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Making Sense of the Other: Reading and Contextualising Xuanzang's Representation of India

Abstract: This chapter focuses, as a kind of scholarly self-reflection, on the reading of the interpretation of Indian culture and society by the Chinese monk and traveller Xuanzang (600 or 602–664) in his *Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang (Datang-Xiyu-ji)*. Xuanzang was not only a prolific translator of Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese but also a skilful “translator” of Indian culture for his Chinese audience. The chapter addresses the hermeneutical “double bottom” which philologists and historians have to take into account when reading and analysing historical sources which represent cultures that are foreign to both the original author and the modern academic. I argue that a meaningful approach to such texts is only possible when the interpretative agenda of the “Urtext” (or the “author”) when “describing” the “other” is reconstructed through means of a careful philological reading – not only of the text but also of its dual context, which, in the case of Xuanzang, is both Chinese and Indian. After reflecting on some of the methodological and philological issues when translating and contextualising the text, I will discuss selected examples from the second chapter of the *Record*. I argue that a careful reading – applying both traditional philology and a cultural studies approach – will lead to a deeper understanding of the text, its complex structure of meaning, its intentionality and possible impact and reception beyond the usually assumed “descriptive” or documentary dimension.

Keywords: Xuanzang, India, Datang-Xiyu-ji, Sanskrit, translation

Note: I would like to dedicate this chapter to the memory of the “triad” of the “ancestral” extraordinary and brilliant French scholars and philologists Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935), Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918), and Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), whose “connected philology” has been a great inspiration and role model for my own modest research.

I am aware that my practice of using Chinese *pinyin* transliteration with heavy hyphenation (e.g. *Datang-Xiyu-ji*) may, at the very least, raise the eyebrows of sinologists. However, I maintain this idiosyncratic use of hyphens not only because it is used in the comparable Hepburn system for Japanese transcription, but also for what I deem to be sound philological reasons: a philological/linguistic parsing of Chinese terms, names, and titles does rather suggest that most of these are compounds and the separation in standard *pinyin* (e.g. *Datang Xiyu ji*) does not allow for a distinction between compounds and syntactic elements or units.

1 Introduction

Before even attempting to “do” philology, one must acquire a set of linguistic skills and methodologies. On the one hand, these are determined and shaped by the textual material that is to be read and analysed. Studying the textual material of religious traditions which historically spread beyond their cultural and linguistic centre of origin often requires engaging with a variety of source languages by the simple fact that the texts were translated into different languages. Many Buddhist texts – including those I work with – clearly belong to this category and their study requires a complex philological approach across different languages. On the other hand, those linguistic skills and methodologies shape our understanding of the corresponding texts. Therefore, I would like to start my contribution with a brief reflection on my own philological “roots,” which enable me to integrate study and self-reflection in the approach I take in this chapter.

I studied in Germany in the 1980s, at a time when there were no university curricula as such. As a humanities student, without a clear focus but with a strong interest in ancient and old languages, I was free to explore a wide range of subjects. This exploration led me to Germanic philology (Old High German, Gothic, Old Norse), classical Indology (Sanskrit and Middle Indo-Aryan languages), linguistics, and Japanese studies, while also dabbling in several other Indo-European languages.¹ My training in the first two subjects followed the classical philological tradition of Lachmann (textual criticism) and Bopp (comparative linguistics) – an approach that could have naturally led me towards a path in Indo-European comparative philology. However, rather than following that path, I ended up combining all the “strange” languages I had studied, to varying degrees of depth, into a content-oriented approach to (comparative) religious studies. The focus on Buddhist studies, which I initially approached in a very philological manner, led me to apply – or at least attempt to apply – the philological methods I acquired through the study of languages like Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan. These are “classical” Buddhist languages essential for conducting meaningful textual philology on Buddhist canonical texts, as many of these originally Indic texts were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, with some only surviving in their translated versions. My impression at that time was that these languages had not been studied in the same rigorous philological way as, for instance, the other Buddhist languages Sanskrit and Pāli.

From a common-sense perspective, this approach extended beyond the typical scope of philological comparison, as the languages compared differed more strongly

¹ For instance, I quit studying Hittite after one semester because, in a naïve way, I considered it not Indo-European enough due to its many foreign interspersed Sumerograms and Akkadograms. I studied Middle Cymric, the predecessor to the Cymraeg or Welsh of my current academic environment, for two semesters but was frustrated by the difficulty of finding the respective dictionary entries because of the euphonic mutation (*sandhi*) of the word initials.

than the ones an Old Testament scholar might study. In the latter case, only Hebrew belongs to a different language group and is arguably still an inflective language, while Latin and Greek are both Indo-European languages and therefore share similar lexical, morphological, and syntactical structures. In the Buddhist “triad,” Sanskrit (or the other main Indic Buddhist language, Pāli²) is inflective, Tibetan is agglutinative, and Chinese is typologically called isolating and written in a non-alphabetic and non-syllabic script. Thus, the comparative philological study of Buddhist texts ideally occurs on three linguistic “levels.”³ The differences can be demonstrated by the introductory formula of canonical Buddhist *sūtras*, as exemplified by the randomly chosen from the voluminous *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*:⁴

