

DID HSUAN TSANG VISIT THE WEST OF CHINA AFTER HIS RETURN FROM INDIA ?

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Hsüan Tsang, or Yüen Chwang, the famous Buddhist pilgrim was born near Honanfu in 605 A. D. He travelled about in China for some years and then set out for India in August 625 A. D. We know he reached his destination by the "Western Route:" that is through I li to Issyk-kul and west to the Chu River. Then passing southwest to Tashkent and crossing the Oxus he entered India via Kashmere. On his return journey he followed the "Middle Route" and went northeast to Yarkand. The Jung Ching History mentions a tradition that Hsüan Tsang practised asceticism in the Shai Ching¹ Temple near that city. The histhorian promptly rejects the tradition as impossible in face of the historical certainty of the pilgrim's routes to and from India. But I was surprised to find the same story with some more details current in Ch'ing Ch'ü. Here it is claimed that a Buddhist priest of the T'ang Dynasty, when returning from India, found that his precious sutras had been damaged by water, and at a point 48 li from the city spent some time drying them. Many years ago, also, an inscription was shown me in a Hsin Ching Temple which it is said commemorated a visit by the "T'ang Sen"². Another tradition associated with Yüen Chwang is that, when in India, he was given a seamless Celestial garment. Later he made his home in the great "Lake Temple"³, and on his departure later left the robe there. "It is probably still extant." It would be interesting to find the cause of the persistency of these traditions. Is it likely that Yüen Chwang⁴ made a detour to Szechwan on his return? I am not aware of any such event. But another solution is suggested. Is the earlier pilgrim Fah Hsien intended? He left China in 399 A. D. and reached India by the "Eastern Route" but returned by sea. In making his way north from some southern port he may have passed up Chien Ch'ang valley to Chengtu. The only other explanation that occurs is that the priest who came from the "Hsi Yü"⁵ during the Posterior Han (936-948 A. D.) with the famous Tea Bushes, now on the Meng Shan may have been mistaken in the minds of the ignorant for his very famous colleague of the T'ang Dynasty.

1. 晒經寺
2. 唐僧 Hsüan Tsang or Yüen Chwang, see note 4.
3. 大湖寺: also at Jung Ching Hsien.
4. 元奘 or 玄奘
5. 西域 or 域