

Faxian's Biography and His Contributions to Asian Buddhist Culture: Latest Textual Analysis

Xican Li¹

¹ School of Chinese Herbal Medicine, Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Xican Li, School of Chinese Herbal Medicine, Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine, Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center, 510006, Guangzhou, China. Tel: 86-203-935-8076. E-mail: lixican@126.com

Received: August 9, 2015 Accepted: August 20, 2015 Online Published: August 21, 2015

doi:10.5539/ach.v8n1p38

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ach.v8n1p38>

Abstract

To provide more updated and accurate information on Faxian, an eminent monk of ancient China's Jin Dynasty (266–421 CE), the present study conducts a literature survey to analyze his native region. It is found that Faxian was actually born in modern Linfen City in Shanxi Province, not Xiangyuan County as previously described. In his childhood, he became a novice monk and was compassionate toward the poor. To search out and collect Buddhist scriptures, Faxian undertook a westward pilgrimage to India from 399 to 412 CE. During this hard and dangerous pilgrimage, Faxian burst into tears three times. Finally, he succeeded in bringing a trove of Buddhist scriptures back to China from India. For the rest of his life, along with Buddhahadra, he was engaged in translating Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. These translated scriptures were highly beneficial for Chinese Buddhism, especially the precepts (sila-vinaya) and Mahāyāna works. Faxian himself is demonstrated to have been a Mahāyāna Buddhist follower. His pilgrimage experience was recorded in his work "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms", which provides important information about ancient Asian kingdoms. Faxian's story promoted Asian tourism relevant to Buddhist culture. As a pioneer in the 4th century, Faxian started a new era of westbound pilgrimage to ancient India, including the similar pilgrimages of Xuanzang and Yijing in the 7th century. Even today, Faxian continues to strengthen friendship among Asian countries.

Keywords: Asian Buddhist culture, Fahien, Fa-hsien, Faxian, Mahāyāna Buddhist, Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

1. Introduction

In 2014, Chinese President Jinping Xi, during a visit to Sri Lanka, said: "The ties between China and Sri Lanka can be traced back to the 1,000-year-old bond of Buddhism created by an eminent Chinese monk Fahien" (Xi, 2014). With these words, Faxian (Fahien or Fa-hsien, 法顯, see Figure 1A), a Buddhist monk in the Jin Dynasty (晉朝, 266–421 CE), again came into popular consciousness. To most ordinary people, the name Faxian is very strange and many are interested to know:

- 1) What was the life of Faxian like?
- 2) How did Faxian create the bond of Buddhism between Sri Lanka and China?
- 3) What were Faxian's contributions to Asian Buddhism and culture?

Some Buddhist devotees or Buddhist scholars, however, may know Faxian's name from his work "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms" (also known as "Account of Faxian", Figure 1B) (Faxian, 1995). The book has now been translated into several languages, including English, French and Japanese. This literature provides some important information about Faxian. However, this is limited to Faxian's pilgrimage experience to India, and seldom mentions his childhood, his Buddhist philosophy (Mahāyāna or Hīnayāna?), and his contributions to Asian Buddhism and culture (Faxian, 1995). Earlier studies on Faxian's biography, however, are outdated, while some are factually incorrect, especially the description of Faxian's native region (Kiroku, 1937; He, 1956; Zhang, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to update, add, or even correct the information on Faxian, which has been known as a distinguished scholar, traveler, and translator in Asian history.

This paper first attempts to conduct a textual analysis of Faxian's native region, briefly introduces his hard and dangerous pilgrimage to India, and finally provides a complete and up-to-date summary of his contributions to Asian Buddhism and culture. Doing so may enhance our understanding of Faxian and Asian Buddhist history.

