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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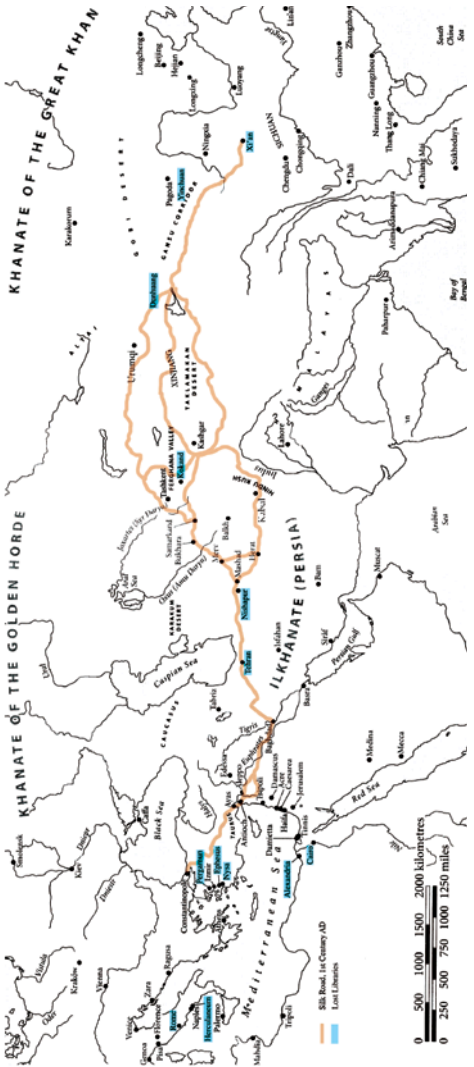

The planned Silk Road route

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 that 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 distraced 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.

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The author in Yinchuan, central China, September 2016