

CHINESE PILGRIMS TO CENTRAL ASIA, INDIA AND SE ASIA

MAPS AND TEXT BY ĀNANDAJOTI BHIKKHU

FAXIAN
XUANZANG
YIJING

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The original transmission of Buddhism to China was by Indian and especially by Central Asian monks who travelled along the silk trading routes taking the new religion with them, setting up some of the most iconic cave temples along the way, such as the Kezelik and Mogao grottoes.

It was not very long though before Chinese monks started traveling in the opposite direction in order to bring back more reliable source texts for their new-found religion.

The journey could be very dangerous indeed, whether they travelled via the overland route through the Taklamakan desert and over the Pamir mountains, or along the sea routes via S.E. Asia.

Besides the perils of crossing thousands of kilometres through deserts, freezing mountain passes, or going through unsettled high seas, there was also the danger of pirates, thieves and famines.

These monks were prepared to make such a dangerous crossing in search of the materials they needed, normally on foot, and often spending years to get to their destination, because they believed that India held the key to the True Dharma.

The maps below are simply indicative of the travels they made, rather than comprehensive, and are only meant to give an idea of the routes they travelled along. Some more details are found in the appended notes.

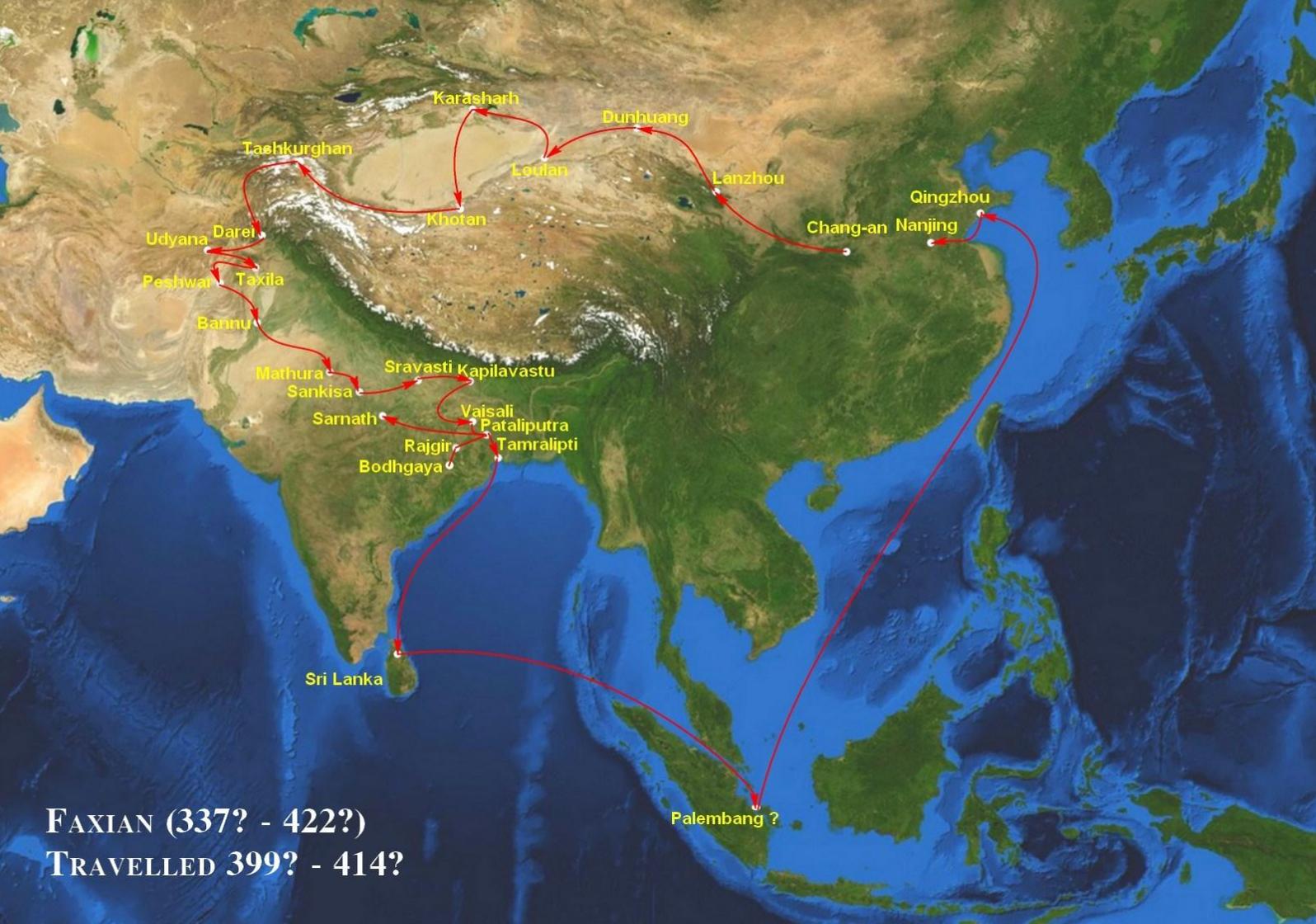
Faxian, 337?-422?

