Rail trip between Beijing and St Petersburg

11th July – 23rd August 2016

Patrick Kenny and Alice Mingay
Our trip this summer was an incredible experience: starting from Beijing we travelled by rail through China, first visiting Xi’an, then Gansu Province and Xinjiang Autonomous Region. From Urumqi in Western China, we spent two nights on a train to Almaty, in Kazakhstan, followed by a further 24-hour journey to Tashkent. After a week in Uzbekistan we returned to Tashkent and travelled for four days on the train north to Moscow, before finally finishing our trip in St Petersburg. We would not have been able to make the journey without the generous grants that we were awarded, for which we are extremely grateful.

We had wanted to make this trip for a number of different reasons, but one that we both shared was simply the enjoyment we feel from travel and it was never in doubt that this trip would fulfil our expectations in that regard. Three aspects were particularly memorable: the people, the food, and the trains.

Before starting our journey, we had wondered who would be travelling alongside us, envisaging either hip backpackers with edgy Nepalese anklets and deep, meaningful tattoos, or old, wrinkled Kazakh men heaving goats into luggage racks. Unsurprisingly, and perhaps fortunately, reality was less stereotyped than our imagination, although no less interesting. There were a few Western tourists on the Uzbek trains but apart from that our companions were either domestic travellers, or those from other Central Asian countries. Neither of us spoke Russian, Kazakh or Uzbek, which meant we became rather good at smiling and nodding to people, and having conversations that revolved around local men naming Premier League football players and doing thumbs up or down. Every person who mentioned football to us, including five Kazakh border guards, supported Manchester United (except for one fair weather fan who told us his team was Leicester City), and none therefore was very impressed by Patrick’s nominal support of Crystal Palace. The people on these trains were often very generous with their food: on the Kazakh and Uzbek trains in particular, if you had not brought at least one hefty melon with you then you were a nobody, and so our co-travellers in the compartment would often take pity on us and offer delicious, juicy slices of fruit. Fortunately, we had stocked up on things of our own to offer people, but we fear that our dried fruit and biscuits rather short changed them. Just as we had not travelled extensively in China or Uzbekistan, locals there had clearly seldom seen someone with ginger hair, and it was very flattering to be asked to pose for photos several times, one Bukharan retaking the photo repeatedly to get that perfect shot. Locals were very happy to give us advice, from the best places to eat or how to change money on the Uzbek black market and we generally heeded it. There was one notable exception to this, when Alice...
excitedly bought a whole smoked fish on a Kazakh station only to be told earnestly by one of our companions in broken English and expressive hand gestures not to eat it. However, after two days on the train, with our food supplies dwindling, we decided to risk it, tearing off leathery strips of smoky fish, and thankfully avoided any ill effects.

