

Along the Silk Road: More than just Ancient History

Van James, Honolulu, Hawai'i

A traveler doesn't know where he's going.

A tourist doesn't know where he's coming from.—Paul Theroux



Chengdu Teacher Training students carrying out a drama exercise.

As a teaching artist and author of several books on art and archaeology, whenever I go somewhere to work I also make a point of visiting the cultural sites of that place. As long distance travel is called into question for both financial and ecological reasons it is increasingly important to meet and acknowledge the cultures we encounter on our travels. Living in a place (Hawai'i) that is far from everywhere makes this doubly important. Therefore, when recently in China for workshops and a teacher training course, I extended my stay to travel with friend and founder of the Chengdu Waldorf School, Harry Wong, and his son Shi Ming. We planned to follow, in part, the ancient Silk Road, the trade route and corridor of influence that has connected East and West for millennia.

Esoteric tradition traces the great Sun Oracle migration of Manu-Noah, following the Atlantean catastrophe (end of last Ice Age), to this region, and from here the Seven Holy Rishis are said to have cultivated the earliest embodiment of the ancient Indian civilization. From three thousand BCE, following the incarnation of Lucifer (according to Rudolf Steiner) up to around four hundred CE the wisdom of the Light Bringer flowed through this corridor to the West, inspiring such cultures as the Greco-Roman. The rhythmic eastward and westward invasions of the Mongolian peoples also flowed through this part of present day China. Today the Silk Road region is mostly remembered as a pathway of commerce. No doubt this is because today we view business as the most essential aspect of our lives. Our cities no longer have religious centers as their tallest, most prominent features. Now the commercial office buildings scrape the sky and declare what is most dominant in our culture—at least in one sense.

But there can be found in Sichuan (not far from the three-year Chengdu Teacher Training program that just completed its second year with eighty participants) concrete evidence of the flow of spiritual ideals that arrived in China via the ancient Silk Road, as one views the Leshan Giant Buddha. Now the largest stone Buddha in the world, this UNESCO World Heritage Site was carved out of a mountainside during the Tang Dynasty (618-907

CE) when Silk Road travel and influence were at their peak. The 233-foot high Maitreya Buddha was constructed to calm the waters of the merging Minjiang, Dadu and Qingyi Rivers. It faces Mount Emei, with its temples and sacred shines, another World Heritage Site. Apparently, when all the rock had been carved from the cliff face to reveal the great Buddha, and then dumped into the confluence of the rivers, it did in fact calm the waters as intended.



Leshan Giant Buddha, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and now the largest stone Buddha in the world.

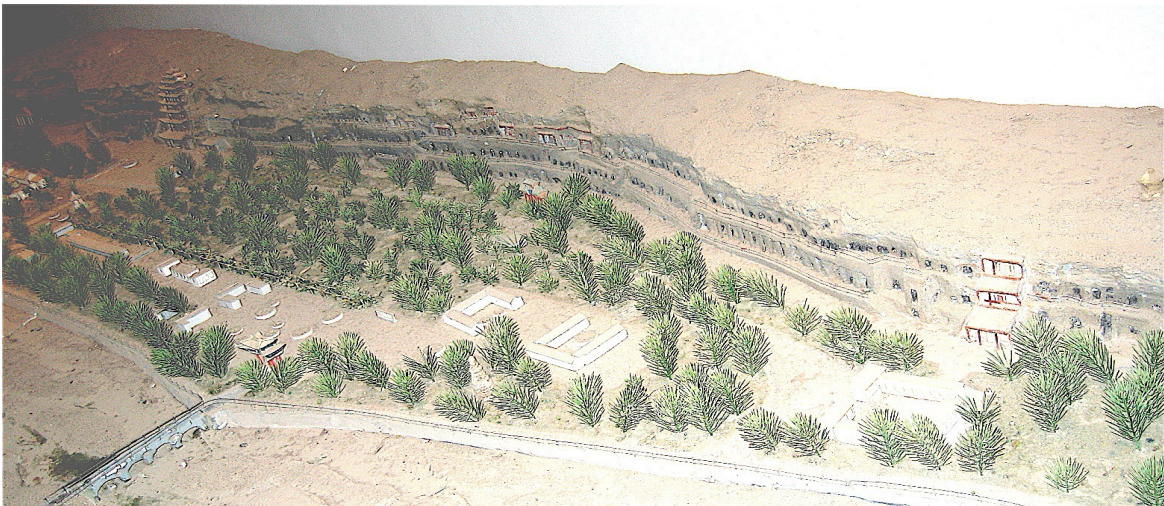
However, the official culmination of the Silk Road is considered to be Xi'an, north of Sichuan. Known for its famous terracotta warriors of the Qin Dynasty, it was the ancient capital of China during much of the Silk Road's history (Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui and Tang dynasties). It was from Xi'an that the riches of the Silk Road, both spiritual and material, were gathered and distributed throughout eastern China or sent on their way across central Asia toward the Near East and on to Europe.

One of the cultural sights west of Xi'an, outside of Dunhuang in the central Chinese province of Gansu, is the Mogao Caves. Strategically located in an oasis along the Silk Road, this system of 492 man-made caves contains some of the finest examples of Buddhist art from a thousand year period beginning after the cave's construction in c. 366 CE. Another World Heritage Site, the caves are decorated with over 450,000 sq. ft. of colorful murals and they possess the second and third largest stone carved Buddhas. This artwork aided the meditation and visualization of monks who lived and worshipped in the

caves, and served as teaching tools for pilgrims and travelers along the Silk Road as Buddhism spread amongst the Chinese. Although Buddhism also entered China through Tibet, its smoothest route was via the Silk Road together with the flow of more material goods, such as spices, gemstones, and of course silk. Nestorian Christianity and Manicheanism also found their ways into China by this route, as did Islam much later.



