This bulletin recounts a trip across more than half the world endeavored by an artist traveling on motorbike to the ancient ruins of libraries dispersed along the Silk Road. In most cases, she doesn't speak the language or know exactly what she's looking for even when she reaches her destinations. Hence the bulletin presents a departure for The Serving Library in its ambitions, which are necessarily diaristic and open-ended. Formally, too, this is the first bulletin we've published asynchronously as a digital version distinct from the printed version included in our 12th issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. The reason is simple: at the time of initial publication (in print), the author has not yet completed the multi-leg journey that the bulletin will eventually chronicle in its entirety. By publishing incrementally (online), we can expand the form to suit its contents via a growing PDF periodically updated as future chapters unfold in time. Stay tuned for further installments from China, Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Italy …

Cover: The author reading near her home in St Just, Cornwall, September 2016. Courtesy BMW.

About six months ago I spent a few weeks intensively researching the lost libraries of the Silk Road from my home in Cornwall, England. I wrote to countless academics, scoured museum websites, and eventually identified 16. That is, I found 16 names, histories, and basic locations. At that point, I drew a rough line across a map of the world and handed it to an agency who booked everything I'd need to get myself down this line. I had been awarded a rather astonishingly open-ended artist's grant from a luxury manufacturer of automobiles and motorbikes, which only required of me to propose a journey, one which I intended to make by motorbike. Embarking was as simple as walking with the first ticket onto the first train, coach, flight and stepping off again at the other end. I hadn't seen any images beforehand of the places I sought. I couldn't have told you exactly how to reach them. I couldn't speak any of the languages that I would encounter in any of the countries I would visit. What follows is a record of my experiences on this journey. I wrote as I traveled, partly out of loneliness, to fend off the disorienting free-fall I felt as I crossed these landscapes.

The Silk Road is a channel across three-quarters of the earth, which naturally concentrates libraries, since before the Common Era books flowed right along with other sought-after goods: silk, gold, drugs. There is, in fact, more than one Silk Road. The plural has been made singular for simplicity's sake. I am following the road from its most clearly defined Eastern source, which is Xi'an, but I will visit only a fraction of the innumerable libraries that have been lost.

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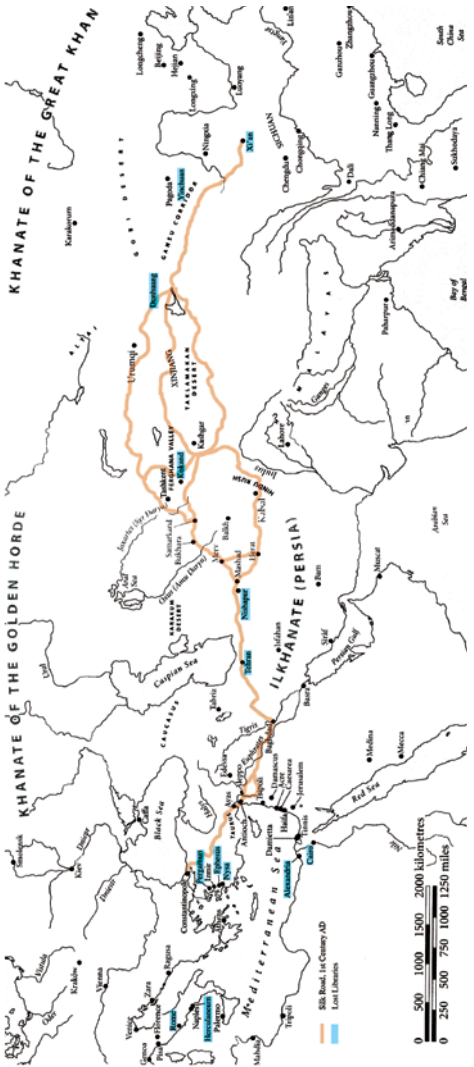


The planned Silk Road route

XIANYANG PALACE, XI'AN (西安)
September 11, 2016

Xi'an (pronounced *She-an*) sounds a little like the Chinese word for thank you (always the first word that I falteringly attempt to mouth in any new country), which is "xie xie" pronounced *seeay seeay*. It is the ancient center of the Ch'in dynasty, whence China derives its name. I flew here from Yinchuan, another library site, but I'll begin my account with the libraries of Xi'an because they are the oldest, the next oldest library on my list at the far western end of the road in Italy, lost when Vesuvius buried it in 79 B.C.E. The Xianyang Palace library had been lost over a century earlier in 206 B.C.E., and I am already having trouble finding it myself as the local guides entirely disavow any knowledge of its whereabouts.

Nobody visits Xi'an except to see the Terracotta Army, which was built to accompany the First Emperor into his afterlife. The ancient history of rebels, dukes, Emperors, and their dynasties is fascinating but muddy. Proper names are Latinized in different ways over the centuries, and place names mutate considerably, making the stories difficult to discern. Time has fogged the lens. We do know that the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, assumed that title when he subdued six states in central China, amalgamating them under his rule from Xi'an, though his glorious reign lasted a mere 14 years. He died in 210 B.C.E., and his library barely outlived him. It's rumored that when the Empire toppled, the library was burned along with all its holdings. As for the people who used the library—the readers—they were buried alive. An 18th-century Chinese painting shows the books burning, the men being buried in pits. The scene is rendered in that non-Western perspective often used for religious narratives, in which all parts of the story can be seen simultaneously from a god's eye view, the same way a child lays out toys on a mat.

The flight from Yinchuan to Xi'an was short. I had intended to travel by road, but it was evident from the plane window that ground travel would have been an exercise in frustration, with most of the path likely closed off except by trespass, if even then. From above, I could observe

a brownish, scrubby desert eventually giving way to increasingly dense systems of farm fields, followed by factory towns. These industrious plains were punctuated by tumuli, large and small, which turned out to be burial mounds of the Qin dynasty, now shouldered by residential blocks.