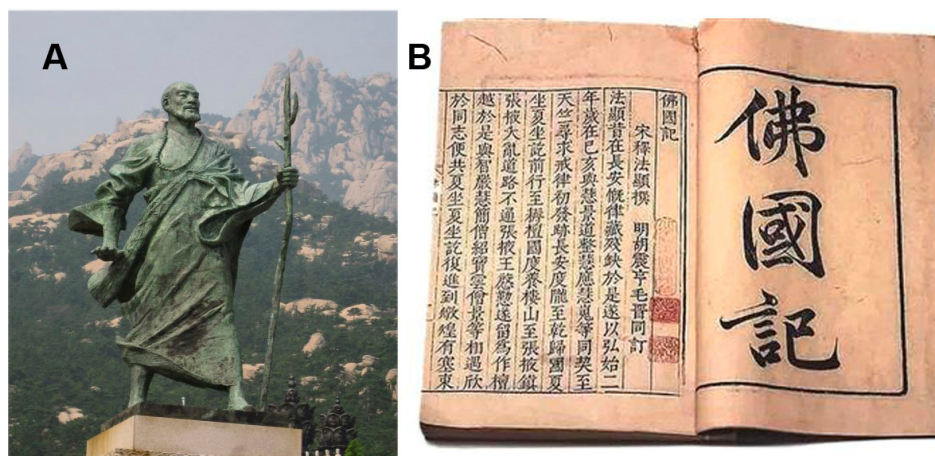


Figure 1. Statue of Faxian (Fahien, Fa-hsien, 法顯) (A) and “Record of Buddhist Kingdoms” a version printed in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) (B)

2. Textual Analysis of the Native Region of Faxian

According to Chinese ancient texts (Shi, 1992; Shi, 1995), Faxian was born into a family surnamed Gong (龔) in Pingyang Wuyang (平陽武陽) during the Jin Dynasty of ancient China. The phrase describing his native region, “Pingyang Wuyang”, is confusing. It is thought to be modern-day Xiangyuan County (襄垣) in Shanxi Province (山西) by several modern scholars (Kiroku, 1937; He, 1956; Zhang, 1997). This version is also adopted by Wikipedia and Baidu encyclopedia. (Faxian, 2015). This explanation is unacceptable, however, because it is based on the linguistic analysis that Wuyang (武陽) was a place name belonging to Pingyang (平陽) administrative region. Our textual analysis of an ancient Chinese text, “History of the Jin Dynasty” (Jinshu, 晉書), which lists place names by administrative areas (Fang et al, 2000), indicates there was no such place called “Wuyang” in Pingyang administrative region. To the contrary, we found a place named Xiangyuan belonging to Shangdang (上黨) administrative region in this text (Shangdang is in the modern Changzhi Region in Shanxi Province) (Fang et al, 2000). Perhaps because of this confusion, some ancient Chinese books in the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE) roughly described Faxian as a “monk from Pingyang” (without the postfix of Wuyang) (Zhisheng, 2013). This, of course, is a conservative statement.

In a word, this is saying that Faxian’s native region is not modern Xiangyuan County in Shanxi Province. Pingyang County is located in today’s Linfeng City (Fang et al., 2000). Therefore, the native region of Faxian is appropriately described as “he was born in today’s Linfeng City (not Xiangyuan County) in Shanxi Province”.

3. The Childhood of Faxian

The childhood of Faxian is described in several ancient Chinese works (Shi, 1992; Shi, 1995). In brief, Faxian had three elder brothers who died young. When Faxian was 3 years old, his father decided to let him become a novice monk for the blessings and protection of the bodhisattvas. However, he was too young to live independently in the Buddhist temple, therefore he remained at home. A few years later, Faxian suffered from a serious illness. His father then sent him to a Buddhist temple, in which he surprisingly recovered after two nights. After that, he was unwilling to go home and stayed at the temple. When Faxian was 10 years old, his father died. Considering the great difficulty for his mother to independently support the family, his uncle advised Faxian to return home to the secular life, but Faxian refused. In order to facilitate his mother visiting, Faxian subsequently built a small house for her outside the temple.

