

The Perilous Journey of Fa-hsien

Fa-hsien (ca. 334—?), whose original name was Kung, was admitted to the Buddhist order at the age of three, at which time his new name, meaning "Law Manifest," was given to him. He set out from China for India in A.D. 399, accompanied by nine or ten other monks. The return from his fourteen-year journey took him to Sumatra, the very brief description of which is presented here. This travel account is the first of its kind available in written form to the scholar.

THE HOMEBOUND VOYAGE

Having obtained . . . Sanskrit books [in Ceylon], he [Fa-hsien] set sail on a large merchant ship which carried about two hundred passengers. A small boat trailed behind, for use in case the large vessel should be wrecked, as sailing on this sea was most hazardous. They had sailed eastward with a fair wind for two days only, when they were caught up in a typhoon and the ship sprang a leak, through which the water rushed in. The merchants wanted to take to the smaller boat; but the men already in it severed the cable, for fear lest they be swamped. Then the terrified merchants believed their end was at hand, and in an endeavour to stop the ship from sinking they threw their coarser merchandise into the sea. Fa-hsien also cast overboard his pitcher, washbasin and some other possessions. Dreading lest the merchants should throw his sacred books and drawings of images into the sea, he invoked Avalokitesvara in all sincerity, as well as the monks of China who had embraced the faith.

"I have come so far to search for the Law," he prayed. "Carry me back with your spiritual power to my destination!"

Fa-hsien, *A Record of the Buddhist Countries*, trans. Li Yung-hsi (Peking: The Chinese Buddhist Association, 1957), pp. 87-90.

The hurricane lasted for thirteen days and nights, but finally they reached the shore of an island. When the tide ebbed, they found the leak and repaired it, then sailed on again.

That sea is infested with pirates, and none who meet them can escape alive. The great ocean stretches on every side without end, and one cannot tell east from west. Only by looking at the sun, the moon and the stars, can mariners tell their direction. On dull or rainy days, their vessel simply drifted before the wind. On dark nights, all they could see were great billows beating one against the other and shining like fire, with huge turtles, sea monsters and other amazing creatures in them. The bewildered seamen did not know in what direction they were sailing, but since the ocean was unfathomable there was nowhere to cast anchor; so not until the weather cleared could they distinguish the direction and set the right course. Had they happened to strike a reef, they would have been lost. After voyaging in this way for about ninety days, they reached the country called Yavadvipa [Sumatra].

THE COUNTRY OF YAVADVIPA

In this country heretical Brahmanism flourishes, and there are very few Buddhists.

After staying here for five months, Fa-hsien embarked on another great merchant ship which also carried about two hundred men. They provided themselves with fifty days' provisions, and set sail on the sixteenth day of the fourth month. Fa-hsien observed the summer retirement on board this vessel, which sailed towards the northeast, bound for Kwangchow.

After sailing for about one month, at the second watch one night it suddenly blew a black squall, and the rain pelted down. Sailors and passengers alike were terror-struck. Once more Fa-hsien in all sincerity invoked Avalokitesvara and the monks in China, and thanks to their protection he was able to live through that night. . . .

Owing to the continuous rain, the pilot charted a wrong course.

Thus they sailed for more than seventy days till their provisions and water were nearly exhausted. They had to use salt water from the sea for cooking, and each man's ration of fresh water was two pints. Soon the fresh water was nearly used up, and the seamen took counsel together.

"Usually," they said, "it takes only fifty days to reach Kwangchow. But we have been sailing now for many more days than that. We must have been off our course." So they steered towards the northwest to look for land.

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A Seventh-Century Visit to Sumatra

An admirer of Fa-hsien, I-tsing (635-713), like his predecessor, was admitted to a Buddhist order at an early age, devoting the first thirty-seven years of his life to scholarly and monastic pursuits. In 671, I-tsing left for India, and in the course of his twenty-five year journey stopped at several points in Southeast Asia on the return voyage to China. The following travel account is one of the major reports of Indianized Southeast Asia during the period of the Tang Dynasty in China (618-907).

. . . This [East India] is the place where we embark when returning to China. Sailing from here two months in the south-east direction we come to Ka-cha [Acheh]. By this time a ship from Bhoga [Palembang] will have arrived there. This is generally in the first or second month of the year. But those who go to the Simhala Island (Ceylon) must sail in the south-west direction. They say that that island is 700 yoganās off. We stay in Ka-cha till winter, then start on board ship for the south, and we come after a month

I-tsing, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago*, trans. J. Takakusu (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896), pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

to the country of Malayu, which has now become Bhoga; there are many states (under it). The time of arrival is generally in the first or second month. We stay there till the middle of summer and we sail to the north; in about a month we reach Kwang-fu (Kwang-tung). The first half of the year will be passed by this time.

When we are helped by the power of our (former) good actions, the journey everywhere is as easy and enjoyable as if we went through a market, but, on the other hand, when we have not much influence of Karma, we are often exposed to danger as if (a young one) in a reclining nest. I have thus shortly described the route and the way home, hoping that the wise may still expand their knowledge by hearing more.

Many kings and chieftains in the islands of the Southern Ocean admire and believe (Buddhism), and their hearts are set on accumulating good actions. In the fortified city of Bhoga Buddhist priests number more than 1,000, whose minds are bent on learning and good practices. They investigate and study all the subjects that exist just as in the Middle Kingdom (Madhya-desa, India); the rules and ceremonies are not at all different. If a Chinese priest wishes to go to the West in order to hear (lectures) and read (the original), he had better stay here one or two years and practice the proper rules and then proceed to Central India.

At the mouth of the river Bhoga I went on board the ship to send a letter (through the merchant) as a credential to Kwang-chou (Kwang-tung), *in order* to meet (my friends) and ask for paper and cakes of ink, which are to be used in copying the Sûtras in the Brahma-language, and also for the means (cost) of hiring scribes. Just at that time the merchant found the wind favourable, and raised the sails to their utmost height. I was in this way conveyed back (although not myself intending to go home). Even if I asked to stop, there would have been no means of doing so. By this I see it is the influence of Karma that can fashion (our course), and it is not for us, men, to plan it. It was on the twentieth day of the seventh month in the first year of the Yung-ch'ang period (689) that we reached Kwang-fu....