
Yúnnán in the ‘*Biographies of Eminent Monks During the Great Táng Who Searched for the Dharma in the Western Regions*’

An Annotated Translation of Part of the 《大唐西域求法高僧传》

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The Yúnnán Papers

This text is part of a series of translations of historical Chinese texts concerning Yúnnán.

This series does not aim to present any new research but to allow an English-speaking audience to better understand Yúnnán’s history and culture through original texts. The texts are heavily annotated, giving geographical, historical and cultural background information and references to contemporary academic discussions.

The texts in this series are currently in draft and undergoing revision. Those translations that have reached a certain state of maturity can be found on my website at

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1 Introduction

The Táng dynasty text called ‘*Biographies of Eminent Monks During the Great Táng Who Searched for the Dharma in the Western Regions*’ 《大唐西域求法高僧传》 records biographical details of fifty-six, mostly Chinese, Buddhist monks who travelled to India between the years 641–691 CE. It was written by the contemporary monk Yi Jìng 义净, *635–†713, who himself set off in 671 CE to India by boat, returning to China only decades later in around 693 CE.⁽¹⁾

The text is relevant to Yúnnán as it contains an early reference to monks from south-western China studying at a monastery in eastern India who are said to have come from Shǔ 蜀, i.e. present-day Sìchuān, via the Zānggē 牂牁 road,⁽²⁾ i.e. a direct overland route passing through Yúnnán. It is often taken as evidence of an early influence of Buddhism in Yúnnán, but it should be noted that even if the text is correct, it does not state that the monks were from Yúnnán, let alone that they returned to teach there. However, the text seems to confirm the continued existence of a land route going south from Shǔ first mentioned in the ‘*Records of the Historian*’ 《史记》.

2 About this Translation

The source text of the 《大唐西域求法高僧传》 for this translation has been taken from <https://zh.wikisource.org>⁽³⁾ and transliterated into simplified Chinese.⁽⁴⁾

Several translations of this text exist. Samuel Beal produced two translations, though not in order of the Chinese text: the earlier in ‘*Indian Travels of Chinese Buddhists*’,⁽⁵⁾ and a later in ‘*The Life of Huien-Tsiang: By the Shaman Hwui Li*’.⁽⁶⁾ Lahiri (1986) contains a full translation of this text in the order of the Chinese original.⁽⁷⁾

Wáng Bāngwéi 王邦维 (1988) provides a critical edition with copious annotations.⁽⁸⁾

3 Annotated Translation

那烂陀寺东四十驿许，寻犍伽河而 | About forty stages east of Nālandā temple, following the Ganges

r1: forty stages] ‘stages’ is also the translation of yì 驿 in Beal (1881), p. 110, but Lahiri (1986), p. 49 translates the term as ‘yojana’, an ancient India distance measure of several kilometres. The term yì 驿 of course suggests stage posts which would have not existed in this form in India.

r1: Nālandā temple] the translations mentioned agree that this refers to Nālandā temple, a renowned monastery in eastern India.

⁽¹⁾ Historical information based on Beal (1881), p. 195, Beal (1911), pp. xxv–xxvi and Lahiri (1986).

⁽²⁾ Here written as Zānggē 牂牁.

⁽³⁾ <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E5%A4%A7%E5%94%90%E8%A5%BF%E5%9F%9F%E6%B1%82%E6%B3%95%E9%AB%98%E5%83%A7%E5%82%B3/%E5%8D%B7%E4%B8%8A>.

⁽⁴⁾ The text is also available in many books, such as Lǐ Dōnghóng 李东红 (2023), pp. 119–120.

⁽⁵⁾ The passage in question here: Beal (1881), pp. 110–111.

⁽⁶⁾ The passage in question here: Beal (1911), pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

⁽⁷⁾ The passage of interest here: Lahiri (1986), pp. 49–50.

⁽⁸⁾ The passage of interest here: Wáng Bāngwéi 王邦维 (1988), p. 103. The commentary passage taken from ‘*Pronunciation and Meaning in the Complete Buddhist Canon*’ 《一切经音义》 on this passage stems from there.

