

Preface

From Xiangyuan to Ceylon: The Life and Legacy of the Chinese Monk Faxian (337–422)

JINHUA CHEN

The fourth and fifth century were a crucial period for the ‘Sinitification’ process of Buddhism. In this period, Faxian 法顯 (337–422), a Buddhist monk from a certain Gong 龔 family in the Xiangyuan 襄垣 County of Changzhi 長治, Shanxi Province, exerted profound influences on this process on many levels. As this anthology will make it clear, Faxian’s legacy is not limited to him being a wise master, a devoted Buddhist, a great traveller or an outstanding translator. Rather, his true legacy is symbolic: Faxian lived on as a perennial symbol of perseverance daring to overcome any distance and danger. Faxian is a spiritual monument that has inspired generations of Buddhists, including Xuanzang and Yijing, to follow in his steps to the West.

During Faxian’s time, China and India were connected only by a treacherous route that became even harder to access as the sovereignty of China splintered into southern and northern rules, whereas various kingdoms in Central Asia wedged between India and China further obstructed a smooth passage between them. But no peril swayed Faxian’s resolve to search *vinaya* texts: along with his fellow monks, Faxian crossed a vast ocean of sands, ascended the Pamir Mountains, voyaged through more than a dozen of foreign kingdoms and walked thousands of miles before finally arriving in India. During the journey, Faxian’s travel companions disappeared one after another—they

either fell victim to myriad hazards or returned to China intimidated by the prospect of greater dangers ahead, leaving Faxian the sole pilgrim soldiering on in this dangerous journey.

In the sacred land of India, Faxian paid homage to the traces of Buddha Śākyamuni and learned local languages and customs. But above all, Faxian was in quest of Dharma. He collected Buddhist classics and sought out prominent Buddhist masters, travelling to places as far as Laṅkā-dvīpa (the present-day Sri Lanka) in the Indian Ocean. Even today we could still find Faxian's traces in Sri Lanka. They are memorial that behooves any Chinese and foreign beholder to imagine and meditate on this great journey undertaken 1,600 years ago. It was also in Sri Lanka where Faxian made his decision to return to China: Faxian came across a silk fan and was overwhelmed by nostalgia towards his homeland. He was thus reminded of his original intent in coming to India: to bring back the Indian *Vinaya* texts to China. Compelled by his sense of responsibility, Faxian started his return journey which he barely survived before returning to China in 412. He brought back an abundant collection of Indian classics and images and dedicated the rest of his life to translating the texts and to spreading the Dharma. Three centuries later, Xuanzang followed in Faxian's steps and performed a similar pilgrimage to India across mountains and deserts. Xuanzang's 玄奘 (600–664) subsequent return and remaining career in China marked a period of incredible progress for the cause of Chinese Buddhist translation. We can therefore say that the legacy of Faxian resides not solely in his personal achievement but also in his posthumous status as a religious model and a cultural emblem who possesses unmatched spiritual appeal among monastic and lay Buddhists alike.

The significance of Faxian also lies in his role as one of the earliest cultural ambassadors between India and China. We could find Indian references to China as early as in the greatest Indian epic poem *Mahābhārata*, written in the second century B.C. as well as in its contemporaneous literature, proving that the two civilizations separated by the great peaks of Himalayas had already commenced feeble and difficult contacts before Buddhism arrived in China. Then during the diplomatic excursion of Zhang Qian 張騫 (164–114 B.C.), India and China only officially opened its portal to each other.

