



### **Restored Jade Gate at Yumen Pass in 2012**

#### **Living with the Past**

The following oral history interview was undertaken by the writer Sang Ye in early 2006 as part of the China Heritage Project's collective contribution to the book *The Great Wall of China*, edited by Claire Roberts and Geremie R. Barmé, produced by Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, in association with the China Heritage Project. The book, which contains the following interview, was launched on 27 September 2006 at the opening of *The Great Wall of China* exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum. (See *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 6)

#### **An Interview with Cao Hai by Sang Ye, Translated by Geremie R Barmé**

Cao Hai was the 52-year-old former head of the Jade Pass cultural relics protection office at the remains of the Jade Pass, which is under the jurisdiction of Dunhuang in Gansu province, west China.

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### **The Jade Gate in 2006 before Restoration**

During the reign of Liu Che, Emperor Wu (140–87 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty (also known as Han Wudi), attempts to mollify the aggressive Xiongnu tribes to the north of Han territory were abandoned in favor of more robust defenses and war. The walls built during the Qin dynasty were enlarged and extended. The westernmost point of these long walls was at Jade Pass, or Yumen Guan, or Yumenguan, in what is today Gansu province.

The Jade Pass, built some 1500 years before the Ming walls, stands, a solitary sentinel, near the ancient oasis of Dunhuang, a key station on the Silk Road, and bordering on modern-day Xinjiang. Much of the Han wall has been obliterated by time and the constant work of erosion. Apart from a slight rise in some places, the once heavily patrolled defenses were long ago reduced to ground level. What remains of the walls show that much of their structure was made of friable materials such as tamarik logs and reeds.

## **An Interview with Cao Hai**

Jade Pass is over 2000 years old. After Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty abandoned his peace and conciliation policy towards the Xiongnu tribes, under which he had forged alliances with the barbarians through marriage, the cavalry general Huo Qubing led a victorious western expedition against them. This resulted in the establishment of command posts at Wuwei and Jiuquan in the second year of Yuanshou [121 BCE], and at Zhangye and Dunhuang in the sixth year of Yuanding [111 BCE]. Shortly afterwards, in the third year of Yuanfeng [108 BCE], they extended the Great Wall this far west and built Yangguan Pass and Jade Pass. This represented a massive expansion of the territory ruled over by China.

Over the following two centuries, Yangguan and Jade Pass were the crucial strategic outposts on China's western flank, the gateways linking the inland to west Asia and Europe via the trade route of the Silk Road. China's silk and porcelain went out through these passes, while various religions, arts and foods—like pepper, grapes and watermelons—came in from the West. During the Han dynasty, the Silk Road split into two routes after leaving Dunhuang: one went west through Yangguan Pass, the other tracked to the northwest via Jade Pass. Back then, this place flourished, with a constant parade of camel trains and merchant caravans. But there would also have been the ceaseless rumble of war chariots and the whinnying of battle horses, and soldiers with bows and quivers on their backs and swords at their waists—for there was always some war to be fought.

Later, from the time of the Wei-Jin [3rd-4th centuries], right through to the Tang dynasty [618–907], there was constant chaos and warfare. During the Hundred Years War, when Anxi and the four garrison districts of Qiuzi, Yueban, Yutian and Shule were embroiled in war, Dunhuang fell on hard times. It became a military outpost as well as a military supply depot, and its men folk were conscripted. What could people do? Life became impossible, so they fled. And Dunhuang went into decline: as the poem says, 'Spring winds never again blew through Jade Pass'. In the Tang dynasty, the Silk Road followed a new route north, through Anxi on to Hami [in present-day Xinjiang]. And so the Jade Pass of the Han era was abandoned and gradually forgotten, buried over the centuries by the shifting sands of the desert.

In 1907, the Englishman Aurel Stein was the first to undertake an archaeological dig at the remains of the Han dynasty Great Wall here at Dunhuang. Near Xiaofangpan he unearthed some Han bamboo slips bearing the words 'Jade Pass Garrison'. In 1944, [the archaeologist] Mr. Xia Nai undertook his own research at Xiaofangpan and further to the east at Fengsui, where he found a bamboo slip on which was written 'Jiuquan Jade Pass Garrison'. This settled once and for all the exact location of the Han dynasty Jade Pass. Today, the remaining ramparts at Xiaofangpan are 24.5 meters by 26.4 meters, and you can make out what has been a square walled area, the 'pass'. The highest point is on

the north wall, which is 10.05 meters high, 3.7 meters wide and 4.9 meters at the base. In the south-east corner of the walled city there is a horse track that is nearly a meter wide, along which you can go right up onto the wall, which is 1.3 meters wide, with crenellations.

