A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

高僧法显传一卷
Gāosēng Fǎxiǎn Zhuàn Yī Juàn
高僧法顯傳一卷

Being an account by the Chinese monk Fāxiǎn of his travels in India and Ceylon (AD 399-414) in search of the Buddhist books of discipline

东晋沙门释法显自记游天竺事
Dōngjìn Shāmén Shī Fǎxiǎn Zìjī
游天竺事

Translated into English by James Legge (1886)
(re-edited & updated)

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Critical Background

With the spread of Buddhism into China came curiosity about its forms in its homeland of northern India and in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where it was known to be especially widespread. In particular there was great Chinese interest in the possibility that scriptures might still exist in those far-off lands that were still unknown in China. Accordingly some self-sacrificing individuals made the difficult journey along the “Silk Road” to India, or “Tiānzhú” 天竺 to retrieve what they could find.

Two of these monks are especially famous. One is Fāxiǎn 法显 (AD 339-416), who has left us an almost blow-by-blow account of his travels, the Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms (Fóguó Jì 佛国记). That is the work presented here. Attached to this page is a brief biography of Fāxiǎn and summary of his excursion. (Link)
The other famous monk is Xuánzàng 玄奘 (AD 600±-664), whose perilous adventures something over two centuries later sought to supplement Fāxiān's collection and became the basis of one of the most beloved story cycles (and novels) of later Chinese history: “Monkey,” or “Journey to the West” (Xiānyóu Jì 西游记). (More)

Indian Buddhism at the Time of Fāxiān

An important feature of Fāxiān’s account is the light it throws on the state of late fourth-century Buddhism in the lands to which he journeyed, where he encountered many features of popular practice that often surprise modern readers if their exposure to Buddhism is only to its scriptures. Clearly fourth-century Buddhism was no more “pristine” or less “superstititious” than in later periods. On the contrary, popular practice as seen in this text looks very much as it has for the last thousand years. Fāxiān describes great honor paid to relics, the thriving worship of Avalokitesvara (Guānyīn 觀音), imposing processions, fabulous and improbable tales about the Buddha and his associates, and the allocation of state resources to support (or sometimes destroy) monasteries. And he hints at considerable hostility in some places between southern Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism and northern Mahayana schools.

As he visits the sites where he believes the Buddha to have lived, Fāxiān refers to various legends of miraculous events, either reminding the reader of tales he assumes are already known, or recounting new ones learned during his visits. In no case does he appear to doubt such beliefs, but merely reverently, and perhaps gullibly, recounts them.

One suspects that the Buddha himself would have regarded most of the miracles attributed to him (or his remains) as absurd, but it is unclear whether he would also have considered them amusing. A modern Zen practitioner would probably answer in the affirmative. (Most of these stories are also known to us from a body of literature referred to as “jataka tales,” a term technically referring to stories of the Buddha’s earlier lives, but also extended to other folklore about him.)

How This On-Line Version Differs From The Printed One

The English Text. There can be little argument that the most influential translator of Chinese texts into English was James Legge (1815-1897), whose translations of the Confucian canon rightly remain the English standard version. The present translation is a modestly revised presentation
of his 1886 edition of Fāxiàn’s work, with romanized Chinese updated to the modern spellings (including tones). The original volume contains numerous footnotes for each chapter explaining his translation choices or other background information, and he was scrupulous in using parentheses to show where he added a word or two to make the translation read more smoothly.

The present version is intended for class use. Accordingly, when practical, Legge’s notes have here been shortened, removed, or converted to a word or two of explanation in the text itself, and most of the intrusive parentheses have also been deleted, incorporating the contents directly into the English text. Occasionally I have overruled his English usage. (For example I have changed his term tope to “stupa” throughout. For him the two were cognate synonyms, but in modern American English the word “tope” is a borrowing from Mexican Spanish to refer to a speed bump.)

In general, Legge went to great pains to use Indian words for Indian institutions when Fāxiàn does. For example Legge uses the Sanskrit borrowing śrāman rather than “monk” when Fāxiàn uses the Chinese sanskritism shāmén 沙門, although he uses the more English “monk” when Fāxiàn uses the more Chinese sēng 僧. I have followed his usage for the most part, save that I have removed Sanskrit diacritics to avoid using letters missing on many computer fonts.

The Chinese Text. The reader has a choice of a bilingual version, of interest to those who have studied or are studying Chinese, or an English-only one (with Chinese inserted only for proper names). As elsewhere on this web site, traditional characters are blue and simplified ones are red.
Although the traditional (blue) Chinese text has been carefully compared with Legge's, the simplified (red) version is mechanically transformed from the simplified one, a procedure which may occasionally introduce errors, since some common simplifications properly refer to only some of the semantic fields associated with the traditional equivalents. Similarly the romanization is mechanically created by a computer program. Although it has been lightly proofed and Legge's preferred readings introduced where I noted them, it may be inconsistent or in some cases may offer common readings in place of rarer but, in context, preferred ones.