One day, when Faxian, along with dozens of monks, was harvesting rice in a rice field, a group of famine victims came to steal the rice. All the monks fled except for Faxian. He said to the famine victims:

“If you need the rice, you can take it as your pleasures. However, you should know, the reason why you are so poor and hungry today, is that you had never done any alms giving in the past lives. If you now still want to grab the other’s rice, you will be hopeless. I am worried about your future lives!”

Then he returned to the Buddhist temple and the famine victims gave up on their theft. Hundreds of monks in the temple all admired the behavior of Faxian.

Later, Faxian entered into the *sangha* (taking the complete precepts of a Chinese Buddhist monk) and did his best to strictly follow them. At this time, he often lamented the absence of Buddhist scriptures, especially on precepts (*sila-vinaya*), which he swore to seek out in India when he grew up (Faxian, 1995).

4. Pilgrimage Experience in India

After dozens of years, Faxian started his pilgrimage to India to collect and search for Buddhist scriptures. His pilgrimage experience in India was recorded in his work named “Record of Buddhist Kingdoms” (Faxian, 1995). Since 1886, this Chinese ancient text has been translated into three English versions (Beal, 1869; Legge, 1886; Giles, 1923), which usually describe the story of Faxian’s travels from Chang’an (長安) overland along the Silk Road through the Pamirs into today’s Kashmir, Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. The trip was extremely hard and dangerous. The present study mainly focuses on Faxian’s three experiences of bursting into tears.

The first time was in the process crossing the Pamirs. According to the historical record, when Faxian started his pilgrimage in 399 CE, he was accompanied by others, including Huijing (慧景), Daozheng (道整), Huiying (慧應), and Huiwei (慧鬼) (Tang, 1991). They soon crossed the Silk Road and arrived at a sandy desert. In such a vast desert, neither bird nor beast could be seen. They identified the direction only by the sun and looked for dead bones as road signs to their destination. The desert is often terribly hot (is described as “hot evil” in Chinese texts), which usually causes a person to die. Later they came to a snowy mountain in the Pamirs (葱嶺), where deadly snow and poisonous dragons might attack travelers. After crossing the mountain, they encountered a cold storm and Huijing was unable to walk without shuddering. He said to Faxian: “I am going to die, you should continue the mission. Don’t perish together here.” Then he died. Faxian stroked his corpse and wept with grief. He continued to move forward alone, and finally got through the Pamir mountains.

The second incident occurred at Vulture Peak (Gijjhakuta, 靈鷲山), a famous Buddhist site in India. According to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom), the peak summit resembles a vulture (Figure 2A), thus it was called Vulture Peak (Figure 2). On the peak, the Buddha spent a great deal of time on retreat, meditating, and teaching many discourses. Faxian asked two senior monks to guide him there. Then he dedicated some flowers, burned incense, and lit a lamp in front of the Buddha. He wept with grief and said it was unfortunate for him to have missed the Buddha and only seen his relics. Since this was where the Buddha preached the *Shurangama Sutra*, Faxian recited the sutra in front of a grotto.

The third time was in Sri Lanka. After learning Sanskrit in India for three years, Faxian, carrying many Buddhist scriptures and statues, arranged for a commercial vessel to travel to Sri Lanka. In Abhayagiri Temple, Faxian saw a white silk fan dedicated to a jade Buddha statue. The white silk fan was produced in his homeland China, which he had by then been away from for ten years. At that time, he thought of the hardship, danger, and loneliness of his pilgrimage experience, as well as dead or missing companions. He felt sad and suddenly tears rolled down his cheeks (Faxian, 1995).

Faxian returned to China via a voyage by sea. The whole pilgrimage to India lasted for over 10 years (399–412 CE).



