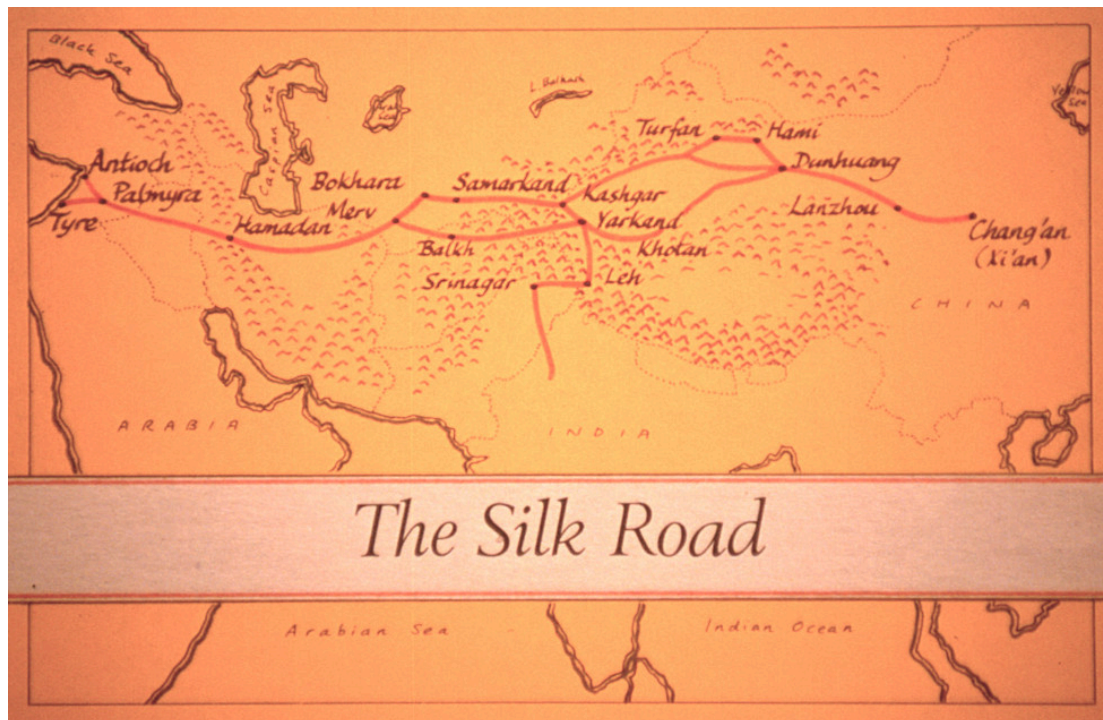




中华人民共和国

PART THREE

1989



Along the Silk Road, then Chengdu

Various people's names have been changed in this section in order to protect their identity.

I am very grateful to Andrew Robinson for proofreading this travelogue.

1 – BEIJING TO LANZHOU

I had hoped to return to China at around this time the previous year, but I had been unable to do that because of personal commitments. However, free once again and keen to see more of China, I had now flown to Beijing for another adventure, this time on my own. My plan was to fly to Hohhot in Inner Mongolia directly from Beijing if possible (though I had been unable to obtain any information about flights), travel along the famous Silk Road to Kashgar in Xinjiang province, then fly south to Chengdu, where I planned to meet up with the students whom I had befriended two years previously. From there I would return to Beijing for my flight home.

Sunday, 30 April, 1989

I had arrived in the capital's main airport this evening at about eleven o'clock, and was surprised to discover that it was almost empty. While I waited for my luggage I changed some money into FECs, the official currency for foreign tourists. When my rucksack and daypack arrived, I struggled upstairs with them to the flight ticket office, which I found closed. Much to my dismay, a notice informed me that tickets for flights to other parts of China were now only being sold in the city centre. I was hoping to avoid that part of the city, knowing that students were demonstrating in Tiananmen Square. Although the situation was under control (for President Gorbachev of the USSR was soon to arrive in the capital), I was still wary of going near the square, and so I decided against flying to Hohhot. This would give me more time for my journey to Kashgar.

Removing a nylon shirt that was making me sweat profusely in the hot airport, I changed into a cotton one, then went outdoors in search of a taxi, for I would now have to find a hotel in which to spend the night. A driver nabbed me and offered me a rather dubious deal for transport to a hotel for ¥60, which I somewhat reluctantly accepted. I found that I had company in the car: a rather sour-faced French girl who quickly opened up when I spoke to her in French and began giving her some tips. When she said something to me that I could not understand, she switched to English. It turned out that she would be staying with a friend in the Italian embassy.

