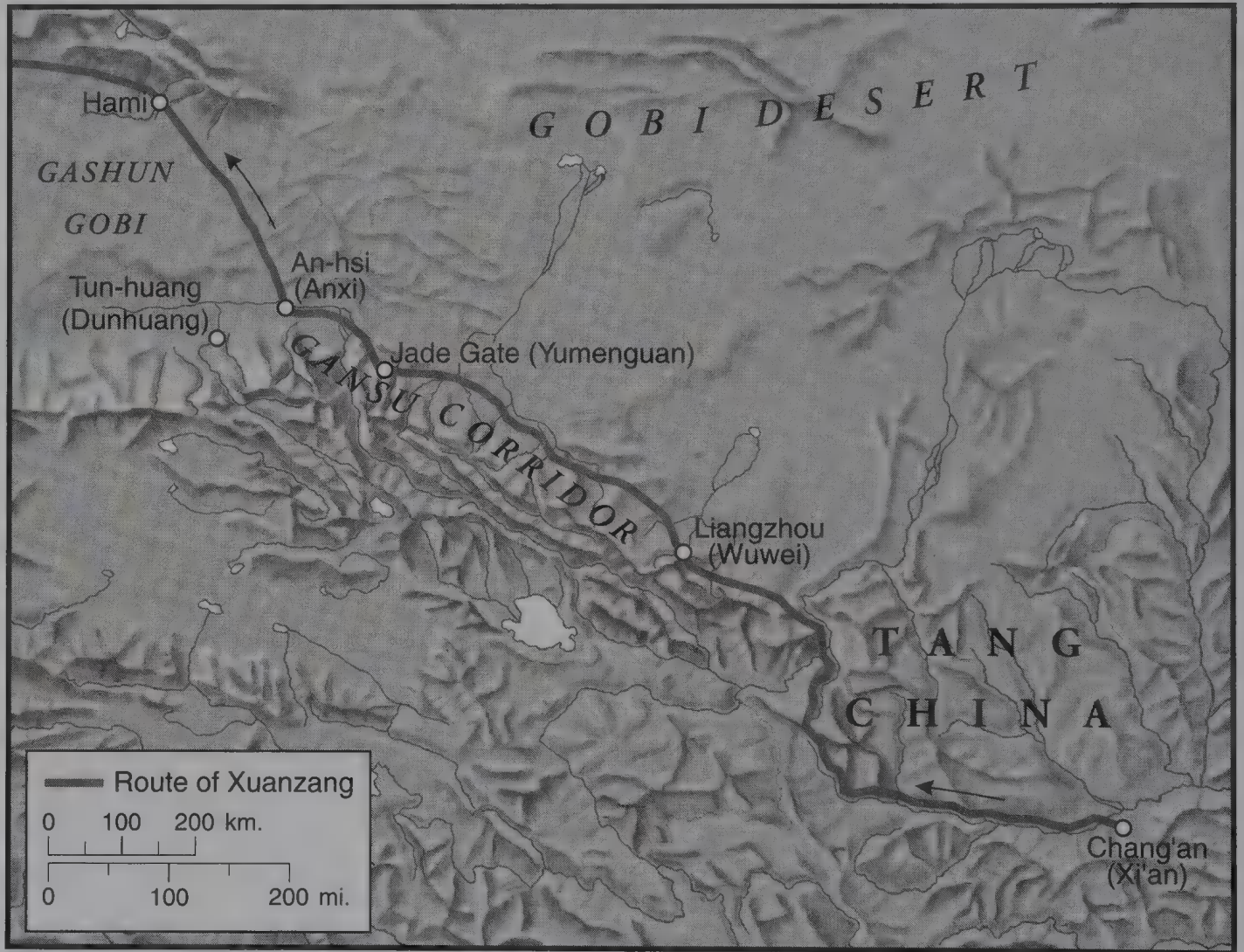



25 ONE

THE PILGRIM &
THE EMPEROR



MAP I. I

*Itinerary of Xuanzang on the Silk Road in China (from Chang'an to Hami)
(Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping)*

 IN 629 C.E. A YOUNG MONK named Xuanzang left China with a warrant on his head; he departed in secret by night. He made his way safely past five watchtowers in the desert and the Jade Gate, the last outpost of the Tang Empire. The fears of this solitary pilgrim were not over, for he was traveling against the wishes of the Emperor Taizong (T'ai-tsung, 626–649 C.E.) (Fig. 1.1).

