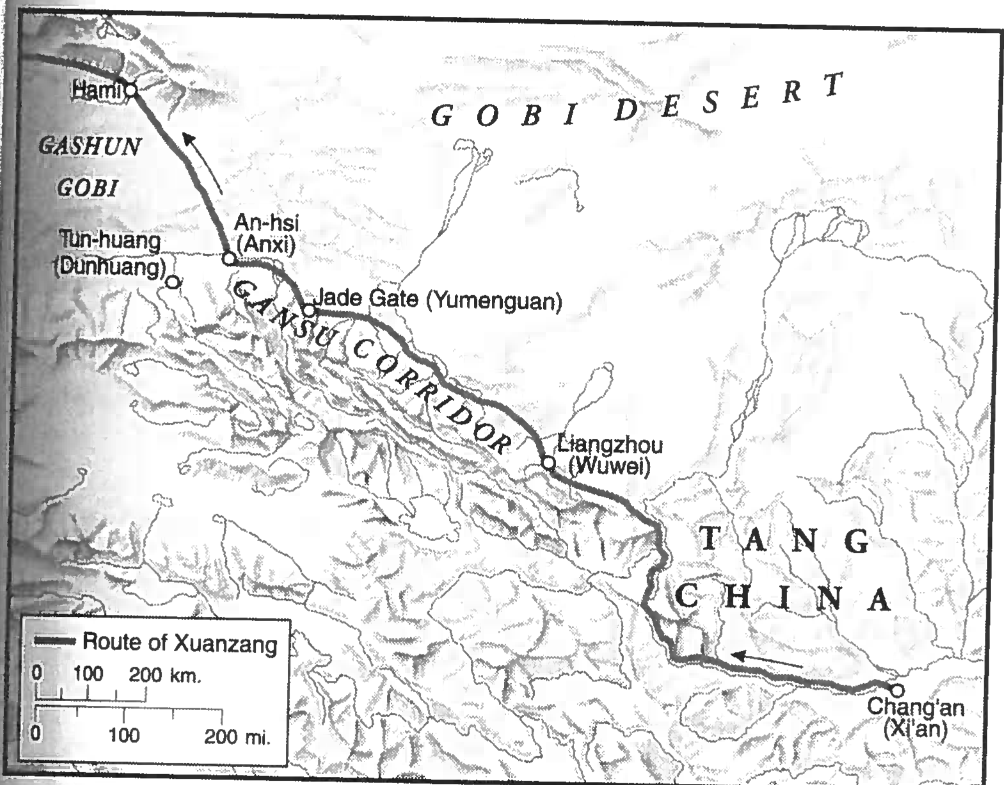
Indian/Sanskrit

In keeping with modern practice, I have eliminated diacritical marks in Indian and Sanskrit words. Names of important Buddhist texts appear in English in the book; Sanskrit equivalents appear in the Glossary. When pronouncing words, one must sound each letter. Vowels are pronounced as in Italian; consonants as in English. The sound of every letter is invariable:

C: C is pronounced "ch" as in *church*.
H: When h appears after p, t, d, g, b, or k, it begins a new syllable. For example, ph as in *uphill*, not as in *philosophy*.
V: V is pronounced like w.
A: A is pronounced like the second a in *America*.
E: E is pronounced like the French é, as in *été*.
I: I is pronounced "ee" like the i in *liter*.

ONE

THE PILGRIM AND THE EMPEROR



MAP 1.1
Itinerary of Xuanzang on the Silk Road in China (from Chang'an to Hami).

In 629 C.E., a young monk named Xuanzang left China, departing in secret by night. He made his way safely past five watchtowers in the desert and the Jade Gate, the last outpost of the Tang empire. This solitary pilgrim was not out of danger, however, for he was traveling against the wishes of the Emperor Taizong (T'ai-Tsung) (c.600–649, r. 626–649) (Fig. 1.1).

This young ruler of the Tang dynasty had little sympathy for Buddhism at the time and did not want Xuanzang or any other of his subjects to venture into the dangerous western regions. His power was far from secure, and his diplomacy was still grappling with the hostility and even treachery of several of the peoples of Central Asia. Disobeying the emperor would carry a heavy price, but Xuanzang was determined to go on a pilgrimage to the holy land of Buddhism in India.[1]

In April 645, after his 10,000-mile quest for truth to India, the pilgrim returned and approached the Tang capital, Chang'an, modern Xi'an. Hearing of his arrival, people gathered to see him in crowds so dense that he was obliged to spend his first night on the outskirts of the city by a canal. When he finally was able to enter the city, the magistrates, fearing that a large number of people would be crushed in the crowd, ordered everyone to be still and burn incense.

FIGURE 1.1
Portrait of the Emperor Taizong (ruled 626–649 C.E.), who at first forbade the young monk Xuanzang to go to India and after the trip asked him to write an account of his journey, which is one of the principal sources for this book. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The emperor was away at the time, but an audience was arranged. A huge procession of monks carried the relics, images, and books that the monk had brought back with him from India. The return of a hero.

In the sixteen years between Xuanzang's departure and his triumphant reentry in 645, both the pilgrim and the emperor had succeeded in the eyes of the world. The twenty-seven-year-old fugitive had become China's best-known Buddhist and one of the world's most remarkable travelers.[2] The thirty-year-old ruler, who was of Turkish/Chinese descent and therefore an expert horseman, had become one of China's greatest emperors, presiding over the expanding empire (Fig. 1.2).

Xuanzang accomplished his religious mission and returned safely with a large collection of Buddhist scriptures. He had seen "traces not seen before, heard sacred words not heard before, witnessed spiritual prodigies exceeding those of nature." He had consulted with the rulers of the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads, the Great Khan of the Western Turks as well as King Harsha, uniter of northern India, and many potentates in between. He would remember a close friendship with the head of India's most illustrious monastery all his life. He had crossed the most dangerous rivers and three of the highest mountain ranges in Asia (Fig. 1.3).

FIGURE 1.2
Relief from the tomb of the Emperor Taizong, showing a general removing an arrow from a wounded horse. University of Pennsylvania Museum.

FIGURE I.3
Copy of a traditional fourteenth-century portrait of Xuanzang with a modern-looking frame pack filled with the Buddhist scriptures he brought with him from India. Portrait from a rubbing taken from a stele at Xuanzang's burial place, at the Temple of Flourishing Teaching outside Xi'an.

While Xuanzang was away, Emperor Taizong not only consolidated his power in China but also conquered Central Asia. After having crushed the Eastern Turks in Mongolia in 630, Taizong turned his attention to the conquest of the Western Turks. This western Khanate simultaneously was struggling under the destabilizing influence of internal revolt. The Khan of the Western Turks was assassinated by a rebel tribe, not long after Xuanzang's visit to the region. Within six months the mighty empire had collapsed. The Tang emperor then began to reestablish protectorates over the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads, where the pilgrim had also been. As a result of these conquests, China exercised direct control as far west as the Pamirs. On occasion, the emperor extended his

power through diplomacy, such as when he arranged a marriage alliance with a Tibetan royal family. He had already sent two Chinese envoys to King Harsha in India in 643 after Xuanzang's visit. Religious missions such as Xuanzang's would extend the reach of China even beyond the Pamirs.