Sanskrit (Skt.): *Evaṃ mayā śrutam: ekasmin samaye bhagavān Rājagrhe viharati sma . . .* (Falk and Karashima 2012, 28)

Pāli: *Evaṃ me sutaṃ: ekaṃ samayaṃ bhagavā Rājagahe viharati . . .* (ed. Waldschmidt 1950–1951, 102)⁵

Gāndhārī: +++ *ś(r)udo ekasamae bhagava rayagaha viharati . . .* (Falk and Karashima 2012, 28)

Chinese: *rushi wo wen yi shi bojiafan zhu Wangshe-cheng* 如是我聞一時薄伽梵住王舍城 . . . (T.220.1b.8)⁶

Tibetan: *‘di skad bdag gis thos pa dus gcig na bcom ldan ‘das rgyal po’i kham na . . . bzhuḡs te . . .* (*bka’* ‘gyur, *brgyad stong*, ka, 1b2)

[Thus have I heard: once, the Blessed One (i.e., the Buddha) stayed in Rājagrha . . .]⁷

2 It is assumed that during a period of several centuries preceding the Sanskritisation of Buddhist texts, these texts were transmitted in Middle-Indo-Aryan dialects, of which Pāli is just one. The discovery of new textual material from the Indian North-West, specifically from the ancient region of Gandhāra, written in a dialect called Gāndhārī, provides another piece of evidence of the vernacular transmission of Buddhist texts before Sanskritisation.

3 This comparison of versions of the same Buddhist text in different languages (translations) was, not least, necessitated by the differences between different versions. Following the discovery of often fragmentary Buddhist Sanskrit texts in Central Asia (Chinese Turkestan), philologists like Sylvain Lévi, Heinrich Lüders, and Ernst Waldschmidt, as well as more recent scholars like Paul Harrison, Jan Nattier, Jonathan Silk, Seishi Karashima, and many others, have made use of the comparative philological study of these texts to elucidate their origin and textual history.

4 For an overview of the various studies and interpretations of this formula, see Nattier (2014).

5 There is no Pāli version of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*; the formula cited is the correspondent phrase of the *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*.

6 Xuanzang’s translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (T.220.1b.8) which reflects what Nattier (2014, 40) calls the “standard rendition” of the formula as used by the famous translator Kumārajīva. This contrasts with other, earlier renderings of the formula, such as *wen rushi* . . . 聞如是. Interestingly, in Kumārajīva’s translation and in most translations of the canonical collections of the *Sūtrapitaka*, the *Āgamas*, the term *Buddha* (Chinese *fo* 佛) is used instead of the expected *bhagavat*. See, for instance, Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (T.223.217a.7).

7 All translations are my own.

The Tibetan and the Chinese are more or less interlinear translations of the Indic original – with the Tibetan postponing the verb (“stayed”) in a semi-final form (*te*). If one somewhat disregards the autochthonous syntax of these languages,⁸ the analysis of the terminology, particularly but not exclusively in Chinese, reveals what could be called a connected philological approach inherent in the original translation processes.⁹ The attempts to either render terms phonetically – such as the Chinese *bojia-fan* 薄伽梵 / *bɔ^h-gia-buam^h,¹⁰ for Skt. (nom. sing.) *bhagavān* – or to analyse them semantically – such as *Wangshe* 王舍 [lit.: “Royal Residence”] for Skt. *Rājagṛha* – result in new and sometimes inventive interpretations of Indic terms, names, and toponyms.

In a way, what is done here could be called text-immanent¹¹ – inasmuch as such a thing is possible – philology, in the broadest sense of the phrase: “how to make sense of texts” (Pollock 2015, 1; and one may add: “words”). Things become more complicated when we look at Chinese Buddhist¹² texts that have no extant parallel – either in Indic languages or other languages like Tibetan – or that are not translations from an Indic original but still refer to Indic Buddhist ideas and concepts. Here sometimes the scholar or philologist must use imaginative skills to infer what the correspondent Indic term or concept of the Chinese text might have been. We are supposed to, as it were, look into the mind of the “author” if we want to understand the meaning of the text or a specific passage. In both cases, philological work requires not only the funda-

8 Considerable scholarly energy – and emic Buddhist discussion – has been dedicated to the “correct” parsing of this sequence, particularly the question where the Skt. phrase *ekasmim samaye*, [. . . once . . .], belongs syntactically: to the first phrase ((Thus I have heard once: . . .)) or to the second phrase ((. . . once the Blessed One . . .)). It is obvious that this discourse is a philological one aimed at detecting the “original” function of the formula as an authenticating “tool” at the start of a *sūtra*.

9 On the underlying emic philological analysis of early Buddhist translations into Chinese, see Deeg (2008/2010).

10 In this chapter, the asterisk * marks the phonological reconstruction of the Early Middle Chinese, following Pulleyblank (1991). Xuanzang and the slightly later Buddhist traveller and translator Yijing use the transliteration instead of the older “translation” term *shizun* 世尊 [lit.: World Honoured One] or alternatively *tianzun* 天尊 [lit.: Honoured by the Gods]. These earlier renderings are not easily explained philologically, but it is likely that the last element *zun* 尊 [honoured, revered] is meant to correspond to the Indic (Skt.) suffix *-va(n)t* (via a Middle-Indic *-vand*): see Deeg (2004). The Tibetan *bcom ldan ‘das* reflects an attempt to analyse *bhagavat* in yet another way.

