

# Silk Road Encounters: Multi-Cultural Interactions in Northwestern China

A travelling seminar of the Asian Sphere program  
Tour leaders: Yuri Pines, Michal Biran and Gidi Shelach

The northwestern part of China proper (the modern provinces Gansu, Ningxia, and parts of



Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia) is one of the most culturally diverse areas in China. For centuries, this area stood at the center of China's interactions with other Asian cultures. Major east-west trade routes that pass through the Northwest—i.e., the Chinese section of the so-called Silk Road known as the Gansu corridor—served Western and Central Asian traders and migrants (from whom the contemporary sizeable Muslim minority originated), and from the 13th century onwards

also some Europeans. Other, less notable routes, connected the steppe nomads at the north with the dwellers of the Tibet-Qinghai plateau at the south, and further south to Sichuan and even Southeast Asia, and India.

The meeting point of four major cultures (Chinese, Islamic, Mongolian and Tibetan) at this vast arid area gave birth to a fascinating variety of interactions: from military struggles to trade, cultural amalgamation, and constant shift and negotiation of individual and collective identities. Some of the most notable features of these interactions are the magnificent Buddhist sites, some of the earliest, richest and best-preserved monuments of Buddhist prosperity on Chinese soil. The Northwest also served as birthplace of one of the most peculiar and enigmatic civilizations on China's borderlands, namely the Tangut Xi Xia kingdom (1038-1227).



Today, this multi-ethnic area, inhabited by Chinese, Chinese-Muslims (Hui), Mongols, Tibetans, and numerous smaller minorities regains its erstwhile vitality due to beneficent investment policies of the Chinese government and increasing internationalization of local industries (of which rapidly evolving ties between the Ningxia-Hui Autonomous Region and the Arab world are most notable). This is, thus, an ideal place to experience and study issues that are at the core of the Asian Sphere program and analyze their archaeological, historic, modern and contemporary manifestations.

The 17-days long travelling seminar brings the students to the hidden treasures of Tangut civilization in the steppes of Ningxia and deserts of Inner Mongolia; will introduce them to the gems of Buddhist culture, including the Mogao cave complex in Dunhuang—the world largest and best preserved collection of Buddhist murals spanning eighteen centuries, and a reservoir of multilingual documents that include some of the more dramatic evidence for cross-cultural and

cross-religious interactions, as well as the magnificent and less known site of Maijishan with its impressive sculptures. It will pass through the Gansu Corridor, the major artery of the Silk Roads; and will include encounters with Muslims, Mongols, Tibetans, and, of course, Chinese. It will end at Xi'an (former Chang'an), the capital of China's powerful early dynasties, and its major



gateway to the West from the second century BCE to the tenth century CE. Throughout the seminar we shall address multiple issues of China's interaction with its close and distant neighbors throughout the last two millennia, and the impact of these interactions on the current political, ethnic, and economic landscape of the Northwest.

The tour will be jointly guided by Professors Michal Biran, Yuri Pines, and Gideon Shelach, each of whom will bring a distinctive disciplinary and chronological perspective on the region's archeology, sociopolitical history, art history, and its present.

### **Seminar credits and requirements:**

The travelling seminar equals 2 credit points in the Asian Sphere program, and in that of Asian Studies. Students who take this course will have to:

- a. Participate in two preparatory seminars which will take place during the second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year.
- b. Give a lecture on a specific subject related to the seminar's theme during the tour (to be coordinated with and approved by the seminar's teachers). Bibliography for the students will be distributed in January or February 2017
- c. Submit a paper (ca. 5000 words length) on the seminar's subject (details to be discussed and approved by the teachers) no later than October 21, 2017.

### **Registration:**

Students who are interested in taking this course and apply to our scholarships should send a letter expressing their interest (i.e. introducing themselves and their academic interests, why they should be included in the tour, how it will contribute to their academic career, etc.) by email to the course's teachers by December 1<sup>st</sup> 2016. Decisions will be published no later than December 24, 2016.

Non-student participants shall contact the organizers (below) by mail at their earliest convenience.

