



**Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour -
Vol. 1**

From Beijing to Istanbul!

Gregory Brundage

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Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Vol. 1

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Notes regarding this First Edition

This Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour Volume 1 contains four articles published about Kung Fu in Afghanistan written in February 2015 and Parts 1 to 16 of the “Official” Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour that followed. I finally reached Istanbul Turkey in August 2016.

As of January 1, 2020, the “Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour” series of articles published in Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine in the USA had 34 parts plus four from Afghanistan and two from Ethiopia. So, this Volume 1 is half of the total series published as of this print publication, June 15, 2020.

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The history of the Silk Roads is the history of the world.

The Silk Roads have always been the center of the world, for along these ancient roads dozens of great civilizations have risen and fallen over the past 12 thousand years.

True, during the past 500 years western civilization has made its mark and yet the focus of forces, the heart of the resource wealth and the future still resides along these ancient and modern highways of trade and prosperity.

I however do not measure wealth in money or gold, oil or rare metals but rather by sincerity of friendship and I have found the Silk Roads to be the richest lands upon the earth.



Introduction to Kung Fu Friendship in Afghanistan



Training at Master Khawani's Club in Kabul – Big classes and hard training

It was this first series of articles from Kabul Afghanistan that inspired me to start the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour later in 2015. It has turned into a long and beautiful journey filled with good friends, wisdom, history, culture, and of course many extraordinarily great Wushu Kung Fu masters and students.

Some people may think this courageous or crazy of me, but for me it was an ordinary kind of goal. I first traveled internationally to do martial arts to Barcelona Spain in the summer of 1971, and Cali Columbia the next summer where I spent most of my time at a Taekwondo club. All through the 1970s until I was in Graduate School in the 1980s, I traveled all around the USA doing martial arts, mostly fighting in competitions. In the 1990s I trained with a National Karate team in South Asia, and sometimes stayed at a Muay Thai club in Bangkok. In 2001 I moved to South Korea and practiced all kinds of martial arts, and in China I've trained in all kinds of martial arts. Before visiting Afghanistan, I had visited Songshan Shaolin, Wudangshan and many other martial art centers including Lhasa Tibet. So, visiting neighboring Afghanistan seemed just normal for me.

Before leaving for Afghanistan I had to get a visa at the Afghan Embassy here in Beijing. I remember two gentlemen discussing if they should grant me the visa. They were talking in some language I couldn't understand, probably Pashto or Dari (Persian). Then I heard one of them say "public relations!" in English and I smiled. Great idea(!) I thought. Hearing those two words planted a seed of an idea that grew over the years. Yes indeed! My thinking had been "fun" and "write a story for Kung Fu Magazine." Good public relations are like friendship building. It's sharing a part of one's self to open doors and bring this world a little closer together. So, I have to thank them for 1) granting me the visa, and 2) planting a seed that has grown, branched and flowered all along the Silk Roads from Beijing to Istanbul, and since then all the way to Ethiopia in East Africa.

Part 1 Kung Fu Friendship in Kabul - Grandmaster Khawani Amiri



A happy friendly looking gentleman I met briefly at the Chicken Market in Kabul. To me he's the face of Afghanistan. I'll venture a guess he's probably a nice grandpa too.

How much can one intrepid Kung Fu/Wushu journalist do in the capital city of a country internationally acclaimed for being one of humanity's fiercest freedom fighting nations, in one week? We'll find out in this series of interviews and events recorded by Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine foreign correspondent, Gregory Brundage.

This is a series of interviews with living legends of Wushu and Kung Ku in Kabul, Afghanistan, including Masters Abdul "Rahim Kung Fu," Khawani Amiri, Mohammad Fahim, Abbas Alizada, and Sayed Rahman Youresh, as well as interviews with some refugees at the SHADO - Charahi Qambar Refugee Camp in Kabul, an interview with Mrs. Dastgirzada, teacher of girls and woman, small business developer and owner of and trainer in a women's gym, all before an interview with Rafi Ferdous, CEO & Secretary General of the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee. There were also side trips to the National Museum, and District 17, the up and coming educational district of Kabul and the Panjshir Youth Wrestling Club, owned and operated by Abdullah Big Waziri, as well as a meeting with two courageous senior editors at Khaama Press. In addition to all that, great friends and fabulous foods!

PRELUDE

There's a "focus of forces theory" about a few places on earth where geographic, economic, and cultural conditions focus. Certainly, Jerusalem is one such place; in Europe Belgium is such a focus; Cyprus certainly is and in Central Asia it is rugged mountainous Afghanistan that stands between Asia and the West, at the crossroads and in the crosshairs of many ancient and modern civilizations.

Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan is about 3,500 years old and though it has been invaded again and again by foreign powers, Afghans are some of the world's toughest, fiercest and most independent people. Hostile invaders always end up going home regretting their unwelcome incursion into that otherwise very beautiful land.

Afghanistan is now still very much in the recovery phase of a series of brutal wars beginning in the late 1800s. Poverty and corruption are rampant but it's amazing how much development there is and cheerful the majority of the people seem to be. One Afghan man said: "We Afghans are happy people; even in a war most of us are happy."

True, according the UN, Afghanistan is a "least developed country," with the lowest socioeconomic and human resources development in the world depending on how it's measured. But... there is construction going on all over this city of 4 million people, and there is access to hospitals or local clinics for most people. Their economy is one of the fastest growing in the world.

Though there are occasional attacks by this group or that, security around Kabul is extremely tight, right down to the truck with guys carrying automatic weapons across the street from every big hotel and many public buildings. And I've never been searched so many times a day in my life. When they check a bag one can bet it's been thoroughly searched. These guys are for real and professional.

Surviving in this war torn and impoverished environment for fifty or sixty years isn't easy and to become the nationally and internationally acknowledged martial arts master and father of Kung Fu in Afghanistan is an accomplishment worthy of note, honor and respect. During this week "on assignment" I was so very, very lucky to meet a few such great men, Grandmasters of Kung Fu and Wushu in Kabul.

Thursday, February 12th, 2014 Arrival & Background on Kabul



Stories unfold in the oddest ways sometimes. Sometimes you're lucky, sometimes not. On this trip I was very lucky, because in the lounge of the Departure Gate at the airport in Dubai I met a very unusual young man named Fariq. An Afghan with excellent English, he told me he was an entrepreneur involved in different kinds of businesses. Though flying to Kabul, he was only transferring planes in Kabul on his way home in the south of Afghanistan. My real in-person education about this rugged land began there and then with him. After the flight at the airport in Kabul he helped me get a local sim card for my mobile, we had lunch together, and he gave me the phone number of a friend of his who, he said, was an excellent translator, teacher and guide to Kabul, named "Shuja." Man, was he right.



Kabul International Airport restaurant – quite good food really

Shuja and his friends Mohiuddin and Mansoor were amazing. On the first two days, Shuja gave me a tour of the old city, starting on “Chicken Street,” kind of an upscale neighborhood with lots of shops geared for tourists, then Chicken Area, the old city with small ancient doorways leading to neighborhoods within neighborhoods. And, not surprisingly, there were chickens and all kinds of other birds.



We had tea at a couple of ancient shops, chatted with locals, strolled here and there and got a feel for the real old city of Kabul.



February 13th Friday (late morning) District 17

The second day he took me to meet Kobra Dastgirzada, President of Farah Farhat Faizi ("3-F") Agricultural Products Production, a non-profit totally indigenous NGO that helps women of all ages start small companies.

She has teachers that instruct young ladies in tailoring so they can start their own shops and basket weaving classes for around 100 widows.

The Ministry of Agriculture buys most of the baskets for farm use. Mrs. Faizi had to leave Afghanistan during the civil war because certain sadly undereducated people didn't exactly approve of her helping women.



Then, Shuja took me to his own private school which he'd started only 10 days previously. The cement walls in the basement school were unpainted and it was a bit rough, but he had good students, 80 of them or so, and they truly love to learn English, math and other subjects. It was beautiful to see. I asked him how he got so many students so quickly and he said: "I only charge about \$2.50 per month, so hay! I'm popular!"





A park in Kabul. It's winter of course, but quite a nice park just the same.

Thus, I had some background on the city, its people and my new friend Shuja. It was time to go in search of the masters of Kung Fu, which began in his district, District 17.

Like most cities, Kabul is divided into districts and District 17 deserves a lot more attention than it's ever gotten. It's the educational center of Kabul, but people from there say no international journalist has ever been there before. Even no U.S. soldiers ever went there, Shuja told me. Exactly why that is, is a bit mysterious, but Shuja said, "District 17 is one of the best kept secrets of Kabul."

It's a part of town moving up to middle class and has been safer than most. We weren't bothered by beggars, it was a sunny early afternoon in spring, the birds were singing, and there were a lot of nice apartment buildings, shops and schools.

It was cleaner than most places downtown and heck it was nice with that large student population atmosphere.

There were three Sanda schools, a boxing school and a Taekwondo school along the main road within a 10-block walk. There are many private schools, colleges, and universities there, as well as foreign hospitals. Everyone seemed to be carrying a book or notebooks. I saw a seven-year-old girl with an English language text book so with Shuja's help I asked if I could take a picture. She said OK, but of course turned mostly away as modesty demands in traditional Afghan culture.

February 13, 2015 Friday (4:00 pm) Mohammad Fahim, the first Sanda teacher I met in Kabul

It was in District 17 that we started our search for the Masters of Kung Fu. Since it was only 4:00 pm most of the Kung Fu/Wushu clubs hadn't opened yet, but finally we found one with an early class with about 20 students. I led the class in stretches for a while, and then we played with the heavy bags. After that I interviewed young Master Mohammad Fahim, the first of the Sanda Kung Fu teachers I met in Kabul. He's competed in national championships and in neighboring countries in the 75 – 80 Kilo division. His club is called Fahim Wushu Club and though it's only been open one month, he already has 90 students.



I like to lead a warm-up when visiting clubs so I'm not just some stranger taking photos. This incidentally is a stretch, not a kick.

When we asked him who the Kung Fu Federation of Afghanistan leader was, he said “Khawani Amiri,” and also mentioned his teacher, Abdul Rahim Yosufi, affectionately known as “Rahim Kung Fu.”



Better yet, he had their phone numbers. Bingo! We were hot on the trail of the old masters! (Oh, there is no phone book here yet but maybe soon.)

February 13, Friday evening Grandmaster Khawani Amiri



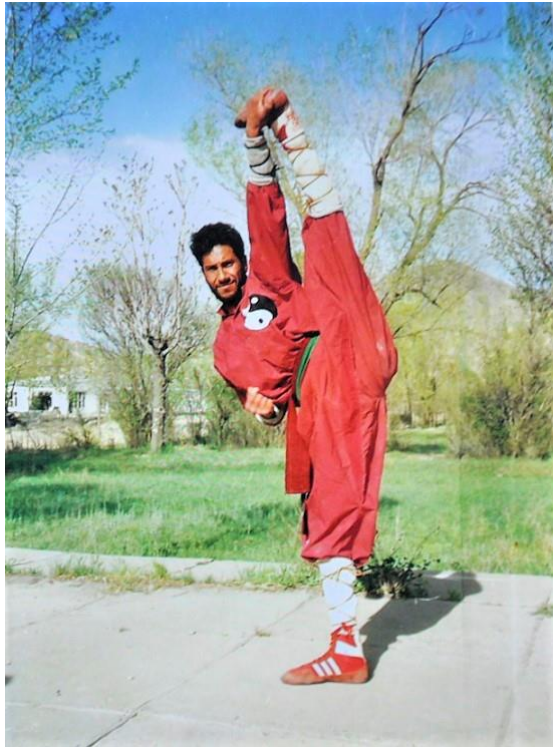
Guided by Shuja I went to the Wushu club of the President of the Afghan National Federation of Wushu, President of Wushu in the General Directorate of Physical Education and Sport and a major protégé of Abdul Rahim Yosufi, Master Khawani Amiri. Master Khawani is not to be confused with Sayed Rahman Youresh, who is the President and Founder of Wushu (Chinese Kung Fu) Afghanistan Federation. They are a bit different.

Walking up the four flights of old cement stairs in the old shopping mall I knew I was close to a real gym by the “*qi*” (*chi*) in the air and the smell of sweat.

Climbing further up the stairs I could hear orders shouted by the coach instructing which techniques to practice. When I got up to the dimly lit large training gym with a ring, there must have been 50 mostly men and a few boys training hard, sweating profusely, really working kicks and kick-punch combinations with maximum speed and intensity.

It was Rocky Balboa slumming it, except this was/is a very bright star club in the constellation of Kung Fu, Wushu, Sanda, Sanshou in Kabul. After a few minutes of watching the most excellent training, we were introduced to Master Khawani and shown into his small but comfortable office adjacent to the training area with windows so we could continue to watch the class.

After introductions we found out that Master Khawani studied Wushu in Iran for four years during “the war.” Everyone’s life here was completely turned upside down and inside out by at least one or more of the recent wars.



Master Khawani “back in the day.”

Master Khawani also mentioned that several of his clubs outside Kabul specialize in taolu. I asked the name of some of the taolu they teach. He told me the names, but I think they're Persian names because most of the masters here studied Kung fu and Wushu in Iran. He told us he has 70 schools around Kabul, and 27 branches around Afghanistan, 10 of which specialize in taolu. Most however, he said, train in Sanda. In Herat alone, he said, he has 25 clubs, 15 of which specialize in Taolu.

I asked if an ethnic Chinese Kung Fu or Wushu practitioner had ever visited Kabul, and he said, "Not that I know of, but I sure wish one would!" (By the way, my most excellent new friend Shuja is translating all this like it's easy, which I know it can't be.)

Master Khawani has more than 20,000 students. I also found out that he graduated from Kabul University with a degree in law. He showed us photos of some of his students which included several female Wushu champions winning in competitions in Afghanistan and India. And, he showed us official badges with his name, photo and titles.



This gentleman – is a legend.

I felt right at home in Master Khawani's club; it reminded me of the killer, brutal, most excellent workouts at Sabir's Kempo-Goju Karate School in West Milwaukee back in my day. He also showed us a leather-bound student attendance roster going back to the black and white era of the first years he was a Kung Fu teacher. He is currently 35 years old and has been teaching in Afghanistan for 18 years.



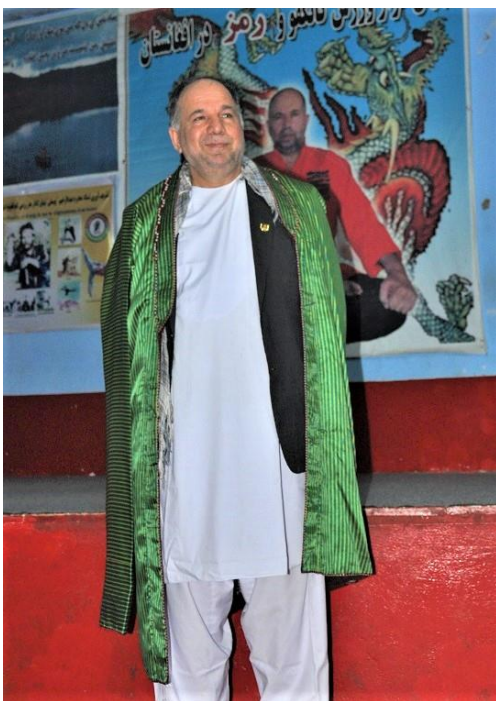
After the interview I really didn't want to leave because it felt so much like home, but at least we knew where we had to go next, his Master.

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<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/ezone/article.php?article=1213>

Part 2 Kung Fu Friendship in Kabul – Grandmaster Abdul Rahim

February 14th, 2015 Saturday Grandmaster Abdul “Rahim Kung Fu”



First on my list of things to do today was to pay a visit and my respects to Abdul Rahim Yosufi, popularly known all around Afghanistan as “Rahim Kung Fu,” who is the General Director of the Afghan National Federation of Kung Fu by popular vote of the athletes. He is the oldest of the masters in Kabul and has been teaching the longest.

He has a huge number of students and students of students.

And given the prestige he garners from the public and other Kung Fu Wushu people in Kabul, he is definitely The Grandmaster.

His gigantic four-story Kung Fu school is on one of the city's old center squares and has no shortage of huge signs advertising it. But there were so many doors to the building Shuja had to ask which door it was. There was a small group of distinguished looking gentlemen standing and talking in a circle in front of the doors and we found out one was Grandmaster Rahim Kung Fu himself.

A few words here are necessary about Afghani culture which is quite unique. First, if one does and says the right things that harmonize with their unique culture and style, Afghans are absolutely the most welcoming and safest people I've ever met. (This of course would not include attacking them with bombs or guns.)

Shuja and I must have done and said the right things because this group of distinguished gentlemen was very welcoming indeed. Of course, being on assignment from Kung Fu magazine helped a lot too, I think. Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine Editor Gene Ching did write a great Press Assignment Letter too and some kind of official looking paper always helps!

Grandmaster Abdul Rahim and a couple of his friends gave us a tour of his huge martial art school.

He must have at least eight very large training areas, at least a couple of rings, maybe 50 heavy and other sized bags hanging here and there (with just the right weight, hardness and balance), weight training equipment, some gymnastic equipment, other matted areas for wrestling and so on.

This however is not some fancy club. Everything there (except the hanging bags) looked about a million years old, but everything's working and this place is rocking when they get going. It's like "Rocky Balboa" doing ghetto training times 20 with a vastly wider range of cultural diversity.

After the tour he invited us into his large office (which was warm) and invited us to sit on the couches and relax. Tea magically appeared. With help from Shuja I introduced us and started asking questions about his past and current things in the hard-hitting world of Kung fu, Wushu and the tremendously popular Sanda in Afghanistan.

Grandmaster Rahim Kung Fu is from Panshir, the shock troop battle ground for the last defense of Kabul by the Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion 1980 - 1985 and a major battle ground during the Civil war 1996-2001. And, Grandmaster Rahim Kung Fu was there in the thick of it all, specifically he trained thousands of men unarmed combat derived from the Kung Fu training he'd taken in Iran some years before.

He started his Kung Fu training during the war with the Soviets some 43 years ago at the age of 17. His trainer was an Iranian named Hussain Dadashi. Five years later he returned to Afghanistan and began teaching - 32 years ago.

He was the first, which makes him the real grandfather of Kung Fu in Afghanistan.

He showed us high resolution videos on his large new smart phone of him with Ahmad Shah Massoud, The Lion of Panshir; he appeared to be in the inner circle throughout the wars working as commander and trainer.

And he showed us videos of him doing both including definitely training men in combat Sanshou/Sanda and leading men.

“Now-a-days” he said “there are hundreds of Sanda clubs in Kabul.” He alone has 27 active branches in 34 provinces of Afghanistan. To become an active branch, it has to have 20 - 30 clubs, and each club has to have a minimum of 100 students. That’s 67,500 students minimum because some clubs are much larger than just a hundred students. Considering that many of his former students have gone on to become masters and teachers, he has more than 100,000 students, and if you add them all up over the years it’s got to be more than a million students.

Somehow the interview drifted a bit which is OK with me, willing to flow with the Dao of things, though this is most definitely the most sincere Muslim environment in the world because these gentlemen are bonded by blood and war of such intensity over such a long multi-generation period of time that diamonds can be forged just from the heat and pressure. (The bond of blood and tears that cannot be broken by the years...) Their Islam is pure, simple and they’ve lived on the edge of life and death their whole lives, with most of those lives dedicated to fighting for freedom from foreign invasions and other foreign inspired indigenous groups that would take that freedom just the same. Of course, he didn’t say any of this, but his every gesture and word affirmed it.

He did mention however that “If the foreign aid given to Afghanistan during the recent wars were distributed equally to everyone in Afghanistan, each person would get 4.5 million dollars.” And, he asked, “Where is it?”

There was a bit more drift in the conversation and he mentioned that he had 40 some female students as well.

I asked if any Kung Fu people from China ever visited his schools or other Kung Fu schools in Kabul or around Afghanistan and he said he'd never heard of it, though they would all certainly welcome such individuals.

After the interview we went downstairs to what was probably the main training area, took pictures, played with kicks and punches for a while and took more pictures.



Left to right, Shuja, Abdul Rahim Yosufi and writer G. Brundage

On our way out he asked to be notified of international competitions in Beijing, and I promised to make sure that some people in the Chinese Kung Fu Federation learned how enthusiastically, diligently and on a massive scale Afghan people embrace Kung Fu!

February 15th, Sunday Interviews at Refugee Camp

Hopping in a taxi Shuja and I headed to one of several refugee camps around Kabul "SHADO - Charahi Qambar Camp" or that's what the sign said, funded by WHO and administered by SHRDO. And, yep, there's a phone number there too which I'm sure is useful if one speaks Dari, Pushtun, Tajik, Urdu, Uzbek or one of the other languages permeating this very diverse city, has a phone and influence, but the phone number seems quite useless to the residents there we found out.

Why do I go to a refugee camp? I'd left a part of my heart in a refugee camp in another Central Asian war in a different Muslim country some 20+ years ago and promised to come back. I haven't got back there yet, but refugee camps are pretty much the same in most ways.



We first met some children then a couple of adults came from inside the camp. We introduced ourselves and I started asking all kinds of questions, with the answers generally adding up to the following:

This camp has about 1,200 families and sometimes they go two and three weeks without food. When they do have food it's just flour, 50 Kilos for 20 families. There are no fruits, vegetables or meat.

The children have to out begging in the morning. One man was from the Kuchi nomadic tribe in the Uruzgan Province.

These human beings were and are the most painful living memories of the wars between the Taliban and the US backed National Army of Afghanistan. Asked if the Ministry of Refugees helped them. They didn't seem to know what it was. I asked why they didn't just go back home, and they said it was too dangerous – the war with the Taliban continues there. I asked if crime in the camp was a problem and they said “No. Alhamdulillah.” (Thanks to God.) Each man had a different story; they were from all over Afghanistan but mostly the South.

After a while the crowd had gotten a bit bigger, maybe 20 people and I got the cell phone numbers for three of them. How they got their phones I didn't ask.

After saying farewell, we met Mohiuddin Farzami, a friend of Shuja and former classmate at Kabul University of Law and Political science. He has an old car (like mine in Beijing). He was from the same district as Abbas Alizada, the “Afghan Bruce Lee” who became an international Internet sensation over the past few months.

<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/ezine/article.php?article=1214>

Part 3 Kung Fu Friendship in Kabul – Abbas Alizada the “Afghan Bruce Lee”

Today we recommence with an interview with young Afghan man who looks and fights very much like Bruce Lee.



February 15th, 2015 Abbas Alizada

It's always the process that defines the trip and the road to Abbas Alizada's house was an interesting one. The first long road Shuja told me was built by Turkish engineers. It went by the Darul-Aman Palace, which was King Amanullah Khan fabulous home once upon a time.

Now it's a shot up, bombed out ruin that somehow remains standing. The name Darul Aman comes from Persian language and it has a double meaning: 'Abode of Peace' and 'Abode of Allah'.

Today it is a place of complete peace; a reminder of the cruelty and destructiveness of war. It is located about ten miles (16 km) from the center of Kabul. It was originally built by King Amanullah Khan, ruler of Afghanistan between 1919 and 1929. He had it designed and built to be the symbol of a new and glorious modern era in Afghanistan.

Shuja and Mohiuddin told me stories about people collecting money from students and teachers to rebuild it, but they said "Nothing happened."



This dark gray hulking skeleton of a former palace is also where Abbas trains sometimes, but we were very fortunate indeed to be invited to his family home, quite a long distance away. Several different roads were needed to get there. Each road I found out has its' own history.

It's necessary to add at this point that I've been here three days already and Shuja has proven himself again and again to know the history, culture and languages of every part of Kabul, and have friends and relatives there too. He's also a simultaneous translator with an enormous English language vocabulary that always seems to say the right things in the right way to open every door we knocked on. He's helped make the whole job of finding and researching people and places, meeting, interviewing and follow-up process easy and fun.

At one intersection going up a hill Shuja told me "This was a place for killing during the war." I asked him: "Which war?" "The Civil war in 1993 and 1994 between the Soviet and American backed Mujahedeen" he answered. Though people here are very appreciative of foreign help in freeing Afghanistan from tyranny, they also feel that foreigners have been the cause of the vast majority of their problems.

Soon we turned onto a smaller, older, paved but very rutted road going further up in the hills. Shuja told me this road was built by the Russians during their war here in 1995. One road was built by Indians. Another road was built by Americans. Every road had a unique history.

I mentioned that only a couple of weeks earlier Russia - for the first time since the wars - formally installed an Ambassador in Kabul, and my new friend Mohiuddin who was bravely driving, quipped that "There are no friends or enemies forever." How true, how true.

After asking directions a few times we found Abbas' house and met him outside his comfortable flat which he shares with his father and two of his five (older) brothers. Though he's about the same size as Bruce Lee, he looks bigger in person, or maybe it's because his house is on a small hill (in bigger hills) so he looked huge coming down to greet us.

Very warm and friendly would describe his greeting; he was genuinely happy to meet us. His apartment is one of several flats on the first floor of this large, mansion like house. We all sat on the floor in a circle except his father who sat on a low platform usually reserved for eating or smaller meetings. It's called a "topchan," a raised platform used in Central Asia for relaxing and reclining both outdoors and indoors. It is used as a table, and/or a bed, and often has a smaller table on it for meals or tea and snacks. They are usually made of wood. Often there's a Persian rug, woven reed mat or thin blanket on it along with pillows for reclining during conversations. Really quite comfortable! Traditional restaurants in Central Asia usually have one for each group of people. Incidentally, practically nobody eats at a restaurant alone in Asia. That would be very strange!

Two of his older brothers wandered in and out from time to time, sometimes with tea. This apparently was guided by their traditional culture and individual natures.

First, I asked Abbas how he first became famous. He said: "I didn't know it happened until after it happened. My cousin called me in December (three months ago) and told me."

But how did your image first become known? Something you posted?"

Abbas explained: "There's a social networking site called: "Afghanistan My Passion," and some photos of mine were posted there. They got passed around Facebook." By the way, almost everyone I talked to in Kabul seemed to be on Facebook via their phones.

"How about the videos?"

"They came after I became famous."

"I've seen so many stories about you, how many international journalists have come to interview you?"

“One hundred international reporters from different countries came to visit me at home or the old Palace,” Abbas answered.

Abbas then recited the names of around a dozen different news agencies, newspapers, magazines, broadcast stations and countries from around the world in their native languages. That was impressive. “I can’t remember them all.” He said.

He’s not employed at this time as he takes care of his elderly father. His family is originally from Ghorband District of the mostly rural Parwan Province. His oldest brother is a construction worker, the second brother is jobless, the third is a manager at the Traffic Department, the fourth is in real estate, the fifth son is jobless, and Abbas, the sixth son takes care of his father, but his dream is to become a true Kung Fu master, the “Afghan Bruce Lee,” act in Hollywood movies; be famous and most importantly help his family and nation.



So, he trains every day at “The Fitness Club” near his home with Master Nabibulian Razae.

I asked if he had a girlfriend and he said “No, I don’t want one now. I just live to train and take care of my father.”

In Afghanistan getting married for men is exceedingly difficult and expensive. I was told earlier by Shuja that the dowry the groom must pay to the lady's father to get married in Kabul is around USD \$25,000, and strangely the dowry in villages is double that. Dating in Afghanistan is a serious kind of business, and not something someone would want to take lightly. Sex is strictly illegal in Afghanistan unless the couple is married and can get a person sent to prison for five years. His decision certainly seems a wise one.

I found out he likes to swim sometimes too. He is "Bruce Lee lean."

"I've heard you might be in a movie in the U.S. Is that right?"

"I was contacted by Linda Lee's secretary a couple of weeks after I became famous, but I haven't heard from them since."

I also found out he'd gotten a call from the office of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani regarding a possible invitation to visit, but again he's waiting. Will he be a "flash in the pan," phenomenon, famous today and forgotten soon after?

I don't think so. I'm sure something will come through. As a matter of fact, I'd asked Shi Yan Pei, head monk of the North Shaolin Monastery to write a letter to invite Abbas to live for free there this year, which he happily did, with the appropriate red seal and everything. So, I gave that to Abbas, along with an extra copy of Kung Fu magazine that I'd brought.

He said his dream is to go to the Shaolin Monastery to learn Kung Fu, but he can't go until next year and he was very anxious to know if the invitation could be changed. I assured him it was no problem at all, when he's ready they will welcome him and I can get another letter very easily.

I tried to find out why he wanted to delay, but I didn't exactly get an answer. It could be several things; maybe he's waiting for the President or a movie offer.

The grapevine in Kabul has it that he may be wanted to help make a better finish to "The Game of Death," Bruce Lee's final and unfinished movie.

There's no doubt that Abbas does look and move pretty much like the real Bruce Lee (though he's still quite young at only 21 years of age). It's also possible his father made him promise to wait for some reason, possibly to ensure that he's mature enough to go overseas alone. Abbas does speak English a bit, but it still needs a lot of work.

My final question was: "Where do you see yourself 30 years in the future?" "I want to be a famous master of Kung Fu, then a Hollywood Kung Fu star and help my family."

I invited him and his family out to dinner, but he politely declined. It was dinner time so Shuja, Mohiuddin and I soon had to leave.

I must say at this point that Mohiuddin's ability to remember and navigate small country extremely rutted dirt roads after dark in an unlit part of a district he didn't know, was amazing, and seemed effortless. But, as I learned over time, there's a lot more to all these young men than meets the eye. They are young, very intelligence and capable supermen, in my opinion.

Afghan Dinner

Back downtown close to my hotel is the kind of restaurant only locals know and usually don't talk much about - keeping it on the "low-low" as they say. We had a spectacular dinner of truly delicious spiced rice and unbelievably tasty beef called "*Qabeli Palaw*," and after that they saw me off at the hotel as it was a long day. I always like to type notes and sort and edit photos before sleep so they don't get blurred by the next day's events.



Left to right: Mohiuddin, writer, Shuja and Mansoor

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Part 4 Kung Fu Friendship in Kabul - Grandmaster Sayed Rahman Youresh



Ambition and confidence at Panjshir Youth Wrestling Club coached by Big Abdullah

Interviews with a President and a Beggar, Time Travel and a visit to an Extraordinary Wrestling Club

February 17, 2015 Grandmaster Sayed Rahman Youresh –
President and Founder of Wushu (Chinese Kung Fu)
Afghanistan Federation

February 17, 2015 First, the heading on this section is exactly what his name card says, and I must admit to some uncertainty as to how they differentiate Kung Fu and Wushu here.

For those readers not familiar with the international distinction between “Kung Fu” and “Wushu,” some explanation. The name “Kung Fu” really means highly refined skill and in regards to martial arts is usually used to refer to the traditional styles of Chinese martial arts and follow the exact traditional routines. “Wushu” is usually used to refer to Chinese martial arts but is more open-ended permitting more freedom to the martial artist. They have separate sport federations in most countries. Some countries combine Wushu and Kung Fu Federations into one, sometimes as a sub-unit within their government’s Ministry of Sport. Partly it seems to be a matter of funding and/or the unique politics of every nation. But, only the Wushu Federation is associated with the Olympics, so the coaches and teams usually get a bit more prestige and money.

Though some clubs in Afghanistan practice taolu, sanda is clearly even more popular.

One difference between the two Afghan Wushu/Kung Fu Federations is that Master Youresh and his “rather large” number of students and students of students, deals mostly with international events, while Master Amiri with his very large number of students and students of students, works more on the local and national levels. But, let there be no doubt about it, Master Youresh has some truly great fighters in his squad. Like only few other masters in Kabul, Grandmaster Sayed Rahmin, usually called “Youresh,” is fully and uniquely qualified for his distinguished position.



