Transcending Space: Buddhist Travelogues across Cultural and Other Borders

Max Deeg

Abstract

This chapter looks at the spatial dimension of "transcendence" in the records of Chinese Buddhist "pilgrims," particularly in Xuanzang's "Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang." Spatiality provides the basic concepts and metaphors for orientation in general and more specifically for the formal representation of transcendence. The travelogues are analysed according to different semiotic aspects used to express transcendence, such as religious-cultural or geographical (rivers, mountain ranges) borders or objects (*stūpa*s, statues). A higher degree of transcendence – for instance, at Bodhgayā – is often expressed by a higher density of 'sacred spots' defined by narratives.

Keywords

transcendence – Buddhism – sacred places – pilgrimage – India – Xuanzang

1 Introduction

My time as a fellow in Bochum fell into the year 2016–17 when the general topic – I have to confess: to my horror at first – was "the evolving of the distinction between transcendence and immanence as triggered by intra- and interreligious encounter" (academic year October 2016–September 2017). When I read the exposé on the TID (transcendence-immanence-distinction) – the "Leitlinie" by Knut Martin Stünkel[1] – I became a little bit more confident that I could indeed apply the material of my ongoing research project, a study (translation and extensive commentary) of the 7th century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang's 玄奘 'travelogue' and his journey to and his stay in India

---

1 Knut Stünkel, "The three-level model of transcending" (2016, unpublished manuscript for the Academic Session 2016–17, CERES).

(629–645), to the theoretical framework of the year's thematic focus. In the following contribution, I will engage some general observations about transcendence in narrative and 'descriptive' text genres with selected examples from the Chinese Buddhist travelogues[2] some of which I discussed in my presentation as CERES-fellow which bore the rather bulky title "From Ominous Appearance to Individual Miracle: Narrative References to the Transcendent in Xuanzang's Datang-Xiyu-ji [大唐西域記, "Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang [Dynasty]"] and Huili's 慧立 biography Datang-Daciensi-sanzang-fashi-zhuan [大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, "Biography of the Tripiṭaka Dharma-master of the Great Cien Monastery of the Great Tang [Dynasty]" (Biography)]. The present contribution is based on the ideas and thoughts developed in that presentation and expands it considerably.

2 Buddhism and Transcendence

When I thought through the three stages of transcendence proposed by Knut Stünkel, the basic one of pointing (or deixis), the formal one of "going beyond oneself," and the specific one of an expressive and dichotomic distinction between immanence and transcendence, I – as probably every scholar working in the field of Buddhist Studies – immediately thought of two dichotomic terminological and conceptual pairs as an example for a Buddhist distinction of the third stage or category.

In a Buddhist context transcendence is clearly expressed by space metaphors around the concept of 'crossing over'.[3] The term *kat exechon* for transcendence is Skt. *pāramitā* (and its translations into Chinese and Tibetan), traditionally interpreted as meaning "having gone to the other shore"

---

2 For an overview of the texts (Faxian 法顯, Song Yun 宋雲, Xuanzang 玄奘, Yijing 義淨, Hyecho/Huichao 慧超) and their reception history see M. Deeg, "The historical turn: How Chinese Buddhist travelogues changed Western perception of Buddhism," *Hualin Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 43–75. Unfortunately the texts, biographical ones as well as travelogues, have attracted a lot of popular attention and in writing about them the term "transcendence" (and the attribute "transcendent") are used and applied in a naïve way: see, for example, P. Weeravardane, "Journey to the West: Dusty Roads, Stormy Seas and Transcendence," *biblioasia* (*National Library Singapore*) 5 (2009), no. 2: 18, who states, in a typically romantic way, that the Chinese travellers "… bring to us, at the beginning of the 21st century, the awareness of a rich and diverse Asian cultural heritage that has transcended time and place."

3 This concept is, of course, not restricted to Buddhism. The Jains call their Jinas "ford-makers" (*tīrthaṅkara*). On the "crossing" nature of Hindu *tīrtha*s see Diana Eck, "India's 'Tīrthas': 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 323–344.

(*pāra(m) + itā*), and the 'canonical' texts (*sūtra*) contain plenty of references to this soteriological metaphor of crossing a water body (river, ocean), sometimes by a raft or a boat. The distinction between immanence and transcendence is most clearly, although not completely congruent with the 'usual' distinction,[4] formulated in the two terms *laukika*, "worldly, mundane," and *lokottara*, "transcending the world."[5] Although these concepts are valid and will work in a lot of Buddhist contexts, the discursive use of this terminology is restricted to doctrinal-philosophical texts and commentarial literature. In narrative and 'descriptive' sources as the ones I am working with, the terms will not be found very often. Instead, we will have to look out for semiotic placeholders referring to transcendence indirectly, or, to use Stünkel's terminology, pointing at transcendence.

Following up on the spatial connotation of the terms discussed in the previous paragraph (shore, crossing) I found it striking that the narratives and naturally the 'descriptive' parts of the travelogues in my sources, in the biographical literature but also in the travelogues, were not always but often enough linked to some particular space, place or site bearing a specific religious importance or meaning that may be understood as referring to transcendence. This raised the question of the role and function of narratively constructed space in general and more specifically in relation to the TID.[6] I particularly want to emphasize the constructed or 'fictional' dimension of my sources[7] because of the tendency to read them, particularly the travelogues, as historical 'eyewitness' reports',[8] an uncritical use of the texts which leaves no room for more

---

4   In Buddhist uses and discussions the term *lokottara* – for instance, in the Yogācārabhūmi – does only refer to what could be called "high transcendence," the "unconditioned" *dharma* of the *parinirvāṇa* and therefore excludes many phenomena discussed here. See Christoph Kleine, "Zur Universalität der Unterscheidung *religiös/säkulär*: Eine systemtheoretische Betrachtung," in: *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 65–80, and Christoph Kleine, "Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2 (2013): 1–34.

5   David Seyfort Ruegg, *L'ordre spirituel et l'ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet: Quatres conférences au Collège de France* (Paris: Collège de France, 1995). See also Max Deeg, "Innerhalb und jenseits der Welt: Kritische Überlegungen zum buddhistischen Begriffspaar *laukika/lokottara* im Verhältnis zu säkular/religiös," in: Proceedings of the 8th workshop of the Arbeitskreis Asiatische Religionsgeschichte (AKAR), forthcoming.

6   For a discussion of the different aspects of a "narratology of space" in which, surprisingly, the aspect of transcendence is not touched upon is Katrin Dennerlein, *Narratologie des Raumes* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009).

7   In my view, the dimensions of narrativity and fictionality of this "genre" of texts are still understudied.

8   For a "history" of using (or sometimes: misusing) these texts see M. Deeg, "The historical turn."

sophisticated hermeneutical approaches that do the complexity of the sources more justice.

In the sources, moments or instances (in case of the biographical sources) and places or sites (in the travelogues) of contact between the immanent and the transcendent are often, but not necessarily, marked by miraculous events; these are, for example, miracles which the Buddha performs or phenomena of light emitting from a *stūpa*. It is striking that places which have no clear reference to and direct link with the 'historical' Buddha Śākyamuni and his life are predominantly attributed these features (saints, Buddhas of the past) which then seem to function like 'boosters of transcendence', while the sites of the events in the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni seem to be 'charged' with transcendence by the sheer fact of being linked to these events and, through them, to the Buddha. It seems that places linked to the 'deep past' of the former Buddhas (pre-Śākyamuni) or the 'shallow past' of Buddhist saints (post-Śākyamuni) need specific signs of transcendence because it is assumed that the transcendent quality of the places becomes weaker over time. There is therefore a paradox by which a high degree of transcendence is caused by a distance of time which creates, at the same time, its inaccessibility. Closeness in terms of space – being at the place where something happened – is not enough to give places the transcendent quality needed to attract the attention of the religious followers. It is also important to reassure oneself that the time distance to the events which make these places special is not neutralizing this very quality.

In this context, it is interesting to note that some biographical traditions of the Buddha's life make a distinction of time which reflects this observed quality of transcendence marked by time distance to the auctorial presence: the biography of the Buddha in the Pāli Nidānakathā, the introduction to the commentary of the collection of "birth stories" (*jātaka*) of the Buddha's previous existences by Buddhaghosa, for instance, divides the biographical "career" of the Buddha into three phases: the "distant period" (*dūrenidāna*) from the *bodhisattva*'s initial vow to become a Buddha in his existence as Sumedha at the time of the Buddha of the past Dīpaṅkara and the Buddha's career as a *bodhisattva* going through the ten different stages of perfection (*pārami*); the "not [so] distant period" (*avidūrenidāna*) of the *bodhisattva*'s descent from Tuṣita-heaven to the achievement of enlightenment; and the "close period" (*santikenidāna*) of the time from enlightenment onwards. Not only do these three periods express different time distances, but Buddhaghosa also seems to refer to spatial closeness and accessibility of sacred places linked to the post-enlightenment period in the biography of Gotama Buddha:

Herein, from the very outset, should the division of those periods be understood. The continuous narrative from the time of the resolution made by the Great Being at the feet of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara up to his birth in Tusita heaven after passing away from his existence as Vessantara, is called the Distant Epoch. The continuous narrative from the time he passed away from Tusita heaven up to his attainment of Omniscience at the throne of Enlightenment [at the foot of the Bodhi tree], is called the Intermediate Epoch. And the Recent Epoch can be accessed at all the places, at each place [where he] had dwelt [as a Buddha].[9]

There is a general difference of referring to transcendence, depending on the genre of the sources: in the narrative genre (hagio-biographies), the movement of the agents is clearly laid out as an itinerary, and their emotions when confronted with the transcendent are often expressed in statements or exclamations.