Figure 2. Vulture Peak (Gijjhakuta, 靈鷲山) in India

5. Translation of Buddhist Scriptures and the Later Life of Faxian

Faxian spent the rest of his life translating or editing the scriptures he had collected. However, there is no relevant record of this in the English versions of “Record of Buddhist Kingdoms”. According to the Chinese literature (Shi, 1992), after arriving back in China, Faxian wanted to go southward, but a local chief persuaded him to stay for a winter. Faxian said, “My mission is to search for Buddhist scriptures and to spread Buddhism, this is the reason why I devote myself to the dangerous pilgrimage. Now my goal is not reached, hence I cannot stay here too long.” Then Faxian went to the capital Jiankang (建康) and invited an Indian Buddhist master named Buddhahadra (佛馱跋陀羅, 359–429 CE) to translate several Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures into Chinese together (Faxian, 1995). These scriptures included the Mahāparinirvana Sutra (六卷大般涅槃經), Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya (摩訶僧祇律), and Samyuktābhidharmahrdaya Sastra (雜阿毗曇心). Of course, there were many untranslated Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures. As soon as they finished the translation of the Mahāparinirvana Sutra, Faxian widely spread the Chinese version. A Buddhist family near Zhuquemeng (朱雀門) in the city wrote out a copy of the sutra by hand, and insisted on holding a Svādhyāya pūjā (Sanskrit; literally “one’s own reading” or “self-study”) everyday. As there was not enough room to do so, they had to deposit the sutra in a room along with the other sundries. One day, a conflagration suddenly broke out and everything was destroyed except the Mahāparinirvana Sutra. This amazed the neighbors (Shi, 1992).

It is worth mentioning that after translating Buddhist scriptures (about in 413 CE), Faxian finished writing the above mentioned Record of Buddhist Kingdoms to record his pilgrimage experience (Faxian, 1995). Faxian finally died in a Buddhist temple in Jingzhou (荊州) around 422 CE (Shi, 1995).

6. Faxian’s Contributions to Asian Buddhism and Culture

6.1 To Spread and Translate Buddhist Scriptures

According to the literary record (Shi, 1995), Faxian collected and brought back eleven Buddhist books from his westbound pilgrimage. Among them, six Buddhist scriptures were co-translated into Chinese by himself and the Indian Buddhahadra, including the Mahāparinirvana Sutra, Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya, Samyuktābhidharmahrdaya Sastra, Vaitulyanirvana Sutra (大方等泥洹經), Mahasangha Sila (僧祇戒本), and Zazang Sutra (雜藏經). Others were not translated, such as the Dīrghāgama Sutra (Longer Agama Sutra, 長阿含經), Samyuktagama Sutra (雜阿含經), Mahisasaka Vinaya (Five Categories) (彌沙塞五分律), and Mahisasakah Vinaya (Sarvastivada) (薩婆多有部律).

Statistics of the Buddhist scriptures retrieved by Faxian reveal that his collection activities focused on Buddhist precepts (sila-vinaya). Most of sila-vinaya scriptures in Chinese Buddhism are from his pilgrimage to India, except for the Four Categories Vinaya (四分律) and the new Sarvastivada Vinaya (有部律). This, of course, is in keeping with his intention for the pilgrimage to India. Faxian played a critical role in the development of Buddhist precepts in China.

Besides scriptures on precepts (sila-vinaya), some Mahāyāna Buddhist sutras were also collected and translated by Faxian, particularly the Mahāparinirvana Sutra, which preaches the idea that all beings have Buddha-nature (the nature of human consciousness and the means of awakening). As we know, this idea was first proposed by Daosheng (道生, 355–434 CE) in China. However, it could not be further verified by any Buddhist scriptures, so it was not accepted and caused a great argument at that time. The Mahāparinirvana Sutra translated by Faxian, however, reversed the trend of thought in Buddhism, and established the idea that “all the beings have Buddha-nature” as the mainstream philosophy of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism.

