



Significance of Chinese Travelogues as Historical Sources for Nepal Studies

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Abstract

This study explores the significance of Chinese travelogues in the context of Nepal studies, emphasizing their underutilized potential in contemporary research. While these travelogues have traditionally been referenced in the historical and archaeological analysis of Buddhist sites in Nepal, their broader relevance in understanding Nepal's cultural, ethnic, religious, economic, geopolitical, and geographical history has not been critically examined. This paper argues that these travelogues, despite containing a mix of authentic and inconsistent information, hold multidisciplinary value when subjected to rigorous verification. Through textual analysis, the study highlights how these records can address existing knowledge gaps and contribute to a deeper understanding of Nepal's historical roots and transnational connections.

Keywords: Chinese pilgrims, Travelogues, Buddhist studies, Nepal studies

Introduction

The Swoyambhu Purana, one of the most influential mythological texts of Nepal, narrates the account of Manjushree's visit from China to Nepal. According to the legend, Manjushree drained the water of the Kathmandu Valley (now Nepal's capital) and made it habitable. He is considered the earliest Chinese pilgrim mentioned in Nepal's mythological literature. Following the introduction of Buddhism in China, numerous Chinese pilgrims began traveling to Nepal. Some of these pilgrims documented their journeys, producing

travelogues that remain valuable for historical studies of Nepal. Among these, the travel records of Fa-Hien, Hiuan Tsang, and I-Tsing are the most frequently referenced.

The names of these pilgrims, however, appear with inconsistent spellings in various scholarly works. Fa-Hien, for instance, has also been spelled as Faxian or Fa-Xian. Hiuan Tsang's name has been represented as Hiouen Thsang, Huan Chwang, Yuén Chwáng, Hiuen Tsiang, Hsüan Chwang, Hsüan Chuang, Yüan Chuang, and Xuanzang, among others. Similarly, I-Tsing is sometimes spelled as Yijing. Fa-Hien traveled to South Asia between 399 C.E. and 414 C.E., Hiuan Tsang's journey occurred between 629 C.E. and 645 C.E., and I-Tsing traveled between 671 C.E. and 695 C.E. Fa-Hien authored *Si-yu-ki* (The Buddhist Records of the Western World), Hiuan Tsang produced *Da-Tang-Xi-Yu-Ji* (The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions), and I-Tsing wrote *Nan-Hae-ki-Kwei-Niu* (A Record of Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago).

In his travelogue, I-Tsing also mentions several other Chinese pilgrims who visited South Asia, including Nepal. According to I-Tsing's account (Beal, 1914), early Chinese pilgrims such as Hiuen-Chiu, Hiuen-T'ai, Taou-fang, Taou-sing, Matisimha, and Yuan-hwui traveled to South Asia and some of them travelled to Nepal. UNESCO (2013) highlights that the Yuchi monk Zhi Sengzai (or Seng Tsai), Wu-Kong, and Fang Chi visited Lumbini before the seventh century. Additionally, Susanne (2012) identifies Wang Huen Tse as a Chinese traveler who visited Nepal around 643 A.D. Scholars largely agree that these visits were motivated by a desire to pay homage to sacred sites, collect Buddhist texts, understand and translate scriptures, seek monastic rules, and explore novel ideas.

The travel diaries of early Chinese pilgrims are important but also problematic sources for studying ancient Nepal. While historians and archaeologists use them frequently, their overall value is limited because we cannot be sure they are completely accurate. The main problems are that these accounts often contradict each other, contain translation errors, and mix facts with legends. Because of this reliability issue, these rich stories are rarely used in fields outside of history. This creates a gap in our knowledge, preventing a broader understanding of Nepal's ancient society, politics, and economy. As a result, we are not fully using these records to help with modern-day issues. Their potential to shed light on cultural heritage preservation, the origins of current traditions, and the history of international relations remains largely untapped.

This article pursues three primary objectives. First, it aims to document the established historical and archaeological value of early Chinese travelogues, summarizing their foundational role in the identification and study of major Buddhist sites in Nepal, including Kapilvastu, Lumbini, and Ramagrama. Building on this, the second objective is to

advocate for a broader interdisciplinary application of these texts, arguing that their utility extends far beyond traditional fields into socio-cultural studies, political science, economics, and geography. Third, the article seeks to establish the contemporary relevance of these ancient accounts by demonstrating how they can inform modern-day issues, such as cultural heritage preservation, the tracing of historical social practices, and the contextualization of long-standing international relations like Nepal's connection to the Silk Road.

