

China and Central Asia

Ancient Syriac Christians, Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci on the Silk Road



Nomadic settlements on the Pamir Plateau

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Marco Polo, Kublai Khan, Tamerlane, Samarkand, Gobi Desert – these names still rattle around in my aging cranium, vestiges of elementary school days. A penchant for history books spawned a boyhood fantasy of joining a camel caravan snaking its way across windswept dunes to exotic Xanadu, immortalized by Coleridge’s famous poem. During college years, I was captivated by an ancient tradition of Nestorian Christianity which though professorially dismissed as “christologically deficient,” courageously missionized the Silk Road. It arrived in China perhaps as early as

the 6th century CE but then mysteriously evaporated leaving behind sparse traces of its original existence. Later, in university, the claim of scholars that Nestorius, the fourth-century “heretic,” was in drastic need of theological rehabilitation, made its way onto my intellectual radar screen. Recently, I have engaged the scholarship of a growing group of historians who have abandoned the use of the term “Nestorian Church” in favour of a more accurate and redemptive designation, “Church of the East.” Its full name is the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East.

The moniker “Silk Road,” which originated with the German geographer and explorer Ferdinand von Richter in

1877, alludes to a near 8000 kilometre trade route that connected China and the Mediterranean world in antiquity. In fact, “The Road” was an arterial network of trade routes from Central Asia to Europe, China and India which spanned over 12,000 kilometres and developed over three millennia. One enduring legacy was the exchange of religious beliefs and practices in a setting where multiple Asiatic cultures converged.

The most daunting *Down Ancient Paths* venture to date took a group of intrepid, seasoned, lifelong learners on a sweat drenched, month-long adventure through the deserts of northwest China and Central Asia (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in search of the ancient Syriac Christians who once plied the Silk Road.

We acclimated ourselves to Chinese culture and climate in the architecturally overwhelming megalopolis of Shanghai and then flew to Xi’an (called Chang’an in ancient times) situated in the Guanzhong Basin of the Yellow River. As one of China’s seven, venerated, historic capitals, it boasts the country’s best preserved wall from antiquity. For the Chinese, the Silk Road began here in the cultural heartland of ancient China.

Our quest for Christian antiquity drew us southwest of Xi’an to the obscure, leaning, Daqin Pagoda which received international attention with the publication of Martin Palmer’s controversial book, *The Jesus Sutras* (2001). Here we rendezvoused with David Tam, a Chinese alumnus of Canadian Bible College from three decades ago. He had come to meet us from Hong Kong where he had been researching *jingjiao* (the luminous religion), a Chinese term used for Christianity during the T’ang Dynasty. David’s fluent translation skills made possible an in-depth conversation with the government-employed site director. Surprisingly, though the latter made no claim to Christian allegiance, he nonetheless endorsed the archaeological and epigraphical evidence for the pagoda being a remnant of the earliest, “monasticized” Christian church in China.

The next day a visit to the Forest of Stelae Museum in Xi'an revealed a remarkably preserved, 8th century CE, Nestorian tablet which records the first 146 years of the history of *jingjiao* in China from the arrival of Aluoben, an official delegate of the Church of the East, in 635 CE.

At the outset of our travels we successfully pulled back the curtains of time and stood face to face with the ancient, Syriac mission to China. The sweltering days that followed would not disappoint. At Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, we strolled the muddy shore of the mighty Yellow River (where western caravans would initially have encountered it), dubbed the “Scourge of the Sons of Han” for all the suffering its destructive flooding has imposed on those living near its banks. From here we accessed the Hexi Corridor which runs for 1200 kilometres between two ranges of mountains, providing the historic link between China and the West through which the Silk Road passed. Polo would have envied the ease with which we travelled the Corridor on the national highway soaking in the ever changing vistas of stark and stunningly beautiful Silk Road topography.

In Zhangye, the richest oasis in the Corridor, we aroused the curiosity of the locals by our photographic obsession with an epitaphed monument to Marco Polo which serenely occupied the centre of a congested traffic circle. The Caucasian countenance of the Italian explorer looked strangely out of place, as did we! At the western end of the Hexi Corridor we came to the strategically situated Jiayuguan Fort. It stands as a lonely sentinel in the desert, the last outpost of the Great Wall proper beyond which lie the vast, stony sands of the Gobi which can burn through the soles of a hiker's boots. Here civilization melts into oblivion.

A nocturnal train ride through the mineral rich, wild solitudes of Xinjiang Province brought us to Turfan, the hottest city in China which makes the claim to be further away from the ocean than any



A camel caravan at Dunhuang

other city in the world. It is surrounded by ruins of lost Silk Road cities. We savoured its refreshing oasis culture made possible by an ancient, ingenious, subterranean canal irrigation system called *karez*. Lunch and dinner under the protective cover of grape vine trellises in the courtyards of a traditional Uighur home and a local restaurant substantially lowered the stress of surviving the blazing sun.

