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De-Centering the Middle Kingdom: the Argument for Indian Centrality within Chinese Discourses from the 3rd to the 7th Century

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Centers and Peripheries

This paper is an excerpt from a larger project on how spatial constructions of the world were extracted from one civilization (India), transported across borders (central Asia), culturally translated for consumption in a new civilization (China), and particularly how these ideas were situated within an already existing discourse on the subject in that new civilization. More to the point, this paper will examine how Chinese Buddhists, from the 3rd to the 7th century CE, argued that India, not China, was the center of the world.

The impossibility of a superior intellectual tradition originating from anywhere but China, the center of civilization, was the most basic arguments made against Buddhism in China. Chinese devotees countered this argument in two ways: 1) accept Chinese centrality but argue that Buddhism had in fact been part of Chinese culture for a long time, or 2) assert Indian centrality over China.¹ The latter, which is the subject of this paper, was attempted in several apologetic arguments and pilgrimage accounts. Of the apologists, Mouzi 牟子 (c. 3rd century) in his *Essay on Removing Doubt* [*Lihuo lun* 理或論] and Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (c. 6th century) in his *Essay on Laughing at the Dao* [*Xiao Dao lun* 笑道論] made the most directly spatial arguments in favor of Buddhism and India. Of the pilgrims, Faxian 法顯 (d. 422) and Xuanzang 玄奘 (d. 664), more prominently, presented firsthand accounts of the centrality of Indian civilization. The most complete argument for India's centrality, however, can be found in Daoxuan's (d. 667) *Gazetteer on the Land of the Shakya* [*Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志], chapter 2, in which he presented a five point thesis for India being the center (*zhong* 中) of the world and China being its periphery (*bian* 邊). This paper will present the five most prominent arguments for Indian centrality: the name, awakening, astronomy, climatology, and linguistics. It will conclude with a discussion of China and the "borderland complex."

Before beginning though, it is important to note that the argument for India's centrality was being waged by Chinese for Chinese. I have refrained from citing Sutras which were written by Indians in Sanskrit and only later translated and introduced to a Chinese audience. As such, this new spatial construction of the world had to be situated within an existing discourse on how the world was to be conceived. These writers sometimes appealed to classical Chinese texts to evidence India's centrality, and sometimes directly contradicted them. But when they did so, they felt deeply the inner conflict of reconciling being both Chinese and Buddhist. This inner conflict lay at the heart of what Antonino Forte has called the "borderland complex"—a feeling of embarrassment for having been born in a land that they now understood to be on the very fringes of the awakened world.

Naming the Center

To begin an examination of the arguments for Indian centrality, one must clearly understand the terminology being employed in these debates; for in the semantics of the name lay the first

¹ E. Zürcher identifies this as one of the four major arguments against Buddhism in China. For details on this ethnocentric argument, see E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 254-285.

argument. Early Chinese sources commonly, although certainly not without exception, identified their state as the Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo* 中國), their homeland as the Middle Plains (*zhongyuan* 中原), and their ethnicity/culture as the Middle Hua (*zhonghua* 中華) or the Middle Xia (*zhongxia* 中夏).² Buddhists desiring to contradict the centrality of China avoided these terms in one of two ways: 1) they employed various names of China that were semantically independent of spatial identifiers, or 2) they renamed China as an eastern rather than the central land. For the name of India, they did just the opposite: 1) they explained the spatially significant semantic meaning of transliterations of India's name, and 2) they renamed India as a central rather than a western land. Through these means, the attempt was made to standardize and rectify India's name, while multiplying and confusing China's.

