

ANIMAL DISCOURSE AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL FOR HISTORY WRITING : CASE STUDY OF HYECHO'S TRAVELOGUE¹

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Abstract

The travelogue of the 8th century Korean Buddhist traveller, Hyecho, provides important insights to the world of domesticated animals in the various regions of the Indian subcontinent. Such descriptive details, which this acute observer of the local animal wealth provides, is rarely encountered in the memoirs of more exemplary Chinese pilgrims, who on account of their better linguistic skills remained more concerned in providing details of the cities, its people, kings, religion and culture. A more contextualized study of the regions described in the text and their respective animal wealth could provide important linkage for the integrated study of the local ecology and economy. The early medieval western Deccan, as the text suggests, shows a greater dependence upon cattle pastoralism in the local economy. To some degrees, the apparent vagueness in the description of the texts can be resolved through a greater contextualization of the animal data provided. The latter also help in finding the routes followed by the traveller himself and understanding the world he encountered. The contextual analysis of the local animal data, through the study of this text, is forwarded as a workable methodological tool for the history writing.

Keywords: Hyecho, sheep, cattle, camel, elephant, travel route

Main purport of the paper lies in bringing animals as a methodological tool in the history writing. The history of animal-human relation is complex and can be studied from multiple perspectives. In the past few decades, the multivalent aspects of these relations have gained academic attention, to name a few, the history of European colonization of America and the war of independence have become much entangled with the history of mosquitos and Malaria²; the exchange of the Buddhist ideas and artifacts between the Himalayan regions

of Kinnaur and western Tibet has been much related with sheep herds and its pastoralists³, the economy of the medieval state of Marwar and the culture of Thar has been increasingly described in terms of the local animal wealth⁴, etc. Long histories of animals like elephants, lions, tigers, cheetah, rhinoceros, camels, etc have been written. Nevertheless, there has been a general neglect to analyze the data on animals appearing in one's primary sources, in favour of the historian's selective approach in digging out "important" facts and data, excluding the description of animals from the text as an information of particular concern. The following paper deals with the case study of an 8th century Chinese travelogue by a Korean Buddhist traveller, Hyecho, called the *Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Kingdoms of India*, discovered by Pelliot at the famous Dun Huang caves in 1908. An attempt has been made through this case study to show that animal data provided in a text could provide some important answers to the questions concerning a historian, what it just requires is a greater receptivity towards the description of animals.

The records of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims like Fahian, Sung Yun & Hui Sheng, Xuanzang and I-Ching (of the early fifth, early sixth, early seventh and late seventh century respectively) have been often studied for the rich information they provide on the cultural and political landscape of the regions they had visited. Hyecho's travelogue (henceforth, HYD) is often neglected in this regard, and a major reason for discrediting him is the apparent vagueness in his passages and very limited descriptions. For instance, the ruler of the land is never named but simply called king, the names of cities rarely appear, etc. Its English translators commented on the "clear gap between the literary attainments" of him and his preceding travellers, and a "lack of linguistic training".⁵ However, what is completely neglected is his fascination for the domesticated animals of the various regions of the subcontinent, something clearly absent in writings of his predecessors.

The paper is roughly divided into two parts. The first part enumerates how the data on animals, which one encounters in this text, could be used as an important historical source for writing the history of the contemporary local economy and ecology of the regions discussed. This involves a case study of the data on domesticated animals which Hyecho provided for the region of Deccan. The second part enumerates how such data can also be used for a better understanding of the text and its author. This involves a careful usage of this data for marking the possible routes which the author followed during his long sojourn across the Indian subcontinent and its west. The two parts also divide his journey into two halves- his journey up to the deccan/south India in the first part and the succeeding journey in the second part.

(a) Contextualizing the local animal wealth and economy from Hyecho's travelogue

The extant fragment of the text begins with the descriptions of two Buddhist pilgrim centres-Vaishali and the desolated city of Kushinagar, and then Varanasi. He informs that a stupa was built at the site where Buddha attained Nirvana at Kushinagar and was surrounded by deserted forests on all sides. He added that those on the pilgrimage were often wounded by *rhinoceros and tigers*.⁶ The greater one-horned rhinoceros is known to have roamed the marshes of northern India—from Sindh to the Brahmaputra valley, as well as the Terai regions of Nepal and Sikkim. Shibani Bose pointed out that during the Gupta period the animal must have been sufficiently around to be encountered during hunts at least in the Ganga valley, but was not part of the popular art due to its infrequent encounters with humans.⁷ It is interesting to think what could have instigated rhinoceros to attack the pilgrims as the animal is usually not known to attack humans. Nevertheless, this is for the first and the last time that he mentions the wild animals in his memoir. What subsequently follows is a vivid account of the domesticated animals in various terrains, including his first hand close observations which are sometimes very acute⁸, and at other times based on what he must have heard. The latter includes his description of the animals in the possession of the state and its army. Such descriptions continue throughout the text once he reaches to, what he calls, the “central region” of the country.