This young ruler of the Tang dynasty had little sympathy for Buddhism at the time and did not want Xuanzang or any other of his subjects in the dangerous western regions. His power was far from secure and he was still grappling with the hostility and even treachery of several of the peoples of Central Asia. Disobeying the emperor would carry a heavy price, but Xuanzang was determined to go on a pilgrimage to the holy land of Buddhism in India.¹

In April 645, after his 10,000-mile quest for truth to India, the pilgrim returned and approached the Tang capital Chang'an, modern Xi'an. The news of his arrival soon spread; the streets were filled to overflowing, so much so that Xuanzang could not make his way through the crowds. People had heard about his pilgrimage to far-off and strange lands and wanted to see him. He was obliged to spend the night by a canal on the outskirts of the city. The magistrates, fearing that a large number of people would be crushed in the crowd, ordered everyone to stand quietly and burn incense. The emperor was away at the time, but an audience was arranged. A huge procession of monks carried the relics, images, and books that Xuanzang had brought back with him from India. The return of a hero.

In the sixteen years between Xuanzang's lonely departure and his triumphant reentry in 645, both the pilgrim and the emperor had succeeded in the eyes of the world. The twenty-seven-year-old fugitive had become China's best-known Buddhist and one of the most remarkable travelers of all time.² The thirty-year-old emperor, who was of Turkish-Chinese descent and therefore an expert horseman, had become one of China's greatest emperors, presiding over the expanding Tang Empire (Fig. 1.2)

Xuanzang accomplished his religious mission and returned safely with a large collection of Buddhist scriptures. He had seen "traces not seen before, heard sacred words not heard before, witnessed spiritual prodigies exceeding those of nature." He had consulted with the rulers of the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads; the Great Khan of the Western Turks; King Harsha, uniter of northern India; and many potentates in between. He would remember a close friendship with the