It must be noted that Faxian himself was a Mahāyāna Buddhist follower, despite bringing back some Hīnayāna scriptures (e.g. the Dīrghāgama Sutra). The direct evidence is that, whenever he encountered an emergency at sea, Faxian always chanted the name of Avalokitesvara (Figure 3) for help (Shi, 1992). Avalokitesvara is undoubtedly a figure in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

6.2 To Start a New Era of Pilgrimage to India

As is widely known, Buddhism originated in ancient India and was introduced to China around the first century CE. In the early stage of Chinese Buddhism, although many Buddhist monks from India or its neighboring kingdoms brought and translated many Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures, these still lacked clarity regarding Buddhist thought or precepts. This resulted in a wave of westbound pilgrimages for Buddhist scriptures. The first monk to do so was Shixing Zhu (朱士行, 203–283 CE), however, he only arrived at Yutian (於闐, 232–1006 CE) (Yutian is in the modern Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China). The movement of westbound pilgrims to India lasted for 1,000 years until the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), and involved thousands of monks (Wei, 2009),

among which Faxian, Xuanzang (玄奘, 602–664 CE), and Yijing (義淨, 635–713 CE) are recognized as three distinguished representatives. However, among the three, Faxian is regarded as the pioneer.



Figure 3. Statue of Avalokitesvara (Sanya, China)

Xuanzang, well known to scholars, travelers, and translators of Asian history, also considered Faxian as the first man to have successfully brought back Buddhist scriptures from India (Daoxuan, 2014). It was documented that the decisions of Xuanzang and Yijing to visit India were deeply motivated and excited by Faxian's experience and selfless spirit (Daoxuan, 2014; Zanning, 1987). Faxian therefore started a new era of pilgrimage to India.

6.3 To Provide Important Information on Ancient Asian Kingdoms

As we know, in the 4th century CE, there were many small kingdoms in Asia. However, most of them have disappeared and did not leave any historical literature. Faxian's record is very important for understanding these kingdoms. As can be seen in *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (Faxian, 1995), there is much important information on ancient Asian kingdoms, including as regarding Buddhism, history, geography, folk customs, and even topography. For example, Faxian observed a Buddhist stupa and an Ashokan pillar (Figure 4) in the kingdom of Magadha (now Bihar, India). In addition, he also watched a folk performance relevant to Buddhism in the capital of Magadha (Faxian, 1995). These records are obviously reliable, because they are Faxian's personal experience.



Figure 4. Ashokan pillar (Bihar, India)

6.4 To Strengthen the Friendship between China and other Asian Countries

As mentioned above, in 409 CE, Faxian arranged for a commercial vessel to reach Sri Lanka and lived there for two years. During this time, Faxian searched for Buddhist scriptures, visited sacred relics, and watched the folk customs. As a messenger of peace, he was widely respected by the local people. The mountain Faxian visited was named “Faxian Hill”, and the cave he stayed in to rest is now called “Faxian Cave”. There is also a “Faxian Temple” and a “Faxian Village” near the hill. In order to memorialize Faxian, the Chinese government set up a stone village about 50 km to the southeast of the capital, Colombo in 1980s, and named it as “Faxian Village”. In fact, Faxian was the first Chinese visitor to Sri Lanka, which is precisely recorded in the historical literature.

Obviously, Faxian’s story strengthened the friendship between China and other Asian countries, especially Sri Lanka. Since then, friendly co-operation between China and Asian countries has been developed, including through a rice-glue agreement (1952–1980 CE); senior-level exchanges between China and Sri Lanka (e.g. the above mentioned Xi’s visit in 2014), and between China and India (e.g. Xi’s visit to India in 2014 and Modi’s visit to China in 2015); and the negotiation of a Sino-Sri Lankan Free Trade Area (started in 2014). All these friendly international exchanges are believed to have partly benefited from Faxian’s story some 1600 years ago.