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology centered on critical textual analysis of primary historical documents, namely the travelogues of early Chinese pilgrims like Fa-Hien, Hiuan Tsang, and I-Tsing. The approach is supplemented by a comprehensive review of secondary literature, including historical scholarship, archaeological reports, and modern academic critiques, to contextualize the travelogues and identify established inconsistencies surrounding their authenticity. By systematically examining the content of the primary texts, the research extracts and analyzes descriptions of Nepal's geography, society, politics, and religious practices. This analysis is then used to build a cohesive argument for the multidisciplinary value of these sources, demonstrating how, despite their limitations, they can be critically applied to address knowledge gaps and inform contemporary studies in fields beyond traditional history and archaeology.

Travelogues as Vital Resources for Historical Analysis

One of the primary objectives of world history is to comprehend the intricate historical connections that have linked human societies through networks of interactions (Michael, 2011). Travelogues serve as a medium for documenting the dissemination of ideas in new contexts and exploring how people learn from one another (Wriggins, 2004), bridging historical writing and travel (Anjum, 2014). They are valuable records of the past (Sen, 2006), providing reliable information (Boulting, 1920) and addressing gaps in historical documentation (Cartier, 1988). These records offer insights into the society, culture, religion, politics, economics, art, architecture, Buddhism, and geography of their respective periods.

Travelogues provide detailed accounts of socio-cultural and religious aspects, such as customs, languages, history, eating habits, urban life, architecture, ceremonial practices, manners, clothing, literature, schools, marriages, caste systems, and human relations. They also include information on geographical and topographical conditions, including climate, seasonal patterns, natural features, towns, calendars, and units of measurement. Moreover, these travel records address political and economic issues, documenting administration, laws, rulers, armies, weapons, governance, natural and manufactured products, and transportation networks. Since many travelers were Buddhist pilgrims, their primary aim was to collect

information on Buddhist religion and practices, resulting in valuable accounts of Buddhist doctrines, rituals, monastic institutions, and stories of the Buddha's miraculous powers.

In Nepal, these travelogues have played a pivotal role in historical and archaeological studies of Buddhist sites. Pilgrim tourism scholar Ghimire (2017) emphasized that these travelogues provide accurate depictions of various parts of Nepal, while archaeologist Acharya (n.d.) highlighted their utility in identifying significant historical sites and monuments. Cultural expert Pandey (1995) referred to a pilgrim's account that mentioned the fractured Horse Capital atop the Ashokan pillar. Similarly, historian Fuhrer and archaeologists Mukherji and Rijal relied on these travel records to identify sites such as Sagrahawa, Kapilvastu, and the stupa of Ramagrama, respectively (UNESCO and Durham University, 2018).

Locations in Nepal Documented in the Travelogues

Various parts of Nepal were visited by these pilgrims, and their travelogues provide detailed descriptions of the locations they encountered. In his travel account, Huen Tsang provided information about Sagarahawa, stating:

In the northwest of the city are hundreds and thousands of Stupas built at the place where the Sakyas were slaughtered. After overcoming the Sakyas, King Virudhaka captured ninety-nine million nine hundred thousand Sakya people and massacred them all. The corpses were piled up like haystacks, and blood flowed into a pool. The corpses were collected and buried amid the panic of heavenly beings and the terror in human minds. (Rongxi, 2016, p. 155)

Regarding Kapilvastu, Fa-Hian described: "Less than a yojana to the east from this brought them to the city of Kapilavastu; but in it there was neither king nor people. All was mound and desolation" (Legge, 1886, p. 64). Similarly, Huen Tsang noted in his visit to Kapilvastu:

Going from here to the southeast for over five hundred li, I reached the country of Kapilavastu (formerly mistranscribed as Jialuowei, in the domain of Central India). The country of Kapilavastu is more than four thousand li in circuit, and there are two palace cities, which are completely deserted. The wall of the royal city is dilapidated, and its circumference is unknown. The inner palace city is fourteen or fifteen li in circuit, and its wall is built of bricks; the foundation is thick and strong. The country has been deserted for a long time and is sparsely populated. (Rongxi, 2016, p. 152).

