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Tang China and the Buddhist Silk Roads: The Historical Geographies of Daxingshan Temple

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Abstract

Tang China's capital was the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city in the world from the early seventh to mid-eighth centuries. Crucial to its prestige was its tolerance of multiple religious traditions and support for long-distance commerce. The Silk Roads, a series of paths through deserts, mountains and grasslands traversing 5000 kilometers of China and Central Asia carried world-transforming cosmologies and luxury products between China, India and Persia. This paper explores how this dynamic circulation created sacred places and iconographic landscapes in Xi'an, Shaanxi, China. I deploy insights from world history and historical geography as an interpretive framework to engage Daxingshan, a Tantric Vajrayana temple and crucial site for the translation of Mahayana Buddhist sutras. Finally, I describe experiential fieldwork at the site, an engagement with an otherworldly sacred space that was and is a creation of a previous era of cultural globalization.

Keywords

China, Buddhism, Sacred Space, Silk Roads, Cultural Globalization

1. Introduction

Globalization refers to more frequent and intense socio-cultural interaction between peoples and places separated by distance. These processes lead to exchanges of material goods, technologies and cosmic beliefs with the power to transform social worlds and geographies (Lechner, 2015). In academic and popular discourse, globalization refers to specific late twentieth and early twenty-first century processes, with information and satellite technologies enabling direct communication between distant actors. Yet, we can apply the globalization concept to earlier periods of human history if the definition excludes immediate communication between distant places. Recent scholarly work in the field of world

history has emphasized interactions and exchanges between peoples on the global scale, rather than the histories of discrete, self-contained regional civilizations. For example, scholars who engage with and practice world history as a research field see the various Silk Roads as the central axis creating a common "Afro-Eurasian" system (Frank & Gills, 2002). Research on the diffusion of varied phenomena such as pandemic disease, religious practices and textile motifs manifests a non-elitist, liminal and multiscalar approach to the past (McNeil, 1976; Foltz, 1999; Jones, 2009). Likewise, when applied to eras such as the first millennium, a heterodox view of globalization can de-center historical geographies from a Eurocentric bias (Sen, 2002). Thus, world history opens alternative paths enabling heterodox interpretations of historical themes (Liu, 2010).

In this paper, I deploy insights from historical geography, world history and experiential-interpretive fieldwork to understand a prior era of globalization. First millennium cosmologies circulated along Eurasia's Silk Road axis, and created symbolic, sacred landscapes in the Sui and Tang-era capital, Chang'an. Through fieldwork interpretation, I explore a Buddhist temple complex as a manifestation of spiritual and meditative traditions designed to deepen sacred consciousness (Sinha & Valderrama, 2014). During the Tang-era, Buddhist monks, Chinese silks and jewels circulated westward to Central Asia and east to Korea and Japan. Likewise, as the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads, the city absorbed the cultural ideas and material wealth of Persia, Sogdiana, Bactria and India, including sutras, medicinal drugs and wool, among other products. The urban landscapes of the Silk Road's cities are the outcome of more than two millennia of people, materials and cosmologies diffusing across Asia.

2. Interpretive Framework

I encounter and interpret Daxingshan, a Buddhist temple complex, through the geographical concept of place making. Place is a material and discursive outcome of a dynamic process of circulation and iconography (Gottmann, 1983). Xi'an's role in Chinese and world history during the first millennium is a direct result of this mutually constitutive process. Different places are linked by these circulations in a spatial field of interaction which benefits its participants. To gain clearer insights into symbolic places and landscapes, we must clarify these terms, especially as they are understood by such social scientists as anthropologists and geographers.

For example, geographers have created a rich body of work around the theme of place. Tuan (1977) wrote of the links between place making, the organization of space and environmental perception as mediated through culture. Place encounters are never limited to the purely mundane. Place always entails the presence of symbolic and layered meanings. Sack (1997) views place as the nexus of nature, culture, and society. As such, places are created through human moral agency as geographies of meaning. Adding further conceptual depth, Olwig (2011) interprets landscape as a material outcome of cultural symbolism, with a

particular emphasis on language, the local environment, and an emerging "sense of place" (an concept richly developed by Wilkie & Roberson (2012)). Consequently, places are infused with deep meanings and associations and are designed to express individual and collective emotions (Relph, 1976). Examples include not only religious places such as the case study in this paper, but also politically significant places such as the Forum in Rome or the Forbidden City in Beijing (Agnew & Muscara, 2012). From a Marxist perspective, Cosgrove (1998) analyzed landscapes in Renaissance Italy that implicitly expressed the privileges of social class power.