While in a specific Chinese context, the contact with transcendence can be a very direct one when the agent becomes "transcendent" or immortal (*xian* 仙),[10] in the Buddhist context the bio-hagiographical literature – Xuanzang's biography or the respective biographies of Buddhist travellers in the Chinese Buddhist biographical collections, Gaoseng-zhuan 高僧傳, "Biographies of Eminent Monks" – doctrinal-soteriological reasons mostly do not allow for a transformation of their agents into "transcendents"[11] and instead emphasize the encounter with the transcendent (Buddha, miracles).

---

9   Translation adapted from N.A. Jayawickrama, N.A., The Story of Gotama Buddha: The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2002), 2; Pāli text: Viggo Fausbøll, The Jātaka, Together with its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha. Volume 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1962), 2: tattha ādito tāva tesaṃ nidānānaṃ paricchedo veditabbo. Dīpaṃkarapādamūlasmiṃ hi katābhinīhārassa Mahāsattassa yāva Vessantarattabhāvā cavitvā Tusitapure nibbatti tāva pavatto kathāmaggo Dūrenidānaṃ nāma. Tusitabhavanato pana cavitvā yāva bodhimaṇḍe sab-baññutappatti tāva pavatto kathāmaggo Avidūrenidānaṃ nāma. Santikenidānaṃ pana tesu tesu ṭhānesu viharato tasmiṃ tasmiṃ yeva ṭhāne labhatīti.

10   Robert F. Campany has worked extensively of the narratological aspects of such figures and encounters (miracles, divination, etc.) in early medieval Chinese literature: see Robert Ford Campany, To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002); "Secrecy and Display in the Quest for Transcendence in China, ca. 220 BCE–350 CE," History of Religions 45, no. 4 (2006): 291–336; Making Transcendents: Ascetic and Social Memory in Early Medieval China (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2008).

11   This is, of course, different in case of the literary 'extension' and 'transformation' of Xuanzang's biography, the Ming novel Xiyou-ji 西遊記, "Journey to the West," by Wu

In travelogues this direct reference to transcendence of the agent through the experience of going from one place to another or of encountering the transcendent in form of a miracle or an appearance of a 'divine' or a 'saint' – the/a Buddha, an *arhat*, a *bodhisattva*, etc. – is missing exactly because usually there is no agent; in the very few cases where the agent/author comes into play, this then may be exactly in reference to a situation of an (attempted) encounter with the sacred/transcendent (see the examples discussed below).

Starting from these points, I began to rethink my own approach to the texts I am mostly working with – the records of the Chinese Buddhist travellers to India – in relation to the function of the basic categories of space and time. Accepting that space and time are socially and culturally constructed,[12] I began to look for structures and patterns in the texts which could mark a quality of transcendence related to the places presented in the texts.

The first observation was that in the specific context of the Chinese Buddhist travelogues 'sacred' places or sites – particularly the ones referred to in Xuanzang's Record – achieve, as already indicated above, their transcendent character by a notion of an *in illo tempore*: it was the sacred past of the Buddha's or, even projecting further back into a more remote past, the Buddhas of the past's presence, which marked them as soteriologically relevant and endowed with an aura of transcendence. Transcending space, in a way, as an attempt to access a temporally reverted transcendence – undertaking the difficult and dangerous journey from China to India – would, however, often lead to an experience of disillusionment *in situ* and corresponding expressions of sorrow or grief to not be able to meet the Buddha himself (see the examples discussed below). One could call this the paradox of inaccessibility: it is exactly the very fact that something or someone cannot be directly contacted because they are lost in a remote past which gives the places which are linked to these 'objects' their aura of transcendence.

The transcendence of the Buddha (or other "items") can then only be "pointed out" (Stünkel) by spatial-material markers such as caves (*shishi* 石室), pillars (*shizhu* 石柱), *stūpa*s (*sudubo* 窣堵波 or *ta* 塔), footprints (*fozu* 佛足), relics (*śarīra/sheli* 舍利), etc. They mark the places as having been 'touched' by

---

Cheng'en 吳承恩 where the journey is reframed as a quest against odds and for enlightenment and liberation: see Robert Ford Campany, "Demons, Gods, and Pilgrims: The Demonology of the Hsi-yu Chi," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 7, no. 1/2 (1985): 95–115.

12   Barney Warf, *Time-Space Compression: Historical geographies* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 2; for the ancient Chinese construction of space see Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

the transcendence or the transcendent power of a Buddha, a *bodhisattva*, an *arhat*, etc.

The visit of such places – often called pilgrimage – in a Buddhist context is paradigmatically narrated in the "Legend of Aśoka" (Aśokāvadāna) where the paradigmatic Buddhist king Aśoka is led around to the most important places linked with the Buddha's life by his spiritual teacher Upagupta.[13] The first of these places which are visited according to their biographical sequence is Lumbinī, the place of the Buddha's birth,[14] and the last one Kuśinagara, the place of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. The narrative of the first visit at Lumbinī reflects quite well what I have, in a more general way, discussed above: the inaccessibility of the transcendence of the place caused through temporal distance and the emotions of sadness and frustration which are triggered thereby:

> First, Upagupta took [Aśoka] to the Lumbinī Wood, and stretching out his right hand he said: "In this place, great king, the Blessed One was born." And he added: "This is the first of the caityas of the Buddha whose eye is supreme. Here, as soon as he was born, the Sage took seven steps on the earth, looked down at the four directions, and spoke these words: 'This is my last birth, I'll not dwell in a womb again.'" Aśoka threw himself at Upagupta's feet, and getting up, he said, weeping and making an *añjali*: "They are fortunate and of great merit, those who witnessed the birth of the Sage and heard his delightful voice." Now for the sake of further increasing the king's faith, the elder asked Aśoka wether he would like to see the deity who witnessed in this wood the birth of the most eloquent Sage, saw him take the seven steps, and heard the words he spoke. Aśoka replied that he would. Upagupta, therefore, stretched out his right hand toward the tree whose branch Queen Mahāmāyā had grasped while giving birth, and said: "Let the divine maiden who resides in this *aśoka* tree and who witnessed the birth of the Buddha make herself manifest in her own body so that King Aśoka's faith will grow greater still." And immediately, the tree spirit appeared before Upagupta in her own form, and

---

13   See John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka. A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 119ff. & 244ff. (translation of the Sanskrit text for which see Edward B. Cowell & Robert A. Neil, *The Divyāvadāna. A Collection of Early Buddhist Legends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), 389ff.). Strong emphasizes the parallel of the thirty-two places visited and the thirty-two marks of the Buddha as a "Great Being" (*mahāpuruṣa*) which reflects the constructed nature of such "pilgrimages" another example of which is young Sudhana's journey in the Avataṃsaka-sūtra.

14   On Lumbinī in different sources see Max Deeg, *The Places where Siddhārtha Trod: Lumbinī and Kapilavastu* (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2003).

said, making an *añjali*: "Elder, what is your command?" The elder said to Aśoka: "Great king, here is the goddess who saw the Buddha at the time of his birth." Aśoka said to her, making an *añjali*: "You witnessed his birth and saw his body adorned with the marks! You gazed upon his large lotus-like eyes! You heard in this wood the first delightful words of the leader of mankind!" The tree spirit replied: "I did indeed witness the birth of the best of men, the Teacher who dazzled like gold. I saw him take the seven steps, and also heard his words." "Tell me, goddess," said Aśoka, "what was it like – the magnificent moment of the Blessed One's birth?" "I cannot possibly fully describe it in words," answered the deity, "but, in brief, listen: Throughout Indra's threefold world, there shone a supernatural light, dazzling like gold and delighting the eye. The earth and its mountains, ringed by the ocean, shook like a ship being tossed at sea." Hearing this, Aśoka made an offering of one hundred pieces of gold to the birthplace of the Buddha, built a *caitya* there and went on.[15]