What a difference there was in the backgrounds and temperaments of these two men! Brought up with Confucian values, Xuanzang was a bookish boy who read Confucian classics and became a scholarly Buddhist intellectual. But he broadened his intellectual skills and, far from staying in a monastic cell, overcame robbers and pirates and became a mountaineer and survivor in the desert. The emperor, whose early education was horsemanship and archery, was a rough soldier and heroic warrior who had come to the throne after assassinating his elder brother. Yet the emperor in the early years of his reign came to be regarded as a moderate, frugal, and wise Confucian ruler who sought the advice of his ministers and was concerned for the welfare of his people.[3] It was Xuanzang's secular knowledge of foreign affairs gained from years of travel abroad that most interested the Tang ruler, although, in a final ironic twist, toward the end of his life, the ailing emperor changed his views on Buddhism, sought out Xuanzang for solace, and accepted him whole-heartedly as his spiritual mentor.[4]

At the first meeting of the emperor and the pilgrim in 645, both men were at the height of their careers. The experiences of the Chinese pilgrim and the political interest of the emperor coincided in a remarkable way. With the expansion of his new empire, Taizong needed first-hand information about the successes and failures of his imperial policies. Xuanzang was the ideal informant. The emperor questioned the forty-three-year-old monk in detail about the rulers, climate, products, and customs of the countries he had been through. Impressed by Xuanzang's knowledge of foreign lands, Taizong asked him to be a minister to advise him on the new Asian relationships and problems of his kingdom. Xuanzang declined. Then the emperor requested that he set down a detailed account, country by country, of the western kingdoms that he had visited. What interested Xuanzang the most, such as information on the monks, their schools of philosophy, and especially the holy places and stories of the Buddha, were matters of indifference to his patron.

No matter. Writing an account of the Western regions was a new kind of request for Xuanzang, who was used to those who sought his advice on religion or philosophy. A man of many parts, adventurer, intellectual, theologian, priest, and ambassador, he had given spiritual advice and inspiration to many political leaders and potentates in Central Asia. A "prince among pilgrims," this Buddhist monk moved easily in both religious and secular worlds. His powerful personality had impressed both the Emperor Taizong and the great Indian King Harsha. A man of unusual flexibility, open to the new and strange wherever he found it, this Chinese Marco Polo was an ideal observer of foreign cultures.

Studying in Monasteries

Who was this Chinese pilgrim and how did he happen to go on his long journey? According to his biographer, Xuanzang was born near Luoyang in the province of Henan in 602 (?).[5] He was the youngest of four sons, an heir to a long line of literati and mandarins. His grandfather had been an official in the Qi (Ch'i) dynasty (479–501) and held the post of eminent national scholar. His father had been well-versed in Confucianism and was also distinguished for his superior abilities and elegance of manner. However, this Confucian gentleman preferred to busy himself in the study of his books and pleaded ill-health rather than accept offers of government service at the time of the decaying Sui dynasty (581–617).

Xuanzang was brought up in a Confucian household. At the age of eight he amazed his father by his filial piety, a strong virtue in Confucianism. He even began to study the Confucian classic books about this time. But the intellectual vitality of Confucianism was waning, and Xuanzang's older brother became a Buddhist monk.[6] He took an interest in his younger brother and saw to it that he began to study Buddhist scriptures at his monastery in Luoyang at a young age.

Xuanzang was the kind of serious boy who was old before he was young. When he was only twelve years old, an unexpected royal mandate announced that fourteen monks were to be trained and supported by the state at his brother's monastery in Luoyang, the eastern

capital of the Sui dynasty. Several hundred candidates applied at the Pure Land Monastery for this important ordination. The young adolescent Xuanzang loitered at the monastery gate until the imperial envoy, who was about to supervise the ceremony, engaged him in conversation. "What is your name? Your age?" And when Xuanzang revealed how very much he wanted to be a monk, the official asked him why. "My only thought in taking this step," he replied, "is to spread abroad the light of the Religion of Tathagata [Buddha]."[7]

Such an unexpected and rather formal reply impressed the official, who recognized from his remarkable combination of eagerness, confidence, and modesty, the quality of this unusual boy and selected him as one of the novices to be ordained in spite of his youth. For, as he explained to his fellow officials, "To repeat one's instructions is easy, but true self-possession and nerve are not so common."[8]

For the next five years Xuanzang lived with his brother at the Pure Land Monastery. He plunged into the study of Buddhist scriptures, both the austere doctrine of early Buddhism and the mystical doctrine of the Greater Vehicle or Mahayana. Xuanzang was irresistibly drawn to this later Buddhism, whose two key words were "Emptiness," signifying the object of wisdom, and "Bodhisattva," or Enlightened Beings who postponed their own salvation for the sake of others (Fig. 1.4).[9]

His philosophical studies were interrupted in 618, when the Sui dynasty collapsed. Because of the anarchy that followed its downfall, and the civil war between the Tangs and their rivals, many parts of the empire fell into chaos.[10] Xuanzang and his brother fled first to Chang'an in the northwest, which the Tang rulers had proclaimed their capital. They found the city swarming with soldiers, and so the two brothers, along with a large community of monks who were gathering from various parts of the empire, made their way to Chengdu in Sichuan. Xuanzang and his brother spent two or three years there studying the different schools of Buddhism.

Xuanzang's biographer compares the two young men: "His elder brother . . . was elegant in his manners and sturdy physically just like his father. . . . His eloquence and comprehensiveness in discussion and capacity to edify people were equal to those of his younger brother." He continued, "But in the manner of loftiness of mind, without being affected by worldly attachments; in profound re-

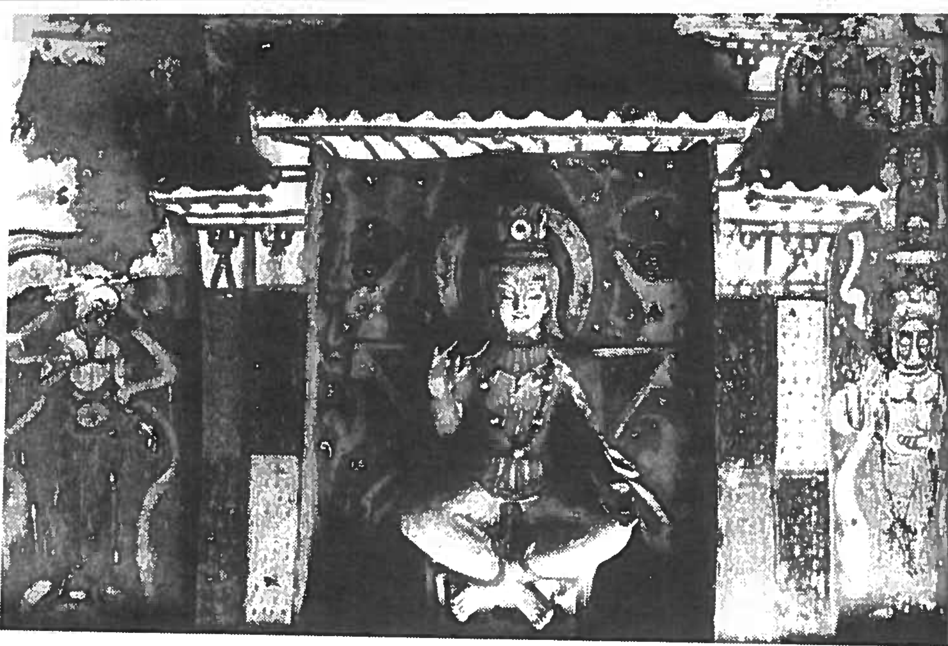


FIGURE 1.4
Wall painting and sculpture in one of the earliest Dunhuang caves in China. Central figure is a Bodhisattva or Maitreya (these are beings who postpone their own salvation so that they may help others). The Lo Archive, Princeton University.

searches in metaphysical aspects of the cosmos; in ambition to clarify the universe . . . and in the sense of self-respect even in the presence of the Emperor," Xuanzang surpassed him.[11]

In 622, when he was twenty, Xuanzang was fully ordained as a monk. Shortly afterwards he left his brother behind in Chengdu and returned to the capital.