11 The close reading (see Nünning 2013) required in this paradigm of literary theory (see, for instance, Borgmeier 2013) is clearly a *conditio sine qua non* of Buddhist and other forms of text philology (for an assessment of an Old Testament hermeneutical approach, see e.g. de Villiers 2019). However, it can only be a starting point, since a real understanding of the text and its components often necessitates a con-textual analysis – comparing one text (or its elements) with others – as well as a careful historical examination.

12 Although the Buddhist tradition was the first foreign religion introduced to China, other religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism, or Islam arrived later and more or less followed the Buddhist model of adaptation or “translation.”

mental skill of commanding the language(s) but also the understanding of the broader historical and religious context.

Sometimes, particularly in the case of Buddhist commentaries and dictionaries produced from the Tang period onward, we catch a glimpse into the “workshop” of the Chinese Buddhist philological mind. In these texts, names or terms are glossed in a mixture of Indic semantic analysis and Chinese critical assessment, partly informed by and following Indian hermeneutical tradition. A random example can be found in the earliest extant Chinese Buddhist dictionary, the *Fan-fanyu* 翻梵語 [Translating Sanskrit], dated to the year 517 and generally considered to be compiled by the monk Baochang 寶唱 (466–518). It explains the term Skt. *arhat* [saint] (i.e., someone who has reached enlightenment through the teaching of the Buddha) here being used as one of the epithets of the Buddha:

阿羅呵，亦云阿梨訶；論曰：阿羅名賊；呵名為殺；亦云應供。(T.2130.981b.4)¹³

[*aluohe*, also *alihe*; the *Śāstra* says that *aluo* means ‘enemy’; *he* means ‘to kill’; [the term] also means ‘worthy of offerings.’]

All of this is, of course, completely unintelligible without some knowledge of the Indic and Chinese linguistic context and philological interpretation. The Chinese pronunciation of *aluohe* and *alihe* does not directly lead to the Indic original *arhat* (or Pāli *arahat*, Gāndhārī *araha*; see Baums and Glass 2002, s.v. ¹*araha*, n.); what is needed is the reconstructed Early Middle Chinese of the time when the gloss was written (i.e. **ʔa-la-xa*, and **ʔa-li-xa*), which, again, does not closely correspond to the Skt. term *arhat*. The semantic analysis given in the gloss – *aluo* (or *ali*), meaning ‘enemy,’ and *he*, meaning ‘to kill’ – suggests that we are dealing with a “traditional” Indian semantic explanation (*nirvacana*) of the word *arhat* (or more accurately, the nominative singular *arhān*) as Skt. *ari* + *√han-* which shows a remarkable continuity, as it is also the basis of the translation of the term into Tibetan (*dgra bcom pa*, lit.: ‘having defeated the enemy’) several centuries later. Although none of the Buddhist Prakrits reflects the form **arihan*, in the Ārdhamāgadhī of the Jain the form *arihaṃta* is attested (Ratnachandraji 1977, 393b, s.v.) so that it is quite likely that a similar form of the word existed in a dialect used by the Buddhist as well.

The gloss in the *Fan-fanyu* is a quotation from a well-known treatise or *śāstra* / *lun* 論, the *Da-zhidu-lun* 大智度論 / *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, “translated” by the Central Asian monk Kumārajīva (T.1509.71b.19–21). However, the *Fan-fanyu* improves upon it by offering the alternative form *alihe*, which was not given by Kumārajīva (344–413) and corresponds more closely to an Indic **arihā(n)*. The alternative explana-

¹³ In the case of the *Record*, I used the punctuation in Ji’s edition (1985); the punctuation of other texts quoted is my own.

tion “worthy of offerings” then is the “correct” philological etymology of *arhat*, derived from *√arh-* [to be worthy].

If one takes this example seriously, along with numerous similar philological notes in Chinese Buddhist texts, and seeks to understand how they came into being and how they function in a broader hermeneutical context of Chinese Buddhism – rather than dismissing them as unsound and incorrect from a modern philological perspective – one must consider multiple philological levels, what I refer to as a “double bottom” in my abstract. This involves at least two emic levels, which may be called “connected” because they are what I would call contextual,¹⁴ that is, one relies on the other, as well as the etic approach of a contemporary philologist. The two emic levels are the Indian and the Chinese, which are, of course, asymmetrical, as the Chinese commentator or lexicographer had to rely on information given by an Indian “expert.” The etic aspect, then, involves applying modern philological tools and methods to understand the possible interrelation between the Indian and Chinese levels, as well as the meaning and function of the gloss.

2 Connected Philology in Xuanzang’s *Record of the Western Regions*

In what could be called Asian interconnected history, no other person arguably represents cultural connectivity through textual sources and the collection of knowledge about India more prominently than the seventh-century Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). He is regarded as one of the most productive Chinese Buddhist translators of Buddhist Sanskrit texts – some of them extremely large, like the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* quoted above – which he and his team translated from Sanskrit into Chinese. While his translation work could be the subject of an entire study, Xuanzang is perhaps most known for his record of a sixteen-year-long journey (629–645) through Central Asia to India and back to China.

