

Why Dunhuang Survived Instead of Loulan

-- An Analysis of the Revolution of the Silk Road

Yongqin Guan^{1,a,*}

¹*William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute, Toronto, M3H5N3, Canada*
a. thomasyqguan@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the northwest of China, there is the Taklamakan Desert, one of the largest deserts in the world, and under the dust, there is a prosperous city hidden. At the same time, in the depths of the desert, a ruined ancient city was sleeping. The two cities we are going to introduce today - Dunhuang and Loulan, are two very similar but completely different cities. The ruins of one of the cities have been buried by wind and sand, but the other city is still full of vitality until today. Loulan's disillusionment is not just a natural factor, but the result of many different choices. We will analyze the endings of these two cities from three aspects (nature, human reasons, and religious reasons), and I also hope that you can gain some thoughts about "choice" while reading.

Keywords: choices, different, similar, religions, silk road

1. Introduction

In the history of our world, some countries are continuously disappearing, and many other countries are constantly appearing. What is the reason for their disappearance? And what contributed to the death of these cities? Why do some cities survive? These questions will lead to the two cities we are going to discuss today - the lost Loulan and the glorious Dunhuang. In this work, I will explain this topic from the following three points, which are geographical environment, religious background and human reasons.

2. Main Content

2.1. The Perspective of the Geographical Environment

First of all, let's start from the perspective of the geographical environment. Dunhuang is located on the northern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the western end of the Hexi Corridor [1]. There are oases on both sides of the bank, and it is surrounded by the Taklimakan Desert. From this geographical information, we can know that Dunhuang has an excellent geographical environment; as a desert city, it is not only a bridge connecting the Central Plains and the Western Regions, but also an excellent resting place for caravans. Dunhuang is an important traffic route from ancient China to the Western Regions, Central Asia and Europe. There are two Great Wall passes, Yumen Pass and Yang Pass built in the Han Dynasty, both of which are military fortresses, they are the

boundary between the Han and Tang Dynasties and the Western Regions point. The later poems “Beyond the Gate of Jade no vernal wind will blow.” “going out of Yangguan from the west without old friends” all refer to this place.

After introducing the geographical conditions of Dunhuang, we can take a look at the information about Loulan. The destruction of Loulan was caused by a combination of many reasons, among which the destruction of the ecological environment played a role that cannot be ignored. Loulan is located in the Tarim Basin [2], closer to the Western Regions than Dunhuang, east of the Taklimakan Desert, and northwest of the Lop Nur region. The arid desert climate in the Tarim Basin has created a fragile ecological environment in the area. Compared with Dunhuang, Loulan’s water resources are rarer and closer to the center of the desert, which makes it more desolate and barren than Dunhuang. In the desert, water and trees are the key to survival. The ancient city of Loulan was being built in the delta of the lower reaches of the Kongque River, where the water system was developed at that time. There used to be luxuriant *Populus euphratica* trees for its construction. When the Loulan people built the ancient city of Loulan with an area of more than 100,000 square meters near Lop Nur, they cut down many trees and reeds, which will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the environment. In about 400 AD, because of the diversion of the main river, the Kongque River, the already scarce water resources became even more scarce, which led to the evacuation of residents and eventually caused the abandonment of the city of Loulan.

In this part, we can learn about one of the reasons why Loulan was destroyed: which is, the harsh geographical environment and the always-changing natural climate, which finally made the area no longer suitable for living.

2.2. The Religious Differences Between Dunhuang and Loulan

In the second part, we will discuss about the religious differences between Dunhuang and Loulan. But before that, we need to understand the route and process of the introduction of Buddhism into China, Buddhism was introduced to China from the Silk Road and flourished with the development of the Silk Road [3]. During the period of Wei, Jin and Sixteen Kingdoms, the Buddhist activities in Hexi were huge, which was necessarily related to its geographical location and historical environment. The Hexi region is the only way from the Central Plains to the Western Regions, and Buddhism should have been introduced earlier than the Central China. With the establishment of a military town in Dunhuang during the Northern Wei Dynasty, the military and political center at the western end of the Hexi Corridor moved from Jiuquan to Dunhuang, and Dunhuang entered a period of development again. This repetition of ups and downs also stimulated the development of Buddhism. The religion in Dunhuang is mainly Buddhism, and the first introduction of Buddhism to China is also inseparable from Dunhuang. Therefore, Dunhuang has become the source and the main transfer station of the eastward transmission of Buddhism. The people in Dunhuang are generally devout Buddhists, merchants of various ethnic groups and envoys from various countries on the Silk Road will pass through Dunhuang when they go to the Western Regions, contributed a lot to the development of Buddhism in China, and also created Dunhuang, a place where different religions and cultures gather.