From this point on, Chinese literature increasingly referenced India as the two civilizations entered an epoch of vibrant cultural exchanges. During this exchange, Buddhism played a vital role of catalyst. By the end of the Eastern Han, Buddhism had spread from India to the Chinese heartland through Central Asia and the modern-day Xinjiang area, carried along by central Asian merchants. After its arrival in China, Buddhism quickly became a source of nourishment and inspiration for the general populace inflicted with fear and despair by numerous warfare during the dying years of the Han Dynasty. At the beginning, it was only Indian and Central Asians who brought Buddhist texts from the Indian subcontinent but soon Chinese Buddhists, especially monks also joined this religious mission by travelling to Central Asia and India. There, they paid homage to sacred sites and searched masters and scriptures. Among these pilgrim-monks, Faxian is the most well-known figure. He stayed in India for over a decade before deciding to return to China. He brought back a trove of Indian scriptures and would dedicate the rest of his life to translating them. Faxian also left us with a travelogue *Foguo ji* 佛國記 (Record of the Buddhist Kingdom). This travelogue not only records the politics, the religions and the social history of India at the time but more importantly, it offers a high-resolution snapshot of India at a specific point in time—a rare gem in the studies of India that otherwise lacked a written tradition emphasizing detailed and precise historical documentation. From this point on, all India-bound pilgrims and Dharma-seekers would follow the example of Faxian, including pilgrims from foreign areas in the Chinese cultural sphere such as Korean and Japan; they would all pilgrim to sacred Buddhist sites and afterwards wrote a detailed record of the pilgrimage. In this tradition comprising innumerable followers, Xuanzang is but one example. Ultimately, however, it is their intrepid and eager spirit to learn from foreign cultures that set them on the path of pilgrimage in search of Dharma, which also obliged them to write the travelogue. It seems therefore that the propagation of a religion not only entails the circulation of trade, commerce and human resources, but also that of culture. During the Tang Dynasty, India shared with China its advanced astronomy and calendrical calculation. Indian astronomers and mathematicians came to China in great numbers

to share their scientific erudition while Indian physicians have healed the ill of many Chinese people. Reversely, the Chinese technology of papermaking and sugar-refining also reached India. This history proves that civilizations could co-exist through exchange and mutual learning, thereby enhancing the well-being of their respective people rather than having to resort to conflicts and warfare. In our modern time when the ‘civilization clash’ becomes increasingly a popular discourse, we have all the more reasons to remember this symbiotic relationship between China and India.

In the spirit of interculturalism as embodied by Faxian and his followers, we hosted an international conference named ‘From Xiangyuan to Ceylon: The Life and Legacy of the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (337–422)’ from March 25 to March 29, 2017 in Faxian’s homeland, Xiangyuan, Shanxi Province. The conference was hosted by the Mount Wutai Research Institute for Eastern Buddhist Culture 五臺山東方佛教文化研究院 and co-hosted by Research Center for the Study of Buddhist Texts and Art at Peking University 北京大學佛典籍與藝術研究中心, King’s College London, the United Kingdom, also by the *From the Ground Up* project based at the University of British Columbia (www.frogbear.org). In total, thirty-three Buddhist scholars from thirteen countries and regions attended the conference (sixteen from mainland China, three from the United Kingdom, two each from Canada, Germany and Korea and one each from Singapore, Australia, Thailand, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and Taiwan), making it a truly international conference.

The conference assembled a relatively small group of scholars, but each attendee was highly qualified and well prepared. The conference performed a comprehensive survey on the Faxian studies during the past century, specifically on Faxian’s life and his translated texts. Importantly, the conference adopted a macroscopic viewpoint by placing Faxian against the historical backdrop of South, Central and East Asia at the time. We used Faxian’s travelogue as a point of reference, from where we incorporated the religious and sociological studies of the entire Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka during Faxian’s time, thereby studying the microscopic historical phenomena in an area that had only scarce historical records.

Conference participants applied this methodology also to studying the religions and societies in Central and East Asia during the time of Faxian but in addition to studying this period synchronically, we also stretched out our discussion diachronically by studying Faxian's symbolic significance that exerted enormous posthumous influences. As a perennial spiritual icon, Faxian commanded a profound and enduring influence among Buddhist followers but he also, through embodied actions, inspired an uncountable number of Buddhists to follow him as role model. Even in our own times, his influence could still be felt—in our very academic circle: Faxian studies has brought a corollary impact on the studies of the Indian subcontinent in general and challenged scholars in these fields to rethink the academic conventions.

The majority of the conference papers are included in the collection *Mount Xiantan and Faxian Culture: International Conference Papers on the Life of the Chinese Monk Faxian (337–422) and His Legacies* 僊堂山與法顯文化：漢僧法顯 (337–422) 其生平與遺產國際研討會論文集 (edited by Miaojiang 妙江, Chen Jinhua 陳金華, etc., Singapore: World Scholastic Publishers, 2019). In the preface, I introduced each paper as well as papers not included in the collection. For this English collection, we have included seven English articles and six articles translated from Chinese, in order to present our conference outcomes to the English-speaking Buddhist scholars.

