

Toponymic Representation of Central Asia in Xuan Zang's "Great Tang Records on The Western Regions"



Maxpurat X. Xubbalieva

PhD student, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT: This article is dedicated to the book "The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions" which recounts the historical journey of the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang to Central Asia in 627 AD, as he embarked on a travelling to India to study Buddhism. Throughout his travels, Xuan Zang meticulously documented the events he witnessed, the geographical locations of various countries, as well as the ethnography and daily life of the medieval inhabitants of the region. The travelogue provides detailed accounts of the distances and routes to several Central Asian countries, offering valuable topographical insights into the history of the region. Xuan Zang's extensive journey encompassed territories that now belong to the Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, offering unique perspectives and impressions of the places he visited. Furthermore, this article delves into comparative analyses of the accounts provided in Xuan Zang's "The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions" and the Chinese historian Ouyang Xiu's "Xin Tan Shu" presenting findings from scholarly works by Uzbek, Russian, and Chinese historians. This study sheds light on the rich historical and geographical information preserved in these pivotal sources.

KEYWORDS: Xuan Zang, The Great Tan's Travelogue, Central Asia, Xin Tan Shu, Buddhism, Suye, Mingbulak, Issyk-Kul, Muzart, Shi Gou, Pamir Mountains, India.

INTRODUCTION

The historical ties between Central Asia and China date back to ancient times. The ascension of the Tang Dynasty in China marked a significant period of development in their relationship. The Tang Dynasty holds great importance in the history of the interaction between Central Asia and China, as it witnessed substantial growth in trade, diplomatic missions, and socio-cultural exchanges between the two regions. This progression is well-documented in Chinese sources, providing strong evidence to support this view. Records from the Tang era not only detail the socio-political connections between Central Asia and China, but also shed light on the geographical landscape and living conditions of both regions. However, it is important to note that most Chinese-language sources do not provide a comprehensive account of the settlements along the caravan routes, making it challenging, if not impossible, to determine their exact locations and relationships. In this context, Xuan Zang's "The Great Tang records on the western regions" (known as 大唐西域记 (Da Tang Xi Yu Ji) in Chinese) holds particular significance, offering valuable insights into this aspect.

The research aims to delve into the historical accounts of Central Asia as found in Chinese sources. Ancient Chinese records contain recounts from various Chinese travelers and Buddhist monks who visited Central Asia, detailing cultural and trade relations, ancient cities, and social life. In the course of this investigation, the focus was on conducting an in-depth analysis of the social, political, and cultural facets of Central Asia as depicted in these travelogues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the years 629-645, the Chinese traveler Xuan Zang¹ journeyed to India, traversing the northwestern territories of East Turkestan, Jungaria, and Central Asia, moving from the northeast through the region's center to the southern border of northern Afghanistan and onward to India. While Xuan Zang was primarily a pilgrim, his accounts also reflect his prowess as a prominent geographer. Throughout his travels to India, he meticulously described numerous countries, categorizing them based on their

¹ People also call him Tang Sing, that is, a monk from the Tang Dynasty. It is also found in the form of "Xuan-tsang" by Russian scientists. In the scientific works of Chinese scholar A. Khodjayev, the author supports writing in the style of "Shuan Zang". Because in Chinese this name comes in the form "xuánzàng"- 玄奘. Therefore, it is correct to express it as "Shyuan Zang" in Uzbek language.

Toponymic Representation of Central Asia in Xuan Zang's "Great Tang Records on The Western Regions"

connections to different caravan routes. This classification mirrors the hierarchical status of each group along specific paths. Although his primary focus was not on physical geography, he made a point to mention the most significant geographical features. Commencing in 629 during the Tang Dynasty, Xuan Zang's journey yielded valuable insights into the Western countries and Central Asia, as documented in his writings.