There are many theories about Loulan’s religious beliefs. The most common one is that Loulan, as a country in the Western Regions, also believes in Buddhism, and there are indeed many Buddhist temples in Loulan. But there is a lot of evidence to refute this view, such as the tomb “Tomb of the Sun” unearthed in the ruins of Loulan. It is generally believed that this burial method is a manifestation of the unique belief of the Loulan people in their own race. The structure and furnishings of the Loulan Sun Tomb reflect the religious belief of the Loulan people in their belief in the Sun God. The cultural relics and murals unearthed in the Sun Tomb also have religious significance, which is Loulan people’s worship and belief in the sun god. So according to this

information, not all Loulan people believe in Buddhism, they have their own unique religion and beliefs.

2.3. The Artificial Factors

In the last part, I will discuss the direct reason why Dunhuang has been able to survive until now and Loulan eventually perished-human reasons. As a nation living on the commercial road, the Dunhuang people have a milder personality and rarely show aggressiveness to the passengers or tribes along the way. In contrast, Loulan was between the Han Dynasty and the Huns. Due to the existence of “foreign races” during the Han Dynasty, King Loulan of the Han Dynasty secretly intercepted and killed Han Dynasty envoys and caravan finances on the Silk Road, which eventually led to a complete blockage of the eastern section of the Silk Road [4].

The Loulan people also have a big problem in the use of natural resources, The massive “Sun Tomb” laid hidden dangers for Loulan’s destruction. Regardless of the reason why Loulan people are popular with “sun tombs”, the prevalence of “sun tombs” has caused Loulan people to bury their own city unknowingly. According to the seven tombs that have been discovered, there are more than 10,000 logs, which is very surprising [5]. Of course, the destruction of ecology cannot be attributed to the establishment of cities and “tombs of the sun”. Loulan is located inland and has a dry climate. Over time, the oasis that used to be full of grass can no longer retain a piece of green. In the unearthed Chinese bamboo slips, we can learn about the reduction in the rations of Loulan soldiers, which reflects from one aspect the hardship of Loulan after the environment deteriorated. Speaking of which, I would like to mention a related city–Pompeii. The Loulan people have a high degree of similarity with the residents of Pompeii who were buried by volcanic ash in ancient Rome. They destroy their natural resources without limit, and eventually their city was destroyed by the power of nature. Compared with Loulan, Dunhuang people are very economical and cleverly use natural resources. The best example is the Mogao Grottoes, commonly known as the Thousand Buddha Caves, located on the cliff at the eastern foot of Mingsha Mountain in Mogao Town, 25 kilometers southeast of Dunhuang. There are up to five floors in the cave. Famous for its exquisite murals and statues. It was first built in the pre-Qin period of the Sixteen Kingdoms, and has been built in the Sixteen Kingdoms, Northern Dynasties, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Xixia, Yuan and other dynasties. There are 735 caves, 45,000 square meters of murals, and 2,415 clay sculptures. It is the largest and richest Buddhist art site in the world [6].

3. Conclusion

Although the Silk Road has brought many opportunities for people to communicate, we also have to think about some things, such as the evil of human beings. Loulan is a good example, they greedily plundered, and even had no chance to take such a large amount of treasure with them when they fled. Greed, insidiousness, betrayal, these human evils are all exposed under the temptation of profit, which is one of the reasons for Loulan’s demise. Loulan is like an amber of history, when we look into it, it shocked our soul. The Silk Road trade played a significant role in opening political and economic relations between China, Korea, Japan, India, Iran, Europe, the Horn of Africa and Arabia. In addition to goods, the network facilitated an unprecedented exchange of ideas, religions (especially Buddhism), philosophies, and scientific discoveries, many of which were syncretized or reshaped by the societies that encountered them. SilkRoad triggered the culture and trade evolution, but at the same time it opens a Pandora’s box; if we only take without screening, we may get lost or disappear along the way or in the history. Choice not chance determined a country’s destiny, so does human being.

References

- [1] Article title: Dunhuang URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunhuang> Website title: Wikipedia Date accessed: April 14, 2023 Date published: March 02, 2023.
- [2] Article title: Loulan Kingdom URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loulan_Kingdom Website title: Wikipedia Date accessed: April 14, 2023 Date published: March 29, 2023.
- [3] Article title: Dunhuang URL: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Dunhuang> Website title: Encyclopedia Britannica Date accessed: April 14, 2023.
- [4] Article title: Decryption: What was the reason for the sudden destruction of the ancient city of Loulan? URL: <https://tech.sina.cn/2017-09-01/detail-ifykpuui0228460.d.html> Website title: Mobile Sina.com Date accessed: April 14, 2023 Date published: September 01, 2017.
- [5] Article title: Loulan Kingdom. URL: https://dbpedia.org/page/Loulan_Kingdom Website title: DBpedia Date accessed: April 14, 2023.
- [6] Article title: Ancient Xinjiang in Silk Road. URL: <https://www.topchinatravel.com/silk-road/mysterious-ancient-xinjiang-area-in-silk-road.html> Website title: Ancient Xinjiang in Silk Road, 10 Unexplained Mysteries of Xinjiang Date accessed: April 14, 2023.