Indian proper names are virtually never felicitous in Chinese. However, aside from the proper names, Fāxiān's prose flows relatively straightforwardly and some students will find it, accompanied by Legge's translation, to be a comfortable exercise in reading literary Chinese. (Details about the Chinese text will be found at the bottom of this page.)

Some Technical Terms & Points to Note

Fāxiān sometimes dates events with reference to the Buddha's attainment of nirvana (níhuán 泥洹), which occurred at the beginning of his earthly ministry, and at other times to his pari-nirvana (bān-níhuán 般泥洹), which was his physical death as a human being.

Fāxiān refers to China as the land of Qín 秦 (after the state—221-206 BC—which originally unified China into an empire), as the land of Hán 漢 (after the dynasty—206 BC - AD 220—which succeeded Qín and became synonymous with Chinese civilization), or as the land of Jìn 晉, the dynasty—AD 265-420—ruling much of China, including Fāxiān's homeland, at the time of his voyage. The term “Middle Kingdom” (Zhōngguó 中国), which today means “China,” is used here for a portion of India. It does not refer to China.

Fāxiān rendered Indian place names in Chinese characters, which have never been an efficient system for rendering the actual sounds of any language (including...
Zhènhái Monastery 镇海寺 in Shānxi 山西 province commemorates the "Living Buddha" Zhāngjiā 张嘉 who once dwelt there. Bas-reliefs around the base carry scenes from his life.

Chinese). It is often close to impossible, starting with the Chinese name, to guess the Indian name, especially since a millennium and a half had passed between Fāxiān’s time and Legge’s, and another century and more between Legge’s time and our own. Legge tried very hard to identify place names, and to identify in footnotes discrepancies between his identifications and those of other scholars. I have taken his interpretations as correct in nearly all cases, but have acknowledged modern national boundaries as seemed helpful. (Pakistan, after all, did not exist in Legge’s time.) However I have not made a methodical effort to check or update all of the many locations that Fāxiān mentions and Legge sought to identify.

Fāxiān estimates distance using Chinese lǐ 里, about a third of a mile, or using ancient Indian yojanas (yóuyán 由延), possibly about three miles. Legge leaves both terms untranslated.

A small glossary has been linked at the top of each chapter page to provide an aide-mémoire for repeated names and technical terms. It opens in a separate window and may be closed after use by simply clicking on it.

The original book is:

LEGGE, James

The on-line Chinese file may be found at:
www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2085_001.htm

Appendix: Technical Details About the Chinese Text.

The Chinese text is presented in simplified characters (red), traditional characters (blue), and Pinyin romanization (green). In contrast to the English
translation, I have been careful to keep the traditional (blue) Chinese as perfectly matched as possible to the text Legge used, so readers of Chinese can adjust the English translations on their own if they choose. The Chinese and English texts here both began with publicly available Internet files, but both exhibited minor scanning errors (dū 妒 rather than dù 妒, zhuān 磚 rather than tuán 坳, chéng 承 rather than yàng 業, fēng 豐 instead of fēng 騰 and the like), which I have (I hope) successfully corrected by comparison with the original printed version. (Some “simplified” characters are very old and alternate in the original text with their “traditional” equivalents, e.g., yú 於 = 于 = 于. The distinction has been preserved here in the traditional version.)

Chinese characters have traditionally been an open set, susceptible of minor calligraphic flourishes and ad-hoc modifications. In footnotes Legge notes minor variant characters and some other variations in his source versions. In preparing an electronic version, it was sometimes reasonable to substitute these when the character he preferred had no Unicode representation. However, unless there was pretty clearly a mistake, I have generally tried to retain his original characters even when they were effectively trivial graphic variants, such as bì (璧 = 璧), bō (鉈 = 鉈) or nài (柰 = 棺). Sometimes the forms used in Legge’s XIXth century type font corresponded to no modern variant. For example Legge’s font has a character intermediate between the two modern writings of zhòng (眾 = 羣) and sharing components with both of them. I have not been entirely consistent.

Legge himself sometimes had to compromise with his sources because an ad-hoc character in his source was not available in his publisher’s type fonts. In chapter 38, for example, he adds a footnote telling the reader that his preferred source added the skin radical (皮) to the character for drum (鼓), presumably simply to emphasize that the drum head was made of skin. But his text could give only the standard form, as does ours, and for the same reason.

Some internet sources change the Chinese punctuation. I have generally restored Legge’s Chinese punctuation points, although using only a single level of stop (•).

Where the Chinese typefont in his original book has indicated the use of a secondary reading for a character because of its specialized use (for example yù rather than yǔ for 語 when it means “inform,” and shàng rather than shàng for 上 when it means “ascend”), I have followed his preferences,
although in some cases the distinction is not observed in modern, standardized Mandarin.

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