

A Walk Along The Ancient Paths

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When you go to China, there are three things you must have before you leave your home country – 1) toilet paper (enough for your trip) 2) WeChat app for communicating inside China 3) a VPN for communicating outside China. Anything else can be bought very cheaply in China, fake or authentic versions of whatever you desire. How about a fake Toyota Landcruiser or a fake BMW?

Three days before we left Australia for China, I received an email from Fabio Andrico asking us if we wanted to accompany him on a trip to Gyarong and Adzom Gar after the month of Yantra Yoga at Samtengar. Who could say no? With the help of Sean who speaks fluent Mandarin, we scrambled to re-organize air tickets to Chengdu and back to Australia ten days later than the original itinerary.

A day after the month-long Yantra Yoga residential was finished, we departed for Chengdu in the late evening. The flight was delayed and it was 3am when we finally slumped into our luxurious hotel beds courtesy of Mr. Wayne. The next day was spent trying to find a new driver (due to numerous plan changes) to take us to Western China and purchasing supplies from the famous Carrefour supermarket.

Chengdu is a huge city of roughly 14 million people, at 500m above sea level and reputedly the fourth most polluted city in China. I cannot verify this but looking at the pinky brown band of dense haze hanging above, feeling the acrid air tickling my throat, it is undeniable. When we departed westward, it took us an hour and a half to actually leave the city environs.

Our driver, Xiao Ni, didn't speak English, so Sean was assigned to the front passenger seat to keep him company while Fabio and I settled comfortably into the back seat of the thankfully-not-too-ancient Mitsubishi Pajero. We had a loose plan of visiting places connected to our lineage Master and a rough timeframe of seven days to achieve it. The driver had only been to one of the locations on our itinerary, so for him it was also a new adventure. We didn't require any extra visas as technically we would still be in China and hadn't even pre-booked any hotel reservations. Fabio and I relaxed in the back seat, munching on fruit, Chinese dates and snapping photos out the window while Sean practiced his guitar and entertained the driver.



Gyarong houses

The roads were so gently inclined that it was only by checking the altimeter in the car that I knew we were steadily climbing in altitude. We were instantly in Gyarong country, an idyllic countryside with fantastic architecture of houses and farms. We drove along the G137 which is a highway of two lanes and, if you haven't experienced the Chinese driving style, then you definitely have not seen everything! Honking the horn is a way of letting other drivers know you are about to pass them, often on the inside and across the center line. Often, it was better not to look and pretend to gaze out the side windows instead. We simply surrendered to our fate.

Hurting towards Ma'erkhang, because the driver, fueled on Chinese Red Bull, drove like a bat out of hell, we passed giant concrete tubes implanted next to the road like giant pins, some had slabs of flat concrete on them, others were just waiting to be connected. China – under construction! The existing roads did indeed need a lot of repair but this massive expansion of the highway foretells a huge army of vehicles on the move, and it made me a little gloomy. In a year or so, this landscape would be unrecognizable.



The shrine of Vairochana's cave

Suddenly, we did a hairpin turn, up a steep winding concrete drive, now at 3000m. We came to a stop at the end of the road. The driver told us we had arrived at Vairocana's cave – Piluzhena in Chinese – near the Suomo River Canyon, a few kilometers before the small village of Zhuokejizhen. A narrow, winding, painted red metal staircase was the only way down the cliff to the cave. Holding on the handrail we applied complete mindfulness for each step as we clung on the staircase hugging the hillside with nothing between us and the ground hundreds of meters below but space. The temple and retreat huts were only built about 40 years ago, so the cave must have been quite deserted and isolated. The past merged imperceptibly with the present. I remember that I was in an absolute state of awe, and still am so I hope the photos will best describe what I experienced with my senses there.