下，至蜜栗伽悉他钵娜寺。[唐云鹿园寺也。]

大唐西域求法高僧传 5

去此寺不远，有一故寺，但有砖基，厥号支那寺。

古老相传云是昔室利笈多大王为支那国僧所造。[支那即广州也。莫诃支那即京师也。亦云提婆佛咀罗，唐云天子也。]

大唐西域求法高僧传 10

于时有唐僧二十许人，从蜀川犍道而出，[蜀川去此寺有五百馀驿。]向莫诃善提礼拜。

王见敬重，遂施此地，以充停息，给大村封二十四所。

大唐西域求法高僧传 15

于后唐僧亡没，村乃割属余人。现有三村入属鹿园寺矣。

准量支那寺，至今可五百馀年矣。

大唐西域求法高僧传 20

现今地属东印度王，其王名提婆跋摩，每言曰：“若有大唐天子处数僧来者，我为重兴此寺，还其村封，令不绝也。”👁️

downstream, one reaches **Mṛgadāva monastery**. [The Táng call it Deer Park Monastery].

Not far from this temple is a former temple, where only brick foundations remain, its name was **Zhīnà temple**.

The old saying is that former great king **Śri Gupta** built it for the monks from Zhīnà. [Zhīnà refers to **Guǎngzhōu**, Mòhē Zhīnà was its leader. He was also called **Típófódáluō**, which the Táng call the son of heaven.]

More than twenty Táng monks lived there, who had set out from **Shǔchuān**'s **Zānggē** [Shǔchuān is more than five hundred stages from this temple.] towards **Mòhēpútí** to worship.

The king respected them very much and donated this land as resting space and granted them twenty-four villages.

Later when all the Táng monks had passed away, the villages were given to others. Today three villages remain under the rule of Deer Park Monastery.

It is reckoned that Zhīnà temple built was more than five hundred years ago.

Today, the land belongs to the king of eastern India, their king is called **Típóbámó**, he often says: 'If there are monks coming from the lands of the son of heaven of the Great Táng, I will restore this temple and return its villages, so that it will last forever.'

The critical edition of the text by **Wáng Bāngwéi** 王邦维 notes the annotation to the term **Zānggē** 犍道 in the 807 CE compiled '*Pronunciation and Meaning in the Complete Buddhist Canon*' 《一切经音义》 by the Táng dynasty monk **Huìlín** 慧琳, see illustration 1.

牂柯

上佐郎反。下音哥。

Zāngkē

Pronounced Z-áng-Gē.

*l*₁₀₋₁₁: 犍道] variant writing of **Zānggē** 牂柯.

*l*₂₃: 👁️] Source text: <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E5%A4%A7%E5%94%90%E8%A5%BF%E5%9F%9F%E6%B1%82%E6%B3%95%E9%AB%98%E5%83%A7%E5%82%B3/%E5%8D%B7%E4%B8%8A>

*r*₂: **Mṛgadāva monastery**] The Chinese is taken as a transliteration of a Sanskrit term. Beal (1881), p. 110 translates this as **Mṛgaśikhāvana**.

*r*₅: **Zhīnà temple**] Beal (1881), p. 110 translates it as 'China Temple'.

*r*₆: **Śri Gupta**] Beal (1881), p. 110 and Lahiri (1986), p. 49 both translate this as Śri Gupta, the founder of the Gupta dynasty in India, a Hindu and 'a great supporter of Buddhism'.

*r*₇: **Guǎngzhōu**] **Guǎngzhōu** 广州 had early become an important trading center with a large foreign population (Guo (2002), p. 146), but trade along the coast had begun much earlier, see Wang Gungwu (1958), pp. 46–61.

*r*₇₋₈: its leader] The term *jīngshī* 京师 is probably not meant to mean 'capital' here, but the ruler, only then the following sentence makes sense

*r*₁₁: **Shǔchuān**] **Sichuān** 四川.

