

# Preface

Hong Kong in May is already humid, a little windy, wrapped in damp clouds. Winter has vanished, but I still enjoy walking on narrow trails that wind through country parks; leafy defiles where British governors' wives once rode their horses. This month, eighteen years ago, I was preparing for a journey on the Silk Road.

I dreamt of seeking out old trade routes connecting China to India. I yearned for space and the past is nothing but spacious. Xuanzang,\* a Chinese Buddhist monk had made a famed journey on the Silk Road to India in the seventh century. He set off from China in AD 627 on a journey from which he returned only eighteen years later, in AD 645.\*\* Xuanzang's records of his travels provide an extraordinarily comprehensive account of western China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Gandharan regions and India in the seventh century. I decided to follow his route to India. Xuanzang would lead me home, I hoped, for home was a question mark that dangled over the globe.

I had grown up in three countries, studied in a fourth and fifth, worked in a sixth. I looked to Xuanzang to unify my fractured life.

My departure loomed weeks away. I was a long way from being ready. I didn't have a backpack yet. I remember that S. was visiting. Our on-off attraction could not countenance a future then. Plus, a complicating journey lay between us.

'Don't you need a backpack?' he asked.

'I don't know where to get one.'

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\* Xuanzang was earlier spelled as Hsuan Tsang or Hiuen Tsang. I have spelled his name according to the modern Pinyin system, adopted by China in 1958. It is pronounced 'Shwenzang'.

\*\* Though the exact dates are debatable, I have used the timeline suggested by scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.



He shook his head and took me to the market stalls. We bargained for a sensible blue rucksack, a sturdy companion for the months ahead. It wasn't clear how long I'd be gone.

I was thirty-two and terrified, but I had treasures and worlds to find.

I completed my Silk Road journey from China to India over the next fifteen months, using that backpack. I never did get a phone.

Then I wrote this book.

The years drizzled around my ears.

'I' became 'we'.

S. and I live in Hong Kong once again. We've looked up to find that Hong Kong has been a part of China for twenty years; it's an uneasy marriage, arranged by history. The world has shape-shifted; we are middle-aged, we have a mortgage and a child.

At the Hong Kong Museum of History this March, a pair of fibreglass Bactrian camels were installed just inside the entrance, to signal a special exhibition on the Silk Road, spearheaded by China. The lavish display is a 'come hither' signal to Hong Kong, an invitation to share in China's glorious past.

It's the last day and I have brought our little girl to see it, straight from where the school bus dropped her off.

Her uniform, at the end of her day, is crumpled and a little stained. Her silky hair spills out of her hair-tie and there is a scrape of peanut butter by her mouth. Her eyes are shining at this after-school adventure.

She darts off and climbs between the humps of the seated Bactrian camel. She whips the reins. She hops off and runs back to my side.

We wander through and she takes in the images of narrow mountain passes, treacherous crossings.

China has travelled its own route to sophistication. The display graphics are slick, the music seductive, the photographs high resolution, the exhibits of genuinely high quality.

An attractive wall-wide screen shows a flaming ball jumping from city to city on the Silk Road, in time with a stirring, symphonic soundtrack, over a mobile, three-dimensional map possibly pinched from Google Earth. I know all those names that flash from my travels. Xian, Lanzhou, Wuwei, Kucha, Samarkand, Bukhara.

I recognize the museum artefacts too: the Tang Dynasty wall paintings from caves in western China; the joyous confidence of



those brush-line camels, the delicate ochre of the animal. I can feel the tension of the reins threaded through the camel's nostrils, pulling rough against the man's palm. I hear the heat and snort of the animal's breath, the lightness of those padded feet, how the cameleer might step off the frame and greet one, mid-step.

My ribs register then a residual ache for my own journey, the explosion of understanding I experienced, however imperfect, the crazed joy of travel through those regions, feeling how connected the world in fact is.

I grope for the right word.

Silk Road saudade? The Portuguese, once great travellers, understood well the feeling of longing for an experience that cannot be replicated, the generalized 'missingness'. My daughter dubbed that feeling 'miss-ness'. Just yesterday, she depicted it as a half-heart, painted black.

Along with the Buddhists, I have come to believe that the dominant human impulse is compassion; a need to seek connection, and connections are messy. The Silk Road is more accurately a network of gentle regional travel routes, a manifestation of what our soul's poet Rabindranath Tagore called 'a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being . . . so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another.'

(He meant women as well, but syntax was against him.)

After all, it is entirely natural to want to drop in on your neighbour, bringing something to trade. While you're there, you might stay a while and you might enjoy their strange globular fruit.

'You call that a watermelon you say? It's delicious!'

'I'm so glad you like it, here, take some seeds back and plant them at home.'

Or a traveller might share their Buddhist faith: 'It brings peace, you've got to try it, we've had such good results.'

A wall painting in your host's nearby cave might catch your eye:

'How *do* you get that amazing blue shade?'

'I just crush some lapis lazuli, if you like it I'll send some over. I have a handyman who knows how to apply it.'

Which is how I think the Silk Road happened.

At the Hong Kong exhibit, my daughter and I watch the video of a Ferghana horse on her side, giving birth. The foal drops to



the ground, inside a transparent stretch of placenta, the membrane suddenly tears open, streaked with blood.

My child isn't as intrigued as I had imagined. Other things are on her mind.

'You went on the Silk Road?'

'Yes.'

'Wasn't it dangerous?'

'Maybe. A little.'

'Which part?'

*When you read the book.*

She knows about my book, I have copies of it at our home.

We are now standing in front of a video about Xuanzang. In the short documentary, he is an exemplary bridge between India and China; not an ordinary monk—grappling his fears, disobeying an imperial edict, living in hiding, a man on a pilgrimage to the Buddha's birthplace, in search of scriptures to accurately retranslate, because he was burning to understand some truths about what it meant to be human.

I don't say any of this to my child.

She tugs at my hand.

'You were chasing this monk?'

'Yes, Xuanzang. But he was dead, I was following his route.'

*I was somebody else.*

The museum has provided sheets of paper and pencils for visitors to note their comments on. My daughter pulls one towards her, reaches for a pencil and draws a recognizable horse. She sketches a figure that sits on it, side-saddle, pigtails sticking out from the head. She draws an arrow and labels it 'me'. On the paper, she scribbles the legend that she has never ridden a horse, that she loved the exhibition, that her mum wrote a book about, she did. Her spelling is still quite inventive. Instead of popping the paper into the box, she folds it up and puts into her pocket. She looks up at me with those bright eyes.

'Which countries sent all these things?'

'China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan.'

'Can we go one day?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, we can.'

Hong Kong  
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