I was born in Dunhuang. My father was a low-level cadre. The Cultural Revolution was still in full swing when I finished high school: everyone was being sent off to the countryside. I was allocated a job in the state forest at Yangguan Pass, about 70 kilometers away. I'd heard of Yangguan from the time I was in primary school. Our textbooks had a famous line from the Tang poet Wang Wei [701–61] written when farewelling a friend: 'Drink another cup of wine my friend, for you'll find none you know west of Yangguan Pass'. During my days in the state forest, all that was left of the Yangguan Pass was one dilapidated beacon tower. This lonely earthen hillock in the vast Gobi desert was once known as the 'eyes and ears' of Yangguan. All that remains is a communications tower for sending signals, not a gateway with a proper crenellated defense around it—that has long since disappeared.

I planted trees for over a decade until I was transferred to the Dunhuang forestry station to work as a ranger. Though on paper it was government policy to give city jobs to young people who'd been sent out to labor in the country during the Cultural Revolution, I was still in the Gobi. Out in the desert there are no forests as such, no matter what they say in the books. The only things that survive in the Gobi are a few small creatures and wolves. I was in charge of protecting tamarisk and reeds that grow there, and of keeping an eye on poachers or people who wanted to dig illegal mines, graze their sheep or collect licorice root for use in Chinese medicine. I worked there for nine years, most of that time outdoors. I was completely used to the Gobi and to moving around it.

In 1992, I was transferred to the State Administration for Cultural Heritage office in Dunhuang, though I agreed to be posted out to Jade Pass and not take a desk job in Dunhuang itself. Why? For one thing, it was a way of carrying on in the tradition of solitude associated with guarding Jade Pass. I could just shut myself away here and study the history of Dunhuang and the Great Wall. Secondly, the pay was good—90 yuan [A15] a month. Wages and prices in Dunhuang were both pretty low; back then, 90 yuan went a long way. And by then I had a wife and son to look after. The new job gave me security into my old age, unlike the forestry job which was on contract. Working for the Cultural Heritage Bureau I became a state employee.

I hadn't done any specialized study in this field, but the leadership told me they needed someone who was stable and reliable and who had experience living in the Gobi. They didn't say what their other reason was for giving me the job, but I knew—it is incredibly desolate and lonely out at Jade Pass. There's no one else within 100 kilometers, and there are no diversions at all. I don't want to big-ticket myself. Although I just said that I was interested in that tradition of solitude, the main reason I accepted the

job was that the money was good. Similarly, although the leadership said they needed a reliable person, for them it was even more important to find someone who could cope with the isolation.

The provincial Culture Heritage Bureau allocated three jobs to the new Jade Pass cultural preservation station, but they made two of them desk jobs at the bureau in town. The leadership didn't hide this from me. They said we should first get the station set up; if the workload increased in the future they'd find the money to hire an assistant for me. In reality, it would have been very difficult to find any extra funding, so for many years I was a one-man band.

The Culture Heritage Bureau gave me a hunting rifle and a Lucky 250 motorbike. The motorbike is the kind people use to gad about the city, completely unsuited to conditions in the Gobi, but it was cheap. So that's how I set up the Jade Pass preservation station. At first there was no electricity or running water. There wasn't even anywhere to live, and no one else to help out. My first task was to dig a well.

A few years back a photographer turned up and asked me if there were times when I didn't bother washing my face. I told him that apart from the first few days when I was without water, I washed my face every day. 'Why did you bother?,' he asked. I laughed because I couldn't answer. I did it for myself.

My main job was to look after the remains of Jade Pass, to chase off people who came out there to dig up licorice root or treasure hunters come to fossick around. Later on I had to keep an eye on the tourists. Only two types of tourist come out to the Gobi: the type who likes to hoon around in their Hummers and Land Rovers, and feisty backpackers with their minds set on travelling the length of the Great Wall or the Silk Road. Normal traffic only got access to this area from 1999, after they finished laying the gravel road.

Most days you wouldn't see a soul. I only saw about a hundred people the entire first year I was there. Apart from peasants coming to dig up licorice root, they were mostly archaeologists and historians. Those people always came in groups, and only for the day. The only ones who ever stayed overnight were old herders and a few truckers hauling saltpeter.