A major problem which the reader of this text encounters is the apparent vagueness of what constitutes the region which makes study of the ecological data for the economy of the region a complicated task and needs a greater contextualisation of the region discussed. There is clear distinction between the supra-regions which Hyecho ‘referred’ to and a small section of it which he actually observed and ‘described’. Regarding the “central region”, his zone of encounter and description would have been fairly limited to the region of Gangetic valley centred around Kannauj. He vividly described the might of its king, who like elsewhere in the record, remains unnamed. The “central region” could hardly be applied to our understanding of central India, as he mentions that the domestication of sheep, camels, mules, asses and pigs is not popular in this region.⁹ Nevertheless, from the “central region”, he moves towards the “southern country” which itself is a problematic term as it could mean the whole of the peninsular lying, below of whatever constitutes his “central region”. His route also becomes quite murky as he moves Southwards.

He describes a South Indian king with vast territories and having a possession of eight hundred elephants. Donald Lopez Jr. has identified the kingdom described by Hyecho as that of Cālukyas.¹⁰ The Cālukyas largely controlled the region of Deccan, which can help, partially, in delimiting the “southern country”. The memoir, thus, provides a literary record of the domesticated animal wealth of the Deccan. Several tracts of the Western Deccan have been traditionally the centres of pastoral activities. Pastoralism has very recently entered the field of history writing, and its proponents have often complained about its slow inclusion. In the semi-arid regions of the Western Deccan, agriculture could never replace pastoralism, which remained, historically, a major component of the economy. The Dhangars and Kurubas/Kuruvas have been the dominant shepherd pastoral communities of Maharashtra and Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh regions. Sontheimer and M.L.K Murty (1980) have worked on the prehistoric origins of sheep pastoralism amongst the Kurubas suggesting the strong sheep breeding tradition amongst the pastoralists of the region. However, Ajay Dandekar (1991, 2003) has pointed out that the Dhangars were once predominantly cattle pastoralists, who at some stage of history became largely Sheep pastoralists. Through his study of cattle-raid memorials of the Western Deccan, Dandekar has pointed at the role of cattle pastoralism (& not simply the agrarian expansion) in the emergence of the local states of the region.¹¹ This is not to neglect the role of early medieval sheep pastoralism, with sheep being the “cow of the poor”, but a predominance of the cattle herding in the region. His argument for the historical shift of local pastoralists from being the cattle herders to the shepherders was based on the dominant depiction of cattle in the early medieval memorial stones and the explorations of the folk legends. He could, however, not provide any literary records to corroborate above trends.

In this regard, Hyecho’s accounts of the domesticated animal of Deccan could provide some important support to the above mentioned trends. For the region of Central India, Hyecho makes clear remarks on the absence of sheep domestication amongst the common people and the great chiefs, except the king who possesses two to three thousand sheeps.¹² Unlike the region of Central India, Hyecho does recognize the practice of sheep domestication in the “southern country”. However, he remarks that *sheeps are fewer*.¹³ Rather, he claims that major products of land are *water buffalo, yellow cattle*, elephants and cotton cloth. It hints towards the greater contribution of cattle towards the pastoral economy of Deccan in the early 8th century as compared to the sheep. This makes the diary of Hyecho an important text for study of the domesticated animal wealth in various regions of the subcontinent. This, at the same time, supports the argument which anthropologists have been forwarding in the past few decades. This is again not to neglect the role of agriculture

in the economy of the region discussed and even Dandekar acknowledged these concerns. Hyecho also comments on the staple food grains of the regions he described, including that of the “southern country”¹⁴, but it is the close observations on the domestic animals by the author which remains unprecedented.