Master Youresh, President of the Afghan Wushu Federation - I meet him most recently again at the 15th World Wushu Championships in Shanghai.

Meeting him this early afternoon I found out his international team had just ten days earlier competed in a huge Iranian International Wushu Championships and came in 3rd, not bad considering they're competing against, for example, China and the very large exceedingly well trained Iranian team.

His story began in Kabul many years ago but his life really changed when he studied Wushu for three years in India at the beginning of the 1980s. After that, for the next eleven years he took two extended training sessions in China every year for a total of 22 trips to China for Wushu study. While in China he studied many styles including Nan Quan, Shaolin Quan, Tai Chi and other styles.

He started teaching in 1983 in Kabul. Now he has 400 schools around Afghanistan with 25,000 students.

He's been a Judge four times in international competition, and works closely with Rafi Ferdous, CEO & Secretary General of the Afghan National Olympic Committee.

Master Youresh's office is in the same Afghanistan Olympic Headquarter building with Mr. Ferdous.

February 17, 2015 Rafi Ferdous, CEO & Secretary General of the Afghan National Olympic Committee

I only got to talk with Mr. Ferdous for a few moments this afternoon as everyone was very busy, but he mentioned some interesting things, for example Iran invested five billion dollars in their Olympic effort whereas the Afghan Olympic athletes gets "almost zero" help from the Ministry of Sport. But somehow things are moving forward, for example they have cooperative agreements with Turkmenistan and are in the planning stages of building such bridges with Japan. According to him Taekwondo is the top Olympic sport in Afghanistan and he mentioned that a new headquarters for the Afghanistan Olympic Committee will be ready in about two months.

He was also adamant that Master Youresh was the one and only Wushu Federation President in Afghanistan.

Mr. Ferdous came across as a real organizer who "knows the ropes" in government bureaucracy, the law, accounting and human nature. I think he's a great guy and very helpful to the development of sport in Afghanistan. In my opinion people like him are the "unsung heroes" of large organizations like national level Olympic federations because without them big events and national training centers don't come to fruition.

Unfortunately, that was all we had time for.

After a late lunch, Shuja had to go to his school for a while, so Mohiuddin and Mansoor came to my hotel and I showed them how to build an Internet site for Mohiuddin's job, which involves promoting the country's four-month-old transportation workers union and has 60,000 members already.

I asked if the government was happy about this development and they said the government was helping to sponsor it. Cool!

February 18, 2015 am Interview with Negeena

After this we went to Moihuddin's car and I interviewed 10-year-old Negeena, whose family is from Tajikistan. Her family has lived in a tent in District 10 for five years. She begs for a living because both her father's arms are incapacitated in some way. Or, as the local papers suggest, she might work for an organized crime boss, or both. Who can say? I gave her 100 Afghan Afghani and my name card with Mohiuddin's phone number and asked her to ask her father to call. I strongly feel refugees need a human face, family and details, but 24 hours later Mohiuddin had not heard from Negeena or her parents.

February 18, 2015 2:00 pm National Museum

Then it was on to the National Museum of Afghanistan. Outside there were some of the first trains in Afghanistan used in 1920. Shuja told me the rebellion led by good King Amanullah which defeated the British and ended their colonial rule started in this same area. Shuja must have been an exceptional student in school.

The fantastic museum has several time-period collections of great antiquity going back to the Bronze Age.



There is a special "Buddhist Heritage of Afghanistan" exhibition at this time.



Some of the Afghan made Buddhas are more muscular perhaps than usually found in most Indian and Chinese art and had more idiosyncratic facial expressions than usually found in China and India; more like normal people rather than stereotype features.



I also noticed some of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan had very western features, like long straight noses, again very different from Indian and Chinese.

I read in a book that it wasn't until Alexander's army came through the region that people started making statues of Buddha. It had previously been forbidden by Buddha himself. "Gandhara art" is a style of Buddhist visual art that evolved in what is now northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan between the 1st century BCE and the 7th century CE.

There was also awesome ancient Afghan weaponry including very unique bows, swords, shields, and first long guns.



There was a collection from the "Mes Aynak," a very famous archeological excavation site located 38 km south of Kabul first surveyed in 1963. Among other things the "Pa Buddhist Monastery" was discovered and excavated, along with a second monastery.

The Afghanistan National Museum also has a display from Bactria - a Bronze Age (3300 BC to 1200 BC) culture of Central Asia dated to ca. 2200-1700 BC, in Northern Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Alexander the Great's army never managed to establish control over Bactria.

February 18, 2015 Panshir Youth Wrestling Club and interview with Abdullah Big Waziri



From before the beginning of this trip I was curious about traditional Afghan martial arts, knowing that almost every ancient culture has at least one. Not surprisingly, they have several traditional martial arts including wrestling, knife fighting and archery. The knife fighting, I can live without, and traditional archery I heard is not being practiced at this time, but wrestling is very popular.

So, after the illuminating beautiful and exciting tour of ancient history and culture at the National Museum, we went to Panjshir Youth Wrestling Club, owned and operated by Abdullah “Big” Waziri.

They call him big for a reason. He went into business five years ago and has competed in national and international competitions like the Asian Games in 2002. He told me about “*Hama Kara*” - Afghan Traditional Wrestling where they compete in mud after oiling up their bodies. Apparently modern style wrestling was started by a man named “Naga,” 60 years ago, and it was he who instituted the use of mats. There were about 35 youth training at the time we were there.

February 18, 2015 Khaama Press Senior Editors Zabihullah Moosakhail and Ahmad Royeen Rahnosh



Editors at Khaama Press

One thing I always like to do in foreign countries is visit the Press Club, but I couldn't find one here listed on the internet anywhere and my local friends couldn't find one either. So, I did the next best thing, meet up with the editorial staff at Khaama Press.

Khaama Press is their (free online) newspaper that taught and prepared me for this trip during the month or so before I came here. It kept me up to date on events around the country in a fair objective manner. For a variety of reasons Afghanistan is one of the world's most dangerous places to be a reporter.

It wasn't easy finding their offices by any means, but thanks to good friends nothing seems to be impossible here except an end to the lingering war and consequent poverty.

Fortunately, we did manage to meet two senior editors who were gracious and welcoming.

My favorite staff writer there is S. Mubashir Noor who has a phenomenal knowledge of history and current affairs, and a remarkable ability to integrate information at the highest levels of meta-cognitive analysis.

He has an obvious appreciation of the absurdity of life and vicissitudes of human nature. Unfortunately, he wasn't there at the time I visited. I pray he is well as I know honesty can be a dangerous thing.

Conclusions

There's a lot of work to be done helping to rebuild an ancient nation with a war lingering on into a new nation.



Working boy and his mule

I have the highest regards for all the Afghan Kung Fu/Wushu masters and students, journalists, editors, police, soldiers, other security personnel, translators and people.

Reporters and soldiers especially are under extreme pressure and every day there is an average of between four and 15 "Shaheed" or martyrs for the nation and liberty for the majority of the people. Everyone here in Kabul prays for the end of the war and an inflow of foreign investment that can create jobs, money and better education.

This is the only way for Afghanistan to catch up with the rest of the world and end the extreme poverty. This poverty results many children and women with babies begging for even tiny amounts of money to buy food.

Something almost everyone mentions is government corruption. I did many other interviews while I was in Kabul but for the sake of brevity, I can't include all that in these stories. For example, I met a Kabul Prosecuting Attorney who was and remains very concerned with corruption. In all fairness however their government is not unique in this.

There is one superpower I can think of for example that has completely legalized corruption and – wow – they are having a lot of financial “issues” because of it.

As for the masters and refugees, the widows and students, time flows while each survives with the help of their family, friends, teachers and Allah. Having some Kung Fu Wushu skills sure can help too sometimes. Clearly the Wushu Kung Fu family in Afghanistan is really huge, growing fast and you never know, world peace through Kung Fu could just start here in Afghanistan. Kabul's three true Grandmasters of Kung Fu/Wushu (Grandmaster Abdul Rahim Yosufi, Grandmaster Khawani Amiri and Grandmaster Sayed Rahman Youresh) just have to keep up their great work. Likewise, everyone needs a good broad-based education, here, there and everywhere.

Every master I talked with in Kabul asked if a Chinese Kung Fu master could come and help teach their coaches and students. I promised to pass on the request. Abbas, the Afghan Bruce Lee is training hard and waiting for a Hollywood contract. His future is so bright “he's got to wear shades,” in my opinion.

The million plus refugees in Afghanistan however urgently need rapid short-term and long-term assistance, food, medicine, jobs, real homes, education for their children and hope for the future.

Is peace in Afghanistan really possible? Inshallah. I believe it is. War has been “good business” for some foreign entities. I believe middle ground can be found in Afghanistan to lift the entire nation with no further bloodshed. The Holy Prophet Mohammed (SWT) was a masterful diplomat and those skills need to be revived.

Very special thanks to all the gracious, welcoming, hardworking and highly skilled Masters, and my new best friends, Shuja, Mohiuddin and Mansoor for all their most excellent help. “*Ta Shukur*” means “thank you,” in Dari language. “*Insha’Allah*” (God Willing) we will all meet again soon.

Also thanks to Mikel Holt (former Editor-in Chief of Milwaukee Community Journal), my first great editor in the USA who taught me how to be a reporter and first put a real camera in my hands and Gene Ching at Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine who is very tolerant when my stories are a bit “longish” sometimes doubling the work-count limit.

Notes

June 2020 - I’m still in contact with Shuja, Moihuddin and Mansoor and we chat from time to time on Facebook. They are all doing well. Shuja has some kind of government job, Moihuddin is in Moscow studying Russian language, and Mansoor is in Turkey with his family. These guys were and are true brothers.

Part 1 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Introduction



2015 - Summer vacation rolls around, exams finally finish and adventure beacons. After my excellent time in Kabul I got to thinking... During the past year in China there's been amazing plans set forth to develop the Silk Road, *One Belt - One Road*, *Silk Road Development Fund*, the *Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank* as well as the *Silk Road Gold Fund*. And, because I am only loosely rooted in any particular time, place, and dimension, I thought: "Why not go on a Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour?"

Consequently I applied for some visas to smooth the way, packed my old camera bag, saddled up the iron horse (in the form an e-ticket), hopped on a super-speed electric train (290 KPM most of the way) in Beijing and sailed smoothly so to speak to Xi'an – once known as "*Chang-an*" the most famous of the two main ancient capitals of China. Chang'an was founded by Emperor Liu Bang of the Han dynasty in 202 BCE. His first palace, Changle Palace (meaning 'Perpetual Happiness') was built across the river from the ruins of the former Qin Dynasty capital.

Xi'an was and is the beginning and end of the fabled Silk Road, more or less. More or less? During the Yuan Dynasty Beijing did become the capital city for some time, so there was a branch of the Silk Road from Xi'an to Beijing, but there never was a whole of hype about all that, so Xi'an was and is the only place to begin.

Brief Silk Road Kung Fu Summary

The Silk Road grew with advances in transportation beginning with the domestication of the noble camel, primarily as a pack animal sometime around the 8th Century BCE. Chinese silk was used in Greece, the Middle East and Egypt by the middle of the first millennium BCE.

The transition from horse pulled wheeled vehicles to horse riding appears to have happened around the 2nd century BCE.

In another sense the Silk Road evolved as a way for China to control its trade with Central and West Asia, as compared to relegating that trade to mounted nomads who were challenging wide and loose groups spread all through north east, west and central Asia mostly under the general name of "Turkic nomads," and against whom the Great Walls – ultimately failed.

The Silk Road as a more or less complete entity didn't come to near full fruition until around the end of the 1st Millennium, but by then the die was cast and the silver and gold road future foretold.

Famous Silk Road Travellers

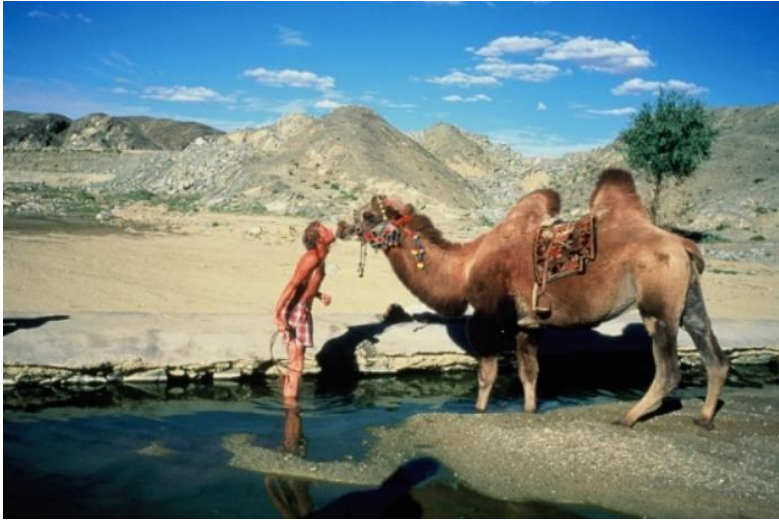
Somewhere between 399 – 413 a monk named Faxian became the first of several Buddhist monks to travel the Silk Road to India to collect Sutras. Others include monk Huisheng who accompanied Sung Yun during the years 518-521.

Probably the most famous of all Silk Road traveling monks was Xuan Zang (c. 602 – 664), who traveled the Tarim Basin via the northern route, Turpan, Tashkent, Samarkand, and over the Hindu Kush to India where he collected the Sutras of the Greater Vehicle, before taking the Silk Road sea route home. His story inspired the later “Journey to the West,” classic series of novels which really focus on Sun Wu Kong, the magical and amazing Stone Monkey who, according to the story acted as one of three rather naughty guardians/bodyguards for Monk Xuan Zang along his Silk Road trip.

And, there was Daoist monk Ch'ang Ch'un who traveled through the Altai and Tianshan Mountains, the Southern parts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Samarkand, Northeast Iran and Afghanistan during the years 1220-1223 accompanied by his disciple Li Qi Ch'an – the man who actually wrote the narrative – a remarkably detailed account of the journey.

Though not a monk by any means, there's also Marco Polo who wrote a detailed two volume collection of notes about his extensive travels along the Silk Road and elsewhere. His family travel stories start in 1260, though most of his travel stories occur in the 1290s.

The most interesting contemporary Silk Road traveler I happened across was Turkish photographer Arif Asci who in 1997, over an 18-month period traveled the entire Silk Road from Istanbul to Xi'an riding camels. His remarkable photo-essay is already a classic of modern neo-classical Asian art. He's also a cool guy in my opinion because he returned my e-mail and sent some of his photos. Salute to you Sir!



Some of his photos can be found on his site: <http://www.arifasci.com>

The last time I heard from him he was living on a Greek island.

Silk Road Caravans and Trade

But these Silk Road travelers are the exception, not the rule. Usually goods are not transported to their destination by one person or group of people.

These goods are usually bought and sold in the trading centers along the road known as "Caravanserais" in West Asia and the Middle East.

The silk road has always been a patchwork series of roads, except during the Yuan Dynasty when the whole vast Mongolian empire was relatively safe and smooth in traffic.

Some Mongolian rulers (such as Kublai Khan) took a positive attitude towards Buddhism, which had a great influence on the whole Yuan Dynasty. However, after the Yuan Dynasty, Islam became the dominant religion in Central Asia. Although Islam and Muslims have had and will continue to have a strong influence on some of the major branches of Chinese Kung Fu, Buddhist temples and cultures in Central Asia are still rare.

Many Muslims however learn from and harmonize with other philosophies. Sufism for example inculcates some practices reminiscent of Buddhist disciplines like mindful meditation.

Around how many campfires along the ancient Silk Road were these issues discussed by Muslims and Buddhists, Christians and Jews, Hindus and Zoroastrians, atheist philosophers, caravan guards, the rich and poor, freemen and slaves alike, down through the millennium? Thousands possibly millions, perhaps as many as the stars that whiten the skies at night.

This question has led me to hypothesize a “reverberating history theory” originating on the ancient Silk Road.

In most musical instruments the resonant sound is not from the primary tone of the vibration of the skin of the drum or string(s), but rather reverberations within and emanating outward from the (musical/transportation) vessel, in this case, the Silk Road itself.

Xi'an Synopsis

Xi'an is the current day capital of Shaanxi Province and the largest city in northwest China. It was the first capital of a unified China in 221BC (under Emperor Qin Shi Huang) and has been capital of the empire on 12 different occasions, some more auspicious than others.

It is the location of the famed Terracotta warriors and eternal home of China's first Emperor Qin, may he Rest in Peace along with his wives, warriors, slaves, horses, etc.





Another example of the ultimate colorfulness of this truly exotic ancient city can be found during the Three Kingdoms period (220 – 280 AD) when a mad tyrant general, Dong Zhou took control of the empire by use of a weak emperor, decimated the old capital of Luoyang and moved his new government to Chang'an. Needless to say, he didn't last long as the "Mandate of Heaven" (required for rulership in China) clearly did not shine upon him. Somewhat fictionalized details can be found in the classic of Chinese literature "Romance of the Three Kingdoms."

As the starting and ending points of the Silk Road, Xi'an was also one of the world's largest, richest and most diverse cities, with not surprisingly the highest and thickest walls, large portions of which remain today, remarkably enough.

The Gold Road

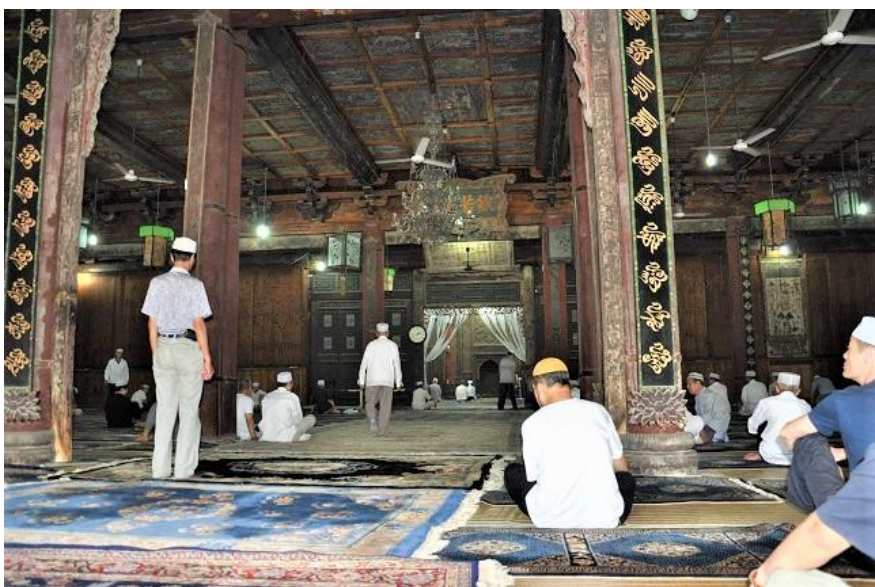
The Silk Road has very recently and quietly acquired another name: The Gold Road. This is the largest single fund ever proposed in Chinese history and was launched recently in Xi'an led by the Shanghai Gold Exchange (SGE). Many countries along the Silk Road have extensive gold resources and China has the technological resources to help them develop that industry. This is going to be an unprecedented source of income for the region (and you read it here first). With a planned scale up to 100 billion Chinese Yuan and a term of 5-7 years, it is expected to become the largest single fund in China.

Xi'an is still very much a leader, while simultaneously preserving its history far better than most ancient-become-modern cities. For example, Xi'an is one of very few cities in China with well-preserved (partly rebuilt) walls, all told more than 15 km. in length which is astonishing in this day and age.

No less remarkable is the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda monastery built in 648 to preserve the sutras brought back from India by Buddhist monk Xuan Zang; though rebuilt a few times it is still unquestionably a monument to enlightened inspiration, history and culture.



And, there's the Muslim Hui District, built around the 15th Century Great Masjid (Mosque) of Xi'an, one of the biggest in China.



It is located in an ancient part of town with narrow stone roads, bazaars, all manner of shops and has more than a thousand years of histories and legends.

The exotic road of danger and hope

Check most Chinese and Korean dictionaries and the word “exotic” translates as “foreign.” But exotic in English is a lot more than that, more like the richness of a magical Persian rug intricately woven with texture and stunning colors, scented with herbs, spices and precious oils from a thousand mystical forgotten cities and mountains.

And, there is probably no more exotic road in history than the Silk Road that begins in Xi'an China – the avenue woven with riches beyond imagining, romance, danger and all too often, death. Yet this road was also the bringer of life and hope to the ancient world, and, now, it is again. So, the wheel turns.

The Silk Road caravans brought to China many wondrous things like horses and wool carpets from Central Asia, dates, saffron powder and pistachio nuts from Persia; frankincense, aloes and myrrh from Somalia, precious stones and sandalwood from India; glass bottles from Egypt, gems and other precious stone from everywhere, and other expensive and desirable goods from all other parts of the world. In exchange, the caravans sent back fine silk, medicines, porcelain, lacquer ware, art, education, and silver to be sure.

But the most valuable role of the Silk Road wasn't any of these mere things, rather it was the exchange of culture between east and west. This includes philosophies and religions, arts and sciences, all manner of technologies, medical knowledge, martial arts, languages, and every other aspect of civilization passed along the fabled silk road.

Certainly ancient Persian Zoroastrian philosophy influenced the development of Buddhist philosophy and it is certainly possible that Chan (Zen) philosophy (of no philosophy) originating at the Songshan Shaolin with Bodhidharma (who himself was probably from Central Asia) had some influence on the Sufi mystics of Central and West Asia, begging the question as to whether the transcendent realization of the oneness of all is inherent in everyone/everywhere. Certainly, the Silk Road reverberated with the harmonies of infinite philosophies in addition to more mundane business transactions.

Naturally enough, more than a few disharmonic cacophonous sour notes were thrown in there too including slave traders, wars, bandits and so on.

Silk Road Guards

One question that has fascinated me for decades involves: “Who would be so brave or foolish as to become a Silk Road Caravan guard?”

In order to protect caravans against bandits and tribes’ merchants usually traveled in large caravans with as many as 1,000 camels.

Guards, often trusted nomads, former military men, martial artists of all sorts, body guards, adventurers, etc. took on the job of accompanying the caravans. To get a perspective of the quantity of goods traveling The Road, a single humped Bactrian camel can carry 400 – 500 pounds of merchandise.

The value of a single caravan was thus enormous, given that they usually carried more than simple spices, silk and carpets, but also gemstones, silver and say for example salaries for distant military garrisons, tax payments for distant rulers, and so on.

Camels were not however the only transportation vehicle along the Silk Road, as horses, donkeys, mules and even elephants were at one time or another used for one reason or another.

Bajiquan has acquired a reputation as the "bodyguard style" in China, as many famous Chinese leaders have historically utilized security personal with background in this particular martial art.

But let there be no doubt about it, the Silk Road was the place where true "Mixed Martial Arts" really began and there were spinoffs in all directions. All nations developed from that artery of trade through Asia to Europe. Probably the greatest living expert on the kinds of martial arts used along the Silk Road is Sifu Ma Wenguo who I interviewed at Xi'an Physical Education University for this series.

Protection of caravans was implemented at both private (bodyguards) and institutional levels. Institutional level protection forces included Chinese garrisons and watchtowers beyond the Great Walls (of which there were many) which used smoke and signal flags for communication, Mongolian Postal Stations (which were sacrosanct owing to the extreme revenge instituted by the Mongolians for anyone so suicidal as to attack one of their stations) and the Caravansaries in West Asia, the Middle East and Anatolia.

The martial arts of that time must have been wickedly savage, and unquestionably evolved over time incorporating mounted use of bow and arrows, swords, halberds, cudgels and just about every other weapon known to man during the two millennium of the ancient Silk Roads life.

The 1st Pan-Asia Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour

In the series of stories that follow in Volume I of these books I interviewed many amazing Kung Fu masters from Xi'an to Turkey. Along the road I also visited every Silk Road archeological site and museum I could find. I have about 55,000 photos from all of my Silk Road travels so far.

There was unfortunately one country I missed: Iran. Why? I have lived in Beijing 11 years and have an American passport. Iran will not issue a visa to any American in China. Why? Well that's a good question, but I can imagine. Hopefully I'll get there before too long as the Persian Empire is one of, if not the most ancient and colorful great civilization(s) in history. The agrarian (farming) age started there. The first great monotheistic religion Zoroastrianism started there, and on and on. Still, I accomplished most of my other goals on this incredible five-year Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour.

First, I was honored to have the opportunity to interview people at the world famous Xi'an University of Physical Education, starting with Director of the Center for International Exchange, Qiang Lei, followed by Sanda Master Coach Zhao, several of his top fighters including Ba Pe Er from Inner Mongolia, Xin Ge Le and Wang Guan, Director of Chinese Martial Arts Institute and PhD of Chinese Martial Arts Ma Wenguo, as well as Ms. Xu Yin, Director of Taolu, Luo Xuelin, Master of Fan Tsu Chuan, Mr. Tang Jun Master of Mantis and Guo Yu, Master of Bajiquan.

In Urumqi I was honored to have the opportunity to interview young Master Ai Li, a faculty member at Urumqi Jingwu School, famed for having the best Wushu faculty in Xinjiang.

In Almaty, Kazakhstan I was honored to have the opportunity to interview Yuriy Vyalkov, Master of Vinh Xuan Dang Gia, sometimes called Vietnamese Buddha Style Wing Chung, whose Master is the legendary Nguyen Xuan Dang Nham based in Hanoi and also to have met and interviewed Shifu Mike Adams who teaches Chinese Wing Chun Kung Fu also in Almaty.

In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan I was honored to have the opportunity to interview Dmitrushenko Yuriy Vladimirovich, President of the Kung Fu Federation of Kyrgyz Republic.

In Tashkent, Uzbekistan I was honored to have the opportunity to interview Uzbekistan's Wushu Federation President Mr. Ganiev Ravshan.

After that I returned to Beijing to teach. During that time, I wrote a humorous story about Kung Fu and Diplomacy at a Kyrgyzstan International Bus Station on the way to Uzbekistan.

On my next vacation I started again where I left off, in Tashkent Uzbekistan with an interview with Master Arteom and the Tashkent Traditional Wushu Association and then a visit to the State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan.

This was followed by an interview with Young Master Anar Bugagli, who kindly guided me around Tashkent's City Center's Chorsu Bazaar. I was very fortunate in Tashkent to also find the International Caravanserai of Culture in Tashkent which is like a Silk Road archeological, art, book and history research center. I made many new friends there.

Then it was off on the road again to Ashgabat Turkmenistan and an interview with Wushu Federation Coach Yazmyrat Annamyradov & a visit to the National Turkmen Kurash (Traditional Wrestling) Training Center.

This was a relatively short trip and while back in Beijing I visited the Silk Road's Northeast Terminal Niujie Masjid, China's Islamic Association and highlighted martial art master Wang Zheng Yi, also known as Great Broadsword Wang the 5th.

On the next trip I was in Azerbaijan where I interviewed Azer Mallem, President of the Azerbaijan Wushu Federation & Azerbaijan Muay Thai/Thai Boxing Federation and learned about the Azerbaijani "Zorkana" "House of Force and Strength."

An all-night train took me to Georgia and I met with the Georgian Wushu Federation team at their Summer Camp in Kobuleti. There I interviewed the Federation President & Taolu Head Coach Giorgi Verulidze, their Sanda Head Coach Lasha Sumbulashvili and some of their very enthusiastic and talented Junior National Team Members.

Also, in Azerbaijan and Georgia I went swimming in the Caspian and Black Seas respectively and made many new friends.

After that it was back on buses to Turkey – the western terminus of the land Silk Roads. First, I spent a couple of wonderful days in Erzurum, a peaceful beautiful ancient city. In Ankara I interviewed Abdurrahman Akyuz, President of the Turkish Wushu Federation, learned about the fathomless histories of Ankara and time-traveled in the awesome Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. After that it was back on the bus and then a ferry boat across the Sea of Marmara. I arrived in Bursa – one of the true terminal endpoints of the Silk Roads and spent a few days there and then went on to Istanbul, the crucible between eastern and western civilizations for thousands of years.

Summary

I calculated the land distances I traveled on busses and trains and it came to about 10,347 kilometers, however if one flies a straight line from China to Istanbul its only about 7,000 kilometers.

The above journeys comprise Volume I of this series of books on the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour.

This first tour left an indelible impression on me as the rich tapestry of cultures and human experiences I was so fortunate to experience hugely broadened my view of the world.

This incredible journey across Asia recorded in Volume I, however was only the first part of my Silk Road journeys.

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Part 2 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Xi'an

The Kung Fu Masters of Xi'an and a Visit to Major Silk Road Landmarks



**Sifu Ma Wenguo Director of Chinese Martial Arts Institute
Xi'an University of Physical Education**

Xi'an Physical Education University – Interviews with Sanda Team Coach Zhao Xue Jun and Sifu Ma Wenguo Director of Chinese Martial Arts Institute and PhD of Chinese Martial Arts. Also visit to the Bell Tower of Xi'an, The Great Mosque of Xi'an, and Giant Goose Pagoda

I left Beijing on July 14th at 5:37 pm on a high-speed electric train with Xi'an as the destination arriving at 12:08 am. Hotel check-in, quite nice, like clockwork, all good.

Waking at 6, after a good hotel breakfast I headed off to Xi'an Physical Education University for a 9:00 am appointment and was greeted at the West Gate by Chao Yuan, a graduate of the Physical Education University, and an Assistant Teacher in the International School who also helped with translations.

He kindly guided me to the office of Professor Qiang Lei, Director of the Center for International Exchange. It was he I corresponded with for weeks before departing on my trip so I felt I knew him at least a little before getting there. For example, I'd found out we were both born in the Year of the Monkey and in Asia such a bond is something.

We sat down in his office for a short chat and he outlined the basic plan of the day for me which he had very kindly arranged. This plan included a visit to watch and interview their internationally acclaimed Sanda team and coaches, followed by a break during which time I could visit the essential Bell Tower, as well as the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Then, at 3:00 pm I could meet with the Director of the Chinese Martial Arts Institute and PhD of Chinese Martial Arts, Ma Wenguo and some of his senior staff.

This was a fortuitous beginning for me because the well-organized schedule indicated he understood my needs within the time limits my ambitious summer plan had allocated. Fortunately, I'd visited Xi'an a couple of years earlier, had a little background at least and some photos of more famous historical attractions like the Terracotta Warriors. One cannot see even 1% of Xi'an in a single day, but that's all I had on this trip, so I especially appreciated the help of Professor Qiang Lei.

After this short meeting Chao Yuan and I walked over to the large Sanda gym. Upon entering I immediately noticed that training was going full throttle, with about 35 students really working kicks and punches full blast reminiscent of the gladiatorial training of the past, sans weapons.

I was introduced to Coach Zhao Xue Jun who summarized the program for me and invited me to interview and photograph as I liked. He then pointed out three of the most illustrious of their team.

During that initial conversation with Coach Chao Yuan I found out that their Undergraduate Program at the university has around 6,000 students with another 1,000 graduate students enrolled.

Also, right off the bat I was told they had a fairly high percentage of ethnic minorities with students from Inner Mongolia being the largest of that diverse group.

Before interviewing the players, I found out that Master Zhao had been coaching for some 21 years and including the students of his students he was the coach, teacher and trainer for thousands of students.

I walked around and took photos, focusing on the most skilled, precise and powerful. After a short while Coach Zhao introduced me to Ba Pe Er from Inner Mongolia.

He reported having fought in 70 - 80 professional bouts and winning gold in 98% of them which didn't surprise me a bit having watched him work out of a while.