In general, this conference was marked by the following highlights. First of all, the research topics were diverse but also in-depth: the conference concerned itself with the entire geographical sphere touched by the influence of Faxian—from the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, Central Asia to the Chinese cultural zone, notably Japan; at the same time, the conference also reached a depth of sophistication deserving a world-class academic conference. Secondly, we employed diverse and interdisciplinary methodologies. We used not only the traditional methods that are common in historical, philological and philosophical research, but also a linguistically diverse range of primary sources (in addition to the classical Buddhist languages such as Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan, we used Burmese and Thai sources) and secondary sources written in English, French, German and Japanese. This linguistic resourcefulness is a research principle that

we have been placing great emphasis on. Moreover, the present volume also includes research outcomes that show technology-savviness and willingness to join the rising trend that uses technology for the benefit of the Buddhist Studies research. Lastly, I feel compelled to say that this international conference is the fruit of the collaboration among thirty scholars from over ten countries and areas. It is a small platform that we built with our meager ability to host the sharing of knowledge among scholars from all over the world. Perhaps our efforts would delight Faxian himself who was a global Dharma seeker transcending the boundary of cultures. The present volume only contains fragments of all the academic inspirations produced from the conference, but we believe these fragments are the seeds that will one day grow and bear dazzling academic fruits. Such is the goal that guides the organization of every activity in the *From the Ground Up* project; and knowing that this goal could come true is the greatest reward to each of us in the organization team.

We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the Mount Wutai Research Institute for Eastern Buddhist Culture and the Xiangyuan municipal government whose support has made this publication possible. Mount Xiantan 僊堂山 sits to Mount Taihang's east, its path meandering, its precipice lofty and rugged, and its ranges layered one behind the other in an infinite multitude. One could find in Mount Xiantan handsome boulders, serene caves, vertiginous waterfalls and verdant forests, all available for roving about and from where to take in an expansive vista. The mountain had its name from the monastery that it sheltered: the Xiantan Monastery 僊堂寺. A legend recorded at the end of the Qing has it that the Xiantan Monastery was created by the hatchet and chisel of divinities and beyond the craftsmanship of human mortals. It was known as the heaven on earth and has attracted a great number of literati and people of distinction.¹ As

¹ Jueluo Shiling 覺羅石麟 (d. 1747) of the Qing, *Shanxi tongzhi* 山西通志 [General Gazetteer of Shangxi], *juan* 169, *Yingyin Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu* 影印文淵閣《四庫全書》 [Wenyuan ge edition of the Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshu guan 臺灣商務印書館, 1986), vol. 548, p. 240b:

for the origin of the monastery name, it came from the *Mahāyāna* scripture *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* which speaks of an immortal hall (*xiantan*) inhabited by enlightened sages.² The local legend tells that Faxian from Xiangyuan has once stayed in the monastery, although time has effaced any textual evidence confirming the legend.

仙堂寺在縣東北五十里。仙堂山寺，舊在山麓坪。相傳：一夜風雨大作，視林石偃仆，佛殿寶幢，已神運山上矣。今寺址猶存。登陟十餘里，經捨身崖，始抵寺。佛像三鐵、一石、一木。一佛前胥涌一泉，殿外二泉環旋，又名五泉寺。絕壁潮音洞，內列觀音、羅漢像。東有閣，相傳為藏經地。內有琉璃洞，水出石佛臍中，禱者輒應。丁為講經，寺有斷碑，喬宇記、劉鳳儀、劉龍、崔鍾瑭、李潛、張星祥、趙三麟胥有詩。

² *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, translated by the Indian *trepiṭaka* master Bodhiruci 菩提留支 (d. 527) of the Northern Wei (386–534), under the Chinese title of *Ru Lengqie jing* 入楞伽經 (*T* no. 671, 16: 1.514c7–15) records,

The Blessed One once stayed in the Castle of Lankā which is situated on the peak of Mount Malaya on the great ocean... its boulders rugged, sheltering everywhere immortal halls, spirit chambers and grottos, filled with countless jewels that are clear and transparent inside and out (so much so that) the ray of sun and moon could penetrate them without being reflected. It was the place where numerous immortals and sages in the ancient times comprehended the precious Dharma and obtained the way. 一時婆伽婆住大海畔摩羅耶山頂上楞伽城中.....重巖屈曲，處處皆有仙堂、靈室、龕窟，無數眾寶所成，內外明徹，日月光暉，不能復現，皆是古昔諸仙賢聖，思如實法得道之處。