

Musing about Past and Present on the Silk Road

By Sylvia Krebs

Author's note: This article is excerpted from my book How Am I to Touch with You? Encounters with China. I have modified and changed the original text for the purposes of this project. The "we" references are to my husband, Ed, and me.

In the summer of 1993, we arrived in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province. Both good and bad news awaited. The good news? We got tickets to Dunhuang where we would visit the famous Buddhist caves near the city. The bad news? There had been a serious train wreck west of Lanzhou, the direction in which we intended to travel. Rumor had it that floods caused the wreck. We made the rounds of Lanzhou's bus and train stations, searching for tickets, but after failing in all our efforts, we took a deep breath and decided that flying somewhere was our only option. We flew to Jiayuguan, some 300 miles to the northwest, only to be told upon arrival there that no tickets to Dunhuang would be available for three days.

Two years after our longest journey in Silk Road country, I read *The Gobi Desert* by Mildred Cable (co-authored by Francesca



Mildred Cable

French), the intrepid English missionary who crossed and recrossed the Gobi with two "lady" companions in the 1920s and 1930s. The length of Mildred's stay and her meticulous account made my observations and musings seem presumptuous. But looking back through the lens of her book added meaning to the experiences and thoughts that marked my three weeks in western China. Thus, her trip became a backdrop for my trip.

In 1923, Mildred and her companions reached Jiayuguan, the fort at the western terminus of the Great Wall, in mule carts. We descended from the skies with spectacular views of deserts and mountains on every side. When Mildred arrived, the fort bustled with travelers and the people who served them, but for us the commercial

activity was in the "new" city three miles from the fort.

In the afternoon we and three Italian musicians hired a *xiao mianbao che*, a little "bread-loaf" van, and went to the Wall and the fort. Even when the Chinese Empire reached farther west, the fort was the end of the civilized world for the Chinese.

When Mildred went out the Gate of Sighs (so named because of the long, dangerous journeys ahead) at the Jiayuguan fort, she climbed the spirit barrier, reputed

It was easy to imagine how a Chinese traveler in ancient times must have felt. No sign of civilization ahead.

to keep out evil spirits and looked out over barren desert. The spirit barrier was long gone, but from a less advantageous point we looked across the debris of a recent international hot-air balloon festival at the same desertscape.

A high point on the restored segment of the Wall served up views of the snow-capped Qilian Mountains rising in the south. The desert sprawled to the north and west, and an oasis with flourishing fields of wheat, beans, and sesame lay in the foreground. Trees standing guard at its edge defined the oasis as clearly as a line on the map.

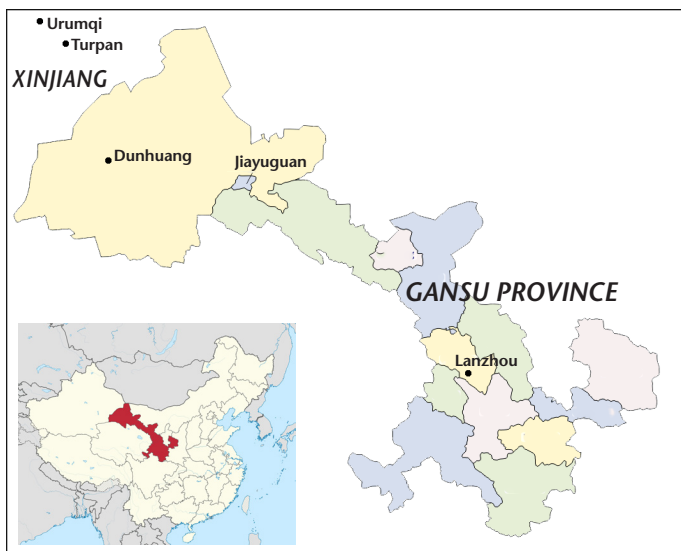
In the late afternoon light, it was easy to imagine how a Chinese traveler in ancient times must have felt. No sign of civilization ahead; nothing but an arduous journey by camel or donkey cart or foot to look forward to. The sighs must have been long and many.

On the way back to the city, we hired the driver to take us to Dunhuang the next day, US\$100 for the five of us. Not a bad day's work for a retired soldier when scientists and teachers made less than that a month.

Mildred learned to travel the "desert way," thirty-mile stages, the length determined by access to water. At first, she feared the "burden of boundless monotony," but she came to treasure the slow, solitary pace so necessary for learning about the desert. We carried ample supplies of bottled water, and the little van boasted a tape deck. No need to suffer from boredom or to stop unless it suited our fancy or the little van failed us.

