

六十三

We opened a door
in the sky and stepped through
Wulumuqi to Xi 'An
on carpets, we flew
in the History Museum
we wandered through time
found ancient inventions
and poems without rhymes



Chapter 63 – Xi’An – Gateway to the West

The Han Dynasty lasted more than 400 years – from 206 BCE to 220 CE. In many ways, it defined much of what China was to become. To this day, over 90% of the people in China are considered to be Han Chinese 漢人 Hànrén (literally ‘people of the Han’) and the Chinese language in its totality is referred to as Hànyǔ 漢語 (the language of the Han). A hàohàn 好漢 in China is “a (Chinese) hero.” The Han Dynasty produced some of the coolest inventions ever. Paper was created then, as was moveable type, instruments for measuring seismic activity, wheel barrows, and suspension bridges were among many amazing innovations of this longest of the Chinese dynasties.



劉邦 Liúbāng, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, established Chang’An (near present day Xi’An) as the capital of China and built a palace there called “the Never Ending Palace 未央宮 Wèiyāng Gong which was over 10 times the size of the current Vatican City. At the collapse of the Han Dynasty, however, the Never Ending Palace did come to an end.

Two centuries later, Chang'an did have a revival as it evolved into a center for Buddhism. But, it did not really hit its zenith until the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century CE when it moved a few miles south and east from its original location to what is now the current location of Xi'an and became a major religious center not only for Buddhism, but for Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism and Manichaeism, many fairly new religions to China. A stele in Xi'an from the 8th century CE describes the introduction of Nestorian Christianity by Syrian priests in 635 CE. The Big Wild Goose Pagoda was built in 652 CE to house the Buddhist scriptures which had been transported from India to China by the most famous of all Buddhist pilgrims, Xuan Zhang. According to Richard Mather, a sinologist from the University of Minnesota, "At the height of its glory in the mid-eighth century, Chang'an was the most populous, cosmopolitan, and civilized city in the world."

One of the first exhibits to catch my eye at the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an was a tea pot with no lid. When the teapot was turned over there was a clay funnel built into the bottom of the teapot and scalding water would have been poured into the clay funnel. Turn the teapot right side up and the tea stayed in the pot. I'm still not sure how they put the tea leaves into the pot, though or how the inside of the pot was cleaned.

- Then there was the goose shaped smokeless bronze lamp. The smoke from the flame of the burning lamp went up through the long neck of the goose and back into the body of the lamp which contained water and there the smoke would die.
- There were coins with squares cut out of them; water wells and grain grinders, axes and adzes, and even a Han loom that looked modern.
- From the Tang Dynasty there were wine pots made out of silver, and drinking cups in the shape of horns made out of agates.
- One of the most famous paintings there from the Tang Dynasty had five men mounted on horses playing polo in a manner similar to English style polo.



The name, “Chang’An” loosely translates as “Eternal Peace.” It’s founders tried to insure its longevity by positioning Chang’An near both the Huang He and the Wei rivers in an area surrounded on all sides by hills. Chang’An was the eastern portal to the Silk Road. It was in 128 BCE during the Western Han Dynasty when 張騫 Zhāng Qiān , a young imperial officer, was sent by Emperor 漢武帝 Hàn Wǔ Dì from Chang’An to explore the Western region to try to establish a military alliance with the Kingdom of Yuezhi in modern day Tajikistan.

- To do that, he needed to go through Inner Mongolia which was controlled by the 匈奴 Xiōngnú.
- Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu in the Hexi Corridor and held captive for more than 10 years. While a prisoner Zhang Qian married a Xiongnu woman who bore him a son.
- When the Xiongnu leader died, Zhang Qian and his good friend and guide, 甘父 Gān Fù escaped with Zhang Qian’s wife and son, but instead of returning to Chang’An, they continued north to Khöshöö Tsaidam in modern day Mongolia and then followed the northern edge of the Tarim Basin, around the Kunlun mountains, and even stopped at Kashgar.
- They then continued west to Ferghana (modern day eastern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), and south to Bactria.
- While in Bactria (present day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), Zhang Qian learned about Alexander the Great and this was the first recorded meeting between these great civilizations.
- On their journey home, Zhang Qian traveled east below the Tarim Basin and crossed the Gobi Desert before finally reaching Chang’An.

Zhang Qian was much more successful in his second journey to the west when he was accompanied by 300 men to present day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. Although Zhang was unable to visit India and the Macedonian and Parthian Empires, he did learn valuable information about those regions. On his journey back, Zhang Qian was able to bring back alfalfa and grapes which grew easily in the western regions of China.

He also brought back stories of horses from the Ferghana valley (located between Kyrgystan and Tajikistan.) Horses have historically held a high status in China, and some horses were believed to have divine powers like dragons. Han Wu Di believed that the horses from Ferghana were “Heavenly horses” (大宛馬 dàyuānmǎ) since a reading from the I-Ching had predicted that “divine horses would appear from the west.” Han Wu Di sent 20,000 infantry and 6,000 cavalry west to the Ferghana valley to obtain these horses, but lost half of his soldiers in the first “War of the Heavenly Horses” (天馬之戰 Tiānmǎ zhī Zhàn .) The unhappy Emperor then sent a

larger force of 60,000 - mostly prison recruits - who had no problem making their way to Dayuan (Ferghana.) After a 40 day siege, the Han forces achieved victory and the Han General left Dayuan with 3,000 horses; 1,000 Heavenly Horses, the Lamborghini of China 2000 years ago, finally arrived in Chang'An in 101 BCE. This poem from the Treatise on Music describes that event.

“The Arrival of the Heavenly Horses”

天馬來兮 從西極 *The heavenly horses have arrived from the Western frontier*

經萬里兮 歸有德 *Having travelled 10,000 li, they arrive with great virtue*

承靈威兮 降外國 *With loyal spirit, they defeat foreign nations*

涉流沙兮 四夷服 *And crossing the deserts all barbarians succumb in their wake!*

–The Shiji, Chapter 24 (“The Treatise on Music”) Shiji (史記) vol. 24, “Yueshu (樂書)” number 2.