Indeed, the food was possibly the best part of the trip. Beijing’s delicious dumplings, dipped in vinegar, and its hotpot – a little like a meat fondue but with flavoured soup you could cook your vegetables and pork in – were particularly good, as was the Peking duck: the little pancakes with crispy duck skin and sweet, spiced sauces were extraordinary. Other cities in China have their own specialty dishes and every single one was delicious. From Xian’s stewed beef buns, 肉夹馍 ròujíamó, sold in the bustling Muslim quarter of the old city, to Lanzhou’s beef noodles and lamb skewers: delicate pieces of lamb or slivers of fat that were spiced and flash fried in the street. Urumqi was interesting because it was the first place we found plov, a dish of rice and stewed meat that we would see in every other city we would subsequently visit, all the way to St Petersburg. In Uzbekistan, the plov was particularly good, with spiced rice and juicy meat, as were the beef soups that had a strong, rich flavour, enhanced by plenty of dill. Food on the trains was more limited, but some of the cities’ large markets had whole sections dedicated to various types of salad, that we could stock up. In Almaty, the Green Bazaar, a bustling two storey high building with long concrete slabs piled high with carcasses and stacks of fruit, had the most unbelievably delicious pickled aubergine. It would be worth making a trip back to Almaty with the sole purpose of gorging on pickled vegetables. However, when you have four days on a train there are other foods you can fall back on. Every carriage is equipped with a large, complicated, slightly industrial-looking tank that dispenses boiling water and here travellers can line up with the emperor/khan of all the train food: the pot noodle. As students, we felt rather at home with this, but even the pot noodles were a cut above those in the UK. The other staple that the water boiler provided for was, of course, tea. We had had some amazing tea in various places in China – Lanzhou in particular, where our small china cup, packed full of dried fruit, herbs and rock sugar, was repeatedly topped up close on 15 times – and we had managed to pick up a lot of different varieties to drink on the train.
We had wondered whether we would become a little tired of the trains: we were taking twelve in total, the shortest being just two hours and the longest 66. However, there is something really enjoyable about being able to sit and watch the lush Chinese hills in Gansu, or the expansive scrubland of western Kazakhstan, rush past. We even felt a twinge of disappointment upon realising that the train to Moscow was only three nights, instead of four as we had previously thought. Indeed, some of the landscapes were gorgeous, and a particular highlight was on our final night on the train to Moscow, when we rattled along the banks of the Volga with the moon hanging above, its light fanning out in ripples on the water like a van der Neer painting. It was also rather fun to really settle in on the longer trains: unpacking the books you would need, hanging clothes or washbags or flasks of tea from the various hooks with which the compartments were studded. The long distance trains would often stop at stations for 15 minutes or so, when you could jump off and wander up the platform looking at the many stalls – sometimes just fold up chairs surrounded by cardboard boxes – which would sell snacks or cigarettes or playing cards, and sometimes even hot food like Uzbek samosas. On our train to Almaty, crossing one of the least densely populated countries on Earth, it was particularly interesting to stop at tiny remote outposts, not infrequently with pens of camels groaning nearby. The stops on our Moscow train were especially important for the older man in the compartment next to ours, who would open his compartment door and release a small, fluffy dog out into the carriage corridor, which he would then herd out onto the platform for a quick walk. We were on a real variety of train, some only with seats, others with a compartment to ourselves, and others still with open compartments and six beds protruding from partition walls. A couple were modern, high-speed trains while others were soviet era, trundling along the same track as they had for decades.

Amazingly, considering the number of journeys, the visas with exact entry dates and the lack of useful languages, we had just two near misses when it came to the trains: the first involved our very first journey, from Beijing to Lanzhou. On the day of our departure the humid and oppressive Beijing weather that had sat above us for a week broke into the most almighty thunderstorm. The rain was torrential and our journey to the enormous Beijing West Railway station (think airport and you have an idea of the size) was slow. We arrived in the station with fifteen minutes to spare only to discover that we needed to collect our tickets from a particular office on the other side of the station. We had never been somewhere so crowded and since Patrick could not understand Chinese, he was left to watch Alice’s
face drop as she asked one of the station guards something and he pointed to the back of a huge queue. This was the queue just to get into the ticket office area, where, we could see through the doors, there were more columns of people lined up. There are often stereotypes bandied about that focus on British people and queueing. But any concerns about the immorality of queue-barging had to be put momentarily to one side as, with hefty D of E backpacks strapped on and carrying a Sainsbury’s Bag for Life full of snacks, we hurled ourselves through the lines of people, Alice apologising profusely in Chinese and Patrick resorting to the – slowly improving – smiling and nodding routine. With about 60 seconds before our train departed we managed to get our tickets, escape that section of the station, dash up a flight of stairs, and sprint towards the barriers in front of the platform area. It was here that the station guard calmly reported to us that our train had been cancelled. With an odd sense of déjà vu we returned to the exact same queues, thought briefly about pulling the same stunt and marching through, then settled in to troop slowly into the cavernous ticket office. An hour or two later and we had managed to purchase tickets for a train to Xi’an and from there, after a day’s stopover, to Lanzhou. Whether because of this near miss or not, Patrick then began a regime of arriving at stations ridiculously early, much to Alice’s chagrin – particularly when he really did overestimate the time it would take to reach one station and arrived at a totally deserted platform – a somewhat comical – four hours before our train would depart. What that did mean was that he was also exceptionally stressed for the other near miss we had, the only same-day connection of the trip. We had originally booked our big train from Tashkent to Moscow 24 hours after arriving back in Tashkent from Bukhara, but for unknown timetabling reasons, the day changed and so the only way we could make the journey work was to take both on this same day. The Moscow train was the one we really couldn’t miss: it was the longest and most expensive, there were no subsequent trains for five days, and our Uzbek visas were time limited. This all resulted in him, on the morning of our departure, nervously pacing up and down the train from Bukhara to Tashkent, moving substantially faster than the train itself, which had stopped dead. The journey was supposed to last six hours, giving us a four-hour window in Tashkent, but our train would trundle along, pause, restart and then repeatedly grind to a halt. By the time we were half way (and should have already arrived in Tashkent) he had asked every carriage conductor what time he expected us to arrive. Answers varied within a range of about four hours; their answers not exactly inducing confidence, especially when one tried to explain the issue as: “they are building the track”. To cut a long (well, an almost ten hour) story short, we did make our Moscow train, and it was with enormous relief that we stumbled into the compartment that would be home for the next four days.