That night, I felt like I'd been to the end of the world and partway back. The Gobi Desert didn't conform to those of my imagination. It wasn't sand, and it was not without vegetation and human habitation. It was, in Mongolian, a *gobi* desert, wide shallow basins with pebble-covered bottoms. From the window of a speeding van, I only glimpsed the desert plants and saw none of the creatures that Mildred came to know so well, but ruins of ancient cities and signal towers testified to the long span of human habitation.

Graves, simple piles of stone or rough dirt, dotted the roadside. How did one decide where to dig a grave in such a for-



saken place? How many bodies had lain without burial along the way?

Dunhuang: the Singing Sands, Crescent Moon Lake, Thousand Buddhas Caves

Mildred hesitated to seek out the little lake, sheltered among the dunes, because she remembered “the fatigue of toiling through loose sand.” The people in Dunhuang insisted that she go. “The skill of man made the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, but the Hand of God fashioned the Lake of the Crescent Moon,” they said.

Late one afternoon, Ed and I went to the dunes. Without a wind, the sand didn’t sing for us, but neither that nor the best efforts of the tourist trade could destroy the beauty. The dunes flowed serenely, silhouetted against a blue, blue sky. We climbed high along the ridge of one dune, treading carefully to keep our bare feet on the shady side. Our reward was looking down on the Lake of the Crescent Moon, shimmering in the evening light. What I saw and what Mildred saw some 60 years before were probably not so different.

To see the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas (begun in the year 366) outside Dunhuang required a full day’s trip for Mildred. “A thousand years and more lay between them and their work and us and ours. It was fitting that a few hours of silence and solitude should be imposed on us, for to pass, without transition, from any restless or noisy life to this reliquary would be to offer it an insult,” she wrote.

We had no such time for meditation during the half hour ride from the city. We arrived with music blaring from the tape deck, a minor insult among the many inflicted on the caves by visitors, vandals, and archaeologists before and after Mildred’s time.

The Chinese, with assistance from the United Nations, have done well in preserving what’s left after nature, time and humans have done their damage. We saw sculptures and paintings of exquisite beauty, and I thought of a Europeanist colleague who asked, “Is there really anything worth studying in Chinese history?” From the towering Buddha to the tiniest intricate detail in the decorations from the Western Xia Dynasty (1036–1227) in northwest China blending Chinese culture with border cultures, the site was spectacular—not

only a history of Chinese art but of China itself and of China’s connections to the outside world.

In ancient times Dunhuang was the last stop before crossing the desert east to west and the first stop crossing from west to east. Caravanners went there to ask for protection on their journeys or to give thanks for safe arrivals. Centuries later, the caves still offered a sense of comfort and gratitude.

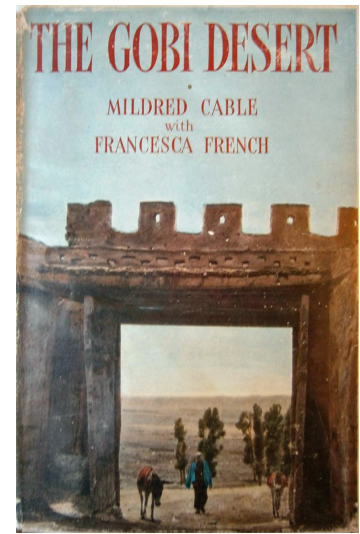
Leaving Dunhuang, we rode a bus for five hours to Liuyuan, a godforsaken spot and not a place in which to be stranded. But stranded we were until the train for Urumqi arrived at 11 p.m., four hours late and bursting with tired, irritable passengers. We who had waited for four hours were no less irritable. Ed and I lost each other in the scrum because he stopped to

The skill of man made the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, but the Hand of God fashioned the Lake of the Crescent Moon.

help a Guatemalan man who had panicked. Ed deserved a gold star since the man had spent much of the interminable wait loudly extolling his travel savvy.

By the time we got back together, every spot was taken. We created a cubbyhole with our luggage in the entranceway between two cars, slept as best we could, made coffee to go with our breakfast buns, and later fetched boiled water for a lunch of noodles. Thus we arrived in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and home to Khalid, our Muslim student at the Xi’an branch of the Chinese Academy of Sciences where we taught English.

Over the next few days, Khalid dragged us through the city to see not only the new high-rise apartments, hotels and office buildings, but the crowded Uighur section as well. We visited markets and mosques, a small taste of how different the Uighurs’ Muslim culture is from that of the Han Chinese. We were still in political China, culturally in Central Asia.