Throughout the sources in question, China was referred to by non-spatially determinate names, or by names of definitively eastern significance. The easiest spatially neutral identifier was to name China by its current dynasty. Songyun, while traveling through the western regions, identified himself as from the land of Wei 魏; Xuanzang employed Tang 唐 in the same way.³ Yet the temporal limitations of political states prevented their regular use when discussing Chinese civilization as a whole. The term Divine Region (*shenzhou* 神州) for China came from the writings of Zou Yan 鄒衍 (c. 250 BCE), who proposed a world of grids of which China was just the southeast corner.⁴ Since this term was not uncommonly employed by non-Buddhists, and it did not carry with it the spatial baggage that "Middle Kingdom" did, it was often preferred by Buddhists when arguing against Chinese centrality.⁵ The final method of avoiding the name Middle Kingdom was to take foreign transliterations of China's name and re-transliterate them back into Sinitic characters. Thus one finds China referred to as "*zhina* 至那," a transliteration of the Sanskrit "cīna," itself a transliteration from the Sinitic "Qin 秦," the name of the first empire of China.⁶ By divorcing terminology from spatial semantics, these terms allowed Buddhists to discuss China without accepting it as the middle kingdom *a priori*. Some writers, instead of neutralizing spatial signifiers in China's name, unabashedly renamed China as an eastern land, for example the land where the sun rises. Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 (499?-550?) called China the Eastern Land (*dongtu* 東土), and Daoxuan called the Chinese people the Eastern Hua (*donghua* 東華).

The most common name in ancient China for India was *tianzhu* 天竺, which semantically carried little spatial significance. From Faxian's account of India, China first became aware that the Indian subcontinent had a land called Madhyadeśa, meaning "middle kingdom" (*zhongguo*), the very same name China had used for itself.⁷ This naturally became the preferred term for

² Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia: 221 B.C.-A.D. 907* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 8-11; Hsu Cho-yun and Katheryn M. Linduff, *Western Chou Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 96-99.

³ Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之, *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 [Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang] (*Congshu jicheng chubian*), 5.205-06; *Xiyu ji* 西域記 [Record of the Western Regions] (*Congshu jicheng chubian*), 5.67-68.

⁴ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 250-52.

⁵ For example, see *Luoyang qielan ji*, 5.204, translation in Wang Yi-tung, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 228.

⁶ A variation of this name includes "*mohezina* 摩訶至那," from Mahācīna meaning Great Cīna. There exist numerous alternate transliterations for Cīna, the most common of which are *zhendan* 振但 and *zhina* 支那.

⁷ Faxian stated in this passage that the dress and food of Madhyadeśa were like that of China (Faxian 法顯, *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 [Biography of the Eminent Monk Faxian], T. 2085.858a18-20). Li Daoyuan in the

India by Buddhists arguing for Indian centrality. Another favorite name, also first introduced by Faxian, was Central India (*zhong tianzhu*).⁸ This term was premised upon the spatial construction that divided India into five regions, the northern, southern, eastern, western, and middle; the middle being where the Buddha was born.⁹ The term Central India was useful for apologists who desired to maintain the spatial signifier while avoiding the confusion of an identical term (*zhongguo*) for both China and India.

Bianji and Daoxuan attempted to both standardize the name of India and explain the semantic significance of the Sanskrit word from which it was transliterated. Bianji and Daoxuan both explained that *tianzhu*, *shendu* 身毒, and *xiandou* 賢豆 were mistakes, and India should properly be referred to as *yindu* 印度.¹⁰ Bianji, in the *Xiyu ji*, carefully explained the semantic importance of this name:

The word Indu (*yindu*) means moon, which has many names, and this is one of them. It means that living beings live and die in the wheel of transmigration ceaselessly in the long night of ignorance without a rooster to announce the advent of the dawn. When the sun has sunk, candles continue to give light in the night. Although the stars are shining in the sky, how can they be as brilliant as the clear moon. It was because saints and sages emerged one after another in that land to guide living beings and regulate all affairs, just as the moon shines upon all things, that it was called India (*yindu*).¹¹

More on the spatial significance of the emergence of sages will be discussed in the following chapter, but for now it is significant that the semantic value of India's transliterated name defined it as the origin point of illumination for the world.

Rectifying names (*zhengming* 正名) had been a primary concern of Confucius and Mencius; both of whom believed names needed to properly represent the named. In a war of words, Buddhists could not concede *a priori* that China was the middle kingdom while India was a mere western region. Instead, they adopted new terms that indicated India's centrality and China's eastern-ness. They tried to explicate and standardize India's names, while multiplying and confusing China's. They explained the semantic value of India's transliterated name, while stripping semantic value from China's name. Because of the significance of each writer's choice of names for either China or India, the terms will be specified throughout the remainder of the paper.

