

The Silk Road

A journey from the High Pamirs and Ili
through Sinkiang and Kansu

Jan Myrdal

*Translated from the Swedish
by Ann Henning*

Photographs by Gun Kessle

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To the memory of my uncles Folke Reimer and Stig Reimer. They made a dark childhood lighter and more bearable. In their home at Kvicksta I began reading about the Silk Road one summer afternoon when I was eleven. As I came home from my journey forty years later they had but a couple of short months more to live.

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Maps

Sinkiang (drawn by Roland Klang)
between pages 41 and 42

**The Silk Routes Between the Mediterranean
and the Yellow River** page 111

Kansu (drawn by Roland Klang)
between pages 233 and 234

Foreword to the American Edition

Sinkiang is still the pivot of Asia. The great game continues even though the British left the table decades ago and the Empire is receding into history. But what is so striking as you travel through what formerly was known as East Turkestan is that Russian policy has been consistent since the days of Peter the Great. Now and then a forced halt; once or twice a diplomatic—and even, as in the case of Ili, a military—retreat; but then after some decades a new thrust forward. The Revolution seemed to change the situation. Many of us believed that there had been a change for good and that only some traits were left from czarist days. After all, Lenin had said that czarist policy was ended. But then the game continued as before. Stalin played for Sinkiang and Manchuria. He was outwitted by Mao Tse-tung and forced to relinquish his hold. And maybe he was even prepared for some kind of peaceful and socialist coexistence with the new China. His successors were not. And now in February 1979, during the border war between China and Vietnam, I was talking to a Chinese friend about the Russian countermeasures.

“They won’t make a major strike,” he said. “They are not quite strong enough to try for Manchuria. Their communication lines are still bad. But they might try for Ili. After all, they do consider it Russian. They were forced to leave only a century ago.”

Russia is still playing the great game for Asia. But the United States now is leaving the table as did the British a generation ago. Twenty-one years ago, when Gun Kessle and I first traveled in Iran and Afghanistan, we saw the United States as not only a great but a dominant power. We believed that it might even have the upper hand in the game. There was an American presence all the way from the Caspian Sea through the Turkoman country of northern Iran and along the Hindu Kush. There was the big base in Peshawar, and coming down from Kabul in the autumn of 1958 we met Americans who talked as if there really was going to be an American century. Now all

that is gone. The bases are dissolved. The American Century became an American Decade in Asia—if even that. The Russians have moved down to the Khyber and are still playing the game according to the rules of Peter the Great.

Western liberals have as great difficulty today as they did a hundred years ago in seeing that history is real. The Chinese are aware of history. Therefore, when they stood up they were able to force the Russians to a diplomatic retreat in Sinkiang and in the northeast. This record of a journey down the Silk Road from Tashkurghan in the Pamirs along the Kansu corridor toward Lanchow is also a book about the great game, and about the men who played it. Stalin is therefore present. The hand he held is still not played out.

But 1976 was not only a year when we traveled in Sinkiang; it was also a year when we traveled in a China where the “Gang of Four” were trying to gain complete power. Now, three years later, many people—even many intellectuals in China—believe that China is very different. China is not. There are twists and turns along the road, but the nine hundred million or so Chinese continue to shape a new China through their work. The direction this new China is taking cannot be changed by a Lin Piao (who was a very real hero once) or by a “Gang of Four” (who had no historical dimensions).

Those who see China only through documents or who believe that China is a concrete expression of political ideologies will have difficulty in understanding this. To them China seems to be undergoing sudden and violent changes. But if you see the documents and speeches as true ideological expressions of the concrete difficulties, if you see China in historical perspective and look at it from below where the view is clear, then these violent changes become just necessary phases in the development of a new China.

What for instance would have happened if “the Four” had won in 1976? If they had gained power? Some people would have been killed, some people jailed. Some people would have been forced to see the huge economic projects on which they were working ruined. China would have suffered. Education, culture, and technology would have suffered. There would have been minor and medium disturbances in different provinces. The policies of “the Four” would not have been just a necessary phase in the development of the new China. But even so, they would not have changed China greatly. The nine hundred million or so would have gone on forming a new society by their daily work. The struggle against the desert would have gone on. In the end “the Four” would have disappeared without leaving enduring traces in Chinese history. Only if they had started a civil war, which would have given

the Soviet Union a chance to intervene, would they have been of real danger to China.

Now that they are gone, China is developing more rapidly. But the direction has not changed.

Some of my Chinese friends agree. Others do not. This winter a Chinese friend stayed with us for two months. We have known each other well for nearly thirty years. She most decidedly did not agree. She had suffered. She was an intellectual. And it is very probable that if I had been Chinese and had been a writer interested in Balzac and romanesque art and things foreign (as I am), then I would have suffered too and would now be saying and writing, like so many Chinese intellectuals, that these last ten years were black years of fascism. It would be understandable, but it would still be wrong. Even these last ten years from 1966 to 1976 were years when tremendous forces were set free in China and when the nine hundred million or so Chinese with their work were building China.

