

PREFACE

When much of the US shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, like many people, I found myself unexpectedly spending a long uninterrupted stretch of time at home. Conferences and workshops were canceled. The university where I worked shut down the campus. Unable to access my office, I headed down to my basement, in the company of shelves of books and notes I had gathered over many research trips. In the time of stillness that I might otherwise have spent on trains, planes, and in cars, I reminisced about memorable trips I had undertaken in the past. During the time that I had planned for further travel to archives and libraries, I started to write.

As I wrote what became this book, I thought often of a trip I had undertaken years earlier. I had lived in Beijing in 2007–2008 while on a Fulbright scholarship and doing research for my dissertation. In the late spring of 2008, a friend and I traveled west, following the outlines of trade routes that have connected China to the rest of the world for millennia. Lines of camel trains no longer ply the Silk Road, but with the Open Up the West campaign starting in 2000, followed by the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China has continued to engage with the outside world through its western frontiers in a series of campaigns and development initiatives. The Chinese government has invested heavily

in the building of infrastructure in the region, from railroads to newly paved roads and entire cities of high-rises surrounded by empty sandy stretches. To travel west, I realized as the horizons widened, was to see China and Chinese identity from a wholly different perspective. I was hardly the first person to come to that conclusion. From exiled officials in the imperial era to early twentieth-century academics and writers, travels to the west often induced a sense of dislocation and personal epiphanies. One of the joys of travel is to untether from the routine of daily life, familial and work obligations, and to experience the world from a new vantage point. As the horizons opened it was suddenly possible to imagine a different China from the familiar coastal cities.

From Beijing my friend and I traveled to Gansu province and the city of Dunhuang at the edge of the Gobi Desert. At first glance a dusty outpost, the city is known for the Buddhist caves carved into the cliffs along the Dachuan River, where travelers and merchants along the Silk Road had once prayed for safe passage before heading into the sand dunes to unknown western lands. The caves had been left to quietly fade into the desert when the British explorer Aurel Stein arrived in 1907. In the last years of the Qing dynasty centralized control over the edges of the empire frayed. Stein was able to win over the trust of the caretaker of the caves, who eventually allowed Stein to remove twenty-four cases of manuscripts and 40,000 scrolls, including the world's oldest printed text, the Diamond Sutra, dating to 868 AD. The discovery and removal of the scrolls, notorious even at the time, quickly caused an outcry and spurred growing Chinese nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹ Although Chinese historians conform to narratives of China's victimization by imperialism in a "century of humiliation," what is remarkable is the extent to which a few early and notorious incidents like Stein's removal of the scrolls from Dunhuang became the catalyst for a strong nationalist response. From the outrage grew support for modern archaeology as one of the first efforts to develop a national science in China.

A century later, in 2008, my friend and I found ourselves the only visitors at the caves of Mogao outside Dunhuang. The voluptuous figures of Bodhisattvas glowed cerulean blue in the cool semi-light of the caves—the rare blue of turquoise imported from Afghanistan, painted in the Indian style, likely by Indian artisans. Their eyes were scratched out, a desecration dating to the period after the Uyghur people of the region

converted to Islam and corporeal depictions of Buddhist deities became anathema to their religious beliefs. The quiet retreat of green and shade in an arid landscape had once drawn people and resources from across the region. Their stories are forgotten but their work remains, these blind Buddhas waiting in dimly lit caves for the end of times.

We traveled onward by car to Jiaohe in the Yarnaz Valley. In this long-abandoned city baking in the sun we walked through ancient hearths, courtyards, and marketplaces, which had once thronged with people in the ninth century. In the long centuries since, the city had steadily eroded into the light yellow of the surrounding sands. Through flat, desert landscapes we passed by lonely obelisks in the sand, the remnants of watchtowers from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 AD), when these arid regions were the frontiers of the empire.

In Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang autonomous region, we went to the Xinjiang Museum, where a plain little exhibition room held one of the famous mummies unearthed from the Tarim Basin. Preserved by the dry climate, the 3,000-year-old mummy resurrected from the desert displays Caucasoid facial features and blond hair. These mummies have become part of a swirling controversy and debate over the racial and ethnic history of the western regions and the origins of Chinese civilization. Historians and archaeologists have long argued for the multicultural and mixed origins of the “Han” race that makes up the largest majority in China, based on findings such as the mummies. These complexities, however, run counter to the dominant narrative of Chinese nationalism. In the months leading up to the Beijing Olympics, the government clamped down hard on any signs of unrest in the country. The first Olympics hosted by China announced the country’s arrival as a great power and had to go off without a hitch, much like the tightly choreographed performances of the opening ceremony.

Xinjiang was already getting restive, although nowhere near the level of disturbances and repression that have since enveloped the region. In the spring of 2008 the government cut back on domestic tourism in the region—which explains in part why my friend and I often found ourselves the only people at major sites. In the years since, conditions in Xinjiang have become far more contentious. The Chinese government has turned the entire region into a surveillance state using the latest technologies in facial recognition and the older technology of incarcerating ethnic Uyghurs in reeducation camps, ostensibly to quell domestic terrorism.

The ethnic tensions in Xinjiang and in other borderlands are rooted in China's modern history. The origins of the conflict date back to before the founding of the communist regime. In the 1920s archaeology became one of the top priorities for a newly organized national academy of sciences, Academia Sinica, which was formally founded in 1928, right after the Nationalist Party unified the country and reestablished its capital in Nanjing. Unearthed artifacts provided incontrovertible proof of ancient Chinese civilization, in turn bolstering nationalist claims over the territorial expanse. When scientists discovered the Peking Man fossils at Zhoukoudian, a small town outside of Beijing, in the 1920s, it quickly became a national sensation, although some found it difficult to assimilate an exalted history of ancient China with its distinctively simian features.² A few years later, starting in 1928, archaeologists at Academia Sinica oversaw the excavation at Anyang, the site of an ancient Chinese civilization, and hailed it as one of the signal achievements of Chinese science in the Republican period. Science and history became entwined with Chinese nationalism and inscribed across the landscape. The interest of the Han Chinese majority, however, did not necessarily coincide with the interests and demands of minority populations in the borderlands. From the Northeast to the Southwest, violent encounters ensued.

By the time we reached Kashgar, on the border with Pakistan, I had grown comfortable with the lulling rhythm of extended travels: a string of hotel rooms; waking up each day in a new place; the long, quiet stretches of time spent in various modes of transportation. The men driving donkey carts, the densely packed old city of twisting lanes, and perilously stacked houses were the furthest removed I had been from Shanghai and the Jiangnan area I was most familiar with in China. The feeling of vast distances and cultural untethering marked the journey, which remained in my memory long after we returned to Beijing and eventually the US. It is this side effect of journeys to induce personal epiphany and, in a larger context, to change the geographical conception of the nation along with the preservation of empire, or at least the imperial territorial expanse, that is the starting point of this book.

In the years after my return from that trip to Xinjiang, I started a tenure-track job at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains; I received a Luce/ACLS China fellowship that saw me travel to Taiwan and China; and two stints of residential

fellowships at the National Humanities Center and the Institute of Advanced Studies. My travels to various archives and libraries continued in spurts until the pandemic suddenly brought life to a standstill. But the journey that began in western China took me to the global frontiers that shaped the emergence of the modern world.



FIGURE 0.1: The long-abandoned city of Jiaohe in Xinjiang. Photo taken by author in 2008.

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