

The remaking of Chinese city Taiyuan into a Singapore on steroids

by Geoff Raby

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From a key city on the old Silk Road to a modern metropolis, Taiyuan has helped shape how China thinks about itself and the world.

It is difficult to imagine the destruction, disruption, and dislocation involved in remaking the city of Taiyuan over the past decade since my last visit. Just as it is impossible to imagine the millions of tonnes of concrete that have been poured and the millions of tonnes of iron ore smelted in blast furnaces across northern China to remake this city from a shambling, dirty, industrial city to something like a Singapore on steroids.

Taiyuan is now just under three hours by high-speed train from Beijing. Once, it was an overnight trip in the green and yellow-striped trains that were made in East Germany before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

With just over 4 million inhabitants, its population has increased by about 30 per cent in a decade and GDP more than doubled. It is a microcosm of China's story of the past 10 years – rapid urbanisation and even more rapidly rising per capita incomes.

The vast canyons of apartment blocks that are still going up will most likely be filled, as China's urbanisation still has far to go to catch up with developed-country averages. The scale of construction is such, however, that a few property crashes may lie ahead on the way.

Like Singapore, transport infrastructure is world-beating. Ribbons of six-lane freeways criss-cross the city in all directions, and rise circling into multi-level over- and underpasses. Ever more stations are being added to the already extensive metro system.

And like Singapore, wide tracts of land for open green public spaces add to quality of urban life. The once polluted Fen River that wends its way through the city is a feature of the city's urban redevelopment. Walking and cycling tracks follow its well-grassed embankments. This is what the Xi Jinping doctrine of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Order' is meant to achieve – quality over quantity.

My return to Taiyuan was to visit Yu Hong's sarcophagus again in the remarkable Shanxi Museum. The present building was opened in 2005 and, in addition to a big number of ancient bronzes, contains an extensive collection of pieces from the time when Taiyuan was one of the richest cities during the Northern dynasties period (386-581 AD).

Along the Silk Road

Taiyuan was a major trading city and junction on the old Silk Road. Sogdian traders from today's Central Asia settled there, playing a key role along the route before the arrival of Islam in the 8th century.

Wealthy aristocrats hired craftsmen and artists from within and outside China to decorate houses, but most importantly tombs, and to supply funerary objects for making the afterlife more comfortable and beautiful.

Born in 533 or 4, Yu Hong had been sent to Persia and modern day north-west China as an envoy by the Great Khan of Rouran in Central Asia at the tender age of 13. He arrived in Taiyuan in 550 as ambassador to the Northern Qi dynasty during Taiyuan's brief period as the capital. During the subsequent Northern Zhou and Sui dynasties, he changed his position to remain in Taiyuan as a senior administrative official. We know all of this from the 625 Chinese characters carved on his tombstone.

Yu Hong's marble sarcophagus is roughly 3 metres square and 2 metres high, like a large doll's house. The wall panels and bases are decorated with 54 individual designs depicting everyday life in 6th century Taiyuan.

The iconographic style of these decorations resembles Persian and Buddhist art more than traditional Chinese motifs. This marvel of a time capsule is complete and in excellent condition.

It has even travelled to the Art Gallery of NSW. In 2013, Cao Yin, herself from Taiyuan, and curator of the Gallery's Chinese Collection, arranged for it to come to Australia for an exhibition, A Silk Road Saga: the sarcophagus of Yu Hong.

As is usually the case when visiting such places as an ambassador, my previous visit was a jet-ski like tour of the collection, darting from one item to another. With more leisure on this occasion, I saw something also from the 6th century AD that transfixed me.

This was a three-panelled fresco of a ceremonial procession in still-vibrant colours of many people and horses. The exquisite painting shows a high degree of artistic skill and sophisticated execution. It was taken from the walls of Lou Rui's tomb.

Lou Rui (531-570AD) was an aristocrat belonging to the Xian Bei ethnic minority, one of the major nomadic groups in northern China during the Northern Qi dynasty who were to be found from Central Asia to Mongolia.

From the mid 3rd century, the Xian Bei had pushed their way inside the Han Great Wall. By the 6th century, they occupied some of the most senior administrative positions in government.

Lou Rui himself held the title of Prince Dong'An of the Northern Qi dynasty, the highest official rank in the Taiyuan area of the time. Horses were essential to their lives as nomadic people and symbols of great wealth and power. It was not surprising then that Lou Rui is painted riding a fine horse in the central panel of the triptych.

But in the centre of this panel, in the place where the artist wanted the viewer to focus, is the most important thing in the painting. It is a stirrup. Lou Rui was riding his horse using a saddle equipped with stirrups. This was some 200 years before the stirrup made its appearance in Europe.

The stirrup was a major technological breakthrough in warfare. It was to be crucial in the Mongol invasions of Europe in 1206. It gave the rider unprecedented mobility, being able to control a horse at speed while leaving the rider's hands free to shoot arrows in all directions, including behind by swivelling around.

Artefacts indicate the stirrup was invented in China around the 4th century AD. So, at the time of Lou Rui's passing, it would still have been a novel innovation in warfare and hence its prominence in the painting.

It is believed that it came to Europe via the Avar invasion of Byzantium in the late 6th century. The Avar were from Mongolian tribes and occupied parts of Central Asia and the North-East Caucasus.

The stirrup was first mentioned in a Byzantine military manual in 580 AD and the earliest found was in an 8th century tomb in Slovakia. Its first recorded use in Europe was at the Battle of Tours in 732.

Some historians have argued that the gradual adoption of the stirrup in Carolingian France led to the emergence of feudalism. Cavalry replaced infantry and, because of the stirrup, kings created a system of vassals who were rewarded with land to maintain horses for warfare and service to the crown.

Taiyuan, which sits on the geographical hinge between the nomadic grasslands of the north and west and the fertile plateau to its south and east, was once a key city on the Silk Road through which art, culture, commerce, and technology passed. We will never know, but the stirrup may also have passed through Taiyuan on its slow journey to the West during the following 200 years.

Although on few tourist destinations, Taiyuan, with its blend of the wild steppe and settled dynastic cultures, embodies one of the many things uniquely Chinese that shapes how China thinks about itself and the world.

First and foremost, China has always been deeply integrated into Central Asia and the Eurasian land mass beyond through traders and occupiers. It has been invaded by nomadic tribes and ruled at many times by non-ethnic Han peoples. In turn, it has Sinicised foreign occupiers or cast them off. All of this can be seen in Taiyuan's museums today.

Taiyuan's historical experience and the artefacts that remain recall why China will always be mindful of its security in Eurasia, the principal focus of today's Belt and Road Initiative. It is a contemporary political slogan in China, but in Taiyuan it has long, deep, and culturally rich roots.

Geoff Raby was Australia's ambassador to the People's Republic of China, 2007-11. His book, China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in the New Global Order, was published on 3 November by MUP. He is also an Associate of China Matters.