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Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang) 玄奘

Born: 600, Zhenliu (today: Kaifeng), China

Died: 664, Jade Flower Palace Monastery, near Changan, China.

Major Works: *Record of Western Lands* (西域記 *Xi yu ji/Hsi yü chi*) (646); *Cheng weishi lun* (成唯識論 *Ch'eng wei-shih lun*) (659); 73 translations of primarily Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Chinese (645-664), including the *Heart Sutra* (649)

Major Ideas

Buddhist method requires logic.

Metaphysical notions such as Buddha-nature and tathāgata-garbha (Buddha's embryo within all beings) distort basic Buddhist teachings.

So-called Buddhist absolutes, e.g., Suchness and Unconditioned Dharmas, are not real but merely linguistic-conceptual creations.

Only what is momentary and produces an observable effect is 'real' (dravya); the 'real' is contrasted with the 'erroneous' and the 'nominal' (prajñapti).

A person's spiritual possibilities are shaped by a combination of inherent and acquired karmic "seeds" that must be brought to fruition.

There is no contradiction between the teachings of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

The fame of Xuanzang, one of the greatest Chinese translators of Indian Buddhist texts, derives in part from his pilgrimage to India and the travelogue he composed after returning to China. His travelogue, *Record of Western Lands*, remains one of our major resources on seventh century India and Central Asia. During his lifetime Chinese Buddhism experienced the beginning of a proliferation of competing Buddhist schools and doctrines, many holding views at fundamental odds with their rivals. Many of these schools based themselves on apocryphal texts pretending to be translations of Indian originals as well as authentic texts into which questionable translations had introduced a host of erroneous ideas that were nonetheless becoming increasingly popular in China and Korea. After returning to China from sixteen years in Central Asia and India, Xuanzang endeavored to bring the Chinese Buddhism of his day back into conformity with what he had learned in India. This he did by retranslating important texts, striving for more accurate renditions, as well as introducing new texts and materials previously unknown in China. Alongside his monumental translation work—74 texts in nineteen years, some quite sizable, including one, the *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā sūtra*, several thousand pages long—he trained monks in the complexities of the Yogācāra system and Indian logic, and was the leading advocate for Buddhism at the Chinese Imperial Court until his death. His translations mark the last major infusion of Indian Buddhist ideas into East Asia.

Xuanzang's motives for going to India

By the early seventh century Chinese Buddhist literature had become a vast sea of translations and original Chinese works representing and supporting many opposing theories and positions, all of which were professedly "Buddhist." Chinese Buddhism in the sixth century could, with some justification, be seen as a battleground between competing versions of Yogācāra Buddhism, i.e., the teachings based on the writings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (c.v.). Details of doctrine, both fine and fundamental, were in perpetual dispute.

While still quite young Xuanzang studied and mastered much of the available Buddhist literature. He was giving lectures to assemblies of monks by the age of thirteen. The Sui Dynasty was collapsing, famine and war were spreading death and uncertainty throughout many parts of China, so numerous leading Buddhist scholars and their students converged on Changan, the capitol of the emerging Tang Dynasty, where they received support and could practice and teach with relative security. Xuanzang too went to Changan, and after studying with several prominent teachers, gained a reputation for great erudition and original thinking. He came to the conclusion that the many disputes and interpretational conflicts permeating Chinese Buddhism were the result of the unavailability of crucial texts in Chinese translation. In particular, he thought that a complete version of the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*, an encyclopedic description

of the stages of the Yogācāra path to Buddhahood written by Asaṅga, would resolve all the conflicts. In the sixth century an Indian missionary named Paramārtha (another major translator) had made a partial translation of it. Xuanzang resolved to procure the full text in India and introduce it to China.

Xuanzang in India

Despite the Emperor's refusal to grant Xuanzang permission to travel, he left nonetheless, encountering many hardships along the way as he crossed mountains and desert, faced starvation and murderous robbers, finally arriving nearly a year later in India. Once there he realized that the disparity between Indian and Chinese Buddhism involved much more than the missing chapters of one text. For over a century Indian Buddhists had become captivated by Dignāga's syllogistic logic, but even though some of Dignāga's epistemological treatises had been translated, Buddhist logic was still unknown in China. Xuanzang also discovered that the intellectual context in which Buddhists disputed and interpreted texts was much vaster and more varied than the Chinese materials had indicated: Buddhist positions were forged in earnest debate with a range of Buddhist and non-Buddhist sects unknown in China, and the terminology of these debates drew their significance and connotations from this rich context. While in China Yogācāra thought and Tathāgata-garbha thought were becoming inseparable, in India orthodox Yogācāra seemed to ignore if not outright reject Tathāgata-garbha thought. Many of the pivotal notions in Chinese Buddhism (e.g., Buddha-nature) and their cardinal texts (e.g., *The Awakening of Faith*) were completely unknown in India.

