

## THE CHINESE WORLD

### WEST CHINA

West China is another story altogether. It is now part of China, **but it wasn't for most of China's history.**

The only exception, as we have seen in previous lectures, was the Gansu corridor, a strip of loess terrain that linked east China to the lands of central Asia and through which weaved the Silk Road.

The dominant element in this part of central Asia is the Pamir knot, an extremely high plateau with an altitude of 5,000 meters that really is the roof of the world. From here originate a series of huge mountain ranges that delineate between them the great cultural centers of Asia.

The Hindukush, which basically corresponds with present-day Afghanistan, has a long history of cultural transmission and was once the land where one of the most fascinating intercultural exchanges took place. It was here that the intermingling of Greek and Indian cultures gave birth to the extraordinary Buddhist art of Gandhara.

The Karakorum and Himalayas are the highest barriers on earth, but Buddhist pilgrims and Indian peddlers have been sneaking through them for millennia. Between the Himalayas and the Kunlun mountains lies Tibet, a very high plateau that stands at between 4,000 and 5,000 meters, and is home to a branch of Buddhism, Tantrism, that would be highly influential in Yuan, Ming and Qing China.

Farther north, between the Kunlun and the Tianshan mountain ranges, both with many summits as high as 5,000 meters, lies the Taklamakan, the most punishing desert on earth, some parts of which are under sea level.

All this desert is barren land, and those who crossed it, like the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzhang in the seventh century and Marco Polo in the thirteenth century have left striking descriptions of the terrifying noises caused by the whistling of the winds and the crashing down of the rocks. But at the foot of the Tianshan and Kunlun mountains water abounds, and this nurtures strings of oases that connect the Pamir with the Gansu corridor, and also the northern with the southern routes.

It was through these routes and the Gansu corridor that Buddhism entered China. The fertile grasslands that stretch between the Tianshan and the Altai have guaranteed constant contact between Persia and China.

So, finally, the Pamir, far from being a barrier, has been throughout history the biggest hub on earth, a real turning point that for millennia has connected three of the world's greatest civilizations: Persia, India and China.

Cultural threads, pilgrims and merchants could cross the Pamir and the fearful mountain ranges that sprang from it. But armies could not. The impressive walls of central Asia deterred the progression of many powerful waves of expansion coming from the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

They marked the limits of the Persian Achaemenid Empire also the furthest point reached by its conqueror, Alexander the Great. And it was also on the heights of central Asia that the last waves of Islam died out.