Reconstructing the Journeys of Xuanzang and Faxian

Explore the interactive map

1. From two journeys to a research question

In 399 CE, Faxian left Chang'an, travelled through the Hexi Corridor and the Western Regions, and crossed the Pamirs into South Asia. He returned by merchant ship through Sri Lanka and Yavadvipa, landing near Laoshan in Qingzhou in 412 before continuing south to Jiankang. More than two centuries later, Xuanzang also set out from Chang'an, but travelled through Gaochang, the Tian Shan and Central Asia, crossing the Hindu Kush into South Asia. After studying and visiting Buddhist sites in India, he returned overland through the Pamirs and Khotan, reaching Chang'an in 645. Their journeys overlapped in some places and diverged significantly in others.[1,2,3]

I wanted to understand more than where they went. What made these journeys possible? How did water sources, mountain passes, merchant ships, monasteries and political relationships shape their movements? Why did one pilgrim return by sea while the other travelled overland? Working with my mentor, I organised historical place names in Excel, reconstructed point and line layers in QGIS, and developed a public interactive website. This document explains that process and considers both the interpretations the map supports and the limits of its evidence.

2. From historical texts to geographical data

Establishing the text before identifying the location

For Xuanzang, my main source was the Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, using the Sibu Congkan facsimile of a Song Buddhist canon edition formerly held in the Fu family's Shuangjianlou collection at Jiang'an. Modern annotated editions helped interpret alternative names, directions and distances. The work describes regions and kingdoms; it is not a daily travel diary. To reconstruct Chang'an to Gaochang, I also used the first fascicle of the Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery, adding Qinzhou, Lanzhou, Liangzhou, Guazhou and Yiwu. This gave the opening route a textual basis instead of relying only on a plausible-looking path across a modern map.[1,2]

For Faxian, the principal source was the Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, also known as the Faxian zhuan, with reference to the Siku Quanshu edition. His biography in Huijiao's Lives of Eminent Monks provided additional context. His travel account continues after his maritime landing to his arrival in the southern capital, so I ended this journey at Jiankang. I did not invent a return to Chang'an to make the two routes symmetrical. This is the endpoint of the journey being mapped, not a claim that Jiankang was the final location of his life.[3,4]

Place identification drew on the annotations by Ji Xianlin and colleagues for Xuanzang and by Zhang Xun for Faxian, alongside research on the Tang Jade Gate and the Guazhou–Yiwu corridor. Existing scholarship already combines textual interpretation, mapping and fieldwork. My contribution is to organise selected interpretations into connected data and an accessible public presentation, rather than claim the first reconstruction of these journeys. Where identifications remain contested, such as Jiecha, I retain a candidate-location note. Selecting a coordinate for mapping does not resolve a scholarly disagreement.[5,6,7]

Designing fields that distinguish different kinds of evidence

I first organised ancient names, modern identifications, feature types, coordinates and descriptions in Excel. I checked the kingdom lists at the beginning of each fascicle of Xuanzang's account for omissions and highlighted country entries consistently. Countries, cities, monasteries and natural features cannot be treated as interchangeable objects. An ancient "country" was not necessarily a modern sovereign state, and a representative point cannot reproduce its historical boundaries. A country and its capital may have similar coordinates while remaining different kinds of records.

Table 1 Records in the current website dataset

Traveller	Place records	Route segments
Xuanzang	303	21
Faxian	85	7 including 3 sea segments

These are record counts in the website data, not totals of distinct places personally visited or numbers of countries. Of Faxian's 85 records, 84 are labelled visited and one reported. These labels express current working judgements and can be revised as the evidence is reassessed.[10]

Table 2 Core fields and their purposes

Content	Field names	Purpose
Names	Name / Present N; name / present	Link ancient names to modern places
Feature type	RegionType; region_type	Distinguish kinds of places
Xuanzang descriptions	NationSize / CapiSize / PlaceSize Buddhism / Language / Notes	Record size, religion, language and descriptions
Faxian itinerary	sequence / chapter route_stage / travel_status	Track order, source index, stage and personal visits
Faxian identification	location_status / SourceURL	Show location status and source links

I distinguish whether a place was visited from how confidently it can be located today. A personally visited place may be difficult to identify, while a reported region may be geographically recognisable. Faxian's data uses five location labels: confirmed, approximate, candidate, representative and disputed. They are not five descending probability scores. "Representative" describes using a point for a larger area; "disputed" indicates competing interpretations. The chapter field is a modern indexing aid, not evidence that the original book had forty fascicles. SourceURL mainly links to the historical text and does not, by itself, substantiate a modern geographical identification.[3,10]

Connecting places while checking the basis of each connection

The geographical data uses WGS84 latitude and longitude, or EPSG:4326, for storage and exchange. In QGIS, my checks included reversed coordinates, abnormal zero coordinates, duplicate records and line direction. Snapping helped repair lines that appeared close to points without actually connecting. I also addressed unintended branches, loops and unnecessary vertices. The aim was continuity between adjacent segments, not forcing an entire journey into a closed loop. Modern roads can suggest valleys and travel corridors, but motorway interchanges, roundabouts and urban detours should not become part of a reconstructed ancient itinerary.

