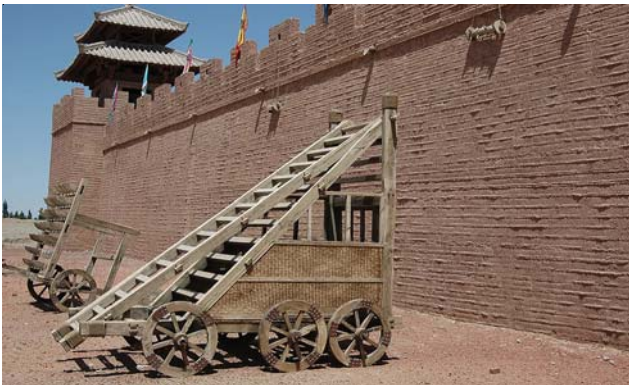

From the editor's desktop

Museums, Entrepreneurship and the Politics of Cultural Identity

The wonderful experience I had this summer of participating in the Silkroad Foundation's Dunhuang seminar and the subsequent tour to sites along the "Northern Silk Road" included visits to a number of museums. They ranged from the dusty little box at the Yumenguan west of Dunhuang, through the motion picture set complex at Yangguan, to the magnificent collection of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Museum in Urumqi. While I did not keep systematic notes, and the visits for the most part were far too short, here are some impressions. I will pay particular attention to the Yangguan museum and that in Urumqi, because they raise interesting issues with regard to purpose, organization, and interpretive strategies. Moreover, the collection in the Urumqi museum is hugely important. As the current jargon would have it, museums are "contested spaces." Much as we would like to think they should educate through a purely "objective" lens, in fact probably none can

museum), I had some basis for comparison. If one leaves aside certain political issues, the progress in "modernization" in China is impressive. Dunhuang itself seemed somewhat forgotten by time back in 1998; today the donkey carts are gone from the streets and it has at least a superficial air of prosperity. Granted, a lot of what we saw there and in cities in Xinjiang may have been stimulated by the national effort to burnish appearances before the Olympics, but the changes surely are much deeper than those inspired by that one-time, highly politicized display of national pride.

I was quite surprised when we visited Yangguan (the "southern" gate at the end of the Great Wall) to discover that instead of the dusty little one-room "museum" that was there 10 years before, a huge complex, apparently created by private enterprise, has arisen phoenix-like at the edge of the desert [Figs. 1, 2]. It includes a reconstructed fortress, complete with replica siege engines; a "nomad" camp where the yurts are sprayed concrete but from a distance might seem to be authentic; and a couple of substantial museum buildings (with, of course, a lavish and expensive gift shop). As visting "dignitaries" we were greeted by elegantly garbed young women and stern-faced young men in replica armor, who burst into song to reinforce the atmosphere of this having been



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Fig. 1. The movie-set fortress at Yangguan with siege engines.

(regardless of where they are located or what the intent of their founders). What is important as we visit them is to understand how the particular biases in selection and presentation affect the ability of the institutions to educate.

Having last been in Dunhuang a decade ago and in Urumqi back in 2005 (just before it was possible to see the new exhibits at the rebuilt



Fig. 2. The movie-set nomadic camp at Yangguan, with the genuine, if decayed, Han watch tower in the background, left of center.



Fig. 3. The welcoming ceremony outside the main gate to the Yangguan fortress.

a site on the vaguely exotic Silk Road of yore [Fig. 3]. The approach here is akin to an installation sponsored by the “Society for Creative Anachronism”—someone’s idea of the Silk Road brought back to life. It is no surprise

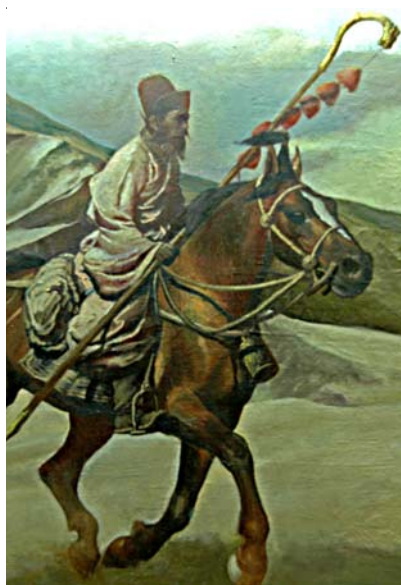


Fig. 4. Zhang Qian rides west in the second century BCE. Detail of painting in the Yangguan Museum. Note the anachronistic depiction of his using stirrups.

that the museum apparently makes money fairly regularly by renting its facilities as a film set. The Yangguan complex seems to have benefited the local economy, although one has to imagine that the vineyards are a more reliable long-term source of income in the oasis, at least until global warming dries up the water supply.