Historical geographers reconstruct past landscapes as snapshots analyzing environmental, social, and cultural factors shaping specific locales and regions. Their work enriches our understanding of the material lives of past social worlds. Likewise, relict landscapes are experienced by current inhabitants and visitors within the changed social and material contexts of the present. Therefore, the term "relict" does not signify something merely past or irrelevant. For example, in Xi'an, temples built during previous streams of cultural diffusion continue as sacred spaces for believers, and with economic relevance as tourist attractions for the city's businesses. Whether as highly emotive landscapes of meaning or as sites of an urban economy's heritage industry, places are immersed with multiple and contested strands of identity, themes that have been emphasized in fields such as urban anthropology (Hannerz, 1996; Appadurai, 1996). The place making process varies depending upon who engages with the landscape, and their degree of power in uneven social relations, but all humans engage, actively or passively, in place making (Tuan, 1977).

3. Place Making in Xi'an and World History

China's symbolic landscapes emerged through the structures of its socio-cultural and political history and through interaction with other cultural hearths in Central Asia and India. In Chang'an and cities along the Silk Roads, Chinese and Central Asians created religious and market institutions that facilitated cultural diffusion. This structure-agency dichotomy can be understood through the concepts of iconography and circulation (Gottmann, 1983; Prevelakis, 2003). Wealth flowed into Chang'an in the form of Mahayana sutras, Zoroastrian (and later, Islamic) texts, artistic motifs, metalware, and medicinal drugs, among other products. Material wealth flowed outward with paper, precious gems, and silk, thus giving the paths between Persia, Central Asia, and China their eponymous identity (Christian, 2000). Increased wealth provided the means to build the sacred landscape, e.g., Buddhist and Zoroastrian temples. Both merchants and the imperial state contributed to monasteries and temples, seeking divine favor. Likewise, the cosmopolitan Tang capital was especially famed for its thriving entertainment industry featuring wine, dancing, sex, and cuisine (Whitfield, 1999). Thus, the wealth of the Silk Road enhanced the immense prestige of Chang'an and its systemic centrality in Eurasia during the second half of the first millen-

nium.

These activities did not take place without regulation. The Tang empire imposed its will on Chinese and Sogdian merchants through its power to control space. Strict daily curfew was enforced, with drums signaling the onset of darkness and restriction of movement, and limits were placed on time of day in which buying and selling could take place (Lewis, 2009). Later dynasties continued to serve notice of their power, with today's Ming (1368-1644) era wall in Xi'an as evidence. The imperial authority also served as an investor, through its system of military bases and the need to purchase material goods from merchants and farmers, whether local or foreign (Hansen, 2017). To protect Tang interests, these military facilities stretched deep into the Gansu (Hexi) Corridor and Tarim Basin, protecting cities such as Niya and Kucha, imposing customs controls and granting travel passes.

4. Daxingshan: Contexts of the Historical Geography of Belief Systems

During Spring 2015, I conducted research in Xi'an, in particular its Tang landscapes. For one month, I engaged in landscape reading and gathered visual sources through photography and video, using a standard Canon light digital camera and an iPhone. To gain some perspective beyond my own impressions and reading, I also conducted informal unrecorded interviews with people who worshipped at the site analyzed here. Local residents are keenly aware that their city was one of the most important in the world during the Tang period. Indeed, Chang'an was the largest and the richest of all cities on the Silk Road, although Samarkand, Bukhara and Balkh were also exceedingly wealthy. The era's cultural treasures were created by artisans animated by religious faith, with Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism all present in Chang'an.

The Silk Road was the central axis of world history during the first millennium. Throughout the period, universalizing cosmologies competed for believers in a long Eurasian axis from Persia eastward to Sogdiana, Bactria, the Tarim Basim kingdoms and China. Thriving in the Persian Sassanian Empire, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism were most important in Sogdiana, with its series of city-states such as Chach (Tashkent), Panjikent, Samarkand and Bukhara. Temples of these principal faiths of the Silk Road cities were also established in Chang'an's Western Market district and were culturally dynamic and innovative social spaces during the Tang period (Lewis, 2009).

In China, the most successful system of cosmological faith and practice was Mahayana Buddhism, which grew rapidly in the wake of the disintegration of the Eastern Han dynasty (9-220 CE) and the consequent loss of prestige of Confucian state ideology (Keay, 2009). Amid social chaos and unrest, Chinese adherents from all walks of life found refuge in the Mahayana creed of salvation through faith and devotion to Bodhisattva's, especially Amitofo (Sanskrit, *Ami-*

tabha).