I also learned that he competes in MMA and kickboxing competitions. Knowing the grueling workout programs these young men endure for years, I usually ask about hobbies just to connect them with "normal" life as most people know it and found out that his hobbies include Tea Dao, and fishing; also that he is married and his wife is due to give birth in less than a week.

This gentleman is a success story in and outside of the Sanda world.



On right, Ba Pe Er from Inner Mongolia - Sanda Champion with more gold than Fort Knox - hobbies include tea and fishing

I was also curious how many major competitions their teams entered every year and was more than a little surprised to find out the number is 40 – 50. That’s a brutal schedule for any fight team.

I wasn’t terribly surprised to find out that the CKF (Chinese Kung Fu – training school for Professional Sanda fighters in Beijing) is heaving stocked with Zhao Xue Jun’s students at all levels, which makes sense given that it was he who started the first MMA program in China back in 2007.

Many of Beijing’s best Wushu training programs have instructors who are graduates of Xi’an Physical Education University, so highly is it esteemed in China and the world.

Next, I was introduced to handsome young heavyweight champion Xin Ge Le, who weighing in at 94 Kilos, towers above the rest of us from a height of 1.9 meters. So far, he’s participated in approximately 50 competitions winning “almost every one.” Though a heavyweight, he moves like a lightweight, fast, precise but with awesome power.

After that short interview I asked Coach Zhao what percentage of his fighters go on to become coaches themselves after their competition careers.

“About one third become coaches, another third goes into security work of some kind, like maybe executive security services, (high price and high-tech bodyguards for VIPS) and the other third goes into some other kind of professional work,” he said.

I was curious if a Physical Education University would have a massage program and if they did, did they practice with his fighters who obviously would have need of some serious sports massage after their hard training.

“Well, there is a sports massage program here,” he said, “but the departments are divided in such a way that no, we don’t get any free massages here.” He kind of laughed as he said this and I could appreciate his humor. I found a blind older Swedish massage lady when I was competing (Karate, Kung Fu, Taekwondo, Judo tournaments) a lot some 30 years ago, and that woman was a master that healed me so many times I couldn’t count. So, naturally I was curious if their fighters got that kind of care. “The budget here is tight,” Coach Zhao said. “Well, I hope they get good sports massage somewhere,” I added. Coach Zhao smiled again.

I asked if they actively sought sponsors (like Anta, Li Ning, Lenovo, Coca Cola, whatever) to help provide extra support services and funding for their team, but it seems they don’t at this time. I could see obviously these Sanda guys (and ladies!) here in this gym could make *much* more dramatic action TV commercials than Michael Jordon. (Sorry Michael, but this gym is filled with a variety-pack sized army of Bruce Lees!)

On the subject of money, Coach Zhao told me the highest paid Chinese Sanda fighters might get \$10,000 for winning a big competition, which we both know is a lot less than an American MMA fighter might get for a big match.

“China concentrates on the Olympic program so there’s little support for other professional and amateur sports.” China is not unique in regards to this and I heard it again and again in different countries. Still, their gym is quite nice and the trainer Coach Zhao is the best of the best. Their team is tough, young and talented. There is no limit to the kind of opportunities that await those who survive this rigorous program.

After this enlightening interview Coach Zhao introduced me to Sanda super-star Wang Guan from Liao Ning who I’m told has been offered a UFC contract, though at this time he’s still weighing his options.



Wang Guan from Liao Ning

We chatted for half an hour or so about things like sports medicine, nutrition and the future and parted friends. Soon I had to get to and back from the Bell Tower and a couple of other places before 3:00 pm for my interview with Master Ma Wenguo, Director of the Chinese Martial Arts Institute at Xi’an Physical Education University. And, for those who might not know, Xi’an is a big city with approximately 8 million people.

On the way out of the gym I took some photos with my new Sanda friends and then my friendly translator Chao escorted me to the street so I could hop a taxi and get to the true starting point of the Ancient and Modern Silk Road, the Xi'an Bell Tower!



Some of the best fighters in the world are forged into steel at Xi'an Physical Education University and yet, are still quite normal friendly guys!

The Xi'an Bell Tower



After the fall of the Tang Dynasty brought about by trends including the Huang Chao Rebellion (874-884) Chang'an (ancient Xi'an) decayed though continuing as a major trade center. It regained much of its former majesty in the Ming dynasty and the famous Bell Tower (*Zhong Lou*) was built in 1384. It is often used as the symbolic starting point of the Silk Road, though rather a late comer in historical terms.

The tower is located at what was and is the intersection of southern, northern, eastern and western roads that lead to the main gates of the City Wall.

Now-a-days it's in the very middle of a very busy huge intersection of streets but getting there is easy because of an underground walkway with shops and such. Inside the Bell Tower is like walking back in time and it's an incredible experience that should not be missed.

The crowded city seems to disappear within the thick ancient walls. Once inside an ancient sword collection first drew my attention, but soon I was lost in time moving around each fascinating floor before climbing to the next.

There is a legend about the tower connected with a huge underground snake that was believed to be the cause of earthquakes in the city. The bell consequently was designed to drive the snake out of China. Another old story goes that when an older bell of the Tang Dynasty, Jingyun stopped ringing it signaled the end of the Dynasty. Another smaller bell was cast and installed in the tower's northwestern corner. In any case the ringing of the bell early every morning called the shops to open and the beginning of work in the city. The first bell by the way is still around, located in the Xi'an Forest of Stone Steles Museum.

So, I had to go there, take some photos including of me with the famed Bell, soak in the atmosphere a while, and then move on to my next destination.

Great Mosque of Xi'an

The Great Mosque of Xi'an is the oldest most beautiful Masjid I have ever seen. The flowing gardens, the ancient buildings and so on are really, really old, not reconstructed like so many of the other religious buildings in China. Why? It has to do with history.

When Chinese were fighting to bring down the corrupted Qing Dynasty (the last imperial Dynasty in China), all the people finally gave up (due to the absolutely ruthless slaughters of huge populations by those dynastic rulers), except the Hui Muslims who kept fighting for 11 more years (until they were defeated in 1873). (Ref: *An Outline History of China* by Bai Shouyi, Foreign Languages Press, 2010 p. 407.)

As reward for their huge sacrifice, after the founding of the modern China in 1949, Muslims and Islamic properties were protected in a way not enjoyed by other people and religions in China. Hui Muslims for example have been exempt from the one child policy. It's a dramatic and glorious part of Chinese history most people miss.

Originally built in 742 the Great Masjid of Xi'an was founded during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) though most of the buildings were constructed during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). It is one of the world's most peaceful beautiful places in my opinion. It is timeless in a sacred way. I spent some time there and made friends with some older gentlemen who seemed timeless as the masjid itself. It was a powerful experience for me. It was, and still is an important stop for all Muslims traveling the Silk Road for the past 1,300 years.

The “old town” streets around the Masjid were most excellent! It was like being in a time machine going back a thousand years to an ancient town market-place. But after a short time, I had to leave and get back to the university. The first taxi driver didn't seem to take me to the right university. Luckily, I made a friend who helped guide me. We're still friends on WeChat. The Silk Roads are friendly places in my experience.

Back at Xi'an Sports University



Administration building at Xi'an Physical Education University

In the afternoon I met Chao again at the West Gate of the University and he took me to the second series of interviews there, this time with Master Professor Ma Wenguo, Director of the Chinese Martial Arts Institute at Xi'an Physical Education University and PhD of Chinese Martial Arts.

I was escorted into a large conference room and was surprised and delighted to find about eight Wushu masters waiting there for me.

Master Ma opened the interview by briefly introducing everyone and then said that at Xi'an Physical Education University the emphasis is on training and that their Wushu program focuses on Northwest Chinese Martial arts, which is a somewhat different curriculum than one might find in Beijing or in the South of China.

He said they focus on five main styles:

1. Fan Tzu - In the 1920s this style was brought from the Northeast to the Northwest. It focuses on short distance punches similar in some ways to Western Style Boxing.
2. Pi Gua Chuan (劈掛拳/劈掛掌) 。 Also from Hebei, this style uses more long-range techniques and focuses on open palm strikes.
3. Bajie Chuan (八極拳) Close in fighting using mainly hands and elbows, famed around China for its up-close explosive power.
4. Tongbi Chuan (通臂拳) Getting the drift of this style was a bit difficult, but pretty soon figured out this style resembles an animal form, specifically, gorilla!
5. Chuo Jiao (戳脚) Lower kicks, like kickboxing, the main style of Northwest martial arts

I also asked him about traditional styles vs. the “New Wushu” and he said they only teach traditional styles, but that the Wushu exercises were useful for basic training. “We use the whole body, and must learn to do that effectively,” he said. “‘Wushu’ is a new word, he said, but added that “Wu Lin,” (武林 martial art circles) are ancient indeed in China.

He talked about different martial art styles of five provinces, like Shanxi, and Gansu (“Closing hands style” of Fengshou Chuan), and the martial arts of Ningxia, (so-called “Muslim Kung Fu,” Xi Liangzha). This was interesting to me because his family name “Ma” is the most famous name associated with Muslim martial arts in China. This Fengshou Chuan was he said started by General Ma Chao during the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history (and yes, that’s the same family name of the gentleman I was interviewing, Ma Wenguo).

He also talked about “Red Boxing” (Hong Chuan) and three kinds of cudgel (a very popular weapon in the northwest he said), long, medium and short used for chopping, sweeping and thrusting. He also talked about five kinds of spears. Using some body language, he illustrated how different weapons movements could be used for standing fighting as compared to fighting on horseback.

Master Ma also talked about history and mentioned that some of China’s best traditional martial arts and books were better preserved in other countries.

We talked about Halberds and Yan Yue Dao and General Yu Da You of the Ming Dynasty, as well as the monks Zhong Qin and Hong Zhuan.

Master Ma mentioned that Xi’an Sports University has 29 members on its Wushu demonstration team.

He said there were about 500 students in the Taolu program. Other martial arts programs at the university include Sanda, Taekwondo, boxing, wrestling (Shuai Jiao), Muay Thai, and Karate, but the emphasis he added is on classical Chinese martial arts.

After this Master Ma opened the conversation more broadly and we talked with the distinguished faculty there following more introductions. I found out for example that Miss Xu Yin (wearing a red shirt in photos) is the Director of the Taolu program, and Luo Xuelin (in black) is the primary coach for Fan Tsu Chuan Boxing (literally 'Rotating fist'); Mr. Tang Jun specializes in Mantis and Guo Yu, though teaching at another university is the master of Bajiquan.

It was/is my impression that Master Ma Wenguo is master of them all.

I asked Master Ma, what students and other faculty call him, as there are so many titles and honorifics in China it's sometimes difficult to know what to call someone. Did, I asked, people usually call him "Sifu?" "No," he said. "In Japan and Korea titles and formalities are very important, and it was that way in the old China, but in the New China people like to deemphasize all that so people usually call me 'Ma Laoshi,' which simply means "Teacher Ma." A humble title for such an internationally acclaimed master! Anyways, I hope he doesn't mind me calling him: Master Ma, for that's certainly what he is. Talking about his resume he mentioned that he's done seminars and other guest teaching in more than 20 countries over the years, and in some cases in Western countries has been paid \$1,000 per hour for teaching which doesn't surprise me in the least because this gentleman is the real deal, connected to the most ancient of the ancient martial arts while simultaneously being a modern man who happens to speak English fluently and knows the world.

After this we all went outside and the masters of Xi'an's most illustrious Kung Fu training university so very, very kindly demonstrated some small parts of their encyclopedic knowledge of the Taolu of their respective arts. Watching it was beauty to behold and I only wish I'd brought a video recorder. But as it was, I got some fantastic photos and will remember that experience forever. It was an awesome honor to witness and I'm deeply appreciative to them all for their time and effort.



Great Wushu Masters at Xi'an Sports Uni Left to right Luo Xue Lin, Guo Lu, (writer G. Brundage – not a great master!), Master Ma Wenguo, Miss Xu Yin and Mr. Tan Jun

In the evening I met my new friend from earlier in the day and we visited the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda watching the sun set over the repository of Silk Road traveler Xuan Zang's great journey. She asked me to choose an English name for her and I thought "Diana" would be nice. We still chat from time to time on WeChat.

My visit to Xi'an was enormously successful and I really have to give special thanks to Qiang Lei for organizing a fantastic day, Ma Wenguo with his encyclopedic knowledge of Martial arts and his legendary faculty, Coach Zhao and all his fantastic Sanda team members.

Many thanks also to my on-campus guide and translator Chao Yuan for an excellent introduction to Wushu Kung Fu at Xi'an Physical Education University and Diana my off-campus guide and friend. This was a most excellent start to my Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour. I plan to come back here. It's a beautiful place with kind hearted, good people who happen to be true masters of Northwest Chinese styles of Kung Fu and hard hitting Sanda.

Part 3 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship - Northwest China



The Flaming Mountains of Xuanzang and Sun Wu Kong fame, the Kung Fu of loving kindness, Motorbike Kung Fu and stolen Buddhas

July 17, 18, 19 2015 – Days 3 -5 of this Silk Road Adventure

Introduction

I arrived in Turpan (locals call it “Turupan”) yesterday morning around 5:00 am at the train station which I found out is at least 40 km. from the city. As in many countries there were quite a number of taxi drivers trying to get people to take their taxis into town but this Silk Road traveler tries to avoid the lazier (more expensive) route when possible and eventually got in a big white van with six other riders for a cheap price to the hotel where I had reservations.

This was to be my second big stop on my quest to find Kung Fu on the Silk Road but I wasn't terribly hopeful about my prospects here because there was absolutely nothing on the Internet about Kung Fu in this town though it has a fascinating history and legacy.

Turpan is on the North Silk Road, a famous oasis in the desert mentioned by Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang and is the fourth lowest point on the earth's surface due to an earth-plate fault line. Turpan is entirely below sea level. During the Cenozoic age the fault was deformed by the collision of the Indian and Eurasian earth-plates. In a further deformation the flaming mountains were created along with the Turpan Volcano. In the basin created by those plate shifts the very beautiful Ayding Lake was also created.

Besides the geological strangeness of the place, there's also the fact that it's an oasis in the desert created by a river/canal system from the Tian (sky/heaven) Mountains (Tianshan).

Turpan is one of the wonders of the world. The water in the river is as cold as glacier water. But this area is one of the hottest places on earth. It is awesomely beautiful, and equally deadly for those not prepared.

And then there's the "real story" about the creation of Flaming Mountains. Once upon a time the holy monk Xuanzang was on his way to India to get some Buddhist Sutras and his way was blocked by the Flaming Mountains which had been created by the naughty stone monkey Sun Wu Kong who while making trouble up in heaven disrupted the octagonal furnace for making elixir, resulting in several bricks falling off and down to earth and crash, bang, boom, that's how the Flaming Mountains were created. Yes, you heard it here first (unless you've read the classic Chinese novel series, "Journey to the West.")

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that this place is hot, very, very hot with temperatures going up to around 50 degree centigrade, or around 122 Fahrenheit. And, that's where I was yesterday, at the foot of flaming mountain riding a camel around just for the heck of it with my slightly insane local taxi driver. The red rippled mountains did flicker in the heat waves above the desert floor as if they were flaming. It was so hot I thought I was flaming too.



Now your average person might be slightly curious why I'd be doing that when I was supposed to be looking for Kung Fu schools. The fact is everyone I talked to in Turupan town assured me with absolute certainty that there are no Kung Fu schools here, though I did find a Taekwondo school. And since I'd already paid for two nights at the hotel, I figured "what the heck!" Let's go ride a camel!

After that thrill we stopped briefly at the iconic Imin Minaret.

It was built in 1777-1778 during the reign of Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong (1735-1796, and yes, the same Qianlong that supported the North Shaolin Monastery on Panshan) to honor a local Turpan general Emin Khoja who joined the Uyghurs with the Qing to protect them from the Dzungars, or something like that.



Imin Minaret



Writer chillin' in the Imin Minaret

Examining the photo immediately above pundits have debated whether I was gawking stupidly at the hole in the ceiling of the Imin Minaret in Turpan or contemplating the divine.

In either case it was profoundly cool, literally and figuratively. Then we stopped at a market and bought some raisins, another major export of Turpan. It was totally lovely.



Back at the hotel around 7:30 pm I noticed it was still sunny and was a bit curious as to why. Sundown should have already happened according to my calculations. So, I checked the internet for Maghrib (sunset) prayer times in Turpan and found it was 7:38, but I knew that was impossible because the sun was still up. What a mystery!

So I walked to the local Masjid just a few hundred meters from my hotel, entered, said: “Assalamu Alaikum” to everyone, and tried to ask about this strange thing in my best Putonghua (Mandarin), but wasn’t sure if they could understand me, because my Putonghua isn’t that great, and Putonghua is their second language too because 70% of the population here are indigenous Uyghur people who have their own languages related to Tibetan because as everyone knows they seized Turpan from the Tibetans in the year 803.

Imagine this conversation:

Q. What time is Maghrib?

A. 7:38

Q. But the sun is shining!

A. Yes.

Q. But Maghrib is at sunset!

A. Yes.

What does someone say to that? Traveling is sometimes highly entertaining!

(Maybe my watch was wrong? Perhaps I was just tired. Who knows?)

After some brief introductions they invited me into the Masjid where we sat in a circle. There were about 10 old men, most but not all with beards sitting in this ancient dimly lit Masjid, softly chanting at least parts of prayers and each had a small collection of small stones which they passed one by one from the right hand to the left and when the right hand was empty they poured all the stones back into the right and repeated the process all in rhythm with the prayers. The Imam sat in front leading this slightly unusual ritual. It was cool, calm and soothing I have to say. I did my best to follow along. Though I didn't know most of the prayers in Arabic, I've memorized a few so I could follow some of them and just sort of followed along with the rest.

Then there was a regular prayer of some sort, but different from I've usually performed. Maybe they're Shiite(?) I wondered.

After all this the old Imam got up and started giving money to some of the old men and I figured maybe they were poor or something. He also gave me five Yuan (about 90 cents), probably figuring I might be poor so better safe than sorry.

When the old men had mostly left the prayer hall, I gave the old Imam 100 RMB, which he clearly didn't want, but I insisted as it was after Maghrib (even if the sun was still up) on the last day of Ramadan, a month when good Muslims are supposed to help the poor and most of the gentlemen looked pretty poor to me.

Outside some of the elders invited me to eat dinner with them in the humble little shack-like building across the courtyard, but I begged off, knowing that I needed some real massive food like a whole chicken, mountains of rice, forests of vegetables and so on and didn't want to eat all their food before their astonished eyes.

So instead I bid my farewells and was off to get my feast on, which I fortunately found just a few hundred meters up the road at an outdoor food stall clinging precariously on the side of the street at a very crowded intersection.

After all that I was really tired having spent most of the last few days on trains and not having slept more than an hour or two during that time.

This morning I woke up, had the Spartan breakfast they offer at this otherwise fine hotel in Turpan, and started walking down the street again looking for a taxi to take me to the one Taekwondo school I found on the Internet. Walking down this little street I met one of the men from the night before, named Abdullah. He was certainly a very kindly gentleman and he invited me into a house right across the narrow country style road where we all sat down and had tea, fruit and pastries, as it was *Eid al-Fitr*, the biggest holiday on the Islamic calendar. This was a very heartwarming experience as they treated me like an honored guest in a wonderful family environment in a courtyard of a very nice medium sized Uyghur style house.

After half an hour they invited me to another house just a five-minute walk away where we sat down again; I think this was Abdullah's house. At this point I started to see him in a different light than I had last night. This gentleman is highly respected, a patriarch, and truly loved by many, not just some guy at a Masjid praying. In fact, I found out he has four adult sons and many grandchildren, as Uyghurs they never had to follow the one-child-only law.

After a while I showed them copies of my Kung Fu Tai Chi magazines, took some pictures and did some Yoga stretches with a little boy of about four, which impressed them pretty much.

Then I did some kicks and punches with him too and helped him do some kicks, blocks and punches.

During this time a few other families stopped by and quite a crowd was forming so the boy and I stopped and just joined the party, drinking tea, eating fruit, etc.



Abdullah (center left) and family



Abdullah has a musical nature too.

About an hour later they invited me outside. We got into a rather expensive new air-conditioned car. It was getting quite hot, so I thought “Why not?” having of course no idea where we were going, but hoping I could get them to take me to the Taekwondo school.

Then it occurred to me. Sometimes I am such a ridiculous robot! Why? Several reasons. One, this was Eid! The biggest holiday of the year. Second, I was having fun! This was like having a family again. I haven’t had a family for 20 years. I could feel loving kindness of these people. It was really wonderful. I was happy. It’s a genuine peaceful feeling.

After a while we drove to another house, were warmly greeted and all sat down and had some fruit, lamb, pastries and tea. There was storytelling and jokes, a lot of laughter and genuine warm happy feelings all around. It was so nice for me to feel in some way part of a family, a big family, in fact a family that seemed to just keep growing. This is normal Muslim culture by the way on *Eid al-Fitr*, but the background and setting, Turpan, in an oasis in the desert, within one of the world’s most unique and unchanged cultures, was quite different.

After about 45 minutes there we got back in the car and were joined by a new big white SUV and more relatives including three other distinguished patriarchs and for the next seven hours or so we visited one family household after another of what turned out to be a huge extended family of well over a hundred people. Though each visit was similar, each was very unique and different too.



For example, each visit started and ended with a very short prayer lasting about five seconds. They're not overly religious, but seemed concerned to at least "touch the bases." We did however stop to pray Zuhur (noon) and Asr (mid-afternoon) prayers. Alhamdullilah! (Thank God.)

Fortunately, somewhere around the middle of this caravan express a large burly fellow joined us after visiting his family. Named A'dul (emphasis on the second syllable) this fellow had lived in Malaysia for some time and spoke reasonably good English, though he was a bit out of practice since he hadn't used it in a while. This was a big relief for me because, as mentioned earlier my Putonghua is pretty limited and their Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) is heavily accented too; OK downright strange, though it's a tossup as to who's Mandarin was stranger.

This rolling party made me feel so good though. What a kind, loving and inclusive culture! Some houses were fabulous, big and beautiful with courtyards and air conditioners, while others were quite humble and small, but there was no difference in the kindness and caring shown by all.

Throughout the day I also quietly compared their culture to so many others I've met and I've got to say it's amazing how polite and sincere everybody including their young people were. There were no phone addicts and I saw only one TV. This was/is an ancient culture completely intact in the modern world. How beautiful. It vaguely reminded me of a summer I spent living (and working) with a farmer family outside Barcelona. Hot work under the sun, but peaceful and kind people.

Another unusual thing. On the outside some "row style" houses which looked like all the rest, were made with mud bricks plastered over with a mud/straw mix. This resulted in a tan colored kind of lumpy outer wall, but on the inside, some were like palaces, really expensive, beautiful and modern, except no TVs. I was told by one of Abdullah's family that those mud and straw brick houses were much cooler in summer and warmer in winter than normal brick and concrete homes and apartments.

I noted that someone might walk or drive by and think: “What shabby hovels!” never realizing that inside some were mansions, with extended families that were born, lived, loved, worked, and died there happily and comfortably generation after generation.

But most houses we visited were large “stand alone” houses with a front gate, buildings on the back and sides and a courtyard in the middle. Several had grape vines growing on lattice structures forming a kind of living ceiling either over the courtyard or in adjoining gardens.

There is an Eden-like feeling in an oasis. Turpan by the way is most famous for its exceptionally sweet delicious grapes. This is better than what the naughty Stone Monkey King created in nearby “Flaming Mountains.”

I also learned that most of the people here make their money either from grapes, the major local industry, or the oil business as there is plenty of oil in Xinjiang.

By far the most valuable thing I learned is that the Uyghur culture is a truly loving one with close huge extended family relationships that is open to outsiders and willing to share their homes and happiness without being asked. They knew I was travelling alone and figured I needed to share a day, especially this very special day of *Eid al-Fitr* with them. And, I have to say, it was one of the best and most meaningful days of my life in spite of the burning hot weather and being a stranger in a strange land. I didn’t like a stranger, I felt at home, which was really something great.

Another interesting thing, at one of the last half dozen stops or so, just as everyone was leaving, one young boy of maybe eight or something let loose with a flurry of kicks and punches that looked pretty good to me. Very good!

So, is there Kung Fu in Turpan? Maybe!

About 6:30 I have to admit I was getting tired and amazingly enough it was just in time as the visits were finished. It's always difficult to end such a day, but I bid farewells, came back to this here fine hotel and started typing... Tomorrow is another day, with a plan to visit Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves...

The Taekwondo schools? Well, nobody answered the phone and it was so hot I was later to find out in Urumqi, people generally don't train in the extreme heat.

So, call it a good day; no, call it a great day(!) because I have a new family and love and respect for an ancient culture thriving in the modern world.

Is there Kung Fu in Turpan? Well, Kung Fu in Chinese really means "high level skill," discipline, art, and mastery.

These people have mastered the art of life in my opinion, and as friends no one could ask for more. What martial arts they might or might not practice; who knows? All I felt was love and kindness, and that's enough for me, the most excellent and powerful Kung Fu of all.



Sunday July 19th Turpan: Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves and a Bus Ride to Urumqi

I woke early as usual, did my stretches and 1,000 kicks and punches like usual, well almost, then had some vegetables, tofu and an egg at the complimentary hotel breakfast place. After that I went back to typing the Xi'an story and then around 10:30 started the journey to and from Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves.

To see these ancient caves properly one must remember that the Silk Road that followed along the foot of the Flaming Mountains I'd visited the day before started around the second century BCE due to the fact that the Han Empire wanted trade and allies.

So, they sent Emissary Zhang Qian west, twice because he got kidnapped the first time and didn't escape for years.

Perhaps his 10-year captivity wasn't that bad because he married a Xiongnu wife and had a son, thus gaining the trust of that particular tribe. But that's really part of another amazing story.

Anyways, the chiseling work at Bezeklik 1,000 Buddha Monastery started around 400 ACE with most of the work completed about a hundred years later. It is believed that most of the work was done by an ancient people called the "Gokturks" that ruled the area starting in the mid-6th century, and the Uyghurs that took over in the middle of the 9th Century, so yeah, they've been dominating the region for about a 1,000 plus years.

Back at the hotel I asked the security guards at the front gate if there were any taxis around and they said no, just as one pulled up driven by a Han Chinese woman. I asked if she could take me to *Yi Chien Fo*, (Thousand Buddhas) and she said yes, then “in a while.” Then she drove off. I waited about half an hour in the growing blast furnace heat, then hitched a ride with a young man with a motorbike. He agreed to take me there for 100 RMB, which is a bit pricy for a 30 km. ride, but I was stuck so I said OK. And off we went, with him driving on all sides of the street and sidewalks when available, weaving in and out of traffic, while simultaneously talking on the phone and smoking a cigarette as the scorching hot sun-soaked July air blasted us both. But I was confident in his skills as I’d seen a lot of very young boys riding motorbikes around and knew he’d only survived this long because he was good at it. This was his Kung Fu.

After about 10 minutes he/we stopped and he told me we were going to visit a grape farm. I said, “No,” we’re going to 1000 Buddha caves. He said “wait,” a friend of his with a car was going to come and give me a ride. So, reluctantly I waited. He asked for 20 Yuan which I gave him and he ordered tea and beef noodles. Around 20 minutes later his friend did show up and off we went.

But first they really tried to get me to visit a grape farm. I assured them I’d visited a grape farm the day before. Yes, it was very lovely. But I really want to go to 1000 Buddha Caves. Then go back to my hotel to pick up my backpack. After that I had to get to the bus station before 6:00. So, finally they relented and off we went.

When we got to Flaming Mountains, they started to pull off the road and I asked why. The driver said the motorbike guy told him I was going to Flaming Mountains. Yes, these young men have quite a sense of humor; the spirit of Sun Wu Kong lives on here!

After some breathtaking scenery we got to the sacred caves. I asked them to wait and that I'd pay them well if they did. And, the driver agreed.

I got the ticket, and there was about a 500-meter walk from the parking lot through the desert before the small entrance ahead, but on the right, I noticed that over the edge of the cliff the Tianshan River could be seen about three km. away. So, I bounded off the dusty old road across the burning desert to the edge of the cliff and took some shots, knowing that Silk Road caravans probably just followed the ancient river pathway and their journey was probably nice, as there were trees along the edge of the flood river basin. At some times in history it was undoubtedly a roaring huge monster of a river, but now it's a small very rapidly moving small river with very clean water.



Very cool! Living history!

I walked back to the old road, entered the gate, had my ticket appropriately scrutinized, and started to walk all in and around the ancient caves, most of which have been restored and protected with doors and locks.



All of the Buddhas have been removed from their caves, but there were some fabulous paintings of Buddhas on the ceilings and walls of “some” of them. In some caves the Buddhas were missing!

Where did the fabulous artwork go?

According to a sign there at Bezeklik 100 Buddha Caves titled: “Cave 20,” “In 1905 a German named A.V. LeCog cut off all the murals (and) carried them away to Berlin. Most of them were destroyed during the Second World War.”

Unfortunately, I was forbidden from taking pictures of what remained and even warned it was a criminal offence by a security guard.

However, there was one cave with really deteriorated art and no security, so I turned the flash off and took a couple of photos of the few Buddha paintings that have survived the last 1600 years there, smiling placidly down from the ceiling upon which their material forms seem to eternally reside, even if somewhat faded. In some cases, it's possible some were also defaced during the Cultural Revolution. That unfortunately was not an uncommon thing.



(For much better, martial art rich cave art see my visit to Mogao Caves in Gansu Province, featured in Vol. 2.)

After some timeless time, I doubled back and reviewed everywhere I could go, which wasn't far actually, maybe 400 meters at the most, then knowing my trustworthy driver was waiting, bid the spirits of the place "farewell," walked back to the parking lot to find the taxi not there. Fortunately, I'd gotten his phone number, called him, and he said he'd return. It only took about an hour, there in that furnace-like desert. During my wait I'd made friends with some teenagers who had motorbikes, but found out their bikes weren't working too well and so had no choice but to wait. Eventually the driver did show up, minus his two friends, but with his two-year-old son strapped in the front seat and soundly asleep.

Then, it was a race back to my hotel to pick up my backpack, loaded mostly with food. We stopped for a moment at “my” masjid, bid my farewells, rushed to the bus station and I bought a ticket.

The bus leaves every half hour, but the last one leaves at 6:00 so I was quite relieved I’d gotten there early, around 4:15. I bought a ticket for 4:30 even though I’d missed lunch, so excited was I to see Urumqi.

The three-hour ride to Urumqi was uneventful really, except the scenery was as usual quite extraordinary. For a long while the road followed the river forming sort of a long, long oasis in the desert. Also, for a while I saw large beautiful soft hills maybe 20 kilometers away, and giant mountains with snow covered peaks in the background, maybe 50 or 75 kilometers away, but following Murphy’s immutable laws there were telephone wires all over the place making getting a good picture quite impossible. There was a grandfather with his 5-year-old granddaughter sitting next to me on the bus, so I took out my notebook and showed her some Bugs Bunny cartoons which she really liked.

Before arriving in Urumqi there was police check and we all had to get off the bus under the cautious eyes of soldiers, showed our IDs, got “wanded” and bags X-rayed.

Getting to Urumqi was nice because it’s a big, clean, modern city. I didn’t realize I’d missed such a thing, but it was pleasant none-the-less and not so hot either. The first thing I did was get a delicious dinner of kebabs, with rice and beef. It was great.

