

INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO CHINA

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Abstract: *The introduction of Buddhism in China was a significant turning point in the country's religious and cultural history. Buddhism, originating from India, entered China during the Han Dynasty in the 1st century CE through the Silk Road trade route. Initially, Buddhism faced opposition from Confucianism and Daoism, the dominant belief systems at the time. However, Buddhist teachings gradually found resonance among the Chinese people due to their emphasis on compassion, inner peace, and the pursuit of enlightenment. As Buddhism spread, it amalgamated with indigenous beliefs, giving rise to unique Chinese Buddhist traditions. This transformative process shaped China's spiritual landscape for centuries to come.*

Key words: *China, Buddhism, monk, Tang San Zhang, Cai Yin, Emperor Ming, Three Kingdoms period, Fa Xian, Yudian, the Eastern Jin Dynasty*

There is a very popular Chinese story about monk Tang San Zhang to India to fetch the Buddhist scriptures (628 AD). It is indeed true that Monk Xuan Zhuang 玄奘⁸ went to the western area to fetch Buddhist scriptures and he was the man who brought home the largest amount of scriptures. But he was not the first who did so. The earliest expedition in quest of texts of Buddhist scriptures took place at least seven centuries earlier. In the period of Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty and the man, Cai Yin, sent by the emperor to seek the Buddha. It was said that Cai met Kasyapa- Matanga and his companion Gobharana in the western area of China and invited them to Luoyang in the present-day Henan Province. Matanga was said to know all about Buddhist classics and often went to states in the western area to disseminate Buddhism. Story has it that he used the canon of Buddhism to persuade two warring factions into peace. After Matanga arrived in Luoyang, Emperor Ming treated him with great ceremony and invited him to translate Buddhist scriptures at the White-Horse Temple outside the western gate of Luoyang City. He and his companion Gobharana translated a lot of Buddhist scriptures. The first works completed was what is known as the Sutra of the Forty-two Sections. The works passed on till today and occupies an important position in the history of Chinese Buddhism. The Sutra is compiled with some extracts from various Sutras. It consists of basic Buddhist teachings, particularly the moral ones, in order to be assimilated more easily in China. When Cai Yin met the two Indian monks, he also found a painted image of Sakyamuni and he took it back to Luoyang. Emperor Ming recognized that that was the very golden flying deity with a light ring over the bald head that appeared in his dream and he ordered a painter to paint another copy for worshipping. This is believed to be the first Buddhist image in China.

⁸ Zhongguo gujin mingren dacidian 中国古今名人大词典 [Xitoyning qadimdan hozirgacha o'tgan mashxur shaxslari lug'ati]. Pekin, 1991.

But the first Chinese monk who went to the western areas to seek the Buddhist teachings was said to be Zhu Shixing 朱士行,⁹ of the Three Kingdoms period. Zhu was a native of Yuxian County, Henan Province. He became a monk when he was very young. He is believed to be the first to take vows to undertake the commandments and officially became a Bhiksu or a monk. So Zhu Shixing is regarded as the first Chinese monk in the history of Chinese Buddhism. In the course of studying Buddhist classics, he felt that the translations of some Buddhist scriptures were not accurate enough and decided to go to the western areas in quest of the originals. In 260, he took the trouble of arduous journey to Yudian (the present-day Hotan in Xinjiang). There he found the long-desired prajnaparamita sutra in the Sanskrit original. It has 90 chapters, running up to more than 600,000 words. But Zhu did not go any further west; neither did he return home. Instead, he asked others to take the Buddhist scriptures home before he died in Yudian. But the first Chinese who really went the hometown of Sakyamuni in quest of Buddhist teachings is Mong Fa Xian (Fa Hsien) which means “illustrious master of the law, of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, as the history of Buddhism recognizes. With a secular name of Gong, Fa Xian was a native of Wuyang of Pingyang Prefecture (the present-day Qiuxian County, Xiangyang Prefecture of Shanxi Province)¹⁰. He had three elder brothers who all died young. Fearing that he would, too, die in infancy, his father followed the local traditional practice of sending the three-year-old Fa Xian to a temple to undertake the ten commandments of sramanera; but he was too young to be left in the temple alone and had to be brought home. A few years later, Fa Xian caught a serious ill, almost at the verge of dying. He was then sent back to the temple. In the third day after he returned to the temple, he was magically recovered. From then on, he refused to leave the temple. His mother had to buy a small house near the temple in order to take care of him. After he became a monk, he immersed himself in the reading of Buddhist scriptures. Gradually, he found that the translations were incomplete and was determined to learn about Buddhist traditions in India and to discover authentic Buddhist writings. In 399, together with his fellow monks Hui Jing, Dao Zheng, Hui Ying and Hui Sui he set off on his journey to India. They traveled through the vast shifting sand and lifeless desert. Despite his age and illness, he persisted in the harsh natural conditions. He was grieved over the death of his fellow monk Hui Ying, who died of a disease and Hui Jing who died of cold on the way. Only he and Dao Zheng, whom he met on the way, continued the westward journey. They at last arrived at the northern border of India. It was 402. They visited as many Buddhist sacred shrines as they could, especially those associated with the presence of the Buddha. Fa Xian studied hard Sanscrit, copied canonic teachings and painted Buddha images. He arrived at Celon (Sri Lanka) in 409. It took him 15 years to complete the journey of more than 30 countries. He recovered a large quantity of Buddhist writings and returned to China in 412 and then devoted the rest of his life to translating them. He is regarded as one of the greatest monks in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Fa Xian also wrote a book, which was later

⁹ <https://www.researchgate.net/>

¹⁰ A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms; being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-Hien of his travels in India and Ceylon, A.D. 399-414, in search of the Buddhist books of discipline. James Legge (trans.). The Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1886

translated as *A Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*. The book has received a high appraisal from historians, geographers, archaeologists and Buddhists in the world.

Another great monk who made great contributions to the introduction of Buddhism into China was monk Xuan Zhuang of the Tang Dynasty.

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