Presently, I am in a car driving through the rain. Tony, the official guide (people who work in the tourist industry take an English work name), has flatly refused to arrange a visit to the Xianyang Palace, claiming the site does not exist. He is already disgusted with me because I have refused a visit to the celebrated Terracotta Army. He rides shotgun while Akin, a Chinese friend who has joined me from Beijing for this leg of the journey, is seated next to me in the backseat. Akin believes she has found the site online, and we have asked a driver to take us to the address, which is near the airport. I can't do this seeking for myself. Even if I could read Chinese script, much of the web is blocked in China, including my Google account.

Akin reports that she has found the site by typing in "Chin dynasty heritage museum." I'm astonished that she could manage this with such ease when all the agencies had thrown up their hands. Once we arrive, though, I suspect the tourist bureaus simply prefer us not to visit. The driver pulls onto a desolate farming road near the airport. This seems like a mistake. The rain patters on the windscreen, and I look out at a high, yellow wall that runs a short distance along this scrappy road. The wall is punctured by a solid metal gate painted brick red. Our banging on it yields muffled clanks but no answer. Luckily, we find the gate unlocked. Behind the wall sits a low shabby building with a wide opening. In the center of this aperture is an enormous dog, posed rather like the carved stone lion-dogs that flank every entrance in Xi'an and Yinchuan, even factory buildings. The dog looks like a cross between an Alsatian and a wolf. It doesn't move or bark when we enter. I notice its fur is matted along each of its flanks, and its eyes are so rheumy they appear blue. The dog is almost blind. As we hesitate in the gateway, it retreats into the courtyard, and after some conference about dog bites, we follow it.

Further banging on doors in the courtyard produces a thin guard wearing a disheveled yellow polo shirt with the breast logo "China Heritage." He seems displeased by our intrusion, but sells each of us a ¥100 ticket and unlocks a door. We are ushered into a dank room that smells almost unbearably of rot. Inside are cabinets containing a few desultory pots and battered bronze scales. A lizard scuttles up the wall. Standing in this room it's difficult to think of anything but a lung full of mold. One ceramic jar in the glass display case is labeled "873" in broad, indelible marker. Akin beats a hasty retreat, and I soon follow. Another room is unlocked, containing a set of surprisingly dusty glass shelves, a crumbling model of the Xianyang Palace site post-excavation, and a few photographs under glass.

Akin says the museum is built on the site of the palace. Supposing the original buildings to have been larger than the footprint of the museum, I set out into the surrounding farmland in search of clues. We leave the courtyard by another enormous metal gate, which gives onto a gravelly rutted side-road. Passing the remains of a bonfire, I walk by a tumbledown cottage with a corrugated iron roof and a propped sign that Akin tells me announces the sale of bricks and vegetables. It's eerily quiet. A pile of bricks by the road is mixed up with willow saplings. The road ends abruptly at an especially resolved rubbish-pile and a thick green hedge. Much to my surprise, an entryway here leads to a brick-paved area, which soon breaks down into a maze of feathery hedges with foliage I don't recognize. The pavement seems to mark the palace site, but it's desolate and overgrown.

The rain, which has been vague, now begins in earnest. I pick my way though the bushes on the maze-paths, which curve into each other. Before long I reach a border of prickly plants that seem to mark an outer edge. They are of a type I've noticed in the U.S. where they're used as a sort of natural barbed-wire to keep out intruders, and they have been burnt. I follow the edge of the prickly bushes to a steep mound, which I surmount, only to discover more small fires, more rubbish, more prickly scrub, and a deep gully, where I see the roof of a house below me among the tree tops. I edge my way down the flank of the mound to gaze along the precipice. I can't go further.

The trees in the gully thrash irritably. Beyond their commotion, at about my height, I can make out gravestones — perhaps 14 — indistinct and far away. I scramble back up the mound and flick away two giant ants from my Bolex case, their bodies and heads as large and black as the clustered spheres of a blackberry. I look back across the landscape through the rain. Somewhere further in the distance lies the Terracotta Army, still surviving the first Emperor, while his library books were lost from the palace where I stand long before the Common Era began. What were they, exactly? Not paper, which wasn't invented until the 1st century CE. Though the 18th-century painting I mentioned shows anachronistic books of the sort familiar to us now, the earliest Chinese texts are recorded on bone and shell, wooden tablets, lengths of silk, split bamboo. They were assembled either in scrolls, or concertina'd, or simply stacked. Much later, the first paper books were stitched into "butterfly binding" — but none of these would have been found here. Nor do we know what the books here contained. The practice of destroying a defunct Empire's cultural wealth, or community, persists today, and is happening now in the Middle East. Mosul, Baghdad, Palmyra, Aleppo, and Damascus — these are the cities I cannot visit on my journey because they are too dangerous. Libraries are burned and buried even as I write.

I turn back to look at the small area of the mound-top where I stand. A tangle of vetch-like flowers in pale pinks and primrose straggle through the thick grasses. Akin has joined me, and I ask her if indeed they are tombstones beyond the gully. She says, "Yes, but this mound is also a burial site," and points out a pale pile of rubbish that I had not especially remarked. I look closer to find a scattering of silver boats, their folded paper shining dull silver in the rain. I lift one boat from the pile and twirl it in my fingers, then put it back. Suddenly, I realize I'm cold and drenched. Akin and I slither down the steep mud path, off the mound, back into the maze. The droplets clinging to the bushes glisten in the green-grey light of the somber courtyard, and the scene feels oddly like a Chinese pastoral — a visual cliché belonging to the same general category as painted lotus flowers and frogs on tall vases.

Though I am quite tired, I'm too wet to fall asleep in the backseat while we fumble our way back to the city though bicycles, cars, and enormous red trucks. As we pass along the crenellated city wall toward the gate, Tony tells me that freeways should be built over the ancient walls and moat to allow more traffic access. I point out that this sort of thing was done in Newcastle, and most people don't like it (though I do). Beside the wall, my eye is caught by a narrow strip of garden containing small, split bamboo cages among its trees. The trees are trimmed back to hardly any leaves, perhaps to accentuate their branch structures, and the narrow, domed cages hold live birds. I notice them because there's a man with a long hooked pole fetching the birds down from the branches to take them in for the night. A caged bird hung in the branches of a tree outside under the sky feels uncomfortably close to a metaphor. The bird-keeper wears a broad brimmed hat against the rain and loose, faded clothes, which ought to place him in a scene from a Chinese vase, as well.

