

# CULTURAL HERITAGE



**Editor's note:** April 18 is the International Day for Monuments and Sites. To mark the occasion, China Daily's reporters have interviewed those involved with protecting the heritage of ancient civilizations to explore how the sites inspire us today.

## Digging up the Buddhist past

Archaeologists unearth intriguing clues hinting at a legacy of architectural achievement, **Wang Ru** reports.

On the wind-swept desert outskirts of Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the remains of two towers have long stood in defiance of the elements. Local residents call them *mo'er*, which means "chimney" in the Uygur language, and regard them as ancient emplacements, but nobody knows for sure what exactly they were.

When Xiao Xiaoyong, an archaeology professor at the Minzu University of China in Beijing visited the site in 2019, he initially thought there might not be any key findings, as he only saw two pagodas and some low mounds with shapes he couldn't exactly describe. But his later work proved that he was wrong.

Several days after they started excavations in 2019, Xiao realized the importance of the site, as they discovered buried walls.

About two weeks later, they began unearthing exquisite Buddhist statues, which shocked not only them, but also the local authorities.

Since then, during the course of four excavations over the past five years, more than 10,000 precious artifacts have been unearthed, including ceramics, wooden pieces, stone, bronze and bone artifacts, the remains of fabric made from silk and hemp, and fragments of statues.

The finds have helped reveal the site's identity. Archaeologists now believe it was a Buddhist temple, first built in the 3rd century and falling into ruin around the 10th century, contemporaneous with the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280) to the late Tang Dynasty (618-907). They have been able to determine its scope, layout, the types of its main buildings, the format of the site, and the evolution of the complex.

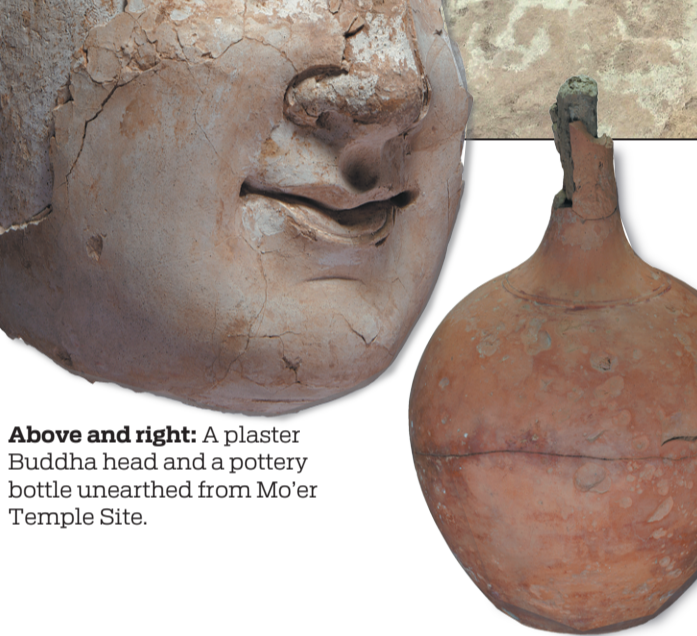
The site lies on an ancient platform of about eight meters in height, to the east of a steep precipice. To date, excavations cover 3,900 square meters.

The two existent structures are a stupa in the center of the site, and a pagoda with a square-shaped base in the northernmost section. Other buildings were once located around them, and were not built at the same time, but gradually formed a large site, Xiao says, adding that the stupa has a typical format that can be traced to Central Asia in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and what remains of it stands about 12 meters in height.

As one of the site's earliest buildings, the stupa is inferred to be center of the temple, with many other buildings facing toward it.

The pagoda has suffered the ravages of time, making it difficult to judge its original function, but it must have been an important building among the others in the site, since it's larger than the central stupa and had at least five stories, Xiao says.

Between the two there were various structures inferred to have been used by monks. They include buildings featuring a layout of homocentric squares, which was common in

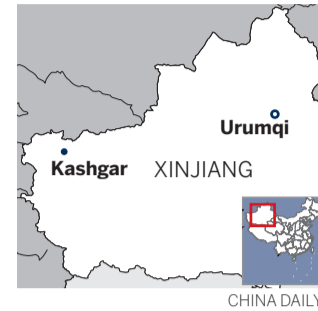


**Above and right:** A plaster Buddha head and a pottery bottle unearthed from Mo'er Temple Site.



**Top:** A bird's-eye view of the foundations of the Mo'er Temple Site in Kashgar, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.  
**Above:** Specialists work on the site in 2021.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



at the site, like Wuzhu coins, a currency that dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), and Kaiyuan Tongbao, a popular Tang Dynasty coin, come from the Central Plains of China.