The taxi stopped at one stage during the journey as a taxi in front of us had broken down. At this point a Chinese girl joined us. We eventually

stopped at a hotel, but as there was no room available, we set off for one that I had been told about on the plane: the Si Hai. When we arrived and I got out of the taxi, I complained to the driver about the price and he reduced it to ¥40. Although it was still far too dear, I paid up. He also changed 200 FECs into 300 RMB, the local currency.

I said goodbye to the French girl, wished her the best, then walked into the hotel lobby, where I was greeted by a lady. Addressing her in Chinese, I asked, '*Ní yǒu méi yǒu fángjiān?*' ('Do you have a room?'), to which she laughingly replied, '*Yǒu!*' ('We have!'). The other members of the staff were quite amused at my Chinese and said, '*Nǐ hǎo?*' ('How are you?') to me, chuckling. The young man at the reception desk was equally good humoured, and I chatted to him in a mixture of Chinese and English. He asked me for the astounding sum of ¥150 for a room, but I managed to beat him down to ¥120.

Some other tourists and I were then shown up to some very smart rooms, which pleased everybody. I asked the room boy to give me a flask of boiling water and then, as I felt wide awake (it being about 4 p.m. at home in Ireland), I set about repacking my big rucksack so that it held everything. I then took a welcome shower and sat on my bed, with little or nothing on as it was so hot, and wrote my diary. I finally went to bed shortly after 3 a.m., still not feeling tired. By now I had decided to try flying to Lanzhou, the first city on my trip westwards along the Silk Road, tomorrow.

Monday, 1 May

I woke this morning at about eight o'clock after a short but refreshing sleep. It was quite pleasant to pull back the curtains and look out over the outskirts of Beijing, now bathed in sunshine. It almost felt like coming home!

After giving my face a dash of cold water, I went down to the dining room for breakfast. The waitresses were dressed smartly, though they moved about carelessly. Once again the relaxed atmosphere of the city struck me forcibly and all of a sudden I felt that nothing was urgent; I realized that things would happen (or not happen) at their own pace, and if I just relaxed and went with the flow, all would be well.

As there seemed to be no set Chinese breakfast, I opted for the Western menu and chose an 'omelet of eggs', bread, butter, and green tea. The food was palatable; soon it was all inside me and I was a few more yuan the poorer. After breakfast I asked the chap at the desk where I could get a plane or train ticket, and he directed me to the Holiday Inn across the road.

I then stepped out into the sunshine and walked to the large and very modern hotel, which looked as though it catered for very well-healed tourists. I discovered that as it was a public holiday (May Day), their travel

office was closed and that I would have to go into the city centre – just what I had been hoping to avoid. The young lady advised me to take a taxi and wrote down some information for me.

Outside again, I returned to my hotel, where there was a bus stop. I asked a lady how to get to the train station and she told me to take bus number 403. A bus stopped moments later and I hopped on. As I had nothing smaller than a ¥50 note, a young man very kindly paid for me.

The journey was a long one; as luck would have it, the terminus was almost at the train station. I joined a noisy throng in the huge ticket office area, but was unable to find the foreigners' ticket office, which I was obliged to use. I went to one of the hatches and asked the lady for directions, but I could not understand her. She wrote something down, but I could not understand that either.

When I turned around, puzzled, a couple of lads approached me and offered to help. They brought me to the foreigners' ticket office, where I filled in a form. I was not too surprised to discover that no hard berth was available on this evening's train. As the woman was not in the least bit helpful, I was at a loss as to know what I should do next. The two lads took charge of me again and told me that they would help me get a ticket; communication was done in basic Chinese and a great deal of dumbshow. When they brought me back to the grubby and chaotic Chinese ticket office, I realized that a bit of skulduggery was about to take place. I was asked to wait and keep my distance. I noticed another fellow who had tickets that he was offering for sale; obviously a thriving black market in tickets was in full swing here!

The two lads kept appearing and disappearing; I guessed that they were bargaining with various black marketeers. I saw one of them pushing his way through the crowd, clambering up on to a counter and shouting down at the ticket seller behind the protective metal bars. I never saw so much chaos in my life! Eventually a ticket was produced but there was a long delay before I was informed how much I should pay. When the price was finally announced, I was shocked: they demanded ¥200 for all the time, energy and skill involved in their shady deal. I protested, but they insisted, explaining that they had spent so much time attending to me and that they were '*lèi jīle*' ('exhausted') – these last words accompanied by a gesture of wiping sweat from their brows. I finally had to give in; they took the money and pushed the ticket, which had cost a fraction of what I had paid, into my shirt pocket.