The traveler Xuan Zang embarked on a journey to India with the intention of deepening his understanding of Buddhism. He traversed a route from Aksu to Tashkent spanning a distance of 600 li (equivalent to 345.6 km) from east to west and 300 li (equivalent to 172.8 km) from south to north. Xuan Zang, who moved through this territory covering a span of about 4 km, highlighted the similarities in land, weather, character, customs, and language of the local inhabitants with those of the Kucha (Kuche or Kuchar)² state. He made note of the excellent quality cotton and woolen products that were highly esteemed in the neighboring regions.

Continuing from north to west, they crossed a stony desert for 300 li (about 172.8 km). Xuan Zang documented the flow of glaciers from Sunlin (Pamir Mountains) towards the north. After passing through the mountains for over 40 li (about 23 km), they encountered a large clear lake, which Xuan Zang referred to as "hawarang" or Jehai - Issyk-kul, also known as Xianghai salt lake. This lake had a circumference of over 1000 li (about 576 km) with a wider east to west and narrower south to north expanse, surrounded by mountains on all sides. Its water exhibited a light blue color and a bitter-salty taste, with numerous significant waves crashing on the shores and abundant fish within. However, despite the plentiful fish, the fear-inducing appearance of the lake deterred fishing activities.

Continuing 500 li (about 288 km) from the north to the west, they reached a city situated on the banks of the Suye River. This city was about 5-6 li in circumference. According to Chinese scholar A. Khodjayev, the city of Suye is believed to be located on the historical site of Tarozga, corresponding to the present-day city of Tokmok.³ From Suye, the journey led to the Kingdom of Keshania (Kesh, Shahrissabz)⁴, known as Suli.⁵ The inhabitants and the city were both referred to by this name. The locals predominantly wore clothing made of thin woolen fabric inside and thick fur outside, with narrow and short lower garments. Their heads were shaved, and their foreheads adorned with silk ties.

Traveling a distance of 400 li (about 230.4 km) west from Suye, they arrived at Xiangshuang, spanning an area of 200 li (about 115.2 km²). Bordered by snowy mountains in the south and a desert on the remaining three sides, the land was moist, with dense forests and a plethora of flowers blossoming during spring. It was known as "Ming Kalit" and "Mingbulok"⁶ due to the numerous lakes present in the area. Tuszyue⁷ visited this region every year to escape the heat.

Xuan Zang's travelling route⁸

² An ancient Buddhist state located on the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, between Karashar and Aksu to the west via the northern route of the Great Silk Road. An oasis in the Aksu district of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

³ А.Ходжаев. Буюк ипак йўли: муносабатлар ва тақдирлар. – Т., 2007. – Б.163

⁴ Б.Г.Гафуров. Таджики: древнейшая, древняя и средневековая история. 2-е изд. – М., 1972. – С.121

⁵ The ancient name of the Sogdians.

⁶ Байпаков, К.М. Западно-тюркский и Тюркешский каганати: тюрки и согдийци, степь и город / К.М.Байпаков // Известия НАН РК. Серия общественных наук. – 2009. – С.105

⁷ Turkish term. Ту жууе - in the old pronunciation, it was read as tiek, tiekle, tienglieng, tietle, tu-kwet. А.Ходжаев. Буюк ипак йўли: муносабатлар ва тақдирлар. – Т., 2007. – Б.170

⁸ On the map, the route given in brown is the route to India, and the one in black is the route back to China. Source. Роман "Путешествие на запад" и подлинная история Танского монаха // <https://anashina.com/roman-puteshestvie-na-zapad-i-podlinnaya-istoriya-tanskogo-monaxa/>

Toponymic Representation of Central Asia in Xuan Zang’s “Great Tang Records on The Western Regions”



In this area, there are numerous deer that have become accustomed to human presence. They show no fear of people and do not flee when approached, but hunting them is strictly prohibited, and those who violate this rule face punishment, thereby safeguarding the deer population. Proceeding westward for about 140-150 li from Xiangshuang, they arrived at the city of Da-lo-si, which spans 8-9 li in circumference and is inhabited by merchants and Sogds. The land and weather there resemble those of Suye. South of this city lies a small town housing ten khanates, impervious to capture, with language, customs, and laws akin to those of the Chinese.