THE FOREST OF STONE STELAE, XI'AN
September 12, 2016

Xi'an's earliest stelae — large, upright stones inscribed with text — were carved in 837 C.E., during the Tang Dynasty, to prevent the great Confucian texts from degradation by copyists. They were set up along a roadway where they could be read, and relief prints could be made from them. By the end of the Tang Dynasty, Chang'an City was almost completely destroyed. As the city shrank, the stones were left outside the city wall. There, they were not destroyed but neglected in the wilderness until the city grew prosperous again. During the 9th century, the stelae were rediscovered and removed to a Confucian temple within the new city wall, which is still intact. Indeed, this new wall is the same one adjoined by the garden where the bird-keeper can be observed hanging his cages.

I had better tell you now how I interpret the word library. Broadly speaking, my conception of a library is that it should be a public collection and free to use. By this definition, the stone stelae at Xi'an are a library, and I will call them stone *books* from here on.

The Confucian temple where the stone books now reside is by the South or Wenchang gate. What is today The Forest of Stone Stelae Museum was built in 1090 C.E. as a study space for the Confucian texts. Confucianism isn't a very religious religion, it's more of a secular ethical code, and to my eyes the building does not at all resemble a church or temple; it's clear that this "temple" was built to be used as a library.

We arrive early — no other visitors are here yet. A sequence of large grey brick pavilions or galleries reminiscent of barns are arranged so a visitor proceeds from one to the next through a series of wide doorways. The window apertures are tucked in beneath the roof, which is capped by typical Chinese tiling tipped up at the corners with a distinctive flick. All of the supporting pillars are painted scarlet. It's an eminently tranquil place. Slender trees populate the courtyard, where a pagoda-form pavilion shelters the *Classic of Filial Piety*, a square, columnar book densely carved on each face.

I walk into room one to find an unexpectedly vast wall of stone. It's extraordinarily long, arranged in a staple-like configuration to fit within the horseshoe shape of the building. The stones are dark, polished, smooth-grained as slate, and soaked in sticky black relief ink. They are thick, perhaps 40 cm wide, carved densely on both sides in small regular letters, and they are tall. If they weren't mounted onto blocks raising them to knee-height, it would be just possible for me to read the top lettering. I suppose that on the road they would have simply been set into the earth.

There is hardly a gap between the slabs. I ask Akin to read, but she says it's very old Chinese, and while some of the characters are familiar, it would take a long time for her to piece it together. I imagine this would be like asking me to read Anglo-Saxon text, which I can feel my way through roughly by relaxing my focus enough that the sounds of the words ring a modern echo in my mind. From Akin, I gather that some of her letters are vanished or altered, just as I find with Anglo-Saxon.

I pace through the sequence of rooms, but the other four contain only singular tablets of stone rather like tall tombstones. These books are prized for their calligraphers' skills, not for their texts. Many are carried on the backs of carved stone tortoises whose noses shine from the polish of so many people sitting on their heads. I return to room one where the forbidding dark wall formed by the stone books, a set of 13 Confucian texts called the *Analects*, blocks light and movement. They seem to recede endlessly.

Tony has nothing much to say about these early stone books, except that the texts used to be the subject of an Imperial examination. The officialdom of the Chinese Court was the aristocracy. In the Tang Dynasty, the Empress decreed that these official positions should not be heritable. They were to be gained only by passing an exam, that of giving an exegesis of the *Analects*. I ask when this exam was first set. "1600," he says. "Until when?" I ask. "Until 1911." Tony says this from the front seat of the car as we drive through the South Gate. He doesn't come into the library with me since I ask him to wait instead.

I film the tiny marks on the stones for a long time, trying to fix and individuate one from the thousands of carefully carved characters. They are like single stars in constellations, especially to me since I can't read the script. These tiny stars wobble and burn out in the square of my viewer. I struggle to maintain the distance needed for the very short focal length of the extension tube on the 75 mm Bolex lens. I'm quickly drained by the extreme focus, the effort I have to make to avoid shake. I work to still myself amidst the letters in the dark stone, but they shiver and disperse in the lens. I'm exhausted by hunting these pale marks in the darkness, and I'm exhausted by the effort even to arrive here.

I lean against a doorjamb and look out into the courtyard as the rain begins again. The sharp chirping of sparrows rummaging in the trees mingles with the warmer chirruping of the human visitors, who are also talking in a language I don't understand. It's soporific.

Sticky red ginko fruits are scattered on the parched clay of the courtyard like letters in the stone. I notice a little girl, her mother chatting with some people I later realize are other tourists not of her acquaintance.

The girl has spread her scarlet-lined, black-quilted jacket over the wide wooden railing that surrounds the sunken stelae in the courtyard. It's a low, rounded railing, which I've already admired for its broad-painted simplicity and tired appearance. It serves to support the pillars that hold up the pagoda-like pavilion protecting the stelae from the rain.

The girl is sitting astride the rail, using her jacket like a saddle. She faces a red upright pillar and pats it, singing to herself and geeing it up. She is perhaps five years old. I approach her, as she is sitting right above my Bolex case. I pretend to busy myself with the case, hoping that I can record her singing, but she stops and dismounts. I'm distracted as I pack up the camera, and when I turn around she is right behind me. She has begun using her coat as padded boots, pulling the arms up to her knees and standing in a puddle of jacket. I smile at her, and her mother immediately engages me:

"This girl is not like normal child. She is very difficult for her mother." I say she's lucky not to have an ordinary child, but a special one.

"She is not a good girl," her mother says. I look at the girl who is squatting down in her pool of quilt and squinting at me. "You're great," I say to the child, giving her a double thumbs up.

"You need English guide!" her mother announces. "My husband …"

"It's okay; here's my guide," I say, as behind her I see Tony rushing over, eager to appear useful.

Tony wears pale blue suede loafers, but his best features are his eyebrows. I have pale, straggly eyebrows that hardly interrupt my face. His are two decisive brush strokes on a smooth brown oval, like a painted egg. Each hair of his brow is deep black and tidily aligned, not overlapping any of the other hairs, but neatly occupying its own space. They are impressive eyebrows.