---

15 *atha sthavirOpagupto rājānam Aśokaṃ sarvaprathamena lumbinīvanaṃ praveśayitvā dakṣiṇaṃ hastam abhiprasāryovāca: "asmin, mahārāja, pradeśe bhagavāñ jātaḥ," āha ca: "idaṃ hi prathamaṃ caityaṃ buddhasyottamacakṣuṣaḥ, jātamātreha sa muniḥ prakrāntaḥ saptapadaṃ bhuvi. caturdiśam avalokya vācaṃ bhāṣitavān purā: 'iyaṃ me paścimā jātir, garbhāvāsaś ca paścimaḥ.'" atha rājā sarvaśarīreṇa tatra pādayor nipatya utthāya kṛtāñjaliḥ prarudann uvāca: "dhanyāste kṛtapuṇyai(ṇyā)ś ca yair dṛṣṭaḥ sa mahāmuniḥ, prajātaḥ saṃśrutā yaiś ca vācas tasya manoramāḥ." atha sthaviro rājñaḥ prasādavṛddhyartham uvāca: "mahārāja, kiṃ drakṣyasi tāṃ devatām? yayā dṛṣṭaḥ prajāyan sa vane 'smin vadatāṃ varaḥ tramamāṇaḥ padān sapta śrutā vāco yayā muneḥ." rājā āha: "paraṃ, sthavira, drakṣyāmi," atha sthavirOpagupto yasya vṛkṣasya śākham avalambya devī mahāmāyā prasūtā, tena dakṣiṇahastam abhiprasāryovāca: "naivāsikā yā ihāśokavṛkṣe saṃbuddhadarśinī yā devakanyā; sākṣād asau darśayatu svadehaṃ rājño hy Aśokasya {manaḥ}prasādavṛddhyai." yāvat sā devatā svarūpeṇa sthavirOpaguptasamīpe sthitvā kṛtāñjalir uvāca: "sthavira, kim ājñāpayasi?" atha sthaviro rājānām Aśokam uvāca: "mahārāja, iyaṃ sā devatā, yayā dṛṣṭo bhagavāñ jāyamānaḥ," atha rājā kṛtāñjalis tāṃ devatām uvāca: "dṛṣṭas tvayā lakṣaṇabhūṣitāṅgaḥ prajāyamānaḥ kamalāyatākṣaḥ, śrutvās tvayā tasya nararṣabhasya vāco manojñāḥ prathamā vane 'smin." devatā prāha: "mayā hi dṛṣṭaḥ kanakāvadātaḥ prajāyamāno dvipadapradhānaḥ/ padāni sapta kramaṇa eva śrutā ca vācam api tasya śāstuḥ." rājā āha: "kathaya, devate, kīdṛśī bhagavato jāyamānasya śrīr babhūveti," devatā prāha: "na śakyaṃ mayā vāgbhiḥ saṃprakāśayitum, api tu saṃkṣepataḥ śṛṇu: vinirmitābhā kanakāvadātā sendre triloke nayanābhirāmā, sasāgarāntā ca mahī saśailā mahārṇavasthā iva nauścāla." yāvad rājñā jātyāṃ śatasahasraṃ dattam, caityaṃ ca pratiṣṭhāpya rājā prakrāntaḥ.* (Cowell & Neil, *The Divyāvadāna*, 389f.); translation: Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 244ff. A similar sub-narrative is given when Upagupta and Aśoka visit the place where the *nāga* Kālika praised the Buddha: see Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 249f.

As John Strong has correctly pointed out, there is a focus on "seeing" in this paradigmatic encounter with Buddhist sacred places which links quite neatly to the Indian concept of *darśan* (Skt. *darśana*) in the sense of images or places of pilgrimage highlighted by Diana Eck as a crucial element of Hindu religions[16] which is, however, also applicable to other South Asian religious traditions.[17] Staying in the framework of Stünkel's transcendence model, one could argue that before one points out at something, one must first see it (or experience it with other senses). The episode in the Aśokāvadāna, however, also refers to a very important point linked to the transcendence of time, or rather to the impossibility to transcend time which creates an inaccessibility of the transcendent represented by the Buddha.

Travelogues seem to be promising texts for tracing notions of transcendence since any spatial movement, naturally, implies transcending space in the most common sense of the word. This seems to be a trivial statement, but it links well with the emphasis of the so-called "spatial turn" on mapping in defining the relation between space and place,[18] but also between places. Such mapping links different places through a common narrative which is often, in religious contexts, based on the biography (or hagiography) of a religious founder or an eminent religious individual (saint, seer, prophet, etc.).[19]

If the previously stated is true then travelogues should reflect, on the semantic and semiotic level, this kind of "basic" (Stünkel) transcendence, a passing from A to B. They are, to use and appropriate the 'smart' title of a book on travel writing edited by James Duncan and Derek Gregory on travel writing, "writes of passage."[20] The specific 'genre' of Chinese Buddhist travelogues, often and wrongly called "pilgrim records,"[21] also reflects dimensions of transcendence

---

16   Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007).

17   In the context of Buddhism this has been highlighted by Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); in the context of the Buddha's relics the aspect of *darśan* has been emphasized by John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 234f.

18   Barney Warf, Santa Arias, "Introduction: the reinsertion of space into the social sciences and humanities," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. B. Warf, S. Arias (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

19   As such the more dynamic projection of "narrative places" into an otherwise meaningless space goes beyond the pure symbolic value of imagined places as claimed by J. Corrigan, "Spatiality and religion," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. B. Warf, and S. Arias (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 116.

20   Duncan, James, and Gregory, Derek, eds., *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

21   For a critique see Max Deeg, "When Peregrinus is not Pilgrim: The Chinese 'Pilgrims' Records – A Revision of Literary Genre and its Context," in *Dharmayātra – Buddhist*

of space: the spatial metaphors of 'crossing' (Chinese *du* 度, *guo* 過) and 'reaching' (Chinese *zhi* 至, *dao* 到) are clearly present in the terminology of my sources. Concretizing the Buddhist metaphor of 'crossing', this often refers to very specific natural or semi-natural barriers such as rivers, oceans, mountains/mountain ranges or forests (jungles) after which one reaches or enters – in some cases also leaves – a site or a region with a higher degree of religious meaning (transcendence) (see below).

At places, Xuanzang's Record reflects the transition from one to a particular spatial sphere of a different quality which may be called 'transcendent'. There are, in my view, two dimensions represented in the texts with relation to transcendence; one could be called a macro-spatial transcendent dimension, the other one micro-spatial transcendent dimension. By the first term I refer to transitions in a wider regional sphere where certain spaces are defined and singled out as bearing a higher degree of transcendence by geographically defined and/or constructed through culturally and religiously meaningful – in the sense of assigned meaning – boundaries and features. By the second, which can play a role in the construction of space of the first category, I refer to specific sites or places or clusters of them which are religiously meaningful because they are linked or linkable to narratives of the founder of the religion, the Buddha, and deliver both religious identity and soteriological meaning. Visiting and venerating these places where the Buddha's transcendence becomes, at least to a certain degree, 'tangible' and at the same time allows to generate religious benefit or "merit" (*puṇya*/*gongde* 功德 or *fu* 福).

3 Narrative Encounters with the Transcendence

In my presentation at CERES in my fellowship year, I focused on the Chinese concepts of *ganying* 感應, "correlative (or: sympathetic[22]) resonance," and *yingyan* 應驗, "responsive manifestation,"[23] as formal aspects or expressions

---

Pilgrimage in Time and Space, ed. C. Cueppers, and M. Deeg (eds.) (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2014), 65–95.

22 See, for example, Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 26, who translates the term as "stimulus-response" (p. 78).

23 Also translated as "miraculous manifestation" or "miraculous response": see Robert Ford Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm. Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012). Almost synonyms are *lingyan* 靈驗, or *lingying* 靈應: see Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, (93ff.). For an interpretation and application of this term in the context of contemporary Chinese folk religion see Adam Yuet Chao,

of transcendence or of the relation between the immanent and the transcendent. As one example, I selected an episode from the Biography[24] in which Xuanzang, on his way on a boat from Ayodhyā on the river Gaṅgā, encounters pirates and worshippers of the goddess Durgā (Tuqie *tianshen* 突伽天神) who want to sacrifice him to the goddess. He asks the pirates to give him time to prepare for his death and enters a deep contemplation to encounter the *bodhisattva* Maitreya in Tuṣita heaven. As a consequence of his devotion a thunderstorm rises ("responsive manifestation") and the pirates are converted and abdicate their former cult.[25]

While in this example the transcendent realm of Tuṣita heaven, the 'waiting room' of the future Buddha Maitreya, is accessible in a potential situation of transition – the pending execution and death of the hero – and a "responsive manifestation" is triggered by this, in another example from the earliest extant Chinese Buddhist travelogue, Faxian's Foguo-ji 佛國記, "Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms" (aka Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan 高僧法顯傳, "Record of the Eminent Monk Faxian") the author expressed his frustration of not being able to encounter the Buddha directly:

> Faxian bought incense, flowers and oil lamps in the New City of [Rājagṛha] and asked two local *bhikṣu*s to lead him up to the Gṛdhrakūṭa Mount. [There he] offered the flowers and the incense and lighted the lamps to illuminate [the place when it got dark]. [He] was very upset and sad, wiped off [his] tears and said: "Once the Buddha preached the Śūraṅgama[-sūtra] at this place. [I] Faxian was born [at a time] when [I] cannot meet the Buddha but can only see the traces where had had dwelled." Thereupon, [he] recited the Śūraṅgama[-sūtra] in front of the cave, stayed one night [on top of the mountain] and returned to the New City of [Rājagṛha].[26]

Miracular Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

24   For the sake of convenience, in this chapter I refer to passages from Xuanzang Biography and his Record not directly quoted and translated by myself to Li Rongxi's English translations. For the present story see Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 76ff. (Chinese text: T.2053. 233c.23ff.).

