

Monks, Merchants and Maritime Travels: Revisiting Faxian's Sea Voyage from India to China

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Abstract: Buddhism played a key role in building up the relationship between ancient India and China. The entry of the Faith in China in the first century BCE and its acceptance generated interest among the monks to visit the land of its origin. By the fourth century CE, the Buddhist travellers from China were ready to undertake the difficult journey to reach the sacred destinations associated with Buddhism in India and for collecting the copies of scriptures. Faxian was the earliest among them, who came through the overland route and returned to his homeland by following the sea route from the Bay of Bengal. The accounts of his sea voyage record the perils on the way and also the incidents relating his company with the merchants on board. The travel also highlights the popularity of Buddhism in China and the royal support extended by the then Chinese emperor. In the light of these facts, this paper attempts to observe the maritime travel by Faxian and understand the role of religion in facilitating trade activities on sea.

Keywords: Buddhism, China, India, Maritime, Merchants, Monks, Southeast Asia, Trade

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Introduction

Buddhism reached China at the end of the the first century BCE when the Buddhist texts were presented to the Chinese court by the Yuezhi rulers (the Kushanas in India). The first century CE, however, was a landmark in the history of India and China when Buddhism became a cementing force connecting the two of the largest regions on the globe. (Bagchi, 1944, pp. 3–9) The discipline of the Buddha in its Mahayana form ('Greater Vehicle') interacted with the Chinese belief systems of Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism) which influenced the life of people in manifold ways. The zeal of the Buddhist monks in China motivated them to undertake the long journeys in search of the Buddhist scriptures in the land of Buddha and to visit the sacred places associated with the Faith. In course of the perilous pilgrimage to a distant land they encountered situations wherein the the interaction

between the pilgrims and traders was frequent. The spread of Buddhist ideas and the diversification of trade activities marched with each other in harmony leading to the vibrant commercial links between India, Southeast Asia and China. (Bagchi, 1944, pp. 67–8; Silk, 2002, pp. 22–24; Sen, 2003, pp. 1–10) This relationship between monks and merchants is a significant aspect of religious developments in the context of cultural influences which requires scholarly attention. The present study attempts to supplement the perspectives pertaining to the learning about our past that integrates the role of trade practices and religious elements as vehicles of cultural contacts.

The entry of Buddhism in China during the first century BCE led to the religious exchanges. The spread of Buddhist ideas also facilitated the commercial contacts between India and China. (Liu, 1988, p. 175) The contact in the early stage, however, was facilitated by the land routes. It is important to observe that the early Buddhist monks from China like Faxian followed the overland route to reach India through its northwestern frontier. They preferred this long route instead of the shorter route through the northeastern part due to the latter being hazardous and inhospitable for the travellers. For his return journey, however, the monk took the sea route from the Bay of Bengal coast to China via Southeast Asia. Besides the linkages with China, the maritime networks also facilitated contacts in various spheres between India and Southeast Asia. Although Southeast Asia had very limited role to play in the spread of Buddhism from India to China, it facilitated commercial exchange between latter two regions to a considerable scale through the maritime routes. (Sen, 2014b, pp. 31–59) Researches have shown that the initial thrust for expansion of Indian civilisation towards the east was generated by the merchant seamen as depicted in the ancient Buddhist literature. (Coedès, 1968, p. 21) The spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and China through the maritime networks can be traced to as early as the early centuries of the Current Era. Although the literary works datable between the third and the first centuries BCE contain evidences for the maritime contacts between these lands, the texts of the post-fifth century present frequent references to vibrant long-distance sea travels. The period was also marked by the religious journeys undertaken by several Buddhist monks in search of the sacred Buddhist scriptures and the teachers of the Discipline. These sea voyages, nevertheless, provided thrust to the mobility of merchants, monks, pilgrims and envoys alike. The maritime routes, however, became more popular after the discovery of monsoon by Hippalus in the first century CE. This acquaintance with the nature of the wind flow and the knowledge of their arrival and retreat made the circumnavigation of the Cape Comorin easier. Previously, the most frequented route followed by the traders to reach to the east coast of India from its west coast was through the land routes. From the fifth century onwards, significant number number of Buddhist monks from South Asia also followed the maritime routes for their journey to China. (Sen, 2014b, pp. 47–48; Aciri, 2016, pp. 1–25; Aciri, 2019a, pp. 36–59).