I enter the shop, hoping for a book about the *Analects*, but find nothing. The assistant shows me an elegant book compiled of prints taken from

the stones. Sections of script have been masked out to give a crisp edge to the inky black box of text, faithfully printed on soft, thin, warmly-toned paper. I longingly finger the viewing copy, but I would have to buy all ten of the small blue-bound books, which would cost hundreds of pounds, and besides that, none of the prints are taken from the books in the first room. There's no other information. People come for the more recent stelae, not that forbidding wall. I buy a "green mood" ice cream instead of a book.

Tony, who moments ago washed his hands of me and Akin, telling us to get a taxi, is now bargaining hard with her to settle a price for his driver and car. As they discuss our next move, I sit on a low wall wondering whether I would make a rubbing if I had some thin paper and a crayon. The *Analects* I have come to see are glassed over, so I would only be able to copy a later tablet. I decide I wouldn't bother to do this, even if I could.

I slowly suck the ice cream off its stick and watch a cat in the courtyard. It's a ginger tom with yellow eyes and a squashed face. The cat sneaks around the courtyard, wary of children, who chase it. It comes over to me. I stare at the cat. It stares at my ice cream. I'm thinking about the lovingly printed book in the shop. The text is copied from the stone by rolling it with ink and transferring this to paper. So the text is negative —white paper seen through a sea of ink—opposite to the printed books of the last 2,000 years. Books are always set backwards of course, but this one isn't, so I think on paper the book would have to be read from behind; through the paper, against the light. This double-negative pleases me, and I happily contemplate the idea of a permanent stone printing press set up by the roadside like an early photocopier. The rain becomes heavier. I finish my green mood, the cat leaves me, and we clamber into the car, minus Tony.

BAISIGOU PAGODAS, YINCHUAN (银川市)
September 8, 2016

The Baisigou pagodas were built by the Xixia (Tangut) in 1075, partially destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1227, and completely destroyed either by "lawless people" in November 1990, as the official texts on the pagodas would have it, or, far more probably, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) headed by Mao Zedong. The Ningxia Institute of Archaeology in Yinchuan excavated the site of the collapsed pagodas in 1991, and in 1999 some of the pagodas were partially rebuilt as copies of the originals, with plans to rebuild all 62 of them. The books retrieved by archaeologists are now stored at the Institute and include a wide range of materials and forms: a handwritten scroll, a number of wooden tablets, and more than 30 printed books in Chinese and Tangut, a language that died about 300 years after the fall of the Tangut dynasty in the 13th century. The most important discovery was *The Auspicious Tantra of All-Reaching Union*, a printed edition of a previously unknown Tangut translation of a Tibetan Tantric Buddhist text.

The Auspicious Tantra has been identified as the earliest known example of a book printed using movable wooden type. Many of the oldest extant texts in China are tantras or sutras. While "tantra" is a term associated with the rather self-conscious and now unfashionable sexual culture of the 1960s, its etymology relates to weaving—that text should weave together different threads of thought.

Travel to the pagodas was meant to be by motorbike. I didn't understand how this would work with the guide, Leo, in tow. (As with Tony in Xi'an, "Leo" is not the name Leo's mother gave him.) But when Mr. Zhang arrived on the "Jia Ling 600" he would lend to me, Leo was riding sidecar. Mr. Zhang wears high, shiny black boots and has a military air. He won't allow me to ride the bike straight away—he says we have to get beyond the police, as I haven't the proper papers. I argue with him but eventually submit to the sidecar while Leo moves up to pillion, and we set off through traffic. I notice straight away it's normal to drive on any lane of the three- or four-lane roads, rather than use certain ones for passing. Drivers sound their horns often to

announce their whereabouts. No one signals, or uses mirrors, or ever looks behind them as they drive, including Mr. Zhang, yet it all seems immensely relaxed.

Once we reach a dual carriageway, Mr. Zhang honorably pulls over, and Leo says, "Miss Abigail. You drive now." Mr. Zhang, who evidently expected a disaster, was apparently delighted when I got the bike into fourth gear, as he then began leaping about in the sidecar, attempting to photograph my victory on his phone from bracingly dynamic angles.

It isn't easy with the sidecar. The steering is stiff, as the bike wants to charge straight onwards, and I find myself leaning over to put all my weight into the turns. These bikes have a reverse gear because they're too heavy to push back like normal bikes. This one also has a different gearing system — you only click up to change gear, not down for first then up through neutral to second as I'm used to.

We drive on the west side of the Helan Mountains, turning toward them along an avenue of poplars with trunks painted white, before crossing a barren area of scrub and boulders. The road has been partially washed away by mountain streams, and it's strewn with stones and sand. I worry about skidding the bike, though perhaps one can't skid a sidecar. Suddenly Leo shouts "Pagodas!" from behind me and shoots an arm out over my shoulder to point straight ahead. Defying all expectations, two slender pagodas appear in pale outline against the mountain face.

The reconstructed pagodas stand aside the mountain on a wide, flat terrace about the size of two rugby fields, which seems to have been formed by pushing dirt and rock upwards from the plain instead of by scraping down from the peaks above. I lift the Bolex from the box on the back of the sidecar and lug it toward the steep flight of steps from the motorbike to the terrace, passing a couple of small dogs on my way. They seem to be strays, and like the others I've encountered, these are jolly but restrained, with hopeful expressions.

Now that I am higher than the treetops, I can see the shimmering plain stretch to the tower blocks of the city of Yinchuan through a dusty

haze. I'm elated to be in the mountains, but I'm puzzled by the pagodas. These are octagonal, whereas I am looking for a square pagoda. Also, I was expecting a pile of bricks, not a reconstruction. Leo assures me we've arrived at the correct pagodas. I have no sense of precisely where the library pagoda was placed, but based on the information at hand, I must concede that I'm as close as I possibly can be to what it is I seek.