Apart from the Hollywood set atmosphere though, the museum has more serious pretensions which, one hopes, may elicit meaningful support so that it may obtain genuine artifacts in place of what to a considerable degree now are replicas. At least the replicas by and large are labeled as such,

unlike in the deceptive “Silk Road Museum,” another private entrepreneurial undertaking which I visited in Urumqi in 2005. (There, we were told, the objects were authentic, even though all too many of them were highly suspect or obvious fabrications.) Private enterprise to lure the unwary tourist seems to be flourishing in China. At least at Yangguan, there is a serious effort to balance descriptive information with appropriate visuals (e.g., paintings of historic scenes, which, even if romanticized, capture moments such as Zhang Qian’s journey west [Fig. 4]). There are some nice reconstruction models of such things as watch towers, forts



Fig. 5. Model (scale 1:40) of Han Dynasty fort at Jianshuijinguan Pass, Zhangye Prefecture, based on excavation of site.

[Fig. 5] and a Han chariot [Fig. 6]. And there are even a some genuine artifacts, the highlight perhaps being a rather well preserved Bodhisattva statue dating probably from the Song period [Fig. 7, next page].



Fig. 6. Full-scale model of Han Dynasty chariot based on tomb excavations and depictions on tiles.

As one drives north, one may experience a range of museums, from the modest, if at least largely genuine collection in Anxi, to the extensive and well-displayed (absent meaningful descriptive captioning) collection in Hami, where the highlight is one of the excavated mummies and the now rather famous beautiful wool "tartans" found in the cemetery at Qizilchoqa. All this pales though in comparison with the riches in Urumqi at the regional museum.

The visitor to the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Museum would be well advised to come prepared and to allow a substantial amount of time to absorb all it offers. There seems to be an agenda for normal tour groups (the average tourist likely has little patience for much more), taking them first to see the ethnographic exhibits, then to see the mummies, and leaving little time for the major section of archaeological exhibits on the first floor. If one spends the time the archaeological section requires, the limited captioning and arrangement of the material is more likely to confuse than to inform, unless the visitor has done his/her homework.

The same, of course, might be said about many museum exhibits, but here the challenge is compounded by the museum's having taken seriously its mission statement, prominently displayed on the wall next to the entrance to the archaeological exhibits on the first floor:

We have [created]...exhibits from the Stone Age to the Qing Dynasty for the purpose to show the contributions the people of all nationalities in Xinjiang have made for safeguarding the reunification of the motherland, for enriching the motherland's cultural treasure-houses and to make the



Fig. 7. Statue of a Bodhisattva, Yangguan Museum



Fig. 8. Entrance ramp to one of the tombs in the Astana Cemetery.

masses of audiences receive the education in patriotism.

Indeed, the intention to present the whole history of Xinjiang from earliest times as the story of the inevitable march of a unified, multi-cultural, but Han-dominated China is very much in evidence. While the exhibits themselves in the ethnographic section, arranged by the individual ethnic groups, are interesting enough, the explanatory comments would make most who are sensitive to identity issues today cringe, since about all we learn is that each group is happy and has beautiful customs. Important issues are glossed over, if mentioned at all: the Hui are a distinctive "Muslim nationality," even though that designation is an artificial creation and within it there is great cultural diversity; that many Tajiks are Ismailis and thus followers of the Aga Khan, who was collecting tithes from them as late as the 1920s, is never mentioned...

We can be thankful for the tastefully conceived new display of the famous mummies on the second floor, a marked contrast to the rather dismal presentation of them in the museum's old building. Here the curators have been very selective, highlighting four of the mummies, from different cemeteries and periods. There are mannequins reconstructing the original appearance of the individuals, and some care has

been taken to create an attractive setting (for example, the body from Astana Tomb 72TAM215 is set against a reproduction of the painted panels there, which we actually had been privileged to see *in situ* when in Turfan) [cf. Fig. 8]. The selection of artifacts which accompany them though is all too slim, and some of the material illustrated on the walls has nothing to do with the particular burials,

even though that would not be obvious to most viewers. Many of the most famous objects excavated from Xinjiang cemeteries are still on tour.

