

# DATONG – THE NEW OLD

by Robert Watt



The Hanging Monastery

**D**atong was my first trip out of the city. My first venture away from the familiar environment of a modern metropolis into China proper. I was ready for something more exotic and mysterious, something more like my childhood fantasies of the orient. And maybe because it was the first journey and the first time for many experiences, or maybe because it was approached without prior expectation, that it has remained the most memorable.

I took the overnight train from Tianjin. My first sleeper, booked to leave at nine in the evening, on what was described as ‘hard beds’. I imagined lying on a stiff wooden board in an over-crowded carriage. I wasn’t expecting to sleep, but I slept like a baby. China passed outside, unseen in the total darkness as we swept through Hebei and onwards into Shanxi.

The night train arrives early in the following morning. But I had already woken, curious to know what new land might lie beyond the window. The same bright sun hung over a pale yellow earth. The flat land had folded into low dry hills, steep crevices scratched in its sandy soil whose shaded bottoms sheltered small clumps of trees. It was

clearly somewhere else. A train fare costing less than a night in a cheap hotel to journey further than is possible within the borders of England. I’d travelled all the night, but when checked on a map, the distance made barely a scratch across this huge country.

## The Ancient capital

My main reason for visiting Datong is the UNESCO dedicated World heritage site of the Yungang Grottoes and the Hanging Monastery. Both sites are as impressive as anything in China and the caves are worthy of the description of ‘the greatest ancient stone carving art treasure houses in the world’. They are the only truly ancient wonders remaining in what was a capital city for 3 dynasties. Once boasting royal palaces, gardens and temples it has, through centuries of war and neglect, all but disappeared. More recently renowned as the capital of coal and for its pollution, it is now being rebuilt. A large area sprouts a cluster of smart high rise buildings, but more impressive is the re-construction of its vast city walls and ancient architecture, aimed at recreating its former glory; and a modern tourist industry.

As I wandered around this part of the city the old hutong like single level houses were

**THERE ARE CLEAR SIGNS OF DAMAGE BY THE WEATHER AND SOME VANDALISM, BUT THERE ARE PLENTY THAT STILL RETAIN THEIR BRIGHT COLOURS AND INTRICATE DETAILS.**

being bulldozed to make way for ‘older’ buildings. Inside the clean new city walls the smart structures of grey brick with stout wood doors and ornate roofs stand solidly next to the soon-to-be-replaced ramshackle and crumbling homes. It could be ironic that the old town is being pulled down to build something that pretends to be older, but I feel the old town isn’t that old; it has just prematurely aged. A consequence of the same neglect that wore down the previous capitals. Hopefully, the reconstructed parts will suffer a similar fate because at present they look too new to feel authentic. The new imperial buildings may be a sham, but the grand ambitions and absolute authority required to build them is typically and timelessly Chinese.

## The Yungang Grottoes

I hire a car and driver for the day to see the caves and the Hanging Monastery. They are not far from the city, but it’s better to spend the time wandering slowly around the attractions than stressing over crowded buses. Datong is cheaper than Tianjin and with some shopping around and haggling it’s not expensive.

I arrived at the Yungang Grottoes feeling disappointed at the new construction. The temple and pillars of palm trunks supported on elephant’s backs are intended to be sympathetic to the period, but like the old city they’re too perfect, too contrived and too excessive. But don’t worry, the modern construction is just the visitor entrance, somewhere to put the ticket stalls and tourist tack. And despite the enormous amount of souvenirs on sale intended to aide memory of the visit, the commercial sham is quickly

forgotten once you're in and climbing up to the grottoes.

They are magnificent. The mountain-side caves and recesses are filled with 51,000 Buddhist statues and carvings. The largest is a seated Buddha. A 17 meters tall carving, staring out into the distant haze. Some caves are fronted by wooden structures, but many are open to the elements. There are clear signs of damage by the weather and some vandalism, but there are plenty that still retain their bright colours and intricate details. After the faux antiquities of the city, these barely renovated relics are a wonderful example of genuine history. The effects of time, the actions of Japanese soldiers and red guards rather than depreciating, add more layers to the record of China's past. The serene face of the Buddha unmoved by the cycles of events around him.

