

LAO TZU FAMOUSLY SAID THAT WHEN WE LET GO OF WHAT WE ARE, WE BECOME WHAT WE MIGHT BE. ON A RESEARCH TRIP TO CHINA, **ASHWIN SANGHI** EXPLORES ANCIENT TIES TO INDIA, AND FINDS SIMILAR SENTIMENTS

China's answer to the Leaning Tower of Pisa—the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda of Xi'an. The 64-metre Buddhist pagoda leans several degrees to the west; and (facing page) young monks practice kung fu at the Shaolin Temple

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Kindred Spirits

I always knew that one of my books was going to be about the flow of knowledge and ideas between China and India. As is my usual pattern, I invested almost a year in my research: reading books, articles and papers that would enable me to build the historical narrative around this ancient relationship. But once I was done, I knew that the final part of my research would be to visit the key places that figured in my story.

The first leg of the journey was on a flight from Mumbai to Beijing. Accompanied by my wife and son, we took a high-speed train to Xi'an, China's ancient capital, and then another Hexie Hao gliding along at 350 km/hr to Luoyang. Our last stop in mainland China was Shanghai, from where we proceeded to Hong Kong and then back to Mumbai. The itinerary sounded strange to those who had already visited China; most people usually do the Beijing-Shanghai circuit and supplement it with Suzhou, Hangzhou, Chengdu or Zhangjiajie. Others go

to Huangshan, Guilin, Yunnan, Tibet or Xiamen. However, my route was not determined by tourist cities, but by specific locations that were part of the book's narrative.

Much like India, China is a box of assorted chocolates. You could keep going because there is so much to see; and even after seeing much of it you would realise that there is a massive gap in what you've covered. So I divided my list of places into 'must-see' and 'nice-to-see', the former key to the narrative of my new novel and the latter only incidental to the story.

Thus the first stop on my must-see list was the Terracotta Army in Shaanxi province. These are around 8,500 life-size clay figures of soldiers, chariots and horses that were buried along with the first emperor of unified China, Qin Shi Huang, more than two millennia ago. This stunning work remained hidden until it was accidentally discovered in 1974. The sculptures turned out to be even more magnificent than the pictures I had seen, and one could easily spend an entire day here. Each figure



A general of the Terracotta Army—with the highest rank, they have the tallest statues; and (facing page) façade of the White Horse Temple in Luoyang

The origins of Shaolin are traced back to Nepalese monk Buddhahadra, who arrived in the court of Emperor Xiaowen

has been fabricated in realistic detail, with subtle variations in facial and physical attributes.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang had been obsessed with living forever. Having conquered all six warring states in China, he was undoubtedly the most powerful emperor the land had seen, but could he also be immortal? When his quest for an elixir that would give him eternal life was unsuccessful, he began consuming cinnabar, or mercury sulphide, with the belief that it would make him immortal. Instead, it poisoned him to an early death by the age of 39. The Terracotta Army that has survived 22 centuries after him is a stark reminder of the impermanence of life.

My next stop was the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an. Of course, when it had been built, Xi'an would have been known as Chang'an, which was the ancient capital of more than ten Chinese dynasties and occupied an area six times that of Rome. Even in ancient times it was a city of over a million people. The city was laid out in a rectangular grid with wide tree-lined avenues and drainage systems. It even had a network of canals to facilitate the movement of goods across the city's waterways, and boasted of a substantial foreign resident population from northern India and central Asia. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism were parallel cultures

jostling for space in this magnificent city.

The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda was built in 652 CE during the reign of the Tang dynasty and originally had five floors. The pagoda was rebuilt as ten storeys 150 years later during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian. But the connection of this pagoda to India is immense. One of the building's many purposes is to store the sutras and figurines of Buddha that were brought to China from India by the seventh-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang. Walking through its gardens and halls, I was transported back in time. I could almost feel the arduous journey that had been undertaken by Xuanzang—according to varying sources, one that was between 16 to 19 years long—to bring the original sutras of the Buddha from Nalanda.

Related to the Wild Goose Pagoda was yet another temple on my list—the White Horse Temple in Luoyang. As the tale goes, Emperor Mingdi of the Han dynasty had a vivid dream in which he saw a spirit with a body of gold and a head that emitted rays of light. The emperor's wise men identified the spirit from the emperor's dream as the Buddha. The emperor then commanded that a delegation go west looking for the Buddha's teachings. The envoys eventually brought back two monks from India—Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna—who carried along with them on a white horse various sutras for translation and transmission. Their arrival marked the first time that



Buddhism had made an appearance in China. The two monks remained busy for many years translating sutras in the temple with a team to assist them.


A feeling of tremendous peace washed through me as I wandered the immense and tranquil grounds. A light breeze wafted through the trees. To the east and west of the gate lie the tombs of She Moteng and Zhu Falan, the Chinese names given to the two Indian monks, respectively. From there, I crossed into the Hall of Heavenly Kings, the Hall of the Great Buddha, the Hall of Mahavira and, finally, the Hall of Guidance. I felt strangely connected to that grand osmosis of knowledge and ideas that had taken place between the two countries.

The final stop on my list was the Shaolin Temple. Shaolin derives its name from the Shaoshi Mountain, one of the seven peaks of the Song range. The origins of Shaolin are traced back to the Nepalese monk Buddhahadra, who arrived in the court of Emperor Xiaowen in 495 CE. He was granted land to build a temple, which resulted in the establishment of Shaolin.

Years later, another monk by the name of Bodhidharma reached the temple and asked for admission. Either hailing from southern India or Central Asia, he claimed to have deep insights in yogic concentration, a practice that would centuries later be known around the world as Zen Buddhism, but the abbot of Shaolin denied him admission. Bodhidharma tried every trick in the book, but to no avail. Rebuffed yet stubborn, he retreated into a cave near the temple. Legend says he sat inside it in meditation for the next nine years, not emerging even once for light or fresh air. Finally, the abbot was left with

no alternative but to grant the adamant monk admission.

During Bodhidharma's nine-year-long meditation, the monk supposedly developed an exercise routine to keep his limbs, joints and blood circulation in top condition. The aim of his workouts was to neutralise the prolonged physical inactivity during his spells of intense meditation. Bodhidharma combined these physical workouts with combat moves that he had brought with him from his homeland. It has been traditionally accepted that after he was accepted into the Shaolin brotherhood, Bodhidharma led to the founding of martial arts at the temple. However, historians dispute this claim, noting that the story is inspired from a 'spurious' manual, the *Yijin Jing*. It was almost certainly written centuries later, with a preface falsely attributed to Bodhidharma.

In the early 15th century, Emperor Yongle commissioned the construction of 3,500 ships. Some of these were the largest ships the world had ever known. If subsequent emperors had kept the maritime tradition alive, the Chinese might have been the greatest seafaring nation of the world today. Instead, China turned inwards. Even today, it is not an easy destination for travel. Sure, the pace of development and modernisation is breath-taking, but the language and cuisine can be challenging. But there is so much history, myth, culture, religion and philosophy that connects India and China. And that is precisely why more Indians need to visit the country. To simply understand that there is more that unites than divides us. 

Ashwin Sanghi's latest book, *The Vault of Vishnu*, (Westland, ₹299) was published in January 2020.