I enter through the enormous gates and find a narrow wooden shelter open on both sides supporting a sequence of copper forms that appear to be drums. "You must push them," says Leo, "to turn your luck." I slowly walk the line, holding my palm out to slide along the drums, which are marked by symbols beaten into their copper coatings. The stamped faces rotate as I brush them, and a warm wind stirs the brightly colored silk prayer-flags hanging like bunting from the uprights. I second-guess myself: Am I pretending? Not really. I do find comfort in cycles: the seasons, night and day. I'm performing an initiatory ritual of stillness and circularity, and despite being foreign to this experience, somehow it feels right. I am at a starting point, and I will need luck to finish.

"Are you following a religion?" Leo asks. "I believe in something, just not a religious practice," I say. I would like to have some sort of practice, though. And I am on a pilgrimage, am I not?

I wander the terrace, blinded by the sun reflecting off the slabs. There are tinny speakers positioned around the site, all playing indistinct Buddhist chants, which are not synchronized in any way. I feel light. I don't know what I'm looking for. A fragment of text from one of the black marble information panels dotting the site catches my eye. At the close of a section describing the burning of the temple in 1227 by Genghis Khan it reads:

The temple was destroyed 870 years ago and the relics are covered by earth of about one meter thick. Nature moves slowly but life lasts protractedly with vicissitudes, how deplorable it is.

The stone of the Helan mountain is purple — the same, basic purple that a child mixes from red and blue poster-paints. But there's a fracture-line here, and the triangular mountain directly behind the

pagodas is a warmer brown. A substantial temple, like a low shed, is positioned above the terrace, and beside it hangs an enormous bronze bell, so large I could crawl inside it. Once again Leo instructs me: "You must ring the bell nine times. The first eight are to let go of something that troubles you, but when you strike the bell for the last time you must call something to you. Something you desire." So I stand looking out from the mountain across the shimmering haze, and swing the wooden block on its chain to strike against the bell. The sound is surprisingly warm, and dissipates so slowly into the mountain that I feel as though I'm holding my breath. I don't call anything.

After some hours spent pacing the terrace and climbing the purple mountain, we return to Mr. Zhang. The somber, quieted mood instilled in us by the pagodas hasn't touched Mr. Zhang, who is exuberant, and spontaneously shows off his driving skills. He powers up and down the road at a 45-degree angle to the ground with the sidecar dangling in the air, then spins the bike in a tire-shreddingly tight circle. He hands the bike over to me only reluctantly, and we head back towards the city. With two men piled on the bike I feel like one of the Ant Hill Mob. As I turn off the dirt track that led up to the pagodas onto a more substantial road, Leo calmly says, "In China we drive on the right."

Driving down a beautiful poplar avenue with a view of the mountain beyond, I feel just happy. The district is called "The Ninxia Autonomous Zone"—we often pass signs stating this fact—and I reflect that my bike is my personal autonomous zone. Even though I'm carrying two unlikely passengers instead of being alone as I had imagined I would be, we've become a gang—friends, even. For the moment at least, it's my bike, and it's my road.

Mr. Zhang has a garage where he renovates motorbikes to sell—but only those with sidecars. He calls his business (in translation) "The Ningxia Retrograde Roadside Car Club." I'm invited to see it, so we drive to his sidecar palace on the other side of the city, swapping positions again when traffic gets busy. By this time Mr. Zhang is in such a good mood he can't stop himself from doing stunts like standing up to drive while holding one arm stiffly out in front with his thumb up.

It's an amalgam of a military salute and a camera pose. He corners onto a major road by flinging the sidecar with me inside it up into the air, raising my eye-level from below his knee to his own eye-height. This makes Leo laugh aloud with what I'm sure was fear. I shake a finger at Mr. Zhang and give him a firm eye-level stare. Leo leans down to the sidecar: "In China we have saying about bike: 'It is fast in three ways. Learn quickly, ride quickly, die quickly.'"

Leo often speaks in epigrams. We pass a group of kids in matching shell suits cycling across the road. I assume they belong to a sports club until I see "Ninxia High School No. 9" printed on their backs. My conversation about them with Leo went like this:

"Are they going home?"

"Yes."

"But it's 7pm."

"Chinese people have school from 8am till late."

"My children come home from school at 3pm."

"This is happiness."

Mr. Zhang's "club" is in a large hall hidden among a maze of small alleys crowded with broken-down buildings and sheds. A huge scarlet text banner hangs across the back wall of the garage above a workstation crowded with oily old bike bits. Along the other sides of the club, 20 bikes with sidecars are neatly arranged below photos from the Cultural Revolution backed with camouflage netting.

We've decided to return to the pagoda early in the morning. Mr. Zhang shows me the bike he wants to take to the mountain next time, but by now I have heatstroke: a splitting headache, fever, nausea, terrible thirst, and overall feeling of weakness. I slump into the sidecar and fall wretchedly asleep as we drive back across the city at twilight.

At the Ningxia Museum Leo asks if we can be shown the Xixia artifacts. There are many books, wall paintings, and diminutive statues left here by the Western Xixia in sites dotted across the Helan Mountains, including the Baisigou Pagodas. Their museum labels inspire a sense of unease; why was everything here seemingly unearthed at once, in 1990? Why is this date emphasized, as if it were somehow more important than the objects' own dates of origin? All the pagodas were blown up in 1990—the square one along with the others? I want to film the artifacts, but it's difficult to change the 16 mm spool while sitting on the floor with two security guards standing over me and multiple groups gathering to watch. I get sweaty hands. Leo is sitting beside me playing with his phone. Every now and then he says "relax" in a quiet voice. The museum is trying to close for the night. We leave having filmed very little.

The following day I ask Leo to take me to the public library of Ninxia province to search for books about the pagodas. The library is new and huge. Outside, an enormous blue billboard announces:

NATIONAL READING AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

"What's that?" I ask. "It's the year of reading," says Leo.

Inside, after the usual trail of people, questions, and walking to and fro seeking different forms of help, we are pointed toward a door, above which is written (in English) "Local Literature and Hui Islamic Literature Stacks." "What is Literature?" asks Leo. "Well," I say, "it used to mean elevated, meaningful writing by people who were really fantastically good writers—like Shakespeare. Now it means anything written. You can have 'travel literature' which just means brochures." "Ah," says Leo.