Preparing Himself in Chang'an

Chang'an had much to offer Xuanzang. It was the greatest city in China—perhaps in the entire medieval world. Tang historical sources are so detailed that we know, for example, that it occupied an area of more than some 30 square miles.[12] Rome at its height occupied 5.2 square miles. A city of a million people in the seventh

century, Chang'an became the center of the great culture of the Tang dynasties. In 742, its population had swelled to two million inhabitants, of whom 5,000 were foreigners.[13]

With its rich cultural life, prosperity, and variety of nationalities that came to live there, Chang'an was a radiating center of Asian civilization. New stimuli from Northern India and the kingdoms of Central Asia enriched Chinese Buddhism and made it the most lively and influential system of thought in its day. From Iran and central Asia came other new religions such as Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeanism, and Nestorian Christianity. Together with these intellectual and spiritual influences came many new developments in the arts, ranging from music and dance to metalworking and fine cuisine, as well as important technical and scientific influences in mathematics and linguistics. A galaxy of poets and artists were also part of this glittering capital. The latest in Buddhist doctrine, the arts, and fashion could be found in Chang'an.

A time of preparation. Xuanzang continued his Buddhist studies in Chang'an and sought out foreigners who could teach the languages spoken beyond China's borders. He probably went to the Western Market, the area of the city connected with the Silk Road, to learn some Tokharian, which was spoken in many places in Central Asia such as Turfan. His gift in languages would serve him well in the future. He also began to study Sanskrit in 626 so that he would be able to communicate with foreign monks whose native language was unfamiliar to him. Like Latin in the Christian monasteries of medieval Europe, Sanskrit was the language of Buddhist scriptures and monasteries in all of northern Asia.

Indian scriptures had been translated into Chinese since the first centuries of the common era. Missionaries from India and Kashgaria (modern Xinjiang), Parthians from Iran, and Sogdians (from the area of Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union) had founded monasteries in Luoyang and Chang'an where individual monks and teams of monks were busily translating the vast Buddhist literature coming out of India. There were also many Chinese monks who had gone west. At least fifty-four clerics before Xuanzang, the first one in 260, had traveled westward, though not all of them reached the land of their faith. Among those who did, the pious Faxian (Fa-hsien) and Zhiyan (Chih-yen) stirred his imagination.[14]

By this time Xuanzang had spent fifteen years in Luoyang, Chengdu, and Chang'an, studying languages and mastering the teachings of the various schools of Buddhism. In so doing he formed serious doubts about some of the Chinese translations. They were conflicting, garbled, or simply inadequate. He came to feel also that each abbot uncritically followed the teachings of his particular school. Like the Indian fable of the blind men, each touching a different part of the elephant and taking it for the whole, these men were blind to the strange discordances and contradictions among them.[15] Some of their theories either vaguely or manifestly contradicted the holy scriptures. Which precepts were authentic? Was it true that all people or only some could attain Buddhahood? Xuanzang was bewildered and unable to decide which theories should be accepted. Thus he made up his mind to go to India to clear up his doubts and to bring back the complete Sanskrit text of what came to be called *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* by Asanga.

Xuanzang was drawn to the sophisticated writings of Asanga and his brother Vasubandhu, who were the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, only part of whose huge compendium of philosophy had reached China.[16] This school of thought professed a metaphysical Idealism in which the outside world does not exist but is a projection of one's own consciousness.

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view "the world of birth
and death," or Samsara.[17]

This verse from the *Diamond Sutra* tells us that the material world is an illusion. It is similar to Bishop Berkeley's Idealism that "all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth,—in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world—have not any subsistence without a mind."[18] The Yogacarins, however, based this concept not merely on a number of logical arguments that proved the impossibility of an external object but also on the living experience of insight meditation.

It seems more a philosophy for the theoretically oriented than one who is willing to meet with storms in the Taklamakan Desert, avalanches in the Tian Shan Mountains, or murderous pirates on the Ganges River. Although Xuanzang was attracted to this school, he enjoyed and was skillful in the art of dialectics. Part of him liked mastering the subtleties of numerous doctrines, a capability that would serve him well as he talked with the eminent doctors of philosophy in India and Central Asia.

With a firm sense of truths only dimly perceived, he knew that he must seek the source.[19] Having decided to go, Xuanzang, along with several other monks, sent up to the Emperor Taizong a petition to be allowed to leave China. Xuanzang's petition was not answered, but an imperial decree made it clear that laymen and possibly monks, unless they had official business, had better stay home. For such a passionate young man as Xuanzang, this was hardly a deterrent.

629 C.E. *The month is uncertain. Dangers and untold difficulties lie ahead of him. He retires into the seclusion of a sacred tower in Chang'an in order to pray for guidance. He has a dream. In it he sees Mount Sumeru, a sacred mountain at the center of the universe, made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal surrounded by a Great Sea. Lotus flowers of stone support him as he crosses the waters, but so slippery and steep is the way up this Asian Mount Olympus that each time he tries to climb its sides, he slides to the bottom. Of a sudden, a mighty whirlwind raises him to the summit; the world stretches out as far as the eye can see. The pilgrim beholds an unending horizon, a symbol of the countless lands he hopes to visit. In an ecstasy of joy he awakes; he has been shown a vision of what he must do. He now knows that it is meant for him to go. He will be severely tested but he is ready to depart.*[20]

Beginning His Journey

Xuanzang was twenty-seven years old. A little under six feet tall, he was an exceptionally handsome young man, with broad eyebrows, bright eyes, a clear complexion, and a noble forehead. He liked to

wear ample garments and a broad belt, which gave him the appearance of a scholar. He spoke elegantly and had a clear, sonorous voice. He carried himself gracefully and looked straight ahead as good Buddhist monks do, without a glance to either side.[21]

It happened that owing to untimely frosts, the harvests had failed, and a decree was issued ordering both monks and laymen to disperse to parts of China that were less affected. Xuanzang took advantage of the decree. He traveled with several companions from Chang'an to the high valleys and gorges of Gansu, one of the westernmost Chinese provinces. The long Gansu corridor cuts between the Land of Grasses (Mongolia) and the wild plateau of Qinghai until it reaches the sands of the Taklamakan Desert. Liangzhou, or modern Wuwei, was the last town of importance in Gansu province, as well as the start of the caravan routes leading over the desert both to Mongolia and to the Tarim basin in the Taklamakan Desert.

The pilgrim stayed in Liangzhou a month preparing himself for his journey. While there, he preached to monks as well as to traders and merchants at a large religious gathering. The governor, who had heard that the monk was about to go to the West, called him to his presence and urged him to obey the emperor's edict and return to the Tang capital. After this interview, Xuanzang knew he had to be careful. So, sheltered and guided by two young disciples of Liangzhou's most revered monk, he hid by day and traveled by night. His companions guided him to Guachou, not far from the oasis at Anxi, the last halting place with local supplies before the wide desert. At this frontier outpost he halted for another month, "so sad and silent," his biographer observed. His new friends had left him, his horse had died, and spies from Liangzhou had informed the district governor of his intentions. Happily the official was a man of piety who tore up the edict in Xuanzang's presence, but he urged him to depart in all haste.

Xuanzang bought a new horse. He was praying in a Buddhist hall when a Central Asian named Bandha made himself known and asked if he might take the five vows to become a dedicated layman. Xuanzang told him of his need for help in starting for the West. Bandha readily offered to conduct him past the Jade Gate and the five watchtowers in the desert.