(b) Tracing the Hyecho's travel route through the animal data

From the “southern country”, Hyecho moved towards the “western country”. The territoriality of the western region again remains quite ambiguous in his accounts, as he opts out to list the exact places he visited and to describe the routes followed. Han-Sung Yang (& others), laid a “very tentative” route by drawing a straight line from Vallabhi in Gujarat to Jalandhar in Punjab, even though the text itself never mentions the city of Vallabhi. This projected route lies very much within the terrains of modern Rajasthan. Later, Lopez Jr. demarcated a very different and, what he calls, “known” route of the journey. This passes from Gujarat to Sindh, and then while passing through the western borders of modern Jaisalmer district and Punjab (Pakistan) reaches Jalandhar. This demarcated route was largely based on a description from the text that “currently, half the country (western region) is destroyed and ravaged by the invasions of the Arabs”, likely related to the Arab capture of the Sindh capital of Aror in 712 AD. However, the impact of Arab invasion was felt even in the Western and Southern Rajasthan and likely in the parts of modern Gujarat. This makes the territorial potential of the “western country” to a fairly large region, as Hyecho, himself, writes, “the land is very broad. To the west it reaches Western Sea”.¹⁵

Lopez Jr. identified the “western country” as the region of Sindh. This identification is possible as Hyecho gives passing reference to the existence of the both sects of Buddhism in this region, a claim which he makes for other regions of the subcontinent as well, where this religion was already declining. However, he does not provide any description of the Buddhist practices, patrons or monasteries of the region, which he did for the active Buddhist centres of North West India, like Xintou Guluo, Tamasavana, Nagaradhana, Kashmir, etc. This is surprising because Buddhism was quite popular amongst the urban sections and merchants of Sindh during the period, who would have actively patronized the monasteries and should not have missed his attention. Another problem with the identification as Sindh is the clear absence of the reference of camels in his list of the products of the western land, which one would expect to be mentioned if he actually passed through the desertified tracts of Jaisalmer-Sindh border. This is notable because the accounts of camels appeared regularly as he moved westwards of Punjab, from Xintou Guluo, Udyana, Kapisha, Tokharistan, Persia, Arab, greater Fu-lin, and so on. He

even remarked his surprise on the absence of camel domestication in central India. Camels were the dominant cattle wealth of the Sindh region in the 7th-8th century and this was also attested by Hyecho's predecessor, Xuanzang.¹⁶ Camels would have never missed the acute attention of Hyecho, if he would have ever actually visited the region of Sindh, a recently devastated region which itself wouldn't have provided him much reason to visit. Moreover, it is also unlikely that he was referring to the arid Western Rajasthan, as the region is not known to have yielded any notable Buddhist traces.¹⁷ Much of Buddhist archaeological remains of Rajasthan comes from the agrarian South Eastern and Eastern Rajasthan. The region around Chittorgarh in the south-eastern Rajasthan, particularly the site of Nagari, has yielded remains of early Buddhist occupations.¹⁸

Moreover, he refers to the West Indian king as possessing five to six hundred elephants. This number is relatively less if compared with eight-hundred elephants of the South Indian king and nine hundred elephants in the possession of a certain Central Indian king of Kanyakubja, whose great chiefs are remarked to themselves possess two to three hundred elephants each! Nevertheless, the total elephants under the possession of the western king still appears to be a decent number, in light of the local terrain. Trautmann has discussed the long history of an Asia-wide retreat of wild elephants. He informs that the Sanskrit texts, starting from Arthaśāstra of Kautilya, provide a recurrent "stock list" of eight elephant forests. Based on his map of these forests, it can be inferred that the Saurashtra elephant-forest would have included portions of modern Gujarat, South and South-Eastern Rajasthan, and small portions of Western Madhya Pradesh. These texts, however, also indicate that the worst kind of elephants came from the Saurashtra forest and the forest of the Indus basin, the two regions where wild elephants began to decline early and are now extinct.¹⁹ The wild elephants must have significantly declined from the Western India during the 8th century, and whatever survived would not have been suitable to the local kings and chieftains of Western India. Hyecho lists elephants as one of the products of the western land, which must have resulted from his confusion of treating imported or traded elephants as the products of the land, a confusion regarding elephants he made for some other regions as well.²⁰ Rather, it appears that during the early medieval period, elephants were largely procured in Rajasthan either through the trade²¹ or as the victories of war.²²