Vairochana's cave



A piece of manuscript of Vairochana

We had started on a course of some ghastly herbal medicine to prevent altitude sickness but by the time we arrived at our first hotel stop, my headache was so bad that I couldn't eat dinner. The Diamox took four hours to take affect and when it did, it was such a relief to feel normal. Sean had gone out with the driver for hotpot and Baijiu, the infamous \$2 alcohol that would rot your gut in no time. He also came back with tales of dancing in the street to Tibetan songs with beautiful Tibetan girls, songs that he recognized and dances that he knew. Fancy that!

After a traditional breakfast of liquidy rice congee and hard-boiled eggs at 7am the next morning, we set off for a ten hour day of driving – westward and upward. This is when the roll of toilet paper comes in handy – pardon the pun. Along the roadside there are public toilets. These are square concrete blocks often surrounded by piles of refuse and stench built randomly. The first time I saw one of these, I was quite excited but was quickly dissuaded to scramble into the bushes with my toilet paper. These were moments when I truly wished I could pee standing up. To cope with the

altitude, we had to keep our fluid intake up, and this meant very frequent “miao miao” stops. The driver at times seemed exasperated at how often we needed to relieve ourselves, but I think he was secretly glad for the chance to smoke a cigarette and gulp down his Red Bull fuel.

The first pass was Kwan Yin Qiao on Sanpa Mountain, at 4200m, the rain was light and gentle on our faces and the temperature not too cold at around 3-4 C. Winding our way around the mountainous region, taking a right turn at Luhuo, keeping alongside the Daqu river we headed towards Ganzi, at 3200m. We got very excited when we saw our first yak train. Apparently they are rarely seen below 3000m.



Yak train

Ganzi was our first truly Tibetan town and it felt like a wild west sort of place, with cowboy hats, boots and all. I insisted on having a Tibetan lunch so we found a proper Tibetan cafe that served tsampa, butter tea and boiled beef, or what looked like beef but tasted like bland leather belts. My jaw muscles were too weak to get through more than a piece the size of a dollar coin. But the tea and tsampa were delicious and nourishing. Ganzi is a very spacious town with wide streets and lots of parks and trees. There must have been a large college in town because we saw a lot of young people with books and in uniform. Our hotel was directly in front of a children’s playground with a large round half wall with a tree in the middle. That evening, a large group of local Tibetan folk gathered to dance, mostly circle dances around this tree. Weather permitting, this is a regular occurrence. Sean of course, joined in the dance. He was the only Westerner but that didn’t seem to disturb anyone, they simply looked a little bemused. I could barely move a muscle so I sat next

to a couple of older men, watching languidly. In this circle, there were people of all ages and gender, the youngest at a guess maybe eight years old and the oldest, possibly in their 70s, some dressed in traditional Tibetan clothes and others in the most fashionable garb of the day. We were told that here in Ganzi, Tibetan children could learn Tibetan in their schools as well as Mandarin.



Tibetans dancing in Ganzi

The next day, setting off at 7am after the customary breakfast we began to make our way up and over the mountain passes towards the village of Maqiong. There was mountain range after mountain range, different shapes and sizes, mostly rock and scree, clouds in between bouts of brilliant blue sky and bright sunshine. We passed the beginning of a tunnel being built into the mountain that in a couple of years would emerge on the other side to join up with the road towards the Tibetan Autonomous Region, cutting the journey by over two hours. All along the winding road, there were giant electric pylons standing on the hillside like gleaming steel sentry. There is no more wilderness here.



The high road to Maqiong

At the T-junction, we turned right towards Achaxiang, then veered off the main road to follow the river towards Maqiongxiang at 3800m. We could tell we were arriving somewhere important because we began to see thousands of prayer flags covering a majestic rocky hillside pockmarked with caves across the river. This exposed cliffside is the place where Adzom Drugpa had discovered many termas. A little further on, we picked up a Tibetan man hitch-hiking and he took us up a rough road full of big pot holes towards the top of the hillside. Neither the driver nor we knew how to find Adzom Gar, and there was no way we could have found this road without his help. Stupas came into view, white tents seen perched on the slope and monastic rooftops gleaming in gold appeared and all of a sudden we had arrived in the middle of this large settlement. It was quite an emotional moment for all of us.