Part 4 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Urumqi

Urumqi Jingwu School – Interview with faculty member young Master Ai Li and research on other Kung Fu schools in Urumqi



July 20, Monday

Today my goals are simple, visit the very famous Urumqi Jingwu School and then another one I'd found on the internet if possible, but nobody had answered the phone so I was a bit skeptical if this second school was still in operation or perhaps off for the summer.

Here in China many of the best martial arts schools are regular schools with reading, writing, math and so on, but in addition they have extraordinary Wushu teachers that produce some of the finest martial artists in China (like “June First Middle School” in Beijing which Jet Li attended).

Jingwu School is one such school. This much I knew before I got there.

I had found a description and address on the Internet in Chinese which was not so difficult, but finding the school itself was a bit tricky. I’m including a photo of the main street location to assist those who might wish to visit, as it’s about half way up a small road off the main street on the left. If one can’t read Chinese it would be easy to miss and if one can’t speak Chinese either it might be impossible to find. Even the taxi driver found this location to be a bit challenging. He’d heard of it of course, but had never been there.

I figured the students would be on vacation, and right I was, but luckily, I met young Master Ai Li, a graduate of guess where(?) yep, Xi’an Physical Education University. He is one of 15 Kung Fu Masters teaching at Urumqi Jingwu School. He must be good because this school produces some of Xinjian’s best Tai Ji, Taolu and Sanda competitors. The school has some 300 students and most excel in one style or another of martial arts.

Asked what his specialty is, Ai Li said: “Shaolin!” What inspired him to get into martial arts? His first answer: Chan Long (Jackie Chan) followed by Li Lianjie (Jet Li).

Like most masters Ai Li started young at age 9, and racked up an impressive series of wins during his 35+ competitions, bringing home the gold in most.

Though he looks like a fighter, and probably is he prefers Taolu competition with his favorite being “*Zui Chuan*.”

Zui Chuan generally refers to “drunken styles,” which is somewhat contradictory given that he’s a Uyghur, which around here means that he’s Muslim which means that he doesn’t drink, but this is China where the oddest contradictions happily coexist alongside each other, so what would one expect?

I’m just starting to figure out the unique ethnic makeup of Urumqi which consists of 13% Uyghur and a whopping 76% Han ethnic group with the reason being that the Qing Dynasty (the last imperial Dynasty, 1644-1912) promulgated a genocide on the primarily Buddhist Zunghars (Oolod Mongols) and imported primarily (Muslim) Han Huis and Turkic Muslims to resettle the lands they depopulated, while the Turkic Muslim culture in particular was actively promoted. The Qing were not entirely successful in their efforts however, as I have done exhaustive research on trying to get a cup of coffee around here and have found none, which would be unthinkable for a true Turkic person as their unique method of brewing coffee is around 400 years old and world famous.

And, if that doesn’t get your head spinning even without a drop of wine, nothing will. When coffee was first introduced to Europe, they called it “Turkish Wine,” strange but true.

Anyways, the head master of the Wushu program at Jingwu School is Mr. Liu Zhang Liang, who was trained in Shandong, and the school incorporates elementary, middle and high schools.

I spent about half an hour interviewing Ali. Then we took a few photos and soon I had to go. I wanted to go to another school called “Chai Jing Xuan Traditional Martial Arts School.”

It took a while, but with the help of a tall enthusiastic and intelligent high school young man named Cai Jing Cheng I found the right address. But apparently the school had moved.

Fortunately, I met a kind and helpful calligraphy master there who gave me the correct address and name of the primary master, but unfortunately, he wasn't available at that time. No matter. Why? Well, again this is China and disadvantages can be turned into advantages at the drop of a hat, and instead I got the name and address of another school too, and the name and correct address of the bus station I needed to get to tomorrow or the next in order to move on to Kazakhstan. During our time there the kind calligrapher served tea in the traditional manner which means always piping hot, cup everfull and quite sweet and delicious even without sugar. One does get a little buzz from this and it's a fun way to socialize.

After that my new high school friend had to take off, while I had a most delicious dinner of chicken and rice, before returning to my hotel. Consulting my list of Kung Fu schools in Urumqi, I decided I had to stay another night. *Se est la vie*, or in Chinese: *Zhe shi shenghuo*!

When I got back to the hotel, I tried to take the memory card out of my camera and realized it wasn't there. I'd left it in my notebook computer the night before. Thus, I had no pictures from the one martial arts school I did find. If I were my own employee, I'd have docked myself a day pay for that blunder, but since I'm my only employee it didn't seem practical so instead decided to go back tomorrow.

With a population of around 3 million people Urumqi is only a medium sized city by Chinese standards and I have to say I love this city even though I've only been here a little more than 24 hours.

It's modern and clean, very diverse, has splendidly creative and integrated cultures and architectural styles, and generally combines traditional with upbeat contemporary very nicely.

In addition, the taxi drivers are much more likely to charge a reasonable price and actually take you where you're going than some other cities I've visited.

This morning, in fact, one “unofficial taxi” spent half an hour finding the Urumqi Jingwu School for me, finally came very close, dropped me off and refused to take any money. That’s never happened to me before. I like this city!

July 21, Tuesday

Traveling like this involves so many details. For example, I’d heard the night before the bus to Almaty is better than the train so after my early morning stretches and 1,000 kicks and punches, and well, breakfast of course, I had to find the International Bus Station and get a ticket for tomorrow. Sounds easy enough, right? Well, recall this is a foreign country... First, I had to find the right name for the International Bus Station in Chinese, because a city this size is going to have a lot of bus stations. So, I found it in Chinese on Baidu.com, the most popular search engine here, copy and pasted it to a word document, increased the font size to 25 then took a picture of it with my phone.

[Only a couple of years later there were excellent GPS phone APPs. That made traveling in China much easier!]

With the name of the International Bus Station in Chinese in hand I went to the front desk of the hotel and asked them to find the phone number and address. Luckily, it’s only about 500 meters away. Then, in my best Putonghua I asked the hotel clerk to find out if I could buy a ticket for tomorrow, today. Yes!

So, off to buy a ticket. It turned out the International Bus Station building is off to the left of the regular long-distance bus station. But, the building on the left turned out to be a rather nice looking bathhouse so I was a bit confused till some rather tall Kazakh guys came along and showed me that I had to go up a little street to the left of the bathhouse to find the International bus station.

During this short walk he asked me why I wanted to go to Kazakhstan, and I told him I was working for Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine. He then told me he likes martial arts and asked me to kick his hand which he held up around shoulder high. Luckily, I'd already stretched out so I did a turning kick followed by a spinning kick, which seemed to please him and his friend and we arrived at the International Bus Station quite good friends, I think.

Got the ticket, off for second breakfast at a small roadside Halal restaurant consisting of rice with some little carrots and green something, with delicious beef. Super second breakfast!

Back at the hotel I got a call from new friend/translator Cai Jing Cheng and it turned out he was free for the day, so about an hour later he showed up and off we went back to Urumqi Jingwu School.

This time we spent quite a while with Ai Li because he knows just about everything about Urumqi and thanks to new friend Cai, I could communicate better with him. Also, I had my HP notebook with me, so I asked about other martial arts school in Urumqi, calling one after another when possible, but... almost nobody answered. A couple of schools said they weren't training now because it was too hot.

On the bright side, I found out from Ai Li there is a real Tai Chi Chuan master that lives about two hours away named Chen Jia Gou. He's highly respected and quite famous so Cai called him and I got his address in Pinyin (the phonetic spelling for Putonghua - Mandarin Chinese), phone number and QQ number (one of China's most popular social media venues kind of like Facebook).

I also found that the Executive Security/Body Guard Company that holds Sanda classes daily in Urumqi is doing well and the contact information is correct, but I also found out from Cai they were also a two-hour drive away.

Why were both schools so far away when they had Urumqi addresses? Well, the answer lies in a geographic restructuring that happened in China (and incidentally South Korea) back in the 1970s. For some reason government administrators decided to cluster groups of small towns and call them all by the largest town's name. Over time the central towns grew into major cities, but still are spread over huge geographic areas. I've been to several other Chinese (and Korean) cities consisting of five or six small towns grouped together over several hundred kilometers and called a city. Everyone accepts this so it must be OK. Urumqi is spread over seven urban and suburban districts and over 11,000 square kilometers. That's why I didn't particularly feel like going to visit the Tai Chi master or the Executive Security/Sanda school. Or, maybe I'm just lazy. Who knows?

It was however very nice sitting around Ai Li's dorm room (no air conditioning though) with him and Cai, chatting the afternoon away figuring out the martial arts scene in Urumqi. He showed us some videos of his Taolu competitions and his work with the spear and other weapons was impressive. He's got a good gymnastics background as well, probably from some training in the "New Wushu" carried along from the 1980s. But he like other martial arts people I've met in China are proud that they mainly practice traditional Chinese Kung Fu.



He was quite confident that his school is the only real martial arts and Kung Fu school in this part of the city though he said there were a few small Taekwondo schools scattered around. He acknowledged that they might not really train regularly during the hottest part of summer, explaining why I couldn't find regular classes anywhere in town.

I retook some photos of him and also got him to share some photos from his computer of Urumqi Jingwu School classes with me.

So, this visit was more productive than yesterdays and when we left, I felt quite happy I had a new friend in Urumqi and a deeper understanding of the city and martial arts therein. Maybe not having the memory card in my camera yesterday was a good thing!



Young Master Ai Li

Back at the hotel I had dinner, made reservations for a hotel in Almaty Kazakhstan while chatting in Chinese (characters) on Weixin ("WeChat," the most popular social networking app in China) with a Uyghur that lives here in Urumqi, and wrote to one of my two contacts in Almaty in anticipation of my next adventure, and oh yes of course typed up a rough draft of this here fine story!

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Part 5 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Almaty, Kazakhstan

*The Road to Almaty and an interview with Shifu Mike Adams
who teaches Wing Chun and Tai Chi Chuan*



Introduction

July 24 – 26, 2015 Kazakhstan is a very large country and the world's largest landlocked nation. It borders Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It has extensive, huge reserves of oil, gas, uranium, chromium, lead, zinc, copper, coal, iron, gold, and diamonds and that's not all.

The list goes on. In the future, Kazakhstan may become one of the richest countries in the world, a new Saudi Arabia, or something like that.

With a total population of slightly less than 16 million it's a nation with lots of room for growth.

In 2009, 63.1% of the population was ethnic Kazakhs, with ethnic Russians representing another 23.7% of the total. Almaty is along the direct line of the North Silk Road.

The Road

It was a pretty and rugged road from Urumqi to Almaty here consisting of a 27-hour bus ride starting at 7:00 pm in Urumqi with lots of stops along the way. The ride was on a “sleeper bus” that had bunk beds instead of seats.

We stopped for a while in the middle of the night for dinner which was great because I’m usually hungry when I travel. I’d made some friends on the bus and we had a great meal.



When I woke around 6:00 am I was greeted by very magical green mountains with fabulous skyway bridges above me believe it or not, and long elegant tunnels that boggled the mind. It was right out of a science fiction movie. I also saw real cowboys tending herds of cows and sheep in lush deep green mountain valleys.

It seemed idyllic, right out of a story book. Western Xinjiang is amazing. Around noon we encountered the border crossing that was rather hot and crowded, but I have to say the Kazakh Immigration officer was efficient, polite and professional which is always a relief.

That took till three or so, and was followed by seven more hours driving along a rather bumpy, twisting turning road. For fans of roller coasters, it would be a blast. We arrived in Almaty around 10 pm.

Basically, I had two “hookups” on Kung Fu before I got here. One was through the Olympic Committee which is in charge of sports, including Kung Fu, Taekwondo, etc. and the other was a semi-retired American expat living the dream here in Almaty I met on the Internet researching Kung Fu in Almaty.

But, before diving into the interviews, it seems nice to put a little more background context on this story. With a population around two million Almaty is the big city, and riding in the taxi going to the hotel that first night I noticed it sure looks modern with lots of expensive cars driving around and all the major international brand names of virtually everything available in large ultra-modern malls. This is no “backwoods” place; it’s a prosperous modern city in most respects. But, that said, not a whole lot of people speak English and if one wants for example to read signs for shops, restaurants and menus it’s a good idea to brush up on ones’ Cyrillic, as Kazak language and Russian are the big two spoken here. English comes in a distant third.

It's not the capital city either. Astana is, far, far too the north and it would take several extra days to get up there and then back on this north Silk Road again, whereas Almaty was/is along the North Silk Road main line.

The majority of people here are at least nominally Muslim, but one is far more likely to see men and women wearing shorts than in Urumqi which is a bit more conservative. I even saw one- or two-men wearing tank top shirts, so it’s pretty liberal at least in some respects. But most important to me, it was a major Silk Road stop and has thousands of years of history.

Oh! I feel compelled to mention one other “first impression” of Almaty. This is the first time in many years I saw a lot of muscle cars and the first time in years I’ve heard a lot of wheels squealing. These guys love their cars.

First this morning I went out to buy some fruit and there met a nice lady named “Aika” that speaks English also buying fruit. I found out she’s a Graduate student specializing in English and Turkish and hopes to become a professional translator. Who says there’s no God?

I got her to call the phone number Aslan – at the Kazakh Olympic Committee - gave me for a Kung Fu club in Almaty, and she got the address and set up an appointment for tomorrow evening, not terribly surprising because today is Friday, and who the heck really wants to work on the Day of Prayer in the Muslim world?

Sifu Mike Adams



Then I called Mike Adams who’s an American that teaches private classes in Wing Chun and Tai Chi here.

We met with Mike about an hour later at the “Green Market” which fortunately is right across the street from my budget “Turkistan Hotel.” Aika had to take off then, with many thanks I wished her well.

Mike Adam’s Tai Chi and Wing Chun Kung Fu in Almaty

For me it was pretty nice to meet up with an American as I’ve been living in East Asia for the last 15 years and most of the time since 1992. Though my school in Beijing has other foreign teachers, they all live in an on-campus dorm whereas I prefer living off-campus in a regular apartment. My school is quite large so I rarely see the other foreigners except at faculty meetings.

After meeting with him at the Green Market he took me to a pretty darned good café which I badly needed as I was a bit tired of the instant coffee, I usually make in my hotel rooms. After sitting down and some small talk he started to tell me his story.

Mike’s Kung Fu journey started way back when he was 25 living in Connecticut (he’s in his late 50s now). Inspired by a variety of martial art magazines he started training in Tai Chi at a school which later on in 1984-1985 transformed into “Footloose Aerobic and Tai Chi.” I remember a great Shorin-Ryu Karate called: “Ki Mind and Body” that changed into “The body Shop,” in the mid-eighties. I knew and liked the owners, but they had to follow the money and the money was following the national trends.

He commented on, and then we reminisced on how fighting arts training in the U.S were in many places hijacked during the mid-eighties into “Yuppie arts” featuring designer gym clothes and the more physical side of training.

He discussed the philosophical meanings of Ying Yang and its role in Tai Chi and emphasized the importance of “Original Intent” in thinking and action, and mentioned that in some ways the rise of the MMA movement now is reminiscent of the New Age Movement of the 1980s with all the emphasis on winning.

In Kazakhstan he said, there wasn’t too much emphasis on Kung Fu, but boxing was/is the most popular sport. He distinguished between sports (win/lose approach) and martial arts where in training both people win. He also discussed the meaning of “Kung Fu life” which implies a holistic unified approach to training and life.

Asking about how he got into Wing Chung he said it was in Naples Italy that he started classes. Unfortunately, he had a rather serious elbow injury during that time and had to quit for a while, but kept up his Tai Chi training.

Later on, in Honduras he met Tom Chi and trained with Roberto Contreres who learned acupuncture in Taiwan and Beijing. He mentioned having reached a plateau in his training which ended when he saw some videos on You-Tube by Earl Montague, an Australian that taught Yang Style Tai Chi and talked about for example the Reptilian Brain, and a philosophy of “don’t wait.” “He’s a great guy,” Mike said, “When I called him from Honduras he answered and talked with me – a complete stranger - for quite a while, sharing a lot of resources that lifted me out of that plateau to a new level of understanding in martial arts.”

Mike also discussed the importance of the “state of Song” or looseness and how that’s different from simple “relaxation,” for martial arts.

At this point along his path Mike started back with Wing Chun and began training at a school in the Catskills Mountains of New York.

“Tom Chi noticed that I favored my right arm and took me into his office. With a combination of massage and needles he fixed the elbow injury I’d been living with for years, in an hour.”

Later on, in Philadelphia Mike says he became more involved with the Moi Yat family via Jay Hitchman attending seminars and other classes with Dr. Pete Pajil, a Pilipino who he described as his *Sigung* or Kung Fu grandfather – a descendant of Moi Yat and before him Yip Man.

Mike quoted Samuel Kuak, “Other styles emphasize ‘hit, wait.’ In Wing Chun the philosophy is hit, hit, hit. A smaller weaker person can defeat a stronger bigger person.” Mike also repeatedly emphasized the importance of stance, and made an interesting illustration of the knight’s use of a lance held across his body, wherein the horse and lance become part of and a foundation for the body. Several times during our interview he jumped up to illustrate his points and the fluidity and precision of his movements proved to me that he is a master worthy of respect.

Though boxing and wrestling are the favorite sports practiced in Kazakhstan, Mike’s private Kung Fu classes offer Almaty locals a broad, rich background in the philosophy and training of the internal styles of Tai Chi and Wing Chun styles.

Before parting for the evening, he agreed to help me find the Kung Fu school recommended by Aslan – at the Kazakh Olympic Committee the next day, as he also was rather curious about it.

After this interview I wandered around the “Green Market,” for a while, a nice place with tons of fabulous things for sale at quite reasonable prices, including Kazakhstan t-shirts and hats. For lunch I had something like a gyro sandwich which was out-of-this-world delicious.

Then I had the evening free, changed some of my Chinese RMB into U.S. Dollars, washed the great sports shirt given to me at Xi'an Sports University, typed some notes, edited some photos, did some yoga stretches and otherwise basically relaxed a little, something I don't often do.



Grasslands of southeast Kazakhstan

Part 6 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Almaty, Kazakhstan Cont.

*Master Yuriy Vyalkov and Vinh Xuan Dang Gia, Vietnamese
"Buddha style" Wing Chun Kung Fu in Almaty, Kazakhstan*



July 25, Saturday - Day 10

With the phone number from Mr. Aslan (associated with the Olympic Committee and Wushu Federation of Kazakhstan), Aika (new translator/friend) had gotten in touch with Master Yuriy Vyalkov, a teacher of Vinh Xuan Dang Gia, also known as “Vietnamese Buddha Style Wing Chun Kung Fu.”

Our appointment was set up for 7:00 pm at Master Vyalkov’s school. It took a while to find his place, being tucked behind a rather nice Sushi restaurant in a building that also has a dance studio.

I went with Mike Adams, also a Wing Chun teacher living in Almaty, but we were not sure we were climbing the stairs in the right building because there was no sign outside of any sort, except advertising a dance studio and so it was gratifying indeed upon reaching the 4th floor to look left and suddenly see the familiar sight of a uniformed formal traditional martial art class working its way through disciplined attack/defense sequences.

Upon entering we met Master Vyalkov who paused in his teaching for an interview. Before interviewing he asked me to simply watch his pairs work with a single student. It was breathtaking and very, very fast. At any age, much less 64, he’s astonishingly quick and precise.

His martial arts journey began some 35 years ago in the Soviet Union, his original homeland. His first martial art training was in Karate. He had attained a relatively high level of mastery when he first encountered a Wing Chun master who “showed him the light.” For those of us with a background in fighting this might seem like a familiar realization: “Wow, this stuff really works.” In my opinion different people’s body types and personalities “fit” better with different martial arts, and when one finds a style that “fits,” it’s a good feeling.



After that he was convinced that Vinh Xuan Dang Gia, Vietnamese “Buddha style” Wing Chun Kung Fu was the ticket to superior martial art skill and subsequently began training. He’s been teaching for some 15 to 20 years now and has been teaching Vietnamese “Buddha style” Wing Chun at his current location for about two years.

Master Yuriy Vyalkov’s Master, is Nguyen Xuan Dang Nham who teaches in Hanoi and every year Master Vyalkov travels there to re-sharpen his art and nourish the spirit.

According to Master Vyalkov, Vietnamese Buddha Kung Fu is a close-range combat fighting system and is one of the most simple, direct and efficient forms of martial arts and self-defense. It emphasizes directness and softness.

At this time Master Vyalkov is teaching three groups, a beginner class with about 20 students, intermediate with about 10 students and an advanced group with 4 students.

Asked about his curriculum he promptly began demonstrating some of his Vietnamese Buddha Style Wing Chung and I could instantly tell it was different in several ways from traditional Chinese Wing Chung.

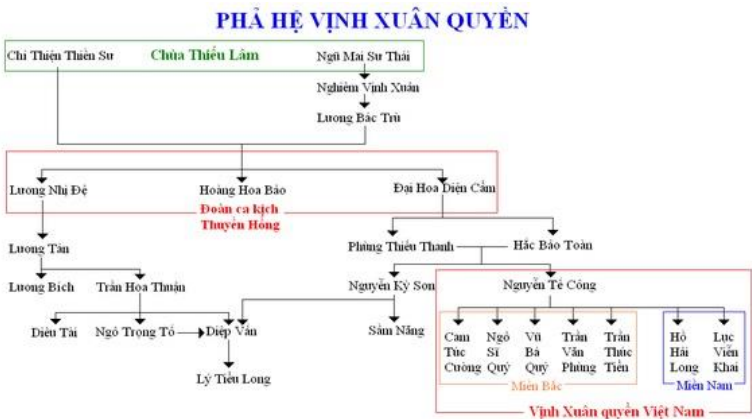
How so? For one thing the circle of defense and attack is larger (vertically, not horizontally), and there is more pivoting and turning (along the spinal axis like other internal styles). But like Chinese Wing Chun every defense was instantly followed by a counterattack targeting the body or attacking limb.

Master Vyalkov talked a bit about several aspects of Vietnamese Wing Chun Kung Fu, including “sticky hands,” (*Li-za*) emphasizing instant trapping/counterattack techniques and the absolute necessity to have a solid foundation in Qi Gung and meditation.

The quiet, efficient very, very fast attack/counterattack training that was going on when we entered is a testament to the fact that these gentlemen are very high-level Kung Fu masters.

I also heard about Grandmaster Su-to Nguyen Te Cong who earned his fame through many challenge fights.

In 1939, Master Nguyen Te Cong fled to Vietnam and since then became the founding father (Su-to) of the Vietnamese Wing Chun branch (*Vinxxuan*). From 1939 to 1954 Su-to lived in Hanoi, training disciples in Wing Chun Kung Fu. These disciples were Chinese and Vietnamese, several of whom became his true successors.



However only two from these six disciples went on to teach this Vietnamese Buddha Style Wing Chun.

Vinxxuan's system is based on four empty hand forms

1st Form: Thu dao quyen (The young idea form)

2st Form: Bai 108 Tai, Cho Khong Thong

Bai 108 Doi Luyen, Tai Cho (108 form with the opponent)

Bai 108 Tien Lui Doi Lyuen, Ben Phai

Bai Moc Nhan So 1, Tien Lui

3st Form: Tam Kieu (Bridging the gap form)

4th Form: Tieu Chi (Thrusting fingers)

Vinxxuan also includes the Moc Nhan (wooden dummy) training form and exercises based on sensitivity and timing of the arms called "Linh Giac" (sticky hands) in Vietnamese and helps the practitioner fight at very close distances. Vinxxuan also includes five animal forms (tiger, crane, snake, dragon & leopard).

After a few photos I was starting to wrap it up when some ladies showed up for the next class and I found out they have a number of female students with the oldest being 62 years young, and according to Master Vyalkov she can defeat men far younger and stronger.

After exchanging contact information, we had to bid our farewells.

Mention should be made here that researching Kung Fu along this old Silk Road isn't easy, mainly because I hate to say goodbye. Finding and making good friends is fun of course, and sharing those positive relations with others is excellent indeed, but still, I just start to feel at home and it's time to move on.

After leaving a friendly young enthusiastic couple with quite good English helped get me on the right bus back to my hotel and I stopped at a small restaurant across the street to pick up some spiced rice with vegetables, chicken and beef, and some unusual fermented sour milk. Wow! That was a delicious feast!

Earlier in the day I'd toured the National Museum after a 10 K hike looking for a bicycle rental shop. Tomorrow first thing (after breakfast of course) I'll head for the Almaty International Bus Station called: "*Cairan*" but written something like: *CaMpaH* in Cyrillic. A word to the wise, if you want to travel Central Asia, it's very helpful to speak Russian because that's the only lingua franca of Central Asia. If you're looking for English speakers its best to try talking with people who look like high school and university students.

Lastly, if you're thinking of visiting Almaty, Master Yuriy Vyalkov's "Vinh Xuan Dang Gia," "Vietnamese Buddha style Wing Chun Kung Fu" class is a must. It's classic, powerful, fast and looked like a whole lot of fun.

Part 7 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Interview with Dmitrushenko Yuriy Vladimirovich, President of the Kung Fu Federation of Kyrgyz Republic and a visit to Ak-Beshim, first recorded in history by Buddhist Pilgrim Xuanzang.



**Ak-Beshim - A former capital city on the real Silk Roads
founded 5-6th century**

July 27, 2015, Bishkek – Day 13

With the help of a new friend/translator/guide named Asan I met at the bus station in Almaty on the way here to Bishkek, the Capital of Kyrgyzstan, I got an appointment with Dmitrushenko Yuriy Vladimirovich, President of the Kung Fu Federation of Kyrgyz Republic at 10:00 am this morning.



Border crossing between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

And, luckily my new buddy Asan was here to translate.

After basic introductions we started this interview by sharing photos on our notebooks because we had them, and it turns out we have a lot of friends in common including each other. In fact, I met Yuriy at the International Wushu Championships in Beijing last year.

His photos included him with Master Fu Biao, CEO of the Beijing Shaolin which hosts an annual International Kung Fu Championships in Beijing; him with Kamil Rabadanov, President of the Russian Kung Fu Federation who I've met on many occasions (and is also on my Facebook too) as well as many team photos at different championships, training, etc. And he had some nicely produced videos of his Kung Fu teams training and competing.

The Kyrgyz Kung Fu federation is still very young having started only two years ago in 2013. None the less they have around 100 plus members, with most training at regular schools as it's more economically feasible than private clubs like in the U.S. Being on summer vacation right now, they aren't training in Bishkek at this time.

Kung Fu unfortunately does not get the government support in most Asian countries that, for example Taekwondo and boxing get because it's not an official Olympic sport, yet. None-the-less it does get some, and popular interest is growing around Central Asia aided by the Wushu Federation of China, the International Wushu Federation and various national Wushu and Kung Fu Federations, not to mention a great love of Jacky Chan, Jet Li, and of course, the one and only Bruce Lee.

It should be remembered that these countries have only been independent nations since 1991 so they're still in "rapid growth mode," so to speak. This sounds better than "developing country," and in many ways provides a better picture of what's really going on here.

The Kyrgyz Republic Kung Fu Federation currently has four local teachers/trainers and though they do teach traditional Wushu taolu, Sanda is the most popular form of Kung Fu in Kyrgyzstan. I also noticed that Yuriy has a certificate in Sanda training from Beijing Shaolin School.

I asked if former Soviet nations had or have sports or martial associations and Yuriy answered "Not officially, though many of us know each other and meet from time to time for one reason or another." In regards to his own martial art background and training I found out he started in Taekwondo at the Kyrgyz State Academy of Physical Education and Sport, however later transitioned into the Kung Fu/Wushu program.

After this we discussed the brilliant future ahead for the Central Asian region, especially those nations located along the Silk Road, and Chinese President Xi Jinping's plans for enhanced cooperation and infrastructure development, e.g. the Silk Road Development Plan and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

As we were parting he invited me to go swimming at lake Issyk Kul, one of the most beautiful places on earth I've been told, and I said "Oh absolutely yes," but afterwards Asan told me it's a four or five hour drive away and my time here in Bishkek is just too darned short! I'll just have to come back!



Dmitrushenko Yuriy Vladimirovich, President of the Kung Fu Federation of Kyrgyz Republic

July 28, 2015 – Suyab – Ancient Silk Road Trading Center and Buddhist Monastery

Today I set my sites on *Suyab*, or modern-day *Ak-Beshim* - a Silk Road settlement of Sogdian merchants in the 5th and 6th century.

The partially excavated ruins are located some 50 Km east of Bishkek and 8 km southwest of Tokmok. It took about an hour minibus ride through the picturesque countryside and another 30-minute taxi ride through and beyond a lovely small town called Tokmok to get there.

The existence of *Ak-Beshim* was first recorded by the very famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang who traveled through the area in the year 629. Discovered by a team of Soviet archeologists, it is considered to be a major historic find.

An article titled: *A Newly Excavated Church of Syriac Christianity along the Silk Road in Kyrgyzstan* written by Wassilios Klein suggests that it was built by the *Sogdians* associated with what are today Iranian and Uzbek cultures. They are said to have occupied that region until the 14th Century.

An article by Mark Dickens, *Syriac Gravestones in the Tashkent History Museum*, states that Christian gravestones with engravings in the Syriac script were found in the Chu Valley in modern-day Kyrgyzstan and other places. *Ak-Beshim* is in the Chu Valley.

However, an article titled *India and Central Asia: Renewing a Traditional Relationship* by Devendra Kaushik (p. 232) states quite clearly:

“Central Asia acted as a transmission belt for spread of Buddhism from India to China. In the first centuries of the last millennium, Buddhism appears to have prevailed as a major religion on the territory of Sogd. This is proved by the excavation of a Buddhist temple at Ak-Beshim in the Semirechye province of Kyrgyzstan by Russian archaeologist A.N. Bernshtam.”

The taxi driver that took us to this site said that a large stone Buddha was found there and moved to Russia.

Though only the foundations and lower parts of some walls remain, it's enough to show the outline and structure of what were dwellings from about 1,600 years ago. It is a truly extraordinary archeological find and what has been excavated is only a tiny portion of a much larger village or town. Clearly a lot more work needs to be done to unearth and protect this ancient Silk Road town. It should absolutely be preserved as a UNESCO Cultural Treasure.



According to an article titled *Safeguarding Silk Road Sites in Central Asia*, *Ak-Beshim* at one time was one of the region's most important and powerful political, military and economic centers due to its position on the Silk Road and by the 6th Century was a symbiosis of Indian, Chinese, Sogdian and Turkic cultures "bringing with them their own religious and cultural traditions." In 2003 UNESCO launched a project to preserve the site.

Xuanzang of course should need no introduction but he is the legendary and historical Chinese Buddhist pilgrim that made a 17 year trip through Central Asia to India (long before Marco Polo) bringing back to China 657 sacred Buddhist scriptures, translated these scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese and inspired by Yogacara philosophy founded the Buddhist Consciousness Only School. He passed away in 664 in Xi'an. That he should be the first to make a written record of *Ak-Beshim* makes this a place of some reverence for Buddhists world-wide. The classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* was inspired by his life, though some Buddhists object to the very naïve portrayal of Xuanzang in that novel, as he had to be repeatedly rescued from various flesh eating monsters along the way by the rather naughty hero of the novel, Stone Monkey, Sun Wu Kong, who I should add did earn his enlightenment at the end of this magnificent classic of Chinese literature.

I have to say I very much like Bishkek and could happily live here. To me it seems young and modern, with lots of great malls, yet surrounded by very traditional farms and villages, and my hotel is quite excellent, clean, new and inexpensive – all great things in my book. There are snowcapped mountains in the distance, and the streets are wide and lined with graceful beautiful trees.