Faxian and his Observations

Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing were the three famous Chinese Buddhist monks who visited India during the ancient period and left the records of their travels. Faxian left the western border of China in 399 CE to bring Buddhist scriptures from India and followed the land route for his onward journey whereas he preferred the sea route to the land route for his return journey to China. (Pachow, 1960, pp. 195–96) He boarded a merchant vessel at Tamralipti (Tamluk) and followed the sea route through Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia to reach China in 414 CE. Xuanzang left China in 629 CE and followed the land route for his journey to India as well as for his return to China in 645 CE. Yijing, who visited India during the seventh century CE, reached India by the sea route and sailed back to China on a ship from Tamralipti. The period of his travel was from 671 CE to 695 CE. (Sen, 2018, pp. 345–68)

These routes, either the overland or the maritime, were infested with robbers and other perils. The accounts of travellers mention several instances of shipwrecks, storms and other hazards in course of their journeys. The scenes depicting seafaring activities and shipwrecks found along with the remains of Buddhist tradition at the sites of Mathura, Bharhut, Kanheri, Ajanta, Ellora and Ratnagiri has also led the scholars to underline the role of religion, especially Buddhism, in promoting maritime travel to distant lands. (Ray, 2012, pp. 47–65) The maritime routes, thus, were not free from often faced obstacles in the midst of the sea as witnessed by those on the board of the ship.

In this context, Faxian's *Foguo ji* (A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms) was the earliest of such foreign accounts which provides significant information in the same regard. After his stay in India for two years, he boarded a merchant ship at Tamralipti headed towards south-west for Sri Lanka (Singhala, the kingdom of the Lion) and further travelled through Southeast Asia to reach China. (Legge, 1886, pp. 100–01) As described in the account, after having obtained the Sanskrit texts, Faxian embarked on a large vessel with more than two hundred persons on board. A smaller vessel was attached by a rope to this ship for assistance in case there occurred any damage to the large vessel and also to counter the perils during the journey. The favourable monsoon winds helped them to proceed towards east for three days before they encountered a violent storm causing a leak in the vessel which let the water rush in. The merchants wanted to enter the small vessel, but the people on board it feared the overloading and cut the rope. Further, the merchants were alarmed feeling the risk of instant death after the ship would be filled with water. So they threw all the heavy and unnecessary cargo overboard into the sea. Faxian also threw his pitcher, water bowl and other articles into the water. But fearing that the merchants would ask him to depart from his books and statues too, he remembered Guanshiyin (Chinese name of Avalokitesvara) with devotion and sought refuge in the Buddhist monastic order in China with commitment to protect the Faith by praying, 'I have travelled far in search of our Law. Let me, by your dread and supernatural (power) return from my wanderings, and reach my resting place!' After facing the storm for thirteen days, the ship was finally carried to the shore of an island where the travellers located the leak and repaired it. Henceforth, the voyage was resumed. (Legge, 1886, pp. 111–12; Deeg, 2010, p. 156; Hu and von Hinüber, 2015, pp. 312–14) It is important to note that the worship of the Guanshiyin cult as influenced by Dharmaraksha's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* in 286 CE was already popular in China before Faxian's departure to India. (Hu and von Hinüber, 2015, p. 315) The tales in the Pali *Jatakas* such as the *Samkha Jataka* and the *Mahajanka Jataka*, on the other hand, also refer to Manimekhala (Girdle of gems) as the guardian of the sea who protected the missionaries and merchants from the maritime disasters during their travels to Southeast Asia. The deity Manimekhala is also mentioned as 'the guardian of the sea' in the Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekhalai* (*Manimekalai/Manimekhala*), who protects the ocean extending from the Cape Comorin to the Far East. She is also the guardian angel of the heroine of the poem who carries the same name. (Levi, 1931, pp. 597–608). Faxian further, recording the hazards encountered in the sea travels, goes on to say that the pirates at sea posed threats to the travellers. The great ocean with its boundless expanse made it difficult to locate the direction which could be ascertained only by observing the sun, moon and stars. During cloudy sky conditions and rainy weather, the ship could move only along the direction of the wind. In the darkness of the night, one could only see the huge waves clashing with each other and the brightness of light emitted by turtles and other marine creatures. The merchants were very frightened as they were not certain about the direction they sailed. The anchoring of the ship for a halt was not possible because of the huge depth of the ocean. Only after the brightening of the sky, one could locate the direction and continue the journey in right course. There was no way to survive if the ship hit any hidden rock or reefs. (Legge, 1886, pp. 112–13; Deeg, 2010, p. 156)