The next day Xuanzang waited and waited for his guide. At last Bandha appeared, followed by another very aged fellow riding a skinny roan horse. The "grandfather" appeared to be there for the purpose of giving advice on dealing with the demons and perils of the desert crossing, for he claimed to have made the crossing more than thirty times. Xuanzang suddenly recalled that a fortune-teller in Chang'an had said, "I see you leaving China on a skinny roan horse. You are riding on a lacquered saddle with an iron stud in front of the saddle hump."[22] As the old man's horse and saddle fit the prediction exactly, Xuanzang agreed to exchange horses. So the old man made a very good bargain in selling his decrepit horse, and the zealous monk set forth.

The hour is early, possibly before dawn. The pilgrim, his guide and their horses make their way as far as the Hu Lu River. Both men are weary after their first day's journey and finally spread out their mats within sight of the Jade Gate, the furthermost outpost of the empire. Xuanzang's body slowly relaxes and sleep steals over him as it does to all tired travelers. But suddenly he awakens. He can see his pious companion stealing toward him with a drawn sword! When he is less than ten feet away, he appears to hesitate; then he retraces his steps. Xuanzang begins to recite scriptures and prays to the Compassionate Bodhisattva Guanyin (Kuan Yin) to protect him from assassins. Bandha goes back to his sleeping place and the monk sleeps lightly until dawn. Not long afterward Bandha departs.[23]

Being Lost in the Desert

Xuanzang was now alone. He set out with his pathetic-looking horse into a broad depression of sand and gravel with many steep and stony gullies to be crossed. Often he saw the bones of men and beasts, each telling a story of thirst, exhaustion, and collapse. The sun shone down cruelly. Rising waves of heat reflected from the shimmering earth as he slowly made his way. Then a chain of black hills rose up ahead of him, for the desert can change from tan and grey dunes to small mountains looking as if they were made of

coal. Near one of these mountains he thought he saw on the horizon hundreds of armed barbarians clad in felt and fur. His devoted biographer describes the desert scene: "And now the appearance of camels and horses, and the glittering of standards and lances met his view; then suddenly fresh forms and figures changing into a thousand shapes appeared, sometimes at an immense distance and then close at hand, and then they dissolved into nothing."[24]

Were these shifting forms of men and horses in the midst of the shimmering heat of the desert bands of robbers? They could well have been armies of Turkish nomads from beyond the Tian Shan Mountains to the north in Turkestan. They might have been mirages. Or were they, rather, the demon shapes and strange goblins of other worlds, the configurations of Mara, the wicked, that so many travelers had warned him against?

Ahead of the pilgrim was the first of five signal towers in the desert. "Fearing lest the lookouts should see him, he concealed himself in a hollow of sand until night; then going on west of the tower, he saw water; and going down, he drank and washed his hands. Then as he was filling his water-vessel with water an arrow whistled past him and just grazed his knee, and in a moment another arrow. Knowing then that he was discovered, he cried with a loud voice: 'I am a priest come from the capital, do not shoot me.'"[25]

He was brought before the captain, who was a Buddhist, and who urged him not to cross the nearly 300 miles of desert to the Hami oasis, but to spend time with the eminent teachers at Dunhuang, the famous Buddhist center at the convergence of what we now call the Northern and Southern Silk Roads (Fig. 1.5).

Xuanzang complained that he was shocked that instead of urging him to go forward, the captain was exhorting him to turn back and give up. The Dunhuang Caves (in modern Xinjiang Province) housed both a large gallery of paintings and sculpture and a substantial library of Buddhist scriptures and secular writings, but it wasn't India.

Xuanzang negotiated the remaining watchtowers safely by leaving the usual route to Hami, following a parallel track to the northwest, and plunging into the heart of the Gashun Gobi (Mo-ho-yen) or what the Chinese call the River of Sand. By that term they mean a desert where the ground is no longer the hard, gravelly, rock-

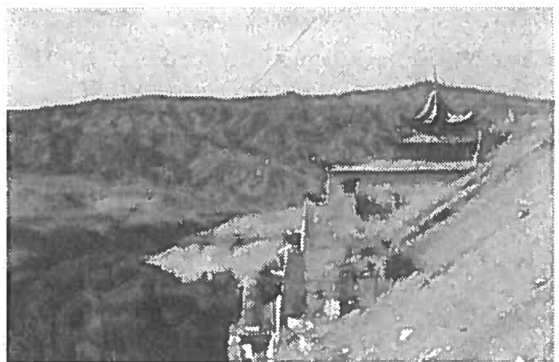


FIGURE 1.5
Exterior of the Dunhuang Caves, which were at the juncture of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads in China. Xuanzang stopped there on his return journey from India.

embedded earth, but where shifting dunes move like waves in the ocean. The Gashun Gobi was a place where there were no birds, no animals, no water, no pasturage. When he felt himself to be in danger, he would invoke the name of the Bodhisattva Guanyin with utmost devotion and also recite a special magic saying found in the *Heart Sutra* (Fig. 1.6). He had learned it many years before from a sick man whom he took to his monastery and supplied with food and clothes. Out of gratitude the man taught him this sutra.[26]

Gusts of hot desert sands obliterated the track and he was obliged to make long detours. After a while, he knew he was lost. He should have come to the Spring of Wild Horses and he hadn't found it. To add to his panic, in a terrible moment, his water bag fell out of his hands! In an instant his whole supply of water drained out into the sands and was gone. Because of one moment of inattention his pilgrimage would come to an end.

Time seems to stop. In despair he begins to retrace his steps back toward China and the fourth watchtower. But then he remembers his oath that he would rather die with his face toward the West than return and live in the East. Again he sets off. For four days and five nights the pilgrim and his horse struggle westward. Not a drop of water anywhere. His mouth, lips, and throat are parched by burning heat. The evening of the fifth day horse and rider fall down exhausted. Xuanzang collapses on the sand. He prays to the Compassionate One, Guanyin. Dew begins to fall on the pilgrim and his horse. A cool wind blows over them. He is

FIGURE 1.6
Scroll on which the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, in Xuanzang's translation, is written in the form of a stupa, or pagoda. From Dunhuang Caves, China. The British Library.

able to slide into a deep slumber. He dreams of a tall spirit holding a lance and standard who calls out to him, "Why do you sleep instead of going forward with zeal?"

Once more he sets forth with his skinny roan horse. He has gone nearly four miles when suddenly the horse starts off in a different direction. He lets himself be guided by the creature's instincts. Soon Xuanzang catches sight of a green oasis. In it is a shining pool as bright as a mirror. The pilgrim drinks long and

deep. He refills his waterbag with the water of life. He and his horse rest a day before going on. After two days' journey, Xuanzang reaches his destination, the oasis of Hami on the other side of the Taklamakan Desert.[27]

Who knows what role the skinny roan horse played? Horses and camels in the desert can not only scent water and grazing spots from considerable distances but seemingly remember such places from previous journeys. For his pious biographer, Huili, the famous desert crossing from Anxi to Hami was surely the sign of a miracle. The pilgrim was his hero. It was the first of many miracles that Huili describes, especially in the first part of his book. For a modern explorer and archaeologist such as Aurel Stein, it was necessary to retrace the pilgrim's route to find out whether his desert crossing was within the realm of feasibility. After all, Xuanzang's topographical records showed that he fully possessed that "instinct of the compass" that some people have. Stein concluded that the dangers and the quasi-miraculous escape that marked the beginning of Xuanzang's travels were neither exaggerated nor fictionalized.[28]

Both his memorable desert crossing, and his vision at the beginning of his 10,000 mile-journey in search of truth, embody the universal elements of a hero's quest.[29] The Buddhist monk was not simply traveling over thousands of miles of dangerous deserts and mountains as if he were a Chinese Marco Polo; he was on a pilgrimage of the soul. His was both an inward and outward journey, and therefore, it carried an aura of special value.

