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# THE MONK, THE PILGRIM, THE SCHOLAR: REDISCOVERING SHI FAXIAN AS THE CHIEF ARCHITECT OF CHINESE BUDDHIST MONASTIC TRADITION

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## Introduction

Buddhism in China has had a long evolutionary history, coloured by varied complex strands of elements, interconnected and interdependent. Evolution entails transformation, reorientation, redistribution and growth into a final mature state of being. From the time of its early dissemination into its emergence into the final state of maturity, Buddhism in China journeyed from being a foreign religion, into gradually becoming an integral part of the Chinese indigenous system of thought, with the subsequent founding of indigenous Chinese Buddhist schools. There have been many factors responsible for shaping Buddhism into its specific Chinese mould. And human agents have been some of the most active and influential catalysts partaking and contributing to the said process of gradual evolution. One such *dharma-vinaya* Chinese Buddhist Master was Shi Faxian, who has perhaps been denied scholarly attention and recognition, long overdue to him.

Shi Faxian's name remains embedded in history and in the minds of many laymen, most of who, perhaps, are not quite aware of the magnitude of significance this name shoulders in the history of Chinese Buddhism and in the promotion of India-China Buddhist monastic relations. For the common people in both our countries of India and China, the name Shi

Faxian sounds familiar. Occasionally, it rises from the crevasse of time, in conversations, articles, storytelling sessions, and colours the imagination of the common masses through simple depiction in history books as a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, who once upon a time travelled to India, the fountain head of the *dharma*, the holy land of the Buddha, in search of Buddhist scriptures and left behind a travel narrative for the future generation. However, it is important to note, that the academic community, on the other hand, has neither devoted much time nor effort in critically examining the significant role played by this fifth century Chinese pilgrim-monk-scholar in shaping Chinese Buddhism and towards determining its trajectory of evolution. The present study attempts to explore the lesser known facts related to the life and works of Shi Faxian and then place the same in context within the larger framework of Chinese Buddhist tradition. Shi Faxian's life is not supposed to be viewed only through the prism of his travel narrative but through the depths of his intense scholarly work, a fact which has seldom won scholarly attention. Therefore, even today, in comparison with the seventh century Tang dynasty Chinese Buddhist scholar-monk, Xuanzang, the fifth century eastern Jin dynasty Buddhist monk Shi Faxian, features more as a devoted Chinese Buddhist pilgrim and less as a scholar.

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