Though also young, the Kung Fu scene here is growing quickly also. MMA, UFC and bodybuilding are very popular here too. I saw a lot of young men wearing T-shirts advertising these athletic endeavors. There are a lot of really huge men here. For example, I couldn't find a pair of shoes in my size (10), they were all too big! That Kung Fu should find a new home here amidst the new fashionable trends in sports and fitness is good, as the philosophic underpinnings of Kung Fu are harmonious with and supportive of this quickly growing beautiful nation.

It does seem a lot like paradise here.

Some of the published literature about *Ak-Beshim*

Dickens, Mark, *Syriac Gravestones in the Tashkent History Museum*, p. 14 Published in *Syriac Gravestones in the Tashkent History Museum*. Can be downloaded from:

https://www.academia.edu/398263/Syriac_Gravestones_In_the_Tashkent_History_Museum

Kaushik, Devendra, *India and Central Asia: Renewing a Traditional Relationship* by Devendra Kaushik (p. 232) can be downloaded from:

<http://sas.sagepub.com/content/5/2/231.full.pdf>

Klein, Wassilios, (2004) *A Newly Excavated Church of Syriac Christianity along the Silk Road in Kyrgyzstan*, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, Vol. 56 Issue 1-4, p. 25-47

Levi-Strauss, Laurent & Lin, Roland (2004) *Safeguarding Silk Road Sites in Central Asia, Proceedings of the second international conference of the Conservation of Grotto Sites, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, People's Republic of China*, June 28-July 3. Can be read online at:

https://books.google.kg/books?id=n8YAyXzJE2IC&printsec=frontcover&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Kung Fu Federation President Vladimirovich speaks Kyrgyz and Russian but no English.

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Part 8 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Tashkent Uzbekistan

*Interview with Uzbekistan's Wushu Federation President Mr.
Ganiev Ravshan and a Visit to the Barakh-khan Madrasah*

August 1 & 2, 2016



Friendly looking fellows from the ancient Silk Roads currently living in the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan, located in Tashkent

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Interview with Mr. Ganiev Ravshan, President of the Wushu Federation of Uzbekistan

First of all, I have to sincerely thank Mr. Ravshan for taking the time out of his busy schedule to meet me at my hotel on very short notice.

In addition to serving as Uzbekistan's Wushu Federation President he is also Deputy Chairman of the Board of FOTON, Open Joint Stock Company, one of Uzbekistan's electrical power plant industrial giants. In other words, in addition to being the Uzbekistan Wushu Federation President he's also a heavyweight in industry, thus taking the time to talk with me on short notice was a special kindness.

The short notice was caused by a miscommunication between me and my former travel agent resulting in a Transit Visa only good for three days in Uzbekistan. Surprise, surprise! My fault entirely, I should have checked it.

So, suddenly I had only one precious day (and a half, because I got a late flight tomorrow) for my interview. So, the first thing I did was get the hotel front desk lady to call Mr. Ganiev Ravshan (knowing most people here don't speak English) and see if I could get an appointment right away. Very graciously, he accepted. Also, I needed a translator and fortunately the front desk lady knew one and after a couple of phone calls everything was set. I asked the front desk to send three coffees to my room and we were ready.



Uzbekistan Wushu Federation President Mr. Ganiev Ravshan

“How long has there been a Kung Fu or Wushu Federation in Uzbekistan?”

“From 1998 to 2005 we were called the “Kung Fu and Wushu Federation of Uzbekistan. Then it was renamed more simply to the “Uzbekistan Wushu Federation,” but of course we practice and teach many styles of Kung Fu, including of course Tai Chi.”

Warming to the subject Mr. Ravshan told me they have more than 60 licensed “trainers” (as they say here in Central Asia) attending their Master’s classes. That large a number surprised me. “Where were they trained?” I asked. “Mostly they train in China, and they go back regularly for retraining, expanding and refining their skills.”

“How many Wushu students do you have in Uzbekistan at this time?” I asked. “Officially around 5,000, however the actual number is a lot higher, more than 40,000. Every year we host four Republic of Uzbekistan Championships.”

“How many countries has your team competed in?”

“More than I can count” he answered. “Of course, we go to the World Championships wherever they may be. All the Asian countries, some places in Europe, and Canada. The Uzbek Ministry of Sports has special funds for the support and development of sports. The President of Uzbekistan has stated that sports are a MUST in all schools and after-school programs. We’re really hoping the IOC accepts Wushu as an Olympic sport because then we’ll get more support. But even as it is, Wushu is growing very quickly in Uzbekistan.”

Knowing that in some countries Sanda has more public appeal these days than traditional Taolu training, I asked Mr. Ravshan the relative percentages of Taolu vs Sanda classes and he replied “Wushu classes here in Uzbekistan are about equally divided between Taolu and Sanda. All trainers know both.”

I asked about upcoming events in the Wushu world, and he mentioned that "The International Wushu Federation (IWUF) recently announced that Wushu is one of eight sports nominated to move on to the next stage of the application process for addition to the Olympic Program for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games with the final decision to be made by the IOC in Rio de Janeiro in August, 2016."

I asked about the 5th Asian Martial Arts Games to be held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan in 2017 and he seemed quite enthusiastic. For those not familiar with this relatively new competition series the First Asian Martial Arts Games were hosted in Bangkok, Thailand in August of 2009. Asked if he knew the Wushu Federation President of Turkmenistan and he said: "Yazmyrat (?) well sure, of course!"

At this point Mr. Ganiev Ravshan went on to explain a bit about the government supported Sports Complex: "The Complex takes the best students for about 10-12 years. The minimum age is six or seven years old. The training is extensive because our government takes sports, all sports very seriously. If the IOC accepts Wushu as an Olympic sport then we'll get even more support. As it is we're growing at a satisfactory rate, but we, and most people I know really believe Wushu deserves to be counted among the sports in the Olympics."

From my conversation with Mr. Ravshan I got the impression that Wushu in Uzbekistan is relatively well funded and very well organized and my guess is that Mr. Ravshan's corporate expertise probably has a lot to do with this.

Unfortunately, my interview with Mr. Ravshan was short as he's a busy man, but one thing I did learn:

Uzbekistan probably has the largest number of Kung Fu Trainers of the Central Asian nations I've visited on this trip so far.

Uzbekistan clearly has a very lively, professionally well-developed Wushu program with a very organized and informed gentleman for its Federation President.

Fortunately, I had most of another day in Uzbekistan as my flight reservation was for 10:20 the next evening so I got learn a bit more about this fascinating nation, its rich history and cultures.

After the interview I had dinner with the translator, Nazira, who also works for a Travel Agency, and is very well educated in the history and languages of the region. Among other things I learned that historically Uzbekistan was a much huger nation, but wars in the last century and a half reduced it to its current size and location. The current geographic boundaries of Uzbekistan were drawn by more powerful foreign nations.

Uzbekistan is considered by many to be the cradle of culture in the region and is probably the most frequently visited Central Asian nation by foreign tourists.

Uzbekistan has a 100% literacy rate and is recently transitioning from 10 to 12 years of compulsory education. The tapestry of cultures along the Silk Road is complex owing to complex histories, with all having been influenced greatly by the former Soviet Union. All are ethnically very, very diverse. For example, the President of Uzbekistan, a Muslim is married to a Russian Christian.

From what I saw during my three days there is that Uzbekistan is a very well managed country with huge numbers of beautiful new and ancient buildings representing a smorgasbord of Western and Eastern architectural styles.

Uzbekistan doesn't want or need loans from the IMF or World Bank unlike some other Central Asian nations I found out.

Economically they are booming.

In fact, I mentioned the high number of Chevrolet cars here to my most excellent taxi driver and new friend, and found out Chevrolet manufactures cars in Uzbekistan. Driving around the city my last day there I saw a huge Christian (Protestant) church, a Catholic Church, a Jewish Synagogue and even had lunch at a Buddhist Temple. Generally speaking, Uzbeks are very tolerant and easygoing people. Most people I met have Russian, Christian, and Jewish friends and don't think much about it. Diversity is just part of the culture as it has been since the Silk Road started some 2,000 plus years ago.



Holy Assumption Cathedral Church (Uspensky Cathedral) in Tashkent



We had lunch at the Buddhist Temple

Also, on my last day before heading to the airport I visited a traditional bizarre and picked up a few souvenirs. After that my newest friend, translator and taxi driver named Faizi and I went to the amazing and awesomely beautiful Barakh-khan Madrasah, the 16th Century Islamic School and Spiritual Administration Center for Muslims in Central Asia, and it's fabulous library with magnificent ancient manuscripts including the world-famous Quran of Caliph Osman meticulously and beautifully hand written in the mid-Seventh Century on deerskin.



Barakh-Khan Madrasah Tashkent

The ancient manuscript is very huge with 353 parchment pages. This is a World Cultural Heritage and Islamic treasure beyond any measure and I got to see it on my 59th birthday. Indeed, the Lord does work in mysterious ways.



Dome of Masjid in Barakh-Khan Madrasah, Tashkent

While at the Madrasah, Faizi and I were invited to have tea with the owner of an amazing shop where I bought the most fabulous hand carved and painted chess set I've ever seen, for about 200,000 Uzbek Som, or about \$75 according to my rough calculations.

After that we went to have dinner at restaurant across from the Madrasah, specifically "Plov" an Uzbek favorite, consisting of a mixture of rice, beef, carrot, onion, garlic and an unusual spice called *zira*, which was altogether outta-this-world-delicious! Luckily new translator, teacher, travel agent, friend Nazira had coached me on Uzbek cuisine the evening before so I knew what to ask for.

Unfortunately, that was about all the time I had in Uzbekistan so Faizi drove me to the airport where we said farewell, and I got ready for my flight to Beijing via Inchon, South Korea.

I'm very much looking forward to picking up my Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour next year starting right here in Tashkent, with the next stops Samarkand, Bukhara, and from there on to Turkmenistan. I may well break up the final stages to this tour to give myself more time for interviews and sightseeing. After all, the Silk Road has been here for a couple of thousand years, so no reason to just rush right through.

Special thanks must again be made to all those who made this trip pure pleasure for me, especially the Masters of Kung Fu from Xi'an to Tashkent, and a large number of other new friends that always seemed to arrive at just the right times to help with translations and directions. Special thanks too, to Miao Hui for making hotel reservations along the way and that short notice flight reservation back to Beijing. The past few weeks have been some of the best of my life and I owe it all the extraordinary kindness and friendship of all whom I met along this portion of the ancient North Silk Road.

As I've said before, a place is after all just a place, its friends that make it special, and now the Eastern half of the North Silk Road is very special indeed for me, thanks to each and every person I met along The Road. Also, just for the record, I always tell my friends, "Never say goodbye; just see you later."

Afterthoughts

Mistakes? I don't think I made too many.

Probably I should have paid a bit more attention to visas and a little less to ancient history and philosophy, but all's well that ends well, so enough about that. Also, probably I should have learned a bit of Russian language as that's the one language everyone in Central Asia seems to know.

The Muslim world experienced an enlightenment era sometimes called the “Golden Age of Islam” beginning with Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786 - 809), a time when arts and sciences flourished. At that time, the “House of Wisdom” was built in Baghdad where scholars from all over the world gathered to collect and translate all of the world’s classical knowledge into Arabic. Uzbekistan appears to have had, and possibly still is experiencing a kind of Golden Age.

Besides the freedom of religions and highly evolved philosophical, religious, infrastructural and educational systems, Uzbekistan is also a sports-oriented nation and I saw joggers and bicyclists all around. Hopefully I’ll pick up the Silk Road trail here in Tashkent in the near future.

It’s truly remarkable how diverse all those countries are. Indigenous people certainly appear to live peacefully with immigrants, first, second, and third generation etc., from all over the world. I met many people not mentioned in these stories, and I’ve got to say the peaceful friendly multiculturalism of the nations I visited hugely impressed me.

Though I’d hoped to get a little further on this trip it’s been a long road already and I’m also a high school teacher in Beijing. So, it’s time for a well-deserved little rest at home and then in just a week or so, back to school for me!

Stay tuned for the Second segment of the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - from Beijing to Turkey - coming up soon!

I sat for a few minutes then got up and strolled about a little when a very serious looking gray-haired older man sitting on the bench looked me square in the eyes and barked: "Passport!" Then he said something about Kazakhstan but I couldn't understand not speaking Kyrgyz language or Russian, and not even sure which language he was using. But he was clearly glaring at me in a not exactly friendly way on that hot sunny afternoon.

He had no ID pinned on him and was wearing kind of scruffy old clothes so he didn't appear to be an official. I know from previous experiences there are some weird people in the world, so I just looked back at him and said in English: "Who are you? God or something?" in a pleasant tone of voice.

I got no response so I tried it in my unquestionably bad Arabic. "Hal Anta Allah?"

Again, no response. For the briefest second, I wanted to add a "ma?" at the end of my probably bad Arabic language question, because in Chinese all interrogatories with a yes/no answer end in "ma?"

This got me thinking for a millisecond how the mind carries over grammar rules from one badly learned language to another, a thought I was to repeat only four days later at Incheon Airport in South Korea where I had to remember that polite interrogatories in Korean end with "...shimnika?" or "...imnika?" according to the rules of that subject-object-verb - with a "politeness" tag at the end - language.

But I quickly suppressed my cognitive psychology (which studies how the brain stores memories) ruminations during my brief conversation with the rather demanding old guy at the International Bus Station in Bishkek as I had more important things to think about.

So, I wandered off for a few moments to consider my options. The fact that he mentioned Kazakhstan was not good, as I was going to Uzbekistan. Later I found out I had failed to remember that to get to Uzbekistan the bus had to cross a rather long distance in Kazakhstan (again). Even so, that should be no worry as Americans get visas at the Kazakh border no problem. But, when buying the ticket at the bus station that morning the woman selling the tickets didn't want to sell me one and I didn't understand why, except she kept talking about Kazakhstan. Mmm. Worrisome! Finally, the older Soviet style ticket seller woman in the morning did sell me the ticket, but only after I started talking a bit loudly about BBC and CNN.

After a few moments of consideration, I thought it best to go and talk with the old guy. Maybe he knew something, even though we didn't have any language in common.

So, I strolled back and sat down next to him smiling winningly.

I slowly opened the notebook part of my camera bag where I kept a copy of my Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine, and ever so slowly pulled it out.

I was relatively sure during my short absence he'd been considering various tortures for me to teach me not to be such an insolent foreigner, but I also knew that if I act too much like a wimp I'll be turned into a slave by every Tom, Dick and Harry that walks along. It's a fine line one must walk when traveling in foreign territory!

His eyes widened just a little when I pulled out the magazine. I'm pretty sure he was expecting something different, like a wad of crumpled papers "proving" I was somebody or other, or something other than what I really was, because this is a land and border crossing with some shifty people; nice people too, but definitely with drug smugglers, thieves and all kinds of illegals mixed in.

As I put the magazine in front of him, I pointed to “Kung Fu Tai Chi” in big print at the top and said: “KUNG FU!” Then, I did my best Bruce Lee imitation, flicking my nose with my thumb and beckoning ‘bring it on’ with the other. “BRUCE LEE!” I said.

He looked a bit confused, but I could see a slight glimmer in his eyes. He knew who Bruce Lee was and suddenly he was a bit curious about this strange foreigner. From that look in his eyes I was pretty sure he’d seen a Bruce Lee movie in his younger days, and he’d liked it! Great! Next, I pulled out my passport and turned the pages showing him page after page and year after year of China Visas. “BEIJING” I said. He kind of started to get it I thought.

Then I said: “XI JINGPING!” who I think everybody knows, and I made the heart symbol with my index fingers and thumbs, and added: “LOVES KUNG FU!” Then, with my heart symbol moving back and forth from my heart, I said: “Boom boom, boom boom” like a beating heart, trying to communicate that Xi Jinping loves Kung Fu!

I’m not entirely sure that’s true actually. I know President Xi loves Beijing Opera, and can only hope he loves Kung Fu too, because I’d hate to misrepresent the President of China there at the International Bus Station in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. But, hey! Everybody likes Bruce Lee. I was safe on this point, I’m sure.

Anyways by this time the old guy was smiling and even starting to laugh a bit at my strange explanation. I gave him the magazine to look at for a few moments and he seemed entertained at the colorful pictures and so on. Then I pointed to my name in the magazine and my name in my passport and I’m pretty sure he started to figure it all out.

By this time, he seemed like a nice old guy and relaxed a lot. So suddenly we’re two old friends sitting at a bus station.

Pretty soon he wandered off and before long a young guy named Ali wandered by and we struck up a conversation as it turned out his English was pretty good. Fortunately for me, he was taking the same bus as I and he proved to be a tremendous help getting across the rather long, complicated, very crowded, dark, dirty and dangerous Kazakh border later that night on the way to Uzbekistan.



Ali, brother of the road

Also, I found out before too long at that still sunny rather warm bus station in Bishkek, the old guy was our bus driver, and the last of the cowboys roaming the ranges in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Ali knew the driver a bit and liked and respected him, and as time went on, I grew to like and respect him too.

But before finishing this story, I have to thank Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine publisher and editor for making a fine looking magazine that became the key that opened the door to the old cowboy driver's imagination, realizing the possibility that I wasn't a drug smuggler at all, just a simple, regular Kung Fu journalist at loose in Central Asia.

Come to think of it, Kyrgyz and for that matter Kazakh languages might well have politeness tags at the end of sentences and follow the subject-object-verb grammar pattern the same as Korean, and Japanese for that matter, given that I vaguely recall they're all from the same Turkic language family, unlike Chinese and English that follow a subject-verb-object grammar pattern, No time for that now. Always too much to think about and do!

What was I writing about? Oh yeah! World peace through Kung fu? Maybe it started there. Maybe it started a long time ago in a distant land along the Silk Road, with two old guys from distant lands waiting for a caravan and comparing ways to better lob someone's head off with a halberd. Who knows?

2020 Update: I stayed in contact with Ali and the last I heard, which was a couple of years ago he was a university student in Turkey.

Part 10 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Return to Tashkent!

Sifu Arteom and the Tashkent Traditional Wushu Association



Students practicing traditional Kung Fu Taolu at Shifu Arteom's evening class

Getting there

January 29, 30, 2016

There is a harmony in the stars, a golden mean that vibrates through all-natural phenomenon, and music pervades the essence of all things if we can hear it.

As the seasons changed the mellow tones and exotic rhythms of the world's longest and most ancient Road beckoned me forth again. And, yes, the lure of new friends, brothers and sisters of the martial arts along that fabled road helped motivate me too.

Because laziness and other bad habits lull us all into the deadly trap of complacency, I knew I had no choice but to shatter those fetters again and venture forth to new horizons. Thus, began the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour Continued: January, February 2016. The plan for my short three-week winter holiday from school is six cities in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, starting where I left off last summer: Tashkent.

I'd already gotten two Letters of Invitation for Uzbekistan – first a tourist visa good for two months, and then a journalist visa compliments of ITF Master Han in Tashkent who so graciously volunteered to help with this last summer. His connections around Uzbekistan made this trip much easier than my previous visit in many ways.

I left Beijing 4:20 pm January 29th on a direct flight to Tashkent. Flying along I noticed the LED screen saying it was 68 degrees below zero up there; we were flying at 36,521 feet into a headwind of 124 km. per hour. Given those rough conditions I was glad to be inside the plane. We arrived at 7:22 pm Tashkent time, or 10:22 Beijing time.

Immigration and customs went smoothly and exiting the airport I was very happy to find someone from Tashkent Topchan Hostel with my name on a sign so it was off to my new home for a few days.

For those not familiar with Central Asian culture, a “*topchan*” sometimes called “tea bed” looks a bit like a big bed except square shaped and without a mattress, which is replaced with a Persian rug and pillows.

They usually have a small short legged table in the middle. It's a place to socialize, relax, drink tea, and eat.

Topchans are usually found in restaurants, gardens, homes, and in-house courtyards. They're also called *tapchan*, *chorpoya*, *karavot*, and *takhta*.

Some families sleep on their *topchan*. They are cozy.

For those who might not travel a lot, or are burdened with an unfortunate excess of money, hostels are the best places to stay in any country because only real people frequent them; they're homelike and oh yeah, cheap. They're the modern equivalent of the true ancient Silk Road Caravanserai (trading center and hotel) in my opinion. Traveling the Silk Road was massively multicultural and social, to be sure. I chatted for a few hours with the half dozen people here, a mix of mostly Uzbeks from all walks of life, plus an Azerbaijani who works designing/constructing tunnels, a Russian that lives in Xinjiang studying Uighur language, and a couple of others. The common language was Russian but most spoke English – like all hostels. I was also happy to find my Chinese “WeChat” (Chinese version of twitter) was working even though I still had my Chinese sim card in the phone. Then, sleep at 4:30 am Beijing time, 1:30 am Uzbek time.

Waking Saturday morning I cooked up some eggs with their local bread, had a coffee and started with the preliminary stuff I didn't have time to do in Beijing before I left, like jotting out the phone numbers of people I knew here and others I'd contacted but hadn't yet met.

These included: Faizi, friend, driver, and sometimes translator from my last trip, and Arteom of the Traditional Wushu Association of Uzbekistan who I'd heard about from Anna, with whom I'd chatted on Facebook but never met. Then I got the address of the State History Museum in Tashkent, and the phone numbers of some of the people here at the hostel. It's always good to have traveler savvy local friends that speak English only a phone call away in a country where you don't speak any of the languages.

Luckily Faizi answered the phone and was free, so while I waited for him, I chatted with Oybek, one of the two founders of this here fine hostel and got his story.

The idea started while he was studying in Paris but came to fruition in his hometown of Tashkent late at night in a Café talking with his friend Raphael. He sold his car, Rafael sold his flat, and together they opened this marvelous establishment in 2013. “It was pretty rough back then,” Oybek said. “We didn’t charge any money for the first couple of years and travelers helped us fix the place up. We used couchsurfing.com to get visitors. February 2015, we opened officially but we still have a lot of work to do...” All I can say is these guys got a beautiful thing going here, a modern day relaxed and friendly caravanserai (Silk Road stop).

Faizi arrived and we were off to Beeline, the biggest Mobil company in Uzbekistan to get a new sim card, (knowing we had to go to the headquarter outlet because I’m a foreigner) then I called Arteom and firmed up a 6:00 pm meeting at one of his schools.

Then, we were off for the State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan – in Tashkent which was everything I’d hoped and more, with many, many real artifacts going back to the Jurassic era, through the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and fire worshipping, Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Islamic eras, Mongolian Yuan Dynasty, and the continued Islamic era.





State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan Tashkent -
Buddha with monks, 1st Cent. AD Fayaztepa, Old Termez

I usually stop short of the modern era which I'd just as soon skip anyways. Fortunately, a photo tells a thousand words (at least) and I took a thousand photos, so I'll let the best of them tell this story except to say: Dream come true.





The Diplomats, State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan

Around 5:30 headed off to the Tashkent Traditional Wushu Association. Faizi found the school easily. A note here is needed: in China and here in Central Asia most martial arts are practiced in schools, like public schools, either as part of the curriculum or as private clubs within the school. Arteom's Traditional Wushu club meets in several schools primarily in the evenings.

When we arrived, there was a kid's class just finishing so I introduced myself and got a couple photos of at least some of the very enthusiastic young traditional Wushu students who I might add really love their Sifu.



We had just a few minutes to chat before the adult class started. When traveling I often volunteer to start the class with some stretches (“Salute to the Sun,” of Hatha Yoga extended in some areas for martial arts), basic Wushu kicks and punches just to be polite and for fun (and my own need for a good stretch and warmup before a new class), and then of course I wanted to experience Shifu Arteom’s class.

A note here is needed. There is an old Chan (Zen) proverb about having an empty cup when visiting a master. Personally, when traveling and meeting new masters and their classes I like to share a sip of my own tea as a gift to my new friends. It is traditional culture here in Asia and many places to bring a gift when visiting another person’s home. People seem to relax a lot when they know a visitor is one of the martial arts family – and willing to share – not too much, just a sip, and not just some strange fighter from afar lurking in the back of the class thinking and planning God knows what!

Sifu Arteom's Wushu class – Being there

Sifu Arteom started the adult class with a Wudang Tai chi form which he flowed through masterfully; then we all practiced segments to tweak our performance. The students vary in ability, from excellent to near beginner. After we did some running calisthenics before leading up to the second half of class which was practice of – Seven Star Shaolin Taolu! Some of my North Shaolin Monastery friends had tried to teach me this, but of course I'm a most terrible student. Still, it was ever so nice to find this Taolu, like an old friend waiting here in Tashkent. Arteom is not only a great martial artist, but also a master teacher. Like all master teachers he demonstrates, we mirror, he corrects, we practice some more and he adds another step.

After about an hour and a half of training we stopped and took some photos.



Most students went home while Arteom, Faizi and I went to meet a couple of friends of the Sifu for dinner. That was great fun, super delicious beef soup with some unusual egg dish. Luckily, they all spoke some English so it was a great lively humorous delicious dinner.



Before eating I interviewed Arteom and found out that his Sifu here in Tashkent is Dr. V.G. Borzov who operates Fire Dragon Wushu club. At age 54 he's one of the most senior true masters of Wushu in Tashkent. I found out Arteom started training with Dr. Borzov in 1994, and lived in Wudang for three months in 2015.

Dr. Borzov is president of the Traditional Wushu Association of Tashkent, trained in Songshan Shaolin and Tai Chi at Wudang Mountain in China.

After Action Report

My body seemed to still be on Beijing time and it was about 3:00 am Beijing time when I got back to the hostel (midnight local time). I chatted with some of the guys for a short while and hit the hay. Usually I like to type up the day before retiring, but the great workout and food left me feeling pleasantly tired so, listening to nature I slept well.

Now it's Sunday morning 11:00. I have to play with various plans like putting together the pieces of a puzzle in trying to make a schedule for the day.

First at 11:30 I'm going to meet Anar Bugagli, formerly of Silver River Dao martial arts school in Tashkent.

He was introduced to me by an extraordinary worker at the hostel name Seyyid. Anar has trained in Xing-Yi Chuan, Bando (ancestor of Muay Thai kickboxing), Sambo, Tantric Yoga, and other arts for about the past 15 years.

His master was Boris Vasilevich in Tashkent who passed away a couple of years ago. Then I really have to get to the traditional bizarre this afternoon as I've heard it's in the old town and really worth the visit.

Part 11 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Winter, 2016

The Wushu of Young Master Anar Bugagli, Tashkent's City Center's Chorsu Bazaar & Visit to the International Caravanserai of Culture in Tashkent - Center for the Study of the Silk Road



January 31, 2016, Tashkent - Woke early as always but didn't do my required 1000 kicks and punches as I did enough last night to hold me for a day. This morning a new friend here at the hostel named Seyyid introduced me to a friend of his named Anar Bugagli who had an interesting Wushu (and other martial arts) history and club.

“Getting there” was easy in this case as Anar is a man who knows his way around Central Asia and certainly Tashkent, and so he ever-so-kindly found his way my hostel shortly after a call from Seyyid.

After initial greetings we talked martial arts and his background is extensive, including his specialty Xing Yi Chuan, studied over a thirteen-year period at “Silver River Dao School” in Tashkent. He told me about his master, Zakariadze Boris Vasilevich, a well-known and highly respected master in Tashkent who taught different kinds of yoga including Tantric, and a variety of martial arts including Xing Yi, Karate, Kendo, Combat Sambo, and Burmese Bando Boxing. His master learned his arts in Korea, Myanmar, and from a Japanese master that taught at a large Japanese company here in Tashkent. After 20 years of study Master Vasilevich went on to teach here in Tashkent at his school Silver River Dao School for decades.

“My master taught many philosophies” Anar said, “including of course about *Tantian*, the harmonic center of body energy, which flows outward like a web through hips and shoulders, elbows and knees through hands and feet, fingers and toes. He also taught that a warrior is a hunter for power; that fighting is not important for it is realization that determines all things - to realize the characteristics of the body/mind whether in Kung Fu, yoga or just ordinary life.”

I asked if his master was still teaching here in Tashkent, and found out he passed away on March 13th, 2013. I asked about how many students his master had. “At any one time maybe 60 or so, but if adding his different level classes together over the years - many thousands.”

Are you teaching now? “Not formally, but I have a circle of friends that practice the various martial arts we have learned together.”

After talking for a while, I found out his early life dream was to be an actor; that he'd studied at the most famous theater in Tashkent, but as happens so often pressure to be "responsible" had resulted in his taking a "regular" job. Yet he continues his training, and succeeded at getting his girlfriend of several years to quit her "responsible job" to pursue her dream of becoming a professional photographer.

After sharing some photos on our Facebook pages, I asked if he'd mind showing me around the bazaar, I'd heard so much about in the city center. He happily agreed and I got the inside tour starting with a short tram ride to the metro (subway) which is one of only two in Central Asia. Unfortunately, people are forbidden to take photos, but it is a classical art and history masterpiece of a subway opened in 1977 under the auspices of the Soviet Union. There is an old-world classic beauty and elegance, and museum like quality to it that has to be experienced to be believed. Each stop had its own art theme. I was told by another visitor at my hostel that it was actually a military installation which is why no photos are allowed and that it is identical to subways in Kiev and Moscow. In any case it's a lot cheaper than the very cheap taxis and a virtual museum in its own right though functioning as a very nice, fast and clean mass transit system. Some of the art extolled for example early Soviet cosmonauts (Kosmonavtlar), while others had art portraying great scientific figures in Uzbek history.

Arriving in the Chorsu Bazaar city center Anar told me that though this wasn't the geographic center of Tashkent, it was historically the commercial city center. *Chorsu* he told me means "intersection of four rivers," making it an ideal location for the ancient traditional market, and no doubt a major Silk Road site once upon a time, though there are few traces of that ancient glory to be seen today.

But the feel is there, the active bustling marketplace at the heart of a world capital, for back in the old Soviet days five Central Asian nations were merged into one called “Turkestan,” and Tashkent was the capital.



We started with lunch in a very traditional food market with divine foods in a semi-outdoor area obviously loved by locals as evidenced by the broad spectrum of ordinary and extraordinary locals eating there. I had chicken, potato and a scrumptious salad washed down with hot fragrant green tea.





The spirit of a traditional market with hundreds of fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, meats, nuts, traditional clothing and so on thrives in the many large domed structures. It was colorful and smelled oh so very, very uniquely Central Asia by virtue of the mix of spices and other food scents.



One tiny produce section of the huge marketplace

After a few hours of sightseeing and a little shopping he saw me off in a taxi back to my hostel.

Later in the evening I walked to a nearby restaurant Anzor Café and I gotta say they had the best beef kabab I've ever tasted. Kabab in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is called: *Shashlik*. It's simply outta this world!

Another most popular national dish in Uzbekistan is called “*Plov*,” which is spiced rice with beef or chicken. Again, super-delicious!

Tomorrow I’m going to visit the International Caravanserai of Culture in Tashkent – Center for the Study of the Silk Road.

Interesting day and many thanks to Anar for sharing some part of his martial journey in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and the many wonders of the ancient turned modern bazaar in the cultural and gravitational center (Tantian) at this modern crossroad of the ancient Silk Road.

February 1st, 2016

Before closing this second visit to Tashkent I’d like to mention a few things about the Academy of Art of Uzbekistan, International Caravanserai of Culture, basically a marvelous Silk Road research center sponsored by philanthropist Ikuo Hirayana, the interesting people I met there and the fascinating work they do.

True, upstairs there’s only a relatively small library and almost everything is in Russian, Uzbek and other languages, none of which I can read or understand. But, after talking with a couple of ladies working there, I was introduced to the very gracious Farrukh Usmanov, Director of the Academy. He asked me specifically what I was looking for and I decided ancient maps of the Silk Road would be best, since I knew I couldn’t appreciate any of the fine books, though I could at least fondly appreciate a fine ancient map. He in turn asked the ladies working there to look through some of the books he suggested for maps, and indeed they found some, which I photographed.