Adam Gar

The abbot, A Ren, a direct descendant of Adzom Drugpa, had already entertained a group of students of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu only a few weeks prior (see Will Shea's article on his [trip to Eastern Tibet](#)). He took us into the monastery's kitchen and generously plied us with butter tea flavored with tsampa, fried dough sticks, freshly made yogurt and sweet, boiled troma.



In the kitchen of Adzom Gar

Then he personally gave us a tour of his monastery, pointing out the retreat huts of Adzom Drugpa, and those of his son and his daughter. We slowly walked to the stupas and reverently paid homage to the statues, touching our heads and feeling a sense of thread somehow connecting us beyond space and time. The highlight for me was the visit to the temple that Adzom Drugpa's son, Gyurme Dorje, had built over one hundred and fifty years ago which still stands undamaged. Unlocking the huge wooden doors with a large key, the abbot took us into the dark unlit hall, up a wide but shallow wooden staircase, along a narrow corridor where there were two monk's boxes alongside one wall, then through a hanging curtain into an inner Gonpa room. There were stupas of the lineage masters adorned with huge pieces of turquoise, Dzi and coral, behind glass cases, as well as a fantastic statue of Adzom Drugpa and his footprint in rock. Gyurme Dorje himself had given Dzogchen teachings in this very room. We asked permission to sit for a little while here to breathe in the sacred atmosphere. I stumbled out of the temple in an altered state of mind.



Inside the small gonpa of Gyurme Dorje's temple

From Achaxiang, we took the Ganbai Road to Anzixiang. We were not certain if we were on the right road or how long it would take to get here. Before the driver was almost ready to turn back, Anzi township appeared on our right and we came to a stop at a police guard post as described by the abbot of Adzom Gar. We had heard that some folks were turned away and not permitted to go up the driveway behind the barrier blocking it. We were also apprehensive about being allowed through and then having to walk up the long driveway in our altitude challenged state. The thought of not being able to make it by foot was also rather depressing. Fabio and I watched Sean

and the driver talking animatedly to the policeman, dressed in black t-shirt and jeans, for what seemed like hours. Imagine our delight, when they jumped back into the car, and the policeman lifted the barrier just high enough for us to sneak under. We couldn't believe our luck and even though we tried to offer the policeman some money, he flatly refused. At the end of the road, there was another barrier across a shorter but steeper drive that led to a small temple whose roof we could barely see when we looked up to the sky. A large group of young Tibetan people were almost running up the drive so we caught up with them. Or rather the driver, Sean and Fabio did. I was lifting my heavy legs, one in front of the other, trying to gain ground, while my heart pumped loudly in my ears. The local monks had come to perform a puja as it was 10th day and as soon as they finished, everyone left. Soon, I found myself alone in the inner temple dominated by the huge white stupa. The room buzzed with sound, light and rays. My senses were blasted, thoughts shattered like shards of glass. All I remember then and now is this photo of the great Yogi.



Yarchen Gar settlement

Exhilarated, we thought to complete this wondrous day with a visit to Yarchen Gar after lunch. The 'Gar' area is massive, on a scale unimagined. A vast hillside of grass, no trees, only sky and earth. And giant golden statues, stupas and major construction all around. We sat on the hill where the golden statue of Guru Rinpoche sits, and looked down in amazement at the settlement below. This huge island separated by a small river is divided like a coffee bean, with thousands of monks and nuns living in self-built huts, segregated in each half. The plains stretched out behind them for miles into the horizon, only grassy hills and sky as far as you could see. The touristy part of the Gar looked a bit gaudy and manufactured and felt rather incongruous with the real activity of those

monastics below. We circumambulated at the main prayer wheels where each wheel seemed to weigh a ton and creaked slowly with each hand that turned it.