"They reflect communication in ancient times and provide material for our studies on the spread of Buddhist art and the evolution of Buddhism," he adds.

Among earthen ruins, the site is relatively well-preserved, according to Zheng Jianzhong, an engineer at the Cultural Heritage Rehabilitation Institute of China Railway Academy in Chengdu, Sichuan province, who was also one of those responsible for restoration at the site between 2020 and 2021.

"Earthen ruins are especially difficult to preserve, but this site has existed for such a long time, and has remains. That's already good preservation," Zheng says.

But it is now threatened by more frequent rain and wind caused by climate change.

"Rainfall has become increasingly frequent in Kashgar in recent years. After a heavy downpour, parts of the remains get swept away, and then wind comes, causing further destruction. Therefore, the site needs urgent protection and restoration," Xiao says.

Zheng says that before restoration, the main problems were that the two towers were unstable and were at risk of collapse. Moreover, problems of drainage had led to erosion, further threatening the structures.

They worked to consolidate the remaining parts, and improved the drainage system. But Zheng points out that these efforts will only prolong their life, not save them, since they are in the open air and exposed to rain and wind.

According to Chen Xingcan, head of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, since the temple complex was built gradually over a long period, it improves understanding of how Buddhist temples developed in Kashgar, and of China's communication with Central Asia in the past.

"It reflects the pluralistic, integrated pattern and inclusiveness of Chinese civilization," Xiao says.

In recent years, Buddhist archaeology in Xinjiang has undergone remarkable progress, but this site is unique, according to Xiao.

"The site was established early and lasted for centuries before being finally abandoned. Systematically excavating such a temple complex is rare in our archaeological work in Xinjiang," he says.

Contact the writer at wangru1@chinadaily.com.cn

the Tarim Basin and Central Asia at the time, and others with a format unique to Kashgar. Altogether, more than 40 rooms have been found, Xiao says.

A highlight is a rectangular Tang Dynasty building believed to be a Buddhist temple. It has a central hall, side halls on two sides and a courtyard in front of the central hall.

Xiao says that this format was seldom seen in Central Asia then, but is similar to temples in the Central Plains of China. He believes that it shows the influence of the Buddhism school, which got localized in Central China, in Kashgar at the time.

Historical records show that Empress Wu Zetian, who reigned from 690 to 705, ordered the building of Dayun Buddhist temples across the country, including in Xiyu, or the western regions, a term used to describe today's Xinjiang and Central Asia in ancient times. One such temple was built in ancient Shule (today's Kashgar) and had a Chinese abbot. Archaeologists infer that the rectangular building was possibly a Dayun Temple.

Archaeologists believe the stupa was built first, and then different

kinds of buildings were gradually built to its south, east and north. Finally, the rectangular hall was built during the Tang Dynasty and became the new center of the complex, Xiao says.

"When I imagine the story of Mo'er Temple, I think it was a gradually developing process. Early buildings continued to be restored and used. As a result, it had a strong sense of history in its appearance. At its peak during the Tang Dynasty, the complex reached the scale we see today," he says.

Since most of the buildings were located on the edge of the steep cliff, they presented a spectacular sight. The buildings would have been painted with white lime and when people viewed them from afar, it would have been impressive, he adds.

The temple can be regarded as testimony to the important era when Buddhism spread to Xinjiang, which is often believed to have been during the 1st century BC.

Xiao says that Kashgar was the gateway from China to Central, South and West Asia and an important station on the ancient Silk Road.

"Combining historical records, scholars believe that when Buddhism spread to Xinjiang, the earliest stations were Khotan (today's Hotan) and Shule. ... No later than the early period of the 2nd century, Buddhism from the Gandhara area (in modern-day Pakistan) spread to Kashgar," Xiao says.

From Xinjiang, Buddhism continued to spread to China's central areas, and developed as it came into contact with local cultural traditions, gradually becoming Chinese Buddhism.

As a result, the Mo'er Temple, which was begun in the 3rd century, was one of the earliest Buddhist temples built in Shule.