Awakening at the Center

The primary reason that India was the center of the world for Buddhists is undoubtedly that it was the birthplace of the Buddha, the one who awoke (*jue* 覺) to an understanding of the

Shuijing zhu took this statement and claimed that it was because of this that central India was called the Middle Kingdom (*Shuijing zhu xiaozheng* 水經注校證, by Li Daoyuan 麗道元, ed. Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 1.4).

⁸ Faxian *zhuan* T. 2085.858a18-20.

⁹ More on the Five Indias will be presented in the section on the cardinal direction model.

¹⁰ *Xiyu ji*, 2.21; repeated in *Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志 [Gazetteer on the Land of the Shakya], by Dao Xuan 道宣 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 11.

¹¹ *Xiyu ji*, 2.21; translation from Li Rongxi, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996), 29.

true nature of the world. This argument was used in both directions—India was the center of the world because it was the birthplace of the Buddha, and the Buddha was born in India because it was the center of the world—with the underlying principle being that the most awakened person must be born in the most important place. Although this concept applied most directly to the Buddha, it was applied also to the rebirth of all sentient beings.

One of the earliest references to the Buddha as a defining central marker comes from the *Essay on Removing Doubt*, which stated, “The Han country is certainly not in the middle of the heavens. As the Buddhist scriptures say, all kinds of living beings, whether above or below or at any point around, converge around Buddha.”¹² While Mouzi asserted centrality around the person of the Buddha, Sengmin 僧敏 in the *Essay on Western Barbarians and Chinese* [*Rong Hua lun 戎華論*] associated that centrality to the Buddha’s homeland, India. “It is as the sūtra says, ‘The Buddha is at the center of heaven and earth, the pure guide to the ten directions.’ Therefore, we know that in the land of India there is the Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo*, Madhyadeśa).”¹³ Both Mouzi and Sengmin based their arguments upon the authority of the sūtras and both took the awakened Buddha as the centerpiece of space.

Just before Xuanzang returned to China, the monks of the Nalanda monastery attempted to persuade him to stay in India and not return to the peripheral land of China. Within their argument was given a reason as to why the Buddha was not born in China. “India (*yindu*) is the land of Buddha’s birth,” they asserted. “China (*zhina guo* 支那國) is a country of mleccas, of unimportant barbarians, who despise the religious and the Faith. That is why Buddha was not born there.”¹⁴ They then continued:

It is said in the scriptures that according to different meritorious deeds, heavenly being have different kinds of food, though they eat together. We are, however, living together in Jambudvīpa (the inhabited continent of this world); but the Buddha was born here in this country and did not go there to your land, because it is a vicious borderland (*biandi* 邊地).¹⁵

According to this description, the Buddha was not born in China because of its people’s faithlessness; conversely, the Buddha lived in India because of the good deeds there. Thus, good deeds and faithfulness became dimensions than could be mapped onto the Indo-centered world.

Daoxuan’s argument on the subject was the most complete and cogent. He argued that the location of one’s birth was gradated according to the principles of reincarnation; that is, the better one’s karma, the closer to India he or she will be born. In his introduction, he stated:

¹² *Mouzi Lihuo lun* 牟子理或論 in *Hongming ji* 弘明集 [Collection on Proliferation of Illumination], T. 2102.3c22-23; translation from John P. Keenon, *How Master Mou Removes our Doubts: A Reader Response Study and Translation of the Mou-tzu Li-huo lun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 103.

¹³ Sengmin 僧敏, *Rong Hua lun xi Gu daoshi yixia lun* 戎華論折顧道士夷夏論 [Essay on the Western Barbarians and Chinese, Analyzing Master Gu’s ‘Essay on Barbarians and Chinese’], in *Hongming ji*, T. 2102.47b26-27.