The western king, therefore, appears to have been powerful enough to procure a decent number of elephants, though not strong enough to have successfully defended the Arab attacks. O'Brien has shown that the Bhatia chieftains of the Raimal region of Sindh, who had significant control over the arid terrains of

the western Rajasthan from around 8th-9th onwards, had a decent population of elephants in their control. ²³ This is much before the process of state formation began in these arid terrains. It suggests that even the local chieftains, whose profits derived from the desert trade and successful utilization of animal wealth, could import a good number of elephants. The local chieftains of Western Rajasthan are not, of course, the candidate for Hyecho's description, for reasons discussed above. The more ideal candidates would then be the local chieftains of the south-eastern Rajasthan. Nandini Sinha has shown that the process of Guhila state formation began in south-east Rajasthan from the 7th century onward, with integration of local chiefs into emerging political structure and emergence of the ideological dimension of the state for the first time in the region. However, this region is not known to have been ravaged by Arabs, which makes them less likely candidates. ²⁴

It is therefore more likely that the portion of the western country, through which Hyecho passed and described, falls somewhere in the south of Rajasthan, the *Gurjaradesha*. This was half ravaged by the Arabs and also falls safely at a distance of three months from his next destination in Punjab, the city of Jalandhar. This place was earlier visited by Xuanzang as well. The Chavadas or the early Pratihara kings of Jalore-Bhinmal area in Southern Rajasthan seem to be the possible candidates of the power authority. Therefore, the western-country described by Hyecho must have been the broad region of western subcontinent upto the Arabian sea, but the region he actually encountered and described must have been only the *Gurjaradesha*. Rather than visiting Sindh and passing through western Rajasthan, he must have reached southern Rajasthan from the western Deccan and thereafter moved towards Jalandhar in Punjab, likely passing through the eastern Rajasthan.

From Jalandhar, he passed through Takshar/ Takka and reached a region called Xintou Guluo. Han-Sung Yang (& others) interpreted and translated the latter as Sindhu-kula. While they themselves didn't comment on the identity of the place, its interpretation as Sindh-Gujarat has been forwarded by some scholars. Lopez Jr., however, questions this interpretation ²⁵ but indirectly hinted for a region near Kashmir ²⁶, without providing any alternative possible identification of Xintou Guluo. The place could, however, not be in Kashmir based on the journey he follows and the distance covered. More importantly, the description of the animals in his memoir is incompatible to its local ecology. Hyecho doesn't mention any animals for the region but camels. He describes land as having "many camels from which the people obtain milk and butter for the food". This data on the local animal could provide some more hints in locating the site or at least the region where the site could have belonged to, as the site must have a significant population of camels.

There is one possibility that the site could have been located in the Northern Cholistan desert, which is safe one-month westward travel from Takshar/ Takka. This is also compatible with the Hyecho statement that currently half of this land has been lost to the Arabs. Hyecho, then, describes the monastery of Tamasāvana, near the town of Cinābhukti on the west of the Beas River in northern Punjab. However, the memoir doesn't clarify whether he actually visited the monastery. Thereafter he reaches Kashmir in fifteen days.²⁷ This much travel time is possible if he counts fifteen days from Tamasāvana. This would then make Northern Cholistan a possible region where it would be located. This identification would, however, become unlikely if the travel days are not calculated from Tamasāvana. In that case, Xintou Guluo could be somewhere in the arid tracts of the Punjab province, which would need some more future investigations. This region also had a significantly large population of camels in the late 19th century, as evident from the table of the approximate distribution of domestic animals in six of the Indian provinces in 1882-83 as recorded in the Gazetteer of India.²⁸

Therefore after reaching Jalandhar in Punjab, Hyecho must have turned westwards towards Takshar/ Takka, and then Xintou Guluo, which could have been located in the northern tip of Cholistan or in some portion of Punjab province and then later reached Kashmir. Thereafter reaching some portions of Tibet, he moved further westwards towards Gandhara, and later crossing Afghanistan and Persian, reached Arab. Each of the regions coming between were described in terms of the domesticated animals he encountered. This alternative reconstruction of the route followed by Hyecho, largely the portion of the memoir between Deccan and Kashmir, is largely based on a methodological approach in which animal data from the text is given a major importance.