Not long after, Mr. Farrukh asked me if I’d like to meet Mr. Sheyko Konstanteen Alexandrovich, Chief Curator and Archeologist in charge of many digs around Uzbekistan.

Well! That's not the kind of question anyone has to ask me twice, so I jumped at the opportunity. I and my new friend of the morning, Mirzahid, a 5th Dan in Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo who helped with translations, went downstairs to find a small museum and Professor Konstanteen's office. He gave us a tour of the small museum, explaining various things about how the artifacts changed with the rise and fall of several civilizations, and then led us into his office.

We spent the next hour looking at photos of the various archeological digs around Uzbekistan on his computer. It was a tour through time and many ancient cultures, but also an inside look into the science of archeology. He said they have about six major "digs" a year with only about six or seven archeologists assigned to each.



Left to right, Mirzahid, a 5th Dan in Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo instructor who helped me find this excellent Silk Road Research and Art Center, writer G. Brundage Farrukh Usmanov, Director of the Academy, and Mr. Sheyko Konstanteen Alexandrovich, Chief Curator and Archeologist in charge of many digs around Uzbekistan

According to Professor Konstanteen a huge amount remains to be excavated and restored. On one hand, based on my own observations I can confidently say Uzbekistan has done a better job than most Central Asian nations at excavating, restoring and preserving its ancient history, but on the other hand less than 5% of what there is to find has been found and restored.

A lot more needs to be done – and this is critical work because Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were the homes of many ancient Silk Road civilizations that began developing right at the very beginning of human civilization.

Termez is a site Professor Konstanteen was especially excited about, and I can understand why, as it was an ancient city sacred to Buddhists and Muslims alike, and also a stopping point for early Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who made a 17 year journey to India in order to bring back the sutras of the Greater Vehicle for the Chinese emperor.

All too soon we had to leave.

I can only hope some foreign university archeology professors read this and can form cooperative relationships with the excellent teams of Professor Konstantin at the research center there in Tashkent, as there is so much more of humanity's early civilizations yet to be discovered.

Search though I did, I didn't find any more Wushu along this Silk Road journey until I reached Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan where I met with Master Yazmyrat Annamyradov, President of National Wushu Federation of Turkmenistan.

Samarkand and Bukhara



Samarkand, Uzbekistan is one of the wonders of the world. It was (and is) so beautiful even Genghis Khan could not destroy it. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any Kung Fu there. So, I took some photos and had to move on to Turkmenistan. Someday, Insha'Allah (God Willing) I'm going back to Samarkand. I want to live there for some time.

But my favorite city in Uzbekistan was really Bukhara. It has the most ancient histories and totally astonishing archeological sites. Here is a place I could most happily live. Everyone I met was wonderful and kind hearted. I didn't find Kung Fu there, but I found peace and a feeling of home.



Domed Caravanserai trading center in Bukhara, Uzbekistan



Kind friends Furkat and Umida in Bukhara, the ancient Silk Road capital of the region



Kalyan Minaret in Bukhara



Popular culture in Bukhara greatly admires Nasreddin Afandi – a Turkish humorist, sage philosopher, Sufi and all-around wise man. He usually rode a donkey.

Finally, I hope we all can learn from the rise and fall of so many civilizations, and the Kung Fu philosophies transmitted to Anar from his Shifu Zakariadze Boris Vasilevich regarding “realization” at Silver River Dao School. “For it is realization that determines all things – to realize the characteristics of the body/mind whether in Kung Fu, yoga or just ordinary life.”

Contact

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<http://www.caravanserai.uz>

Part 12 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Winter, 2016

The Road to Ashgabat, Interview with Yazmyrat Annamyradov, President of National Wushu, Federation of Turkmenistan and Head Coach of the Turkmenistan National Wushu Team & A visit to the National Turkmen Kurash (traditional wrestling) Training Center



Ashgabat National Museum of History

Brief Recap

During my summer Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship tour I traveled in China from Beijing, to Xi'an, Turpan, and Urumqi, then crossed into Kazakhstan to Almaty, followed by Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and then Tashkent in Uzbekistan, traveling a land route of 5,133 kilometers, or 3,188 miles on the ground in 21 days while also interviewing martial art masters and visiting museums in every major city along the way.

On this winter trip I took it a bit easier, traveling from Tashkent where I left off last summer, to Samarkand, and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, crossing the border into Turkmenistan, then Turkmenabad, Mary/Merv, and finally Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan traveling a land route of 2,058 kilometers, or 1,278 miles over a 17-day period, for a combined total of 7,191 kilometers or 4,466 miles, in 38 days, naturally visiting martial arts schools, museums and Silk Road sites all along the way, as usual. It's not that I was lazier on this trip, but rather my winter vacation is shorter so my goals had to be abbreviated.

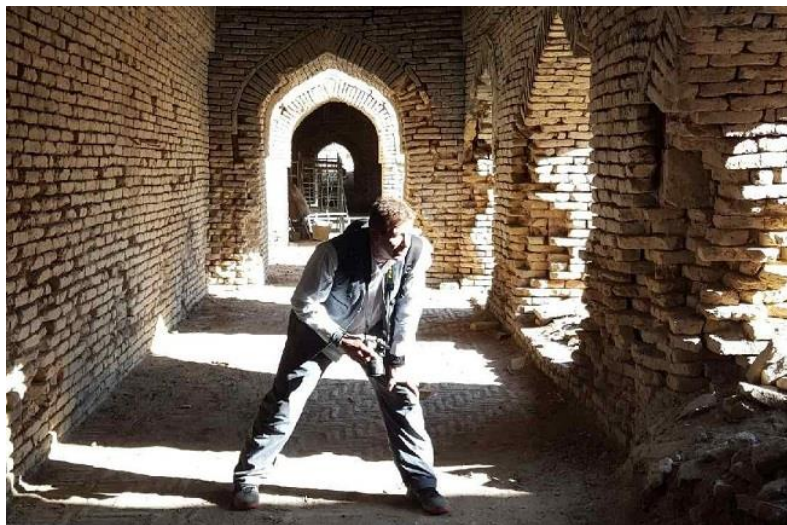
Though I only found a few Kung Fu schools in Uzbekistan I know there are many others. I'm not going to write more about Uzbekistan here as I'm sending quite a few pictures and can only hope Kung Fu magazine editor Gene Ching can include as many as possible for Uzbekistan is home to many of the world's most ancient civilizations and wonders of literature, poetry, philosophy, art, and architecture whose beauty and grandeur is really impossible to describe.

TURKMENISTAN

Turkic peoples are any of a wide variety of ethnic/cultural groups that speak languages of the Turkic sub-family of the Altaic languages. In the 6th Century they formed a loosely knit empire stretching from what is now Mongolia, parts of northwestern China and west to the Black Sea at the eastern edge of Europe. They include Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uighurs, Uzbeks and many other races and cultures.

Central Asia is really divided between Turkic peoples and those speaking languages from Persia, now called Iran. Turkic peoples were warrior horse tribes for most of recorded history and bonded by Islam for most of the past 1,000 years or so.

Turkmenistan has been at the heart of Central Asia for several millennia, bordered by Kazakhstan in the north, Uzbekistan in the north-east, Afghanistan and Iran in the South, Azerbaijan and Russia all along the Caspian Sea in the east. Most of Turkmenistan, some 80% is comprised of the Karakum Desert which is one of the driest places on earth with an average rainfall of less than half an inch a year.



Writer inside Dayahatyn Caravanserai, Turkmenistan -
a true "untouched" ancient Silk Road trading center

This has bred an unusually hearty and tough people and culture. On October 27th, 1991 Turkmenistan declared independence from the Soviet Union after 67 years as a union republic. Turkmen greatly cherish their independence and on December 12, 1995 the 50th Session of the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution on the Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan preventing it from participating in multinational defense organizations (like perhaps NATO), while simultaneously Turkmenistan has diplomatic relations with 132 countries. In other words, they fiercely love their independence and freedom, sincerely wish to stay out of other people's wars and provocations and in some ways are really quite social internationally.

While I was in Turkmenistan's capital city Ashgabat, I picked up a copy of Turkmenistan's first president's (Saparmyrat Nyyazow) book titled *Ruhnama* and found it quite enlightening, quoting extensively as he does Turkic folklore, Islamic and Buddhist beliefs. He was very much a moralist but also had quite a sense of humor at times too. He describes the Turkic people as honest, loyal, straightforward, and possessing of extraordinary martial valor:

"We have many national heroes to be proud of because the art of war is not unfamiliar to our nation. A nation which regarded every adolescent boy as a soldier and whose horses were always saddled and readied guns passed on its art of war over from generation to generation. Our art of war of thousands of years started in the era of Oguz Khan, who was the ancestor of Turkmen..." "They never disguised themselves while riding a camel. Everyone one of them fought the enemies like wild wolves..."

Yet, they steadfastly maintain honor in war: "In the field of the art of war, the sons of Turkmen have drawn lessons from the teachings of people. One of the teachings says that "Even a snake would not disturb anyone asleep...." "The fame of Turkmen heroes went beyond the mountains and became well-known everywhere since they were known for their bravery, fearlessness, fidelity to their oath, generosity, and good manners." "...In that era, in Persia, Tukey, the Caucasus, Russia and in many other countries, the palaces were guarded by the Turkmen. The Turkmen soldiers were known as dependable, loyal and decent men."

President Saparmyrat Nyyazow was also very much a naturalist: "Man is a produce of nature and a child of nature. Man has to obey the harmony, rules and order of nature and has to be line with it. Nature is the major teacher of man."

If I lived in Uzbekistan my choice of cities would be Bukhara; were I to live in Turkmenistan my choice of cities would be Mary, which is adjacent to the ancient, ancient city of Merv which in the Bronze Age (3,300 BC – 1,200 BC) was one of the major cultural centers of the East, and is referred to in the *Avesta*, the holy book of the fire-worshippers as *Mouru*, as one of the seven regions where the population followed Zarathustra, and was given the name *Margush* in an inscription by the Persian King Darius the First, and *Merv* in medieval Arabic literature.

The State of Margush in the Bronze Age almost 40 centuries ago is thought to be the birthplace of Zoroastrianism. It was a state comparable with Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and India. The ancient palace/temple/fortress oasis complex of *Gonur-depe* in Merv is proving to be one of the world's most precious archeological treasure troves of ancient history – a major crossroads of the ancient Silk Road there in the Karakum Desert.



The Great Kyz Kala, or “Maiden’s Castle,” is the largest in a group of buildings outside the west wall of Sultan Kala on the Merv Oasis. Built in the 8th Century the archaeological site in Baýramaly, Turkmenistan

But those are not the primary reasons I'd be happy living there. The reason is, like Bukhara in Uzbekistan – the people in Mary/Merv are friendly, honest and straightforward, the pace of life is relaxed and easy going, and it basically felt good to me. However, whereas Bukhara was experiencing spring-like weather when I visited, Mary/Merv was something else entirely.

February 10th, the morning I arrived in Mary/Merv, a snow storm hit with blizzard like conditions, the first snow of the year and people joked I brought the snow. They actually like the snow and cold, whereas I had just endured the coldest winter in 25 years in Beijing. Ha! Funny. Photographing Merv during the storm proved to be something of a challenge, but my photos might be somewhat unique because of the lovely white snow covering one of the driest deserts in the world.

Ashgabat is the capital city and administrative center of Turkmenistan, and that is where I found President of National Wushu Federation of Turkmenistan and Head Coach of the Turkmenistan National Wushu Team, Master Yazmyrat Annamyradov.

February 12, 2016

Like practically all martial art masters in Central Asia Master Yazmyrat started his martial art career in Karate, due in part to Russian influence during the era of the Soviet Union. He started this training in 1985, however in 1989 he went to a Wushu seminar in Russia and met up with Wushu Master Hussain Magomayev. After that life changing event he switched over and hasn't looked back.



President of National Wushu Federation of Turkmenistan and Head Coach of the Turkmenistan National Wushu Team, Master Yazmyrat Annamyradov

Thirty-one years later he's become a legend here in Turkmenistan and highly respected around Asia as a superb trainer, coach, and organizer. For example, in Hong Kong they won 3 golds 3 silvers and 4 bronzes in 2011. In Berlin his team won 4 golds, in fact all over the world they've done very well, even when fighting team competitions with only half a team. For example, in the 2006 Junior World Wushu Championships held in Kuala Lumpur he only entered four athletes who walked away with three silver medals, earning them 5th place, which is pretty darned good considering other national teams were competing with teams of eight and there were forty-five nations participating in this event. Because of the medal count in this championship his team was recognized as the Vice Champion. This was hardly the first or last of this emerging great team's dramatic victories. Master Yazmyrat's National Wushu Team has earned medals in over 150 international competitions in 45 countries.



Turkmenistan Wushu Federation and National Olympic Training Center,
Ay Gul, age 18

They also have a tendency to finish Sanda bouts with KOs. During our interview Master Yazmyrat showed me some videos of his team member's international competition bouts and indeed I saw one knockout after another. No doubt these Turkmenistan athletes are dauntless and tough to the core, but there's a lot more going on here than that.

In Turkmenistan the Wushu and Kung Fu federations are merged. This isn't terribly surprising given the Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan. So, synergizing Wushu and Kung Fu into one organization is perfectly in line with their penchant for unification and peace.

Altogether Master Yazmyrat has 25 Wushu coaches teaching about 1,500 students around Turkmenistan and their meteoric rise to Wushu international fame is noteworthy.

After our interview he kindly allowed me to lead a stretching and basic kick/punch warmup session with one of his junior teams.

Coaches are usually pretty surprised when I volunteer to do this with every national team I meet. Usually because of language it's often difficult to explain that after spending days and nights on buses I really need some kind of workout! Thus, my motives are not entirely altruistic, but instead might be called: "enlightened self-interest."



Writer G. Brundage enjoys leading warmup techniques before National Junior Team class

February 13, 2016 - My last full day in Turkmenistan & very special visit with Turkmenistan's National Junior Koresh (traditional wrestling) Team

All along The Road in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan I'd tried to visit a traditional Koresh wrestling school but it seemed the fates had decreed against it and so I was just absolutely delighted when Guvanch my friendly guide in Turkmenistan told me I had been invited to meet their national junior Koresh team at one of the fabulous Olympic/Asian Games training centers around Ashgabat on my last day there.

Just how old is Koresh?

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “When the Islamic rulers of Persia began hiring Turkic mercenaries about the year 800 CE, the soldiers brought with them a style of loose wrestling called Koresh, in which grips may be taken on the long, tight leather pants worn by the wrestlers and the bout ends with a touch fall of the loser briefly on his back...”

Thus, it was with no small amount of excitement that I walked up the stairs to their training hall as I’d read a little about it and knew they wore a jacket and belt when competing and hoped I might be allowed to participate a bit and see if my old Judo skills might be of some use.

Arriving at the training hall Guvanch and I were greeted by National Team Coach Hemra Nurmammedow and his team. I found out they were going to leave for an international competition that afternoon in Turkey but had showed up just to meet me and demonstrate their pride and joy, real Turkmen Koresh.

The students lined up along one edge of the mat and Coach Hemra offered me a jacket if I’d like to participate! Wow! Was he reading my mind? The answer to that was a no-brainer so I stripped off my outer pants and of course I had my taekwondo pants underneath as I practice all kinds of martial arts along The Road, including Wushu, taekwondo, kickboxing, wrestling, whatever! (This non-discriminatory policy of mine has prevented me from becoming a master of any art, but on the other hand I’ve had a darned good time and made a lot of friends.)

First Coach Hemra explained that traditional Turkman Koresh is different from another Koresh by for example the belt being tied around the waist as compared to around the chest, and different from traditional belt wrestling.

I was also told (with Guvanch translating) that one point can be gained by getting the opponent to touch any body part to the mat, except the feet of course, e.g. hand, knee or elbow, whereas a complete win (two points) can be gained by throwing the opponent on his back. Then he had his students demonstrate some of the major throws/takedowns. It looked like all good fun to me, similar to judo in some ways, but the footwork, grips, approaches and executions were decidedly different in most cases.



It was explained to me that at the beginning of a match contestants step onto the mat, are formally introduced, then proceed to the center to get their grips. Once thus prepared, the referee will call a start to the match. After that I was invited to try it.

I tentatively followed the procedures but needed Coach Hemra to make sure my grips were right, which of course they weren't the first time.

Coach Hemra called for the match to begin and it was on! Fortunately for me the young guy, probably all of 16 or 17 years old didn't resist at all so I threw him to the cheers of the audience. After helping him up I gave it another go and they so very kindly awarded the match to me.



All in fun of course, but it was exceedingly kind of them to bring the team in to demonstrate this fine ancient art just for me. But, it's the love of our martial arts that sustains us all in our endeavor to attain higher levels of mastery and promote our arts. So, I understood and felt/feel profound appreciation and honored at their thoughtfulness and effort. Giving me the splendid real Turkmen Koresh jacket as a gift was one of the nicest surprises I've ever had.

Knowing they had to leave that afternoon I got a couple of their e-mail addresses, passed out a few of my name cards, and bid them farewell wishing them luck in competition, health and happiness.

I have to mention the people of Turkmenistan have very kind hearts. On several occasions people invited me into their houses to eat and were always splendid hosts.



Friendly restaurant owner on the way to Astana-Baba Allamberdar, Turkmenabad. He wouldn't let us pay for lunch. Kind people everywhere!

Conclusions

Though this Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour segment was a bit shorter than last summer's it was again supremely educational, challenging at times and really, really great fun. Classes at my high school here in Beijing start in a few days, and of course I'm really looking forward to that, but have to admit I'm already planning the next segment of this fabulous adventure, starting again in Ashgabat, then crossing the border to Mashhad (Iran), Damghan (Iran), Tehran (Iran), and then crossing the border to Turkey, and traveling from Ankara to The Harbor of Eleutherios later known as the Harbor of Theodosius, one of the ports of ancient Constantinople, in Istanbul, Turkey, the land's end of the Silk Road, and beginning of the Maritime Silk Road. From there, who knows?

(2020 Note: Unfortunately, the visa for Iran didn't come through, probably because of my background as journalist. Tragically western journalists have a very bad reputation in many parts of the world for being spies.)

Technical note: To visit Turkmenistan you'll need a Letter of Invitation which can only be gotten from one of their government owned travel agencies (unless you've got some high-powered friends maybe).

You will be given a guide, which is quite nice and in my case very helpful indeed because he (Guvanch) was great at getting appointments and finding things in general. Crossing the Farab border from Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan was quite nice as I got there a little before 9:00 am, the weather was quite nice, they hadn't really opened yet and practically nobody was there. But, a word to the wise: Be sure to have your guide's name and phone number written down or Immigration might not let you in. Luckily, I have e-mail on my phone and was able to get the phone number of my guide who met me on the other side of the border.

Part 13 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Beijing on the Silk Road

Silk Road's Northeast terminal in Beijing, the Niujie Masjid, China Islamic Association and Wang Zhengyi, also known as Great Broadsword Wang the Fifth



Old front gate of Niujie Masjid in Beijing

Preface

April 26, 2016 Though physically here at my home in Beijing, a part of my spirit is still in Ashgabat Turkmenistan where I had to temporarily stop my most recent segment of the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour. My ultimate goal this coming summer is Istanbul, specifically the 5th Century Harbor of Eleutherios later known as the Harbor of Theodosius and known as the “Portus Theodosiacus” in Latin, which was one of the ports of ancient Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, located beneath the modern Yenikapi neighborhood in Istanbul.

Now however, I'm on a one-week vacation from my life as a teacher for the May 1st holiday here in China, and thus continuing my Silk Road explorations, except here in my adopted home city of Beijing. My original intention on this short pilgrimage downtown was to visit an ancient mosque and something called the China Islamic Association. What I found was a whole lot more including an amazing Kung Fu story/history.

Introduction

With more than 3,000 years of history Beijing has seen the rise and fall of many nations and empires. "Beijing" meaning "North Capital" was one of the four ancient capitals of China, along with Nanjing (South Capital), Xi'an (known as Chang'an in ancient times), and Luoyang.

Beijing, just before the Yuan Dynasty was known as "Zhongdu," thanks to the Jurchen Jin Dynasty in the 1100s and was subsequently reduced to rubble by Genghis Khan in 1215. Cities that did not submit to Genghis the Khan were totally obliterated. Beijing, as it is now known was then rebuilt by Kublai Khan and renamed as "Daidu," a new capital for the Yuan Dynasty.

Whereas prior to the Yuan Dynasty Beijing was the northern frontier of a tributary to the Silk Road, that same fabled road reached its zenith during the Yuan Dynasty and was naturally the major highway for "Daidu" to the enormous and enormously wealthy Western world.

Given that almost all of the nations west of China all the way to Turkey are Muslim countries (except for Georgia and Armenia), Muslims that traveled and traded all the way to Beijing would probably seek in this ancient city now called Beijing, Muslim quarters for rest, companionship and prayers, weddings, funerals and other necessities of civilized life.

The heart of the Muslim quarters in Beijing then and now may be found along “Niujie” or Oxen Street, where for most of the time since the Liao Dynasty in the year 996 one may find the Niujie Libai – though it was obliterated along with everything else in 1215 by Genghis Khan, however was rebuilt in 1443 during the Ming Dynasty.

The “Oxen Street Mosque” is very much the spiritual heart of the Islamic quarters in Beijing, at home in a Muslim community of around 10,000 mostly Hui and Uyghur Chinese Muslims, in addition to some Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Bonan, Uzbek and Tartar Muslims, hardly surprising really given that this is the Muslim center of the northeast terminus of the major tributary to the famed Silk Road in China. Though the name “Oxen Street” may sound a bit strange to non-Chinese, most of the streets in this ancient city of Beijing were named for the commodities bought and sold there, e.g. Lamb Street, Horse Street, Donkey Street, Hat Street, Oil Street, Curtain Street, Glass Street, Stone Street, Red String Street, and so on. Other streets were often named after illustrious families.

My visit to Niujie Masjid

With this background in mind this National Day holiday here in Beijing I ventured forward to the subway from my northern district of Changping for the two hour journey to Niujie Mosque just a little southwest of the Forbidden City, with the name “China Islamic Association” and its cross street location hastily scrawled in my little notebook.

Getting off the Line 4 subway at Caishikou Station I had only the faintest inkling of what to expect. It was about a three-block walk to the Mosque. Standing around outside were a few elderly Muslims pleasantly passing the beautiful spring early afternoon.

Zuhr (noon prayer) was scheduled for 1:30 so I had about half an hour to do Wudu, ritual washing before participating in my first prayer at this famed Mosque.

Inside the Prayer Hall it was serenely beautiful, gleaming with the quiet spiritual power only ancient places of worship can radiate. Just before the prayer started six or seven pairs of Ulama (Muslim scholars) in a line solemnly walked up the central aisle spreading across the front row of prayer in front of the 20 – 30 other mostly older faithful preparing for this noonday prayer. This was clearly a Masjid of learned Muslims!

After prayer I reemerged into the gorgeous spring day outdoors from the ancient Prayer Hall. Radiant peace emanated in all directions, connected through nature, the community and history under the clear spring blue sky.

Like other Chinese style Mosques Niujie Libai is built around a large courtyard with many trees, ancient stone steles, and small garden-like areas with doorways, meeting halls and pathways here and there. This is in contrast to most Central Asian mosques that are domed, generally taller, made of stone and more box shaped, probably because this shape is easier to defend in those rugged lands.

After a circuit of one part of the Masjid grounds I was back in front of the Prayer Hall when I heard some young men speaking Bahasa Malay language. Having lived in Malaysia for several years I wandered by them, greeting them with *Assalamu Alaikum* and “*Apa-ka-bar!*”

We chatted for a while and I found out they were on a six-day holiday here in Beijing, had kind hearts like most Malays and eager to discover this ancient magnificent city.



After taking some pictures, we scanned each other's WeChat ID codes and I was off to explore the rest of this ancient Silk Road Muslim Prayer Center. I also stopped at a small shop and bought some souvenirs e.g. a small prayer bracelet, Halal soap, and a distinguished professional looking shirt with some beautiful Arabic writing.

After photographing some of the more picturesque venues within the Masjid grounds I had to go if for no other reason than because I was hungry and wanted to see if I could find the China Islamic Association before it closed.

Finding a great Halal restaurant was easy as there are several across the street and I had a most delicious beef noodles dish, with some specialty chicken on the side. Wow! Heavenly!

China Islamic Association

Then, off to find the China Islamic Association, which according to my notes was at the intersection of *Nanhung Xi Lu* and *Jiaozi* Hutong. Just a note for the non-Chinese speakers, *Jiaozi* sounds a lot like the steamed dumpling so loved in China on New Year's, but these characters were different and means "teach son," or "teach children," (as "zi" here has a neutral gender). In any case, it sounded good to me!

Only about three blocks away huge ornate buildings appeared with three green domes on top. We introduced ourselves to the guard at the gate and asked if someone was available who might be able to tell us about the Association and what they do.



China Islamic Association in Beijing

A few moments later we were inside looking for the office number we were given and upon finding it met a Mr. Musa Chen Yulong, Director of the international Department and another friendly man named Hakim. Luckily my Chinese friend Miao was with me because my Putonghua (Mandarin) isn't too good and Mr. Chen's English is a bit limited as well. Hakim however speaks English well. All good!

After introductions and giving them my name card, we were seated and I got to interview Mr. Chen about the Association's activities.

First, he told us a little of their history. The China Islamic Association started teaching about Islam in 1953 and was officially founded in 1955 (only six years after the founding of the modern China in 1949).

Though their operations ceased during the Cultural Revolution, they started again in 1982.

He then explained there are two main parts to their mission and building. First, in one building they are a teaching institution, teaching about Islam to people from all over China, specifically preparing exceptionally learned individuals to become Ulama, or Islamic scholars. Secondly in another building they plan for and network with a variety of national and international Islamic and other inter-religious peace organizations.

A teaching association

He said that at the Beijing headquarters they only accept 30 students per year for a five-year study program. Since their inception they've established regional Islamic Associations in eight other provinces, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Liaoning, Gansu, Qinghai, Henan, Yunnan, and Hebei. Mr. Chen said there are also other large religious schools in many provinces, in most cases operated by large Mosques. The China Islamic Association however is the largest such organization and also publishes a bimonthly magazine in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), and a quarterly magazine in Uyghur language (spoken primarily in Xinjiang).

Peace networking association

The other half of the mission of the China Islamic Association is to network with national and international Islamic and inter-religious peace organizations, including an annual international meeting in Qatar, the Chinese Committee for Religious Peace (CCRP), the Asian Committee for Religious Peace (ACRP), and another series of international inter-religious peace meetings held regularly in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Muslim martial art story

After this Mr. Chen told me a very brief story about an extraordinary Muslim martial artist that lived and worked in Beijing for some years.

He was also a hero of the revolution against the corrupted Qing Dynasty in the years leading up to the turn of the 20th Century. The following is his story supplemented with some of my own research.

Wang Zhengyi (1844-1900), known as Great Broadsword Wang, (Dadao Wang), and Wangwu, or Wang the Fifth, as he was the fifth of his master's great students, was an amazing hero of China. Liang Qichao another hero of the revolution referred to him as the "Hero of Yanzhao," with Yanzhao being the traditional name for Hebei, which prior to the 1970s was a huge province in northeast China that included Beijing, Tianjin, and Zhang Jia Kou, one venue for the upcoming 2022 Winter Olympics. Great Broadsword Wang's broadsword by the way weighed a hefty 100 Jin (110 pounds).



Artist's conception of Dadao Wang

Of Muslim Hui ethnicity Wang Zhengyi was originally from a poor family in Cangzhou, Hebei, then and now home to a sizable population of the Muslim Hui ethnic group.

His father died when he was three years old and he grew up strong having to do many chores. He was the fifth student of “Two Swords” Li Fenggang a famous martial art master who taught *Liu He Xin Yi Quan* and “Big Sword Style” in Cangzhou.

Liu He Xin Yi Quan is known as the Muslim branch of *Xing Yi* because it follows a patrilineal line down through the Muslim community in Luoyang, descending from Master Ma Xue Li, with the “*Liu He*” name distinguishing it from other *Xing Yi* branches.

“*Liu He*” refers to the six harmonies of the body: three external, wrists-ankles, elbows-knees, and shoulders-hips and three internal harmonies of *Xin-Yi*, *Yi-Qi*, and *Qi-Li*. “*Xin*” here refers to heart, spirit and emotional mind; “*Yi*” means intentional harmonies, “*Qi*” breath and momentum which is to be harmonized with “*Li*” or physical strength and power. The Henan branch uses a 10-animal system and in some lineages may or may not use five elements.

As a young man Wang Zhengyi joined a body guard/courier company, commonly known as a “protection agency” (*Biaoju/Biaohang*) and worked several years in Tianjin and Beijing. Eventually he founded his own protection agency in Beijing called Shunyuan Protection Agency in 1879, across from *Zhengyangmen* city gate, the old main gate of Beijing which still stands just south of Tiananmen Square though the last of the *Biaoju* closed its doors for the last time in 1921. None the less the auspicious location of Wang Zhengyi’s Shunyuan Protection Agency strongly suggests he was very successful at that time. In the beginning his protection agency taught martial arts only to Muslims, but later on expanded to teach all patriots in the revolution against the decaying Qing Dynasty.

During the revolution Wang Zhengyi joined a revolutionary group.

He was a good friend and martial art teacher of Tang Si Tong, one of the very famous six heroes – Tan Sitong, Liu Guangdi, Yang Rui, Lin Xu, Yang Shenxiu, and Kang Guangren - of the revolution.



Tan Sitong

Tan Sitong (1865 - 1898) from Liuyang, Hunan wrote a book titled: *On Benevolence* in which he called for the breaking off of all feudal vestiges, denounced all emperors as “despots and traitors to the people,” and characterized aristocratic monarchy as rule by bandits (page 430, Bai Shouyi, *An Outline History of China*). Tang Sitong with others also launched a revolution in poetry advocating that poetry mirror current political and social reality without violating the traditional poetic style. (*ibid*)

Though the nominal Guangxu Emperor, Zaitian – the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty supported the six heroes and the reforms they proposed, his mother, the Dowager Ci Xi didn’t, imprisoned the emperor and plotted to have the six heroes all executed in September 1898 after they tried to rescue the young emperor.

Though Tang Sitong had the opportunity to escape, he refused, saying: “No country in the world as yet has had a successful reform without blood being shed... If this will happen let it begin with me.”

When Wang Zhengyi heard that the emperor's mother had decided to kill the six heroes, he tried to save them but was unsuccessful.

Also, in 1898 Wang Zhengyi joined the *Yi He Tuan*, known in the West as the Boxer Rebellion.

There are conflicting histories in regards to how Wang Zhengyi was killed. According to *Baike* an online Chinese encyclopedia, on October 25, 1900 he traded himself for hundreds of the foreign occupiers' (revolutionary) prisoners and was then killed by German soldiers. Other sources say he died that same year from bullet wounds while fighting against foreign troops.

All the histories agree his head was cut off and displayed above the Drum Tower door. His family was not allowed to take the head, which remained there for some time until Huo Yuanjia (1868-1910) co-founder of Jing Wu School in Tianjin (at that time; later moved to Shanghai) heard of this, and subsequently came by himself at night to recover the head by stealth.

He then gave the head of his friend Wang Zhengyi to his family to be properly buried with honor.