Since he was a brilliant monk with keen scholarly interests, he began his journey of the soul for intellectual and theological reasons—to seek the truest doctrine. His vision of Mount Sumeru was a spacious vision, a call from his innermost being that would sustain him in his many ordeals ahead. When he passed beyond the Jade Gate, the furthermost outpost of the Tang empire, he reached a point from which it was difficult to turn back. Going through such a gate is usually a decisive step, taking one from mere investigation to commitment. For the Chinese, especially, one side of the

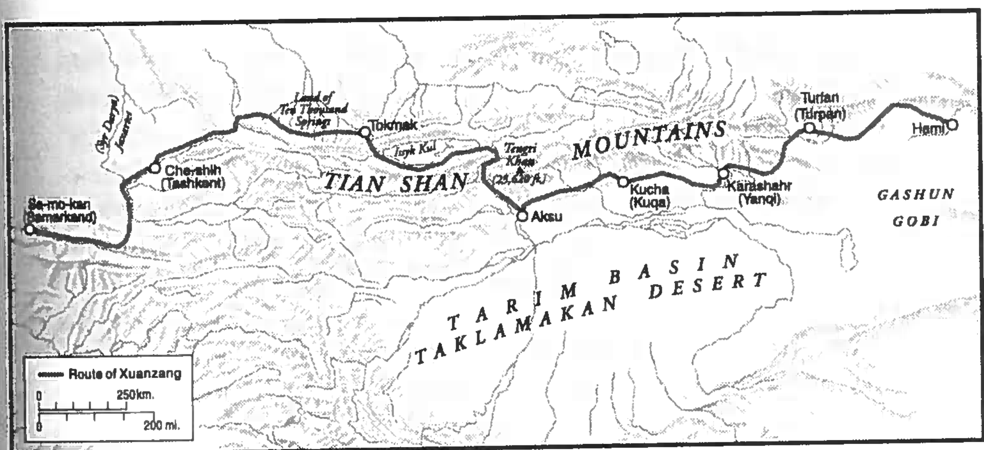
Jade Gate represented their civilized world with all that it stood for in culture, tradition, and a knowable world; the other side represented a place of desolation, the land of the unknown. Having passed this threshold as well as having nearly lost his life at the hand of his assassin-guide, he had faced his ordeals alone. He had circumvented five watchtowers in the desert and then survived a succession of trials, often in a dismal landscape of mirages and dust storms, only to lose his way. He experienced a "dark night of the soul," a time of crisis when he lost his water bag and collapsed in the desert. His guide was one of his Compassionate Ones of his Buddhist faith, the Bodhisattva Guanyin, and with the help of this guide, he emerged victorious.

Because of this heroic quality, which is so marked in the first part of his journey, Xuanzang has all the vividness of a character in an epic. "His kindred, in the world of our imagination," as Arthur Waley wrote, are "not the great travelers, not Marco Polo, or Vambery, nor the great theologians such as Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas, but rather Aeneas, King Arthur, Cuchulain. He is the hero of a sort of spiritual epic, as they of their knightly sagas."[30]

Thanks to Huili, his biographer, and probably many other monks, Xuanzang became a legend in China even before he died. Whether his desert crossing was a miracle or even a feasible exploit, it was a near disaster; his trip almost ended before it had begun. As so often happens in legend or in real life, however, it was quickly followed by an event that was to change his fortunes dramatically—his meeting with the strong-willed king of Turfan.

TWO

THE OASES OF THE NORTHERN SILK ROAD



MAP 2.1
Itinerary of Xuanzang on the northern Silk Road (from Hami to Samarkand).

Before Xuanzang met up with the strong-willed king of Turfan, he stopped at the oasis of Hami, the beginning of the string of oases at the foot of the Tian Shan Mountains. When he lifted his eyes to the snow-capped peaks of this range, he was looking at the source of life of the desert oases below. From the icy summits of these mountains, rivers flow beside fir-clad slopes, down brown, barren valleys below, rushing ever downward to desert dunes and further west to the Taklamakan Desert until they disappear eventually in the sand.[1]

Desert dwellers long before Xuanzang arrived had developed an ingenious system of underground channels and wells (called *karez*) to preserve this water from the mountains. From the air the series of wells looks like earth mounds, because their keepers are constantly digging and piling up the earth so the water flows smoothly. They are sometimes as much as forty meters long. With fertile land and an increasingly prosperous trade of ancient China with the West, and the West with China, along the Northern Silk Road these oases flourished. It was those kingdoms that the young Xuanzang would visit in 629–630 C.E.; that is where he would replenish his caravan of horses and camels, visit with kings, and preach the Buddhist doctrine to merchants and warriors as well as to his fellow monks on his way to India. He would be the most famous pilgrim to travel on this road, one of the longest and oldest trade routes known to mankind—the Silk Road.

Staying at the Hami Oasis

When Xuanzang was in Hami, he stayed in a monastery where three Chinese monks lived; they were overjoyed to see him. The oldest embraced Xuanzang with tears, saying, "Could I ever have hoped to see a man from my own village?" Xuanzang showed an unexpected warmth and shed tears of sympathy with him. It was from monasteries such as this that the teachings of Buddhism radiated from India as far as China, a country that was enlightened by the new religion in much the same way as northern Europe had received the teachings of Christianity from the monasteries of Ireland.

The oasis kingdom of Hami, famous for its melons, had long been inhabited by a Chinese military colony that had accepted suzerainty of the Turks during the troubled times of the Sui and early Tang dynasties. Several months after the monk's visit, the kingdom of Hami reverted back to China. Like many another oasis, it was caught between nomadic hordes from the north and west and the sedentary civilization of China to the south and east.

The impetuous king of Turfan, having heard of Xuanzang's approach, ordered an escort to meet him. A powerful monarch of Chinese descent, the king had sent rare gifts to the Tang emperor and also presented himself in person at the Chinese court. Some time later, he associated himself with the Turkish nomads, and cut off the caravans between China and the western kingdoms. It is said that he died of fright as he awaited the arrival of the Chinese armies. In 640, Turfan was annexed to China.[2]

Opposing the King of Turfan

Since the king of Turfan was also a devout Buddhist, Xuanzang could hardly refuse to see him. The pilgrim had another itinerary in mind, but he changed his route in order to go to Turfan. After a six-day march through the desert, a distance of about 200 miles, he reached the borders of Turfan at sunset. The moment the king was informed of Xuanzang's arrival, he left his palace and proceeded by torchlight to meet him. When the two of them arrived at the king's elegant pavilion, the king personally conducted the monk to a seat. The queen and all her serving women came to pay their respects and food was served. Then the king, according to Huili, persisted in talking with him all night.

630 C.E. The hour grows late. Having stayed for ten days, the Master desires to take his leave and continue his journey. But the king wants him to be a spiritual preceptor for his kingdom.

Xuanzang says: "It needs no repeated explanation to understand your deep kindness. But as I am going to the West to seek the Law of the Buddha, it is improper for me to stop half way before I have found it."

The king is adamant.

Xuanzang is firm.

The king becomes sullen, and shouts at the pilgrim, flapping the sleeves of his royal robe. "I have other ways to deal with you." He threatens to detain him by force or else send him back to his country.