*r*₂: Pronounced Z-áng-Gē] Literally: 'The upper [is pronounced] like *zuǒ* followed by *láng* using the *fǎnqiē* method, the lower is pronounced like *gē*.' The text here gives the pronunciation of **Zāngkē** 牂柯 using two different traditional methods. The *fǎnqiē* 反切 method was used for the upper, i.e. the first character as the text was written from top to

案牂柯者南楚之西南夷人种类亦地名也。即五府管内数州皆是也。

在益蜀之南。

今因传中说往昔有二十余人从蜀川出牂柯往天竺得达。

因有此说遂检寻括地志及诸地理书南方记等说此往五天路经。

若从蜀川南出经余姚越雋不喜永昌等邑古号哀牢玉汉朝始慕化后改为身毒国。隋王之称也。

此国本先祖龙之种胤也。今并属南蛮。北接互羌杂居之西过此蛮界即入土蕃国之南界。

西越数重高山峻岭涉历川谷凡经三数千里过土蕃界。更度雪山南脚即人东天竺东南界迦摩缕波国。其次近南三摩怛吒国呵利鸡罗国及耽摩立底国等。

此山路与天竺至近。险阻难行。是大唐与五天陆路之捷径也。

仍须及时盛夏热瘴毒虫不可行履遇者难以全生。秋多风雨水泛又不可行。冬虽无毒积雪沍寒又难登陟。唯有正二三月乃是过时。

Annotation: Zāngkē is the name for a group of western and southern *Yí* people south of Chǔ and also a place name, it is also the name of several prefectures under the rule of the five administrations.

It is south of Yì and Shǔ.

Today, there is the saying that in the old times more than twenty men set out from Shǔchuān on the Zāngkē and reached India.

Because of this story they searched for local gazetteers and geographical books such as the '*Records of the Southern Regions*' that mentioned the road to India.

If one travels from south passing through Yáo, Yuè, Bùxǐ, and Yǒngchāng (the old name of this town was Āiláo yù) who during the Hàn dynasty began to admire China, and later changed to state of Shēndú. During the Suí kings it was also called so.

The ancestors of that country were **originally descendants of a sort of dragon**. Today, they are subordinate to the southern *Mán*. In the north, they are close to settlements of various *Qiāng*, in the west, crossing the borders with the *Mán* then one enters the southern border of the state of Tǔbō.

In western Yuè are many high mountain ranges and gorges to traverse, all in all after passing over three thousand *lǐ* one passes the border with Tǔbō. Then crossing the southern feet of the snowy mountains one enters the south-eastern border of eastern India's border with Kamarupa. After that it is close to the southern three states of Módázà, Hēljīluō, and Dānmólidǐ.

This mountain road is the shortest to India, it is treacherous and difficult to travel. It is a shortcut on the land route between the Great Táng and India.

One has to pick the right time: at the height of summers it is hot, there are miasmas and poisonous snakes, and it is impossible to travel. Those who travel find it difficult to survive. In autumn storms and rain flood it and it is also impossible to travel. In winter there is no poison, but snow accumulates and it is freezing cold, so

一切经音义 5

一切经音义 10

一切经音义 15

一切经音义 20

一切经音义 25

一切经音义 30

一切经音义 35

[11: 五天] Tiānzhú 天竺, i.e. India, was considered to consist of five parts.

[13: 越雋] I believe this is a variant writing of Yuèxī 越雋.

[13: 不喜] I believe this is a variant writing of Bùwéi 不韦, a place east of Yǒngchāng 永昌.

[19: 土蕃] variant writing of Tǔbō 吐蕃.

[23: 土蕃] variant writing of Tǔbō 吐蕃.

[24: 人] should maybe 入?

bottom, splitting the character into two parts: the first giving the initial, the second the vowel or vowel with consonant. For the second, lower, character the *dúruò* 读若 method giving a homophone was used. For the different methods and their origin, see Zhu and Li (2018), pp. 23–24. That this aid was necessary indicates that neither character used in the name was common.

r17–18: originally descendants of a sort of dragon] A reference to the '*Biographies of Āiláo*' 《哀牢传》.



Illustration 1:

Handwritten copy of ‘Pronunciation and Meaning in the Complete Buddhist Canon’ 《一切经音义》 with the passage on Zāngkē.

Source: <https://archive.org/embed/02076199.cn>

一切经音义 40

仍须译解数种蛮夷语言兼赍买道之货仗土人引道展转问津即必得达也。山险无路难知通塞。

乃为当来乐求法巡礼者故作此说以晓未闻也。👁️

it is difficult to climb the mountains. Only in the first three months of the year is it possible to cross.