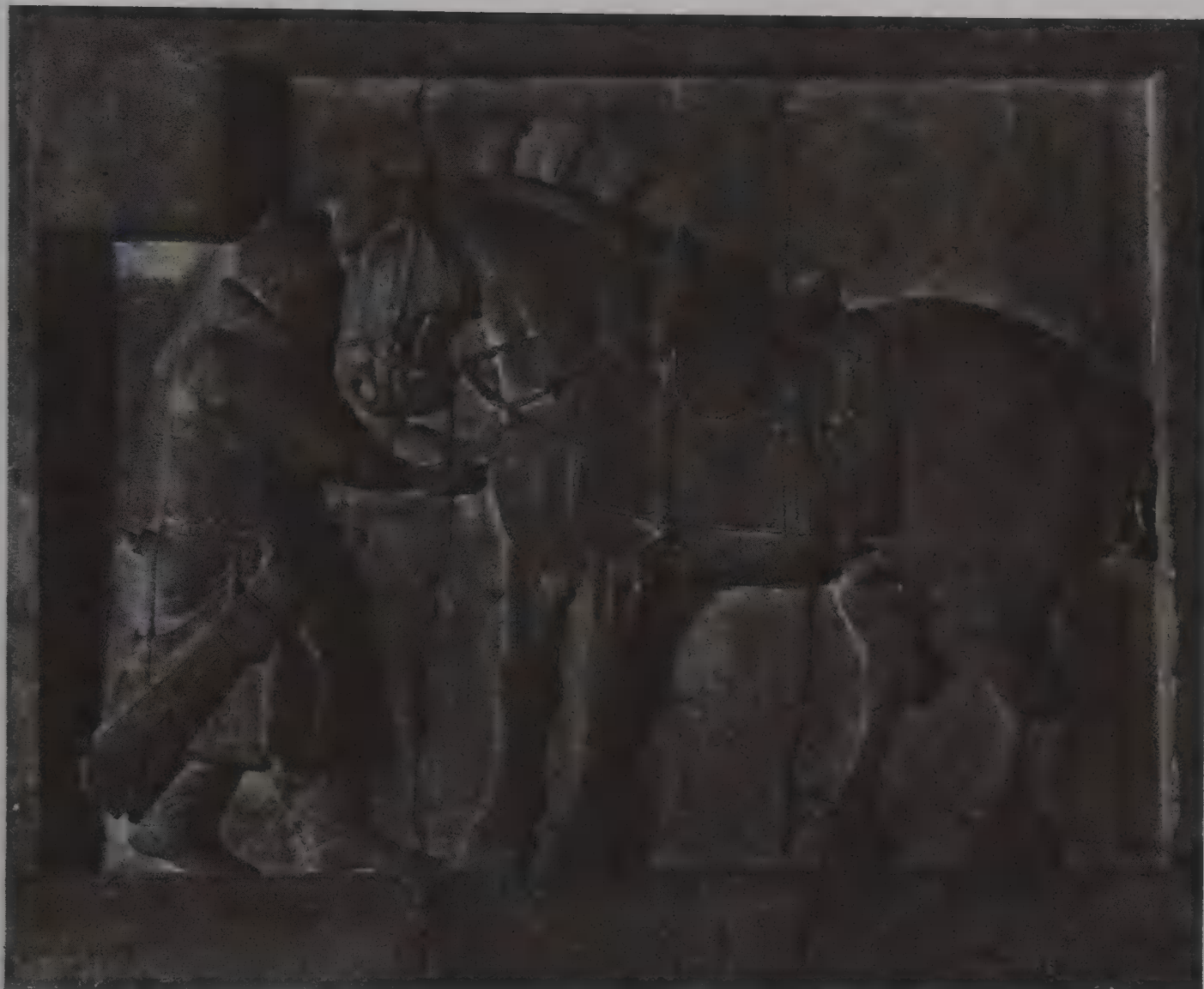
FIGURE 1.1

Portrait of the Emperor Taizong, who at first forbade the young monk Xuanzang to go to India and after the trip asked him to write an account of his journey, which is one of the principal sources for this book (The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, 1947 [48.81.1j])



head of India's most illustrious monastery all his life. He had crossed the most dangerous rivers and three of the highest mountain ranges in Asia (Fig. 1.3).

Not only had the new Tang emperor consolidated his power in China; he had conquered Central Asia. First he defeated the Eastern Turks in Mongolia in 630 C.E. Then he turned his attention to the Western Turks. By a curious stroke of fate, the Great Khan of the Western Turks was murdered shortly after Xuanzang's visit; six months later his mighty empire collapsed. The Tang emperor then began to reestablish protectorates over the oases of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads, where the pilgrim had also been. As a result of these conquests, China exercised direct control as far as the Pamirs. On occa-



sion, the emperor extended his power through diplomacy, such as when he arranged a marriage alliance with a Tibetan royal family. He had already sent two Chinese envoys to King Harsha in India in 643 C.E. after Xuanzang's visit. Religious missions such as Xuanzang's would extend the reach of China even beyond the Pamirs.

What a difference in background and temperament of these two men! Brought up with Confucian values, Xuanzang was a bookish boy who read Confucian classics and became a scholarly Buddhist intellectual. But he broadened his intellectual skills, and far from staying in a monastic cell, he overcame robbers and pirates and became a mountaineer and survivor in the desert. The emperor, whose early education was horsemanship and archery, was a rough soldier and heroic warrior

FIGURE 1.2
Relief from the tomb of the Emperor Tai-zong (ruled 626–649 C.E.), showing a general removing an arrow from a wounded horse (University of Pennsylvania Museum [Neg. #23298])

FIGURE 1.3
Copy of a traditional fourteenth-century portrait of Xuanzang with a modern-looking frame pack filled with the Buddhist scriptures he brought with him from India. Portrait from a rubbing taken from a stele at Xuanzang's burial place, at the Temple of Flourishing Teaching, outside Xi'an. (Courtesy Abe Dulberg, photographer)



who had come to the throne after assassinating his elder brother. Yet the emperor in the early years of his reign came to be regarded as a moderate, frugal, and wise Confucian ruler who sought the advice of his ministers and was concerned for the welfare of his people.³ As a final irony, it was Xuanzang's secular knowledge of foreign affairs gained from years of arduous travel that interested the Tang ruler, although toward the end of his life, the ailing emperor changed his views on Buddhism, sought out Xuanzang for solace, and accepted him wholeheartedly as his spiritual mentor.⁴ At the first meeting of the emperor and the pilgrim in 645, both men were at the height of their careers. The experiences of the Chinese pilgrim and the political interest of the emperor coincided in a remarkable way. With the expansion of his new empire, the emperor needed firsthand information about the successes and failures of his imperial policies. Xuanzang was the ideal informant. The emperor questioned the forty-three-year-old monk in detail about the rulers, climate, products, and customs of the countries he had been through. Impressed by Xuanzang's knowledge of foreign lands, Taizong asked him to be a minister to advise the emperor on the new Asian relationships and problems of his kingdom. Xuanzang declined. Then the emperor requested that he set down a detailed account, country by country, of the western kingdoms that he had visited. What interested Xuanzang the most—information on the monks, their schools of philosophy, and especially the monuments and stories of the Buddha—were matters of indifference to his patron.