¹⁴ *Da Tang da ci'en si sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 [A Biography of the Trāpīṭaka Master of the Great Cī'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty], T. 2053.246a; translation from Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation, volume 1: Introductory Orientations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 209-10. Mleccas is the Indian word for barbarian; for more on Indian concepts of barbarians, see Richard B. Mather, “Chinese and Indian Perceptions of Each Other between the First and Seventh Centuries,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112.1 (Jan.-Mar., 1992): 1-8.

¹⁵ *Fashi zhuan*, T. 2053.246a; translation from Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Trāpīṭaka Master of the Great Cī'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 139.

Therefore the town of Kapilavastu (*jiapiluo* 迦毘羅), the birthplace of the Buddha, should be its [the world's] center. . . The Buddha's mighty spirit (*weishen* 威神) was not born in a peripheral land (*biandi*). That would cause the earth to tilt. The Kingdom of Middle India (*zhong tianzhu*) of Tathagata (i.e. the Buddha) has been built underneath the Bodhi-tree. It has the Diamond Throne that he was using when he became the Buddha.¹⁶

As part of his argument that men were evidence for India's centrality, he furthered the spatial reincarnation argument.

The ultimate stage (*jiwei* 極位) of an ordinary man is called the King of Wheels (*lunwang* 輪王). The ultimate stage of the sage is called the King of Dharma (*fawang* 法王). Now these two kings are not born just anywhere, their birth is definitely at the center. Moreover, mountains, streams, kingdoms, and cities are a person's environmental rewards. When a person overcomes, then his environment also overcomes. This is why these two kings reside at this place.¹⁷

According to Daoxuan, the spatial distribution of men was a radial function of awakening, and the quality of one's environment was directly related to one's status of rebirth. This principle was not limited to the Buddha awakening, but also the "ordinary men" and "sages" as well. This was confirmed by Xuanzang's account that the common people of India were honest and "fear the retribution for sins in future lives and make light of the benefits they enjoy at the present time."¹⁸ Daoxuan's principle of spatial alignment to karmic rewards would have applied to these people as well. He further argued that "emerging from the mundane and entering the sagely must start with the Middle Kingdom (Madhyadeśa)."¹⁹ Thus, what began as an argument for India being the center of the world because it was the birthplace of the Buddha developed into an argument for India being the center of awakening, the pole of karmic rewards.

Astronomical Evidence for India's Centrality

A number of astronomical arguments were made to support India's centrality in the world. The most simple, such as that from the *Record of the Land of the Buddha* [*Foguo ji* 佛國記], stated that India was the "center of 3,000 suns and moons and of 12,000 heavens and earths."²⁰ The more complicated arguments took astronomical observations of the sun and stars as evidence both for a de-centered China and a centered India.

Mouzi made the earliest argument of this nature by considering the North Star. He explained that since the North Star was at the center of the heavens (since all stars circle around it) and the North Star was north of China, then China could not be located at the center of the

¹⁶ *Shijia fangzhi*, 7. Tathagata (*rulai* 如來) is an alternate name for the Buddha. The Bodhi-tree (*foshu* 佛樹) was the tree under which Sakymuni was meditating while he achieved awakening. The Diamond Throne (*jingang zuo* 金剛座) was the seat upon which Sakymuni was sitting when he achieved awakening.

¹⁷ *Shijia fangzhi*, 11.

¹⁸ *Xiyu ji*, 2.25; translation from Li, 60.

¹⁹ *Shijia fangzhi*, 8.

²⁰ This line is from a fragment quoted in the *Shuijing zhu xiaozheng* 水經注校證, by Li Daoyuan 麗道元, ed. Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 1.7; it was also quoted in *Shijia fangzhi* 7.

heavens.²¹ This argument said nothing of India, since it too would have been south of the North Star. Instead it was intended to prove that, as John Keenan states, “China appears to be the center of culture, but is itself off on the margin.”²² Daoxuan built upon the North Star argument by claiming that “when gazing at the North Star, it seems as though it is to the west, alas.”²³ In this argument, India, although not underneath the North Star, would still have been aligned with the North Star along a north-south axis.