25   This episode has been discussed at some length and with a focus on the aspect of *darśan* by Eckel, *To See the Buddha*, 131ff.

26   T.2085.862c.29ff. 法顯於新城中買香，華，油，燈，倩二舊比丘送法顯到耆闍崛山。華，香供養，然燈續明。慨然悲傷，收淚而言："佛昔於此住，說首楞嚴。法顯生不值佛，但見遺跡處所而已。" 即於石窟前誦首楞嚴。停止一宿，還向新城。 See also Max Deeg, Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle. Der älteste Bericht eines chinesischen buddhistischen Pilgermönches über

What is missing in this episode is a responsive manifestation of the transcendent, a "defect" which obviously was felt and rectified by the biographer of Faxian when he describes how wild lions become tame when the monk recites a *sūtra*. The inaccessibility of a place loaded with transcendence is in the same biography in Huijiao's 慧皎 Gaoseng-zhuan 高僧傳 when, on his way back from Gṛdhrakūṭa, Faxian meets the Buddha's disciple Mahākāśyapa who dwells in the mountain and waits for the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya to transmit Śākyamuni's robe to him as Śākyamuni's rightful successor.[27] When, after realizing whom he has just met, Faxian tries to access Mahākāśyapa's his way is blocked by rocks and Mahākāśyapa's dwelling place in the mountain is inaccessible.[28] The reaction is sadness and frustration,[29] in some cases expressed in poetic form.[30]

4   Constructing Transcendent Space

Seen from a Chinese Buddhist worldview up to the Tang period, there is a concentricity of 'sacredness' or transcendence which has its centre in India, the land of the Buddha. The Chinese travellers approached this 'centre' through different stages or regions of increasing 'sacredness'. For Xuanzang it was obviously very important to state this very fact by clearly discerning between the different regions of India. The Record – I deliberately avoid the terms 'traveller' or 'pilgrim' as the text itself does not have such an agent – moves from an outer, peripheral area to an increasingly relevant and meaningful religious centre, or rather centres, in terms of soteriological transcendence which is, or which are, directly linked to major, soteriologically important events in the biography

---

seine Reise nach Indien mit Übersetzung des Textes (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), 552.

27   On this Buddhist "Kyffhäuser" tradition see Max Deeg, "Das Ende des Dharma und die Ankunft des Maitreya. Endzeit- und Neue-Zeit-Vorstellungen im Buddhismus mit einem Exkurs zur Kāśyapa-Legende," *Zeitschrift für Relgionswissenschaft* 7 (1999): 145–169. An inscription from the area around Rājagṛha shows that the narrative has been well-known in the region: see Vincent Tournier, "Matériaux pour une histoire de la légende et du culte de Mahākāśyapa: une relecture d'une fragment de statue inscrit retrouvé à Silao (Bihār)," In *Autour de Bāmiyān: de la Bactriane héllenisée à l'Inde bouddhique* (Archaeologia Afghana, Série scientifique), edited by G. Ducœur. Paris: De Boccard, 2012: 375–413.

28   Deeg, *Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan*: 615f.

29   See T.H. Barrett, "Exploratory Observations on Some Weeping Pilgrims," in *The Buddhist Forum, Volume 1*, edited by Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990): 99–110.

30   Max Deeg, "Wailing for Identity: Topical and Poetic Expressions of Cultural Belonging in Chinese Buddhist Literature," in *Identity and Network: Exchange Relations between China and the World*, ed. A. Heirman, C. Meinert, and C. Anderl (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 227–252.

of the Buddha, for instance the four Great Places (*mahāsthāna*) of birth at Lumbinī, of enlightenment at Bodhgayā, of the first sermon at Sārnāth near Vārāṇasī and *parinirvāṇa* at Kuśinagara.[31]

In the other direction, from centre to periphery, necessarily but in some contexts the sacred centre is the *bodhimaṇḍa*(*na*) (*daochang* 道場), the place underneath the *bodhi* tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment. I will discuss the phenomenon of densification of transcendence at places like Bodhgayā later, but on a geo-topographical macro-level there is clearly a hierarchy of transcendence with an utmost concentration around the spot of the enlightenment.

Moving away from the centre, the next circle is Magadha, a region to which Xuanzang dedicates two complete chapters (out of twelve) and which includes, among others, Rājagṛha and Pāṭaliputra, the two capitals of the most important early royal supporters of Buddhism, Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru and Aśoka. Accepting the Gaṅgā as the northern border of Magadha Xuanzang seems to adopt the extension of the kingdom at the time of the Buddha and the kings Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru, while in reality and historically Magadha included a considerable bigger territory north of the great river,[32] a process which, according to Buddhist tradition, already started with king Ajātaśatru's imperial ambitions towards the end of the lifetime of the Buddha.

The next "circle" is Central India – Zhong-yindu 中印度 in Xuanzang's terminology or Zhong-tianzhu 中天竺 –, sometimes also called "Middle Region," *madhyadeśa* (Chin. *zhongguo* 中國); this is the region where the important events in the life of the Buddha mentioned above happened. The other regions, arranged according to the cardinal directions, do not have – with the one exception of North India (see below) – a direct connection with the biography of the Buddha;[33] they are, in a way, less loaded with transcendence than the inner circles.

---

31   It is interesting to note that the birth of the *bodhisattva* at Lumbinī ontologically is the moment when the Buddha transcends but, as it were, invertedly, from a transcendent place, the Tuṣita-heaven, into immanence – at least from a "Buddhological" (in the sense of "theology") standpoint which does not assume the overall transcendency of the Buddha, so to speak: his dharmakāyic nature. John Strong (*The Relics of the Buddha*, 230), has referred to this aspect as "the comings and goings" of the Buddha/Tathāgata, without using, however, the concept of transcendence.

32   On Magadha and its specific place in the cultural development of India see Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha. Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007).

33   Indirectly, the special status of Central India is also expressed by the general description of India in the second chapter where the overall geographical character of the other four regions is specified but Central India is left out (T.2087.875b.27ff.): 五印度

In concrete terms, the "description" in the Record starts at the periphery of the Central Asian borderland (*biandi* 邊地), in Kuča and first, in Central Asia, moves through soteriologically neutral territory. India itself is divided into five greater regions, the "Five Indias" (Wu-Tianzhu 五天竺 or in the Record Wu-Yindu 五印度) of the Chinese, into four more peripheral regions, North, West, East and South (Bei-Yindu 北印度, Xi-Yindu 西印度, Dong-Yindu 東印度, Nan-Yindu 南印度), all-encompassing Central India (Zhong-Yindu 中印度) or Magadha (Mojietuo 摩揭陀) with its centre, the place of the enlightenment of the Buddha at Bodhgayā.

With the "Five Indias" Xuanzang uses a divisional geographical scheme for India which is neither found in other Indian texts around his time but also not in earlier Buddhist texts. It is a very ancient one from the Vedic period. The idea of India being divided in five greater regions is based on the archaic concept of five *janapada*s, the ancient r̥gvedic "five regions" or "tribes" (*pañca kṣitayaḥ, pañca janāḥ*)[34] according to which India (Jambudvīpa) was divided of five parts: the centre or *madhyamāpratiṣṭhā diś* corresponding to the later *madhyadeśa* (*zhongguo* 中國), the north or *udīcī diś*, the east or *prācī diś*, the south or *dakṣiṇā diś*, and the west or *pratīcī* or *aparāntā diś*. This rather schematic concept of division into five *janapada*s had already become defunct at an early point: the number of the *janapada*s increased continuously,[35] and in the canonical Buddhist literature already sixteen *mahājanapada*s are known.[36] It has to be doubted whether such a system, and be it only in an idealized way, was still in use in 7th century Northern India under the relatively stable unity of Śīlāditya's empire. Nevertheless, the "Five Indias" – often shortened to Wutian 五天 (for Wu-Tianzhu) – of Xuanzang, not found in Buddhist literature

---

之境，周九萬餘里，三垂大海，北背雪山。北廣南狹，形如半月。畫野區分，七十餘國。時特暑熱，地多泉濕。北乃山阜隱軫，丘陵舄鹵；東則川野沃潤，疇壠膏腴；南方草木榮茂；西方土地磽确。 ("The territory of the Five Indias encompasses more than ninety thousand miles, has oceans on three [sides, and] to the north [it] is bordered by the 'Snow Mountains'. [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. The seasons are extremely hot, [and] the land [provides] a lot of water [and is very] humid. The north is covered by mountains, [and the soil of] the craggy terrain is acidic; the river-plains of the east are fertile and moist, [and its] beds and fields are fertile; the south [is covered by] dense vegetation; the west is barren land.").