I would like to start with a remark on what I consider to be Connected Philology in the case of the *Record*. I do not claim, of course, that what I dub as Connected Philology in this text is a premodern example of Connected Philology as outlined in this volume’s introduction or, for instance, in Islam Dayeh’s programmatic article “The Potential of World Philology” (2016). Rather, I want to highlight an intellectual activity underlying Xuanzang’s text that goes beyond the usual translation process by employing what I would call a comparative approach – comparing, at least implicitly, China

¹⁴ I am hesitant to call this contemporaneous as, in most cases, we do not know which Indian material and data the Chinese author or compiler relied on.

and India. This approach has to be taken into account when trying to apply a modern philological method to understand the composition and working of the text.

Some preliminary remarks seem appropriate. The adaptation process of Buddhism in China – often referred to as the conversion or conquest of China¹⁵ – represents a continuous intellectual exercise that lasts roughly until the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907). It involved negotiating the Chinese cultural and intellectual legacy against the religious practice and “ideology” of a foreign Indian religion and culture, which were not always easily reconcilable. Within a Buddhist worldview, India, the land of the Buddha and of the origin of his teaching, assumes the role of the “Middle Kingdom” (Skt. *Madhyadeśa*, Chin. *Zhongguo* 中國, see e.g. Cheng 2018), presenting a challenge to China’s claim of this spatial, almost cosmological, position. In this context, China was considered a Buddhist borderland (*biandi* 邊地, see e.g. Nicol 2014) over a long period of time. Chinese Buddhists often had to negotiate a strong cultural identity with a feeling of religious inferiority. Understanding and explaining India from a Buddhist perspective to themselves and to a sometimes-hostile environment that questioned or negated the Buddhist worldview was a constant challenge for Chinese Buddhists. To some extent, Xuanzang’s *Record* tried to address these issues by comparing India with China in cultural and political terms, portraying the homeland of Buddhism carefully as equally culturally refined as China and, in some places, even as a *primum inter pares* (Deeg 2021). This approach was quite successful, as the *Record* remained the source of standard knowledge about India across and beyond dynastic changes.¹⁶

When Xuanzang travelled to India in the year 629,¹⁷ Chinese Buddhism had already been shaped by several centuries of religious and cultural influence from India. Texts had been translated (sometimes multiple times),¹⁸ ideas and concepts had been transmitted (and adapted and changed),¹⁹ and Indian material culture had taken root in China (Kieschnick 2003). There was a significant interest in Indian geography,²⁰ architecture, art, and so on, as reflected in Chinese Buddhist texts and material culture. As we have seen, certain aspects of an emerging Chinese philology clearly developed under the influence of Indian semantic analysis (so-called etymology or *nirvacana*;

15 Following the title of Erich Zürcher’s groundbreaking study (2007), originally published in 1959.

16 Bits and pieces of information about India were still used and introduced not only into Buddhist historiography (西域記云: . . . [The *Xiyu-ji* says: . . .]) but also into the respective geographical sections (*Dili* 地理, [[*On*] *Geography*]) dealing with India in the dynastic histories until the Mongol period.

17 There is some discussion about the right date of Xuanzang’s departure from China, but 629 is the generally accepted date: see, for instance, de la Vaissière (2010).

18 Although not completely up to date, the most comprehensive overview of Chinese translations in a Western language is Bagchi (1927 and 1938). A recent critical evaluation of translations of the earliest translations and their ascription to individual translators is given by Nattier (2008).

19 For a general overview one may still consult Chen (1973).

20 The earliest documented attempt to retrieve information about Buddhist India was Shi Daoan’s 釋道安 (312–385) *Xiyu-zhi* 西域志 [*Memoirs of the Western Regions*]: see Petech (1966 and 1974).

see Deeg 1995; Bronkhorst 2001; and Visigalli 2017), as well as Indian grammar²¹ and phonetics.²²

Xuanzang's *Datang-Xiyu-ji* 大唐西域記 [*Records of the Western Regions*] could be called an encyclopaedic overview of Buddhist India.²³ Commissioned by and submitted to the second Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649, r. 626–649) in 646, less than one year after Xuanzang's return from India, it provides an account of the geography, nature, agriculture, customs, political circumstances, and religious practices of the regions he visited. In the second fascicle (*juan* 卷) of twelve, Xuanzang presents the reader with a general description of India, covering topics such as customs, hygiene, agricultural products, law, military affairs, and education. His expertise as a well-trained and, at points, almost dogmatic philologist is evident not only in his translation work but also in his frequent corrections of earlier transliterations of Indian names in the glosses or notes – such as the example of older terms for India in the passage discussed below – inserted into the *Record* and the Chinese semantic renderings which he gives of these transliterations.

For the philologist attempting to interpret this description of India, a dual philological approach that considers both the Indian and Chinese aspects of the text is essential. This is more crucial compared to other Chinese Buddhist texts because Xuanzang, the author himself, is deeply engaged in a philological task of translating not only Indian words and names but also cultural concepts to his Chinese audience, particularly to the Chinese emperor and to relevant parts of the Tang court.

