

Buddhism along the Silk Road

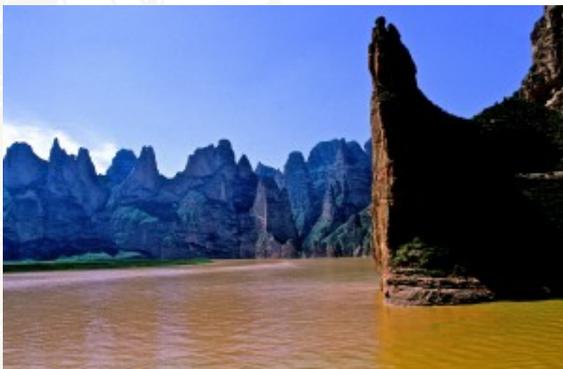
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The 'Silk Road', coined by 19th century German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of famed WWI fighter Ace 'The Red Baron') is something of a misnomer. Many commodities were traded along a web of transcontinental trade routes, from gold and ivory, to jade, slaves, exotic animals and plants, as well as silk. Arguably though, the most valuable treasures carried along the Silk Road were not shining jewels or glittering gold, but ideas, philosophies and faiths. One of these travelled from Central Asia in the first centuries AD, transforming China and her neighbours forever: Buddhism.



In turn, in 629 AD, a monk named Xuanzang left the Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an) for India, in search of original manuscripts to clarify the teachings of the Buddha. Xuanzang's brave pilgrimage was made in the face of strict orders from the second Tang Emperor Taizong, whose armies fighting Turks in modern Xinjiang meant no Tang Chinese should travel west. Xuanzang's account of his successful 17-year journey, *Xiyu ji* ("Record of the Western Regions") is an extraordinary tale of adventure. Xuanzang's epic work, in turn, inspired the 16th century Ming allegorical novel *Journey to the West* in which the protagonist, Monkey, undertakes a similarly stupendous trek. Children of the 70s and 80s will remember the hilarious and trippy television series based on the same Ming-era novel. When Xuanzang returned to Xi'an, Emperor Taizong was dead and had been succeeded by his son Gaozong. Emperor Gaozong built the Great Wild Goose Pagoda in Chang'an/Xi'an to house 657 key Buddhist texts Xuanzang brought back; these were vital for the revitalisation and propagation of the faith in China.



Along with warfare against the Turks, the Tang also fought another rival imperial power in the west: Tibet. To defend the Middle Kingdom from barbarian attack, the earlier Han Dynasty protected their vital east/west Silk Road by extending the fortifications we call the 'Great Wall' to Yumen, in the far north-west of modern Gansu Province. Buddhism flourished after the collapse of the Han, becoming the official religion in some northern successor states. Buddhist art proliferated and many shrines were built in temples, caves, and on cliffs.

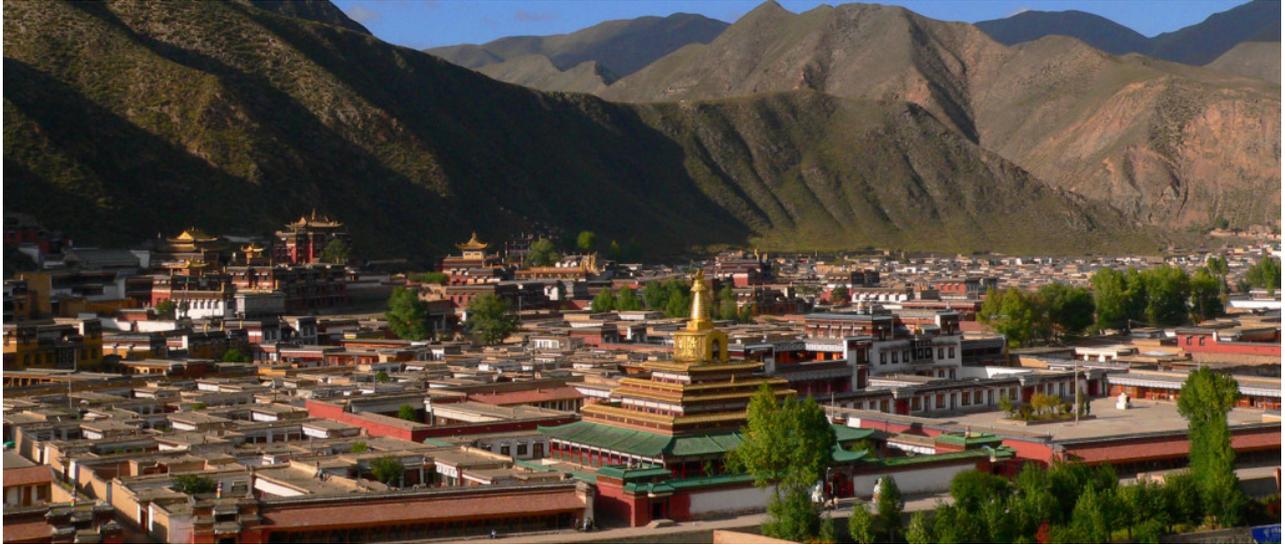


The Tang continued Han military policies, refortifying many towns and cities along the Gansu Corridor to Dunhuang. These settlements were serviced by shrines and monasteries; many dedicated by travellers and merchants on the Silk Road. A splendid example of this are the Bingling Si Caves, situated in the Jiajishi Mountains, on the northern bank of the Yellow River. Bingling Si - transliterated from Tibetan for 'Ten Thousand Buddha' - means 'large Buddhist cave complex'. The grottoes were first dug in 420 AD under the Western Qin and North Wei, and expanded by the Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Each shrine consists of an upper temple, a gully of painted caves, and lower temple, all gazing out over the Yellow River. 183 caves hold 694 stone statues, 82 clay sculptures and more than 900 square metres of bright, delicate murals.



South-west of Bingling Si stands the town of Xiahe, nestled high in a mountain valley. Xiahe's strategic location means that it is a melting pot of Silk Road religions and cultures. The nearby Labrang Lamasery is one of the six great monasteries of the Gelukpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Buddhism. Often referred to as 'Little Tibet', it is the largest Lamaist institute in the world, with a huge collection of scripture. Founded by monk E'Ang Zonghe in 1709, Zonghe was the first generation Living Buddha, or Jiemuyang, making Labrang Tibetan Buddhism's most important monastery town outside Tibet itself. White walls and golden roofs, combining Tibetan and Chinese architectural traditions, shelter 2000 monks; 18 halls; 6 institutes of learning; a golden stupa; and a precious library of nearly 60,000 sutras. In surrounding villages, amongst the bustle of old taxis and bicycles, Hui Chinese Muslims in white skullcaps sell Tibetan jewellery and old monks meditate with prayer beads at street corners. In this part of China, where east and west have met for millennia, the Silk Road is still very much 'The Faith

Road”.



Images (from the top)

[1] Bingling Si Caves, Gansu Province, China

[2] Monks, Labrang Lamasaray, Xiahe, China

[3] Binglingsi Landscape, Gansu Province, China

[4] Reproduction of the reclining Buddha of the Tibetan period from cave 158. National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

[5] Young Monk, Labrang Lamasaray, Xiahe, China

[6] Labrang Lamasaray, Xiahe, China