Continuing 200 li (approximately 115.2 km) southwest, they reached the city on the White River (Bai-shui in Chinese). N.V. Aleksandrova, a Russian historian, maintains that the monk referred to the river near the city. She also identifies the White River as a tributary of the Aris River.⁹ The land and weather in this area are described as notably superior to Da-lo-si. Proceeding another 200 li (about 115.2 km) southwest brings them to the town of Gun-yu, which N.V. Aleksandrova suggests may correspond to Kangyuy¹⁰ in the Orkhon inscriptions.

Ouyang Xu used Xuan Zang’s notes and information from ambassadors while composing his work on the Western countries for the *Xin Tan Shu*. By aligning Xuan Zang’s descriptions and dynastic historical data, an attempt is made to illustrate the relative positions of states in the western part of Central Asia during the late 6th and early 7th centuries.

Unlike the dynastic history, Xuan Zang provides the local names of states. Scholars, in translating the travelogue, endeavored to correlate these names with their counterparts in the old Chinese language or during the Tang period. Another Russian historian, L.A. Borovkova, in “Запад Центральной Азии во II в. до н.э. VII в.н.э.” compares Xuan Zang’s travel route with the invaluable sources of Tang Dynasty history, the “New History of Tang Dynasty” and the “Old History of Tang Dynasty”. The research also delves into the locations and names of addresses.

Roughly 600 li (about 316 km) west of Suji (Kuchi) lies the state of Balujia, identified as the former Gumo in the *Memoirs of the Western Countries of the Great Tang* and *New History of the Tang Dynasty*. According to “*Han Shu*” (history of the Han Dynasty¹¹), the distance from Guitsi to Gumo was 670 li (around 268 km). It’s essential to consider the difference in the “li” measurement between the Han and Wei periods. During the Sui and Tang periods, the length of the “li” changed to match that of the Late Wei period.

Based on the travelogue, Balujia is located in the western part of ancient Gumo. It seems improbable that Xuan Zang would have ventured into the capital of Baluchia, as it would have significantly lengthened his journey. From the eastern lands, he likely continued his northwest journey, possibly from the present-day Yakkaariq region, eventually reaching Issyk-Kul.

According to the “*Han Shu*”, the route from Wensu to the north to the capital Usun was considered the shortest way from East Turkestan to the Tekes and Ili valleys, accessible only through the Muzart pass. Xuan Zang writes, “To the northwest, after 300 li/157 km, we crossed the Shizi River and approached Linshan (Ice Mountain)”, which is detailed in the 12th chapter of the

⁹ A river in the south of Kazakhstan

¹⁰ It occupies the area between the Talas River and the lower reaches of the Chu River, in the south to the Shosh region and in the north to the lower reaches of the Syrdarya.

¹¹ *Hanshu* (hànshū- History of the Han Dynasty) is a work that reflects the history of the Han Dynasty from 206 BC to 25 AD. The work was written by the Chinese historian Ban Biao, his son Ban Gu, and later by his daughter Ban Zhao, providing valuable information about the Han Dynasty.

Toponymic Representation of Central Asia in Xuan Zang's "Great Tang Records on The Western Regions"

travel book about the Ice Mountain, marking the northern boundary of the Sunlin (Pamir) mountains.¹² It's noteworthy that according to the beliefs of the Chinese at the beginning of the 7th century, Sunlin actually commenced from the junction of Khan Tengri Mountain in the north.

On the map, the distance from Yakaarik to the Muzart pass is approximately 120 km, corresponding precisely to the 157 km road distance at the commencement of the 7th century through the pass with an altitude of 3564 m. Describing the subsequent route, Xuan Zang mentions, "After crossing the mountains 400 li, we arrived at Dasingchi (also called Zehai or Xianghai), 1000 li in circumference, stretching from east to west and narrowing from south to north. It is surrounded by mountains on all four sides".¹³ There is no doubt that this refers to Issyk-Kul. However, there are differing opinions on how Xuan Zang arrived there. Some believe that he passed through Musart's Bedel pass (4284 m). The modern PRC scholar Zhou Liangquan, in his foundational work "Description of Historical-Geographical Research on Notes on the Western Area of the Great Tang Period", presented all these points but did not concur with any of them, suggesting that Xuan Zang found another pass - the Karaqir - and strives to demonstrate that he traveled to the present-day village of Tup on the eastern bank of Issyk-kul.