Attribute fields organise the journey into stages. Xuanzang's stages distinguish the outward journey, travel within India and the return. Faxian's distinguish westward land travel, pilgrimage in India, the sea journey east and the subsequent journey south within China. Reported places remain a separate evidence category, not a t

ravel stage. When one line crosses a stage boundary, it should be split at an evidence-based transition and ass igned the appropriate values. Classification and colour can therefore use existing geometry without redrawin g a route simply to change its appearance.

Decisions about personal visits must return to the text. Faxian explicitly says that he could not visit Dakshina and relied on local accounts. It belongs among places described, but should not be connected to his walking route.[3] Conversely, a point far from the reconstructed line might reflect a mistaken identification, an omitted route section or a representative coordinate for a large region. Topological continuity establishes a geometric al relationship; historical credibility still depends on textual and geographical evidence.

3. Making the research accessible through an interactive website

Allowing readers to follow the journey

The website shows Xuanzang in red and Faxian in blue. Readers can play or pause the animation, change its speed, move through the journey or display all locations. Nodes appear as the animation progresses, while th e information panel shows distance along the route, an estimated date, the current location and the next stop. Parallel playback helps compare the structure of the journeys. It does not suggest that the travellers were cont emporaries or that animation speed represents their actual pace.[10]

I grouped locations into seven categories: countries; cities and settlements; monasteries and caves; stupas; rui ns and sacred sites; mountains and deserts; and rivers, lakes and seas. Readers can display categories individ ually or together. Clicking a node reveals available information on names, type, size, Buddhism, language an d textual descriptions. Faxian's records also include chapter, journey stage and location status. The two datas ets do not contain identical fields for every point, and an information card does not mean that every identifica tion has received the same level of verification. English and Chinese interfaces and alternative basemaps offe r different ways to explore the material.

Distinguishing animation from historical evidence

The website processes exported geographical data into a browser-readable format, orders route segments, cal culates cumulative distance and simplifies coordinates for animation. Distances use a spherical approximatio n, rather than treating degrees of latitude and longitude as kilometres. The displayed figures measure the dra wn lines, including pilgrimage detours and mapping decisions. They are neither distances directly recorded i n the sources nor estimates that account for elevation gain. The sea curves are especially unsuitable as precis e records of actual navigation.[10]

The dates need similar qualification. Xuanzang's timeline currently uses 627 as its departure convention, whi le the first fascicle of his biography gives the third year of Zhenguan, or 629. This discrepancy should remain visible rather than be settled by an animation. Some intermediate dates are approximate anchors, with dates between them interpolated linearly by route distance. Displayed months therefore do not necessarily correspo nd to independently documented arrivals. Years spent studying, seasonal waits and other interruptions cannot be accurately reconstructed from distance alone.[2,10]

Faxian's maritime sections are separate segments, shown as dashed background lines to indicate their schema tic nature. This does not imply that every solid land segment is precisely established. The website also autom atically flags points more than 100 kilometres from the route as possible reported places. I regard this as a pr ompt for review, not a rule for deciding whether a place was visited. Nodes are positioned along the animatio n by projection onto the route; repeated visits to the same place still require textual interpretation. Public data and scripts make digital processing inspectable, but the reasoning behind each place identification and manu ally drawn segment needs its own documentation.[10]

4. What comparing the routes reveals

Cultural contact depended on material and institutional support

Mapping drew my attention to conditions that can seem incidental in a travel narrative. Faxian received suppl ies from the governor at Dunhuang before crossing the desert. Xuanzang obtained water, food and directions in frontier regions, while the king of Gaochang provided resources, companions and letters to other rulers.[2,3] Determination mattered, but it could not replace drinking water, transport or assistance. The pilgrims travelle d through corridors sustained by both the environment and social relationships.

Monasteries were therefore more than religious buildings on a map. They could provide accommodation, stu dy, opportunities to copy texts and access to information. Cities, oases and ports connected travellers with m oney, transport and people who spoke different languages. The Silk Road is better understood as a network o f connections than as a single permanently open highway. An obstruction could cause delay, a detour or a ch ange of transport without ending all contact between East and West.