In fact, the other stressful moment of the day occurred at that point, when we boarded our train: in our compartment was a large Styrofoam wrapped package in one of the storage containers. Patrick wandered outside to ask the conductor what it was and was told in limited English that it was his table, and whether we wouldn’t mind transporting it for him. We didn’t really need that storage area so he nodded and smiled. Unfortunately, misgivings quickly began to set in: What if there were some sort of
tax on furniture that you had to pay at the Russian border? What if it were a bomb? What if the conductor had hollowed out the table legs and packed them full of heroin? Deciding to allay mounting fears, we double checked when the conductor came round the compartments that at border crossings, it would be clear that the table was his: “No problem, no problem. At the customs, it’s my table...Except Uzbek customs, it’s your table there.” It was a slightly difficult position: this was the train official who would be looking after us for the next three nights and it wouldn’t be ideal to make things awkward by refusing to claim ownership of his furniture. But it would also not be ideal to be arrested by Uzbek customs. The conductor got out his phone and tried to use a translating app to explain why we needed to pretend it was ours; who knows exactly what he typed in Uzbek but the translation did not put minds to rest: “we cannot be easy” ...was it a threat? Maybe the equivalent of the mafia ran all the transportation infrastructure in the country. Patrick tried to argue that if this was some sort of smuggling operation, it would seem implausible to Uzbek border guards that two backpackers had decided to bring along a rather substantial table on their journey. This logic persuaded him and we gave him a hand in shoving the table into the neighbouring compartment. In the event, we probably would have got away with it as the Uzbek guard who searched our bags and stamped our passports at the border was one of the friendliest men we had ever met. We had the obligatory discussion of football (yet another Manchester United supporter) and he insisted on taking our numbers so we could chat when back in England. In case he ever reads this, thanks for making our evening Bobur.

As well as this shared enjoyment of travel, and all the quirky places and people that come with it, there are more individual reasons, particular to each of us, for making this trip. For Patrick, a part-completed degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies meant that his interests particularly lay in three fields: the ways in which Islam is practised in China and Central Asia; the Arabic influences that can be found in Xinjiang and Uzbekistan; and the historical importance of the area with regard to Islamic history.