I-Tsing, describing Buddha's return to Kapilvastu, mentioned:

Returning home to require parental love in the Palace of Kapilavastu, he [Buddha] found numerous disciples who inclined their hearts to his teaching. He began his teaching with (the conversion of) Āgñāta Kaundinya, whose first prayer he accepted in order to reveal the truth. (Takakusu, 1896, p.4).

Regarding Niglihawa, Fa-Hian describes, "Going north from here less than a yojana, they came to a town which had been the birthplace of Kanakamuni Buddha. At the place where he and his father met, and where he attained to parinirvana, topes were erected" (Legge, 1886, p.64).

Huen Tsang, providing the location the location of Gotihawa, he writes, going southward for more than fifty li from the city, I reached an old city with a Stupa. This was the natal city of Krakucchanda Buddha at the time of the bhadrakalpa when the human life span was sixty thousand years. Not far to the south is a Stupa marking the place where this Buddha met his father after attaining full enlightenment. Inside the Stupa at the southeast of the city, the remains of Krakucchanda are contained, and in front of the Stupa is a stone pillar over thirty feet high with a carving of a lion on top; the events of his nirvana are inscribed on its sides. This pillar was erected by King Asoka. (Rongxi, 1996, p. 155)

Describing present-day Kudan, Huen Tsang stated: "Three or four li to the south of the city, in a banyan wood, is a stupa built by King Asoka. This was the place where Sakya Tathagata, returning home after having gained full enlightenment, saw his father and preached the Dharma for him" (Thapa, 2001).

Fa-Hian described Lumbini: Fifty le east from the city was a garden, named Lumbini, where the queen entered the pond and bathed. Having come forth from the pond on the northern bank, after (walking) twenty paces, she lifted up her hand, laid hold of a branch of a tree, and, with her face to the east, gave birth to the heir-apparent. When he fell to the ground, he (immediately) walked seven paces. (Legge, 1886, p. 67)

Similarly, Huen Tsang recounted his visit to Lumbini: Going northeast from the Arrow Spring for eighty or ninety li, I reached Lumbini Wood, where there is a bathing pool full of transparent water, with flowers of different descriptions spreading all over the place. Twenty-four or twenty-five paces to the north of the pool is an Asoka tree, now withered; this was the place where the Bodhisattva was born into the world. (Rongxi, 2016, p.157)

Fa-Hian, describing Ramagrama, mentioned: East from Buddha's birthplace, and at a distance of five yojanas, there is a kingdom called Rama. The king of this country, having obtained one portion of the relics of Buddha's body, returned with it and built over it a tope, named the Rama tope. By the side of it, there was a pool, and in the pool, a dragon, which

constantly kept watch over (the tope), and presented offerings to it day and night. (Legge, 1886, p.68).

Huen Tsang also wrote about Ramagrama: From here, going eastward for more than two hundred li through a wild jungle, I reached the country of Rāma[grāma] (in the domain of Central India). The country of Rāma has been deserted for many years and has no boundary marks. The towns and villages are in ruins and are sparsely populated. To the southeast of the old capital city is a brick stupa less than one hundred feet high, built by a former king of this country. When the Tathāgata had entered nirvana, the king of this country obtained a portion of his relic bones, which he brought back to his own country; he built this stupa for paying homage to his share of the relics. (Rongxi, 2016, p.159).

Beal (1884) noted that V. de St. Martin connected the name (Chen-shu-na) with Janaka and Janakpura, the capital of Mithila (Memoire, p. 368). Huen Tsang described Janakpur in his travel account: This kingdom is about 4000 li in circuit. From east to west, it is broad and narrow from north to south. The soil is rich and fertile; fruits and flowers are abundant. The climate is rather cold; the men are quick and hasty in disposition. Most of the people are heretics; a few believe in the law of Buddha. There are about ten sanghdrdmas; the disciples (priests) are less than 1000. They study assiduously both the Great and Little Vehicles. There are several tens of Deva temples, with a great number of unbelievers. The capital of the country is called Chen-shu-na. It is mostly in ruins. (Beal, 1884, p. 78).

Huen Tsang also visited present-day Kathmandu, historically referred to as Nepal. He described Kathmandu as: "Going north-west from this 1400 or 1500 li, crossing some mountains and entering a valley, we come to the country of Ni-po-lo (Nepala). This country is about 4000 li in circuit, and is situated among the Snowy Mountains. The capital city is about 20 li round. Mountains and valleys are joined together in an unbroken succession" (Beal, 1884, p.80 In the northwest of the city are hundreds and thousands).