Xuanzang spent many years studying with India's most illustrious Buddhist teachers, visiting holy sites, and debating various advocates of Buddhist and non-Buddhist doctrines, defeating all of them and gaining a reputation as a fierce debater. After one series of debates with two Madhyamakans (followers of Nāgārjuna's teachings), he composed in Sanskrit a three-thousand verse treatise on "The Non-difference of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra" which is no longer extant. After promising Śīlabhadra, his mentor at Nālandā University (the central seat of Buddhist learning at that time), to introduce Dignāga's logic to China, he returned in 645 with over six hundred Sanskrit texts.

His translation project

Hoping to gain valuable tactical military information from Xuanzang, the Emperor installed him in a special monastery near the capitol, and assigned some of the leading scholars of the day to assist Xuanzang in his translation projects. Though refusing to provide the Emperor with information that might be useful militarily, he did write a travelogue describing the places he'd been, and especially the Buddhist sites he had visited. This work, *Record of Western Lands*, offers us today our most comprehensive view of the life, customs, manners, geography, and the condition of Buddhism in Central and South Asia in the seventh century.

The scope of materials he translated covers almost the whole range of Buddhist teachings: there are Yogācāra texts with their commentaries; Madhyamaka texts with Yogācārin commentaries; devotional texts (Xuanzang was the first one to associate the notion of "Pure Land"—a realm presided over by a Buddha into which one can be reborn—with Sukhāvātī, the realm of Buddha Amitābha; this "pure land" eventually became the most popular in East Asia); tantric and dhāranī (incantation) texts; logic manuals; Major sūtras (canonical accounts of the Buddha); Abhidharmic texts (especially the Vaibhāṣika abhidharma canon) as well as the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu; and a Hindu Vaiśeṣika text. Conspicuously missing are *Tathāgata-garbha* texts. Although comprehensive, his selection of materials was not arbitrary. Rather than compose polemical tracts championing one sectarian viewpoint over another, he presented accurately translated authentic texts that themselves would, he hoped, set the record straight.

Word quickly spread throughout East Asia about Xuanzang: that he had been to India to study Buddhist teachings at their source; that he was uniquely patronized by the Chinese Emperor; that he was introducing through his translations new, authentic teachings previously unknown in East Asia. He was the most famous and respected Chinese Buddhist of his day, with students making pilgrimages to study with him from Korea and Japan as well as China. His Japanese students carried his teachings back to Japan, establishing the Hossō (lit: Dharma-characteristic) school which was to be the preeminent Buddhist school there until the advent of Japanese Tendai (Tiantai, T'ien-t'ai), which, through deliberate political machinations, usurped it a few centuries later. While his teachings spurred interest in Korea, they were eventually syncretized with Huaom (Huayen) and Son (Chan, Zen) teachings which have dominated Korean Buddhist thought for the last thousand years.

The Cheng weishi lun (Ch'eng wei-shih lun) and Kuiji

In 659 he produced his most unusual work. Intending to translate ten separate commentaries on Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses*, at the insistence of his major disciple, Kuiji (窺基 K'uei-chi), he instead blended their interpretations and arguments together into a single text. After Xuanzang's death, Kuiji established the Weishi (唯識 Wei-shih) sect taking the *Cheng weishi lun* as his root text. Kuiji wrote several commentaries to it, most of which are extant, and his interpretations and expositions have been followed throughout East Asian history as the orthodox reading of the text. There are a number of reasons for being suspicious about Kuiji's claims, however.