He asks a librarian about the pagodas. We're instructed to sit at a desk and wait. Pretty soon, a woman brings us a single, heavy volume. On the cover is a color photograph of the Baisigou Square Pagoda. Though the book is in Chinese, there's an English précis headed "Xixia Quadrilateral Pagoda." I love this book—well-printed photographs on good

paper, carefully produced, but appropriately restrained. The gist of the English précis is that in 1991 Mr. Niu Da-sheng announced that his survey of the pagoda ruins had unearthed (literally) the earliest known example of a book printed with wooden movable type. I suppose this 1990 date really denotes the point in time when it became acceptable to own that heritage again — when the Cultural Revolution had sufficiently slackened its grasp. Although I press Leo on this point, he is non-committal.

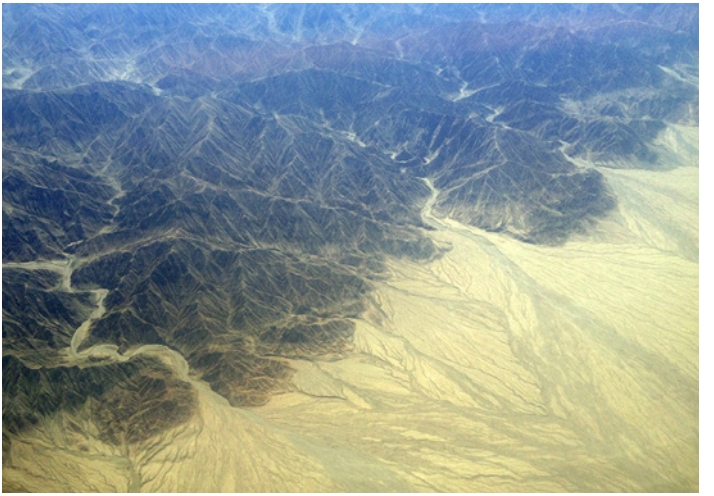
I spend a while looking at the images in the book, trying to ascertain whether the pre-destruction photos of the pagodas are from the late 1960s /early 1970s (and therefore might have been "cleared" by the Cultural Revolution) or from the 1980s (and therefore outlived the Cultural Revolution), but I can't be sure. A desire to do away with the truculent past is familiar to me — being British, I love Los Angeles; the flat instantaneity of the place feels like liberation. By the same token, I imagine it may simply be easier to create a new China if the old China is burnt.

The author in Yinchuan, central China, September 2016

MOGAO CAVES, DUNHUANG
September 14–17, 2016

Looking down from the airplane window over western China, I could see we were tracking a mountain range. Snow lay untouched on the north facing slopes beyond which harsh terrain bore few traces of road or farm. Here, the earth wrinkles into sharply pointed triangular piles interspersed with flat alluvial plains. Water has travelled downhill from the narrow ranges in broad fan shapes, its torrent unbroken by trees, but with nothing to hold it in the ground, the water has vanished into an emphatically tan, parched surface. Coming from the fog bound chill of the northern Cornish coast, I have never seen a less hospitable landscape. Once on the ground, though, the desert fringing the city of Dunhuang brings to mind the Atlantic fringing Cornwall. Both are potentially lethal. Successfully crossing either requires a keen knowledge of conditions based on direct observation, extremely good navigation resources, and external aid, whether camels or boats. Humans enter the ocean and the desert only under sufferance. Unprepared, they quickly die.

From Dunhuang to the dunes is an easy ride. A dry riverbed divides the desert from the flat plain on which the city is built. All I need to do is find this riverbed and follow it until I discover a way onto the sand. The bike I have here is a Super Sherpa—low enough for me to put my feet down easily when the wheels slide, which makes it feel like a friend, and light enough that I know I won't drop it. It reminds me of my old yellow VanVan. The Sherpa is similarly painted in a bright grass green. Pleased by the little motorbike, I set off on dusty rutted roads alongside the wide, flat riverbed. I don't know where I'll be able to cross it to reach the dunes, but with the missing river to lead me back to my starting point like Ariadne's thread, I can enjoy the feeling of losing myself in the landscape without the risk of actually getting lost. A plume of dust rides behind me. Hardly anyone is around, and I encounter no other visitors as I pass shacks, half-built mansions, farms, concrete irrigation channels, small dogs, and men on bicycles. The dunes turn rosy in the early evening sun, and I am happy to take the first junction towards them, finally to be riding directly on the gravel of the riverbed



next to the high, scalpel-cut slopes my Chinese guide has referred to as Sand Mountain. The riverbed is stable compared to the rutted road, and I bounce up the levels where old courses have run to form shelved plateaus. I look for gravel patches and try to avoid the mud, but I don't have to decide where to go — just upriver.

I see a raised path crossing onto the dunes and carefully follow it but am soon undone when the hard track disappears in the sand. I'm not used to this. Stony tracks in Cornwall where I love to ride often lead to intriguing outlooks or hidden places, but they're all hard standing. Here, the wheels of the Super Sherpa sink and slither. Discouraged, I leave the bike propped on its stand and set out on foot with my Bolex, shedding my shoes beside a clump of desert grass. As I press my feet into the warm sand, I sink like the bike. I trudge forward, each step fully absorbed by the sand, giving the impression that very little headway is being made, though when I look back after a minute or so, I see that I've come further than expected. I try to conceive of the person I would have to be to cross a desert — someone born in another time to more difficult circumstances, I imagine, since I can't fathom coping for long

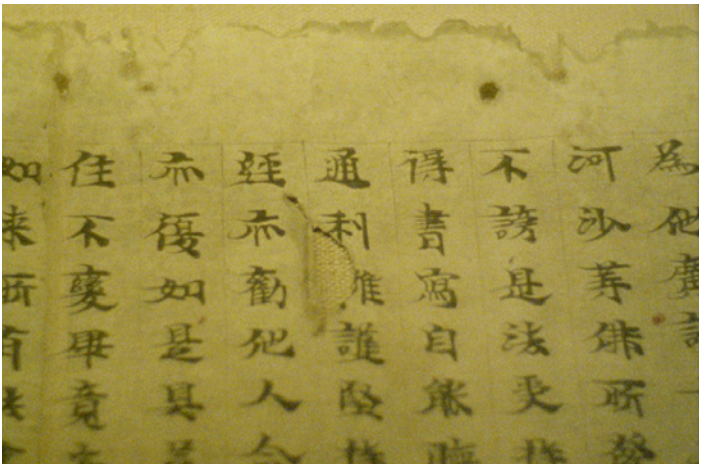
in these extremes of temperature and silence with no accompaniment beyond the sound of one's own feet slipping into sand. The ridges of the dunes are sharp and clean. Sitting astride one, I remember the little girl on the fence at the Forest of Stone Steles in Xi'an.

