



Chinese Archaeological  
Discoveries

# MYSTERIES OF XINJIANG

Written by Hu Jia & Zhong Xizheng



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English Editor: Michael Harrold



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# THE MYSTERY OF XINJIANG

Stone Statues  
on the Prairie



Yining

Bagua (Eight-Trigram) Town



Aksu



Kizil Thousand-Buddha Caves

Kashgar

Kashgar Painted Pottery



Tomb of the Fragrant Princess

Hotan



Atlas Silk



Gelanmu Carpet

Yutian



Hotan Jade



○  
Altay



Altay Rock Carvings

○  
Qinghe

○  
Karamay



Przewalski's Horse

○  
Kuitu

◎  
Urumqi



Ruins of Jiaohe

○  
Turpan



Huoyan Mountain  
(Mountain of Flames)

○  
Korla

○  
Hami



Ancient City of Loulan

## Preface

Viewed from above, the boundary between Xinjiang and Gansu is barely discernible. People travelling overland, either by train or by car, in a north by northwest direction will, when they reach longitude 97°E, start to notice subtle changes, as the terrain gradually changes and assumes the features that are normally associated with Xinjiang.

Xinjiang is both China's western border region and the geographical centre of Asia. Baojia Caozi village in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, has been called "The Heart of Asia" ever since its location, at 43° 40' 52" N and 87° 19' 52" E, was confirmed internationally in 1992 as the geographical centre of Asia.

The smell of the ocean is one of the few features absent from Xinjiang, since it is an inland region far from the sea. Yet Xinjiang has a multitude of features that are unique and one of a kind: Naan bread, camels, Ili horses, cheese, fruit and the Twelve Muqam... The legend of Queen Marichi and Yaochi (Jade) Pool, cultural relics, foreign adventurers, the Silk Road, and so on. It is impossible to list them all. Such are the depth, scope and complexity of Xinjiang's appeal that it cannot be recorded in a single, or even two, cultural or historical volumes. And Xinjiang is somewhere that must be explored, because it occupies 1/6 of China's territory; it has long been a melting pot of Eastern and Western civilizations; it has so many ethnic features; it is such a magnet to adventurers and outsiders; and it is the only place in the world where so many ancient civilizations have collided and interacted and still have a global influence today.

Those who have never been to or lived in Xinjiang, tend to be surprised by the vastness of the desert that accounts for much of the region's land area. But there is much more to this region than its land. Xinjiang is a cultural treasure-house, where unique natural landscapes, a rich variety of ancient sites and colourful ethnic features are perfectly integrated. Xinjiang, with the ancient Silk Road passing through it, was influenced





by the world's greatest civilizations and cultures; ancient India, ancient Greece, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and so on, not to mention the Chinese civilization that formed its backbone. All three routes of the ancient Silk Road, southern, northern and middle, crossed Xinjiang. These routes are littered with earthen buildings, ancient cemeteries, well-preserved "mummies", ancient temples, grottoes and rock carvings, and stone statues, as well as priceless historical documents and inscriptions, pottery, bronze-ware and wooden vessels, currency, artifacts, and so on. These relics are not only a product of the coming together of cultures, but also elements that gave rise to Xinjiang's own culture. Xinjiang's location and history made it a window through which varied cultures were absorbed in ancient times. This window allows us a vantage point from which to view the events of the past and many great figures in history, such as Zhang Qian, Ban Chao, Zuo Zongtang, Zeng Jize and Sven Hedin... In more recent history, there are General Wang Zhen and his soldiers of the Xinjiang farming corps. We also remember how Xinjiang has inspired greatness in such men as Zhang Qian and Xuan Zang, and greed in the minds of the foreign adventurers of contemporary and modern times.

Xinjiang is a symbol of the Chinese nation's heroism, and a place that will always excite us. Words are inadequate to describe the full features of Xinjiang. It's a place that intoxicates and inspires us, but sometimes it also saddens us. When we study a map of Xinjiang we see names like Aksu, Ili, Altay, Turpan, Hami, Hotan and Kashgar, which pull at our heartstrings. We still remember how, decades ago when the economy was weak and transport conditions were poor, we learned about Xinjiang from people as far away as China's southeast coast who had a connection there. Often, a letter from a relative or friend who had gone to distant Xinjiang to assist in the construction work, would make us sob with excitement. It's hard for people today, with access to the Internet, to understand how



important were the letters to and from Xinjiang and other areas of the country's hinterland. At that time, a letter was worth far more than the few cents spent on the stamp.