A crucial event in the Mahayana movement through Central Asia and into China was the rise of the Kushan Empire (30-375 CE), which ruled Northern India and Bactria during a period of intensive religious syncretism and experimentation. Kushan prestige and power fostered Buddhist institutions and artistic motifs (e.g., Gandhara sculpture) and spread the faith into the Tarim Basin. As China fragmented in the three and a half centuries preceding the Sui Dynasty (589-618 CE), a series of Buddhist city-states emerged in the oasis towns that ringed the Tarim along its northern and southern fringes, desert havens fed by fresh water from mountain snowmelt. These oases were key nodes of hospitality and support, particularly for traveling monks and merchants. As a result, cities such as Khotan, Niya and Kucha played the role of catalyst in the diffusion of Buddhism eastward into the Chinese heartland.

Daxingshan emerged in this historical geographical context, founded in an earlier form as "Zun Shan Si" during the Western Jin dynasty (265-316 C.E.). The temple hosted Indian scholars who assisted Chinese monks in translations and exegesis of Mahayana texts, most crucially the Lotus Sutra. Vital in this effort was Kumarajiva (b.344), son of an Indian prince and Kuchan mother. Kucha was a Buddhist city-state kingdom on the northern path around the Tarim Basin, with rich trade and cordial diplomatic links with China. Kumarajiva arrived in Chang'an in 401 and took up residence at Daxingshan, working there until his death in 413. During the seventh century, as the Tang Dynasty was rising in geopolitical power and cultural prestige, three more Indian scholars Subhakarasimha, Amoghavajra and Vajrabodhi arrived at Daxingshan to continue this work. They also introduced the Chinese to the esoteric version of Tantric Buddhism (*Vajrayana*) which emphasized the mystical powers of chant and verse in worship, thus taking the Mahayana tradition into the supernatural realm. The Japanese monk Kukai, who studied in Chang'an from 804-806, brought this version of esoteric Tantric Buddhism to his homeland, where it was adopted by the ruling class as a state religion (Mason & Caiger, 1997).

To make the Buddhist faith accessible to the population, Chinese monks needed to translate the sutras of the vast Mahayana canon from Sanskrit to Chinese. The work was painstaking, due to profound differences in grammar and writing systems between the sacred and target languages. Consequently, literal translations were ineffective, so the goal was to impart the spiritual power of Buddhism through colloquial Chinese, with its rich idioms and allegories. Kumarajiva's translations were especially esteemed because these captured the spirit of the Buddhist scriptures for Chinese readers and hearers. Most influential was the Lotus Sutra, a mystical text advocating music, mantras and material offerings in worship, empowering Buddhism with a much greater level of auditory presence and colorful visibility relative to belief systems such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism (Frankopan, 2017). For these reasons, Daxingshan was one of East Asia's most vital sites for the diffusion of Greater Vehicle Buddhism.

By the seventh century C.E., the temple had become an official worship site

for the Tang emperors and acquired a political cachet to accompany its lustrous visual and spiritual appeal. Although Xi'an eventually lost its status as imperial capital, Daxingshan was preserved as a center of learning, with the complex rebuilt in the fifteenth century after a fire and redesigned with the changing artistic trends of Late Imperial China. Below, I provide a brief experiential landscape reading of Daxingshan, exploring the impact that such sacred landscapes can have on those who experience them.

5. Daxingshan as a Sacred Place

In experiencing Daxingshan, I vicariously shared an experience with Buddhist worshippers and travelers who trekked here in previous centuries. The temple is an invitation to engage with a transformative sensory and emotive experience within the framework of Mahayana cosmology, Tantric practices and the pursuit of enlightenment. I had visited other Buddhist sites in eastern Asia, notably Pulguk-sa in Kyong-ju Korea and Sensoji in Asakusa, Tokyo Japan. On those visits, I was always impressed with how the specific landscape design and material at the specific locale shapes the visitor's perspective. Pulguk-sa is, in visual effect and historical experience, a mountain fortress. In contrast, Sensoji is an island of calm in the midst of the clamor of Tokyo, one of the world's megacities. Daxingshan offered an even deeper immersion in Buddhistic experience than those sites.