I left feeling rather annoyed, for a plane ticket would probably have cost just a little more. However, I would now not have to pay another ¥120 for a hotel room, and would be able to leave Beijing this very evening.

I now retraced my steps to the bus stop, travelled back to the hotel, went to my room and spruced myself up. I then made my way to the dining room

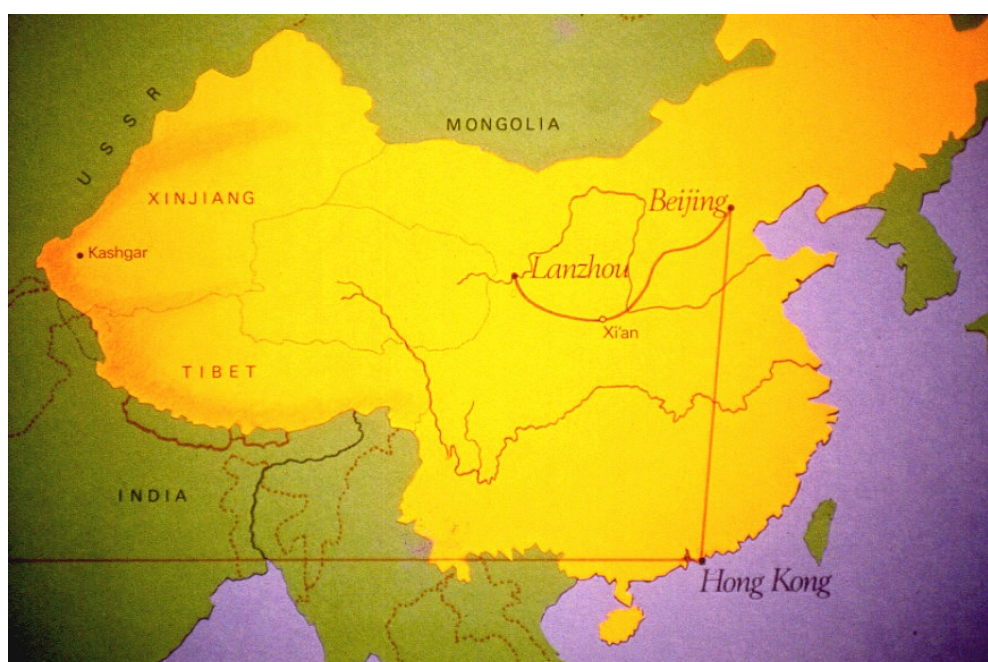
for a rather mediocre lunch, which I washed down with a glass of beer. Feeling drowsy, I returned to my room and slept for a while. Later I wrote a letter home and a couple of others to two of the students in Chengdu. When I finished these, I brought my diary up to date.

At about six o'clock I went downstairs to buy stamps and post the letters. Afterwards I ate a basic meal in the dining room, then returned to my room. I shaved, changed into my grubbier clothes, left the hotel and set off with my luggage for the train station, travelling by bus once again. It was pleasant to look out of the window at young lovers holding hands and people making their way home from work or going out to enjoy themselves. Families with colourfully-dressed children clambered aboard the bus. Elderly ladies, helped by younger women, were treated with great respect.

At the station, I found hundreds of people sitting on the ground outside; while waiting for their trains, they were watching television on a huge screen. As I was not in a hurry, I wandered among them before going inside and taking a seat in the civilized foreigners' waiting room.

I did not have to wait too long before boarding the train at nine o'clock. Much to my delight, I found that I had a hard berth – not a hard seat as the staff in the hotel had told me. As I sat down, I was greeted by a man who spoke good English. As he was merely saying goodbye to his brother, he left shortly afterwards. Although the brother's English was basic, we managed to keep a conversation going for quite a long time. As on previous journeys in the country, everyone around seemed to be quite friendly and easy-going.

We set off just before half past nine; the lights were switched off at about eleven o'clock and we all retired to bed shortly afterwards. So far so good; my long-wished for journey along the Silk Road had now begun.



Tuesday, 2 May

I slept lightly during the night and was rudely woken at 6.30 a.m. by the familiar racket on the radio. I, like most of the other people, did not surface until about 7.30. I bought something to eat from the breakfast trolley for just ¥2, and had my simple meal up on my bunk bed. I clambered down half an hour later and went off to wash. By now the local people had hung their face cloths and towels to dry on a line that ran along by the corridor windows. I rejoined my new companion and we resumed our conversation.

At about nine o'clock we crossed the mighty Huang He (or Yellow River) and later we stopped at the city of Zhengzhou for about ten minutes. I hopped out and bought some food. Off we went again and later I wrote some more of my diary. At one stage I stopped to listen to a song that was playing on the radio: it was the well-known Irish melody known both as 'Nora' and 'Maggie', though now I heard it sung in Chinese. I also heard rather mangled versions of popular classical music from the West.