This journey in 1976 was also a journey through the hinterland of China at a time when China watchers in Hong Kong and in Peking were casting political horoscopes. I have always held that you see the historical and political realities better in the hinterland than in the capital. What is decisive is not whether youngsters in Peking drink Coca-Cola or not, or whether they dance this or that new dance, or whether they go dressed this way or that; what is decisive is whether it will be possible to beat back the desert and see to it that the people of China achieve a decent standard of living. If the new China cannot quickly increase production and income for the hundreds of millions in the agricultural hinterland, then it will fail, no matter if the youngsters of Peking go dressed this way or that way. And the only force that can change the destiny of the hundreds of millions in the still poor hinterland of China are these hundreds of millions themselves. Only by their own labor and their own conscious effort can they build a better life. That has been the main direction in China all these years.

When I put it this way, I believe that all my Chinese friends—even those who suffered at the hands of the “Gang of Four”—will agree. After all, China has stood up and is strong enough to hold its own against Moscow. And that is a great hope for us all.

Jan Myrdal

Fagervik

April 2, 1979

Preface

I began planning this book in 1959. Seventeen years later the journey had been made. Gun was in the hospital in Tsingtao for her old TB. There I worked on the manuscript during the autumn of 1976. When she got better, we went home to Sweden. While the book was being printed in Sweden, we were going back to China to make films for the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation.

Much had happened in China since we traveled down from the Pamirs in 1976. We were following the Silk Road through Sinkiang and Kansu down toward Lanchow as the "Gang of Four" were making their desperate bid for power in the summer of 1976. Reading the book in the summer of 1978 in China when the rectification campaign was in full swing, it once again struck me how little the "Gang of Four" really mattered.

Of course there are—and will be—struggles and contradictions among the nine hundred million or so Chinese. But such as the "Gang of Four" were but froth on the surface of that revolution which is carrying China back to its normal position as one of the most highly developed nations. One with a quarter of the world population, though.

Many people helped to make this journey possible. Rewi Alley kept on encouraging me year in and year out. Many Chinese friends—none named and none forgotten—tried to arrange the necessary permits. The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries helped us arrange everything. The Chinese friends who traveled with us were old friends indeed.

Publishers and editors and people from the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation helped finance our journey. Gunnar Jarring, Anders Lenartsson, Per-Olow Leijon, Jan Stolpe, and Torsten Örn read the manuscript and helped me avoid certain mistakes. For the remaining ones, the responsibility is mine.

For reasons of economy the English version is slightly abridged.

In *The Silk Road*, the Myrdals—the first foreigners in twenty-seven years allowed to travel the fabled Chinese trade route—follow the footsteps of Marco Polo through the majestic Chinese Pamirs in the latest of their books on Asia.

Their trip begins in northwest Sinking province, where China meets Russia and Afghanistan. Embarking from a remote village of Tadhiks (a mountain tribe living 12,000 feet above sea level), Myrdal provides breathtaking descriptions of the spectacular mountains and deserts that flank the Silk Road in western China.

This scenery, rarely glimpsed by Western eyes, is only one focus of their book, which is much more than a travelogue. The Silk Road has been for thousands of years a vital trade route and the setting for incessant political and military conflict. Once, nomadic tribes battled with Mongolian and Chinese invaders for control; now, after a disputed border settlement, it is the scene of hostile confrontations between China and Russia—confrontations that often threaten to erupt into open warfare. Myrdal demonstrates how the history of the area is deposited in the architecture and attitudes of the residents. He emphasizes the massive effects of the 1949 Chinese Revolution upon the technology and the social relations of the region.

By interweaving his fascinating “exchanges of heart” with individual villagers into his own inimitable blend of historical

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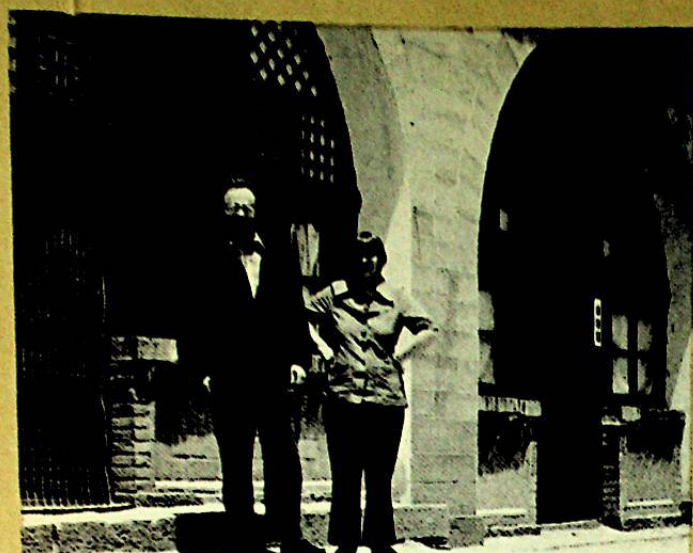


PHOTO BY GUN KESSELE

and political analysis, Jan Myrdal offers us a portrait of postrevolutionary China unavailable elsewhere. The text is perfectly complemented by Gun Kessle's magnificent photographs, which capture both the striking terrain and the character of the people.

Jan Myrdal has been permitted to observe and report on postrevolutionary China for many years. He has written five previous books on China and Asia, including two in collaboration with Gun Kessle. He is a well-known columnist, poet, and novelist in Sweden.

Gun Kessle is acclaimed in Sweden both for her photographs and for her own books on China.

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