In some cases, quite a lot of philological ground has to be covered to understand what is in the text. I will demonstrate this with Xuanzang's discussion of the names for India at the beginning of the second fascicle:

詳夫天竺之稱，異議糾紛，舊云身毒，或曰賢豆，今從正音，宜云印度。印度之人，隨地稱國，殊方異俗，遙舉總名，語其所美，謂之印度。印度者，唐言月。月有多名，斯其一稱。言諸群生輪迴不息，無明長夜，莫有司晨，其猶白日既隱，宵燭斯繼，雖有星光之照，豈如朗月之明！苟緣斯致，因而譬月。良以其土聖賢繼軌，導凡御物，如月照臨。由是義故，謂之印度。印度種姓，族類劾分，而婆羅門特為清貴，從其雅稱，傳以成俗，無云經界之別，總謂婆羅門國焉。... 北廣南狹，形如半月。畫野區分，七十餘國。(T2087.875b.16–29)

21 While no direct evidence of a reflective reception of Indian grammar is found in Chinese (Buddhist) texts, certain features of Indic languages have obviously exerted some influence on the Chinese language via the translations of Buddhist texts. From the Tang period, there are some attempts to illustrate or explain the function of Sanskrit declension and other grammatical features (see van Gulik 1956; Staal 1972; Chaudhuri 2011; and Kotyk 2021).

22 For instance, the *fanqie* 反切 method of indicating a pronunciation of a Chinese character by the initial and the final of two homophonic characters is considered to have been influenced by the Indian way of “breaking down” or analysing the rendering of the Sanskrit sounds into writing. For discussions of this method, see, for example, Mair (1991), who offers a more sceptical view on Indian influence, and Branner (2000).

23 The number of publications on Xuanzang and his biography is large. For a first orientation one may consult Brose (2021); on the biography, see Mayer (1992).

[As for all the [different] names of India (*Tianzhu*), the disagreement [about the correct one is quite] drastic: in former times [it] was called *Xiandu*, or named *Xiandou*, [but] now, according to the correct sounds, [it is] appropriate to call [it] *Yindu*. The people of *Yindu* call [their] kingdoms according to [the name of] the [specific] land; the different regions have different [name] traditions, [but] for a long time a general name has been used to express its beauty, [and in this context the country] is called *Yindu*. *Yindu* means ‘moon’ [in the language] of the Tang. The moon has many names, [but] this [term *Yindu*] is one of its designations. [It is] said [that] all living beings [are reborn] in the incessant circle [of rebirth], [are engulfed] in a long night of ignorance with no herald of daybreak, just as if the bright sun has already sunk,²⁴ [and only] the glow-worms continue [to glow]; [and] even when the stars are shining – how could [they] be as bright as the moon! According to this very fact, [*Yindu*] is compared with the moon. This land excels in a continuous lineage of sages²⁵ [who] guide [its] inhabitants like the moon is shining down [on earth]. Because of this reason, it is called *Yindu*. The castes and clans of *Yindu* are multiple, but the *poluomen* (*brāhmaṇa*) are considered to be particularly pure and distinguished, [and] from their noble name it has become a custom – without referring to the different [internal] borders – to call [it] generally the ‘Kingdom of the *brāhmaṇas*’. [. . .] [Its] northern [part] is wide, [and] its southern [part] is narrow, [so that its] form is like a half-moon. [It] is divided into more than seventy kingdoms.²⁶]

This discussion of the different names for India, describing the subcontinent inside the borders indicated by Xuanzang, is clearly presented from a Chinese perspective, as noted by Thomas Watters (1904, 131). It seems as if Xuanzang wants to make a point of the “correct” name for India, *Yindu*, though Yijing 義淨 (635–713), the other famous Chinese traveller to India, emphasises in his *Nanhai-jigui-neifa-zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 [*Record of the Inner Law Sent Back [to China] from the Southern Sea*] that this name is not very widely used:

或有傳云：印度譯之為月；雖有斯理，未是通稱。（T.2125.222a.18）

[There is another tradition calling [India] *Yindu* and translating this as ‘moon’; although this is correct, [it] is not a common name.]

As far as I know, no Indian source refers to India as a geographical unit called *Indu*; the most common term in Indian texts that could be identified with the subcontinent

²⁴ The metaphor in this phrase is a clear reference to the common Buddhist comparison of the Buddha after his *parinirvāṇa* as a sun which has disappeared and has left the world – or rather the part of the world which ignores the *dharma* of the Buddha – in the darkness of ignorance (Skt. *avidyā*, ambiguous in Chinese *wuming* 無明, which can mean both ‘without light’ and ‘without knowledge’).

²⁵ This may be an allusion to Skt. *Āryavarta* (see below).