For us, Xinjiang is both distant and close at hand; both familiar and strange. The feeling is even stronger when we're actually in Xinjiang. In the summer of 2005, we visited Xinjiang again and met experts like Mu Shunying and Wang Binghua, who have been living and working there for 45 years. We marvelled at these famous residents as they told us about Xinjiang's cultural relics. The previous summer, when we had stood by Lake Sayram near Xinjiang's northwestern border and in the Valley of Fruit, complimenting Xinjiang and Ili, a second-generation corps soldier had murmured: "The old people say the real Ili stretched far to the west..." His remark filled us with sadness as we gazed into the infinite west...

The mountains were silent and so were we. We remember the date clearly: August 19, 2004, and the sun was about to set.

The vast region of Xinjiang was so remote and forbidding to ancient people. Now it takes just four hours to fly from Beijing to Urumqi. Thanks to modern means of transport, the journey to Xinjiang is no longer the romantic but exhausting experience it once was. Regrettably, though, if we want to journey into its past, our sources of information extend to little more than the manuscripts left by our forefathers.

Xinjiang was known as Xiyu, or the Western Regions, in ancient times, and lay on China's western frontier. According to historical records, the name Xiyu first appeared in the Han Dynasty, after Zhang Qian went on his pioneering journey to the west. In fact, even before Zhang Qian's journey, paths had already been opened up between the Central Plains and Central Asia. Geographers believe that the Western Regions as a concept referred to the vast area west of the Yumen Pass and the Yangguan Pass. In its broadest sense, the Western Regions referred to Central Asia; while in its narrowest sense, it meant Xinjiang. Like the





Central Plains region, which is commonly regarded as the place where the Chinese nation originated, Xinjiang also bears traces of our forefathers' presence. In this book, you will learn that human activities in Xinjiang can be traced back to the Old Stone Age; that in 60 BC, the Western Han Dynasty established the office of the "Protectorate of the Western Regions" (the location is now in Wulei, a town in Luntai County in Bayin'gholin Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang) to govern the vast regions east and south of Balkhash Lake, which included what we know today as Xinjiang; that in the early Qing Dynasty, the place was administered by an official known as the Ili General; and that in 1884, the Qing Government formally established a province in the Western Regions, naming it Xinjiang (meaning 'old territory returned to the motherland').

Use of the word "great" is so common these days that it has lost virtually all meaning. However, when we look back and recall the names of the brave men who once journeyed to the West, men like Zhang Qian, Ban Chao and Xuan Zang, "great" is the only word to describe them. While inheriting the legacy of history we must also accept its burden. It is in this that Xinjiang acquires a feature that marks it out from every other province in China. Out of Xingxing Gorge and from every pass in Xinjiang, that feature touches every Chinese heart – such is the greatness of Xinjiang!

So, let us begin our journey north by northwest. Let us turn the echoes of history into written words. Whether you have been to Xinjiang or not, we hope this book will, by taking you there, give you the chance to sample the full features of Xinjiang.

Hu Jia & Zhong Xizheng

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## Let the Belle of Loulan Guide the Way

It was quite by chance that Mu Shunying and her colleagues discovered an ancient tomb on the tableland two miles to the north of the Tieban (Iron Plate) River, near the ancient city of Loulan. And yet, although it appeared to be a chance discovery, it almost seemed to be fated.





## He Loses His Way and Makes a Discovery

Two world-renowned cultural heritage sites define Chinese history. One is the Great Wall and the other is the Silk Road. The vast area of Xinjiang across which the Silk Road winds, was known historically as the “Western Regions”.

Down through the centuries, many adventurers and archaeologists from China and the rest of the world have been drawn to this mysterious land, where numerous cultural remains have been preserved thanks to the unique climate and geography. Among their discoveries, many have been made by chance. Among them is the Belle of Loulan.

The Belle of Loulan is associated with the name Sven Hedin, who was a famous Swedish explorer.