34 Sudama Misra, *Janapada State in Ancient India* (Vārāṇasī: Bhāratīya Vidyā Prakāśana, 1973): 24; Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989): 11f.

35 Mishra, *Janapada State*, 44; the list in the Purāṇas has seven *janapada*s, a number also found in the Dīghanikāya: Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition*, 14.

36 Mishra, *Janapada State*, 262; this number is also given in the Jain Bhagavatīsūtra, while other Buddhis texts (Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra) have twelve *janapada*s.

before the Record, became the most used term for the subcontinent in Chinese Buddhist sources.

So, what intention may lie behind the construction of India in this way, particularly when looking at the territory defined as Central India? According to Xuanzang the most western region of Central India was Mathurā, the most eastern kingdom Puṇḍravardhana; the southern border is defined by Bodhgayā and (southern) Kosala, and in the north it still includes Śrāvastī and Kapilavastu and Lumbinī which one may expect to belong to North India. This geographical definition creates, as can be seen on the 19th-century archaeologist and Xuanzang-"enthusiast" Alexander Cunningham's map (Figure 2.1),[37] a disproportionately distributed Central India in terms of size and position, the goal of which seems to be to include all sacred sites linked to the traditional biography of the Buddha; but it also includes, on its extreme western side, places like Mathurā, probably as the place of origin of the important Buddhist patriarch Upagupta,[38] and Sthaneśvara as the home region of the ruling dynasty of king Śīlāditya Harṣavardhana (which happens to be the place of the *dharmakṣetra*, the great battlefield of the Mahābhārata).[39]

When the Record 'enters' India proper, into the North(-West) Indian region of Greater Gandhāra, Xuanzang expressively points out this transfer into a different realm of sanctity: Bei-yindu, "North India," the region which, according to one Buddhist tradition, is also consecrated by a visit of the Buddha – it is a centre at the periphery of the real centre, Magadha. It is interesting that the access to this peripheric centre of transcendence is marked by a spatial 'transcending':

> [If one] goes from there (i.e., from the region around Kāpiśī, MD) more than six hundred miles in eastern [direction], [with] the valleys running parallel [and] the mountain peaks [being] steep, one crosses the 'Black

---

37   Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India, 1. The Buddhist Period Including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang* (London: Trübner and Co., 1871).

38   Xuanzang himself probably did not visit Mathurā: see Max Deeg, "Has Xuanzang Really Been in Mathurā? Interpretatio Sinica or Interpretatio Occidentalia – How to Critically Read the Records of the Chinese Pilgrims," in *Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture. Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. C. Wittern, and Shi Lishan (Kyoto: Editiorial committee for the Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki, 2007), 35–73.

39   On Xuanzang's description of this region see Max Deeg, "'Show Me the Land Where the Buddha Dwelled …' – Xuanzang's 'Record of the Western Regions' (Xiyu ji): A Misunderstood Text?" *China Report* 48 (2012): 101ff.
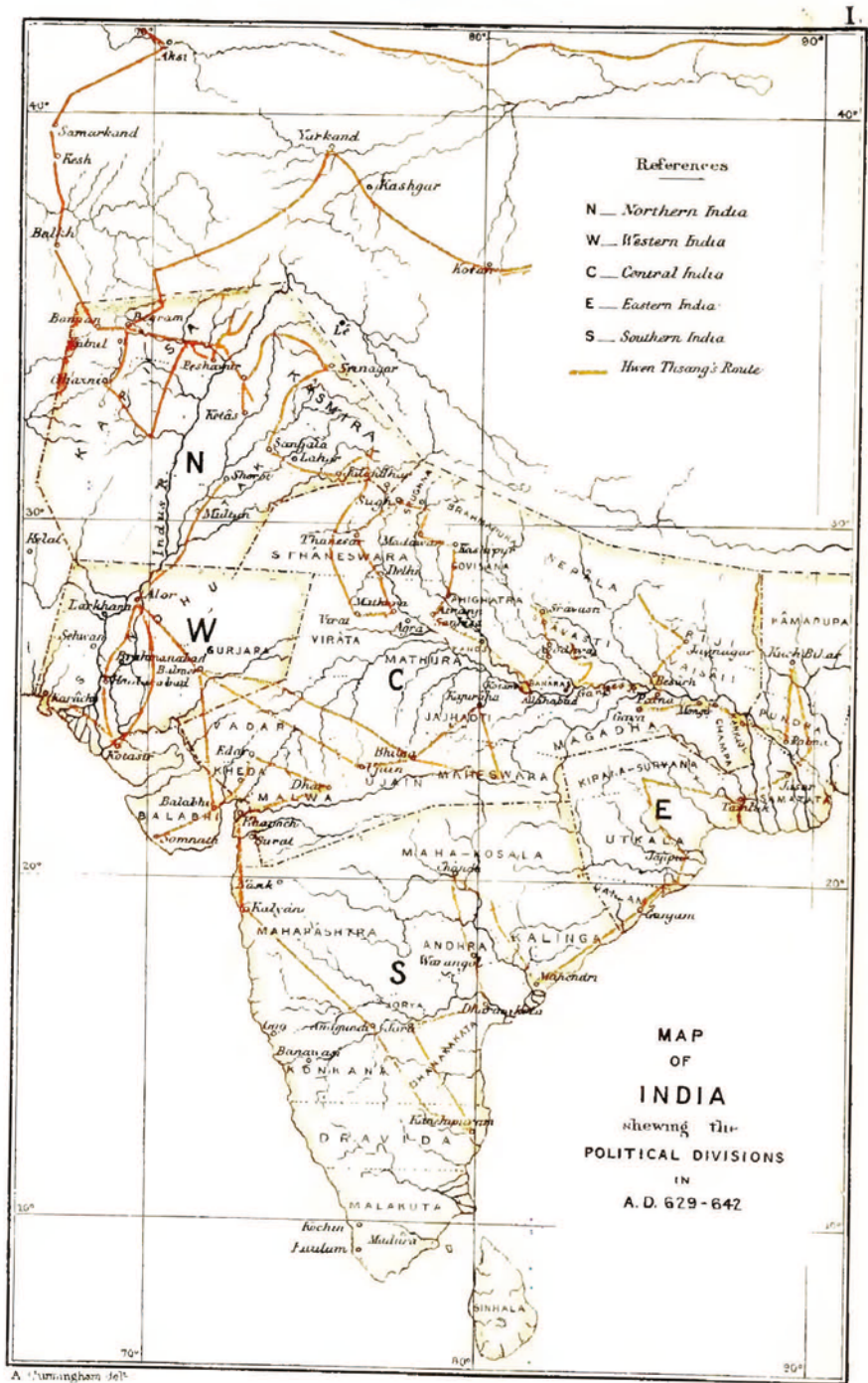
FIGURE 2.1 Alexander Cunningham's map of Xuanzang's India (1871)

Mountain Range', enters the territory of Northern India [and] arrives in the kingdom of Lanbo (territory of Northern India).[40]

The described route from Kāpiśī (Begram), the last place described before entering India/North India proper, to Lanbo/Lampāka (modern Laghmān) does not follow the most natural way through the valleys in southern direction towards Kabul and then along the course of the Kabul river but instead crosses the mountains (Figure 2.2). The route comes from an area which was not sanctified by the presence of the Buddha, to the first region in (Northern) India which was, according to the version of the Buddha biography known to Xuanzang, visited by the Buddha, and still had considerable remnants of this visit, south of Lampāka. After another crossing over mountains[41] – which does not exist in reality since the natural access to the Kabul river valley from Lampāka follows the course of the Alishing river (modern Laghman-Sukhakhan highway) –, the area around Nagarahāra (modern Jalālābād) is reached. The Record 'transcends', as it were, to the site where the Buddha, on his visit to the Northwest of the subcontinent, left the most tangible/visible trace of his presence, his famous shadow image (*foying* 佛影) in a cave near the city of Nagarahāra;[42] nearby this extremely important site, there were also the relics of the parietal bone, the cranial bone (*uṣṇīṣā*), of an eyeball, the *kāṣāya* and *saṅghāṭī*, and the mendicant staff (*khakkhara*) of the Buddha.[43]

A similar 'description'[44] of crossing is found when the Record enters Magadha, the inner circle of Central India; it is explicitly stated that this is marked by crossing the river Gaṅgā although the cultural-political borders of

---

40   T.2087.875b.4ff.: 自此東行六百餘里，山谷接連，峯巖峭峻，越黑嶺，入北印度境，至濫波國(北印度境)。

41   T.2087.878b.25f.: 從此東南行百餘里，踰大嶺，濟大河，至那揭羅曷國(北印度境)。 ("Going more than a hundred miles to the south-east from there (i.e., Lanbo), climbing over the great mountain range and crossing a great river [one] arrives in the kingdom of Najieluohe (Nagarahāra).")

