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Xuanzang

The Great Pilgrim — An Extraordinary Journey of Faith, Knowledge, and Discovery

by Robert Miller

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PART ONE

The Making of a Seeker

第一部：求法之心

Chapter One

A Son of Scholars

第一章：書香門第

The family that produced Xuanzang believed in learning the way other families believed in land. Land could be confiscated by a new dynasty, burned by rebels, or divided among quarreling heirs. Learning, once acquired, went wherever its owner went, and it was the one inheritance that every son could receive in full.

The family name was Chen. Like many educated households of the period, the Chens traced their descent to a distinguished ancestor of the Han dynasty, in their case Chen Shi, a magistrate of the second century famous for his fairness and his patience with wrongdoers. One story told of him held that when a thief hid in the rafters of his house, Chen Shi, rather than calling the guards, assembled his sons and grandsons and lectured them below the beam on the importance of self-improvement, observing that bad men are not born bad but become so through habit, "like the gentleman on the rafter." The thief came down, bowed, and confessed. Whether or not the story is true, it tells us something about how the family wished to see itself: as people who governed through moral example rather than force.

The family claimed Chenliu, in the region east of modern Kaifeng, as its ancestral seat, and early biographies call Xuanzang "a man of Chenliu." In practice the household lived at Goushi, a county town southeast of Luoyang, in the valley of the Luo River, near what is today

the city of Yanshi in Henan province. Xuanzang's great-grandfather, Chen Qin, had served as a prefect under the Northern Wei. His grandfather, Chen Kang, had been an erudite at the National Academy of the Northern Qi, one of the scholars responsible for teaching the classics to the sons of the elite, and had been granted lands at Goushi as a reward. The family was not among the great aristocratic clans that dominated the court, but it belonged firmly to the class of literate officials on whom every Chinese dynasty depended.

Xuanzang's father, Chen Hui, completed the pattern and then broke it. He was a tall man, the biographies say, with fine eyebrows and bright eyes, who dressed in the broad robes and wide sash of a Confucian scholar and was admired for his dignity. He served for a time as magistrate of Jiangling, in the middle Yangzi region, under the Sui dynasty. Then, seeing the government decline, he resigned his post and retired to his estate, where he devoted himself to the classics and declined further invitations to office. Contemporaries compared him to the Han recluse scholars who refused to serve unworthy rulers. Whether he withdrew from principle, from prudence, or from simple distaste for the politics of the age, his decision gave his children something precious: a father who was at home, and who was a teacher.

There were four sons. The youngest was born, by most reckonings, in 602, though some scholars place the birth as early as 600. His personal name was Yi, so that in childhood he was Chen Yi. Older English books occasionally confuse this name with his father's; the boy was Chen Yi, the father Chen Hui. The name Xuanzang, which means something like "Profound Treasury," was the religious name he would receive on entering the monastic order, and it is the only name history has kept.

The Boy Who Stood Up

The biographies preserve a single anecdote from Xuanzang's early childhood, and it is a good one. When he was about eight years old, his father was teaching him the Classic of Filial Piety, the short text that every literate Chinese child learned and that set out the duties a son owed to his parents and, by extension, a subject to his ruler. The father reached the passage in which Confucius's disciple Zengzi, hearing his master begin to speak, rose from his mat out of respect. At that moment the boy straightened his robe and stood up. His father asked him why. The boy replied that if Zengzi rose from his seat when he heard his teacher's instruction, how could he, Yi, remain sitting while receiving instruction from his father?

The father was delighted, and he told the family that this child would make something of himself.

Every pious biography contains a story of this kind, and the scholar is right to be cautious about it. Yet this particular anecdote has the ring of something remembered rather than invented. It is too specific, too modest, and too Confucian to have been manufactured for a Buddhist saint. And it captures, in a single gesture, a trait that would define the man: the habit of taking texts seriously enough to act on them. Most children who learn that Zengzi stood up for his teacher learn it as a fact. The boy in Goushi learned it as a command.

The same biographies describe him as a serious child who did not join in the games of the village children and who was not drawn by the music and spectacles that passed through the streets. He spent his days with books. He read not only the Classic of Filial Piety but, before long, the core of the Confucian canon: the Analects, the Book of Songs, the Book of Documents, the ritual texts. He was being trained, in other words, exactly as a future official would be trained, and nothing in his early education suggested that he would end up anywhere but in the examination halls and government offices that his ancestors had known.

A House of Two Teachings

Yet the Chen household, like many educated families of the age, did not live in a purely Confucian world. Buddhism had entered China more than five centuries earlier, in the Han dynasty, and by the late sixth century it was woven into the life of every class. Emperors built monasteries and sponsored translations. Aristocrats endowed temples and copied sutras as acts of merit. Peasants joined lay associations that met for vegetarian feasts and recitations. Scholars read the Buddhist philosophical treatises as eagerly as they read the classics, finding in them a sophistication about the mind and the nature of reality that the native traditions did not attempt.

The Sui dynasty, which reunified China in 589 after nearly three centuries of division, made Buddhism something close to a state religion. Its founder, Emperor Wen, had been raised partly in a Buddhist convent by a nun, and as ruler he distributed relics of the Buddha to over a hundred prefectures, built stupas to house them, and presented himself as a Buddhist monarch in the mold of the Indian emperor Aśoka. His son, Emperor Yang, though remembered chiefly for his extravagance, also sponsored the great Tiantai master Zhiyi and supported monasteries in both capitals. For a family of scholars in the Luoyang region, Buddhist learning was not exotic. It was part of the intellectual furniture of the age.