Significance in Contemporary Nepal Studies

Although credibility of such records has questioned over, "a historian can ferret them out by his painstaking labour" (Anjum, 2014, p.196). Even contradictions found in their writings have provided opportunities for scholars to expose concrete evidences on the historical facts. There are several limitations on the use of these travelogues; they are highly useful for contemporary studies and "have been translated and printed in a variety of form" (Moore, 2007, p. 20). They are significant in the study of World history, history of South Asia and the History of Nepal. They are also relevant in contemporary Nepal studies to trace back the historical roots and pattern of changes in various practices. Several fields including, socio-cultural studies, economic studies, political studies, studies of international relations,

archaeology, study of Buddhist and religious studies, ecology can use these travelogues to explore the historical bases.

These travelogues have provided information on the various sects and religious groups. They can be accessed to explore religious and ethnic roots of various religious and cultural groups of Nepal. They can also be used to explore roots of various socio-cultural practices and institutions. These travelogues have provided information on "iconography and subject matter of Buddhist art" (Wriggins, 2004, p. 227) and the artistic remains of various places. Some of those objects have been lost and some have been unexplored yet. These travelogues can still be used to study the patterns of transmission of ideas and their localization processes. History of the transmission of Buddhism from Nepal to Central and South Asia can be unwoven through intensive studies of these travelogues.

Similarly, they are also useful for the study of Buddhist rituals, literature, monks and sites. Several important historical sites have not been explored yet and the location of some important sites including Kapilvastu "remains controversial" (Neelis, 2011, p. 70). These travelogues are relevant "to identify further sites in the area"(UNESCO and Durham University, 2018, p.23) whereas they can be used as "guidebook for the excavation and rediscovery of such important ancient sites" (Rongxi, 1996, p.155). These travelogues are very important for the study of transmission of Buddhist literature from South Asia to Central and East Asia. The history of those texts and their socio-cultural values can be traced back through these travelogues. Nepal is one of the major centers of Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Their roots can be tracked back through studies of these travel accounts. Similarly, these travelogues have connected various pilgrim sites with Buddhist mythologies. So, they can also be used as reference materials for the study of Buddhist mythologies, folklores and legends.

They can be used to study the historical linkages of various central Asian and East Asian countries with Nepal. "The beauty of the palace is highly spoken of even by the Chinese pilgrim" (Shrestha and Singh, 1972, p.12). They are the primary source for the creation of Image of Nepal in the Buddhist countries. They are the records which provide authenticity to pilgrim sites. Proper utilization of these travel accounts of these pilgrims can be used to motivate and inspired other pilgrims to travel these two countries. The revival of Silk Road is one of the pioneer projects in the sector of international relation in Asia and the World. These travelogues pave way for the exploration of roots of foreign policy and international relation in this region. They "corroborate epigraphic and petrolyphic evidence for trans-regional movement to and from South Asia"(Neelis, 2011, p.70). Similarly, "In the past, Nepal was strategically located on the Southwestern Silk Road (SSR)"(Rana, Pradumna, and Karmacharya, 2014, p.3).

Various sites located in the Nepal have been linked with ancient Silk Route. This exposure of information on linkage of Nepal to Silk Road could help in the initiatives to revive Silk Road and for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritages of this route. But limited scholarly attempts have been made to link Nepal to Silk Routes. Intensive studies of these travelogues can provide information on the ancient routes connecting Nepal to ancient Silk Routes. They can also be utilized to unwoven the historical characteristics of trading practices in these routes. "Thus, as a multidisciplinary genre, travel has been subjected to varied uses and purposes" (Anjum, 2014, p.196).

These records can only be used to their fullest potential "through an analysis of partially denied or unacknowledged intertexts" (Hulme, 2002, p.1). Their authenticity can be harnessed through "comparison of the different pilgrim records" (Deeg, 2007, p. 37). They need to be analyzed in the context of changing time and space. Similarly, these travelogues have never been critically studied which is the major reasons behind their falsification. So, critical studies of these travelogues can enhance their authenticity.

