

DID BUDDHISTS ACTUALLY DISCOVER AMERICA?

Part II (continued from issue 143)

by F. Mark Davis, Editorial Representative,

WORLD FELLOWSHIP OF BUDDHISTS REVIEW, Thailand

The account has been a matter of controversy ever since 1753 when Phillippe Bauche published a monograph entitled (translated from the French) *Geographical and Physical Considerations about the New Discoveries in the North of the Great Sea*. Curiously, since the North American coast was then unfamiliar, --the Spaniards didn't settle in California until 1769--Bauche told about what has since been named the Bering Strait and claimed that in the fifth century (CE) Chinese monks had established a colony in what is now California. Then in 1761 sinologist Joseph de Guignes published a paper entitled (also translated from the French) *inquiries on the Voyages of the Chinese to the Coast of America and Some of the Peoples Situated in the Eastern Extremity of Asia*. In it he claimed that Wen Shen Kuo (Country of the Tattooed Body) and Ta-Han, both mentioned in the *Liang Shu*, were the Japanese island of Hokkaido and the Kamchatka peninsula, respectively. But Fusang, he concluded, was the northwestern portion of the American continent. Other sinologists, however, remained sceptical.

Thus in 1831 Prussian sinologist Julius Klaproth attempted to discredit de Guignes' hypothesis in a paper of his own. Partially basing his views on the mention of the horses and grapes of Fusang in the *Liang Shu*, neither of which he considered to be indigenous to America, he supposed Ta-Han to have been Sakhalin Island and that Fusang was Japan. He seemed, however, to have ignored two facts, namely, the enormous distances recorded in the original narrative and that the Dharma did not enter Japan until 552 CE, nearly a century after the five monks journeyed to Fusang. As for the horse, while it is generally acknowledged that the animal was first brought to America by the Spaniards, in recent times evidence has been found that the animal probably existed in at least some parts of America before the European incursion. And virtually every schoolchild knows that the Norsemen, who "discovered" America in 1,000 CE, called the country "Vineland"--owing to the fact that grapes were found growing in abundance.

After Klaproth's ostensibly careless debunking of the Fusang story, it became a dead issue among academicians. Nevertheless, it refused to die entirely. Thus in 1861, another German sinologist, Karl Neumann, wrote a paper in which he not only defended de Guignes' hypothesis, but identified Wen Shen Kuo with the Aleutian islands and Ta-Han with the Alaskan peninsula. Unlike de Guignes, however, he placed Fusang in Mesoamerica, and there it has remained to this day.

-to be continued.