While for Kuiji this text was the singularly most important treatise, there is no evidence that it held any special significance for Xuanzang, who may in fact have regretted amalgamating rather than faithfully translating the original commentaries. The last major text Xuanzang translated was the massive *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra*. Due to its size and his failing health he considered abridging his translation but was tortured by dreams warning him that omitting even a single word would be a grave error. This may likely reflect the remorse left over from his mistreatment of the commentaries he didn't faithfully translate while composing the *Cheng weishi lun*, which he had only completed the year before. (2) Though Xuanzang's eminence was unassailable, his prestige did not automatically transfer to Kuiji, who had to fight several tenacious rivals, including Fazang (法藏 Fa-tsang), a foundational thinker for what was to become the Huayen sect. Historically, Fazang proved victorious over Kuiji, since the influence of Xuanzang's orthodox teachings declined rapidly during Kuiji's lifetime. (3) Even among the followers of Xuanzang, there was some dispute over who was his proper heir, and the key justification offered by Kuiji and his supporters for his claim to succeed Xuanzang was his unique access to the *Cheng weishi lun* based on the presumption that Kuiji alone had been privy to Xuanzang's secret teachings on the text. The rival heir was a Korean monk named Won'hyo, whose commentary on *Cheng weishi lun* Kuiji attacked with polemical and vitriolic vigor. (4) Kuiji's commentary treats *Cheng weishi lun* as a catechism, refuting the erroneous theories of some of the commentaries and promoting the correct interpretation, which, according to Kuiji was invariably the position of Dharmapāla, a sixth century Indian Yogācārin. While the *Cheng weishi lun* itself never explicitly attributes any position to any of the Sanskrit authors (in fact, they are never mentioned or named anywhere), Kuiji fastidiously makes such attributions, but, at least in the case of the one Sanskrit commentary still extant against which we can check his attributions, that of Sthiramati (an important fifth-sixth century Yogācārin), his attributions are fallacious. (5) An account Kuiji offers of a secret transmission of Dharmapāla's commentary to Xuanzang by a lay-follower of Dharmapāla's while Xuanzang was in India is internally inconsistent and contradicts other contemporary evidence suggesting such a transaction never took place.

Thus, though the East Asian tradition has consistently relied on Kuiji's commentaries for interpreting the text, thereby assuming it presents and champions the view of Dharmapāla, this is probably an exaggeration if not an outright fabrication. Kuiji had much to gain—or so he thought—in garnering exclusive rights to the *Cheng weishi lun*, but he may have been overzealous, and a bit overly creative in exercising those rights.

Significant positions in Cheng weishi lun

Using Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses* for its skeleton structure, the *Cheng weishi lun* is an encyclopedic account of orthodox Yogācāra doctrine and its disputes with other Yogācārins as well as non-Yogācārins. It includes detailed discussions of the eight consciousnesses, one hundred dharmas, three self-natures, Buddhist causal theories, and the five-step path to Buddhahood (c.v. Vasubandhu), as well as sundry other topics of concern to Indian and Chinese Buddhists in the seventh century. Since this text is *not* merely a translation (I would argue it is much less a translation than is usually assumed), whether or not Kuiji's interpretations are followed, it remains our only source for Xuanzang's own philosophical and doctrinal leanings (aside from *Record of Western Lands*, which is more inspirational than doctrinal or philosophic in tone). Several of its major ideas contrast sharply with ideas that were commonly accepted by Chinese Buddhists at that time.

While the term *Tathāgata-garbha* never appears in *Cheng weishi lun*, refuting it along with its attendant ideological notions is one of *Cheng weishi lun*'s obvious agendas (which is one reason that advocates of *Tathāgata-garbha* thinking, such as Fazang, attacked Xuanzang's teachings). Chinese *Tathāgata-garbha* rhetoric compared the "pure," "unconditioned" nature of *Tathāgata-garbha* with spatiality, infinitely extended

everywhere while neither impeding nor being impeded by anything. *Cheng weishi lun* argues that ‘spatiality’ is a mental construct produced by habitually visualizing some image of spatiality that one has heard about. All “unconditioned” dharmas are similarly linguistic fictions, including one of *Tathāgata-garbha*’s most important synonyms, *tathatā* (Suchness). For many Chinese Buddhists Suchness evoked the idea of a metaphysical, subtending reality, clearly accessible only to the enlightened. *Cheng weishi lun* says: “The unconditioned dharmas are all nominal-fictions (Skt: *prajñapti*, Ch: *jiaming* 假名) established on the basis of Suchness; and Suchness also is a nominal-fictitious term.... We are not the same as other schools (who claim) that apart from material-form, mind, etc., there exists a real, permanent dharma called by the name ‘Suchness.’ Instead, (we say) the unconditioned dharmas definitely are not real existents.”