Firstly, the route to Issyk-Kul taken by Xuan Zang remains uncertain. Secondly, it's perplexing why Xuan Zang chose not one lower pass, but two notably high ones, and did not specify the second. Thirdly, the rationale behind his selection of a long and strenuous path rather than the traditionally traveled route, especially knowing that the extensive journey to India would be arduous, raises questions. The Bedel Pass (4284 m), higher than Muzart (3564 m), lies at a cartographic distance of 200 km from modern-day Aksu, exceeding the ancient road distance to Lingshan.¹⁴

Given that Suye was occupied by merchants from various countries, it's evident that it sat on a significant caravan route. However, based on the distance indicated by Xuan Zang, it would be erroneous to seek it beyond Issyk-Kul, which only encompasses the distance to the Chu River near the lake. Further in the travelogue, we encounter the passage, "After 400 li west of Suye, they arrived at Mingbulok. On the southern side of Mingbulok there are snowy mountains, and on the other three sides there are plains. Rivers water the earth". The Baityk interridge depression in the northern foothills of the Kyrgyz ridge offers a distinct natural environment, marked by mild summers and winters, along with clean and clear air.

Approximately 73-78 km west of Mingbulok, as documented by Xuan Zang, lies the city of Dalosi, where "merchants and foreigners of all countries lived together", suggesting its designation along the main caravan route. 200 li/105 km southwest of Dalosi, as per Xuan Zang, is Baishuichen. Nuchijian is located 50 li/26 km to the south, but there's scant historical information concerning these places.¹⁵

The state of Jeshi, situated 220 li / 115 km west of Nuchijian, was known as Shi (stone) in the "Bei Shi" and "Xin Tan Shu" dynasties, receiving special attention for its location in Tashkent. Xuan Zang's travelogue and the Xin Tan Shu equate Buhan, positioned 1,000 li southeast of Zheshi (Shi), with the ancient Dawan in Ferghana. Ouyang's reliance on Bei Shi materials for his second description of Xu Shi is apparent. The "Bei Shi" presents the state of Buhan (Fergana) as positioned 600 li to the south of Shi, while the description of Buhan places Shi at 500 li northwest, and Buhan itself at 1000 li west of the city of Shule and 500 li east of the country of Suduishan, 5500 li west of Guazhou (Dunhuang). These distances affirm that its capital remained situated in the region of Osh.

After visiting Syrdarya, Samarkand, and Bukhara, Xuan Zang continued his journey to the south from Bukhara, encountering a road flanked by high rocks on both sides, which he referred to as "Temenguan" or "Iron Gate". However, Xuan Zang's account of a 300 li / 157 km road to the Iron Gate through very high and challenging mountains conflicts with geographical realities. The road from Samarkand to the Derbent pass in the Bansuntog range does not traverse mountains, but rather a hilly area just 1000 meters above sea level, covered with grass and fir trees, crossed by numerous rivers and streams. Hence, it is inaccurate to characterize this road as one between steep mountains with scarce water and grass.

There is a clear distinction between the geographical features of the road to the Iron Gate delineated by Xuan Zang and the route from Samarkand to Derbent. Considering that Samojian/Kang's territories were located in today's Sogd province, if the second caravan route to the south is contemplated, it essentially encompasses three high ridges in succession - Turkestan, Zarafshan, and Hisar. This roughly 100 km long path traverses high mountains with limited water and vegetation. South of the Iron Gates lie the 27 provinces of Tuxolo, suggested by Xuan Zang's account to have been established in the territory of the ancient state here. Xuan Zang describes them sequentially along the caravan routes. Following the Iron Gate¹⁶, he initially

¹² "Sin Tan Shu" says: 300 li west of Balujia. Undoubtedly, such an indicator is the result of the loss of one hieroglyph, because if the capital of Balujia was in Aksu, then there is no pass to its west, a distance of 157 km, about 120 km.