No matter. Writing an account of the western regions was a new kind of request for Xuanzang who was used to those who sought his advice on religion or philosophy. A man of many parts, adventurer, intellectual, theologian, priest, and ambassador, he had given spiritual advice and inspiration to many political leaders and potentates in Central Asia. A "Prince among Pilgrims," this Buddhist monk moved easily in both religious and secular worlds. His powerful personality had impressed both the Emperor Taizong and the great Indian King Harsha. A man of unusual flexibility, open to the new and strange wherever he found it, Xuanzang was an ideal observer of foreign cultures.

Studying in Monasteries

Who was this Chinese pilgrim, and how did he happen to go on his long journey? According to his biographer, Xuanzang was born near Luoyang in the province of Henan in 602. He was the youngest of four sons, an heir to a long line of literati and mandarins. His grandfather had been an official in the Qi (Ch'i) dynasty (479–501 C.E.) and held the

post of eminent national scholar. His father had been well versed in Confucianism and was also distinguished for his superior abilities and elegance of manner. However, this Confucian gentleman preferred to busy himself in the study of his books and pleaded ill health rather than accept offers of government service at the time of the decaying Sui dynasty (581–618 C.E.).

Xuanzang was brought up in a Confucian household. At the age of eight he amazed his father with his filial piety, a strong virtue in Confucianism. He even began to study the Confucian classic books about this time. But the intellectual vitality of Confucianism was waning,⁵ and Xuanzang's older brother became a Buddhist monk. He took an interest in his younger brother and saw to it that he began to study Buddhist scriptures at his monastery in Luoyang at a young age.

Xuanzang was the kind of serious boy who was old before he was young. When he was only twelve years old, an unexpected royal mandate announced that fourteen monks were to be trained and supported by the state at his brother's monastery in Luoyang, the eastern capital of the Sui dynasty. Several hundred candidates applied at the Pure Land Monastery for this important ordination. The young adolescent Xuanzang loitered at the monastery gate until the imperial envoy, who was about to supervise the ceremony, engaged him in conversation. "What is your name? Your age?" And when Xuanzang revealed how very much he wanted to be a monk, the official asked him why. "My only thought in taking this step," he replied, "is to spread abroad the light of the Religion of Tathagata (Buddha)."⁶

Such an unexpected and formal reply impressed the official, who recognized the boy's remarkable qualities from his eagerness, confidence, and modesty. The official selected him as one of the novices to be ordained despite his youth, for, as he explained to his fellow officials, "To repeat one's instructions is easy, but true self-possession and nerve are not so common."⁷

For the next five years Xuanzang lived with his brother at the Pure Land Monastery. He plunged into the study of Buddhist scriptures, both the austere doctrine of early Buddhism and the mystical doctrine of the Greater Vehicle, or Mahayana. Xuanzang was irresistibly drawn to this later Buddhism, whose two key words were "Emptiness," signifying the object of wisdom, and "Bodhisattvas," or Enlightened Beings, who postponed their own salvation for the sake of others (Fig. 1.4).⁸

His philosophical studies were interrupted in 618 C.E. when the Sui dynasty collapsed. Because of the anarchy that followed its downfall and the civil war between the Tangs and their rivals, many parts of the empire fell into chaos.⁹ Xuanzang and his brother fled first to Chang'an in the northwest, which the Tang rulers had proclaimed their capital.



FIGURE 1.4
Wall painting and sculpture in one of the earliest Dunhuang Caves in China. Center figure is a Bodhisattva, or Maitreya (these are beings who postpone their own salvation so that they may help others). (The Lo Archive)

They found the city swarming with soldiers, so the two brothers, along with a large community of monks who were gathering from various parts of the empire, made their way to Chengdu, in Sichuan. Xuanzang and his brother spent two or three years there studying the different schools of Buddhism.