Patrick:
The intersection of religion and politics is always a complicated one, and that is certainly true of the countries we were passing through. For instance, in China, Islam is a defining feature of both the Hui and the Uyghur ethnic groups, but they are viewed very differently by the government and generally occupy different places in society. Equally, after its relative isolation under Soviet rule from some of the concepts of political Islam in the twentieth century, some argue that Islam in countries like Uzbekistan is more ‘secularized’. Unfortunately, it can be very hard to see manifested some of these intriguing political, religious or social features that you know exist in an area or community when you are only passing through very briefly. However, it was really interesting to begin to see some differences in Islamic practice, particularly compared to that in the Middle East, with which I was more familiar having just finished living for a year in Jordan. The most obvious instance of this was in the mosques: those in China were totally different to any found in the Middle East or in Europe. From the outside the buildings were all in traditional Chinese style with bright red wooden beams and flared cornices. The minarets were short and wide and there was very little of the Arabic calligraphy that normally adorns Islamic buildings. Except for the rugs inside the prayer hall and a few signs in Arabic I would never have guessed they were mosques.
The Islamic buildings of Uzbekistan - the (pleasingly alliterative) mosques, madrasahs and mausoleums – were a little more like those of the Levant: tall minarets and huge domed buildings, inscribed with Arabic and set around long courtyards. What was noticeable, however, was how few of them there seemed to be. In Amman, where I had lived for the past year, there were mosques around every corner, but even when we wandered away from the famous historical centres and into the residential areas of Tashkent or Samarkand or Bukhara, we found almost none. This was despite the fact that the population was around 90% Muslim, but was perhaps a hangover from the more secular Soviet regime.

The influence of Arabic was a little easier to see in these countries: the Uyghur language, although influenced by a host of other languages, such as Turkish, Persian and, more recently, Mandarin, is written in a version of the Arabic script. After a few weeks of travelling through China, where I had understood nothing, this meant that I became very excited at being able to read a few signs and shop names when we arrived in Urumqi. In Uzbekistan I also became very excited, because everyone greeted each other with the Arabic greeting of “As-salāmu ʿalaykum”. It was rather nice to be able to add this to my smiling and nodding routine.

I think travel is especially enjoyable when it gives a context to what you have read, studied, or come across in other circumstances. Having studied Islamic history at university, I was therefore very interested to visit a region that has been hugely important in that chronology. Samarkand was truly extraordinary. I think it can be quite easy to be slightly blasé about historical or cultural sites that are clearly very impressive or interesting. In the past, for example, I think I have been guilty of visiting, say, a medieval French cathedral or a Roman fort, and not really appreciating what extraordinary locations they are. However, it is impossible not to be astounded by the buildings of Samarkand. Although extensively repaired over the past century, the original historic monuments of the city date from around five hundred years ago, the time of Timūr, known in English as Tamerlane, who extended his empire across Central Asia, Northern India and into the Levant. Timūr imported both craftsmen and 95 elephants to help build the first great structure of his period, the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, before taking Baghdad in 1401 and forcibly moving many of its artists to Samarkand as well. The result was a collection of huge madrasahs and mausoleums, constructed from great slabs of marble and inlaid with coruscating turquoise blue tiles. There was a real sense of awe as you approached the huge gateways of the Registan buildings and are able to see more closely
the patterns and designs that spread across the stone. The interiors are just as decorated: bright gold and rich blue interwove around ceilings and walls. Within the mosque or madrasah courtyards local craftspeople stand by stalls selling a wide variety of bags, pictures, clothes, and trinkets. It felt like there was a definite contrast between the extraordinarily opulent facades of the historic buildings in Samarkand, and the relatively low standard of living of its citizens. However, to me, some feeling of an uncomfortable contrast was more manifest in Bukhara.

Bukhara, like Samarkand, was a key city on the Silk Road, and also has some extraordinary buildings: the soaring Kalân Minaret that dominates the cityscape, the mosque it is attached to which can accommodate 12,000 worshippers, and the mighty Ark which was used as a fortress from the fifth century AD until its capture by Russia in 1920. But the major attraction of Bukhara is its old town centre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where numerous old, domed markets are strung along winding streets. While the buildings of the old city were historically interesting, I think that the real attraction to markets and old city centres is the people, the bustle, the activity. But the only locals in the old market places were those who manned the relatively sparse stalls and shops, selling handicrafts of varying quality to tourists. There were not even that many tourists, and when we walked outside the touristic centre it was very easy to find what must have once been very impressive family houses, perhaps of wealthy merchants, that now sat crumbling, with carved wooden doors held together by rusted padlocks. It felt to me that there was a contrast between Bukhara’s extraordinary historical importance and how it seemed today. Bukhara had been hugely prosperous under the Sâmânid emirs, it had been the capital of its own Khanate at various points, and it was from here that some of the greatest Islamic scholars came, from al-Bukhârî to Ibn-Sînâ. Yet now the old buildings were derelict, the madrassahs were empty of students, the call to prayer was silent. These comments could equally be levelled at Samarkand, and I think that they did not really occur to me there simply because of the scale and magnificence of Samarkand’s historical mosques and madrasahs – which of course were also mostly empty. Perhaps I am being unfair, especially since we visited for only a few days, and I do fear that the real issue lies in my perception of the cities: for example, the Silk Road seems such a romantic concept, with camels braying as they carry strong spices and rich cloth, and merchants arriving in oasis towns to spend the night in loud, crowded caravanserais. Perhaps the problem is really that real life can not quite live up to my own, rather orientalist, fantasy.