42   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 67f. For a discussion of the legend attached to this site see Max Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae: Early Chinese Reports on Nepal – The Foundation Legend of Nepal in its Trans-Himalayan Context* (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2016), 100–113.

43   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 69.

44   For obvious reasons, I use "description" in inverted commas to point to the fact that the travelogues are more complex than documentaries: they are situated between inherited tropes of Chinese geographical and ethnographical concepts and a complex intentionality of the authors to project an idealized Buddhist India to their Chinese readership and to "prove" that what is known from Buddhist texts is "really" found *in situ*.
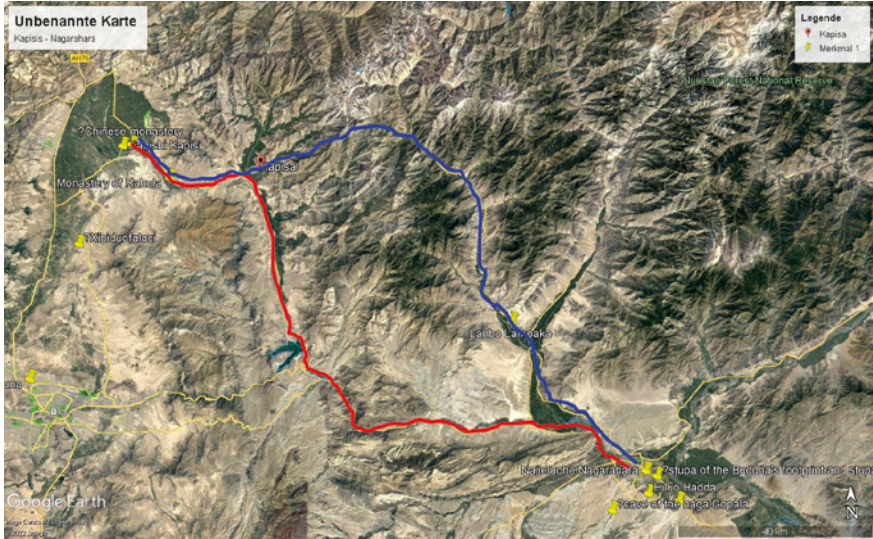
FIGURE 2.2   Routes from Kāpiśī to Nagarahāra (blue: described route; red: natural route)

Magadha at that time (first half of the 7th century) and before certainly were not restricted through the river (see above).

5   Narrative and Spatial Density of Transcendence

If a hierarchy of transcendence is expressed through *loci*/places which are religiously meaningful because they are linked, in one way or another, to the biography of the Buddha one may expect places where this transcendence is "compressed" by frequent visits of the Buddha. The "Vulture Peak" (Gṛdhrakūṭa) near Rājagṛha, for instance, is highly venerated and frequently visited because of its accumulated transcendent aura as could already be seen in the episode of Faxian's visit discussed above. The reason for this importance as a place of transcendence is not that the mountain is connected with one particularly important episode in the life of the Buddha but because it is here that the Buddha delivered many of his sermons; it is the place where most of the Mahāyāna-sūtras like the Śūraṅgamasamādhi-sūtra mentioned and recited by Faxian (see above) locate the preaching of the Buddha.

Other places attain their status as sites of transcendence by the soteriological importance of a series of biographical events connected to them. They usually reflect a higher 'density' of sites echoing the narrative of the Buddha's

biography in which events 'densify' towards the important main event, the point of narrative culmination, as it were, in a dramatic way. This phenomenon can be observed in the case of the four major events, the birth, the enlightenment, the first sermon and the *parinirvāṇa*. Translated in spatial terms, this could create a high density of sites in a quite narrow environment around a centre of veneration which the travelogues, particularly the Record, reflect.

The most prominent site of this kind has been and is Bodhgayā, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment[45] where the described feature of densification is most prominent. Here some of the places are only some steps away from each other, but they all lead to or from the centre which is the place where enlightenment was achieved, symbolized through the *bodhi* tree and called the "diamond seat," the *vajrāsana*.[46]

A list of places which are described in the Record – brought into a narrative-biographical order in which they are told in the biographies which is not completely but followed in the topographical sequence of the places towards the *centrum dramatis* (marked bold below) in Xuanzang's Record – are:[47]

F.   The place of the *bodhisattva*'s extreme austerities for a period of six years.

G.   The place where the *bodhisattva* took a bath before accepting food.

H.   The place where the *bodhisattva* ended the practice of harsh asceticism and accepted the milk gruel from two village girl.

I.   The encounter of the *bodhisattva* with the *nāga* Kālika (or Kāla) and the crossing (sic!) of the Nairañjanā-river.

J.   The place where the *bodhisattva* entered the Nairañjanā-river to take a bath.

K.   The cave in which the *bodhisattva* meditated before approaching the *bodhi*-tree (*prāgbodhi*).

---

45   The Aśokāvadāna, for instance, singles out Bodhgayā, particularly the *bodhi* tree, as the place which receives the utmost attention and veneration of the king: see Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 125ff. & 257.

46   Another aspect is how the different stages are "repleted" with doctrinal content: see, for instance, the analysis in Ghiorgo Zafiropulo, *L'Illumination du Buddha. De la Quête à l'Annonce de l'Eveil: Essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (*Enquête sur l'ensemble des textes canoniques bouddhistes se référant – à titre principal ou accessoire – à l'« Abhisaṃbodhi » du fondateur at à quelques épisodes connexes: antérieurs ou postérieurs*) (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993).

47   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 243ff. (T.2087.915a.14ff.).

L.   The place where the *bodhisattva* received grass for the diamond-seat for the from a grass cutter.

M.   The place of the appearance of the ominous birds guiding the *bodhisattva* to the *bodhi*-tree.

N.   **The *bodhi*-tree (enlightenment).**

O.   **The diamond-seat (*vajrāsana*) (enlightenment).**

P.   The place where the Buddha realized the law of cause and effect (enlightenment).

Q.   The place of Māra's temptation (enlightenment).

R.   The place of the image of the earth-deity (enlightenment).

S.   The pond where the Buddha washed himself after the enlightenment.

T.   The place where the Buddha received food from two village girls after enlightenment.

U.   The Buddha's *caṅkramana*-path where he walked in meditation for one week after his enlightenment.

V.   The place where the four guardian deities of the four directions donated the alms bowl to the Buddha.

W.   The places of the Buddha's post-enlightenment contemplation (7 × 7 days).

X.   The pond of the *nāga*-king Mucilinda who protected the Buddha from a thunderstorm.

Y.   The place of the food donation by the two merchants (Trapuṣa and Bhallika).

Z.   The place where Brahmā urged the Buddha to turn the *dharma*-wheel.

AA. The place where the Buddha ascended to Trayastriṃśa-heaven to teach the *dharma* to his deceased mother.

BB. Departure for Vārāṇasī – another place of transcendence – to teach the first sermon.

The microspatial aspect of a hierarchy of transcendence is expressed in the Record through an increasing density of religiously meaningful places (see e.g. Figure 2.3 for Alexander Cunningham's identification of most sites). The *bodhisattva* is moving towards the centre, the *vajrāsana*, accompanied by a series of ominous or miraculous signs (e.g., the blind *nāga* Kālika regaining his eyesight). The centre itself is described as the eternal centre of the world which does, however, already show signs of inaccessibility (invisibility) due to the decline of the *dharma*:
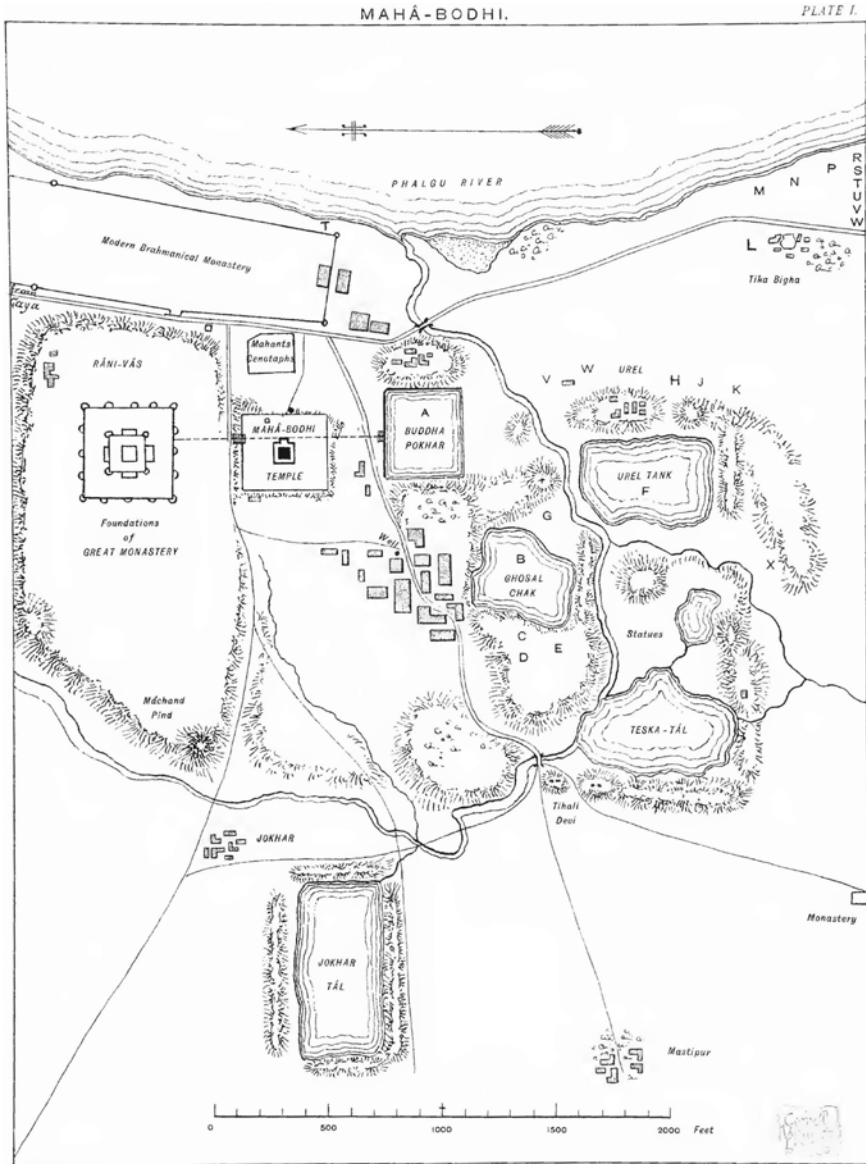
FIGURE 2.3   Bodhgayā (Alexander Cunningham, *Mahābodhi*, 1892)