The second of Chen Hui's sons, Chen Su, entered the monastic order and took the religious name Changjie. He lived at the Pure Land Monastery (Jingtu si) in Luoyang, the eastern capital, and became known as a lecturer on the sutras and as a man of refined manners who could also discuss the Confucian classics and the Daoist texts. He would be his younger brother's first guide into the monastic world and his companion through the first years of upheaval. The relationship between the two brothers runs through the early chapters of Xuanzang's life like a thread, and its eventual fraying would mark the first time the younger man chose his own path against the wishes of his family.

Early Losses

The biographies are brief and unsentimental about the losses of Xuanzang's childhood, as Chinese biographies of the period usually are. His mother, née Song, the daughter of a prefect, died when he was young, perhaps around the age of five. His father died a few years later, when the boy was about ten. The exact dates are uncertain. What is certain is that by the time he reached adolescence, Xuanzang had lost both parents and was dependent on his older brothers.

We can only imagine what this meant to him, because he never wrote about it directly. What we do know is that late in life, after he had become the most celebrated monk in the empire, he asked the emperor for permission to return to his home district and rebury his parents' remains with proper ceremony, because the original graves had been modest and had fallen into disrepair. He found an elder sister still living, married into a family named Zhang, and he wept with her. The man who had crossed the Gobi and debated before kings had not forgotten the small graves outside Goushi. That reburial, which took place in 657, is one of the few glimpses we have of the private man behind the public monk, and it suggests that the childhood losses left a mark that sixty years did not erase.

At the time, the practical consequence was simple. The orphaned boy went to live with his brother Changjie at the Pure Land Monastery in Luoyang. There, among the incense, the bells, and the recitation halls, he began to study the Buddhist scriptures. He was perhaps eleven years old.

Luoyang in the Last Years of the Sui

The city to which the boy moved was one of the wonders of the age. Emperor Yang had rebuilt Luoyang on a colossal scale beginning in 605, conscripting, according to the official histories, some two million laborers each month to raise palaces, walls, markets, and canals. The Grand Canal, which he completed in these same years, linked the city to the rice-rich lower Yangzi and to the northern frontier, so that grain barges, salt boats, and imperial pleasure craft crowded its wharves. Foreign merchants from Sogdiana, Persia, and the Turkish steppe traded in its markets. Monasteries large and small filled its wards.

It was also a city built on exhaustion. The labor gangs that raised it died in thousands. The canal that fed it had been dug by conscripts who left their fields untilled. And in 612 Emperor Yang launched the first of three enormous and disastrous campaigns against the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo, mobilizing more than a million soldiers and losing most of them. The second campaign followed in 613, the third in 614. Each one drained the treasury, emptied villages of young men, and pushed peasants toward banditry. By the time Chen Yi was studying sutras in his brother's monastery, rebellion had begun to flicker in the provinces, and the more perceptive members of the educated class could see that the dynasty was in trouble.

The boy studying in the Pure Land Monastery could not have known how soon the trouble would reach him. But he grew up, as many gifted people do, in an atmosphere of brilliance shadowed by danger: a magnificent city, a prestigious tradition, and beneath them both the steady sound of something giving way. His father had withdrawn from such a world. His brother had renounced it. Before long, the boy would be asked to choose.

The World Into Which He Was Born

It is worth stepping back for a moment to see the wider world into which the boy from Goushi was born, because his life would eventually touch a remarkable portion of it.

In the early years of the seventh century, the great civilizations of Eurasia were all in motion. In Constantinople, the Byzantine Empire was descending into a bitter civil war; in 610 the general Heraclius would seize the throne and begin a long struggle against Sasanian Persia, whose king, Khosrow II, was pushing his armies toward Jerusalem and Egypt. In Arabia, in about the same year, a merchant of Mecca named Muhammad began to receive the revelations that would become the Qur'an, setting in motion a movement that within a generation would overthrow Persia and transform the Middle East. When Xuanzang finally returned to China in 645, Arab armies had already conquered Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and Persian refugees were beginning to arrive in Chang'an.

In north India, a young prince named Hara would become king in 606 and spend the next decades building an empire across the Ganges plain; Xuanzang would one day sit beside him. In the Deccan, the Cālukya dynasty was rising toward its greatest king, Pulakeśin II. In the high plateau of Tibet, a ruler named Songtsen Gampo would soon unite the Tibetan clans and found an empire that would later trouble the Tang. On the steppe, the Turks controlled a domain stretching from Manchuria to the Black Sea. In Japan, Prince Shōtoku issued his famous Seventeen-Article Constitution in 604, a document steeped in Confucian and Buddhist values, and in 607 sent an envoy to the Sui court with a letter that famously addressed the Chinese emperor as the ruler of the land where the sun sets, from the ruler of the land where the sun rises. The Sui emperor was not amused.

Across this vast and turbulent world, Buddhism was one of the few threads that ran from end to end. It was present in Central Asia, India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. Monks, texts,

relics, and images moved along the trade routes with the silk and the spices. A learned monk could travel from Chang'an to Nālandā and find, at almost every stage of the road, a monastery where he would be received, a community that shared his vocabulary, and a teacher willing to talk with him. The Buddhist world was, in a sense, the first international community of scholars, and the boy born in Goushi around 602 would become its most famous traveler.

None of this, of course, was visible from the family estate in the Luo valley. What was visible was a household of books, a father who taught his sons, and a brother who had chosen the monastery. The wider world would come later.

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