The Mogao caves I'm here to see are a complex of Buddhist temples and study spaces built into a cliff-face beside a winter river in the desert. Chief among the caves is the Library Cave, the single most celebrated lost library in the world. Once as difficult to reach as crossing this vast desert, the caves are now a 10-minute coach ride from a modern road, the enormous crowds flocking to them efficiently organized at a coach park. This would make reaching the Library Cave seem easy, except you cannot reach it at all because the very thing you've come for has essentially vanished by virtue of its accessibility. Dunhuang was originally a Silk Road trading post, so it has long been a station for travelers, but it seems a great pity that Dunhuang airport was ever built; without it, no one would make the punishing journey across relentless mountain ranges and barren river-beds so casually as we all do now, and the caves would remain sacred and scarce.

My journey begins in China because this is the origin of the Silk Road, but it is also the origin of paper, which, once invented, traveled along the trade route, reaching the Middle East by 795 CE. The oldest known example of a paper book is from Dunhuang, though books of wood, silk and hemp were also found in the Library Cave. The cave represents the flow and diversity of the Silk Road by synecdoche: books collected here covered a span of seven centuries from approximately 400–1100 CE, and were written in many languages, including Sanskrit, Tibetan, Tangut, Uyghur, Khotanese, Kuchean, Sogdian, Mongolian and Hebrew, in addition to Chinese. They describe Confucianism, Buddhism, Nestorianism, Taoism, and other religions without fixed names, which are instead consigned to the purgatorial realm of 'Apocrypha'. The library also held works of history, literature, astronomy, and astrology.

The Library Cave was discovered by accident in 1900 when the advent of cigarettes in China made airflow visible in a new way.

An aviation engineer I knew once years ago told me that before smoking was banned in aircraft, it was a useful means of discovering cracks in the fuselage. Smoke exhaled in flight would seek these cracks and stain them a dark brown. Given this propensity of smoke, it's not surprising that someone idly smoking in the caves discovered the library chamber when his cigarette trail sought a crack in the wall behind him, rather than escape through the entrance ahead. (Smokers are great detectives since they regularly stand for five minutes on street corners and in doorways simply observing.)



Among the many remarkable surprises stored in the cave was the beautifully illustrated *Diamond Sutra*, still regarded as the world's earliest printed book. The sutra includes a colophon explaining that it was "reverently (caused to be) made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 13th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong" (i.e., 11th May, 868 CE)—meaning, of course, that it was a library book.

For almost a thousand years the Library Cave had sheltered the *Diamond Sutra* along with a hoard of other books, but once revealed,

the books were swiftly sold off by armfuls to a generation of cash-carrying visitors. Like the prehistoric paintings in the cave at Lascaux, which were largely destroyed by the collective exhalation and resultant mold brought on by a stampede of tourists, an errant human breath gravely disturbed what the Library Cave had long protected. The collection of 15,000 paper books found there, gathered over many years from countless travelers, was as diverse as the cultures feeding the Silk Road. In the dark, dry, cool of the cave, the collection was perfectly preserved from light, humidity, and time, but couldn't endure plundering officials from across the globe who carted away the spoils. First to come was Auriel Stein, who didn't know much about books. He indiscriminately bought up stock by weight, paying a total of £130 before transporting chests of precious manuscripts back across the desert to Britain. After Stein came Paul Pelliot, a French purchaser, who was soon followed by other American and European teams chasing across the dunes to grab whatever they could. Chinese officials ordered the remains to Beijing. Manuscripts vanished en route, and only a small portion ever arrived.

I stretch out supine on the straight slope of the dune, pressing my back flat as I can. Lying with my spine completely straight, arms out at a shallow angle like book pages, palms up, my soles flop lazily toward the warm sand. The sun strikes just under my chin. If ever I lie like this in the warmth, even on the hard stone of a cliff, I quickly fall asleep. When I wake up, I know I haven't moved at all because the inner joints of my elbows ache pleasantly from over-flexing.

I had been in Dunhaung two days already before I entered the desert, but my retelling begins here to compensate for present-day conditions at the Mogao Caves: the imposition of concrete armatures, walkways, coach parks, widened doors, turnstiles, barriers, gates, plastic screens, gift shops, cafes, and toilet blocks, to which I've by now submitted via chartered coach not only once but twice.

The caves at Dunhuang are all numbered. Judging by the site map, Cave 16 and Cave 17 — the Library Cave — are connected and evidently equally-sized spaces, but in fact the Library Cave resembles

a large cupboard in the corridor to Cave 16, where a threshold at waist height opens onto a small space perhaps only 12 square meters in area, though it's as tall as any more generously-scaled room.

Every cave entrance at Mogao features larger-than-life-sized paintings of donors and courtiers, and the entrance to Cave 16 is no exception. Standing in the painted corridor of 16 like the smoker from a century ago, I see that the opening to 17 curiously interrupts 16's murals; it seems that uncovering the doorway to 17 must've required annihilating one of 16's figures completely, though the small pavilion that was painted to protect the head of this lost figure remains, now floating asymmetrically over the library doorway. The library entrance hole encroaches on an approaching figure, as well, eating away some of his halo. Based on this evidence, the opening would seem to have been sealed before the paintings were made. But then again, perhaps not, for on the short section leading to the door of 17, the figures proceeding into the cave appear pale with dark embellishments, and beyond the door, further into the cave, their skin is painted a deep blackberry purple, suggesting a narrative relationship. It's not known

why the library was hidden, nor so entirely forgotten. Likely it was to save the books from plunder by Mongol invaders, though invaders of a different sort eventually found it. I'm still pondering these visual clues when guards begin shouting at me to say they are closing the large wooden door of the pavilion that marks the entrance to the cave, and I must leave.

