

Silk Routes Within China as Seen in Archeological Discoveries

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The route of the Chinese section of the Silk Road varied from time to time. Apart from precise literary records, relics such as imported foreign (e.g. Byzantine, Sassanian and Arabian) coins, gold- and silver-ware, decorations, glassware and Chinese silk produced especially for exportation all serve as tangible road evidence. It is never an exaggeration to say that sometimes archaeological research on the Silk Road offers an even more determining approach.

The route chosen by our expedition is the main line of the Silk Road. It starts from Xian passing through Chang'un, Xianyang, Fufeng, Wuwei, Jiuguan, Dunhuan, Turfan to Wuqia (to the west of Kashi) with foreign objects and Chinese silkware found all through the way. The same finds were also reported from Loulan, Yutian and Khotan in Southern Xinjiang.

Two other routes functioned - from Xian to Wuwei (Liangzhou). One of them past Binzhou, Jingchuan, Guyuan (Yuanzhou), Jingyuan (Huizhou) which, from there, crossed the Yellow River towards Wuwei. This northern route to the Hexi Corridor was no less important than the southern route now taken by our expedition. Extremely important discoveries were made at Guyuan and Jingyuan. The other route was opened when the Tibetans captured Qin (Tianshui), Lan, Yuan and Hui Prefectures during the middle Tang Dynasty (the second half of the 8th Century). It passed Binzhou, Ginyang (Gingzhou), Huanxian (Huanzhou), Lingwu (Lingzhou) and after crossing the Yellow River skirted the southern foot of the Helan Mountains for Wuwei. Lingzhou therefore became an important hub of communication with the Hexi Corridor and the regions to the north of the desert.

The discovery of Sassanian silver coins at Xining of Qinghai suggests a route from Lanzhou through Xining and Fusicheng either to Shangye or westward directly to Southern Xinjiang.

Foreign objects were found in the following places: Taiyuan and Dutong, Shanxi; Kunhot, Tumet Left Banner, Aohan Banner and Haiman Banner, Inner Mongolia; Dingxian, Zanhuang, Jingxian and Cixian, Hebei; Jixian, Tianjin, Chaoyang and Beipiao, Liaoning. They cover a time span beginning from the 5th and lasting until the 11th century. This again implies another route starting from Hami in Xinjiang eastward via Echina Banner (Xinia) and other places in the Mongolian Grassland to Datong, the early capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty then called Pingcheng, and further eastward into eastern Liaoning to Yingzhou (Chaoyang), an important city in northern China today. The foreign objects found at Dingxian in Northern Hebei and Jixian near Tianjin were most probably brought there by this grassland route.

In this collection, special mention should be made of the intensive contact of the Khitan with Central Asia through the medium of the Uighurs in the early years of the Liao Dynasty (the 10th to 11th century).

It is common knowledge that the Silk Road started in Xian. But where certain periods are concerned, no less attention should be paid to Luoyang. This is even a special residential district with some 10,000 foreign families, after the late Northern Wei Dynasty moved its capital there in the early 6th Century. At the beginning of the 7th Century, the government of the succeeding Sui Dynasty also had a large party in Luoyang for foreign guests. International contacts extended from Xian to Luoyang. Foreign objects have been found at Luoyang and Shanxian.