Xuanzang's biographer compared the two young men: "His elder brother . . . was elegant in his manners and sturdy physically just like his father. . . . His eloquence and comprehensiveness in discussion and capacity to edify people were equal to those of his younger brother." He continued, "But in the manner of loftiness of mind, without being affected by worldly attachments; in profound researches in metaphysical aspects of the cosmos; in ambition to clarify the universe . . . and in the sense of self respect even in the presence of the Emperor," Xuanzang surpassed him.¹⁰

In 622, when he was twenty, Xuanzang was fully ordained as a monk. Shortly afterwards he left his brother behind in Chengdu and returned to the capital.

Preparing Himself in Chang'an

Chang'an had much to offer Xuanzang. It was the greatest city in China—perhaps in the entire medieval world. Tang historical sources are so detailed that we know, for example, that it occupied an area of more than 30 square miles.¹¹ Rome at its height occupied 5.2 square miles. Chang'an, a city of a million people in the seventh century, became the center of the great culture of the Tang dynasties. In 742 C.E. its population had swelled to two million inhabitants, of whom five thousand were foreigners.¹²

With its rich cultural life, prosperity, and the variety of nationalities that came to live there, Chang'an was a radiating center of Asian civilization. New stimuli from northern India and the kingdoms of Central Asia enriched Chinese Buddhism and made it the most lively and influential system of thought in its day. From Iran and Central Asia came other new religions, including Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity. Together with these intellectual and spiritual influences came many new developments in the arts, ranging from music and the dance to metal working and fine cuisine, as well as important technical and scientific influences in mathematics and linguistics. A galaxy of poets and artists were also part of this glittering capital. The latest in Buddhist doctrine and in pictorial models, the newest in entertainment and fashion, could be found in Chang'an.

A time of preparation. Xuanzang continued his Buddhist studies in Chang'an and sought out those foreigners who could give him instruction in the languages spoken beyond China's borders. He probably went to the Western Market, the area of the city connected with the Silk Road, to learn some Tokharian, which was spoken in many places in Central Asia, such as Turfan. His gift in languages would serve him well in the future. He also began to study Sanskrit in 626 C.E. so that he would be able to communicate with foreign monks whose native language was unfamiliar to him. Like Latin in the Christian monasteries of medieval Europe, Sanskrit was the language of Buddhist scriptures and monasteries in all of northern Asia.

Indian scriptures had been translated into Chinese since the first centuries of the common era. Missionaries from India and Kashgaria (modern Xinjiang), Parthians from Iran, and Sogdians (from the area of Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union) had founded monasteries in Luoyang and Chang'an, where individual monks and teams of monks were busily translating the vast Buddhist literature coming out of India. There were also many Chinese monks who had gone to the west. At least fifty-four clerics before Xuanzang, the first one in 260, had traveled westward, though not all of them reached the

land of their faith. Among those who did, the pious Faxian (Fa-hsien) and Zhiyan (Chih-yen) stirred his imagination.¹³

By this time Xuanzang had spent fifteen years in Luoyang, Chengdu, and Chang'an, studying languages and mastering the teachings of the various schools of Buddhism. In so doing he formed serious doubts about some of the Chinese translations. They were conflicting, garbled, or simply inadequate. He came to feel also that each abbot uncritically followed the teachings of his particular school. Like the Indian fable of the blind men, each touching a different part of the elephant and taking it for the whole, these men were blind to the strange discordances and contradictions among them. Some of their theories were either vaguely or manifestly in contradiction with the holy scriptures. Which precepts were authentic? Was it true that all men or only part of humanity could attain Buddhahood? He was bewildered and unable to decide which theories should be accepted. Thus he made up his mind to go to India to clear up his doubts and to bring back the complete Sanskrit text of what came to be called *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*, by Asanga.

Xuanzang was drawn to the sophisticated writings of Asanga and his brother Vasubandhu, who were the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, only part of whose huge compendium of philosophy had reached China.¹⁴ This school of thought professed a metaphysical idealism in which the outside world did not exist but was a projection of one's own consciousness.

*As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view "the world of birth and
death," or Samsara.*¹⁵

This verse from the *Diamond Sutra* tells us that the material world is an illusion. It is similar to Bishop Berkeley's idealism, according to which "all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth,—in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world—have not any subsistence without a mind."¹⁶ The Yogacarins, however, based this concept not merely on a number of logical arguments that proved the impossibility of an external object, but also on the living experience of insight meditation.