²⁶ This does not correspond to the number of Indian kingdoms which are actually described in the *Record* (c. 80) but seems to be based on the traditional symbolism of the number: according to the classical Chinese sources, King Wu 武 (trad. 1076–1043 BCE), who is considered the founder of the of the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty in Chinese tradition, had established seventy-one enfeoffed kingdoms (*Xunzi* 荀子, *Ruxiao* 儒效, ICS 8/27/16).

is *Jambudvīpa*,²⁷ a name which was already used in this meaning by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka.²⁸ Nevertheless, Xuanzang's efforts proved effective, as evinced by the frequent references to his explanation in the Chinese Buddhist sources, as well as by the fact that *Yindu* became the standard name for India in Chinese – a usage that persists to this day. It should be pointed out that the similarity of the Western onomastic *India* and *Yindu* is purely coincidental.²⁹

There is some philology at work when Xuanzang presents and criticises the old Chinese names for India and tries to establish *Yindu*, Skt. *Indu*, as the correct one. Starting from the most common Chinese name for India, *Tianzhu* 天竺, his argument for rejecting the others – interestingly, not *Tianzhu* itself – is that they are diverse. Xuanzang translates *Yindu* as “moon” (yue 月), and from this meaning, he develops two aetiologies, both allegorically linked to the enlightening capacity of the moon. The first is more Buddhist, obviously playing on the metaphor of the sun disappearing – representing the Buddha who has entered *nirvāṇa* and no longer “enlightens” the world. The second draws from the same metaphorical aspect but in a more generalised way: India is called “moon” because it has been and is populated by sages who enlighten its population. Although this allows for the inclusion of eminent Buddhist monks like the Buddha's disciples and their successors, this explanation almost seamlessly leads to the more “Brahminical” name of India as the “Kingdom of the *Brāhmaṇas*” (*Poluomen-guo* 婆羅門國). It is slightly odd that Xuanzang does not pick up the more rational explanation based on the half-moon shape of the subcontinent given by himself some lines further down. This may be due to the fact that in other Buddhist texts the shape of the continent *Jambudvīpa* is given as that of a chariot or wagon (broad chassis and narrow at the drawbar). Furthermore, in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* translated into Chinese by Xuanzang (and his team) it is the continent *Pūrvaideha* which is described as possessing a half-moon shape:

東勝身洲周匝八千踰繕那量，形如半月，人面亦爾。(T.220.957c.11–12)

27 For an overview of the cosmological aspect of *Jambudvīpa* in the three major Indian traditions (Brahmanism-Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), see Kirfel (1920).

28 Minor Rock Edict I (Rūpnāth): *yā [i]māya kālāya Jambudīpasi amisā devā husu te dāni m[ī]s[ā] kaṭa* (Ed. Hultzsch 1969 [1925], 166 and 228–229) [But during that time men [i.e. when Aśoka had become more active as a Buddhist layman] in *Jambudvīpa*, who were unmingled with gods, were made to mingle with them] (tr. Olivelle 2023, 279). As Olivelle observes, the term *Jambudīpa* (var. *Jambudīpa*, [land mass]) is used for the subcontinent here rather than for a polity like the Mauryan empire which was not in control of the whole subcontinent; see Olivelle (2023, 19, 45, 47, passim).

29 As is well known, the name India (German: *Indien*, French: *Inde*, etc.) goes back to classical Greek geography. In Greek, this is a loan from the Iranian name for the river Indus, *Hindu*, Skt. *Sindhu* (Iranian *h* vs. Indic *s*). See Wecker (1916, 1268).

[The continent ‘Eastern Excellent Body’ [i.e.: *Pūrvavaideha*] has a circumference of eight thousand *yojanas*, has the shape of a half-moon, and the face of the people is also like that.]³⁰

Looking at the onomastic range of the Chinese terms for India from a “connected” and etic philological standpoint, there are some points to be examined and explained. First, all the name forms given by Xuanzang, including his preferred term *Yindu*, likely go back, like the classical Greek name, to an Iranian form of the name of the river Indus (Skt. *Sindhu*), as shown in the following list:

Tianzhu 天竺 / **then-truwk*: Iranian **hinduka* (see Pahlavi *hindug*).

Shendu 身毒 / **cin-dəwk*:³¹ via Han pronunciation (*shen* 身 / **xin*) Iranian **hinduka*.

Xiandou 賢豆 / **ɣen-dəwh*: Iranian *hindu*.

Yindu 印度 / **ʔinh-dəh*: Skt. *indu*.

While the three “old” names derive from an Iranian name or word, Xuanzang’s proposed name *Yindu* is irregular, as it drops – like the Western forms of the name derived from Greek – the consonantal initial of the Iranian form (aspiration or fricative). The reconstructed Sanskrit form *indu* (originally meaning ‘drop,’ then *soma*, the ancient Indo-Aryan sacrificial intoxicant offered to the Vedic gods) is indeed one of the Sanskrit words for “moon,” but, as far as I can tell, it is not attested as a toponym. So, one could assume that Xuanzang’s name for India, *Yindu*, is the invention of a folk-etymologist who, rather forcefully, wanted to make a connection of a Sanskrit word with the old Iranian *hindu(ka)*, by simply ignoring the initial *h*.

There is, however, evidence of similar *h*-less name forms coming from Central Asia: in Tokharian B we find *yentuke* [Indian] (Adams 1999, 505); (Iranian) Sogdian has *induka* – with forms like *ʔyntʷk* / *induk*, etc., *ʔyndwkstan* / *indukastan*, *yntwkʹny* / *indukānē* (Gharib 1995, 87, no. 2207–2209, and 447, no. 10996); the (Iranian) Bactrian adjective *hindugān* very likely had an unstable initial *h*.³² The Uigur word for India or Indian is *änātkāk* (‘NʹTKʹK) which is explained as a loanword from a Sogdian form of the name (Röhrborn 1998, 378–379, s.v.). In this respect, Xuanzang’s biography seems