In the train to Lanzhou

As the scenery outside was not very impressive and I was beginning to feel sleepy by now, I retired to my top bunk and dozed until lunchtime, when I ate a round slice of savoury bread and two little buns with a cup of tea. A chap in the next compartment offered me a bottle of Coke, which he insisted I take from him. I thanked him and drank it later. I then put a film in my camera and, as my companion had dozed off, I took a photo of the carriage corridor. Some people whom I had included in the photograph

beckoned me to join them and started to talk to me. As I could not understand them, a young lady with spectacles, who had attracted my attention earlier, translated what they were saying into excellent English. Now that we had acquired an interpreter, the questions came thick and fast. I produced my photographs from home, which fascinated them. When later the questions eased off, I turned to the girl and began to chat with her in the corridor. She proved to be quite adorable, often smiling and winking at me. Although looking a little prim and old-fashioned in her round spectacles, she was lovely without them on. In a typical gesture of Chinese friendship and hospitality, she gave me a can of lychee juice and, using my penknife, peeled an apple and gave it to me. She told me that she was studying in Xi'an and that she was now returning from a visit to her boyfriend in Beijing. We had a long and interesting conversation together, discussing many different things. As she did not collect stamps, but her mother did, I went off to my bag when she absented herself for a few minutes, and returned with some of the stamps that I had bought in Hong Kong two years previously. She was quite surprised and very appreciative. I now sat down beside her in her compartment and apologized for disturbing her. She was not at all put out; on the contrary, she was glad of some company and to have somebody to talk to. She told me that the journey would be very long without me. The pleasant lady sitting opposite us was included in our conversation. I spoke to her a few times, but as she could not understand my Chinese, the girl either repeated or rephrased what I had said. After a while the Chinese lad from my compartment joined us and we all exchanged addresses. Sensing that I was now paying more attention to the girl than to him, the lad left us. By now the girl and I were making a lot of eye contact. She, noticing my increased interest in her, suddenly became quite romantic; she began singing snatches of Western songs that she had learned, and I joined in. We then began talking about love, girlfriends and boyfriends. However, when she suggested that I join her in Xi'an, stay somewhere near the university and meet her parents, alarm bells began to ring in my head and I hesitated, for that would surely mean the end of my trip along the Silk Road and possibly walking into some sort of trap. I desisted from giving her a clear answer and fortunately she did not press me any further. When I told her how much I would miss her after we stopped in Xi'an, and what a nice girl she was, we fell silent and occasionally gazed into each other's eyes. It was obvious that she had become just as emotional as I had, and I began to feel somewhat guilty for having inflicted all this upon her – and, indeed, upon myself.

We finally arrived in Xi'an. I lifted down her bags, helped her put on her jacket, and saw her off the train, carrying her small rucksack for her. Out on the platform we said goodbye and, taking me quite by surprise (for I

gathered that such things were not done here in China), she seized my arm and kissed me full on the lips. I felt quite dazed when she marched off and disappeared into the crowd without turning around to wave. In a state of utter confusion I returned to the train. Although I was heartbroken to lose her, common sense told me that I had done the right thing and now I could continue my journey; after all, I did not want to upset the relationship between her and her boyfriend or anger her parents (who, I had gathered, were people of quality – and hence their daughter’s good education). Also I had been in Xi’an twice two years previously, and I had no great desire to return to the city.

I now shaved and spruced myself up, then dined on instant ‘chicken noodles’ from a packet. Afterwards I wrote more of my diary: a long and slow process as the train was now rocking from side to side. When I had finished, I retired to bed. By now I had been moved to the bottom bunk, on the girl’s suggestion.

Wednesday, 3 May

Once again I slept fitfully and was woken at about seven o’clock by the lights being turned on and the women in charge shouting at everyone to get up and to hurry. All the sheets, blankets and pillowcases were collected, thrown on the floor and folded. As no boiling water was available, breakfast was out of the question. Instead, I packed up my things and looked out at the scenery: wide valleys with cultivated patches and strangely-shaped mountains. It all looked quite dramatic in the morning sunlight.

Suddenly we found ourselves entering the industrial outskirts of Lanzhou, which stretched away into the distance, and finally came to a stop at the Dongzhan or East Station. I hopped off the train, followed the crowds and, when our tickets were taken from us before leaving, I asked for directions to the foreigners’ ticket office. I quickly found it and succeeded in buying a ‘hard seat’ ticket to Jiayuguan for the day after tomorrow.

This done, I left the station and went off in search of somewhere to stay.