

REPORT ON MARCH MEETING

Mr Bill Mowbray: The Old Silk Road.

With his usual vigour and enthusiasm, Bill took us on a trip to western China on a trip arranged by the Australia-China Friendship Society in 1999.

The trip began with flights to Guangzhou, Urimchi and Kashgar. Kashgar is at an elevation of about 1,000 metres, tucked in an elbow between two mountain ranges, each of which has peaks rising above 7,000 metres. As a geologist, Bill was interested in seeing these mountains, some of the newest on earth, as they are still being forced slowly upwards by movement of the Indian plate.

From Hashgar, he had an exciting bus trip up the Karakorum Highway which leads to Pakistan. At a level of about 4,000 metres, they visited Karakuli Lake. By contrast, on the way home they were in the second-lowest area on earth in the Turpan Depression.

Wending their way east by bus-train-bus-train-bus-plane, they eventually finished the trip at Xian, the city near the famous entombed warriors. In doing this they passed through many sections of the historic Old Silk Road which has been a link between China and the West for thousands of years, perhaps before silk was first woven in China 3,000 years ago. Goods such as silk, jade and porcelain were transported by a succession of traders using camels, horses or donkeys as beasts of burden. More Chinese inventions like paper, printing and gunpowder followed in later years, as well as arts such as music, architecture, mathematics and astronomy.

For centuries the Chinese jealously guarded their secrets, particularly in regard to silk and porcelain. Eventually silkworm eggs were smuggled to the West, with stories ranging from eggs being concealed in a Princess's hair to the legendary staff carried by a monk

As the silk road was affected by various political movements, Bill gave us a brief history of China, including the observations of Marco Polo in the 13th century, the two invasions by the Mongols and the building of the great wall. At times the silk road passed through as many as 38 different ethnic groups and was affected by at least nine different religions.

Each area had its own particular arts and crafts, some samples of which were passed around for inspection, such as the knives, the piece of lapis lazuli and those

mysterious anti-bed-wetting implements, carved from poplar wood.

Bill's talk was fully illustrated by use of overhead transparencies and coloured slides which showed maps and scenes of ancient ruins as well as the life of people who now inhabit these deserts and grasslands. Quite remarkable were the ruins of cities, forts and towers built of mud brick which have resisted the decay of centuries, possible only in a desert climate. One slide of a water wheel on the Yellow River, of a type said to be in use 2,000 years ago, is a tribute to the ingenuity of China's ancient engineers.

As a fitting close to an enthralling talk, Bill read to us his notes for his day on the Karakorum Highway:

Monday 11 October, 1999.

Up in the mountains today: I have paid 150Y in advance for oxygen which I hope not to use. Did not need the gas!

Today was the most exciting of days - along the Karakorum Highway towards Pakistan to Karakuli Lake - 4,000 metres? A glacial lake 5 hours from Kashgar.

Our passports not checked at the army post high up in a narrow gorge.

The road follows the Gaze River - barren mountain peaks, jagged needles as cloud-piercers--the Kun Lun or the Pamirs? Copper mines, coal mines, and limestone quarries for cement plants. Great masses of loose and unconsolidated till, sand and rocks; hundreds of metres high perched on top of metamorphic rocks. Road washed away in hundreds of places.

On the high plateau--rounded peaks; braided rivers; mountains covered in glistening sand [frost]; swamps with ducks and hares. Camels, yaks, donkeys, horses, cattle, goats and sheep grazing.

Glaciers down from the mountains; scree slopes.

The road to Tajikistan off to the right--unsealed; rarely travelled. Trucks, buses, cars, to and from Pakistan grind along our road all day.

The great mountain on our left is Muztagata;* yurts around the lake--deep snow. Kirhiz people with camels and yaks--do you want a ride!!

Next month they will retreat down the valley to their adobe homes and the poplar trees. Boys selling tourmaline and other metamorphic minerals, trinkets, bags, cushion covers, knives and hats. Cold up here. Glad to be wearing thermal underwear.

* 7,548 metres.