## Detailed itinerary

17.8	Departure by HU7958 TLV-PEK <b>1440 0500</b> 18AUG	O/n
18.8	0550 Arrival Beijing; flight to Yinchuan. Yinchuan: Visit Museum of Ningxia-Hui Autonomous Region; if time allows: pagodas from the Xi Xia period (Haibao si 海宝寺 and/or Chengtian si 承天寺) and/or the Grand Mosque	Yinchuan
19.8	AM Visit to Xi Xia tombs 西夏王陵; continue to Helan mountains pictographs 贺兰山岩画; Return to Yinchuan	Yinchuan
20.8	AM: 7:30 depart to Qingtongxia 青銅峽, s/s 108 pagodas. Continue to Zhongwei: visit Gaomiao 高廟. Continue to Shapotou 沙坡頭, visit Desert Experimental Center; Yellow river resort. Continue to Wuwei (late evening arrival)	Wuwei
21	AM: visit Tiantishan grottoes (天梯山); White Pagoda 白塔寺; Confucius temple in Wuwei (if time allows); then drive to Zhangye; visit Grand Buddha Temple 大佛寺.	Zhangye
22	AM: Zhangye, visit Matisi 馬蹄寺; drive to Jiayuguan; s/s Jiayuguan Great Wall 嘉峪關長城 and Ming "Suspended Wall" 懸臂長城 o/n Jiayuguan	Jiayuguan
23	Drive to Ejina (ca. 6 hours), starting our program with Ejina. S/s Qara-hoto 黑城, a few archeological sites from the Han and later periods; the Juyanhai 居延海 Lake; local museum dedicated to the Torghuts 塔王府	Ejina
24	Continue Ejina program. PM return to Jiayuguan	Jiayuguan
25	AM: Drive to Guazhou 瓜州; s/s Yulin caves (榆林窟), Suoyang fortress 锁阳城 ruins and Taersi 塔尔寺 temple ruins; Guazhou museum 瓜州博物館. Continue to Dunhuang	Dunhuang
26	Dunhuang full day Mogao caves	Dunhuang
27	Dunhuang: possibly continuing Mogao caves; pm drive to the Jade Gate Pass 玉門關 (Han era Great Wall). If time allows: Crescent lake, Minsha Dunes + optional camel ride. Evening train to Lanzhou Y668: 20:12-7:25	Night train
28	Lanzhou: after arrival and breakfast: Provincial Museum; pm drive to Liujiaxia power station; taking a boat on the Yellow River and Liujiaxia water reservoir to Binlingsi grottoes (炳灵寺石窟); Evening continuing to through Linxia County to Xiahe (the location of Labrang temple); arrival after 22:00 (note that this is a VERY long day).	Xiahe
29	AM: Visit Labrang temple; PM: drive to Tianshui, o/n Tianshui	Tianshui
30	S/s Maijishan grottoes (麦积山石窟); Yuquan Daoist Temple 玉泉观 and Fuxi Temple 伏羲庙. PM Drive to Baoji	Baoji
31	Baoji: visit Baoji s/s (if the time allows) either Nanzhihui Lord of Qin tomb; or Famensi temple 法门寺; continue to Wu Zetian's tomb (Qianling 乾陵); then to Han Wudi's tomb, Maoling 茂陵 (i.e. Huo Qubing's 霍去病 tomb). O/n Xian (another long day)	Xian
1.9	AM: Forest of steles (碑林), PM: Qin Emperor's Mausoleum and Terracotta army	Xian
2.9	AM: Shaanxi Provincial Museum, PM: Muslim quarter (大清真寺), city wall (市城牆). PM flight <b>HU7238 1955 2155</b>	---
3.9	<b>Flight to Tel-Aviv HU7957 0155 0745</b>	

**!! Attention!!**

This is a very intensive tour which requires at times 14 hours and more in the bus and in different sites; hundreds of kilometers of travel a day; difficult weather conditions (hot at day and cold at night); local-level hotels and food. We recommend the participants to query with their physician about their fitness to the tour.

We regret to inform that the intensity of the tour prevents days of rest, so we will travel during Saturdays. We are also unable to take care of personal dietary preferences. There are plenty of restaurants throughout the tour, but the food is Chinese (at times also Mongol, Muslim and Tibetan) with very limited choice of Western-type cuisine.

## **Costs and payment conditions:**

### **1. Land operation in China**

- Reduced price for students enrolled to the course 1050 USD
- Price for university teachers and spouses 3150 USD
- Price for (a very limited number of) other guests 3650 USD

**\*\* Competitive grant of up to 1000 USD will be awarded to a limited amount of students based on academic merit.**

The payment will be done in three steps:

- 100 USD (non-refundable): no later than Feb 28, 2017
- 500 USD for students and 1000 USD for lecturers June 20, 2017  
(full return of this sum for cancellations prior to July 18; 75% return for cancellations prior to July 30, 50% return for cancellations prior to August 9, no return for later cancellations)
- The rest: in cash upon arrival to China

This payment includes: flight from Beijing to Yinchuan on August 18; train from Dunhuang to Lanzhou on Aug 27; land transportation in a/c bus (49 seats) throughout the tour; 4\* hotels (3\* in Ejina) + breakfast (Chinese style with small Western additions); all entrances to all the sites; guidance by the tour leaders and by local guides at certain locations

This price excludes: meals except breakfast; personal expenses; international and one domestic flight as specified below.

### **Attention!**

- The costs are based on exchange rates of RMB to USD as for September 2016 and may be subjected to change in case of substantial alteration of the current rate.

- The itinerary above may change due to unpredictable circumstances. We shall do our best to prevent these changes from influencing the tour's price.

2. **Flights: Tel-Aviv to Beijing (17.8); Xian to Beijing (2.9) and Beijing to Tel-Aviv (3.9): all by Hainan airlines**

1230 USD

This sum will be paid to our tour agent, Ms Iris Nagola as follows:

- a) 150 USD (non-refundable) no later than March 31, 2017
- b) the rest will be paid by May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 (refundable prior to July 15, non refundable for later cancellations)

\* Those who issue tickets individually will be personally responsible for arrival at Beijing (or at Yinchuan) in time and for timely departure from Xi'an.

Organizers

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