Buddhism Arrives in China

Fah-hian

OVERVIEW

In his book about his pilgrimage to India, from A.D. 399 to 414, the Chinese Buddhist monk Fah-hian (Fa-hsien, Faxian) included the following description of how he believed Buddhism had arrived in China from India. Information in the footnotes was of course supplied by the modern translator.

GUIDED READING

As you read, consider the following questions:

• What do you learn about religious pilgrimages from this passage?
• Why do you think the author concludes that the “diffusion of the law of Buddha was no human work”?

Keeping along the incline of the Tsung Ling Mountains, in a south-westerly direction, they travelled onwards for fifteen days. The road is difficult and fatiguing. Steep crags and precipices constantly intercept the way. These mountains are like walls of rock, standing up 10,000 ft. in height. On looking over the edge the sight becomes confused, and then, on advancing, the foot loses its hold and you are lost. At the base there is a stream called the Sinto (Indus). Men of old days have cut away the cliff so as to make a passage, and have carved out against the rock steps for descent, amounting altogether to 700 in number. Having passed these, there is, suspended across the river, a bridge of ropes, by which travellers pass over it. From one side of the river to the other is eighty paces. According to the records of Kau Yih, neither Chang Kian nor Kan Ying of the Han dynasty, reached so far as this. All the priests asked Fah Hian what he knew as to the time when the law of Buddha began to spread eastward from their country. Hian replied, "On enquiry, men of those lands agreed in saying, that, according to an ancient tradition, Shamans from India began to carry the sacred books of Buddha beyond the river, from the time when the image of Maitreya Bodhisatwa was set up." Now this image was set up 300 years or so after the Nirvana of Buddha, which corresponds with the time of Pingwang, of the Chau Family. Hence it may be said that the diffusion of the great doctrine may be attributed to the influence of this image. For apart from the power of the great teacher Maitreya, following in the footsteps of Sakya, who would have been sufficient to cause the knowledge of the three precious ones to be spread so far, that even men on the outskirts of the world acquired that knowledge? We may conclude, therefore, with certainty, that the origin of this diffusion of the law of Buddha was no human work, but sprang from the same cause as the dream of Ming Ti.
A south-easterly direction would be more likely, yet the difficulties of the road, and the windings of the mountains, would perhaps account for any uncertainty of the course.

Chang Kian was a Chinese general who lived in the reign of Wou-ti of the Han dynasty, B.C. 122. He conducted the first memorable expedition of his nation into Central Asia (vide Rémusat)

Kan Ying lived in the year 97 A.D. He was sent as far as the Caspian Sea, to subjugate the Roman empire. As he heard, however, that with an unfavourable wind it would take two years to cross that sea, he returned without accomplishing his object (R).

That is, the Eastern Han dynasty, which lasted from A.D. 25 to A.D. 190.

The Nirvana, that is the death, of Buddha occurred, according to the Pali Annals of Ceylon, 543 B.C.

770 B.C.

The three precious ones, that is, Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha; or Buddha, the Law, and the Church.

Ming Ti, the second emperor of the Eastern Han dynasty, began to reign A.D. 58.