Detailed information about Faxian is hard to come by and precise dates and locations are difficult to pin down. He ordained as a child in China, and seems to have become more and more discontent with the lack of authentic texts in the country, especially those pertaining to the Discipline (Vinaya).

He set out from China to go to the West in 399 around the age of 60 and spent maybe ten years or more years there, before traveling to Sri Lanka where he spent a further two years. During the sea route from Sri Lanka back to China he stopped off somewhere in either Sumatra or Java.

After returning he spent the rest of his life recording his travels, especially concerning the practices he found in India, and translating the texts he had brought back, and died at the ripe old age of eighty-eight.

Book: A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms.



FAXIAN (337? - 422?)
TRAVELLED 399? - 414?

Palembang ?

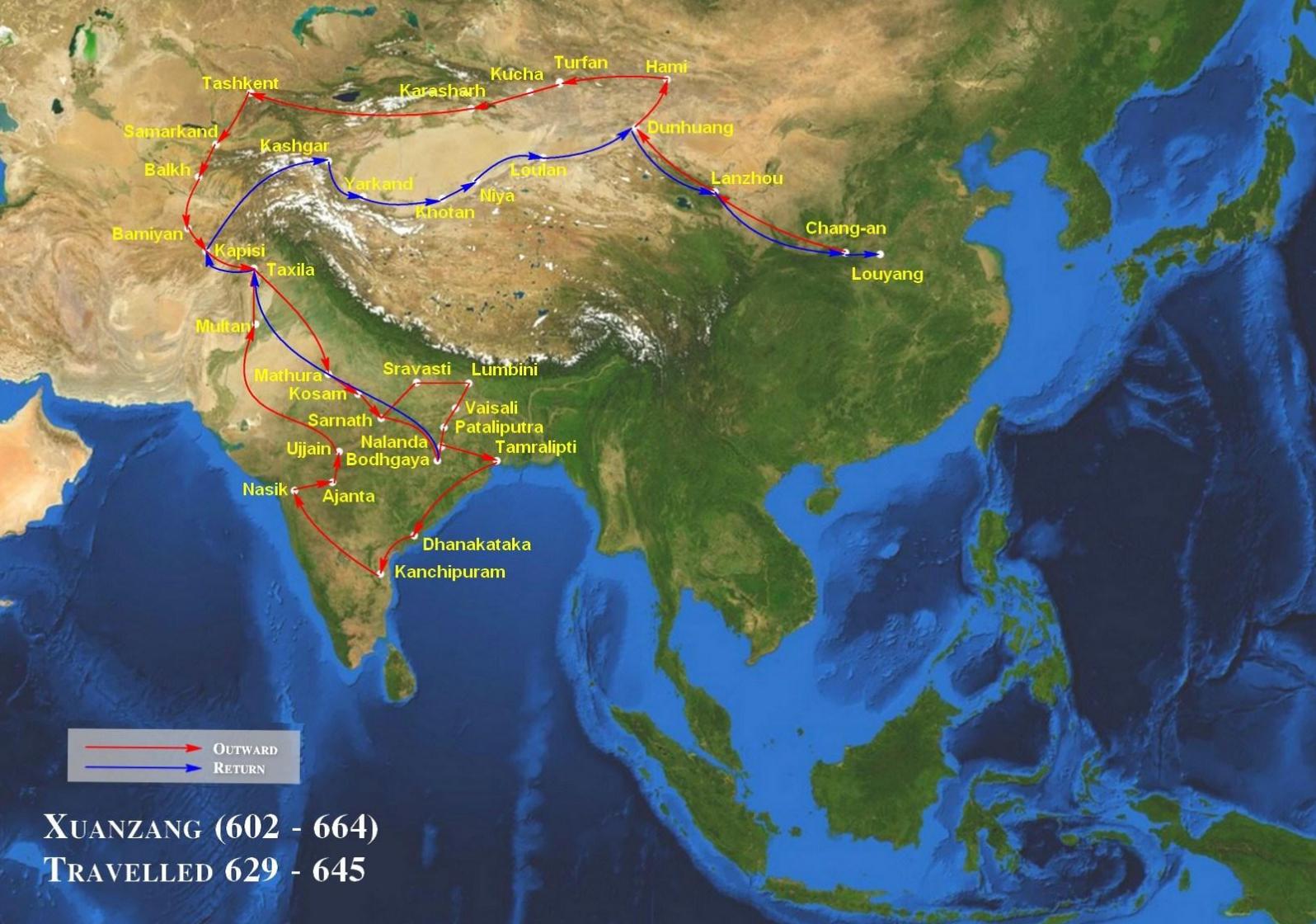
Xuanzang, 600-664

Xuanzang is the most celebrated and influential of all the Chinese monks who travelled to India in search of the Dharma. He was born around 600 and started his journey in 629. After crossing the Taklamakan desert and then the Pamir mountains he made his way to Kashmir, where he studied for two years, before heading down to the Ganges plains and into the Buddhist heartlands.

He followed further studies at Nālandā University for some years, and became a great teacher himself, before going on pilgrimage round India. On return to Nālandā he won a great debate, and finally decided to return to China with his treasure trove of scriptures, relics and sacred images.

After many adventures and life-threatening incidents he arrived back sixteen years after leaving. He spent the rest of his life translating the texts he had brought back.

Book: Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World.



