

The Loulan Beauty



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The dead tell a tale that China doesn't care to hear

By Edward Wong

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URUMQI, China: An exhibit on the first floor of the museum here gives the government's unambiguous take on the history of this border region: "Xinjiang has been an inalienable part of the territory of China," says one prominent sign.

But walk upstairs to the second floor, and the ancient corpses on display seem to tell a different story.

One called the Loulan Beauty lies on her back with her shoulder-length hair matted down, her lips pursed in death, her high cheekbones and long nose the most obvious signs that she is not what one traditionally thinks of as Chinese.

The Loulan Beauty is one of more than 200 remarkably well-preserved mummies discovered in the western deserts here over the last few decades. The ancient bodies have become protagonists in a very contemporary political dispute over who should control the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The Chinese authorities here face an intermittent separatist movement of nationalist Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim people who number nine million in Xinjiang.

At the heart of the matter lie these questions: Who first settled this inhospitable part of western China? And for how long has the oil-rich region been part of the Chinese empire?

Uighur nationalists have gleaned evidence from the mummies, whose corpses span thousands of years, to support historical claims to the region.

Foreign scholars say that at the very least, the Tarim mummies - named after the vast Tarim Basin where they were found - show that Xinjiang has always been a melting pot, a place where people from various corners of Eurasia founded societies and where cultures overlapped.

Contact between peoples was particularly frequent in the heyday of the Silk Road, when camel caravans transported goods that flowed from as far away as the Mediterranean. "It's historically been a place where cultures have mixed together," said Yidilisi Abuduresula, 58, a Uighur archaeologist in Xinjiang working on the mummies.

The Tarim mummies seem to indicate that the very first people to settle the area came from the west - down from the steppes of Central Asia and even farther afield - and not from the fertile plains and river valleys of the Chinese interior. The oldest, like the Loulan Beauty, date back 3,800 years.

Some Uighurs have latched on to the fact that the oldest mummies are most likely from the west as evidence that Xinjiang has belonged to the Uighurs throughout history. A modern, nationalistic pop song praising the Loulan Beauty has even become popular.

"The people found in Loulan were Uighur people, according to the materials," said a Uighur tour guide in the city of Kashgar who did not want his name published for fear of running afoul of the Chinese authorities. "The nationalities of Xinjiang are very complicated. There have been many since ancient times."

Scholars generally agree that Uighurs did not migrate to what is now Xinjiang from Central Asia until the 10th century. But, uncomfortably for the Chinese authorities, evidence from the mummies also offers a far more nuanced history of settlement than the official Chinese version.

By that official account, Zhang Qian, a general of the Han dynasty, led a military expedition to Xinjiang in the second century B.C. His presence is often cited by the ethnic Han Chinese when making historical claims to the region.

The mummies show, though, that humans entered the region thousands of years earlier - and almost certainly from the west.

What is indisputable is that the Tarim mummies are among the greatest recent archaeological finds in China, perhaps the world.

Four are enclosed in glass display cases in the main museum in Urumqi, the regional capital. Their skin is parched and blackened from the wear and tear of thousands of years, but their bodies are strikingly intact, preserved by the dry climate of the western desert.

Some foreign scholars say the Chinese government, eager to assert a narrative of longtime Chinese dominance of Xinjiang, is unwilling to face the fact that the mummies provide evidence of heterogeneity throughout the region's history of human settlement. As a result, they say, the government has been unwilling to give broad access to foreign scientists to conduct genetic tests on the mummies.

"In terms of advanced scientific research on the mummies, it's just not happening," said Victor Mair, a professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania who has been at the forefront of foreign scholarship of the mummies.

Mair first spotted one of the mummies - a red-haired corpse called the Cherchen Man - in the back room of an older regional museum in Urumqi while leading a tour of Americans there in 1988, the first year the mummies were put on display.

Since then, he says, he has been obsessed with pinpointing the origins of the mummies, intent on proving a theory dear to him: The movement and contact of peoples throughout human history is much more common than previously thought.

Mair has assembled various groups of scholars to do research on the mummies. In 1993, the Chinese government tried to prevent Mair from leaving China with 52 tissue samples after having authorized him to go to Xinjiang and to collect them.

But a Chinese researcher managed to slip a half-dozen vials to Mair. From those samples, an Italian geneticist concluded in 1995 that at least two of the mummies had a European genetic marker.

In recent years, the Chinese government has allowed genetic research on the mummies to be conducted only by Chinese scientists.

Jin Li, a well-known geneticist at Fudan University in Shanghai, tested the mummies in conjunction with a 2007 National Geographic documentary. He concluded that some of the oldest mummies had East Asian and even South Asian markers, though the documentary said further testing needed to be done.

Mair has disputed any suggestion that the mummies were from East Asia. He believes that East Asian migrants did not appear in the Tarim Basin until much later than the Loulan Beauty and her people.