Right in the centre of the wall [around] the *bodhi*-tree is the 'Diamond-Seat'. It came into existence at the beginning of the *bhadrakalpa*, rose together with the Great Earth, occupies the centre of the three thousand great thousand worlds, reaches all the way down to the 'Golden Wheel' and above gets near the extreme [ends] of the earth; [it is] built from diamond, has a circumference of more than one hundred paces; the Buddhas of the *bhadrakalpa* sit on it and entered [the stage] of 'Diamond-Contemplation': that is why it is called 'Diamond-Seat'. Where the sacred Dao (*bodhi*) is realized is also called 'Place of the Dao'. [Even when] the great world is shattered [by an earthquake], only [this place] does not collapse. Therefore, [when] the Bodhisattva was about to realize full enlightenment and [he] passed the four corners of this ['Diamond Seat'], the whole earth shook, [but when he] then arrived at that place [the earth] was calm and did not shake [anymore]. From [the time when the world] has entered the end of the *kalpa* [and] the True Dharma degenerates, sandy soil covers [the seat] [so that one] cannot see it anymore.[48]

6 Individual Places and (Again) the Transcendence of Inaccessibility

As another example of transcendence indicated through the inaccessibility of space I would like to discuss an example in the inner circle of the region or kingdom of Magadha which is linked to an unspecified episode in the life of the Buddha which I had, so far, not been able to identify in the extant biographical sources.[49] The place identified with the site described by Xuanzang was visited and identified by a research team on a field trip in the Indian state of Bihār in January 2020.[50] On this trip we were trying to identify, among others, a site described by Xuanzang as follows:

---

48 T.2087.915b.15ff. 菩提樹垣正中有金剛座。昔賢劫初成，與大地俱起，據三千大千世界中，下極金輪，上侵地際，金剛所成，周百餘步，賢劫千佛坐之而入金剛定，故曰金剛座焉。證聖道所，亦曰道場，大地震動，獨無傾搖。是故如來將證正覺也，歷此四隅，地皆傾動，後至此處，安靜不傾。自入末劫，正法浸微，沙土彌覆，無復得見。

49 From the description and the fact that Xuanzang himself probably never visited and saw the place it may be concluded that this is a local tradition.

50 The trip was part of the ongoing project "The Xuanzang Trail," funded by the Bihar Heritage Development Society and co-investigated by Dr. Bijoy Choudhary and me with a team of colleagues from different disciplines (archaeology, history, science); the goal of this project is to revisit, reassess and identify the different sites in Bihar mentioned in Xuanzang's Record.

More than ninety miles southwest of the Tailāḍhaka-monastery [one arrives] at a big mountain with one rock next to the other [reaching up to] the clouds, [where] spirits and immortals reside. Poisonous snakes and violent *nāga*s gather in its caves; fierce beasts and birds of prey dwell in its forests. On the crest of the mountain is a huge boulder, and on top of it is a *stūpa*, more than ten feet high and [marking] the place where the Buddha entered contemplation. Formerly, [when] the Tathāgata had subdued a local spirit (*shen* 神) and stayed there, he was sitting on this boulder, entered the 'Contemplation of Extinction', [and] at that time he spent the night there. All the gods and divine immortals made offerings to the Tathāgata, played celestial music, [and] had celestial flowers rain down. [When] the Tathāgata emerged from contemplation, all the gods felt grateful and built a *stūpa* from jewels, gold, and silver. [Now that] the [lifetime] of the Saint is already so far away, the jewels have turned into stone. Since ancient time until today, it is only [when one] looks at the high mountain from the distance that [one] sees the strange creatures[3]. [Together like] close relatives[4] huge snakes and fierce beasts circumambulate [the *stūpa*] clockwise. Celestial immortals and divine saints come follow each other according to their seniority to pay reference [to the *stūpa*].[51]

What already becomes clear through this passage is that the transcendent nature of the miraculous stone *stūpa* on top of the mountain described in the text is characterized by its inaccessibility to humans: it is originally built by the gods and only venerated by wild animals.

Following the corrected distances and directions given in Xuanzang's Record, we were looking for this site at or around the rock formation of the Barābār Hills, about 50 kilometres south of the modern city of Paṭnā (Figure 2.4), the site of the old Magadhan capital Pāṭaliputra from the Mauryan (2nd cent. BC) to the Gupta period (5th cent. AD). The Barābār Hills were a good candidate for the site described by Xuanzang, who probably never visited the site himself, since they house man-made rock caves with inscriptions identifying them as dwelling places given to the ascetic Ājīvika denomination from the Mauryan

---

51   T.913c.2ff.   鞮羅釋迦伽藍西南九十餘里，至大山，雲石幽蔚，靈僊攸舍。毒蛇暴龍，窟穴其藪；猛獸鷲鳥，棲伏其林。山頂有大盤石，上建窣堵波，其高十餘尺，是佛入定處也。昔者如來降神止此，坐斯磐石，入滅盡定，時經宿焉。諸天靈聖，供養如來，鼓天樂，雨天花。如來出定，諸天感慕，以寶金銀起窣堵波。去聖逾邈，寶變為石。自古迄今，人未有至，遙望高山，乃見異類。長蛇猛獸，群從右旋。天仙靈聖，肩隨讚禮。
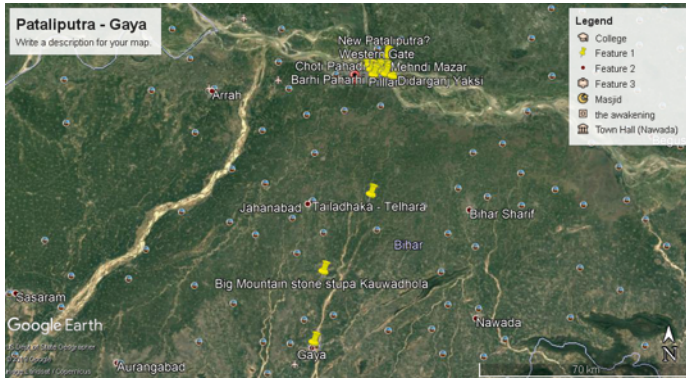
FIGURE 2.4
Map of
Southern Bihār
(with Kawadol/
Kauwadhola)

period onwards.[52] As remote mountain caves for religious specialists, ascetics and *śramaṇa*s, searching for transcendence in form of being released from the circle of rebirth they were, *per se*, places of transcendence – but unfortunately there was no direct evidence for a Buddhist presence at or around the main rock formation of Barābār.

When we left the Barābār Hill complex in the late afternoon and drove back in western direction, we suddenly were stunned by the scenery of an individual conical hill at some distance and in the dimming light of the sunset (Figure 2.5); this hill was crowned by a rock boulder that looked like a *stūpa*. The hill itself, the flanks of which are covered by rock boulders, is called Kauvadol in Hindī, which literally means "Crow's Swing": a local narrative has it that the rock on top of the hill – the one we saw from the distance – starts swinging when a crow is landing on it.