Tashkent

Kucha

Turfan

Hami

Karasharh

Dunhuang

Samarkand

Kashgar

Balkh

Yarkand

Loulan

Lanzhou

Bamiyan

Kapisi

Taxila

Chang-an

Louyang

Multan

Mathura

Kosam

Sravasti

Lumbini

Sarnath

Vaisali

Pataliputra

Ujjain

Nalanda

Bodhgaya

Tamralipti

Nasik

Ajanta

Dhanakataka

Kanchipuram

→ OUTWARD
→ RETURN

XUANZANG (602 - 664)
TRAVELLED 629 - 645

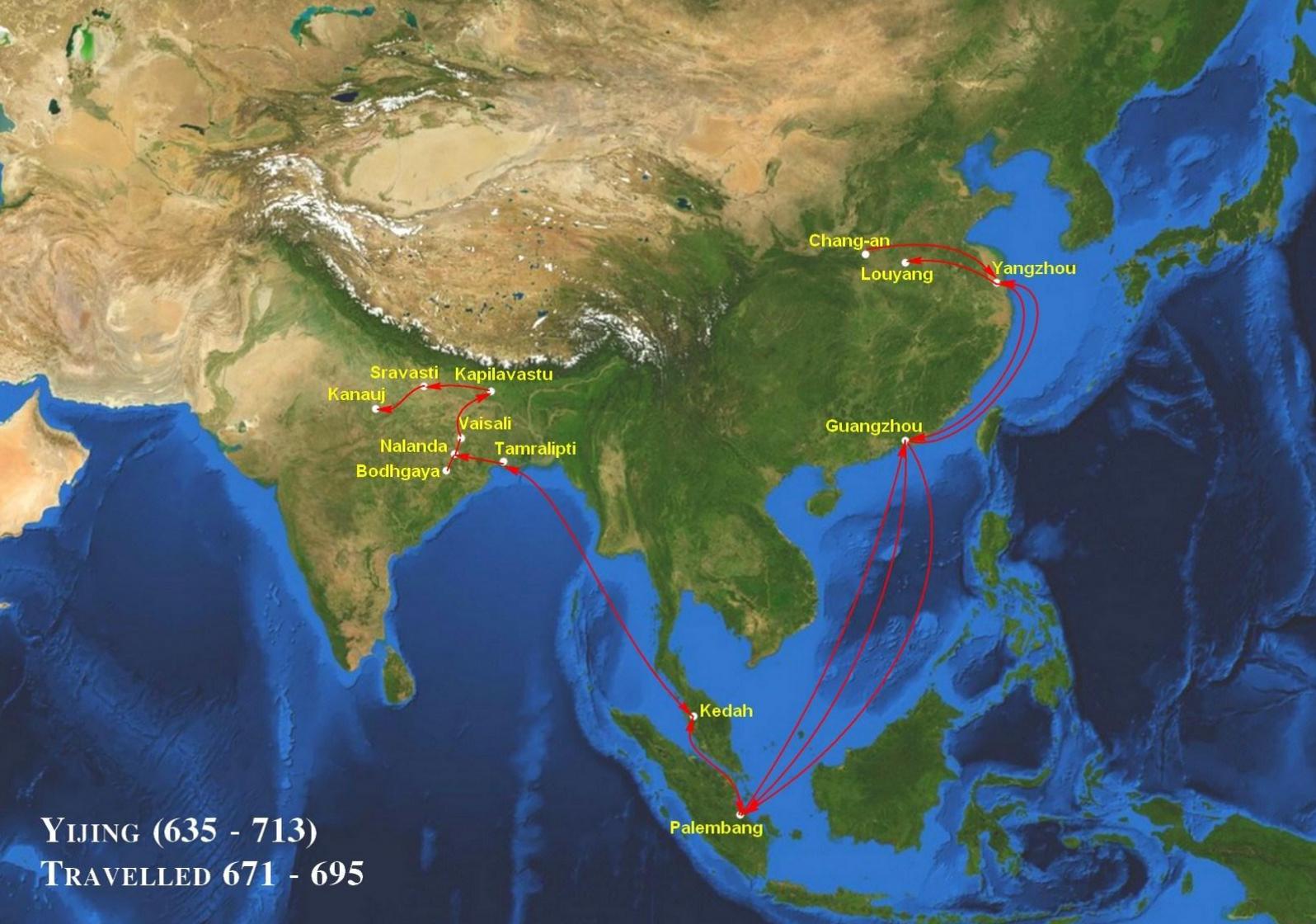
Yijing, 635-695

Yijing's works are very important for an understanding of the history of Buddhism and Buddhist sects as he wrote extensively on his travels, and the sects and practices he found not only in India, but in the Malay Archipelago also.

He was an admirer of his predecessors Faxian and Xuanzang and decided in his mid-30s to travel to the famed monastery of Nālandā in India. On his way he studied Discipline and Sanskrit in the monasteries in Sumatra and Tamralipti.

He also stayed for around seven years in Sumatra during his return journey, during which time he made translations of the more than 400 texts he had collected on his travels. He even travelled to Guanzhou and back to Sumatra when he ran out of writing materials.

Books: A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago. His second book, Chinese Monks in India, Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the Western World in Search of the Law During the Great Tang Dynasty records all the information he was able to gather about Chinese monks who had gone to India before and during his time, some of whom he met while in India. A third book Yijing wrote about India has not survived.



YIJING (635 - 713)
TRAVELLED 671 - 695