6.5 To Promote Asian Tourism Relevant to Buddhist Culture

Faxian’s story not only enhanced friendship between Asian countries, it also promoted tourism in China, Sri Lanka, and India, relevant to Buddhist culture. In 412 CE, Faxian came to Mount Lao (嶗山), 30 kilometers east of Qingdao (青島) in northern China. In 2003, Qingdao erected a Faxian statue (Figure 1A) and built a “Faxian Square” at the site of Faxian’s arrival (Figure 5). This attracts a lot of tourists every year. Faxian Cave and Abhayagiri Stupa (Figure 6) in Sri Lanka, and Vulture Peak (Figure 2B and 2C) in India, which are confirmed in Faxian’s or Xuanzang’s records, also attract numerous Buddhist pilgrims from around the world every year.



Figure 5. Reliefs from “Record of Buddhist Kingdoms” in Faxian Square, Mount Lao (嶗山) (Qingdao, China)



Figure 6. Abhayagiri Stupa (Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka)

7. Conclusion

Faxian was born in modern Linfen City (not Xiangyuan County) in Shanxi Province, China. In his childhood, he became a novice monk and was compassionate toward the poor. To make up the shortage of Buddhist scriptures, Faxian undertook a hard and dangerous pilgrimage to India. During the journey for over 10 years, Faxian burst into tears three times. Finally, he succeeded in bringing a trove of Buddhist scriptures back from India, some of which were subsequently translated or edited by Buddhahadra and Faxian. These translated scriptures were extremely beneficial for Chinese Buddhism, especially the precepts (sila-vinaya) and Mahāyāna works. In fact, Faxian himself was a Mahāyāna Buddhist follower. He recorded his pilgrimage experience in a work named "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms", which provides important information on ancient Asian kingdoms. As a pioneer in the 4th century, Faxian started a new era of pilgrimage to ancient India for Buddhist scriptures and influenced the decisions of Xuanzang and Yijing to visit India. Faxian's story has promoted tourism relevant to Buddhist culture, and even now continues to strengthen friendship among Asian countries.

References

- Beal, S. (1869). *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist pilgrims, from China to India*. London: Trubner and Co.
- Daoxuan. (2014). Continuation eminent monk biography (續高僧傳). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Fang, X. L. et al. (2000). *History of Jin Dynasty* (晉書). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Faxian. (1995). *Note on record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (佛國記註釋). Changchun: Changchun Publishing House.
- Faxian. (2015, August 1). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrived August 1, 2015, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faxian>; In Baidu encyclopedia. Retrived August 1, 2015, from <http://baike.baidu.com/view/30157.htm>
- Giles, H. A. (1923). *The travels of Fa-hsien (399-414 CE), or record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- He, C. Q. (1956). *The traffic in ancient western countries and Faxian's pilgrimage experience in India* (古代西域交通與法顯印度巡禮). Wuhan: Hubei People's Publishing House.
- Kiroku, A. (1937). *The textual analysis of biography of Faxian* (法顯傳考據). In J. M. He, & X. L. Zhang (Trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Legge, J. A. (1886). *Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shi, H. J. (1992). *The biography of eminent monks* (梁高僧傳). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Shi, S. Y. (1995). *Compilation of notes on the translation of the Tripitaka* (出三藏記集). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Tang, Y. T. (1991). *The Buddhist history of Han-Wei-Jin-North&South Dynasties in China* (漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史). Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House.
- Wei, D. R. (2009). Westward pilgrimage for searching Buddhist scriptures of Chinese monks. *Journal of Encyclopedia knowledge* (Chinese), 14, 42-43.
- Xi, J. P. (2014, Sept.). Let us become partners in pursuit of our dreams, Daily News (Sri Lanka), p. A1. Retrieved from <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/exclusive-xi-jinping-president-people-s-republic-china-daily-news-readers-let-us-become>
- Zanning. (1987). *The biography of eminent monks* (宋高僧傳). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang J. (1997). The Nationality, Quantity, Crew, and Sea Area of the Ship by Faxian. *Study of Chinese History*, 3, 12-14.
- Zhisheng. (2013). *Record of Sakyamuni's teachings compiled during the Kaiyuan period* (开元释教录). Guangzhou: Nanfang Publishing House.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).