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Of nomads and settlers – the song of the silk road

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We are at the end of the Silk Road and I am sad to say goodbye to the half imagined, long- redundant trade path that has so ignited our imaginations and offered us such adventures. Today we are at the splendid city of Xian – the place where so very long ago, traders from all over China would gather their goods in caravans and set off in search for prosperity. Coming from the opposite direction – from Italy, Persia and Turkey – tired merchants would call out in the marketplace, hawking their own exotic ware. We’ve followed in their long lost footsteps in our three weeks in China, making our way from Kashgar to Xi’an, hiking in deserts, clambering up and down rickety stairs to gaze at jaw-dropping Buddha statues, and wandering along lost ancient cities in our attempt to make sense of the route that had once inspired so many to take to the road and forge new, better lives for themselves.

Our first indication of what we had undertaken came to us in the tiny city of Turpan. Today, the city of Turufan (as the Chinese call it) is known as a grape growing valley, with red, port like wine being sold everywhere in small jars. But many centuries ago, Turpan was famous for more restless reasons – a major stop on the way to Uzbekistan or Pakistan, Turpan was a crucial oasis in the Northern silk road. Today, those ancient cities – Jiaohe and Gaochang are dusty ruins, baked by the hot sun and touted by the tour guides as must visit spots in the area. We were willing participants in such schemes – after all, we had come to the area to witness exactly these remnants of an ancient age. I have to say, we managed to get much more than we had expected in Turpan. All the guidebooks nudge travelers towards the ruined city of Jiaohe – which was truly lovely – windblown, crumbling ruins of what had obviously been a wealthy, influential metropolis in the early 4th century. But it was Jiaohe’s sister city of Gaochang that really caught our hearts and lit our imaginations.



Gaochang

Established around the first century BC, the city truly came into its own in the 7th century under the Tang Dynasty. As a capital along the Silk Road, Gaochang was an influential trading post up until 850 AD, and texts in many languages – Tibetan, Sanskrit, Chinese, Uyghur have been unearthed here. Unlike Jiaohe, Gaochang is left alone and unrestored. Today, nothing real remains here except stubs of buildings, sand covered and neglected, and wide ruins of great streets, along which desert shrubs have staked their claim. Wandering around the shadeless crumbled city, Arvind and I fell silent

– all about us were evidence of past accomplishments – a palace lay fallen in the distance, in the horizon we could spot the remnants of a trading post, once at the end of town was a Buddhist monastery – but they are long gone. The streets that had once rung with laughter, the houses that had been great homes, the city walls that had let in merchants and caravans – they are all lost today. Nothing remains but the indications of past glory and heaps of dust, lit by the heat of the mid day sun.

A similar sense of wonder overtook us at Dunhuang, where we found our way to the Mogao caves.



Mogao caves (Pictures from reproductions – the caves are too fragile for photos.)

25 kms south of the city of Dunhuang, the Mogao caves are not listed as a wonder of the world, but we feel that they should be. Established in 366 AD by a monk called Lie Zun, these clusters of caves are the earliest, and arguably the most impressive repository of Buddhist art in the world, spanning a thousand years of art history saved in one, hidden location on the outskirts of the Gobi desert. From the 4th to the 14th centuries, Buddhist monks gathered scriptures and saved them in the recesses of these grottoes and passing pilgrims helped sculpt and decorate some of the art of the caves. As a hub of the silk road, the influences of the vast tract traversed by the pilgrims are reflected in the art work – the early Buddhas were overtly Indian – an unsurprising fact given the heritage of Buddhism – but quite often the musical instruments played by the Bodhisattvas or apsaras are Persian in origin, Kyrgyz horses gallop across the walls, in one cave, a worshipper is performing an Uzbek dance, sometimes the Buddha wears clothes that look suspiciously Roman. Literally, the ancient world collided in the planes of these caves and with colors made from lapis lazuli, malachite and cinnabar – the ancient monks portrayed peacocks and tigers, wild buffalo and swans – the new, brave world that they had encountered, which are now frozen into place in a tiny corner of China where time has stood still.

As I gaze upon these brilliant caves or stumble amongst sun-dried ruins, sometimes I ask myself what it is about the silk road that enchants me so. The trail has long been useless – in the modern age trade between nations takes place in less physically demanding ways. Also the commodities that exchanged hands – jasmine, rose, horses, persimmons, oranges, wine-making, paper-making and silk – are now a part of our lives – still luxurious, but not enough to inspire two SF residents to seek out a ghost road.

As I see it, for me, the appeal of the road lies in the nature of those who walked it once, so very long ago. Those men – and they were mostly men – who left their lives to take to the desert trails for months on end, encountering danger and adventure. new friends and bandits. sandstorms and oases. and riding their camels for days on end. all for the hope of a

better future and the thrill of adventure.

To me it seems that maybe there are two sorts of people in the world – those who seek and those who stabilize. Maybe an easier way would be to call them nomads and settlers. The settlers stabilize our societies – they hold good jobs for long periods, on the walls of their homes the same pictures hang for so long that they make picture-shaped shadows on the whitewash. In their pantries, their spice jars are all of the same size and labeled with names of the contents. Shockingly, the spices in the jars match the label – no sugar in the cinnamon jar for the settlers.

And the nomads – what of the nomads? You've met them in bars, have you not? The bushy haired, khaki-shirted men and women with a light in their eyes that make you want to change your humdrum existence? They mooch on friends' couches, they don't pay for their own drinks, and they smell of woodsmoke, and faintly of the outdoors. When you hear their stories – of Morocco, of Chile, of the seer they met once in India – your hair stands on end, and your own life clunks around your ankles, cold and sure like a cuff – and just for a moment you wish you had made different choices when you had the chance.

You see, I have always wanted to be a nomad. Yet, if you ever come to my home, you'd know the truth – my spice jars are as blameless as the ones that I've earlier described, and there are picture shaped shadows on my walls. My greatest pleasure involves a book, a sofa, Arvind and a cup of tea. I am no nomad. My loves are too home-leaning for that attribute. Yet, of course I wish I were – a long haired gypsy upon a camel, exchanging silk for silver, my feet dusty with months of sand, my body aching with the long strain of being on the road – with stories to tell that would make a whole room quieten, of star lit skies in the Gobi desert, of the icy mountains of Bolivia, of the mating rituals of macaws.

This long travel has been my attempt to remake myself in the order of the silk road, to see how I fare without my spice jars and photo frames, whether I too can smell faintly of woodsmoke, and have calluses on my feet without running to a pedicure. This adventure has been my small test to renew my sense of myself. And my silk road, my constant friend these past months – the awful mountains, the high passes, the rivers, the sand – they have seen so much – the real nomads have passed through them, so long ago, and now I have too – just a temporary seeker, yet perhaps the happiest one to have found this road, and all its myriad, mysterious teachings.