The oldest mummies, he says, were most likely Tocharians, herders who traveled eastward across the Central Asian steppes and whose language belonged to the Indo-European family. A second wave of migrants came from what is now Iran.

The theory that the earliest mummies came from the west of modern China is also supported by other scholars. A textile expert, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, in a book called "The Mummies of Urumchi," wrote that the kind of cloth discovered in the oldest grave sites can be traced to the Caucasus.

Han Kangxin, a physical anthropologist, has also concluded that the earliest settlers were not Asians. He has studied the skulls of the mummies and says that genetic tests can be unreliable.

"It's very clear that these are of Europoid or Caucasoid origins," Han, now retired, said in an interview in his apartment in Beijing.

Of the hundreds of mummies discovered, there are some that are East Asian, but they are not as ancient as the Loulan Beauty or the Cherchen Man.

The most prominent Chinese grave sites were discovered at a place called Astana, believed to be a former military outpost. The findings at the site span the Jin to the Han dynasties, from the third to the 10th centuries.

Further clouding the picture, a mummy from the Lop Nur area, the 2,000-year-old Yingpan Man, was unearthed with artifacts associated with an entirely different part of the globe. He was wearing a hemp death mask with gold foil and a red robe decorated with naked angelic figures and antelopes - all hallmarks of a Hellenistic civilization.

Despite the political issues, excavations of the grave sites are continuing.

Abuduresula, the Uighur archaeologist, made a trip in late September to the desert site at Xiaohe, where 350 graves have been discovered. The bottom layer of graves dates back nearly 4,000 years.

More recent graves point to a matriarchal herding society that worshiped cows: Skulls of cows littered the site, and cowhides covered coffins housing female mummies, Abuduresula said.

Somewhere in those sands, he said, archaeologists have discovered a woman as striking as the Loulan Beauty. She is called the Xiaohe Princess, and even her eyelashes are intact.

Xinjiang's mummies get new history

By Robert J. Saiget, AF

URUMQI (China): After years of controversy and political intrigue, archaeologists using genetic testing have proven that Caucasians roamed China's Tarim Basin 1,000 years before East Asian people arrived. The research, which the Chinese government has appeared to have delayed making public out of concerns of fuelling Uighur Muslim separatism in its western-most Xinjiang region, is based on a cache of ancient dried-out corpses that have been found around the Tarim Basin in recent decades.

"It is unfortunate that the issue has been so politicized because it has created a lot of difficulties," said Victor Mair, a specialist in the ancient corpses and co-author of "Mummies of the Tarim Basin".

"It would be better for everyone to approach this from a purely scientific and historical perspective."

The discoveries in the 1980s of the undisturbed 4,000-year-old "Beauty of Loulan" and the younger 3,000-year-old body of the "Charchan Man" are legendary in world archaeological circles for the fine state of their preservation and for the wealth of knowledge they bring to modern research.

In historic and scientific circles the discoveries along the ancient Silk Road were on a par with finding the Egyptian mummies.

But China's concern over its rule in restive Xinjiang has widely been perceived as impeding faster research into them and greater publicity of the findings.

The desiccated corpses, which avoided natural decomposition due to the dry atmosphere and alkaline soils in the Tarim Basin, have not only given scientists a look into their physical biologies, but their clothes, tools and burial rituals have given historians a glimpse into life in the Bronze Age.

Mair, who played a pivotal role in bringing the discoveries to Western scholars in the 1990s, has worked tirelessly to get Chinese approval to take samples out of China for definitive genetic testing.

One expedition in recent years succeeded in collecting 52 samples with the aide of Chinese researchers, but later Mair's hosts had a change of heart and only let five of them out of the country.

"I spent six months in Sweden last year doing nothing but genetic research," Mair said from the University of Pennsylvania.

"My research has shown that in the second millennium BC, the oldest mummies, like the Loulan Beauty, were the earliest settlers in the Tarim Basin. From the evidence available, we have found that during the first 1,000 years after the Loulan Beauty, the only settlers in the Tarim Basin were Caucasoid."

East Asian peoples only began showing up in the eastern portions of the Tarim Basin about 3,000 years ago, Mair said, while the Uighur peoples arrived after the collapse of the Orkon Uighur Kingdom, largely based in modern day Mongolia, around the year 842.

"Modern DNA and ancient DNA show that Uighurs, Kazaks, Krygyzs, the peoples of Central Asia are all mixed Caucasian and East Asian. The modern and ancient DNA tell the same story," he said.

China has only allowed the genetic studies in the last few years, with a 2004 study carried out by Jilin University also finding that the mummies' DNA had Europoid genes, further proving that the earliest settlers of Western China were not East Asians.

In the preface to the 2002 book, "Ancient Corpses of Xinjiang," written by Chinese archeologist Wang Huabing, the Chinese historian and Sanskrit specialist Ji Xianlin soundly denounced the use of the mummies by Uighur separatists as proof that Xinjiang should not belong to China.—AFP