Xi'an, north of Sichuan, is known for its famous terracotta warriors of the Qin Dynasty.



Mogao Caves, outside of Dunhuang and another World Heritage Site, is a system of 492 man-made caves constructed from c. 366 CE.

The art of these caves is quite unique in its expressive desert style. Hundreds of years before Islamic art reached its high point, the Mogao painting style articulated a windswept, movement-filled, linear language of form and gesture that is echoed in later Islamic calligraphic painting. The Flying Devi figures especially display this fiery flexibility as they glide their way across the walls and ceilings of the grottoes in this area renowned for its Flaming Mountains that burn red in the setting sun. As protectors of the Buddha, the Devi are unusual spiritual beings that clearly fly, but have no wings, only long flowing (silk?) garments that appear to function as wings. Coincidentally, this area is where scenes from *Crouching Lion, Hidden Dragon* were filmed; a movie that featured otherworldly, flying martial arts practitioners. The Flying Devi appear in cave after cave along the Silk Road.



The Flying Devi are protectors of the Buddha, unusual spiritual beings that clearly fly, but have no wings only long flowing (silk?) garments.

The Mogao Caves, and their nearby neighbor the Thousand Buddha Caves, are part of a vast network of Buddhist grottoes that include Longmen, Yungang, Bezklik, and other sacred art galleries housing exquisite religious paintings and sculpture. One begins to see that the commercial aspect of the Silk Road trade, foremost in the history books, seems much less impressive in comparison with the cultural-spiritual oases that flourished parallel to this trade. As one travels further west from Dunhuang to Turfan (Xinjiang province, Uyghur Autonomous Region), across the barren landscape where camels used to carry their loads and have now become tourist attractions, one sees the continuing stream of commercial truck traffic and realizes this passage way through Asia is also where China's largest oil and mineral reserves lie. This region is extremely hot in summer and very cold in winter. It boasts the second lowest depression on earth after the Dead Sea and there are many salt lakes in the area. It is said to be the most distant place on the continent from any ocean, and I could feel a kinship to it, being from Hawai'i, the most distant group of islands from any continent.

In the area between Turfan and Urumqi (Wulumuqi), the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region, there are numerous ancient city ruins, such as Gaochang and Jiahe. These two sites, both built around the 1st century BCE and abandoned after the invasions of Genghis Khan in the 13th century, were stopping points for travelers on the Silk Road. The area is well beyond the reach of the westernmost ruins of the Great Wall, built to keep the Mongols out of eastern China, and its people have a very different look from the rest of the country. The population of 70% Uyghur (Turkic-Islamic roots) and only 25% Han Chinese would prefer some form of independence from Beijing, as the unrest in the area has clearly shown. This part of China borders on Mongolia and Russia to the north; Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Afganistan and Pakistan to the west; and India and Tibet to the south. It is lamb kabob and street bazaar country. Donkeys are still a viable form of transportation.



The Mogao Caves possess the second and third largest stone carved Buddhas in China.

Many of these places along the Silk Road have been developed into lucrative tourist stops. The Mogao Caves entrance fee is priced so high that locals will not go and out-of-area Chinese complain. But there are still sites that remain off the tourist map. A petroglyph site called Kangjiashimenzi, dated to well before Buddhist influence in China, was not at all easy to track down and certainly no tourists were anywhere in the area.



In this place that receives minimal annual rainfall we managed to catch a day of cold drizzle and muddy, very slippery mountain roads.



In the dense Atlantean-like mist we found a visible memory of indigenous Eurasian humanity.

With scant information from a Chinese handbook and even fewer details from an obscure website, we set off with Danny, a Chinese-speaking Belgian ex-patriot--now area resident, into the foothills of the Tian Shan (where according to Taoist tradition, the goddess Hsi Wang Mu guards the “peaches of immortality,” at the center of the world), four-hours drive southwest of Urumqi. In this place that receives minimal annual rainfall we managed to catch a day of cold drizzle and muddy, very slippery mountain roads—no guard rails to prevent spectacular, plunging views into the gorges below. After enquiring with several peasant farmers and Uyghur goat herders who spoke little or no Chinese, we found a guide who could lead us to the prehistoric rock art. In the dense Atlantean-like mist we found a visible memory of indigenous Eurasian humanity. The slim, alien looking human figures accompanied by rams and tigers were like nothing in recorded Chinese history. It was well worth it--this journey to the *center of the earth*!



In traveling through this region of China one sees not only a place of the past, but also a place of great future potential—even with its forbidding landscape. The Silk Road has been rushed through by so many—including Harry, Shi Ming, and myself—that it hasn’t given up a fraction of its secrets. The Silk Road is just as much a mystery today as it was in Marco Polo’s time or a thousand years before him.

Afterword

Silk is a miraculous material! As a natural protein fiber spun by mulberry silkworms (*Bombyx mori*) it refracts light in a special way that shimmers. Because of its triangular prism-like structure, light dances off it in all directions to give it its unique sheen. Silk is

also one of the strongest natural fibers. It is used for parachutes and was used in the early development of bulletproof vests. A pencil-thin cable length of silk can be used to pull a 747 airplane without breaking. It is both beautiful and strong, much like the route it has lent its name to. More than half the world's silk is still produced in China.



The Silk Road is just as much a mystery today as it was in Marco Polo's time.