It seems more a philosophy for the theoretically oriented than for one who was willing to meet with storms in the Taklamakan Desert, avalanches in the Tian Shan Mountains, or murderous pirates on the Ganges River. Although Xuanzang was attracted to this school, he enjoyed and was skillful in the art of dialectics. Part of him liked

mastering the subtleties of numerous doctrines, a capability that would serve him well as he talked with the eminent doctors of philosophy in India and Central Asia.

With a firm sense of truths only dimly perceived, he knew that he must plumb to the source.¹⁷ Having decided to go, Xuanzang, along with several other monks, sent a petition to Emperor Taizong to be allowed to leave China. Xuanzang's petition was not answered, but an imperial decree made it clear that laymen and possibly monks, unless they had official business, had better stay home. For such a passionate young man as Xuanzang, that was hardly a deterrent.

629 C.E. the month is uncertain. Dangers and untold difficulties lie ahead of him. He retires into the seclusion of a sacred tower in Chang'an in order to pray for guidance. He has a dream. In it he sees Mount Sumeru, a sacred mountain at the center of the universe, made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal, surrounded by a Great Sea. Lotus flowers of stone support him as he crosses the waters, but so slippery and steep is the way up this Asian Mount Olympus that each time he tries to climb its sides he slides to the bottom. Of a sudden, a mighty whirlwind raises him to the summit; the world stretches out as far as the eye can see. The pilgrim beholds an unending horizon, a symbol of the countless lands he hopes to visit. In an ecstasy of joy he awakes; he has been shown a vision of what he must do. He now knows that it is meant for him to go. He will be severely tested, but he is ready to depart.¹⁸

Beginning His Journey

Xuanzang was twenty-seven years old. A little less than six feet tall, he was an exceptionally handsome young man, with broad eyebrows, bright eyes, a clear complexion, and a noble forehead. He liked to wear ample garments and a broad belt, which gave him the appearance of a scholar. He spoke elegantly and had a clear, sonorous voice. He carried himself gracefully and looked straight ahead as good Buddhist monks do, without a glance to either side.¹⁹

It happened that owing to untimely frosts the harvests had failed, and a decree was issued ordering both monks and laymen to disperse to parts of China that were less affected. Xuanzang took advantage of the decree. He traveled with several companions from Chang'an to the high valleys and gorges of Gansu, one of the westernmost Chinese provinces. The long Gansu corridor cuts between the Land of Grasses and the wild plateau of Quinghai, until it reaches the sands of the Taklamakan Desert. Liangzhou, or modern Wuwei, was the last town of

importance in Gansu province, as well as the start of the caravan routes leading over the desert to both Mongolia and the Tarim Basin in the Taklamakan Desert.

The pilgrim stayed in Liangzhou a month preparing himself for his journey. While there, he preached to monks as well as to traders and merchants at a large religious gathering. The governor, who had heard that the monk was about to go to the west, called him to his presence and urged him to obey the emperor's edict and return to the Tang capital. After this interview, Xuanzang knew he had to be careful. So, sheltered and guided by two young disciples of Liangzhou's most revered monk, he hid by day and traveled by night. His companions guided him to Guachou, not far from the oasis at Anxi, the last halting place with local supplies before the wide desert. At this frontier outpost he halted for another month, "so sad and silent," his biographer observed. His new friends had left him, his horse had died, and spies from Liangzhou had informed the district governor of his intentions. Happily the official was a man of piety who tore up the edict in Xuanzang's presence, but he urged him to depart in all haste.

Xuanzang bought a new horse. He was praying in a Buddhist hall when a Central Asian named Bandha made himself known and asked if he might take the five vows to become a dedicated layman. Xuanzang told him of his need for help in starting for the west. Bandha readily offered to conduct him past the Jade Gate and the five watchtowers in the desert.

The next day Xuanzang waited and waited for his guide. At last Bandha appeared, followed by another very aged fellow riding a skinny roan horse. The "grandfather" appeared to be there for the purpose of giving advice on dealing with the demons and perils of the desert crossing, for he claimed to have made the crossing more than thirty times. Xuanzang suddenly recalled that a fortune-teller in Chang'an had said: "I see you leaving China on a skinny roan horse. You are riding on a lacquered saddle with an iron stud in front of the saddle hump."²⁰ As the old man's horse and saddle fit the prediction exactly, Xuanzang agreed to exchange horses. So the aged man made a very good bargain in selling his decrepit horse, and the zealous monk set forth.