Land and sea routes coexisted

Faxian's return is particularly revealing. He did not cross the ocean alone in a small boat; he travelled on larg e vessels carrying merchants and other passengers. His account also describes storms, leaking ships, navigati onal difficulties and shortages.[3] Commercial shipping could support long-distance travel in the early fifth ce ntury, but the existence of a route did not make it safe. Religious movement depended on commercial transpo rt, whose participants did not necessarily share a faith.

The contrast cannot be reduced to a simple story of maritime progress between Faxian and Xuanzang. Nor w as Xuanzang's overland return an experiment testing which mode of transport was better. Study locations, av ailable support, political relationships, seasons and personal arrangements could all influence choices. Separa ted by more than two centuries, the travellers did not provide repeated observations under identical condition s, and their environments were not entirely unchanged. Overlapping routes suggest shared constraints; diverg ent routes raise historical questions. Explaining a particular choice still requires evidence from the relevant p art of the journey.

Density and absence first describe the distribution of records

Both accounts emphasise monasteries, monks, sacred sites and places of study. Their concentration can revea l religious spaces important to the authors, but cannot directly become a population or trade heatmap. A locat ion may appear dense because a traveller stayed longer, described it in greater detail or because one complex was entered as several nodes. A blank area may reflect an omission, an unidentified place or incomplete data entry, rather than an absence of inhabitants.

Both travellers describe Buddhist life in Khotan, supporting its importance in their respective observations. H owever, figures for monks may refer to different areas or categories, so they cannot automatically be used to calculate a rate of religious growth or decline.[1,3] Reported places likewise show that geographical knowledge could extend beyond personal travel. They do not demonstrate that information necessarily deteriorated with distance. Separating observation, report and identification hypothesis makes meaningful comparison possibl e.

5. Why monks' travel accounts are so visible

Monks were not the only travellers or the only people recorded

Starting with two famous monks can create the impression that ancient long-distance travellers were all Budd hist pilgrims. That impression partly results from selecting these particular sources. Sima Qian's Records of t he Grand Historian preserves Zhang Qian's diplomatic journeys through the practices of state diplomacy and historical compilation. Fourth-century Sogdian letters discovered near Dunhuang preserve commercial relatio nships and family difficulties.[8,9] Faxian's ships also carried merchants, sailors and other passengers. These pe ople participated in history even when their lives did not survive as complete travel biographies.

The letters of Miwnay, a woman stranded in Dunhuang, are especially important. Her accounts of hardship re mind me that Silk Road experience included dependence, poverty and the inability to leave, not only successf ul journeys.[9] Their survival and discovery were contingent, and they cannot represent all merchants or wome n. Nevertheless, they challenge the idea that the written world of long-distance movement belonged exclusiv ely to monks.

Travelling writing and surviving in the record required different opportunities

For Faxian and Xuanzang, seeking Buddhist teachings was closely connected with textual work. Finding full er disciplinary texts, learning languages, copying manuscripts and translating required sustained engagement with writing. Their experiences subsequently entered books, monastic biographies and religious collections. Xuanzang supplied the knowledge behind the Great Tang Records, which Bianji compiled, in a context that a lso included court interest in information about foreign regions. Its survival involved compilers, readers and i nstitutions as well as an individual traveller.[1,2,3] Religious use, intellectual value and continued reproduction helped preserve these accounts. This does not mean that other people never produced records.

The implications for social class are therefore about access to opportunities, rather than assigning everyone t o a rigid scheme of scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants. Xuanzang's biography describes an official fav ouring his admission to the monastic order partly by invoking his distinguished family. This does not establis h every claim in the biography's distant genealogy. It does show that the author treated family background, a bility and official recognition as relevant to opportunity.[2] Religious identity could intersect with education, r eputation and political connections. Monks were not a uniform class whose members were equally wealthy, l iterate or powerful.

Xuanzang's encounters with frontier restrictions and his later support from Gaochang show that the value of an identity depended on circumstances.[2] Merchants could possess capital and transport connections; sailors h ad specialist knowledge; monks might obtain hospitality through religious networks and training in texts. The se resources were not necessarily concentrated in the same group. Two prominent monks cannot establish so ciety-wide literacy rates or mobility patterns. They do suggest that participating in a journey and having the means to preserve an account of it were different opportunities.

