



Xi'an in Just 5 Days, I Say!

From Terracotta Warriors to surprisingly good steak sandwiches, this Study Tour experienced Shaanxi's finest

By Wendy Lemmens

The precarious walkways and stairs attached to the side of Maijishan; photo by author

Xi'an, I say. Terracotta Warriors, you say. Yes, this is the first thing that comes to mind when we talk of Xi'an. But, on a recent FOM Study Tour organised by FOM member/art historian/tour leader extraordinaire Patricia Welch, we learnt that there is much more to the Province of Shaanxi than just Terracotta Warriors. A very busy, five-day tour showed us the beginning point of the Silk Road leading west, and the origins of today's China.

The jam-packed schedule meant early mornings and long days, but there was always the promise of something rewarding. There was, for instance, 'the best steak sandwich' on our arrival into Xi'an. This was Patricia's promise at the end of 10 hours' travel from Singapore to Xi'an with a four-hour layover in Guangzhou. (Some of us were taken by surprise by the S\$7 bottle of water at the Guangzhou airport, but the steak sandwich lived up to expectations!) Then there was the beauty of misty farmlands and the brightly decorated and lovingly cared-for graves of the farmers' ancestors as we headed out along the road in the morning.

Xi'an became the political and cultural centre of China in the 11th century BCE and was home to the Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui and Tang dynasties from 1045 BCE to 907 CE. Steeped in a culturally significant history, the area contains the fourth largest concentration of Buddhist grottoes in China. Maijishan, also known as 'Wheat-Stack Mountain', rises majestically over the plains. The grottoes were begun around 384 CE. There are 194 caves containing 7,200 Buddhist sculptures and 1,000 square metres of murals that are reached by a precariously stepped walkway. This sacred site, reaching a height of 140 metres, or 47 storeys high, has witnessed

wars, fire, flood, earthquakes and many reconstructions.

China has unearthed many significant discoveries, and this tour took us to visit a number of the restored tombs. One was the tomb of Prince Yide, with its famous murals illustrating day-to-day life in the Tang period - vibrant and detailed hunting scenes of cheetahs bringing down their prey and the Guard of Honour preparing to march out from Chang'an (early name of Xi'an) in a colourful royal procession. We also visited the tomb of Princess Yongtai, who was put to death, like her brother Prince Yide, by their grandmother, the Empress Wu Zetian, in 701 CE. The murals from this tomb have been removed, placed in the Shaanxi Museum for safekeeping and replaced with replicas. Most tombs have been robbed over the centuries and the break-in entrance to her tomb can be seen. The patriotic General Huo Qubing of the Han dynasty, who died at the age of 24 and was admired for placing state concerns before his own, lies in peaceful surroundings near the Maoling Mausoleum.

The Qianling Mausoleum, the best-preserved of all 18 mausoleums from the Tang era, is located on Liangshan Mountain, 80 kilometres from Xi'an. This limestone mountain consists of three peaks, the highest of which is the Northern Peak. Its 61-metre-long tunnel leads to the inner tomb chambers located deep within the mountain. The two Southern Peaks, called Naitoshan ('Nipple Hills,' due to their shape!), form a sort of gateway. A spirit path lined with stone figures of humans and animals that show distinct West Asian and Greek influences leads into the Mausoleum. Here lie the tombs of the third Tang Emperor Gaozong, who died in 683 CE

aged 55 years, and the Empress Wu Zetian, who died in 705 CE aged 80 years.

And so now we come to the tomb perhaps most identified with Xi'an, the compressed earth 'mound-tomb' of the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, who became King of the Qin State at the age of 13 in 246 BCE. In 221 BCE he unified seven states to form China and declared himself Emperor. He died in 210 BCE. We have all heard the story of the farmers who, while digging a well in 1974, discovered the terracotta warriors in a pit. There aren't too many farmers in the fields any more, said our delightful

Famous Tang Mural from the Tomb of Princess Yongtai; photo by Warren Lemmens





Xi'an 2010 Study Tour group in front of Maijishan Grottoes; photo by author



Maijishan Grotto with Statues of Guanyin and Bodhisattvas; photo by Warren Lemmens



Partly excavated Warrior in Pit 1 to the east of Qin Shi Huangdi's Mound Tomb; photo by Warren Lemmens

local guide, Jessica – they are all digging wells! I wonder what the farmer who discovered the warriors is thinking now as he sits in the gift shop and gets paid to sign autographs for tourists?

Archaeologists have uncovered a city for the afterlife containing an army of approximately 8,000 life-sized soldiers accompanied by chariots and horses – a tomb fit for the Emperor who unified

China and created the country's first central government as well as its legal and taxation systems.

All this in five days, you say? And there was more, for example the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, built in 652 CE to house Buddhist sutras, and the Small Wild Goose Pagoda, built between 707 CE and 709 CE to also house relics brought back from India. The revered Famen Temple (Famensi), dating to the 5th century, houses the four finger-bone relics (one genuine and three shadow bones) of the Buddha. Other treasures include 1,000 sutras, gold and silver wares, glass and porcelain objects and silk fabrics. Adjoining this temple was our overnight accommodation, the new Foguangge Hotel (Pilgrim Hotel). With high vaulted ceilings and corridors wide enough to drive a bus down, this was clearly five-star accommodation for pilgrims who wanted the best. Being a Buddhist hotel, however, there were disappointments for some – no meat on the dinner menu and no beer.

Food is an important part of any day and we were treated to many experiences. Our dumpling banquet was very special. Plates piled high with various dumplings were paraded to our table. Our initial problem was sorting out how to operate the enormous Lazy Susan in the centre of our table. We attacked a steamboat meal with equal enthusiasm. Maybe it was the serving staff's Red Army outfits or guide

Jessica's steamboat-eating lessons, but in any case we had a great evening of eating followed by a trip to the night market for a little bargain shopping.

After hectic days of memorising dates and names and fighting fatigue, we were treated to the Forest of Steles. This peaceful place, which covers an area of 30,000 square metres in the grounds of an ancient Confucian temple built during the Northern Song Dynasty, houses an impressive collection of 2,000 inscribed stones. This museum, the largest in China, is an art treasure house and a beautiful place to de-stress – although I did notice some Study Tour members with their i-Pods attached to their ears... No, they were not listening to music but catching up on the podcast recordings Patricia had encouraged us to make of our chosen research topic.

Good food, not-so-good bathrooms, good company, not-so-good delayed flight home. Many memories of a fast-paced and exhausting but wonderfully organised tour.

Xi'an, I say! I wonder what you will say now? Maybe we can ask FOM to organise another trip.

Wendy Lemmens joined FOM when she arrived in Singapore three years ago. *Monday Morning Lectures* and *PASSAGE* magazine inspired her to sign up for the Xi'an Study Tour, whetting her appetite for more FOM travel in the future.