The hour is early, possibly before dawn. The pilgrim, his guide, and their horses make their way as far as the Hu Lu River. Both men are weary after their first day's journey and finally spread out their mats within sight of the Jade Gate, one of the last outposts of the empire. Xuanzang's body slowly relaxes, and sleep steals over him as it does to all tired travelers. But suddenly he awakens. He can see his pious companion, Bandha, stealing toward him with a drawn sword! When Bandha is less than 10 feet away, he appears to hesitate; then he retraces his steps.

Xuanzang begins to recite scriptures and prays to the Compassionate Bodhisattva Guanyin (Kuan-Yin) to protect him from assassins. Bandha goes back to his sleeping place, and the monk sleeps lightly until dawn. Not long afterward Bandha departs.²¹

Being Lost in the Desert

Xuanzang was now alone. He set out with his pathetic-looking horse into a broad depression of sand and gravel, with many steep and stony gullies to be crossed. Often he saw the bones of men and beasts, each one with a story of thirst, exhaustion, and collapse. The sun shone down cruelly. Rising heat waves reflected from the shimmering earth as he slowly made his way. Then a chain of black hills rose up ahead of him, for the desert can change from tan and gray dunes to small mountains looking as if they were made of coal. Near one of these mountains he thought he saw hundreds of armed barbarians clad in felt and fur on the horizon. His devoted biographer described the desert scene: "And now the appearance of camels and horses, and the glittering of standards and lances met his view; then suddenly fresh forms and figures changing into a thousand shapes appeared, sometimes at an immense distance and then close at hand, and then they dissolved into nothing."²²

Were the shifting forms of men and horses in the midst of the heat waves of the desert sands actually bands of robbers? They could well be armies of Turkish nomads from beyond the Tian Shan Mountains to the north in Turkistan. They might be mirages. Or were they, rather, the demon shapes and strange goblins of other worlds, the configurations of Mara, the wicked, that so many travelers had warned him against?

Ahead of the pilgrim was the first of five signal towers in the desert.

Fearing lest the lookouts should see him, he concealed himself in a hollow of sand until night; then going on west of the tower, he saw water; and going down, he drank and washed his hands. Then as he was filling his water-vessel with water an arrow whistled past him and just grazed his knee, and in a moment another arrow. Knowing then that he was discovered, he cried with a loud voice: "I am a priest come from the capital, do not shoot me."²³

He was brought before the captain, a Buddhist, who urged him not to cross the nearly three hundred miles of desert to the Hami oasis, but to spend time with the eminent teachers at Dunhuang, the famous Buddhist center at the convergence of what we now call the Northern and Southern Silk Roads.

Xuanzang complained that he was shocked that instead of urging him to go forward, the captain was exhorting him to turn back and give up. The Dunhuang Caves housed both a large "art gallery" of paintings and sculpture and a substantial library of Buddhist scriptures and secular writings, but it wasn't India. (See Color Plate 1.)

Xuanzang negotiated the remaining watchtowers safely by leaving the usual route to Hami, following a parallel track to the northwest, and plunging into the heart of the Gashun Gobi (Mo-ho-yen), or what the Chinese call the River of Sand. By that term they mean a desert where the ground is not hard, gravelly, rock-embedded earth, but composed of shifting dunes, more like waves in the ocean. The Gashun Gobi was a place where there were no birds, nor animals, nor water, nor pasturage. When he felt himself to be in danger, he would invoke the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva with utmost devotion and also recite a special magic saying found in the *Heart Sutra*. He had learned it many years before from a sick man whom he took to his monastery and supplied with food and clothes. Out of gratitude the sick man taught him this sutra (Fig. 1.5).²⁴

Gusts of hot desert sands obliterated his track, and he was obliged to make long detours. After a while, he knew he was lost. He should have come to the Spring of Wild Horses and he hadn't found it. To add to his panic, in a terrible moment, his water bag fell out of his hands! In an instant his whole supply of water drained out into the sands and was gone. Because of one moment of inattention his pilgrimage would have to come to an end.