My days were always crowded with work though. Apart from keeping an eye on Jade Pass, I was responsible for Hecangcheng 13 kilometers to the east and Majuanwan and the Han Great Wall 15 kilometers to the west. They were all in my remit; they form what's called 'The Remains of the Han Great Wall and Beacon Towers'. The State Council in Beijing designated it one of the Group One protected cultural relics of China. So I was never able to achieve my original aim of researching the history of the Great Wall and Dunhuang. Apart from experiencing the traditional sense of isolation that I was

interested in, nothing was as easy as I thought it would be. By day I was always scooting around on my motorbike. And, thanks to the mosquitoes and the lack of electricity, I couldn't read at night. So the first year I was here I gave up on my original aim and focused on my rounds.

I also had to clear up all the sheep dung that had collected in the place over many years. Before the station was established, an old herdsman used to bring his sheep over here to shelter from the big sandstorms, so the ancient walled gate compound was filled with sheep shit over half a meter deep. Like an ant gnawing a bone, I cleaned it up bit by bit. Apart from the sheep shit, the old herdsman also left a hut behind, and that's what I moved into. It was halfway between a tent and a shed—just a simple wooden structure covered with plastic and canvas. But it was a 10-meter square area that kept out the rain and the sand. This courtyard you see here today was built in 1999, but for the first seven years I was out here that tent was both my office and home. There wasn't even a place to hang the sign announcing that this was the State Administration for Cultural Heritage office at Jade Pass. Since I was living in a shepherd's tent, I decided to raise my own flock of sheep for company.

Jade Pass is 92 kilometers from Dunhuang, and 64 from the closest shop at Shazaoyuan. This road was completed in 1999 and, although 60 kilometers is unsealed, it's much better than before. Before, to get here from Dunhuang, you travelled a 30-kilometer stretch of dirt road and then through 60 kilometers of desert. Getting lost was the biggest problem, but that didn't worry me much because I'm very familiar with the Gobi. The other scary thing is the wolves, though I was okay as I had my rifle.

So I lived out here and went into town once a month to pick up my provisions. If I ran out of anything, so be it. I wasn't going to starve as I had several vats of vegetables I'd pickled. From 1996, I had a wind-powered generator too, which meant I could watch satellite TV at night, but only for a short while as it didn't have much storage capacity—two and a half hours' tops. Guess that's why my wife divorced me. At first I was pretty upset, but gradually I saw it from her point of view. I lived in the Gobi and she lived in the city: she was married to a guy who never came home. She had other options.

Occasionally people turn up here—they're always only passing through. I welcome them warmly and see them off warmly as well. So long as you don't harm any artifacts or leave any rubbish behind, we can all get on with our own business. Not long after my courtyard was finished the movie director Zhang Yimou turned up. He wanted to make his film *Hero* in this part of the Gobi.

Zhang told me he wanted to rent my courtyard for his film crew to use. Funny that, since some of his people had already moved in on me quite a few days earlier. I refused his offer. I told him that I wasn't interested in making money. Friends could come and stay a few days for free, no problem, but if they hung around too long they'd get in my



way, disrupt my work. These past days, I told him, your people have been running around and clambering all over the place. It's not good for the cultural relics. You're already getting in my way, I told him, so I think it's time you went. And that became news. It's probably because people don't usually say no to a big star. There I was, this nobody protector of cultural relics in the middle of the desert, saying no to Zhang Yimou. So it made the news. The principle isn't hard to comprehend: everyone should simply behave appropriately. They make their films, I protect my cultural relics. The real hero is someone who knows how to behave appropriately.

In the years before the road came through I experienced something of the ancient desolation of this place. I was a modern-day Jade Pass commander, guarding the border between history and the present. I found Han bamboo slips, and have had stare-offs with wolves as well, each of us waiting to see who had the most patience. After the road was built things changed completely—anyone who could afford the trip out here and the 30 yuan [\$A5] entrance fee could come and wander around.

Some tourists are appalling. They should consider themselves lucky to be able to see what our ancestors from 2000 years ago have left behind for us. But they're not happy just looking, they want to touch as well, and dig, and they want to pull out the reeds and tree branches in this ancient stretch of the Great Wall. These things have existed in perfect harmony for over two millennia, but these visitors want to pull them out for no other reason than to satisfy their idle curiosity. They say they come out here to cultivate and temper their hearts and minds, but then they throw rubbish all over the place. Ever since they built the road we've had 3000 tourists a year. The whole place is strewn with lunch boxes and plastic bags, more than I could possibly pick up. My advice would be not to worry about self-cultivation until you've learned a few basic manners and some sense of civic duty.