In contrast to the steel and glass structures in Xi'an's newer districts, Daxingshan offers the visitor a radically different spatial and sensory world when passing through the main gate, with its aged wooden roof, curved upward in Chinese *Xieshan* style, walls of light, dark gray brick and four slender, red-painted doors. The structure impresses the viewer with the wear of centuries (**Figure 1**). The temple's sacred name is inscribed in traditional, gold colored Chinese calligraphy, read right to left. Walking toward the interior of the complex, one approaches cream-colored stone steps with dragon carvings, marking this as a truly Chinese space and conveying a sense of symmetry and strength. One then gazes upon the exteriors of the prayer halls, that vividly display spiritual imagination materially embodied in stone, wood, bronze and stunningly lustrous gilt statuary (**Figure 2** & **Figure 3**).

The esoteric and mystical space of Daxingshan, which represents the Tantric Vajrayana school, deploys a hypnotic mélange of visual, olfactory and auditory stimuli, combined with alternating stillness and movement of its human actors to create an otherworldly aura. The experience intensifies as one moves from the periphery to the inner core of the complex, symbolic of deeper levels of enlightenment. The eyes gaze upon aged wood and brick in the outer buildings at the edge of the complex which give way to brighter structures with brilliant kaleidoscopic color and elaborate calligraphy on the exterior surfaces and inner sancta of the main prayer halls. Ascending the stone stairs to the interior of these halls, one is overwhelmed by deep amber and lustrous gold colors, which for me

Figure 1. The main gate of Daxingshan.

Figure 2. The photo shows the main hall, which is in Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) style. The temple was rebuilt after it was destroyed by fire in the 15th century.

Figure 3. The photo shows the magnificent interior of a prayer hall with five Boddhisattva images displaying five different *mudras*, i.e., hand gestures used by enlightened beings to instruct the faithful.

symbolized the Buddhist principle of wisdom. The olfactory sensations are enveloped by sandalwood and lavender incense, evoking a pervasive sense of serene peace and pleasurable inner calm. As with other visitors and worshippers, I took a long stick of incense and placed it in a carved bronze prayer urn while cupping hands to move the scent toward my head and heart, to purify both. Magnifying the effects noted above, the primary auditory sensations were the sounds of deep, reverberating bronze bells and the chanting of sutras and the name of "Amitofo" by monks and worshippers alike, who were performing circumambulatory ritual movement with chanting, drum and gong beating, practices observed in geographically varied sacred settings throughout the world (Bhardwaj, 1983).

Daxingshan's sensory ensemble is incredibly powerful in creating a social space and sense of cosmic place outside any realm of mundane existence (Geertz, 1973). The result for me was a higher level of consciousness and enhanced well-being. At the microscale, this center of Tantric Vajrayana space evokes what Amitofo's (Sanskrit, *Amitabha*) Western Paradise might look, sound, smell and feel like to the believer who passes into the Buddhist realm of cosmic release from *samsara*, the perpetual cycle of suffering and rebirth and into a space of eternal bliss.

6. Conclusion

This paper foregrounds several key insights. First, the academic field of world history enables a better understanding of how dynamic past interactions created a far more unitary human experience than that portrayed in histories of discrete civilizations. Circulations of world transformative cosmologies and technological innovations along the Eurasian and maritime Silk Roads were assimilated by diverse peoples who then adapted these innovations to (re)create the landscapes of our world. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Chang'an were greenhouses of cultural innovation, commerce, and genetic mixing of world historical importance.

Second, this paper's fieldwork site, Daxingshan, is a microscale example of the transformative circulations noted above. Yet, the site is also evidence of how people in specific locales expressed agency, through selective engagement with Buddhism. Through this geographical process elite actors and common people alike transformed an Indian Vedic cosmology into a hybrid Chinese spiritual system. This selectivity is the essence of the iconographic impulse present in us all. Cultural innovation is variably adapted by different peoples in particular social ecologies. Mahayana Buddhism, an innovation of Indian philosophers such as Nagarjuna, was itself remade as the tradition diffused from its hearth in the Gangetic Plain, through Bactria (Afghanistan), the Tarim Basin and finally into North China.

Third, interpretive-experiential applied fieldwork with its radically personal and sensory interaction with place, reveals the power of sacred sites. A vicarious fieldwork experience at a 1700-year-old Buddhist temple enables the researcher

to acquire a deeper appreciation for how people in a previous age might have engaged with novel cosmological systems, such as those diffused along the Silk Roads.

Finally, Daxingshan, a legacy of previous eras of cultural globalization, is a vibrant, living vessel of sacred space. Through centuries of exchange, the Silk Road cities are marked by cosmopolitan splendor, manifested in landscapes of biota, water, stone, bronze, wood and gold. Material landscapes are the etchings of centuries of human cultural perceptions onto the earth's surface and experiencing a sacred site at the sensory level yields deep insights into our geographically expressed spiritual aspirations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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