The second astronomical argument was associated with the sun and the extremely authoritative act of setting the calendar. Daoxuan recorded a conversation between the Song (420-479) official He Chengtian 何承天 and the Sraman Huiyan 惠嚴. Chengtian asked, “What calendrical arts does the Buddhist Kingdom (*foguo*) use to identify itself as the middle?” Huiyan responded:

As for the kingdom of India (*tianzhu*), on the day of the summer solstice, its direction is in the middle and does not have a shadow, so it is said to be the middle of heaven and earth. At the central plains of this kingdom [China], when the shadows are measured, there are remaining inches. This causes our calendars to be off after three generations. Calculations are made to compensate for the differences, but the seasons always differ from our time. This explains why it [China] is not the middle.²⁴

According to the report, Chengtian was unable to respond to Huiyan’s answer. This argument not only de-centered China, as did the North Star argument, but it also centered India. Whereas the setting of the calendar was an extremely authoritative act reserved only for the emperor, Huiyan’s proposal that India’s calendar was more accurate than the Chinese calendar carried with it political and cultural, as well as spatial, significance.

Climatological Evidence for India’s Centrality

The climate was a common component of official report on distant lands. It was believed by some early Chinese that men’s character was determined by the climate and topography of their homeland.²⁵ Early accounts of India reported on its temperate weather and fertile land. Some reports, however, suggested that India was too hot and humid, more suited for elephants than for men.²⁶ Nice weather by itself was not an argument for centrality, but when a center was conceived of as a balance point for peripheral extremes, then weather became powerful evidence for India’s central location in the world.

Faxian reported central India to be a place of temperate climate and flourishing plants.

²¹ *Lihuo lun*, T. 2102.3c22-23.

²² Keenan, 105.

²³ *Shijia fangzhi*, 8. Daoxuan added to this statement that one inch in heaven equaled a thousand on earth. Therefore, China being a very slight distance to the west from the North Star made it a very great distance from the north-south axis on earth.

²⁴ *Shijia fangzhi*, 7.

²⁵ On reports of foreign lands, see Cartier, 3-4. On climate and topography determining character, see Lewis, 202-12. This idea is even expressed in the *Xiyu ji*: “Human beings are of different dispositions, stubborn or pliable, and speak different languages. This is caused by climatic conditions and by customary usage” (*Xiyu ji*, 1.3; translation from Li, 20).

²⁶ *Xiyu ji*, 1.3.

Madhyadeśa (the Middle Kingdom), he reported, “has a temperate climate (*hanshu tiaohē* 寒暑調和), without frost or snow; and the people are prosperous and happy, without registration or official restrictions.”²⁷ While there, Faxian visited the actual rock and tree where the Buddha had once sat. Explaining how the rock and tree were still there, he stated that in Madhyadeśa, “the climate is so equable (*hanshu jun tiaohē* 寒暑均調) that trees will live several thousand, and even so long as ten thousand, years.”²⁸

Although Faxian never directly associated a climatological balance with spatial centrality, he laid the foundation for Mouzi and Daoxuan to do just that. When asked about the Buddha’s birth and homeland, Mouzi responded with a description of a spatial and temporal convergence of harmony.

[The Buddha] was born in the first month of summer (i.e. the fourth month), which is neither cold nor hot, when the plants and trees flower and bloom, when one removes fox furs and clothes oneself with light, broad-stitched cloth. Born in India (*tianzhu*), the center of heaven and earth, he was balanced and lived in harmony.²⁹

Thus according to Mouzi, the Buddha, the man of perfectly harmonious qualities, was born at the most temperate of seasons, in the most balanced of lands. Daoxuan took “the seasons (*shi* 時)” as one of his five arguing points for India’s centrality. It was, however, by far the shortest of his five theses and left a great deal unsaid. The entire argument is as follows:

Speaking of the seasons (*shi*), it is said that [the land] south of the Himalayas (*xueshan* 雪山 “snowy mountains”) is named the Middle Kingdom (Madhyadeśa). [The climate] is temperate and even, the summers and winters are in harmony. The flowers and trees are always in bloom, and the drifting snow doesn’t fall. Of the remaining borderlands (*bianbi* 邊鄙), what more can be said?³⁰

Daoxuan made this argument in such a self-evident tone that it left much to the imagination. It is possible, although not verifiable, that he, as well as Mouzi, had in mind the principles of the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行) as developed during the Han synthesis. In this conceptualization, the four cardinal directions were connected to the four seasons, and the middle direction acted as the transitioning point of the seasons.³¹ The center, therefore, was a point of balance and transition, and India’s harmonious climate was evidence of its centrality in the world.