Cheng weishi lun contrasts three ‘levels’ of reality: 1. *the utterly false and erroneous*, which includes logical chimera, erroneous cognitions (e.g., hallucinations), etc. 2. *the nominally-fictitious* which are linguistic-conceptual creations mistaken for real existent things. For *Cheng weishi lun* this is a double-edged sword, since while such fictions may lead people to believe in and attach to things that are not the case, the fictions of Buddhist teachings (e.g., the concept of Suchness) can help liberate people from the fictitious altogether. 3. *Real existents*, which *Cheng weishi lun* defines as momentary, produced by causes and conditions, and producing an observable effect. Thus something permanent and non-observable, such as God or Suchness, is not real, while a moment of conscious sense-perception is real. All three are further defined as ‘conventionally true’ (*saṃvṛti-sat*). What is ‘ultimately true’ (*paramārtha-sat*) is the flux of mutually dependent, momentary conditions (*paratantra*).

Tathāgata-garbha thought, especially as promulgated by the translator Paramārtha, reified the Mind as the true, subtending, eternal cause of everything, recognition of which constitutes enlightenment. *Cheng weishi lun* sharply distinguishes its own use of the terms “consciousness only” and “mind only” from that idea. “To oppose false attachment to the view that external to mind and mental-concomitants (*citta caitta*) there are real existent perceptual-objects, we say that only consciousness exists. If you attach to ‘only consciousness’ as something truly existent, that is no different than being attached to external sense-objects, that is, just another dharma-attachment.” External objects are denied in order to focus epistemologically on the fact that whatever is known directly happens only within consciousness; that we are trapped in this narcissistic mirror is *the problem*, not the solution. Breaking this epistemological closure by turning the consciousnesses into ‘direct cognitions’ (*jñāna*) is *Cheng weishi lun*’s goal.

Finally, the idea the Chinese found most controversial derived from *Cheng weishi lun*’s use of the Yogācāra seed metaphor (c.v. Vasubandhu). Claiming that each consciousness stream has ‘seeds’ that have inhered in it beginninglessly as well as seeds that it acquires through novel experiences (i.e., nature vs. nurture), *Cheng weishi lun* spells out the classic Yogācāra doctrine of five *gotras* or soteriological ‘families.’ The inherent seeds determine one’s soteric possibilities. Three of the types represent the three traditional Buddhist images of an enlightened being: Arhat (one enlightened by studying Buddhism), Pratyekabuddha (one enlightened unassisted by discovering the causal principles at work in the world), and Bodhisattva (one who is enlightened through the Mahāyāna path). Each of these *gotras* has some, but not all of the pure seeds leading to enlightenment, and thus their degree of enlightenment is determined accordingly. Arhats have the least, Bodhisattvas more, with Pratyekabuddhas in between. Those in possession of the full complement of pure seeds can become Buddhas. The controversial aspect of this model concerns those who utterly lack any pure seeds whatsoever and are thereby incapable of enlightenment. This violated the Chinese Buddhist notion, based on the *Nirvana Sutra* and other scriptures popular in China, that Buddha-nature is universal, so that all beings are capable of enlightenment. No doctrine in *Cheng weishi lun* was more vehemently attacked by opponents than this one.

Xuanzang’s legacy

Of all the works translated by Xuanzang, the one that has remained the most popular, and which has been chanted daily throughout East Asia for over a thousand years, is the *Heart Sutra*. Famous for its line, “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” it was also what Xuanzang himself chanted at the moment of his death.

His journey to India has continued to excite the East Asian imagination. It was the inspiration for Wu Chengen’s *Journey to the West*, one of China’s most famous and popular novels (pub. 1592). In it Xuanzang is accompanied on his journey by a brash, courageous, mischievous, impatient, arrogant, magical

monkey (symbolizing the human mind). The novel has been the subject of countless dramatic treatments over the centuries, including a long-running Chinese television serial.

Dan Lusthaus

Bibliography

(For general readings on Yogācāra thought, see Vasubandhu)

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