Time seems to stop. In utter despair he begins to retrace his steps back toward China and the fourth watchtower. Then he remembers his oath that he would rather die with his face toward the west than return and live in the east. Again he sets off. For four days and five nights the pilgrim and his horse struggle westward. Not a drop of water anywhere. His mouth, lips, and throat are parched by the burning heat. The evening of the fifth day the horse and rider fall down exhausted.

Xuanzang collapses on the sand. He prays to the Compassionate One, Guanyin. Dew falls on the pilgrim and his horse. He is able to slide into a deep slumber. He dreams of a tall spirit who calls out to him, "Why do you sleep instead of going forward with zeal?"

Once more he sets forth with his skinny roan horse. He has gone nearly 4 miles when suddenly the horse starts off in a different direction. He lets himself be guided by the creature's instincts. Soon Xuanzang catches sight of a green oasis. In it is a shining pool as bright as a mirror. The pilgrim drinks long and deep. He refills his water bag with the water of life. He and his horse rest for a day before going on. Xuanzang reaches his destination, the oasis of Hami, on the other side of the Taklamakan Desert.²⁵

FIGURE 1.5
Scroll on which the
Heart of the Perfection
of Wisdom Sutra, in
Xuanzang's transla-
tion, is written in the
form of a stupa, or
pagoda. From Dun-
huang Caves, China.
(By permission of The
British Library)



Who knows what role the 'skinny roan horse played? Horses and camels in the desert cannot only scent water and grazing spots from considerable distances but seemingly can remember such places from previous journeys. For his pious biographer, Huili, the famous desert crossing from Anxi to Hami was surely the sign of a miracle. The pilgrim was his hero. It was the first of many miracles that he described, especially in the first part of his book. For a modern explorer and archaeologist such as Aurel Stein, it was necessary to retrace the pilgrim's route to find out whether his desert crossing was within the realm of feasibility. After all, Xuanzang's topographical records showed that he fully possessed that "instinct of the compass" that some people have. Stein concluded that the dangers and the quasi-miraculous escape that marked the beginning of Xuanzang's travels were neither exaggerated nor fictionalized.²⁶

Both his memorable desert crossing and his vision at the beginning of his 10,000-mile journey in search of truth embody the universal elements of a hero's quest.²⁷ The Buddhist monk was not simply traveling over thousands of miles of dangerous deserts and mountains as if he were a Chinese Marco Polo; he was on a pilgrimage of the soul. His was both an inward and an outward journey; therefore, it carried an aura of special value.

Since he was a brilliant monk with keen scholarly interests, he began his journey of the soul for intellectual and theological reasons—to seek the truest doctrine. His vision of Mount Sumeru was a spacious vision, a call from his innermost being that would sustain him in his many ordeals ahead. When he passed beyond the Jade Gate, the furthest outpost of the Tang Empire, he reached a point from which it was difficult to turn back. Going through such a gate is usually a decisive step, taking one from mere investigation to commitment. For the Chinese, especially, one side of the Jade Gate represented their civilized world, with all that it stood for, in culture, tradition, and a knowable world; the other side represented a place of desolation, the land of the unknown. Having passed this threshold as well as having nearly lost his life at the hand of his assassin-guide, he faced his ordeals alone. He circumvented five watchtowers in the desert and then survived a succession of trials, often in a dismal landscape of desert mirages and dust storms, only to lose his way. Xuanzang experienced a "dark night of the soul," a time of crisis when he lost his water bag and collapsed in the desert. His guide was one of the Compassionate Ones of his Buddhist faith, the Bodhisattva Guanyin, and with the help of this guide he emerged victorious.

Because of this heroic quality, which is so marked in the first part of his journey, Xuanzang has all the vividness of a character in an epic. "His kindred, in the world of our imagination," as Arthur Waley

phrased it, are "not the great travelers, not Marco Polo, or Vambery, nor the great theologians such as Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas, but rather Aeneas, King Arthur, Cuchulain. He is the hero of a sort of spiritual epic, as they of their knightly sagas."²⁸

Thanks to Huili, his biographer, and probably many other monks, Xuanzang became a legend in China even before he died. Whether his desert crossing was a miracle or even a feasible exploit, it was a near-disaster; his trip almost ended before it had begun. As so often happens in legend or in real life, however, it was quickly followed by an event that was to change his fortunes dramatically—his meeting with the king of Turfan.