Which brings us back to Beijing's Niujie Masjid. As Beijing's oldest and largest Masjid, it is highly likely that Master Wang Dadao the Fifth prayed here also. Little did I know, that morning of April 26th, 2016 when I entered the beautiful ancient Masjid that I was probably walking in the footsteps of a Muslim martial art hero and martyr that helped bring down the terrible old monarchy and protect China from ill-conceived colonial efforts.

Also interesting is that if I hadn't stopped at the China Islamic Association I never would have heard of this great hero Wang Zhengyi , also known as Broadsword Wang the Fifth, or Tang Sitong (or the other five great heroes of the anti-Qing revolution) or that a full half of that great educational institution's efforts are geared towards working with national and international Islamic and inter-religious peace making organizations. Even though I didn't have a prior appointment, Director of the international Department Mr. Chen and his assistant Hakim were wonderful hosts answering my endless flow of questions for around two hours. Many deep and sincere thanks to them, and the wonderful new friends I made at Niujie Mosque here in the ancient and modern city of Beijing, northeast terminal of the ancient and modern Silk Road.

Additional References

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Part 14 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Baku, Azerbaijan



Baku Cityscape photo from the top of Maiden's Tower

Interview with Azer “Mallem,” President of the Azerbaijan Wushu Federation and Azerbaijan Muay Thai-Thai boxing Federation, “Zorkhana” - The House of Force and Strength and the Palace of Shirvanshah

July 27, 2016 – Day 11

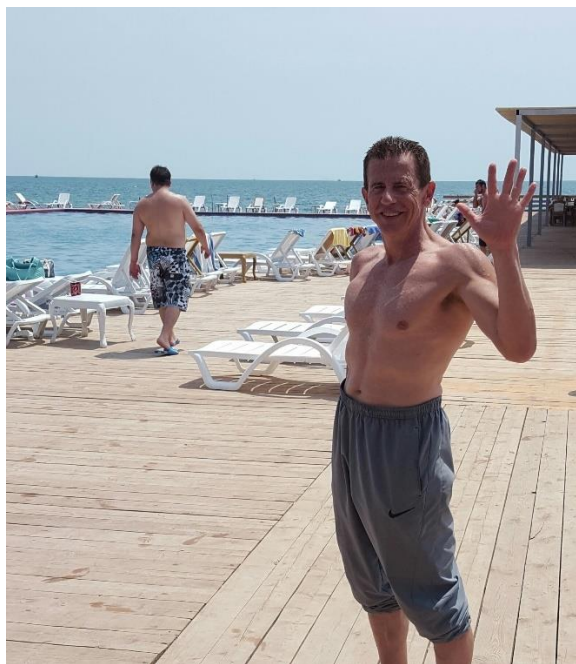
Life sometimes is just so absurd you have to laugh at it.

Due to delays in visas for Iran and Turkmenistan, I decided to fly to Georgia, not the state, but rather the country and apply for the Azerbaijan visa there, figuring it might be faster than in Beijing, which turned out to be right.

Arriving in Tbilisi Georgia it only took a short time to find out their National Wushu Federation team was at a summer camp on the Black Sea Coast, specifically a beautiful small beachside city called Kobuleti.

But that was west, and I wanted to go east to Baku. Fortunately, the Azerbaijan visa in Tbilisi only took two days to get, so after some days sightseeing in Georgia I was off to Baku Azerbaijan via a rather comfortable overnight train. Around 7:00 am I woke up, walked out of the train compartment and saw marvelous sun rays piercing the clouds and shining on the Caspian Sea. Wow! It was an awesomely beautiful way to wake up. My company on the sleeper train, a Georgian female basketball player on the Azerbaijan team named Natali Liveru and a humorous, quite strong Azeri fitness instructor were great travel companions, my kind of people.

I'd already booked my lodgings at the New Baku Hotel with really nice helpful people and a peaceful environment. After a couple of days of visiting museums and famous sights, and a morning swim in the Caspian Sea with my friend Mustafa from the Caravanserai Buxara Restaurant in the Old Town of Baku (*Icheri Sheher*), I cruised back to the hotel in a taxi with the best sound system I ever heard, jamming to Ramil Nabran's "Bomba" and some other tunes. We made a music video on the way back to my hotel by the way. Baku is a colorful oil rich world capital city with oodles of classic buildings and people.



Arriving back at the hotel I found out the desk clerk named Isa (that's "Jesus" in English by the way) had done a great job and managed to get an appointment with the president of the Azerbaijan Wushu Federation, Azer Hassansoy at 3:00 pm that same day at my hotel. Good man!

After chatting for a while with several of the guys at the front desk, I ran upstairs, ate some bread and jam which I keep in hotel rooms for snacks, drank some milk, then ran up two more floors to the restaurant, got an expresso, and took the elevator down to the lobby to be ready for the appointment. All systems go!

Right on time Azer Hassansoy showed up at 3:00 and we went upstairs to the outside lounge to sip on coffee and help me get up to speed on the world of Wushu in Azerbaijan and their Wushu Federation.

Azer Mallem – Patriarch and architect of martial arts organizations in Azerbaijan, and elsewhere



First, it's always good to know how to properly address a distinguished person, and I found out people usually call Azer Hassansoy, "Azer Mallem," with "Mallem" meaning "teacher," or "Sir" in Arabic language as a traditional sign of respect.

Next, I asked Azer Mallem about the history of the Wushu Federation in Azerbaijan and found out he'd started it in 1989, back during the Soviet era; he was the first Azerbaijan Wushu Federation President; in fact, he started the first sports federation here in Azerbaijan after independence in 1991. I also heard from a third-party source that he was instrumental in helping Turkey begin its Wushu Federation as well.

Asked about his training in the fine arts of Wushu, Azer Mallem said learned his Wushu in Kyrgyzstan and Dagastan in 1987 – 1989.

After independence, he'd gone to China to train at the Shaolin and other places, and he subsequently went with this team to Malaysia in 1993 to compete in the Wushu World Championships with three of his fighters winning, gold, silver and bronze.

In 1994 his team competed in Germany in the European Championships, winning one gold and two silvers, and they continued their winning streak at every major competition since, except in 2005 when they didn't attend due to the conflict with Armenia. Master Azer also mentioned championships in Italy, Hong Kong and many other (60+) nations around the world over the past decades.

It turns Azer Mallem is also the coach of my old friend Ramil Allahverdiyev, super champion Sanda fighter from Azerbaijan here, and several other of my Azeri Sanda friends. Not surprisingly he also knows Kamil Rabadanov, president of the Russian Kung Fu Federation and of course Master Fu Biao of Beijing Shaolin.

Something tells me we have a lot more friends in common since I've been traveling the Silk Road, but I had too many questions and too little time to fully explore all of our mutual friendships here, there and everywhere.

I found out Azer Mallem has 10 fighters as the core part of his national team, and about 35 clubs around Azerbaijan with around 4,000 to 5,000 students training in those centers.

"Ten years ago, I had 60+ clubs," he said. When I asked him why the decrease, he mentioned that Wushu is not an Olympic sport at this time, and also it might have something to do with the rapid economic and social development in Azerbaijan. "These days' people like to play tennis and ping-pong, spend time on the Internet, go to malls and so on," he added.

I found out the government helps their Wushu competitors financially, at least when it comes to international competitions. A few of the “super-winners” he said, “might be awarded flats in reward for their victories...” I’ve heard this is true with Olympic Gold Medal winners in China, and have asked other Federation presidents about it, but this is not commonly done and clearly Azerbaijan does support their athletes in many ways as all nations should (!) in my humble opinion.

I also learned that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Ali was president of the National Olympic Committee in 1997 and has since built 33 Olympic training centers around Azerbaijan in every big city. “He really likes sports and sports coaches, and helps, not only the Olympic sports, but all sports” Azer Mallem said.

I found out too that the Minister of Youth and Sport, Azad Rahimov is also president of the N.O.C, practiced Karate and handball when he was younger, and is a great friend to sports coaches and athletes nationwide.

Azer Mallem went on to list just a few of the international sports events held recently in Azerbaijan and in the near future...

- the First European Games were held in Baku in 2015 with more than 6,000 athletes attending, and the Azerbaijan team came in second behind Russia.
- There was a Formula 1 race on a layout designed by renowned F1 track architect Hermann Tilke in Baku, last month (June 2016)
- In October of this year the World Chess Olympiad will be in Baku
- The Islamic Solidarity games will be held in Azerbaijan in 2017

- In 2020, Baku will host group stage and quarter-final matches of the UEFA European Cup.

Azerbaijan is clearly a sportsman's paradise.

Azer Mallem has an incredible martial arts history. I learned that he was and is also the president of the Azerbaijan Muay Thai-Thai boxing Federation. His master was Kru Possawat, Professor in the Academy of Muay Thai.

As if that isn't enough, he's also former president of the Azerbaijan Kickboxing Federation which he'd asked his best qualified friend to take over a while back due to his friend's ideal qualifications and his own rather busy schedule.

Azer Mallem's personal martial arts career also included four golds, in Taolu (performing Shaolin and Chen style Tai Chi forms) in Hong Kong four years in a row, which at least partly explains his ranking of 6th Duan, and 14th Khan.

At the time of our interview Azer Mallem was busy getting ready for a training camp in Russia with several of his top fighters, so I didn't want to detain him any longer, but expressed great appreciation, and my genuine feeling of being honored that he'd take the time to talk with me.

Before leaving the outdoor lounge, he gave me the name and phone number of one of his elite coaches, Mursal Guliyev, and told me I should call this man if I needed anything, or would like some guidance around town.

I expressed my sincere wish that we meet again soon.

About an hour after he left, I got a phone call from Mursal who invited me out for dinner this very same evening.

Given my endless curiosity regarding Wushu in Azerbaijan and that I'm nearly always hungry, I happily agreed.



Mursal Quliyev on Right

Around 8:00 pm he picked me in his rather nice car and he drove towards a simply sumptuous outdoor garden-like restaurant. On the way however I saw an unusually large and spectacular Masjid lit up and shining in the night and asked to stop to photograph it.



He parked and we walked around it for a while. There were lots of families and couples strolling around and playing there and there. It was a rather idyllic peaceful Wednesday evening under the stars with a slight cool breeze on a mid-summer's evening.

After that we drove to the nearby restaurant, and it was totally delicious. We talked about all kinds of things, including Azerbaijan traditional music called *Mugam*. I told him about the Azerbaijan fusion hip hop I like by Ramil Nabran and he laughed. He also volunteered to show me around Baku more in the next couple of days, but I have to leave tomorrow to have enough time for the Kung Fu Federation on the west coast of Georgia and time for Ankara and Istanbul, before my all too short summer vacation runs out in a couple of weeks.

Reflecting this evening on my meeting with Azer Mallem and his very impressive martial arts record, riding the tides of remarkable change in Azerbaijan, extraordinary organizational skills, his easy going friendly manner, and great thoughtfulness in introducing me to Mursal, I realized there is no doubt whatsoever in my mind; this is a true master of Wushu and life.

Azerbaijan National Museum of History & Azerbaijani “Zorkhana” - The House of Force and Strength



An eclectic mix of Arab and European styles can be seen in Azerbaijan's weaponry and armor

A few days earlier while visiting the Azerbaijan National Museum of History I happened upon what looked like the heaviest battle shield I'd ever seen, and stopped to carefully read the signs and look at the display. What I subsequently found was quite interesting and new to me.



It looks like a practice shield and exceedingly heavy. What better way to develop force and strength for battle?

Zor means strength and power, and *Khana* means house. Traditionally the big hall of *Zorkhana* was blocked by tall arch beams with a domed roof.

Depending on the size of the cloth mat from 15 to 20 players could compete simultaneously. Games in *Zorkhana* were accompanied by music.

After a special sign was given by the judge, music played and the games began. After those games gulash (national wrestling) began. Upon finishing the games Pakhlavans kissed the hand of the judge and left the arena. Pakhlavans participating in Zorkhana traditionally wore only trousers, shorts actually that came to just below the knee. Pakhlavans used maces and heavy wooden clubs used in war and weighed between 12 to 30 kilos. Zorkhana competitions included breaking of swords, lifting heavy stones, gulash (wrestling) and other games.

The common story is that after the Arabs captured Persia and what is now Azerbaijan in the 7th Century, rebels led by Abu Muslim Khorasani went to the mountains of Khorasan where they established secret training camps to prepare for a rebellion. Khorasan (7th to the 18th Century) was once a great empire that extended east to India. “Azerbaijan” by the way means “Guardians of the Fire” in Persian, owing to the fact that it was a center of Zoroastrian – fire worshipping – religion.

And it was ultimately Abu Muslim Abd al-Rahman ibn Muslim Khorasani or al-Khorasani that led the Abbasid Revolution that finally toppled the Umayyad Dynasty. Historians disagree as to Abu Muslim’s origin, with some saying he was Persian, while others say Arab, and some say he was Tajik, Afghan, Azerbaijani, Yemenite, Kurdish or of another ethnicity in the region which basically means nobody knows.

The signs at the Azerbaijan National History Museum say that at the Zorkhana they had “contests with maces, and wrestling,” and judging by the very, very heavy wooden practice shields, it looks like they practiced other diverse forms of martial arts/war arts as well.

A series of wars followed, and led to an increased need for warriors of great power, which created a need for *pahlavan wrestling*, and the Zorkhana was where they forged men into iron and then steel, to maintain the honor of families and win wars.

Baku was one of many Zorkhana centers (also Ganja, Shusha, Sheki, Nakhchivan, Ardabil, Maraga, Khoy and Urmiya) in Azerbaijan of *pahlavan wrestling* training in classical times with Baku being the most famous. The Baku Zorkhana was founded by Shonu Abdullah in the early 1800s. He by the way lived to be 116 years old.

More recently there is an International Zorkhana Sports Federation established on 11th October as part of the National Olympic and Paralympic organizations in Tehran in 2004. Zorkhana and Pahlavan wrestling joined the International Zorkhana Sports Federation in 2007, and the first International Zorkhana tournament took place in Baku from March 13 to 17 in 2009. In November 2010 “Zurkhaneh” Sports was registered with UNESCO. (One might notice the slight spelling differences between Azerbaijan and Iran, “Zorkhana” and “Zurkhaneh.”)

According to azerbaijans.com:

“According to historical facts, Zorkhana was systemized 700 years ago by Puryayi Vali (Mahmud ibn Valiyuddin). It was also noted that Zorkhana had more ancient history. The roof of Zorkhana is a dome and the floor is below the ground level. A person who wants to come in the door should bend himself as its door very low. To get in by bending makes the sportsmen modest.”

What does it look like? Today it’s a form of wrestling where they wear special shorts, a T-shirt and cloth belt.

Zorkhana now is a form of belt wrestling, not so different from the Kuresh (also spelled Goresh I found in Turkmenistan). These gentlemen here are quite muscular possibly because they also train with rather heavy “clubs” and other unusual forms of weights.

The Museum was truly extraordinary in many ways. The word “Baku” may have come from the word: *Bakhau*, mentioned in the *Book of the Dead*, an Egyptian funerary text dated to 1550 BCE. There are many mysterious connections between Ancient Egypt and Azerbaijan, including a range of archeological finds of blue Egyptian clay found in Azerbaijan, and similar relics, rites and rituals related to sun worship developed sometime in the 3rd Millennium BCE.

The Palace of Shirvanshah

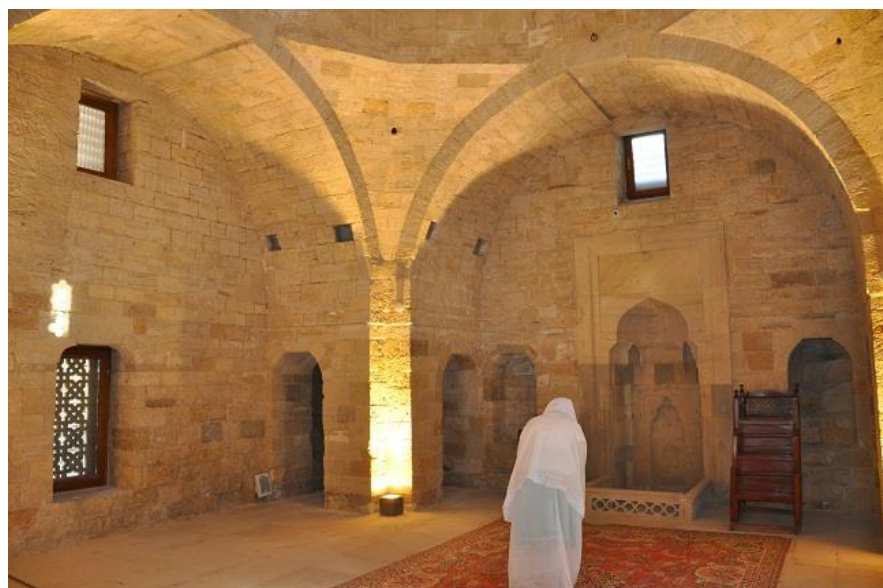


Though mostly rebuilt in the 15th Century, the dynasty of Shirvanshah lasted from the 9th to the 16th Century. That is one of the longest dynasties in world history. It's not a huge palace, but it's just perfectly beautiful, serene and quite secure.



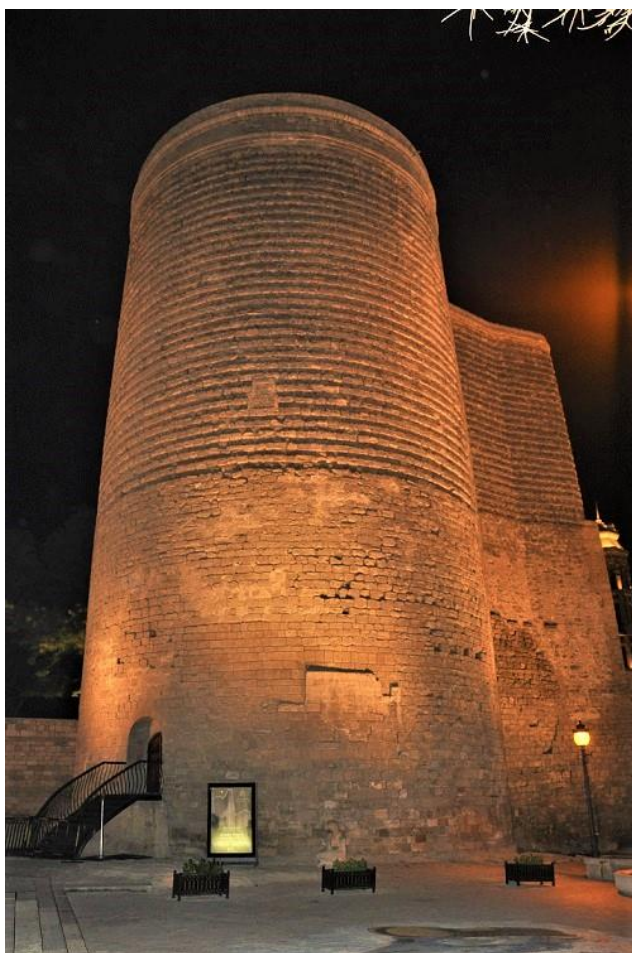
Historically it was much larger, with at least two outer layers of walls, but I guess they're not really needed these days. After my tour I chatted with some of the friendly tour guides adding them to my Facebook. It was really beautiful all around.





Relaxing and chatteing with some of the tour guides at the Palace of Shirvanshah

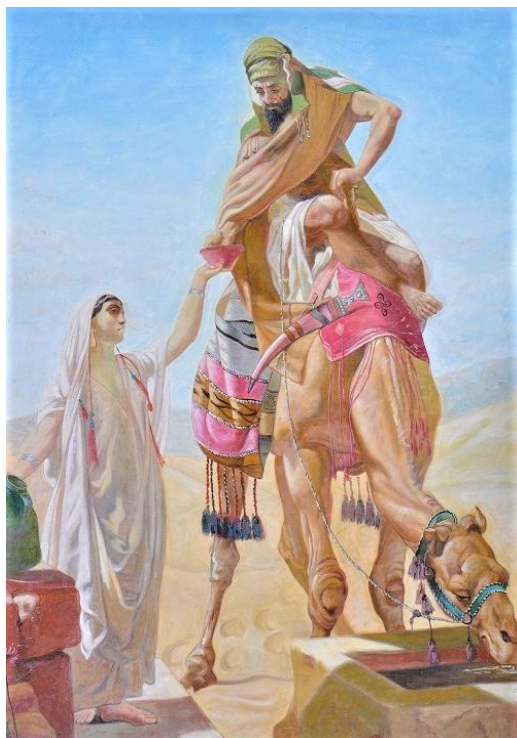
Another impossible to miss sight in Baku is Maiden's Tower, which is huge, at least a couple of thousand years old, and shrouded in mystery, though it is believed to be a Zoroastrian fire worshipping temple and fortress. Its simple beauty and splendid architecture, combined with its great age, aura of total mystery combine to make it a powerful symbol of Baku, Azerbaijan, a country that respects and protects diversity and tradition, while simultaneously being a very modern country.



Maiden's Tower – It may not look so big from the outside but inside it's vastly larger. It's also a museum and has spectacular rooftop views.

Azerbaijan is an oil rich country on the coast of the Caspian Sea. Strolling the Old Town is like time traveling. Unlike many other countries they don't really need tourist money (which is nice - not so many tourist trap areas), but still everyone I met was very easygoing and friendly.

Sincere thanks to Master Azer Mallem and Mursal Guliyev for their time and warm hospitality and the dozens of other people who made Baku Azerbaijan seem like a beautiful seaside home away from home. By the way, they both speak English excellently, which is always nice. Finally, I could easily and happily live there as Baku is a truly great city and God willing, "I'll be back!"



A painting I saw in Baku's Old Town. I looked for the shopkeeper but no one was there. Indeed, Baku Azerbaijan there on Caspian Sea is a most excellent oasis for the road weary traveler.



The hotel people were very friendly and helpful also!

CONTACTS

Buxara Restaurant:

<https://www.facebook.com/Buxarazerbaijan>

Part 15 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Tbilisi, Georgia



“Kartlis Deda” affectionately known as the “Mother of Georgia looking down on Tbilisi from Sololaki hill under a full moon. In her left hand she holds a bowl of wine to greet those who come as friends, and in her right hand is a sword for those who come as enemies.

Visit to the Georgian Wushu Federation Summer Camp in Kobuleti and Interview with Federation President and Taolu Head Coach Giorgi Verulidze, their Sanda Head Coach Lasha Sumbulashvili and some Junior National Team members.

July 29, 2016 - Say “Georgia” to most Americans and they think of the lovely state next to South Carolina and Alabama.

Well, this is *other* Georgia, the country which by the way is much older, at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia on the east coast of the Black Sea, just south of Russia, northeast of Turkey, north of Armenia and northwest of Azerbaijan.

For about 800 years Georgia was a major Silk Road transit location. It is part of the Caucasus nations between the Caspian and Black Seas and is home to the Caucasus Mountains. The Caucasus became a significant metallurgical and mining region in the second half of the 4th millennium BC at the start of the Bronze Age.

According to UNESCO information:

“The Caucasian route gained importance in the 6th century (AD) after confrontation between Byzantium and Iran started – it became unprofitable to deliver silk to Byzantium and other Mediterranean countries via Iran both from economic and security reasons. Under such conditions the issue of the alternative route became very urgent. Central Asian merchants that provided Byzantium with Chinese silk tried to explore new routes, namely the one going to the north from the Caspian Sea, crossed the Caucasus range (via Dariali gorge or other passes in the West Georgia) and proceeded to Byzantium via Georgia. It is known that the first caravan loaded with silk passed this route in 568.

The new road was much more difficult than that via Iran, but from the political and military point of view occurred to be more favorable. Archeological excavations in the North Caucasus confirmed that in the late 6th century and the first half of the 7th century the significant part of the Chinese silk was delivered to Byzantium through Caucasus.

The Caucasus branch of the Great Silk road was explored after the 7th century as well, even when Georgia was under Arab control. Lately, after the 14th century this branch of the Silk Roads lost its importance and the great caravan routes ceased to traverse Caucasus."

<http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/georgia>

According to a sign in the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi:

"Since time out of mind Georgians were well known as excellent warriors. This is universally proved by Ancient Greek, Ancient Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Turk, Persian and Armenian chroniclers. They have noticed numerous historical facts proving Georgian's victory of outnumbering enemy. Georgia was crossed by numerous trade and military routes. It was like a buffer zone between Asian Muslim and European-Christian states. Therefore, each tried to subjugate this country, placed in the heart of the Caucasus... Influenced by these circumstances Georgian art of war acquired various specific elements."

After my interviews and tour in Azerbaijan I hopped the train back to Tbilisi Georgia. During my short rest stop in Tbilisi I met with a very good friend Georgian ITF President Mr. Levan Tsaretashvili who had picked me up when I arrived in Tbilisi the first time and showed me around the city.

He's one of those "super-people" in my opinion: kind heart, really smart, hardworking, creative and helpful. More than anyone else he helped introduce me to Georgia. For example, he also arranged for the trip to the ancient capital city Mtskheta the first time I visited this beautiful capital city.

I'd also visited the national museum during that first trip and was awed by the fabulous collection of artifacts from their long history.



After that short reunion at the bus station I boarded a bus to "Kobuleti," an absolutely beautiful resort town on the Black Sea. At the bus station in Kobuleti I was very kindly greeted by Georgian Wushu Federation President Giorgi Verulidze, one of his top coaches Lasha Sumbulashvili, and a translator named Baiya. Wow! These are some very thoughtful people here in Georgia! From the bus stop we drove to their camp.

But before going on to that, a couple of travel notes. On the "midnight train to Georgia" (ha, ha) coming back from Azerbaijan I shared a compartment with a young Irish traveler and a Greek, Russian, Georgian "babushka," (grandmother) who was charming and delightful but spoke no English.

Fortunately, the young Irish fellow knew some Russian and Georgian so we also had a lively and interesting journey. Thus, traveling between these countries was quite entertaining.

Journey West to Kobuleti!

We got to the camp around 7:30 pm and this was the last evening of their two-week camp but fortunately I was in time for their last training session.



I photographed the youth doing quite a variety of Taolu with a few of the older ones training in Sanda for about an hour before they stopped and I interviewed some of them. Most of them spoke English reasonably well, which is pretty good considering their ages ranged from around 11 to 18. In a few cases I was assisted with expert simultaneous translations by Anna Kiknadze.

Interview with Loka (Locas) Khotiashvili (Age 14) - "How long have you been doing Wushu, and why did you start?" I asked. "I started two years ago and wanted to do Wushu because I like Kung Fu Panda and Jackie Chan movies! That's who I am, funny guy that likes Wushu!" He said all that in English by the way. "Do you think that Wushu training has changed you in any way?" "Wushu helped me understand China more, and also Shaolin life. I think it can help me become a champion like Bruce Lee; maybe I can become one of the legends of Kung Fu." Having observed his Taolu earlier I can only say this young man is a "quick study," and pretty funny too!

Mirian Tormannidze - "I'm 14 years old and started when I was 8 years old. I was at school and the Wushu team did a performance. They offered a scholarship and I started going to classes. I really liked it. So, I never stopped.

"How many hours a week do you train?" I asked "Nine, usually," she responded.

I found out during the interview that Mirian has entered nine Georgian national competitions, and won 9 gold medals. She entered three International competitions and won another three gold medals.

Valer Gobejushvili - He started Wushu training at age 5, and is now 18. In the beginning he did Taolu but these days mostly trains in Sanda. His favorite is *Changquan*. He's a five-time Georgian national gold medal winner.

Next year he'll be competing in Russia, and the next year the European Championships will be in Georgia where he'll also compete.



Guram Pirtskhalava – At age 12 Guram has been practicing Wushu for five years. She specializes in Drunken style, but when asked said she “never tried alcohol.” This got a laugh from everybody. She’s taken first place in the Georgian Championships, 2nd and 3rd in the European Championships and 1st in the International Championships.



I also talked with their Sanda Head Coach, Lasha Sumbulashvili. He's currently age 40 and began Wushu training at the age of 12 with the same Chinese coach as Federation President Giorgi Verulidze, a Master named Suan Jiao Shan, who was trained at Shaolin. Though he started his training in Taolu, in recent years he's transitioned into Sanda. He is a veteran Tai Chi taolu champion, e.g. a world championship in Tai Chi in 2009 and silver in Bulgaria in 2015. When Georgia became independent in 1992, Lasha helped the Federation transition to its new form by working as a General Assistant. He's married and has two children.

After that, Georgian Wushu Federation President Giorgi Verulidze, one of his daughters, Lasha, another translator named Anna and I went out for dinner. Before dinner I had time to briefly interview Giorgi Verulidze.

Originally from a city called Kutaisi, third largest city and legislative capital of Georgia, Giorgi first saw Wushu in 1989 when he was a high school senior.

I asked if at that time he ever imagined he'd ever one day become the President of Georgian Wushu Federation and he laughed and said, "No."

Back in high school he was doing a lot of sports, which included three years of Karate, not coincidentally I think because many of the Wushu and Taekwondo masters in Central and West Asia started their martial arts training in Karate.

He was 18 when he started formal Wushu training with the same master as Lasha, Shifu Suan Jiao Shan. Since then he trained at Songshan Shaolin and several other locations in China and has acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of Wushu Taolu including many "sport and traditional style" Shaolin forms and Chen style Tai Chi forms.

Asked to name some of his favorites he mentioned: *Da Hong Quan*, *Baji Quan*, *Fan Xi Chuan*, *Mei Hua Dao*, and a lot of others that were too quick for me to write down. He holds a 5th Duan ranking. Judging by the medal count of his young team, his teaching style must be as masterful as his own Taolu skill.

The first president of the Georgian Wushu Federation was Teimuraz Shervashidze in 1989 and Giorgi is now the 8th President starting in that position in 2014.

During our interview I found out there are currently 27 certified Wushu training centers around Georgia with some 625 participants, which might not seem like a lot, but the population of the entire nation of Georgia is less than 4.5 million, that is, about half the number of people living in New York City.

About this time dinner came and we were all quite hungry. After dinner we were all pretty tired as they'd been training hard non-stop for weeks, and I'd spent the previous night on a train, and all day on busses to Tbilisi from Azerbaijan, and then from Tbilisi to the Black Sea coast city of Kobuleti.

For those who might like to visit, Kobuleti is quiet, beautiful and small resort town. For those who like a bigger sea side city and a little more action, Batumi is only an hour away, also on the Black Sea and has many forms of entertainment.

Before sleep I reflected on Georgia and its truly remarkable martial history. Before my trip to Azerbaijan I'd spent a week in Tbilisi, the capital city and a day at Georgia's former capital city called Mtskheta poised at the merging of two great rivers, the Aragvi and the Mtkvan.



Mtskheta rests peacefully below the ancient Jvari Church/fortress which seems to float in the sky above on a great hill. The ancient Svetitskoveli Cathedral (Cathedral of the Living Pillar) was built on the remains of a Zoroastrian temple and is a reminder to all that Georgia is an Eastern Orthodox Christian bastion poised between Muslim Azerbaijan and Turkey.



Georgia Jvari Church fortress in Georgia's old capital Mtskheta

The Cathedral was originally built in the year 337, has original frescos from the Byzantium era, and besides being a holy place of worship and pilgrimage site was also used for coronations and burials of the monarchs of Georgia. Mtskheta was a major Silk Road stop in its “day” which lasted about a thousand years from the fifth to the 15th Century.

In Tbilisi I visited the gemstone Fortress Narikala, the geo-political-economic nexus point at the cross-roads of Europe and Asia. Originally built in the 4th Century it glows with a golden light at night high above this nation’s capital. The evening was warm, the moon almost full, there were lots of sweet-smelling trees, bushes and grass after a light rain earlier, and the other people in the tour, some Russians, Koreans, Germans, and others were all very friendly.