On the bottom of the hill there is a shrine with a huge statue of the Buddha (Figure 2.7) in meditational posture, and on the lowest row of rocks around the hill there are images of the Buddha in meditation and various deities (Figure 2.6). The hill does not show any sign of human modification to make it accessible – as, for instance, the staircases hewn into the rock at the nearby Barābār Hills do. This and the other features (the shrine and the stone reliefs) allow for a clear identification of Kauvadol with the site described by Xuanzang. The setting of the place also makes it very likely that the "stone *stūpa*" on top of the hill has been venerated only from below, as Xuanzang's description implies as well. This veneration from the distance is, I would claim, a clear reference to the inaccessible transcendence of an individual place.

---

52   On the Barābār Hills and caves see Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source-Book with Bibliography* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2006), 258ff.

FIGURE 2.5 Kauvadol, sunset (approaching direction west from the Barabar Hills)
PHOTO: M. DEEG

FIGURE 2.6 Kauvadol: rock images, Buddha and other deities
PHOTO: M. DEEG

FIGURE 2.7 Kauvadol: Buddha statue (8th/9th cent.)
PHOTO: COURTESY LAXSHMI GREAVES

7   Conclusion

In this chapter, I based my analysis of some passages in the Chinese Buddhist travelogues and related sources (bio-hagiographies) on a distinction between – and separation of – immanence and transcendence which is not the absolute one of religious metaphysical-doctrinal discourses. Such a more fluid and flexible understanding of transcendence and the transcendent can change the theoretical perspectives and interpretative approach to the sources I am studying in a wider hermeneutical framework which allows to clearly articulate a layer of meaning which goes beyond the positivist reading of the text as a description of a historically 'real' landscape. In my sources, the notion of transcendence is intensified through a tension between spatial accessibility and temporal inaccessibility. To understand the construction of space and landscape in a text like Xuanzang's Record, one has to take into account the different layers of meaning expressed in the text, and this includes implied references to transcendence.

Bibliography

Barrett, Timothy H. "Exploratory Observations on Some Weeping Pilgrims." In *The Buddhist Forum, vol. 1* (*Seminar Papers 1987–1988*), edited by Tadeusz Skorupski. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990: 99–110.

Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Greater Magadha. Studies in the Culture of Early India*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007 (Handbook of Oriental Studies 2.19).

Campany, Robert Ford. "Demons, Gods, and Pilgrims: The Demonology of the Hsi-yu Chi." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 7, no. 1/2 (1985): 95–115.

Campany, Robert Ford. *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002.

Campany, Robert Ford. "Secrecy and Display in the Quest for Transcendence in China, ca. 220 BCE–350 CE." *History of Religions* 45, no. 4 (2006): 291–336.

Campany, Robert Ford. *Making Transcendents: Ascetic and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2008.

Campany, Robert Ford. *Signs from the Unseen Realm. Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012 (Classics in East Asian Buddhism).

Chao, Adam Yuet. *Miracular Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Corrigan, John. "Spatiality and religion." In *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Barney Warf, and Santas Arias, pp. 157–172. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Cowell, Edward B.; Neil, Robert A. *The Divyāvadāna. A Collection of Early Buddhist Legends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886.

Cunningham, Alexander. *The Ancient Geography of India, 1. The Buddhist Period Including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang*. London: Trübner and Co., 1871.

Deeg, Max. "Das Ende des Dharma und die Ankunft des Maitreya. Endzeit- und Neue-Zeit-Vorstellungen im Buddhismus mit einem Exkurs zur Kāśyapa-Legende." *Zeitschrift für Relgionswissenschaft* 7 (1999): 145–169.

Deeg, Max. *The Places where Siddhārtha Trod: Lumbinī and Kapilavastu*. Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2003.

Deeg, Max. *Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle. Der älteste Bericht eines chinesischen buddhistischen Pilgermönches über seine Reise nach Indien mit Übersetzung des Textes*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005 (Studies in Oriental Religions 52).

Deeg, Max. "Has Xuanzang Really Been in Mathurā? Interpretatio Sinica or Interpretatio Occidentalia – How to Critically Read the Records of the Chinese Pilgrims." In *Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture. Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, edited by Christian Wittern, and Shi Lishan. Kyoto: Editiorial committee for the Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki, 2007: 35–73.

Deeg, Max. "'Show Me the Land Where the Buddha Dwelled …' – Xuanzang's 'Record of the Western Regions' (Xiyu ji): A Misunderstood Text?" *China Report* 48 (2012): 89–113.

Deeg, Max. "When Peregrinus is not Pilgrim: The Chinese 'Pilgrims' Records – A Revision of Literary Genre and its Context." In *Dharmayātra – Buddhist Pilgrimage in Time and Space*, edited by Christoph Cueppers, and Max Deeg (eds.). Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2014: 65–95.

Deeg, Max. *Miscellanae Nepalicae: Early Chinese Reports on Nepal – The Foundation Legend of Nepal in its Trans-Himalayan Context*. Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2016.

Deeg, Max. "The historical turn: How Chinese Buddhist travelogues changed Western perception of Buddhism." *Hualin Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 43–75.

Deeg, Max. "Wailing for Identity: Topical and Poetic Expressions of Cultural Belonging in Chinese Buddhist Literature." In *Identity and Network: Exchange Relations between China and the World*, edited by Ann Heirman, Carmen Meinert, and Christoph Anderl. Leiden: Brill, 2018: 227–252.

Deeg, Max. "Innerhalb und jenseits der Welt: Kritische Überlegungen zum buddhistischen Begriffspaar *laukika/lokottara* im Verhältnis zu säkular/religiös." In: Proceedings of the 8th workshop of the Arbeitskreis Asiatische Religionsgeschichte, forthcoming.

Dennerlein, Katrin. *Narratologie des Raumes*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009 (Narratologia, Contributions to Narrative Theory 22).

Duncan, James, and Gregory, Derek, eds. *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*. London, New York: Routledge, 1999.

Eck, Diana. "India's 'Tīrthas': 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography." *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 323–344.

Eck, Diana. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007.

Eckel, Malcolm David. *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Falk, Harry. *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source-Book with Bibliography*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2006.

Fausbøll, Viggo. *The Jātaka, Together with its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*. vol. 1. London: Pali Text Society, 1962.

Jayawickrama, N.A. *The Story of Gotama Buddha: The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*. Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2002.

Kleine, Christoph. "Zur Universalität der Unterscheidung *religiös/säkulär*: Eine systemtheoretische Betrachtung." In *Religionswissenschaft*, edited by Michael Stausberg. Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012: 65–80.

Kleine, Christoph. "Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory." *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2 (2013): 1–34.

Lewis, Mark Edward. *The Construction of Space in Early China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Li Rongxi. *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty, Translated from the Chinese of Śramaṇa Huili and Shi Yancong* (*Taishō, Volume 50, Number 2053*). Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995.

Li Rongxi. *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions, Translated by the Tripiṭaka-Master Xuanzang under Imperial Order, Composed by Śramaṇa Bianji of the Great Zongchi Monastery* (*Taishō, Volume 51, Number 2087*). Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996.

Misra, Sudama. *Janapada State in Ancient India*. Vārāṇasī: Bhāratīya Vidyā Prakāśana, 1973.

Ruegg, David Seyfort. *L'ordre spirituel et l'ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet: Quatres conférences au Collège de France*. Paris: Collège de France, 1995.

Scharfe, Hartmut. *The State in Indian Tradition*. Leiden, et al.: E.J. Brill, 1989 (Handbook of Oriental Studies II.3.2.).

Sharf, Robert H. *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002 (Studies in East Asian Buddhism 14).

Strong, John S. *The Legend of King Aśoka. A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Strong, John S. *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Stünkel, Knut. "The three-level model of transcending" (unpublished manuscript for the Academic Session 2016–2017, CERES).

Tournier, Vincent. "Matériaux pour une histoire de la légende et du culte de Mahākāśyapa: une relecture d'une fragment de statue inscrit retrouvé à Silao (Bihār)." In *Autour de Bāmiyān: de la Bactriane héllenisée à l'Inde bouddhique* (Archaeologia Afghana, Série scientifique), edited by Guillaume Ducœur. Paris: De Boccard, 2012: 375–413.

Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Warf, Barney. *Time-Space Compression: Historical geographies*. London, New York: Routledge, 2008.

Warf, Barney; Arias, Santa. "Introduction: the reinsertion of space into the social sciences and humanities." In *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Barney Warf, and Santas Arias, pp. 1–10. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Weeravardane, Prasani. 2009. "Journey to the West: Dusty Roads, Stormy Seas and Transcendence." *biblioasia* (*National Library Singapore*) 5 (2009), no. 2: 14–18.

Zafiropulo, Ghiorgo. *L'Illumination du Buddha. De la Quête à l'Annonce de l'Eveil: Essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (*Enquête sur l'ensemble des textes canoniques bouddhistes se référant – à titre principal ou accessoire – à l'« Abhisaṃbodhi » du fondateur at à quelques épisodes connexes: antérieurs ou postérieurs*). Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993 (Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Sonderheft 87).