Yarchen Gar

We were definitely feeling contented and satisfied on the drive back. We oohed and aahed at the awe inspiring mountain view, with the light of the setting sun changing from pink to lilac to purple atop the ranges. On our final descent from the high pass, dark clouds appeared and within an instant, rain and hailstones as large as marbles bounced on the car and along the roads, turning day into night. It felt like the ultimate blessing to a magnificent day. We concluded the day with a short Ganapuja later that evening back at the hotel.

The weather on the trip had been incredibly benevolent, with brilliant sunshine and fresh soothing breezes. Since we still had a couple of extra days to spare, we decided to go look for Vimalamitra's mountain in Danba. We retraced our steps back to Luhuo and took the S303 south and then east toward Danba. We passed through the famous Minyak grasslands, which at this time of year were not abundant in wild flowers but nomadic camps and yak. The nomads ran the horse riding camps for the tourists with Tibetan horses saddled in traditional blankets. We passed through many police checkpoints but they only wanted to take our photos with our passports. In Danba, at 2050m, everything felt pleasant and easy. This is the heart of Gyarong country where the three rivers meet to give birth to the Dardo river. The landscape is lush with abundant fields and orchards. The Gyarong people wear traditional clothes with brightly colored headdresses and lots of gold jewelry. They are darker skinned and stocky and the women have beautiful round faces.



Sean with Danba girls



Our guesthouse in Danba

That night we stayed at a Tibetan guesthouse, sharing a room with five beds in it, all for the three of us. Thinking that this would be a small and cosy guesthouse, we were quite taken aback to find ourselves at a muddy car park with a whole bunch of Chinese tourists with large suitcases. We had to leave the car there and lugged our essentials down a path among the maize fields and vegetable terraces to a traditional Gyarong building built on the hillside. There was not much to see as the sun had already set. We woke up the next morning to a breathtaking view of the valley with houses like stone castles hugging the slopes and terraced orchards and fields. Our guesthouse was one of many all clustered together and it was obviously a large establishment geared towards mass tourism. That morning the terraces were crowded with tourists clicking away at the scenic view.

We crossed the river to arrive at a village called Three Family Meeting Place. After an hour and a half tramping through the village houses and then a stony path up the hill, we stopped at an abandoned hamlet. Here we tried to glimpse Mo'erdo, Vimalamitra's mountain but the clouds stubbornly hid it from view. Mo'erdo is also sacred to Bön practitioners and the young manager of our guesthouse who sidelines as a mountaineer frequently take guided groups up to the top. There are numerous caves two days' hike in. This trek definitely goes on the bucket list to do. Again on our descent, we were blessed with a soft light rain freshening our faces.

We passed the tallest watchtower in Gyarong in almost its original state and a policeman at a check point came out to offer us perfectly ripe, locally grown apples in apology for delaying our journey. Being autumn, the pear and apple trees were laden with fruit and the air smelled of freshly threshed Sichuan peppers. Verandas were covered in bunches of maize and red chillies drying in the sun.



Vairochana's footprint

We headed north, stopping at Jinchuan for the night before picking up the G317 again retracing our steps back to Piluzhena. It was like returning to visit your favorite grandmother. We almost ran down the steel staircase in our rush to the Gonpa jutting out under the cave roof. There were only the monks who live in retreat there and us. The young head monk showed us the rock imprints of Vairochana's foot, ear and nose. In the small temple near the cave, he pointed out a piece of manuscript stored in a glass case. It was amazing to see and touch rock imprints in person! We had gone full circle and were brimming with glee.

To redeem itself, China offered us one last public toilet experience. Near Wenchuan, we stopped at a concrete block, marked out with characters in Mandarin; the character for 'Man' looks like a person with two legs apart while the one for 'Woman' is a person with legs crossed. An old lady lives in the concrete house next to it, cleaning and collecting 1 Yuan per visit. It was worth much more as it was the cleanest toilet we had come across, no stench and with water running through. Go 'spend a penny' next time you are there.



Statue of Adzom Drugpa built by Gyurme Dorje

Photo credits Oni McKinstry and Fabio Andrico.