Following the trail of Marco Polo took us from the charming, noodle-famous market town of Kashgar up to the Pamir plateau. We ascended into thin air with oxygen bags on board. Accompanied by his entourage Polo likely traversed the Jade Road, a centuries-old hazardous caravan route which has now metamorphosed into the Karakoram Highway, the world's highest altitude paved road. It was constructed over twenty years by Chinese and Pakistani engineers to cover the 1300 kilometres from Kashgar to Islamabad. Cut precipitously through glacial moraines and bottomless ravines, it navigates the majestic Pamir mountains which tower to 8000 metres. The region, close to the Afghan border, is a melting pot of Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Uighurs

interspersed with strictly monitored, militarily sensitive areas.

We arrived at Tashkurgan (the “Stone Fortress”), doorway to the most southerly of the Silk Road's routes. It overlooks the world's largest water garden dotted with white felt yurts. The town's now mostly forgotten name was once as alluring as those of the other great Silk Road emporia – Dunhuang, Bukhara, and Samarkand. Polo has long vanished but a local hotel worker confided in hushed tones of her involvement in a transcontinental venture of a different kind – the Back to Jerusalem movement of the Chinese house churches engaged in evangelism westward along the old Eurasian trade routes.

Our travels demanded ascetic effort from time to time. We exited China for Central Asia via a sleep deprived, overnight flight from the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi to Ashgabat in south Turkmenistan. Our eventual destination, reached by a short drive from Mary over a pocked, crudely asphalted road was Merv, a onetime urban pearl of the Silk Road whose cultural splendour has long been consumed in a dust bowl. It is the largest archaeological venue in Central

Asia and the impoverished country's only World Heritage Site. More for purists than tourists, it remains a prized destination for history lovers given its pristine, relatively unrestored state. Within the severely eroded remains of the city's once imposing ramparts, we endured the blast furnace heat, dipped deep into our depleted energies, and climbed the weathered mounds of two barely discernible Assyrian churches to contemplate what had once transpired there.

Turkmenistan sports a minimalist version of Islam, leader megalomania, and long-necked steeds. It is mostly a lizard-filled landscape of desert scrub and boulders shrouded with drifting sand. The country's few cities seem more like isolated frontier outposts. We crossed the famous, fast-flowing, Amu Darya River (aka the Oxus River in classical times) and arrived at the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border which, at first glance, had the semblance of a marooned point of transit

to nowhere. Having parted company with our air-conditioned bus, a veritable mobile oasis, we were now held hostage at high noon by an antiquated, Soviet-styled bureaucracy. After a couple of hours, it released us reluctantly from its clutches into the hospitable, welcoming arms of our Uzbek, Armenian Christian guide. However, there were still hundreds more kilometres of scorched aridity over dubious pavement to be travelled before finally reaching legendary Samarkand.

Over the centuries this storied city, known as the "Fourth Paradise," has inflamed the literary imaginations of westerners. Famed for its exquisitely constructed turquoise-blue tiled mosques, mausoleums, and palaces, Samarkand was once the oldest of the Church of the East's metropolitanates. A grand church here honouring John the Baptist and perhaps celebrating the conversion of Mongol tribes, described by Marco Polo, has disappeared without trace, another casualty

of time along the Silk Road. Today the city celebrates unabashedly the rapacious exploits of the anti-Christian Tamerlane (aka Timur the Lame), who made it the capital of his fourteenth-century empire.

Evidence of Syriac Christianity resurfaced in Uzbekistan. It took the form of gravestones featuring Syriac script and symbols on display (but easily missed) in the Tashkent History Museum. Cemeteries, moreso than the remains of churches, have yielded fascinating glimpses into the life of the Church of the East in Central Asia towards the close of the first millennium CE.

Our Silk Road odyssey concluded in Beijing (once named Khanbalik, the "city of the Khan"), which became one of the most prestigious and intriguing cities on the Silk Road from the Mongols onwards. In the spirit of the east-west cultural exchange fostered by the Silk Road, the onetime "great capital" of Kublai Khan served up more Christian treasures from the early modern period. I visited the grave of the savant and Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci (b.1552; d.1610 CE), who brought western science to China in the sixteenth century. He is remembered with distinction among the Chinese as one of the first European scholars to master the Chinese script and also honoured as the first westerner to be invited into the Forbidden City. Ironically, his grave is located on the campus of the elite Communist Party University where it is currently undergoing restoration. The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Beijing's oldest Roman Catholic Church established in 1605 by Ricci, stood in close proximity to our city centre hotel and commanded a visit. It lives on as an active and spiritually vibrant parish. Ricci's tomb and the Cathedral which he birthed, known to the locals as "the South Church", stand as stalwart witnesses to the "second coming" of Christianity to China where atheistic communism is revered as the official state "religion." 

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