Limitations of travelogue as historical sources

Some scholars have referred these travelogues as authentic sources whereas, some other scholars have questioned on the authenticity of the information provided by these records. Deeg has stated that, "it is certainly impossible to draw final conclusions about the credibility of the records" (Deeg, 2007, p. 37). The facts provided by those travelogues are "inconsistent" (Mukhopadhyaya, Chandra, and Smith, 1899, p. 7). In the context of Location of Kapilvastu, UNESCO has mentioned that there is confusion in location due to "differences in the descriptions given by the two Chinese pilgrims" (UNESCO and Durham University, 2018, p. 8). Same place has been differently presented by these travelers, "we may therefore assume that the Po-lo-yue monastery of Fa-hian was the Durga monastery of Hiuen-Tsiang" (Beal, 1888, p. xxii).

Major reason behind discrepancies in the records of these travelogues is the "problem of translation: literal, cultural and chronological" (Moore, 2007, p. 20). The translated versions have always "superimposed on the Chinese one" (Cartier, 1988, p.45). Translators themselves have raised questions over the authenticity of each other's translations. The most commonly used translation of Huen Tsang by Mr. Beal, "contains many mistakes" (Watters, 1904, p. ii). Giles in the preface of his writings has mentioned that, "the present translation will be found a much more accurate rendering than that published by Mr. Beal, who in the year 1869 seems to have been quite unqualified for the task he undertook" (Giles, 1899).

Most of the scholars who do not have access to Chinese language need to depend on the translated versions which "surreptitiously mix into the Chinese source elements of the

common knowledge - as well as prejudices" (Cartier, 1988, p.45). These travelogues were written after those pilgrims reached China where, "the traveler relying on his memory would confuse the names of places and persons" (Anjum, 2014, p.204). Similarly, the pilgrims were mainly based on the information provided by informants and they even added some of their prior knowledge of Buddhist literature (Deeg, 2007). These travelogues have extensively incorporated several legends in their accounts as if they were true. This indicates that these pilgrims were more concerned with the authenticity of the information they were collecting.

Scholars themselves are reducing the credible use of these travelogues due to "too naive exploitation" (Cartier, 1988, p.45). As for example, Nepalese historian Thapa, has stated that "His (Huen-Tsang) account obviously proved the existence of the Buddhas in different epochs before that of the historical Buddha" (Thapa, 2001, p.27). Here, Thapa has tried to over emphasize the travelogues to justify his personal assumptions. They cannot be authentic source of information of Primordial Buddhas unless they are supported by evidences. These travel accounts can provide information only of the time and place of their visit. Similarly, the story of Virudhaka's invasion of Kapilvastu finds support in the writings of the Chinese pilgrim Faxian, a point highlighted by Violatti (2013). Here too, the travel incidence has not been supported by evidence, so cannot be stated as fact. Scholars are using these travelogues as fact in themselves, which is one of the major reasons behind falsification of historical facts by the scholars. These are the records of the fifteen hundred years ago and they have been "moulded after certain patterns of inner-Buddhist or intercultural Chinese topoi" (Deeg, 2007, p.37).

Conclusion

The significance of Chinese travelogues as historical sources for Nepal studies extends far beyond their conventional use in Buddhist archaeology. While these records present a mix of credible historical observations and inconsistencies, they remain invaluable for understanding Nepal's socio-cultural, religious, economic, geopolitical, and geographical history. Their detailed descriptions of locations, customs, and religious practices contribute to an enriched perspective on Nepal's past, offering insights into transnational linkages, the spread of Buddhism, and the development of trade networks such as the Silk Road.

Despite their potential, these travelogues must be approached with a critical lens. The inconsistencies arising from translation errors, memory reliance, and the interweaving of legend with historical fact necessitate rigorous cross-verification with other historical and archaeological evidence. As demonstrated in this study, contradictions in the travel records have not only prompted scholarly debates but have also led to significant discoveries and reconstructions of Nepal's historical landscape.

These travelogues serve as primary references for the identification of ancient sites, artistic heritage, and lost Buddhist relics. They also hold contemporary relevance in tracing Nepal's historical roots and studying socio-political changes over time. Moreover, their role in shaping Nepal's image in Buddhist countries underscores their diplomatic and cultural significance.

Future research should focus on interdisciplinary methodologies to critically assess and authenticate the information within these records. Comparative analyses with indigenous Nepalese sources, epigraphic records, and archaeological findings can enhance their reliability. Additionally, exploring underutilized travelogues may reveal new dimensions of Nepal's historical narratives. By refining the methodologies for studying these accounts, scholars can unlock their full potential as valuable historical sources and bridge gaps in Nepal's documented history.

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