³⁰ In the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā* also translated by Xuanzang, only the half-moon-shaped faces are mentioned (T.1545.868a.9–10): 毘提訶人面如半月。[The faces of the people of *Videha* [look] like a half-moon.] This idea that one of the continents has the shape of a half-moon, however, is already old: in the *Shiji-jing* 世記經 of the *Dirghāgama* / *Changahan-jing* 長阿含經, which has no parallel in the Pāli *Dīghanikāya*, the continent *Godanīya* is described exactly in the same way (T.1.115b.17–18): 須彌山西有天下, 名俱那尼; 其土形如半月, 縱廣八千由旬; 人面亦爾, 像彼地形。[West of Mount *Sume[ru]* is a world called *Godanīya*; the shape of this land is like a half-moon with a breadth and length of eight thousand *yojana*; the faces of humans are also like that, resembling the shape of this land]; see also *Ekottarikāgama* / *Zengyi-ahan-jing* 增壹阿含經 (T.125.656b.14–15).

³¹ The underlying name here cannot be an Indian one starting with a sibilant (**sindhuka*), as the Chinese standard transliteration reflects an initial *ś* (**śindhuka*), which does not exist in Indic languages (Prakrit; see Gāndhārī *sidhalavaṇa* [salt from Sindh], Baums and Glass 2002, s.v. *sidhalavaṇa*, n.).

³² Personal information by Nicholas Sims-Williams from 6 May 2012.

to be astonishingly correct when it has the Turkic *khagan* say that Xuanzang should not go to *Yintejia* 印特伽 / *ʔjin^h-dək-gia:

因留停數日，勸住曰：“師不須往印特伽國（謂印度也）彼地多暑，十月當此五月。觀師容貌，至彼恐銷融也。其人露黑，類無威儀，不足觀也。” (T.2053.227b.22–26)

[Because [Xuanzang only wanted to] stay for a [certain] number of days, [the Turkic *khagan* tried to] persuade [him] to stay with the words: “There is no need for the teacher to go to the kingdom of *Yintejia*³³ (which means *Yindu*) [as] this land is very hot [for a period of] ten months, equivalent to the five months [of heat] here [in our region]. [When I] look at the [physical] appearance of the teacher [I] fear that [he] will melt away as soon as [he] arrives there. The people there are naked and dark[-skinned and] are not worth looking at.”]

Another interesting piece of evidence supporting the Central Asian (Tokharian / Kutchean) origin of the name *Yintejia*’s comes from a treatise on translating from Sanskrit (*fan* 梵) and Central Asian languages (*hu* 胡) into Chinese in the biography of the Central Asian monk Manyue 滿月 (Tang period) in the *Song-Gaoseng-zhuan* 宋高僧傳 [*Biographies of Eminent Monks from the Song [Dynasty]*]:

如據宗本而談，以梵為主。若從枝末而說，稱胡可存。何耶？自五天至嶺北，累累而譯也。乃疑琮公留此，以待今日亦不敢讓焉三；亦胡亦梵。如天竺經律傳到龜茲，龜茲不解天竺語 – 呼天竺為印特伽國者 – 因而譯之，若易解者，猶存梵語。 (T.2061.723c.11–17)

[If [one] discusses the essence of the teaching [of the Buddha, one should] make Sanskrit the basis. If [one] explains the minor points, what is called Hu³⁴ [languages] can be retained. From the Five Indias³⁵ to the North of the mountain ranges there are countless translations; hence, there is doubt that the original teaching³⁶ is preserved in [them], so that at present no one dares to let the [texts be translated through] three [different languages]: [it is] either the Hu [language] or Sanskrit. When the *sūtras* and the *vinayas* are transmitted to *Qiuci* (i.e., Kucha), the Kucheans do not understand the language of India – [they] call India (*Tianzhu*) kingdom of *Yintejia* – and therefore the [texts] are translated. If it is easy to understand [however], it should completely remain in Sanskrit.]

Historically, it is quite plausible that an unaspirated form of the Iranian name *Hindu* made it back to India from a Central Asian context, likely during the Kuṣāna empire, which aligns with the period from which most of the early Chinese name forms origi-

33 It is striking that Li (1995, 43) translates the name as Indica, borrowing the famous title of the Greek author Megasthenes’ work on India, even though the two names are similar only by coincidence (see above).

34 *Hu* 胡 – often translated as “barbarian” – refers to Central Asia, explained a few lines earlier (and alluded to later in this passage) in the text as the regions north of the mountain range (of the Pamir-Karakorum).

35 *Wu-Tian(zhu)* 五天(竺) refers to the five major (schematic) parts of India: South, North, East, West, and Central.

36 I read *congong* 琮公 as *zongong* 宗公 [ancestor] here.

nate. In this unaspirated form, it may have undergone a reinterpretation as Skt. *indu* [moon], which would then form the basis for the explanation given by Xuanzang.