Linguistic Evidence for India’s Centrality

It has been argued that “Chinese civilization” was conceived of by early Chinese as “the universal standard of civilization,” a vital component of which was its writing system and

²⁷ *Faxian zhuan*, T. 2085.859b1-2; translation from H. A. Giles, trans. *The Travels of Fa-hsien (399-414 A.D.), or Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 20.

²⁸ *Faxian zhuan*, T. 2085.863a26-29; translation from Giles, 53.

²⁹ *Lihuo lun*, T. 2102.1c24-26; translation from Keenan, 60-61.

³⁰ *Shijia fangzhi*, 8.

³¹ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation, volume 2: History of Scientific Thought* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991), 261-68.

profound literary history.³² Pilgrimage accounts and apologetic works challenged this notion and presented the language of Central India as a divinely received language, an uncorrupted tongue, and a linguistic standard for the rest of the world. The earliest references to the Indic language from Faxian were innocuous and brief, later accounts from Bianji aggrandized the Indic language in greater detail, and then Daoxuan took these descriptions and set them in direct opposition to and denouncement of the Chinese language.

Faxian was the first to report on the language of Madhyadeśa being used as a standard in surrounding areas. He reported that in Udyāna (*wuchang* 烏長), just north of India (*tianzhu*), “the language of Central India (*zhong tianzhu*) is universally used here, Central India being what they call the ‘Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo*).”³³ Bianji reported a great deal more. He declared that the script was “invented by the Brahmadeva (*fantian* 梵天) as an original standard (*ze* 則) for posterity.” As this pure, primal language gradually dispersed through time and space, it was corrupted, being modified according to diverse peoples and places.

The people of Central India (*zhong yindu* 中印度) are particularly accurate and correct in speech, and their expressions and tones are harmonious and elegant like the language of the devas (*tian* 天). They speak accurately in a clear voice and serve as a standard (*ze*) for other people. The people of neighboring lands and foreign countries became accustomed to speaking in erroneous ways until their mistakes became accepted as correct, and they vied with one another in emulating vulgarities, not sticking to the pure and simple style.³⁴

According to Bianji, Central India, unlike everywhere else in the world, was able to preserve the language handed down to them from the gods. This single, central point was a standard to all the remaining space wherein the divine language had been perverted. Bianji did not state it clearly, but it must be understood that China was included within those “neighboring lands and foreign countries” who spoke “in erroneous ways.”

Daoxuan made China’s place within this linguistic-spatial construct more explicit. He reiterated that the language of India was received from the Brahmadeva, calling the writing system a “heavenly scripts (*tianshu* 天書)” and the spoken system a “heavenly tongue (*tianyu* 天語).” He then contrasted the Indic language with that of the Western Barbarians (*xirong* 西戎) and the Chinese, both of which lacked divine origin and therefore were categorized together as degenerate and peripheral.³⁵ “The language of the Divine Region (i.e. China),” he declared, “was without this [divine] origin.” He rejected the notion that Chinese writing derived from Fuxi’s 伏羲 trigrams, King Wen’s 文王 hexagrams, or Cangjie’s 蒼頡 bird tracks. As evidence of the degenerate nature of the Chinese language, Daoxuan pointed to its mushrooming vocabulary. During the Han, Xushen’s 許慎 *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Explaining compounds and defining graphs] contained 9,000 words, but by his own day he claimed that there were 30,000 words. “With each subsequent person and generation, [new] associative compounds are

³² Holcombe, 8-11.