One must decipher the languages of the various *Mán* and *Yí* and bring goods to sell, rely on local people to guide the way, passing around and making enquiries, which is all required to reach it. The mountains are dangerous as there are no roads and it is difficult to know what is open and what is blocked.

This was written for those who have no information about it but are coming from the east to make a pilgrimage in search of the *dharma*.

4 Glossary

Āiláo 哀牢: legendary state in western Yún-nán during the Hàn dynasty. It is thought that a graveside discovered in 2012 in Chāngníng 昌宁 is related to it, see Hú Chángchéng 胡长城, Wáng Lírui 王黎锐 and Yáng Fān 杨帆 (2016), Hú Chángchéng 胡长城 (2014) –

Āiláo Yí 哀牢夷: Āiláo Yí, mythological tribe hailing from the Āiláo Shān 哀牢山, in present-day Bǎoshān 保山 – see page 7, 8, see 哀牢

Āiláo Shān 哀牢山: Āiláo mountains, – see page 8

[44: 👁️] Source text: <https://www.zhonghuadiancang.com/foxaebaodian/huilinyinyi/30752.html>

- Āilāo Zhuān** 《哀牢传》: ‘*Biographies of Āiláo*’, one of the oldest texts about Yúnnán, describing the mythology of the ancient land of Āiláo – see page 7, 8
- Bǎoshān** 保山: present-day important city, the historic Yǒngchāng 永昌 – see page see 永昌
- Bùwéi** 不韦: county in Yǒngchāng 永昌, named after Lǚ Bùwéi 吕不韦 – see page 7
- Chāngníng** 昌宁: present-day a county belonging to Bǎoshān 保山 –
- Chǔ** 楚: – see page 7
- Dàtáng** 大唐: Great Táng, reference to Táng Cháo – see pages 6, 7, 9
- Dàtáng Xīyù Qiúfǎ Gāosēng Chuán** 《大唐西域求法高僧传》: ‘*Biographies of Eminent Monks During the Great Táng Who Searched for the Dharma in the Western Regions*’, 691 text by Yì Jìng 义净 – see page 5, 9
- dúruò** 读若: older method of describing the pronunciation of Chinese characters by giving a homophone, see Zhu and Li (2018), pp. 23–24 – see page 7
- Ērhǎi** 洱海: lake Ērhǎi, highland lake in western Yúnnán with the center of Nánzhào on its western side. It was also called Xīěr 西洱, Xīěrhé 西洱河 – see page 9
- Fǎ** 法: *dharma*, the Buddhist teachings – see page 8, 9
- fǎnqiē** 反切: one method of describing the pronunciation of Chinese characters, using two characters, one giving the initial, the other the vowel/consonant part, see Zhu and Li (2018), pp. 23–24 – see page 6
- Guǎngzhōu** 广州: south-eastern region of China – see page 6
- Guìzhōu** 贵州: today a province in south-west China –
- Hàn Cháo** 汉朝: Hàn dynasty, Chinese dynasty, 202 BCE–220 – see page 7, 9
- Huìlín** 慧琳: Táng dynasty monk, compiled the 《一切经音义》 – see page 6
- Jiāmólǚbō Guó** 迦摩缕波国: Kamarupa, an early Indian state, in the region of present-day Assam – see page 7, 9
- Jiàngjiāhé** 弥伽河: Ganges, Indian river – see page 5, 9
- Lǚ Bùwéi** 吕不韦: Zhànguó 战国 period scholar and politician –
- Lùyuánsì** 鹿园寺: Deer Park Monastery, where Buddha gave his first sermon – see page 6, 9
- Mán** 蛮: historically a generic term for non-Chinese people in the southwest – see page 7, 8
- Milijīāxītābōnuó Sì** 蜜栗伽悉他钵娜寺: Mṛgadāva monastery, pilgrimage place where Buddha gave his first sermon – see page 6, 9, see 鹿园寺
- Mòhēpútí** 莫诃菩提: – see page 6
- Nàlantuósì** 那烂陀寺: Nālandā temple, renowned Buddhist monastery in eastern India – see page 5, 9
- Nánfāng Jì** 《南方记》: ‘*Records of the Southern Regions*’, lost geographical work, mentioned by Huìlín 慧琳 – see page 7, 9
- Nánmán** 南蛮: southern *Mán*, – see page 7, 9
- Nán Yí** 南夷: southern Yí, general term for non-Chinese people south of China – see page 9