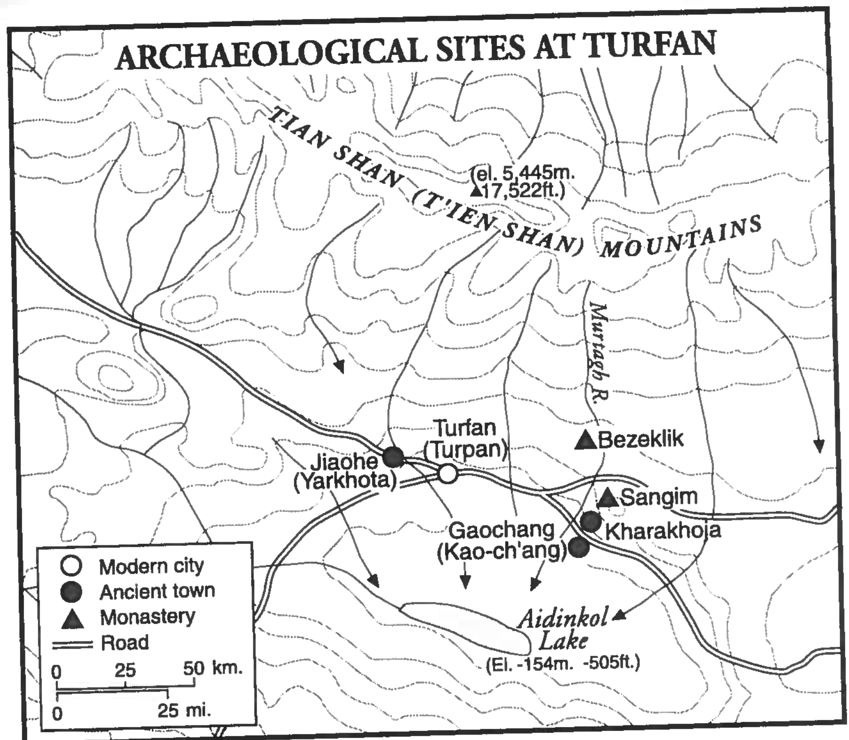
It is Xuanzang's first confrontation with royal authority and power. There will be other times when he will have to resist a monarch's wish, even that of the emperor himself. He stands firm. Still the king does not let him go, increasing his offerings. Xuanzang decides that he must refuse to eat and drink. The king serves him with his own hands. For three days Xuanzang fasts, hoping to change the king's mind. On the fourth day the Master's breath is very feeble. The king is ashamed and gives in.[3]

In the end, Xuanzang promised to preach to his subjects in Turfan for a month.

He also agreed to stop in Turfan for three years on his return journey to China. This was not to happen, for the king's death released the pilgrim from the promise, and Xuanzang returned fifteen years later, on the Southern Silk Road.

During his stay of a month in this area, Xuanzang stopped at the ancient city of Gaochang, which lies twenty-nine miles southeast of Turfan. This impressive city of 1.5 square miles is divided into three parts: an outer city, an inner city, and a royal palace, more or less like the pattern of Chang'an. Today, after more than a thousand years, part of the ancient city wall still stands, over thirty feet high; the gates, the stupa shrine, the Buddha hall, and the bases of various temples are still recognizable. In such an excessively dry climate with only one-half inch of rainfall a year, some of the buildings are timelessly preserved so that we may easily imagine a prosperous kingdom even now.

Although the king prepared a special pavilion for Xuanzang to talk to an audience of three hundred, he may also have preached in front of the large Buddha hall, a square structure constructed of sun-dried bricks with hollowed-out niches three to four feet high on the exterior of the building. Some of these carved-out spaces still have painted halos in them recalling the Buddha figures or Compassionate Ones they once contained.



MAP 2.2
Archaeological sites at Turfan oasis, with indication of rivers that flow from the Tian Shan Mountains feeding Aidinkol Lake.

Most probably he also visited Jiaohe, six miles west of Turfan town, a natural fortress that stands on a high bluff between two rivers. A stroll across a dusty plain would take him to an unusual stupa with a tall central round pillar surrounded by four towers. Ten years after Xuanzang visited the Turfan oasis, Jiaohe became the main base for administering the western regions of the Chinese empire.

It is likely that Xuanzang climbed in the foothills of the Tian Shan Mountains, passing by the famous Flaming Mountain, so called because of its reddish hue. These red foothills, strangely rent with gouged-out gullies, are the setting of and inform the action of a chapter in the famous Ming novel *Journey to the West,* an epic inspired by the monk's pilgrimage to India. It is but a short walk for such a vigorous, young monk among barren, desolate hills to the

monks' cells of the Sangim ravine, where he may have paused on his way to the truly spectacular caves at Bezeklik (Fig. 2.1).

Almost hidden until one is right upon them, these cells stand in the Murtok gorge on a steep bank of conglomerate rock. Above the temple cells, partly cut out of the cliff, is a smooth tableland, as if the river, hundreds of years before the monks built their monastery, had been at a higher level and over the centuries had cut its way through to form a wild, narrow gorge. The caves face an equally steep, serrated cliff on the other side of the gushing river. Like the Greeks, the Buddhist monks had a genius for place; their monasteries usually stand in dramatic settings.

The sounds of the swift-flowing river at night must have been soothing, but who knows about the wailing howls of wolves baying in the gorge at the full moon? Albert von Le Coq, an early-twentieth-century German explorer, heard them in this desolate gorge thirteen centuries after Xuanzang passed through and told us that the wolves, though they sounded dangerous, were mostly harmless.

FIGURE 2.1
General view of Bezeklik Monastery, which, like many Buddhist monasteries, overlooks a river. The caves were filled with beautiful wall paintings, which are now largely destroyed.

After Xuanzang's month-long sojourn in this oasis, the king equipped him in truly grand style for his pilgrimage. He had various articles of clothing made that were suitable for such a climate, such as face-coverings, gloves, leather boots, and so on. Moreover, he gave Xuanzang a hundred gold ounces, and three myriads of silver pieces, with five hundred rolls of satin and taffeta, enough for the outward and home journey of the Master during twenty years. He also gave him thirty horses and twenty-four servants.[4]

The gold, silver, satin, and taffeta would be for the kings and Khans whom he would visit on his journey. Most important of all, the king gave Xuanzang twenty-four royal letters to be presented to the twenty-four different kingdoms. The Turfan king requested these rulers to conduct Xuanzang through their territories and to provide relays of horses. And finally, he commissioned one of his officers to conduct Xuanzang to the Great Khan of the Western Turks.

In his letter to the Great Khan, the king of Turfan asked him to be kind to Xuanzang, as he had been to the servant who writes these respectful lines. The relation of the two monarchs was clear. The king of Turfan was a vassal of the Khan, and had a right to claim protection for his new friend—a medieval code that seemed to apply in Asia as it did in Europe.[5]

Xuanzang was overcome by his generosity.

> For all these favours, I feel ashamed of myself and do not know how to express my gratitude. Even the overflow of the Chiao [Jiao] River is not comparable with the amount of your kindness, and your favour is weightier than the mountains of the Pamir Range. Now I have no more worry to travel across the suspending bridge over the perilous Icy River, and it is now time to visit the Land of the Heavenly Ladder and the Bodhi tree. If I may achieve my objective, to whom shall I owe my achievement? To nothing but the king's favour.[6]

Xuanzang was more right than he knew, for the empire of the Western Turks extended all the way to Merv in Persia (Iran) and to present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan and included what is now Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This protection was doubly strong, for the monarch who ruled from Kunduz (in present-

day Afghanistan) was both the Khan's son and the king of Turfan's brother-in-law. The monk who had left China secretly by night would now have official standing; all the petty kings of the desert oases, all the rulers of the Western Turks, were at his service. From Turfan, the pilgrim and his now large caravan traveled 200 miles toward the southwest to Karashahr (Yanqi), climbing a range of mountains celebrated for its silver mines. On the other side of the Qoltag Mountains, Xuanzang and his party were confronted by robber bands, who had already killed all the men in the caravan ahead of them, but Xuanzang's party was able to bribe the bandits, who withdrew. After these dangers, Xuanzang reached the remarkable, prosperous kingdom of Karashahr. At one time the number of grottoes here was so great that the word *mingoi,* meaning "a thousand caves," was used to describe the region and came into general use to describe similar cave sites. Xuanzang's account tells us that there were ten monasteries containing nearly two thousand monks of the Hinayana school, an early form of Buddhism.