After travelling for more ninety days, the ship reached Javadvipa (Java). During his five-month stay in Java, the monk noticed there the flourishing state of Brahmanism whereas Buddhism had minimal influence in the region. (Legge, 1886, p. 113; Sen, 2014b, p. 46; Aciri, 2019b, p. 56) After his five-month stay here, Faxian embarked a large vessel with more than two hundred men on board for journey to China. His northward journey from Southeast Asia to Guangzhou too passed through fierce wind and rainfall over the sea for which monk's presence in the merchant vessel was held ominous by the Brahmanas on board. They held the *sramana* responsible for the misfortune and went to the extent of deciding to maroon the *bhikshu* (Faxian) on an island in order to avoid any further misery. He was, however, supported by a lay supporter who threatened the Brahmanas with reporting the Han ruler of China if any such treatment was meted to the monk. On knowing that the Chinese ruler was a supporter of Buddhism and honoured the *bhikshus*, the merchants aborted the plan of abandoning Faxian. (Legge, 1886, p. 113; Sen, 2014a, p. 42; Aciri, 2019b, p. 57) On his return to China, royal welcome was extended to the monk as his arrival was held with joy for bringing the books and images from India.

The above-mentioned incidents of hazards at the sea also bring to light the significance of Buddhism as reflected in the prayers invoking the Bodhisattava Avalokiteshvara for averting the disaster. (Bopearachchi, 2014, pp. 161–87) In this context, it is important to note that the literary works, inscriptions and sculptural evidence of later periods, especially from seventh-eighth centuries onwards, also highlight the practice of paying reverence to cults such as that of the Buddhist deity Mahapratisara for appeasing hazards encountered at sea. These remains also reflect the contact between southeast Asia and eastern India where the Mahapratisara cult was popular in the contemporary period. (Mevissen, 2009, pp. 99–129; Crujisen et al, 2012, pp. 71–157) Furthermore, Faxian's accounts also highlight the popularity of Buddhism during the Han period in China and the reverence to the *sangha* by the ruler. At other instance, the monk is held responsible for the misfortune in the form of wind and rainfall that occurred during the maritime journey. But he escaped the ire of the fellow travellers as they did not risk the displeasure of the Han ruler who was the supporter of the Faith. (Sen, 2014a, pp. 42–43; Aciri, 2019b, p. 57)

Conclusion

The evidence, thus, suggest that the maritime travels served as important means of mobility for the merchants, monks and others from India to China. The sea routes, however, were not always smooth to traverse as the travelers frequently encountered hazards in the form of pirates, storms, shipwrecks, etc. The account of Faxian's journey enables us to infer about the complex and varied nature of relationship between the Buddhist monks, travelers of different faiths and merchants during the time of crisis at the sea. In course of his travel, the opposition to Faxian's Buddhist identity from the believers of other doctrines indicates the popularity of the latter in Southeast Asia. The descriptions, nevertheless, also reveal about the popularity of Buddhism under the Han rule in China and its recognition by other religious sects. The monk's observations attests the participation of the Brahmanas in the seafaring activities. The account of the sea travels also highlights the prevalence of Buddhist saviour deity such as Avalokiteshvara who was called upon by the devotees to safeguard people facing adverse situations and challenging environment during their voyages. Frequent oceanic travels by the monks, nevertheless, established a strong foundation of Buddhist faith in Southeast Asia and China along with the widening of exchange networks between these regions.

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