### The Hanging Monastery

After lunch it is time to drive to the Hanging Monastery. It's not as vast as the cave complex and because of this cannot accommodate the large numbers of visitors that are likely to be queuing. The approach provides good opportunities to take pictures of the structure, to wonder how the temple was built high up on a cliff face and how it can support the huge numbers of tourists intending to tramp up to the suspended rooms.

Although there isn't much to see inside,

it's definitely worth the wait to wander around its wooden walkways and see the intricate ornamentation of the roofs and beams. From the top you can look out over the parched valley, and the rickety thin dry timbers that precariously balance the building against the rock. It feels solid, but I sense it was never intended to support so many feet and I expect the thing to collapse at any minute, flinging us all to certain death on the rocks below.

In the evening there are cheap food stalls around the busy square, or you can try the new shopping area of Gu Cheng. This is a quiet place to wander and find a restaurant to eat in. Again the building style is intended to recall the city's ancient past with dark wooden shopfronts and streetlights clutched by bronze coloured statues. But this time the architecture is a more modern interpretation than a replication. Perhaps the consequence of having to perform a useful function instead of just being theatre props.

I returned to Tianjin the following day. For a first trip, a weekend was enough. I'd escaped the modern city in search of images of the past. I thought the monastery and the grottoes embodied some authentic essence. But looking back, the recreation of the capital from the ruins of its past is equally characteristic. The rise and fall of cities and of the dynasties that build them, are also China's long story. My journey to Datong had been dwarfed by the vastness of the land. Equally, my time there nothing against the city's slow cycle of change,

reborn once more under the unbroken gaze of the Yungong Buddha.



The largest Buddha.

## 探寻古都大同

大同是我到中国后第一次远离熟悉环境，外出旅行的城市。为了寻找儿时印象中的东方世界，我做足了准备。我搭乘夜晚的火车一路西行，列车驶入山西省的时候，窗外一片寂静，我从没想过在那样吵闹的车厢里，我竟可以睡得如此香甜。转天一早到达目的地，我迫不及待的想要看看窗外这陌生而神奇的土地，看着那明亮的太阳在黄土高坡缓缓升起，我心里是说不出的激动。火车已经开了足足一个晚上，我以为已经走的足够远，但当我拿出地图仔细看的时候，却发现只不过是地图上的一小段。

到访大同是因为这里有两个景点被联合国教科文组织评为世界文化遗产：云冈石窟和悬空寺。毫无疑问，这些景点令人印象深刻，尤其云冈石窟更是配得起外人对它的描述：世界闻名的石窟艺术宝库。我很庆幸在悠悠历史的长河中以及岁月的洗礼下，它还能被完整的保存下来。城市的发展必然少不了高楼大厦的建设，但让人高兴的是，我们已经看到大批的城墙以及四合院正在被修补和修建。未来，这些古老的建筑物还会再向世人呈现它们昔日的精彩。

云冈石窟的造像气势宏伟，内容丰富多彩，堪称公元5世纪中国石刻艺术之冠，被誉为中国古代雕刻艺术的宝库。它位于大同市西郊17公里处的武周山南麓，石窟依山开凿，东西绵延1公里。存有主要洞窟45个，大小窟龕252个，石雕造像51000余躯，为中国规模最大的古代石窟群之一。云冈石窟历经1500年的沧桑，由于石窟区所处的地质及环境条件的变化，不同程度地经历了自然风化和人为破坏，致使洞窟及雕像有不同程度的损毁。历史上云冈石窟也经历过不同方式的保护与修复，经过多次大规模的维修保护，石窟得到了很好的保护。

悬空寺位于大同市浑源县恒山金龙峡西侧翠屏峰的峭壁间，以如临深渊的险峻而著称。建成于1400年前北魏后期，是中国仅存的佛、道、儒三教合一的独特寺庙。因为其建筑的特殊性，所以致使每次参观的人数都有一定的限制。对于这样的胜景，一切的等待都是值得的。悬空寺的选址之险，建筑之奇，结构之巧，堪称世界一绝。它将力学、美学和宗教融合为一体，做到尽善尽美，是这个古老民族真正的灿烂文化和文明历史。

对于这样的旅行，一个周末就已足够，短短两天就能让我们逃离现代都市的烦躁，然后躲进历史的遗迹。如果你有时间，不妨也到这里来探寻旅行。去旅行，你才能发现自己的渺小，去旅行，你才会看到世界的伟大。



The mountain-side caves and recesses are filled with 51,000 Buddhist statues and carvings.