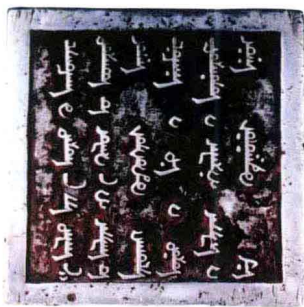
Sven Hedin was a student of Ferdinand von Richthofen, the celebrated German geographer who made seven journeys to China. In 1877, at the age of 44, von Richthofen published the first volume of his great work, *China*. In it he coined a new term for the ancient trade route linking China with the southern and western regions of Central Asia and India; Seidenstrassen, or Silk Road. In 1910, based on new archaeological research, German historian Albert Herrmann published the book *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien* (*The Ancient Silk Road from China to Syria*). In it, he described the Silk Road as extending as far as the west of the Mediterranean Sea and Asia Minor; he called it a trade route connecting ancient China, via Central Asia, with Southern and Western Asia, Europe and North Africa. In light of the quantities of Chinese silk products that were traded westward along this route, he argued that “Silk Road” was a natural choice for its name.



Sven Hedin



Silver seal weighing 4.3kg: A gift to the chief of the Torghut tribe, in 1775, the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the Qing emperor, Qianlong. The inscription on the seal, written in both the Manchu and the Mongolian languages, reads: "Seal of the loyal chief of the Torghut." The silver seal was presented to the Torghut chief Ubashi Khan after he led his people on an arduous journey out of exile in Russia, and back to China.



Face of the Silver Seal

On March 28, 1900, Sven Hedin completed his exploration of western Lop Nur. But as he was leaving, he realized that he had left a trowel – a vital piece of equipment for an archaeologist – at his camp. He sent his guide Aldik, who was an ethnic Uygur, to go back and fetch it. But a storm blew up, and Aldik lost his way. Eventually, he stumbled on the ruins of an ancient city. In the dim moonlight, he espied cultural relics scattered over a wide area, including exquisite woodcarvings and ancient coins. Sven Hedin was fascinated by his guide's description of what he had seen. In 1903, he led an expedition to the ancient city, where he excavated a vast quantity of relics. Back in Sweden, he announced to the world that he had found the famous city of Loulan. The news caused a sensation.

Loulan subsequently became a major historical site in Xinjiang. Like a magnet, it drew explorers and archaeologists from all over the world.

During the Han and Tang Dynasties the ancient kingdom of Loulan, located in the northwestern corner of Lop Nur, occupied a strategic location on the Silk Road where it passed through the Western Regions. Early on, it was where Chinese merchants traded silk and tea for horses, grapes and gemstones from the West; it was also a place where merchants stopped to rest. In its heyday, Loulan was crowded with shops and Buddhist temples, and with emissaries, merchants, monks and visitors from various countries, talking any number of languages. Loulan can be called one of China's earliest import-export trading centres. Founded some time before the year 176 BC, the Kingdom of Loulan prospered for six centuries, before its demise around the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.





Zhang Qian, a traveller and envoy of Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty, visited Loulan. In *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)*, in the chapter “A Biography of Dayuan”, it is stated that: “There are city structures in Loulan and Gushi, both adjacent to a salt marsh.” This indicates that Loulan was a “city-kingdom” as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Zhang Qian, during his two missions to the Western Regions, opened up exchange between East and West; meanwhile the rivalry for control of the Western Regions between the Han Dynasty and the powerful Xiongnu (Hun) tribes, was becoming heated. In 108 BC, the Han general Wang Hui conquered Loulan. Following a series of military campaigns, the Han Dynasty established full control over the Western Regions, and opened up the trade route between East and West that became known as the Silk Road.

Thanks to its key location, Loulan saw its economy grow rapidly as a result of the opening of the Silk Road. At its height, the kingdom controlled a vast area that extended as far as the Guyang Pass in the East, the Niya River in the West, the Aerjin Mountains in the South, and Hami in the North.

The city of Loulan was the kingdom’s political, economic and cultural centre. Yet, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it appears suddenly to have disappeared. When, in the early years of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Fa Xian, an eminent Buddhist monk of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, passed through the area, he wrote: “No birds above, no animals on the ground; as far as the eye can see, there is nothing but corpses and skeletons.” The once-flourishing civilization of Loulan had mysteriously vanished.

Sven Hedin’s good fortune ensured his position in academic circles; it also led to the discovery of the Belle of Loulan.

## In Bed with the Belle of Loulan

On April 1, 1980, eight decades after Sven Hedin’s guide lost his way among the ruins of Loulan, a team of archaeologists set off from Dunhuang in Gansu Province, heading for Lop Nur in Xinjiang’s hinterland along the famous Silk Road. Their expedition attracted little public interest outside archaeological circles. The team’s leader, Mu Shunying, who was the director of the Xinjiang Archaeology Institute at the time, was its only woman. Their first stop was the Yumen Pass, from where they turned westward along the