Historical visibility is not the same as numbers or importance

Making monks' accounts the organising threads of a map should not turn their companions into irrelevant ba ckground. Merchants, guides, crews, interpreters, local residents and donors helped make travel possible. Yet a narrative centred on a pilgrim may give little space to their names or experiences. Visibility in the historica l record reflects activity, the author's interests and the survival of materials. A map should therefore ask not o nly who travelled where, but also why we know so much about one traveller and so little about others who m ade the journey possible.

6. Significance and next steps

For me, this project has three implications. First, it grounds cross-cultural exchange in transport, supplies, lan guage and hospitality, making it more concrete than the abstract movement of ideas. Second, it shows that su rviving sources are not a proportionate representation of past societies. These pilgrims offer important perspe ctives, but cannot stand in for merchants, women, ordinary residents or people of other faiths. Third, it chang es how I understand digital maps. Precise coordinates and smooth animation can create confidence; readers n eed evidence, assumptions and gaps alongside them to judge whether that confidence is justified.

My next priority is to complete the references for candidate identifications, record edition-specific locations a nd preserve a history of revisions. I would then like to expand the routes into a network of monasteries, cities , ports and people. Terrain-cost or cumulative-ascent analysis would require explicit elevation sources, resolu tion, sampling and smoothing methods, as well as comparisons between alternative identifications. Even a m odel's easiest route would be a comparison, not proof of the route actually taken. Merchant letters, excavated documents and archaeological evidence could help test what a picture built around monastic texts leaves out.

Faxian studied and copied disciplinary texts at Pataliputra and spent time at Tamralipti copying scriptures an d producing images. Xuanzang likewise returned with texts and continued the work of translation.[1,3] Their ac hievements extended beyond arrival or return to interpreting what they had learned for new readers. My own project remains open to examination and revision: it brings journeys from historical texts into public discussi on while preserving the questions that the evidence cannot yet settle.

References and source access

Numbered citations refer to the sources below. Historical texts are identified by work, fascicle or relevant passage. Chapter divisions in Faxian refer to a modern index. Online texts support consultation but do not replace the project editions and annotations. References without page numbers do not claim page-by-page collation. Website counts and functions reflect the version reviewed on 16 September 2026.

[1] Xuanzang and Bianji. Great Tang Records on the Western Regions (Da Tang Xiyu ji), 12 fascicles. The project primarily refers to the Sibu Congkan edition; relevant passages include fascicles 1 and 12 and the account of Khotan. Sibu Congkan text; Siku edition preface.

[2] Huili and Yancong. Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery (Da Tang Da Ci'en si Sanzang fashi zhuan), fascicle 1. Relevant passages concern ordination, frontier restrictions, Qinzhou to Gaochang and royal assistance. Praise and miraculous episodes should be distinguished from independently testable itinerary evidence. Original text.

[3] Faxian. Record of Buddhist Kingdoms (Foguo ji), also known as Faxian zhuan or Gaoseng Faxian zhuan, one fascicle. Relevant passages concern Dunhuang, Khotan, reported Dakshina, study and copying, and the maritime return. See also James Legge, trans., A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms (Oxford, 1886), including its Chinese text. Its early geographical identifications do not necessarily represent current consensus. CBETA T2085; Legge translation and Chinese text.

[4] Huijiao. Lives of Eminent Monks (Gaoseng zhuan), fascicle 3, biography of Faxian. Used to cross-check biographical information and translation activities after his return.

[5] Xuanzang and Bianji; annotated by Ji Xianlin and colleagues. Da Tang Xiyu ji jiaozhu [Annotated Great Tang Records on the Western Regions]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985.

[6] Faxian; annotated by Zhang Xun. Faxian zhuan jiaozhu [Annotated Account of Faxian]. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1985.

[7] Hou Yangfang, Jia Qiang and Yang Lin. "Precise Reconstruction of the Location of the Tang Jade Gate and Xuanzang's Clandestine Crossing Route" [translated title]. Historical Geography Research 42, no. 3 (2022): 101–109. Journal article.

[8] Sima Qian. Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), chapter 123, Account of Dayuan. Zhang Qian provides an example of a non-monastic traveller preserved in historical writing. Chinese Text Project.

[9] Nicholas Sims-Williams, trans.; introduction by Daniel C. Waugh. The Sogdian Ancient Letters. University of Washington, Silk Road Seattle, 2004. Letters 1, 2, 3 and 5 and the introduction provide evidence of commercial and family experiences. Translations and introduction.

[10] Bruce. Silk Road project website, public data and scripts. Dataset counts, fields, line styles, distance calculations and date interpolation were checked against the online version. Interactive map; Data builder; Interaction script; Website data.