- Nánzhào** 南诏: southern *zhào*, regional power with its center on Ěrhǎi during the 8th and 9th centuries – see page 9
- Qiāng** 羌: ethnic group in western Sichuan – see page 7
- Shēndú Guó** 身毒国: state of Shēndú, an ancient reference to India – see page 7, 10
- Shǐjì** 《史记》: ‘Records of the Historian’, – see page 5, 10
- Shìlǐjǐduō** 室利笈多: Śri Gupta, Śri Gupta, founder of the India Gupta dynasty, see Beal (1881), p. 110 – see page 6, 10
- Shǔ** 蜀: name of a state during the Warring States period, later used to refer to the western part of present-day Sìchuān – see page 5, 7
- Shǔchuān** 蜀川: variant ancient name for Sìchuān – see page 6, 7
- Sìchuān** 四川: Chinese province – see page 5, 6
- Suí Cháo** 隋朝: Suí dynasty, Chinese dynasty, 581–618 – see page 7, 10
- Táng Cháo** 唐朝: Táng dynasty, Chinese dynasty, 618–907 – see pages 5, 6, 10
- Táng** 唐: Táng, Chinese dynasty contemporary with Nánzhào, 618–907 – see page 6, 10
- Típóbámó** 提婆跋摩: – see page 6
- Tiānzhú** 天竺: India, A commonly used name for India – see page 7, 10
- Tǔbō** 吐蕃: Tibetan empire – see page 7
- wáng** 王: king, ‘King, title commonly used in reference to rulers of foreign states and alien peoples’. It is important to note that this does not have the meaning of a ruler equal to the Chinese emperor, it is a designation of a ruler below him, when used in titles conferred by China, the ruler of a vassal state, see Hucker (1985), 7634 – see pages 6, 7, 10
- Xīnán Yí** 西南夷: western and southern Yí, a term first appearing in the 《史记》 denoting non-Chinese people in present-day Sìchuān, Guìzhōu 贵州 and Yúnnán. It is often translated as ‘southwestern barbarians’, but it seems to be a short form referring to both Xī Yí 西夷 and Nán Yí 南夷, see Yang (2004), pp. 5–6 – see page 7, 10
- Xī Yí** 西夷: western Yí, – see page 10
- Yáoān** 姚安: present-day county in Yúnnán –
- Yáozhōu** 姚州: Yáo prefecture, prefecture established by the Táng dynasty in 622, present-day Yáoān 姚安 – see page 7, 10
- Yīqiējīng Yīnyì** 《一切经音义》: ‘Pronunciation and Meaning in the Complete Buddhist Canon’, commentary by the monk Huìlín 慧琳 – see pages 5, 6, 8, 10
- Yí** 夷: one of the collective terms for non-Chinese people in the south-west – see page 8, see 蛮
- Yì** 益: – see page 7
- Yì Jìng** 义净: Táng dynasty monk – see page 5
- Yǒngchāng** 永昌: present-day Bǎoshān, a Chinese outpost founded in 69, see Fāng Guóyú 万国瑜 (1953) – see page 7
- Yuèxī** 越巂: – see page 7
- Yúnnán** 云南: at the time of the Táng dynasty the name for the geographic region south of its Jiannan district – see page 5
- Zānggē** 牂牁: the region of present-day Guìzhōu – see page 5, 6

- Zāngkē** 牂柯: variant writing of Zānggē 牂牁 – see pages 6–8, see 牂牁
- Zhànguó** 战国: Warring States, Warring States period, the time before the Qin dynasty, 475–221 BCE – see page 10
- zhào** 诏: *zhào*, term for a local ruler or his realm – see page 11
- Zhīnà Sì** 支那寺: Zhīnà temple, a temple mentioned in the 《大唐西域求法高僧传》, the name referring to the monks from China who resided there – see page 6, 11
- Zhōu** 州: prefecture, administrative unit – see page 7, 11

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