Although the pilgrim was given a very warm reception, he spent only one night before setting out for Kucha (Kuqa). Xuanzang depicted the king of Karashahr as being brave and conceited but without practical ability. This description was confirmed by the action of the Emperor Taizong in 643. When the king of Karashahr secretly renounced his duty and allegiance to China, just as the king of Turfan had done, the emperor sent an army to invade his kingdom, and took the king prisoner.[7]

Visiting the Monasteries at Kucha

From Karashahr, Xuanzang followed the historical route running along the foot of the Tian Shan Mountains. Like the king of Turfan before him, the Kucha monarch went out to meet the young pilgrim, accompanied by the chief officers of the court and the monks of the district. The king of Kucha was a devout Buddhist, and at the time anxious to win the favor of the Chinese, so it was natural that he should give Xuanzang a warm welcome.

Unlike the king of Turfan, the king of Kucha was not of Chinese descent, nor was his appearance Chinese. He had red hair and blue

eyes. He seems also to have been without the fiery temper of the Turfan king. The elegant royal pair (Fig. 2.2) who greeted the Chinese pilgrim were representative of an Indo-European people in race and appearance.[8] Xuanzang described the king as a man of weak intellect who was controlled by his ministers. Shortly after the pilgrim's visit in 630, the king sent the Tang emperor a tribute of horses and received in return an imperial warrant of investiture. Later the same ruler showed his lack of political wisdom in renouncing Chinese suzerainty in favor of an alliance with the Turks. In 648, the Chinese invaded his country and took him prisoner.

Kucha was perhaps the most important kingdom in Central Asia. Xuanzang was impressed with its wealth and the brilliance of its civilization as well as its great size.

FIGURE 2.2
Portraits of the king and queen of Kucha, originally on grotto frescoes from the first half of the seventh century C.E. *Thought to approximate the appearance of the royal pair who greeted Xuanzang in 630.*

> This country was above 1000 *li* from east to west and 600 *li* from north to south; its capital being 17–18 *li* in circuit. . . . This country yielded millet, wheat, rice, grapes, pomegranates, and plenty of pears, plums, peaches and apricots. It produced also gold, copper, iron, lead, and tin: its climate was temperate and the people had honest ways; their writing was taken from that of India, but has been much altered; they had great skill with wind and stringed musical instruments.[9]

A Kuchan orchestra had in fact been introduced at the Chinese court and during the whole of the Tang period took part in imperial fetes. We even know the names of the pieces it played, such as "The Jade Woman Hands the Cup Around," "Meeting on the Seventh Evening," and "The Game of Hide the Buckle."[10]

A beautiful fresco from the caves at Kizil of a musician and an Indian goddess (Fig. 2.3) exerts such charm and fascination that we might even come to believe the legend that the enchanting melodies of the Tokharian music were taken from the sounds of a waterfall. Although this fresco is now in a museum in Germany, there are many other frescoes at Kizil, which show flying *apsaras*—like our angels—gods, and musicians playing flutes, oboes, and four-stringed lutes.

Along with its cultural richness, Kucha seems to have been a very important center of Buddhism along the Northern Silk Road. Xuanzang wrote that on either side of the western gate of the city were two Buddhist statues over ninety feet tall. One month before and after the autumnal equinox, large crowds would gather for ten days here for religious celebrations and Buddhist sermons. All the monasteries in the region participated in an elaborate "procession of images" with highly adorned statues of the Buddha mounted on floats, decorated with precious substances or covered with silken stuffs. Xuanzang visited twelve monasteries in Kucha, and this kingdom, he said, had no fewer than five thousand monks.

Among the especially famous monasteries, Xuanzang mentions a few by name, such as the Ascharya Monastery: "Forty *li* north of the depopulated city at the slopes of the hills, and separated by a river, were two monasteries which bore the common name Chao-hu-li [Zhaohuli] distinguished respectively as Eastern and Western. The images of the Buddha in these monasteries were beautiful

FIGURE 2.3
Wall painting of an Indian goddess and a celestial musician from cave at Kizil. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

almost beyond human skill: and the Brethren were punctilious in discipline and devoted enthusiasts."[11]

Numerous stupas, worship halls, and Thousand Buddha caves crowd one another at Subashi old city, a site covering about two acres, twelve miles north of Kucha. Subashi old city is spread along the east and west banks of the Kucha River and might well have been the Zhaohuli monasteries that so inspired Xuanzang.

Heavy snows in the high passes of the Tian Shan Mountains lying to the north of the oasis that year obliged the pilgrim to remain two additional months at Kucha. Close by was a ring of monasteries that he surely did see. Several of them were far enough away from the thriving cities for the idly curious not to be tempted to come and disturb the monks in their meditations, and yet near enough for the devout to visit and bring them offerings.

A climb ascending a steep Yanshui gorge and down in a westerly direction would take him to the 236 caves at Kizil, thirty-five miles away. Local people call it the High Thousand-Buddha Cave. In the wild ravines of the Muzart River, caves connected by interior galleries and staircases had been hollowed out of the soft sandstone of the mountain. A dramatic photograph taken by the German expedition of Albert von le Coq, a view from a monastic cell, shows much the same landscape that spread out before the eyes of Xuanzang 1,300 years ago.

Little has changed in other ways, too. The openings of the ancient chapels still present the same darkness and light as they did then, much as Xuanzang must have seen them: darkness, for the caves are lighted only by the front entrance of the grotto or by torchlight; and light, for the very brilliance of the blue lapis lazuli, the copper green, and the chalky white of the flesh tones combine to make bright and pleasing patterns.

The Buddhism practiced at Kucha at the time of Xuanzang's visit was Hinayana Buddhism, an early form of Buddhism still practiced in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. However, Kucha is well-known as the birthplace of Kumarajiva (344–415), one of the greatest translators of the scriptures of the Mahayana school, a later form of Buddhism. Kumarajiva was so distinguished that he had been called to Chang'an, where he stayed ten years working with a team of translators, rendering some of the most important scriptures into Chinese, most notably "*The Lotus of the True Law.*"

Instead of the illustrious Kumarajiva, an aged local philosopher spent many long hours debating with Xuanzang. But the pilgrim seems to have challenged him on so many points that the older man was glad to see this bright, young Chinese intellectual head for the mountains.

Two days out of Kucha, Xuanzang had another narrow escape when his caravan encountered a band of about two thousand Turkish bandits. (Was this a poetic figure or an actual contingent of roving tribesmen on the loose?) Luckily, the marauders were quarreling about the spoils they had acquired from their previous haul and showed no interest in Xuanzang's party. And so at length he came to the oasis of Aksu, which was in many ways similar to Kucha.

Crossing the Tian Shan Mountains

From Aksu, Xuanzang's party entered the Tian Shan range. They climbed around the giant peak of Tengri-Khan, 23,620 feet high, and crossed the chain of the Tian Shan by the Bedal pass. Its slope was covered with glaciers.