In his famous book *Datang Xiyu Ji* (Great Tang Records on the Western Regions), Tang Buddhist monk Xuanzang records his journey to India on a mission to obtain Buddhist sutras, and mentions that when he returned, he passed by what is now Kashgar and saw "several hundred Buddhist temples and more than 10,000 monks".

"This means he possibly visited Mo'er Temple, and saw it at its most prosperous," Xiao says.

A lot of sheep, cow and horse

bones have been unearthed as have evidences of a large number of peaches, grapes and apricots, which prove that many people lived there, he adds.

However, the prosperity Xuanzang may have witnessed has eroded with time. During the long passage of time following the monk's visit, people left and buildings collapsed, leaving only the two towers that seemingly defy the wind, their ancient stories untold until recent archaeological efforts.

Studies show that the main buildings were finally destroyed in a fire. The archaeologists infer that they were abandoned in the 10th century, but no evidence of that has been found so far.

Among the large number of artifacts unearthed, there are many fragments of plaster Buddhist statues. The statues combine features of both Chinese and Gandharan Buddhism, Xiao says.

"They have curly hair, very similar to Gandhara Buddhist statues, but their facial expressions are not flinty, like Gandharan style, but are similar to Chinese Buddhist statues," he says.

Moreover, some of the coins found

## Secrets emerge in Northwest China from the mists of time

By **WANG RU**

A newly excavated site has revealed a graveyard containing the largest number of prehistoric tombs found in Northwest China, and a mysterious culture, experts say.

The Xia'eryamakebu Site in Dulan county, Haixi Mongolian and Tibet autonomous prefecture, Qinghai province, about 100 kilometers from the well-known Tang Dynasty (618-907) Reshui Graveyard Site, one of China's top 10 archaeological discoveries of 2020, has been identified as the only large-scale Nuomuhong Culture site containing both residential and burial areas ever found, says Du Wei, a researcher with the Qinghai Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

Xia'eryamakebu means "the riverbank where gazelle appear" in Mongolian. The excavation was carried out by the institute and Northwest University in Xi'an, Shaanxi provin-

ince, between 2021 and 2023. Located in the Qaidam Basin on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the site occupies an area of nearly 250,000 square meters and dates to around 3,500 to 3,000 years ago, contemporaneous with the middle and late periods of the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC). The Hatu River runs through the site and divides it into two halves, north and south of the river respectively.

The north part comprises a large cemetery, while its counterpart in the south is a residential area with two smaller cemeteries.

Altogether, 3,228 tombs have been discovered in the three cemeteries, making this the best-preserved and largest prehistoric graveyard found in Northwest China to date. The scale is also rare in contemporaneous sites in the Central Plains, says Du, who is also head of the archaeological project.

The tombs show evidence of a spe-

cial burial custom. They were reopened years later, the remains disturbed, and then reburied.

They show differences in level, since some are large and contain many funerary objects, while others are smaller and contain fewer objects. This is evidence of social differentiation in the Qaidam Basin, an indicator of civilization, Du says.

A great number of artifacts combining multiple cultural elements have been unearthed, including pottery, bronze, jade, stone, bark and wooden artifacts, animal and plant remains. For example, millet, painted pottery and lacquer ware, probably from the Central Plains and North China have been found, as well as bronze pole head decorations in the styles that were widely seen across the Eurasian grassland, and carnelian beads similar to those from South Asia.

"It shows how early people moved to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the



Pottery vessels unearthed from tombs at the Xia'eryamakebu Site in Dulan county, Qinghai province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

process of communication and integration among multiple ethnic groups," Du says.

Nuomuhong Culture was discovered when archaeologists excavated the Talitaliha Site in Dulan in 1959, and found evidence of a Bronze Age

culture in what is now central Qinghai. Further study of the cultural type almost ceased afterward due to the lack of new archaeological evidence.

The Xia'eryamakebu Site fills in this gap, and Du says the artifacts found so far are believed to enrich the

"panoramic understanding of the time, settlement features, economic forms, handicrafts and human structures of Nuomuhong Culture".

They have also made clear the evolution and layout of the settlement part of the site, and bear witness to an uninterrupted history spanning 500 years, Du says.

"It's rare to find such a large group of tombs on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau," says Huo Wei, an archaeology professor at Sichuan University. "It proves the long history of the Qaidam Basin and enriches our understanding of the civilizational history of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau."

Chen Xingcan, head of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, says with its large number of bronze artifacts, well-built and well-preserved tombs, the site changes archaeological ideas about the social development of the northern area of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.