Beyond the historical contextualisation and explanation of the different names, the broader question related to the passage discussed is the following: what was the intention behind Xuanzang's strong insistence on the correctness of and his promotion of the "new" name for India (*Yindu*)? The presentation of India as a single entity – both topographically and politically – was not self-evident and is informed by geographical and cultural-religious factors. On the one hand, the Buddhist cosmological name or term *Jambudvīpa* [Continent (lit.: Island) of the Rose-Apple Tree],³⁷ while obviously based on the geographical shape of the Indian subcontinent, extends beyond this scope to include other regions of the known (or partly known) world.³⁸ On the other hand, the Brahminical concept of an *Āryavarta*, or something similar to Xuanzang's *poluomen-guo* 婆羅門國 [Kingdom of *Brāhmaṇas*], which may be reconstructed as Skt. **Brāhmaṇadeśa* or **Brāhmaṇarāṣṭra* – a *Brāhmaṇavarta* [Region of the *Ārya* / *Brāhmaṇa*] – is too narrow for a comprehensive idea of India, as it is restricted to certain regions in the Northwest of the subcontinent where the "ideal" *brāhmaṇas* live (Minkowsky 2010). What then is Xuanzang trying to "sell" or to "translate" as India to his Chinese readership?

I suggest that conceptualising and presenting India under a specific name not yet known in China was crucial for "selling" the Indian empire as a comparable polity or realm (*tianxia* 天下 [Under Heaven]) to the Tang emperor and court – a theme which recurs several times in the *Record* (Deeg 2012; 2016). Even though Xuanzang does not describe this India in political terms, and despite the fact that the contemporary North Indian king Harṣavardhana Śīlāditya (r. 606–647) only ruled over a fraction of the north of the subcontinent, the monk's educational-didactic intention was to present the Indian ruler as equal, or even superior in terms of being a Buddhist ruler, to the Tang emperor (Deeg 2016). The Indian king therefore had to rule over a united empire like the Tang monarch. That this was behind the concept of a Greater India is suggested by Xuanzang in his own narrative of the ascension to the throne of Harṣa, where it is prophesised by the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara that the prince-to-be-king

37 For a critique of the common translation of *jambu* as "roseapple tree," see Wujastyk (2004).

38 Chinese Buddhists used this open idea of *Jambudvīpa* for locating themselves in this Buddhist sphere of bliss. For instance, they allegedly found Buddhist relics, which, according to the Buddhist tradition, were distributed by king Aśoka throughout the whole *Jambudvīpa* in their own region. It is interesting to see that, despite the propagation of the concept of *Yindu* in the *Record*, the old and obviously more powerful notion of *Jambudvīpa* was reintroduced into East-Asian Buddhist mapping. However, the reintroduction retained the details from Xuanzang's geographical pattern in the *Record*, thereby overwriting the cosmological implications of the term (central Mount *Sumeru*, the four main rivers flowing into the four cardinal directions) and thus creating near unity between *Jambudvīpa* and the India (*Yindu*) of the *Record*. For these Buddhist maps and their development, see Moerman (2022).

“will rule the whole of India.”³⁹ This is even more clearly expressed in the encyclopaedic works of Xuanzang’s collaborator Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) in the *Shijia-fangzhi* 釋迦方志 [*Memoirs of the Regions of Śākyamuni*] and his contemporary Daoshi 道世 (?–683) in the *Fayuan-zhulin* 法苑珠林 [*Forest of Pearls of the Dharma Garden*] who, after quoting the respective passage about the seventy polities, both add that India is, like China, “under one rule.”⁴⁰

3 As a kind of conclusion

Reflecting on one’s own philological approach is and should be an ongoing self-critical process which can hardly be conclusive. I hope to have demonstrated that reading and interpreting premodern texts like Xuanzang’s record involves multiple connected levels of philology which have to be fully appreciated before an attempt can be made at reaching a more contextual understanding of the text. For me, Xuanzang’s presentation of his material exemplifies what James Turner (2014, x) defines as philological work: it is “comparative” – translating “India” to “China” – and often employs a “genealogical” approach by tracing the origins of words, phenomena, or stories. In following this emic philological approach – following the implicit comparisons and the genealogical-etiological explanations of the text’s agent (*auctor-cum-compiler*) – I am just trying, like an old-fashioned philologist, to come to a more complex understanding of the text and its multiple layers of meaning and intentionality. I am very aware that, by employing traditional philological methods, I am not (yet) “beyond comparison.”⁴¹ However, the Tang monk certainly has transcended this worldly sphere in many ways, embodying the Buddhist virtue of a *bodhisattva: pāramita*, “having gone beyond.”

39 慈悲為志，傷感居懷，不久當王五印度境。(T.2087.894b.17–18) [By making compassion your will and having sympathy for the trouble of the people, [you] will soon become ruler of the five [parts of] India].

40 *Shijia-fangzhi: tong yiwang-ming* 同一王命 (T.2088.954b.9–10, and in Xuanzang’s biography in Daoxuan’s *Xu-gaoseng-zhuan* 續高僧傳 [*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*], T.2060.448b.2); that Zhipan’s 志磐 (c. 1220–1275) encyclopaedic historiography *Fozu-tongji* 佛祖統紀 [*Comprehensive Record of the Buddha and the Patriarchs*] from the Song period (960–1279) quotes this phrase as being in the *Datang-Xiyu-ji* (T.2035.315c.25) may be an indication of a version of the *Record* which contained this phrase. *Fayuan-zhulin: yi yiwang-ming* 依一王命 (T.2122.498a.15–16).

41 [Note by editors: This volume is the outcome of the conference “Beyond Comparison: Towards a Connected Philology.”]

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