> This mountain is steep and dangerous, and reaches to the clouds *(heaven)*. From the creation the perpetual snow which has collected here in piles, has been changed into glaciers which melt neither in winter nor summer; the hard-frozen and cold sheets of water rise mingling with the clouds; looking at them the eye is blinded with the glare, so that it cannot long gaze at them. The icy peaks fall down sometimes and lie athwart the road, some of them a hundred feet high, and others several tens of feet wide.[12]

The heavy snows that caused them to delay their forty-mile crossing of the mountains at Kucha should have been a warning; events would show that they left too soon. Xuanzang's description of mountains of ice that rose up into the sky and the ice peaks that fell down sometimes gives us a clue as to the hardships ahead. It took seven days to cross Bedal Pass, one of the major passes used by Western Turks to communicate with their dependencies in the Tarim basin. During that time he lost three or four out of every ten men, and great numbers of oxen and horses. The loss of one-third of his men and many animals might lead one to think there was an avalanche, but he says that his men either starved or froze to death. His 10,000-mile pilgrimage had scarcely begun. Yet not even in the Hindu Kush Mountains in Afghanistan, where his party got lost and was rescued, and not in the Pamirs, where he crossed a 16,000-foot pass, did he experience so great a disaster.

On the northern side of the mountains, the sadly depleted caravan rested at Lake Issyk Kul, the "warm lake," so called because it never froze. The comparative warmth of the water and the sheltered location made it the winter headquarters of the Great Khan of the Western Turks. The khan's summer capital was farther west at Che-shih (Tashkent), but he often spent time in the valley of the upper Yulduz River.

As Xuanzang and his party went along the southern side of this great inland sea 114 miles long and 36 miles wide, the pilgrim noted: "On all sides it is enclosed by mountains, and various streams empty themselves into it and are lost. The colour of the water is a bluish-black, its taste is bitter and salt. The waves of this lake roll along tumultuously as they expend themselves *(on the shores)*. Dragons and fish inhabit it together. At certain *(portentous)* occasions scaly monsters rise to the surface, on which travellers passing by put up their prayers for good fortune."[13] Xuanzang was a man of the seventh century, after all, believing in spirits in the mountains, demons in the desert, and dragons in the lake.

Meeting the Great Khan

In 630, Xuanzang met the Great Khan of the Western Turks at Tokmak, today in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan at the northwest side of Issyk Kul. The Great Khan's relations with the Tang emperor were friendly at that time. Three years earlier he had offered to the court of the Emperor Taizong a belt of gold adorned with jewels, and five thousand horses. By the early years of Taizong's reign, the Western Turks had come to control much of the vast region from the Tang empire to Persia in the west and from Kashmir in the south to the Altai mountains in the north.

At the time of Xuanzang's visit, the Great Khan was at the height of his power. After he returned from a hunting trip, the Khan gave Xuanzang a warm welcome. This nomad king, reminiscent of Jenghiz Khan,

> was covered with a robe of green satin, and his hair was loose, only it was bound round with a silken band some ten feet in length, which was twisted round his head and fell down behind. He was surrounded by about 200 officers, who were all clothed in brocade stuff, with their hair braided. On the right and left he was attended by independent troops all clothed in furs and fine spun hair garments; they carried lances and bows and standards, and were mounted on camels and horses. The eye could not estimate their numbers.[14]

The pilgrim handed over the letter and gifts of the king of Turfan. Their party was treated to a feast in the khan's yurt, a large pavilion "adorned with golden flower ornaments *(Ta kwan)* which blind the eye with their glitter. All the officers had spread out in front long mats, in two rows, on which they sat; they were clad in shining garments of embroidered silk. The body-guard of the Khan stood behind them. Regarding these circumstances of state, although he was but the ruler of a wandering horde, yet there was a certain dignified arrangement about his surroundings."[15] (Xuanzang sounds a bit patronizing here, as if, as a civilized Chinese, he is surprised that the nomadic tribes are not quite as uncouth as he had expected.)[16]

Quarters of mutton and boiled veal were piled high in front of the guests, who included envoys from Tang China and Turfan. Everyone but Xuanzang drank a lot of wine, and all enjoyed the loud, clashing chords of their music. Special rice cakes, cream, mare's milk, crystallized sugar, honey, and raisins were provided for the pilgrim, whose religious beliefs did not allow him to eat meat. At the end of the sumptuous banquet, the khan asked him to "improve the occasion" by expounding on the Buddhist doctrine. A difficult assignment in such a setting and before such company! The pilgrim spoke on the need for love of all living creatures and the religious life that leads to final deliverance. Apparently the khan was impressed.

The Great Khan had always been quite open to Buddhism. Some years earlier, an Indian missionary named Pabhakarmitras had even tried to convert him before going on to China.[17] At Ak Beshim, only a short distance southwest of Tokmak, two Buddhist shrines that can be dated to the seventh or eighth century have been excavated by Soviet archaeologists.[18]

Having taken a liking to Xuanzang, the khan sought to dissuade him from going to India by saying that it was a very hot place where people were like savages, without any decorum. Theirs was a gentle exchange with no threats of force like that of the impetuous king of Turfan. Xuanzang replied that notwithstanding all this he was determined to go and gaze at the sacred traces and earnestly search for the law, that is, scriptures. The khan then sought out a young Chinese soldier to accompany Xuanzang part of the way.

The khan also gave him letters of introduction to the petty princes of the Gandharan region—part of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan—who were his vassals. He presented Xuanzang with fifty pieces of silk, and a set of clothes of crimson satin. Like the kings of Turfan and Kucha before him, the khan and his officers, with true courtesy, accompanied Xuanzang a few miles to start him on his journey.

Xuanzang set out again for the western regions. He crossed the plain on the north of the Alexandrian mountains where the nine rivers that feed the Chu, and the ten rivers that feed its tributary, the Kuragati, have their source. Even today this area eighty miles west of Tokmak is called "The Land of One Thousand Springs" (Bing-yul). The pilgrim tells us that the Great Khan of the Western Turks often camped in this delightful region with its many pools and verdant trees.

In all his travels through Central Asian Turkdom, especially in areas inhabited by Iranian and Turkic peoples, which were later to become great centers of carpet weaving, Xuanzang makes no mention of the production of either woven or knotted carpets. For those seeking to understand the origin and development of such carpets, Xuanzang's realistic and detailed description of the Great Khan and the nomadic life in Central Asia is crucial evidence that the nomads at that time were producing only felt rugs.[19]

The next important place he visited was Che-shih, modern-day Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. He probably crossed the famous Syr Darya (Jaxartes) River at the present village of Chinaz. Finally Xuanzang had to traverse the eastern spur of the Desert of Red Sands in order to reach Samarkand. He found it to be a great sandy waste. "North-west from this we enter on a great sandy desert, where there is neither water nor grass. The road is lost in the waste, which appears boundless, and only by looking in the direction of some great mountain, and following the guidance of the bones which lie scattered about, can we know the way in which we ought to go."[20]

One hundred fifty-six miles of solitude . . . Once again the desert, the land of bleakness, driving winds, and bleached bones. The pilgrim's goal was the golden oasis of Samarkand, the farthest point west on his journey.

Many Western poets, Milton, Keats, and Edward Fitzgerald among them, have been charmed with the cadence of the word Samarkand, and in the nineteenth century James Flecker romanticized it still more in his book *The Golden Journey to Samarkand.*

We are the pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further; it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow . . .
Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the golden road to Samarkand.
We travel not for the trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned
We make the golden journey to Samarkand.[21]