³³ *Faxian zhuan*, T. 2085.858a18-20; translation from Giles, 11.

³⁴ *Xiyu ji*, 2.23-24; translation from Li, 55.

³⁵ It is here that Daoxuan differentiated the Indic language from those of the Western Barbarians, which he explains must be translated to be understood by the Indians. This was part of a larger effort, to be discussed later, to convince the Chinese that Indians were culturally distinct from, and superior to, the other Western Barbarians.

born.” Daoxuan contrasted this swelling of the Chinese language with India, “whose written and spoken language is set (*ding* 定).”³⁶ Thus, because China’s language was not set, nor was it divine, it was just as peripheral as that of the Western Barbarians. According to Buddhists, the Indic language, not Chinese, was the standard of civilization for the world, and India was the single point on earth where men and gods spoke the same language.³⁷

The “Borderland Complex”

For all the reasons described above, India was presented within Chinese discourses from the 3rd through 7th centuries as the center of the world. India, the true Middle Kingdom, was the center point of wisdom and righteousness, the only land onto which awakened beings were born. It was aligned with the heavens, and it balanced the four seasons. Central India’s written and spoken language was divine. As is commonly the case in a center/periphery model, these arguments have much more to say of the center than of the periphery. China, and the rest of the periphery, was defined implicitly as everything that the center was not. It was not the homeland of the Awakened One but the land of “mlecchas (barbarians)... who despise the Dharma.”³⁸ China was not aligned with the North Star or the sun, causing its calendars to require regular correction. Chinese weather was not temperate, and its writing system lacked divine origin and continued to degrade. Thus according to these Buddhist constructs of world space, China was an unimportant and un-awakened periphery, a borderland with little of real value to offer the rest of the world. Antonino Forte has argued that Chinese Buddhists felt this peripheral and inferior status deeply, and worked hard to overcome what he labeled the “borderland complex.”

There are two quintessential examples of what is meant by the borderland complex; the first from the biography of Faxian and the second from that of Xuanzang. While at the Jetavana (*qihuan* 祇洹) Monastery, Faxian and his traveling companion Daozheng 道證 “remembered that the World Honoured One (*shizun* 世尊) had dwelt here for twenty-five years, and [they] were personally grieved that that they had been born in a peripheral land (*biandi*).” As they beheld the Buddha’s vacant place, “their hearts were inexpressibly sad.” After identifying themselves as from the “Land of Han (*Han di* 漢地),” the Indian monks marveled because they had never seen adherents to the faith from such a “peripheral state (*bianguo* 邊國).”³⁹ Later on, while at the Mahayana (*moheyan* 摩訶衍) Monastery in Central India (*zhong tianzhu*), Daozheng made the momentous decision to part with Faxian and remain in the holy land of India.

Since Daozheng had arrived in Madhyadeśa (*zhongguo*), he had observed the dharma and principles (*faze* 法則) of the Śramaṇa and the grave demeanor of the monks, notable in all circumstances. He reflected with a sigh that in that peripheral land of Qin (*Qin tu biandi* 秦土邊地) the precepts and rules (Sk. śīla and vinaya, Ch. *jielü* 戒律) of the monks were mutilated and lacking. He swore an oath, “From right now until I become a Buddha, I will not live in a peripheral land (*biandi*).” He therefore remained and did not

³⁶ *Shijia fangzhi*, 12.

³⁷ This divine origin of the language of Central India never resulted in a sole, authoritative religious language—as is the case with Arabic and Islam. It was widely accepted that the teachings of the Buddha should be translated as it is proliferated, allowing devotees to read his words in their own language.

³⁸ *Fashi zhuan*, T. 2053.246a12-16.

³⁹ *Faxian zhuan*, T. 2085.860c1-8.

return home; but Faxian's original desire was to diffuse knowledge of the precepts and rules throughout the land of Han (*Han di*), therefore he returned home alone.⁴⁰

Daozheng's point of comparison between China and India was the clerical observations of principles and rules. For Daozheng, diffusing knowledge to China and trying to fix the decadent state of the Chinese clergy was a fruitless endeavor. His refusal to even return to the Chinese borderland, even in order to bring awakening to it, reveals his deep feelings of China's inferiority and undesirability.