When I return to the caves early the next morning, I observe a Buddhist monk in the bus queue leading from the obligatory 3D-film experience (which I have successfully battled not to see by joining the queue and dodging out of it again). He's tall and stands out readily above the Chinese tour groups. He holds his ticket to his chest slightly folded around his thumb, his youthful face betraying a struggle to retain calm in frustrating circumstances. I watch him through the bus window, sorry for what I know he will soon find — that the caves have been "protected" in the most insensitive way. Pebble-dashed concrete reminiscent of 1950's social housing has been applied to the cliff, and every cave fitted with a metal door painted military green. Numerous check-points, turnstiles, and tape barriers such as are used in police crime scenes filter tourists in and out of the temples via a one-way system. I watch the line move, each person patiently ticking past the gate like a single frame on my 16mm spool.

Since I'm a foreigner and therefore furnished with an expensive ticket, I'm denied entry at the gate closest to the Library Cave. Instead, I must enter at the main gate where the English language tours begin. I protest but am made to join a tour group and decide not to press the matter further as I'm very frankly holding the Bolex case, and cameras are not allowed. I plan to enter three caves with the tour before breaking away, protesting fatigue or thirst or headache; it's not that I don't want to see the beautiful caves — they are literally awesome — simply that I'm a wasp who knows where the jam is. For me, all else palls beside the Library Cave. However, drifting with the group against my will to the last of the three caves I had mentally agreed to withstand, I encounter a worthy goddess. A low, richly decorated corridor opens onto a dim, high space that at first appears to be filled by one enormously chubby foot. Advancing, the knees, tummy, shoulders and head of a grand and

puffy Buddha are revealed, her round white face lit from below. The guide informs us the statue is modeled on the Empress who paid for her construction, but that she represents the Buddha to come. In other words, she's the future. And since it's impossible to behold her until one is nearly stepping on her toes, she necessarily fills the spectator's field of vision, seeming even more gigantic than she undoubtedly is.

Eventually I make it back to Cave 16, where I stand my ground by the library opening while successive waves of tour groups pass by. I want to film, but I also just want to look. The cave entrances all face south, so the cave interiors are lit by sun filtering through these long entryways, which open onto each of the large temples. Now the sun strikes the edge of the doorway to the Library Cave, which is secured by a metal gate of thin bars. A single fluorescent bulb rigged up on a spar inside the cave throws a shadow from these bars onto the concrete threshold, so at first the ledge appears tiled. Inside the cave, the walls are painted a purplish brown. On a makeshift dust-laden dais facing the door sits a battered white Buddha, slightly smaller than life-sized. He's joined on his left and right by painted companions in long robes, who are standing by a tree, the tree fronds arching over the sculpted Buddha's head. The Buddha's green shoulder bag hangs by a strap from a dead branch. Does the dead branch signify that the Buddha has no need of the objects in the bag? Strings of black letters on fine threads dangle from the tree and sway in the breeze. I draw them.

I'm hopeful the various guards and guides will turn away long enough that I can manage to film. In the bag by my feet, the camera is loaded, its 25mm lens in place, the aperture fully open. After 20 minutes' wait, I seize my chance — quickly focusing on the letters dangling behind the Buddha, I press the motor. Its whirring immediately attracts the attention of a tourist who reprimands me before informing a uniformed guard of my transgression. Alarmed, I have dropped the camera and picked up my notebook by the time the guard reaches me. I show him that I am drawing, not filming. He retreats but posts another guard in the cave with me. That's it. I continue standing rather abjectly in the doorway of the cave, trying to draw, but the dense crowds jostle me. I'm nervous and hungry.

Glass panels protect the cave walls to a height of about six feet, but the glass paneling by me, which is necessarily cut off at either side of the Library Cave door, attracts a passing child who delights in slapping every painted wall surface he can reach. No adults reproach him as he gloats boisterously over his victory against the library. Later, a Korean man reaches an arm over the same glass pane to scratch the painted surface of the wall while hurling words over his shoulder to a companion in his tour group. He walks on, cursorily examining the dust under his fingernails.

In the transfer bus back from the caves, a retired French man seated beside me flicks through his camera data. He has of course been unable to photograph the caves, so he has snapped a second-hand archive of the images of cave interiors printed on the signage.

Today the International Dunhuang Project based at the British Library is attempting to collect all the material from the cave as a digital file, much as the Pergamum Museum in Berlin has made a digital copy of the acropolis, which lies ahead of me on the Silk Road. It occurs to me

that paper will survive much longer into the future than our fragile file formats and digital platforms. I see no reason to prefer these, not from my present position atop a sand dune, nor in our collective, more fragile future. We would like to reverse time, we would like a second chance, and we pretend that there will be one, but there won't be. All the collected thoughts that lay beside one another in the Library Cave for a thousand years are scattered now, lying alongside other books in other collections around the world. I feel conflicted about this.

Sprawling lazily at the apex of the giant dune, I shove a heap of sand from the ridge and watch as the handful of desert slides a short way downhill before its motion suddenly arrests amidst the combined friction of many more thousands of sand grains. To my surprise, I experience a slight feeling of sea-sickness. I repeat the shoving motion, and the sand within my view again forms a tiny avalanche, once more moving a ways down the dune until suddenly, instantaneously halting, again leaving the shape of the small landslide clearly marked on the flat side of the dune, but this time without disturbing my own equilibrium. With a third effort, I push the sand and watch it rush down, and—there it is—for a brief moment the sliding pile appears to rebound, as if on a spring, inflicting the mildest sensation of motion sickness. I try a few times more, but the sand only stops still instead of bouncing back. I've suppressed the effect with my understanding.

By now the low sun is almost set. In its bluish light I film some unusually resilient plants that have managed to grow here before sliding down the soft mountain to my waiting bike.

Tomorrow I will depart China for Uzbekistan, following the Silk Road toward Urumqui and Tashkent.

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The author in Dunhuang, western China, September 2016