Part of the problem with the mummy exhibit then is its mixing of cultures from different regions and periods. While this may be consistent with the museum's stated educational goal, it works against any effort at real understanding of the fact that even after the initial Chinese penetration of the region under the Han Dynasty, the larger "Xinjiang" (a term coined in the Qing Dynasty) was still very much a disparate collection of regional cultures. They interacted to some extent, yes, but at the same time they maintained distinct regional traditions. At very least it is an oversimplification to assert (as is done in the section of the first-floor exhibits which ostensibly focuses on the Silk Road) that thanks to the Han Dynasty conquests, "here became the place where the civilizations of the world assembled and syncretized." All roads in fact do not lead historically to the P.R.C. To say that, though, should not be construed as questioning contemporary political legitimacy, however much some might wish to do so.

This difficulty created by the museum's interpretive framework is reinforced in the very extensive archaeological exhibits, largely very nicely displayed on the first floor. The arrangement is ostensibly chronological, starting with the early Palaeolithic, but then in any given room one may see items side-by-side which have no particular relationship to each other and come from ecologically very different regions which are far apart on the map. A photograph of the now well-known gold mask unearthed in a nomadic tomb way beyond the mountains at Boma decorates the wall of an exhibit of objects from Astana and Karakhoja in the Turfan region. Unlike the approach that was taken in the Berlin/Mannheim exhibition last year, grouping the artifacts by site, here those from a single site may be scattered randomly through several rooms. Therefore there is no way to obtain any real sense of historical and regional development. A melting-pot of nationalities? Perhaps, but that is a kind of modern construct that may have little interpretive value for our understanding of the richness of what archaeology in Xinjiang has unearthed.

Furthermore, there are distinct biases here, perhaps an understandable legacy of a historic unwillingness in China to recognize the power and legitimacy of its "barbarian" neighbors. We find little that might help us to appreciate the importance of the nomadic Xiongnu or Wusun who at one point dominated large parts of the region. While there are several examples of texts in languages and scripts other than Chinese, there is no clear elucidation of the significance and dominance of those languages in certain periods. Might we not learn that the Kharosthi script in Niya generally was used to write a north Indian language which was a vehicle for administration in the Kushan Empire? But perhaps to hint at possible Kushan dominance of what is now southwestern Xinjiang might undercut the inevitability of "reunification of the motherland." Might we imagine a day when no one would feel compelled to entertain such a thought seriously?

Ideally a museum not only should inform but it should provoke the viewer into thinking long and hard about what he or she is viewing, stimulate a desire to learn more, and present a range of interpretations. In Sweden, a country where a concern over national identity is very much alive, the national historical museum in Stockholm in fact takes very seriously the mission to present alternative interpretations and challenge the viewer to decide which may be right. In the regional museum in Vladivostok in the Russian Far East, I was amazed to discover in 2004 how quickly the ideologically constructed narrative about the inevitable triumph of the Soviet system had been replaced after its collapse by somewhat subtle questions about how in fact one might think about the history of the late 20th century. Unfortunately, as controversies at the museums in Washington, D.C., have shown in recent years, assertive nationalism aimed at presenting a triumphal narrative of the past may end up forcing thoughtful curators to compromise and end up largely avoiding anything which might stimulate the viewer to think.

It would be naive to think that the dominant narrative in Urumqi will change any time in the near future. The more the pity, since the richness of the collections on display there surely will grow, and the ways in which they might be invoked to cultivate an appreciation of the diversity and fascination of the history



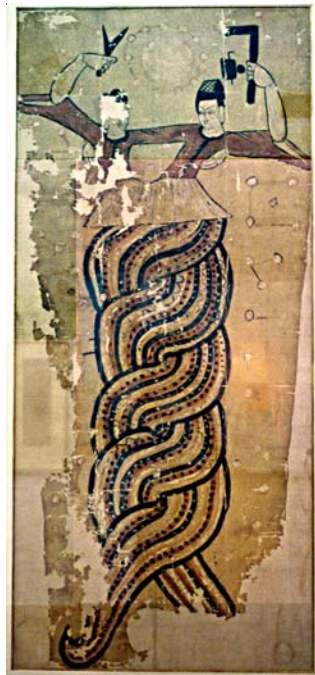
Fig. 9. Clay pedestal bowl, excavated at Astana by Aurel Stein. British Museum, Inv. no. CE.1928.1022.110 (Ast.i.1.05)

of the Silk Roads are endless. This could be done, of course, without raising any kind of political or ideological challenge, since to a considerable degree the problems in the museum exhibits as currently mounted

could easily be corrected by rearrangement and more extensive analytical captioning.