Nevertheless, I would love to return to Uzbekistan and revisit some of these amazing cities. The Silk Road started much further east than Uzbekistan, of course, but I leave it to Alice to describe both our trip through China and then the final leg of our journey, northward to Russia.
Through my interest in Chinese history and international relations, I had become increasingly aware of how different societies and their histories are inter-linked. The Silk Road is an archetypal example of this, with its use as a travel route dating at least as far back as Zhang Qian and the Han dynasty. It was interesting that in China, many of the cities used the Silk Road in travel advertisements found on large billboards, or the names of events they were holding. Shops selling hats and ice-cream to tourists, as well as some restaurants and hotels all took advantage of this in their branding, whilst museums highlighted the important role their city and its long history. In Dunhuang, the International Cultural Expo they held in September has even taken on ‘Silk Road’ as its name, suggesting that this phrase has come far more to represent the idea of exchange of both goods and cultural ideas than just a nickname for a particular route that predates the speedy modern air and sea travel. Indeed, the routes themselves are currently not particularly well used – train travel requires many connections and the road network is limited. However, there is currently an Iron-Silk Road project underway, aiming not only to make train freight possible but also to improve connections between the various domestic lines in order to attract more trade and investment to the region.

Markets that I had previously visited or heard about in China had tended to sell manufactured goods in large quantities, often intended for resale. Whilst food markets do exist, they tend to be small and few in number, as most people buy their food from supermarkets. In contrast, the markets in Urumqi, Almaty and throughout Uzbekistan were sold all kinds of vegetables, meat, bread and handicraft goods. Moreover, it was interesting that buildings of historical importance, such as the mosques and madrasah, were located very close to these markets, highlighting the social importance of both religion and trade.

One of my biggest interests in China lies in the Communist Party’s very assertive political influence, both domestically and as a world power, and I know of distinct political differences that remain between the governments of the countries we passed through. I found it fascinating how noticeable the change was between Urumqi (in Xinjiang, Western China), and Almaty (Kazakhstan). For example, the style of development was noticeably different, probably largely in part to the different population density of the two cities. Whilst banks and office blocks could be found in each, there were far more of the mundane, tall, concrete sort in Urumqi, as well as multi-lane roads filled with cars. The combination gave it a far more cramped and busy feel, in comparison with Almaty where the number of people on the streets was fewer, buildings were in general less tall and further apart, roads were wider, and most of the city could be reached within a 45-minute walk. Despite the actual distance between Almaty and Urumqi being quite large, much of the ethnic composition of the two cities is similar, with large numbers of Uyghurs, Krygyz and Kazakhs. However, there was a noticeable difference in that Urumqi also had a
large number of Han Chinese, whilst in Almaty these were replaced by more Caucasian looking faces. Aside from being excited about being vaguely able to blend in for the first time, this emphasised the difference between China and the areas which used to be part of the Russian Empire. This break was only reinforced by the different railway fittings in the two countries, and the fairly dull hour and a half that we waited on the platform of a tiny Kazakh station whilst they changed the gauge.