The second quintessential example of the borderland complex comes from the biography of Xuanzang. While at the Nālanda Monastery, Xuanzang announced his intention to return to China. The Indian monks there attempted to persuade him to remain, like Daozheng, in India:

India (*yindu*) is the land of Buddha's birth, and though he has left the world, there are still many traces of him. What greater happiness could there be than to visit them in turn, to adore him and chant his praises? Why then do you wish to leave, having come so far? Moreover, China (*zhina guo*) is a country of mlecchas, of unimportant barbarians, who despise the religious and the Faith. That is why Buddha was not born there. The mind of the people is narrow, and their coarseness profound, hence neither saints nor sages go there. The climate is cold and the country rugged—you must think again.⁴¹

Several of the spatial concepts discussed already can be seen in the Nālanda monks' appeals for Xuanzang to remain in India. The pertinent point here however is the disdain with which the Indian monks speak of China; they obviously saw China as unworthy of Xuanzang's attention. It is noteworthy that this account was written by the Chinese monk Huili 惠立, who based his narrative off of Xuanzang's account of what these Indian monks actually said to him. At least these two Chinese monks felt deeply an inferiority complex due to their peripheral position in the world. "Whether it be true or imaginary," Forte writes, "this episode is a perfect expression of the feeling of uneasiness and the state of dilemma which could only be solved by showing that China, too, was a sacred land of Buddhism, that is, by overcoming the 'borderland complex.'"⁴²

Forte and Tansen Sen have addressed well the many ways in which China overcame this borderland complex from the 7th through the 10th centuries. Empress Wu, for example, employing Buddhist paraphernalia to establish herself as a Cakravartin ruler over all of Jambudvīpa was a significant component of this process. The creation of indigenous Chinese schools of Buddhism during the Tang and their proliferation during the Song, the dissemination of Buddhism through China to the rest of East Asia, the establishment of pilgrimage sites within China (especially Mt. Wutai), and the decline of Buddhism in India in the 12th century all contributed to Chinese Buddhists overcoming their borderland complex.⁴³ For two comparison points, one can look at Daoxuan in the early 7th century and Zanning 贊寧 (919-1001) in the 10th century. The former argued for Indian centrality and superiority in almost every respect; the later criticized Indian culture and asserted that Chinese Buddhism had become independent of its

⁴⁰ *Faxian zhuan*, T. 2085.864b28-c4.

⁴¹ *Fashi zhuan*, T. 2053.246a12-18; translation from *Needham*, vol 1, 209-10. Alternate translation in Li, *Biography of the Tripitaka Master*, 138-39.

⁴² Antonino Forte, "Hui-chih (fl. 676-703 A.D.), a Brahmin Born in China," *Annali: Istituto Universitario Orientale* 45.1 (1985), 125-26.

⁴³ Forte, 122-28; Sen, 53-141

Indian origins.⁴⁴ Both Daoxuan and Zanning were faithful Buddhist monks, but they reveal the de-centering of India within Chinese Buddhist discourse after its climax in the 7th century.

An effort to recreate China into a sacred Buddhist realm in its own right was not the only consequence of the argument for an Indic-centered model of the world. The long-existing discourse on China's place in the world had been forever altered. A new voice had been added to the conversation, to which all other voices now had to accommodate. Even outside of Buddhist circles, some Chinese began to understand the world not as a Chinese/center and barbarian/periphery construct, but as a polarity of civilization between a Chinese East and an Indian West.

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⁴⁴ Zanning's biography is in *Song Gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 [Biography of Imminent Monks compiled during the Song dynasty], T. 2061.879c. His arguments can be found in *Da Song seng shi lue* 大宋僧史略 [A Brief History of Monks compiled during the Song dynasty], T. 2126.235b. His life is addressed Albert A. Dalia, "The 'Political Career' of the Buddhist Historian Tsan-ning," in *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval China, Buddhist and Taoist Studies II*, ed. David W. Chappell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987): 146-80.