Flawed as it is, the Urumqi museum is arguably the single most important one anywhere to introduce the visitor to the early history of Inner Asia. Even though huge quantities of the archaeological treasures of Xinjiang were carted off by foreigners beginning in the late 19th century, the sheer volume and variety of what the excavations of the last half century have uncovered is stunning. I had no

Fig. 10. A silk banner depicting Fuxi and Nuwa, 7th-8th century CE, excavated at Astana by Aurel Stein. National Museum, New Delhi, Inv. no. Ast.ix.2.054.



idea, for example, after seeing so many of the *mingqi* and other grave goods from the Astana Cemetery in collections in London and Delhi [Figs. 9, 10, 11, 12], that the Urumqi collection holds a group of them which is so large and varied.

And the textiles scattered throughout the Urumqi displays are equally impressive in their variety. The more so in that some of the most striking examples were not even there but off in traveling exhibitions [Fig. 13, facing page].

Rather than indulge in listing the other treasures, I would conclude by recommending to those who may never have the good fortune to visit Urumqi some books which can introduce the Xinjiang archaeological collections. On the

occasion of its re-opening after the completion of the new building, the museum issued a nicely illustrated catalogue, with text in Chinese and somewhat fractured English (*Xinjiang* 2006). The material is grouped by type



Figs. 11, 12. A mounted soldier and detail of a mounted equestrienne, 7th-8th centuries CE, excavated by Aurel Stein at Astana. National Museum, New Delhi, Inv. nos. Ast.iii.2.021, .024, and Ast.iii.2.016, .022.

Fig. 13. Detail of woven decorative band depicting a winged beast, on a woolen skirt fragment, dating to the Han Dynasty period and excavated at Sampula. Xinjiang Uighur Museum Inv. no. 84LSIM01:361.



of object—ceramics, wood, metal, etc.—not arranged by the order of the displays in the museum itself. For those who read German, the catalogue for the recent Berlin/Mannheim exhibit, reviewed in these pages in our last issue, provides a good many important objects not in the Xinjiang museum catalogue (as well as some which are) and more extensive analytical essays and descriptive cataloguing (*Ursprünge* 2007; Waugh 2008). Smaller selections of some of the Xinjiang material have appeared in other exhibitions, such as that curated by Li Jian at the Dayton Art Institute in 2003 (*Glory* 2003). For the ongoing discoveries at Niya, there is a beautifully illustrated introduction edited by Feng Zhao and Zhiyong Yu (*Legacy* 2000), issued in conjunction with an exhibition at the China National Silk Museum. One-stop shopping, at least in the sense of its geographical coverage and number of illustrations, is the comprehensive *Ancient Culture in Xinjiang Along the Silk Road* (2008), a kind of illustrated encyclopedia arranged by site, with captions and essays in both English and Chinese (the essays in Chinese are more substantial). This remarkable book has everything from architecture to cave murals to archaeological artifacts, with illustrations which, if small, are generally good enough so that they could readily be scanned for incorporation into lectures by those who teach the silk roads (cf. Waugh 2007).

In short, one need not travel the Silk Roads in Gansu or Xinjiang to learn what archaeology has revealed about their cultures and history. That said, studying a book is no a substitute for seeing the Mogao Caves, or wandering

through the ruins of Jiaohe, or, for that matter, slowly and thoughtfully perusing the displays in the Urumqi regional museum.

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Note: I have made no effort to transliterate titles in Chinese but merely provide the information on them from their English titles, along with the ISBN numbers to help those who might wish to obtain them.

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(Above): Museum model of Jiaohe on its mesa between two rivers.

(Below): Panoramic view of the vast ruins at Jiaohe, including on the right the Large Monastery.