This was also the first autonomous region I have visited in China. I have read quite a lot about how the administrative difference between them and the rest of the provinces is fairly minimal, but I also found it interesting how there was less obvious differences between there and, say, Beijing than I had expected. Clearly the food was different, and the high-proportion of Uyghur people and other ethnic minorities was evident both from faces and styles of dress, but beyond that you were still obviously in China. Perhaps this is not that surprising – whilst Xinjiang gets a lot of press for its Uyghur separatists, a lot of the investment in infrastructure has come either directly from central government, or otherwise from State-Owned Enterprises. Furthermore, Mandarin is used on all of the road signs, as well as most of the building names, as well as posters promoting national unity, harmony and prosperity found tagged onto railings and all over the parks, just as you would have elsewhere in China. Clearly as the main city in the region, it is inevitable that this influence would be very clear in Urumqi, but it would be interesting to see the extent to which it has carried into more rural areas.

The Soviet Union was the other dominant 20th century communist power, and again, I was keen to contextualise what I know about its differences with China. I think architecture often preserves and reveals the history of a place, and also really affects the atmosphere of a neighbourhood or city. A combination of destruction under the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and extraordinary growth in the last 40 years means that most architecture in Beijing is fairly functional and modern, and even the majority of remaining hùtòng alleyways have been substantially reconstructed. In contrast, I found that even aside from the churches and palaces, a huge number of the buildings both in Moscow and St Petersburg felt far older. I was also immediately struck by the European atmosphere of both places, St Petersburg in particular, which I think was partly caused by having travelled Westward onto them as opposed to straight from Europe. We did not have the chance to visit much outside of the centre of both cities, and apparently plenty of grey block-style buildings exist that were built in the Soviet era; however the number of older, well-preserved buildings (excluding moments and attractions) is, I feel, in a different league to Beijing. I was also keen to compare the different feels of Tiananmen and the Red Square. On the sides of both are the respective seats of government, at the centre of each stands a monument to the workers, and Tiananmen contains Mao’s mausoleum whilst the Red Square contains Lenin’s. Having to pass through security checks to enter Tiananmen whilst in contrast most of the area directly surrounding the Red Square is pedestrianised also gave the former a far more mysterious and perhaps even slightly ominous feel, whilst a temporary seats had been erected for a concert whilst we were in the Red Square, which with the exception of military parades, would almost certainly never happen at Tiananmen.
Between London and Beijing, I have always lived in extremely urban centres. By comparison the Asian Steppe is one of the world’s most open expanses. For parts of the journey, the entire surroundings were completely devoid of human activity whilst others were far busier, but in both cases to have time to sit and watch the extraordinary landscape change was very memorable. In Gansu on several occasions, we passed miles and miles of windfarms, all positioned at slightly different angles to catch the wind whichever way it was blowing, whilst in comparison, once we were beyond Urumqi, we didn’t see much at all aside from stations that we stopped at. This is I think both evidence of the land being harder to use, and infrastructure being less and less well developed as you head further West, making large scale projects such as wind farms harder and more expensive. The journeys between Samarqand and Bukhara were also interesting, as whilst the immediate surroundings of both were fairly dry, there were still a huge number of plants and trees, testament to the fact that the soil must have been wet not that far down. Interestingly enough, quite a lot of the region between the two then suddenly became noticeably greener, even with bits of grass in some cases. This suggested to me the huge variety in micro-climates, as was also evidenced by Bukhara being a very noticeable couple of degrees hotter than Tashkent or Samarkand. Compared to the cities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, you could also guess from a much earlier point that we were nearly arriving into the city of Moscow or St Petersburg, as you travelled through quite a lot of suburban area. This could be suggestive how much newer train lines in Central Asia compared to Russia, many were built at the end of the 18th century. This means the stations are very much in the centre of the modern city, as opposed to being built quite a lot further out, as particularly the Almaty station was, meaning that your first glimpse of the city only really came once you were travelling in to where we were staying.

It is difficult to do justice to some of these places when describing to friends and family different aspects of the trip, but hopefully this has managed to get across just some of our impressions and amusing incidents! Thank you again for the generous support that allowed us to make this trip, we really are extremely grateful.

Patrick Kenny and Alice Mingay, October 2016.