¹³ The 400 li road from Linshan to Datsingchi is omitted/not shown in Sin Tan Shu. After Shiji, a 500-mile road to Suye is shown (221/1, p. 6233).

¹⁴ Боровкова. Л.А. Запад Центральной Азии во II в. до н.э. VII в.н.э. – М.:Наука, 1989. – С.132

¹⁵ In this work, the author refers to the European researchers, without mentioning their names, and localizes Bayshuychen in this way.

¹⁶ Ходжаев А.. Буюк ипак йўли: муносабатлар ва тақдирлар. – Т., 2007. – Б.164

Toponymic Representation of Central Asia in Xuan Zang's "Great Tang Records on The Western Regions"

mentions the town of Dami on the lower reaches of the Fochuhe River. Nonetheless, in his overall description of the Tuxolo lands, he indicates that the Fochuhe River coursed through the heart of the Tuxolo lands but then abruptly veered northward. This indicates a historical challenge present in the ancient Chinese record-keeping where riverbed directions weren't always accurately known or were misreported, potentially resulting in different rivers being labeled under the same name. Thus, Xuan Zang may have confused the Surkhandarya with the Fochuhe River, conflating the two in his narrative.¹⁷

Subsequently, Xuan Zang passed through several countries en route to Balkh before reaching the Hindukush Mountains. Post the crossing, he arrived at Kabul. Further east, after covering 600 miles, he entered North India. Xuan Zang's expedition through Central Asia provided valuable insights into the locations and living conditions of many tribes in the region.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of Xuan Zang's travels and his work "The Great Tang records on the western regions" is pivotal in unveiling substantial historical and geographical information about Central Asia. Unlike other sources from the Tang period, Xuan Zang's travelogue offers a more accurate portrayal of the region's geographical and topographical attributes. This enhances the worth of the travelogue due to its unique attributes.

Firstly, a true understanding of China's historical international relations with the countries of this region can only be achieved upon determining their historical-geographical locations.

Secondly, the documentation of individual states in the dynastic histories is limited, and Ouyang Xu's attempts to interconnect this information in the *Xin Tan Shu* are intricate to decipher. Particularly, Xuan Zang's travelogue stands out as a crucial source of vital information on the political landscape of the regions south of the Hisar range.

Thirdly, in his travelogue, Xuan Zang recounts the events he witnessed and the route he traveled. Particularly, let's focus on the information regarding the capital city of Shitsin. Xuan Zang describes the city as a place where peas and wheat are abundantly cultivated, while other grain products were scarce. The Vanch Valley has historically been renowned as the granary of the Pamirs, implying that wheat cultivation has been a longstanding practice in the region. Thus, the claim in the "Xin Tan Shu" (New History of the Tang Dynasty) that the local inhabitants solely engage in robbing merchants is inaccurate.

The travelogue stands out due to its outstanding qualities when contrasted with sources like "Xin Tang Shu" regarding the history of the Tang Dynasty. Highlighting details about the location of certain countries in Central Asia and accurately documenting place names, the travelogue serves as a crucial source for shedding light on the medieval history of our region.

REFERENCES

- 1) Ходжаев А. Буюк ипак йўли: муносабатлар ва тақдирлар. – Т., 2007. – P. 280.
- 2) Байпаков К.М. Западно-тюркский и Тюркешский каганати: тюрки и согдийци, степь и город / К.М.Байпаков // Известия НАН РК. Серия общественных наук. – 2009. – P.105-146
- 3) Боровкова Л.А. Запад Центральной Азии во II в. до н.э. VII в.н.э. – М.:Наука, 1989. – P.175.
- 4) Гафуров Б.Г..Таджики: древнейшая, древняя и средневековая история. 2-е изд. – М., 1972. – P.425.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.

¹⁷ Боровкова Л.А. Запад Центральной Азии во II в. до н.э. VII в.н.э. – М.:Наука, 1989. – С.145