Turpan: the Bezeklik Caves, Gaochang, Vineyards

“There is no more interesting place on the Asian highways than Turpan,” wrote Mildred. We went to Turpan on a public bus, jammed with people, mostly Uighurs, and their belongings. The bus snaked its way through the Tian Shan range into the desert with only one stop along the way. There, rickety roadside stands sold snacks and noodles, with the “men’s room” on one side of the road in the trees, the women’s on the other behind little hillocks. As they got off the bus, the men hitched back their jackets, revealing knives.

In Turpan, the delight of the day was biking to a Muslim cemetery with evening light dressing the scene in softened colors. Among simple mud graves stood elaborate mausoleums topped with crescent moons, a scene confined by neither time nor place.

The next morning we saw the Buddhist caves of Bezeklik and the remains of Gaochang, an ancient capital, whose ruined walls and foundations still recalled the city’s days as a crossroads of trade and a cultural melting pot.

Mildred would have had little use for me. She traveled for over a decade, I for slightly more than half a month. She suffered the rigors of carts and camels on dry, lonely tracks and the dangers of bandits, soldiers and desert storms. I carped about noisy hotels, late trains, and pushy souvenir peddlers. I carried no religious message nor anything else to the people I met—except my money.

Continued on next page

Silk Road *(continued)*

But Mildred and I are not entirely different. Safely back inside the Wall, we both needed to “review [our] riches, appropriate them and make them irrevocably [ours].” Even the most interested listener would have such a different perspective that any explanation would remain “incomprehensible to them.” Mildred feared that she would give up attempts to explain her “deeper thoughts about these experiences,” and so did I.

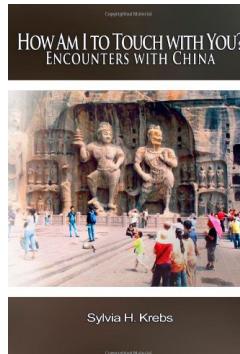
Mildred found parables aplenty in her desert odyssey, all applicable to her faith, and learned a thousand things as well. I learned lessons of politics and economics, sociology and history, even in my modest travels. In the six decades since Mildred crossed and recrossed the desert, life changed more dramatically than it had in all the centuries gone before. Mildred understood what the future held: “...machine-minded men are now in control, who discuss the Gobi in terms of profit and loss, and propose to lay iron rails across it and commercialize its ancient sites.” So they have done, to my dismay, and yet I would not wish for a return to poverty, isolation and banditry.

Nevertheless, when I was there in the last decade of the twentieth century, what Mildred called the “inviolable spirit” of the desert still existed. Location made that part of the world a giant bazaar, teeming with human activity. To Mildred, the

town bazaar was a neutral ground for peoples of different cultures and religions, and so was the giant bazaar. Change destroyed its economic function, but the mosaic of humanity remained. And the desert preserved physical reminders of human experience often forgotten in today’s world of “machine-minded men.”

To me, the serenity of giant Buddhas and the silence of empty mosques spoke of the enduring quest for life’s meaning. Artifacts of different cultures and others that mingled cultural influences illustrated the long interdependence of humanity. The harsh beauty of barren landscapes and the occasional rigors of even modern travel reminded me that pleasure isn’t found only in luxuriant environments and comfortable surroundings. Mildred would agree, I think, that these too are desert parables. 友

Sylvia Krebs is a member of USCPFA’s Atlanta chapter. From 1984 to 2000, she and Ed lived in China for three to 16 months at a time, teaching and traveling.



To Circumvent U.S.-China Business Tension, Focus on People

An article on GlobalAtlanta.com reported that, even amid a deterioration in U.S.–China relations, Georgia has had relative success in attracting Chinese firms.

That’s because business is done by people, not governments, and even the direst of scenarios can breed opportunity in some sectors, the article said. That was the conclusion of business leaders during an annual China Breakfast Briefing in Atlanta in November (held online).

The article quotes Ginger Merritt, vice president of the textile and chemical company Milliken & Co., who believes grassroots collaboration is possible.

“The fact is that we are businesses doing business with other businesses. It’s not country-to-country necessarily. Even

more than that, we are people interacting with other people, and as long as those relationships are well grounded and established, we will continue to have good success in doing business between the two countries,” Merritt said.

Over 12 years working in China she said she has built deep relationships with colleagues there. Trade and political tensions come up as a sort of exasperated comic relief at almost every business meeting, but they don’t hinder the work.

“The business still gets done very effectively between the individuals of those companies,” she said. 友

To read the entire article, go to GlobalAtlanta.com. Under the dropdown menu, search for “China.”

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