Concluding notes

The two segments of this paper used the animal data from the HYD for a better understanding of the texts, delimiting the vague regions and contextualizing the territories which author described, the demarking the route followed by the traveller- which differed significantly from the previous studies on his routes (at least regarding some portion), etc. All this was largely carried on the basis of the information on the domesticated animals which Hyecho had provided. Even if these identifications and interpretations proved to be misjudged at some juncture, the future writers analysing the text would have to look at the issues highlighted regarding the animal data for providing a better alternative for the route, identification of cities and delimiting the regions. The travelogue provided rich information for linking the local ecology and economy of the various regions discussed. In this regard, Hyecho provided

important literary corroboration to the claims of anthropologists on the dominance of cattle wealth in the early medieval western Deccan. The shift from predominantly cattle based pastoralism to a sheep based pastoralism in the Deccan or the retreat of elephants from the Saurashtra forests of the western part of the subcontinent testify to the long term changes in the local ecology and its components, which are often neglected for more tangible colonial era changes. As K.D. Morrison pointed, one needs to look at the “longer records of change” rather than just seeing changes (in this case regarding animals) as ‘colonial ecological watershed’. Texts like Hyecho’s travelogue, deeply entwined with natural world one encounters, can help in engaging with such longer records of change, though, to the best of my knowledge Hyecho’s travelogue was never analysed in this regard by scholars interested in the history of animal-human relationships.

The previous travellers like Xuanzang had sufficient command over the local Indian languages, which allowed them to provide more precise details on the various aspects of Indian society, culture and economy, through direct conversations. Hyecho’s limited skills in this regard made him a better observer and a naturalist. Thus, he provided much precise and extensive detail on the local animal wealth which his predecessors didn’t find relevant to record. Both parts, while somewhat different in contexts, claim one thing in common. That is to humbly bring the animals, the mute others, in the discourse of history writing and celebrating its huge academic potentials.

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Notes

1. Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five kingdoms of India
2. McNeill (2010).
3. Singh (2003)
4. Choudhary (2021)

5. Han-Sung Yang (1984:20)
6. HCD:39-40
7. Bose (2014: 74)
8. For instance, he writes that most cows in the “central region” are white, and among ten thousand heads rarely there is one which is red or black. (HCD:41)
9. *ibid*:42
10. Lopez Jr. (2017:23-24)
11. He showed that it was in the semi-arid zones of western Deccan from where Yadav rulers probably came, patronized the erection of a large number of hero stones and patronized their principal temples, like Pandharpur. Dandekar (2003: 66-7, 84)
12. HCD:42
13. *ibid*:43
14. He mentions that they have rice fields but no sorghum or millet in the southern country. HCD 43
15. HCD:44
16. Xuanzang remained virtually silent on the domesticated animals of the subcontinent. However, he makes exceptional remarks on the animal wealth of Sindh, “it is suitable for the breeding of oxen, sheep, camels, mules, and other kinds of beasts. The camels are small in size and have only one hump”. (Siyuki: 271-272)
17. One of the minor exceptions could be vedika remains from Badrol, Bikaner. (Chaturvedi 2012:160)
18. *ibid*:158-9
19. See the first chapter of Trautmann (2015) for a general discussion on the retreat of elephants in the various regions of Asia.
20. Hyecho makes similar remarks for the region of Jalandhar (Punjab) and even Kashmir, which cannot be corroborated from other sources. This mistake appears again in accounts of Gandhara, where its Turkish king is said to have possessed (only) five elephants and countless Sheep and Horses. Despite this, the king is described as having generously donated to the Sangha, on the feast of the Wu-che assembly, whatever he likes, including horses and (surprisingly) elephants!
21. Elephant was one of the high value item traded at Ahar or early medieval Āghāṭapura in south eastern Rajasthan. (IA vol. 58; c.f. Chattopadhyaya 2012:106)
22. The Harsha record of 973 AD informs that the Cahamana ruler of Sikar acquired large quantities of spirit-rutted elephants from the enemies. (EI vol.2, p.127)
23. O’Brien 1996:49
24. The other known chieftains were the Maurya of the Upamala region

- in eastern Rajasthan, who are known to have patronized some early 8th century temples. (EITA II:part 2, p. 275) The region, again, does not fit to the covered distance enumerated in his memoir, nor was it ravaged by Arabs.
25. He questions this on two grounds. For him, the western region represented Sindh, and therefore, he pointed out that it would have been unlikely for him to return. Secondly, the distance from Takshar to the Sindh would have taken more than a month's journey that he mentioned.
 26. Hyecho describes XintouGuluo as the homeland of Saṃghabhadra (HCD:25). Lopez Jr argued that the latter was an important fifth-century Indian master of the Vaibhāṣika school, who is believed in traditional accounts to be born in Kashmir.
 27. HCD:46
 28. IA 1906:16

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