Although our organization was established to protect cultural relics, there's a lot of people who are more interested in press-ganging cultural relics into the service of tourism. Is this appropriate? You won't hear anyone saying otherwise. The mayor says nothing, and the central government itself is silent. If you want my opinion, here it is: I'm in favor of tourism, but it mustn't be allowed to harm cultural relics. It's obvious enough: you can have tourism in a place where there are cultural relics, but you've got to do it so your descendants will be able to travel here and see more than just the souvenirs of your tourism.

Loneliness can give you an inflated sense of self. The isolation made me sensitive to the fact that once the hooves of great armies on horseback had thundered over the very earth on which I was walking. Countless soldiers and horses, endless trains of merchants, had passed through a place that is now a vast emptiness. You become a little disoriented and, like Chairman Mao's poem: 'Brooding over this immensity, I ask, on this boundless land, Who rules over man's destiny?' You become delusional, and think that you are king

of all you survey, and can do whatever you please. In this desolate vastness I have heard the sighs of ancient warriors, and the rumble of the chariots of war racing towards me from across the Gobi, banners fluttering in the wind. Everyone knows that science says there are no ghosts, but I really have heard them and seen things.

The stretch of the Great Wall between Jade Pass and Majuanwan is the best preserved because the salinity of the desert here is very high. Over the centuries, this section of the wall has absorbed a lot of that salt, and it's formed a hard crust that protects it from erosion by the wind and rain. I guess I'm a bit like that myself. If you go on a bit further you'll come across a raised battlement where Han dynasty soldiers had their quarters and their kitchen. From the broken wall of their 2000-year old kitchen you can make out the layers—black, yellow, black, yellow, on and on. Every time cooking smoke blackened the wall, the soldiers would cover it with fresh mud.

Redecorating a kitchen plays no part in fighting a war. There are a number of possible explanations. Maybe older soldiers who were about to be discharged and sent back home wanted to leave behind a clean kitchen for the new recruits. Maybe they'd heard that family members had undertaken the arduous journey to come visit them and didn't want their loved ones to see the poor circumstances in which they lived. Or, maybe someone's girlfriend was coming—people back then had girlfriends too—so they decided they'd better get their act together. Or maybe it was for no particular reason at all. Maybe the kitchen was just too dirty and they decided to clean up, just like I wash my face every day, just for my own satisfaction. Regardless of the reason, you get a real sense of humanity from those walls. No one ordered them to do it, but they did, and may even have enjoyed it.

After conditions out here at Jade Pass improved they allocated seven other people to work here during the high season. That's when the leadership began to say I'd done the hard yards and it was time for me to think of going back to the city. At first I didn't agree, so I hung around for another two years until I realized they wanted to move their family members in here. I stopped resisting. It wasn't worth it. The famous general Ban Chao [32–102 CE] spent three decades defending the Western Region for the Han dynasty, convinced he was irreplaceable. He finally wrote a letter to the Han emperor saying that he was old and had achieved nothing, that he only did what was expected of him as a minister of the throne and that he dared not even hope to be assigned to the command post at Jiuquan, but expected to live out his remaining years at Jade Pass. Why should I let things get to that stage? This minister was going back to the city.

I returned to Dunhuang in 2002. The whole system in the city had changed. They'd set up the Dunhuang Museum with a cultural relics department. They made me head of the department, but I didn't have the education or administrative skills for it. I just had this hard, salty crust that had grown on me in the Gobi desert, just like the Han Great Wall. I was terrible at dealing with people. The leadership could see I just didn't have the



knack for administrative work so they looked after me. They gave me a job collecting tickets at the museum entrance. But even that required bookkeeping skills. You also had to write reports and essays on your political thinking. I hadn't done that stuff for years. What could I possibly say?

Within a year I was off sick with a serious eye condition that I was told couldn't be cured. The doctor suggested I be allowed early retirement, but that too was hard. You see, without a high-level position I wouldn't make enough to have a comfortable retirement. They had high-level researchers, curators, accountants and all that, but they couldn't make me any of those. I'd just been looking after Jade Pass, and my high school diploma, my work history and my experience weren't qualification enough. Moreover, it was too late for me to try and pass the exams for a promotion. Eventually they thought of a way around it.

They let me take an advanced driving test and I got the promotion and the wages that went with the position of top-level driver. I retired in 2003 with a pension of over 1000 yuan [\$A166] a month. It's ridiculous, I know, but that's the system. Though, if you think about it, my title on retirement really does suit me. The most advanced skills I acquired in my long years of service all had to do with riding across the trackless Gobi on a motorbike.

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