Inside one can see the St. Nicholas Church which was rebuilt in 1996-1997 owing to the original 13th Century church having been destroyed by fire.

Persians built the foundation of this majestic and creatively designed fortress, while the walls were constructed sometime later when Arabs ruled the city. Naturally the Emirs palace was located inside the fortress which due to its’ location on a good-sized hilltop has a splendid view of Tbilisi’s old town below.

After about an hour with the tour, I bid them farewell and walked back through the “party town” of Tbilisi to my hostel. And, a party town it is as people from all over the world come here for vacation, so it’s definitely got an exciting very active night life in addition to its’ fabulous history.

While on the tour I got a few night photos of “Kartlis Deda,” the “Mother of Georgia,” a huge statue of a lady erected on top of Sololaki hill in 1958 to celebrate Tbilisi’s 1,500th Anniversary.

Looking up at her one can see that she's smiling and holding a cup (of wine) in her left hand to greet those who come as friends and a sword in the right for those come with "other" intentions.

With these thoughts in mind, I slept deeply with the sounds and smells of the Black Sea only a hundred meters away there in Kobuleti.

July 30, 2016 – I woke in the beach resort hotel around 6:30 am, ate an apple and went outside to swim with the mostly junior team.

Around 7 we hit the beach and I dived in quite joyful to be back in the sea, and most notably a "new" sea I'd never swam in before. When we first stepped onto the beach Anna, the excellent translator from the night before mentioned that the black sand there was magnetized and this magnetic sand was good for joint problems like arthritis. She said people come from all over the world to get the curative benefits of the sand there.

Around 8 I came in and we all walked back to the hotel, more specifically the communal cafeteria for breakfast. I had the opportunity to meet Giorgi's wife (and personal assistant) and we had a scrumptious breakfast, much of which I couldn't identify for sure, but there was something like really delicious cream of wheat porridge, hard boiled eggs, great "French" bread, sour cream, cottage cheese (the real thing, not from a store), with butter and yummy honey and of course, tea.

After breakfast we all took pictures and so on and pretty soon, I had to go. Fortunately for me, Giorgi and his wife kindly drove me to the small bus station in Kobuleti, where I caught a minibus to Batumi. There, we parted, and I caught the bus to the Georgian side of the Turkish border crossing called Sarpi, before another short bus ride to the Turkish Immigration Station and naturally another entire spectrum of exciting new adventures!



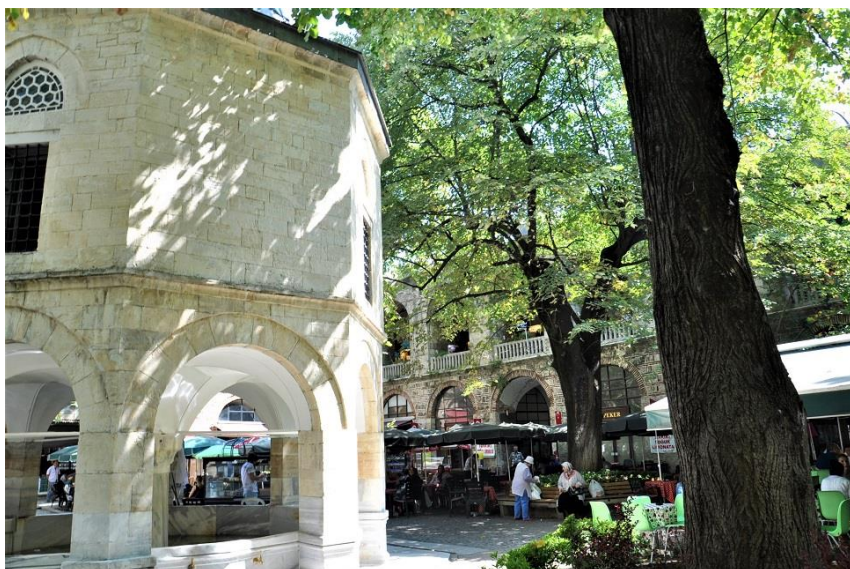
Sarpi Border crossing – quite nice actually. One can get off the bus, buy some snacks and relax before crossing the border. I was a little nervous because I wasn't able to get an e-visa. That might have had something to do with the attempted military coup the week before... Luckily the border crossing was easy, I just had to get the visa there – a huge relief!

Part 16 Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour – Ankara Turkey

Interviews with Turkish Wushu Federation President Abdurrahman Akyuz, his daughter World Champion many times over Elif Akyuz, the “Hans” – trading center terminus endpoints of the mighty continental Silk Roads and the fathomless histories in Ankara, Bursa and Istanbul



The Bosphorus seen through a gate in the old city wall



Inside Koza Han, Bursa, Turkey

I can't believe it! I made it – traveled the entire length of the land Silk Roads from Beijing to Bursa and Istanbul Turkey on the ground (except for Iran). For me it was about 10,347 kilometers. It is a dream come true. An indescribable joy with huge appreciation for all who helped at every step along these infinitely long roads.

Interview with Turkish Wushu Federation President Abdurrahman Akyuz

August 4, 2016 Today was a gold medal day for me in that I got an interview with Turkish Wushu Federation President Abdurrahman Akyuz and his Wushu World Champion, linguist and medical student 19-year-old daughter, Elif Akyuz at the federation office in Istanbul.

Founded relatively recently in 2006, the Turkish Wushu Federation has experienced lightning fast growth to make up for the late start.

Federation President Abdurrahman Akyuz was pleased to inform me that as of the most recent accounting, their federation had more than 8,000 certified trainers, 45,000 students and their National Team can boast of having more than 300 highly skilled competitors, though all naturally don't go to every international competition.

Abdurrahman Akyuz is more than a Federation President, he's also husband and father of a remarkably talented Wushu family, given that his wife is Head Coach of the National Wushu Taolu Team, and his four children have been remarkably successful in national and international competitions.



Turkish Wushu Federation President Abdurrahman Akyuz with writer

But of course, this is Turkey and Federation President Akyuz didn't just come out and say this. Instead I pieced it together in follow-up conversations with other organization members after our interview. Looking on the computer of their most excellent translator while searching for good team photos, I noticed a magazine cover featuring President Akyuz's family, and that turned the key in my mind, cementing what I'd been slowly figuring out on my own. His whole family is amazing!

Ankara is the very modern capital city of a great and very large country but many traditions still hold sway, with modesty being foremost among them.

I was fortunate to get the opportunity to interview his oldest daughter Elif over the phone at least. I was pleasantly relieved her English is quite good. But we didn't start speaking English right away. Nope.

When I introduced myself to Federation President Akyuz I told him (honestly of course) that I'm from Beijing.

So, when I was given the phone with Elif on the line she started in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) which I speak a lot better than Turkish – a language I'm learning now: "Sifir, bir, iki, uc, dort, besh..." (that's 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5) which is pretty easy to remember compared to some other languages.

Anyways, I found out that she's 19 years old and won gold medals in the 2011, 2012, and 2014 World Wushu Championships, is heading to a medical school in China to become a doctor, is a lively conversationalist, has a great sense of humor, and I found out later, speaks English very well indeed.

Present in the office during my interviews with Federation President Akyuz and Elif (via telephone) were several other fascinating individuals including Nesrin Aydin, a journalism student at Ankara University and translator for my interview with the Federation President, and Serap Yasar, a young lady with remarkable Sanda skills, as well as several others who spoke English to varying degrees from not at all, to at least a little.

Federation President Akyuz is a very busy man because in addition to his job with the IWF, he also is the Chief Executive of a mechanical engineering company he'd founded.

This did not surprise me much, because I've learned from other interviews that highly successful businessmen are often appointed to become leaders of sports federations in different countries, precisely because they are very good organizers and know how to generate and manage the capital that is so essential to a growing sports federation.

Of course, in President Akyuz's case there's a lot more than that going on. He's the patriarch of a Wushu dynasty here in Turkey and a man with considerable expertise in Wushu himself, as he's worked as coach and trainer before, though these days he's pretty busy with administrative responsibilities.

After our preliminary interview I asked if it was OK to get a photo of him. He politely agreed, and invited me to join him in the picture. It's a real honor to stand next to such a highly successful, talented and genuine person and family man.

Before he had to leave for another appointment he asked me if I'd eaten – like maybe he'd read my mind and knew I hadn't – and being such a compulsively honest person I said: "Not really," so he asked me to wait a few moments, and in no time at all a most delicious dinner appeared, and I and one of those who spoke no English at all sat down for some seriously great food!

Later, while looking through Nesrin's photo collection on her computer, I happened to notice several photos of Federation President Akyuz and his children playing with Turkish President Erdogan. Wow! Very cool! Naturally I didn't copy those being personal photos but I found quite a number of great photos I can use.



These interviews today more or less complete the goals for interviews I'd set on this leg of my Silk Road Kung Fu/Wushu Friendship Tour.

Of course, this journey isn't nearly over yet. Thanks to some historical insights freely given to me by a most excellent history professor I met at my hotel, I've decided to make a couple of short stops on my way to what may be the most culturally/historically rich city in the world, Istanbul.

As I sit here comfortably in my hotel typing these notes, the soulful sounds of Azan, the Call to Prayer wafts across this ancient city as a cooling evening breeze floats through the land - dissipating the summer afternoon heat during the grandly colored sunset and a reflected back on events of the last week.

The Road and Sea Journey to Istanbul

First of all, Turkey is a very large country and the bus ride took days. From the border I first went to Erzurum where I took a break for a couple of days.



Erzurum - new friends in an ancient land and culture. I was in heaven.



All I can is good people here in Erzurum. Very kind and good people.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “He governs best who governs least.” I think that’s true. Here I found one of the highest percentages of the most civilized people I’ve ever met. I can’t see that they really need much in the way of governing. They appear to govern themselves quite fine, thank you!

Here again in Erzurum I found inclusive, open-minded, curious, friendly true humans with that loving/kindness I experienced really so often along the Silk Roads. People think being a traveler and/or traveling alone is “lonely.” Not really. There is a world family of good people I’ve met that makes anywhere a home. I toured the town as well including the Erzurum Citadel. Being summer and a bit warm, especially just a couple of weeks after an attempted military coup, there were not really any other tourists, so it was quite peaceful. I stopped for Asr (mid-afternoon) prayer at the ancient masjid. So peaceful, and yet a place in history with enough stories to fill a thousand books.



Masjed in the Citadel of Erzurum. I have no idea about the unusual lighting. It was mid-afternoon. It was built in the 12th Century and is reported to be the oldest Turkish building in Erzurum.

So yes, I love being a traveler and meeting all the members of our human family. The only problem is... I'm also a man with a mission! Yes! In search of Kung Fu along the Silk Roads! And so after a couple of days in paradise, I had to get back on the road, this time to the capital city of Ankara.

August 2nd in Ankara I got a real treat when I got back to my hotel only to meet a group of American archeologists and one historian, named Gregory McMahon from the University of New Hampshire. I found out a bit about their work and told them a little about my Silk Road plan. Professor McMahon then very kindly informed me that simply getting to Istanbul and visiting a port wasn't going to do it. Nope. My work was not finished. A westerner might say "O-M-G!" A Muslim would probably say: "*Mashallah!*" - an Arabic phrase that means "God has willed it" and is used to express appreciation, joy, praise or thankfulness for an event or person that was just mentioned.



Far left is Professor Yilmaz Selim Erdol, in center is Professor Gregory McMahon

First, he enlightened me on a rather important topic. He explained that Caravanserais were as I knew, trading posts along the Silk Road, but they were not the end points. They were not the destinations. They were NOT THE END OF THE SILK ROADS! "Oh nooooo!"

There was a short dramatic pause here.

Fortunately, he clued me in, "What you need to visit are the '*hans*' because the *hans* were the buying houses for Silk Road goods, and the real terminal endpoints of the Silk Road. "There are some right here in Ankara, quite a few in fact. You should visit some. Also, you would really enjoy stopping in a city called "Bersa" on the way to Istanbul, because that was the major Silk production city, the first capital of the Ottoman Empire and the true western end of the land Silk Road in West Asia.

Four simple sentences that changed my destiny, oh yes they were. In fact, they were a remarkable gift for my birthday, yes, 30 years old again (for maybe the 30th time).

Then he continued, “You might even like to take a boat from Bursa to Istanbul across the Marmara Sea. It would be grand,” he said, or something to that effect. Wow. Professor McMahon reminded me how much I miss university and the kindly, knowledgeable and often wise professors that share so much.

Before leaving Ankara, I visited one of the digs of those archeologists about an hour drive outside the capital, specifically Gordian’s Tomb (father of King Midas) in a village called Yassihoyuk, and in fact there is also a whole village of burial mounds left by King Gordian’s royal family yet to be excavated. Gordian was once the capital of the Phrygians who dominated most of Central Anatolia during the 1st Millennium BC and is comparable to Athens, Rome, Pompeii, the Hittite capital at Hattusha and Babylon.

The reader should know there are no simple stories, truths or paths for this intrepid martial arts wanderer; no simple fast trains to Istanbul. And yet, it is the fascinating details woven through the tapestries of history and life that give it rich colors, vibrancy, textures and meaning.

First thing next day I visited Suluhani, the largest of the ancient *hans* in Ankara. It was fantastic, partly because Turkey is very different from most countries. Specifically, they don’t throw everyone out of their national monuments or other ancient places, instead they just usually upgrade the place and everyone stays put. So, Suluhani is still a thriving marketplace today.



A small section of Suluhani in Ankara

Also, in Ankara I visited the Museum of Anatolian Civilization. This museum redefined my understanding of ancient civilizations with its spectacular collection. Never before have I seen so many, so well preserved, so highly evolved objects of such great antiquity. I could write a hundred books about the astonishing things in there and not cover half of it.



Orthostats of Long Wall – 900-700 BCE – There is a naked enemy with an arrow in his hip lying face down under the horse's feet. It is believed he is depicted as small because he is an enemy.



Orthostats of Herald's Wall 900-700 BC Military Parade

One thing that rocked my world was the stone: "*Gladyator Chrisampelos'un Mezar Steli, Mermer, Roma Donemi*, (The Funerary Stela of Gladiator Chrisampelos), carved in marble during the Roman Period, 2nd Century AD. To quote a book I bought (*Ancient cities of Turkey*) "In theaters one can see the changes made to accommodate the gladiator fights and wild animal shows so popular in major city theaters during Roman times..." (P. 13)



RIP *Gladyator Chrisampelos*

There was also the Bust of Ulpus Aelius Pompeianus, from the Period of Hadrianus (AD 117-138, “the superintendent of the sacred games in Ankara.” He’s also credited with organizing “games” in other cities, e.g. Claudio polis (Bolu).

This isn’t to suggest that Roman influence was all cruel and bad, for they also aided and refurbished much of ancient Anatolia:

“Anatolia occupied a privileged position in the eyes of Roman rulers who believed that their origins lay in Anatolia. Moreover, they were also aware of the strategic importance of Anatolia’s rich natural resources in terms of keeping Syria, Palestine and Egypt under their control.

As a result, they founded new cities in Anatolia and repaired old cities in line with their advanced engineering skills. It is thus that the Anatolian cities have survived to our day all display traces of the Roman period and it is obvious that, even if they were founded before the Roman period, they were subsequently Romanized.

Yasar Yilmaz, *Ancient Cities of Turkey*, published by YEM Yayun, Istanbul 2014, P. 12

Also, in the “ground floor” collection are displays of coins through the ages, divided neatly into appropriate era. It is certainly worth noting that the first minted coins on earth were found made in ancient Anatolia.

Though innumerable books and articles obviously have been and will be written about the unbelievably excellent collection in the Museum of Anatolian Civilization, I have to say I felt slightly dizzy there, which is an unusual experience for me.

I felt almost lost in the vastness of time, representing a million years of history and most of the evolution of humanity at least since the beginning of farming some 9,000 years ago.

Also, I felt humbled by the extraordinary skills utilized so very, very long ago.

Also, before leaving Ankara I visited the ancient Ankara Citadel/castle/fortress atop the highest hill, and spent a lovely sunset with some young attorneys and a judge standing upon the highest outside wall, which was less than a meter wide. There were romantic couples, groups of boys and one fellow flying a kite up there.



View of Ankara from the top of Ankara Citadel

After finishing up other business in Ankara I was off for Bursa. Turns out the Marmara Sea has dropped a few meters during the past few hundred years and Bursa is no longer exactly on the coast, but the monuments and more importantly, many, many *Hans* are still there. So, I went to the Bersa Silk Market, the Koza Hani, sat and drank tea with some locals for a couple of hours and even met some silk dealers, one of whom gave me some silkworm cocoons.



Silk shop keeper in Koza Hani holding a silk worm cocoon

So, this was the end point, or actually one of hundreds of purchasing houses - terminal endpoints - for Silk Road products. In most cases the overall structures were most typically a quite large garden-like courtyard area with a fountain surrounded by trading houses. They all seemed to have similar internal structures as well, specifically couches in an “L” shape with a coffee table in the middle. It was there that Silk Road goods were finally sold at journey’s end.



Inside Koza Han in Bursa, Turkey – One the more famous trading houses at the ends of the continental Silk Roads

In Bursa I visited Koza Han, the Turk Islam Eserleri Muzesi, (Islamic Museum of Turkey), the Emir Sultan Camii (pronounced “Jami”) which is a mausoleum for some of the greatest Ottoman Sultans and of course the Yesil Camii the famous and spectacular “Green Mosque.”

All too soon, I had to jump on the boat to cross the Marmara for Istanbul.



Ferry boat across the Sea of Marmara

What I found in Istanbul escalated my sense of the absolute hugeness of time and grandness of history. I read in one of the books I bought that Turkey is the world's largest living museum with three times the number of ancient historical cities than actual cities now, so vast and wide is its history.

The boat to Istanbul was exciting, effortlessly gliding across the Marmara Sea, examining the shoreline and realizing there were hundreds of ideal locations for ports and smaller shipping docks. To look for one ancient port would have been ridiculous. There were thousands. Please remember that Turkey is the western tip of Asia that connects Asia to Greece, the Mediterranean Sea and all of Europe.

In Istanbul I visited the Blue Masjid, the coast (where I swam out of the Golden Horn, around Sarayburnu into the Marmara Sea), the Spice Market, Ismail Aga, The Basilica Cistern, Topkapi Palace, the Grand Bazaar, Hagia Sophia, the Istanbul Archeological Museum, Turkish and Islamic Museum, the Egyptian Obelisk, Greek Serpent Column, yes, the remains of the Hippodrome where the Eastern Roman empire - which lasted a thousand years longer than the Western Roman Empire - celebrated the "Games" including of course chariot races and gladiatorial fights to the death.

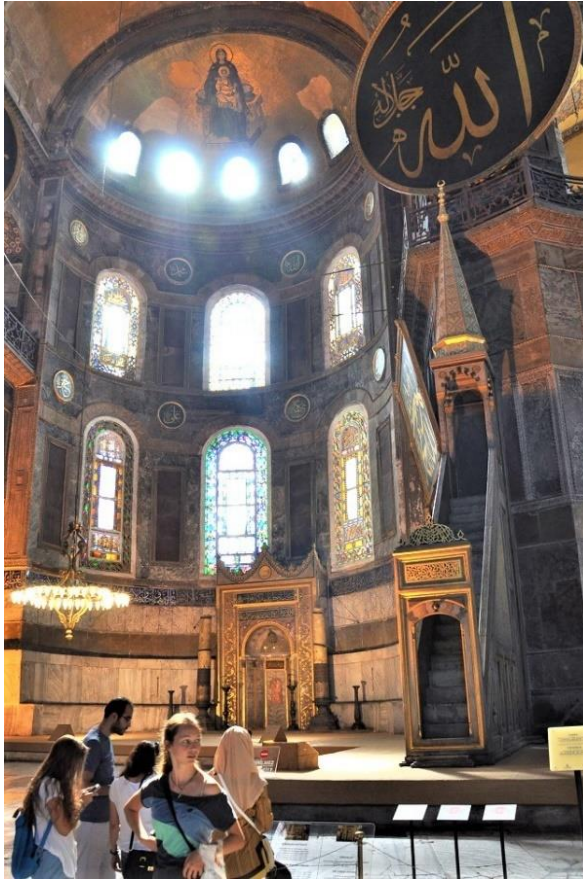


New friends Smsm Gimish and bride from Sudan on honeymoon Sultan Ahmed Camii (the "Blue Mosque")



Domed ceiling inside the “Blue Mosque”

I could try to describe for example the Hagia Sophia supported by columns collected from innumerable pagan temples and located on what was a pre-Christian temple of some kind, built over a 16 year period by 14,000 workers under the supervision of 400 masters working day and night according to the designs of two Anatolians, the architect Antemios of Tralles and the mathematician Isidore of Miletus, into an Orthodox Cathedral and seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople starting in 537, which it remained for 667 years until 1204 when it was converted into a Roman Catholic Cathedral by the Fourth Crusaders under the Latin Empire of Constantinople, however a mere 249 years later in 1453 when Constantinople reverted to its indigenous owners the Anatolian/Turks, the Hagia Sophia was converted into an Ottoman Masjid, but, I’m above my word count for this story.



Inside Hagia Sophia

Or, I tell the story of Ibrahim Pasha who was the son of a sailor in Parga, northwest Greece, who as a child was abducted by pirates and sold to the Manisa Palace in Western Anatolia where the Ottoman crown princes were being educated and how he met crown Prince Suleiman who was the same age and the deep friendship they forged resulting in his first royal position as the Sultan's falconer.

And then explain how he graduated through the ranks as diplomat and successful commander acquiring numerous titles and awards, but ultimately how he sided with the wrong side of a succession argument and one of Suleiman's wives successfully plotted against him and had him strangled in the Topkapi Palace one night.

Certainly, cannot forget to mention that Ibrahim Pasha's former pleasure palace has stood silently above the steps of the Hippodrome facing the Walled Obelisk and Serpent Column for the past 600 plus years and is now the quite nicely refurbished Turkish and Islamic Museum. But, I'm way over the word count for one article, for sure.



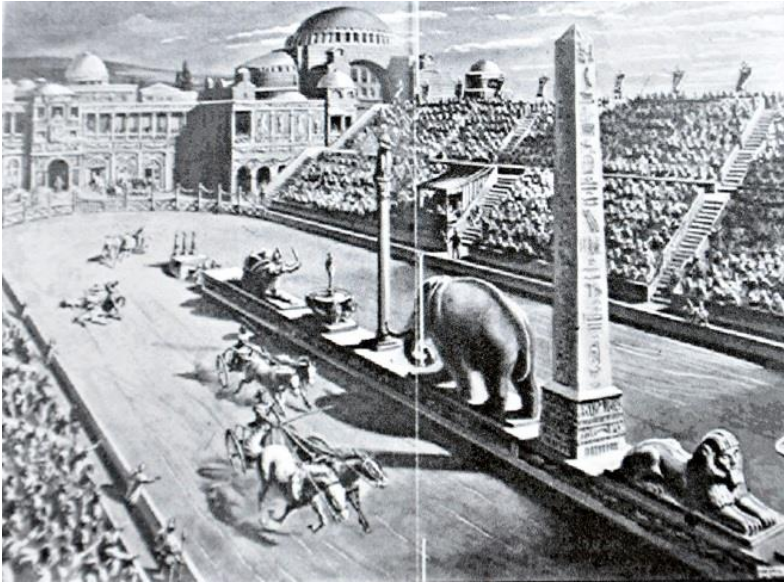
Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art – Formerly the home of Ibrahim Pasha - the son of a sailor in Parga in northwest Greece.



One of several garden courtyards in Topkapi Palace, Istanbul



The Obelisk of Theodosius is the Ancient Egyptian obelisk of Pharaoh Thutmose III re-erected in the Hippodrome of Constantinople (Istanbul) by the Roman emperor Theodosius I in the 4th century AD.



Artist's rendering of the ancient Hippodrome which held chariot races and gladiatorial combat in then "Constantinople," now called Istanbul.



Celebrating the Games during centuries of glory in old Constantinople – long after the gladiatorial games were forbidden, chariot races continued.



Remains of the Serpentine Column in the Hippodrome in Istanbul.

To commemorate the Greek victory at Plataea in 479 BC a votive offering was dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. Likely cast from the captured bronze weapons and armor of the defeated Persians, the monument represented three serpents, their intertwined bodies forming a serpentine column and their heads, the jaws open, stretched out to support a golden tripod. The tripod was stolen by the Phocians in 355 BC but the bronze column survived, only to be appropriated by Constantine to decorate the central spina of the Hippodrome in his newly founded capital of Constantinople. This may have been as early as AD 324, when Constantine became sole ruler of the Roman Empire, or as late as AD 330, when the city was dedicated. There the Serpent Column remained intact until its sack by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

https://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/circusmaximus/serpentine.html



What the tripumphant Serpentine Column in the Hippodrome originally looked like

In sum, virtually everything in Turkey has astonishing histories.

And here this epic Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Volume 1 will conclude for now, to be picked up again in Volume 2.

Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Volume 1 Conclusions

About 13 months ago I ventured out on the ground from Beijing to Xi'an, Turpan, Urumqi, Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Turkmenabad, Mary/Merv, Ashgabat, then flew over Iran for the time being, continued on the ground in Tbilisi, went back east to Baku where I swam in the Caspian Sea, then back west again to Tbilisi, and on to Kobuleti where I swam in the Black Sea, and from there crossed the border into Turkey at Sharpi, went to Hopa, Erzurum, and Ankara before visiting Bursa and finally Istanbul where I swam from the Golden Horn into the Bosphorus as it mingles water from the Black Sea with the Marmara Sea, interviewing as many of the Kung Fu masters as I could, visiting as many of the Silk Road sites as possible, and fully exploring every major museum along the way. I could mention that during the three segments of this Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship tour so far, I've traveled some 10,347 kilometers or 6,428 miles on the ground, but... oops, I already did.

This series may never end as the Silk Road and her martial art masters and mysteries are virtually endless. Certainly next year I hope to get to Iran, and if possible Pakistan, and after that Iraq and Syria (I may wait a few years on these latter two), Lebanon, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, many other locations in Afghanistan outside Kabul, and there are some major Silk Road crossroads here in China I have yet to visit, e.g. the Southern Route from Kashgar along the Taklimakan Desert and so on.

Though I'm nearly finished with the "straight" North Road west across the continent of Asia from Xi'an to Istanbul, this Silk Road journey may be only beginning. "There are over 40 countries today alongside the historic Land and Maritime Silk Roads, all still bearing witness to the impact of these routes in their culture, traditions and customs..."

<http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes>

Volume II of the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour

- Pakistan (Islamabad to Lahore to Karachi on busses)
- Gansu here in northwest China
- Qatar on the Arabian Peninsula
- Ethiopia in East Africa
- Vietnam
- All around Japan
- Several islands in Indonesia
- Shanghai for the 15th World Wushu Championships, and then Ningbo City, Yuyao City and its fabulous museum, Tiantong Buddhist Monastery and the 7,000-year-old Hemudu archeological site in Yuyao County and its museum
- Thailand, and
- Hong Kong

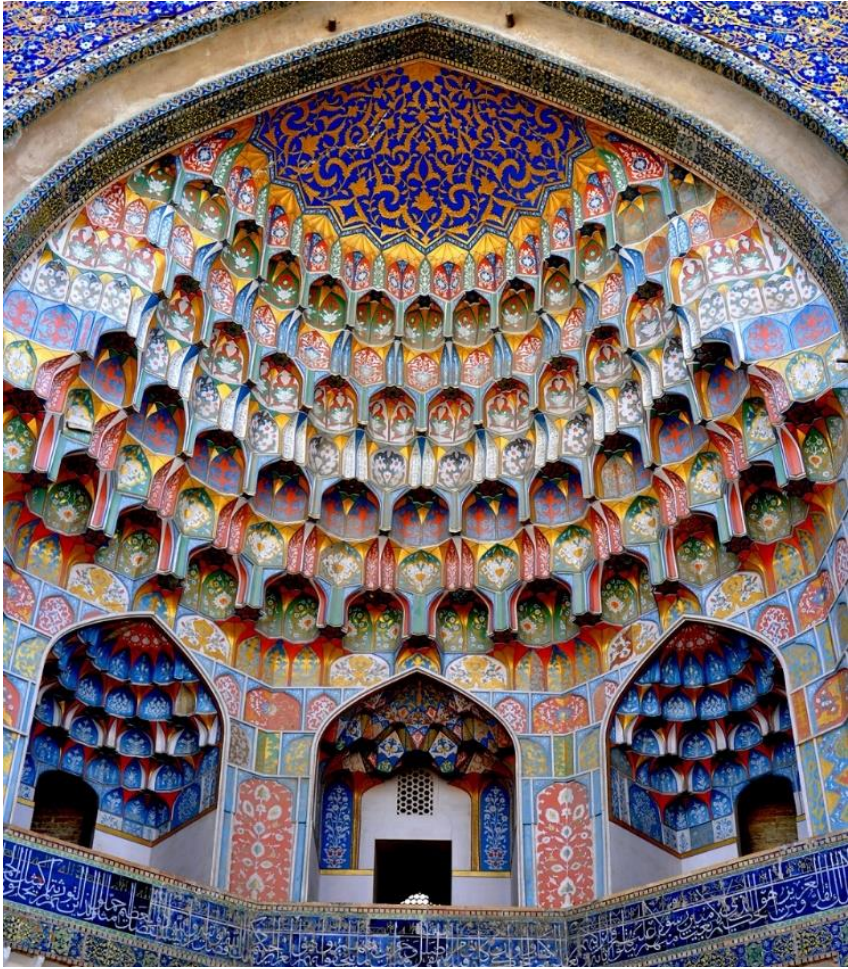
The truly incredible thing is there are so many Silk Road countries I haven't visited yet and so many amazing Kung Fu landmark cities in China I haven't had time to visit either. So, in my opinion, my Silk Road journey is still just beginning!

As always, I must thank God, and all the most excellent masters, trainer/coaches, organizers, and Kung Fu/Wushu people, as well as the innumerable regular extraordinary people all along this road who so often gave me directions and companionship, Professor McMahon for his kindly and generous instruction and especially Gene Ching of Kung Fu magazine who somehow always manages to get my stories published in spite of my endless irreverence, other ridiculous non-sense and word counts that are always just a little higher than they should be.

Publication List Volumes 1 & 2

American "Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine" - Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - publication Series

<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/ezine/article.php?article=1213> Afghanistan 2/2015
<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/ezine/article.php?article=1214> Afghanistan 3/2015
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On one level this book is about the incredible and ongoing journey of a seasoned martial artist learning about the ancient Silk Roads and the Wushu Kung Fu masters and students that live along them. Journalist Gregory Brundage traveled some 14,000 kilometers on busses, trains and even camels from Beijing China to Istanbul Turkey researching this series of articles published in Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine 2015-2020. On another level this book is a spiritual journey giving the reader an insider's look into the cultures and human beings that were so kind and helpful all along the road. No doubt the roots and flowers of human civilization can be found along the ancient and modern Silk Roads. History, humor, incredible skills, archeological wonders, in fact the highest heights of human endeavor are waiting for the travelers who choose to take a different path and discover the beauty and wonders of the world's mightiest trade routes, the Silk Roads.



Gregory Brundage, also known as first started traveling the Roman Roads in 1963 & 1964 going from the UK to Rome. In 1972 he started training and then competing in various styles Kung Fu. He first moved to a Silk Road country in Southeast Asia in 1992 and has spent most of the last 30 years living, training and traveling in Asia. He worked as a journalist in many countries since 1988.

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